

Osteology Collection: Human Skeletal Remains

We would like to introduce you to the human skeletal collection you will be learning from. The teaching collection was obtained by the department in the early 1970s from Carolina Biological Supply Company, with some elements coming from Osta International in later years. The individuals represented here are predominantly from Calcutta, India, and are unclaimed bodies prepared for use in medical teaching and exported in accordance with India's laws at the time (a few elements originate from Russia and China). The collection consists of numerous disarticulated individuals, for whom we have no identifying information. There are over 10,000 bones in the collection, including some 300 first cervical vertebrae, but only 30 crania. These elements vary by biological sex, age at death, body size, and health status prior to death, allowing students to develop a sense of the many ways in which life history affects the human skeleton. A subset of the collection has been separated from the main collection as it demonstrates various pathological conditions. These elements are used mostly to teach advanced courses. The rest of the collection is used primarily for teaching skeletal anatomy due to the lack of detailed individual information.

We recognize that there are parts of the collection that exist due to the exploitation of vulnerable individuals, most of whom lived in poverty and none of whom consented to this use of their remains. Although the use of unclaimed bodies for anatomical teaching and research was once widespread, we acknowledge that this does not align with current ethical standards for anatomical study collections. Still, we continue to employ the human bone collection for teaching. As the individuals represented in the collection are unknown, there is currently no practical solution for meaningfully repatriating their remains. We believe that this, along with the pedagogical benefits of learning from a large, variable collection of real human remains, means that the collection can and should continue to serve as an invaluable teaching resource in our department. At the same time, though, the remains and their history must serve as a potent reminder of our ethical responsibilities as anthropologists.

During your courses you may encounter fragmentary bone and exam bones, which include elements from the teaching collection, but also some archaeological bones that are unprovenienced (of unknown origin). There are no records relating to the origin of these archaeological bones, which have been at the University since the 1960s. Because it was once common for individual archaeological bones encountered by the public to be brought to the University, we have human remains that are either unprovenienced or of vague origins. The department holds a series of modern crania and dental materials that have been transferred to the department from the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry and donated by individuals.

The PSLA legislation (<https://www.qp.alberta.ca/documents/acts/p19p5.pdf>) provides the legal direction for us to obtain and maintain this museum collection and we operate under a Acquisition Strategy and Management Strategy (<https://policiesonline.ualberta.ca/policiesprocedures/policies/museums-and-collections-policy.pdf>) that has been approved by the General Faculties Council.

*Prepared by Sandra Garvie-Lok, Lesley Harrington, and Pamela Mayne Correia
26 August 2021*