Skulls, skin and names: The ethics of managing heritage collections data online

Rebecca Kahn
University of Vienna
Rainer Simon
Rainersimon.io

Abstract

The care, preservation and display of sensitive cultural heritage materials in museum collections is a well-studied and highly regulated aspect of museum practice. Institutional, national and international guidelines exist to help museums treat these objects with discretion, sensitivity and respect, and ongoing discussions around decolonisation have resulted in growing numbers of these objects being repatriated to the communities from which they originated. However, although there is emerging practice at institutional, local and national levels no such broadly accepted guidelines exist for managing the digital surrogates of these objects which reside in databases around the world. This chapter explores the complexity of managing sensitive data in large repositories, and highlights the need for guidance specifically tailored to the emerging digital spaces.

Through a qualitative analysis of open museum data harvested from the European heritage portal Europeana, we show that the proportion of this type of material is small. It could be argued that this makes managing such data even more difficult: what degrees of openness are appropriate? What are the implications for managing a relatively small number of sensitive objects in massive collections retrospectively, once they have been released openly online?

It is important to highlight that this paper is not intended as a critique of Europeana itself. The questions we are asking apply across repositories and portals of museums and other heritage data. Indeed, Europeana provides us with an ideal opportunity to think critically about ethical, legal, and policy issues associated with managing large-scale heritage collections online under increasingly ubiquitous regimes of openness in a way that few other projects do.

Zusammenfassung

Die Pflege, Bewahrung und Ausstellung von sensiblen Objekten in Museumssammlungen ist ein gut untersuchter und stark regulierter Aspekt der Museumspraxis. Institutionelle, nationale und internationale Richtlinien helfen Museen dabei, sensible Objekte mit Diskretion und Respekt zu behandeln. Die laufende Diskussion um Dekolonisation hat zudem dazu geführt, dass immer mehr Objekte an ihre Herkunftsgesellschaften zurückgegeben werden. Für den Umgang mit den digitalen Surrogaten solcher Objekte, die sich in Datenbanken auf der ganzen Welt befinden, fehlen solche Richtlinien jedoch. Dieses Kapitel diskutiert die Herausforderungen, die im Zusammenhang mit der Verwaltung von sensiblen Daten entstehen, und argumentiert für die Notwendigkeit von Leitlinien, die den digitalen Räumen gerecht werden.

Anhand einer qualitativen Analyse offener Daten aus dem europäischen Kulturerbe-Portal Europeana zeigen wir, dass der Anteil dieser Art von Material gering ist. Man könnte aber argumentieren, dass gerade dies die Verwaltung solcher Daten noch schwieriger macht: Welcher Grad an Offenheit ist angemessen? Welche Herausforderungen entstehen bei der Verwaltung einer relativ kleinen Anzahl sensibler Objekte in umfangreichen Sammlungen, insbesondere nachdem sie bereits online veröffentlicht worden sind?

Es ist wichtig zu betonen, dass dieses Kapitel nicht als Kritik an Europeana selbst zu verstehen ist. Im Gegenteil: Die Fragen, die wir stellen, gelten für alle Repositorien und Portale von Museen und Kulturerbe-Organisationen. Vielmehr bietet uns Europeana, wie nur wenige andere Projekte, eine geradezu ideale Gelegenheit, um kritisch über ethische, rechtliche und regulatorische Fragen nachzudenken, die sich aus der zunehmenden Digitalisierung von Kulturgütern, und der wachsenden Forderung nach Offenheit ergeben.

1. Introduction

The care, preservation and display of sensitive cultural heritage materials in museum collections is a well-studied and highly regulated aspect of museum practice. Institutional, national and international guidelines exist to help museums treat these objects and the communities from which they originated with discretion, sensitivity and respect, and the ongoing discussions around decolonisation have resulted in growing numbers of these objects being repatriated to their communities of origin. However, no such broadly accepted guidelines exist for managing the digital surrogates of these objects which reside in databases around the world. And even less guidance is available for how to deal with these digital surrogates when they are mapped into Linked Data repositories, and released 'into the wild' via the Web. This absence is also glaring with respect to copyright and intellectual property issues.[1] In this chapter, we will explore the complexity of managing data in large, converged repositories, as well as highlighting the need for guidance specifically tailored to the emerging digital spaces.

Through a harvest of openly available museum data from the European heritage portal Europeana, and subsequent qualitative analysis of the results, we show that the proportion of this type of material is actually very small. It could be argued that this makes it even more difficult to manage such data retrospectively, once it has been ingested into the system, and made available online. The degree of openness required to leverage the power of linked data is also one of the difficulties that have to be considered when sharing heritage collections within these infrastructures—are these levels of access appropriate for the types of data being shared?[2] And if not, what are the implications for managing a relatively small number of objects in massive collections of data?

Although we have used Europeana as our test case for this exploration, we think it is important to highlight that the questions we are asking apply across the web, to large scale repositories and portals, as well as to linked data databases of museums and other heritage data. This paper is not intended as a critique of Europeana itself, or of the progress it has made in making heritage materials from across Europe available online. But Europeana provides us with an ideal opportunity to think critically about the ethical issues associated with managing large-scale linked data heritage collections online, in a way that few other projects do. As an example of a large, complex linked data project, it offers the chance to look at technical and legal issues, such as underlying data models, minimal standards for interoperability and copyright policies, which

---

[1] See Okorie (Chapter 11 in this volume).

[2] Filosa, Gad & Bodard (Chapter 3 in this volume) also consider openness and its limits.

have a bearing on how sensitive material is accessed and shared online.[3] At the same time, Europeana also represents the digital embodiment of European cultural policy, a policy which has its own ethics and principles, and which need to be measured and assessed in relation to the materials available via the portal. It also provides an opportunity to assess the challenges presented by technological development which moves faster than the established ways of doing things, and how to consider the implications of the increasingly ubiquitous regimes of openness.

2. Europeana: Background and context

Europeana was launched in 2008, a flagship project of the European Commission with the stated purpose of creating a digital cultural heritage portal for Europe. It was, at the time, seen by many observers as a counter-response to Google Books' mass digitisation of libraries around the world, both in terms of its public nature (in contrast to the anxieties around privatisation of cultural heritage that Google Books represented) and its pan-European focus (again, in contrast to the perception that Google Books represented a risk of American colonisation of European culture). As Thylstrup (2018) and Capurro and Plets (2021) point out, Europeana should be understood as more than a digital service, but also as a space where political, cultural, economic, and technological forces combine to into a standalone cultural product in and of itself, shaped by the processes and politics of mass digitisation and an overt manifesto of an imagined, shared European identity.

In fact, it is the mass nature of the data in Europeana that is key to the argument we present in this chapter. Dahlström, Hansson and Kjellman (2012) distinguish between what they describe as mass digitisation and critical digitisation processes and their results. They argue that critical digitisation processes are essentially qualitative in nature, primarily manual, critically recognise the distortion to data which can take place during digitisation and are designed to maximise interpretation in metadata—resulting in digital collection that can be noted for their depth. They characterise mass digitisation, on the other hand, as primarily automated, designed to treat digitisation as a cloning process, minimise interpretation of metadata and result in digital collections that are notable for their scale (p.436). Neither approach is perfect, and both have their benefits and drawbacks, depending on the initial intentions behind the digitisation in the first place. But what is worth noting, and which Dahlström et al point out, is that each approach risks falling for the fallacy

---

[3] Okorie (Chapter 11 in this volume) discusses how copyright law can both contribute to and help address problems with digitisation of and access to heritage materials.

of exhaustiveness. At one end of the spectrum, mass digitisation approaches conjure up the image of the all-encompassing portal or encyclopaedic library, while critical digitisation processes create the false illusion of definitiveness, if only it were possible to digitise all the detail of an object, supplemented with the most complete and complex metadata possible (p.464). Of course, neither are possible, and as this chapter will show, pragmatism and interoperability are often the deciding factors when it comes to creating digitised resources that sit between these two poles.

In this chapter, we are not going to examine the processes by which the original digital objects were created in the various institutions which aggregate and/or supply content to Europeana. However, we will examine the process by which digital heritage content is ingested into Europeana, and the affordances (and compromises) that have been made to manage this influx of complex, heterogenous, multilingual data, in the service of creating an accessible, interoperable and useful heritage infrastructure.[4]

It is important to remember that Europeana is not, in and of itself, a repository of cultural heritage materials. Rather, it has always considered its role as that of an aggregator of digital surrogates, which are ultimately owned by the providing institutions themselves (Purday 2009). At the most basic level, the institutions provide Europeana with the descriptive metadata of the object, an image of it (originally thumbnails, although increased use of the IIIF protocol has made it easier to provide high-resolution images) and a link to the object itself (Europeana 2017; see also the Europeana Data Exchange Agreement).[5] This implies that the responsibility for managing the ethical treatment of sensitive objects in their collections should remain with the providing intuitions. As Capurro and Plets (2021) point out, this decision had a pragmatic advantage for Europeana and their partner institutions by enabling the portal to overcome the issue of the diversity of digital resources' file formats, while enabling the providing institution to retain copyright over their materials, and benefit from the increased traffic to their own sites from Europeana (p.173). This is certainly a pragmatic approach to the governance of a huge volume of materials which originate from different national jurisdictions and exist in different forms. However, it is also worth noting that the quality of metadata supplied by the partner institutions varies widely, as does the appropriateness of the copyright applied to some of these objects. As we will show in the findings section, this somewhat hands-off approach means that in some cases, high-resolution images of culturally sensitive materials, which are licensed under Creative Commons licences which actively encourage reuse and sharing, are

---

[4] Okorie (Chapter 11 in this volume) also discusses the issue of control over heritage objects and digitisation.

[5] Europeana Data Exchange Agreement: https://pro.europeana.eu/page/the -data-exchange-agreement.

able to enter the linked data stream, with little allowance made for their particularities. Users who wish to download these images are able to do so from the Europeana pages directly, and since the metadata is not always complete, or, as we will show, there may be a discrepancy between the metadata available on the two sites. contextualising information may be lost, if it is even available in the first place. It also means that any warning screens which may be accessible on the providing institutions site, which alert users to the sensitive nature of the materials they might encounter, are bypassed by the direct URL linking the item into Europeana.

Institutions wishing to add their data into Europeana are required to map it to the Europeana Data Model (EDM). The EDM grew out of the Europeana Semantic Model (ESE) which defined a lowest common denominator of descriptive information required to describe an object, across domains, formats and disciplines (Isaac & Clayphan 2013). The EDM, on the other hand, was designed to be more complex, and is not built on any one particular standard. Rather, it makes use of what Europeana refer to as 'an open, cross-domain Semantic Web-based framework that can accommodate the range and richness of particular community standards (Isaac & Clayphan 2013: 5), making it appropriate for ingesting data from a range of different museum, archival or library sources. What this means is that while the model can include any element, class or property which is found in the content provider's description (Europeana 2017), practically, it is preferable that enough metadata to create a link between the surrogate and the original digital resource on the home institution's site be provided, in order to facilitate inclusion. This holds for images, but is not mandatory for text, video, sound or 3D digital objects. All metadata in Europeana are licensed as CC0, meaning it can be reused by anyone, without requiring attribution. This is in keeping with general European Commission policy on sharing cultural heritage data. However, as Capurro and Plets (2021) highlight, this approach has been problematic for many institutions. Their survey showed that many museums consider the creation of metadata as part of their intellectual work, and were reluctant to share all of this work without any institutional attribution. As a result, many provided only a restricted amount of their data in CC0, while retaining the balance in their own institutional repositories, using the reasoning that any Europeana user can simply follow the links back to the providing institution's records. This has resulted in a stripped-down subset being available in the EDM, and consequently, data of inconsistent depth being available on the platform (pp. 178–179). For sensitive heritage materials, such as human remains, where the contextualising data around an object is crucial to understanding how, when and where they were collected and preserved, and under what consequences, the absence of this data can be critical. It leaves the objects unmoored, without the biography that elevates them from being read as curiosities and serves to remind the viewer that they were once human beings, and therefore more than the sum of their parts.

3. The Ethics of Human Remains in Museums

One aspect of museum collections which illustrates these difficulties and complexities is the case of digital surrogates of human remains, both as records and images. Human remains, from mummies to fragments of bone, pieces of hair to complete organs preserved in alcohol are kept in museums around the world. Some are part of the collections of museums of natural history, others are kept in medical museums (often attached to hospitals or universities) or ethnographic museums. Some are preserved in museum stores, away from public view, others are used as the basis for ongoing research into topics as diverse as disease and human nutrition. In some institutions they are displayed in galleries as illustrations of the development of societies or religious practices. Since the 1970s, however, there has been a growing discussion and debate among museum professionals, academics and Indigenous groups from around the world as to the right for museums to hold these collections of human remains, particularly those which may be considered to have sacred significance (Förster & Fründt 2017). The result of these discussions has been the emergence of a regulatory framework for the collection, preservation and display of human remains which is conducted and implemented at the institutional, national and international levels by a range of statues and bodies.

Most museums which have human remains in their collections will have explicit policies, often guided by national policies, as to the storage of human remains. For example, in the United Kingdom, the Human Tissue Act of 2004 and the Department for Media, Culture and Sport's *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums* set the legal framework and the best practice baselines for how institutions should handle, conserve and display human remains, including defining which institutions are allowed to deaccession human remains under special licences, the conditions under which museums may acquire new materials containing human remains, (particularly those which are less than 100 years old) the legal and technical requirements for the storage of these collections, and the best practice for labelling and display of these materials (DCMS 2005). Individual institutions are also able to make their own decisions about these types of materials – for example, the University of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum, which holds a substantial number of human remains, as one would expect of a museum that grew out of an Anthropology department, recently decided to remove 120 objects from their public galleries, including South American *tsantsas* (commonly known as 'shrunken heads'), South Asian Naga Trophy heads and the Egyptian mummy of a child (Kendall Adams 2020). In Germany, similar guidance is laid out by the Deutsche Museums Bund (German Museums Association) who include detailed guidance on how to manage materials whose provenance is unclear, and give specific details on the process for managing materials that originated during the period of National Socialism (Deutsche Museums Bund 2021). In the United States, the

Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) provides the legal and ethical framework for the retention, management and, crucially, restitution of any human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony held by federal institutions in the US, including museums, university collections and local governments.[6]

Internationally, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) sets the standard for the acquisition, research, exhibition, and removal from exhibition of human remains in their *Code of Ethics* (ICOM, 2017). This text has been critiqued for being overly cautious (Lenk, 2021) but could also be read as being drafted in such a way that acknowledges the case-by-case specificities of these types of collections, and encourages innovation and active engagement at the level of local institutions, as illustrated by the example of the Pitt Rivers Museum.

What we see then, is a comprehensive set of guidance, legal requirements and best practice designed to help museum staff and the public navigate the (sometimes fraught, often emotional) topic of human remains in their collections. What is glaring in its absence, however, is a similar set of guidelines, regulations and best practices for managing the digital surrogates of these objects, once they have been created. This is described in detail by Pavis and Wallace (2019) in their discussion on the need for legal frameworks to facilitate the return of cultural heritage materials. As digital objects, they consist of a set of different components—images, textual data, metadata, and their corresponding underlying data models. As such, they are stored differently, shared differently, and accessed differently from their analogue progenitors. As more institutions digitised their collections and their records, many more of these objects are becoming accessible, via individual institutional websites, integrated research infrastructures and cross-institutional search tools. Data from these institutions is being remodelled and opened up to linked data and semantic web search functionality, making access increasingly ubiquitous. But how should museum staff, researchers, and digital humanities scholars who use these materials approach the ethical and intellectual property law questions attached to them? Do the same rules apply to the digital surrogate as to their analogue originals? Or do we need to reconsider these guidelines, in the context of these new information storage and sharing realities? In reality, there is not much to go on. The *ICOM Code of Conduct* mentions the term 'data' four times in the text, in the context of data security, data privacy, and the academic and scientific responsibilities that ICOM members have to promote investigation, preservation and use of information in their collections, and the need to keep such scientific data safe. Nowhere does it mention how to manage sensitive collections data.

---

6 Facilitating Respectful Return, https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nagpra/index.htm.

4. Human Remains in Digitised Museums

Perhaps the most telling illustration of this lack of guidance is in the myriad different ways museums around the world approach the display of and access to human remains in their digitised databases and online exhibitions. In some museums, cultural sensitivity warnings are displayed when trying to access a catalogue or exhibition online. These warnings highlight the fact that historical terminology used in databases might be outdated or offensive, or that the databases might contain information on and photographs of, objects associated with certain rituals, which might bring with it certain cultural restrictions on who should have access to them, on the grounds of gender, age, or status of the viewer.[7]

In our exploration of human remains in museum collections around Europe, we encountered a range of different messaging on this subject, no direct limits to access (apart from expired or dead URLs) and some inconsistencies in what was available. As illustrative examples, these are the messages we encountered from three of the museums whose collections we investigated:

The Wellcome Collection in London (which will be discussed in detail later on) collects artefacts related to medicine and health. The Wellcome publishes over 92,000 items from their collection to Europeana, and we identified 201 of these as being human remains. The Wellcome includes a 'statement of intent regarding culturally sensitive items' on their Collections pages[8] and a Care of Human Remains policy, which includes a commitment to considering how to 'prepare visitors to view remains in exhibitions put on by Wellcome Collection, and to warn those who may not wish to see them.'[9] However no mention is made specifically of digital objects, or of these items are handled in the online database. When accessing human remains in the Wellcome directly, either via their collections database search tool, or through the source link in Europeana, these statements are bypassed entirely.

Similarly, in the database of the Horniman Museum and Gardens in London, which houses a collections of anthropological materials, natural history specimens and musical instruments, and who provide around 22,000 objects to Europeana, we identified 15 objects as being human in origin, ranging from decorated ceremonial skulls from Indonesia to mummified human remains from Peru. These can be searched for in the database by descrip-

---

[7] Pitt Rivers Museum Terms of Use for Pitt Rivers Museum Database of Object Collections: https://prm.web.ox.ac.uk/terms-use-pitt-rivers-museum-database-object-collections.

[8] Wellcome Collection statement of Intent: https://wellcomecollection.org/pages/YJkM-REAACMABEhW.

[9] See Wellcome Collection https://wellcomecollection.org/pages/WyjY_SgAACoALCmH.

tion or object number with no access restrictions, and can be shared using permanent URIs.

The Swedish Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm provides about 264,000 objects to Europeana, and our harvest only located four of these as being human remains. When linking back to the original record for one of these objects—two human femurs, bound together and inscribed with text and collected in British Columbia, Canada in the late 1890s (inventory number 1904.19.0086), there is no restriction to accessing multiple images of the object, and all the metadata associated with it. However, as we will show later, some images of human remains in the collection have been removed and no images can be accessed.

A critical digitisation or ingestion process would allow for items such as these to be considered on a case by case basis, but in the massive data dumps of hundreds of thousands of items, which characterise the ingestion process for Europeana, these items, often relatively small in overall number, slip through the cracks. This is, to a certain extent, a practical problem: how to manage a small number of highly specific objects, when working at scale, is not a question that can easily be answered. It is also a conceptual problem. As scholars working with historical sources have pointed out (Bailey et al 2021) the Linked Data triple model has limited capacity for presenting the additional types of data needed to conduct humanistic deductions, such as assertions and attestations. In this context, we would argue, the same can be said for museum data models, which require additional contextual and historical data to present objects and their backstories in complete, and sometimes ethically sound ways. This poses a significant challenge for systems that are designed to be interoperable at both the technical (or Linked Data) and legal (specifically, copyright) levels.

At this point it is sensible to take a look at how we conducted our data harvest, and how we decided what to include, and what to exclude.

5. The Data Harvest

To inform our investigation, we used the publicly available Europeana Search API to retrieve records of potentially sensitive material.[10] Based on manual searches we had experimented with initially, we compiled a list of queries (including searches such as "human remains" or "human bone") that we knew would return a significant number of sensitive collection records. We also used the Europeana query translation service to translate the queries in our list into the languages that Europeana provided as options in the search interface.[11]

---

[10] Europeana Search API, https://pro.europeana.eu/page/search.

[11] Europeana Search API, query translation, https://pro.europeana.eu/page /search#translation.

Because the query translation service is, to the best of our knowledge, based on matching queries against Wikipedia page titles, it is rather conservative in its results. Many queries do not yield translations at all, resulting in a situation where a lower number of higher-quality translations is favoured over a larger number of (potentially ambiguous) ones.

The combined multilingual query we used in the harvest consisted of 15 query terms, either in English, or in one of 11 other languages for which the Europeana query translation service had returned results. The harvest itself was automated through a script, implemented as a Google Colab notebook, which i) sequentially collected EDM search result pages; ii) aggregated them to a single result set; and iii) crosswalked some of the essential EDM fields we were interested in into a more readable spreadsheet format. These fields included: each object's unique ID, in order to be sure we were not harvesting any duplicates; the title, description and type of the object, which would allow us to capture all the free text and descriptive metadata of the object. Including the edm:Concept allowed us to see the controlled vocabularies and conceptual classifications used for each object—this was particularly useful when it came to eliminating anatomical paintings, drawings and etchings from the final result, as they shared the same type ('image') as the photographs of actual remains. The last two fields included were 'Europeana_link' which provided us with the definitive URLs for each object, and 'edm:IsShownAt' which provided the link to the original record on the providing institution's site (although not 100% of these links were live at the time of the harvest, and some returned error messages). We then used OpenRefine to dig deeper into the textual data, and sort and cluster records which shared similar characteristics, such as source, type, descriptions of certain body parts, or IconClasses.

6. Results and Findings

In total, the harvest returned 1494 records, which works out to roughly 0.002% of the over 51 million objects in Europeana. Of course it is necessary to make allowance for the fact that there may well be objects which have been described using terms that we did not include, or languages that our translations did not cover. However, for the qualitative purposes of this chapter, many of the objects we did find represent some of the more contentious and problematic examples of human remains kept in heritage collections, and are illustrative of the general difficulties of managing materials such as this at the scale of a repository such as Europeana. In fact, the relative smallness of our dataset enabled us to work manually and check almost all of the links by hand, one after another, in the browser—a reality which, on reflection, shows that such a small amount of material would require a dedicated manual effort from a team of individuals to continually check, update and deal

with such material—a reality that is unlikely in many heritage organisations, let along an infrastructure as large as Europeana. In that sense at least, this project can be seen as a microcosm of how to approach the ease of access to such materials.

In the following section, we describe three objects (or sets of objects) which we identified out of the 1494 records. Each has a different set of particularities which make them useful for exploring the ethical and technical challenges we have outlined above. The first should not be visible or accessible, but is. The second were collected under ethically dubious circumstances, and the third are the products of colonial looting, which is only glancingly alluded to in their documentation.

6.1 Toi Moko or Mokomokai

Perhaps the most striking example of the kinds of materials which we found in our exploration of Europeana is an item from the collection of the Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire (Royal Museums of Art and History) in Brussels. Described in the metadata as a 'Chopped off head with tattoos ("mokamokai") *[sic]*', (Accession number ET.38.15.1). This is in fact an example of a *toi moko* (also known as mokomokai)—the preserved head of a Māori man whose skin had been intricately tattooed and carved, so that deep grooves and geometric patterns can be seen on his cheeks, forehead and across his nose. This practice, known as *Ta moko*, was not just a process of body decoration—it was deeply embedded in the social, political and religious life of the Māori people. Moko contained information about a person's status, lineage, social rank and past exploits, as well as their divine status (Palmer and Tano, 2004). Traditionally toi moko were created as part of Māori funeral rituals, kept by the families of the deceased, and treated as objects to be revered. They were also made from the heads of enemies, taken as trophies and used as symbols of military strength. In both cases, access to them and their display was tightly controlled and strict protocols had to be adhered to (Procter, 2020); the practices were *tapu*—something sacred, and restricted, to be removed from the sphere of the profane and put into the sphere of the sacred. Tapu was used as a way to control how people behaved towards each other and the environment, placing restrictions upon society to ensure that society flourished.[12] However, after Captain James Cook's voyages to the Pacific in the 1700s, European interest in toi moko quickly grew, as did the demand for these objects. Sales of toi moko to European collectors took place openly until the 1830s, and their social and economic value shifted from being intimate and personal,

---

[12] Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand: https://teara.govt.nz/en.

to commercial and market-driven, particularly when it became possible to trade them for high value objects such as weapons. A secondary source of toi moko emerged, as local people, reluctant to part with their sacred objects, took to tattooing the faces of prisoners or captives with less significant symbols, and then selling their preserved heads to collectors (Gilbert, 2000; Palmer and Tano). Although this practice was legally repressed, toi moko continued to be traded until the 1980s. Records at the Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand show one being displayed for auction in 1988 for between £6,000 and £10,000.

It is impossible to know how many toi moko were transported to European museums, let alone how many were in private collections and may have been damaged or destroyed over the years. What we can do is look at the repatriation claims for toi moki that have been made over the years as a guide to the number of those which have, at least, been returned to Aotearoa New Zealand. Te Papa Tongarewa has been mandated by the New Zealand government to lead these claims, and since 2003 has received over 400 of these objects from museums in Europe, the US and Australia.[13] It is impossible to know the origins of the toi moko we found, when or under what circumstances it was created, and how it came to be in the collection. None of this information is provided in the accompanying metadata.

After finding this object in the initial data harvest, we conducted a manual follow-up search in Europeana, to see if any other toi moko could be found in the collection. The search yielded four other results. All of these were described as 'mokomokai', and made no mention, in the description, of any of the search terms we had defined, which explains why they were not part of the initial results. Of these four, only one contains an image—this is an additional toi moko which is also part of the collection of the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels. Of the three other results, two records point to the same object in the Ethnographic collection in the Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin (Berlin State Museums). However, neither of these records have a corresponding image—rather they show a generic outline of a vase, in grey, with the words '*Aus ethischen Gründen nicht gezeigt/ Not shown for ethical reasons*'. The final record links to an object from the Ethnographic Museum of Sweden. The accompanying image in both Europeana and on the museum's own site is a grey block, with the words '*Ritual Object: picture has been blocked*'. The description of the object makes it clear that it has been repatriated, although the full record is still accessible in the museum's catalogue.

---

[13] The repatriation of Māori and Moriori remains: https://www.tepapa.govt .nz/about/repatriation/repatriation-maori-and-moriori-remains.
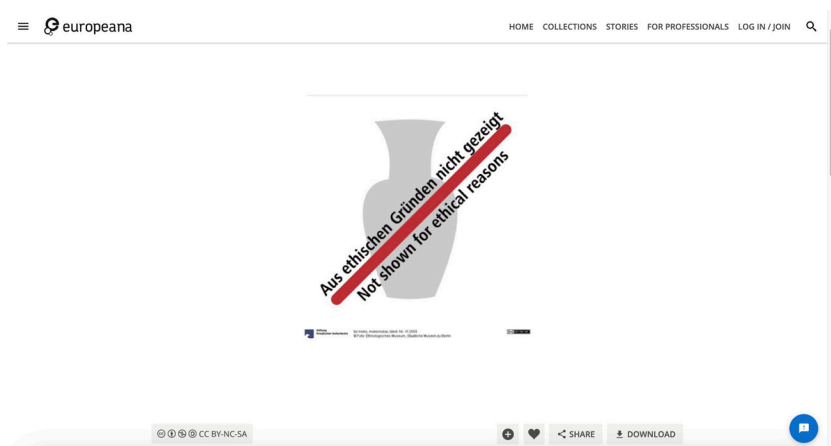
Figure 10.1: Screenshot (dated April 2023) of search result for 'mokomokai' in Europeana, showing the record of an object in the collection of the Ethnographic collection in the Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin (Berlin State Museums), and the generic message detailing the removal of the image for ethical reasons.

6.2 Tattooed skin fragments

Another substantial set of objects to emerge from our survey of the harvested data were 18 records of pieces of human skin, tattooed with various words and motifs, including French flags, flowers, human figures, and butterflies. While the descriptive texts accompanying each item describe different details, they all share the following information:

> "…purchased by one of Henry Wellcome's collecting agents. The agent was Captain Johnston-Saint, who bought it in June 1929 from Dr Villette, a Parisian surgeon. Villette worked in military hospitals and collected and preserved hundreds of samples from the autopsies of French soldiers. In the late 1800s, tattoos were often seen as markers of criminal tendencies, or 'primitiveness'. Medical men tried to interpret common images and symbols."

All of these objects are part of the Wellcome Collection in London, a museum and archive of medical artefacts, original artworks and other objects which explore the relationships and connections between medicine, health, art and society. The collection grew out of an initial bequest from Sir Henry Solomon Wellcome, an American British pharmaceutical entrepreneur, whose estate also formed the basis of the Wellcome Trust, one of the largest non-governmental funders of medical and socio-medical research in the world. As one would imagine, the Wellcome Collection contains a fairly large number of human remains, most of which have been held for them by the Science Museum in

Figure 10.2: Image of human skin tattooed with a soldier, badge and anchor, France. Science Museum, London. Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0), accessed via the Wellcome Collection online catalogue, April 2023.

London since the 1970s. Helpfully, the Wellcome also provides a list of these objects,[14] which totals some 670 items. In this list, every item is recorded with an accession number, a provenance, a date made and a short description. Not all of these items are available in Europeana, which we took as evidence that only selected records were published to the portal.

---

[14] List of human remains in Sir Henry Wellcome's Museum Collection https://wellcomecollection.cdn.prismic.io/wellcomecollection%2F0e081286-9ca7-4be8-a8ad-420df58a0679_list+of+human+remains+in+sir+henry+wellcomes+museum+collection.pdf.

By cross-referencing this list with the 18 results from our Europeana harvest, we discovered that the 18 records automatically found in Europeana were, in fact, a subset of 298 examples of tattooed human skin in the Wellcome's collection, all of which seemed to share a similar provenance. Without access to the full catalogues (inaccessible via either the Wellcome Collections online, or Europeana) it is impossible to say with absolute certainty that these objects come from the same collection. However, their accession numbers run sequentially from A524 to A822, which implies that they were originally catalogued in one batch. They are all recorded as coming from France, and are dated between the late 1800s and early 1900s, information which offers strong evidence that many more items were bought from Dr Villette than are available via the Wellcome's Europeana aggregation. What we can be certain of, however, is that the images of all 18 of the pieces of human skin in the Europeana instance are from this collection, and that, if the metadata supplied is reliable, they were removed from the bodies of the soldiers after their death. Whether permission was asked or granted for this collection is not specified. In this case, the desire to collect items which fed a collector's fascination with the criminality and primitivism mentioned in the description seems to have been the driving force behind their acquisition, and the biographies of the men from whom they were collected is all but irrelevant. All 18 items are available to download, and licensed with open licences, in this case Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 licence.

6.3 Asante Skulls

The final set of objects we will look at are perhaps the most biography-less, although their stories reveal the part they played in British imperial history. Our harvest found eight records for human skulls, again from the Wellcome Collection, which were described in the title field as 'Human skull inscribed with prayers for the deceased. Collected by Robert Baden Powell's Asante (Ghana) expedition 1895'. When we checked these objects manually, using the links in the Europeana_link and edm:IsShownAt metadata fields, all eight bore the same museum accession number (A666427), although it quickly became evident that one of these objects is a complete skull, and the other is only a fragment of a cranium. After cross-referencing the museum number with the list of objects from the Wellcome stored at the Science Museum (mentioned in the previous section) we found that there were in fact two objects with different museum accession numbers: A666426 was the cranium fragment, and A666427 was the complete skull. However, somehow in the Wellcome and therefore also in Europeana, these items have become conflated.

Both objects are covered in text, which has been written or painted onto the bone in a language which appears to be Arabic—although the available metadata does not give any details of this, or provide a transcript. Whether this detail exists in the catalogue is impossible to ascertain, without access to the full record, which is not online. All we have to work with is a title, image (downloadable as a high resolution JPEG), and some technical metadata describing licensing (CC BY 4.0). But what we can deduce from their titles and combined with a bit of historical sleuthing, is that these two objects are part of a familiar narrative of British imperial violence.

The Anglo-Ashanti wars were a series of conflicts that took place in what is now modern Ghana, between 1824 and 1900 between the British Empire and the Ashanti Empire. The Ashanti were a powerful kingdom who came into conflict with the British over access and control of the coastal areas of the region. The 1895 expedition mentioned in the description was led by Lieutenant Colonel Robert Baden-Powell—who later went on to found the worldwide Boy Scout movement. In her study of the West African collections in the Manchester Museum, Emma Poulter describes how the British forces marched into the Ashanti capital of Kumasi. The Ashanti king, Prempeh, aware that his forces were outnumbered, put up little resistance, and accepted British protection, but could not pay the fine of 50,000 ounces of gold demanded by the British (Poulter 2003: 11). The British responded by arresting Prempeh and deporting him to Sierra Leone and then to the Seychelles, where he was exiled for 28 years. They also ransacked the the palace and Prempeh's other residences, which Baden Powell recorded in his diary:

> There could be no more interesting work, no more tempting work than this. To poke about in a barbarian king's palace, whose wealth has been reported very great, was enough to make it so […] Here there was a man with an armful of gold-hilt swords, there one with a box full of gold trinkets and rings, another with a spirit case full of bottles of brandy […] There were piles of the tawdriest and commonest stuff mixed indiscriminately with quaint, old, and valuable articles…

While it is not possible to know with absolute certainty whether the skull and fragments were taken in this particular moment, or at another point in the campaign, or how they came to the Wellcome, it is significant to place them in the context of the narrative that the British often used to describe these expeditions. They were framed as 'civilising' actions, waged in the name of the salvation of the 'pagan' and the fight against the perceived barbarity of African peoples (Poulter 2013: 12). These objects illustrate these attitudes perfectly—with no evidence of their use, origin or sacred purpose provided, or transcriptions or translations of the inscriptions they bear, we see them as the collectors did—curiosities which can be used to justify military actions on moral grounds.

7. Conclusions

It could be argued that by exposing these sensitive materials, Europeana is doing the decolonisation of museum collections a significant service, by helping to locate and expose much of this material which might, due to its relatively low volume, otherwise remain hidden in databases. However, there is another side to this argument: if Europeana's search functionality (ie: their APIs) are to be used as a source of structured data for researchers, including those looking for training data for, say, automated algorithmic tools, there is a question of ethical responsibility. If the EDM is considered too generic, and the copyright requirements too open, to ensure that museums are willing or able to share their data fully, and with deeper context, the question has to be asked whether it is appropriate for sensitive heritage materials with deep backstories to be available via the platform at all. This question also resonates when we consider the linked nature of the data accessible via Europeana. Sharing materials seamlessly over the Web has been the premise and the promise of the open semantic web, and is increasingly becoming a reality. But just because something can be shared, does not automatically mean that it should be, and in the absence of guiding principles and best practice rules for digitised human remains, and the increasing volume of materials coming online every year, the question of how to manage these collections and objects becomes ever more urgent.

8. References

Baillie, J., Andrews, T., Romanov, M., Knox, D., & Vargha, M. (2021). Modelling Historical Information with Structured Assertion Records. Paper presented at Data for History Conference 2021.

Capurro, C., & Plets, G. (2021). Europeana, EDM, and the Europeanisation of Cultural Heritage Institutions. *Digital Culture & Society, 6*(2), 163–90. DOI: https://doi.org/10.14361/dcs-2020-0209.

Dahlström, M., Hansson, J., & Kjellman, U. (2012). As We May Digitize: Institutions and Documents Reconfigured. *Liber Quarterly: The Journal of European Research Libraries, 21*(3/4), 455–74. DOI: https://doi.org/10.18352/lq.8036.

Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Government of United Kingdom. (2005). *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains. Retrieved from:* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/906601/GuidanceHumanRemains11Oct.pdf. Accessed May 2020.

Europeana. (2017). Definition of the Europeana Data Model v5.2.8. Retrieved from: https://pro.europeana.eu/files/Europeana_Professional/Share_your

_data/Technical_requirements/EDM_Documentation/EDM_Definition _v5.2.8_102017.pdf. Accessed March 2022.

Förster, L., & Fründ, S. (2017). *Human Remains in Museums and Collections:* A Critical Engagement with the "Recommendations for the Care of Humans Remains in Museums and Collections" of the German Museums Association. Clio-online und Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. DOI: https://doi.org /10.18452/19383.

German Museums Association. (2021). Guidelines Care of Human Remains in Museums and Collections. Retrieved from: https://www.museumsbund.de /wp-content/uploads/2021/07/dmb-leitfaden-umgang-menschl-ueberr-en -web-20210625.pdf. Accessed March 2022.

Gilbert, S. (2000). *Tattoo History: A Source Book : An Anthology of Historical Records of Tattooing throughout the World.* New York: Juno Books.

International Council of Museums. (2017). ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums. Retrieved from: https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICOM -code-En-web.pdf. Accessed March 2022.

Isaac, A., & Clayphan, R. (2013). Europeana Data Model Primer. Retrieved from: https://pro.europeana.eu/files/Europeana_Professional/Shar_your_data /Technical_requirements/EDM_Documentation/EDM_Primer_130714 .pdf. Accessed March 2022.

Kendall Adams, G. (2020). Pitt Rivers Museum removes shrunken heads from display after ethical review. *Museums Association Journal* 18 September 2020. Retrieved from: https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums -journal/news/2020/09/pitt-rivers-museum-removes-shrunken-heads -from-display-after-ethical-review. Accessed March 2022.

Lenk, C. (2021). Ethical Principles for Collections Containing Human Remains. In *Guidelines Care of Human Remains in Museums and Collections* (pp. 110–120). German Museums Association.

Palmer, C., & Tano, M. (2004). Mokomokai: Commercialization and Desacralization. International Institute for Indigenous Resource Management, Denver, Colorado. Retrieved from: http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly /tei-PalMoko.html. Accessed March 2022.

Pavis, M., & Wallace, A. (2019). Response to the 2018 Sarr-Savoy Report: Statement on Intellectual Property Rights and Open Access Relevant to the Digitization and Restitution of African Cultural Heritage and Associated Materials. *Journal of Intellectual Property, Information Technology and E-Commerce Law 10*(2), 115–129. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.2139 /ssrn.3378200.

Poulter, E. K. (2013). Silent Witness: Tracing Narratives of Empire through Objects and Archives in the West African Collections at the Manchester Museum'. *Museum History Journal 6*(1), 6–22. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1179 /1936981612Z.0000000001.

Procter, A. (2020). The Whole Picture: The Colonial Story of the Art in Our Museums & Why We Need to Talk about It. London: Cassell.

Purday, J. (2009). Think Culture: Europeana.Eu from Concept to Construction. *The Electronic Library 27*(6), 919–37. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1108/02640470911004039.

Thylstrup, N. B. (2018). The Politics of Mass Digitization. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.