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ReachMD on the Road: Exploring the Mutter Museum, Part Three

VISIT TO MUTTER MUSEUM

Hi! This is Dr. Michael Greenberg, on the road, and today I am in Philadelphia, home with my favorite cream cheese and continuing my visit to my new favorite museum, The Mutter, with my guide, The Curator, Anna Dhody.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

Let's move upstairs.

ANNA DHODY:

All right, let's go upstairs.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

Okay. We are up in an upper gallery now that is loaded with tourists today. We are in front of about 100 and some skulls.

ANNA DHODY:

A 139 skulls. Pretty aware that you are going to see 139 skulls just altogether like this. This is actually called the Hurdle Skull Collection because it was collected by Dr. Joseph Hyrtl. Now, again, most of the stuff we are dealing with mid 1800s. Dr. Hyrtl actually was ahead of his time. He wanted to actually debunk the notion of phenology as a real science. So, what he did himself and he established agents to go out to Europe. Most of these skulls are predominantly eastern European and he collected them. He also collected antemortem data. So this is what we call a known population. We know a lot about these individuals and if you come over here, I will should you a couple. Now, we have lots of interesting stories here that are just condensed into this little card, but this little edentulous fellow right here, no teeth whatsoever. His name was Giza. He was 80 years' old at the time of death. They recorded that he was a reformist and < ____ >. Now at the age of 70, he attempted suicide by cutting his throat. Now, unfortunately or fortunately, he had an ossified larynx, so it did not work, and it says here that he lived for another 10 years without melancholy.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

A new potential treatment.

ANNA DHODY:

An ossified larynx, but you see here we have another man named, I am probably put this pronunciation Andrew Sokolow, he was a Skoptji I am not sure how to pronounce that, a Russian sect that believed in castration and he died of self-inflicted removal of testicles.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

Does not say how old he was?

ANNA DHODY:

Does not say how old he was.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

Everybody else?

ANNA DHODY:

I can judge by looking him that he was fairly young. He was probably between, well, his third molars are in, so he was over 18, probably between ages of 18 and 30. Now, for most of these we do have ages. A lot them have interesting stories. We have 1 individual who committed suicide because he was afraid his mistress was being unfaithful.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

You know, it is interesting as I look at these and look at the stories. It is not just skulls; it is a story of each of these people executed for murdering her child, died of typhus in Vienna.

ANNA DHODY:

Suicide by hanging. Died of tuberculosis in the charity hospital in Vienna.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

You really kind of get a medical history in these skulls of that part of the world at that time.

ANNA DHODY:

Exactly, exactly.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

If you look at the ages. They are all pretty young.

ANNA DHODY:

Well, except for Giza here.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

He was the exception.

ANNA DHODY:

He was the exception. Now did you see this guy here? I think he was soldier and for the crime of grave in subordination died under the most cruel scourging. Interesting stuff, but aside from the kind of sensation of how they died from an anthropological standpoint, not just doctors, but also anthropologists and other types of scholars also come here. We recently had the American Academy of Physical Anthropologist Meeting in March and we had about 2000-3000 bone enthusiasts descend on the museum and of course, this is a very popular exhibit because what you are looking here is a chunk of time, so from the period of 1800, we know exactly where these people came from, so in terms of body morphology, cranium morphology, you can do studies and compare and contrast the morphological differences that people have undergone since more genetic migrations have occurred.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

I can't help it. When the bone specialists were here did you serve them a buffet of ribs?

ANNA DHODY:

No, I should have, well they are my own people because you know I am again a forensic physical anthropologist, so you will notice here that a couple are missing. They are in my office right now; I am in the process of taking detailed measurements and photographs of every single one of these. We are going to create a database and make it available for researchers.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

Well, I think the point here for our physician listeners is that. I mean visually this is quite a stunning exhibit, when you look at all these

skulls staring out at you, but when you start to read this as a physician what I get is not the sensation <____>, but I get the public health concept of that time of the world that what was going on, the diseases that are listed, how people died, you get like a slice of life into that time something that we can get in modern times other ways, but this is history. This is living history.

ANNA DHODY:

Absolutely.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

And whenever we tour a museum, I think the bottom point of the line is that this is not that stuff. This stuff speaks to us and it teaches us.

ANNA DHODY:

Absolutely and in terms of education for maybe the younger generation, I think a lot of younger kids have what I call this Halloween syndrome. They think all skulls look alike and they have just come out of that Halloween factory and I sit them here in front of this display and I ask them show me some differences that you see in these skulls. Do they all look alike, and they say, oh! no, this one is really narrow, look at the teeth on this one and they really start to look at them and go this was a person, and this skull is the framework of a face and this is why we look different and they really just kind of get his eye-opening experience of this isn't just 139 skulls. This is 139 unique individuals who had unique life.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

If you have just tuned in, you are on the road with me, your host Dr. Michael Greenberg, and we are on tour in Philadelphia with Anna Dhody, The Curator of the disturbingly informative Mutter Museum

Well we are here under the portrait of Dr. Mutter, Thomas Dent Mutter, is there <____>. Yes there is?

ANNA DHODY:

Yes, we would like to stress, there is an <____> it is not Mutter or Mudder. It is Mutter.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

And a good looking young man, not unlike myself.

ANNA DHODY:

But, unfortunately, the reason he looks so young and good looking here is he did not really have a chance to get old; he died at the age of 48.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

And, he was a surgeon.

ANNA DHODY:

He was a surgeon. He was on the faculty at Thomas Jefferson University and the reason he had such an amazing collection was that he was a teacher, he was a professor, as well as a practicing surgeon and he amassed through his own efforts these collections of anatomical specimens of wax models. When he found out, he was in ill health; he decided to donate these objects to the college of physicians of which he was a fellow along with quite a substantial endowment for the creation of a fireproof building to house this museum. The museum itself while it officially received the items in 1858 did not open until 1863.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

Let's move over and take a look at the soap lady.

ANNA DHODY:

All right.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

Now we are in the dermatology section, which is dear to my own heart and one of your famous pieces here is a lady with a cutaneous horn, which is large. I have treated one of about a quarter of that size, this one is about 8 inches coming out of her forehead.

ANNA DHODY:

Right. Yeah. Approximately 8 inches long. Her name was, well we refer to her as Madame Madame Dimanche or the Widow Sunday. She was a washerwoman in Paris and people always ask why did she let that horn grow so long. It is coming pretty much right out of the middle of her forehead and extending down past her face. So, it would be right in front of her face and one of the main reasons is surgery was and really is a kind of a dangerous or hazardous pursuit you don't you know go into it lightly and at the time she of course, she was not very well off. So, she was at the mercy of charity hospitals. But, I should say, eventually she did actually have a surgery. She survived the surgery, and her skull and the horn are in a museum in Paris. I am not sure which one. Now, what we have here is predominantly a whole section of skulls with tertiary syphilis. A lot of people don't realize that syphilis is of course systemic and it has basically 3 stages, and one should hit that third stage is when you really start seeing a massive necrosis of the skeletal system, a lot of the times in a delicate facial region.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

Something we just don't see these days in our practices. I mean you have small pox here.

ANNA DHODY:

Oh my goodness, we have small pox, we have gangrene, we have things like eczema, diaper rash. We show everything because it all has a significance in terms of medical education.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

If we turn around here, we come to a case with what looks more like a mummified person, but it is not, it's a soap lady.

ANNA DHODY:

It is a soap lady. It again is a type of preservation of natural preservation. It is called adipocere, is also known as saponification. Hence, the soap lady because adipocere is a waxy tallow-like substance that is similar to soap. One of the main questions I get of course when we have toured this, is this real, and absolutely she is a real human body preserved. You will see she is in a simple glass and wooden case. There is no refrigeration. There is no kind of humidity control, and if you take a whiff, you will realize that she is fine. She does not really smell.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

Where was this body found?

ANNA DHODY:

Interestingly enough, this body was found in Washington Square Park. Washington Square Park is one of our many beautiful open-air parks in the Philadelphia area and what a lot of people don't know is that these historic parks in Philadelphia and really in a lot of cities in the United States during times of epidemics, especially in urban areas, there parks were the only available source of open land and were used as open graves. Perhaps, it is a morbid way of thinking, but if you are walking on any our pretty historic parks, you are probably walking on somebody.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

I am sitting in front of a cabinet here. I love this kind of stuff, its objects. It is some hair from Edward Jenner, it is Dr. Benjamin Roche's very fancy jeweled shoe buckle and I see here an electrometer used by the Curie's.

ANNA DHODY:

Yes. Pierre and Marie Curie. We actually had a couple more objects, unfortunately those objects came directly from their labs and they

were radioactive, they were hot, so we had to remove them offsite.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

And they are going to stay there for the next 3000 years.

ANNA DHODY:

Yeah, unfortunately, we have to maintain the safety of not only the staff, but the visitors, so we have been routinely screened for radioactivity for mercury vapor for things like that.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

See to me as a physician this is fascinating. This is listed as original tubes for testing sterilization and these are names we all know Pasteur, Lister, Curie. Yeah exactly, and being around their objects, there is something sacred about that to me.

ANNA DHODY:

I feel the same way, I mean this is a piece of history. You have to think you know that Lister held that, they used it and it was an integral part of a very important period of medical history.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

And, we have one more place to see, which is outdoors.

ANNA DHODY:

Yes, the herb garden.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

Let us go to look at the herb garden.

ANNA DHODY:

All right lets go look at that.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

Right now, we are outside next to a beautiful church.

ANNA DHODY:

Right in downtown center City of Philadelphia is this wonderful little garden, little oasis where it actually there is a little message to this overgrowth here. This is a medicinal herb garden. What we have here is a lot of seemingly normal plants that were used for medicinal purposes in the 18th and 19th century.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

Lot of medicinal bees, so we have lavender and primrose.

ANNA DHODY:

We have the <_____> that was of course used for bandage.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

Really? Tell us about that.

ANNA DHODY:

We'll take a look and feel some of them, you will see that they are nice and soft and an absorbant and back before there was, you know, the Band-Aid brand or you would wrap your little boo-boo

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

And this would have been the type of herb garden a physician may have had to make up their medicinals.

ANNA DHODY:

Exactly to restock those medicine cabinets, the medicine box that you saw here and this is a nice place to have lunch.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

You don't think the station sent me here without telling me to bring home souvenirs. So of course there was one last place to visit.

And now here we are in the, we are in the gift shop and I am struck right away that you can buy a gummy heart.

ANNA DHODY:

Yes absolutely.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

An edible gummy heart?

ANNA DHODY:

Oh absolutely, we have gummy hearts. We have eyeball lollipops. I think some of our more popular ones are these skull candies right here, organ slime of course very popular, snoddy nose key chains.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

And the world's tallest shot glass, oh with a double because it's Chang & Eng

ANNA DHODY:

It's Chang & Eng.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

It's a double-size shot glass, this is great

ANNA DHODY:

Double.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

Someone deserves an award for coming up with this one.

ANNA DHODY:

Would you like to have one?

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

Thank you. I will take it back to the station and thank you for letting us tour your museum. It has been absolutely fascinating.

ANNA DHODY:

Thank you for coming.

DR. MICHAEL GREENBERG:

So with cheese stick stains on my tie and gummy heart in hand I left Philadelphia and The Mutter Museum whose curator Anna Dhody would love to welcome all our listeners. We welcome your questions and comments. Please visit us at www.reachmd.com where our newly redecorated web side with our on-demand and pod cast features will allow you to access our entire program library. Register on the website and enter promo code, RADIO, for 6 months of free pod casts and we truly thank you for listening.