

The human specimen: Bodies on display

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [Mar 22, 2005](#) issue

There is some uncertainty about what to do with the dead. Should we anoint them, embalm them, bury them, preserve them in vaults, or burn them up and keep their ashes on the shelf? Recently people have started doing some disturbing new things with dead bodies—turning ashes into jewelry, or freezing bodies for a day when they can be cloned.

Stranger still is the option recently on display in major museums around the world: turning dead bodies into art. *Body Worlds: The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies* is an exhibit of over 200 “authentic human specimens” preserved through a process called plastination, developed by the German physician Gunther von Hagens. The exhibit, now on display at Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry after stops in Japan and Europe (a concurrent exhibit is in Los Angeles), is a partly educational, partly artistic and partly religious experience.

The educational aspect is much heralded by the exhibitors. With the aid of plastination, grade school kids can learn what a pancreas looks like and medical students can examine healthy and diseased body parts without the formaldehyde. Plastination removes the body’s liquid and fat, leaving only odorless tissue that is initially malleable and then hardens to preserve the shape into which it is set. Many specimens are cross-sections of the entire body, others are (almost) whole bodies creatively arranged and opened to reveal specific systems—the skeletal, muscular, cardiovascular or reproductive system, for example. (The bodies in the exhibit come from persons who knew they would be plastinated and displayed in a museum or classroom.)

Viewers tend to be astonished at what parts of ourselves look like: So our brains really are that small. Wow, we sure have a lot of blood vessels. Prosthetic heart valves sure are cool. The exhibit offers a clear health lesson by displaying lungs black from smoking and arteries hardened and twisted by obesity.

While the educational purpose of the exhibit is touted, the artistic aspect is most striking. These bodies aren't arranged like your average Halloween skeleton. The man demonstrating his muscular system stands behind his muscles. That is, his skeleton, with cartilage and eyes, has been placed behind his plastinated muscles. Another stands with knees crouched and eyes bulging (necessarily, I suppose), chalk in one hand and book in another, in a teaching pose as he informs us about bodies. Another, called "winged man," might as well be called "flasher": his arms flail open to reveal his innards. He even has a white broad-brimmed hat. A swimmer swims in two directions with two different parts of herself, performing a stroke that could not happen in real life. One man stands holding his skin—showing the body's heaviest organ removed like an outer garment. The only nonhuman specimen is a horse rearing with a rider atop. The rider leans forward to show the viewer his brain in his hand.

The exhibit has aroused controversy, especially in Germany, where sensitivity to new uses of bodies for purportedly scientific purposes quickly evokes comparisons to Nazi experiments. Protestant and Catholic church leaders denounced it there. Another controversy has surrounded the portions of the exhibit that involve children and fetuses. While the exhibit gives no details of the individual lives, it states that individuals volunteered their bodies and that the fetuses were not, to the exhibitors' knowledge, aborted.

The most delicate display hides behind a curtain with a warning about its sensitive nature. An eight-months pregnant woman lies with her belly open to show the child inside. She had known that she and her child might not make it through the pregnancy, we're told. Apparently, fears that protesters may attack (an antiabortion protester in London covered the woman with a blanket) has led to the placing of protective glass around this specimen and many others.

Whatever the implications for abortion politics, I found myself drawn by this part of the exhibit. I not only felt for the child who would never be born, but felt claustrophobic at seeing the fetus scrunched inside his plastinate mother. The exhibit's intention of blurring the line between "inner" and "outer" is achieved to a breathtaking degree.

All museum exhibits have a semisacred quality, as people whisper and gaze reverently at objects deemed worthy of public display and preservation. This one even more so. One woman bumped into me and apologized, "I'm just so absorbed in

this!" "Isn't it wonderful?" another gazer intoned, apparently inspired by the beauty to speak to a stranger. Thousands of visitors to the exhibit have pledged to donate their own bodies, attracted by the prospect of having a purpose after death, or of ending up in a beautiful display beyond decay. "Discover what you're made of," announces the ad around Chicago. Quotes from great philosophers pepper the exhibit. They begin with Psalm 8: "What is man, that thou shouldst remember him? . . . Yet thou hast made him little less than God, crowning him with glory and honor."

The most striking Christian analogy to *Body Worlds* is the ancient church tradition that dead saints occasionally do not decay. Father Zossima's disciples in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* attest to this tradition when they expect him to remain preserved after death in anticipation of the resurrection of the body. In the end they are disappointed.

Latter-day followers of Sts. Francis and Clare went looking for the saints' remains in the 19th century. The bodies had been buried deep underground beneath the churches dedicated to them to keep rival Italian cities from stealing their relics and their concomitant revenue stream. Francis was as we would expect a man 600 years dead to be—a few bones and a bit of cloth. But Clare was intact. She still is, behind the altar in her church in Assisi—a bit weathered but remarkably preserved.

Science can now do reliably what faith only promises. You can now be beautifully preserved, without decay, for the quasi-religious devotion of future pilgrims. Immortality without rot, beauty without loss, admiration from newly educated and delighted strangers without end, delivered every time. Those so inclined can still go the route of faith, hope and love to accomplish those things. But it's far less certain a proposition.