

HI2L2-15 Life After Death: A History of Human Remains

26/27

Department

History

Level

Undergraduate Level 2

Module leader

Elise Smith

Credit value

15

Module duration

10 weeks

Assessment

100% coursework

Study location

University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

Description

Introductory description

Human remains have a unique material history given their dual nature as both people and objects. Since antiquity, the remains of famous and infamous individuals have been preserved as emblems of their corporeal existence around the world. But in the modern era, those of less prominent individuals have also been used in teaching and research, identified as exemplars of disease or sources of corruption, mounted as trophies, used to solve crimes, and transplanted to save lives. As a result, tens of thousands of human remains have passed through medical schools, museums, and laboratories, and have been kept far from their intended resting places.

This 15-CAT module particularly focuses on the medical uses of human remains, charting the instrumentalization of body parts since 1800 and the historical legacies this process has incurred. It looks at the myriad reasons bodies and body parts have been preserved and the various functions they have served—from revered ‘relics’ to medicinal ingredients, from teaching and research objects to symbols of reconciliation.

Module aims

Particularly drawing on methods in material history and medical history, this module examines the

potency of human remains as subjects and objects, and the ongoing ethical issues surrounding their use and display. It examines the competing value systems that have made corpses and body parts into particularly contested objects for research, focusing on cultural taboos, beliefs about death, and the class and racial disparities that have informed the repurposing of the dead. Through activities such as a site visit to the Hunterian Museum (London), primary source analyses, secondary readings, and training in medical ethics and tracing object histories, this module will train students to comprehend the polysemic nature of human remains as both people and things.

Outline syllabus

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

Week 1: Preserving the Dead—Holy and Secular Relics

Week 2: Eating the Dead—Cannibalism and Corpse Medicine

Week 3: Stealing the Dead—Grave Robbing and Dissection

Week 4: Collecting the Dead—Human Remains in Museums

Week 5: Field Trip to the Hunterian Museum, Royal College of Surgeons, London

Week 6: Reading Week

Week 7: Disposing the Dead—Cemeteries and Ossuaries

Week 8: Interrogating the Dead—Forensic Medicine

Week 9: Resurrecting the Dead—Transplantation and Tissue Research

Week 10: Returning the Dead—Repatriation

Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- Demonstrate a detailed knowledge of the 'afterlife' of human remains in the modern period, their role in medical research and practices since 1800, and their contested legacy as museum specimens.
- Communicate ideas and findings in both class discussions and academic writing.
- Generate ideas through the analysis of a broad range of primary source materials, including texts and objects, related to the history of human remains.
- Act with limited supervision and direction within defined guidelines, accepting responsibility for achieving deadlines.
- Analyse and evaluate the contributions made by existing multidisciplinary scholarship in medical history, material history, museum studies, indigenous studies, and medical ethics.

Indicative reading list

[Reading lists can be found in Talis](#)

Research element

Students will research and write a 3000-word essay, incorporating a synthesis and analysis of

primary and secondary sources.

Subject specific skills

See learning outcomes.

Transferable skills

See learning outcomes.

Study

Study time

Type	Required
Lectures	8 sessions of 1 hour (5%)
Seminars	8 sessions of 1 hour (5%)
Tutorials	2 sessions of 1 hour (1%)
External visits	1 session of 2 hours (1%)
Private study	130 hours (87%)
Total	150 hours

Private study description

History modules require students to undertake extensive independent research and reading to prepare for seminars and assessments. As a rough guide, students will be expected to read and prepare to comment on three substantial texts (articles or book chapters) for each seminar taking approximately 3 hours. Each assessment requires independent research, reading around 6-10 texts and writing and presenting the outcomes of this preparation in an essay, review, presentation or other related task.

Costs

Category	Description	Funded by	Cost to student
Field trips, placements and study abroad	For the field trip (which has received HoD's approval), this module will incur the cost of a day's coach hire to London, to visit the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons.	Department	£0.00

Assessment

You do not need to pass all assessment components to pass the module.

Assessment group A

	Weighting	Study time	Eligible for self-certification
Assessment component			
Research Essay	80%		Yes (extension)
Students will research and write a 3000-word essay on the history of human remain(s) of their choosing, using primary and secondary sources, drawing on techniques in material and medical history.			
Teaching on this module will include meaningful in-class support and feedback to help students prepare for their substantive assessment. This may include, for example, class exercises on essay plans or source analysis; work-in-progress presentations; use of peer feedback.			

Reassessment component is the same

Assessment component			
Seminar contribution	20%		No
On-going participation and enagement with seminar activities and discussion. Students will be asked to complete a short form to reflect on their own participation, and their comments will be taken into consideration for their mark for this component.			

Reassessment component

1000 word Reflective Essay in lieu of Seminar Contribution			Yes (extension)
A 1000-word reflective essay on module content in lieu of seminar participation for reassessments.			

Feedback on assessment

Written feedback will be provided on Tabula, and further verbal feedback will also be available during office hours at students' request.

Availability

Courses

This module is Optional for:

- Year 2 of UENA-VQ32 Undergraduate English and History
- Year 2 of UENA-VQ34 Undergraduate English and History (with a term in Venice)
- Year 2 of UHIA-V102 Undergraduate History (Renaissance and Modern History Stream)

This module is Option list B for:

- Year 2 of UHIA-V100 Undergraduate History
- Year 2 of UHIA-V1V7 Undergraduate History and Philosophy (with a term in Venice)
- Year 2 of UHIA-VM13 Undergraduate History and Politics (with a term in Venice)

This module is Option list D for:

- Year 2 of UHIA-V100 Undergraduate History
- Year 2 of UHIA-V102 Undergraduate History (Renaissance and Modern History Stream)

This module is Option list E for:

- Year 2 of UHIA-V1V5 Undergraduate History and Philosophy
- Year 2 of UHIA-VM11 Undergraduate History and Politics
- Year 2 of UHIA-VL13 Undergraduate History and Sociology
- Year 2 of UHIA-VL15 Undergraduate History and Sociology (with a term in Venice)