

AR592 Art History Seminar
Research Paper

APPROACHING THE DEAD:
PERSONAL INSIGHTS INTO THE BEAUTY OF HUMAN REMAINS

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". . . still full of life
and more beautiful than the best portraits
by the world's greatest artists,
since it is the man himself we see."

P.V. Glob, *The Bog People*

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One: Keeping the Dead

I keep images of the long dead in my memory after a painful, acknowledging stare. Lasting must be a common human wish. In the case of mummified bodies, the granting of that wish leaves one irreparably alone; Seti I has become an object (fig. 1).¹ I've not looked at an ancient Minoan pot as I've looked at an Egyptian pharaoh. My own intrigue and curiosity about the human body, the sensitive relationship I have with my own, skews my point of view when I see such things.

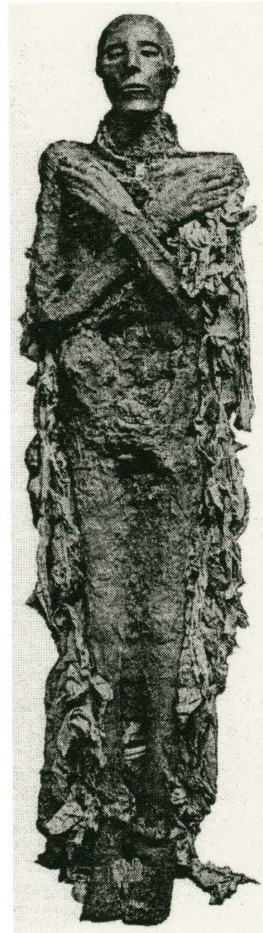


Figure 1. Mummified Body of Egyptian Pharaoh
Seti I, 19th Dynasty , c. 1304 B.C.

¹ Seti I's mummified body was discovered in the royal cache at Deir el-Bahri, Thebes. The pharaoh ruled during the 19th Dynasty (c. 1304 B.C.). His body is on exhibit in the Cairo Museum.



*Figure 2. Plaster Cast of a Victim of the Volcanic
Eruption at Pompeii*

There exists figurative sculpture. The body is expressive in its frozen gestures and postures. Artists utilize this. They portray both the living and the dead. The lava which surrounded the people of Pompeii hardened into precise molds, preserving the positions of their bodies.² The figures seen today in the Pompeii Antiquarian are actually plaster casts (fig. 2). These figures are art works; they have in them an intervening human touch--the pouring of the plaster, their placement into a museum. They are cultural imprints that have been lifted and exposed.

² Lukas, Jan, and Sir Mortimer Wheeler, Pompeii and Herculaneum (London: Spring Books, 1966), 18-25.



*Figure 3. Mummified Body of a Male, Predynastic Burial,
c. 3200 B.C., Egypt*

Through the framing of the picture--that delegated viewpoint of the photographer--the preserved bodies of the dead may also function artistically. A viewer needs to be told where to look. The blunt style of archival documentation allows the body itself to communicate. And it does.

Nature can be overwhelmingly beautiful. Yet only in the arrangement of flowers is a striking bouquet made. Human remains are potent objects; the consciousness that resided within shaped the body, formed the bones. This is its inherent beauty. If the bodies of the dead could be considered art works, it would depend upon an intentional treatment or positioning. Some trace of human involvement would be necessary to define them as such. Nude or wrapped or elaborately dressed; dried, oiled, eviscerated, or embalmed; lying flat, or in fetal, in seated positions--there are spiritual and aesthetic reasons for these. What occurs in a death ritual leaves a body marked, arranged, *presented* (fig. 3).

I am living thousands of years later than the ancient people whose bodies have remained--and yet I have been allowed to view them. This is both a disturbing and touching gift. On a beach in India, the bodies of the dead are burned on great mounds of lumber and sticks. Nothing is kept--it is emptied into the water. In this case, it is the Ganges which receives.

Two: Human Bones

I have examined medical textbooks and atlases of human anatomy, studying the organization of my bones. It is such a vital system in the living body--for stability, movement, for mineral storage, for the production of blood cells. It's amazing to me that what I eat can transform into such a solid substance, without my knowing it, without my guidance. My own skeleton is that part of me that I imagine will be last to degrade. My bones will outlive me.

There is something aesthetic about the line drawings used in those texts to depict the skeletal system (fig. 4). It is a symmetrical and perfect illustration; it is orderly. There is a decisive and knowing quality in the naming, the labeling of the various bones: sternum, radius, patella, etc. My imaginative eye sees a bird cage in the structure of the ribs, a smile in the exposed teeth. This skeleton is clean and white and sterile.

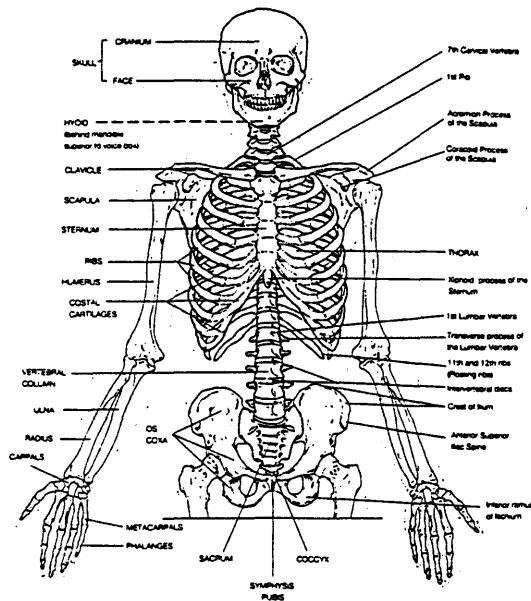


Figure 4. Anatomical Illustration of the Human Skeletal System

In the dirt of Tucume, Peru, the bones of a male sacrificial victim were unearthed (fig. 5).³ They have become stained the color of terracotta pottery, a pale rosy-orange. These bones are not the pristine, organized set presented in an anatomical chart. They are a misaligned, collapsed jumble.

Real human bones carry in them the signature of their creator. Science studies this in an effort to determine an individual's diet, or state of health, or stature. But pathological investigations cannot reveal personality, gestures, or the sound of one's voice. Pathological investigations do not reveal *spirit*. This is what the bones themselves hold. This is what is affecting to me when bones are discovered, photographed.

These bones have been lived. I look at them as if looking with x-ray vision through the flesh of an ancient person. I know something he did not: I know the size and shape of his bones, their final position in the earth, the erratic suture lines of his skull. These bones are the remains of a living person, witnesses to his culture, or favorite foods, his memories. The drive of the anthropologist and the archeologist stems from the eternal gap of knowledge between then and now, between the living and the dead, the "you" and the "me." All of this kept secret in the exposed armature of a body.

³ Thor Heyerdahl, Daniel H. Sandweiss, and Alfredo Narvaez, Pyramids of Tucume: The Quest for Peru's Forgotten City (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 83-84.



*Figure 5. Skeletal Remains of a Male Sacrificial Victim,
c. 1400 A.D., Tucume, Peru*

Beyond the emotional impact of human bones, in the positions of unearthed skeletons, is a more discreet reward. These bones our bodies make, in their form and variety are (in the arbitrary positions of the dead) arranged into aesthetic compositions. In the photograph from Tucume (fig. 5), the semi-circular ribs radiate from the left scapula, reminiscent of a dropped stone's effect on water. The long bones of the left leg form a "V," cradling the skull--its own bowl-like form a larger echo of the rounded facets of the ankle and shoulder bones, nearby. The defeated remains of some unknown man read like a formal sculpture; they are visually pleasing. Each bone is a personal, three-dimensional creation, formed in the confines of muscle tissue, nourished by capillaries, hidden under the flesh of the body.

Three: Being Reminded

I have a great respect for the dead, for the bodies of the dead. I mean not to equate them with works of art; I mean not to call them works of art. It is in looking at them that I feel something that I can only compare with an aesthetic experience. A person can be touched in many ways, through many things; some music can induce tears. When a single art work communicates a common human emotion--expresses some universal feeling--it is affecting and meaningful. For me, it is the ability to *cause* this effect that art works and human remains share.

I have a pair of gloves which belonged to my grandmother. When I wear them, I feel strengthened and supported--as if the gloves themselves retained some aspect of her, as if by filling the exact same space, my hands might act as hers. It is as if I am provided with some exclusive inherited reassurance and power. In New Guinea, Asmat family members sleep on the skulls of their ancestors. The bones themselves are used for empowerment and spiritual protection. What is left by the dead can have a meaning and a use; bones can continue to function beyond their purpose within a living body.

When the human skull becomes an empty vessel, it also becomes an empowered symbol. Death is depicted as a skeleton. What was concealed beneath living tissue serves as a reminder of one's mortality. Masaccio relied on this in his painting for the Santa Maria Novella cathedral in Florence (fig. 6). Below the crucifixion scene, a skeleton lies upon a sarcophagus. Repentance and salvation were offered by the Church as the only means to avoid such an unrewarding and lonely fate; to be in heaven requires leaving the body behind at death. Through the words above the skeleton, the concept of *momento mori* is clearly expressed: "I was once what you are, and what I am, you will also be."⁴ Becoming a skeleton is a fearful and motivating thought.

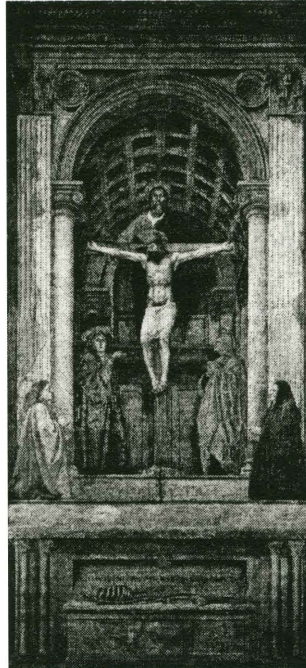


Figure 6. *The Holy Trinity*, Masaccio, 1425, Santa Maria Novella, Florence

⁴ This is a translation from the Italian: "IO FU GIA QUEL CHE VOI SIETE E QUEL CHIO SON VOI ANCO SARETE." See Hartt, Frederick, History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), 167.

Weakness is never a desirable characteristic. At the tomb of a sixteenth century frenchman--nearly decomposed, offering his heart to God--is a statue that is not without strength (fig 7). Gesture alone counters the vulnerability of his decaying body. Through the animation of human bones, artists allow the abstract concept of death to become physical. Death receives an image and a personality. When bones alone function as a living being, they instill fear and dread. In Heironymus Bosch's *Death of the Miser* (c. 1500), it is a skeleton that opens the door and shoots the fatal arrow (fig. 8). Death himself is portrayed as an agile and conniving set of bones, anxious for company, unpredictable and gruesome.

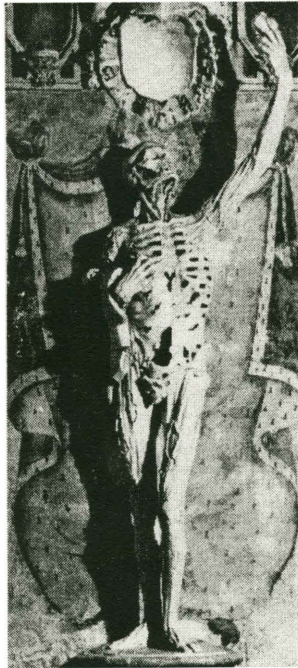


Figure 7. Funerary Sculpture at the Tomb of Rene de Chalon, Ligier Richier?, after 1544, Bar-le-Duc, France



Figure 8. *Death of the Miser*, (detail)
Hieronymus Bosch, c. 1500



Figure 9. *Christ in the Tomb*, Hans Holbein the Younger, 1521

When depicted by artists, what actually happens to a body at the time of death becomes more meaningful. Graphic representation of the martyr's afflictions is meant to enhance the story. The image of Christ's emaciated, crucified body is essential to the message of his suffering and sacrifice. Hans Holbein's *Christ in the Tomb* (1521) is a realistic portrait (fig. 9). By its very detail, focus, and honesty, it is one of the most powerful.⁵

There is a Mayan myth of the tree of life itself rising from the open body of a sacrificial victim; the Aztecs performed human sacrifices to assure the daily cycle of the sun. From the mummified body of the Egyptian god Osiris grew life-sustaining grain.⁶ Such beliefs are strengthened when they are illustrated. Blood and entrails and death become sacred symbols. The power of the Hindu goddess Kali is clear when she is shown devouring the intestines of men.⁷ The human body is constantly a means of transformation, inherently at the mercy of nature.

⁵ Hans Holbein's *Christ in the Tomb* (1521) has been criticized for its clinical representation. A short discussion can be found in Snyder, James, *Northern Renaissance Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1985), 386-387.

⁶ These sacrificial myths can be found in Campbell, Joseph, *The Mythic Image* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974), 422-426.

⁷ Ibid. 350-351.

"*Vanitas*" still-life paintings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were meant to be careful reminders of life's transience.⁸ Caught in a single moment is food or game on the verge of spoiling; flowers in bud, full bloom, or wilting; insects; pearl necklaces, silver goblets (fig. 10). By framing these for contemplation, artists expose the brevity of life, instill an awareness of such comforts. Hourglasses and timepieces are blatant symbols, human skulls are an even more direct message to the viewer (fig. 11). In times of wealth and materialism, in that time of plague, importance is placed upon moral lessons and truths of nature. Death is unavoidable. Where the skull is an actual remnant of an individual body, its depiction in such paintings illustrates a more universal regret: nothing lasts.

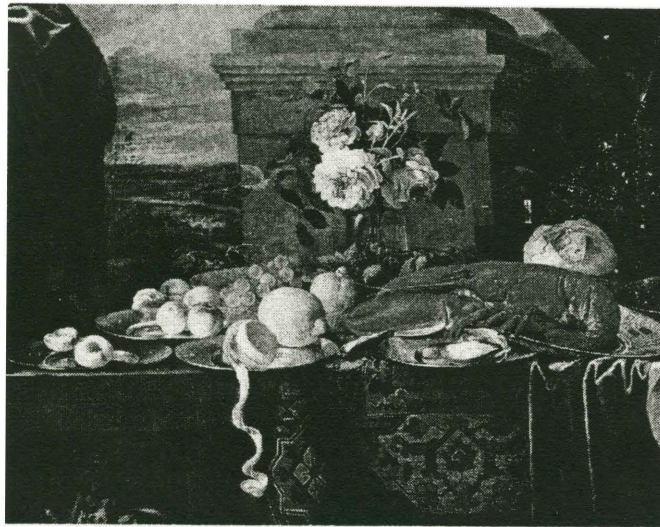


Figure 10. Still Life with Lobster, Fruit, and Roses,
Jan van den Hecke I, c. 1645

⁸ Most famous "*vanitas*" paintings were created in the Netherlands. A complete discussion can be found in Skira, Pierre, *Still Life: A History* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1989).



Figure 11. *Vanitas*, Philippe de Champaigne, 17th Century

George Tooker's *The Mirror* (1975) is a modern version of this theme: in the vain act of looking at her reflection, a woman catches sight of Death over her shoulder (fig. 12). One's own image is an ever-changing, ever-aging progression toward that reality which is, indeed, a skeleton.

Artistic depiction is not real; no painting of a skull is a skull. An artist can only attempt to pinpoint--to recreate--a more heartfelt experience. For this one must rely on the bones and the bodies themselves. There is something horribly awakening in the hollow eyes of an empty skull. What is seen is *more* than a skull, more *exactly* in what it lacks. In human remains I recognize my own stark bones or discolored skin. I see in them my own death.



Figure 12. *The Mirror*, George Tooker, 1975

Four: Bodies

The thin brown shells left behind by mature cicada insects are a perfect impression of their form. I remember at about the age of seven, tentatively inspecting those hollow shapes, curious as ever, both disgusted and amazed. I was afraid to touch them; those shells were the fragile remnants of magic.

The human body is sometimes referred to as a container for the soul. Death relegates it to an empty vessel, purposeless but to decompose. The bodies of the long dead become special objects because their preservation seems counter to the course of nature. By climate or by chemicals, they continue as immobile and silent testaments, as witnesses. What lasts, what remains--once owned--still communicates. The molted tail feather of a red flicka is perhaps useless, but it is beautiful.

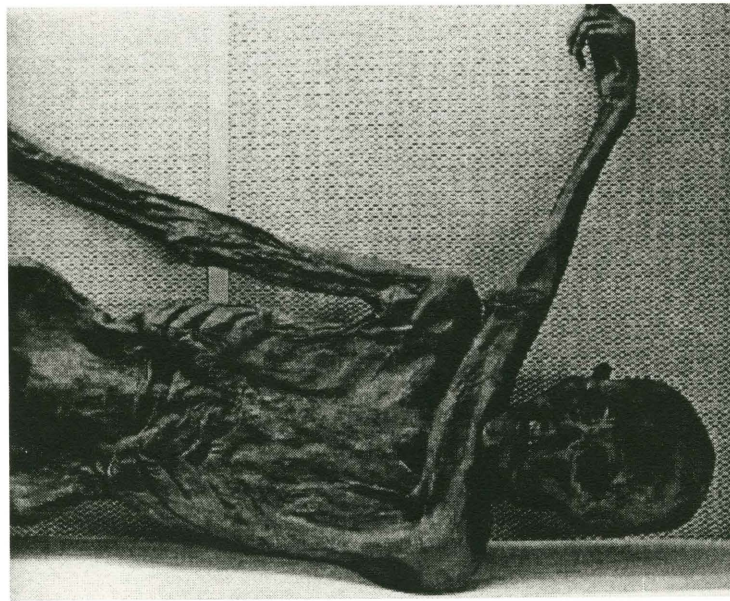
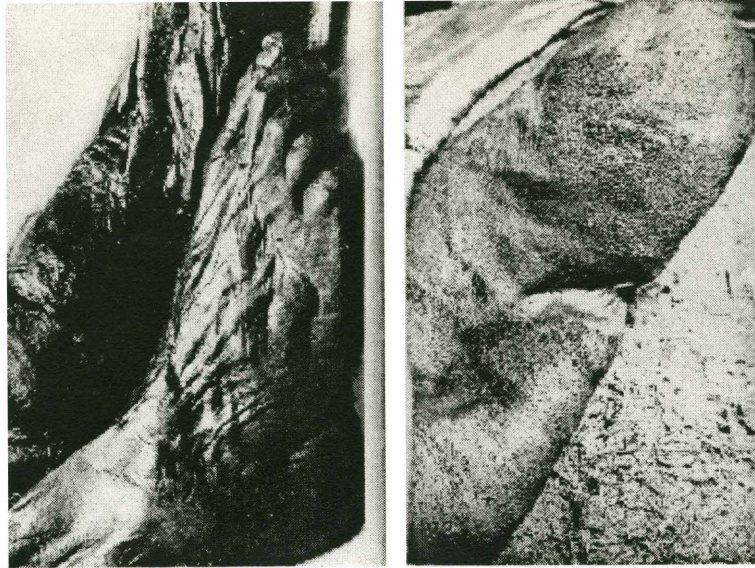


Figure 13. The Ice Man, c. 3000 B.C.,
Discovered in 1991, Otztal Alps, Austria



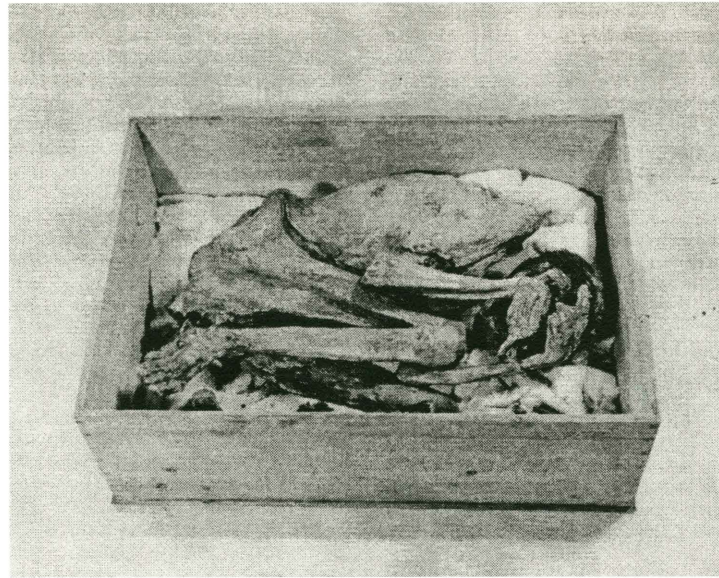
*Figure 14. Two Views of the Foot of the Grauballe Man,
c. 310 A.D., Discovered in 1952, Denmark*

In my own skin, I see dermal growth lines, pores, and the aqua-blue veins beneath its surface. In looking at my own body I glimpse the structure of my skeleton, the protrusion of bone at my ankles and hips, at the base of my throat. I look at these sites with curiosity, with a sense of awe, an appreciation.

These aspects of my own living form become a point of comparison for those same characteristics in the preserved bodies of the dead. My own hands are bony, with visible veins and tendons. I see these same qualities in the hands of the Ice Man (fig. 13).⁹ It is in the sharing of human form, in what is similar between our bodies, that allows me to feel related. In looking at the remains of ancient people, I experience my own body as mummified, or preserved in peat, or frozen. It is unsettling and moving. I begin to look more closely at myself. After studying the pattern of delicate grooves on the foot of the Grauballe Man (fig. 14)¹⁰, I look more intently at the sole of my own.

⁹ For a detailed account on the Ice Man see Konrad Spindler, The Man in the Ice: The Discovery of a 5,000-Year-Old Body Reveals the Secrets of the Stone Age, trans. Ewald Osers (New York: Harmony Books, 1994).

¹⁰ The Grauballe Man is one of many discoveries from Denmark bogs. Further information can be found in P.V. Glob, The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969), 37-62.



*Figure 15. Mummified Body of a Female,
Predynastic Burial, before 3100 B.C., Egypt*

Little is required to look at things admiringly. Objects of daily life can be appreciated for their color or texture or shape; few deny the elegance of a flower. But it is more difficult to be convinced of the beauty of a slug or beetle, of a drainpipe, a stone.

The heated, dry sand of Egypt has preserved the body of a woman for over four-thousand years.¹¹ I've seen a photograph of her (fig. 15). She lies on her left side, curled into the typical position of such ancient burials. It is a posture I find myself in when I have a stomach-ache, or when I'm frightened. The whole of her body is tight, the skin shrunk to her bones, wrinkled and creased. She looks brittle. Placed on a white cloth, in the confines of a sturdy wooden box, her body's fragility is emphasized. The arc of her back and ribcage, curled hands near her head, the long horizontal edge of her shin leads my eye in a slow oval. Only to read the numbers on the front side of the box--32752--does my eye stray from this pattern.

¹¹ A discussion of this and other Egyptian mummies can be found in Aidan Cockburn, and Eve Cockburn, eds., Mummies, Disease, and Ancient Cultures (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

Mummified bodies *are* aesthetic objects. What remains after the spirit is gone communicates in a visual, or tactile--even odorous--voice. These bodies speak in the same manner as art works. Each could be discussed in terms of material, texture, composition, color. But their impact proceeds from emptiness, not artfulness.

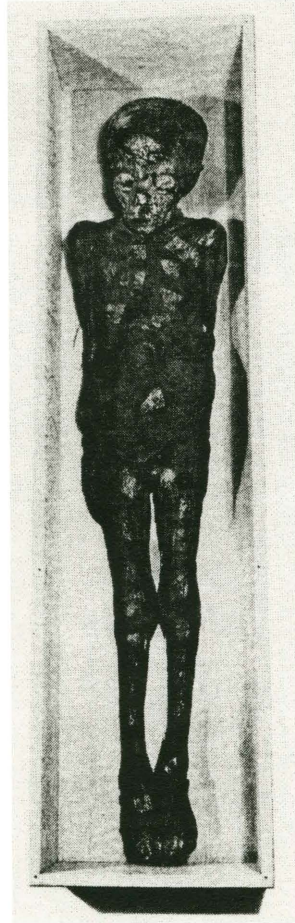


Figure 16. Mummified Body of a Youth, 1st Century A.D., Egypt

Five: Letter to Lucy

In November 1974, paleo-anthropologist, Don Johanson, discovered the bones of an early hominid near the Awash River in the Hadar area of northeast Ethiopia. These bones have been dated to over three million years ago, and belonged to a female, named "Lucy" by her discoverers.¹² She was about three and one-half feet tall, between nineteen and twenty-one years old, with a muscular build. Lucy and thirteen other hominids found nearby are believed to be "very early and direct ancestors of human beings."¹³ These are the oldest human remains yet unearthed. While on display at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, Lucy's bones were photographed (fig. 17). Such an aesthetic documentation of this particular archeological find inspired the following.

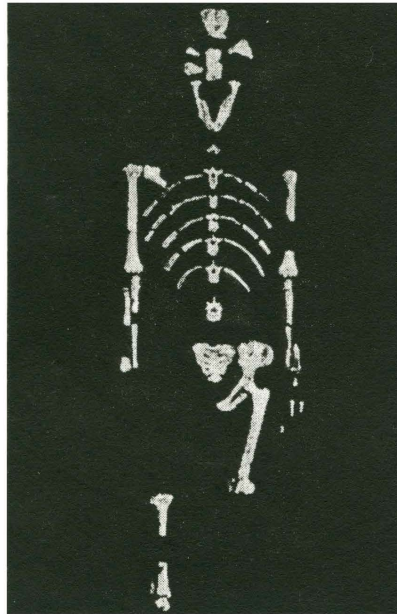


Figure 17. Lucy

¹² The discovery of Lucy is briefly described in Brian Fagan, New Treasures of the Past: Fresh Finds That Deepen Our Understanding of the Archaeology of Man (New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1987), 22-25.

¹³ Other scientists disagree that Lucy is on the main line of human evolution. See Milner, Richard, The Encyclopedia of Evolution (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1990), 284-286.

I look at a photograph of you, whom they have named "Lucy," and imagine my own unnamed vertebrae, so similar to yours, but warmed by moving blood and cushioned by cartilage. I imagine my own bones are comforted by such cohesion. Your bones are photographed in black and white, placed near their proper anatomical positions. Each would be worth as much solely on their own. As a whole, you are yet a fragment, your individual bones intriguing puzzle pieces.

I would not like to see my own skeleton this way--carefully placed on a black ground, ordered like the architectural plan of a city, or fine jewelry. Not even bone anymore, yours have become stones, fossils, mineral casts. What of you that remains holds my attention, but not as much for what I see as for what I do *not* see. The dry slope you slid from--reaching out with that humerus, catching the archeologist's eye without waving--must still contain *you*. When I look at your bones, of course, it is *you* that I see missing.

Perhaps I should never have stared at your sacrum like this, following its outline, admiring its symmetry, its slight lateral curve, pitted texture. I fluctuate between aesthetic delight and shame, for your bones are still *your bones*. What you ate, by the metabolism of your body, under the direction of your private brain, formed them. Along with your flesh, the rights of any ownership have degraded during the three million years since your death. None of your family is here to protest such a display of your remains.

But it's beautiful, Lucy. They've presented you as a delicate warrior--your thin ribs form a fragile chest-plate, the bones of your arms have been pinned in a strong vertical line. The foreign men who pulled your bones from the sand of the Afar were innocent and curious persons. Like myself, they have marveled at the expanse of time through which these parts of you have lasted.

I look at your bones as if I were looking at my own. Ancestor of mine or not, I've not seen the remains of my own grandmother as I've seen yours. I have still inside me what you have exposed. It is a moving expression.

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