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THE BODY SHOP

## An Eye for an Eye

The grisly sale of human remains has exploded in popularity on social media. But who is buying? Who is selling? And where do the body parts come from?

BY ELIZABETH MCCAFFERTY

Last month I found myself in Essex, England, sinking into a sofa next to Henry Scragg, a bearded, 40-year-old man with ginger dreadlocks and a cornucopia of facial tattoos. I sipped on scalding tea from a mug shaped like a cauldron while Scragg puffed large blooms of smoke into the air from a pipe as we watched his dog chew on a human pelvis. Spines hung from his ceiling by meat hooks, and nearly 100 skulls were loosely arranged in a pyramid behind me. This was Scragg's office. His desk is a mortuary slab.

Previously a gardener, Scragg, a surprisingly friendly and funny presence, has for the last 15 years collected and sold oddities. The largest part of his collection focuses on human remains, what is known as the “red market,” a multi-billion-dollar trade that covers legal collectibles such as Scragg’s as well as the illegal trade in organs for transplant. Scragg says he can make up to \$13,000 a month selling items like mummified hands, pickled organs, and bones. He showed me a jar of ashes and explained that these were the remains of his grandmother, which he plans to auction off for charity. He then proudly pulled out a wallet made from human skin.



Henry Scragg and his wares.

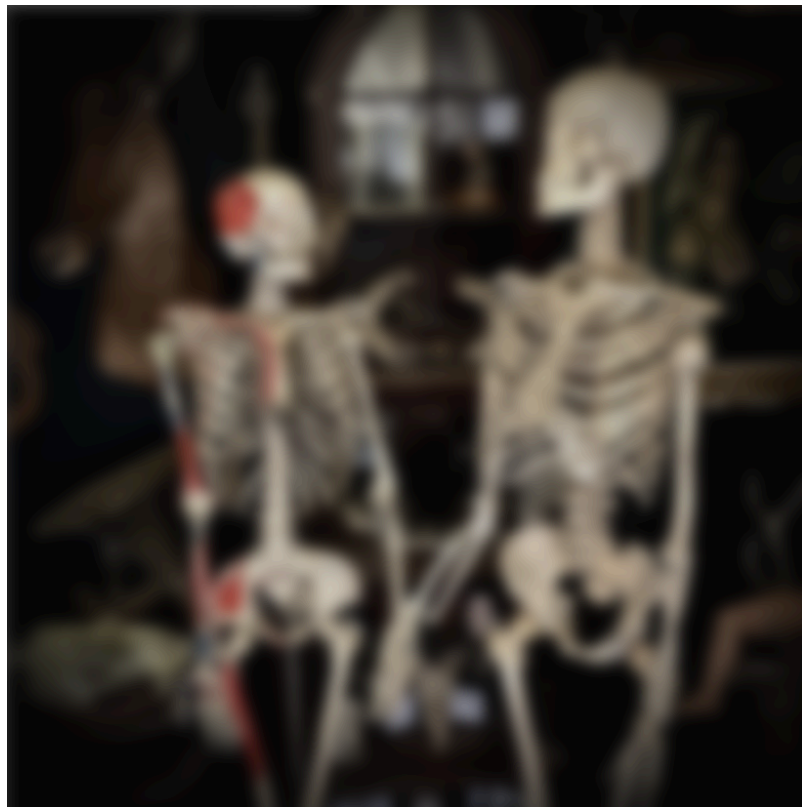
Collectors of human remains are not new, but the venue of their trade is. There are hundreds of listings for body parts on Facebook, where skulls can go for anywhere between \$1,000 and \$1,800 and spines for \$700. On Instagram, eBay, TikTok, and Etsy, too, sellers use simple alternative words to evade being caught, using terms like “noggin” for “skull” and “hooman” for “human.”

(Meta and TikTok did not respond to requests for comment on the trade. An eBay spokesperson says: “The sale of human body parts, and items containing human body parts, is prohibited on eBay. We have block filter algorithms in place aimed at preventing items that breach our policies from being listed on site. Additionally, we have security teams proactively monitoring the site to remove any items that may

evade our filters.” An Etsy spokesperson says that “standalone substances from human bodies, or items made from human anatomical waste, biohazardous material, or body parts, except for teeth, fingernails, and hair are prohibited on Etsy.”)

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The trade is so rampant because the legal framework to regulate it is so patchy. In Europe, laws on selling or owning human remains are different for each country, and in the U.S. it depends on the state. Most places have laws to deal with medical-grade tissue and organs for transplant. But when it comes to buying and selling body parts as collectibles, legislation is a lot looser. It’s easy for unscrupulous sellers to disguise recent remains—which are generally considered illegal to sell—as historical remains, which are often allowed to be traded.



Human skeletons and animal skulls can be found in Scragg's shop.

Earlier this year in Massachusetts, Denise Lodge, the wife of the former manager of the Harvard Medical School's morgue, Cedric Lodge, pleaded guilty to selling and trafficking stolen human body parts that her husband had allegedly taken from his

work. Cedric Lodge has pleaded not guilty and is awaiting trial. In 2023, in Colorado, the funeral-home owner Megan Hess was sentenced to 20 years in prison for dissecting and selling the body parts of 560 corpses without family consent.

Shawn Graham, a Canadian archaeologist, has been tracking the human-remains trade online since 2017. He's logged tens of thousands of examples of remains being sold through mainstream Web sites, and he is concerned about their provenance. "[The remains that] are being bought and sold are typically not white people," says Graham. "They're going to come from communities that really didn't have much say about their own bodies in life, let alone death."

Graham acknowledges that archeologists and oddities collectors have similar interests. But he suggests that collectors are ethically problematic, removing the humanity and dignity from their artifacts by turning them into "things." For the collectors "it's about creating stories of adventure and conquest and control," Graham says, explaining that there's usually an exotic—and often false—story attached to the sales of remains.

While Graham says that eBay has done a good job of policing its site, much of the trade is finalized through messaging apps. Similarly, public forums offer a vast array of tips on how to get bones accepted by shipping companies (UPS, DHL, and FedEx will not knowingly accept them, although the U.S.P.S. will, primarily for cremated remains) by disguising them as Halloween decorations.

Damien Huffer, an osteoarchaeologist (one who studies archaeological human remains) living in Australia, had been researching the trade in human remains for four years before meeting Graham; the pair now work as a team. The fact that these purchases are so accessible without needing to use the dark Web is partly why the market has exploded in size, and he is concerned that the boom in bones is leading collectors to engage in illegal practices. "We see photos of bones for sale where they look recently dug up. It's clear to see tool marks or fresh dirt on the bones," says Huffer.



Scragg hopes the items he sells “invoke curiosity.”

Graham and Huffer share their knowledge with local authorities so that deliveries can be intercepted or the sellers investigated, but it’s often the case that local law enforcement is unable to distinguish a recent bone from a “historical” one.

“Legislation in these sectors of crime has not caught up,” says Huffer. “It’s become a gray space, which is why so much activity continues to slip through the cracks, because so many law-enforcement agents can’t do anything about it.”

But it’s a trade that’s increasingly coming into public view. In 2023, the anthropology department of the University of California, Berkeley, was discovered to be using bones that were of Native American origin as teaching aids. It is a federal crime to possess Native American human remains under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990. It was estimated that the university held the remains of some 9,000 Indigenous people, most of which are now being returned to their tribes. That same year, they issued an apology: “The university’s failures to repatriate ancestral remains and sacred objects in a timely manner has been both highly disrespectful and harmful to native American peoples and native nations.”

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Huffer agrees that human remains that have been seized by police should be returned to descendants, but he acknowledges that many will never be able to be reconnected to a source. “In those cases, contrary to what collectors might tell you, I’d like to see such remains actually return to medical/anthropological teaching programs, with students required to learn about the history of the bone trade as well.”

Graham and Huffer shy away from using the term “raising awareness” about their work because they feel there is virtually no awareness of the trade in the first place. They prefer to say that they “educate” people about an industry that most know nothing about, or would prefer not to acknowledge. “You can collect Beanie Babies or Transformers without all of the dignity-stripping, problematic, and law-breaking actions that are required to get remains onto the market and in people’s collections,” says Huffer.



Scragg makes up to \$13,000 a month selling items such as these.

But it's a hard sell. The journalist and author Scott Carney, whose book *The Red Market* documented the illegal trade in human organs for transplant, thinks the moral issues of the curiosities trade are dwarfed by the rest of the market. "Reselling markets are not as pressing as the illegal skin-graft, blood, and kidney markets. People are being killed for this in 2024," says Carney. "Curio resellers are shocking, but ... people weren't suffering in order to be killed for their bones."

Similarly, for collectors like Scragg such ethical arguments do not hold much water. The beauty of curiosities, Scragg says, is that they "invoke curiosity. Each item is like a key that unlocks cultures." What culture the preserved penis he has floating in a glass jar unlocks is uncertain; indeed, Scragg's human-leather wallet, which he says comes "from somewhere they process bodies for universities," might seem to run afoul of the U.K.'s Human Tissue Act, which forbids the removal, storage, or use of human body parts for a purpose that was not previously consented to.

It doesn't seem to worry Scragg, who often gets the authorities turning up at his shop. "I've had to explain the Human Tissue Act to the police quite a few times when people have sent them down to look at my shop," says Scragg. "The police never know the laws." Scragg says that they are usually fascinated to hear about his work; he gives them a cup of tea, and they leave happy.

As for Scragg's own body, he has started investing in it, recently replacing his canine teeth with gold fangs to make his skull more valuable. "When I die, I'm hoping someone like my friends or my little one would sell what's left," he says.

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*Elizabeth McCafferty is a freelance journalist and broadcaster.*

Photos: @instagram/curiositiesfromthe5thcorner (Scraggs; shop, all)