

Human remains, heritage and ethics: What are the challenges for museum professionals?

Tuesday 3 June 2025 - 6pm-8.30pm (CEST)

On digital platform (Zoom)

About the evening

In 2023, several British museums announced a change in terminology: the British Museum, the National Museums of Scotland and the Great North Museum in Newcastle decided to refer to 'mummified remains of ...' or 'mummified person', moving away from the hitherto used term 'mummy' in favour of expressions deemed more respectful and intended to refer to people rather than objects. Far from being anecdotal, this semantic change reveals the questions that museum professionals have to face when it comes to managing what are commonly known as 'human remains', such a specific category within the items they are responsible for.

Many museums today are concerned with the management of human remains, and the subject is vast. Museums of anthropology, science, history, fine art, archaeology or even contemporary art, because they preserve fossils, bone fragments, mummified bodies, reliquaries, hair souvenirs or works of art including materials of human origin, to name but a few examples, are faced with this issue, which is situated at a legal crossroads. In France, the legal framework is complex and several regimes apply: the Civil Code, the Criminal Code, the General Code on the Property of Public Persons, the Heritage Code, and the Public Health Code (via the bioethics laws), etc.

While the law passed in France on 26 December 2023 concerning the restitution of human remains of foreign individuals deceased after 1500 belonging to public collections, has recently enabled the return of 3 Sakalava skulls to Madagascar, we felt it was important to revisit this subject, which presents a certain legal complexity, coupled with strong ethical issues.

The presence of human remains in the collections under our care entails our responsibility as museum professionals, in different fields of intervention, from documentation to presentation to the public, including conservation-restoration. It requires us to rethink the entire traditional heritage chain, and to rethink the meaning and ethics of 'conservation', 'study', 'restoration' and 'exhibition'. All of our professional practices need to be adapted in order to find the most respectful responses to the sensitivities of the public and the singularity of these 'collections', whether identified or anonymous, if the term 'collections' can even be judiciously used.

Émilie Girard, Chair of ICOM France, May 2025