

The Harvard Crimson

New Exhibit Explores History and Science of Human Dissection

By Emma C. Cobb, CRIMSON STAFF WRITER March 7, 2014



A poster of the human skeletal system hangs at the Body of Knowledge display in Science Center 251. The exhibition, which focuses on the history of human anatomy, runs until Dec. 5, 2014.

The Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments, which boasts objects collected by departments across the University, launched a new exhibit about the study of human anatomy and dissection at the second floor Science Center exhibit area Thursday evening.

The exhibit, entitled “The Body of Knowledge,” explores the preparation of a human body for dissection, the dissection procedure, and the material culture left behind following the dissection.

“There is an enduring fascination with the human body that has lasted for centuries,” said David S. Jones, a History of Science professor who was involved in the creation of the exhibit, at its opening. “By coming to this exhibit, you are participating in that preoccupation.”

The exhibit, which features preserved organs, skeletons, and at least one full human head, examines the history of human anatomy and dissection not only in the medical field but also in other parts of society throughout history.

Many of the displayed objects, including a large skull that had been used for the past 100 years to teach anatomy, were donated by the Warren Anatomical Museum at the Harvard Medical School. The Warren Museum worked with the large curatorial group that constructed the exhibit.

“We’re looking at the way anatomy was practiced and remembered,” said Cara K. Fallon, a graduate student in the History of Science Department who collaborated with other graduate students and curators to put the collection together in the past year.

In addition to human body parts, the exhibit includes a variety of anatomical models and historical objects. Visitors can walk through a recreation of the Leiden anatomical theater—a 17th century amphitheater that witnessed some of the earliest scientific dissections of humans—as well as a display of objects such as the game Operation that convey the material legacy of human dissection.

Visitors can learn more about 31 features on display by making use of an interactive online gallery guide created by Cira Louise Brown, a Tufts graduate student who was awarded for her work on the exhibit.

Jones said that he hopes that the exhibit inspires curiosity and an “emotional response” from visitors. He added that he understands the difficulty that visitors may have when viewing human bodies on display and welcomes people to question their beliefs regarding the display of human specimens, though he stands by the decision to show them.

“Human bodies need to be treated with respect, but they can also serve a variety of purposes for humanity,” Jones said.

The exhibit will be on display until Dec. 5.