WHEN MUSEUMS TACKLE TOUGH TOPICS

NEW PUBLIC PROGRAMS FOSTER COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

By Kate Quinn
An Egyptian skull from the Morton Cranial Collection at the Penn Museum. The 19th-century collection attracts modern researchers studying human biological variation.
The Penn Museum’s Building Transformation Campaign works on more than one register—as it transforms its physical space and presents its collection in a dramatically different and relevant way, our Museum will also transform the ways it invites visitors to engage with the remarkable collections that tell the story of our common human history.

At the heart of this approach, we have begun to explore public program formats that provide a forum for discussion on topics inspired by the collection. A 2016 Public Classroom series on the controversial topics of race and science, inspired by our Morton Collection of Human Crania and funded by The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, is a recent example.

Studying Human Skulls
The Morton Cranial Collection, assembled by Samuel George Morton in the 19th century, is one of the most famous collections of human skulls in the world, numbering 1,225 carefully prepared and labeled crania. Morton was a well-known, Philadelphia physician and natural scientist, best known for his measurement and analysis of human skulls, which he gathered from all over the world through his extensive network of colleagues. He is now remembered as the father of scientific racism. Morton’s work on categorizing human skulls by cranial capacity or brain size was used to justify early Western arguments for slavery and racial inequality.

Since coming to the Penn Museum in the 1960s, the unique composition of the Morton Collection as a comparative set—illustrating human biological variation in the skull from the early to middle 19th century—has made it invaluable for research, with hundreds of

Samuel Morton divided his cranial collection into distinct categories. This categorization played a part in racial designations still used today.

Dr. Janet Monge answers a question from the audience. The Public Classroom presented attendees with an opportunity to ask questions of world-renowned race and science experts.
Examining the Past

ABOVE: Attendees to the Public Classroom interacted with a selection of skulls from the Morton Collection in a facilitated collections workshop. RIGHT: Paul Wolff Mitchell, graduate student in Anthropology, presents 18th- and 19th-century racial theories to Classroom participants.

researchers requesting permission to visit the collection and use the CT scan data we have derived from it.

The Morton Collection also seemed invaluable as a public engagement tool—a catalyst for discussion on the timely and deeply important topics of race and science. Kate Quinn, Director of Exhibitions and Public Programs, and Dr. Janet Monge, Associate Curator-in-Charge and Keeper of Collections, Physical Anthropology Section, explored a number of ways to present the collection before arriving at the “Public Classroom” program format, presented in Fall 2016.

Tackling Sensitive Subjects

The Public Classroom: Science and Race—History, Use, and Abuse advanced the Penn Museum’s mission to transform understanding of the human experience more so than any other public program offered in recent years. By tackling this sensitive topic, one that is not commonly discussed in programs presented by cultural organizations, the Museum provided public audiences from diverse educational levels with a powerful opportunity to examine their beliefs about race, science, and justice. An internationally recognized group of over 25 experts from various academic backgrounds led the audience in examining and transforming their understanding of race over the course of five public classes from September 21, 2016 to November 16, 2016 that were also live-streamed.

“The things we have buried long and deep into the earth and that we have forgotten or that we wish wouldn’t reappear are now reappearing. And I think we should think about that...because clearly burying our sentiments does not make them go away. They do fester and bubble over.”

—Christen Smith, Ph.D., speaker in the “Violence and Race” class, Assistant Professor of Anthropology and African and African Diaspora Studies, University of Texas at Austin.
“To be in a space where you can really get people to think a little bit differently about what they take for granted vis-à-vis race is a good thing, and I believe museums are the perfect context for that kind of self-conscious and purposeful investigation of the subject.”
—John L. Jackson, Ph.D.

“The questions that came directly from the audience commentary at the end of each discussion panel challenged me on a number of levels. One of the audience participants said: ‘Why do white folks hate black folks? This is what we talk about around the dinner table. How can you help me answer that question?’ In that moment, I realized the limits of my own ability to effectively address that question. Still, I think that anything that opens up discussions on race on all kinds of levels, is going to be the most effective tool in dealing with race and racism as folks witness it in their everyday lives.”
—Janet Monge, Ph.D.

Public Evening Classes
Our goal was to provide discussion tools for families and teachers to help in examining beliefs about race, science, and justice in a series of five free evening classes, for those aged 14 and up, on the topics of the history of race and science; biomedicine and race; genetics and race; geography, culture, and race; and violence and race. Each class began with an overview taught by a Penn graduate student and a workshop highlighting skeletal remains from the Morton Collection, followed by a panel discussion, with moderators from public radio WHYY and African American talk radio WURD. All sessions ended with audience interaction. Discussions on race were presented through the lenses of anthropology, biology, genetics, sociology, philosophy, economics, criminology, and law.

Penn’s Camra Initiative, an interdisciplinary collective of researchers and educators committed to participatory, experimental media-making, engaging in projects and workshops that use multimodal representation to push knowledge production in new directions, partnered with the Museum to create a short documentary film that was based on the classes. This film, broken into five chapters, was presented in the event “When Museums Tackle Tough Topics: Race, Science, and the Penn Museum” in May 2017.

A Growing Audience
The five classes and film event drew 704 attendees into the Museum, many of whom had never been to an event

Participants in each class were given worksheets providing a glossary for terminology used in the classes, relevant articles on the topics, and blank notecards for questions.
The Public Classroom @ Penn Museum: Science and Race—History, Use, and Abuse was organized by Kate Quinn, Director of Exhibitions and Public Programs and Dr. Janet Monge, Associate Curator-in-Charge and Keeper of Collections, Physical Anthropology Section. Assistance was provided by Dr. Deborah Thomas, R. Jean Brownlee Term Professor of Anthropology; and Dr. John Jackson, Richard Perry University Professor and Dean of the School of Social Policy & Practice, both at the University of Pennsylvania. Arjun Shankar, Ph.D., Post-doctoral Fellow, School of Social Policy and Practice, led the film team. A feature-length film is planned for release in 2018.

KATE QUINN is Director of Exhibitions and Public Programs at the Penn Museum.

“In a context in which discussions of race, racial discrimination, and anti-black state violence were dominating the headlines, we sought to engage people in thoughtful discourse about the history behind contemporary issues, and the various ways in which this history manifests...

The classrooms were simultaneously provocative, illuminating, and moving as different audience members shared their perspectives, questions, and ideas. This is just the sort of programming that will build the Museum as a space for public conversation on vexing issues.”

—Deborah Thomas, Ph.D.