Bog Bodies on Display

Heather Gill-Robinson

ABSTRACT
Although bog bodies are on permanent display in Europe, recently several of these bodies were brought to Canada for the first time, as part of the exhibition “The Mysterious Bog People: Rituals and Sacrifice in Ancient Europe”. Though the same exhibition had run in Hanover, Germany without incident, less than a week after the exhibition opened at the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa, it faced sharp criticism for the public display of human remains. This paper is an exploration of public perceptions of the temporary display of bog bodies in Canada and a permanent display in northern Germany.

Keywords: BOG BODIES, MUSEUMS, EUROPE, CANADA, ETHICS

Introduction
There are approximately twenty bog bodies from peat on display in museums in northwestern Europe. Many of these bodies have been on display for decades, often since their excavation and conservation. In 2002, for the first time, several bog bodies were brought to Canada as part of the special exhibition “The Mysterious Bog People”. This paper is a discussion of some of the issues surrounding the display of bog bodies in Europe and Canada.

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Hva bør jeg vurdere før han ble involvert i Leilighet Fremleie?
Bog bodies in Canada

“The Mysterious Bog People” is a large traveling exhibition formed through the cooperative international partnership of four museums: Drents Museum of Assen in the Netherlands; the Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum of Hanover, Germany; the Canadian Museum of Civilization of Gatineau, Canada and the Glenbow Museum of Calgary, Canada. Entirely curated in Europe, the exhibition consists of more than 400 artefacts from bog sites in northwestern Europe, as well as seven preserved ancient bodies. The primary focus of the exhibition is to present the artefacts and bodies as evidence of votive offerings to sacred wetland sites. This exhibition is unique and has identified important goals:

“…it is the first time that the important bog finds will be brought together on a major North American-European collaborative scale. It will bring an appreciation to all visitors, but especially in North America, of the uniqueness of the bogs of North-western Europe and the need to preserve these sacred landscapes and their archaeological treasures” (Bergen et al. 2002, 5).

Although there is no law against the display of archaeological human remains in Canada, it is generally not an acceptable practice. Much of the archaeology in Canada is linked to the heritage of First Nations groups and it may be offensive to the indigenous groups to display the physical remains of their ancestors. Canadian museums, in general, no longer include human remains in any exhibition about First Nations groups and they are careful to ensure that all human remains are shown in an appropriate and respectful manner. During preparations for the “Mysterious Bog People” exhibition, the views of First Nations and other interested groups were taken into consideration as part of the planning. Megan Williams, National Director of the Canadian Conference of the Arts, believes that “…there’s been a lot more sensitivity of this issue in North America because Aboriginal people have sensitized us” (Schmidt 2002, A10). Dr. David Morrison, of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, noted “…it was a sensitivity issue we kept in mind as we designed the exhibit… the human remains are in there because they are part of the story. In fact, it’s the apex of the story” (Schmidt 2002, A10). As part of the planning for the exhibition, several meetings were held with interest groups to ensure that the exhibition would appropriately presented.

The exhibition opened in Canada at the Canadian Museum of Civilization early in December 2002. Within a few days of the opening to the public, the media reported negative public perceptions of the display of the bog bodies as part of the exhibition. One comment in particular from Megan Williams was reprinted nationally: “…what I think is what a lot of people think, that exhibiting human remains is really despicable. It is disrespectful of the dead” (Gessel 2002). Ms. Williams was speaking not in her role as National Director of a Canadian arts organization, but as an independent individual. It is likely that many others agree with Ms. William’s comments, although many of these people will neither attend the exhibition nor publicly express their opinions. The primary issue seems to relate not to the study of the human remains from the past, but to their display in public as part of a museum exhibition.

In response to the negative perceptions presented in the media, the Canadian Museums
Association produced an Advocacy Alert Statement on the Ethical Standards for the Display of Human Remains. In that statement the Canadian Museums Association asserted their unqualified support for the exhibition: “The CMA supports the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec, and its partners in the current exhibition, The Mysterious Bog People. The CMA believes they have followed ethical guidelines for this exhibition in a sensitive and professional manner” (Canadian Museums Association 2002).

Other comments about the exhibition that have appeared in press or on websites are highly variable. The Pagan News, an internet site for those with links to organized Paganism, stated, “What is undeniable, though underplayed, in the exhibition is the fact that throughout Europe, scores of well preserved human bodies have been unearthed. Apparently bogs were used as cemeteries, though perhaps not always for the most honorable of ancestors” (Heart LeFay 2003). Unfortunately, the writers of this review appear to have grossly misinterpreted the exhibition, both ignoring the substantial collection of archaeologically valuable artefacts and inaccurately reporting the use of bogs as cemeteries and the interment of bodies in bogs as a common cultural practice. Another review from the Calgary Sun, a Canadian newspaper, suggested that “if you have a weak stomach then skip this one …” (Anonymous 2003). Conversely, the exhibition was voted “one of the Top 100 events in North America during the coming year by the American Bus Association (ABA)” (Anonymous n.d.).

While some in Canada may have taken issue with the display of human remains as part of a museum exhibition, others were offended not by the exhibition itself, but by the substantial marketing that accompanied the exhibition. A wide range of souvenirs was available in the gift shop following the exhibition at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. These souvenirs included tote bags, posters, pen and paper holders, pens, books and, to the horror of some, T-shirts – all with the image of Yde girl, a Dutch bog body who was used in the promotion of the exhibition. On the book cover, a picture of the reconstructed head of Yde girl is used, but for all other merchandise the body is presented as she can be seen today, in a state of partial preservation.

The T-shirts, in particular, proved a contentious element of the presentation and marketing of the exhibition. The Ottawa Citizen commented that it was believed “…there would be no tasteless souvenirs sold in the museum gift shop. T-shirts displaying images of rotting corpses apparently passed the taste test and are on sale” (Gessel 2002). Available in two colours, black and olive green, the T-shirt displays the head and shoulders of the Yde girl as she can be seen today. Although the term “rotting corpse” is somewhat misleading and very negative, it suggests a particularly strong feeling of opposition to the use of the image of a bog body in this manner. In Europe, where bog bodies are part of permanent museum displays, it is common to be able to purchase more subdued souvenirs – postcards, books and pamphlets or posters, but T-shirts would not be considered appropriate.

In June of 2003 the Canadian Museum of Civilization confirmed attendance at the exhibition at over 150,000 visitors. The vast majority of comments received about the exhibition have been positive and very few have expressed reservations about the display of human remains as part of the exhibition. The exhibition moved to a second Canadian museum before returning to Europe with venues in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.
Bog bodies in Germany

Bog bodies are on permanent display in several museums in Europe. The Archäologisches Landesmuseum at Schloß Gottorf in Schleswig, northern Germany, has a collection of six bog bodies, four of which are on permanent display as part of the Iron Age exhibition at the museum. As part of the bog body display the Archäologisches Landesmuseum has placed a comment box in the exhibit room, near the bog bodies. The comment box allows the museum to undertake an on-going project of monitoring, responding to and reviewing visitor comments. Although visitors are free to write any comment they wish, three questions are posted on the comment box to direct visitor response to specific concerns. These questions are:

1. What is your opinion of this exhibition?
2. Do you think that it is right that these bog bodies are exhibited here?
3. What did you make of, or learn from, your experience?

All of the responses are collected daily and collated weekly, monthly and annually and, where possible, the comments are separated into those from adult visitors and those from children.

The data included here is part of a long-term project to analyze the public perceptions of the display of the bog bodies at Schloß Gottorf. Based on data collected between October 2000 and September 2001 and collated in September 2001 by Thomas Brock, an intern at Schloß Gottorf, visitor response to the bog bodies on display is generally positive. Visitors made a total of 907 written comments during this time period. Of these, 746 (82.25%) were from children or adolescents, while the remaining 161 comments (17.75%) were contributed by adults. Out of the three questions listed above, the second question is the most directly linked to public perceptions of the display. From the data, a total of 318 comments addressed that specific issue. The responses are presented in Table 1.

General comments are also included in the responses from members of the public. These comments are both positive and negative and examples from both perspectives are included here.

“I think it is good that the bog bodies are here, since death is a natural and proper part of life.”

“I find that the bodies are reverently exhibited – not sensationalistically. The dark atmosphere and the manner in which the corpse is covered with the peat is very dignified. I was pleased that my child could see something so valuable.”

“The bog bodies have found themselves in a false place. They should be left where they were found…. It is a question of morals and ethics, less of science. The bog bodies are only a sensationalized representation of death.”

“The question is this: how long do humans remain inviolable? …Unfortunately, even cen-

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<th>Response</th>
<th>Children/Adolescents</th>
<th>Adults</th>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>246</td>
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Table 1. Public response to the question “Do you think it is right that these bog bodies are exhibited here?”, separated by age of respondents (collated September 2001)
turies or millennia after death [people] remain in the service of science.”

“I think this is **** (expletive deleted), that the bog bodies are exploited only to earn money.”

Addressing the concerns of the public

Although there seem to be few problems with the display of bog bodies, and other archaeological human remains, in Europe, there appears to be a higher level of public concern for these displays in North America. It is important to consider how to address the public concerns in preparation for future exhibitions or modifications to existing displays.

First and foremost it is essential to be prepared to both acknowledge and address the concerns of the public and ensure that they are not dismissed as irrelevant or unimportant. One way to do this is to provide as much information as possible during the planning stage and throughout the exhibition so that visitors and potential visitors are fully aware of the meaning and purpose of what they are viewing. As part of this it is important to be aware the role of media in the presentation of the exhibition. Throughout the planning and design stages it is important to seek public opinion and design exhibitions with cultural sensitivity and a high standard of ethics. Where possible, follow established guidelines of professional associations.

Finally, no matter how much planning and consultation is undertaken, there will be some people who will be unwilling to attend the exhibition for any reason. It is impossible to guarantee that all parties concerned will be unconditionally accepting of the exhibition.

Conclusion

Although bog bodies have been on permanent display in European museums for decades, in 2002 the first exhibition in Canada to include bog bodies offered an opportunity for comparison of public perceptions of the display of these human remains in Canada and in Europe. It was anticipated that strong public reaction against the bog bodies in Canada would exist; only limited negative public opinion has been voiced. The aspect of the exhibition that has caused the greatest public opposition is not the display of the bog bodies, but the commercialization of the exhibition through souvenirs such as T-shirts. The exhibition of a collection of bog bodies at a museum in northern Germany has led to little public opposition, although not all comments received by the museum have been favourable.

In general, the display of preserved human remains is an issue of sensitivity in North America, possibly as a result of the awareness of issues surrounding First Nations remains in Canada and Native American human remains in the United States. The Mysterious Bog People exhibition was, however, well received at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. The best way to avoid any potential conflict or public opposition is through careful planning, education and sensitivity to local cultural situations.
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References


