

*Real people are preserved and revealed in museum show*

**StarTribune.com** MINNEAPOLIS -ST. PAUL MINNESOTA Last update: April 29, 2006 -9:26 PM

## **Real people are preserved and revealed in museum show**

A controversial Science Museum exhibit of human cadavers has caused some to raise questions about death and respect for the dead.

Josephine Marcotty, Star Tribune

PHILADELPHIA -It was almost like being in church.

Even teenagers were hushed by the sight of the skinless bodies displayed like sculptures in Philadelphia's cavernous Franklin Institute.

A leaping man with his backbone dangling behind him. An 8-month fetus curled up inside the reclining figure of its mother. A brain darkened by Alzheimer's disease.

"That is cra-a-a-zee," the teens whispered as they walked past one extraordinary specimen after another.

This is Body Worlds, an exhibit created by German anatomist Gunther von Hagens that opens Friday for a four-month run at the Science Museum of Minnesota. The plastic-infused cadavers present for public viewing what had been the exclusive purview of doctors and medical students --a glimpse of what lies beneath the skin, in breathtaking detail.

The exhibit, von Hagens says, is "the democratization of anatomy."

### **Magnet for controversy**

But his creations have been a magnet for controversy, including questions about whether he acquired all of the bodies ethically. Some critics revile his work as desecration of the human body and accuse him of using cadavers as art. In Europe, von Hagens has been called "Dr. Death." His harshest critics compare him to Josef Mengele, the Nazi scientist concentration-camp victims called "the Angel of Death."

Nevertheless, his exhibits --three Body Worlds are now traveling the globe --are hugely popular in Europe and the United States. At the end of their runs in Los Angeles and Chicago, crowds were so large that museums kept their doors open 24 hours a day. And there are now eight copycat shows.

The appeal of Body Worlds, many say, goes beyond anatomy. The figures' lifelike poses are like mirror images of the people who gaze at them, von Hagens said. "The body talks to them" he said in a telephone interview, adding, "I close the distance between life and death."

### **Donated their bodies**

The figures, about two dozen in all, are all deceased people who donated their bodies to von Hagens. Minnesota Science Museum officials made certain of that by sending an attorney to check the death certificates against the donor documentation at von Hagen's plastination center in Heidelberg, Germany. Other museums have done the same thing since the California Science Center hosted the first Body Worlds exhibit in 2004.

The pregnant woman and fetus were a particular concern, said Michael Day, a senior vice president for the science museum.

"We wanted to make sure it was her baby," he said. The donors are all anonymous, a legal and ethical requirement for virtually all scientific body donations. But because reaction to the pregnant woman is so intense, it is the only plastinate figure for which Body Worlds provides background information.

She became pregnant after she was diagnosed with a fatal illness. Neither she nor her fetus survived, according to information provided at the exhibit in Philadelphia. "Her husband transported her body to Heidelberg," Day said.

The figures are preserved through a process von Hagens invented in the 1970s called plastination. The cadavers are embalmed, then the water in their bodies is replaced with plastic, a painstaking process. The end result is "spectacular," said Anthony Weinhaus, an assistant professor of physiology at the University of Minnesota. "I'm staggered by the opportunity to see anatomy in that detail."

Yet for many the exhibit is unsettling. "These were once real human beings, flesh of our flesh, bone of our bones," said Paul Wojda, an associate professor of theology at the University of St. Thomas, and a member of the science museum's advisory committee for Body Worlds. "Is a proper respect being displayed here? And quite honestly, reasonable people are going to come to different conclusions."

They certainly did in Europe --especially in Germany, where memories of the human experiments at Nazi concentration camps have not subsided. When the show opened there in the mid-1990s, leaders of the Jewish Congregation of Berlin compared Von Hagens' work to the Nazi atrocity of turning victims' skin into lamp shades. Munich officials banned him from their city in 2003.

In the United States, von Hagens' exhibits have drawn intense media coverage, some of it critical, but no public protests. Von Hagens said he understands why history has made his work controversial in his home country. Germans "are very sensitive to corpses and the human body," he said. "When Germans hear 'corpse,' they think of concentration camps."

But he does not object to the controversy --in fact, he courts it. He sent his figures on a bus through the streets of Berlin and posed them in coffee shops. In London, he defied authorities and conducted an autopsy before a paying audience at an art gallery. But he has vigorously denied allegations that he acquires cadavers unethically or illegally. That included claims that surfaced two years ago that he has used bodies of executed Chinese prisoners. German prosecutors investigated and found he had done nothing illegal. von Hagens also won a legal injunction against Der Spiegel, the German magazine that first published some of the allegations.

### **No shortage of donors**

He has also denied reports linking his plastination facility to a scandal involving a forensics official in Novosibirsk, Russia, who was convicted of illegally providing bodies to a medical facility. Prosecutors questioned whether some of the bodies were destined for von Hagen's plastination lab, but he was never accused of wrongdoing. He was also cleared by German prosecutors in a similar investigation involving bodies from Kyrgestan.

Von Hagens has no shortage of donors. About 6,800 people have signed their bodies over to him since 1982, he said; 350 of them have died and had their wishes fulfilled. Minnesotans will have the opportunity to sign up for his donation program this week when the exhibit opens at the ( Science Museum.

"It is highly dignifying to fulfill the wish of people to become body donors," von Hagens said, "and to plastinate according to their will."

Josephine Marcotty .612-673-7394

@2006 Star Tribune. All rights reserved.