

Face to Face: Hidden Histories



Drawings of the Skull Room: Artwork by Jude Joseph

The University of Edinburgh's collection of over 1,700 skulls is held in a room underneath the Anatomical Museum. It is used for teaching purposes but is not open to the public. In 2023, students on the MScR Collections and Curating Practices programme organised the *Face to Face* project which aims to foster discussion, connecting the collection to decolonial thought and struggle while seeking to humanise and bring some dignity to the remains.

As well as a public dialogue, *Face to Face* includes a revision of specific labels in the Anatomical Museum which provide insight into the 'hidden histories' of the remains on display.

A History of the University of Edinburgh's Skull Collection

1720-1859

Monro Series were collected by Professors of Anatomy Alexander Monro Primus, Secundus and Tertius.

1880-1884

The skull room is built by architect Robert Rowand Anderson most likely under the instruction of Sir William Turner.

1909-1948

The Robinson Series was collected by Professor of Anatomy Arthur Robinson.

1947

The first recorded repatriation is completed (to Ceylon, present day Sri Lanka)

1990s-2000s

Several hundred skulls returned to Australia and New Zealand

1867-1916

The Turner Series, one of the most populous series, was collected by Sir William Turner. The official skull collection begins

1890s

The Henderson Trust Series was gifted to the University after the Phrenological Society of Edinburgh is dissolved.

1931-1958

The Brash Series was collected by Professor of Anatomy James Couper Brash.

1990

Official Repatriation policy is adopted by the University

2019

Nine skulls taken from Sri Lanka were returned to the Wanniyalaeto Vedda.

The Skull Collection was officially created by Sir William Turner in approximately 1867. He held many positions at the University, including Professor of Anatomy, and later, Principal. He most likely helped design the display cabinets used to house the remains with the architect Robert Rowand Anderson in the 1880s. These were built according to a cataloguing system that was informed by discredited and offensive ideas from so called 'racial science'.

