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Unbundled: European Collecting of Andean Mummies 1850-1930

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Propositions to accompany the defense of “Unbundled. European Collecting of Andean Mummies 1850-1930” by María Patricia Ordoñez Alvarez.

- 1) Though every collection in each museum is different, they are the result of a global change in the way culture is perceived, and as such can be compared and discussed outside of the specific museum to which they belong.
- 2) The collecting of Andean mummies in European collections is not isolated, it needs to be considered as a part of the commerce of antiquities from South America that intensifies after independence, and that is still taking place.
- 3) Though the timeframes of collecting point to historically significant moments and motivations, the spread of where these remains were collected can certainly help reinforce or reject those temporary links. Not only do they convey areas of interaction for collecting, but these locations of collecting also point to routes of trade in objects and ideas. These ideas are reinforced by local intellectuals, and by the continuous visit to the same places that are deemed fruitful for researchers.
- 4) Mummy attires, especially textiles, are the most common components of a mummy that are either added or removed. They are also the best way to contextualize remains that do not have a clear provenience.
- 5) The majority of collectors of mummies are travelers from Europe to the Americas, however, lumping them all together under the same category diminishes the complexity of their travels. The veracity of their claims and the authenticity of the information provided with the mummies should still be taken with healthy skepticism, more so in the case of private sellers or sponsored scientific collectors, as their bending of the truth may have served their economic intentions – and we are not privy to those through documentary evidence.
- 6) What is collected in Europe does not always represent the most interesting mummies discovered to date. In that regard, museums in Latin America have benefited from larger assemblages and better organized materials.
- 7) Because of the particular obscure place that mummies have had in the collections researched, there is no systematic approach that can be used to look for a representation of the Andes in the way the mummies are now exhibited or stored.
- 8) The issues of repatriation of human remains not exhibited or researched needs to be assessed collection by collection and in coordination with probable source countries. Nevertheless, the number of mummies without a provenance, and the outstanding number of mummies in South American may result in a lot of this collections remaining where they are.
- 9) The use of medical imaging of mummies is only now beginning to be explored for mummy collections in Europe. It is important to emphasize that they are not only relevant for examination of the remains but also to create engaging tools for the public, that do not expose the remains themselves on exhibition rooms.
- 10) Working among the dead may be challenging in many ways, but the peace and solemnity that comes with mummy work allows for reflection and concentrated work. *Memento mori*.
- 11) In life as in death, dogs – or their mummies- are the best companions.