

## **BONY STORIES**

JOHN LE GRAND

*Groningen University Museum, the Netherlands*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 2003 the Museum of Anatomy merged with the University Museum in Groningen after nearly 100 years of independence.



Museum of  
Anatomy in  
Groningen

For nearly 20 years, I worked for the department of Anatomy as a prosector as well as a curator, in the ratio of 4 to 1, which says something about the importance of the preservation of cultural heritage according to managers, but let us not look back in anger – when I started in the Museum of Anatomy in 1980 we had 203 visitors per year and at the time of closing down in 2003 it was an estimated number of 4000 per year. I moved with the collection as a dowry to the University Museum. This removal was a precarious undertaking, and fortunately all objects survived the relocation.

The anatomical collection of the Groningen University is a very special one: the oldest preparations date from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and were collected by Petrus Camper (1722–1789), a famous and universal scientist during the Enlightenment who lived and worked in Groningen for 10 years.



Petrus Camper  
(1722–1789)

During the reign of King William I, a reorganisation of Universities and their collections took place. An extensive collection of Pieter de Riemer (1769–1831), a scientist from The Hague, was given to the University of Groningen because the college of The Hague was shut down. Pieter de Riemer's collection is the largest (about 1000 pieces) and was documented very thoroughly in a catalogue the size of a fist. The collections consist of dry bones, preparations on spirit and wax models.



*Pieter de Riemer (1769–1831)*

One of the reasons why we are here together in Tartu is bone material and its conservation. As for the conservation, I can be very short: we keep all material climatized at a temperature of 19° and a humidity of 55%. We do not do anything else. However, the background of some of the material demands a closer look; and I would like to highlight some of the preparations.

An important discovery was made after the removal in the storage of the UM: from the cellars of the former Laboratory for Anatomy and Embryology, I had taken a number of bones that were used for (the profession of) physical anthropology, an academic study they closed down.



Human femur

These human bones were used as course material for students to recognize the different kinds of diseases they may encounter at excavations. This bone collection was labelled with numbers adhered to the bones, and I had no idea where these numbers came from or what they meant.



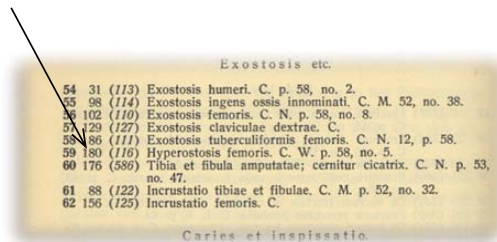
Old numbers

At the same time, I was investigating an old photo collection of an exhibition that was organised in the dissection room of the Laboratory for Anatomy and Embryology in 1939.



*Exhibition in the dissection room of the Laboratory of Anatomy and Embryology in 1939*

Of this exhibition, held to commemorate the day Petrus Camper died 150 years ago, a catalogue was printed in addition, and in this catalogue, there were extensive descriptions of the exhibited preparations, books, drawings and skeletal material.



Catalogue of the exhibition

Three kinds of numbering were used. When you translate the Latin text, you cannot but come to the conclusion that the middle numbers refer to this particular bone collection. Thanks to a Latinist of the library and anatomical knowledge, I was able to compare the translations in the catalogue with the bones. The outcome was that 24 bones had been collected by Petrus Camper and thus could be added to his collection. They might as well have been left in a dusty box in a corner and got lost for the future generation.

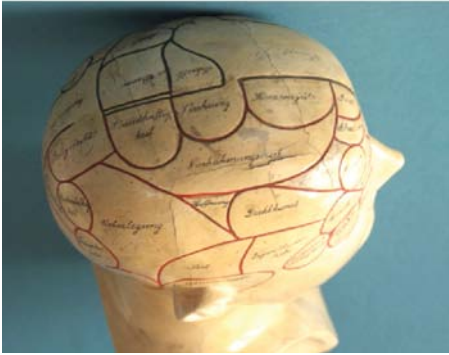
### **Phrenology**

Among the skulls that Pieter de Riemer collected, there is a select company of lunatics and criminals.



Skulls in the former Museum of Anatomy

Around 1800 the phrenology of the Austrian medical scholar Franz Joseph Gall was a real hit. In short, we can say that it was believed that there was a connection between the shape of someone's skull and his criminal disposition, intelligence and character.



Classification according to Gall



De Riemer tested this questionable theory on the skulls of dead people, whilst knowing their psychological abilities when they were still alive. During a trip through Europe, Gall was eventually caught as a fraud. On a visit to De Riemer's museum, amidst many learned professionals, he pointed at two skulls of ordinary people:

*"... at De Riemer he had chosen from some skulls that were shown to him, one of an honest bootmaker and one of a virtuous woman, that in those skulls the signs of blood lust were present, while he had not discovered those signs in the skulls of two murderers. After having indicated this, he did not want to argue about the phrenology any more, neither with De Riemer, nor with the other present gentlemen.(...)"*

De Riemer's catalogue mentions three skulls of members of the notorious gang of Zwartjesgoed. They plundered and murdered from 1798 to 1806. The Zwartjesgoed gang consisted of 18 members, a large number of women among them. The skull of a member of the gang is part of Gerardus Vrolik's collection which was probably used for educational purposes but unfortunately got lost.

Five members of this gang were condemned to the scaffold and killed by strangulation and broken on the wheel in The Hague. One woman was lashed on the garotte and condemned to 60 years of detention. In those days it was customary that anatomists could use the dead bodies of the criminals. Famous examples can be seen in paintings, like *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaas Tulp* by Rembrandt on which you can see Adriaen het Kint, a criminal who is being dissected.





The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaas Tulp by Rembrandt

Pieter de Riemer worked and lived in the Hague at that time. And finally the skulls ended in the collection of De Riemer and in the Museum of Anatomy of Groningen.

Before the display cases and preparations of the Museum of Anatomy were removed to the storage of the University Museum, we took photographs of their original position, in order to use these for a virtual website, which was launched in 2005 as a Virtual Anatomical Museum: <http://anatomie.ub.rug.nl/index.htm>



Museum of Anatomy in Groningen

These three skulls found their way to the virtual website of the former Museum of Anatomy too. Thanks to Dr. Herman de Jong, curator and head of the entomology section of the Zoological Museum in Amsterdam, who traced these skulls by surfing the Virtual Anatomical Museum (it is his hobby to try and find out everything that concerns the Zwartjesgoed gang), it became clear that there were portraits of the gang members stored in the community archives in The Hague, the city where De Riemer lived and worked. This is very exceptional because at that time criminals were never portrayed, only by accident sometimes during an anatomy lesson. Herman de Jong and also various archives handed me a lot of background stories of the crimes the gang committed and about which even sentimental songs were written.



Skull and portrait of Johannes Pieter Matthijs van den Bos



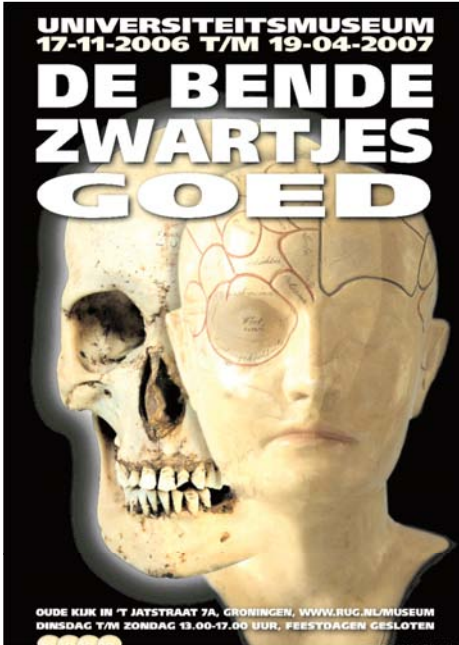
Portrait and skull of Johan Christiaan Hersberg



Skull and portrait of Johan Joseph Baptist



So, all of a sudden there was enough material to organize a small exhibition. We borrowed the original portraits from the community archives of The Hague, a portrait of Pieter de Riemer from the Historical Museum of The Hague, and the skulls were our own possessions. The exhibition about the gang of Zwartjes-goed and the phrenology of Franz Joseph Gall lasted for three months.



Poster for the exhibition

Unexpected points of view and different lines of approach of other professionals can add important information to various collections all over the world. We can thus conclude that it is of major importance to go worldwide on the internet with our collections.

In 2010 we built a website together with various libraries, archives and university museums in the Netherlands, called <http://academischecollecties.nl/> All kinds of academic collections are shown here and, thus, collections and treasures are now open to the public, either professionals or interested visitors.

**Address for correspondence:**

John Le Grand  
Groningen University Museum, the Netherlands  
Nadorstplein 2d, 9747AB Groningen  
Netherlands  
E-mail: [j.g.le.grand@rug.nl](mailto:j.g.le.grand@rug.nl)