



The College of Physicians of Philadelphia
BIRTHPLACE OF AMERICAN MEDICINE®

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WITH \$285,500 GRANT, MÜTTER MUSEUM LAUNCHES MAJOR PROJECT TO ENGAGE THE PUBLIC ABOUT THE FUTURE OF ITS HUMAN REMAINS COLLECTION

**Myriad Opportunities, Including Town Hall Conversations,
to Provide Feedback Begin This Fall**

Philadelphia, Pa. (September 14, 2023) — The [Mütter Museum](#) announced today that a \$285,500 grant from The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage will support the launch of *Postmortem: Mütter Museum*, a collaborative public engagement project to provide feedback to the Museum through town hall discussions, on-site workshops, feedback stations in the Museum, a new exhibition, and new online videos exploring complex questions about respect, consent, and ethics related to the collection, interpretation, and display of the human remains in the Mütter Museum. The Center's grant includes both project funding and an additional 20% in unrestricted, general operating support.

Led by internal staff in collaboration with a diverse team of external academic, medical, community engagement, and disability experts, this multifaceted two-year project will actively seek public input from existing and new audiences with a goal to inform a roadmap for the future of the Museum's design, interpretive approach, and displays. Planning for the *Postmortem* project — the biggest community engagement project in the institution's history — began in late 2022.

"Over the past few months, many in the Mütter community have passionately expressed their thoughts about the Museum's future and we've been listening," said Kate Quinn, Executive Director of the Mütter Museum and Historical Medical Library at the College. "This two year-long project will be the most robust community collaboration project ever undertaken by the Museum, providing many opportunities for engagement, discussion, and feedback, coupled with in-depth research focused on the collection's human remains. We will plan for change along with our communities and guided by experts."

The Mütter collections contain approximately 6,500 biological specimens, including human bones, skeletons, organs, and tissue samples. Current provenance research shows that less than 3.5 percent of the individuals represented in the collection actually gave informed consent for their remains to be displayed.

Postmortem aims to gather perspectives from individuals including but also beyond the medical community to rethink the way the collection is presented and interpreted. Feedback from marginalized and disabled communities that have been most impacted by unethical museum collections and display practices and are often the same groups still underserved by

medical and healthcare fields —will be an important part of the project.

A diverse project team with expertise in ethics, medical history, disability studies, community engagement, and institutional genealogy with emphasis on inherent inequities and exclusion will conduct research and pose questions that will provide contextual content for an exhibition. The team will work with staff to create priorities for provenance research, explore the historical and cultural contexts that impacted Mütter acquisitions, and uncover the buried narratives and histories that will lead to a more complex and complete understanding of the collections. The results of the work will be shared in a workshop exhibition space through the duration of the project, as well as online.

Through the *Postmortem* project, the Museum will listen to its audiences, engage them in the process, and build sustainable trust between staff and community. A public engagement plan will take the form of town halls, in-person and online discussions, workshops, surveys, street team interviews, and feedback toward new contextualized content in the Museum. The first town hall will take place on October 17, the exhibition will open in the spring, and share-out events in the final six months of the project will provide an overview of the feedback gathered and additional opportunities to respond.

This project builds on recommendations and feedback from a series of robust focus group discussions with active researchers as well as with members of the Museum's neighboring, predominantly Black community of Mantua. The summary of these discussions can be found on the Museum's website.

The Museum is part of [The College of Physicians of Philadelphia](#), one of the oldest professional medical organizations in the country.

"The mission of the College is to 'advance the cause of health while upholding the ideals and heritage of medicine.' *Postmortem* aligns with our mission and will benefit both the College and the Fellowship for years to come" said Dr. Mira Irons, President and CEO of The College of Physicians of Philadelphia, which includes the Mütter Museum. "We are committed to owning our past and learning more from feedback that the project will provide."

"It's important – now more than ever – that the Mütter Museum reckon with historically problematic collecting practices, specifically regarding the human remains in our care, and make changes focused on dignity and respect for the living and the dead," Quinn continued. "We expect *Postmortem* to inform a broader and more nuanced interpretive approach to explore and understand the history of American medicine and its continuing impact on our daily lives. We are indebted to The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage for its support of this important public engagement process."

The Museum is currently engaged in the Museum Assessment Program (MAP) process, widely considered a major step in gaining recognition as a fully accredited cultural institution, which helps to ensure the integrity and accessibility of museum collections, reinforce the education and public service roles of museums, and promote good governance practices and ethical behavior.

In August, the Museum released a new [online collections database](#) that provides worldwide access to its collection of medical history through a free online searchable database.

Featuring more than 20,000 collections records, including 5,100 new high-resolution photos, it is the result of a two-year-long project that dovetails with an ongoing comprehensive collections audit to organize and strengthen the Museum's records.

In July, the Museum completed a two-year [state-of-the-art renovation](#) of its collections storage and lab facilities, a long-awaited project that will dramatically expand research capabilities for scientists and researchers in Philadelphia and around the world.

Support for *Postmortem: Mütter Museum* has been provided by The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage.

[Learn more.](#)

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