

Write a profile of an interesting person, place, or event, using the Norton chapter "Profiles" as a guide. You must use at least one primary source, such as an interview or personal observation. Make sure to include some background information on your subject.

-Professor Jonathan Hobratch

Neha Kamireddi

The Mütter Museum: A Museum of Medical History

Prior to my first visit to Philadelphia, I began searching on Google for interesting places to visit. Almost immediately, the Mütter Museum, a museum of medical history, popped up. I immediately decided that this would be my first stop while in the city. Walking up to the building, I was already excited to see all the specimens and exhibits at the museum. The building was fairly unobtrusive, and I had almost walked past it at first. Upon entering the museum, we first came into a brightly-lit atrium with a single skeleton, and several quotes painted on the walls from the famous Philadelphia doctor, Benjamin Rush. The sight was pretty underwhelming. I had expected to walk in and see skeletons and body parts in jars, and other interesting specimens that could be found in an anatomy museum. Slightly disappointed, I walked up the stairs to the main museum area, and I froze. I stood in a huge room, dimly lit with soft, orange lighting. It was surrounded by mahogany cases full of children's skeletons, severed limbs, jars of eyeballs and skin, and countless other specimens pinned to the walls of the cases. For a moment, everything was still as I took all of this in, and for the next few hours, I sped around from exhibit to exhibit, trying to see and absorb as much information as possible.

The main exhibit at the time was based on Grimm's fairy tales. According to the museum website, it was created, "in honor of the two-hundredth anniversary of the publication of *The Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*" (Grimm's *Anatomy: Magic and Medicine*), and it presented real life examples of the gruesome medical conditions referenced in the various stories. There were skeletons of achondroplasia dwarfs to represent the dwarfs in *Snow White*, and a severed foot for *Cinderella*. This, along with several other displays and the stories behind them, was incredible to see.

Across from the room featuring the Grimm exhibit was a display of the Hyrtl skull collection. This is a collection of 139 human skulls from the Viennese anatomist Joseph Hyrtl. Each skull mounted in the case had the person's age, place of origin, and cause of death inscribed directly on the bone in Hyrtl's handwriting. Although the actual writing has somewhat faded, the Mütter museum included translations of these descriptions, along with an explanation of the research done by Hyrtl. The care Hyrtl took in keeping accurate records of every piece in his collection was incredible, and I was amazed at how well they had preserved the specimens in the exhibit, since these skulls would have been nearly 200 years old.

One year later, I visited the Mütter museum again and participated in a tour with the Biomedical Engineering Learning Community at Drexel. Entering the main exhibit room, I experienced that same feeling of awe and amazement at the amassed collection, even after having seen it once before. While we were there, our guide told us a short history of the museum. She said that the Mütter Museum is part of The College of Physicians of Philadelphia. This organization was founded in 1787, and it is one of the oldest professional medical organizations in the United States. The museum was started after Dr. Thomas Dent Mütter donated 1,700 objects and \$30,000 to the College with the stipulation that the College would hire a curator, maintain and expand the collections, fund annual lectures, and erect a fireproof building to house the collection. Since this first donation, the museum collection has grown to more than 25,000 objects. The museum continues to educate through outreach programs directed towards students, teachers, and the general public. Shortly after this explanation, our guide took us through the museum, pointing out some of the major exhibits and providing some fun facts about different specimens.

Some of my peers' favorite exhibits included the Chevalier Jackson collection, the skeleton of Harry Eastlack, and the giant megacolon. Dr. Chevalier Jackson was a notable otolaryngologist: an ear, nose, and throat doctor. In his collection, the Mütter Museum has amassed a collection of 2,374 objects that had been inhaled or swallowed, and then removed by Dr. Jackson. Dr. Jackson was also a fellow of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, and he developed methods and tools for removing foreign objects from human airways. Most of his collection, after his 75-year long career, is on display at the Mütter Museum along with information about each patient that the objects were removed from.

Harry Eastlack was a patient who suffered from a condition now known as fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva. This disorder is caused by a genetic condition which converts connective tissue such as tendons, ligaments, and muscles into bone. This eventually fuses together the joints of the skeleton, eventually causing paralysis. When looking at the skeleton, there are obvious pieces of bone that follow the shape and patterns of different muscle groups in the body. Harry Eastlack eventually died at the age of thirty-nine due to pneumonia after having spent years bedridden.

The giant megacolon came from a twenty-nine year old who suffered from Hirschsprung's disease, which at the time was an unknown condition. He had suffered from constipation his entire life due to a lack of nerve cells in sections of the colon. Although doctors knew that his illness was due to an issue with his colon, at the time surgery was too risky and he would have likely died. He eventually died at the age of twenty-nine from his condition. During his autopsy, his colon was measured to be eight feet long, and it contained over forty pounds of feces. The Mütter Museum currently has the entire colon on display, cleaned and filled with paper to add dimension

After visiting the Mütter Museum twice, I can easily say that it is my favorite place in Philadelphia. Both times I have visited, there have been new exhibits to see and learn about, and even old ones that I missed during a previous visit. This museum is a place for record keeping, and for teaching things that are now known, but were once great mysteries to be solved. These records and specimens preserve past knowledge, and they allow for future generations to learn how the practice of medicine has transformed throughout history. The Mütter Museum allows an observer to experience the process of discovering, learning, and understanding something new at each and every exhibit, and this is what makes it a truly special place.

Works Cited

"Chevalier Jackson Collection." *Exhibits | Mütter Museum of The College of Physicians of Philadelphia*, muttermuseum.org/exhibitions/chevalier-jackson-collection/.

"Fibrodysplasia Ossificans Progressiva." *Memento Mütter*, memento.muttermuseum.org/detail/fibrodysplasia-ossificans-progressiva.

"Giant Megacolon." *Memento Mütter*, memento.muttermuseum.org/detail/giant-megacolon.

"Grimms' Anatomy: Magic and Medicine." *Exhibits | Mütter Museum of The College of Physicians of Philadelphia*, muttermuseum.org/exhibitions/grimms-anatomy-magic-and-medicine-1812-2012/.

"Hyrtl Skull Collection." *Exhibits | Mütter Museum of The College of Physicians of Philadelphia*, muttermuseum.org/exhibitions/hyrtl-skull-collection/.