

## The Wellcome collection

**Date :** August 17, 2007

*Sandra Rozental, NYU Anthropology PhD*

[The Wellcome Collection](#) opened its doors to the public in June of 2007. The museum is housed within the Wellcome Trust building on Euston Road in central London. This was the original site of the first Wellcome Museum that opened in 1913 as an educational tool for professionals interested in science and the history of medicine. Henry Wellcome (1853-1936), after establishing a pharmaceutical empire, began an ambitious project of collecting artifacts across time and space that were related to understanding the human body and curing its ailments. The collection grew to immense proportions, attaining one million objects in the 1930s, most of which are ethnographic artifacts. After many decades in storage and a brief appearance in a major exhibition at the British Museum in 2003 focusing on Wellcome and his collecting ventures "Medicine Man," and serving as part of a literary experiment in a collection of short stories based on a handful of objects in "The Phantom Museum," the forgotten collection has finally found a permanent exhibition space. The Wellcome Collection houses permanent galleries and temporary exhibitions, as well as a library. The core of the museum is a space designed to echo an early twentieth century exhibition space where 500 objects of Wellcome's original collection are on view, displayed by object type as they would have been given the taxonomical trends during his lifetime. The gallery is divided in sections such as "beginning of life" with objects related to fertility, birth and conception; "end of life" with artifacts used for mortuary practices, funerals, and death rituals; "understanding the body" with a display on acupuncture, nails and x-rays, among many. Other sections are entirely devoted to a type of object like "masks," "votive offerings," "metal instruments" and "artificial limbs." Certain objects are presented more like curiosities such as a lock of King George III's hair, or Napoleon's toothbrush. The objects are displayed in glass cases without any labels. To find out information about the object such as provenance and what it was used for, the viewer must open

cabinet-like doors behind which explanatory labels are hidden.

The second permanent display is called "Medicine Now," focusing on what has happened to medicine since Wellcome's death in 1936. This section's collection includes both objects related to medical practice and artworks commissioned especially for the gallery from artists asked to respond to medical issues. Three contemporary medical topics are central in this display: obesity, malaria, and genetics. Much of the exhibition focuses on exposing the disparity in medicine's availability and development in the global North where obesity is the main illness, and the global South where people die of malaria and starvation. The last section of the exhibition invites the viewer to become part of two current research projects: the first, to find the average face, and the second to create a map of biometric identities. Although the exhibition hints at some debates in recent medicine, certain key issues are either not addressed or simply glossed over such as HIV, stem-cell research, abortion and contraception, controversies over pharmaceutical companies, the increasing reliance on antidepressants, to cite only a few.

The unfortunate silences in "Medicine Now" might be due to a lack of space to cover all of these topics, a handicap that might be remedied by using temporary exhibitions to address some of these pending issues. The current temporary exhibition, "The Heart" certainly delves into a particular body part in all its complexity. The show, curated by Emily Jo Sargent and James Peto, and on view from June 21 until September 16 2007, is comprised of scientific artifacts and artistic works. It dissects the heart as an organ that has been explored by scientists interested in finding out its role within the body, but also looks to its role as a symbol, at times thought to contain the human soul,

at others understood as the container of our emotional selves. The introductory label states: "This exhibition looks at the evolution of our understanding of what the heart is, what it does and what it means (...) It follows the development of our anatomical knowledge of the heart, but also considers its far-reaching cultural and symbolic significance."

Acknowledging a Western bias, the exhibition includes an exploration of the material culture generated around this human bodily organ. The collection is comprised of Egyptian papyrus, 17th and 18th century anatomical illustrations, Leonardo Da Vinci drawings, film footage about the first human heart transplant in 1967, a modern perfusion machine used to substitute the heart during surgery, Aztec sacrificial knives, Sacred Heart imagery, Victorian valentine cards, a silver heart-shaped casket for Thomas Hardy's heart, who like Livingstone's, was subject to a separate burial, as well as specimens, both animal and human, of hearts and venal system (all the exhibitions warn the public that they contain human remains at the entrance of the galleries). Other objects include poems about hearts, as well as audio tracks of songs such as "Heartbreak Hotel" by Elvis Presley and "Your Cheatin' Heart" by Hank Williams. Many contemporary artworks also pepper the gallery such as Andy Warhol's "Heart," Ana Mendieta's performance pieces, and two video installations by Jordon Basemen, one showing an open heart surgery, and the other, entitled "1+1=1," shows Patrick Williams, a recipient of transplanted lungs and heart, discussing his experience. The entire gallery is invaded by the reverberating sound of a beating heart, at first a disquieting soundtrack that soon becomes almost a part of the viewer's own body as she navigates in the exhibition space.

This multidisciplinary show focusing on a very specific topic, a body part that is literally the core of our being, is a promising beginning for the Wellcome Collection's temporary displays, one that allowed curators to use many objects from the original collection and library, as well as explore more recent developments and include contemporary artifacts as both specimens and artworks. Hopefully, "The Heart" will be the first of many such intricate exhibitions at this new venue.