

## The Skeletons of Art

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In an empty interior, nine young women wear skirts and aprons, sitting around a drawing on an easel depicting a female form. Electric lamps with shades made from bent cardboard hang from the ceiling. Most women turn away from the camera, focusing on the person in the middle holding a human skull in her lap. She cradles the skull tenderly. Three women hold large palettes and long-handled paintbrushes. No one smiles. This scene is captured in a photograph from the Ateneum Art Museum in 1894. A short handwritten note in Swedish at the bottom of the backing card reads, 'In the atelier, spring 1894.' The hall, located on the third floor of the Ateneum, served as the painting studio for the Finnish Art Society's Drawing School.

The women in the photo are students, and the barefoot person sitting apart is the model. Elin Danielson, the group's teacher, squats in front, closely observing the person holding the skull, her cousin Onni Bäckström. The serious mood and skull's position create a strange atmosphere. The skull, representing someone who once loved, dreamed, and sang, may seem eerie today, but for a 19th-century art student, it was a common subject. The use of skulls, skeletons, and bone fragments in art education dates back to the 16th century. These human remains served as lifeless models for artists, demonstrating human anatomy and functioning.

The photograph suggests a thoughtful and deliberate composition, revealing an academic context. Ateneum's art students, taught human anatomy by Imperial Alexander University of Finland's anatomists, utilized both living and deceased models, including skulls and bones. University anatomy professors, instructing with living and deceased models, specifically used human remains as instructional tools. The peak of the human skull collection at the Imperial Alexander University of Finland's anatomy department comprised about 1500 skulls. These remains were excavated from various areas, including Saami regions. It's likely the skulls and skeletons at Ateneum were from prisons and state institutions, collected to study human differences, origins, and populations.

In my presentation, I explore the artistic symbolism and historical context within the photograph's depiction of a skull. I delve into what the image reveals about the life and emotions of art student Onni Backström in the spring of 1894. Additionally, I investigate the use of human remains as

models in art and the associated ethical problems. I consider the photograph's role within historical collections, asserting that the depiction of women with a skull is not merely an archival document but a deliberate artistic creation. The conveyed message through the image opens a window to the past, delving into the world of late 19th-century artists. Simultaneously, its archival status informs us about the photograph's significance in interpreting art history.

A significant aspect of the analysis focuses on the personal narrative encapsulated in the photograph, particularly on Onni Backström. The deliberate pose and gaze towards the skull evoke art-historical motifs depicting encounters with mortality, suggesting a personal connection to the subject matter. The tragic suicide of Onni's father, Selim Bäckström, a year before the photograph, adds a poignant layer to the narrative. This event likely influenced Onni's decision to discontinue her art studies in the spring of 1894, transforming the photograph into a visual expression of grief and a farewell to the artistic pursuit.

Beyond its historical and personal dimensions, the photograph is examined as a deliberate artistic creation. The subjects consciously use the medium to craft an artistic representation, transcending its archival status. This study unravels the symbolism, historical nuances, and personal narratives embedded in the photograph, offering a nuanced understanding of the interconnected realms of art, science, and individual experiences in the late 19th century. The photograph serves as a valuable artifact, not just documenting a specific moment but providing a contemplative entry point into the cultural and emotional landscapes of its time. The photograph becomes a window into the educational practices of the time and the dual role of art as both an aesthetic pursuit and a scientific endeavor.

This work is based on practice-led research and does not build on a specific theoretical frame. There is, however, a writer whose thinking I've followed and explored during the journey into the intoxicating melange of images in the archives. The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's book *Corpus* (1992) reflects on the possibility of a philosophy of the body and at the same time sketches the basics of the philosophical body through the concepts of susceptibility, exposure, and contact. According to *Corpus*, the body is a state of its own extremities and limits, a space with conditions, notes and markings. For Nancy, the word itself is a key element when approaching the concept of the body.

Bodies, for good or ill, are touching each other upon this page, or more precisely, the page itself is a touching (of my hand while it writes, and your hands while they hold the book). This touch is infinitely indirect, deferred – machines, vehicles, photocopies, eyes, still other hands are all interposed – but it continues as a slight, resistant, fine texture, the infinitesimal dust of a contact, everywhere interrupted and pursued. In the end, here and now, your own gaze touches the same traces of characters as mine, and you read me, and I write you. Somewhere, this takes place.

The philosophical body is made of words, whereas the body of art is constructed from different materials such as paper, charcoal, chalk, and plaster. Still, Nancy's poetic text helped me to approach and write about the artistic and imaginary, and at the same time real and tangible bodies of the museum collections and archives. Common to the philosophical and artistic bodies is that they are both representations that reflect the thinking, skill, and aesthetic sensibility of their creator. They are studies of the human being and interpretations of the same subject. They are also, as every real or imagined body is, forever political and central to how we understand the facets of identity such as gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity. The bodily representations are mirrors of humanity, expressing the values of different cultures and eras.