

Canadian Museum of History
POLICY ON HUMAN REMAINS

1. TITLE

Human Remains Policy

2. INTRODUCTION

The Canadian Museum of History (CMH) is a federal Crown corporation established by the Museums Act, with responsibility for two national museums: the Canadian Museum of History and the Canadian War Museum. In addition, the Corporation administers the national investment program, Digital Museums Canada, and the online Virtual Museum of New France.

Use of the terms “the Museum” and “the Corporation” in this document refer to the Canadian Museum of History as a corporate entity and encompass both the Canadian Museum of History and the Canadian War Museum.

3. EFFECTIVE DATE

This Policy was endorsed by the Senior Leadership Team and was approved by the President and CEO of the Canadian Museum of History on February 3, 2026, taking effect the same day.

4. POLICY OWNER

The Vice-President, Reconciliation, Engagement and Government Affairs and the Vice-President, Research, Collections, and Exhibitions are co-owners of this *Policy on Human Remains*.

5. APPLICATION

This policy pertains to Museum employees who care for human remains and associated materials, internal and external researchers who wish to access and/or study them, and Indigenous communities/community members who provide the Museum with guidance and wish to access remains for study and/or repatriation. It also applies to Museum employees who wish to exhibit, research, and publish images with depictions of human remains.

6. DEFINITIONS

Burial materials: Items placed in direct association with a grave as a part of a burial rite or ritual.

Descendant communities: A group of people whose ancestors lived in a particular location associated with the human remains.

Human remains: The whole or any part of a deceased human being.

For clarity, naturally shed elements of living individuals (e.g., hair, teeth) are not subject to this policy, except those found in an archaeological context.

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Indigenous ancestral remains: The physical remains of an Indigenous person from whom a person or persons is/are descended.

7. CONTEXT

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The Museum currently houses human remains (Indigenous ancestral remains and non-Indigenous human remains), objects containing human remains, and images of human remains.

From the Geological Survey of Canada (1856) to as late as the 1980s, human remains and burial materials came into the Museum through anthropological collecting, donation (by private collectors, amateur anthropologists, natural scientists, police organizations, etc.), and as a result of archaeological investigation. The majority of the human remains housed at the Museum are Indigenous ancestral remains collected during archaeological excavations across Canada at a time when the practice was common. The age of the remains ranges from approximately 5700 years ago to 1902/1903. A small percentage of human remains originate from outside of Canada.

The Museum acknowledges past colonial collecting practices that resulted in the acquisition of Indigenous ancestral remains and the harm to Indigenous communities caused by their excavation, removal, and retention by the Museum.

The Museum has not acquired Indigenous ancestral remains for decades and actively works with Indigenous communities for the return of ancestral remains. The Museum recognizes and supports Indigenous rights, including rights to the repatriation of human remains under Article 12.2 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The repatriation of Indigenous ancestral remains is a priority for the Museum.

8. PURPOSE

This policy provides guidance for the care of, and access to, human remains that are housed at the Canadian Museum of History, the majority of which are of Indigenous origin.

It aims to ensure that Indigenous rights are respected, and that the Museums' activities are in alignment with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Calls to Action and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

It incorporates the rights of representative and/or descendent communities and ensures their participation in decision-making specific to the care, and access to, human remains.

9. POLICY DETAILS

I. Acquisition

The Museum will not acquire human remains.

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In rare cases, the Museum may be a temporary repository for Indigenous ancestral remains that are being repatriated to Indigenous communities in Canada by other organizations or governments, if that is a legislative requirement for repatriation from those organizations or governments.

II. Exhibition, Publication, and Display

Indigenous ancestral remains and burial material:

The Museum shall not develop displays related to Indigenous ancestral remains or burial material, nor will it loan or exhibit Indigenous ancestral remains, burial material, or replicas (including casts) unless requested and approved by the descendant community.

The Museum will not publish, present, or share images of Indigenous ancestral remains, burial material, or replicas of either, unless requested by descendant communities or the designated representatives of the deceased.

Non-Indigenous human remains:

The Museum will not exhibit non-Indigenous human remains. Images of non-Indigenous human remains may be published or exhibited with permission from the descendant communities, the designated representatives of the deceased, or the Vice-President Research, Collections, and Exhibitions.

From time to time, non-Indigenous burial material (e.g. from ancient civilizations) and/or replicas of non-Indigenous burial material may be exhibited. This will be considered on a case-by-case basis; the approval of Vice-President Research, Collections, and Exhibitions is required.

Commercial reproductions of anatomical specimens may be used for teaching purposes. Human remains in the care of the Museum will not be used for this purpose.

III. Care

The dignity of human remains shall be respected in all aspects of their care. Human remains and burial material shall be cared for in a secure location, with access restricted to required staff, descendant communities, and their designated researchers. Any inappropriate treatment of human remains will result in disciplinary action.

Items from all collections in the Museum's care containing any part of a human will be identified and any appropriate restrictions will be put in place.

IV. Access

Indigenous ancestral remains:

The majority of the human remains housed at the Museum are Indigenous ancestral remains. Access to Indigenous ancestral remains and burial material for research purposes is prohibited, except by the relevant Indigenous community or their designates. Access to Indigenous ancestral remains and burial material shall be limited internally to designated staff as required. Decision-making about the care,

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documentation, and access to Indigenous ancestral remains and burial material will rest with the descendant communities. Museum staff will make best efforts to identify descendant communities. In cases where descendant communities no longer exist, or cannot be identified, the closest geographic Indigenous community to the site of collection may be consulted, if appropriate. The Museum acknowledges the challenges posed by unrecognized or self-identified communities and nations in this regard. The Museum will exercise caution in any consultations.

DNA testing or other invasive analysis may provide information about the affiliation of Indigenous ancestral remains for the purposes of repatriation. Tests may be undertaken on a case-by-case basis, in accordance with the CMH Scientific Analysis and Sampling Guideline, and with appropriate external consultation with the relevant community. In the case of conflict over the disposition for repatriation of Indigenous ancestral remains based on DNA testing, a collaborative discussion with all relevant parties may be initiated by the Museum.

Temporary loans may be approved for imaging services (e.g. CT, X-ray, etc.) by the Vice-President, Research, Collections and Exhibitions, if requested by the relevant Indigenous community/representative.

Non-Indigenous human remains:

Access to non-Indigenous human remains and burial material for research purposes is prohibited unless approved by the descendant community. Access will be limited to designated staff as required. Internal access to non-Indigenous human remains and burial material for research purposes may be granted with prior approval by the Vice-President, Research, Collections and Exhibitions.

Significant interventions (like destructive analysis) may be undertaken within the parameters outlined in the CMH Scientific Analysis and Sampling Guideline, or the approval of the Vice-President, Research, Collections, and Exhibitions on a case-by-case basis.

V. Documentation

Access to all inventories, databases, and images pertaining to human remains and burial material currently housed at or repatriated by the Museum will be restricted.

Indigenous ancestral remains:

Access to any research and other documentation related to Indigenous ancestral remains and burial material, or created through the repatriation process, shall be determined by the descendant or closest geographical Indigenous community, where appropriate.

VI. Associated Materials

Casts and replicas made from Indigenous human remains and burial material in the care of the Museum shall be treated in the same manner as human remains and burial material.

Access to life masks for the purposes of research or exhibition will be granted only with written permission from descendent communities.

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Headstones, cemetery markers, and other material related to death, burial, and commemoration in the Canadian War Museum collections are outside the scope of this Policy.

VII. Repatriation

Human remains (both Indigenous ancestral remains and non-Indigenous human remains), burial materials (including casts and replicas), and associated material from the site of excavation are eligible for repatriation under the CMH Repatriation Policy. The Human Remains and Repatriation Policies should be read together.

10. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The **Vice-President, Reconciliation, Engagement and Government Affairs** is responsible for ensuring this Policy remains in line with ethical and legal obligations related to human remains and Indigenous rights.

The **Vice-President, Research, Collections, and Exhibitions** is responsible for:

- review of breaches of the Human Remains Policy on a case-by-case basis;
- approval of the creation and/or exhibition of replicas of unprovenanced and/or ancient burial material; and
- approval of requests to access non-Indigenous human remains for research purposes.
- approval of temporary loans for imaging services (e.g. CT, X-ray, etc.) in their respective collections;
- approval of access to non-Indigenous human remains for research purposes; and,
- approval of images of non-Indigenous human remains for exhibition or publishing purposes.

11. IMPLEMENTATION

This policy will be implemented by the Research and Collections divisions at both Museums, and the Repatriation and Indigenous Relations division.

This Policy should be read in conjunction with:

CMH Research policy (2026)

CMH Framework for Indigenous Relations (2020)

CMH Repatriation Policy (2026)

12. REFERENCES

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf

Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report
https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2015/trc/IR4-8-2015-eng.pdf

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13. PUBLICATION

This Policy will be posted internally on the Museum website.

14. SUPERSEDED VERSIONS

This policy supersedes:

Former policy(ies)	Version number	Version date	President & CEO approval date
CMH Human Remains Policy	2	2007	
CMH Human Remains Policy	1	1992	

15. MONITORING

The office of the Vice-President, Reconciliation, Engagement and Government Affairs is responsible for reviewing and updating the policy, and to ensure alignment with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous law. The Directors of Research at CMH and CWM and the Director, Repatriation will monitor its implementation and application, including reporting on challenges to the Vice-President, Vice-President, Research, Collections, and Exhibitions and Vice-President, Reconciliation, Engagement and Government Affairs.

16. CONSEQUENCES OF NON-COMPLIANCE

In the event of non-compliance with this Policy on Human Remains, corrective measures may be applied, ranging from training to the removal of delegated authority, to disciplinary action including suspension, or any combination of these.

17. REVIEW

This policy shall be reviewed within three years by the designated authority in the Reconciliation, Engagement and Government Affairs branch.

18. ENQUIRIES

Any questions concerning the legal and other requirements outlined in this Policy must be directed to:
Vice-President, Reconciliation, Engagement and Government Affairs

Canadian Museum of History
100 Laurier Street

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Gatineau, QC K1A 0M8

Any questions concerning the implementation and operational aspects of this Policy must be directed to:

Vice President, Research, Collections, and Exhibitions

Canadian Museum of History

100 Laurier Street

Gatineau, QC K1A 0M8