

## *Media Review*

### **‘Three Cheers for the Brown, Grey and Black’: A Review of *Teeth* at the Wellcome Collection, London**

The Pogues founder, Shane MacGowan, bites into an apple for the first time in decades following a gruelling procedure to replace all twenty-two of his rotten teeth. This excerpt from a Sky Arts documentary is a tacit reminder not just of the importance of a functioning set of teeth but the very feeling of teeth in the mouth. The short film is one of the first exhibits visitors come to at the Wellcome Collection’s *Teeth* exhibition showing 17 May–16 September 2018. Head of Public Programmes, James Peto, and co-curator, Emily Scott-Dearing, developed the exhibition inspired by Richard Barnett’s book, *The Smile Stealers* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2017). It charts our relationship with teeth and 300 years of dentistry through 150 plus objects. The Wellcome has previously held exhibitions about the heart, brain and skin, now teeth are undergoing examination.

The exhibition showcases a wealth of striking artefacts and visual material from large dental chairs to an animal tooth amulet, oil paintings of dentistry, public health posters, satirical cartoons depicting charlatan tooth-pullers and giant teeth teaching aids. Some objects are owned by the Wellcome Collection and others are on loan from dental collections, including the Science Museum, the British Dental Association, the Thackray Medical Museum, the Hunterian Museum, The Royal Dutch Dental Association and the University Museum Utrecht. Several films and an audio-point provide additional content alongside replica tools and dentures that visitors can touch. The designers, Dyvik Kahlen Architects, have used largely pastel-toned colours, giving the exhibition space a bright atmosphere contrasting with the, at times, grotesque content. Small objects are displayed in coloured metal trays and plastic curtains and obscured glass form partitions evocative of the dental surgery but reinterpreted within a marshmallow hued aesthetic.

The exhibition begins by looking at teeth’s sensory, sometimes symbolic, connection with the world. The pain experienced by teeth has prompted superstitious or religious rituals represented in the exhibition by a Roman votive offering of a terracotta set of teeth, nineteenth-century amulets carried to ward off toothache and imagery of Saint of Apollinaire, the patron saint of tooth problems. Teeth are both a marker of age as well as an indicator of economic status and oral health inequality. Two nineteenth-century female skulls powerfully reflect the latter; one buried in an expensive coffin wears a platinum dental bridge inset with another person’s teeth, while the other skull, exhumed from a burial ground associated with a debtor’s jail, has rotten teeth covered in dental plaque.

The following thematic section, ‘Pulling Teeth’ describes the first dental practitioners. In the early eighteenth century, oral healthcare was almost exclusively concerned with the removal of teeth carried out by tooth-drawers, such as the carnivalesque Parisian tooth-drawer Le Grand Thomas, or by barber-surgeons and blacksmiths. The industrial style metal tooth keys used to ply their trade are enough to make one’s toes curl. Peto and Scott-Dearing describe a dentistry revolution instigated by Pierre Fauchard, whose treaty on teeth, on display, positioned a new type of dental professional coined the ‘*dentiste*’, who provided maintenance and repair to the mouths of the wealthy. A case of ivory dentures, some including human and porcelain teeth riveted to the ivory base, exemplify this new era of restorative dentistry, although the objects look like archaic relics today.

'Drugs and Drills' describes the introduction of anaesthesia, the development of dental equipment and the increase in knowledge about causes of tooth decay in the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Posters for dentists offering painless extractions and smiling-faced patients contrast strongly with those experiencing the agony of tooth removal in the previous section. Dentist tools became mass-produced; the introduction of the treadle drill revolutionised cavity preparation and the application of vulcanised rubber in dentures with porcelain teeth broadened the affordability of artificial teeth. The history of the toothbrush, from Addis bone handles set with boar hair to 1980s Star Wars themed brushes, underscore the diversification and commodification of the oral hygiene market.

The proliferation of dentistry in the second half of the twentieth century following concerns over the oral health of the nation, brought into relief during the conscription of troops during the World Wars, is considered in the part of the exhibition titled, 'Our friend the dentist'. A photograph depicts workers sifting through a deluge of NHS dental applications following its introduction in 1948 when accessibility to dental care increased dramatically. A large projection shows three public health films from the 1940s, 50s and 60s, encouraging people to regularly go to the dentist, 'good teeth mean good looks' is the overarching rhetoric. For many, dental treatment is riddled with pain and anxiety – a nineteenth-century painting by Luciano Nezzo, of a woman being examined by a dentist who is holding a tooth key surreptitiously behind his back, captures the sinister image of the dentist that continues to be an enduring stereotype in popular culture.

In the final section of the exhibition, 'A sense of self', considers how teeth fundamentally effect who we are. Damage to the mouth and maxillofacial surgery is covered in the story of Ad van del Elzen, who was injured by an exploding bullet in his face in the 1950s. A plastic model of his skull and face is displayed alongside photographs of him before and after the facial reconstruction that was central to both his physical and mental recovery. Teeth can be a means of self-expression and identity, as some consumers invest today in tooth whitening, tooth veneers or tooth adornments. The exhibition draws to a close with film posters depicting the white Hollywood smile, a vital component in accepted notions of beauty and Dracula fangs, a visual cue for horror.

Teeth intersect a surprisingly expansive range of themes and this exhibition admirably incorporates this wide scope into a digestible format. The exhibition charts a story of dental advancement. It shows the professionalisation of practitioners, the development of a commercial dental industry, the increase of knowledge about teeth and the formation of dental public health. For the patient, the management of teeth was historically marred by pain, while in the present context individuals' physical and psychological wellbeing are shown to be vastly improved by modern dental healthcare. Chronological progressive accounts, common in dental history books, have been challenged in the broader field of medical history. It is understandable why the curators have opted for a more traditional trajectory, but it becomes most thought provoking when it is disrupted and links are made between historic and contemporary objects. For example, Mayan teeth from 500–1000 CE studded with turquoise sit alongside sparkling grillz produced by tooth jewellery specialists in 2018, showing a propulsion for teeth adornment through vastly different time periods and societies. Historic objects relating to the health of children's teeth are followed by a display of recent letters to and from the tooth fairy, tapping into how society navigates the rite of passage of losing milk teeth and placates trauma through myth and fantasy.

The *Teeth* advertising poster features an acrylic denture on a gold plate; inside the exhibition these disembodied objects are often united with their owners' stories. Dental items associated with famous individuals, including Napoleon's toothbrush and

George Washington's dentures, highlight that dental health was a real challenge for real people. A set of aluminium dentures gain resonance once one learns they were made from a fallen Japanese fighter plane by an interned RAF corporal in a Burmese prison camp during World War II after his dentures were smashed by prison guards. The experience of individuals like Dr Phil Marsden, a forensic dentist, who used teeth to identify the dead following the Boxing Day Tsunami, and Louise Quarmby's audio description of the challenges of living with a cleft palate and lip are emotionally impactful and emphasise the profound significance of teeth in the world today.

The graphic panels acknowledge 'poverty is still the major factor affecting our dental health'. A comic poem by Spike Milligan from 1959 ridicules the poor state of English teeth, which he describes as 'brown, grey and black'. However, poorly decayed teeth in a contemporary context, often the outcome of these oral health inequalities, are only represented visually by MacGowan's transformative surgery. This exhibition has been developed for public consumption; graphic imagery of diseased teeth is perhaps too unpalatable even within the reflective context of an exhibition. The absence of 'bad' teeth only reaffirms what is communicated through the exhibition – teeth are a sensitive area, not just physiologically but in terms of our sensibility too.

For the medical historian, this exhibition offers an insight into a currently understudied area of research of which there are points of comparison, overlap and relevance with broader medical history subjects. The exhibition also has a wider appeal; we all have teeth, or had them, so there is a connection to all. During my visit, other visitors walked through the display discussing anecdotal stories about their own experiences of teeth and visits to the dentist. This exhibition is successfully inspiring people to reflect on what teeth mean to them and situating their own experiences within a medical history framework. Our teeth, after all, are as unique to us as our personal stories about them.

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