



CANNIBALS: MYTH AND REALITY

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Fingernails, skin, blood and boogers: these are things people consume every day without thinking twice. We bite our nails and chew the skin on our lips along with the inside of our cheeks. When we get paper cuts, we suck on the blood in the wound. Do these actions make us cannibals?

This is one of the many unorthodox questions posed at the San Diego Museum of Man's feature exhibit, *Cannibals: Myth & Reality*. While preconceived ideas might suggest otherwise, the exhibit is not all blood, guts and gore.

Upon entering two large wooden doors guests are greeted by a giant wall, every inch decorated with posters of films like *The Hills Have Eyes*, *Silence of the Lambs* and *In the Heart of the Sea*. Clips from *It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia* and *Family Guy* play on a small TV near the end of the stretch. Old paintings and drawings of people hunting humans encapsulate the last bit of the wall and a large orange sign reads, "Sometimes it's hard to separate myth from reality, especially when the reality is unexpected and simply unbelievable."

"My first instinct was, 'Oh my gosh it's gonna be so gross. It's gonna be disgusting,'" said Erika Katayama, the Director of Exhibits at Museum of Man who first saw the exhibit on its opening night March 5, 2015. "But I left going, 'What, that was so awesome. I loved it.' I went back three more times because I loved it so much."

Katayama visited the exhibit before she was hired at the museum just over a year ago. She explained that the purpose of the exhibit is to be immersive and educational, breaking down those stereotypes we've harbored for so long and showing a very real and relatable side to this group of people.

"We want to explore the human experience in the exhibits we produce," said Katayama. "We want people to come here because it's something they can't see any place else."

The exhibit showcases hundreds of books like *Cannibal Jack*, *Heart of Darkness* and *Robinson Crusoe* that have depicted cannibals as foreign terrors. But, as another part of the exhibit explains in large, liftable flash cards, even Charles II, King of England in the 1600s, consumed and experimented with "corpse medicine," a special mix of skull powder that was later named "King's Drops" after the ruler himself. At the exhibit's Baldrick's Apothecary Shop, guests can be prescribed their own "corpse medicine," from mummy dust to skull moss, and from fresh blood to human fat.

"The fascination with 'cannibals' originates in Europe during colonial times when distortions about other people groups were being made for the sake of generating interest and income for expeditions," said Dr. Jamie Gates, PLNU's Professor of Cultural Anthropology. "There's a lot of racism in the idea of cannibalism, and it still carries that trope. It's that sense of the exotic and scary 'other' that seems to attract people."

It still does. *Cannibals: Myth & Reality* has become a "fan favorite" exhibit at the Museum of Man according to Katayama and has had over 106,000 visitors since its opening.

While the exhibit does showcase headdresses and blood bowls used for warrior dances and human sacrifices, the main focus and moral appeal of the exposition is the idea of survival.

There is a broken skull, the face totally bashed in, inside a glass case on the main floor of the exhibit. Scientists believe the skull belonged to a young woman at Jamestown, an early English settlement in America where the people resorted to cannibalism during a harsh winter. Past Jane's skull, there's a hallway with blue lights and the sound of ocean waves leading to a raft and barrel with sticks stuck in the top. The scene simulates a shipwreck and guests draw sticks to see who would be killed and who would do the killing.

"The most impactful thing for me was learning about the siege of Leningrad," said Katayama of another survival situation turned to cannibalism. "The fact that there are people that can still remember that that happened, just blew me away. I had no idea." *Cannibals: Myth & Reality* offers an emotionally jarring experience, whereby challenging attendees' morals and beliefs, it humanizes a group of people normally associated with fear and terror.

"I think moralizing stops when you are that hungry and that desperate," said Dr. Gates. "Survival sometimes makes us do things that we wouldn't otherwise do."

Katayama adds, "When people leave the exhibit, I hear them talking like, 'Oh my gosh did you see that thing with the fingernails?' or 'Would you actually eat a placenta?' People are having these conversations about things you don't normally talk about." At the end of the adventure, guests are handed a button reading, "Cannibals are people too."

Cannibals: Myth & Reality is set to stay open till January 2018. Further dates have yet to be decided.