

ad caput capitis: the lost skulls of Swedenborg

an exhibition of artefacts from the Swedenborg collection
including talks by Colin Dickey and Iain Sinclair

EXHIBITION GUIDE

Curated by Stephen McNeilly
18 October to 22 October 2017

Swedenborg House | Free Admission

The Swedenborg Society
Swedenborg House
20-21 Bloomsbury Way
London WC1A 2TH



2017



ad caput capitis: the lost skulls of Swedenborg

introduction

ad caput capitis: the lost skulls of Swedenborg brings together 11 artefacts, items, relics and artworks from the Swedenborg collection that bear witness to the uncommon story of Swedenborg's skull.

Buried in 1772, in the Swedish Church in Wapping, East London (now Swedenborg Gardens), Swedenborg's skull was stolen on at least two separate occasions. The first time was in 1816, by a phrenologist, John Didrik Holm, who when urged to replace the skull, returned a substitute in its place. The second occasion was in 1817, a year later, by a Captain Ludvig Granholm, who hoped to sell the skull to one of Swedenborg's adherents. Unable to find a buyer, and wracked by guilt, Granholm admitted to the theft on his deathbed in January 1819. He gave the skull to his confessor, the Swedish Pastor J P Wåhlin, who in turn charged C A Tulk, a Swedenborgian and friend of William Blake and S T Coleridge, with keeping the skull safe until the vaults of the church were next opened and it could be returned to Swedenborg's casket. Tulk, unaware that the real skull had been replaced with a substitute, kept and exhibited the skull in his own phrenological collection until it was placed in Swedenborg's coffin in 1823. Whilst in Tulk's possession, three plaster casts of the skull were made at the recommendation of the sculptor John Flaxman.

In 1908, by royal consent of the King of Sweden, Swedenborg's remains were returned to Uppsala, Sweden and buried with state ceremony. The publicity

surrounding this event prompted a gentleman called William Rutherford to write (on 1st April 1908) from Crowthorne, Berkshire to the Swedish Legation in London, to share his memory of having seen a skull that was purported to be Swedenborg's on display in a curiosity shop in the East End in the 1870s. Rutherford feared that the skull in Swedenborg's coffin may not be the genuine one. It is likely that this William Rutherford was William Rutherford Benn (1855-1921), poet, journalist, father of the actress Dame Margaret Rutherford and a distant relative of the politician Tony Benn. William Rutherford Benn grew up in East London and was a resident of Broadmoor Hospital (in Crowthorne) from 1903 until his death; he had dropped 'Benn' from his name to become William Rutherford after he killed his father with a blow to the head from a chamber pot whilst suffering one of a number of psychotic breakdowns that he experienced throughout his life.

Rutherford's letter led to an examination of Swedenborg's coffin and remains, and attempts to find the skull he had seen in the East End. It was discovered, several years later, that this skull had been bought by a Mr Williams, who had taken it with him to Swansea, and from whom it passed onto his daughter, Charlotte Brandt (née Williams).

In 1958 Swedenborg's tomb was opened again to determine, once and for all, which skull was the authentic one. Scientific tests concurred that the Swansea skull was authentic. This skull was later put up for auction at Sotheby's and was bought by the Royal Academy of Sciences, Stockholm, who reinterred it with the rest of the body. During this time, and since, the skulls have undergone repeated scientific, literary and artistic focus.

*

To accompany the exhibition there will be talks by Colin Dickey and Iain Sinclair. This Exhibition guide also contains a Q&A with the curator Stephen McNeilly plus commentaries of the objects on display by Stephen and the Society's Librarian and Editor James Wilson.

Q&A with stephen mcneilly

How did the exhibition come about?

I first became interested in Swedenborg's skull around 20 ago when exploring the Society's archives. There I found a plaster cast of the wrong skull, and was intrigued by the books and material that had accumulated and been published in response to it. Much later I began drafting hypothetical lists of works that might be included in a hypothetical exhibition. This year we had a surprise opening in our calendar that coincided with the Bloomsbury Festival. So an opportunity emerged to turn this hypothetical list into an actual event. It also provided a great opportunity to invite Colin Dickey and Iain Sinclair to speak.

What is the significance of the title *ad caput capitis*?

The title is taken from eight recently discovered offset prints of the skulls on display in the Wynter Room. *ad caput capitis* can be translated as 'head to head' or 'head with head' or even 'head against head'. I was struck firstly by the ambiguity inherent within the Latin: it mirrored the uncertainty between the skulls, i.e., that these two objects had been brought together by accident, or some strange quirk of fate, and are now conjoined in a permanent and posthumous dialogue. Latin, of course, is the language of Swedenborg. It is also noteworthy that several of these prints bear the inscription 'ad caput capitus', a slight textual and semantic shift on 'ad caput capitis', which can be translated as 'at the top of' or 'at the head of [something]'. So further ambiguities.

Could you talk briefly about the themes of the exhibition?

There are several overlapping themes, so perhaps I might draw attention to the three most obvious.

The first plays on the correspondence of the intellectual and skeletal architecture of the man himself. In short we are dealing with *reliquiae*. And relics are incredibly charged objects. In the case of Swedenborg we have the added curiosity of two skulls, so a double biography.

Secondly, and when framed within the context of Swedenborg's writing, there is the sub-theme or category of correspondences. According to Swedenborg, representations of death almost always offer us unique opportunities to conceive of the material world as the embodiment of the infinite.

Thirdly, and invoking more traditional notions of mortality, there is the framework of *vanitas* and the *memento mori*. Via Symbolism, Swedenborg had a huge impact on modern developments in art and literature within this tradition. So we return full circle, a reflexive embrace. The mind that once inspired, becomes deconstructed and analysed by the concepts it once helped to formulate.

There is also the hope, of course, for new narratives. And in this sense, the talks by Colin and Iain are intended as integral components of the event of the exhibition, pointing in new directions.

The Archive has a rich selection of objects, why have you chosen the ones we see on display? And could you talk a bit more in depth about the object you think is a must see?

The exhibition was given special focus by the recent discovery of the eight offset prints now on display on the main table in the Wynter Room. More broadly though, the curatorial focus is the relation or dialogue between the objects. One particular example of this would be the proximity and relation between Vernon Watkins's poem (written in response to the real skull in 1957) and Iain Sinclair's prose text (written in response to the wrong skull in 2010). But this interplay informs all of the items, textual and otherwise.

Colin Dickey's book *Cranioklepty* charts genius through a history of misplaced skulls, including Swedenborg's. Do you stand by that reading of Swedenborg's skull or are you coming at it from a slightly different angle?

I enjoyed Colin's book but I wouldn't prioritize any one account or narrative above another. Again my interests lie with the overlapping narratives and the manner by which these narratives continue to have such ongoing appeal. Colin's book is by far the best place to start though, and I highly recommend it.

The exhibition is based around a selection of objects from the Swedenborg Archive, including an artwork by Jeremy Millar that was previously displayed in Swansea. Why bring it to Swedenborg House?

Jeremy's flag was first commissioned as part of the Locws 'Art Across the City' project in Swansea in 2014. He combined the visits (to Swansea) of two prominent intellectuals, namely Wittgenstein and Swedenborg (posthumously via his skull). The flag was an attempt to reactivate these two separate historical events into the present day. When Jeremy was preparing the artwork he was in dialogue with the Society's Librarian and Archivist James Wilson who supplied the photographs of the skull from the Swedenborg Archive. So there was a double interest. Firstly, given the context of the exhibition, it seemed natural to draw attention to the latest re-emergence of Swedenborg's skull into the public domain. Secondly, and with regard to the flagpole at Swedenborg House and my interest in Jeremy's work, it seemed too good an opportunity to miss.

Can you talk a bit more about the image that you've used to represent the show, the skull that appears to have lots of lines drawn on it? Where does it come from, what was its purpose as a document, why is it here at the Swedenborg Society? What do the lines mean?

As mentioned above the prints were recently discovered, so they have yet to be fully examined. It is possible that the white lines have a ritualistic intent. It is also possible that the lines are purely decorative. Perhaps they are there for other reasons. I was initially struck by the way the lines transform the normally objective emphasis of the photographic images into a personalized, almost private, objects. It seems, via the crop marks, that they are offset prints being made ready for the press. But even this is conjecture.



EXHIBITION GUIDE

FRONT FAÇADE OF THE BUILDING

Am I Glad to be Here!

Flag

Artist: Jeremy Millar

Millar was selected as the inaugural Locws candidate for the International Public Art Open Submission commission, which saw his work feature in the 'Art Across the City' 2014 project taking place in Swansea. Millar's flag flew in the city centre from the Guildhall Rotunda, marking the visits to Swansea of Emanuel Swedenborg and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Swedenborg's visit was a posthumous one, his skull residing for many years in the private collection of Mr W A Williams, of Victoria Arcade, Swansea, and passing on to his daughter, Dr Charlotte Brandt, after his death in February 1956. Wittgenstein, meanwhile, spent the summers of 1941-7 in Swansea, escaping the misery he endured after being appointed to the chair in philosophy at Cambridge University. He stayed with his friend, the American philosopher Rush Rhees, and worked on his *Philosophical Investigations*, exclaiming each time on his arrival 'Am I glad to be here!'. Millar's aim for the flag was 'to combine these two visits by two great thinkers—one who was dead, one who was very much alive—to create a new image for Swansea. I propose to take the image of Swedenborg's elongated skull, and combine it with Wittgenstein's joyous exclamation'. The flag was especially remade in 2017 for this exhibition.

WYNTER ROOM

1. The Mortal Remains of Emanuel Swedenborg

Lectern

Author: Johan Vilhelm Hultkrantz (1862-1938) was a Swedish doctor and academic who specialized in anatomy, anthropology and eugenics.

Date: 1910

In May 1908, after William Rutherford's letters had provided a reminder of the knowledge of a past theft of Swedenborg's skull, and long-whispered rumours that the skull in the coffin did not belong to the head of the great Swedish mystic and scientist, the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences in Stockholm was prompted to order the Royal Society of Sciences at Uppsala (of which Swedenborg had once been a member himself) to carry out a scientific investigation of Swedenborg's casket and its contents. Hultkrantz was chosen to head a team of anatomy professors from Uppsala University to conduct an investigation of Swedenborg's newly repatriated coffin and the mortal remains contained therein. Hultkrantz concluded that the skull in Swedenborg's casket was the correct one and published his findings in *The Mortal Remains of Emanuel Swedenborg* (Uppsala, 1910). Shortly after publication, Mr Rutherford was able to locate the skull he had been shown 40 years earlier, and photos and a plaster cast of this skull were sent to Hultkrantz. Hultkrantz detailed these in *Additional Note to the Mortal Remains of Emanuel Swedenborg* (Uppsala, 1912), but remained of the opinion that the correct skull was already in Swedenborg's casket.

2. Plaster cast of the wrong skull

Glass fronted cabinet

Date: 1908

This plaster cast of a skull was made in 1908 after Swedenborg's mortal remains had been repatriated from their resting place in the vaults at the Ulrika Eleonora Church in Princes Square, Wapping (now called Swedenborg Gardens), where they had lain for 136 years, and prior to their interment in a stately and newly commissioned sarcophagus in Uppsala Cathedral. The cast was one of several made during the course

of J V Hultkrantz's analysis of Swedenborg's mortal remains and it was presented to the Swedenborg Society in 1910, during its centenary celebrations, by the Anatomical Institute of Uppsala University. The plaster casts made for J V Hultkrantz of what has now been determined as the wrong skull were not the first—three plaster casts were made of the skull in 1823 at the suggestion of the sculptor John Flaxman who had commented on the skull 'How beautiful the form—how undulating the line here. . . Why I should almost take it for a female head, were it not for the peculiar character of the forehead'. Hultkrantz used one of the plaster casts of the wrong skull to model a bust of Swedenborg (see no. 3 below).

3. Reconstructed head of Swedenborg from the wrong skull

Display plinth (plaster bust burnished with a bronze finish)

Artist: J V Hultkrantz

Date: 1910

A bust of Swedenborg modelled by J V Hultkrantz on a cast of what is now deemed to be the wrong cranium. 'Several criticisms will very likely be made of my Swedenborg bust, and I am fully conscious that I have not succeeded in reproducing in it all the characteristic features of the portraits, but the purpose of the reconstruction was not the production of an artistic piece of sculpture, but only to scientifically test whether the man whose cranium was the basis for the bust could have had an appearance which agreed in its essential characters with Swedenborg's, as we know him from his portraits, or in other words whether Swedenborg had a skull of a type similar to the cranium which now lies in his coffin. I consider myself justified in giving an affirmative reply to these questions. The proof lies, of course, not in the resemblance between the bust and portraits with regard to the delicate details of eyes and mouth, eyebrows, hair-dressing, etc., but wholly and solely in the agreement of the facial proportions' (J V Hultkrantz, *The Mortal Remains of Emanuel Swedenborg*). Intriguingly, Hultkrantz elected to give his bust of Swedenborg what appears to be a pencil moustache. No existing portraits of Swedenborg have been found with him wearing a moustache.

4. Emanuel Swedenborg's Cranium: A Critical Analysis

Display plinth

Author: Folke Henschen (1881-1977), professor of pathological anatomy at the Karolinska University Hospital, Stockholm.

Date: 1960

In the 1950s, after reading an article by W Rutherford entitled 'A Swedenborg Mystery: the Rival Skulls', in the *Journal of Anatomy and Physiology* (October 1913), and having found, with the aid of the Swedenborg Society, the present location, in Swansea, of the rival skull, Folke Henschen requested permission of the Swedish Government for Swedenborg's sarcophagus to be opened for further examinations and tests on the skull. Permission was granted and the examinations took place in September 1958, with similar tests being conducted on the so-called 'Swansea skull' in the United Kingdom. Advancements in scientific techniques, including X-rays, and analysis of blood groups and fluorine content, led Henschen to conclude that the 'Swansea skull', notable for being an example of a scaphocephalic type, was in fact Swedenborg's skull. Henschen published his findings in *Emanuel Swedenborg's Cranium: A Critical Analysis* (Uppsala, 1960).

5. Head of the wrong man

Framed text, wall

Author: Iain Sinclair

Date: 2010

This text was commissioned and included as part of an exhibition staged by the Swedenborg Society in 2010 entitled *Fourteen Interventions*, and was one of a series of eight descriptions of objects written by Iain Sinclair to accompany the exhibition. These texts were printed in 2012 in a book with Brian Catling entitled *Several Clouds Colliding*, published conjointly by BookWorks and the Swedenborg Society.

6. Wooden block of Head (Swedenborg)

Display plinth

Artist: unknown

Date: unknown

Provenance: unknown

7. Swedenborg's Ear bones

Wall mounted glass case

Incus and malleus bones purported to be those of Emanuel Swedenborg. The donation of the ear bones of Emanuel Swedenborg is recorded in no. 1165 of the minutes of the Committee of the Swedenborg Society for their meeting of 4 February 1881: 'on the table a walking stick which once belonged to Swedenborg and also an ear bone (in a case) originally in the possession of Dr Spurgin—both articles presented to the Society by Mrs Bateman'. Mrs Bateman was the widow of Henry Bateman (1806-80), the founder of New Church College, Islington, and former senior surgeon at the Islington Dispensary, who had acquired the ear bones from Dr John Spurgin (1796-1866), physician at the Foundling Hospital, and chairman of the Committee of the Swedenborg Society for over 30 years, having first joined the Society in 1816. Where Spurgin obtained the ear bones is not known, but it may have been through Charles Augustus Tulk, his colleague (and likewise former chairman) on the Committee of the Swedenborg Society, who is known to have possessed as a relic, at one time or another, at least one tuft of hair alleged to be Swedenborg's, and who had the 'wrong skull' of Swedenborg in his phrenological collection for 4 years from 1819. Tulk was also present at the ceremony when this skull was placed back into Swedenborg's coffin on 25 March 1823, which may have presented an occasion to take bones and hair away from the coffin as souvenirs.

8. Swedenborg's Hair clipping

Wall mounted glass case

The donation of this item was recorded in the minutes of the Committee of the Swedenborg Society for their meeting of 1 November 1907: 'A lock of Swedenborg's hair which was originally presented by Mrs Messiter to Mr C. A. Tulk was

now offered by his daughter, Mrs Harrison, to the Society'. This information slightly conflicts with or embellishes the provenance recorded in the letter of donation by Caroline Louisa Harrison. Caroline Louisa Harrison (née Gordon, d. 1920) was the granddaughter of Charles Augustus Tulk. The Mrs Messiter mentioned in both the Committee minutes and letter of donation may refer to the widow or daughter of Dr Husband Messiter of Islington (d. 1785), who was Swedenborg's friend and physician at the time of his decease in 1772, and who became a member of the early Swedenborgian group, the London Universal Society for the Promotion of the New Jerusalem Church, founded in 1776. The Mrs Harrison (d. 1859) mentioned in the letter of donation as mother of Charles Harrison (d. 1867), and mother-in-law of the donor Caroline, is likely to be the daughter of Suzannah Harrison (née Cookworthy, b. 1743), who was herself the daughter of the early translator of Swedenborg and inventor of English porcelain manufacture, William Cookworthy (1705-80). Suzannah married the celebrated Quaker abolitionist and trader George Harrison (1747-1827) in 1777.

9. Sotheby's catalogue

Plinth

Date: 6 March 1978

Swedenborg's skull was put up for auction sale by Sotheby's on 6 March 1978, where a predetermined bid of £1500 from the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences was accepted. The Academy was never billed and Sotheby's defrayed the costs to the seller themselves. This was partly due to a sustained letter-writing campaign by a group of Swedenborgian New Church members, who objected to the sale. This group was orchestrated by the Swedenborg Society's then librarian, Nancy Dawson, who wrote letters to MPs and clergymen of various denominations, including Cardinal Basil Hume. Dawson attended the auction sale and her annotations of the prices different items were sold for can be seen in the catalogue. It is said that Dawson's campaign influenced changes in Sotheby's policy with regard to the sale of human remains. Several months after the auction, the 'Swansea skull' was placed in the sarcophagus at Uppsala Cathedral,

in a private ceremony, by Torstein Sjøvold, professor in historical osteology at Stockholm University, and the other skull, the ‘wrong skull’ was removed and buried in ground outside the Cathedral.

10. Swedenborg’s Skull

Central table

Typescript poem and signed letter by Vernon Watkins

Date: March 1957

Welsh poet Vernon Watkins—close friend and collaborator of Dylan Thomas—was inspired to write the poem shown here after he had been shown the skull confidentially in 1956. It was in February of this year that the owner of the skull, Mr W A Williams, passed away. During this same time period, Folke Henschen and Freda Griffiths, Honorary Secretary of the Swedenborg Society, had been busily trying to liaise with Mr Williams to arrange for the skull to undergo tests at the British Museum. Analysis of the typeface shows that the letter and poem were written on the same typewriter. The poem was first published in *The Listener*, 21 February 1957, and then reprinted in an anthology of poems entitled *New Poems*, edited by Clifford Dymont and published by Michael Joseph, in 1958.

11. ad caput capitis

Central table

8 offset lithographic prints

Artist: unknown

Date: unknown

Provenance: unknown

Discovered recently in an untitled folder in the Society’s archive, these 8 offset prints depict profile, front and elevation views of Swedenborg’s skull and the substitute that was placed in his coffin. At the bottom left of 4 sheets there is printed the title *ad caput capitis* meaning ‘head to head’, whilst on the other four it reads *ad caput capitis* meaning ‘at the top’, or ‘at the head’. Although the dating of the works are unknown, the images are drawn from the official photographs of

the skulls first published in 1910 in *The Mortal Remains of Emanuel Swedenborg*, by Johan Vilhelm Hultkrantz. It might also be noted, from the shadow print contained on several pages, that the paper is sourced from endpapers of the 1740 edition of Louis Moréri's *Le Grand Dictionnaire Historique ou le melange curieux L'histoire sacree et profane*, although the relevance of this is uncertain. Several of the pages have prints on both sides.

IAIN SINCLAIR is a writer, poet and filmmaker known as a chronicler and critic of ever-changing contemporary London. His works include *Downriver*; *London Orbital*; *Blake's London*; *Swimming to Heaven*; and *The Last London: True Fictions from an Unreal City*.

COLIN DICKEY is a US writer, speaker and academic who contributes regularly to *LA Review of Books* and *Lapham's Quarterly*. His works include *Cranioklepty: Grave Robbing and the Search for Genius*; *Afterlives of the Saints: Stories from the Ends of Faith*; and *Ghostland: An American History in Haunted Places*.

JEREMY MILLAR is an artist, writer, curator and senior tutor at the Royal College of Art, London. His recent solo exhibitions include *M/W*, Muzeum Stzuki, Lodz; *XDO XOL*, Whitstable Biennale (both 2014); and *The Oblate*, Southampton City Art Gallery (2013).

STEPHEN MCNEILLY is Museum Director at the Swedenborg Society and series editor of the Swedenborg Archive series. For the Swedenborg Society he has curated *Now It is Permitted: 24 Wayside Pulpits* (2016) (with Bridget Smith), *Swedenborg House: Fourteen Interventions* (2010) and *D T Suzuki: an exhibition of manuscripts, letters and other items* (2012).



The Swedenborg Society
Swedenborg House
20-21 Bloomsbury Way
London
WC1A 2TH
+44 (020) 74057986 ext 4
www.swedenborg.org.uk

Charity registration number: 209172
Company registration number: 00209822