

Extraordinary natural curiosity : a living skeleton.

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Living Skeleton

Aug. 1. 1793.
**EXTRAORDINARY NATURAL CURIOSITY.
A LIVING SKELETON.**

A young man, a native of France, has just been brought to London, of whom the following very curious description is given in the *Medical Advertiser* of July 30:—

The name of the Living Skeleton (for by that title he was designated on the Continent) is Claude Ambroise Seurat; he is a native of Troyes, in Champagne, was born on the 10th of April, 1793, and is consequently 22 years of age.

The child, in the first instance, presented the customary baby form, its features being handsome; but in proportion as the infant grew the frame gradually wasted away, and so continued to decrease until the attainment of its full stature, which occurred according to the usual term of life, at which period Claude Ambroise Seurat had attained his present height of five feet seven inches and a half, when his frame had dwindled to the living skeleton form it now personifies. Having been shaved, for the purpose of displaying the formation of the skull, in order to prevent the effects of cold he wears a wig, the colour of his eye-brows, which are a dark chestnut brown.—

The pupils of the eyes are large, full, and penetrating; the whites very clear, and his sight strong; but the upper lids appear rather to weigh downwards, from a laxity of the muscles, added to which there is a glassiness in the sight that conveys a something of ghastliness to the general appearance. A casual observer, however, on contemplating the physiognomy alone (the residue of Seurat's frame being covered), would be led to regard him as an object just recovered from a dangerous illness, whereby he had been reduced to the brink of the grave. His teeth are perfect; his powers of mastication very good, as there is no defect in the strength of the jaws. His right shoulder inclines very much downwards, while the left rises in proportion. The upper joints of the arms, present nothing but bones covered with the skin, their circumference measuring just four inches; while the fore arms, on the contrary, are five inches and a half. The hands are particularly long, and the nails beautifully formed; but the fingers are contracted upwards. The muscles of the arms are, however, wasted away or contracted, so that our subject does not possess the power of elevating the hands higher

than in a semi-horizontal position, and when in that attitude nothing can possibly exceed the sepulchral appearance of this living anatomy. Perhaps one of the most wonderful circumstances attending the living skeleton is, that if measured externally from the chest to the back bone, the distance is under three inches. Taken round the waist at the bottom of the ribs, the body measures barely one foot eleven inches, and when the object throws its arms backwards the shoulder blade bones are scarcely one inch asunder. From the vertebrae of the back, taken between the shoulders to the centre of the loins, the falling-in is not less than five inches. The thighs are much smaller than the legs, and like the upper joints of the arms merely covered with skin; the knees, of a reddish colour, protrude in the front and sides, forming as it were a bowl at the bottom of the thigh bones. The legs, of which the right is the largest, merely shew signs of calves, particularly the latter; and the main arteries of the exterior of the thighs and legs are large and full, which were no doubt augmented by the excessive heat of the weather.

When in France, where he ate very little if any animal food, a penny French roll was enough for a day's sustenance; but as he now partakes of animal diet in very small quantities, his portion of bread is reduced accordingly. As regards his feeding, those dishes which afford most nourishment satisfy him the quickest, and two or three ounces a day are sufficient. In France he was accustomed to drink the wine of his country; but in England he partakes of wines greatly diluted by water, finding the liquors here so much stronger; as the champagne he usually drank was what is denominated *Vin de pays*, or small wine, of which we have none in this country. In eating, he masticates his victuals very much, taking small pieces, as the passage to the stomach would not admit of any great repletion; and in drinking the same precaution is required, other wise suffocation would ensue.

CITY SCRAPS.

No. 428.—THE LIVING SKELETON.

For several months during the year 1825, among the other notabilities of London, Claude Serrat, denominated, from his extraordinary physical condition, the Living Skeleton, took a distinguished place, and gathered to his daily levees eager crowds. We have before us a drawing, in three positions, of this strange natural phenomenon, taken by the now veteran artist, George Cruikshank. The figure represented is male, except a scanty decency toga round the waist. No. 1 shows Claude standing sideways; he is quite bald, but the face is tolerably full, and the cheek bones are not particularly prominent; all the rest of the frame, however, displays an almost total absence of muscle. The shoulder-blades seem ready to burst their scanty covering. The arms appear nothing more than the upper and lower bones very sharply edged over with a billious-looking skin. The sacrum projects in a startling manner, while the legs and feet have a dry, hard outline which remind of those members in a corpse long dead. No. 2 represents a front figure. Here the head, though quite bald, gives the idea of that of a man in middle life, with a shrewd but rather agreeable expression of face. The trunk, with its frightfully prominent ribs, and the shoulders and arms preternaturally thin, and appearing stiffly connected with the body, as if attached by wires. The hips peep out through the decency cloth in the oddest manner. The knees have a queer rounded outline, and seem too large for the poor pipes of legs; yet the feet, though mere articulated masses of bone, with their queerly elongated toes, must be pronounced out of proportion to the upper portion of the structure. No. 3 supplies a back view of Master Serrat. Here the arms are elevated, and the motion of the shoulder-blades is developed with a terrible accuracy. The right side projects in a most distressing mode, and the hips look from their loop-holes like dry withered limbs of bone. The articulation of the knees and feet excite a frightful rigid sharpness, and we are made to think of a dead skeleton, hung in a surgeon's cupboard for demonstration.

The particulars we shall now give of Claude Serrat were published during the exhibition by "John Fairbairn, Broadway, Ludgate-hill," in a shilling pamphlet, and are amplified from other reliable sources. In 1824 the continental journals contained statements respecting the existence of a human being, styled Le Squelette Vivant, or the Living Skeleton. The reports at first could not be verified, and the whole passed for a joke. But a Major Williams—an Englishman of fortune—prompted by curiosity, resolved to make inquiry in the localities indicated, relative to the supposed phenomenon. He realized the fact in the French province of Champagne. After inspecting the *l'assu nature* in question, he found that numerous French medical men had seen the man; and that in consequence of their harsh treatment of his frail frame, by squeezing and rough manipulation, he had imbibed such a horror of surgical inquiries that he would no longer allow any examinations of his person. His father had been offered large sums for the purchase of his body after death; but the man, with proper natural feeling, had indignantly refused all such offers. It had also been suggested that he should be taken to Paris for the inspection of Charles X., but Major Williams now proposed to convey Claude Serrat to England, under the care of his mother-in-law, Joe exhibition. This plan was acceptable to his family, but a difficulty arose—no communication had been made on the subject to the French School of Medicine; and it was thought they might interfere, and no passport be allowed for his journey. Great precaution, however, as to secrecy, relative to his departure, was observed, and no obstacle arose. He was exhibited on his way—at Rouen, and in other towns. 1,500 persons visited this living prodigy—many more were anxious for admission, but Claude's fatigue prevented it. He reached Brighton without much notice, and landed on the pier, Thursday, July 14, 1825. Thousands lined the coast to witness his disembarkation; they were cheated, however, by a rumour that it was an individual recovering from the plague, and the credulous sight-seekers, in great alarm, sought to escape from the danger of infection.

Claude Ambroise Serrat was a native of Troyes, province of Champagne, born April 10th, 1798. He was consequently 27 years of age when exhibited in London. His mother, who had been dead some time, was of small stature, though rather stout, and short-sighted. It was not known that she had been annoyed by any disgusting object during her pregnancy with Claude. It had been pretended that she had been frightened by seeing a skeleton, at a medical man's house. There appeared to be no warrant for this report. As an infant he was a fine child, but soon began to waste, and exhibit symptoms of marasmus; and he continued to grow more emaciated as he increased in height, until he presented the form he wore, being five feet seven inches, and began to be called the "Living Skeleton." "Speaking for ourselves (says the writer), we must declare that a sensation of awe filled us on entering the room, Claude Serrat presenting himself in an erect posture, completely naked, with the exception of a narrow silk apron round his loins, which had holes on each side through which the hip bones protruded, serving to hitch the apron upon. His head was once covered with dark brown hair (Cruikshank represents him as quite bald), which had been shaved off to show the shape of the cranium. When exhibited, he wore a wig, but would remove it, if asked. Craniologists say the skull lacks the organs of intellect, and the posterior part is flat. Spurzain's organ of phlogogenitiveness was also wanting. The ears were well formed,

and his hearing good. The forehead was an average height, and the eyebrows well arched. The eye was prominent, the pupil of a dark brown, the iris drooped somewhat, owing, perhaps, to a laxity of the muscles. His eyes occasionally emitted a sort of lambent gleam, which had an unnatural effect. The nose projected, the cheeks were drawn in, the lips rather thick, his chin the ordinary size, the skin about the jaws of a blackish hue, owing to the roots of the beard, which was closely shaved. A casual observer, supposing Serrat to be wearing the usual clothes, might have thought him an invalid, for the head and face alone would not give any notion of the condition of the rest of his frame. The teeth were sound, and the jaw strong; his taste was natural, but the narrowness of the gullet allowed him only to masticate small pieces of food, nor could he do more than sip fluids, as a full draught might have produced suffocation. When feeding, he used to place his elbows on the table, and raising his hands, supported in that manner, bent his head so as to meet them, and thus convey food to his mouth. The expression of his countenance was calm and contemplative, and his appearance excited a feeling of sympathy and compassion. In France, he usually ate each day about four ounces of bread, drinking champagne, very much diluted with water, the common beverage of the country people. In England, he swallowed minute portions of animal food, and still less bread; he scarcely ever exceeded three ounces of solid food in one day. His drink here was porter, cyder, or wine, greatly diluted. His digestion was good, and the action of the stomach and alimentary canal satisfactory. The vertebrae of the neck was painfully apparent, and when he spoke, his rotatory motion was plainly seen. The shoulder bones protruded, and the right is much lower than the left. Sir Astley Cooper pronounced the upper joints of the arms the most extraordinary specimens of the living anatomy he had ever beheld. The skin was tightly stretched over them, and the circumference of each arm was only four inches, the elbow joints seemed large in contrast, and the forearms increased in size, and measured at the broadest parts five inches and a half. There was little muscular power; he could not raise them above a semi-horizontal position. The hands were skinny, the fingers long, the lower joints partially contracted. He could not hold a pen, but the nails were beautifully formed, and possessed the curved acorn shape. The blade-bones were tightly covered and seemed starting out; when the arms were thrown back, they approached close enough to grasp a walnut, while the cavity between them, while in that position admitted a large orange to pass without touching the nut alluded to. Taken between the shoulders from the vertebrae of the back to the loins, the cavity or recession is not less than five inches.

The general emaciation was extreme. The coccyx was flat, the neck broad, the scapula projected, the spine was curved, and most of the cervical vertebrae were curved backward, there was also a curve backward formed by some of the lower dorsal vertebrae. Some of the bones were so prominent that they might be distinctly traced by the eye from the end of a large apartment. The formation of the upper extremities and breast were very noticeable. The left scapula was higher than the right, and both, when viewed sideways, presented a large knotted tumour, from the immense projection of the ribs. The upper angle was placed very forward, and from the base of the neck the scapula proceeded backwards, and to permit its closer application to the upper and back part of the chest, its concave surface was remarkably curved, but not enough to prevent the lower angle, from being pushed forward in an unseemly manner. This arrangement interfered with the freedom of muscular motion, and must have proved troublesome to the individual. The trunk was oddly shaped, viewed in front the chest was not particularly narrow, its breadth across the sternum being sixteen inches, but it was flattened as if driven inward towards the dorsal vertebrae. In a well formed man the bone is slightly convex externally and concave internally, giving ample room for the thoracic viscera; but in Serrat, the outer surface is concave, and the internal convex, so that a space of scarcely two inches is left between the opposite vertebrae. Hence there would be a slight difficulty in swallowing; and of the unnatural position of the heart, which, instead of being located behind the third, fourth, and fifth ribs, was observed to pulsate low down behind the seventh, eighth, and ninth ribs, in the place of the left hypochondrium. The lower ribs, called false, were rounder and more natural, affording space for the heart, stomach, &c. Nor formed as the upper part of the chest was, could life have been maintained without this lower sweep of the ribs—so much the cardiac functions were impeded. A wonderful provision wrought out naturally to remedy the evils consequent on an almost unprecedented malformation. The condition of the abdomen must be noticed. At first view it seemed to contain two cavities, so much was Serrat contracted round the loins. The pelvic viscera partook of the general wasting, and its angle stood out as they do in imacinate skeleton. The ribs were as if distinguishable, osseous, and detected by the touch, as early they were separate pieces of bone; while the heart was seen palpitating very low down under the left breast. The thighs are smaller and thinner than the legs, the skin drawn tight over them is of a dark hue, and they much resemble dry bones; yet the main arteries, running down their inner surface, were full and prominent. The knees were large and of a reddish hue in contrast with black tinge of the rest of the body. There were nodules on the shins, but the calves of the legs were well pronounced—one being much larger than the other. The ankles exhibited a swollen, depressed appearance. The second toes lapped over the great ones. Serrat could only walk

on a level surface. The foot appeared like a useless piece of wood attached to the leg. The toes when raised inclined downwards, and each step in advance was made feebly. The skin was dry and harsh to the touch. It had little or no moisture. Such a covering to an ordinary human body would be incapable of most of its natural functions. Serrat's breathing was almost a past, yet its quickness did not seem to distress him; but he seldom spoke, and then only by monosyllables. A medical journal writing of him said, "The action produced by the motion of the lungs does not come from the chest, as in ordinary cases, but from the lower extremity of the abdomen, as if the respiratory organs had dropped from their natural cavity and had from use accommodated themselves to the abnormal position." His health was ordinarily good. He slept well, but occasionally had attacks of night-mare. That he might have ready assistance, he constantly slept in the same bed with his father and step-mother, and they were accustomed to awake at the slightest touch. He said he dreamed frequently, but that his dreams were never unpleasant or allusive to his miserable physical state. His voice, shrill and thin, was not disagreeable. Music seemed to delight him, and his father declared that Serrat sometimes sang, in a very faint tone, passages of the airs of Champagne. He appeared excessively sensitive to touch. When a visitor touched his left side, the rest of the surface sympathized by an involuntary chill, which contracted the pores of the skin, and produced the external roughness known by the term of goose-skin.

Sir Astley Cooper believed that the wasted condition of Serrat was attributable to the unnatural position of his heart and lungs, whence ensued a gradual decaying of the muscles and a progressive decay of the whole frame. It was a remarkably hot summer in 1825, when Serrat was in London. His nude costume, otherwise, would have made the change of atmosphere from his native element very perilous. To appearances he seemed hardly wind-proof, yet the opening and shutting of the exhibition room did appear to annoy him. Serrat had no objection to being exhibited for money. When he told that some of the public journals had animadverted on the credulity and bad taste of the parties who made a profit of his peculiarities, he declared nothing had been done in the matter without his full consent. The memoir we have quoted concludes thus—"However the front view of the 'Living Skeleton' may create dismay in visitors, the feeling is augmented on viewing his person in a side attitude, with the arms elevated. Glancing from the unnatural position of the shoulder, along the hollow of the back, down to the hip, forming a symbol of the figure 8, and then turning to the front of the figure you meet the ghastly projection of the chest, the sharp cavity of the abdomen, and the strange protuberance of the left side, caused by the low position of the heart, from which the eye falls on the protruding posterior, a form so wild is brought before them that they may well pronounce him 'Le Squelette Vivant,' or 'The Living Skeleton.'" Mr. Maguire, a surgeon of eminence at the period, wrote thus on the subject—"The case exhibits no deformity nor derangement of any vital functions. The heart executes its work duly, respiration goes on, unless from exhaustion, which also accounts for the gradual wasting, and the brain is full of power. Fully to account for the progressive wasting is difficult. Serrat is not a *l'assu nature*; from what disease does he suffer? Sir Astley Cooper says the heart is misplaced. I do not believe it. Let the heart be located where it may be, while it continues to act so well, the blood will be distributed properly, and will fulfil the needs of the body, if the blood is in a healthy state. We must look to the quality of the blood for the cause of decay, and not to the organ which propels it in its circulation. The air may alter the quality of the blood, it may not be sufficiently oxygenated, but then symptoms of disease arise. I think the disease must be sought in the fluid from which the blood is formed—the chyle, a compound formed in the process of digestion. If the chyle formed is healthy, it is clear the muscles &c., will be properly nourished. Hence, we infer that the chyle in Serrat's case is unhealthy. He eats very little. Why does he eat so little? I think it is caused by the early obliteration of numerous lacteal vessels, which are essential to the proper distribution of the chyle. It is obstructed and has grown unhealthy, unfit to furnish the requisite nourishment. I state this opinion fearlessly. Muscles require good blood, good blood is unattainable without chyle. If it is not supplied the body must waste. I can imagine no other cause. The case is decidedly atrophy or tabes mesenterica, only that instead of an acquired disease of the mesenteric glands, it is a preternatural deficiency in them." Mr. Maguire declared his conviction that his opinion would be confirmed by an examination of Serrat's body after death. He hoped the opportunity would be remote. We have not been able to learn whether Serrat died in England, or whether he survived for a long period; but the exhibition closed towards the winter of 1825, and many persons who he must soon die from mere exhaustion. We have gone largely into professional opinions on this remarkable case, and cannot but think that Sir Astley's view was the soundest. The misplacement of the heart and lungs were fully sufficient to produce the effects described. Could there be any healthy action under such circumstances? And if the mesenteric glands were in part obliterated, might not the malformation explain that also? Such cases are fortunately very rare, and without the examination hinted at by Mr. Maguire, there could be no absolute certainty in this *Le Squelette Vivant*.

CITY PRESS, May 30, 1858.