

Little Men: A Mystery of No Small Significance

by Caroline Alexander



It was hard to believe: Forty blocks north of Columbia University, 100 blocks north of Tiffany's, on the edge of Harlem, lay a deceased European man who had been shrunk to a height of 31 inches. This piece of information was conveyed to me over a casual lunch one bright summer day two years ago by a longtime resident of this amazing city in which all unthinkable things are possible. As a child my acquaintance had seen the object in the National Museum of the American Indian, and her memory of it was vivid.

It had stood within a glass cabinet, a fully formed man with blond hair and mustache, shrunk to puppet size by Jivaro headhunters of the South American forest.

The conversation was the start of what became for me a minor obsession. This museum curio was a grim manifestation that man is in fact matter, bound by the same laws of physics that govern purely material objects. Drop him in water and he will sink; set fire to him and he will burn; desiccate him and he will shrink.

My fascination was also wrung from the horrified realization that there was a fate worse than death. I imagined a young missionary or explorer haplessly wandering into the dark Amazonian forest 100 years ago. Renowned for their ability to shrink the heads of their enemies, his Jivaro captors had doubtless been inspired by their novel acquisition to new heights of artistic ambition: They would shrink not merely the head, but the whole man. I was haunted by certain unspeakable images-- a ring of naked warriors laughing in the erratic shadows of a campfire, and the victim, alone and terrified, faced with the inescapable certainty both that his death was imminent and that his mortal remains would be reduced to a doll-size object of mockery.

The impact of this discovery did not diminish as the weeks went on, and eventually I persuaded myself that I had to confront this entity one on one, that perhaps by gazing at him, sorrowfully and understandingly, I could bring belated solace. I say persuaded myself, but there was surely also, somewhere in my heart, a less altruistic compulsion: the primal and inexplicable need, peculiar to humans, to gawk at another's misfortune.

The National Museum of the American Indian is situated at Broadway and 155th Street. It was officially established in 1922, having grown out of the vast foundation of a wealthy amateur collector named George Gustave Heye. Today, the Heye collection of Native American artifacts, spanning more than 10,000 years and covering the entire Western Hemisphere, is one of the finest in the world. In 1989 the museum became part of the Smithsonian Institution; much of the collection will be relocated to Washington, D.C. by the end of the century.

I arrived at the museum one gray autumn day only to discover that the object of my quest had vanished from display a decade or so earlier. And there was a further surprise: The blond man had in fact been one of two shrunken men in the collection. Though they were the only two shrunken human bodies ever documented, the museum had removed them, in part because they were deemed a little too ghoulish for the taste of an increasingly sensitive public, in part because they represented unorthodox extremes of Jivaro head-shrinking art, and in part because they were growing mold. The bodies, therefore, had been placed in "deep storage" in the bowels of the building.

But apparently there were photographs of the men, and after a number of awkwardly worded telephone calls I received permission to visit the museum's library. Although referring to them offhandedly by their acquisition numbers, 12/6201 and 11/1830, I fooled no one; it was common knowledge that I had come to see two

shrunken men. The information cards for both had been pulled years ago, which indicated that they were regarded as "sensitive materials." Even the photographs themselves had been removed, and now only the negatives remained.

And thus it was in the negatives' unnatural shadows that I first viewed these most unnatural objects. The first set of negatives, labeled simply "mulatto", revealed a ghostly figure, diminutive but well proportioned, with a mound of Afro-style hair and wearing a nonchalant expression. According to the museum registry, he was 26 inches tall. Looking at him, I felt incredulity but no emotional shock. If this character had known in advance what was in store for him, nothing in his relaxed demeanor indicated that he particularly cared.

But things were otherwise with the second, somewhat larger, substantially clumsier figure whose stiffly held arms, raised shoulders, and thrust-out chest suggested a pathetic defiance. Whereas the first figure was neat and compact, the second was scraggly and uncouth, covered with white hair. The mop on his head, the luxuriant mustaches covering half his face, the rug of wiry chest hair, the wool on his legs-- none of these had shrunk, and now they bristled out of proportion to his wizened limbs.

Although both figures had been on display together, I could well understand why my friend had remembered only the second. The "mulatto" struck me as being in his element, bemused by the rules of a game that he had evidently already known. The second figure had had things done to him that he'd never dreamt of. According to the notation on the negative, he had in happier times been a "Spanish military officer."

Far from quenching my curiosity, this glimpse of the negatives only incited me to dig more deeply into the twisted histories of the duo. Through the museum archive I learned that the first of the shrunken men, the "mulatto," had been obtained by the Heye Foundation "through the generosity of Mrs. Thea Heye." The foundation had purchased it for \$600 in 1922 from a Polish mining engineer named Juan Krateil, then living in Lima, Peru, where he was the president of a petroleum company. One senses from the correspondence that this acquisition was for the museum a source of much satisfaction. Dr. Marshall Saville, one of the museum's most distinguished ethnologists, had apparently been searching for such a specimen for 25 years. The shrunken man soon became one of the most well-known items in the Heye collection. In early 1923, pictures of it were widely circulated in newspaper articles across the country announcing the establishment of the new Museum of the American Indian.

In the summer of that year, however, an incident occurred that threatened to despoil the museum of its prized possession. A Dr. Gustave Struve, a former resident of Lima but then living in Ecuador, contacted the museum through his lawyer to claim that the shrunken man had been stolen from him in 1920 by one Manual Mejia, alias Beinvenida. According to Struve, Mejia had actually been convicted of the theft in Lima but had managed to escape with his booty. The charge caused an unpleasant stir among

the museum's trustees, who then wrote to highly placed Americans in Peru and Ecuador to find out more about this Dr. Struve.

"We did not wish to make inquiries through the native Peruvians," the board secretary wrote in his plea to the American Mercantile Bank of Peru, "but desired to get the friendly cooperation of an American who would be in a position to make some quiet inquiries."

The correspondence returning from South American reported only that Dr. Struve was not known-- was not, therefore, a member of "good society" and may not have been a reputable doctor. In New York, however, the museum trustees were forced to recall that Juan Krateil, from whom they had purchased the body in good faith, had reportedly obtained it himself from "a Spaniard en route from Callao to Panama"-- not exactly a sterling pedigree. Quiet inquiries having proven valueless, the trustees resorted to a more direct line of approach by procuring the services of a private investigation firm in Manhattan, which, however, as the secretary noted with discernible despair, "found nothing."

"I hope that Struve is not in this country," wrote the secretary to the museum's ethnologist in August of 1923. His hope, as it turned out, was in vain, for when Dr. Struve was next heard from he had taken up residence in Buffalo, New York so as to better position himself to press his claim. Ultimately, Struve prevailed. An official bill of sale made out by the board of trustees to Dr. Gustave Struve notes a payment of \$500 for the mummy in their possession, "shrunken by the Jivaro Indians of Ecuador."

It was at the time of this sale that Struve also offered the museum two additional items from his macabre collection: a shrunken human embryo and the shrunken man with the yellow mustache, whom Struve identified as "a Spanish military officer." Eventually the two shrunken men were displayed together on the third floor of the museum along with 15 shrunken "Jivaro" heads and five shrunken sloth heads; the human embryo, apparently, was felt to be too outré for public viewing. Postcards and a color slide of these curiosities became especially popular items in the museum gift shop.

Carmelo Guadagno, the photographer who took the archival photographs and is now enjoying a well-deserved retirement in Florida, recalled with some vividness the sensation of handling the mummies, which were hollow, light, and stiff as leather. He said bones had been left in the feet, presumably as ballast for stability. "They were chilling," Guadagno said. "They look like dolls, but you know they aren't. There is no question that they are human beings."

The Shuar people (as the Jivaro are properly known, *jivaro* being Spanish for "savage") are an aboriginal tribe now numbering less than 20,000. They inhabit the Montaña, a region of dense forest covering the eastern slopes of the Andes in Ecuador and Peru.

The Shuar have long been known for their skill as head-shrinkers, representations of which have been found on Peruvian Nazca ceramics dating back as far as the first century. The earliest written report was made in 1527 by Miguel de Estete, a Spaniard who probably traveled to South America in the company of Pizarro. The Spaniards, Estete tells us, at first believed that the small heads they came across were "of a race of dwarfs that had lived in the country, until we learned the truth of the matter."

In Shuar culture, a shrunken head, or *tsantsa*, is neither a mere object of curiosity nor, as I had imagined, an objet d'art. *Tsantsa*-making is an inextricable component of a traditional war raid and is specifically directed at thwarting the hostile power of a slain enemy's *musiah*, or avenging soul. The process of head shrinking is usually begun by the warriors on the march home from a successful raid. The head of the slain enemy, male or female, severed as close as possible to the base of the neck, is carried away by the raiding party until a suitable spot is found to begin the complex and delicate shrinking operation.

The head is first slit from the base of the neck up to the crown and the skin delicately peeled away from the skull. The incision is then neatly sewn up and the skin lowered by the hair into a pot of boiling water-- according to one "recipe," for approximately 15 minutes. The act of boiling extracts the skin's natural oils, and the head begins to shrink.

"When the head was finally withdrawn it was almost as white as paper," reported Jane Dolinger, an English traveler who witnessed this ceremony in the 1950s, adding that "the odour of cooked human flesh permeated the air and I gagged repeatedly." (Dolinger, the author of several vivid travel books, had been led into Shuar territory by an obsession similar to, if decidedly riskier than my own: a quest to find the identity of the head of a young woman with long blond hair that had reportedly been seen in a remote village in the Ecuadorian Oriente.)

At this stage, the head has the shapeless appearance of a limp, wet rag. A length of flexible vine is threaded around the base of the severed neck so as to hold the opposing sides apart and restore its original shape. The eyelids are then sewn tightly shut and the lips sealed with three wooden pegs. Next, the head is half filled with hot sand and whirled around by the hair so that the sand is distributed throughout the cavity. When the sand cools, it is emptied out and new, hot sand put in; after three or four days, the sand is replaced with heated stones. Over days the head can be reduced, as Estete observed, to the size of a newborn child's; over weeks, it can be reduced to the size of an orange.

A well made *tsantsa* retains the original features of the face. This most challenging aspect of the head-shrinking process is achieved by continually smoothing and molding the facial contours with flat, heated stones. Finally, the fine facial hair is singed off and the skin itself roughly polished and then blackened with charcoal. This last step is taken to insure that the spirit of the slain enemy is shut up, as it were, in a dark room, from which it cannot see its way out to escape and torment the survivors.

When the *tsantsa* is satisfactorily finished, a feast is held in honor of the *muka heindinyu*, or "lord of the head." The *tsantsa* itself is passed around to everyone who partook of the victory; according to some reports, the *tsantsas* are ceremonially insulted and abused. Traditionally, the *tsantsa* might be retained to adorn the victor's house or, less often, thrown away at the end of the celebration.

When it became known that the white man would barter guns and other valued objects for these Shuar trophies, they were sold to collectors, who in turn sold them to museums. Over the years this outside interest was responsible for provoking a brisk trade in made-for-market counterfeits: heads, sometimes of Europeans or other foreigners, that had been shrunk by Shuar artistry but divorced from the traditional ceremonial context. Christian missionaries brought an end to *tsantsa*-making, although knowledge of the art was kept alive by the practice of shrinking the heads of animals, particularly sloths, who are considered distant human ancestors in Shuar mythology but also objects of bitter scorn.

The complexities of the head-shrinking operation only hint at those involved in shrinking whole bodies. The entire skeleton would have to be removed, much in the manner in which a fish is filleted. Tireless applications of stone and sand would be required. The whole procedure sounds preposterously complicated, and without knowing better one would be tempted to attribute the very concept of a shrunken body to the collective overawed imagination of centuries of terrified gringo travelers.

Over the centuries apocryphal tales were floated about whole people shrunken by remote tribes in the interior forest environs of the Rio Negro and Orinoco. One especially compelling version is given by the French traveler Bertrand Flornoy, who had heard it in the 1940s from an old missionary in Quito: In the early nineteenth century, during the Ecuadoran uprising against the Spanish, all Jesuit missionaries were jailed and deported. One of them, however, loved his adopted country too much to leave, and so made his way inland, across the rivers east of the Andes and into the forest, until he came to the territory of the "Jivaro" people. There he was met with kindness and was allowed to live-- until he fell afoul of the local witch doctor, the most powerful figure in the community. "Then," Flornoy tells us in his book *Jivaro*, "in savage passion, the Indians shriveled not merely his head but his whole body. Years afterward a traveler in southern regions, seeking salt, saw in a hut in the Upper Morona a blackened corpse, no bigger than a child's, hanging near the bed of a warrior while the warrior himself, clad majestically in a large cassock, sat on a stool drinking fermented *yamanche*."

Significantly, such tales brought back by other travelers, missionaries, and explorers were always secondhand. Then, in 1898, a shrunken man was displayed at an exposition in the Ecuadoran port of Guayaquil. This was a time when "ethnological" curiosities were hot, and word of the shrunken man quickly spread to potential collectors. The object was apparently not for sale, but for the next 15 years its whereabouts were avidly tracked by hopeful curators of both public and private collections. The shrunken man was said to stand only 26 inches tall and had reputedly been a tribal chief. In all likelihood this was the "mulatto" that wound up in the museum's collection.

My fascination with the fate of the two mummies provided unforeseen benefits. There is a definite satisfaction to be had in learning any new skill, even that of shrinking heads, and I could justifiably take a certain pride in the fact that there were few other people in Manhattan possessed of this particular knowledge. The spotting of an ideal head for shrinking among a crowd of live commuters also added a certain spice to otherwise mundane bus or subway journeys.

But there were unforeseen drawbacks as well. Having followed the history of the little men off and on for some years, I came to regard them with a somewhat proprietary interest. I had even begun to cherish the hope of learning their identities. I had little hope of learning anything about the "mulatto," but I imagined myself making my way to a simple home in a rustic Spanish village, bearing a small shoebox. ("Excuse me, señora, but did you ever hear of your great-uncle Carlos...?") Certainly it had never crossed my mind that having researched photographs, press clipping, archival material, and more information than I needed to know about *tsantsa*-making, I would be denied access to the objects of my study. But this indeed turned out to be the case.

In November 1990, Congress passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, a law designed to protect the contents of burial sites, including human remains and sacred objects, from exploitation and desecration. Among other injunctions, NAGPRA calls for all federally funded museums that possess Native American artifacts to circulate inventories of their collections for possible repatriation claims. This legislation effectively put a stop to the time-honored occupation of professional grave plundering.

When the Museum of the American Indian acquired its two shrunken men, grave robbery of native peoples was a respectable, even glamorous occupation, and human remains were an accepted component of any major ethnology collection. "Grave Hold Thousands of Indian Bodies"; "Dog Digs Up Kivas"; "Bones of Famous Old Red Man Found"-- these headlines appeared in respectable newspapers from New York to San Francisco in the 1920s. One article featured a photograph of a triumphantly grinning archaeologist standing over a long row of Indian skulls, which he had arranged in order of descending size much as a big-game hunter might line up the spoils of his hunt for the requisite vanity picture.

Since NAGPRA became law, the National Museum of the American Indian, along with other major institutions, has been engaged in "deaccessioning" all human remains. Indeed, a recent press kit states categorically that "the National Museum of the American Indian does not have human remains in its collections." Apparently it had forgotten the two shrunken men.

My request to see the figures, I was later informed by two members of the museum Curatorial Council, was largely responsible for bringing them back into the museum's attention. It also presented a dilemma: While NAGPRA forbids federally funded institutions from possessing the remains of Native Americans, it says nothing about the

remains of other humans. Therefore, the museum's possession of the shrunken Spaniard did not, strictly speaking, represent a violation. Nonetheless, it was obvious to all parties that we were dealing with a moral gray area, if not a legal one.

The council's rationale for denying me permission was somewhat erratic: Initially I was informed that viewing the shrunken men would deny them their dignity. In addition, I was later told, the figures were in the process of being moved to the National Museum of Health and Medicine in Washington. This curious institution on the grounds of the Walter Reed Army Medical Center is a repository for (among other things) some 20,000 anatomical specimens, including the world's most extensive collection of Civil War soldiers and an exceptional collection of skeletons of nineteenth-century children.

At length, after exhausting the museum's administrative channels along with its curator's patience, I had to accept that permission had been categorically denied. Bowing to necessity, I asked instead only to be allowed to copy the photographs of the figures in the museum's archives. To my dismay, even this wish was denied. The photographs, I was told, were "restricted" at the request of a Shuar delegation that had visited the museum some two years ago after my own visit. Although recognizing the rectitude of this gesture, I was forced to intervene with an objection. For by this time, my research had provided me with a startling new piece of information.

Determined to establish whether any relatives of the key players in this saga were still living, I found in the Quito telephone directory a listing for a Jara Gustavo Struve. Requisitioning the interpretive skills of my old friend Andy Solis, who is fluent in Spanish, I placed a call to Mr. Struve, who turned out to be, as I had hoped, a relative of Dr. Gustave Struve, the collector who had sold the bodies to the museum. In fact, he was his son. Now 75 years old, he said he had not thought about his father for many years; indeed, he had hardly known him. "He left us when I was three years old," the old man said. Although Jara Gustavo Struve had taken his father's German name, his parents had never married.

I could only make out a few odd phrases of the conversation, but it seemed to be going well. Then suddenly Andy sat up straight and with a strange smile said something in a tone that implied he was correcting the old man. Then his eyes widened.

"OK, are you ready for this?" he said after he had hung up the phone. "I asked Jara if he knew anything about the mummies his father had sold. He told me something that didn't make any sense. So I asked him, 'You mean your father got the mummies from the Indians?' He said, 'No. Papa used to make the mummies.'"

After this, Jara had been reluctant to say more. His memories of his father were few and unhappy. "We were raised in an atmosphere of hate," he said. After Dr. Struve left for America in 1923 to press his case with the Museum of the American Indian, he never returned to his family. For a while he sent postcards and some toys, but then these

stopped. It was thought that he had gone to China; the money from his sale to the museum might well have helped finance the journey.

Although details and dates are hazy, it appears that Dr. Struve had lived with the Shuar Indians for several years and learned the art of head-shrinking from them. Olaf Holm, director of the Museo del Banco Central, an archaeological museum in Guayaquil, told me he had heard that both bodies were shrunk "as a joke" by medical students in Guayaquil, and in all likelihood Struve was one of those enterprising students. Holm added that "in those days the yellow fever was still uncontrollable, and unclaimed bodies were stacked in the morgue, so nobody would bother about experimenting with them."

As the Struve family had no photographs, no letters, no souvenirs of any kind relating to Dr. Struve, it appeared that the sole material relic of his existence was his signature on the museum's bill of sale. I decided to present a copy of Struve's signature to Harry Teltscher, a renowned handwriting expert who has published several books on handwriting analysis and testified as an expert witness in numerous court cases. Receiving Struve's signature with no briefing of any kind, Teltscher concluded that the writer had been intelligent and independent-minded, that he'd begun his career with high ideals, that he was tenacious, and that at the time of the writing he had great anxiety about "expenditures of a financial or emotional nature." Furthermore, Teltscher stated, the writer was "difficult to get close to and would fight any attempts at emotional intimacy."

If Gustave Struve was the maker of the shrunken men, then the Shuar delegation's objections were obviously without grounding. But by the time I was ready to present my evidence about Struve to the museum authorities, a new development had arisen. The discussion concerning the deaccessioning of the little men had apparently prompted some soul-searching among members of the museum's Curatorial Council.

"People expressed the concern that deaccessioning the bodies to another museum was essentially passing the buck on to someone else," Ray Gonyea, head of the museum's repatriation program, told me. "It was not felt to be an appropriate way to treat human remains. We are seeking to do the proper thing, and the appropriate thing in this case would be interment. We are investigating appropriate places for burial."

A shrunken man displayed in a museum's glass cabinet is a central symbol in Flannery O'Connor's novella *Wise Blood*. Although I cannot be sure, it is my belief that O'Connor was inspired by the two figures in the Museum of the American Indian. Certainly, although she could not have known it, her imagination had created an eerie fictive counterpart to the true story of the little men. For as in real life, the shrunken man in *Wise Blood* was also stolen and later turned out to be a fake. As for the enigmatic Gustave Struve, he would have sat very easily among the other grotesques of O'Connor's fiction.

More to the point, every detail of both stories is a lesson in urban savagery. The very conception of a shrunken man was, after all, purely the product of a "civilized" imagination. The drama of the blond soldier and his companion was not enacted in the flickering shadows of the Oriente forest, but far more likely in a German medical student's clinic. Still, I wonder whether the poor devils knew something of their fate in advance. Did they, dying, look up from their hospital beds into the cool assessing eyes of their European doctor?

It later occurred to me that, having mastered the complex and painstaking art of shrinking human bodies, Struve might have been loath to neglect the lucrative skill once he left South America. My inquiries about the existence of shrunken figures in Chinese museums, however, has come to naught.

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