

The Mysterious Julia Pastrana

I have been intrigued with Julia Pastrana (1832/34–1860) for many years. The story of her life as a sideshow attraction is so well documented that I will not dwell on it. The image seen here (top) is an enhancement I performed (pastels) on a photo (head detail) of her mummified remains (I changed the eye stare so that she is looking at you—like the Mona Lisa)

Medical science in the early-mid 1800s was a far cry from that of today and it appears current scientists think their predecessors were not too bright. When Julia was alive, she was examined by at least two doctors. Dr. Alexander B. Mott of New York declared her to be “one of the most extraordinary beings of the present day,” a hybrid between human and orangutan. Professor S. Brainerd, M.D, of Cleveland, concluded that her hair, skin and protruding jaws, “entitle her, I think, to the rank of distinct species.” Obviously if this were true much greater attention would have been paid to her remains.

The last doctor to my knowledge who took any great interest in Julia was Dr. Jan Bondeson. He wrote a book on unusual medical-related cases entitled *A Cabinet of Medical Curiosities* (Cornell University Press, 1997). Julia got top billing (as she did throughout her life) and adorns the dust cover. Dr. Bondeson saw Julia’s mummy in 1990 and wrote extensively on her life and medical condition. His conclusion: “Julia Pastrana represents an extreme case of congenital hypertrichosis (with terminal hair) and gingival hyperplasia, perhaps the most extreme of all time. Nothing ever resembling her gross facial deformity—the thick lips, broad and flat nose, and large ears—has been seen in any later examples of this syndrome.” Dr. Bondeson obtained samples of hair.

Although it is highly unlikely that Julia was somehow the off-spring of some sort of homin (Like Zana, the Russian ape-woman), I am still curious as to what a DNA analysis of Julia’s hair would reveal.

For many years, her mummy resided at the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Rikshospitalet, Oslo, Norway. However, in 1996, there was a petition to have her remains cremated. While the petition failed, the following year a woman claiming to be the mummy’s rightful owner contacted the hospital wishing to have Julia’s remains buried in Mexico, the place of her birth. The following from Wikipedia is the latest information:

On 2 August 2012 it was reported in *Aftenposten* that Pastrana would finally be buried in Mexico at an unspecified date. In February 2013, with the help of Sinaloa state governor Mario López Valdez, New York-based visual artist Laura Anderson Barbata, Norwegian authorities, and others, the body was turned over to the government of Sinaloa and her burial was planned. On 12 February 2013, hundreds of people attended her Catholic funeral, and her remains were buried in a cemetery in Sinaloa de Leyva, a town near her birthplace.



Pastel enhancement (1996).



Photograph taken of Julia in 1857, three years before she died.



Julia’s mummified remains.



A poster advertising Julia. She was very popular. She had a son who died three days after birth, and Julia died five days later. Both Julia and her baby were mummified and their mummies displayed as a sideshow attraction—it was a very different time.