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Aesthesis in Anatomy

Cover illustration: drawing of a preparation from the eighteenth-century Leiden anatomical collections, on display at Museum Boerhaave (LUMC catalogue number Afo044).
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Aesthesis in Anatomy

Materiality and Elegance in the Eighteenth-Century Leiden
Anatomical Collections.

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Identification of preparations

For the sake of readability, I have tried to avoid identifying anatomical preparations by using their catalogue number in the running text. In order to enable the reader to trace preparations in the Leiden University Medical Centre anatomical collections catalogue (accessible through the Leiden University Library Catalogue), I have given the catalogue number for each preparation in a footnote at least on the first mention. In chapters where more than two or three and/or very similar preparations are discussed, I have added catalogue numbers in footnotes repeatedly to help identify preparations correctly. Also, catalogue numbers and descriptions have been added to the photographs of preparations in the illustrations section.

Quotes

Unless stated otherwise, all translations of quotes from other languages (Dutch, French, Latin) are mine.

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The LUICD also financially supported a number of trips to international conferences in Lyon, Durham and Edinburgh, where I presented papers on my work in progress. The organizers of, and contributors to, these conferences have helped me greatly in testing and developing my ideas. In Leiden, there was also the ongoing support of our informal reading group – Frans van Lunteren, Martin Weiss and Eric Jorink regularly joined our small research group to discuss work in progress. Also very important for the development of my work were the international project workshop and conference we organized in Leiden in 2009 and 2012 respectively. The latter has formed an international network of scholars, curators, and artists working with anatomical collections, and has resulted in the Leiden Declaration on Human Anatomy.

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Lisa Temple-Cox has made the beautiful drawing of the bead-decorated foetus on the cover of the book. It is of a preparation in the Leiden anatomical collections that Lisa drew in February 2012 when she attended the international conference on anatomical collections that we organized; she deserves special mention for her great work as an artist and scholar.

My colleagues at LUICD/LUCAS and other institutions I thank for sharing their thoughts on my work and PhD life in general during meetings, workshops, reading groups, and seminars. Anna, David, Elisa, Hieke, Larissa, and MARRIGJE, I'll miss our informal Wednesday lunches! Lenie Witkam and Lia ten Brink at the LUICD secretariat deserve to be mentioned for all their practical support.

Even with this wonderful professional network, this book could never have been finished without the support of my friends and family. My friends and my brother have to be credited with timely reminders of the fact that there is a world outside academia and putting things in perspective. My parents I thank for always supporting me, no matter what, and teaching me that it is more important to make a living doing what you love than to make big money. Wouter has been my greatest mainstay for over nine years now – I thank him for being my best friend, the person I can always count on, and the love of my life. Home is wherever I am with you. Finally, I dedicate this book to my grandmothers, who had very little formal education and few career choices in life yet made the best of it.

London, October 2012



Colour plate 1: A0007 Heart injected with red wax and mercury. Probably from the collection of Eduard Sandifort (1742-1814). © Anatomisch Museum LUMC 2012. Photographer Arno Masee. (also see illustration 3)



Colour plate 2: Abo100 B.S. Albinus (1692-1770) – Ear with tiny smallpox scar.
© Anatomisch Museum LUMC 2012. (also see illustration 16)



Colour plate 3: Ado022 Wouter van Doeveren (1730-1783) – Dog with cleft palate.
© Anatomisch Museum 2012. (also see illustration 17)



Colour plate 4: A10045 Female foetus, ca. five months old. Wearing multicoloured beads and yellow beaded necklace with a coin marked 'Hollandia 1778.' Probably from the collection of Sebald Justinus Brugmans (1763-1819). © Anatomisch museum LUMC 2012. Photographer: Arno Masee. (also see illustration 23)



Colour plate 5: Detail of A10045. Coin marked 'Hollandia 1778.' Probably from the collection of Sebald Justinus Brugmans (1763-1819). © Anatomisch museum LUMC 2012. Photographer: Arno Masee. (also see illustration 24)



Colour plate 6: A10040 Female foetus of approximately seven months old, with white, yellow and black beads around wrists, loins, knees, ankles, and a berry (probably nutmeg) in right hand. Probably from the collection of Sebald Justinus Brugmans (1763-1819). © Anatomisch museum LUMC 2012. Photographer: Arno Masee. (also see illustration 25)

Introduction

“Many curators of medical collections have been tempted to try to avoid, or even willfully to prevent, the visceral responses that some visitors might have to medical historical displays. Two-headed babies, shrunken heads and the feet of Egyptian mummies are thus selectively removed to reserve collections. (...) An excessively cautious and fearful approach to such displays [thus] runs the risk of substituting packages of worthy but uninteresting education for windows on to the real world.”

Ken Arnold PhD, Exhibitions Unit Manager at the Wellcome Trust, *Manifesting Medicine* (2004)

Anatomical collections are popular. *Body Worlds*, the contemporary exhibitions of plastinated human bodies by the German anatomist Gunther von Hagens, have drawn thousands of visitors all over the world in the past eight years. But less spectacular displays can also count on public interest, such as the anatomical museum at the St. Radboud University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, that draws about 7,500 ‘lay’ visitors a year.¹ And it is not only contemporary collections of human anatomy that draw visitors: the eighteenth-century London Hunterian collection is popular with medical and art students and the general public alike, and a recent exhibition about the historical anatomical collections at the Groningen University Museum was a huge and uncontroversial success, attracting over a thousand visitors in its last weekend.²

¹ Source: <http://www.umcn.nl/ONDERWIJS/MUSEUMVOORANATOMIEENPATHOLOGIE/Pages/default.aspx> (last consulted 3 May 2012).

² ExtraIntermuseumal January 2011, p.2. The exhibition was ‘*Binnenste Buiten. De mens ontleed.*’ (‘Inside Out. Man dissected.’), 12 February - 23 January 2011, <http://www.rug.nl/museum/tentoonstellingen/actueel/BinnensteBuiten>.

At Leiden University, there is also a rich and fascinating historical anatomical collection. The oldest items date as far back as the early seventeenth century, and from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a substantial collection remains.³ A few items from these historical collections are now on permanent display at the Leiden Museum Boerhaave. Another selection from the historical Leiden collections is on semi-public display in the Leiden University Anatomical Museum, although this is only open to the general public two days a year – on the national museum days. The Anatomical Museum at Leiden is primarily aimed at training medical and paramedical students, and for that reason lacks the kind of explanatory cards and panels customary in public museums, although information on the newer exhibits is accessible through touch screens. Even the ‘historical cabinet’ in the Anatomical Museum is only a small part of the historical anatomical collection: most of it is kept in storage by its owner, the Leiden University Medical Center. In theory, the collections are accessible through the Leiden University Library Catalogue, but most of the preparations listed there lack an illustration and descriptions are often very terse – all in all not very informative for a member of the public with an interest in these historical anatomical collections.

As the opening quote by Ken Arnold suggests, some of this seclusion may be due to fears about compromising medical ethics or of visceral responses from visitors, although historical anatomical collections can in fact be an unique access point to medical history. As Legêne points out, we need to provide disclosure about the history of objects, the context in which they were collected and the aim of their presentation, because otherwise visitors are unlikely to identify with them and establish a connection with a shared, if contested, history.⁴ Historical anatomical collections matter because they are evocative reminders of our fairly recent history of medicine, which is in fact a cultural history. The Leiden collections have so much to tell us about how our forebears thought about health and sickness, life and death, beauty and ugliness, research and medicine, themselves and the other, and how their ideas and practices influenced ours, that it would be a loss if we did not try to enhance our understanding of them. This book therefore aims to explore the eighteenth-century Leiden anatomical collections to gain a better understanding of

³ Over two thousand of the 8170 items listed in the current LUMC catalogue were acquired before 1900.

⁴ Legêne 2008, p.58.

why and how these objects were made and used, of what they meant and can mean. Why were seemingly unrelated preparations such as a dog with a cleft palate, a baby decorated with a bead necklace, a child's hand with a lace-rimmed sleeve holding a string with an eye membrane, foetal bones in oil of turpentine, and a mercury-injected preparation of the lymphatic system all made by anatomists within a century of each other and why did they eventually end up in the same institutional collection?

This book explores how and why the eighteenth-century Leiden anatomical collections were made and used by using their specific preparations and materiality as its starting point. To do so systematically, and to understand the epistemic culture from which the preparations emerged, a theoretical framework is used to develop the analytical concept of aesthesis in the first chapter. Aesthesis has a number of tacit yet distinct, interwoven characteristics, such as gaining knowledge through sensory perceptions, a search for beauty and perfection in those perceptions, dealing with disgust evoked by the practices of anatomy, and commodification of the body. The subsequent chapters each focus on a number of particular preparations that share some kind of material characteristic, i.e. the presence of mercury, lace, plants or bead strings, or pathology and deformity, or simply consisting of the same bodily tissue, like bone. From the analyses of their materiality, it will appear that the preparations and the epistemic culture from which they resulted can be understood in new ways through the concept of aesthesis and its various aspects. Although all aspects can be found in every preparation to some extent, in most one particular aspect stands out distinctly. The final chapter on bone preparations explores the end of aesthesis.

Although this book is far from exhaustive – after all, only a fraction of the preparations from the eighteenth-century collections can be analyzed in detail in a work of this size – the objects chosen form a representative and appealing selection of the collections and are indeed a unique access point to an understanding of their history.

