

BOOK REVIEW

Flesh and Wax: The Clemente Susini's anatomical models in the University of Cagliari

Alessandro Riva, editor. Ilisso Edizioni – Nuoro, 217pp. (2007). €56.00. ISBN 978-88-89188-97-2.

The anatomical wax models illustrated in wonderful detail in this book represent one of the most beautiful collections ever made. They were created in Florence between 1803 and 1805 at the famous workshop of 'La Specola' museum when the artist, Clemente Susini (1754–1814), was at the height of his powers. He was already well known as one of the wax modellers responsible for the larger collections that are today still housed at La Specola and at the Josephinum museum in Vienna. The Cagliari waxes were commissioned by Francesco Antonio Boi, who had been appointed to the chair of Anatomy in Cagliari, Sardinia, in 1799. At the start of the 1801 academic year he found himself at a loose end, no students having signed up for the medical course that year, so he travelled to the Italian mainland to further his anatomical studies. In Florence he discovered the flourishing La Specola workshop and at once realized the potential of anatomical waxes for teaching purposes.

The Cagliari collection is housed in 23 cases, each with one or a group of related models. To overcome the disadvantages inherent in two-dimensional illustration of three-dimensional objects, several of the models have been photographed from more than one viewpoint, and the reader is given a real sense of the whole. In keeping with the original didactic function of the waxes, many of the colour photographs are also reproduced in smaller black and white plates, with numbers on anatomical components that are listed in the accompanying legend. As the photographs clearly show, the models are so realistic that it is difficult not to think of them as 'specimens'. The translucent and shiny appearance of the waxes enables them to be photographed much more successfully than real dissected parts, and their three-dimensional appearance is more life-like than the drawings in even the best of atlases. I am not suggesting that the book can be used instead of an atlas, but nevertheless there is real anatomical information here.

The photographs are preceded by five essays on the history of the Cagliari waxes and their wider context. Although there is a considerable overlap between them due to the various contexts in which they were originally written, they provide a fascinating insight into the origin of these and other anatomical waxes. Alessandro Riva, the current curator of the Cagliari museum which now houses

the waxes, documents the many people involved in bringing them to their current state of preservation and display, from the 18th century to the present day. One of the most recent is Luigi Cattaneo, who was appointed to the Chair of Anatomy at Cagliari in 1963. During World War II the waxes had been wrapped in newspaper and hidden in a remote location, but their move, and perhaps longer-term neglect, had left them requiring careful restoration. This was provided under Cattaneo, whose note for the first (1970) catalogue is reproduced here. In 1978, the 35th National Congress of the Italian Society of Anatomy was held in Cagliari under the chairmanship of Alessandro Riva: Bruno Zanobio's lecture about the models to this audience is also reproduced here. These three articles convey a justifiable sense of local pride. The other two articles, both by the art historian Roberta Ballestriero, are rather different. They are in-depth accounts of the history and art of ceroplastics that not only place the Cagliari collection in a wider context but describe the social history of the period in which they were made. Although wax modelling for religious purposes had been carried out in Italy since around 1600 (including life size models of worshippers that were presented in churches as votive offerings), anatomical wax modelling began later, in response to the atmosphere of intellectual enquiry and desire for scientific knowledge engendered by the Enlightenment. Wax likenesses of anatomical dissections offered a more durable alternative to the relatively unsuccessful attempts to preserve dissected specimens by injection. Another result of the Enlightenment was that votive waxes went out of fashion, so craftsmen and workshops with appropriate artistic and technological skills were conveniently available to be redeployed for scientific purposes.

The first anatomical waxes were produced in Bologna in the 1690s, through collaboration between the Sicilian artist G. G. Zumbo and a French surgeon (Zumbo is best known for his gruesomely realistic depictions of the French plague). Following Zumbo's example, schools of anatomical wax modelling were set up in the early 18th century in some of the leading European universities, but few examples of these early waxes have survived. In spite of the absence of a renowned university, anatomical studies flourished in Florence due to the popular lectures given by Paolo Mascagni, who was also one of the anatomists responsible for the dissections provided for the Florentine anatomical wax modellers. The La Specola workshop was set up in 1775;

the waxes that were retained at La Specola, and those sent to Vienna, are clearly works of art, showing less attention to anatomical detail than the Cagliari waxes. The aim of the director, Felice Fontana, was 'to create anatomical models of scientific value for teaching purposes whilst removing the sense of repulsion produced by cadavers'. This is presumably why the subjects are portrayed as if asleep, on silk cushions.

By the time the Cagliari waxes were commissioned, Fontana was no longer in charge, leaving Susini free to use his own judgement, and his by now expert knowledge of anatomy, in copying the dissections prepared for him. His highly accurate reproductions do not simulate life as in the earlier examples, but neither are they straightforward recreations of cadavers like those made later by Joseph Towne (1806–1879) for Guy's Hospital (London). The Cagliari models, displayed simply on wooden boards, clearly show the body in death, but although their didactic function is primary, they are emotionally touching. At the time he created them,

Susini's health was failing, at least in part due to decades of exposure to the chemicals involved in the modelling process and to the stench of the decaying dissections he was copying. Many people, on viewing the models, feel a sense of wistful sadness that is not engendered by the earlier La Specola/Josephinum collections, and it has been suggested that Susini's own feelings of mortality are captured in them.

Looking at the illustrations in this book made me want to see the original waxes, but the photography is so good that it is the next best thing. As an art book, it is questionable as a subject for the coffee table, though this depends on who is visiting! Just as the Cagliari museum is open to the public, the beauty of Susini's art as displayed in this book deserves to be better known, both within and outside the anatomical community.

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