Surrogate corpses

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The Wellcome Collection is showing Exquisite Bodies, an exhibition of anatomical wax models from the 18th and 19th Centuries.

Religious and social prohibitions on dissection meant that there was a shortage of cadavers for medical teaching from the first days it became an empirical endeavour instead of theoretical construct based on Aristotle and Galen; it is worth remembering that Galen’s anatomy was based on the dissection of monkeys, the dissection of human cadavers being forbidden under Roman Law.

Even when human dissection became permitted, round about the 14th Century, there was no refrigeration and any dissection had to be carried out quickly. So it made sense to record the dissection in drawings and models. Some of the early models are idealized version of the human form: Exquisite Bodies has a good example of a pair of ivory figures from the 17th Century. The anterior thoracic and the abdominal walls are removable, revealing carefully carved organs (and a fetus) inside, but they are more of an illustration than a map.

There were no structured courses for medical doctors in 18th Century England, and anatomy was taught in private anatomy schools open not only to the medical men, but also to scientists and the merely curious. For those did not want, or could not afford, to attend a dissection, there were exhibitions of anatomical waxworks from the beginning of the 18th Century. This was the time of Marie Tussaud (1761–1850) of the wax museum and the lesser known Anna Manzolini (1714–1774), a lecturer of anatomy and maker of anatomical models in wax, whose talent as a modeller was famous throughout Europe.

The exhibition has a wax female figure from the 1770s which is about 0.75 m tall with the organs from the upper thoracic cavity to the pubis exposed. The venous and arterial systems are coloured blue and red respectively, and she is carrying a fetus which looks undersized for its development stage. Her face is peaceful and she has long brown hair, in plaits.

After the 18th Century, the habit of making these models attractive, at least on the outside, faded, and the 19th Century introduces a robust realism, many of the corpses looking far from at peace. Joseph Towne (c. 1827–1879) was the official model-maker at Guy’s Hospital London for over 50 years, during which time he made over 1000 models of great skill and accuracy. His Section of the Thorax at the Level of the Heart shows a detached and accurate representation of the dissection process, which is also finely detailed – to the individual bits of stubble on the chin and broken teeth. Towne was secretive about his techniques and kept the keyhole of his workshop blocked – with wax, of course. His models are still used to teach medical students at King’s College London.

Towne was one of several able to make models of exquisite detail. There is another wax female figure, this time from the late 19th Century and it is interesting to compare it with its 1770s counterpart. First, it is life-sized and, second, there is no pretence that we are looking at anything other than a dissected cadaver. The internal organs are naturally coloured and there is an odd detail: a hair growing from a mole on the left cheek. This scrupulous attention to detail is evident in all 19th Century models: the man suffering from psoriasis has dirty fingernails, for instance.

The public showed a fascination with dissection: when John Bishop and Thomas Williams were sentenced to be hung and then dissected, “immense crowds” turned up to view the remains and waxworks of the heads. But the Anatomy Act of 1832 ended public dissection as a judicial punishment, so the crowds had to be satisfied with waxworks.

Antonio Sarti opened London’s first dedicated public anatomical museum in March 1839. Many of the exhibits in Exquisite Bodies show the ravages of venereal disease, a subject about which many people of the early 19th Century were ill-informed. Viewing models of the various stages of syphilis might seem an odd amusement now, but the Victorians seem to be made of sterner stuff. Anatomical exhibitions open to the public advertised themselves as educational events; a poster for a display of Antonio Sarti’s models announces “Know Thyself … the wonderful structure of the human frame.” It continues by saying that everyone should visit, with “ladies more especially; to them this exhibition is particularly valuable, as teaching matters of the most important and valuable kind.”

The women had their special days, Tuesday and Friday, and demonstrator,
difficult to imagine this fascinating exhibition in any other UK venue. Please note that Exquisite Bodies runs until the 18 October. The online version (www.wellcomecollection.org/exhibitionsandevents/exhibitions/Exquisite-Bodies/index.htm), good as it is, is no substitute for the ‘real’ thing.

References