

Review: The Fate of Anatomical Collections, edited by Rina Knoeff and Robert Zwijnenberg

Journal ISSN number: 2054-5770

This article was written by [Dr Simon Chaplin](#)

03-13-2016 Cite as 10.15180/160509 Book review

[Review: The Fate of Anatomical Collections, edited by Rina Knoeff and Robert Zwijnenberg](#)

Published in [Spring 2016, Science Museums and Research](#)

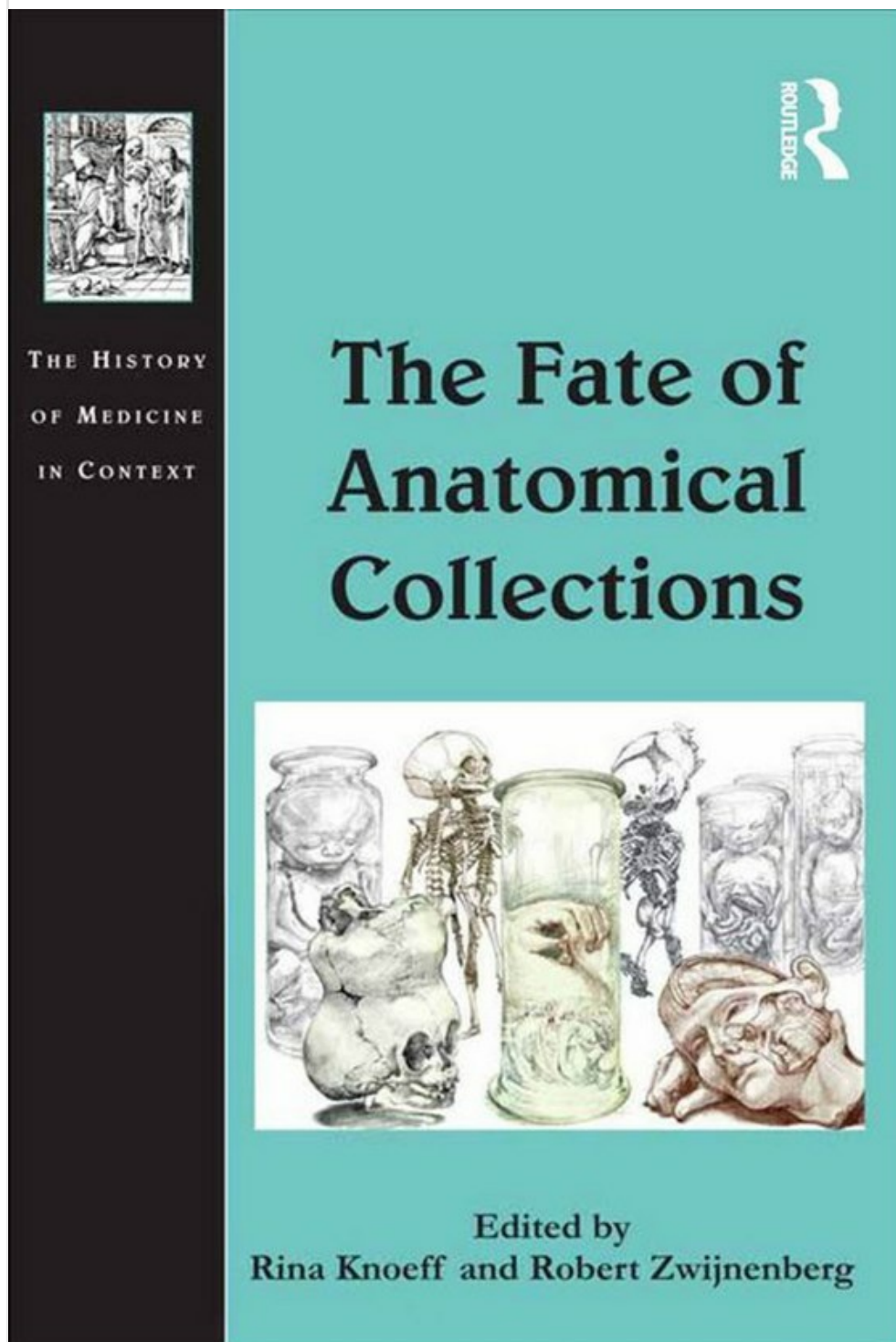
Article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/160509>

Keywords

book review, collections, anatomical, medicine, medical history

The Fate of Anatomical Collections

Figure 1



Edited by Rina Knoeff and Robert Zwijnenberg

Ashgate History of Medicine in Context Series

As we approach the second decade of the twenty-first century, anatomical collections are in many ways in rude health. In the UK the museums of the two royal surgical colleges in London and Edinburgh have placed human anatomical and pathological specimens at the heart of their visitor offer, to public and critical acclaim. In the US the Mutter Museum of the College of Physicians in Philadelphia draws huge crowds, as it has done for decades, while in Europe the Josephinum in Vienna; the Berlin Museum of Medical History at the Charité; the Musée Fragonard outside Paris and the Vrolik Museum in Amsterdam are testament both to the long history of anatomical collections as private resource and public spectacle, and to the continuing interest in such collections from non-medical audiences. And while commercial shows such as Gunther von Hagens' *Bodyworlds* may have attracted both public and medical criticism when they first appeared over a decade ago, they are now such a common-place visitor attraction that the only risk they carry is of *ennui*. All of which makes this otherwise excellent set of essays on the fate of anatomical collections feel in some ways oddly *passé*.

That said, there is no doubt, as editors Rina Knoeff and Robert Zwijnenberg state in their scene-setting introduction, that a lack of interest in using old specimens and models for their originally intended primary purposes of teaching and research has resulted in ill-judged decisions about disposal or, more often, long periods of neglect that have left them in a perilous state. Their call to arms involves bringing a range of perspectives from the arts and humanities to bear upon objects previously considered medical, and exposes the fluid state of anatomical collections as their uses and users have changed over time. Their cast of collaborators is impressive, and reflects the depth and breadth of scholarship which Knoeff and Zwijnenberg convened during a long-term research project based at the University of Leiden – at least two of the essays are the products of highly original and much-needed research carried out by PhD students as part of the project.

There is much detail for historians of anatomy and its museums to enjoy, making this a handy primer to some well-known collections. The volume is also very deftly stitched together, with common strands woven through and each essay neatly linking to the next, no mean feat across a volume with eighteen contributors (nineteen including artist Lisa Temple-Cox, whose delicate drawings of anatomical specimens from some of the featured museums adorn the dust-jacket).

The book itself is structured in five sections. Aside from the editors' introduction, the scene is set with Ruth Richardson's 'Organ Music', in which she gives eloquent voice to the inhabitants of the pathology museum, a useful reminder of the ways in which the identities of the 'subjects' of dissection are often the first things to be cut away in their journey from life to chemically preserved afterlife.

The importance of identity is picked up in the second section in Andrew Cunningham's and Cindy Stelmackowich's essays on the Hunterian Museum in London and the McGill University Collection in Montreal. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodiet?* – Who curates the curators? – is the question posed by Cunningham as he unpicks the way in which Richard Owen (1804–1892) made his own name by recasting the collection of John Hunter (1728–1793) as a Cuvierian museum of comparative anatomy, and in so doing remade Hunter as a 'modern' (by 1830s standards, at least). In fact, Owen's reinvention of Hunter was only the first of many that ensured that both Hunter's collection and his reputation remained at the heart of The Royal College of Surgeons of England, a position it continues to occupy today.

In contrast, Stelmackowich offers a salutary tale of the converse, linking the declining fortunes of McGill University's medical museum to the chauvinistic attitudes faced by physician and curator Maude Abbott (1869–1940). That the collection – the remains of which are now (according to Stelmackowich) in a 'small locked basement' at McGill – survives long enough to become feted as the tangible legacy of a female medical pioneer is something to be wished for.

Tim Huisman then takes us back to the late sixteenth century to explore the evolution of the collection linked to Leiden University's anatomical theatre, one of the first in Europe. Like the theatre itself the collection was a popular attraction for tourists to Leiden in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and was well-described in a series of catalogues-cum-guidebooks. Huisman argues that despite its fame and its associations with a succession of prestigious anatomical teachers, it was the inability to reconceptualise the collection that led to its demise; by being established in both the medical and the public eye from the start, the ability of the collection to be pulled to suit the changing interests of the former was constrained by the latter. A similar theme emerges from Anita Guerrini's *long-durée* survey of the display of human skeletons in early-modern Europe, in which she traces its shifting status from moral to medical object, with some individual skeletons making the transition and others remaining stuck depending, in part, on their visibility to different audiences at different times.

The question of audiences, users and their agency is more fully addressed in the third section of the book, with essays by Hieke Huistra on the Leiden anatomical collections, Anna Maerker on the different users and uses of anatomical models in the late nineteenth century, Tatjana Buklijas on the geography of anatomical collections and their users in Vienna, and Alfons Zarzoso and José Pardo-Tomás on the rise and fall of the Museo Roca in Barcelona. Huistra's account of the excision of the identities of brother-anatomists Bernard (1697–1770) and Frederick Albinus (1715–1778) from the anatomical specimens at Leiden University weaves in the role of curators, audiences and of the objects themselves. Unlike models, Huistra argues, the intrinsic nature of specimens as things constituted from the body, and not simply representing the body, enabled them to be 're-made' in ways which facilitated, if not necessitated, their distancing from their original preparators.

In contrast, Maerker cites the physical uniformity and portability and conceptual stability of the *papier-maché* models marketed by Louis Thomas Jérôme Auzoux (1797–1880) as key reasons for their popularity. While Huistra looks at how the expert anatomist remade the specimen, Maerker instead looks at how models enabled a range of practitioners outside of the medical academy to present themselves as expert, and in so doing to become 'ambassadors' for the models as quasi-medical objects.

Buklijas expands upon Huistra's and Maerker's focus on the interplay between object, expert and audience by considering the importance of geographical setting, tracing the movement of the collections created by Joseph Hyrtl (1810–1894) around different locations in Vienna before and after the revolution of 1848. Buklijas identifies the exhibition of Hyrtl's specimens on a site previously used for a commercial anatomical museum as particularly problematic, leading to associations with popular entertainment that were detrimental to Hyrtl's reputation among younger colleagues.

The contested nature of 'popular' anatomical museums forms the subject for Zarzoso's and Pardo-Tomás's essay, which seeks to untangle the history of the anatomical museum created in Barcelona in the 1920s by the showman Francisco Roca (1860–1945) and his family. By concentrating on a genre of anatomical exhibition-making in which marketing rhetoric by turns exaggerated and obfuscated the custodial history of the museum they expose the challenges facing historians of similarly liminal anatomical cultures, as well as the ease with which assumptions about audience and use become reified.

Issues of provenance take centre stage in the penultimate section. First, Marieke Hendriksen looks (at least metaphorically) at the 'beaded babies', a series of preparations of human fetuses mounted in preserving fluid in glass jars in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by Dutch anatomists, in which the bodies are adorned with strings of coloured beads. Traditionally described (in catalogues) as being of African or Asian origin, Hendriksen deftly exposes the uncertain nature of any claims about their identity or original purpose, and ties this not only to the ways in which these specimens have been treated in the past but to current museological debate about how they should be treated today, including the decision by some museums to withdraw them from public display, creating an irresolvable paradox in which the specimens' putative problematic history is used to prevent research which might inform a deeper understanding of their origins and thus a more considered ethical approach to their future. Fenneke Sysling's account of Dutch physical anthropology collections, and particularly the collection of human skulls representing different races, also addresses the importance of provenance, and especially uncertain provenance, in determining the fate of such collections.

The last essay in the section, by Tricia Close-Koenig takes a different tack, providing a counterpoint to Cunningham and Huistra by highlighting the accretive nature of paper records describing the Pathological Anatomy Collection of Strasbourg University.

While state (as well as individual academic) authority of the collection was asserted through the process of compiling and publishing new catalogues, Close-Koenig asserts that each new presentation of the collection built upon, rather than effaced, what had gone before, so that the collection came to constitute paper as much as tissue.

The final section of the book contains three essays on modern museum practice. Sam Alberti begins with a recapitulation of the history of anatomical craft, especially as applied in the museums of the Royal College of Surgeons of England. Bringing the story up to the present by looking at the current work of the College's Conservation Unit, Alberti argues that the common thread is the amount of skilled work needed to create and preserve anatomical collections, and the ways in which this is privileged such that the work of famous anatomists may be recognised and celebrated, while that of technicians is too frequently forgotten. Flavio Häner uses the example of the restoration of a single human skull specimen from the University of Basel's Anatomy Museum, in which the erasure of inscriptions in order to create a 'good, clean anatomical specimen' removed all trace of the specimen's provenance (details of which were, thankfully, documented elsewhere, but which fundamentally changes the viewer or user's relationship with the specimen as historical object).

Karin Tybjerg closes the section by drawing parallels between the anatomical museum and the biobank as sites of active accumulation of human tissue, rather than simply curation of historical archives. Each can speak to the other, she offers, to suggest the continuing value of human remains and the ways in which these can be reconnected to a human experience of the body.

As a form of epilogue, Rina Knoeff reflects on the public audiences for anatomical specimens, and on their affective quality. Exposing and accentuating the personal narratives, identities, and/or humanity of remains is nothing new, but is perhaps more important than ever in an era in which medical authority and to the guardedness which often accompanies medical tissue collections is susceptible to catastrophic failure when public scrutiny is brought suddenly to bear, as in the case of Alder Hey in the UK. Coming full circle, it is perhaps the quality of mortality – the allusion to fate that underpinned early modern anatomical specimens' status as *mementos mori* – that now provides the best protection against their loss. And so it is slightly disappointing that the collection ends with the well-intentioned if grandiosely titled *Leiden Declaration on Human Anatomy/Anatomical Collections*, formulated by the participants at the symposium at Leiden University in 2012 from which the book stems. It is unintentionally illuminating, talking as it does of the cultural as well as medical and scientific significance of specimen collections and referring to their relevance to research in a range of scholarly disciplines while studiously avoiding any suggestion that the audience for such collections might extend beyond the academy. If history teaches us anything, it is that the fate of anatomical collections requires not only handing the keys to the museum from one set of custodes to another, but also throwing open the door.

Component DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/160509/001>

Tags

- [Museum collections](#)
- [History of medicine](#)
- [Conservation](#)
- [Collections storage](#)
- [Object display](#)

Author information



Dr Simon Chaplin

Director of Culture and Society

[Contact this author >](#)

Dr Simon Chaplin is Director of Culture and Society at the Wellcome Trust