

The Birth of Venus / Venus in Wax

[subtitle]

Joanna Ebenstein



242 x 176mm hardback, 176pp?, c.200? illustrations, colour integrated.

Foreword by ???

Introduction

“The purpose of anatomical images during the period of the Renaissance to the 19th century had as much to do with what we would call aesthetic and theological understanding as with the narrower interests of medical illustrators as now understood . . . They were not simply instructional diagrams for the doctor technician, but statements about the nature of human beings as made by God in the context of the created world as a whole . . . they are about the nature of life and death. . .”

—**Martin Kemp and Marina Wallace**, *Spectacular Bodies*

Clemente Susini’s Anatomical Venus (circa 1790) is, to this writer, a perfect object whose luxuriously bizarre existence challenges belief. It—or, better she—was conceived of as a means to teach human anatomy without need for constant dissection, which was messy, ethically fraught, and subject to quick decay. The Venus also tacitly communicated the relationship between the human body and a divinely created cosmos, between art and science, between nature and mankind as understood in its day. Referred to also as “The Demountable Venus,” this life-sized, dissectible wax woman—who can still be viewed in her original Venetian glass and rosewood case at the Museum of Zoology and Natural History (La Specola) in Florence, Italy—is adorned with glass eyes and human hair and can be dismembered into dozens of parts revealing, at the final remove, a beatific fetus curled in her womb. Her sisters—also anatomical models made under the artistic leadership of Susini (1754–1814), and referred to by such names as “The Slashed Beauty” and “The Dissected Graces”—can be visited at a handful of European museums. Supine in their glass boxes, they beckon with a smile; one idly toys with a plait of real golden human hair; another clutches at the plush, moth-eaten velvet cushions of her case as her torso erupts in a spontaneous, bloodless auto-dissection; another is crowned with a golden tiara; while yet another has a silk ribbon tied in a bow around a dangling entrail.

Since their creation in late-eighteenth-century Florence, these wax women have seduced, intrigued, and instructed. Today, they also confound, troubling the edges of our neat categorical divides: life and death, science and art, body and soul, effigy and pedagogy, spectacle and education, kitsch and art. They are corporeal martyrs, anatomical odalisques, the uncanny incarnate. These wax models are the pinnacle of “artificial anatomies,” a tradition of three-dimensional, anatomical teaching tools stretching back to the turn of the eighteenth century.

WAX

A short history of its long history

Functional

Candles, writing tablets, seals (wax imprints have incarnate power).

Ritualistic and religious

The resemblance to flesh and its material mutability symbolize resurrection, Agnus Dei, effigies and organic relics, votives, ex votos, candles, vanitas, memento mori. “My heart softens like melted wax and Christ’s form is traced on it.” (Francis of Assisi). Middle Ages and voodoo wax figures of enemies.

Funerary urn seals, waxed shrouds, embalming.

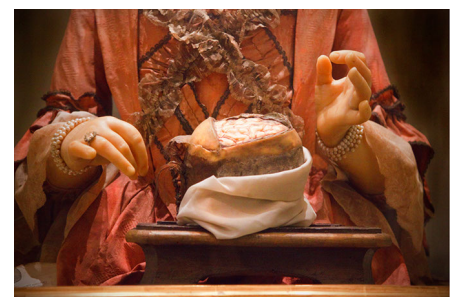
Artistic or entertaining

Roman ‘imago’ means impression of face and also a model in wax (Pliny comments on its “extreme resemblance”); Tussaud’s French Revolution models, carnivals and freakshows, museums.

Scientific

Enlightenment Pope Benedict XIV (Lambertini, 1675–1758) discouraged superstition. In 1742, having walked through the university of Bologna’s wax laboratories (where Clemente Susini, a former sculptor, was apprenticed, soon to become the leading waxmaker), he decided to found the first museum of anatomy, based on wax models. Gaetano Giulio Zumbo, aka Zumbo (1656–1701) was commissioned by French physician Guillaume Desnoues to make the first anatomical waxwork. This was a man’s head, now displayed in La Specola, Florence, home of the Caligari collection. The art of wax moulage: wax makes good teaching devices as incorruptible, available, and uncannily fleshlike. The first anatomical wax écorché by Il Cigoli (Lodovico Cardi), c.1600, Florence. Scientist Clemente Fontana commissioned Susini.

The artists: Zumbo, Lelli, Clemente Susini, Manzolini and his wife Anna Morandi (who assisted with and then took over his dissection and modelling after her husband’s death, becoming a famous lecturer and fixture of the European Grand Tour), Calami, Calenzuoli, Pierre Pinson etc. Many gave lectures and were fixtures of the European Grand Tour. The works of Lelli, Manzolini and Morandi can now be seen in the Palazzo Poggi, the original site of the old Institutum that operated from 1711 to 1799. Clemente Susini’s extraordinary anatomical Venus resides in Florence’s La Specola. Others from the same workshop exist in Pavia, Vienna, Bologna, with smaller ones in Budapest and London.

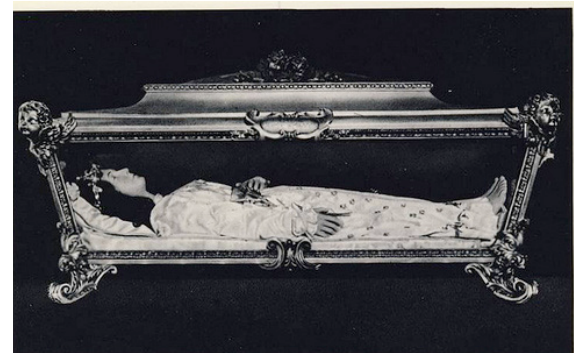


THEOLOGY

Pope Benedict XIV instrumental in casting out superstition and encouraging the study of science in the discovery of the divine. Death and medicine changing hands from the clergy to medics. Incorruptible saints, relics, body and soul. Ruysch and his moralizing yet scientific tableaux.

Movement from Religion to Science to explain life and death and disease.

Saints: In Italy before the rise of medicine, the Catholic church and its saints were the main strategy for coping with death and disease. If you had an ailment, there was a saint to pray to or visit the shrine of. If you were a practicing Catholic, you had recourse to a veritable pharmacy of saints in the treatment of a given ailment; to name just a few: you had Saint Abel for blindness or lameness, Agatha for breast cancer, Agathius for headache, Agricola of Avignon for bubonic plague, Agrippina of Mineo for leprosy, bacterial diseases, and bacterial infections, Anthony for skin disease, Apollinaris for epilepsy and gout, Apollonia for toothache, Audoin for deafness, Augustine of Hippo for sore eyes, Adrian of Nicomedia for plague or epilepsy and those are just a few of the saints whose names begin with the letter A.



THEATRE/SPECTACLE

Popular Anatomy; Anatomy as entertainment; because we all have human bodies, of intrinsic and deep interest to most people, unlike much of science which is so distanced. Public dissections during carnival in 17th century anatomical theatres. The hyperreality of wax made it a popular entertainment in fairgrounds, for-profit museums, Spitzner's Sleeping / Breathing Venus, Tussauds. Banner would often read "know thyself"

PEDAGOGY

The art and science of education, theatre and spectacle, associated entertainments:

Western Enlightenment project. Grand 18th century medical museums, palaces of enlightenment, Vesalius, Fabricius, Da Vinci etc, mapping the body, Anatomy Act 1832, Grand Duke of Florence set up wax modelling workshop in 1771, Joseph II. Public dissections during carnival in 17th century anatomical theatres.

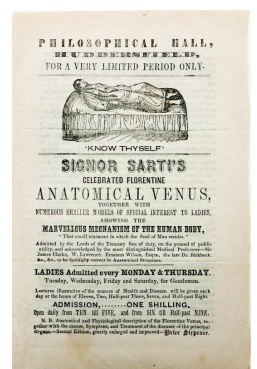
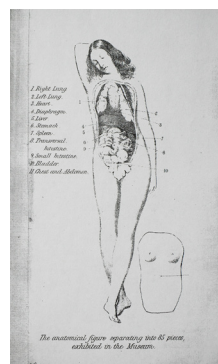
SCIENCE

Gray's Anatomy 1858, scientific project became 'pure', unaesthetic, departure from art and religion.

Goethe – on seeing La Specola in 1786: "a worthy surrogate that, ideally, substitutes reality by giving it a hand." "Apparently, Goethe's preference for the study of models in place of anatomical dissection was not motivated simply by pragmatic or technical considerations. 'Like other romantic artists,' Gonzalez-Crussi surmises, 'he appealed to superior ideals of beauty, to supra-individual norms that must govern the actions of all human beings who aspire to perfection. The 'new man' was a sensitive, delicate being, unable to countenance the spectacle of bloodshed and organic decomposition..."

Wax Fibers, Wax Bodies, and Moving Figures, from *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, edited by Roberta Panzanelli

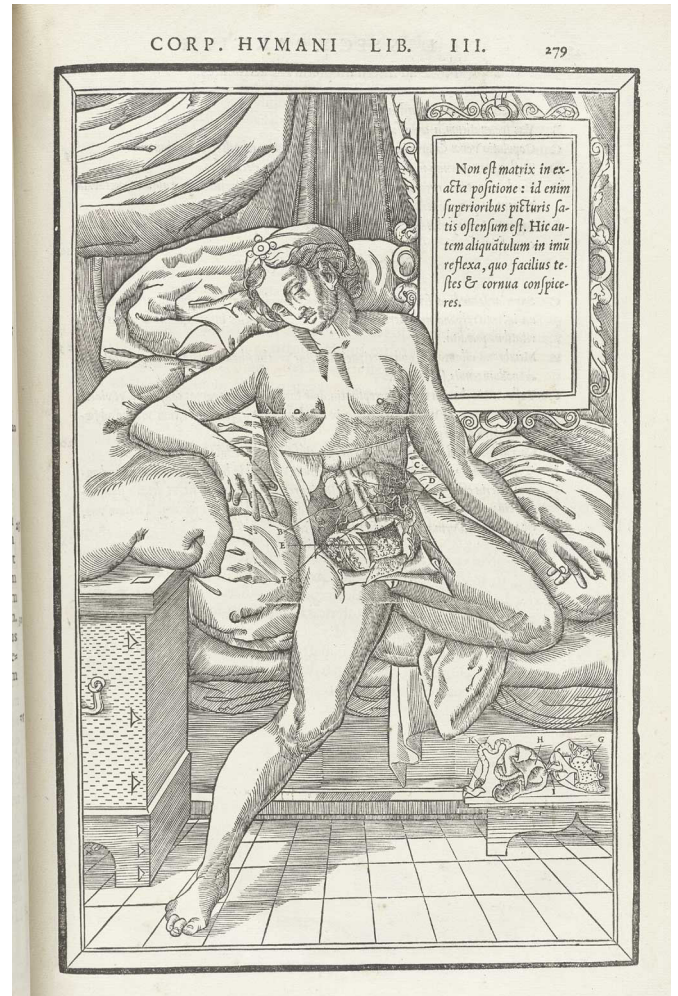
"In a report of 1789, Fontana complained that wax anatomical models are 'of no use when one wants to relate parts to parts [in the living body].'" [Fontana produced a wooden model in which all parts could be disassembled, but this didn't catch on. Wax did, and its hyperreality led to its exploitation in wax museums, fairgrounds and carnivals...]



EROTICISM / ROMANTICISM

Anatomy was filled with erotic and beautiful images of female bodies in general. The anatomy of the female body was an exception to the canonical male: problematic, erratic, and troubling. It was also understood to be intimately tied to the female temperament, which was thought to be sensitive, nervous, passionate, childlike, passive, and prone to hysteria ('wandering womb').

"for men to be instructed, they must be seduced by aesthetics" Gautier-d'Agoty



THE AESTHETICS OF THE ANATOMICAL VENUS

“The product of one sculptor’s clearly intimate experience with cadavers, she suggests an Enlightenment-era St. Teresa ravished by communion with the invisible forces of science.”

Los Angeles Times, ‘The Color of Life: Polychromy in Sculpture From Antiquity to the Present’ exhibition at the Getty Villa

The most famous anatomical models were female – secretive, productive, magical, they almost always feature a fetus. (A few male models – Carlo Calenzuoli, in Paris, collection: Muscular Anatomy of the Face and Neck.)

There is a surplus of artistry in the anatomical Venuses. They recline on cushions of satin and velvet in glass and rosewood cabinets, they sport real human hair and wear tiaras and pearl necklaces. Lifting the breastplate and exposing an anatomical Venus’s abject innards was a striptease with a special frisson.

“Ludmilla Jordanova has highlighted the striking passivity of the female form in eighteenth-century anatomies; she lies prone in a teasingly seductive pose in contrast to the upright, heroic musclemans postures of male anatomical figures.”

Wax Fibers, Wax Bodies, and Moving Figures, Joan B. Landes, from *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, edited by Roberta Panzanelli



“... abandons herself to death voluptuously and completely naked.” Caption at Palazzo Poggi

“The tension between the intended scientific rigour and the sensual artistic representation renders the Venus alluring and disturbing at the same time: her seemingly indifferent expression and empty gaze are in open conflict with the very notion of anatomy as the ultimate invasive practice. Her lively colouring and naturalistic hues, the meticulous modelling of the waxen skin and tissue enhance the reception of the model as a living being. The appearance of life... may simply be a convention against the popular taboo about viewing dead bodies, but the unfocused gaze and relaxed expression of the woman’s face create in the viewer a sense of discomfort. Halfway between artwork and artefact, between scientific tool and uncanny simulacrum, the Anatomical Venus elicits responses that are as varied as they are contradictory: she has been defined as drugged, ecstatic, resigned, aroused, indifferent, inviting disclosure, and passively or openly erotic.”

The Color of Life: Polychromy in Sculpture from Antiquity to the Present, Ed. by Roberta Panzanelli, Eike D. Schmidt, Kenneth D.S. Lapatin



UNCANNY

1850 OED enters word in its common modern sense. Freud's *The Uncanny* (1919), cites Hoffmann's tale 'The Sandman' of Olympia, the doll whose lifelikeness is key to her uncanniness. *Das Unheimliche*, "the opposite of what is familiar."

Scientific rigour and sensuality create a tension. Flickering on edges of our categories, like life and death; education and spectacle; eroticism and pedagogy.

Pinson's *Woman with a Teardrop* (sagittal section showing brain and brain stem) 1784

"what is the reason for the tear on the cheek of this decapitated woman?" asks the writer and film director Louis Seguin, "why does she cry?" (Joan B Landes)

"There is a specific dimension of the uncanny that emerges with modernity... In premodern societies the dimension of the uncanny was largely covered and veiled by the are of the sacred and untouchable. It was assigned to a religiously and socially sanctioned place ... With the triumph of the enlightenment, this privileged and excluded place the exclusion that founded society) was no more. That is to say that the uncanny became unplaceable; it became uncanny in the strict sense."

Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*

ART / SURREALISM

Dada, Hirst, Paul Delvaux, Duchamp's *Etants Donnes*, Marc Quinn, Anthony Noel Kelly, Zumbo's Theatre of Death v like Chapman Bros, Koen Hauser, Eleanor Crook, Sigrid Sarda, Chantal Pollier.



AFTERWORD

Financial Times on the Morbid Anatomy Museum

“All this erudition supports the museum’s overarching point: that a concern with the once-alive and the eerily lifelike has long suffused modern culture.”

The new morbid, a desire to admit art and mystery back into the world of science and medicine, reconciliation of themes.

Much of the intrigue in these waxes, their enchanting incongruity, the nature of their flickering on the binary edges of our foundational categories, stems from the fact that both realities [religion, church / science, museum] are still very present and strongly resonating. It is perhaps an intuited resolution of our own divided natures that draws us to the Venus, an unconscious comprehension that she might suggest another avenue abandoned, one in which beauty and science, religion and medicine, soul and body, are one.

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DESIGN

This should be a large scale, beautiful coffee table book

PHOTOGRAPHY AND ART

All photos by the author were taken in a Canon 5D and shot in camera raw by Joanna Ebenstein and most have permissions. I also have an excellent relationship with private collectors and museums, who will allow us to use, usually free of charge, their images.

SELLING VENUES OUTSIDE OF TRADITIONAL BOOKSTORES

I see this book as being at art museum shops, medical museum shops, subcultural clothing shops that stock books, and the museums discussed in the book

PRELIMINARY SCHEDULE

Manuscript and images delivered one year from signing.

BIOGRAPHY

Joanna Ebenstein is an internationally recognized expert in the art of anatomy and the cultures of death. She is the creator of the Morbid Anatomy blog, library and event series and was cofounder and creative director of the recently shuttered Morbid Anatomy Museum in Brooklyn. She is also a well known writer, photographer, event producer, and award winning curator. Other publications include *Walter Potter’s Curious World of Taxidermy* (Constable and Robinson, 2014), and *The Morbid Anatomy Anthology* (Morbid Anatomy Museum Press, 2014). Her writing and photography has also appeared in *The New York Times*, *K48*, *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, and *V Magazine*.

Ebenstein is an avid and excellent public speaker, and gives talks regularly at academic and popular venues around the world. In 2016, she delivered a Tedx talk entitled “Death as You’ve Never Seen it Before.” She and her father were also featured on an episode of StoryCorp.

Ebenstein has a robust media profile. Her work has been covered by *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Guardian*, *The Financial Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Wired*, *National Geographic*, *The Atlantic*, *New York Magazine*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek*, *CNN*, *Mental Floss*, *Time*, *BBC*, *The Utne Reader*, *CNN*, *The New York Post*, *The Observer*, *The Village Voice*, *Vice Magazine*, *Bust Magazine*, *The New York Daily News*, *Collector’s Weekly*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, *Newsweek*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Huffington Post* and more. She has been interviewed on air for BBC’s *Today*, *Inside Science* and *Women’s Hour* shows, as well as

NPR's Weekend Edition, WNPR's Colin McEnroe show, and PRI's The World. She has also been featured in video appearances on *Fox News, Newsweek, Toni on New York, Rocketboom Media, PBS's Articulate* and *The Midnight Archive.*

Ebenstein has also worked with such institutions as The Coney Island Museum, The American Folk Art Museum, The New York Academy of Medicine, The Wellcome Collection, The Museum of Sex, The Vesalius Trust and Amsterdam's Vrolik Museum.

SOCIAL MEDIA/PLATFORM

Morbid Anatomy Facebook : 231.9 K

Morbid Anatomy Instagram: 79.9 K

Morbid Anatomy Twitter: 18.2 K

Mailing List: 10K

Morbid anatomy Blog: 50,000 Page views per month

THE MORBID ANATOMY STORY

Founded in 2007 by Joanna Ebenstein, Morbid Anatomy is a project which explores—via words and images, art and scholarship, in both the virtual and physical world—the overlaps between art and medicine, death and culture. It began as a blog in 2007, a satellite to an exhibition for the Alabama Museum of the Health Sciences on about the art and culture of medical museums. In order to collect material for this exhibition, Ebenstein went on a one-month “pilgrimage” to great medical museums of Europe and the United States. When she returned from this trip, she found herself overwhelmed by the volume of material she had collected. Thousands of photographs, scores of links to online exhibitions and museum websites, piles of books and scholarly articles... The Morbid Anatomy blog was born from an impetus to organize this material for use in her own research.

She drew the name “Morbid Anatomy” from the medical term for the study of diseased organs and tissues; the phrase also operated as a kind of medical double entendre with which she wished to problematize ideas of what constituted the morbid. Why, she wanted to ask, was it deemed morbid to be interested in death? If death is the greatest mystery of human life; if everyone who ever has lived has died or will die; how, then, could being interested in death be seen as pathological?

Ebenstein had long been intrigued by the ways in which depictions of death ranged between cultures and eras. This interest intensified when she went on her first trip to Europe. The fine art representations of death she saw in the churches and museums of Germany and Austria surprised her; nothing in her middle class Californian upbringing had prepared her for this intermingling of beauty and death. In America, imagery of death was largely under the jurisdiction of Goths and heavy metal fans, and horror movie aficionados. The idea that death could be approached with gravitas, dignity, elegance and beauty came as a great surprise.

At college, Ebenstein studied intellectual history and art, and this interest in cross-cultural ideas of death grew into something of an obsession. She began to collect images and information surrounding ideas and depictions of death in a variety of times and cultures: Incorruptible saints in Catholic churches, post-mortem photography, the cult figure of Santa Muerte, phantasmagoria, ossuaries, memento mori-themed fetal skeleton tableaux such as those of Frederik Ruysch, the Anatomical Venuses of Clemente Susini... Clearly, she became convinced, death was not always considered an inappropriate subject for art and contemplation, and clearly ideas of death and beauty had not always been in conflict. How, she wanted to know, had death become strange to us? How could looking at the material culture of the past teach us something about the cultural relativity of our own views? These are the questions she has been investigating via Morbid Anatomy since its inception.

Since starting this project seven years ago, Morbid Anatomy's audience and scope has grown in surprising ways; in 2008, it expanded to include the open-to-the-public Morbid Anatomy Library; in 2009, Ebenstein launched

the “Morbidity Presents” series of lectures and workshops in London and Brooklyn. In 2013, Ebenstein and Colin Dickey attempted to raise \$8,000 to self-publish *The Morbid Anatomy Anthology*, a collection of essays based on some of the best Morbid Anatomy lectures; after much press coverage and becoming a Kickstarter Staff favorite, the book surpassed its funding goal by over 500%, earning \$46,338 with the support of 1,319 backers, making it one of the most funded publishing projects on Kickstarter, both in terms of money raised and in percentage of its original goal. The finished was published in 2014 at 500 pages, hardback and in full color. It is distributed by DAP.

In June 2014, Ebenstein and Tracy Hurley Martin co-founded The Morbid Anatomy Museum in Brooklyn, New York, a brand new three-story exhibition, library, education and event space committed to showcasing and championing artifacts, art, and ideas which fall between the cracks of our disciplinary divides, high and low culture, art and medicine, death and beauty.

SIMILAR BOOKS

There is no extant book with the scope of the one we propose; there are, however, books that touch on related topics in various ways. These I will detail below:

The Morbid Anatomy Anthology

The Morbid Anatomy Anthology

Edited by Joanna Ebenstein and Colin Dickey, 2014

<http://morbidanatomy.bigcartel.com/product/the-morbid-anatomy-anthology>

SYNOPSIS: This book is a lavishly-illustrated collection of articles based on some of the best of the Morbid Anatomy Presents series, which is an often sold out series of lectures and conferences produced by Morbid Anatomy for a popular audience. The volume includes contributions by Evan Michelson and Joanna Ebenstein and capitalizes on the cult following popular Morbid Anatomy brand.

OF NOTE: The forthcoming *Morbid Anatomy Anthology* was funded via Kickstarter; it surpassed its funding goal by over 500%, earning \$46,338 with the support of 1,319 backers, making it one of the most funded publishing projects on Kickstarter, both in terms of money raised and in percentage of its original goal.

SIMILARITIES: This book will deal with some of the same subject matters —the macabre, the curious, anatomical museums

Heavenly Bodies: Cult Treasures and Spectacular Saints from the Catacombs

Paul Koudounaris, Thames and Hudson, 2013

<http://www.amazon.com/Heavenly-Bodies-Treasures-Spectacular-Catacombs/dp/0500251959>

SYNOPSIS: This is a collection of photographs of, and a definitive history of, jeweled skeletons around the world. Beautiful art book. 4-Color, large format.

OF NOTE: Very broad appeal for a very niche and macabre topic. Lecture we produce with the author are books even at a fairly high \$45 price point. I see the book for sale in both subcultural (Last Tuesday Society bookshop, London) and institutional (Museum of Natural History, London) settings.

SIMILARITIES: Similarly niche and macabre topic

The Empire of Death: A Cultural History of Ossuaries and Charnel Houses

Paul Koudounaris, Thames and Hudson, 2011

<http://www.amazon.com/Empire-Death-Cultural-History-Ossuaries/dp/0500251789>

SYNOPSIS: This is a collection of photographs of, and a definitive history of, ossuaries and charnel houses around the world. Beautiful art book. 4-Color, large format.

OF NOTE: I think this book was a game changer for the publishing world; very broad appeal for a very niche and macabre topic. When I hosted a lecture event with the author, we sold out of 20 books even at a fairly

high \$45 price point. I see the book for sale in both subcultural (Last Tuesday Society bookshop, London) and institutional (Museum of Natural History, London) settings.

SIMILARITIES: Similarly niche and macabre topic

Special Cases: Natural Anomalies and Historical Monsters

Rosamond Purcell, Chronicle Books, 1997

<http://astore.amazon.com/morbanat-20/detail/0811815684>

SYNOPSIS: An idiosyncratic jaunt through the world of monsters and human anomalies by photographer Rosamond Purcell, illustrated with her art photos and antique illustrations. 4-color.

SIMILARITIES: Subject matter of anatomical specimens, inclusion of some art photographs. Idiosyncratic yet rigidly researched, personal approach and narrative style.

Encyclopedia Anatomica: Museo la Specola Florence

Taschen, 1999

<http://www.amazon.com/Encyclopedia-Anatomica-Museo-Specola-Florence/dp/3822876135>

SYNOPSIS: Complete photographic catalog of a La Specola's collection of baroque anatomical models. Also includes essay about the collection. 4-Color, small format.

OF NOTE: Extremely popular and well-known book; helped bring anatomical models to a popular audience. Made this obscure collection in Italy the most widely known collection of medical models. The book was the first of its kind that I know of.

SIMILARITIES: A photo book which approaches anatomical models as artworks. This collection will also be featured in the proposed book.

The Mütter Museum: Of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia

Blast Books, 2002

<http://astore.amazon.com/morbanat-20/detail/0922233241>

SYNOPSIS: A collection of images from the Mütter Museum calendars (see above). 4-Color, large format.

SIMILARITIES: Artistic photos of objects in medical museums. 4-color art book.

Medicine Man: The Forgotten Museum of Henry Wellcome

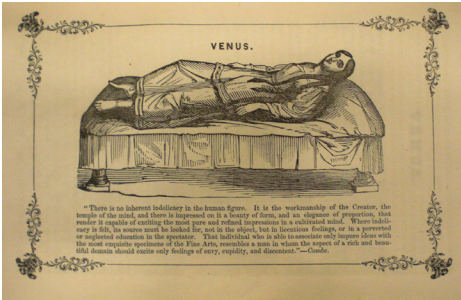
British Museum Press: 2003

<http://astore.amazon.com/morbanat-20/detail/0714127949>

SYNOPSIS: Heavily illustrated book about the medical collection of Henry Wellcome, late 19th-early 20th Century Pharmaceutical magnate. 4-Color, large format.

OF NOTE: From an exhibition of Henry Wellcome's objects at the British Museum

SIMILARITIES: About medical collections; approaches medical museum artifacts as art objects



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 organs.—Second Edition, greatly enlarged and improved.—D. Appleton & Co., New York.



