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## Touching anatomy: On the handling of preparations in the anatomical cabinets of Frederik Ruysch (1638–1731)



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### ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the anatomical Cabinets of Dutch anatomist Frederik Ruysch must be understood as an early modern workshop in which preparations were continuously handled. It is claimed that preparations actively appealed to anatomists and visitors to handle, re-dissect, touch, and even kiss them. Touching anatomy, therefore, not only refers to the physical handling of objects, but also to the ways preparations impacted on visitors and touched them emotionally.

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### 1. Introduction

One of the many bizarre stories in the history of medicine is a tale about the Russian Czar Peter the Great and his visit to the anatomical Cabinets of anatomist Frederik Ruysch in Amsterdam. The Czar was greatly impressed with the collections, in particular with the lifelike way in which Ruysch had preserved the tiny bodies of infants and babies. The story goes that he was so moved by the appearance of a child, which looked as if it were asleep, that he picked it up and kissed its rosy cheek.

Historians have often repeated this story. Few have taken it seriously, however. It has often been omitted from academic work on Ruysch. If historians mention the episode at all, it is almost always in a metaphorical way, not in reference to a real event. For instance, the research team who recently launched a virtual museum exhibiting the Ruysch collections kept in the *Kunstkamera* in St. Petersburg, a joint venture involving Russian and Dutch historians of science and medicine, called the episode a 'fairytale'.<sup>1</sup>

They seem to adhere to the argument put forward by art historian Julie Hansen, that

the tale of the czar's embrace implies more than deception by mere imitation: Peter was not tricked into believing that the beautifully preserved child was actually alive; rather it was its eloquence and innocence that provoked his desire to embrace it, and later to possess it.<sup>2</sup>

Luuc Kooijmans, author of the most recent Ruysch biography, leaves the question of whether the story is true unresolved, but similarly relates the Czar's embrace and kiss to his admiration for the lifelike appearance of the preparations.<sup>3</sup> When seen this way, the story mainly highlights the level of artistry of the preparations—they looked so lifelike that visitors could even imagine kissing them. Historians have mainly left it at that and never seriously considered the possibility that the Czar physically touched and kissed the preparation.

Yet there is more truth in the story than we acknowledge. For a start, Ruysch himself described the episode in his collected works.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Anna B. Radzjoen, curator of the Ruysch collections at the *Kunstkamera*, St. Petersburg. See: <http://ruysch.dpc.uba.uva.nl/cgi/t/text/text-idx?page=ruysch-rusland;c=ruysch;cc=ruysch>.

<sup>2</sup> Hansen (1996), p. 673. See also Roemer (2010) and Jorink (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Kooijmans (2004), p. 240.

He proudly stated: 'I prepared the face of a boy so beautifully that a certain great monarch in Europe embraced it and kissed it'.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, I would argue that at the time it was considered normal to touch and even handle preparations while visiting an anatomical collection. So it is not unimaginable that Ruysch took the child's head out of its container for Peter the Great to hold. This means that, as well as emphasizing the great beauty and perfection of Ruysch's Cabinets, the story gives an important insight into how particular audiences physically and emotionally responded to preparations. In other words, Czar Peter's kiss shows that when we think of Ruysch's preparations solely in terms of their visual beauty, we overlook crucial aspects of how historical actors actually handled and experienced them.

One important reason why historians have hardly ever considered the daily goings-on in Ruysch's Cabinets is that we tend to think about early modern anatomical collections in a nineteenth-century way. Historians of collections and museums have marked the nineteenth century as the period when collections turned into museums, whereby the 'museum is a kind of entombment, a display of once lived activity' and 'collecting is the process of the museum's creation, the living act that the museum embalms'.<sup>5</sup> What is more, in museum studies it is generally assumed that museums in the nineteenth century adopted a hands-off policy and changed into disciplining institutions, forcing visitors to keep a respectful distance.<sup>6</sup> In medicine the detachment between anatomical objects and their viewers further increased after the 'laboratory revolution' in medicine and the 'birth of the clinic' pushed anatomical collections into the inaccessible domain of medicine. The ensuing break in the ways anatomy was practised and experienced created a radical divide between medical professionals and students on the one hand, and a lay public for whom it became increasingly difficult to visit and experience anatomical collections on the other.<sup>7</sup> Whatever was happening behind the doors of medical collections was so much hidden from the public eye, that it has often been assumed that preparations—in particular early modern pieces—became obsolete objects, no longer actively used, merely collecting dust on the shelves. Practices of handling preparations were slowly forgotten. Only recently have historians started to acknowledge that nineteenth-century 'museum medicine', far from forgetting anatomical collections, in fact continued early modern practices of touching, handling and re-dissecting anatomical preparations.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, although historians have started to rewrite the history of nineteenth-century anatomical collection practices, the way we tend to look at eighteenth-century anatomical collections is still heavily influenced by the austere and disciplining image of medical collections as secluded spaces full of 'hands-off' specimens which, once made, were carefully locked away on the shelves of anatomical museums. This is also how historians generally view Ruysch's anatomical preparations—as 'pieces of art', showing God's providential hand in creation, carefully arranged on the shelves to be admired from a safe distance. This image of Ruysch's Cabinets does not however do justice to the fact that Ruysch was always working on and re-using his preparations in the pursuit of new research questions. Nor does it consider how preparations affected visitors, who actively and emotionally engaged with the preparations.

This paper offers a new reading of how anatomy was 'done' in the early eighteenth century. It emphasizes hands-on practices and experiences, the trial and error method of doing anatomy, and the active involvement of both lay and professional audiences. Rather than solely focussing on the sense of sight in the analysis of objects—as is so often the case in the historiography of the visual and material culture of the sciences—the paper follows recent work on the import of the other senses in the making of the sciences.<sup>9</sup> In so doing it provides an explanation of why Peter the Great's kiss was not so bizarre (even though we shudder at the thought of it).<sup>10</sup>

The argument builds on the work of historians and art historians who have hinted at more active and commercial uses of objects in collections. Historian Daniel Margocsy has rightly drawn attention to the fact that anatomists—including Frederik Ruysch—were regularly involved in the marketing of anatomical objects as expensive luxury goods with a significant financial value.<sup>11</sup> This argument in itself makes the preparations more profane, i.e. it focuses our attention away from the moral (*memento mori*) messages that have always been at the centre of historical attention.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, it has been argued that on the art market owners, visitors and potential buyers habitually picked up pieces of art to closely examine them. This is visible on prints of the Antwerp art market, for instance.<sup>13</sup> Art historian Geraldine Johnson has similarly argued that small-scale sculpture on the Italian market was meant 'to be savoured at close quarters, [and] turned in the hand'. However, as Johnson states, 'the evidence for and implications of such encounters have only rarely been examined in any depth'.<sup>14</sup>

Historians of wax models have also stressed the importance of physically experiencing objects. They have argued that wax models—as opposed to earlier anatomical rituals—brought anatomy closer to people. No longer viewed from a distance during a public dissection, organs and body parts could be brought within close proximity of viewers. The materiality of soft, malleable and moist-looking wax gave the models a 'lifelike' appearance, i.e. the choice of material highlighted the anatomist's capacity to replicate life and, as it were his ability to cross the line between the natural and the artificial. Moreover, wax modellers' explicit decision to focus on the senses suggests an intimate connection between anatomy and sensory experience.<sup>15</sup> A material disadvantage of the models was that they were extremely fragile—handling them was reserved for a privileged few. Anna Maerker has argued that in Florence more widespread physical involvement of visitors began in the 1780s with the making of wooden 'dissectible models'.<sup>16</sup>

However, although historians have hinted at the importance of handling objects in collections, what the handling actually entailed often remains unclear. I offer here a detailed description of proceedings in Ruysch's Cabinets in pursuit of the argument that we should consider Ruysch's anatomical Cabinets as a typical early modern workshop and the knowledge that emerged from this workshop as a tacit and sensory kind of knowledge embodied in preparations.

<sup>9</sup> See Roberts (1995) and Roberts et al. (2007) and Ragland (2012).

<sup>10</sup> On the importance of studying hands-on knowledge see: Roberts et al. (2007), p. 38. See also Smith (2004).

<sup>11</sup> Margocsy (2011). See also Margocsy (2009). Margocsy's argument is in line with the fairly recent focus among historians on the relationship between collections, craftsmanship and commerce. See for instance Guerrini (2004) 219–239 and Smith & Findlen (2002).

<sup>12</sup> See for instance: Huisman (2009) and Jorink (2006).

<sup>13</sup> See Honig (1999).

<sup>14</sup> Johnson (2012), p. 183.

<sup>15</sup> Dacome (2007). See also: Messbarger (2010) and San Juan (2011).

<sup>16</sup> Maerker (2011, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Ruysch (1744), p. 1222. Unless stated otherwise it is this edition of Ruysch's Works that I have used. The translations of the Dutch are mine.

<sup>5</sup> Eilsner (1994), p. 155.

<sup>6</sup> For the history of the nineteenth-century museum as disciplining institutions see: Hooper-Greenhill (1992), Bennet (1995) and Alberti (2009).

<sup>7</sup> Huijstra (2013).

<sup>8</sup> Huijstra (2013), pp. 4–5. See also Alberti (2007) and (2011) and McLeary (2001).

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