

The Cabinet of Frederik Ruysch

Frederik Ruysch's cabinet of curiosities, commonly referred to simply as the Cabinet, was a museum Ruysch created in the Netherlands in the late 1600s. The Cabinet filled a series of small houses that Ruysch rented in Amsterdam, and they contained greater than 2,000 specimens, including preserved fetuses and infants. The collection remained in Amsterdam until it was purchased by Tsar Peter the Great of Russia in 1717 and transferred to St Petersburg, Russia. Similar to Gunther von Hagens' twenty-first century Body Worlds exhibition, which presents bodies preserved through plastination, the Cabinet was open both to medical professionals and to laypeople. The pieces in the Cabinet were life-like and aesthetically composed, making them education tools for prenatal and infant anatomy as well as an effective medium for garnering public interest in anatomy.

The Cabinet had two components: a human anatomy section, and a plant and animal collection. When Ruysch first started his collection it consisted of specimens that were preserved using drying as well as traditional embalming techniques, which involved draining the tissue and treating it with chemicals. As Ruysch's collection grew, however, so did his repertoire of preservation methods. Some of his specimens were preserved in jars of alcohol, while his later additions were preserved using his own injection technique. This process, which he kept secret until the end of his life, involved injecting the vascular systems of the specimens with a special red-tinted wax and submerging them in embalming fluid called liquor balsamicum.

Ruysch's vascular embalming technique allowed him to control the arrangement of his specimens. To make them appear alive, he altered the chemicals in the injection material to make specimens, such as embryos, more flexible. The ability to manipulate and move the specimens enabled Ruysch to make the displays as anatomically accurate as possible. Realism was important to Ruysch, but he also considered his audience. To make the specimens more appealing, Ruysch decorated and posed them with the help of his daughter Rachel Ruysch, a still-life artist, to reflect themes about the brevity and beauty of life.

According to historian Gijsbert M. van de Roemer, Ruysch used four display techniques to make his specimens visually appealing. First, Ruysch created scenes by mixing plant, animal, and human specimens. One such display showed a human fetus held within the mouth of a gecko. Second, textiles and ornaments were used to decorate the specimens. In some displays, delicate fabrics encircled the blunt ends of dissected limbs; and in others, jewels were placed in the hands of fetal specimens. Some of the preserved fetal heads were also embellished with lace collars. The third technique involved adorning the lids of the jars in appealing manners. The final and most famous display method was Ruysch's creation of dioramas, called tableaux. He created landscapes from kidney stones, bones, and preserved plants, and he then positioned specimens, such as fetal skeletons, on top.

Ruysch's Cabinet was popular among physicians, anatomists, and the public. Ruysch meticulously arranged and staged his displays to minimize what he considered the grotesque nature of the specimens. This minimization was important because many of the displays contained embryos and fetuses, to which people were sensitive. Ruysch's museum did not focus on abnormal anatomy because he felt that it was too sensational. His few specimens with deformations were only shown when requested.

Ruysch's sensitivity to the material that he presented, including fetal specimens, helped his Cabinet to meet with little criticism. Ruysch, an anatomist and physician, invited colleagues, students, and interested people to view his collection, making it possible for many to learn about anatomy. Ruysch represented many of the displays in the Cabinet on paper, and he published those representations

between 1701 and 1716 in his book, *Thesaurus Anatomicus*. These books contained sketches of the Cabinet specimens along with descriptions.

Copies of the original books, as well as 900 of the displays have survived. The contents of the Cabinet are considered pieces of art that helped to advance the field of embryology by introducing new educational tools to students studying prenatal anatomy.

Sources

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