

BOOK REVIEW

Malleable Anatomies: Models, Makers, and Material Culture in Eighteenth-Century Italy

by Lucia Dacome

Hardback, 336 pages
Oxford University Press
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Anatomy is best taught visually and this book describes how anatomical modelling, mainly in wax or wood but later by injection, developed in the eighteenth century, particularly in Bologna and Naples. Models kept the messy and bloody aspects of dissection to one side, and were used for public and medical demonstration, artistic teaching, and eventually as destinations for the Grand Tour. The models also acquired a value of their own.

This book is not about modelling techniques; rather, a history of the models and their makers. It explains how Prospero Lambertini, later Pope Benedict XIV, encouraged but also controlled the supply of bodies to anatomists and set up the Institute of Sciences. The story of how Ercole Lelli and Anna Morandi (and her husband Giovanni Manzolini) became such renowned anatomists and artificers is contrasted: Lelli working in the Institute; Anna dissecting at home. They both became celebrities.

The chapter on “Blindfolding the Midwives” is a fascinating tale of how Giovanni Antonio Galli set up a teaching collection of midwifery models. Wax models were used in visual instruction but, being too fragile for use in practical demonstrations, wood or plaster was used instead. One model had a transparent “crystal womb” so the teacher could see what manipulations the blindfolded student was using to extract a puppet. However, the description of a model of a foetus *in utero* in an “unordinary position” grated. Why not use “abnormal” or the obstetric term “malpresentation”?

Malleable Anatomies took years to write, and is a work of great scholarship, intended for the historian rather than a reader with a passing interest. This is clear from the immense amount of detail included: thirty-two pages of bibliography, extensive footnotes to every chapter, fifty-four plates and fourteen figures.

Unfortunately, the book is written in the language of historians, and this makes it is hard to access for a reader trained in another discipline, such as medicine. I found it difficult to read and repeatedly had to re-visit sections. With that caveat, any reader interested in this period, and with some prior knowledge of the subject, will likely gain a great deal from it.

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