

## Ode to an Anatomical Venus

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*“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. The genre came into being when Gaetano Giulio Zumbo, known as Zumbo (1656–1701) was commissioned by the French surgeon Guillaume Desnoues (1650–1735) to create a likeness of an important medical dissection that was beginning to decompose (Riva et al. 2010). Zumbo was a Sicilian abbot who delighted in the creation of wax miniature series “Theatres of Death” boasting names such as “The Plague” and “The Vanity of Human Greatness,” and featuring exactly rendered dead and tortured bodies. The product of Desnoues’ and Zumbo’s collaboration was the first wax anatomical teaching model, and established the tradition of an artistic/medical partnership in the creation of such tools.

The Venus and her sisters were intended, from their very conception, not only to instruct, but also to delight and elicit the wonder of a popular audience and, beginning with their public debut in the 1790s, they did just that, attracting throngs of both local Tuscans and visitors on the Grand Tour circuit (Maerker 2011, Dacome 2006). Their popularity was so great that they ultimately inspired a series of knockoffs—first a series of similar models by the same workshop for Joseph II of Vienna and Napoleon and, later, in series of models advertised as “Florentine” or “Parisian” or even automated *breathing* Venuses that toured Europe, attracting masses of visitors to the popular anatomical displays found in Europe well into the twentieth century (Kametsu and Sato 1997). The uncanny allure of these somnambulant, neither-dead-nor-alive women was not lost on surrealist artists such as Paul Delvaux—who cited his visits to the Spitzner Collection, with its famous breathing Venus, as a life and art-changing moment—and Marcel Duchamp, whose enigmatic peepshow “Étant Donnés, seems to have been inspired, at least in part, by the paradoxes embodied by such figures (Hoffmann 2006).<sup>1</sup>



The Anatomical Venus, The Slashed Beauties, and the Dissected Graces were created by the wax workshop of La Specola under the directorship of scientist Felice Fontana (1730–1805), and master artist Susini. The Venuses were the jewels on the crown of what was already a rich and varied collection, of one of the first public science museums in the world. The breadth and scope of the collection—which included zoological specimens, hundreds of wax models of human and animal anatomies, and scientific equipment drawn from Medici cabinets of curiosity—reflects the concerns of Natural philosophy, the philosophical precursor to science as we know it today, which applied and combined approaches we would now term scientific, magical, philosophical, and pseudo-scientific to the project of understanding the natural world. At the center of this cosmology was the human being, which was understood to be the pinnacle of God’s creation and a microcosm of the universe; to know the human body was, in a sense, to know the world and the mind of God. The study of human anatomy, then—as alluded to in the epigraph to this essay—clearly had much broader implications than it does today.

At the time these models were conceived of and created, the anatomy of woman was of great interest, in both the medical and social arenas;



the residue of these concerns, as argued by scholar Ludmilla Jordanova in *Sexual Visions*, can be found in the Anatomical Venus and other anatomical waxes of the era (Jordanova 1993). The anatomy of woman was understood at this time to be the exception to the canonical body of the male: problematic, erratic, and troubling. It was also understood to be intimately tied to the female temperament, which was thought to be sensible (ie *sensitive*), nervous, passionate, childlike, passive, and prone to such nervous disorders as hysteria—literally, “wandering womb.” Men, in contrast, were understood to be muscular, vigorous, and reasonable. This difference is reflected in the models from the workshop of Susini. Each of his Venuses feature a fetus—the *raison d’être* of woman, after all!—at the last stage of anatomical striptease. And, while male figures can be represented standing or reclining—and are more often than not were portrayed completely skinned, demonstrating, say, human musculature—all the female figures are reclining and with their hyper-perfect skin intact, except for the places where the anatomical elements are exposed. The female figure, then, always remains beautiful and, one could argue, sexually desirable, and it is the line between her classic, serene beauty and the abjectness of her innards that adds to her special frisson.

This frisson seemed to be a formula for popular success, so it is no surprise that Susini's Venus and her sisters were not the first to employ it. Indeed, in 1719, Desnoues, the French surgeon who partnered with Zumbo in the creation of the first anatomical model, exhibited to the public a wax dissectible anatomized woman featuring a newborn child with the umbilical cord still attached (Panzanelli 2008). Fourteen years later, the Paris-trained anatomist, surgeon, and modeler Abraham Chovet exhibited in London ". . . the representation of a woman big with child chained upon a table; supposed to be opened alive. In the face there is a lively display of the agonies of a dying person, the whole body heaving and the hands clinched, the action suitable to the character of the subject."<sup>2</sup> This ingenious piece demonstrated the circulation of the blood during pregnancy via an network of blown glass tubes coursing with blood-red claret. Also in the eighteenth century, Marie Marguerite Biheron, a French anatomical modeler, exhibited a full-size body of a woman that could be opened up and taken apart like those at La Specola (Massey 2008).

Although Susini's Anatomical Venus was not the first of its sort, in her, we witness a significant historical shift taking place, and it is this that lends her a special power. As pointed out by scholar Roberta Ballestriero, long before the birth of our Venus in the eighteenth century, Florence was already famous for its fine wax simulacrums of the human body, albeit in a religious rather than a medical context (2007). The city was renowned for the quality of its votives--representations of the afflicted body meant to solicit or commemorate miraculous healings—and effigies for use at religious sites (Ballestriero 2010). It is easy to see the formal and contextual similarities between the effigies, incorruptible saints, and relics that fill the churches of Italy on the one hand, and anatomical models on the other. It is my belief that this similarity is more than just skin deep. For at the very same historical moment that early public science museums such as "La Specola" were being established, the Catholic church, under the leadership of Pope Benedict XIV, was introducing edicts that formally discouraged the practice of wax votives, effigies, and other "magical" or superstitious practice (Messbarger 2010, Messbarger 2012, Daninos 2012). In fact, in 1752, Pope Benedict XIV founded one such public museum and commissioned as its centerpiece statues of Adam and Eve, flanked by angels of death made of real human skeletons, and surrounded by life-sized male and female anatomical studies in various states of anatomical undress.

The line between religion and science, metaphor and model, *church* and *museum*, is delightfully, intriguingly blurry.

It is my belief that what we witness in the material form of Clemente Susini's Anatomical Venus and her sisters is a passing of the torch from religion to science and medicine as the primary way of dealing with death and disease, of understanding the nature of life, our purpose, and our place in the universe. 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 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.

## Notes

1. *Étant donnés* (full title: *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage . . .* (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas . . .) is Marcel Duchamp's is last major art work and was created in secret over two decades (1946–1966). It is a life-sized, 3D diorama or tableau that can only be viewed through a pair of peep holes in an old wooden door. The tableau depicts an enigmatic scene featuring a hyper-real nude woman reminiscent of a breathing Venus; she is lying on her back with her face hidden and legs spread, and holds aloft a gas lamp before a landscape backdrop with a moving waterfall in the background.
2. As reported in the *General Evening Post*, quoted in Craske 2001.

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- See also Messbarger, "The Re-Birth of Venus in Florence's Royal Museum of Physics and Natural History," *Journal of the History of Collections* (advance access online publication, May 2012): 1–21.
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