

OBJECT LIST & ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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House of Wax: Anatomical, Pathological & Ethnographic Waxworks from Castan's Panopticum, Berlin, 1869–1922

*Curated by Ryan Matthew Cohn
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HOUSE OF WAX OBJECT LIST

Center of room: Wax anatomical Venuses, signed by E. E. Hammer

Nook behind red curtain: Full sized wax figure of German serial killer Friedrich Heinrich Karl “Fritz” Haarmann (1879 – 1925), who sexually assaulted, murdered, mutilated and dismembered at least 24 boys and young men between 1918 and 1924 in Hanover, Germany. He was nicknamed the Butcher of Hanover because of his penchant for extreme mutilation, and the Vampire of Hanover and the Wolf Man due to his preferred murder method of biting into or through his victims’ throats.

1. Wax moulage showing psoriasis vulgaris
2. Moulages showing leprosy and lupus
3. Moulages showing syphilis
4. Wax moulage showing tuberculosis
5. Death masks, left to right: Napoleon; Henrik Ibsen, Norwegian playwright; unknown; Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots; Kaiser Wilhelm I, King of Prussia, first German Emperor, and first Head of State of united Germany; Karl XII, King of Sweden from 1697 to 1718
6. Digestive system in wax
7. Plaster cross section of human head (not from Castan’s Panopticum)
8. Model demonstrating a pathology of the genitals
9. Model demonstrating deformation of the male genital organ
10. Model demonstrating the surgical procedure of circumcision
11. Model demonstrating eye surgery on a woman
12. Canker of the genitals
13. Plaster model showing consequences of corsetry
14. Internal organs of a newborn child showing placenta
15. Wax bust depicting a woman suffering from “Feuermal”, nevus flammeus or “port-wine stain.” This is a birthmark in which swollen blood vessels create a reddish-purplish discoloration of the skin
16. Baby with diphtheria
17. Internal organs of a newborn child
18. Unlabeled ethnographic bust
19. Case, left to right: tuberculosis of the lungs, leg with trichophyton rubrum (ringworm), syphilis papula, embryonic syphilis; beneath case: unlabeled ethnographic bust of mother and child
20. Wax model possibly of a nymph, early 20th century, sometimes referred to as “Lolita”
21. (Top of case) Unlabeled ethnographic busts
22. (Top row of case, left to right) Obstetrical waxes showing difficult childbirth; two signed by E. E. Hammer (Emil Eduard Hammer); possibly all by him.
23. (Second row of case, left to right and bottom to top): female sexual organs after childbirth; genitals with syphilis; intersex genitals; intersex genitals; unlabeled pathological genitals; malformation of the male genitals; intersex genitals; intersex genitals

24. (Bottom row of case, left to right): Fetus with placenta; pregnant uterus in the fourth trimester; moulage showing “skaegpest;” tongue pathology
25. Full size wax figure depicting Luitpold, Prince Regent of Bavaria, who ruled Bavaria from 1886 to 1912 after King Ludwig II and King Otto were deemed mentally incapable
26. Unlabeled ethnographic bust
27. Ethnographic bust labeled “Chinese Nobleman”
28. Unlabeled ethnographic bust
29. Case containing a variety of wax heads, some from Castan’s Panopticum.
30. Unlabeled wax head
31. Ethnographic bust, labeled “Bushwoman, Südostafrika”
32. Unlabeled ethnographic bust
33. Ethnographic bust labeled Hottentot or Bushman
34. Wax model showing results of tight corsetry

CASTAN’S IN CONTEXT: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON A BYGONE WORLD IN WAX

By Peter M. McIsaac, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

These objects are the remnants of a largely forgotten popular exhibition known as Castan’s Panopticum. Founded in Berlin in 1869 and lasting until 1922, Castan’s was a wax museum its German contemporaries described as an “Allesschau,” a “show of everything.” “Panoptikum,” the critic Walter Benjamin wrote in his seminal *Arcades Project*, “not only does one see everything, but one sees it all ways.”¹ Uncanny, entertaining, shocking, but also titillating, sensational and sometimes illuminating, the panopticum drew on the ability of wax to portray, in life-like realism, gory murders and the latest scandals ripped from newspaper headlines alongside canonical scenes from history, literature and culture. The collection of death masks and heads fashioned for cultural icons such as Goethe, Beethoven, Dostoevsky, and Ibsen that survive to this day represent only part of this subsection of Castan’s Panopticum. But if, in these points, the German-speaking panopticum resembled European counterparts such as Madame Tussaud’s in London or the Musée Grévin in Paris, it also devoted considerable space to topics with a more “scientific” bent, particularly those related to anthropology and medicine. In Berlin, Hamburg, Vienna and Munich, panoptica had specialized subsections whose individual pieces, especially their “anatomical cabinets,” could number in the thousands. Not all panoptica were so massive, of course, with many existing in itinerant forms that traveled the European fairground circuit. Yet whatever its size, a panopticum could be counted on to provide a mix of visually striking objects with cultural, scientific and medical pretenses.

Panoptica were a cultural form targeted at the broad public. In many ways, the sensational, shocking and sometimes morbid qualities were clear commercial calculation on the part of entrepreneurs whose livelihoods depended on drawing the largest possible paying audience, which in fact came in sizable numbers. Castan’s, in its heyday, could attract as many as 5,000 visitors on a single Sunday, with appeal so strong that franchises were established in Cologne, Frankfurt am Main, Brussels and Amsterdam. Castan’s success also helped set expectations for the larger form of panoptica in German-

¹ Page 531. Translation slightly altered.

speaking Europe. As a for-profit mass cultural form, panoptica more than resembled the whole range of nineteenth-century entertainments such as the dime museum, panoramas, sideshows, and later early cinema, with which they also competed for customers. Castan's frequently hosted attractions such as "the last living Aztecs" and Chang and Eng Bunker, a pair of conjoined twins famous on the international "freak show" circuit (whom Castan's later modeled in wax and dressed in the costume worn in their Berlin performance). In their attempts to provide exotic and arresting visual fare, panoptica often traded in many of the gender, sexual and racial stereotypes that marked late nineteenth and early twentieth-century European (and North American) culture. A case in point are the Orientalizing, eroticized harem environments recorded in photographs and postcards throughout Castan's run.

The interest in anthropological representations of mankind that remains palpable in Castan's collections also went deeper than the mere exploitation of waxes. At several points, Castan's also offered staged displays of living non-Europeans, a form of "ethnographic exhibition" (*Völkerschau*) sometimes referred to today as "human zoos." These shows, which toured Europe and North America between the 1870s and 1920s, presented peoples from far off and legendary places as a means of demonstrating to lay audiences the stereotypical dress and everyday customs of particular groups. They were hosted by panoptica both as a means of attracting the public and, perhaps surprisingly, shoring up a panopticum's credibility and social standing. To capitalize on the presence of living exemplars of the racial types it claimed to faithfully represent (but which were, more often than not, shaped to suit exoticizing and/or racial stereotypes), for instance, Castan's would array its anthropological waxes for affirmation vis-à-vis the "originals." More valuable still in terms of credibility was Louis Castan's collaboration with the Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory, a society he helped co-found with internationally renowned physician, politician and physical anthropologist, Rudolf Virchow. In line with the methods of early German anthropology, Virchow and members of the Society measured, photographed and made phonograph recordings of participants in ethnographic exhibitions as parts of numerous published studies. Virchow's efforts lent German panoptica and ethnographic exhibitions an integrity seemingly all the more compelling, insofar visitors, as "armchair anthropologists," were invited to verify the "facts" before their very eyes.

For other reasons as well, panoptica such as Castan's were not simply written off by contemporaries as "low culture." Castan's, in particular, enjoyed well-publicized personal visits by a range of socially prominent visitors. In a different kind of endorsement, former Chancellor of the German Empire, Otto von Bismarck, was even reported to have sat personally for Castan's wax model. And then, many of the objects themselves, particularly in the anatomical cabinets, were of high quality. Like many of its German-speaking counterparts, Castan's not only employed, but in some cases also trained wax modelers whose skill and expertise would enable them to pursue careers at leading medical research institutions such as Berlin's Charité hospital. Some suppliers such as Paul Zeiller, an anatomical and ethnographic modeler in Munich, even opened their own panoptica. In terms of workmanship and anatomical accuracy, the individual objects that modelers made were often indistinguishable from those created for serious research purposes, and it is no accident that medical modelers who sold to panoptica also collaborated with or supplied researchers in medical and scientific institutes. Surviving panoptica such as Castan's thus offer important glimpses into the kinds of objects and methods of knowledge production that informed anthropology, anatomy and pathology in the decades before and after 1900. Moreover, with anatomical and anthropological objects in panoptica often literally doubling those in research-oriented collections, it is also not impossible, particularly in an age notoriously

reticent about topics related to the body and sexuality, that a visitor might have left panoptica more knowledgeable about matters of the body than when she or he entered. The Delphic enjoinder to “know thyself!” (*erkenne dich selbst*), invoked as the motto of so many anatomical cabinets, was not necessarily empty rhetoric.

But if learning was not impossible in panoptica, it was also by no means assured. The educational potential of panoptica was limited both by the backgrounds and motivations of their visitors and the environments they themselves provided. While individual anatomical objects themselves were often accurate enough, they were often arranged so as to harness their striking visuality for particular emotional effects. One visitor to a Hamburg anatomical cabinet reported being unable to cross the cabinet’s threshold after seeing, when the curtain was drawn to the first room, a life-size nude, flayed woman surrounded by walls covered entirely by dramatic dermatological waxes of diseased faces and lesions on outstretched tongues (most likely depicting stages of syphilis and other, then-incurable sexually transmitted diseases). In other cabinets, such arrays of diseased body parts awaited visitors after they had encountered healthy, alluring waxes of nude bodies and genitalia, as if to suggest, through a kind of associative “before” and “after,” that deadly danger lurked in an unsuspecting (and likely also arousing) encounter with even the seemingly healthy naked body. These latter effects were sometimes exploited by impresarios ready to offer discrete consultation and quack remedies to visitors exposed to the possible downsides of indulging in sex.

Such sexualizing and perhaps moralizing impacts went hand in hand with visitor environments that enhanced a sense of forbidden illicitness. In German-speaking panoptica, the anatomical cabinet was typically marketed as “for adults only,” who, typically by paying an extra fee, would only be admitted to the most risqué material in groups segregated by gender. As cultural commentator Egon Erwin Kisch wrote looking back from the 1920s, the prohibition of mixed genders and also a sense of time pressure—Kisch writes of groups of men and women alternating every 15 minutes, one entering while the other waited eagerly outside—intensified the forbidden allure of the anatomized bodies. Yet rather than regard the separation of men and women as a precaution made necessary by the dangers of sex, it is worth noting that earlier similar exhibitions were not always segregated by gender. Anatomical waxes of human reproductive organs have arguably always been perceived as sexual, but before 1850, men and women in many parts of Europe were permitted to visit them together with little general concern about their possible deleterious effects. The sense of anatomical waxes as illicit, pornographic and debasing—attributes sometimes associated with the panoptica and anatomical waxes to this day—belongs to the era that follows the ban on viewing the objects in mixed company.

Many panoptica did not survive past the 1920s and 1930s, for reasons that have only partly to do with their increasing association with lower, indeed base cultural status. This, of course, did not help panoptica endure or make their objects seem worthy of preservation. But panoptica also yielded to pressure from film and later television, media that could respond to the ever-increasing pace of current events with stunning visuality of their own. Fields such as anatomy, pathology and anthropology also became ever less collections-based, making the assemblages of material in panoptica appear increasingly antiquated and distant from the realms of knowledge that once lent them middle-brow status. Looking back from the digital age, it is possible to understand why so many objects in this early mass medium ended up dispersed or destroyed. And it also becomes possible to place them in a historical and material context that helps to see how these fascinating and multivalent objects themselves were made to mean by specific physical, material and human contexts in dialogue with

ideologies and cultural values with half-lives of their own.

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