

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

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Malleable Anatomies by Lucia Dacome presents the history of anatomical modelling in mid-18th-century Italy. It explores the lives of people involved in the production, consumption, and display of anatomical models, and uses their biographical histories as a lens through which to investigate the 'lives' of anatomical wax models as material objects, commodities, and communicators of bodily knowledge. In the book Dacome examines a multitude of interactions between medicine, religion, politics, art, and commerce on the Italian peninsula in the age of Enlightenment, as a period that brought with it a growing fascination with the body, celebrity, and travel, as well as a prominent visual and material culture. Dacome shows that it was the distinctive fusion of medicine, religion, and artisanal culture in mid-18th century Bologna which gave birth to fashions for anatomical wax models which later spread elsewhere in Italy, and eventually throughout Europe, in the late 18th and 19th centuries.

Malleable Anatomies is precisely researched, and full of rich detail about the lives and times of anatomical models and their makers. It is also beautifully illustrated, featuring some 54 high quality colour plates of surviving wax and fabric anatomical models, including images of models of 'nerves' and 'muscle' men, dissected kidneys and eyes, and interactive midwifery models. The images also show contemporary anatomical displays and their architecture, and other visual and material evidence associated with 18th-century Italian anatomical modelling. There is also a further set of black and white images showing contemporary prints, portraits, and paintings of anatomical model makers, and the world in which they lived. The book makes original contributions to scholarship on wax and anatomical modelling, and the 18th-century Italian commercial, artisanal, and visual culture.

The main aim of *Malleable Anatomies* is to explore how the production, display, and consumption of anatomical models mediated and communicated various forms of knowledge about the human body. It examines the development of anatomical modelling in the context of a diverse range of material and visual practices used to represent and display the body in mid-18th century Italy. Dacome argues that 'the meanings of mid-eighteenth century anatomical models were neither fixed nor unambiguous'. Instead, she proposes that the meanings of anatomical wax models 'varied according to their spaces and sites of production and viewing, as well as to their different employments as pedagogical tools in medical and

artistic settings, as curiosities, artworks, Grand Tour collectibles, luxury goods, cultural currencies, or home decorations' (p. 5). Dacome demonstrates this in a multitude of ways throughout the book, but most clearly in her discussion of the various roles of women in crafting anatomical knowledge through their activities as makers and users of anatomical models. Dacome also shows, in her study of the life of Anna Morandi, how through anatomical modelling some women (and their families) were able to make celebrities of themselves alongside their art.

The methodology employed in *Malleable Anatomies* is rather complicated. In her introduction, Dacome explains that *Malleable Anatomies* employs a micro-historical approach to explore the 'entangled lives' of anatomical models and their makers. She writes that 'this study adopts a micro-historical approach that closely follows threads of [anatomical models] intricate historical fabric', and 'privileges an in-depth investigation of smaller units of analysis to retrieve the voices, domains of experience, and social relations that accompanied the creation and early use of mid-eighteenth century anatomical displays' (p. 21). Dacome explains that as part of her micro-historical approach she also applies a biographical lens through which she explores the 'lives' of both anatomical models and their makers. She proposes this approach creates a 'a special point of entry into the specific conditions that determined these objects' capacity to create and convey knowledge' (pp. 21–2). What this means in practice is that each book chapter explores an aspect of the biographical history of a character in the world of Italian wax modelling, using this as a 'micro-historical' lens to examine the meanings attached to their production, display, and consumption, in different contexts in Italy, and within the context of the European Grand Tour.

The methodological approach of *Malleable Anatomies* offers some interesting insights into how the social, cultural, medical, professional, and religious worlds of 18th-century anatomical modellers were intertwined. It also provides a detailed biography of interesting figures involved the commission, making, and display of anatomical models, including: Prospero Lambertini, Erole Lelli, Anna Morandi, Giovanni Manzolini, Giovanni Anatonni Galli, Girolamo Ranuzzi and Raimondo di Sangro. It also offers insights into the individual motivations of these social actors, in commissioning, making, purchasing, using, and displaying, anatomical models.

Yet, overall the methodology has the problematic tendency to obscure the broader arguments of the book, and the history of the anatomical models themselves. Indeed, throughout the book the primary focus of the analysis shifts back-and-forth from anatomical models to their commissioners, makers, and consumers, and this sometimes causes arguments to become convoluted. Secondly, although in the book's introduction anatomical models are presented as the work's 'main protagonists' - with Dacome making extensive reference to Arjun Appaduari's *Social Lives of Things* - the narrative of *Malleable Anatomies* tends to privilege the story of the 'lives' of the anatomical model makers over the 'lives' of their models.⁽¹⁾ Thirdly, broader issues concerning the role of anatomical models in knowledge production often got lost as a result of the micro-historical organisation of chapters and their focus on individual biography. It might have been useful for Dacome to explore some of these bigger issues in the conclusion, and this could have helped her establish the wider significance of the themes that emerged across the different chapters. In the conclusion, Dacome could have also more effectively highlighted the book's main contributions, and how the themes raised in the book extend the existing historiography. Discussion of the legacy of Italian anatomical wax modelling in Europe in the 19th century, might have also been usefully commented upon in the conclusion. Fourthly, the methodology employed in *Malleable Anatomies* makes it 'hard to use' as a researcher. This is because the micro-historical biographical approach makes it difficult to 'dip into' individual chapters to extract main points/arguments, as such information comes tightly wrapped or intertwined with detail about the life of the person (or persons) through which the theme explored in the chapter is investigated. Connected to this, many of the chapters rely very heavily on discussion which is presented in the chapters that proceeded it, and not necessarily in direct order. This means that to fully grasp the books main argument the reader must read the book in order, cover-to-cover, and preferably as quickly as possible, so to make sure they retain the information discerned from earlier chapters.

For its research material, *Malleable Anatomies* draws upon a range of evidence, including surviving

anatomical models, as well as the body parts that were incorporated into these models and displayed alongside them. It also utilises a wide range of visual and printed material evidence including, paintings, maps, architectural drawings, anatomical drawings, etchings, and prints. By far the largest body of sources, however, comes from archival materials which related to the lives of people involved in the production of anatomical models. These sources include, personal diaries, letters, correspondence, memoirs, record books, and account books. This evidence is supplemented by analysis of a range of printed materials such as, anatomical and medical texts, and art and travel literature.

The chapters in *Malleable Anatomies* are organised chronologically and geographically. Chapters one to six examine the activities of the commissioners, makers, viewers, and users of anatomical models in Bologna, whilst chapter seven looks at how anatomical models were displayed, and their sale and purchase, in Naples and Palermo.

Chapter one explores the relationship between anatomy and Catholicism, examining Prospero Lambertini's (later Pope Benedict XIV), impetus for patronising anatomical modelling in Bologna. Dacome links Lambertini's anatomical interest to his desire for anatomy to be used in the identification of signs of holy embodiment. Clearly demonstrated in this chapter is the centrality of the church in Italy in promoting Enlightened bio-medical research, and the connections between religion and medicine in Italy during this period.

Chapter two, through examination of the career of the artisan Ercole Lelli, looks at the connections between anatomy and the world of artists, antiquarians, artisans, and craftsmen. This chapter makes some convincing arguments about how the anatomy room functioned as a site for training the eyes in 'enlightened' ways of looking, and the parallels between the way anatomical models, and other statues and figures, were displayed in this period. In this chapter Dacome also discusses how and why Lelli became an anatomical celebrity in the context of the Grand Tour, and the reasons why Anatomical Room at the Institute of the Sciences in Bologna became a key site to visit for 'foreign' visitors.

Chapter three focuses on the commercialisation of anatomical models through analysis of the activities of the anatomical modelling, husband and wife team, Anna Morandi and Giovanni Manzolini. This chapter also plays with the idea of the 'fabric' of anatomical models, exploring the meanings of domesticity and femininity that were taken on and conveyed by the anatomical models that Morandi and Manzolini displayed in their home, as a 'complex, multi-functional, and porous space of production, presentation, consumption, and commercialisation of anatomical knowledge, which served both private and public functions' (p. 95).

In chapter four, Dacome once again follows the life of Anna Morandi, this time examining her activities after the death of her husband and using this as a lens to analyse the issues faced by unmarried women in the commercial world. Explored in this chapter are broader issues about the use of wax in devotional practices and rituals, and how as a medium was used to explore the relationship between the religious, artistic, medical and magical domains. This chapter raised some of the most intriguing questions in the book about wax's use in exploring early modern boundaries between the inner and outer body, the natural and supernatural world, and the porosity of the body. Yet, at the same time this was the least fully realised of *Malleable Anatomies* chapters. This was because much of what was discussed (especially the relationship between wax and devotion) necessitated consideration beyond gender and the activities of Anna Morandi; the two central analytical prisms of the chapter.

Chapter five, 'Blinding the midwives', is the stand out chapter of the book. It examines the collection of midwifery models collected by the man-midwife Giovanni Antomio Galli, and how they were used and incorporated into midwifery training. Dacome shows how midwifery models addressed uncertainties around generation and midwifery by translating 'midwives' tacit and gestural knowledge into a demonstrative regime of learning that was still non-verbal and yet could be publically communicated' (p. 167). This chapter also shows how cultural ideas and practices around childbirth brought themselves to bare on the fabric of anatomical midwifery models, and how these models altered birthing practices. In the processes it

also reveals how in the realm of midwifery, anatomical models redefined the relationship between skill, knowledge, and expertise.

In chapter six, 'Transferring value', Dacome explores how anatomical displays were involved in the transfer of medical and cultural knowledge, and commercial trade networks. As its analytical focus, this chapter returns to the life of Anna Morandi (also addressed in chapters three and four). This time Dacome focuses on the later period of Morandi's life, and the ways Morandi and her descendants (after her death) used her collections to promote her celebrity for their own social and commercial ends. The chapter also examines how the Bolognese nobleman Girolamo Ranuzzi, who purchased Morandi's collection in 1769 to use it to promote his own commercial pharmaceutical and spa ventures.

Finally, in chapter seven, Dacome picks up on some of the themes raised in chapter six, and continues her analysis of anatomical models as 'cultural currencies that had the capital to transfer value' (p. 216). The focus in this chapter is on wax anatomical injections: anatomical preparations where wax was injected into the veins and vessels to visualise their bodily dissemination. Dacome explores the history of these preparations through analysis of the sale and purchase of anatomical 'skeleton's' which originally belonged to the Palermitan anatomist and priest Giuseppe Salerno. This chapter makes an important scholarly contribution in providing a detailed examination of wax anatomical injections, as a subject which has been neglected in historical scholarship to date. However, this chapter feels a bit at odds with the book's other chapters, as the only one that focuses primarily on a region other than Bologna (it focuses on Naples). There is also an argument that wax anatomical injections are better defined as anatomical preparations rather than 'models'.

Malleable Anatomies provides an intricate history of the 'diversified' world of mid-18th century Italian anatomy. In many ways the book is a thing of great beauty. It is rich in details that can only be the product of years of meticulous archival research, and it is wonderfully illustrated. The analysis in the individual chapters is also woven together with great skill. Yet, the same things that make this book a 'beautiful' history make it a book that is challenging to work 'with' as a text about anatomical modelling. Indeed, readers of this book will have to concentrate to identify the book's key points and arguments about the role of anatomical models in the production of bodily knowledge in 18th-century Italy. That said, by and large, the effort is worth it, and this book is full of interesting insights and perspectives.

From the author I would welcome further comments on the book's key and original insights, both in terms of its contribution to the existing scholarship, and the broader themes and issues it raises about the history of anatomical modelling in Italy and Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. I would also welcome comments from the author on the following questions raised by the book: What are the distinct methodological issues and benefits involved with using wax anatomical models as source material for historians? What was the broader culture of wax modelling in early modern Europe (especially figurative modelling), and how did anatomical models figure as part of this? In what ways did wax anatomical models change and/or alter understandings of the body and its boundaries? Were wax models viewed differently to other figurative and bodily models made of other materials, especially religious effigies?

Notes

1. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai (Cambridge, 1986). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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