

Memory of the Body: the Anatomy Conservatoire of Montpellier

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Introduction

The closing of the Salernitan medical school in 1811 made the one at Montpellier the oldest university in the world to be still functioning nowadays. Its anatomy conservatoire is one of the rare collections to be preserved in its original settings. It was initially founded in 1794 (article 6 of the 4th of December 1794 decree) to be then moved in 1851 to its current location.

Anatomy has been given attention for long in Montpellier, where the first non-authorized dissection was executed by Henri de Mondeville (1260-1320) in 1315 (Bonnel *et al.*, 2010). In 1340, anatomic dissections were made official and in 1556 the school inaugurated with Guillaume Rondelet (1507-1566), Rabelais' friend, its theatre for anatomy (Palouzié, 2010). This historical importance of anatomy that was transmitted throughout centuries could nothing but engender such an exceptional conservatoire which will be now presented.

Presentation's relevance

This presentation is not only relevant because it is part of the oldest university in the world still functioning, but also because it presents a double patrimonial attraction for the city of Montpellier on the one hand, and for all people interested to human beings and to everything related to its body, healthy or sick, on the other hand.

Furthermore, the conservatoire has managed to preserve its didactic goal, which used to be its first and most important role for all the students of medicine until the beginning of the 20th century. The conservatoire is a rich exhibition of the work made by the pioneers of surgery, anatomy and comparative anatomy; it is the witness of pathologies in manifestations now forgotten thanks to medicine's progress, the witness of the will to improve curative techniques, and the witness of a the questioning of man on Man in the 19th Century.

The conservatoire surely keeps a major pedagogical interest for all lecturers, students and researchers of medicine, as well as of anthropology and paleopathology.

A fragile and precious location

Almost 217 years-old, the conservatoire of anatomy went through times of glory and times of misery. In 1945 it became a museum but its dilapidation soon caused its closing to the public and left it slowly sink in oblivion, victim of the throes of time in the absence of funding and maintenance. It is only thanks to the will of men women conscious of its value that the conservatoire was classified in 2004 as historical museum and reopened in 2010. It is nevertheless too late already for part of the collection: several anatomic pieces, masterpieces produced by past prosectors, are now condemned to destruction. Some collection could be restored, such the anatomic waxes created by Felice Fontana. But there is still a lot of work to accomplish to give back to this place its prestige. A first step would be to list, file, arrange and restore the different pieces of the collections so mishandled in the past century.

Historical approach

The teaching of medicine in Montpellier started as early as the 12th Century when, in 1181, Lord William VIII of Montpellier proclaimed freedom to teach Medicine in Montpellier.

The bases of the university of Montpellier, and of its Medicine school in particular, are however to be found in 1220, with the first status of *universitas medicorum*, given by cardinal Conrad of Urach, Pope Honorius III's legate. The fame of the school grew mainly after the 14th Century via its teaching of anatomy: in 1450 the royal college of medicine and in 1755, François Lapeyronie created the royal college of surgery (Bonnel *et al.*, 2007-2008).

The birth of the conservatoire

Because it wanted to suppress all associations and corporations within the entire République, the Legislative Assembly is responsible for the disappearance in 1792 of both royal colleges of medicine and surgery, despite their international fame. The revolutionary will however caused penury of surgeons on the revolutionary battle fronts. Because of this penury, and willing to give to the State the control of the forma of its doctors and surgeons, the French national Convention ordered in 1794 via the decree of the 14th frimaire of year III (4th of December

1794), the creation of three Health Schools: one in Paris one in Strasbourg, and one in Montpellier (Jean-Baptiste Duvergier, 1854).

This is a new birth for the school of Montpellier which leaves its old buildings to settle in its current ones, located in the monastery of Saint Benedict and Saint Germain.

Article 6 of the decree ordering the creation of the schools explained that each of them should possess: "a library and a cabinet of anatomy, series of instruments and appliances for surgery, and a collection of medical natural history" (Duvergier Jean-Baptiste, 1854). The anatomy conservatoire of Montpellier thus appeared on the 16th of December 1794, with Joseph Guillaume Virenque as first curator (Bonnel et al., 2007-2008).

Acquisitions of the collections: the 18th Century

On the 30th of June 1795 the first collections entered the conservatoire: they were part of the inheritance of the counsellor Montpelliérain Joubert. In this collection can be nowadays found major pieces, such as the "Écorché" by Houdon (1741-1828). A great source of enrichment for the collections emerged with the school's prescription from 1798, which stipulated that no student could be admitted to the final exams, unless the student brought a natural or artificial anatomic piece to expose in the conservatoire. These pieces are precious and constitute the core of the collections, but they also are the one that suffered the most from the throes of time.

19th Century

From 1801 to 1802, under the supervision of Jacques Philippe Raymond Drapanaud, the conservatoire purchased pieces carried out by a 18th Century Florentin ceroplastic master, Felix Fontana. The great reputation of his wax workshop attracted the greatest sovereigns (Hélène Palouzié, 2010). Bonaparte admired them during his Italian campaign and decided as soon as 1796 to purchase copies. In spite of the Parisian covetousness, the 64 anatomical waxes produced by the Florentin master were kept in Montpellier. This collection was restored between 2007 and 2010.

From 1803 to 1804, under Joseph Anglada's supervision, the conservatoire acquired a fish collection of the South Seas. Cuvier's interest in this collection demonstrates its importance. For some pieces, the paleontologist exchanged paleontological studies containing plaster reproductions of his fossil animals.

The conservatoire was now rich of many collections. It was decided to move them in 1817 in order to gain space. In the following years, the collections grew rich essentially through anatomic specimens carried out for some contests, as well as with pathological anatomy preparations offered by Montpellierian surgeons, and plaster or wax models coming from hospital pathological cases.

In 1848, the conservatoire purchased waxes from the Dupont's collection showing cancerous and venereal lesions.

Once again, the conservatoire's building became narrower as far as its collections grew larger. The prestige of those collections motivated the construction in 1851 of a

sumptuous building to accommodate them. Nowadays, collections are still located in this place.

In 1854, Anthropology enters the conservatoire with a collection of 79 heads of subjects supposed to represent the so-called "various human races." It was supplemented in 1876 by 50 natural or plaster heads representing the various human types.

At the end of the 19th Century, the famous and very complete collection of teratology was acquired. It included several rare specimens of monstrosities and congenital malformations. At that time, therapeutic abortion did not exist...

20th and 21st Century

The last curator of the conservatoire was Paul Gillis. In 1927, at the end of its mandate, the curator function was indeed removed. From now on, the conservatoire is linked to the chair of anatomy. The function disappearance and medical progress lead to the academy's decline. The lack of resources obliged to transform the conservatoire into a museum in 1945. What's more, academy's place and collections will undergo damages in the following years. They compelled to close the place. The old conservatoire was to fall into oblivion.

However, a common patrimonial policy of the University of Montpellier 1, the School of Medicine, and the Montpellier tourist information centre, gave rise to some hopes at the start of the 21st Century. After its rank as a "Historical Monument," works started in 2004 to restore the building of the old conservatoire. Between 2007 and 2010, it was the turn of some collections (waxes of Fontana and bottles of teratology). Finally, the museum reopened its doors in January 2010 for guided and "reasoned" tour because of the brittleness, the complexity, and the peculiarity of the collections (Montpellier tourist information centre, 2010).

Debate

Beyond its historical and didactic aspects, a patrimonial area such as the conservatoire of anatomy of the School of Medicine of Montpellier leads to an anthropological reflection.

The body presented in these places shall move and question one's self. Indeed, as Dietmar Kamper wrote it:

"Death and sexuality are always worth like the two fundamental body weaknesses and are kneaded of unmemorable anguishes. To return what is historically due to the one and the other, there is only a one and single strategy for civilization: the transformation of the body (corruptible) into image (eternal)" (2002).

Imprisoned in formalin or in resin, or moulded in plaster or wax... the healthy or sick body became here to a certain extent "body of eternity."

One can also be surprised by the particular setting of this "Pantheon" where anatomists, surgeons, doctors of the last centuries are painted on the ceilings, where stuccos look rich near the Doric columns... Why this imposing place? The "horror vacui" (fear of death) is opposed here

to the "homo sanus et integer" ("the human in good health, it is the normal human"; Herbert, 1645). As Dieter Lenzen expressed it: "health professions have always had a bond with sins handing-over or forgiveness" (2002). One can thus obviously talk about a sacerdotal function of the medical practice: "It is not a chance if, in the Middle Ages, the medical activity and the monastic life go hand in hand". This very particular medicine aspect and his link with death to better understand the life is almost represented in the conservatoire in a religious way. During the 19th century, the period during which the new conservatoire was built, death is integrated in Man's cyclical existential course. With the 21st century, this course becomes linear:

"The rites of transition disappeared and those which remain degenerated into family celebration (baptism, marriage, burial) whose primitive function lost itself" (Lenzen, 2002).

The Man is nowadays confronted with a disease and death phobia in a society which gets busy to break the marks of old age and is proud to generate centenaries. This undoubtedly explains why "even for certain scientists today, the conservatoire of anatomy, now a museum, is an austere place, a museum of the horrors" (Palouzier, 2010). Beyond these considerations, the conservatoire remains the testimony of a will of knowledge and of transmission of this knowledge. If today's technologies made it possible for science to explore the body in three dimensions, one should keep in mind that formerly only the dissections of corpses permitted to explore the human machine to better know it and look after it. In this place, the doctor will find the memory of his Masters, the historian, the anthropologist, and the paleopathologist will find the rich testimony of diseases sometimes disappeared. But, above all, they will especially discover here the memory "of a humanist dream" (Palouzié, 2010) in the sacred union of art and anatomy.

Conclusions

Teaching was the primary vocation of the academy. It was during long years a matchless tool for work at a time when exploration means of the human body did not exist. It is

still obviously a precious tool. This invaluable medical and anthropological document commands a duty of memory. Beyond the scientific community, it affects every man because, by the image communicated, it is the pain of the man which appears and his intelligence in his will to know and fight it. It is certainly a strange and disturbing place for the 21st Century people because of its fear of the disease, the "abnormal", and the death. In this respect, the conservatoire of anatomy of Montpellier cannot leave indifferent. Its magniloquence confronts us with our frailty.

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