

M.M.A. Hendriksen, Review of Elizabeth Hallam (ed.), *Designing Bodies. Models of Human Anatomy from Wax to Plastic*. (London: Royal College of Surgeons, 2015). *Social History of Medicine*, 2016; doi: [10.1093/shm/hkw072](https://doi.org/10.1093/shm/hkw072)  
Word count: 786

## Review

Elizabeth Hallam (ed.), *Designing Bodies. Models of Human Anatomy from Wax to Plastics* (London: The Royal College of Surgeons of England, 2015).

This book arose from an exhibition titled *Designing Bodies. Models of Human Anatomy from 1945 to Now* at the Royal College of Surgeons (RCS) in London from 24 November 2015 to 20 February 2016, of which the editor was a guest curator. In fact, most of the book (160 pages) is devoted to high-quality full colour photographs of the exhibited objects, which initially give the reader who did not have the opportunity to visit the exhibition the satisfying sense that she was able to experience the exhibition anyway. Although a photograph of an object cannot replace the experience of seeing it in real life entirely, the quality of the photos here is such and the layout chosen so carefully - with only one photograph on each verso-rector spread – that the reader gets a very good impression of the materiality and agency of the actual objects. The 77 pages that precede the catalogue of models contain three chapters: one by Hallam, one by historian of medicine Anna Maerker, and one by the director of the Hunterian Museum at the RCS, Samuel Alberti.

In the first chapter, Hallam explores the materials and designs of three-dimensional anatomical models from 1920 to the present, drawing on three significant RCS collections of twentieth-century models: the corrosion casts of RCS-prosector David Hugh Tompsett (1910-1991), the mid-century leg and foot models of orthopaedic surgeon John Herbert Hicks (1915-1992), and the recently developed brain model MARTYN (Modelled Anatomical Replica for Training Young Neurosurgeons). Although all three modelling practices contributed to the understanding of living anatomy, the materials and techniques that were employed and the ways in which the models themselves are used vary widely. Especially in the discussion of Hicks' work and the creation of MARTYN, the collective nature of contemporary model-making and use comes to the foreground. The most striking development in twentieth-century anatomical model-making though is the increasing importance of models that are not only meant to view, but also to handle – to the extent of eventually destroying them, as is the case for MARTYN, which is used to train young neurosurgeon's operating skills.

The second part of the book covers the historical context, opening with a chapter by Maerker on models and materials in Europe between 1650 and 1890, with a strong focus on wax models. It is a good introduction to the history of anatomical models for the general reader, although it is surprising that while Maerker skilfully explains the influence of religious and popular wax modelling practices on anatomical wax modelling, the importance of existing papier-mâché modelling techniques for the development of the nineteenth-century Auzoux models remains unexplored. Plaster models and corrosion casts receive no attention whatsoever in this chapter, which is strange given the fact that the plaster was already a popular material for casts and models by the early nineteenth century, and wax models play such an important role in the exhibition and were made more or less continuously at least since the late seventeenth century.

The final chapter by Samuel Alberti on medical models in Britain from 1750 to 1920 fills the gaps in Maerker's story to some extent, as he discusses not only wax models but also plaster casting in some detail. Alberti focuses on the transition from singular to serial production of anatomical models and the rise of specialized modelling companies in the nineteenth century. He pays special attention to the role of casts in the study and treatment of war injuries, and suggests that models can have strange and unpredictable afterlives and new meanings. Alberti does not go into detail about these afterlives, but the photographs of the exhibits that follow his piece confirm this, as they give the models, especially the corrosion casts and the schematic wooden limb models, an almost abstract quality. This is particularly the case for the casts that have been executed in resin colours that we do not usually associate with anatomical models, such as those of the inner ear in green and a corrosion cast of the bronchial tree in white. Seen in isolation against a white background, these models are reminiscent more of vegetables or fossils than of human anatomy, stressing the importance of colour in our understanding of objects.

The visual index is a nice touch, and the list of suggested further reading is a good starting point for those wanting to learn more about the history of anatomical modelling. Giving insight in the history and importance of materials, creation processes, and use of anatomical models in England from the nineteenth century until today for a general readership, *Designing Bodies* is a fascinating introduction to models of human anatomy, and a richly illustrated guide to the modern and contemporary model collection of the RCS.

Marieke Hendriksen, Utrecht University  
[m.m.a.hendriksen@uu.nl](mailto:m.m.a.hendriksen@uu.nl)