CHAPTER ONE

THE ANATOMY LESSON

When Frederik Ruysch was born in The Hague on 28 March 1638, the Dutch Revolt—the Eighty Years’ War against Spain—was entering its final decade. The fighting had taken place far from his home, but when he was ten, he witnessed the festivities held to celebrate the long-awaited independence of the Dutch Republic. For a boy of Frederik’s age, The Hague held plenty of attractions: it was the seat of government, where the Princes of Orange held court, and there was much coming and going of foreign diplomats and military men. One could spend all day gaping at their sumptuous attire and splendid carriages, and every day brought news from the rest of the world.

The news was mostly about politics, but there were often reports of amazing discoveries taking place in far-off lands. For decades the Dutch—following in the wake of the Spanish and the Portuguese—had been sailing to East Asia and South America to establish colonies and conduct trade. Almost by accident, however, the voyagers had discovered unexplored territories with unknown peoples whose customs and traditions surprised—and sometimes shocked—Europeans. When Frederik Ruysch was a boy, Abel Tasman, who had been sent by the Dutch East India Company to map the lands south of the Indian archipelago, discovered a large island, which he named Van Diemenland, after his superior. News of such discoveries spread not only by word of mouth, but also through letters, newspapers, periodicals, pamphlets and books. The Hague was one of the few places in Europe where books were produced on a large scale. The publications appearing during those years of discovery included a history of the Dutch West India Company, a collection of travellers’ accounts of the East Indies, and the journal of the Dutch sea captain Willem Ysbrantsz Bontekoe. The experiences of English, French, German, Spanish and Portuguese travellers were also published, giving more and more people the opportunity to learn about previously unknown parts of the world.

The exotic objects the travellers brought back—artefacts from other cultures, as well as flora and fauna—were viewed with great interest.
It was finally possible to see animals previously known only from travellers’ tales, such as parrots, chameleons and armadillos. There was a brisk trade in monkeys and exotic birds, the seeds of rare plants, and unusual shells and stones. Such rarities were collected both for pleasure and out of a desire to catalogue everything in existence. The seemingly far-fetched stories about distant places resulted in a demand for evidence. Collections proved instrumental in satisfying this need to create order out of chaos.

Apothecary’s Apprentice

One collector of curiosities was the young Frederik Ruysch, who had become an apothecary’s apprentice, even though that was not the most obvious choice of profession for one of his background. A number of his ancestors had studied law, and nearly all of his closest relatives were lawyers and civil servants. When the Protestants seized power in 1578, his great-grandfather, Ruysch Claesz, was appointed pensionary of Amsterdam (spokesman for the city at the meetings of the provincial government), a post he held for six years, after which he moved to The Hague to take up the office of public prosecutor for the province of Holland. Frederik’s grandfather, Gijsbert Ruysch, had started out as a notary and clerk for the States of Holland (the provincial government), but in 1608 he became secretary of the recently established Court of Audit. Hoping to give his sons a livelihood, he began to acquaint them with his work when they were still quite young. His two eldest sons soon obtained positions as registry clerks at the States General (the parliament to which each province sent representatives), while the third became a clerk at the States of Holland.

Gijsbert Ruysch became a prosperous man, wealthy enough to buy a fine house in an exclusive street in The Hague. But just as he was preparing to move into it—in the spring of 1624—he fell ill, in all likelihood a victim of the plague epidemic that struck The Hague that year. When he realized he was dying, he asked the States General for assurances that his eldest son would be allowed to succeed him as secretary of the Court of Audit. This would give the family some measure of security by safeguarding their income and social standing. It was also advantageous from the government’s point of view, since there was no formal course of training for civil servants, so practical training under paternal supervision was a common way of ensuring continuity