CHAPTER 3

Quicksilver Anatomy: Exploring the Lymphatic System with Mercury

Quicksilver was an appreciated but notoriously challenging material for anatomists in the long eighteenth century. Preparations injected with a mixture of mercury and hardening agents gain an attractive silvery shimmer if the injection is successful. This chapter analyses the use of quicksilver in anatomical preparations in Leiden in the eighteenth century, revealing aesthesis in all its complexity. Quicksilver-injected preparations literally are eyecatchers. Housed in the anatomical museum of the Leiden University Medical Center, this preparation is briefly described in the most recent catalogues as ‘an exceptionally fine specimen,’ and attracts the visitors’ attention straight away with its silvery shimmer.¹ The curator of the collection in the 1950’s, Ms Elshout (the later professor Luyendijk-Elshout) attributed it to Eduard Sandifort (1742–1814), professor of anatomy at Leiden University from 1771 to 1814. There are other mercury-injected preparations of the lymphatic system in the collections too, some wet, some dry, some of separated lymphatic vessels, others of lymphatic vessels in situ, of the heart, the liver, the penis, and the intestines. This chapter explores whether all these preparations were made by Sandifort, why these body parts were chosen and prepared with mercury, how the preparations were used, and what they meant to their contemporaries, while paying specific attention to the material aspects of aesthesis.

Moreover, I argue that the initial choice for mercury as injection mass for the lymphatic system was no coincidence, but the result of both the materiality and the meanings of mercury in the second half of the seventeenth century. Quicksilver to the late seventeenth-century anatomist was easy to discern, it was the penetrating, cool, wet opponent of dry, hot sulphur, it was cleansing, resurrecting, influenced the hands and was a source of eloquence. This chapter will explain those meanings and how they changed, as the subsequent reappearance of mercury as an injection mass for anatomical preparations in the second half of the eighteenth century was possible because of subtle changes in the meanings of mercury. The materiality of mercury in these preparations

¹ Elshout, Het Leidse kabinet, LUMC catalogue: “Buitengewoon fraai praeparaat van de lympheklieren uit de regio inguinalis. De klieren zijn gepraepareerd op de fascia abdominus superficialis, die geplet en gehard is. De lymphevaten zijn met kwikzilver opgespoten, waardoor een zeer fraai effect verkregen is.”
gives us access to, and is better understood through, a complex world of anatomical and medical knowledge and practices. These objects are, after all, evidence of complex social relationships; they are simultaneously products and modellers of a distinct epistemic culture.\(^2\) As Klein and Spary have recently pointed out, materials can be challenging things that “provoke their investigators to expand and refine their activities and understanding.” Materials speak irresistibly, and not only through their interpretation and representation.\(^3\) In the case of mercury, we will see its agency and meaning are in its colour, its effect on the human body, and its volatile and intangible character. The mercury-injected preparations made by Sandifort were the products of typical eighteenth-century aesthesis.