CHAPTER 4

Hands, Lace and Plants: Meaningful Embellishments

Two infant hands in jars, lifelike in lace sleeves, hands rising upwards in their phials, one of them holding a flimsy red piece of tissue on a string, the other lifts a vulva tied to a lacy ribbon. Another phial holds a fragment of a plant, a sole frumpy flower on one of its branches. On the bottom is a ghostly collection of white flakes.\textsuperscript{1} The first two preparations are on permanent display in the Leiden Museum Boerhaave and the Leiden University Anatomical Museum respectively. The last preparation, the phial with the white flakes, sits in a storage cabinet in the cellars of the Leiden University Medical Center. A first superficial description of the materiality and location of these three particular preparations raises more questions than it explains. Why do those hands look so life-like and pinkish, why are they holding bits of tissue and why are they wearing the lace sleeves? What is the thing on the string, and why would one make a preparation of a child’s hand holding a vulva? What are the white flakes on the bottom of the phial, and why is there a flowered branch in it? Do these preparations have something to do with one another; do they even fit into some kind of wider tradition? How were they looked at when they were first made and what happened to them as time went by?

One of these preparations (the hand holding the vulva) is ascribed to the Amsterdam anatomist Frederik Ruysch (1638–1731), the other two to his student and Leiden anatomy professor Bernard Siegfried Albinus (1697–1770). Relatively much has been written about Ruysch and his collections: A.M. Luyendijk-Elshout in 1970 was the first to relate the decorations of the Ruysch preparations to contemporary vanitas ideas about life, death and the human body.\textsuperscript{2} Art historian Julie Hansen rather anachronistically identified Ruysch primarily as an artist in a 1996 article.\textsuperscript{3} Luuk Kooijmans published an extensive biography of Ruysch in 2004 that appeared in translation in 2009, Gijsbert de Roemer explored possible theological connections in an article in the same year, and Josien Driessen van het Reve explored the faith of the Ruysch collections after they were incorporated in the St. Petersburg Kunstkamera in 1717

\textsuperscript{1} LUMC catalogue, numbers Abo015, A0009, Abo001.
\textsuperscript{2} Luyendijk-Elshout, “Death Enlightened.”
\textsuperscript{3} Hansen, “Resurrecting Death.”
in an exhibition catalogue and article in 2004 and 2005 respectively.⁴ Dániel Margócsy discussed the advertisement of anatomical collections and skills by anatomists like Ruysch in 2008, and Rina Knoeff recently published an article on Ruysch’ display strategies.⁵ Albinus also had his fair share of attention, mainly in the work of Luyendijk-Elshout and Punt between 1950 and 1985, yet no attempts have so far been made to understand the resemblances and differences between their preparations, nor has an object-driven analysis of the Albinus preparations been attempted before.

This chapter shows that the Ruysch and Albinus preparations are actually closely connected, but also distinctly different, and that a close reading of their materiality reveals even more about their make-up and meaning. First, the use of coloured wax injections in anatomical preparations in this period will be explored, particularly the use of red pigments. Subsequently, the arms and the tissue they are ‘holding’ are discussed, as well as the possible uses and meanings of the lace-rimmed sleeves with which they are decorated. This analysis will provide an initial understanding of the influence of aesthesis on the creation of preparation in which hands are combined with other body parts and textiles. After that, the mysterious preparation of flakes and a branch will demonstrate that deciphering the aesthetic of this anatomy is sometimes far from straightforward. Finally, the reception history of these preparations will be discussed briefly in order to gain some more insight to the problems and opportunities these preparations presented and present.

**Materies rubra, materies coerula: Coloured Wax Injections**

The two arms preserved in the preparations by Ruysch and Albinus look surprisingly healthy and lifelike in their phials, with a pinkish glow—a far cry from most other wet preparations of limbs, which have become ghostly white under the influence of their preservation liquid. The secret to their glow is in arterial and venal injections with a hardening wax mass coloured with red pigment. The choice of red pigments to achieve a lifelike effect and to visualise veins and arteries may seem obvious because of the apparently timeless connotations with red blood and healthy blushes, but there is more to this technique than meets the eye. As Domenico Bertolini Meli points out, colour is one of the most immediate sensory experiences yet also one of the most complex philosophical

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