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Figures du corps. Une leçon d'anatomie aux beaux-arts

Paris, École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, Oct 21, 2008–Jan 4, 2009

Reviewed by: Fend Mechthild

In a splendid exhibition, the École des beaux-arts in Paris is currently showing their own anatomical collections enriched by a small number of objects from other French institutions. Usually behind the scenes - stored away in archives and galleries reserved for the training of art students - the books, prints, drawings, photographs, waxmodels or casts are now centre stage in two large exhibition halls at Quai Malaquais. With these materials the exhibition traces the history of anatomy training at the French national art school. The prestigious institution was founded in 1648 under Louis XIV as Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture and was later, in the course of the French Revolution, renamed École des beaux-arts. Established by court artist Charles Le Brun, the academy was a typical product of absolutism, and intended to remove art production and education from the guilds and put them instead under the control of the State. Along with this institutionalisation came the assumption that art followed a set of authoritative rules and could be taught accordingly.

Anatomy training was part of the application of such scrutiny in the approach to the human body. Following the model of earlier Italian academies, students at the Académie royale were guided to draw from anatomical prints, from skeletons and écorchés, before finally encountering the life model. Moreover, students would occasionally engage with human and animal corpses, or at least assist anatomical dissections. This earlier Italian tradition of artistic anatomy is summarily dealt with in Andrea Carlino's catalogue essay and presented in the first section of the exhibition labelled "L'héritage de la Renaissance". The sixteenth-century displays include the well known anatomical treatises by Vesalius and Estienne, studies on proportion after Vitruvius and by Lomazzo and Dürer, as well as écorchés and muscle studies by Bandinelli or Antonio del Pollaiuolo. In the next of the six sections, which are organized more or less in chronological order, the formation of the French art academy up until the early nineteenth century is addressed, especially the increasing specialisation of anatomy training for artists; this development is also explored in the catalogue essay by Morwena Joly. The first anatomy tracts dedicated to artists are represented among others by François Tortebat's "Abrégé d'anatomie accommodé aux arts de peinture et de sculpture" of 1667-68. The book is illustrated with skeletons and muscle figures after Vesalius'

"Fabrica" and accompanied with (as the title advertises) a very abbreviated text. The textual information is restricted to the nomenclature of bones and muscles, and a short explanation of their location and function, establishing the assumption that an artist needs far less textual knowledge about anatomy than a physician. Later treatises also provide new images that range from the morbid and fantastic engravings of Jacques Gamelin to the functional neoclassicist illustrations of Jean-Galbert Salvage. The army surgeon provided both an écorché of the Borghese Gladiator and an anatomical treatise, which illustrates the bones and muscles of the famous ancient statue. In addition to the anatomical treatise and the écorché, the exhibition assembles a whole set of objects resulting from this project.

The title of the third section is "La prose des formes" and refers to the tendency towards scientific objectivity in medical illustrations of the nineteenth century. Many atlases, using the new printing technique of lithography starting in the 1820s, manifest a prosaic scrutiny of the human body. But they are not totally devoid of anecdotal detail. Frequently the pins and hooks used by the draughtsman to hold the body open are part of the representation, as are faces and period hairstyles that evoke the individuals used in the dissection. It is thus not quite justified to leave it to "romantic artists", in particular Géricault, to explore the disturbing facets of anatomy. At times it is precisely the sobriety of the medical gaze that conjures up the macabre aspects of anatomy. Among the most stunning objects on display is Jules Talrich's coloured plaster model (c. 1870) showing the neck of a guillotined person where the cut of the aseptic execution machine and the medical cross section coincide with brutal clarity. What unites these images - artistic and medical - is an obsession with looking that goes beyond any distinction between realist and romantic styles of representation.

In the second floor, one of three further sections deals with "L'animal et l'homme". It includes animal studies and casts, man animal comparisons from Giovanni della Porta to Charles Darwin, and various physiological, phrenological and anthropological attempts to classify and rank humans according to their internal or external features. These attempts to order the character and expressions of humans are also the focus of critical analysis in the catalogue essay by Martial Guéron. Focusing on the nineteenth century, the section "La science comme modèle" sets out the relationships between scientific and artistic imagery, and looks in particular at the measuring of the body, as well as the use of the camera and the photograph as an instrument of observation, registration and documentation. The final section "La quête du mouvement" is dedicated to the study of movement and the chronophotographic investigations of human and animal locomotion by Étienne Jules Marey, and Paul Richer with Albert Londe in Paris as well as Eadweard Muybridge in the US. Here as in the other sections, it is the variety of the objects within a theme that make the exhibition so exceptional and enables it to demonstrate vividly the complexities of the construction of the image of the human body. To take measurement as an example, there are various nineteenth century treatises on proportion alongside a table with the registration of the measurements of individuals recorded by hand, as well as the actual instrument, an x-shaped pincer, used by Paul Richer and others for such measurements. Paul Richer's ex libris represents a male nude, which is placed on a step at a right-angle pose and is shown measuring a statue. The model for this nude is itself by the anatomy professor and artist and is on display in the plaster version and in the reproduction from Richer's "Canons de proportions moyennes du corps humain" (1893). This is almost a mise en abyme that gives an idea of both the excess and the redundancy at stake in the construction of the normal body.

Despite such sensitive ordering of materials, the exhibition is by no means simply didactic. The smart and subtle exhibition, curated by Philippe Comar and designed by Alexis Bertrand, produces an unsettling atmosphere of its own, especially via the still life like arrangements of many objects, in particular casts and wax models. These evoke allegorical traditions of the memento mori, in keeping with many older anatomical illustrations, objects and installations. One such object, an anonymous autel macabre that uses embryo skeletons posing as allegories of death and decay, greets visitors as they enter the exhibition. At the same time, this macabre aspect of anatomy is countered through the use of modernist display cases, which are pastel in colour and thus are distanced from the objects presented and from expected clinical whiteness of scientific research. Smartly designed, these large table-like cabinets function both as vitrines for the flat pieces (books, prints etc) and as platforms for the larger three-dimensional objects.

The curator, Philippe Comar, is professor of morphology at the École des beaux-art. This is the post formerly called chair of anatomy and renamed in the wake of Paul Richer's adoption of Goethe's term for the anatomy of exterior form and thus marks modern artistic anatomy's focus on the external features of the human body. This renaming accompanied a shift in expertise, and although exceptionally the post has been filled by someone (Richer) with both an artistic and medical training, those holding it before the twentieth century were anatomists, while more recently it has been held by artists. Comar teaches anatomy and writes on the history of anatomy and thus returns to the tradition of his predecessors, namely Édouard Cuyer and Mathias Duval who published an early history of artistic anatomy in 1898.^[1] Comar's comprehensive catalogue essay covers the history of anatomy training at the École des beaux-arts since the formation of the Academy royale, and is especially illuminating in the later part on the less well known developments during the twentieth century.

Altogether, the catalogue comprises nine scholarly articles, but is particularly useful thanks to its "Thesaurus iconographique" containing excellent reproductions and almost 400 carefully done catalogue entries. As such it is a unique compendium of and key to the anatomical collections of the École des beaux-arts. Considering that the catalogue will certainly remain a reference work for many years, if not decades, to come, it is deplorable that the bibliography is rather patchy. While the list of historical works (pre 1960) is fairly comprehensive, the barely two pages with recent "critical works" fail to mention important exhibition catalogues such as Martin Kemp's "Spectacular Bodies" and even George Didi-Huberman's "L'empreinte", important surveys such as Jan Goldstein's Teaching Art or Anthea Callen's fundamental articles on the art training at the École des Beaux-Arts.^[2]

It is also regrettable that such a wonderful exhibition is on display for less than three months, and will not travel. Given the public and scholarly interest in the topic, and the limited accessibility of the archives and collections of the ENSBA (even for specialists) it would be desirable if at least parts of this commendable exhibition could be turned into a permanent public display.

Notes:

^[1] Édouard Cuyer and Mathias Duval: Histoire de l'anatomie plastique, les maîtres, les livres, les écorchés. Paris, 1898.

^[2] Spectacular bodies: The art and science of the human body from Leonardo to now. Exhibition curated by Martin Kemp and Marina Wallace, Hayward Gallery, London 2000; L'empreinte, exhibition curated by

George Didi-Huberman. Paris, Musée national d'art moderne, 1997; Carl Goldstein: Teaching Art. Academies and Schools from Vasari to Alberti. Cambridge 1996; Anthea Callen: "The Body and Difference: Anatomy training at the École des beaux-arts in Paris in later nine-teenth century", Art History 20, 1997, pp. 23-60.

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