

Exquisite Bodies

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[Exquisite Bodies](#) focuses on the popular anatomical models used to educate both medics and everyday people about the most familiar workings of the human body - childbirth and so on - and also about the physical effects of smallpox, syphilis and other venereal diseases. This "popular history of the anatomical model" ranges from the award winning models of Joseph Towne, the official model maker at Guy's hospital to the extremely popular museum of Roca in Barcelona. It is noteworthy that many of these objects circulated in widely diverse contexts: as well as being used for teaching in medical schools, and for the popular dissemination of knowledge about the human bodies, they were prominently displayed at World's fairs and formed part of many fairground attractions. Like the Hunterian Museum, and other medical museums, in the 19th century, the acquisition of knowledge about the human body was fraught with concern for exceptions, strange cases, and the moral underpinnings of infectious disease. no wonder that models of syphilitic genitalia are here presented with lifelike busts of bearded ladies. Objects such as the "anatomical virgins" married technical skill with an insight into cultural values and questions about the human body. Modelists such as Towne were concerned to maintain the veracity of the corpses they used as their models and unlike those artists representing the human body in its more idealised form, were unflinching in their portrayal of the stubbled chins, and anguished expressions of the people that ended up as cadavars (unclaimed corpses drawn from the lowest echelons of society).

Behind a red velvet curtain the most shocking models of disease stricken genitalia speak to the every day concerns of the 18th and 19th centurys. The exhibition is provocative, insightful, oddly moving, and at times disturbing. It makes an excellent compliment to the Assembling Bodies exhibition in Cambridge (reviewed earlier on this site [here](#)). Exquisite Bodies runs until October 18th, 2009.

See also this BBC site about the Cambridge exhibition Assembling Bodies:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/8224706.stm> previously discussed on the blog [here](#)