

Editorial

From scientific popularization to voyeurism: what about exhibition of plastinated specimens?

Régis Olry

*Département de Chimie-Biologie, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, Trois-Rivières, Québec,
Canada*

As an introduction to this editorial, may I be allowed to tell you the story of a pupil of Jakob Christoph Le Blon: the French artist Jacques-Fabien Gautier-Dagoty (1716-1785). In the mid-eighteenth century, he invented (or improved) a technique of color engraving which was very successful in illustrating books of anatomy. Pierre Tarin and Joseph Guichard Du Verney, among others, called on Gautier-Dagoty's service for many anatomical plates. Some years later, the anatomical illustrations began unfortunately to lose their scientific content, and became more and more gruesome: the plates «do not have any more the slightest useful purpose in anatomy. The chromatic system only serves as a reverie with a sexual connotation on human body: the accurate definition of the figures is neglected on behalf of incongruous esthetic effects, of more and more insistent phantasmagoric digressions» (Rodari, 1996). Gautier-Dagoty really perfected a very attractive technique, but could no more differentiate between artistic and scientific anatomy on the one hand, and more or less questionable iconographic prowesses on the other hand.

Over two centuries later, the same story is maybe about to happen again. The numerous exhibitions of plastinated specimens give rise to controversy which brings back Gautier-Dagoty's difficult times to me. Many journals (*New York Times*, *Le Devoir*...) mention the uneasy feeling produced by some whole body plastinated specimens, which effectively belong much more to baroque anatomy than to science or scientific popularization (Olry and Motomiya, 1997a). In this short editorial, my aim is neither to question religious convictions, nor to reprove this kind of exhibition for the general public. I only would like to give rise to reflections on these events and their putative consequences.

Firstly, it has to be pointed out that most of visitors are very satisfied with the exhibition, and do not express the slightest scepticism at all (Olry and Motomiya, 1997b). Secondly, it is obvious that small plastinated specimens (heart, lungs, liver,...) are well accepted, including - maybe espe-

cially - those with pathological conditions (cardiac infarction, bronchogenic carcinoma, cirrhosis of the liver,...). In other words, every thing related directly to scientific popularization is welcome in the general public, and this kind of exhibition will probably have to be developed in the future. Unfortunately, many people may be shocked by other specimens, such as whole body plastinated specimens holding in their hand their own muscular system, abdominal viscera or gravid uterus. One of my colleagues, a French professor of anatomy, disapproved of the exhibition of such specimens: I only want to point out with this remark that not only bigoted churchwomen may take offense at them. In a democracy, every one has a right to express an opinion, and every kind of art has a right to be displayed. Some people will claim that such specimens should never be exhibited, whereas other people will point out the fact that these specimens were not displayed on the street, in full view of every body. Would it be reasonable to censor some specimens, but according to which principles?

Another point however is worth thinking over. The papers published in different journals all around the world mention this polemic, and we all have to hope that they will not cast a slur on the image of plastination in the general public.

Plastination is a wonderful technique of preservation. As usual in science, the use which is made of it is dependent on every one's freedom of conscience.

Bibliography

- Olry R, Motomiya K: Baroque Anatomy Masterpieces as Models for Plastinated Specimens. *J Int Soc Plastination* 12 (1): 18-22, 1997a.
- Olry R, Motomiya K: Report. The 1996 Osaka Plastination Exhibition. *J Int Soc Plastination* 12 (2): 39, 1997b.
- Rodari F (Ed): *Anatomie de la couleur. L'invention de l'estampe en couleurs*. Paris, Lausanne, 1996.