

The Anatomical Collections of the École des Beaux-Arts – Its Past and Present as a Philosophical Museum

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Abstract From 2020 to 2021, the Beaux-Arts de Paris have undertaken an inspection of their anatomical collections in order to control that each piece is still in place in accordance with their inventory. This work which made it possible to date more precisely its main pieces leads to a new critical understanding of this collection which value is mainly based on its historical use by famous artists and the myths which surrounded them. This anatomical museum is therefore more a philosophical museum than a scientific.

¹ Mathilde Vauquelin, who worked at the École des Beaux-Arts as head of “récolement” in 2021. The term “récolement” (that is to say, “verification”) refers to a French legal obligation that requires museums to inspect their collections every 10 years.

From 2020 to 2021, the Beaux-Arts de Paris have undertaken an inspection of their anatomical collections in order to control that each piece is still in place in accordance with their inventory.² This inspection, which is an obligation for French museums, gave the occasion to reorganise our collections of anatomy: that is to say, to dust them off, to protect the more fragile elements, to create a new deposit in order to lighten the main room where the collections have been presented since 1869 and to launch a rational campaign of restoration, which will allow in the following years to gradually put in order the most fragile works, in particular, the osteological assemblies which suffered the most from educational use and the lack of upkeep of the collection. This work has helped us to have at least a precise more numerical appreciation of the collection. Previously our inventories mentioned 318 objects related to artificial anatomies (that is to say, plaster cast, wax or papier-mâché objects); we now can count 350. As far as animal preparations and human remains are concerned, our inventories never mentioned them precisely, but the estimation was about 300; it is now more than 1000. For this project, our curator and professor in charge of teaching with the collection are working together closely as the collection is still intensely used. This is for me the most fascinating aspect of this collection, which has been used by artists for more than two centuries. Some of our anatomical preparations are more important from this point of view than from a strict historical or scientific point of view, as illustrated by the striking example of a mummy of a cat, called “Matisse’s cat” for generations.³ The origin of this designation lies in the famous novel devoted to the painter by Louis Aragon (1897–1982) who recalled that Matisse, who studied at the École des Beaux-Arts for more than 8 years, asked Edouard Cuyer (1852–1909), assistant professor of anatomy, to “get him a dissected cat to better study the back and legs”.⁴ Of course, it is quite sure that the cat described by Aragon is not this cat, since the novelist speaks of dissection. Furthermore, while working precisely on the history of our collections to complete our inventories, the date of entry of this animal mummy has been discovered as 1928, which is a long time after Henri Matisse (1869–1954) studied at the École des Beaux-Arts. The deconstruction of a myth did not decrease the heritage value of our mummified cat, since hundreds and hundreds of students have been taught anatomy with this cat and its fantasized relationship to Matisse, which is at any rate a very important point for the history of art teaching. The aim of my contribution is to trace the historical evolution of the use of this collection, complementary to dissection and to live models, which is a fundamental point to take into account when elaborating the preservation and storage rule of the collection.

2 Called “récolement” in French, see note 1.

3 This designation is mainly oral. Philippe Comar only suggested this interpretation by publishing the cat mummy before Aragon’s quotation (Comar 2009, p. 56).

4 Aragon 1998 (first ed. 1971), p. 106.

When the course of anatomy at the Académie de Peinture et de Sculpture was created in the middle of the 17th century, just after the years following its royal recognition, the first professor, the surgeon François Quatroulx (ca 1593–1672), taught with the help of a skeleton. This teaching, based on science, was separated and complementary from the study of live models which was its main and most important course. The Academy, which considered itself as the heir to Italian Renaissance humanism, was the only one to hold the privilege of having the models pose at the Academy.⁵ In the middle of the 18th century, the need emerged to give lessons from nature, meaning from corpses. In the age of Enlightenment, it appeared as the best way to be scientific. Jean Joseph Sue (1710–1792), surgeon and professor at the Hôpital de la Charité, gave the first lesson based on dissection in 1772. These kinds of lessons ended only in 1975! However, dissection raised many debates at that time. The first objection was aesthetical. It seems paradoxical that the repulsive ugliness of the dissected body could help young artists reach the canons of beauty. On the second hand, the mannerist exaggeration of anatomy seemed completely opposed to neo-classical rules. The engraver Charles Nicolas Cochin (1715–1790), who was the main theorist of the Academy, would have preferred artificial models because according to him, the study of a corpse “is too mixed with disgust and must be so rapid because of the decay that one can only accumulate confused ideas, which disappear as quickly as they were received”⁶ (1764). But this was not the reason why Jean Joseph Sue the elder decided to create in 1776 lessons from live models. Its aim was to complete the study of the corpse, which alone can lead to false observations, as his son, who seconded his father and then replaced him as anatomy teacher, explained: “The human body is then in its deadly parts what would be an instrument with all the strings instead of being stretched, crawling and lying one under the other.”⁷

It is interesting to underline that the Sues, father and son, considered antiques, plaster casts or wax models as well as plates mainly inefficient for teaching because they considered that they gave superficial information: “Who ignores that the plaster figures, the beautiful statues, of which the proportions are the most perfect, inform only of the external form of the parties without giving any idea of their internal structure? The anatomical plates, the wax pieces, serve to make some models known, it is true, but they absolutely allow their play to be ignored.”⁸

A third aspect of the activity of the Sue family was their astonishing collection. Sue the elder made a speciality of preserving bodies by injection or mummifying. He is the author of an important book related to this point, published probably in 1749⁹ and

5 Michel 2012.

6 Guédron 2004.

7 Sue 1788, p. IV.

8 Ibid., p. 8–9.

9 Hyrtl 1860, p. 614; Cole 1921, p. 331; Faller 1948, pp. 71, 72.

largely republished in 1765 called *Anthropotomie, ou l'art d'injecter, de disséquer, d'embaumer et de conserver les parties du corps humain*. These skills allowed him to gather an incredible collection of animal and human parts. The first description of his collection is a striking manuscript dating from the period of the French Revolution, which is part of our collection, where hundreds and hundreds of skeletons, thousands of jars with injected anatomical preparations are described (Fig. 1). This collection, which was

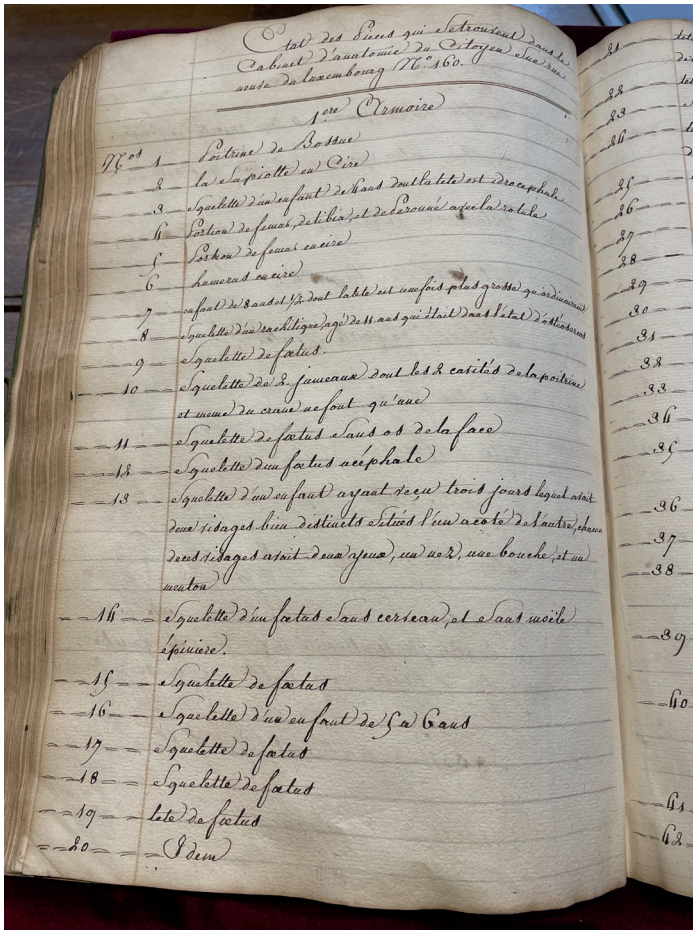


Fig. 1 Description of the cabinet of Jean Joseph Sue, end of the 18th century, Les Beaux-Arts de Paris, Archives 162, © Alice Thomine-Berrada

a highlight for Parisian high society, which delighted to shiver at these oddities, is also mentioned in the most famous guide of the time.¹⁰ The considerable fame of this collection made it highly desirable abroad, but Jean Joseph Sue the son (1760–1830) decided in 1824 to give it to the École des Beaux-Arts, which leads to the question of its interest in the context of the École anatomy training. The remarks made by Sue the younger on this occasion gave some very important clues:

10 Thiéry 1787, p. 404.

“In this museum are gathered once animated ruins, real medals of the natural history of man; debris torn off at a second death that was waiting for them in the tomb; precious remains which like imposing columns of an ancient palace destroyed by the hand of time awaken great ideas and command a kind of veneration [...] The roads of the blood marked by a coloured fluid; the lymph replaced by the mercury, the ramifications that one would be tempted to take for the most untimely productions of the vegetal reign; the nervous system, a surprising tree species whose roots occupying the upper parts and the branches the lower part; human brains offering naked the studied workshop occupied by thought and forming the first term of a progression composed of brains of all animals, depending on the degrees of intelligence; all the differences, the nuances itself that age leads to development, also demonstrated by growing or decreasing series; the flexibility of the viscera maintained by the liquor in which they are plunged; the colour and freshness rendered to the most delicate organs; [...] the destruction decorated as much as it can be: death finally enjoying a kind of life, showing at least under an exterior more accommodated to the sensitivity of our senses; everything in this philosophical museum awakens the soul, [interests it, stirs it, agitates it; the soul can listen] to the eloquent silence of all these corps formerly inhabited by principles similar to it.”¹¹

With this collection, anatomy became more than a question of science; it became a philosophical basis for thinking about life and disappearance, materiality and emptiness. But as its main part vanished just after Sue (the younger)’s gift to the École des Beaux-Arts, its pedagogical use has been very ephemeral. In the archives, an administrative report explains the reason of its disappearance: before their arrival, the pieces were already in a bad state and the building, humidity and north-facing orientation accelerated the phenomena of decomposition.¹²

The Sues’ collection is the original core of our gallery of anatomy, even if only a few mummies and a macabre altar (**Fig. 2**) are still there. Like Matisse’s cat, this altar is a piece of our collection that aroused fantasies – it was long considered to be a 17th century piece but can now surely be dated to the beginning of the 19th century.¹³

In 1830, the course of anatomy at the school was passed to Edouard Emery (1787–1850), doctor trained on the battlefield, for whom dissection was the main way to teach. However, in the second half of the 19th century a new kind of anatomical teaching was set up with the nomination in 1863 of the surgeon Pierre Charles Huguier (1863–1873), whose teaching was less scientific and more sensitive and who had a new gallery built especially devoted to the collections of anatomy (1869). His successor, Mathias Duval (1844–1907) worked a great deal to increase the collection with for example the ar-

11 *Biographie nouvelle des contemporains*, Paris, 1825, quoted by Comar 2009, *op. cit.*, p. 464.

12 Comar 2009, *op. cit.*, p. 466.

13 According to the expertise of Pauline Carminati, conservator. Philippe Comar dated it to the 17th century (*op. cit.*, p. 467).



Fig. 2 “Autel Macabre”, from the Sues’ collection, end of the 18th century, fœtus skeleton, wood, metal, glass, Les Beaux-Arts de Paris, MU 12243 © Beaux-Arts de Paris, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Thierry Ollivier

rival, in 1876, of animal life plaster casts coming from the workshop of Antoine Louis Barye (1795–1875) or, in 1891, the monumental coloured skinned plaster cast designed by Jules Talrich (1826–1904) (Fig. 3). The famous painting from François Sallé of 1888 as well as the engraving of Alexis Lemaistre (1852–1932) of 1889 illustrates the new relationship between the live model, the collection and dissection. Training was based on the equal use of all three, even if Mathias Duval’s method was to first use the skeleton and then to reconstruct the whole body.

A next step was taken at the beginning of the 20th century with Paul Richer (1849–1933), who was nominated at the École des Beaux-Arts in 1903. This doctor, an admirer of Jean Martin Charcot (1825–1893) discovered the scientific role of drawing during the five years he spent writing his first book, *Anatomie artistique*, published in 1890. This is the reason he decided to make drawing the main focus of his training, based on the combined use of human bones and live models, rather than dissection. In 1906 he described the principle of his practical teaching: “The pupil begins by drawing under their various faces the isolated bones. Then when he has thus figured all the bones of a part of the body, of a member, for example, he learns to put them in their true place in the human body by drawing all the skeleton of the region according to the model. He must begin by drawing the shapes of the model as exactly as possible, then using



Fig. 3 Jules Talrich, Four skinned plastercats, colored plastercasts, bought in 1890, Les Beaux-Arts de Paris, MU 12481 © Beaux-Arts de Paris, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Thierry Ollivier

the bone marker points which appear there to reproduce either on this first drawing itself, or what seems to me preferable, on a sheet of transparent paper applied above the skeleton in its entirety.”¹⁴

In his opening lessons of 1908, he went further, criticized the “macabre procession” which accompanies dissection, its unreal nature, believing that the study of death cannot help to understand life and decided to stop it in order to teach the “anatomy of the living”, the “life anatomy”. Even more, he denounced the flaws of working on reconstructed skeleton. He published three drawings to illustrate this idea (**Fig. 4**), two of them made from live models and the last one made from a recomposed skeleton. According to him, it was possible to “observe in this drawing an exaggerated uplift of all the ribs, the last ones specifically. The lower end of the sternum, thus projected forward, becomes the highest point of the rib cage on this side [...] Certainly a torso skeleton similar to that [...] could not match a healthy and well-formed body.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Richer Paris, 1906.

¹⁵ Richer 1908, s.p.

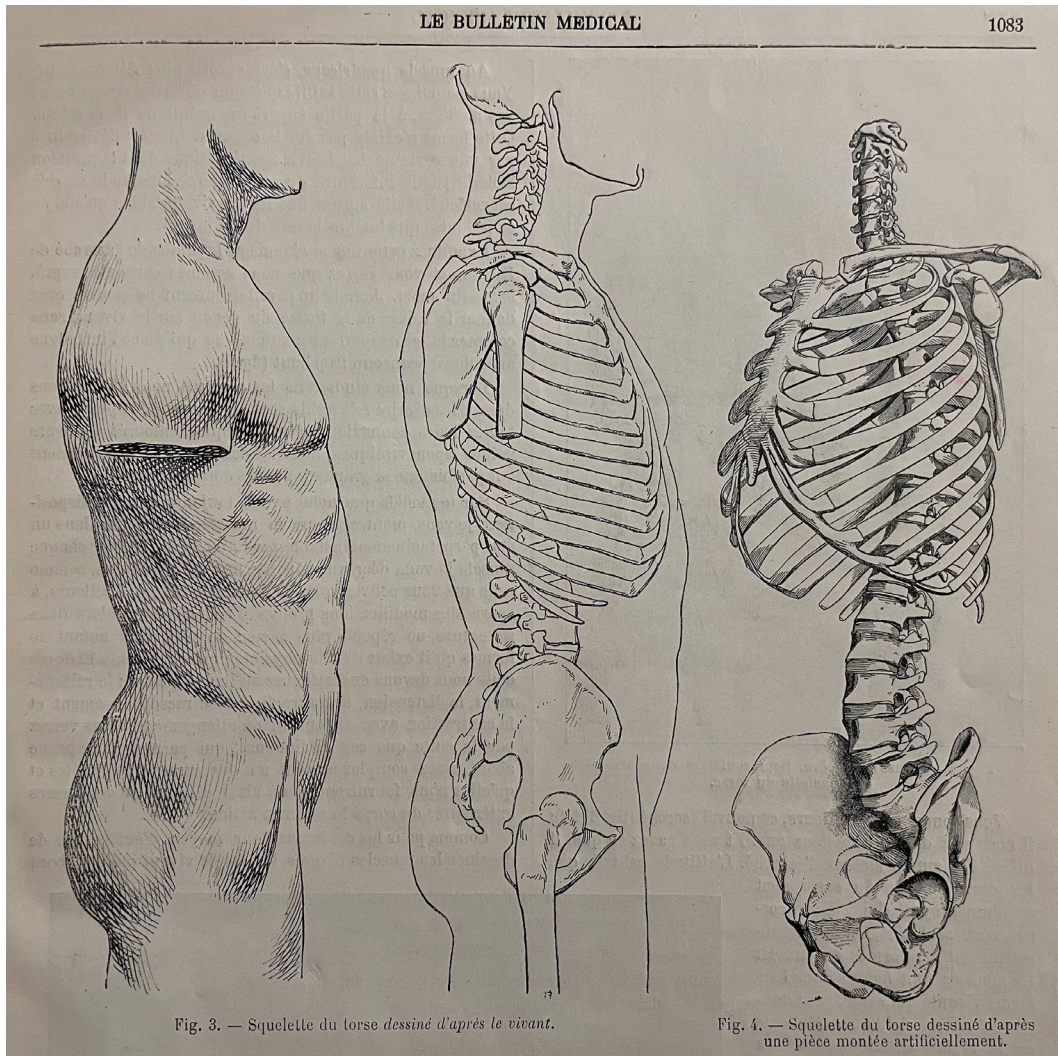


Fig. 4 Paul Richer, Drawings published in *Leçon d'introduction* (Paris, 1908), © Alice Thomine-Berrada

The solution found by Richer was to create an artificial skinned plaster cast where the muscles are figured in their living form; he called it “écorché vivant”, which could be translated as “skinned alive”. On this plaster cast, “the pectoral, for example, does not have the triangular and flattened appearance that we see on the corpse and on some skinned statues (...). It is quadrangular in shape like the pectoral region itself, a shape it owes to the state of relaxation in which it is found.”¹⁶ Richer gave three plaster casts of this kind to the École des Beaux-Arts (**Fig. 5**).

In 1920, this evolution leads him to add a new terminology and to speak of “morphology”, meaning “the science of shape”. By doing this, he drastically overturned the



Fig. 5 Paul Richer, Recomposed skinned plastercast, called “écorché vivant”, colored plaster, circa 1908, Les Beaux-Arts de Paris, MU 12203 © Beaux-Arts de Paris, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Thierry Ollivier

hierarchy of the Beaux-Arts anatomy teaching, which was suddenly no longer based on the inside, the skeleton, but on the exterior, the live model. This terminology, as well as the former description of his plaster casts, can be directly linked with his interest in the philosophy of vitalism, which considered that life cannot be reduced to physical laws. After his departure in 1922, the dissection slowly returned, mainly because the professors who succeeded him, especially Pol Le Coeur (1908–1996, professor from 1956 to 1978) did not share his vitalist point of view but had mechanical conceptions, considering the body as a structure that meets the motor forces.

The situation changed definitively in 1968 with the arrival of the painter Jean-François Debord (born in 1938) to assist Pol Le Coeur. His first action was to completely abandon the term “anatomy” and to adopt solely the term “morphology”. His second decision in 1975 was to stop dissection, exactly for the same reason as Richer, due to its unreal character. He denounced this practice in a very ironic way: “a corpse on a dissection table: very quickly gravity makes it obey the table, the spine becomes rectilinear like a beam, the head abandons itself backwards, the rib cage is raised like that of a fairground athlete, the horizontalized sacrum tilts the pelvis and the pubis is thrown

upwards. The opening, a good hand's width, thus created between the last ribs and the iliac wing is all the more deep as the subject has been happily emptied like a chicken ready for sale. The muscles of the thighs and legs descend along the bones; as for the arms, they are spread out with open palms, in a horizontal rank."¹⁷

In accordance with the term "morphology", his teaching was completely devoted to shape. Debord was an artist who taught as if teaching was a kind performance, as evidenced by the film done during his last year courses in 2002–2003.¹⁸ He also intensively used the collections of bone. This can be considered contradictory to the study of shape but this was not the case, as it was metaphorically a way to learn "drawing intelligence."¹⁹

This use of bones was not only intellectual but also held an important sense-based aspect. Sylvie Lejeune (born in 1953), a French sculptor who studied at the École des Beaux-Arts at the end of the 1980s remembered: "One day, the professor of morphology ... took a panther mummy. [...] It was a panther mummy which came from the Jardin des Plantes and which had in fact been requested by Delacroix and had therefore landed in the Morphological Museum of the École des Beaux-Arts. And so, the professor a bit playfully took him and put him in my arms and so I was like that with open arms receiving this beast that seemed huge to me. [...] in fact, we imagine that taking a panther must be extremely heavy and perilous at the same time. And so, I was short-circuited by the kind of contrast, this mind-blowing paradox of finding myself with a panther in my arms that is in fact a mummy, with enormous weight because I was terribly intimidated, a heart-rending fragility, and at the same time an absence of weight. And so there it is, really a pure feeling of sculpture because the only question that remains of this experience, since it is almost the meeting of the absence of weight, what is interesting is that it poses the pure question of presence: what makes an object, all at once, its weight, in which life has only passed, it is no longer there – what is it? Which causes this object to have such a presence, such a charge, what does it strike in my memory, what does it strike in my body? But in any case, it hit, it hit incredibly, it was one of the biggest emotions I felt, first because I was overwhelmed by a gesture that I was not expecting and after by this question."²⁰

This text is an important testimony because it highlights another myth of our collection, since the panther mummy doesn't date from Delacroix but arrived at the École des Beaux-Arts at the end of the 1920s. At any rate, it shows how the historical depth, even if false, has an important impact on students and teaching. More broadly, it re-

17 Debord 1993, p. 102–116.

18 Online on Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsEp-jCHD8w> (05. 10. 2022).

19 Interview done with Cyril de Turkheim in 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHKKovp86-Q> (08. 11. 2021).

20 Radio emission, 9 December 2015, France-Culture, <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/au-singulier/sylvie-lejeune-35-le-tigre-d-alger> (08. 11. 2021).

veals the metaphysical importance of these kind of collections, which speak about absence and presence, perhaps more than medicine and science, as already suggested in the description of the Sues' collection dating from 1824.

To conclude with the present, the professors now in charge of anatomy, Valérie Sonnier (born in 1967) and Jack MacNiven (born in 1988), still feel an incredible privilege, since they can teach with real human or animal remains whereas the medical students use mainly synthetic ones. This point is very important for them since they are convinced that “it is the only way to teach differences”, which according to Sue's speech, means life. Even if the main part of Sues' collection has vanished, the collections of the École des Beaux-Arts are profoundly the heirs of the philosophical museum he created at the end of the 18th century. A few examples of their work, completely inspired by the philosophical ambiance of the gallery of morphology, bear witness to this (**Fig. 6**)



Fig. 6 Valérie Sonnier, *La galerie Huguier*, photography, 2008, ph18299, © Beaux-Arts de Paris, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais, ADAGP

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