

Preserving and Exhibiting Human Remains from the Anatomical Collection of the University of Montpellier Faculty of Medicine

Caroline Ducourau

University of Montpellier, caroline.ducourau@umontpellier.fr

Abstract The University of Montpellier houses substantial collections related to its research and teaching functions in numerous scientific fields: paleontology, mineralogy, zoology, physics, astronomy, botany, pharmacy, ethnology, and anatomy. This article will present the issues surrounding anatomical collections in the University of Montpellier Faculty of Medicine. It will at first describe the anatomical collections and their history, then expose the problematics about their preservation and their exhibition to a larger public than the medical audience the collections were originally made for.

The anatomical collections of the University of Montpellier Faculty of Medicine: a brief history

The beginnings of the anatomical collection of the University of Montpellier date from the extreme end of the 18th century. Its first core is indeed directly derived from the revolutionary reforms. Ideas related to a new way of teaching medicine, developed in the 18th century in the context of the Enlightenment, led to its profound restructuring during the last years of the Revolution. This renovation of teaching passed through the constitution of anatomical collections. The National Convention created in 1794 three “Écoles de Santé” in Paris, Strasbourg and Montpellier. In 1795, the Montpellier University of Medicine was settled down in the former monastery-college Saint-Benoît, previously the Renaissance episcopal palace. The institutional reform of the Convention, which brought together the future doctors and surgeons in one place, was accompanied by a desire to improve teaching by giving bigger space to practical studies, with the creation in each of these schools of a conservatory consisting of an anatomy cabinet, surgical instruments and a collection of natural medical history. A curator, responsible for this collection, was also appointed to perform demonstrations of drugs and surgical instruments.¹

The anatomical collection of the University of Montpellier is sheltered today in the gallery built for this purpose in 1851: the conservatory of anatomy presents, in a majestic framework punctuated by colonnades, and under paintings of famous doctors and allegories of various sciences, a succession of windows showing the description of the human body in detail as well as its pathologies (Fig. 1). The collection is a remarkable testimony to the history and practices of teaching anatomy in the 19th and early 20th centuries before the development of new technologies for studying the human body and the advent of living anatomy.

The collection is logically focused on the study of human anatomy, both normal and pathological. This main theme is completed by series related to comparative anatomy and zoology on the one hand, and archeology and physical anthropology on the other hand. The preserved pieces are either artificial, in wax, plaster or papier-mâché (paper pulp), or natural. The human remains represent almost half of the collection and have different aspects: dry or fluid anatomical preparations, osteology, and histological sections.²

When the conservatory was created at the end of the 18th century, the collection was almost non-existent and successive curators took care of its progressive enrich-

1 Lemire 1990, p. 214–215; Palouzié 2010.

2 The estimated 2440 human remains, i.e. 43% of the entire collection, consist mainly of dry anatomical specimens (72%, of which 1% are mummies). The other types are distributed as follows: osteology (18%, including 5% from the anthropological collection of skulls), wet items (10%, including 3% from the teratological collection). Histological sections are rare in the conservatory.



Fig.1 Université de Montpellier. © David Richard

ment. The collection also benefited from numerous donations from surgeons, anatomy, pathology or clinical teachers, for example, donations from Jacques-Mathieu Delpech (1777–1832) showing bony malformations, particularly related to the spine, which formed the heart of his research as surgeon and external clinical professor.³ These pieces illustrate the growing interest in pathological anatomy since the 1820s. Later, Professor Jules Mouret (1865–1928) gave a set of bones and anatomical preparations related to the skull enhanced with colors to emphasize the different bony, vascular and nervous relationships. This series corresponds to the course he taught in the 1920s on otolaryngology. This example highlights the strong initial links between research, teaching and the anatomical collections. Another example is the set collected by Professor Paul Soubeyran, a front-line surgeon during World War I who brought back a number of bone fragments that are a harrowing testimony to the severity of the injuries. In parallel, there are contemporary bone surgery exercises that show the advances in surgery during this time.⁴ A final important set further completed the conservatory at the beginning of the 20th century: between 1927 and 1952, anatomy professor Jean Delmas (1882–1966) managed the collection and enriched it with numerous parts, in particular a series of cuts made on the frozen subject which, accompanied by captioned plates, form a remarkable pedagogical ensemble at a time where medical imaging techniques did not exist.⁵

Some sets of human remains do not directly concern anatomy, but were nevertheless given to the conservatory, considered as a sort of museum dealing with human sciences as a whole. Many pieces have their origin in the decisive action of Joseph-Marie Dubrueil (1790–1852), professor of anatomy from 1824 until his death. During this period, he gave pieces several times; moreover, after his death his family gave his collection, which not only refers to pathological and comparative anatomy, but also includes a large number of skulls and heads from people from all over the world. This group is of course to be seen in the context of physical anthropology as it developed in the 19th century. This group is completed by some pieces brought back from non-European journeys by the botanist Alire Raffeneau-Delile (1778–1850), who went to Egypt with Bonaparte, or later by Professor Charles Martins (1806–1889), naturalist and director of the Montpellier Botanical Garden, who gave a lot to the conservatory. Among the parts which don't directly concern anatomy, several items or lots are related to archaeology. The conservatory thus houses a dozen whole mummies, including eight from the excavations of the Egyptian necropolis of Antinoöpolis by french archeologist Albert Gayet. The archaeological material from these excavations was sent by the state to university museums for educational purposes.⁶ The mummies of the con-

3 Bonnel, Palouzié 2012

4 <https://expo1418.edu.umontpellier.fr/> (07.03.2023).

5 Laux 1958, p. 126–130.

6 Lintz, Coudert, 2013.

servatory could be considered as objects of curiosity, as in a curiosity cabinet, but also as a means of observing the human body and archeology of medicine: in fact, in one of the mummies orthopedic aids can be seen.

In addition to the traditional methods of acquisition, by purchase or donation, there is a specificity of the anatomy conservatory: linked to teaching, the conservatory received pieces produced as part of this activity. The school decided that students wishing to register for the final exams should manufacture an anatomy piece. It was actually the teaching staff who, logically, mainly participated in the enrichment of the conservatory: not only the anatomy teachers, but also their management team. The competitive exams for the different jobs generated considerable emulation between the candidates who had to produce several dozen pieces of anatomy (human and comparative) in order to be evaluated.⁷ These anatomical pieces from the competitions are well represented in the windows of the conservatory. Their preservation is sometimes problematic: for example, they are not all well prepared or varnished because they were created for a competition in a specific date and were not intended to be preserved until now.

The former Delmas-Orfila-Rouvière museums, coming from the University of Paris, and including more than 7000 items, have recently come to increase this collection, thanks to a donation in 2012. The University of Montpellier is now equipped with a first-rate anatomical ensemble, classified as a historic monument. These collections bear the names of Mathieu Orfila (1787–1853) who founded the museum in Paris in 1844, Henri Rouvière (1876–1952), professor of anatomy, and André Delmas (1910–1999), professor of anatomy and dean of the faculty, who continued the work of Orfila by preserving and enriching the original collection. The Parisian collection, formerly exhibited in the Faculty of Medicine, was crated in 2005. The reception of the collection in the historic building of the Faculty of Medicine wasn't done easily, as it is an old building, with vacant spaces that are not well adapted and require major development work. The goal was to quickly restore a general vision of this collection not presented to the public for ten years: the first sequence evokes the academic collection; the second exposes the most prestigious elements of the fairground museum of Dr. Spitzner (1833–1896). This new room was inaugurated in November 2014 (**Fig. 2**).⁸

7 Dulieu 1986–1990, t. IV-1 p. 310–315; Bonnel 2010, p. 14.

8 Palouzié, Girard, 2014.



Fig. 2 The Delmas-Orfila-Rouvière room, Spitzner collection © Jean-François Peiré – DRAC

Preservation issues

Until recently, there weren't storage rooms for both these collections; all of the Montpellier collection was on display, as well as pieces in poor condition because there wasn't an alternative space. In addition, the Paris collection was kept in boxes because there wasn't any space to unpack it. But the Faculty of Medicine has benefited from the construction of a new campus near hospitals. In 2017, the moving of lessons into a new building, not total but substantial, freed up spaces in the historical building. It has also been possible to devote more space to the collections storage rooms and to lighten the presentation of the display cases by making a selection of the most relevant pieces of a showcase while preserving the initial museum spirit. Moreover, some pieces in bad condition were placed into the new storage rooms. In parallel, some efforts have been made to improve the storage rooms to adapt them to their new use (Fig. 3). This improvement is sometimes difficult to achieve because of the nature of the modern building, which is, in contrast to the historical building, more sensitive to climatic changes.

Some items need to be restored, for example, this skull covered with wax complements attributed to Gaetano Zumbo (1656–1701) from the Paris collection (Fig. 4). Before the restoration, a partnership with a radiologist allowed this object to be scanned in order to become more familiar with it.

In addition, some human remains present conditions of acquisition that no longer correspond to our contemporary ethical standards, especially some acquired in a colonial context. This explains why in 2009 France returned all Maori remains, including a head from the Montpellier anthropological collection, whose historical cast is still preserved in the collection.



Fig. 3 Storage room of wet preparations, © Université de Montpellier



Fig. 4 Skull with wax sculpture, attributed to Gaetano Zumbo, © Université de Montpellier

Mediation and exhibition issues

Nowadays, this collection has certainly lost its value of primary use but retains an exceptional heritage value: the medical students it was designed to serve are there only occasionally; on the other hand, the conservatory of anatomy now attracts a wider audience of adults, students in the humanities or visual arts, or high school students, all interested in the extremely original dimension of this collection. The emphasis is thus now as much as possible on education.

The University of Montpellier has a team for conservation and scientific culture, but no public education department as in traditional museums, so alternative solutions have been promoted: for several years, as the Faculty of Medicine is protected by the Heritage Law, it opens during European Heritage days and hosts a huge audience, but with few explanations about the collection. For the rest of the year, the Faculty of Medicine has developed guided visits, thanks to a partnership with the tourist office, and thanks to volunteer physicians, specialized in guided visits for medical congressmen. More recently, the “collections team” welcomes groups for pedagogical reasons (students, high school pupils, and associations).

2020 was the year of the 8th centenary celebrations for the Faculty of Medicine and an exhibition about anatomical collections was proposed in that context. It was an opportunity to present these collections in a more museum-like setting, with selected relevant items and explanatory texts, as in traditional museums, so that the public could visit without a guide. This exhibition is now re-opened to compensate for the closing of the conservatory for long lasting renovation works (Fig. 5).

The spaces released by the move of a part of the Faculty of Medicine will allow a better installation of the collections, more logical in terms of distribution in the historic building, with a wing devoted to anatomy from the basement to the second floor. The installation of the collections will also be more logical in terms of themes:

- the conservatory of anatomy, whose presentation must be modified in a subtle way in order to respect the spirit of historical museography;
- the former dissection room, which will allow the installation of the anatomical collections, in particular the Delmas-Orfila-Rouvière collection; this presentation of historical collections will be accompanied by a section about progresses in medical imaging in the 20th century and the development of living anatomy, which will make the link with medical news; and
- the current Delmas-Orfila-Rouvière room, which can be reorganized around the only Spitzner collection.

If these perspectives materialize, there will be in the same place the respect of the “in situ” heritage (the anatomical gallery) and the exhibition of the historical Parisian collections, with a presentation of the latest developments in the teaching of anatomy, up to the current techniques of investigation of the human body.



Fig. 5 Room about normal anatomy, exhibition, 2020 © Université de Montpellier

It will probably take more time to realize this project, but this thinking is moving forward at the moment at the University of Montpellier thanks to a dialogue between numerous people, namely the political and administrative actors of the University and the Faculty of Medicine, along with architects and various curators responsible for different collections within the historical building (anatomical collections, library, and archives).

References

- Bonnel F., Claustre J.-E., Bonnel C. 2010. L'enseignement de l'anatomie à Montpellier. In: *Nunc Monspeliensis Hippocrates*, n° 10, 2010, p. 6–20.
- Bonnel F., Palouzié H. 2012. Jacques-Mathieu Delpech (1777–1832): chirurgien de génie, fondateur de l'orthomorphie à Montpellier. In: *Cahiers du cercle Nicolas Andry*, n° 6, 2012.
- Dulieu L. 1986–1990. *La médecine à Montpellier*. Avignon: Presses universelles.
- Laux G. 1958. Le musée anatomique de la Faculté de médecine de Montpellier et son histoire. In: *Montpellier médical*, 3rd serie, t. XIV, n° 1, p. 126–130.
- Lemire M. 1990. *Artistes et mortels*. Chabaud, 446 p.
- Lintz Y., Coudert M. 2013. *Antinoë. Momies, textiles, céramiques et autres antiques*. Paris, Louvre Editions, Somogy, 600 p.
- Palouzié H. 2010. *Felice Fontana, l'aventure des cires anatomiques de Florence à Montpellier*. DRAC-LR, 50 p.
- Palouzié H., Girard C. 2014. La réunion des collections des universités de Montpellier et Paris. *Chantiers*, n° 9, p. 18–21.