

## Revisiting clinical knowledge through medical artefacts. Venereal wax moulages, past and present

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Many ancient and all but forgotten anatomical collections are held in European towns such as Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Heidelberg, Montpellier, Stockholm, Zurich, Bologna, Firenze, Geneva, Amsterdam, etc. Exhibited in dedicated museums or attached to university hospitals, these collections usually contain wet or dry natural specimens, as well as wax casts. The latter were the subject of *Wax Bodies. Histories of clinical and artistic uses of syphilis ceroplastics*, a recent international research workshop held in Paris. The event, organized as part of an ongoing research project on the history of syphilis, brought together some 50 historians, dermatologists, artists, ceroplasticians and museographers on June 30th and July 1st, 2022. The venue was held at the remarkable *Musée des moulages de l'hôpital Saint-Louis*, which holds some 5,000 pathological casts, about a quarter of which represent body parts afflicted by syphilis.



Ill. 1: © Musée des moulages, Hôpital Saint-Louis, AP-HP

When it was opened in 1889, the museum had both political and medical functions. On one hand, it was designed to serve as a flagship upholding the modernity and the dynamism of the French school of dermatology. On the other hand, it was to be a place for the production and transmission of dermatological knowledge: Exuberant morbid disorders were systematically listed, differentiated from each other, and classified in alphabetical order in showcases, as if to tame them and enhance students' ability to learn them. Today, this very collection of casts is listed in France as a historical monument (*monument historique*). A decree published on July 7, 1992, signed by the Ministry of National Education and Culture, explains conferring such a particular status by the fact that the casts are of "public interest from the point of view of the history of medical techniques". In other words, waxes are no longer preserved for their original medico-clinical value, but for their value as patrimonial heritage, and more precisely as witnesses of a past industry and know-how. Waxes are no longer valued because of the pathologies they designate, but for the craftsmanship which enabled their production.

Today, this evolution questions the uses of different educational artifacts produced by medicine. This is evermore true as ceroplasties, many now over a century old, have come to generate a new interest in the contemporary medical world: Dermatologists in different medical schools in Europe now consider these objects as practical and realistic teaching aids available at any time.

In the light of these developments, the workshop *Wax Bodies* addressed anatomical ceroplasties as boundary objects. The aim was to bring together the material history of anatomical ceroplasties, a cultural approach to syphilis, and the history of the construction and transmission of clinical knowledge. Indeed, only an interdisciplinary confrontation makes it possible to study ceroplasties both as actors of an educational tradition and as means to perceive a 'shameful disease' such as syphilis.

In light of the papers and discussions that fueled the workshop, four types of issues can be identified as particularly promising, suggesting new research questions in the ever-growing field of medical cultural history. All of them deserve to be followed up and reconsidered in future workshops.



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**Malades en cire**  
Histoires des utilisations cliniques et artistiques des céroplasties syphilitiques

**Wax bodies**  
Histories of clinical and artistic uses of syphilitic ceroplastics

**jeudi 30 juin | Thursday June 30, 2022**  
**vendredi 1er juillet 2022 | Friday July 1, 2022**

Paris, Musée des Moulages de l'Hôpital Saint Louis (1 Av. Claude Vellefaux, 10e Arr.)

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Ill. 2: *Wax Bodies* poster, 2022

## Intermediality (*Intermedialität*)

The first concerns the circulation of information held in ceroplasties through different media (*Intermedialität*). The three-dimensional waxes travelled throughout the scientific community in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, their likeness is reproduced first in lithographic drawings and then, from the middle of the century thanks to photography. Far from being restricted to specialized medical museums, anatomical waxes also circulated widely among the lay public, especially women, which regularly caused scandals. They could be found in travelling exhibitions or at certain fairs that bank on the scurrilous nature of venereal artifacts. In fact, devious uses of anatomical waxes have always existed – in other words, uses that escape the sole training of future doctors. For instance, parents used them for preventive purposes: Showing the horrific consequences of syphilis on human bodies to children was supposed to impede risky sexual behaviour. Such uses place ceroplasties in the history of prophylactic recourses to different cultural goods: anti-syphilitic poetry in the 19th century, anti-syphilitic novels and plays at the turn of the 20th century, health propaganda films from the 1910s onwards. The latter appropriated the codes of the nascent cinema – Hollywood silent films and German expressionism of the 1920s – and featured waxes from medical collections. The waxworks can therefore not be understood without taking into account the dialogue they established with other arts, including even, unexpectedly, with avant-gardes such as Cubism.

## Combining material approach and conceptual approach

The second issue emerges from the encounter of a material approach – that is, a technical one, attentive to the conditions of manufacturing – and a conceptual approach – in the present case, a historical and aesthetic one – of ceroplasties.

The precise composition of the wax mixtures used by the ceroplasticians of past times often disappeared with their inventors. Sometimes unintentionally, due to the lack of documentation of their techniques; more often voluntarily, fuelled by the fear of being imitated and of losing customers. Today, artists and heritage restorers strive to recover the original mixtures. Thanks to their meticulous craftsmanship and research, they are unveiling a body of knowledge that evades written archives: the formal inventiveness and ingenious tinkering, experimented more than a century ago by their predecessors. This practical rediscovery of the object ‘ceroplasty’ enables the renewal of questions in medical history. It reveals the multiple artistic and economic determinants at work in the way clin-

ical specialties were built around emblematic and federative objects (in this case, syphilitic casts as the flagship object of dermato-venereology). Contemporary artists who create new works found their work on the knowledge provided by famous medical schools of the past, in Italy, France or Germany. It is a demanding craft marked by the risk of being burned and requiring anatomical knowledge that can only be perfected by having access to restricted environments, such as operating rooms or dissection rooms.

A clear understanding of the making of waxes also enriches the aesthetic reflection on the effect that waxes produce on spectators: a gain of knowledge for some, disgust or fascination for others. For the lay public, it can be difficult to distinguish the pathological signs from certain deteriorations due to bad conservation conditions or to former botched restorations. Waxes may blacken or become opaque; their texture may change and their surface crack. Some pieces have melted, sport drips that mingle with the lesions, or simply take on undesired shades. These 'scars' are an integral part of the history of ceroplasty. They are precious witnesses of the uses, functions and interest of these pieces through time.

## Art and science

As objects of figuration and objects of knowledge, anatomical waxes stand at the intersection of art and science. They highlight the way medicine represents pathologies, the way in which it defines them and makes them visible through artifacts. This leads to a third issue, the human monstration from an artistic – and sometimes critical – point of view.

The technical history of ceroplasty encompasses the history of the patients who served as models. At Saint-Louis, the famous ceroplastician Jules Baretta benefited from the facility provided by the institutional setting of the museum within Saint-Louis hospital to recruit interesting cases 'worthy' of being cast. Chosen patients were hospital patients, often humble and poor people, certainly not in a position to refuse the painful operation of coating their limbs, their genitals or even their face with plaster, in order to create a negative mold of the lesions on their skin. We know almost nothing about these silent patients, and one must look closely at the waxes to see here and there the thinness of a limb or a tattoo, rare traces of a social condition or a profession.



Ill. 3: Jules Baretta: *Syphilitic cankers of the lower lip*. ©BIU Santé (Paris)

## Second Life

A fourth emerging issue is ceroplasty as a dialogue between the past and the present. The quiet permanence of waxes and the rapid innovation of medicine in the twentieth century go hand in hand, each being mutual disclosers. The confrontation of the contemporary gaze with apparently obsolete objects raises questions about diseases such as syphilis, diseases that modern medicine has not managed to eradicate despite its impressive therapeutic capacities.

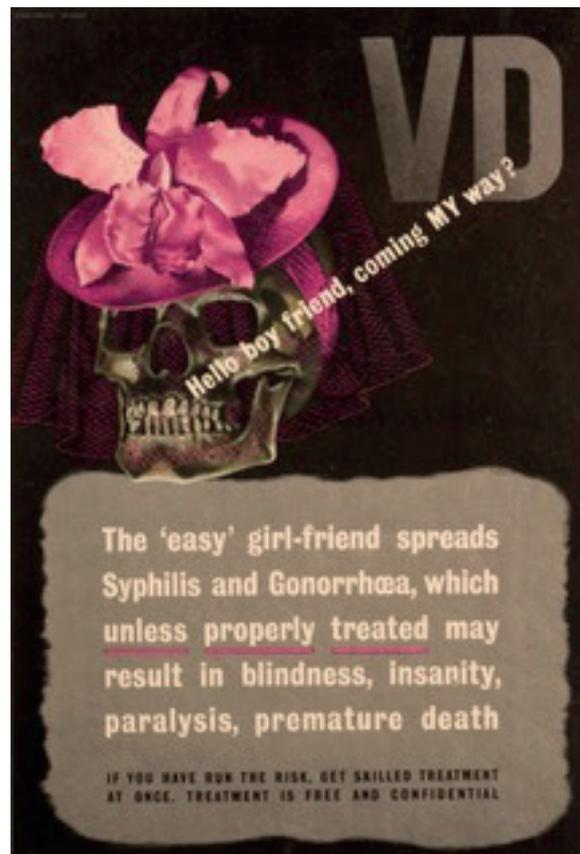
Paradoxically, in our world of instantly reproducible images, some medical faculties or university hospitals take their students or interns out of lecture halls and into very particular places such as anatomical museums. There, the ceroplasties are used to support clinical teaching in dermatology. Sometimes, they are even the subject of poster presentations in connection with research. Finally, the 3D digitization projects of ceroplasties that are emerging in various institutions open up a possible second life for the artifacts, while revealing the great difficulty of digitally reproducing the quality of the textures and tints of the wax originals.

## Les Fleurs du mal

The Musée de l'Hôpital Saint-Louis certainly contributed to make *Wax Bodies* an exciting workshop and an important contribution to the development of new questions in medical historiography. Syphilis has always possessed its own geography. In the brothels, in the merchant ports or in the armies, the authorities of the past fought the disease as a hidden

enemy. In sharp contrast, a museum such as Saint-Louis was one of the rare places where the secret and hidden disease was exhibited in an official, voluntary and controlled way. The museum is thus a place of reversal, revealing the dark side of a society in which sex education was an unspoken fact and syphilis a scandal that contravened public order.

In medical discourse, the luxuriant syphilitic lesions were often compared to monstrous flowers. Doctors coined the concept of florid syphilis in the 19<sup>th</sup> century already. Moreover, Joris-Karl Huysmans, a contemporary writer devoted several pages to describing orchids as “gnawed with syphilis” and “marbled with roseola”<sup>1</sup>. The Museum of Saint-Louis is thus presented as a garden, an Eden in reverse, full of foul fruit engendered by the turpitudes of man. Michel Corday, the author of an antivenereal novel published in 1901, *Vénus ou les deux risques* wrote: “And then it is all the garden of the cutaneous affections, these buddings, these frightful bloomings, these lupus, of which a visit to Saint-Louis, even to the Museum, would offer you so beautiful examples.”<sup>2</sup>



Ill. 4: “The easy girlfriend”, poster, England, 1943-1944. Credit: [Science Museum, London](#)

1 Joris-Karl Huysmans: *À Rebours*. Paris 1884, chap. 8.

2 Michel Corday: *Vénus ou les deux risques* [1901]. Paris 1909, 102.

But this world upside-down is itself a system capable of stating norms: “behind the gates of the human zoo, the savage serves to teach civilization; from the windows of the morgue, the corpse teaches the fear of crime; in the half-light of the wax museum, the casts of flesh devastated by heredo-syphilis warn of the danger of sexual promiscuity.”<sup>3</sup> Finally, to write the history of wax objects and their conditions of exhibition is also to tackle the history of the medical gaze. The exhibition of thousands of body parts, in a collection such as that of Saint-Louis, fragments the bodies, enlarges and accumulates the lesions. Then as now, the spectator’s gaze hesitates as to the exact nature of what is displayed: sick individuals or diseases separated from individuals. This uncertainty the source of the richness of anatomical ceroplasties.

The workshop [program](#) and the [abstracts](#) of the papers are available online. *Wax Bodies* workshop was part of the interdisciplinary research project [Neverending Infectious Diseases](#) funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation ([SNF](#)).

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Jacques Courtine: Le monstre et la norme. In: *Médecine, sciences de la vie et littérature*. Geneva 2014, t. 1, 416.