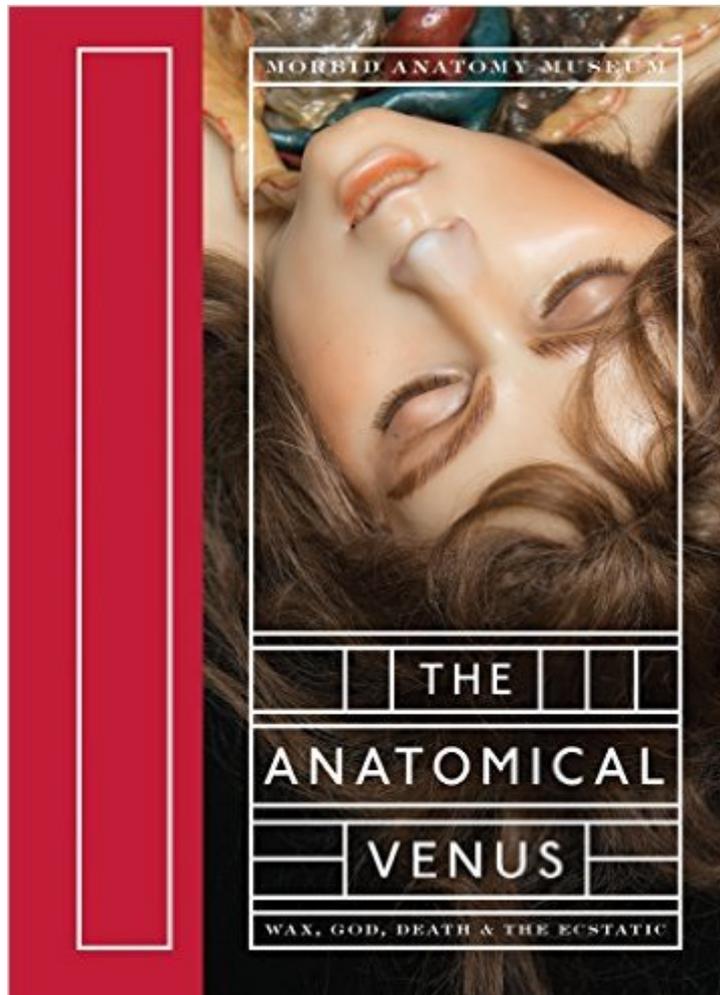


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The Anatomical Venus: Wax, God, Death & The Ecstatic



Synopsis

Of all the artifacts from the history of medicine, the Anatomical Venus—•with its heady mixture of beauty, eroticism and death—is the most seductive. These life-sized dissectible wax women reclining on moth-eaten velvet cushions—•with glass eyes, strings of pearls, and golden tiaras crowning their real human hair—•were created in eighteenth-century Florence as the centerpiece of the first truly public science museum. Conceived as a means to teach human anatomy, the Venus also tacitly communicated the relationship between the human body and a divinely created cosmos; between art and science, nature and mankind. Today, she both intrigues and confounds, troubling our neat categorical divides between life and death, body and soul, effigy and pedagogy, entertainment and education, kitsch and art. The first book of its kind, *The Anatomical Venus*, by Morbid Anatomy Museum cofounder Joanna Ebenstein, features over 250 images—•many never before published—•gathered by its author from around the world. Its extensively researched text explores the Anatomical Venus within her historical and cultural context in order to reveal the shifting attitudes toward death and the body that today render such spectacles strange. It reflects on connections between death and wax, the tradition of life-sized simulacra and preserved beautiful women, the phenomenon of women in glass boxes in fairground displays, and ideas of the ecstatic, the sublime and the uncanny. Joanna Ebenstein is a multidisciplinary artist, curator, writer, lecturer and graphic designer. She originated the Morbid Anatomy blog and website, and is cofounder (with Tracy Hurley Martin) and creative director of the Morbid Anatomy Museum in Brooklyn, New York. She is coauthor of *Walter Potter's Curious World of Taxidermy*, with Dr. Pat Morris; coeditor of *The Morbid Anatomy Anthology*, with Colin Dickey; and acted as curatorial consultant to Wellcome Collection's *Exquisite Bodies* exhibition in 2009. She has also worked with such institutions as the New York Academy of Medicine, the Dittrick Museum and the Vrolik Museum.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is another beautiful book from Joanna Ebenstein and the Morbid Anatomy Museum. The book itself is well designed, well made, and includes nice touches like headbands. The photos and illustrations are of intriguing anatomical models that were widely used before the advent of photography. The detail on some of the models is astounding. Some of the models even include detail of the lymphatic system which is usually, even to this day, ignored. I was especially surprised to see a photo of a painting depicting the sculptor Jean-Léon Gérôme creating my favorite statue, Tanagra. I highly recommend this book for anyone interested in medicine, anatomy, physiology, curiosities, art, etc.

This touches two fascinating subjects--wax sculpture as an art form, and anatomy books as a source of scientific information and cheap thrills. The first deserves more respect than it generally gets; Madame Tussaud's is barely the tip of the iceberg. The second is treated here mainly as a means to guilty voyeurism. (You will hardly learn anything about anatomy from this book, but the images of chopped-up women are jolting.) The book gives a nice coverage of the history of wax and anatomical art. Some features of the production did not appeal to me: Entire pages are devoted to boldface quotations, with legends too tiny for the human eye to decipher. (The first time I read the book, I didn't even notice the legends at all.) There is a wealth of historical photographs, but many are printed so small (commemorative postage stamp size) and at such low resolution that some of the history contained therein is lost. For an art book, try Alessandro Riva's book on Clemente Susini, which is stunning. ISBN 978-8889188972

Strangely delightful, *The Anatomical Venus* throws some light on what some may perceive as the darker corners of the boundary between science and popular culture.

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