



New Netherland Institute
Exploring America's Dutch Heritage

FREDERIK RUYSCH AND HIS REPOSITORY OF CURIOSITIES

By Peter Douglas



Frederik Ruysch (1638-1731) was a Dutch anatomist and a pioneer in the techniques of preserving organs and tissue. He was born in Den Haag and studied medicine at the University of Leiden, obtaining his medical doctorate in 1664. His main interest was anatomy, which has been his passion since youth, when he would ask gravediggers to open graves so that he could make anatomical investigations. In 1666 he became “praelector” of anatomy for the surgeon’s guild in Amsterdam, and held many other posts in this field.

Ruysch studied the art of making anatomical preparations in the laboratory of Johannes van Horne. In addition to his medical and scientific contributions, Ruysch was the first great exponent of the anatomical specimen. He specialized in the construction of artistic arrangements of his material. In several rented houses in Amsterdam he set up his own museum and visitors from all over Europe came to marvel at his “repository of curiosities” and the museum became a major attraction. As Amsterdam’s chief instructor of midwives and “legal doctor” to the court, Ruysch had ample access to the bodies of stillborns and dead infants, using them without consent to create extraordinary multi-specimen scenes.

Among the bizarre displays were a number of dioramas assembled from body parts and fetal skeletons. Some of these were captured in meticulous detail by the engraver

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Cornelius Huyberts. These engravings were inserted as fold-outs in various early 18th century editions of Ruysch's works. Other arenas of creativity for Ruysch was making natural history assemblages to decorate the tops of jars of preserved animal specimens, and the preservation of babies in jars.

In 1717, Peter the Great bought the collection for 30,000 guilders, and several items are still held in the Museum of the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. The indefatigable 79-year-old Ruysch immediately began to set up a new collection.

To see some of Ruysch's dioramas and drawings, check out these web locations:

<http://www.zymoglyphic.org/exhibits/ruysch.html>

http://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/dreamanatomy/da_dream_part.html

