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The Mermaid Models of the Bologna Wax Collection

Rossella Gelsi1*, Alessandro Ruggeri1, Kevin Petti2, Hutan Ashrafian3, Logan Keding4, Filippo Fini5, Frank J. Rühli6, Francesco M. Galassi1

1 Department of Biomedical and Neuromotor Sciences, Via Irnerio 48, 40126, Bologna, School of Medicine, University of Bologna, Italy
2 Departments of Science and Health, San Diego Miramar College, 10440 Black Mountain Road, San Diego, CA USA
3 Imperial College London 1089 Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother Wing (Qeqm), London (UK)
4 The University of Winsconsin-La Crosse, USA
5 University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy
6 University of Zurich, Institute of Evolutionary Medicine, Winterthurerstrasse 190, 8057 Zurich, Switzerland

Correspondence to Ms Rossella Gelsi (MSc) : rossella.gelsi@gmail.com

Abstract

Having recently discussed at length in this journal the role of the University of Bologna anatomical waxes in medical education (Galassi et al. 2015), we are compelled to add to the conversation by discussing one more stunning example of wax sculpture of the utmost importance in the field of teratology and anatomic pathology.

The sculptures in question represent two cases of sirenomelia. The one on the right side (Figure 1) was modeled, most likely in 1824, when the fetus was studied by the renowned wax artist Giuseppe Astorri (1785-1852), who was commissioned for this work by the anatomists Luigi Rodati (1762-1832) and Francesco Mondini (1786-1844). The artist not only deftly demonstrates the physical abnormalities with great precision, but also succeeds in adding an expressiveness that turns it into a rather extraordinary and compelling work of art. In addition, another interesting aspect that makes this wax sculpture unique is its accompanying dry viscera preparation (Rodati 1854). (Figure 2) As was the habit in those days, the waxwork was paired with a Latin commentary published in 1834, where one can still read the original case report as well as admire a meticulous drawing of the abnormal fetus (Rodati 1843). (Figure 3) The wax on the right side represents another case of sirenomelia, probably the one studied and published by Luigi Calori (1807-1896) in 1859 (Calori 1859). (Figure 1)

Sirenomelia (from the Greek οἰρήν ‘siren’, and μέλος ‘mélos’, ‘limb’), also known as Mermaid Syndrome, is a rare, 1/100,000 live births, (Calori 1859) and severe congenital condition in which the legs are fused together, associated with both visceral and urogenital abnormalities. In most cases this malformation is fatal, as life expectancy is at most one or two days. The exact cause of this condition is unknown, although multiple genetic and environmental factors may be involved in its pathogenesis. Clinical studies have proposed several hypotheses; the most widely

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Figure 1
Wax models showing sirenomelia from the “Luigi Cattaneo” Museum of Anatomical Waxes of the University of Bologna. Photo from Rossella Gelsi’s private collection.
accepted hypothesis postulates a primary vascular defect leaving the caudal part of the embryo hypoperfused (Isik et al. 2015, Garrido-Allepuz et al. 2011).

Throughout history, mermaids have been the objects of a mysterious curiosity and they are found in very early sailors’ tales. The first literary evidence for the myth of the sirens is found in Homer’s Odyssey, which many scholars believe was written in the 8th century BCE. In this epic poem sirens were portrayed with bird bodies and female heads and were endowed with a chant capable of luring sailors to their death (Graves 1963). Thanks to the Danish author Hans Christian Andersen (1805 – 1875) and his famous fairy tale The Little Mermaid, written in 1837, this idea became increasingly popular with the general public (Romano et al. 2006).

Because of its historical relevance and anatomical precision, even today this wax model proves a very useful tool for medical students approaching the realm of pathology from its morphological foundations. This compelling sculpture also serves as a launching point for a conversation about the connection between anatomy and art, as well as the influence of literature on the language of science and medicine. Such an interdisciplinary exercise enhances medical education in a unique and valuable fashion. Thankfully, the sirenomelia is on display at the University of Bologna Museum of Human Anatomy, encouraging continued dialogue nearly 200 years after it was sculpted.

References cite


Figure 2
Dry viscera preparation from the fetus. “Luigi Cattaneo” Museum of Anatomical Waxes. Photo from Rossella Gelsi’s private collection.

Figure 3
Drawings showing the 1824 case of sirenomelia, from Luigi Rodati’s work (1834). Photo from Rossella Gelsi’s private collection.
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About the Authors

**Rossella Gelsi, MSc,** has extensive expertise in histology and also worked in the past at the “Luigi Cattaneo” museum. She is particularly interested in the mermaid syndrome from a morphological and genetic perspective.

**Alessandro Ruggeri, MD,** is Emeritus Professor of Human Anatomy at the University of Bologna, and was the scientific director of the Luigi Cattaneo Museum for decades. He is an expert in the history of waxwork and medical education in Italy.

**Kevin Petti, PhD,** is Professor at San Diego Miramar College and President Emeritus of HAPS. His main research is in the history of anatomy education in the Italian peninsula. As founder of Anatomia Italiana, he leads HAPS-I and undergraduate study abroad courses to Italy several times each year.

**Hutan Ashrafian, PhD,** MRCS, is a surgeon and Clinical Lecturer in Surgery at Imperial College London. His research focuses on surgical metabolic modulation, systems biological modelling, robotics, and enhanced patient outcomes. His interests include disease analysis in art and the history of medicine.

**Logan Keding** studied biomedical research at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and specializes in human anatomy and the history of anatomical representations.

**Filippo Fini** is about to graduate in medicine from the University of Bologna and is deeply interested in historic anatomic collections.

**Prof. Frank J. Rühli** is the director and founder of the Institute of Evolutionary Medicine at Zurich University’s Medical Faculty. His research encompasses paleopathology, human morphology and evolution, and molecular biology. He is currently coordinating research on Egyptian canopic jars and mummies in Switzerland and Northern Italy.

**Francesco M. Galassi, MD,** works as postdoctoral assistant at Zurich University’s Institute of Evolutionary Medicine. His research scope covers paleopathology, history of medicine, pathography and the history of anatomy.