

Joseph Towne, master modeller in wax

A visit to the Gordon Museum at Guy's Hospital reveals some remarkable treasures. There you will discover the original pathological specimens put down by Thomas Addison, Richard Bright and Thomas Hodgkin of their eponymous diseases. You also cannot help but admire the beautiful wax models of anatomical preparations made by Joseph Towne, the 200th anniversary of whose birth, in 1808, we celebrate this year.

Wax models of anatomical preparations were used as an aid to artistic studies by Italian artist-anatomists in the 15th and 16th centuries, but these models were also used in medical schools. In the 17th century, Frederick Ruysch (1638–1731), in Holland, developed the technique of coloured wax (as well as mercury) injection of blood vessels to a state of near perfection. By the early 18th century, wax models were vying with human dissections for the teaching of anatomy – and without the disadvantages of all the problems associated with the procurement of human bodies and of the unpleasant odours attached thereto.

Among many famous wax modellers in mainland Europe, mention must be made of Anna Morandi (1716–74), who was appointed to the chair of anatomy in Bologna, where her specimens can be seen today. Her contemporary in Paris was Marie Bihéron (1719–86). Her wax anatomical models included the entire body of a female which could be opened to permit removal, examination and replacement of all the internal organs. These models were so fine that Sir John Pringle (1707–82), the father of British military medicine, on visiting her collection, exclaimed: 'Mademoiselle, there is nothing lacking except the stench!'

Christopher Curtius, a Swiss physician, modelled in wax first because of his interest in teaching anatomy. He turned to modelling of the famous and opened a waxworks museum in Paris. His claim to fame and mention in this article was that he trained his niece in wax modelling – her name was Madam Tussaud!

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Up to the beginning of the 19th century, there was little interest in anatomical wax modelling in this country. One man was to change this. Joseph Towne was born in 1808 in Royston, Cambridgeshire. He was the son of a minister of religion who himself was an amateur artist. As a youngster, Joseph showed a considerable talent for modelling in wax and clay. At the age of 17 years, he produced a beautiful wax skeleton, based on illustrations in books and a skeleton he was able to examine in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. (The model can be seen today in the Gordon Museum.)

Towne travelled to London in 1826 to submit his model to a competition at the Royal Society of Arts, which was offering a gold and a silver medal for the best two wax anatomical models submitted. Towne first brought his model to show Mr (later Sir) Astley Cooper (1768–1841), surgeon at Guy's Hospital. Cooper immediately recognized that this young man was an exceptionally fine artist and gave him a testimonial which stated: 'I have examined the model of the skeleton made by Mr. Joseph Towne, of which I approve'.

Cooper also gave Towne a letter of introduction to the hospital treasurer, Benjamin Harrison, and the lad was immediately appointed wax modeller to Guy's Hospital – a position he held for the next 53 years. Imagine an appointment being made like this in today's NHS! Towne submitted his model to the Royal Society of Arts and received the silver medal. The following year he submitted wax models of the brain, for which he received the gold medal.

For the rest of his life Towne worked unremittingly at Guy's. Many of his anatomical studies were of the meticulous dissections performed by John Hilton (1804–78), who spent 12 years as an anatomy teacher before being promoted to the surgical staff at Guy's; his nickname was 'Anatomical John'. In addition to the anatomical studies (Figure 1), Towne produced a wonderful collection of dermatological conditions at the initiation of Thomas Addison, who had a keen interest in diseases of the skin. Shortly before Towne's death, the catalogue listed 537 dermatological models. Many of these are on show today and are still useful teaching aids.

Towne was undoubtedly what one might kindly call a 'character'. He was reclusive and worked all day in a little basement room which had been allocated to him in the hospital. He never ate much – a sandwich and mug of tea were sufficient to see him through the day. He was a short, heavy-set man with, in his later years, sparse grey hair. His instruments were few and were simple indeed – a chisel, spatulas and a dulled knife blade. Visitors came from all over the world to see his work.

He exhibited at the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park and again at the Paris Exhibition of 1855. Specimens of his work were sent far and wide, although many of these have been lost. Some years ago I found some of his brain models tucked away in a cupboard in the anatomy department in Cambridge and we had these moved back on show in the Gordon Museum.

Towne was also a sculptor in marble. Some of these works are on display in the Gordon Museum and there are splendid busts of Addison, Babbington and of his old sponsor, Astley Cooper, in the corridors of the medical school.

Joseph Towne died in 1879 and was buried in West Norwood Cemetery. In his will he left all his casts to Guy's. His collection is a lasting memorial to this remarkable artist. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.

Figure 1. A Towne wax dissection model in the Gordon Museum at Guy's Hospital.

