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Immolation of the Phoenix

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Immolation of the Phoenix

Abstract
The time period of wunderkammer opened a plethora of sciences that scholars devoted their lives to. Among these were botany, zoology, ethnography – studies that had already been somewhat established before. But there were some fields that had not been tapped into, one of them being the study of human anatomy. Up until the late 15th century, the most legitimate writing on anatomy was the Fasciculus medicinae which had very crude illustrations and professed incorrect, archaic theories about the human body. [excerpt]

Keywords
phoenix, Frederick Ruysch, anatomy, mythology

Disciplines
Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Fine Arts | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Industrial and Product Design | Intellectual History

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Audio guide on this portion of the exhibit included.
The time period of wunderkammer opened a plethora of sciences that scholars devoted their lives to. Among these were botany, zoology, ethnography – studies that had already been somewhat established before. But there were some fields that had not been tapped into, one of them being the study of human anatomy.

Up until the late 15th century, the most legitimate writing on anatomy was the *Fasciculus medicinae* which had very crude illustrations and professed incorrect, archaic theories about the
human body.\footnote{In the western world, there had been little dissection during the classical period to learn about our physiology, and almost no productive study during the middle ages. However, the study of anatomy made leaps and bounds during the pre-modern era. During the Renaissance, the very first anatomists were painters such as Leonardo da Vinci, who took it upon themselves to study and draw human bodies and how they function in order to improve their life-like depictions in works of art.} Frederik Ruysch was by far the most unique anatomist during this time period. His dissections and studies contributed greatly to the field, and he’s famous to this day for his morbid constructed objects he created, typically from infant cadavers. However, one can argue that they do have a certain savage beauty, and its in this respect how he combined science with art that led to anatomy being legitimized as a respected field of science.\footnote{His displays weren’t only for artistic viewing, for they allowed other scholars and interested individuals to be able to competently study the human body. His constructed scenes showcasing infant skeletons depicted them in different positions and movements characteristic of man’s physical capabilities, and Ruysch’s jars of embalmed body parts such as a head and arm provided more, if grisly, material. Ruysch had also perfected the embalming of his non-skeletal objects and preserve their colors and textures, and he did this so well that when visited by Peter the Great, the czar picked up a baby’s head and kissed it.} Thus, these constructed objects hit two birds with one stone in that they creatively manipulated objects so that they would draw attention and provide viewers an entertaining sight, yet at the same time also be a legitimate means to study the anatomy of a species.
Jars containing pipa pipas, which are unique frogs whose offspring are emerge from their backs when being born. Such a display was an efficient and brilliant way to study these amphibians’ anatomy and habitat, and please the eye.

The phoenix construct that is featured in the gallery, titled as the Immolation of the Phoenix, depicts the mythical bird incinerating at the end of its current life. It is created from a pigeon skeleton adorned with bright feathers in various areas.

Many cultures across Eurasia had the phoenix, in some form or another, present in their folklore. According to ancient Egyptian and Hellenistic myth, for example, the phoenix was immortal, however after a thousand years it grew fatigued due to old age and thus it flew across the world before arriving in Europe where it fashioned itself a funeral pyre upon which the bird immolated itself, after which it rose from the ashes as a hatchling. So began the Phoenix’s life cycle all over again.
The phoenix held great symbolic value to various civilizations. It represented eternity and immortality (including Rome’s usage of the bird to symbolize their eternal empire) and also resurrection, being compared to Christ in medieval Europe.⁶ In China, although not necessarily a phoenix in that it combusted and was resurrected, there was a mythological bird known as Fenghuang that was born from the sun and had physical features characteristic of multiple species of real birds. Being an auspicious omen if seen, it was considered one of the four intelligent creatures, the other being the dragon, tortoise, and khi-lin, and it represented the celestial bodies of the cosmos, with different parts of its body symbolizing the sky, sun, moon, clouds, planets, etc.⁷ In other cultures, the mythical beast was simply seen as being an allegory of the sun, for like the phoenix, the sun was fiery and radiant, and at the end of the day it set into the ground, only to rise again in the morning, for eternity.
When the pre-modern era came about in Europe, mythological creatures, such as the Phoenix, continued to captivate the interest of scholars, especially since this time coincided with the Age of Exploration when new kinds of fauna were being discovered in distant parts of the globe. The Renaissance sought to usher in many aspects of the culture from antiquity, and this included hellenistic and latin myths that featured mythical beings. As natural history gained a following, it had a fringe science known as monster and prodigy literature. One of the best respected books on prodigy literature is Konrad Lycosthene’s *Prodigiorum ac ostentorum chronicon* which was famous for its highly detailed descriptions and images of mythological beings (still thought to exist at this point) such as satyrs, frog-headed babies, wild men, and three-legged fowls.\(^8\)

However, in the early stages of Renaissance natural history, animals, that to the Europeans were unique and bizarre, that had been discovered in the New World and other foreign places were often deemed to be monsters and prodigies. This resulted in exotic American species such as panthers, turkeys, and opossi appearing side-by-side with entries about hydras, dragons, and other mythical beasts, until the surgeon Ambroise Pare pioneered their separation.\(^9\)

Constructed objects came in various forms and served different purposes. Regardless of whether they were hideous or beautiful, they always added character to any collection they were in.

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