

# Antonio Canova's drawings in the Rare Books Collection of the Istituto Superiore di Sanità Library (Rome, Italy)

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## Abstract

*The paper aims to promote the knowledge of the extraordinary collection of anatomical subject drawings by Antonio Canova, the most important Italian neoclassic artist, owned by the National Institute of Health Library in Rome. The history of acquisition by the library and the analysis of their importance in the long career of the artist is also treated. A short story about the fortune of the drawings in the last 20 years completes the study.*

**Key words:** art; drawings; anatomy; muscles; neoclassicism; Canova.

## Introduction

The library of the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS) in Rome holds a small treasure consisting of 17 anatomical drawings by Antonio Canova (1757-1822), the great sculptor and master of European neoclassical art between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. They are part of the Rare Books Collection of the library which has over 1,200 volumes from 1501 to 1830 on its shelves. It is not so usual that a biomedical library, whose aim is to support the needs of scientists doing current research, has a relevant historical heritage which is typical of a conservation library. But the story of the Institute shows us a great president from the early thirties until the beginning of the sixties of the past century, Professor Domenico Marotta. He was a brilliant scientist but also a great bibliophile and the acquisition of books for the rare collection is due to his passion and his purchases over two decades on the antiquarian market, including Canova's drawings. The 17 muscle bundle drawings were purchased in 1943 from a Florentine bookseller (Leo Olschki) in a folder, including also a small autograph notebook by the artist with descriptions of the muscles. In all likelihood the original collection included some extra drawings – two or three – lost over time.

## Anatomical studies and artists

Anatomical studies taken from dead bodies are part of the formative course of artists, starting from the Renaissance. Although we have some rare examples of drawings or small pictures representing studies of human bodies also in the fourteenth century, the first to carry out systematic anatomical studies was certainly Leonardo da Vinci. The Florentine genius (in this year we celebrate the 500th anniversary of his death) made many drawings on this subject, most of which became part of the Royal Collection of Windsor Castle after his death. During the following centuries, many other artists have turned their attention to the study of the human body and of its details, a path that has become mandatory especially for neoclassical artists like Canova.

But what was the purpose of the artists in dealing with these studies? Certainly, the drawings were not made to set up an anatomical atlas or as a *vademecum* for the scientist or to support scientific research. The drawings were made for a purely personal study purpose, namely to acquire knowledge on the functioning of the human machine and of its details in order to transfuse this know-how into the realization of their works, achieving the best possible artistic result in the naturalistic representation of the human body.

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Therefore, we must not consider these works from the point of view of their aesthetic results, but rather as an essential intermediate step to attain a fundamental cognitive process in the career of an artist. In conclusion, their historical value exceeds the artistic one, representing an interesting evidence of the apprenticeship period in the life of the artist.

### Antonio Canova and the drawings in the ISS Library

Antonio Canova has been arguably the most important European neoclassical sculptor. Born in Possagno (Veneto) in 1757 he moved, when he was very young, to Venice where he took the first steps of his artistic career before moving to Rome in 1779. In the city of the Popes he remained for the rest of his life, becoming one of the most famous and requested artists of his time and receiving commissions from the principals and most prestigious clients, such as emperors, kings, popes, up to the Italian and Russian nobility. During the Napoleonic period Canova became the court artist, realizing some of his most famous works including the statue of the emperor as a peacemaker, the three Graces and the Paolina Borghese.

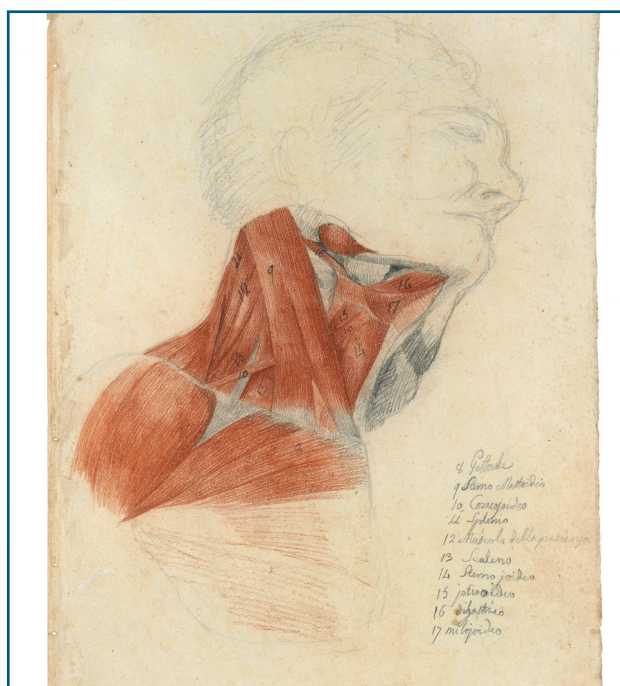
His work process started with drawings and sketches of real models, passing through the preparation of small preparatory clay prototypes until the realization of his extraordinary marble sculptures. Canova left many drawings which must be considered solely as sketches and studies for the realization of the sculptures: they have only a creative function.

The drawings of the ISS Library, however, have a different scope: they are not preparatory studies for specific works but generic studies on the human body and on the muscular and tendinous bundles, the result of a direct observation of corpses on a dissecting table, according to an academic practice. We don't have a secure dating for them but it is very likely that they date back to a youthful period, towards the end of the Venetian period or the beginning of his Roman stay, between the seventh and the eighth decade of the eighteenth century.

The 17 tables were made using both black pencil and red pencil (sanguine). In particular the artist realized the muscular bundles in sanguine, while for the remaining parts, such as faces, arms, legs, bones and tendons, he integrated the drawings with the black

pencil. The tables have various sizes, from 59x47 cm of the largest to the 41x28 cm of the smallest, and represent the whole human body divided into the following sections:

- a right side view of the neck (Figure 1)
- three views of the torso (two right posterior lateral and one left anterior-lateral) (Figure 2)
- three views of the thigh (both in extension and in flexion)
- three views of leg and foot (anterior, lateral, posterior) (Figure 3)
- two views of the foot (lateral and plantar)
- four views of arm (forearm, internal, two external) (Figure 4)
- one view of the hand (both dorsal and palmar)



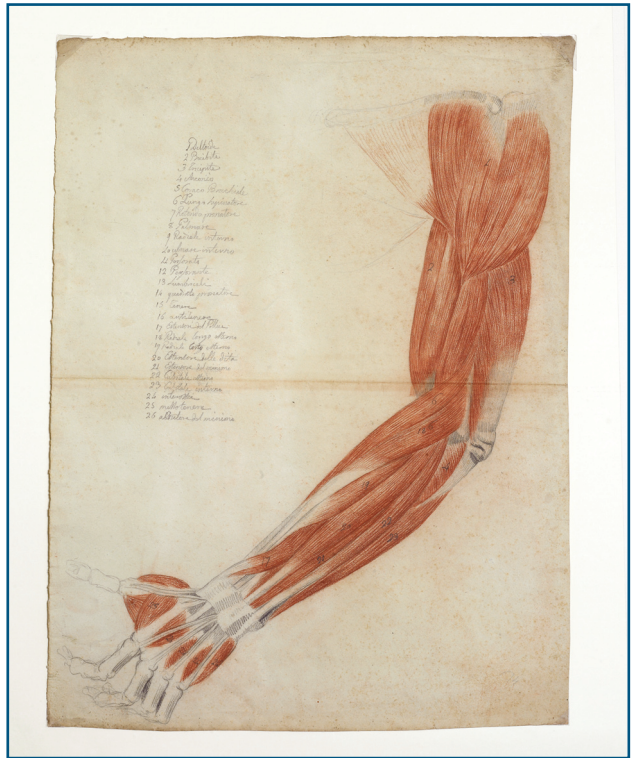
**Fig. 1.** Antonio Canova, drawing. Plate 1 – Muscles of the neck.

Some of the drawings present a numbering of muscle bundles with an index shown on the same sheet.

The little autograph notebook (8 pages) that integrates the collection has the heading *Descrizione dei muscoli esteriori del corpo umano* (Description of the external muscles of the human body) and contains 48 annotations by Canova about the name, functioning, action and position of the human muscles, without



**Fig. 2.** Antonio Canova, drawing. Plate 3 – Muscles of the chest and of the abdomen.



**Fig. 4.** Antonio Canova, drawing. Plate 14 – Muscles of the arm (lateral view).



**Fig. 3.** Antonio Canova, drawing. Plate 8 – Muscles of the leg and foot (lateral view).

having however a direct relationship with the illustrations. It has also a notation by the artist's friend Giuseppe d'Este who certifies that both the drawings and the notebook were made directly by the Venetian artist.

Until 2001 the collection was kept in a single folder and presented serious problems of conservation. In that year it was decided to send the drawings to the National Institute for Restoration and Conservation of Books (Rome) in order to ensure the best possible preservation conditions for the documents. Each drawing was cleaned, stabilized and provided with a frame that allowed its use for consultation and exhibitions and this is still their current situation. Now they are stored in the rare books room, in a special dedicated housing and in an environment with constant wet and temperature and humidity.

In the last 15 years the Canova drawings of the ISS have received widespread exposure through their participation in several exhibitions and cultural initiatives. They have also been mentioned and described in many studies and publications.

When the Institute celebrated seventy years since its

foundation in 2004, a great exhibition was set up with the presentation of all 17 sheets. This was the first opportunity to show the complete collection to the public and also the starting point for future opportunities to extend their diffusion and knowledge. In 2015 the Museum of the History of Medicine was inaugurated in Padua and the drawings together with many other reproductions of ISS books gave shape to the so-called “white book”, a virtual path that allowed visitors to browse the pages of the volumes and drawings as if in the presence of the originals (<https://www.musme.it/en/>). In 2017 a section of the new museum of ISS was dedicated to the treasures of the library and one original drawing by Canova is on permanent exhibition (Figure 5). Moreover in 2018 a great virtual and multimedia exhibition on Canova was staged in Venice at the Scuola Grande della Misericordia ([https://www.magister.art/en/exhibitions\\_magister/magister-canova-venice/](https://www.magister.art/en/exhibitions_magister/magister-canova-venice/) and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCLX3jUABRk>): it was composed of six sections and the first one was dedicated to the reproduction on many screens of our drawings, shown as a key moment in the artist’s apprenticeship

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94zeYTaCdLI>). Looking at books and other publications, the first important volume to cite is by Marcello Pantaleoni (1), published at the end of the forties. It contains a complete reproduction of the full set of drawings and of the notebook with also a short critical essay by the author on the history of how the collection was acquired by the institute and on the relevant importance of this work in the artist training process. The collection also appears in the book published in 2004 for celebrating the anniversary of ISS foundation (2) and in many other volumes, among which are a prestigious French edition titled *La Leçon d’anatomie. Le corps des artistes de la Renaissance au Romantisme (Ouvrage prepare avec le concours du Centre national du livre)* (3) and a dedicated box inside the sixth volume of the *Storia della scienza* published by the Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana (4). The Canova drawings are freely available on request to scholars and art experts and lovers and we hope that this short essay could stimulate the interest of our colleagues for a visit to our library.

*We’ll be waiting for you!*



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