

Forces of Form



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Laurens de Rooy and Hans van den Bogaard (photographs)

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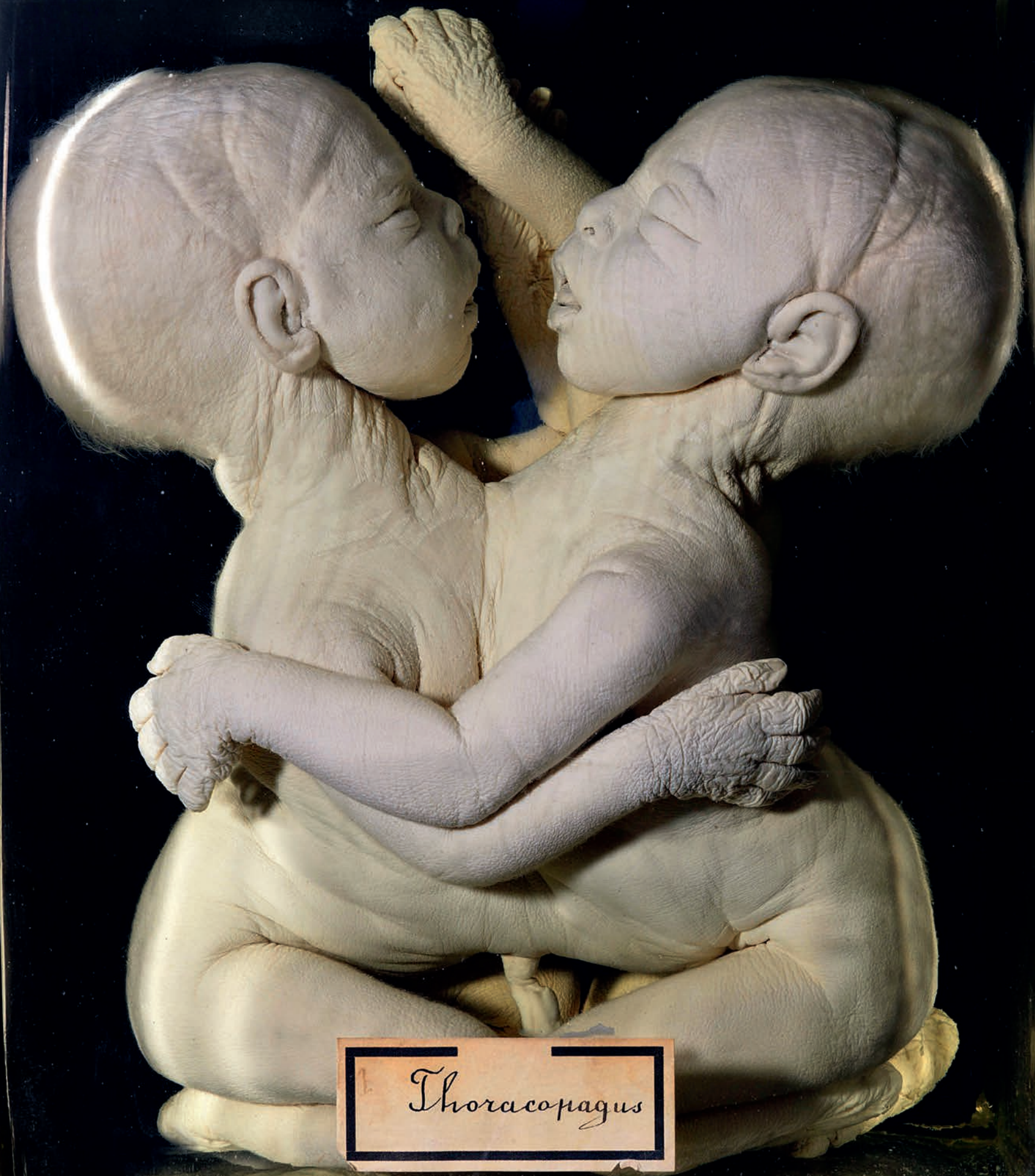
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◀ Vrolik Museum
Front cover: Human
eye with eyelids
Back cover:
Armadillos

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Thoracopagus

Foreword

The *Museum Vrolikianum*, the private anatomical collection put together by Gerard Vrolik (1775-1859) and his son Willem (1801-1863), was famous amongst scientists and medical men all over Europe in the nineteenth century. No visit to Amsterdam was complete without taking the opportunity to gaze in admiration at the five thousand specimens the two men had gathered over half a century, ranging from curious stillbirths to human skeletons and skulls, healthy or diseased, and those of all kinds of exotic and not-so-exotic animals.

As collectors and preservers of the body in all its forms, Gerard and Willem were part of a long Dutch tradition. Frederik Ruysch in the seventeenth century is its best-known exponent nowadays, but others like Petrus Camper, Andreas Bonn and Jacob Hovius were also worthy predecessors of the Vroliks.

The *Museum Vrolikianum* was the last major private collection of its kind to be assembled in the Netherlands. Never again would congenital abnormalities, pathological specimens and comparative anatomy be brought together in the same systematic way. That makes the Vrolik collection a veritable time capsule from the age just before major medical and scientific changes – not least the publication of Darwin's theory of evolution – heralded a new era.

Uniquely in the Netherlands, the gems gathered

by the Vroliks have stayed together down the centuries. The pelvis, bones and organs deformed by disease were never transferred to the Department of Obstetrics and Pathology because 'that would be a better place for them'; the collection of animal anatomy did not fall into the hands of biologists. Against the grain of new ideas about collecting and the increasing specialisation of science, this miscellaneous assemblage remained whole. A time capsule resisting the passage of the years, its enquiring nineteenth-century soul intact.

After Willem's death, the *Museum Vrolikianum* was acquired by the Athenaeum Illustre, forerunner of the University of Amsterdam, which housed it at the anatomical laboratory. As an academic collection, the treasures gathered by the Vroliks were added to by successive generations of anatomists, each with its own scientific and didactical perspectives – a process which continued right up until the 1950s. What was now called the Vrolik Museum would eventually come to hold the very respectable total of about 10,000 objects.

Lodewijk Bolk (1866-1930), the most influential anatomist in the Netherlands during the first half of the twentieth century and, after the Vroliks themselves, the most important collector the museum has known, was not exaggerating when he claimed that it was certainly one of the finest anatomical collections on the European continent,

Conjoined twins

and in England surpassed only by its prestigious counterpart at the Royal College of Surgeons. In fact, as far the human body, its development – normal as well as abnormal – and evolution were concerned, it was probably amongst the best in the world.

The move to the Academic Medical Center (AMC) in the early 1980s ushered in an important change, with the Vrolik now transformed into a modern and accessible museum for anatomical education. That threatened to overshadow its significance for a while – that is, until the publication of a series of articles in the *American Journal of Medical Genetics* during the 1990s. Rediagnosing its specimens of congenital abnormalities in the light of current medical and genetic knowledge, these articles restored the museum's international fame. Since then, increasing numbers of scientists, journalists and authors from every corner of the world have

found their way to the collection.

One tangible result of this renewed interest was the first English translation of Willem Vrolik's most important work – his annotated lithographs of congenital abnormalities, first published in 1849 as *Tabulae Illustrating Normal and Abnormal Development in Man and Mammals*. Another highlight was the museum's appearance in the documentary series *Human Mutants*, based upon Armand Leroi's successful book *Mutants* and first screened on Channel 4 in the UK in 2004. And the present work is also sure to attract considerable attention, if only for Hans van den Bogaard's wonderful photographs.

Forces of Form provides a beautifully illustrated overview of Amsterdam's great tradition of anatomical collecting, homes in on the Vrolik Museum's long history and reveals the collection's huge scientific and cultural value. After all, a collection like this deserves to be seen.

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