

About the Theatrum Anatomicum

An anatomical theatre was an institution used in teaching anatomy at early modern universities. The Waag's Theatrum Anatomicum was built in 1691 as a space dedicated to advanced experimenting, observing and learning.

The theatre was usually a room of roughly amphitheatrical shape, in the centre of which would stand the table on which the dissections of human or animal bodies took place. Around this table were several circular, elliptic or octagonal tiers with railings, where students or other observers could stand and get a good view of the dissection almost from above and unencumbered by the spectators in the rows in front.

On the more scientific side it was the place where leading figures of the surgeon's guild dissected the corpses of many criminals to expose the anatomy of the human body and help advance medical science. At later stages these dissections turned into events where not just medical professionals or students, but also the man in the street could have a glance at this intriguing, taboo-breaking world of new discoveries. For this part of the audience, the spots higher up on the amphitheatric benches were available at low prices.

The Waag is depicted in Rembrandt's 1632 painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*. The surgeons' guild commissioned this painting for their guildhall in the Waag. Remember that this painting was made 60 years before the Theatrum was built. Nicolaes Tulp died in 1674 and thus has never seen the Theatrum.

The surgeons were responsible for the biggest modifications in the building's structure. A large and well-appointed lecture-hall was required to function as 'Theatrum Anatomicum'. Hence, the surgeons had an octagonal cupola tower erected in the middle of the building, transforming the lecture-hall in an amphitheatre. The transformation was completed in 1691. Between 1731 and 1789 the healers-gentlemen had no less than 87 coats of arms painted in the higher reaches of the cupola. The attributes in these coats-of-arms often indicate that surgeons had a background in the barbers trade but had seen earning opportunities in the pulling of teeth. The coat-of-arms of one Klaas Kiesz for instance shows a man with a razor blade. In the centre you will find Frederik Ruysch (1638 – 1731), who was a Dutch botanist and anatomist, remembered for his developments in anatomical preservation and the creation of dioramas or scenes incorporating human parts.

Today, after several constructional modifications, the original floor of the Theatrum has moved up and the benches are gone. But the room still bears the traces of this time and through its octagonal shape invites you to imagine its former function as a stage for hands-on experimental research. Since 1996 there have been many new media experiments and artists installations in the Theatrum. At this moment the Theatrum has a modern theatre equipment for lighting, sound and streaming media facilities. This space can also be rented for presentations. A number of our public events, like debates and exhibitions, are held in this space.

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waag society