

ARTICLE · CULTURA & SAÚDE

The Anatomical Way

Memories of Renato Locchi's Anatomy Laboratory at the Casa de Arnaldo

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ABSTRACT

The author recalls his memories of the Anatomy Laboratory of the Casa de Arnaldo during the period directed by Renato Locchi, describing it as a pole of vocation for work and scientific research, recognized by the Rockefeller Foundation as a center of excellence. He recalls the inaugural lecture, in which Locchi would suddenly uncover the cadaver of a young black woman, engraving on the students' memory their entry into the "priesthood of medicine." He leads the reader along an "Anatomical Way," with stops at the laboratory's stations: the room and bust of Alfonso Bovero, the library with its rare collections, the Museum of Specimens and the Museum of Bones. He pays tribute to Locchi's personality and intellect, drawing on quotations from Seneca and Henry Van Dyke about time, and closes with the poem "Hope," by Augusto dos Anjos.

KEYWORDS: *anatomy; renato locchi; alfonso bovero; casa de arnaldo; history of medicine; anatomical way*

All who were students of Prof. Renato Locchi carry, indelibly recorded in their memory, the vivid sensation of the moment they crossed the threshold of the temple of medicine. I shall "lend" the reader my recollections of that moment.

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The Anatomy Laboratory of the Casa de Arnaldo experienced, under Renato Locchi, a period of vigor. The environment was marked by an intense vocation for work, thus creating the perfect climate for scientific research. It became a pole of attraction for surgeons, who found in Anatomy the ideal place to refine themselves in their specialty and, beyond that, to learn to do research. Anyone who intended to produce a scientific work or a Doctoral Thesis had a competent adviser, always with the utmost willingness to teach. Such was the magnitude it attained that the Rockefeller Foundation recognized it as a center of excellence for the training of anatomists, and began to require anyone seeking study grants abroad to first complete an internship in that Laboratory.

There is not the slightest doubt that the "A" rating awarded by the American Medical Association to the Casa de Arnaldo in 1952 had in Anatomy one of its cornerstones.

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Guiding the reader along the "Anatomical Way," with brief stops at each of its "stations," will make it easy to grasp the significance of that School and its power to influence generations of physicians. I invite you to accompany me, recalling the first day of the medical course, beginning with the Inaugural Lecture delivered by Renato Locchi. He warned of the need to make intensive and proper use of time, which passed all too quickly to allow one to learn the whole human body well enough to become a physician.

He drew special attention to the fact that the teaching "material" of anatomy was very different from all others, since it involved the human cadaver. In the course of the lecture, with a sudden gesture, he would uncover the marble table on which lay the body of a 28-year-old black woman, delivering the inaugural lecture over it each year.

The impact triggered by the abrupt exposure of the cadaver deeply impressed the young student. But his mind fell into conflict as he tried, in a flash, to comprehend the span of life and the span of death. The young woman, with a delicate face and a sad, placid expression, fixed in formalin for longer than she had been alive, remained permanently unchanged.

Locchi—with erudite speech, vibrant in timbre, accompanied by incisive and lively gestures, driven by an obsessive quest for truth and a great hope in youth, crystallized by respect for the cadaver—engraved this moment on the young student's memory. The student had the sensation of entering a mystical world, where death was present to teach the secrets of life. He learned to respect the mortal remains, fragmented by dissection, as part of the body of a fellow human being. The cruelty of a life that, through misfortune, had reduced her to the condition of a "specimen" for study became evident. There remained, too, the impression of destiny cruelly exacting, after death, the burden that perhaps in life she had imposed upon the unjust society that had placed her in the condition of a pauper. Such circumstances marked, for the future physician, the beginning of his relentless struggle against death. The moment was carried by the dazzling personality of Renato Locchi, and two enormous forces clashed: the vigorous energy of the youth present there, attentive and bewildered, on one side, and the coldness of death on the other. The student felt as though he were taking part in the ritual of his initiation into the priesthood of medicine.

Let it be noted that the hallmark of the priesthood is devoted work. That was the moment of decision: to live for medicine.

Stations of the Anatomical Way — After the lecture, a tour of the Laboratory was conducted:

1. *The Bovero Room* — The room of Professor Alfonso Bovero was kept just as he had left it. There lay his long lab coat, yellowed by time; his pointer and his worktable. The visit to this place was made with respect and in absolute silence. It gave the impression of being at the Altar of a Cathedral.

2. *Bust of Bovero* — The memory of Bovero, kept permanently alive by his stern-eyed bust, strategically placed in the Laboratory's entrance hall, ensured the sense of his omnipresence in that setting.

3. *Library* — The Anatomy library was on the students' tour route. Locchi displayed the collection with the pride of showing the most valuable monument of homage to its founder. First, he presented the collection of rare books. Next, he showed the collection of Indexes and Catalogues used for bibliographic research in the field of Anatomy. He boasted that the collections were complete and without a single gap. He would then point to the shelf of classic works. Extreme satisfaction became apparent when he entered a recess of the Library where, on tall shelves and correctly classified racks, stood boxes containing the richest collection of research-publication offprints. Bovero had meticulously begun this collection of documents, and Locchi had been contributing continuously to keeping it up to date.

4. *Museum of Specimens* — The next station of the "Anatomical Way" was the Museum of Specimens, carefully begun by Bovero and with the participation of all the anatomists who worked in that Laboratory. It was a museum extremely rich in specimens of the most varied preparations. Many were diaphanized, representing hundreds of hours of work. The collection of specimens of the lymphatic system is precious; there are also many preserved by different methods. Its holdings include a collection of one thousand five hundred specimens, consisting of tongues and larynxes, painstakingly catalogued by ethnic group, sex and age. A collection of plaster masks of Brazilian Indians is part of the Museum's heritage.

5. *Museum of Bones* — The next stop was at the Museum of Bones, where more than a hundred complete skeletons are catalogued in suitable drawers. Two remarks were made: one showing the skull of an adult black male, in which the dental arches were complete and intact; and another, in a display case acquired in Germany, with the reproduction of a fetal skeleton complete with all its bones, including the ossicles of the middle ear—and then he would show another, similar one, made by a Laboratory employee who, though having no training whatsoever, possessed great skill, much dedication, and love for what he did.

Presence of the master — Locchi, with his exuberant presence, conveyed the enormous energy of his personality and the brilliance of his intellect. Endowed with logical reasoning and fluent, precise speech, in concise phrases, he delivered his message with special brilliance, opening horizons for the young.

Those who spent time with Locchi learned to admire him. His enormous respect and great veneration for Bovero caused something similar to grow, by analogy, in relation to him. Here I paraphrase DiDio when he quotes Seneca as saying: *Admire a man of high character and keep him always before your eyes, living as if he were watching you and acting as if he dictated your actions.*

I too met Locchi.

I close with another quotation from the same author, when he recalls Henry Van Dyke, conveying the idea of the correlation between time and the emotions:

*Time is
too slow for those who wait;
too swift for those who fear;
too long for those who grieve;
too short for those who rejoice;
but for those who love
Time is eternity.*

Locchi is present at every Station of the Anatomical Way and in the hearts of many privileged ones—his admirers.

Hope

Hope does not wither, it does not tire, Just as Faith too does not succumb. Dreams depart on the wings of Disbelief, Dreams return on the wings of Hope.

Many an unhappy soul thinks otherwise; Yet the world is an utter illusion, And is Hope not, by decree, This bond that shackles us to the world?

Youth, therefore, raise your cry, Let belief be your blessed beacon, Let glory save you in the future—press on!

And I, who live bound to despair, Also await the end of my torment, In the voice of death that cries out to me: rest!

Augusto dos Anjos