

*Amsterdam's Anatomy Lessons Dissected*



*Frank IJpma & Thomas van Gulik*

# ***Amsterdam's Anatomy Lessons Dissected***



*Amsterdam University Press*

*Front cover*

Detail of Rembrandt,  
*The Anatomy Lesson  
of Jan Deijman*, 1656  
(see Chapter 5)

*Back Cover*

Detail of Rembrandt,  
*The Anatomy Lesson of  
Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632  
(see Chapter 4)

*Fly-leaf left*

Detail of Jan van Neck,  
*The Anatomy Lesson of  
Frederik Ruysch*, 1683  
(See Chapter 4)

*Fly-leaf right*

Detail of Thomas de Keyser,  
*The Osteological Lesson of  
Sebastiaen Egbertszn*, 1619  
(see Chapter 2)

*Frontispiece*


Detail of Tibout Regters,  
*The Anatomy Lesson  
of Petrus Camper*, 1758  
(Chapter 9)

*Image on Title Page*

Coat-of-arms of the  
Amsterdam Surgeons' Guild,  
in the vault of the dome  
of the Anatomy Theatre in  
The Weighing House, on the  
Nieuwmarkt in Amsterdam  
(see p. 18)

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# Introduction

## *Healthcare in Amsterdam in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the responsibility for Amsterdam's healthcare was shared among various authorities. The *Doctores medicinae* and apothecaries were registered with the *Collegium Medicum* (Medical Supervisory Board), while the *Doctores Medicinae* were academically trained physicians whose principal concern was the internal ailments of patients. They wrote prescriptions and, if a surgical intervention was deemed necessary, they consulted a surgeon.

The meaning of the word 'surgery' is derived from the Greek word χειρῆργον (*cheirergon*), which means 'working with the hand'. Indeed, surgeons were primarily involved in dealing with external physical ailments which could be treated 'by hand': or in other words, by operations. Besides barbering, their work consisted of blood-letting, bandaging, treating wounds and ulcers, draining abscesses, the setting of broken bones and performing small operations such as repairing inguinal hernias and the removal of bladder stones. In contrast to physicians, surgeons were traditionally trained by a master surgeon as apprentices, and were not academically trained. In 1600, there were approximately thirty practising surgeons in Amsterdam, serving a population of 100,000 inhabitants. By 1670, the population had grown to around 200,000, while the number of surgeons expanded to around 240 in 1688.

► **The Amsterdam Surgeons' Guild** Initially, the surgeons in Amsterdam belonged to one single guild that also included barbers, patten-, frame- and skate-makers. In 1551, the latter three set up their own guild. The surgeons detached themselves from the barbers a year later, upon which the territories of these various professions were indelibly defined.

The Amsterdam Surgeons' Guild was an extremely well-organized professional body; it monitored surgical care, and organised the surgeons' training and examination. The board consisted of six governors. Every year in September, the Municipal Council of Amsterdam would choose two new governors from a list of four candidates. Usually, a governor remained in office for three years, after which he was not permitted to serve in any other capacity on the board for at least one year. The dean and the Chief Tutor (*proefmeester*) were president and vice-president of the guild, while the chief tutor was responsible for preparing candidates to take the guild examinations, the rules of which were meticulously recorded in the Guild Regulations. The Board of Governors regularly met to discuss routine – and financial matters and also awarded (membership) tokens – also known as presentation tokens – by which fellow guild members could identify themselves at official guild gatherings. Sometimes, tokens were issued to mark special occasions. The Surgeon's Guild activities were diligently recorded by the Board in the minute books, the majority of which are still preserved in the Amsterdam City Archives.

The municipal council appointed a *praelector anatomia* (literally: a reader in anatomy), an academically trained physician (*doctor*



Oldest extant membership token of the Amsterdam Surgeons' Guild, dating from 1620. Private Collection.

## *Introduction*



*medicinae*) whose task was to provide the Surgeons' Guild with theoretical knowledge instruction twice a week. To supplement this instruction, the Surgeons' Guild also organised anatomy lessons – initially once a year. In order to teach empirical anatomy, the *praelector* dissected the body of a criminal who had been condemned to death. During his anatomical dissections, the *praelector* was assisted by the Assistant Tutor, whose tasks included rotating the dissection table and handing the *praelector* his surgical instruments.

► **The Surgeon's Shop** The surgeons practised their craft in surgeon's shops, which were located throughout Amsterdam. A 1669 painting by Egbert van Heemskerck gives us a glimpse of the surgeon's shop of Jacob Franszn, a practising surgeon in Amsterdam at that time. Jacob is depicted performing a blood-letting as his son Thomas, catches the blood in a bowl, while his wife sits on the right with his other son and daughter. In the background, an



Egbert van Heemskerck,  
*Jacob Franszn (c. 1635–  
1708) and His Family  
in the Surgeon's Shop*,  
1669. Detail. Collection  
Amsterdam Museum.

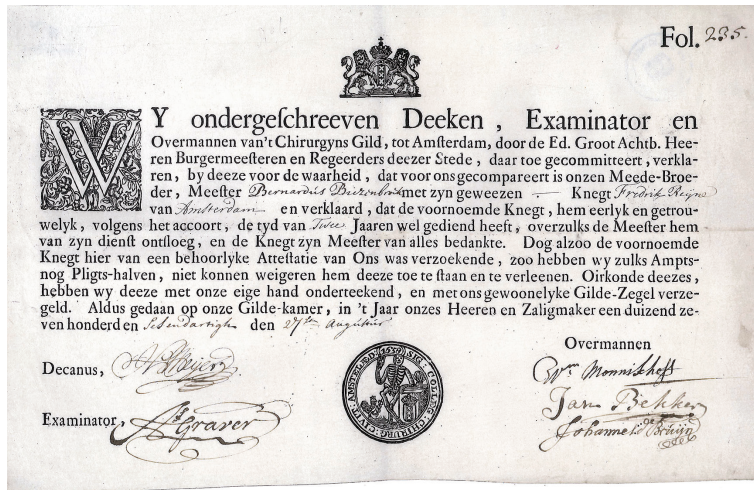
apprentice is seen shaving a customer. In the background on the left, two other customers are awaiting their turn and a fourth customer is leaning on crutches as he stands in the doorway on the right. The shop is furnished with several distinctive items that are indicative of Jacob Franszn's profession. A wall cabinet containing surgical instruments and jars containing medications. A skull adorns the top of one cabinet, and a stuffed swordfish is suspended from the ceiling. There is a painting on the right wall showing a miniature reproduction of an anatomical dissection of the abdominal and thoracic cavities. Van Heemskerck's painting of the interior allows us a unique opportunity to go back to the conditions in which a surgeon practised his profession at that time.

► **The Surgeon's Education** For centuries, surgeons were traditionally trained according to the master-apprentice principle. Pupils learned their craft by serving as an apprentice in a surgeon's shop for a number of years - usually five - during which they were taught by a master surgeon. The quality of the training depended heavily on the knowledge, skills and dedication of the master surgeon concerned. At the beginning of their training period, apprentices were registered in the guild book, paying a registration fee of 12 to 20 *stuivers* (a Dutch copper coin worth 5 cents, or one-twentieth of a guilder) to the Surgeons' Guild. At the successful conclusion of an apprenticeship, the master provided his pupil with a certificate (*leerbrief*). In this certificate, the master declared that the apprentice had worked in his surgeon's shop for a certain number of years in a satisfactory manner, having shown both diligence and dedication.

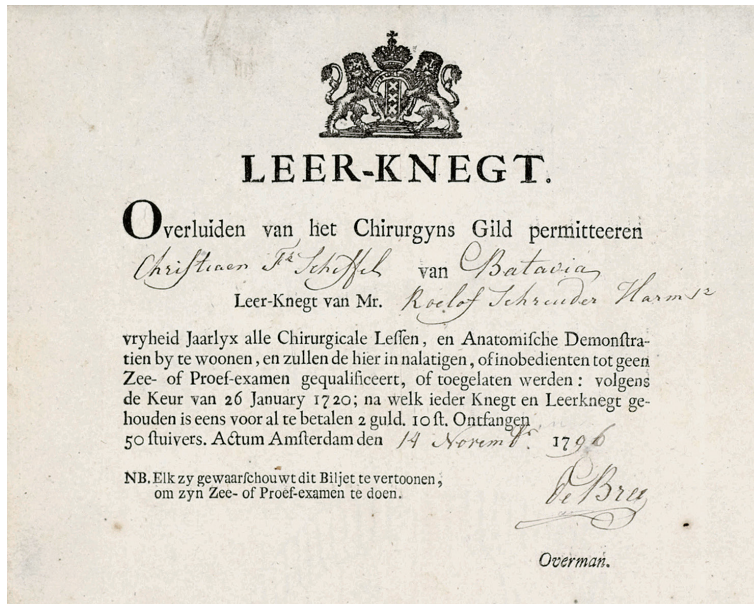
Apart from having to work in the surgeon's shop, the apprentices had to attend compulsory lectures given by the *praelector anatomiae*, which were held at the Anatomy Theatre (*Theatrum Anatomicum*). When they embarked on their training, the apprentices were given a so-called letter of permission, confirming that they had been granted permission by their masters to attend the lectures. Failure to attend could result in an apprentice being barred from partaking in the final practical examination, the masterpiece.

The final practical examination — the masterpiece —, took place at the very end of the surgeon's training and was the ultimate test of a surgeon's competence. It was prepared and conducted by the Chief Tutor in the presence of the *praelector anatomiae* and the Guild's Board of Governors. The exam commenced with the candidate having

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Certificate of apprenticeship issued by the Amsterdam Surgeons' Guild granted by Master Surgeon Bernardus Biezenbrink for his apprentice Frederik Reijne (1736).  
Municipal Archive Amsterdam.



Certificate of apprenticeship for apprentice C.F. Scheffel (1796).  
Municipal Archive Amsterdam.