

# ZURICH'S MOULAGE MUSEUM



by Duncan JD Smith

8

We have from time to time in HIDDEN EUROPE featured the writing of Duncan JD Smith, urban explorer extraordinaire, whose work nicely unpicks the textured detail of communities across Europe. Duncan's book 'Only in Zurich' is published next month, the first Swiss title in a series that already encompasses Budapest, Prague, Vienna, Berlin, Cologne, Munich and Hamburg (for more details see [www.onlyinguides.com](http://www.onlyinguides.com)). All the books are authored by Duncan and published by Christian Brandstätter Verlag. We have had a

sneak preview of the upcoming Zurich book. It uncovers another Zurich from that described in regular guidebooks, revealing the pleasures of dining in a former factory, touring the city's waste water treatment plant, attending a Hare Krishna temple ceremony, or playing pinball in an underground garage. With the kind permission of Duncan and his publisher, we present here a slightly adapted extract from 'Only in Zurich'. A German language edition of the book, entitled 'Nur in Zürich', is also released this spring by the same publisher.

Until the 1950s, when high-quality colour photography became affordable, anatomy students were sometimes taught using accurate, life-sized wax models. Known as medical *moulage*, from the French word for ‘casting’ or ‘moulding’, such models were undoubtedly more appealing to handle than real bodies. The last professional *moulageuse*, Elsbeth Stoiber, retired in 1963 from the University of Zurich, leaving behind some 1,800 examples of her art. Since 2005 these have been on permanent display in what is undoubtedly Zurich’s most curious museum: the Moulage Museum (Moulagenmuseum) at Haldenbachstrasse 14 in Zurich’s Oberstrass district.

The technique of medical *moulage* was pioneered in Renaissance Italy during the late seventeenth century by Gaetano Giulio Zumbo (1656–1701). Zumbo

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worked first in Naples, then Florence, and finally Paris, where he was granted a monopoly on the technique by King Louis XIV. Later the technique spread as far as Russia, Japan, America, and England,

by which time medical *moulage* was being used not only in anatomy but also to reproduce the physical manifestations of various diseases (such as tuberculosis) and dermatological conditions (such as eczema).

To protect their livelihood, practitioners of *moulage* were often secretive about their methods. In general terms, however, the technique involved taking a plaster cast of the relevant body area from a living patient, which was then filled with wax, resin, and sometimes calcium carbonate. To render in lifelike detail the particular stages of a disease or injury, different coloured wax was used to represent scars and sores, with glass bubbles for blisters. Finally, hairs were inserted individually for added realism. A laborious and expensive process the technique of medical *moulage* was usually only available to the wealthiest hospitals.

The *moulage* collection in Zurich was begun in 1917, shortly after the German dermatologist Bruno Bloch founded a clinic there. A problem

for museum staff later tasked with documenting the collection was that many of the *moulages* were labelled only with the patient’s name and date of birth, the relevant medical records having been long since destroyed. Fortunately, during the golden age of *moulage* great value was placed on publishing case studies, and so long hours in the university library have since reunited many of the exhibits with their individual histories.

Investigations also revealed that the Zurich *moulages* had not only been made for teaching purposes but also for medical research. Consequently many pieces in the museum record the results of laboratory experiments (for example into the causes of cancer), as well as the side effects of drugs, and the consequences of developing surgical techniques (including varicose vein removal and plastic surgery). One such *moulage* was taken from a seventeen-year-old girl, whose hands had been deliberately infected with a virus to demonstrate sensitization of the immune system. Another records the cancer-causing effects of early X-rays on human skin. The collection also includes *moulages* made of the experiments Bruno Bloch conducted on himself, demonstrating that eczema can sometimes result from an allergic reaction to external agents. Medical *moulage* served other purposes, too, as is the case with the disturbing examples showing the symptoms of venereal diseases, which were used in propaganda campaigns to discourage promiscuity.

Zurich’s medical students still enjoy practising their skills of recognition in the museum, the *moulages* sometimes engendering greater intuition than even computer images in identifying subtle differences in the surface manifestation of diseases. Nor is the art of *moulage* yet dead since one of Elsbeth Stoiber’s colleagues, Michael Geiges, a professor of dermatology and director of the museum, still makes the occasional *moulage*, whilst also restoring the old ones in the museum. ■

*The Moulage Museum is open Wednesday 2–6pm and Saturday 1–5pm (other weekdays by prior arrangement). Entry is free with enlightening guided tours available for 100 SFr. For further details visit [www.moulagen.ch](http://www.moulagen.ch).*

PHOTO OPPOSITE: Examples of *moulages* in Zurich’s Moulage Museum (photo by Duncan JD Smith).