

Original Paper

Rembrandt's Painting "The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp" Influences the Romanian Visual Artists

Dinu Iuliu Dumitrascu MD, PhD^{1*} & Irina Dora Magurean, MA, PhD²

¹ Department Morphological Sciences, Chair Anatomy, Iuliu Hatieganu University of Medicine and Pharmacy Cluj-Napoca, Romania

² University of Arts and Design Cluj-Napoca, Romania

* Correspondence: Assoc. Prof. Dinu I. Dumitrascu, ddumitrascu@umfcluj.ro

Received: January 5, 2026

Accepted: January 29, 2026

Online Published: February 17, 2026

doi:10.22158/jrph.v9n1p23

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jrph.v9n1p23>

Abstract

The painting "The anatomy lesson of dr. Tulp" is one of the most famous works by the Dutch Rembrandt van Rijn. This is also one of the best representations of medical activities and education in fine arts. This outstanding painting was not only widely reproduced, but inspired other works of art. The aim of our paper is to present Romanian paintings influenced by this masterpiece. The Romanian visual artists are less visible, with few exceptions. However their work deserves to be visualized and disseminated.

Keywords

Anatomy, Dr. Tulp. Rembrandt, Visual arts

1. Introduction

One of the most famous paintings in the world is the work by Rembrandt titled "The anatomy lesson of Dr. Tulp". This is preserved in the Museum Mauritshuis in The Hague, the capital of the Netherlands. It is reproduced on different items and is one of the emblematic art works of the mankind, like Da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" or Van Gogh's "Sun flowers". Like other major paintings, it has influenced the work of some Romanian artists. As a teacher of anatomy and plastic surgeon interested in hand surgery (Dumitrascu, Crivii, & Opincaru, 2016; Dumitrascu & Georgescu, 2011), and respectively as teacher of visual arts, we were interested in studying this influence. This chapter will describe our findings.

2. Rembrandt

The painter Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn was a famous Dutch painter of Jewish ethnicity, living in the Jewish district of Amsterdam (Schatborn & Hinterding, 2020). He was born not far from Amsterdam, in Leiden, on 15 July 1606 in Leiden, and finished his life on 4 October 1669, in his famous house, now Museum, Amsterdam. Starting in poverty, he worked with assiduity all his life, creating paintings, drawings and etchings. Besides this, he was an important art teacher and even art dealer. His best cognoscible style includes the dramatic alterations of light and shadow, a technique which independently was developed in Southern Europe by Caravaggio.

With material difficulties, with different familial hassles, he had to accept a lot of social orders to portray and depict his contemporary bourgeois class. His emblematic large painting “The night watch finished almost 400 years ago, represent a climax of his master work. It demonstrates the liberal interpretation of portraits, as an evolutionary and progressist attitude towards the classical, frozen representation of people. His work influenced generations of artists, immediately, even during his life, when arts were blossoming in the Netherlands. Even nowadays, even if technique changed, he influenced artists and stimulated them to interpret topics from his masterpieces.

3. Doctor Tulp

Of course, the visitors of the Museums in the Netherlands and art students and historians, have been intrigued by the person who is in the center of the painting “The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp”. This is one of the most emblematic works by Rembrandt. It was created in 1632, has gene technique use and the techniques use is oil on canvas. This painting is one of the major attractions of the Museum Mauritshuis from The Hague, the Netherlands. It is important to note that this painting is the first one signed by the master only “Rembrandt. f[ecit] 1632” in the upper corner left. Previously he used to sign his work with the initials HRL. This monogram was the acronym for Rembrandt Harmenszoon Leiden). Thus, it is a token of awareness of the artist on his own fame or celebrity (Ijpma, van de Graaf, Nicolai, & Meek, 2006).

The medical/surgical/anatomical appeal of the work could not escape, of course, to historians of medicine. Indeed, we can have an impression, contemplating this masterpiece, about the practice of medical teaching 400 years ago.

In the center of the painting, we can see the serious facial expression of what seems to be a medical doctor, dressed in the clothing of his time, that no one would bear nowadays. Around him, a lot of probably students or disciples look very keen to learn from the master’s lesson. Contemporary eye, educated in the spirit of equity and diversity, would consider this team not fairly composed, i.e., including only males of white race, none of them young. Nicolaes Tulp is represented in the moment when he was going to teach to his disciples the muscular system of the human arm. Who are depicted around him, as well dressed in what at that time was considered medical outfit? They are fellows or

simply physicians wishing to update their knowledge by a so-called, nowadays, continuous medical education event!

In reality, being portrayed there was not so easy. Like in the famous painting “The night watch” by same Rembrandt, where the guards paid their position in the painting, here again, it is a collective portrait and those portrayed had to pay for their presence on the canvas! However, it is not possible to recognize them now, because they were not so famous. We know only that these are members of the Guild of Surgeons from Amsterdam, which commissioned to Rembrandt a group portrait, as it was so usual at those times. Nicolaes Tulp was the most outstanding figure in the group, because he has been appointed anatomist of the city of Amsterdam, thus in charge with the dissections of criminals. Not all criminals were studied, only once per year was this maneuver allowed. We should remember that the great philosopher Rene Descartes, himself migrated to Amsterdam, had to perform the dissection of cows that he could get in slaughterhouses. No wonder that Dr. Tulp is the central figure of this painting and even gave it his name (Delany, 2011).

The Guild commissioned periodically group portraits to famous contemporary artists, to immortalize their activity. Nowadays we take and publish group photos instead. When Rembrandt received this commission, he was young and just arrived from Leiden to Amsterdam (O'Bryan, 2005). Those who wanted to be portrayed had to pay, and those who were in a more central position paid more than those who were at the periphery. It is supposed that Tulp also paid more than the others around him. Innovative in this work is the presence of the corpse in the middle of the painting, giving more impressive power to the work (Heller, 1988). The author also introduced an anatomy book in the painting, probably the world-famous treatise of Vesalius *De humani corporis fabrica*. We should also mention that no dissection tools were depicted, probably being considered mundane by this distinguished society.

Dutch scientists were able to identify the corpse: it was a criminal Adriaan Adriaanszoon who was hanged few hours before the dissection performed by Doctor Tulp and depicted by Rembrandt (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gGE7qfYYi4>).

If the anatomists try to analyze the anatomical details from this work, they may observe that despite serious knowledge of morphology of muscles and tendons, some aspects are not realistic. (<http://www.drawingonanatomy.com.au/>)

This is not the single work by Rembrandt dedicated to medicine or anatomy. Indeed, 25 years later, in 1656 exactly, Rembrandt replied to another commission and created a new painting, less popular than the one we discuss here. This is The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Deijman. The doctor was successor of Dr Tulp as anatomist and surgeon, so no wonder he also wanted his portrait. Unfortunately, large part of this work was burned by a fire 60 years later and only a fragment survived.

The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp impressed many other artists, famous or anonymous. The most famous is Édouard Manet who painted a copy and offered it to one of his physicians.

A polemic work was realized by Yiull Damaso in this century, where the artists presented the famous South African president Nelson Mandela as a corpse. Several South African presidents and politicians were displayed around him. Of course, the work was blamed as being disrespectful and even racists (Rachlin, 2007). Another parody is the work “The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Freeman” by Susan Dorothea White (<https://anatomymasterclass.com/>) where the doctors look like skeletons in an anatomy lab. The painting is referenced also in several movies. It is also depicted on several memorabilia, including stamps. We present here a philatelic issue from Costa Rica (Figure 1) and from the Netherlands (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Stamp from Costa Rica: In observance of the 50th Anniversary of the Legal medicine teaching in Costa Rica, depicting the Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp, Rembrandt



Figure 2. Miniature sheet issued by the Posts of Netherlands 2011 dedicated to the Lesson of Anatomy of Dr Tulp.

4. The anatomy and Medical Science in the Time of Rembrandt and Dr. Tulp

We must mention that the period when they lived was a golden age of the Netherlands. Not only on the political scene Netherlands made tremendous progresses, but due to its economical affluence, this country became one of the most favourable to artistic but also scientific development. Many philosophers, some with medical interests like Descartes, moved to the Netherlands. The best center for the study of anatomy, and correlated to this, of medicine, was the University in Leiden, town where Rembrandt was also born. In Leiden came students from all around the Western World of that time (Cunningham, 2003; Knoeff, 2012). Famous doctors worked there. Many of them are remembered by medical students from their textbooks of anatomy or surgery. Some of them are: Peter Paauw (1564–1617); Franciscus de Boë Sylvius (1614–1672), Hieronymus Fabricius (1533–1619). Otto Heurnius (1577–1652), Johannes van Horne (1621–1670), Jan Swammerdam (1637–1680), Reinier de Graaf (1641–1673), Frederik Ruysch (1638–1731), Nicolas Steno (1638–1686), Govert Bidloo (1649–1743), Herman Boerhaave (1668–1738) (Knoeff, 2012). Their exceptional work was continued in the 18th Century by other outstanding scientists.

Even the earlier living Andreas Vesalius (1514–1564), nowadays could be called a Belgian, but at that time his city Brussels belonged as well to the Netherlands. His work influenced very much the Dutch anatomists who followed him a generation later.

In this atmosphere, it was not surprising that anatomy demonstrations became a desired to attend social events. These were taking place in anatomical theaters, built inspired by the famous amphitheater from Padua.

5. The Lesson of Anatomy of Dr Tulp and its influence in Romania

Not only abroad, but also in Romania the famous work by Rembrandt had a notable influence. We present here two artists who worked influenced by this painting and we consider this worth to be mentioned and disseminated.

In fact, many Romanian visual artists were interested by anatomy, like artists from all the world and from any geographical area. Indeed, artistic anatomy is an important staff and difficult exam for the students of the fine arts academies (Ghiteșcu, 1962; Papilian, 1945). Even if nowadays art does not try to reproduce with fidelity the structure of the morphological features, the study is part of each artist instruction. Beside this, several artists worked in anatomy theatres also in Romania, i.e. in Cluj. There are testimonies about painters who visited dissection rooms to learn more on anatomy (Muradin, 2010). Now we present for the first time to historians of medicine two art works inspired by the anatomy lesson of doctor Tulp, so gloriously represented painted by Rembrandt (Mellick, 2007).

6. Alexandru Mohi and the lesson of anatomy

Alexandru Mohi (1902 – 2001) has in Romania a very good reputation of late cubist painter. He was professor at the Fine Arts School in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. He became well beloved by connoisseurs and later by investors for his fresh postcubists works (Dumitrascu, 1996).

Alexandru Mohi grew up in Satu Mare. After graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Cluj Napoca, he taught drawing between 1929-1937 at the reformed high school in Satu Mare. At the same time, he actively participated in the cultural life of the city. Preoccupied with art, without material possibilities, Alexandru Mohi began to work at Satu Mare, under the guidance of Aurel Popp, whom he accompanied to Baia Sprie. Between 1926-1930 he attended the courses of the School of Fine Arts in Cluj, having as teachers Aurel Ciupe, Catul Bogdan and Anastase Demian.

He worked in Baia Mare in 1924, 1926 and 1927. In 1949 he was appointed professor at the “Ion Andreescu” Institute of Fine Arts in Cluj. He made his debut, being a student in 1928 at the Official Salon in Bucharest. She participated in collective and group exhibitions opened in Satu Mare, Cluj, Budapest, Oradea and Bucharest. He organized personal exhibitions in 1932 in Satu-Mare, Dej (1942 and 1974) and Cluj (1968 and 1970) (Sümegi & Takács, 2010).

Recently arrived in the art commerce of the city of Cluj-Napoca a previously very few known copies of the Anatomical lesson of Dr Tulp (Figure 3). The painting has the dimensions of 59.5x69.5 cm. The

painting is signed with the usual signature of the master, monogram MO but not dated. It is a cubistic style parody of the painting, with a very well technique and perspective. The colors are bright, in the own style of Mohi and is easily recognizable.



**Figure 3. Alexandru Mohy: Copy after Anatomy lesson of Dr Tulp, oil on canvas, 69,5 x 59,5 cm
(private collection, with permission)**

7. Ana Maria Micu and Dr Tulp wife

This is an amazing triptych found in a private art collection from Cluj-Napoca. It represents a detail of the famous painting in a sequential order of hand rotation, that makes an impressive effect and must express the eloquence of the teacher. (Fig. 4 a,b, c). Following this movement of the hand, we are impressed not only by the fantasy of the author, its originality but also of her artistical technique (<https://www.anamariamicu.com/>).

The painter is still a young artist with success on the East Asian market (Topan, 2014). She was born 1979, in Dorohoi and lives and works in Botoşani (Northeast Romania). After graduating from the University of Arts and Design Cluj-Napoca, section painting, she past a master degree in visual arts in 2004. Nowadays she works with the Mind Set Art Center, Taipei, Taiwan region, where she exhibits constantly, both solo and in various groups.



Figure 4a. Ana Maria Micu: Dr Tulp wife part 1 (private collection, with permission)



Figure 4b. Ana Maria Micu: Dr Tulp wife part 2 (private collection, with permission)



Figure 4c. Ana Maria Micu: Dr Tulp wife part 3 (private collection, with permission)

Interested by the surrounding world, she could not miss the structure of human body. Among its components, hand is very important and probably here we may find the reason she chose to paint Dr Tulp hand, in movement. Why the work is titled “Dr Tulp wife” is less understandable but produces indeed effect.

The artist had recently an important solo show “Left hand to distant view” at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest, Romania (Curator: Simona Vilău). It means that the hand remains a preoccupation for the artist.

But other anatomical components are depicted by Ana Maria Micu, like cornea. One of the best works of her is: Drying your swollen cornea, 2022, India ink on paper, 180 x 120 cm.

The future will reserve us more such artworks, compared with the past. Artificial intelligence will offer its full support (Magurean et al., 2024).

References

- Cunningham, A. (2003). The Pen and the Sword: Recovering the Disciplinary Identity of Physiology and Anatomy before 1800: II: Old Anatomy – the Sword. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 34, 51-76. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1369-8486\(02\)00069-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1369-8486(02)00069-9)
- Delany, S. R. (2011). *Silent Interviews: On Language, Race, Sex, Science Fiction, and Some Comics--A Collection of Written Interviews*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Di Matteo, B., Tarabella, V., Filardo, G., Tomba, P., Viganò, A., & Marcacci, M. (2016). Nicolaes Tulp: The Overshadowed Subject in The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp. *Clin Orthop Relat Res.*, 474(3), 625-629. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11999-015-4686-y>
- Dumitrascu, D. (1996). [Art labyrinth] *Labirintul artei Ed Forum Cluj-Napoca*.
- Dumitrascu, D. I., & Georgescu, A. V. (2011). [Systematic review of 51 habd transplantations]. *Revista sistematică a 51 transplante de mână. Clujul Medical*, 84(4), 595-602.
- Dumitrascu, D. I., Crivii, C. B., & Opincaru, I. (2016). A sculpture masterpiece for the teaching of anatomy. *Clujul Med.*, 89(2), 304-306. <https://doi.org/10.15386/cjmed-645>
- Ghiteșcu, G. (1962). *Anatomia artistica* vol I and II Ed. Meridiane Bucharest.
- Heller, J. (1988). *Picture This, Scribner Paperback Fiction*.
<http://www.drawingonanatomy.com.au/>
<https://anatomymasterclass.com/>
<https://www.anamariamicu.com/>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gGE7qfYYi4>
- Ijpma, F. F., van de Graaf, R. C., Nicolai, J. P., & Meek, M. F. (2006). The anatomy lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp by Rembrandt (1632) and the findings during dissection of the forearm of a cadaver: anatomical discrepancies. *Ned Tijdschr Geneesk.*, 150(50), 2756-2765. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhsa.2006.02.014>
- Knoeff, R. (2012). *Dutch Anatomy and Clinical Medicine in 17th-Century Europe*. EGO Eur Hist.
- Magurean, I. D. et al. (2024). Artificial Intelligence as a Substitute for Human Creativity. *Journal Research in Philosophy and History*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.22158/jrph.v7n1p7>
- Mellick, S. A. (2007). Dr Nicolaes Tulp of Amsterdam, 1593-1674: Anatomist and doctor of medicine. *ANZ J. Surg.*, 77, 1102-1109. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1445-2197.2007.04328.x>
- Muradin, J. (2010). [Arists who worked in autopsy rooms in Cluj]. Artiști care au studiat în sălile de autopsie la Cluj. *Clujul Medical*, 83(3), 530-531.
- O'Bryan, C. J. (2005). *Carnal Art*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Papilian, V. (1945). *Manual practice de disectie Cluj Ed Dacia Traiana*.
- Rachlin, H. (2007). Scandals, Vandals and Da Vincis. *Chrysalis Books*.
- Schatborn, P., & Hinterding, E. R. (2020). *The Complete Drawings and Etchings Hardcover, Taschen*.
- Sümegi, G., & Takács, P. (2010). [Cluj painters] *Kolozsvári festők*. Százhalombatta.

Topan, D. (2014). *Alexandru Mohi, Centrul Artistic Baia Mare*. Retrieved from <https://muzartbm.ro/2014/alexandru-mohi-1902-2001-odihna-la-amiaza/>