

IL CORPO & L'IDEA

La Testa anatomica di Filippo Balbi

The *Testa anatomica* (Anatomical Head) by Filippo Balbi (1806-1890) is the featured painting in the *The Body and the Idea* Exhibition, which will remain open until Oct. 29, 2023.

Testa anatomica is an oil-on-panel painting measuring 47.8x59.5 cm, created by the artist in 1854, in Rome. It was exhibited at the International Exhibition in Paris in 1855, where it received awards and captured the admiring interest of both the public and critics.

The artwork represents a human head composed of a tangled assembly of bodies, meticulously reproducing the various muscles of the head and neck.



Filippo Balbi was born in Naples in 1806. He attended the Royal Institute of Fine Arts in 1822, where he had Costanzo Angelini, a painter with a neoclassical vocation, as his teacher. In his early thirties, he moved to Rome, where he completed his artistic training by studying the works of Michelangelo and the painters of the seventeenth-century tradition, such as Guido Reni, Domenichino, and Carracci. There, he began his long association with the order of Carthusian Fathers, and they commissioned him to create new decorations for the Carthusian Grangia, located outside Porta Maggiore. On this occasion, he experimented with a mural technique of his own invention which involved oil painting directly on the wall, the same technique that we will find in Trisulti, in the pharmacy, and whose secret he did not reveal to anyone.

After several temporary stays, Balbi settled permanently in Trisulti in 1859, where he resided until 1863 when he moved to nearby Alatri. In 1873, in Alatri, he painted his self-portrait, which is currently displayed in the newly renovated rooms dedicated to self-portraits at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. In the self-portrait, he depicts himself alongside his most famous painting, the *Testa anatomica*, as if to say that he entrusted his hope of artistic immortality to that work. In Alatri, he died in 1890.

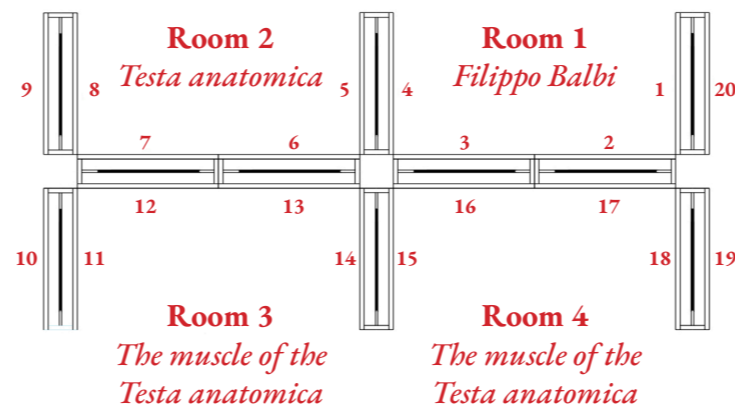
The Exhibition consists of **four rooms** and a **room of Wonders** in which the *Testa anatomica* is displayed.

In the first room, the exhibition is divided into four panels where visitors can learn more about the painter. Panel 2 and 3 present a biography of the artist, organized according to the periods and places he lived, trained, and worked: Naples (1806 to 1840), Rome (1840 to 1859), Trisulti in the town of Collepardo (1859 to 1863), and Alatri (1864 to his death in 1890). Panel 4 features a moral and artistic profile of Balbi, written by F.M. Apollonj Ghetti:

“Proud of the position that he attributed himself as extreme representative of an illustrious pictorial tradition in danger of extinction; hostile to the whole world which, as he would say, had always opposed him and still opposed him or, worse, ignored him”.

In the second room, the four panels are devoted to the *Testa anatomica*: the description of the painting (panel 5); The sources and models from which Balbi drew inspiration (panel 6); The readings and interpretations (panel 7); The main photographic images of the painting from 1856 to 1927 (panel 8).

Room 3
Tactile translation of the painting for the blind



In the entry dedicated to the work at the International Exhibition in Paris (1855), Charles de Montluisant wrote as follows:

“Master Balbi, of Rome, in the Testa anatomica (also called a flayed head), has represented all the muscles, all the tendons, all the movements of the flesh, through human bodies united in the most natural and daring positions”.

Behind the second room, panel 9 tells the story of the painting. The painter kept it with him until his death when it ended up on the “private market”. It was purchased by collector Evan Gorga, a famous tenor who, overwhelmed by debt, was later forced to sell it to the State in 1929. The inventor of the Museum of the History of Medicine, Adalberto Pazzini, obtained it for his museum in 1948.

In front of panels 9 and 10, we find the “tactile translation of the painting for the blind”.

“A work of art should belong to everyone; everyone has the right, as they can, to admire it. And it speaks to everyone because it is rich in meaning and feeling”.

Behind **the third room**, panel 10 illustrates the stages of restoration:

“The restoration work has enabled an important aesthetic recovery in the reading of the painted image, which can now be admired in its original splendor”.

In the inner panels (11, 12, 13, 14) begins the detailed description of the muscles of the *Testa anatomica*, which continues in the **fourth room** (panels 15, 16, 17, 18). Each body is a muscle or part of a muscle.



“Filippo Balbi’s anatomical invention draws us into a singular adventure, that of bodies arranged together to give life to a macroscopic head, which reveals its own bony and muscular structure. We are thus able to recognize the shape of the various muscles and reveal the “stage-like” composition as if we were in the theater. An exercise in science and creativity that makes Filippo Balbi one of the most interesting artists of the Italian nineteenth-century scene”.

Panel 19, titled ‘The Exhibition on Display,’ provides information about the installation we are currently viewing, the accompanying sound plot, and the tactile translation encountered along our path inside the Refectory.

Additionally, it presents details about the multimedia work and virtual reality pieces inspired by *Testa anatomica*, specially created for our Exhibition. While these multimedia creations are not found in the Refectory, they are accessible for viewing in the ‘Room of Visions,’ set up in the Foresteria Hall located in the right building of the entry courtyard.

Panel 20 displays the names of those who worked on this Exhibition and the acknowledgments of the institutions, sponsors, and friends who contributed the donations that made it possible.

Il Corpo e l’idea. La Testa anatomica di Filippo Balbi (The Body and the Idea. The Anatomical Head of Filippo Balbi) has lived up to its promise as our community’s cultural and artistic project”.

The room of wonders showcases the restored *Testa anatomica* in its original colors and features, which time had once spoiled. It is the unique experience that Il Corpo e l’idea offers to all of us.