

# The Animalcules of Antoni Van Leeuwenhoek

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This series began in January, with an image of Zeus releasing various life forms from a universal egg. The image and its caption “Ex ovo omnia” (all things from the egg) were the foundation of Sir William Harvey’s thesis of 1651, a notion that was widely adopted by the many “Ovists” who followed him. This month’s image was submitted to the Royal Society in 1678 by the premier “Spermist,” Antoni Leeuwenhoek. A pioneer in microscopy, this Dutch draper, sheriff, and student of biology commissioned the drawings of “animalcules” that he visualized with a single lens microscope in the semen of a dog and a rabbit. He had previously seen similar “worms” in a sample of his own semen. Leeuwenhoek took great pains however, to reassure his Royal Society colleagues in London that this sample “was not obtained by any sinful contrivance on my part,” but was “the excess which Nature provided me in conjugal relations.” (Masturbation was clearly a very delicate subject in the 1600s.) Leeuwenhoek went on to

boldly, and wrongly, conclude that “it is exclusively the male semen that forms the fetus and that all women may contribute only serves to receive the semen and feed it.” Thus, the battle lines were drawn between the Ovists and Spermists and for the next two centuries, each side clung to its position with righteous but misguided indignation.

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