

Annotations

The art of anatomical science

Ars Medica: Medical Illustration through the Ages

Exhibition catalogue

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University of Toronto

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Images: <http://link.library.utoronto.ca>

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The exhibition *Ars Medica*, held January–April 2006, marked the 70th anniversary of the Associated Medical Services (AMS), Canada's first nonprofit, prepaid health care organization to be sponsored by physicians. The works highlighted in the exhibition as well as in the illustrated catalogue were culled from some 15 000 rare medical books in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library collection. This historical medical collection, known since 1973 as the Jason A. Hannah Collection in the History of Medicine, encompasses the rare books Hannah purchased on behalf of the AMS from the Medical Society of London, important historical medical books acquired from individual collectors, as well as the works of medical history that were part of the university library's special collection.

Ars Medica offered a rare opportunity to examine the critical relationship between art and medical science, especially the ways in which anatomic illustration in Europe claimed the body as a terrain to be discovered, uncovered and displayed.

Flayed and dissected medical mannequins hold onto their skins, dance in the Paduan hillsides and push their body surfaces and tissues further apart for the viewer to see more deeply. Represented as both the subjects and the objects of medical science, these uncanny dissected figures “live” with an obvious web of contradictions. Endowed with neat, finely combed hair and rosy cheeks they strike elegant classical poses derived from Western art history. Yet, as animated medical mannequins demonstrating the various

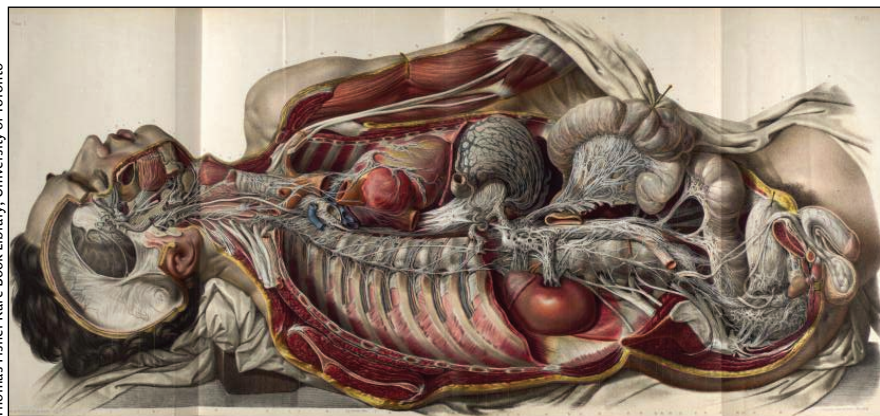
stages of deep dissection, they strangely appear to hover between life, dissection and death. Eerily, these anatomized figures seemed to know they were being watched: they either stared back meeting the viewer's gaze or, they tilted their heads away with their eyes softly shut — an illustrative technique that invites our own gaze to look or inspect without being seen.

Situated between Western art history and the history of medicine, *Ars Medica* demonstrated the ways that medical science has for 500 years posited the body simultaneously as a “scientific” object and as a remote and strange land to be voyaged into. Through painstaking efforts to fully illustrate what was believed to have remained below the line of visibility, new bodily recesses and physiologic phenomena were “discovered,” uncovered and visualized for the first time in these mesmerizing anatomic illustrations. The exhibition thus pointed to the ways in which medical science has attempted to define the body at different historical and cultural moments and how medical illustrations were instrumental in marking the development and dissemination of new visual languages through which the interior of the body was opened to view.

The rise of science during the Renaissance marked the initial attempts

at mastery over the body and control of its internal processes. This growing impetus to peer into the recesses of the body resulted not only in the production of important books that revolutionized the science and teaching of anatomy, such as Andreas Vesalius' *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*, which featured 200-plus woodcut illustrations including striking images of the flayed muscle man arranged in the progressive stages of dissection, but it also marked the appearance of anatomic flap books, which were invitations for laymen to participate in the drama of revealing and exposing the underlying layers of the body. *Ars Medica* included a 1543 first edition of the Vesalius text, as well other works by him, his students and followers.

In tracing the cultural imagery related to the history of anatomic science, this specialized exhibition revealed the ways in which medical illustrations became the site in and around which the scientific discipline of medicine emerged. For example, in a number of significant multiple-volume surgical and pathological atlases from the turn of the 19th century, a new anatomic discourse was instrumentalized and new visual languages were developed in order to produce a new “realistic” image of the bodily interior. In his 19th-century anatomic atlas, Jean-Marc



Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto

Large folding plate demonstrating the autonomic nerves of the body in situ. From Marc-Jean Bourgey's *Traité complet de l'anatomie de l'homme*. Paris, 1831–1854.

Bourguery, a French surgeon and anatomist who devoted over 2 decades to complete an 8-volume, folio-sized atlas that contained 726 hand-coloured lithographs by Nicolas-Henri Jacob, announced that the illustrations in the surgical atlas would be “viewed as if pictured in real life.” The consecutive sequencing of the pages in the atlases was designed to represent the layers of the skin and internal organs as they were peeled away during dissection; the process of reading thus allowed the viewer to participate actively in the process of dissection, according to the ordering principles of anatomic science. Specialized binding techniques incorporated oversize “folio” pages that folded outwards in multiple sections, giving the reader the sense of folding out the inside of the body in life-size proportions. Such techniques of illustration and book design relied upon specific visual and narrative tropes to produce an imaginary, yet rationalized, presentation of the serial stages of the dissected body within the bound pages of a distinct new genre of medical book: the anatomic atlas.

These fascinating foldouts extended the life-size appearance of the dissected corpse — they allowed the reader’s gaze to linger longer, to follow the pathways, the routes of disease. So although the anatomic atlases were attempts at constructing an emergent codified knowledge of the body, they were also an invitation to get in close and see the body bursting out. Thus, the anatomic atlases were simultaneously designed to fulfill the intended, dominant purpose of objectivity and yet, at the same time, served the tendency to give way to curiosity, to offer new forms of pleasure and desire related to looking at the inner regions of the anatomic body and its fascinating parts. As such, these atlases were a strange hybrid between public displays and private pleasures, between correct ways of “scientific” and socially sanctioned scrutiny and a more illicit voyeurism.

A major highlight of *Ars Medica* was the inclusion of well-known works by renowned anatomists and artists. Each of these noteworthy texts drove advances in anatomy and developed new methods of draughtsmanship and

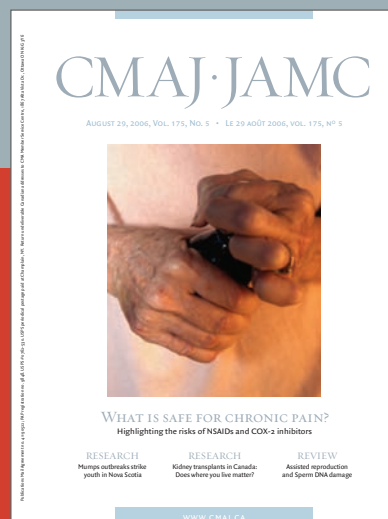
printing techniques. Examples included Mascagni’s brightly coloured illustrations of the lymphatic vessels; Albinus’ elegant skeletal and muscle plates; Gautier d’Agoty’s provocative life-size dissected figures prepared using a richly saturated mezzotint technique; Carswell’s beautiful hand-coloured lithographs of diseased tissues, as well as life-size plates by William Hunter for renowned British physician William Smellie’s obstetrics atlas. Other notable historical works emphasized the allegorical and emblematic nature of medicine and surgery. These illustrations, conspicuously fraught with anxiety, included engraved 17th-century plates of menacing surgical instruments, images of frightening amputation procedures performed during the early 18th century and delightfully macabre images of articulated skeletons and body parts that decorated elaborate title pages in 17th-century medical textbooks.

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