

ART

The art of medicine

In 1943, when he was chair of the University of Toronto's anatomy department, Dr. John C. Grant published a massive textbook with a simple title: *An Atlas of Human Anatomy*. Filled with meticulously rendered images of the dissected human body, it swiftly became one of the most renowned anatomical atlases in the world. Now known as *Grant's Atlas of Anatomy*, it still features many of these same renderings after almost 70 years in print. This is a testament to their technical accuracy and clinical relevance — and perhaps something else as well: their uncanny beauty. Anatomical illustration can rise to the level of art, when rendered by the most gifted artists.

A current exhibition of the artwork used for *Grant's Atlas* repositions anatomical illustration as art in its own right. Divided among two venues in Toronto and Mississauga, *Splice: At the Intersection of Art and Medicine* takes Grant's visual mapping of the human body and dissects the book, as it were, into a series of discrete stand-alone masterpieces. Launched at the West Vancouver Museum earlier this year by its chief curator, Darrin Morrison, the exhibition offered a rare, up-close look at the original exquisitely detailed watercolours, coloured-pencil, carbon-dust and ink drawings that have been reproduced in the *Atlas*. Rather than a tribute to the book itself, the exhibition pays homage to the unheralded artists — most of them women — who created its enduring images. As exhibition curator Nina Czegledy writes in the accom-



Sclerosis, by Elizabeth Blackstock (watercolour, 1950)

panying text, anatomical illustration provided a portal for women to enter the medical field at a time when the profession was still overwhelmingly dominated by men.

The first academic program of medical illustration had been launched in 1911 by Max Brödel at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, providing a para-

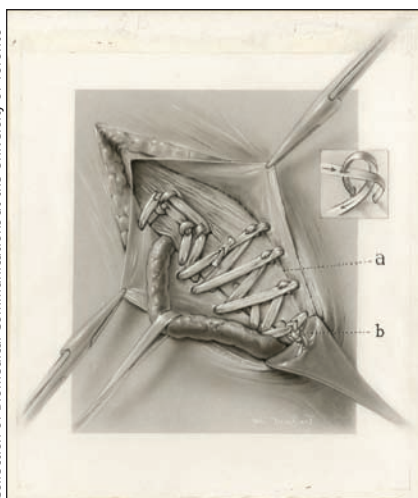
digim for Wishart's University of Toronto program. But the 20th century began not only with an explosion of scientific and medical discovery, but also with the first waves of feminism. The lead artist of Grant's *Atlas*, Maria Wishart, had become the dean of Medical Art Services at the University of Toronto and established Canada's first academic program of medical illustration in 1925. This pioneering program would become the Department of Art as Applied to Medicine in 1945, and is the precursor of the university's present-day Department of Biomedical Communications.

Wishart required her students to study life sciences, anatomy and surgical procedures — subjects widely considered a male-only domain. Yet the students also had to have and hone outstanding artistic talent as well. From this very select group of students came the most prolific illustrators of Grant's *Atlas*: Elizabeth Blackstock, Eila Hopper-Ross, Nancy Joy, Margaret Drummond and Dorothy Foster Chubb — who was herself a student of Brödel's. Together, they delved into the socially acceptable study of visual arts, while simultaneously devoting themselves to

the more marginalized (for women) study of science.

The process of actually transforming body part into art was laboriously explained by Grant himself in his preface to the *Atlas*. Each cadaver part was positioned and photographed as a kind of still-life object; the negative was enlarged and transformed into a

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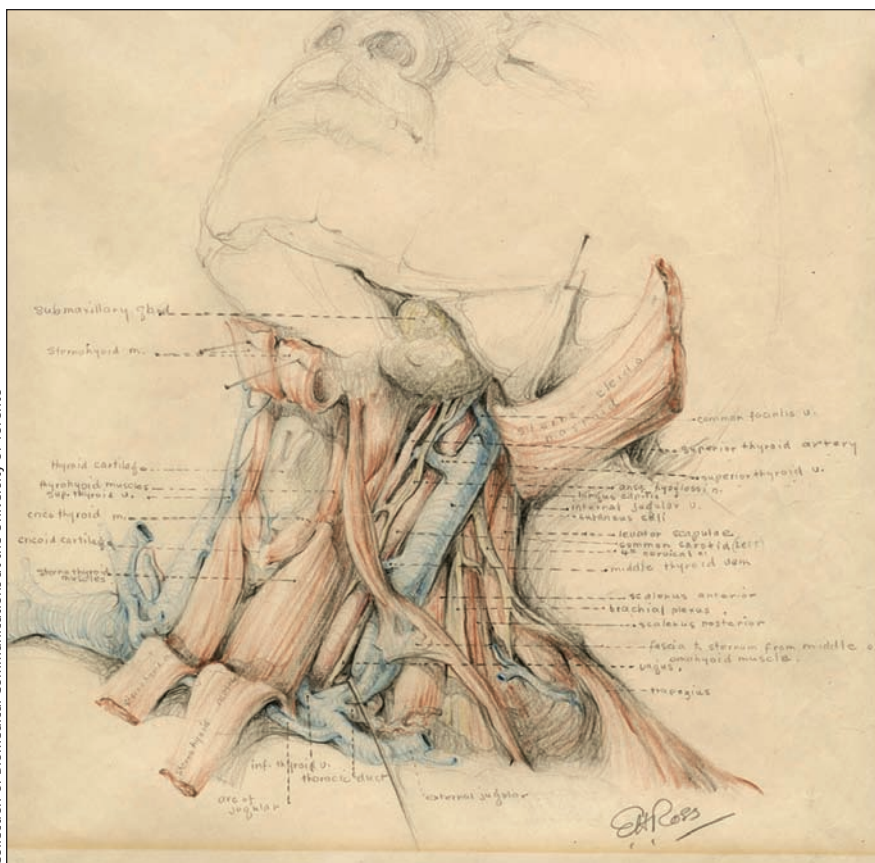
Living sutures ventral hernia repair, by Maria Wishart (carbon dust, 1924)

positive film, and a viewing box projected the outlines of the specimen onto tracing paper. “The outline tracing was then presented to the artist who transferred it to suitable paper and, having the original dissection beside her, proceeded to work up a plastic drawing in which the important features were brought out,” wrote Grant. “Thus, little, if any, liberty has been taken with the anatomy; that is to say, the illustrations profess a considerable accuracy of detail.”

Conspicuously absent in Grant’s dry explanation is any suggestion or boast of the powerful beauty of the results, most particularly when seen in their original format, as this exhibition uniquely offers. The mechanical reproductions — as these renderings appear to students and practitioners in the actual textbook — convey neither the subtle gradations of tone nor the exquisite delicacy of line that you can see in the originals. The original renderings — in carbon dust, pen, ink and watercolour — are quite often shockingly beautiful. They convey not just the complexity but also the pure elegance of human anatomy — even in pathology. The medical artists’ rare dual training in art and science fostered a certain kind of visual realism that seems unique to their field, as though each artist has animated the specimen in her own unique way.

As Czegledy argues: “Expert anatomical visualization, while based on factual observations and scientific

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Neck Anatomy, by Eila Hopper-Ross (coloured pencil, 1937–38)

data, is more personal, frequently beautiful yet sometimes frightful or grotesque.” Chubb’s *Suprarenal Gland* (1932) projects a startling looming golem-like figure; Blackstock’s *Sclerosis* (1950), a surreal nebula against a feathery backdrop. Wishart’s *Petrousitis* series (1936), including a “Necrotic patch of tissue with sequestrum” is as sculptural as anything by Henry Moore. The renderings offer more than practical illustration: they are a powerful reminder that the human body is, in itself, a work of art.

For the Toronto exhibitions, Czegledy is augmenting the 50 illustrations of the West Vancouver show with the work of nine contemporary artists whose work focuses on anatomical themes: Joyce Cutler Shaw, Jack Burman, Dana Claxton, Orshi Drozdik, Catherine Richards, Jon Baturin, Eric Fong, Rebecca Cairns and Fred Laforge. Acting in dialogue with the traditional medical illustrations, the works of these latter artists offer “a fresh discourse,” according to Czegledy, to address themes of authen-

ticity, substance, intervention, mediation and provocation. While frequently referring to science and anatomy, notes Czegledy in the exhibition text, they operate in a context that allows them to break free of a direct representation.

The medical artists of Grant’s *Atlas of Human Anatomy* had no such freedom in principle, but in practice they imbued their own idea of what life looks like, within the outlines of their subjects. Rendering their quiet artistic vision under such pragmatic constraints, they have left us with a legacy of pedagogy and beauty. One could hardly imagine a more fitting tribute to the human project.

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Splice: At the Intersection of Art and Medicine will be copresented by the University of Toronto Arts Centre and the Blackwood Gallery in Mississauga from Oct. 23 to Dec. 1, 2012.

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