

# Versions of Vesalius

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**Andreas Vesalius reformed anatomical knowledge and teaching in the Renaissance by adopting Galenic methods from the classical past. His careful drawings revealed the human body in unprecedented and realistic detail, but the images of himself were more ambiguous.**

Three of the Renaissance's most important books were published by northern Europeans within a single decade. First came Martin Luther's German translation of the Latin Bible (1534), which undermined the Pope's authoritative control by enabling ordinary people to read God's words directly for themselves. Nine years later, while Nicolas Copernicus was overthrowing Christian tradition to place the Sun instead of the Earth at the centre of the universe, Andreas Vesalius was rejecting conventional anatomy by examining the human body directly. Following Galen's advice to look and learn for himself, Vesalius revised significant errors that had been passed down through the centuries by men who pledged their faith in books rather than trusting the evidence uncovered by their scalpels.<sup>1</sup>

Vesalius's most famous illustrations for *The Structure of the Human Body* (1543) show giant skeletons striding across beautiful landscapes or grieving over the prospect of their own death, but he also portrayed in unprecedented detail the fine structure of nerves and veins, muscles and arteries. The son of an apothecary, Vesalius insisted that elite physicians should acquire the skills of working surgeons. Even so, despite his meticulous techniques, his education as a Galenic physiologist led him to get some details wrong. For example, he maintained that there must be tiny holes in the wall dividing the two sides of the heart, even though he could not see them.

To guarantee the verisimilitude and accuracy of his images, Vesalius collaborated closely with local draftsmen and woodblock cutters from artistic workshops. One of his innovations was to combine drawings with words, labelling bones and organs with tiny letters so that he could describe them more fully in his verbal accounts. In addition, his book opens with two complex images whose significance relies on the interplay of the visual and the textual information incorporated within them. Designed as a pair, both woodcuts include Vesalius himself.

To emphasize his message that doctors should rely on their hands as well as their memories, Vesalius posed for his own portrait next to a giant dissected human fore-arm

(Figure 1), holding it delicately to reveal its tendons. On the table lie the twin tools of his trade – a scalpel and a pen – while the paper leaning against the inkwell refers to his book's chapter on the muscles of the hand, precisely those that make an anatomist's work possible. The inscription across the front of the table follows artistic conventions by declaring Vesalius's age in 1642 (28), and beneath that is a Latin motto adapted from Celsus (the Roman predecessor of Paracelsus) recommending that medical treatment be carried out 'safely, quickly and pleasantly.'

Vesalius appears again in his book's frontispiece, which is even more densely packed with allegory (Figure 2). During the sixteenth century, an emblematic title page was regarded as a word/image rebus, an ambiguous puzzle to be deciphered by its readers. In Figure 1, Vesalius stares out of the page to make viewers share his emotions by engaging their eyes and attention, but here he invites us to observe him from the outside as he interacts with people located within the depiction.

Vesalius transformed book-bound medicine by insisting that physicians study with their hands, the intimate body-to-body procedure he advertises visually in this surgical scene. According to him, the cadaver was a convicted criminal who had tried to postpone execution by claiming she was pregnant, and his dissection confirmed the midwives' verdict that she was lying. Vesalius boasts about his intellectual predecessors by allying himself to the classical past: the two larger-than-life figures at the front are Aristotle, looking down at the dog that may be next on the dissecting table, and Galen, recognizable by the physician's prescription case on his belt. In the inscription at the top, although he is identified in Latin, Vesalius reminds readers that he came from Brussels, while the three weasels on his coat-of-arms refer to his original name, Andreas Van Wesele.

Traditionally, students stood below the high official chair of a professor who read out Latin texts while a surgeon went through the routine of dissecting a corpse and a demonstrator pointed out important features. Instead, Vesalius encourages spectators to cluster round closely, showing them how to identify organs and operate on them. In his book, he included many detailed illustrations of his equipment, as well as different parts of the body at various stages of exposure. Because he presented these in the same order as his actual dissections, Vesalius enabled distant students to feel like immediate witnesses and share the experience of delving deep inside a human corpse.

Both these pictures of Vesalius are imbued with religious references. In Figure 1, the clothing, hair and posture of the oversized standing cadaver recall contemporary portraits of Jesus and the crucifixion, and the prostrate corpse in the frontispiece resembles Christ after he has

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<sup>1</sup> For this article, I have drawn heavily on Park, K. (2006) *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection*. New York: Zone Books, pp. 207–59 and Long, P. (2002) 'Objects of art/objects of nature' in *Merchants and Marvels: Commerce, Science and Art in Early Modern Europe* (Smith, P. and Findlen, P., eds) (New York and London: Routledge), pp. 63–82.

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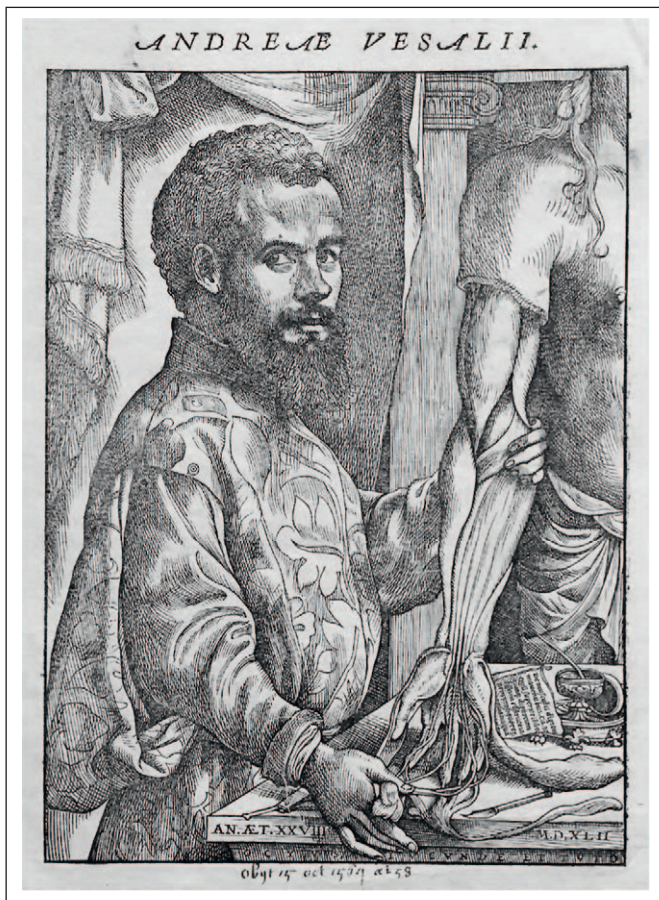


Figure 1. Portrait of Andreas Vesalius from his *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543).

been taken down from the cross, or else a saint stretched out on an altar. The prominent skeleton hanging over the body is both a teaching aid and a *memento mori* reminder of life's brevity. Like other anatomists, Vesalius was not embarrassed to play up the sexual connotations of dissection, and the shocking nature of this scene is reinforced by the fact that a male anatomist is pulling back a woman's flesh to display her abdomen.

Angling for employment (successfully, as it turned out), Vesalius dedicated his book to the Emperor, Charles V. Diplomatically, in his frontispiece he implied that the Hapsburg dynasty was descended from the imperial line of ancient Rome. Drawing on stories that had circulated in northern Europe for centuries, Vesalius alluded to Julius Caesar both in the Latin motto at the bottom and in his iconography. As suggested by the term 'Caesarean



Figure 2. Frontispiece from Andreas Vesalius, *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543).

operation', Caesar had allegedly been cut out alive from the womb of his dead mother, and Vesalius is here examining the woman's uterus. Caesar fathered the first emperor, and so this mythologized version of his origins suggests a lineage based on male violence rather than maternal influence. The violation of female honour is also conveyed by the eager men who throng round a naked, recumbent woman, her open legs angled down towards the external voyeur.

Caesar's rescue as a tiny baby heralded a new empire, and so the arrival of Vesalius' book is intended to signal the birth of a new type of anatomy, a 'reborn art of dissection' as he called it. By reverting to Galen's insistence on combining the skill of the hand with the insight of the mind, Vesalius was founding a scientific empire whose roots lay in the classical past.