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REVIEW

Preserved and Safeguarded Copies of Vesalius's Fabrica: a new census

Daniel Margócsy, Mark Somos, Stephen Joffe, *The Fabrica of Andreas Vesalius: A Worldwide Descriptive Census, Ownership, and Annotations of the 1543 and 1555 editions*, Brill, Leiden, 2018, xix + 517 pp. (incl. 132 illustrations, 5 maps & 9 tables) €165.00 HB

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Vesalius, called « the father of modern anatomy », was born nearly 500 years ago in Brussels, in 1514, in a family of physicians and pharmacists. He started his university studies in the *Pedagogium castrense* of the University of Louvain. Then he registered in 1533 at the medical faculty in Paris, where renowned professors, also famous for their philological knowledge, were teaching; among them, Jacobus Sylvius (1478-1555) and Johannes Guinterius Andernacus (1487-1574).

On December 5, 1537, Vesalius defended his dissertation in Padua in order to be ranked Doctor in Medicine. On December 6, the Senate of Venice, under whose authority the University of Padua was placed, appointed him *chirurgiae explicator*, i.e. in charge of the practical anatomy classes. It is also in December 1537 that Vesalius performed his first « anatomical demonstration » or public dissection.

Vesalius's career at the university was quite short (from December 1537 to September 1543, date when he started working as Emperor Charles V's physician), but it stands out as a unique example of the extraordinary intellectual and literary vitality of the young professor of anatomy, and anatomist himself, who published almost all his scientific work over this six-year period, and was constantly going from anatomical practice to teaching and writing, from asking questions and making observations to reading books, until he was able to question old theories and affirmations that others taught without ever having verified them.

In June 1543, the printer Oporinus put up for sale a superb in-folio of over seven hundred pages, illustrated with wood engravings (frontispiece, portrait of the author, plates in various sizes, title plates, either in full pages or inserted in the text, figures in the margins, versals, etc): the *De humani corporis fabrica libri septem*, and its *Epitome* are fundamental books, which ushered knowledge of the human body into the modern world, namely which are still considered as masterpieces of medical literature and of anatomical iconography.

The title of the treatise appears on the title page decorated with a superb but unsigned (like the other plates in the treatise) frontispiece that has sometimes been attributed to Jan Stefan van Calcar, sometimes to one of Titian's pupils, and even sometimes to Titian himself. The scene represents the author of the treatise dissecting the cadaver of a woman in an amphitheatre filled with spectators; this scene, world-famous today, has been the subject of numerous studies and interpretations, historical, artistic and philosophical, and it served as a model (« the anatomical lesson ») for one type of frontispiece typical of anatomical manuals for almost two centuries. This magnificent book was dedicated to the Emperor Charles V.

The iconography is striking in the precision of the observations and in the sense of proportions and of movement. The description of the human body is no longer made by regrouping similar parts, nor by investigating specific « cavities » in a way that encourages philosophical speculations, but it obeys an order defined by the anatomist whose purpose it is to build an architectural representation of human anatomy. The first two books respectively describe the skeleton and the muscles and they represent almost half the volume, because in Vesalius's eyes they are the two essential elements of the body: the skeleton is the bone frame ensuring solidity and the muscles are the instruments allowing voluntary movement.

Several editions and revisions were made during the 16th century : the small book edited by Jean de Tournes in Lyon in 1552, comprised in fact only books I and II, which describe the bones, cartilages, ligaments and muscles, and contains very few illustrations. Oporinus put up for sale another edition. In a larger format than the 1543 edition, the 1555 version of the *Fabrica* presented numerous modifications both in the text and in the illustrations. In fact the 1552 Lyon edition is an unauthorized edition, printed in a small format, with only four woodcuts; the 1568 Venice edition printed by Francisci and Criegher does not have the original woodcuts. En 1725, the *Vesalii opera omnia* edited by Boerhaave et Albinus encloses more or less the 1555 text, but with a new frontispiece and figures engraved on copper by Jan Wandelaar.

The *Fabrica* has left its mark on generations of physicians and artists through its text and iconography. Vesalius's book has not only been used as a standard work of reference but as a surgical implement. It has been copied and corrected, nourishing further anatomical knowledge as well as artists' creative imagination. Its high reputation has expanded to fields that are irrelevant to medicine, while its iconography has freed itself from the text and become autonomous.

The bibliography devoted to the *Fabrica* is immense. Since Cushing's fundamental work published in 1963¹, several researchers have attempted to inventory the copies of the 1543 and 1555 editions that still exist nowadays.² Taking the opportunity of the 500th anniversary of Vesalius's birth, new research was undertaken: it has fostered a major interest for the history of the book and enriched the Republic of Letters. Stéphanie Charreaux and Jérôme van Wijland have carried out a novel census and description of the *Fabrica* copies (1543) preserved in French public libraries,³ Stephen N Joffe and V Buchanan have done the same research in the United States, concerning the 1543 and 1555 copies.⁴ From 26 to 29 May 2017, under the patronage of the University of Antwerp (Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences) and the

¹ Cushing H. *A Bio-bibliography of Andreas Vesalius* 2nd edition. Hamden: Conn. Archone Books; 1963: 91-93. 218-9, XVI.

² Horowitz M and Collins J. "A Census of Copies of the First Edition of Andreas Vesalius' *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543), with a note on the Recently Discovered Variant Issue" *J Hist Med Allied Sci* 1984, 39: 198-221; Cockx-Indestege E and Andreas V E. *Andreas Vesalius: A Belgian Census*. Brussels, Royal Library; 1994: 160; Joffe S N. "A census of the edition of 1555 of Andreas Vesalius' *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*", *International Archives of Medicine*; 2009: 2: 26; Steeno O, Biesbroeck M. "Stolen and Lost Copies of Vesalius's *Fabrica*". *Acta Med Hist Adriat*; 2012: 10: 213-234.

³ Charreaux S. and van Wijland J. "Recensement et description des exemplaires de la première édition du *De Fabrica* (1543) conservés en France dans les bibliothèques publiques », in Vons J (ed). *La fabrique de Vésale. La mémoire d'un livre*, BIU Santé, Paris, 2016 : 253-312, <http://www.biusante.parisdescartes.fr/ressources/pdf/histmed-vesale-actes2014-13charreaux.pdf>

⁴ Joffe SN. and Buchanan V. "An Updated Census of the Edition of 1555 of Andreas Vesalius' *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* in the United States of America". *International Archives of Medicine*; 2015: 8: 1; Id., "Updated census in USA of first edition of Andreas Vesalius *De humani corporis fabrica* of 1543", *International Archives of Medicine*; 2015: 8, 23: 1-17.

Antwerp University Hospital, Francis van Glabbeek and Ann van de Velde organised at Zakynthos (Greece), the second international Vesalius Triennial Conference. Dániel Margócsy (University of Cambridge) presented a paper, *The Vesalius census: some spectacular copies*. He said he had made a census of all the copies known at present of the two editions of *De humani corporis fabrica* (302 copies from 1543 and 415 copies from 1555).

Today, Dániel Margócsy, Mark Somos and Stephen Joffe present their findings and describe authored editions from 1543 and 1555 separately, including complete and incomplete copies, but not the pirated or later editions.

Material and methods

The long introduction begins with the historical and scientific background of the writing of the *Fabrica* and its publication by Oporinus. The *Fabrica* was a masterpiece of printing, one of the most beautiful books in the first half of the sixteenth century (along with Fuchs's *De historia stirpium commentarii insignes*); with 700 pages and more than 200 figures. This book was very expensive, reserved for aristocrats or curial physicians. Meanwhile some annotations confirm that the *Fabrica* was donated by Vesalius to the Emperor Charles V and to various contemporary physicians, Stephanus Lagus, Renatus Henerus and Achilles Gasser. The copy at Boulogne-sur-mer is remarkable in every respect: it belonged apparently to Vesalius before Jan Walter Viringus, translator of the *Epitome*, as revealed in a note on the front flyleaf (*Sum Vesalij Galterij Viringi*) and in another on the frontispiece (*Iohannes Gualterius me possidet*) (*Census*: 148-149).

The next chapter of the introduction examines the history of the book across the centuries, and how its owners contributed to embellishing their copies with nice bindings and hand coloured plates. The authors examine the variety of these hand colours: decorative initials, Vesalius' portrait, and so on, but some colourings have a didactic function, for example for understanding the three-dimensional structure of the vascular system. Some diagrams show the type of owners across the centuries, from private physicians to public and university libraries. Coloured and tinted copies of illustrations are very rare. The Imperial copy belonging previously to Haskell Norman has completely coloured plates and the volume now in Chapel Hill would be the second copy but probably tinted and coloured several years after publication. A third copy with coloured plates is at Princeton University with eight contemporarily coloured figures of organs (Joffe 2015:10).

Analyses

The authors of the census make a description of the books as material objects, but they also examine how these objects have circulated across the globe since their publication. This is a very important project: they analyze what readers did with their copies of the book. The marginal annotations from readers are very interesting. Many annotations, corrections or information in the marginalia or under the figures show sufficiently that the *Fabrica* had filled a great position in the evolution of anatomical science. We can see that this book was read discontinuously but more often in a fragmentary manner: the census gives many examples of this sporadic reading that meant focused and selective attention from readers. By the aggregate of all these individual annotations, Margócsy, Somos, and Joffe are able to show how readers interpreted the *Fabrica* in the early modern and later periods, with summaries, underlinings, manicules or added drawings in the marginalia, comments on internal organs in Book V (seemingly readers' favourite section), annotations identifying bones or vessels with pen and

red or black ink, personal observations, comments about Vesalius's *disputationes* against Galen and the divergences between the two authors, and some critical notes of Vesalius's opinions.

As Charreaux and van Wijland have done with copies in France, the authors of this census pay attention to the ex-libris, and ex-dono, that mark the identity of the owner, his social or professional status. Some annotations tend to provide information about the life and death of Vesalius, and participate in the cult of this young genius.

The last chapter of the introduction examines the practices of Catholic censorship applied to this book, printed by a Protestant printer, Johannes Oporinus (listed on the Index in 1559) and containing figures and discussions of the sexual organs. Only one copy has been seen where the name of Oporinus was inked and four copies where the anecdote about the dissecting of the monk's mistress was censured (*Census*, fig. 73 and 75). But in general the content of the *Fabrica* was not significantly affected by the censor's attention (*Census*, fig. 77).

The authors have not included in the census the Variant copy in the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, which was presented by Lessing J. Rosenwald, retired chairman of Sears Roebuck and Company in 1943. This issue was probably an intermediate issue between the first and second edition, produced and distributed by the printer Oporinus between 1546 and 1551.

Results

A short but important guide opens the catalogue; the authors have personally examined several hundred copies, sent questionnaires to librarians, and have received photographic documentation. But in some cases, the information received from libraries and private collectors was incomplete. In some cases the authors were refused access. The descriptions are first of copies accessible to the larger public (institutions, libraries), then of books in private collections. The authors used also descriptions in auction catalogues (that is perhaps more hazardous). They assign each copy an identifying number. They describe the two editions separately, and list the books in alphabetical order, by country and city. The information is listed in a unique order for each copy: physical description, binding, provenance, annotations.

So readers can see how the first great modern anatomical book becomes, across the centuries, a rare book for collectors, while maintain valuable content for physicians and surgeons, historians of medicine and artists.