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2004

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Recommended Citation

Dowl, Aimée, "Dissecting Meaning from the Parts: the Anatomy of a Personal Collection" (2004). *Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition*. 19.

<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/nbcec/19>

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Neureuther Essay Prize Entry
March 26, 2004

Dissecting Meaning from the Parts: The Anatomy of a Personal Collection

I asked Professor Gavitt if I could tag along, and fortunately he said yes. He was taking his students from St. Louis University on a tour of the Archives and Rare Books section of Becker Medical Library at Washington University. I was hoping to get a glimpse of the Paracelsus collection, but ended up seeing much more. Many of us taking the ARB tour, lead by its unfailingly friendly and helpful librarian, Lilla Vekerdy, had never touched a book from the nineteenth century, much less the sixteenth, and we marveled at the beauty, functionality, and sturdiness of the bound relics. A bit surprised that we were permitted to pick them up, we knocked on the leather and wood bindings, unhinged the clasps, and turned the pages. The ornate script adorning the volumes attracted our curious eyes and set us to looking for recognizable words. Ms. Vekerdy graciously agreed to show us Washington University's edition of Andreas Vesalius's *De humani corporis fabrica*, arguably the most important work on human anatomy ever published and a masterpiece of Renaissance art. I couldn't resist asking Ms. Vekerdy how much the book is worth, but she assured us that the monetary value, which easily makes it the most expensive book owned by the university, is well beyond that of money. "Wow!" was heard around the table in whispers as she then threw out an astonishing figure.

My passion for the history of medicine and titles related to it was born in the Archives and Rare Books room. The wealth of information bound in these exquisite books attracted me to our shared medical heritage: uroscopy, cautery, and bloodletting; surgeons, alchemists, and midwives; dissection arenas, leprosaria, and hospitals. As I looked at more and more manuscripts and catalogues, I realized that my favorite histories – medicine, women, and art – melded into one in some of this collection's remarkable holdings. I was particularly drawn to indices of glorious illuminations in medieval and early modern medical manuscripts. One may not be able to read Latin, Greek, or a medieval vernacular, but certainly one can identify with the pain of a toothache or an injury or simply seeing the doctor. Vibrantly layered with reds, blues, greens, and gold, these manuscripts literally illuminate the experience of illness and its remediation throughout the ages in a manner that speaks to our common experience of suffering

with illness. Those interested in women's history take notice of the near-non-existence of female healers in these illustrations and the isolated representations of female patients. Where, one asks, is the female in medieval and Renaissance medical illustration? Scholars of history, the arts, social sciences, and other disciplines have dedicated increasing research time and funds to understanding women's roles as patients and medical practitioners in the distant past, and an admirable body of work has followed from their efforts.

Although my personal library contains many fiction and nonfiction books that deal with medicine generally, it is where women, art, and medicine mesh that I find my greatest inspiration. My Archive of Not-So-Rare Books, of course, cannot aspire to the brilliance and prestige of the ARB. It doesn't contain any hand-painted manuscripts or fragile folios; however, for those who browse it, my collection reveals our epoch's increasing preoccupation with recognizing and reconciling the relationship between art and medicine, whether it be through the use of images to clarify medical ideas or the use of medicine to construct images. I hope the emphasis among my titles on the role of women in these relationships will be particularly interesting to my little library's patrons.

I've built my collection based on what brings me looking and reading pleasure. Knowing that I would not be able to look at Vesalius's anatomical drawings from the sixteenth-century original at Becker Library everyday, I procured *The Illustrations from the Works of Andreas Vesalius* so that I could inspect the drawings at my leisure. Perusing my facsimile, I found that on top of being a great achievement of medical didacticism, Vesalius' anatomical drawings are thrilling and amusing to view. As the layers of the human body – skin, muscles, nerves – are drawn away, page by page, to finally reveal the skeleton, one also sees in the background the unfolding of the Italian countryside, serving as an earthly reminder of where this eviscerated human being once walked; this playfulness with scenery and awareness of death is entirely absent from today's clinical photos, which conceal subjects with cropped photos and black, personality-extinguishing boxes over the face -- indeed, in the age of photography and informed consent, an entirely appropriate practice. From Vesalius' famous frontispiece, which displays the anatomy theater occupied by himself, a fascinated and prestigious audience, animated skeletons, dogs, and a monkey, to the careful renderings of individual organs, these drawings solidified the connection between medicine and art for the ages.

Several exhibitions mounted to display pictorial and material medical culture reveal the marginalization of women's bodies in the history of medicine, and their catalogues have become an intriguing part of my personal library. The Vesalian anatomy reminds observers that early modern academic medicine relegated women to the dissection table. The only woman present in the frontispiece depicting the anatomy milieu is she who is on the table, cut open from sternum to pubis. Elsewhere in the text, she goes under the knife, although only to demonstrate the ways in which she contrasts with man: as a reproductive unit. Her genitalia and womb are revealed and justify her presence in the work, echoing her second-class status in society. Females also occupy a marginal place in the highly detailed woodcuts of Charles Estienne's anatomy (1545). Reprinted in several of my catalogues, the illustrations show segments of female reproductive system laid into existing portraits of Venus. These strange figures distinguish the female anatomy as an eroticized object in a most unexpected arena. Among the works in *The Physician's Art: Representations of Art and Medicine*, photographs of an eight-inch female manikin, whose delicate ivory belly may be removed to reveal her uniquely feminine organs and tiny in utero infant, mesmerize me. Clearly the delight of an upper-class owner, the doll sits on an exquisite velvet-lined divan, attired in miniature eighteenth-century aristocratic dress.

Woman as patient or as gynecological model can be found in medical art, but woman as medical practitioner is more conspicuously absent. My library highlights some important exceptions, such as an exemplary depiction of a midwife delivering a child in *Ars Medica*, a catalogue of collected medical prints at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. A characteristic coin purse dangling from her belt, the *sage femme* sits before the parturient woman, propped on a birthing stool by two female attendants. In the background, a male astrologer casts the newborn's horoscope, in keeping with sixteenth-century medical astrology. Perhaps the most famous midwife in western history is Madame du Coudray, who produced babies "like a cobbler produces shoes" and is credited with the astounding feat of increasing the population of eighteenth-century France. Her textbook, which is analyzed in *The King's Midwife: A History and Mystery of Madame du Coudray*, contains unparalleled color engravings that had never before been used in anatomical illustration. A rival to her achievement is the success of Martha Ballard, the paragon of midwives on the American front. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's Pulitzer-Prize-winning study of Ballard's diary from 1785-1812 reveals that this midwife's infant and maternal mortality rates were significantly lower than those of her male physician

contemporaries or even hospitals in the 1930's. Furthermore, Ms Ulrich's investigation of the diary celebrates the thoughtful self-reflection of a literate female practitioner while revealing her own ambitious intellectual effort to unravel the mysteries of this great American document.

While women have practiced medicine since the Middle Ages, records of their work are limited because of exclusion from universities and widespread devaluation of their roles as healers, in part a result of the professionalization of medicine. When obstacles to advancement in the arts got in the way, female anatomists were further constrained. A classic on women artists by Germaine Greer, recently rereleased by popular demand, and Gianna Pomata's *Contracting a Cure: Patients, Healers, and the Law in Early Modern Bologna* briefly mention the work of Anna Morandi Manzolini, whose wax anatomical figures have the verisimilitude of flesh. Morandi, even as she was constrained by the prejudice of the eighteenth-century Bolognese medical elite, produced her extraordinary wax reliefs based on her own dissections and identified several new structures and functions of the body in her writings. *Spectacular Bodies: The Art and Science of the Human Body from Leonardo to Now* displays one mounted female face by Morandi in addition to several impossibly lifelike wax anatomical figures of females by other artists. Other works pay lip service to Morandi's achievement, although my library awaits a more thorough study of her work.

A gross pastiche on the dismemberment and discomfort inherent in anatomical dissection is the exuberant and challenging work of artist Cindy Sherman. Following centuries of illustrated and photographed anatomy, Cindy Sherman crosses the fragmentation of the cadaver with contemporary objects and modern constructs, such as manikins and various female personae. She plays continuously on the role of the body in the history of western art by fashioning her subjects of plastic limbs and organs into iconographic poses, forcing viewers to consider the role of women's bodies, both as images and in their living individuality, in the construction of beauty.

From illustrated medieval manuscripts to daringly modern revisions of medicine in art, my personal library reveals women in myriad roles: as patients, cadavers, practitioners, visionaries, and as subjects and the artists who depict them. A fascination that began with images of dissection has led to a small collection that emphasizes the body. Even in its dismembered parts, I have come to find beauty, knowledge, and inspiration. In their contents, readers can discover the powerful connection between the history of disease and treatment and

how we view the body, particularly the female body, today. When someone asks me how much my books are worth, I can only think of that power and respond: priceless.

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