Vesalius' Digitally Restored Renaissance-Era Prints Bring Dissection to Life

By: Katherine Lattal, Galter Library Special Collections volunteer

In celebration of famed Renaissance anatomist Andreas Vesalius' 500th birthday in 2014, Northwestern professors and library staff teamed up to produce a complete annotated translation of Vesalius' masterpiece, *De humani corporis fabrica* (*The Fabric of the Human Body*). Professors Daniel H. Garrison (Classics) and Malcolm H. Hast (Otolaryngology—Head & Neck Surgery) worked for over 20 years on the two volume set, utilizing an original 1555 second edition of the *Fabrica* in the collection of Galter Health Sciences Library.

Full-size prints from the *Fabrica* are now on display on the mezzanine of Galter Health Sciences Library.

Vesalius began his medical education when the humanist movement was reaching its peak in Europe. Humanism was rooted in the idea that direct readings of primary classical texts provided a better foundation for learning than medieval sources, which were often inaccurate, confusing, and rife with errors. Vesalius had access to ancient Greek and Latin medical texts previously unknown to medieval practitioners, particularly more accurate texts of Galen, the influential ancient physician and philosopher. Whereas Galen's experience in anatomy came mostly from animal dissection, Vesalius was able to practice the novel procedure of human dissection while still a student, and he became known for his adroitness in both philology and autopsy. As Vesalius observed more and more of the human body during dissection, he realized that many of Galen's writings were inaccurate. Vesalius began to challenge the ancient authorities, arguing that observation and critical analysis developed through practical experience were superior to following an ancient source blindly.

At the time, anatomy was taught from crude drawings of the body, created as memory aids and thus anatomically imprecise. Vesalius, undoubtedly due in large part to his humanist education, believed the physical aspect of anatomy—observing or perhaps even taking part in a dissection—was just as important as theoretical education, if not more so. This conviction shaped the *Fabrica* and offered a significant contribution to revolutionizing the teaching of anatomy in Renaissance Europe. Vesalius' innovation was to provide finely detailed illustrations of the skeletal, muscular, vascular, and nervous systems drawn from life and accompanied by descriptions gathered from observation, interviews, and other research. The *Fabrica* was an instant classic, used by physicians, medical students, and even artists, and would influence medical training for centuries to come.

Vesalius' *Fabrica* is still engaging for modern audiences, especially for the artistry of its illustrations. The illustrations currently on display on Galter Library's mezzanine level show figures that are set against pleasant pastoral backdrops. Many of the bodies are posed like classical Greek and Roman sculpture, another nod to Vesalius' humanist roots. Vesalius blends the most recent advances in medical science with Renaissance art and thus allows the talent and creativity of the *Fabrica's* illustrator to really stand out. These prints are just one small way in which we can still appreciate Vesalius' work.

If you are interested in viewing the 2014 translation or the 1555 second edition of Vesalius' *De humani corporis fabrica*, please contact Special Collections at ghsl-specialcollections@northwestern.edu for an appointment. For more information on the new volumes of Vesalius' *Fabrica*, please see http://www.vesaliusfabrica.com/en/home.html and http://vesalius.northwestern.edu/index.html. Thank you to University Libraries Digital Media Library and Academic

Technologies for the prints on display.