Estienne’s La dissection des parties du corps humain

Special Collections featured item for August 2014 by Erika Delbecque, former Liaison Librarian for Pharmacy and Mathematics.


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Charles Estienne’s La dissection des parties du corps humain [see title-page shown left] is one of the great illustrated anatomical works of the sixteenth century. It offers a fine example of the accomplishments and innovations of the Parisian printing houses of this period, and its full-page woodcuts have fascinated readers to this day.

Charles Estienne (c. 1504-1564) was a French physician who conceived of this work when he was still a medical student in Padua. It was at this time that he also met Étienne de la Rivière, the surgeon who would carry out the dissections that provided the basis for the book’s illustrations, and who is likely to have contributed to their design. As the stepson of Simon de Colines, Charles Estienne was able to have his work
published by one of the greatest printing houses in France. De Colines’ influential innovations in the design and type of French printing can also be seen in *La Dissection*, such as the clean layout of the page and the use of italic font, in which de Colines, a former type-cutter, followed Italian models.

This woodcut was made by Étienne de la Rivière, and includes his initials (hanging from a tree stump on the lower right hand side of the image). The use of an explanatory index was one of Estienne’s innovations.

The printing of the work was delayed by several years because of a dispute between Estienne and de la Rivière, in which the latter accused the former of plagiarism because his
contribution to the work was not acknowledged. The Latin version, *De Dissectione Partium Corporis Humani Libri III*, was finally published in 1545, and duly recognised Étienne de la Rivière’s efforts by listing him as the co-author on the title-page. When it was published, Estienne’s work was only the fourth fully illustrated anatomical work on the whole body in Europe. The fact that the French translation appeared the next year testifies to the popularity of the *Dissectione*, and the interest that the science of anatomy generated.

For the most part, Estienne based his *Dissectione* on the works of the Ancient Roman physician and surgeon Galen of Pergamon. Many errors in the Galenic doctrine would be corrected by Vesalius, whose ground-breaking work *De humani corporis fabrica libri septem* [see image above] was published two years prior to the *Dissectione* in 1543. Nevertheless, *De fabrica* was in fact conceived after Estienne’s work, and scholars have recently recognised the influence it had on the work of Vesalius, who studied with Estienne at the University of Paris in the 1530s. Although *La Dissection* is less successful in its attempt at anatomical illustration than *De fabrica*, it contains some original contributions to the science of anatomy, as well as the earliest illustrations of the whole external venous and nervous system and of detailed brain dissections [see image below].
Plate showing dissection of the brain from Book 2. Note the broken lines betraying that both the depiction of the dissection and the skullcap on the table are later insets into the original woodcut.
Through the publication of his work, Estienne, who had already published popular works on agriculture and literature prior to the *Dissectione*, aimed to bring anatomical knowledge to a wider audience. Annual dissections had become a standard part of university education for medical students in the fifteenth century, and through using print, Estienne was able to replicate this process for anyone who had an interest in anatomy. According to Estienne’s preface to the work, the many illustrations in the book serve to replicate the experience of witnessing a live demonstration of a dissection as closely as possible:

“Nostre intention et deliberation n’est que de te montrer tant seulement et descripre en ce lieu ce que nous avons veu devant noz yeulx et faict dissequer en nostre presence”

“Our intention and consideration is only to show and describe to you solely what we have before our eyes and have dissected in our presence”

Nevertheless, many scholars have since commented on the inaccuracy of the anatomy in the illustrations. Often, the depictions of the organs are indistinct or incorrect, and the proportions are poor. However, others have argued that despite his naive claim to authenticity in the preface, accuracy may not have been Estienne’s primary concern: in rendering the mysteries of human anatomy visible through print, the need for comprehensibility to the lay reader may have justified these deviations in Estienne’s eyes.

*La Dissection* is divided into three books, and it contains 64 full-page woodcut illustrations, and 101 small woodcuts in the text. One is signed by Étienne de la Rivière, some are signed by the engraver Jean Jollat, others include a monogram commonly used by the workshop of the famous engraver Geoffrey Tory, and yet others reveal nothing of their authorship. In some of the woodcuts, part of the original has been replaced by a newer inset depicting the dissection [see image above], which suggest that they may have been unused woodcuts from de Colines’ printing house that were repurposed into anatomical illustrations for Estienne’s work.

The varying provenance of the illustrations is reflected in their variety in style and quality. In the first book, we encounter a series of skeletons depicted against landscape backgrounds, mostly executed in a crude, popular style. They contrast sharply with the mannerist style of the elaborate landscapes and extravagant poses of the figures in the second book. The illustrations in this book refer to the practice of dissection as a spectacle: the bodies are artificially arranged in dramatic poses, and some illustrations include depictions of spectators. The act of dissecting is thus aestheticised and displaced, possibly to alleviate the discomfort associated with the idea of dissection for the reader.
Plate depicting dissection of the uterus, showing twin foetuses. Again, note the broken lines indicating the inset into the original woodcut. The plate contains a wealth of detail such as the carvings and decorations on the opulent furniture.
We encounter yet another style in the woodcuts of Book 3, which deals with the female reproductive organs, by an anonymous Italianate master [see image above]. The tone of these prints is overtly erotic. For example, the illustrations include nude women reclining amongst heaps of pillows on lavish beds. Indeed, these woodcuts are likely to have been influenced by an erotic series of prints, Les amours des dieux, by Perino del Vaga, a pupil of Raphael. As in Book 2, insets depicting the dissections replace part of the woodcuts, reinforcing the possibility that these illustrations were originally intended for a different purpose altogether. The combination of the eroticism of the poses with the grimness of the act of dissection creates an unsettling effect, making these some of the most fascinating illustrations in La Dissection.

Further reading


Detail from decorative furniture carving (from plate shown above)