

## **Magnificent musculature enlivens Andreas Vesalius' brilliantly illustrated monument of anatomical medicine**

Andreas Vesalius, *De humani corporis fabrica*. Basel: Oporinas, 1543. 16 1/8 inches x 11 3/8 inches (410 x 289 mm), 700 pages, illustrated throughout.

Andreas Vesalius' *De humani corporis fabrica* (On the fabric of the human body) is arguably the best-known book in the history of Western medicine. Published in 1543, at the height of the Renaissance, it is an exhaustive visual atlas and verbal description of human anatomy based in part on the author's own dissections; its massive Latin text of over 700 folio pages contains extensive descriptions of the tools and techniques of dissection, as well as the structures of the human body those tools and techniques reveal. The whole is illustrated by a remarkable series of woodcuts from the circle of Titian. A book of great intellectual complexity and physical beauty, it was also a work of daring, reflecting Vesalius' youthful ambition — he was only twenty-eight when he completed it — and his desire to use the new technology of printing and the developing artistic techniques of the period to push the edges of contemporary anatomical knowledge.

To a modern reader, the most striking and original aspect of the *Fabrica* is its heavy reliance on images. They were based on meticulous observation of dissected cadavers, and Vesalius conjoined them closely with his text, using an elaborate system of captions, cross references, and marginal annotations, which made them an integral part of his presentation. Furthermore, the illustrations were works of art in their own right; even the simplest far exceeded all previously published anatomical images in clarity and detail, and the more elaborate were extraordinary for their beauty and the originality of their conception.

*De fabrica* was aimed at an audience of “learned men” — classical scholars and, especially, practicing physicians — who lacked the skills to do their own dissections as well as access to cadavers, and who would welcome his work both for its practical utility and its contribution to anatomy as an intellectual discipline. The elaborate title page shows Vesalius in the middle of a public dissection, surrounded by a large audience of students and other

viewers. It both depicts a number of his pedagogical innovations — he performed his own dissections, used animal as well as human cadavers, and employed an articulated skeleton to demonstrate the bones of the body — and places the anatomist in a central and commanding position, underscoring his authority by the fact that of all the figures in the woodcut, only he engages the reader's gaze.

This beautiful copy from the Warnock Library is bound in seventeenth-century marbled brown calfskin over pasteboard. The boards are plain, having no decoration. The spine, which has been re-backed, is divided into eight panels by bands. The title is gilt on a red leather label on the second panel. Other panels have double gold rules with a diamond decoration in the center of each panel. This book belonged to John Cecil (1648–1700), fifth Earl of Exeter and sixth Baron Burghley, and remained in the family library until 1959.

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