

Bare bones

Block Museum's anatomical art exhibition dissects the role of gender **By Ruth Lopez**



Jacques Fabien Gautier D'Agoty, *Exposition anatomique des maux vénériens, sur les parties de l'homme et de la femme...., 1773.*

In her work as an art historian, Northwestern University professor Lyle Massey didn't start out looking for differences in how the sexes are portrayed in art. But when you are an academic, casual observation can often graduate to a premise.

"I just became so struck between the way men's bodies were depicted and women's bodies were depicted," says Massey, who curated "The Anatomy of Gender," at the Block Museum.

The exhibition of early anatomical art includes illustrations and objects from the mid-1500s to 1800. While there have been several museum shows on anatomical art over the years, this key issue has been overlooked. For the most part, she says, male bodies were shown in action, women in repose. Massey, whose area of expertise is Italian Renaissance art, noticed that illustrations of the female often

embodied an erotic component.

In the work of Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and other artists, the human body is a universal (and, in some cases, pioneering) theme. Artists and physicians studied anatomy for different yet intersecting reasons; in dissecting the dead, artists could accurately draw the living while surgeons could learn how to fix the living.

The rise of anatomical art is tied to developments in printing, as this exhibit

makes clear. Sharing new discoveries on the human body became possible with the production of scientific texts.

Among the work on display are three of the main medical at-

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lases of the human body from the 1500s: Vesalius's *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*, first printed in 1543, revolutionized anatomical studies with illustrations based on scientific examination; Juan Velarde de Amusco and Charles Estienne's works set the tone of naturalism in anatomical imagery.

Vesalius was a physician with a passion for anatomy and accurate representation. He performed dissections and worked with

artists to produce accurate anatomical charts. "There is an important contrast between male heroism and engagement of the world and a woman's passive portrayal, which is overlaid with eroticism," Massey says.

You can see this clearly in the pair of 18th-century carved ivory models of the pregnant female. The delicate, prone figures are asleep, their belly compartments open so we can "discover her secrets," as Massey says. In another small statue, a pregnant woman stands, her knee bent coyly like a Botticelli figure.

Massey points out that there is a paradigm between interior and exterior views of the human body—with guys, we get to see muscles and eviscera (blood and guts, if you will).

Of course, we chose to run a photo that's the one odd exception: D'Agoty's stunning mezzotints are hard to come by and are great examples of early color printing. The Deering Library's special-collections department recently acquired this piece.

This exhibit overlaps with an international conference at Northwestern on art, science and anatomy in early modern European art, which examines the impact of anatomical images across disciplines. There has also been a project under way at the university to produce the first complete translation of the Vesalius atlas into English. The job is only half finished, but all 254 woodcuts have been digitally scanned and can be viewed online at vesalius.northwestern.edu.

If you saw "Body Worlds"—German anatomist Gunther von Hagens's sensational traveling exhibition of dissected human cadavers—and thought it was revolutionary, consider that up into the 19th century, dissections of human bodies were once public spectacles. "Body Worlds" also sequestered its sliced-open pregnant woman behind white curtains—continuing a tradition of cloaking the female with mystery. "This show is intended to counter what [Von Hagens] is doing," Massey says.

"The Anatomy of Gender: Arts of the Body in Early Modern Europe" is at the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art through March 12. See Museums & Institutions.