

Book Reviews

A. HYATT MAYOR, *Artists and anatomists*, Oxford, Blackwell Scientific Publications, 1984, 4to, pp. vi, 132, illus., [no price stated].

There is no better way to introduce this delightful book by Hyatt Mayor, Curator of Prints at the Metropolitan Museum of Art 1946–66, than to quote the opening sentences of the author's own short preface: "Histories of anatomy exist in sufficient quantity, so this essay revolves around two questions only: What have artists done to record dissections and so help anatomists to see? And what, in turn, have anatomists discovered to help artists in portraying man's body? These questions center on the everlasting preoccupation of Western art, which is the study of man."

The posthumous publication of the manuscript which Mayor had written some thirty years earlier is, in a sense, a milestone in the sporadic but continuing collaboration which medical historians and art historians have enjoyed over the decades. The medical historians have been fairly consistent in treating the contributions of artists, as a survey of this journal reveals. The art historians have been more fickle, and in recent decades there has been very little discussion in their "trade periodicals" of the work that many major artists produced in the area of anatomical illustration. A comparison between the date of the research and writing of Mayor's manuscript and the publication date of the book is significant in this regard, and we may hope that the decision to publish it at this time indicates a revival of interest in the art world on the subject.

The year 1943 furnished a convenient focus for the study of anatomical illustration, as it marked the 400th anniversary of the publication of Vesalius's *Fabrica* and *Epitome*. 1934 had seen the publication of the *Icones anatomicae*, from the original wood-blocks for these publications, with the learned explications of J.B. de C.M. Saunders and C.D. O'Malley. The project to publish a facsimile of this edition was delayed by the war until 1950, by which time the original blocks had been destroyed in the bombing of Munich. The Vesalian quatercentenary also provided the occasion for William Ivins, Mayor's mentor and predecessor at the Metropolitan, to publish his controversial essay on the Vesalian artists, unique in the literature as an analytical study of this famous problem informed by knowledge of "how prints are made". It was in the context of this intellectual ferment that Mayor began to indulge his well-known curiosity about all aspects of printed illustration, leading to the present book.

The book attempts to survey anatomical illustration from ancient times to the present, with attention to eastern as well as western manifestations of the art. The material is divided into chapters chronologically, with a cavalier disregard for proportional representation. It is highly subjective but, given the immense learning and experience of the author, not superficial, though, as with all Mayor's books, the absence of footnotes and bibliography is sometimes annoying. It is a book to be read for its startling insights and imaginative prose style rather than for factual instruction. Almost any page chosen at random will provide sentences worth quoting: "Michaelangelo started dissecting when he was about seventeen and continued off and on for years until he looked into every living body as into a package of structure and, conversely, imagined every dissection in lively action, which makes it often impossible to tell whether he is drawing from a model or a dissection . . . Indeed he may have thought that dissection uncovered a nakedness beyond nudity" (pp.68–69). Or, on the Renaissance, "Artists saw what doctors had not seen because they approached anatomy with an entirely different practical purpose and because you do not really see a thing until you try to draw it . . ." (p.49). Mayor always wrote with a single purpose in mind: to provoke, enrage, or titillate the viewer into looking more closely at the object at hand. In this he succeeds brilliantly in this book, and I would challenge any reader, who might be looking to quibble over facts (and it is almost impossible to prove Mayor wrong, I have tried), to read this book and not share his intellectual and spiritual exaltation at that phenomenon which lies at the core of both artistic and medical investigation: the human body.

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