

# The theatre of anatomical dissection

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**Elma Brenner**

15 Sep 2020, 12.47

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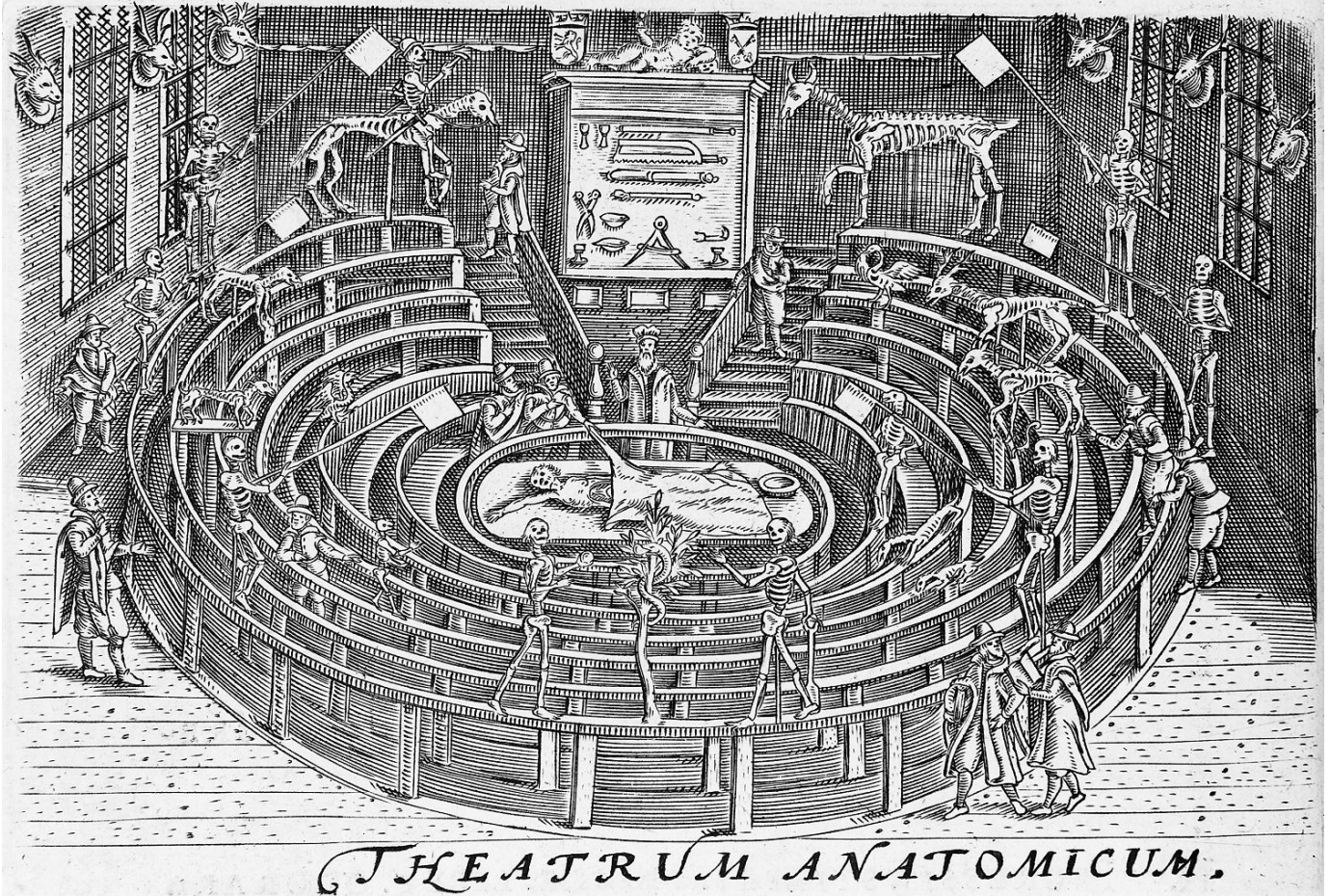
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During the early modern period, the anatomy theatre became one of the first and foremost places where scholars, artists, scientific practitioners, and members of the general public gathered to learn more about the human body and the natural world. Illustrative of their established status as a location of knowledge, permanent anatomy theatres were built at the end of the sixteenth century at the universities in Padua, Bologna and Leiden.



## IOANNIS MEYRSI



For professors and students, the architecture of the anatomy theatre offered clear educational benefits, making it easier for students to simultaneously observe the dissections and hear the professor lecturing on anatomical texts. However, as we shall see, the anatomy theatre also had an aesthetic function through which the anatomical dissection itself became highly theatricalised.

Traditionally, the texts read out by learned physicians in the anatomy theatres were considered to be the most important source of knowledge. Performed by barber-surgeons or dissectors rather than professors of medicine or anatomy, the dissection itself functioned to illustrate what was being read and heard. In 1306, for example, the professor of anatomy at the University of Bologna Mondino de Luzzi (c.1270-c.1326) oversaw the public dissection of a human body, and is shown in an illustration of c.1493 sitting elevated in a chair, holding an open book whilst pointing to the body on the table below.

The first book to include a description of an anatomy theatre was written by Alessandro Benedetti (c.1450-1512), professor in medicine and anatomy at the University of Padua. His 1502 Anatomy or the History of the Human Body promoted the anatomy theatre's visual and auditory qualities. However, in his dedication to Emperor Maximilian I, Benedetti also refers to the horrible task of dissecting, stating that this is worthy of its own theatrical spectacle.

The theatrical character of dissections indeed became increasingly accepted in the following centuries; this was further helped by the fact that dissections often took place during carnival. In addition, music often accompanied the entrances, dissections and orations of doctors. Students, too, occasionally led lute players into the theatre to please the spectators and to lighten the mood. Furthermore, Benedetti's description, quoted below, shows the public nature of anatomical dissections, which were attended not only by medical students but also by an eager and paying general audience.

“ A temporary theatre should be established in a sizeable and well-ventilated place with seats around it, and of such a size as to hold a number of spectators so that the dissectors may not be disturbed by the crowd. These should be skilled men who have conducted several dissections. Seating must be allotted in order of rank. There must then be one Praefectus to keep an eye on everything and to put people in their places. There must be guards to restrain the eager public as it enters. Two reliable stewards should be chosen to make the necessary payments from the money that is collected.

The adoption of the architecture and practices of the theatre for anatomical dissections is paralleled by an early modern shift in medical teaching practices from text towards action and observation. For professors, this shift meant that they started to climb down from their lecterns to become more visibly hands-on with the dissections. For students, it meant that anatomical dissections took a more prominent place in their medical training. On occasion, they would also handle parts of the dissected human or animal body, much to the disgust of onlookers.





ANDREAE VESALII  
BRUXELLENSIS, SCHOLAE  
medicorum Patauinæ professoris, de  
Humani corporis fabrica  
Libri septem.

CVM CAESAREAE  
Majest. Galliarum Regis, ac Senatus Veneti gra-  
tia & privilegio, ut in diplomatis eorundem continetur.

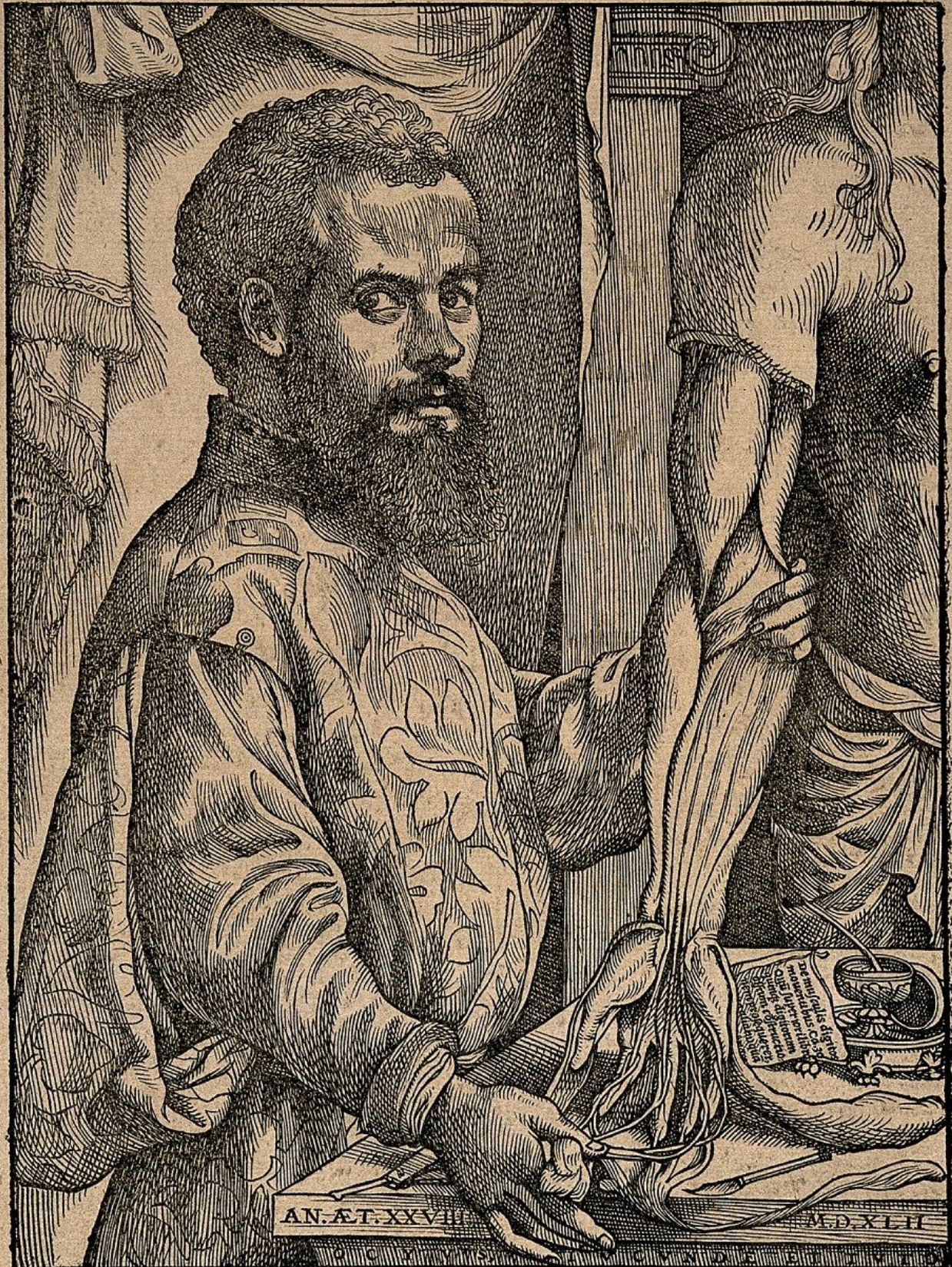
B A S I L E A E .



The title page of *On the Fabric of the Human Body* (1543) by Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564) is illustrative of this change from text to action and observation. It no longer depicts a professor of anatomy, as Vesalius was, sitting in a chair overlooking the dissection. Instead, Vesalius is shown standing on the floor adjacent to the body and is surrounded by spectators, which underlines the public and theatrical nature of the dissection. The dissectors are still present, but they are no longer central, being seated under the table, sharpening their knives.



ANDREAE VESALII.



In the same book, Vesalius's portrait shows him using his hands to point out the muscles in a dissected forearm. While the image clearly places the emphasis on action and observation, text from Vesalius's book is visibly present in his portrait, with the opening words to Vesalius's section on the arm. This underlines the fact that textual information



continued to play an important role for medical training. However, the title page and portrait in Vesalius's work show that action and observation are now prioritised over textual information.

We have seen that the theatre had an important impact on the architecture and practice of anatomical dissection during the early modern period. During the seventeenth century this increased further still when anatomical theatres, in particular the one built in Leiden, became places of exhibition or 'cabinets of curiosities'. Aimed at the moral edification of artists, scholars, and members of the general public, the space of the theatre used a combination of text, images, and objects to communicate the new understandings of humankind and the natural world beyond the field of learned medicine. In this regard, the impact of the anatomy theatre reaches far beyond the disciplines of anatomy and medicine, which is something we are only just beginning to understand.

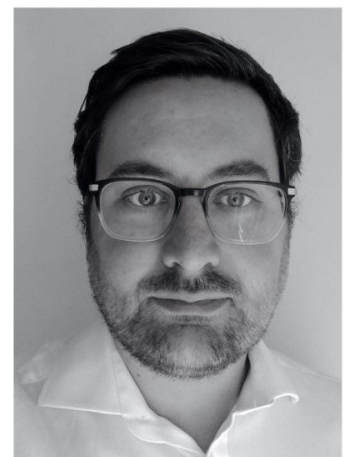
### Further reading:

Cynthia Klestinec, *Theaters of Anatomy: Students, Teachers, and Traditions of Dissection in Renaissance Venice* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

Sachiko Kusukawa, *Picturing the Book of Nature: Image, Text, and Argument in Sixteenth-Century Human Anatomy and Medical Botany* (The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

## MEET OSCAR SEIP

Dr Oscar Seip is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the research group "Visualizing Science in Media Revolutions" led by Dr Sietske Fransen at the Bibliotheca Hertziana - Max Planck Institute for Art History in Rome. He studied Theatre and Art Studies at the University of Amsterdam and Cultural and Intellectual History at the Warburg Institute in London. His doctoral research focused on the sixteenth-century Italian philosopher Giulio Camillo and his 'Theatre of Knowledge' as a case study for the intertwined early modern history of the arts and the (medical) sciences. His current research project examines how artists, scholars, and scientific practitioners used the theatre to reimagine the world, and their place in it. As a case study, the project sets out to classify a corpus of 842 printed works that have the word theatre in their title and were printed between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe.



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## 1 Comment



**Erika Loggin**

Graduate Trainee

Tuesday 15 September 2020

Thanks for sharing, Elma! I had no idea anatomical theatres were so theatrical -- even lute players! I have only visited one, at the Gustavianum in Uppsala, and found it a very eerie place.

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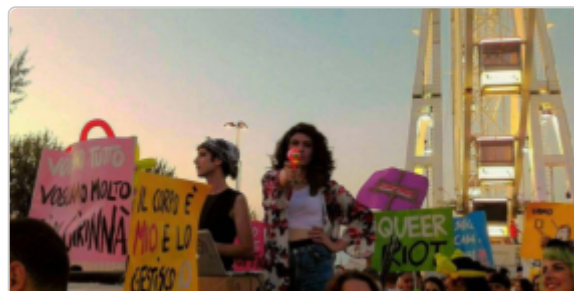
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