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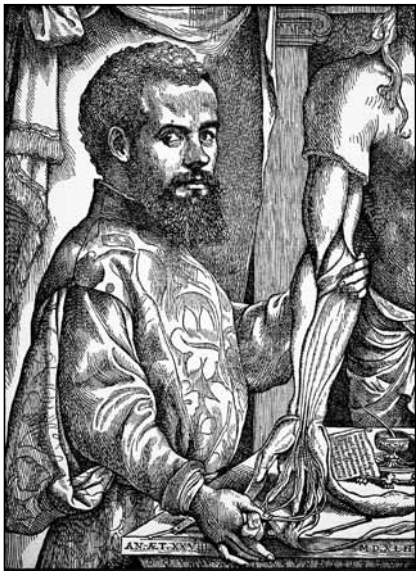
Andreae Vesalii Bruxellensis Icones anatomicae. Part 2

In the first part of this article[1] I described some of the background to the reprinting in 1934[2] of the woodcuts from the original sixteenth-century wood blocks of Vesalius's *Fabrica* and *Epitome*, many of which survived until 1944 when they were destroyed in an Allied air raid on Munich. I also showed a comparison of the details of one of the musclemen as they appear in the Library's copy of the first edition of the *Fabrica* of 1543 and in the 1934 reprint from the same wood block which had been slightly modified for the 1555 edition.



Portrait of Vesalius from: Andreae Vesalii Bruxellensis Icones Anatomicae, Munich, 1934

Wiegand, who printed the images from the blocks in 1934, remarked on their remarkable state of preservation and on the fact that they had been treated with oil before cutting.[3] Some of the fine detail of the first muscleman is much better preserved in the 1934 reprint than it is in the image printed from the block in 1543 when it was new.[1] This observation, surprising at first sight, merits a little more discussion.

The 1934 images were printed from the blocks on a modern hand-press which, as Wiegand points out, was able to exert higher pressure than the rather soggy presses of the sixteenth century. He also mentions the technique of pasting slips of paper on to the tympan to adjust the pressure on localised areas and suggests that, '...in the time of Vesalius, preparation for the press could be done only in a rough way...'. We do not have any accounts of the printing of woodcuts from the sixteenth century but the use of paper slips to adjust the press-pressure locally was certainly current in letterpress printing in the seventeenth[4] and eighteenth centuries[5] and I suspect it was used in the sixteenth century also – and almost certainly for setting up wood blocks as well as type. Wood blocks were very frequently set up along with letterpress on the same page, and printed on the same pull of the press and so must have been carefully levelled and adjusted to print correctly at the same time as the type. All the woodcuts of the *Fabrica* and the *Epitome* have letterpress on the same page. However this may be, the sixteenth-century press was certainly capable of only modest pressure and the results achieved by Wiegand using a modern press are very fine indeed; the images of the *Icones* are better printed than those of the 1543 *Fabrica*. Ashley-Montagu[6] remarked on the 'deep black ink' used in the reprinting on what he says is too white paper; it is certainly true that the contrast of the images is much higher than that in the original editions of the *Fabrica*. I doubt, though, that the ink is blacker; the blocks were probably more heavily inked and the paper of the *Icones* is certainly much heavier. The end result of heavier press pressure, meticulous setup and heavy inking is a quite remarkable preservation of detail in the reprints whose lines are much sharper than those in the sixteenth-century prints. For example, Figure 1 shows a small region of the right leg of the first muscleman, magnified considerably. In the 1543 print the cross-hatched lines are poorly defined and badly broken-up, whereas in the 1934 reprint they are completely sharp, of even density and quite unbroken. Overall, the effect is to give a remarkable three-dimensionality to the figures which is lacking in the sixteenth-century prints. Their aesthetic effect is certainly strikingly different from that of the sixteenth-century versions to which we are accustomed and it is difficult not to agree with Ivins, a former curator of prints at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, when he says:

> Only in this modern volume can these woodcuts of the mid-sixteenth century be properly seen and appreciated as drawings. Their precision and clarity of statement, and the extraordinary way in which, thanks to the influence of Titian, the third-dimensional qualities of the subjects were brought out, were epoch-making and such that many of these woodcuts are still classical models of representational draughtsmanship.[7]

THE PORTRAIT OF VESALIUS

I mentioned in Part I that none of the Library's copies of Vesalius's works contains the portrait of the author; the acquisition of the *Icones anatomicae* offers an opportunity to discuss this portrait of Vesalius about which some new information has come to light in the last few years. Unfortunately, the wood block of the portrait was not one of those which survived so its image in the *Icones* is from a photographic reproduction from a copy of the *Fabrica* but this is unimportant for the present purpose. Vesalius's portrait, the first woodcut in the *Fabrica* (and in the *Epitome*) after the title page, is a good deal more than just a picture of the anatomist in 1542 at the age of 28 as the inscription on the edge of the table announces. He has chosen to demonstrate a dissection of the complex arrangement of the flexor muscles of the fingers and their tendons, shown grossly out of scale

FIGURE 1 Enlargement of part of the right leg of the first muscleman. Both images were printed from the same wood block. Top: from *Fabrica* 1543; Bottom: from *Icones* 1934. The block was modified between 1543 and 1555 by removing hatching around the index letters but was otherwise unchanged during the 391 years between the printing of the two images. Thus the much greater clarity of the lines in the 1934 print must be attributed to differences in the presses, in the heaviness of inking (and possibly in the inks and papers) and in the setting up of the block in the sixteenth and twentieth centuries.

with his own figure. The iconography of the portrait and its possible significance in historical and religious contexts has been well discussed, most recently by Siraisi.[8] On the table behind the dissected hand lies a sheet of text (Figure 3). In spite of one extraordinary modern claim that it 'is written in a code so complicated that historians have been unable to decipher whether it has meaning', the text is quite easily read and understood.[†] It refers to a description of the flexor muscles of the fingers and begins with a chapter heading 'On the muscles that move the fingers, Chapter 30'. A revised version of the same text is found, not in Chapter 30 but in Chapter 43 (page 304) of the second book of the *Fabrica* itself. In fact, the text – which is plain Latin and not in any kind of code – relates directly to the dissection that Vesalius is demonstrating.

There is a third piece of text in the image, rarely remarked upon and not very easily read (Figure 2).[††] It is in the hatched area below the edge of the table and reads *'ocyus* [for ocius] *iucunde et tuto'* – 'swiftly, pleasantly and safely'. Without further information this is quite obscure. However, in a 'Stammbuch' – a kind of album of inscriptions by friends – belonging to Abraham Ulrich (1526–77) that came to light in the 1990s[9] there is an entry by Vesalius dated 1553 at Mons (now in Belgium) that reads:

> Ocyus iucunde et tuto. A[ndreas] Vesalius
> Montis Hannoniae anno 1553. Septe[mbris] 13.

Fichtner[10] discusses the discovery and interpretation of Vesalius's inscription in the Stammbuch in detail and suggests that Vesalius may have used the phrase *ocyus iucunde et tuto* as a sort of motto. The phrase seems to be an adaptation of a remark by Celsus (ca. 25BC–50 AD) following his comment that there were many kinds of treatments for fever because each practitioner had his own. Celsus continues: *Asclepiades officium esse medici dicit, ut tuto, ut celeriter, ut iucunde curet.* (De medicina Lib. IV cap. 4). 'Asclepiades says that it is the physician's duty to treat [it] safely, swiftly and pleasantly.'

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FIGURE 2 Enlarged view of the lower part of the portrait showing a sheet of text (on table), Vesalius's age and the date 1542 and, barely visible in the hatching below the table, his 'motto' which reads '*ocyus iucunde et tuto*'.

Since he included the phrase in the *Fabrica* in 1543 when we know him only as an anatomist – though the duties of his appointment in Padua may have included teaching surgery – this gives rise to a suggestion that perhaps Vesalius always regarded himself primarily as, and wanted in fact to be, a medical practitioner. If this is so then it might make his defection from academic anatomy at the very height of his fame as an anatomist to become a *medicus* at the court of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V easier to understand. Interesting as this suggestion is, it is perhaps rather a weighty hypothesis to erect on a single phrase buried so that it is almost invisible at the bottom of the portrait. He does not seem to have used the phrase elsewhere in his published works and Vesalius cannot have relied upon posterity to discover the Stammbuch and so be able to interpret the hardly legible phrase in the shadow under the table edge of his portrait.

By 1553 when he wrote in Ulrich's book, Vesalius had already abandoned the practice of anatomy and joined the imperial court as a medical practitioner and the phrase would have been more obviously appropriate to him than it was in 1542/3. For all that, at the very time when he was in 'Belgium' with his imperial master[10] and wrote in Ulrich's Stammbuch, Vesalius was engaged in the preparation of the text of the second edition of the *Fabrica* that Oporinus published in 1555 so he had certainly not lost interest in anatomy even if he no longer practised it.

FIGURE 3 The sheet of text in the portrait, rotated.†

We also know that Vesalius's family had a long tradition of medical practice to the nobility and one might wonder, perhaps, if the phrase about treating 'swiftly, safely and pleasantly' was as much a family 'motto' as one exclusive to Vesalius.

IML Donaldson, Honorary Librarian, RCPE
(email: i.m.l.d@ed.ac.uk)

NOTES

†The text on the sheet in the portrait reads: *De musculis digitos mouentibus. Ca. 30. Quu[m] superiori libro quinque digitorum ossium co[n]structionem prosequerer, ... aliam ... quam...* On the muscles that move the fingers Ch 30. 'When (or 'although' – the fragment is too short to know which is meant) I described in the previous book the arrangement of the finger bones... other ... than'.

††I am most grateful to Dr Thomas Rütten of the University of Newcastle for telling me about the existence of the Ulrich Stammbuch and Fichtner's article on it and for a copy of the article.[9,10]

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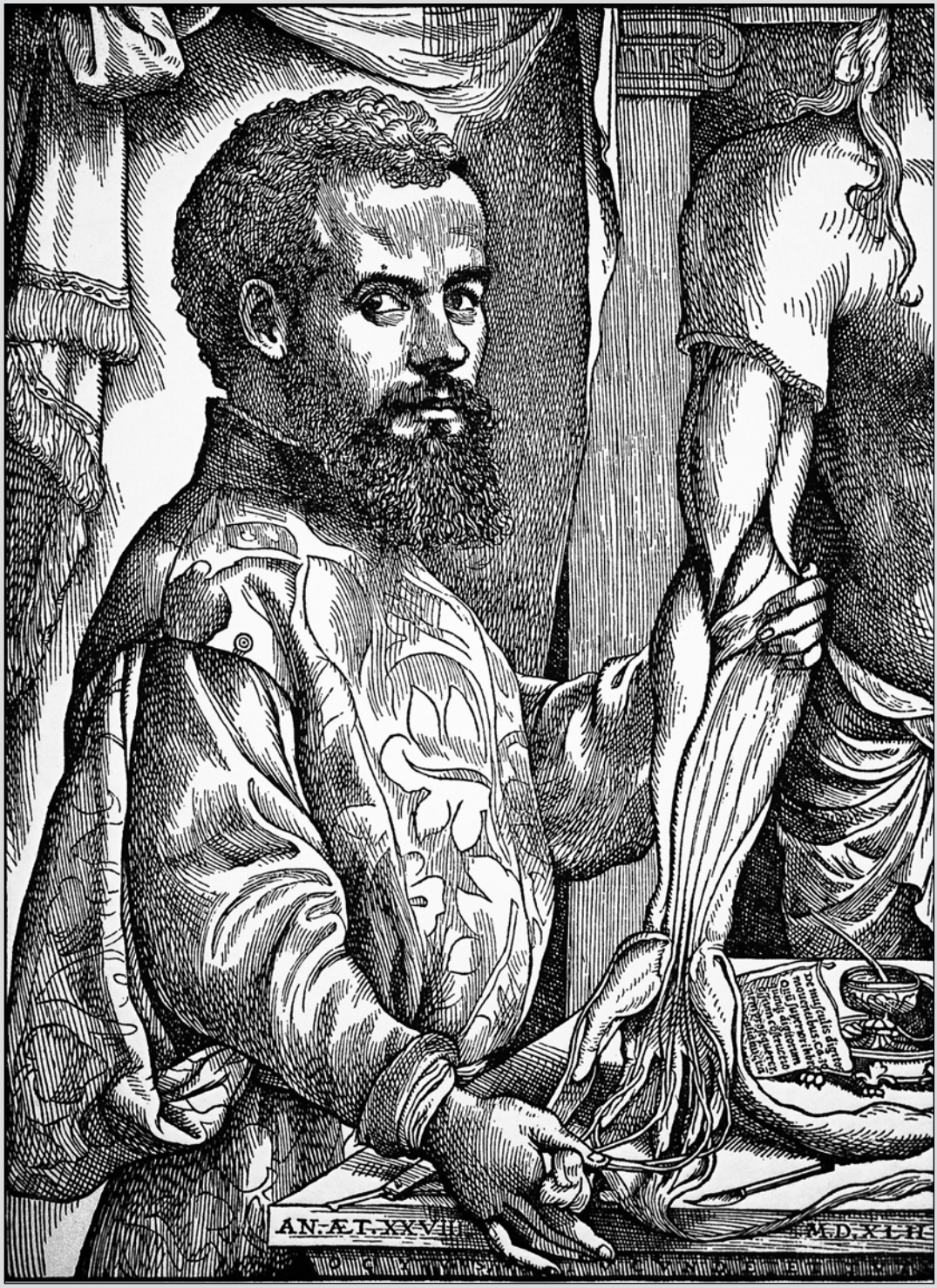

Portrait of Andreas Vesalius aged 28 reproduced in the *Icones anatomicae* of 1934. The wood block for this portrait was not found and this image was made from a full-size photographic reproduction of the portrait in a copy of the *Fabrica*. Attributed to Vesalius's fellow Netherlander Jan Stephan van Calcar, the portrait appears in both editions of the *Fabrica* (1543, 1555), in the *Epitome* (1543) and in the German translation of the latter also published by Oporinus in 1543. Note the out-of-scale dissection of the flexor muscles of the right forearm. The piece of text lying on the table refers to a chapter of the *Fabrica* describing these muscles. On the hatched area below the edge of the table top carrying Vesalius's age and the date is the text '*ocyus iucunde et tuto*'. See the article on pages 280–2 for further details.