

BOOK REVIEW

Sachiko Kusakawa, *Andreas Vesalius: Anatomy and the World of Books*

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Anita Guerrini 

Oregon State University

Sachiko Kusakawa's new book is both a biography of a book and a biography of Vesalius through books, his own and others'. *De humani corporis fabrica libri septem*, first published in 1543 and familiarly known as *Fabrica*, is the best-known work of early modern anatomy. *Fabrica* has been the topic of many studies and its illustrations have been endlessly reproduced. Vesalius himself was the subject of an exhaustive 1965 biography by C.D. O'Malley. Since that time, two English translations of *Fabrica* have appeared, as well as a wealth of new scholarship, and Kusakawa, the foremost scholar of Vesalius, offers within a brief space and with abundant illustrations not only a reassessment of Vesalius and his book, but a recasting of the history of early modern anatomy and its publication.

Kusakawa introduces *Fabrica* as a job application to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. Vesalius's father served as an apothecary at the imperial court at Brussels, and his son aimed to be an imperial physician. *Fabrica*'s dedicatory letter to Charles and the author's self-presentation on the book's title page set the stage for Kusakawa's examination of the relationship between books, anatomy and medical careers in the sixteenth century. *Fabrica* and its creation epitomized both the central role of books and printing in the creation of humanist medicine and the symbiotic relationship among dissection, illustration and text in the Renaissance. The publication of *Fabrica* owed to a unique configuration of author, printer and artists.

The teaching of learned medicine relied on texts, and these remained for centuries selected works of Hippocrates and Galen with commentaries by medieval and more recent authors, all in Latin. Most medical schools offered one public anatomy demonstration per year. The advent of printing did not change this programme but made it easier for students and physicians to accumulate a learned library. Humanist admiration for the ancients led to a flood of new editions and translations. Such books were tools, to be regularly consulted and annotated. Anatomy books became important components of such collections and provided a way for anatomists to establish their intellectual standing and promote their careers to potential patrons.

Before turning to *Fabrica* itself, Kusakawa takes the reader on a sweeping tour of printed anatomical books in the forty years before its appearance, closely examining their physical components, including size and typeface as well as content. Not all of these books were illustrated, but the ones that were, such as Berengario da Carpi's *Commentary* on the popular textbook of Mondino de'Liuzzi, added another layer of production that included artists and engravers. Born in 1514, Vesalius entered the learned world of books at the University of Louvain in 1530 and began his medical education three years

later in Paris, a centre of both humanist medicine and printing. The young student assisted his teacher Jacques Dubois with dissections while another professor, Johann Guenther von Andernach, was translating rediscovered works of Galen into Latin. Guenther's translation of Galen's *On Anatomical Procedures* had recently appeared, a critical text for the new generation of anatomists.

Vesalius then proceeded to Padua, gaining his medical degree at the end of 1537 and an appointment as professor of surgery. He wasted no time in establishing his authority by means of books: first a revision of Guenther's textbook, and then a set of large-scale anatomical tables. The preparation of these six sheets of woodcuts, as Kusukawa explains, provided critical training for the much more ambitious project to come. While these early works were published in Venice, Vesalius turned to a Basel printer, Johannes Oporinus, to print his masterwork, opening the prospect of distribution and fame throughout the Holy Roman Empire. When Vesalius wrote to Oporinus in the summer of 1542, the text and illustrations for *Fabrica* were about to be sent to Basel. Vesalius soon followed to supervise the production of his long and complex work and its shorter companion, *Epitome*.

Images played an unprecedented role in *Fabrica*, and Kusukawa's chapter on art and anatomy brilliantly summarizes the relationship between Renaissance art and human anatomy. That relationship did not follow a direct line from observation to art but included considerations of proportion and beauty that relied equally on classical theory and sculpture. Empiricism and aesthetics were not necessarily incompatible. However, Vesalius intended his figures to educate artists as much as anatomists. Kusukawa does not resolve the question of who drew *Fabrica*'s images, nor who engraved them, but elucidates the process from dissection to illustration to engraving to printing, allowing the reader to see these familiar images anew.

Kusukawa then explores the circumstances and setting of Vesalius's public anatomies in Padua. Where they took place remains unknown, but she deftly explores the sources of bodies as well as the nature of the audience. Vesalius pointed to his spectators as witnesses who verified his claims while he complained about unruly students. Usually employing only a single cadaver, he was both lector and dissector, reading from and commenting on Galen's text while demonstrating on the body.

Although the book closely followed the order of dissection, it allowed Vesalius to describe a canonical body based on observations of many individual bodies. Such a body was perfect in form and fulfilled its purpose in each part. However, frequent dissection of humans also led Vesalius to deny aspects of Galen's work that had been based on animal anatomy, although Vesalius too employed animals. By publishing a book, Vesalius in a way adopted Galen's persona in establishing his authority not only as a learned physician, but as a seeker of truth: what the next century called a natural philosopher. In her penultimate chapter, Kusukawa describes Vesalius's task in *Fabrica* as both making and unmaking the human body: he disassembled the human body to demonstrate both how it was made and why.

Kusukawa's final chapter briskly takes the reader through the last twenty years of Vesalius's life as an imperial physician and looks at the immediate afterlife of *Fabrica*. Its images had far more impact than its text, immediately becoming the canonical images of the human body for at least two centuries. In her beautifully written and well-produced book, Kusukawa has given both *Fabrica* and its author new life.