

REVIEW PAPER

AUTOPSY IN EUROPEAN ART OF THE LAST FIVE HUNDRED YEARS. A SHORT STORY

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We will probably never know who and when performed the first autopsy, but Galen's (c. 130-200 BC) interests in anatomy prove that the desire for scientific knowledge of the human body has been with us since ancient times, despite it being a taboo subject in European culture for a very long time. There were many reasons for it, however this is no place to discuss them. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that from late antiquity until the end of the Middle Ages there was no favourable atmosphere for dealing with autopsies. No wonder, then, that the artists did not take up the subject. The situation changed at the beginning of the Renaissance. Fascination with classical antiquity has triggered interest in the human body and its anatomy. This subject virtually did not exist in art before, however at the beginning of the early modern period it became so popular that it was embraced by such outstanding artists as Leonardo da Vinci, but also young adepts of painting and sculpture. This situation can be largely credited to Alberti, who in his work *De pictura* published in 1435 urged artists to study anatomy. But the interest in anatomy was also fuelled by the situation in Europe in the late Middle Ages and in the Renaissance. It was a period that in a special way accustomed people to the phenomenon of dying, making death something close to every human being. Epidemics of plague and other contagious diseases, hunger and war, although they had occurred earlier, were particularly striking in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In addition, there were public executions that gathered large crowds of people. All of that caused people to become accustomed to the sight of demise, which did not let itself be forgotten, and the spectre of death constantly occupied minds, becoming a frequent topic of conversation. Philosophy and theology directed their attention to the matters of death. This resulted in increased interest in the technique of "dying well"; *ars moriendi* or *ars bene moriendi* became an extremely popular motif in art and literature at the end of the Middle Ages. One of the concepts closely related

to that motif was *danse macabre*, dance of death, which consisted in depicting a procession of people of different social backgrounds led by a personification of death. Initially, it was depicted as a mummified, dried-out human body with a distinctive rib pattern, a head with empty eye sockets and without a nose, which is perfectly visible in the famous painting by Bernt Notke [1]. At the turn of the 16th century, the skin "fell off" revealing the skeleton [2], which has since become a personification of death in European iconography. This can be seen in numerous representations of *danse macabre* (Fig. 1), although for me the most glorious example of this is the series of woodcuts by Hans Holbein [3]. Thanks to this, the depiction of the human skeleton has "made a stay" in modern representations of the study of anatomy.

One of the first modern depictions of anatomy lessons is the title page of *Fasciculus medicinae* by Johann de Ketham, published in 1493, which shows a dissection performed under the guidance of a professor of medicine standing at the lectern (Fig. 2). Half

Fig. 1. *Danse macabre*

a century later, in 1543, a textbook of human anatomy was published – *De humani corporis fabrica libri septem* (On the fabric of the human body in seven books) written by Andreas Vesalius. This book combines text with numerous illustrations and shows how much the artists' knowledge of anatomy and autopsy evolved during this era.

Although as early as 1497 Alessandro Benedetti clarified the conditions of public anatomy lessons, it was almost a century later, in 1594, at the University of Padua, that the first anatomical theatre was built. Other universities followed suit, hence the seventeenth century can be called the age of anatomical performances. The widespread interest in anatomy lessons meant

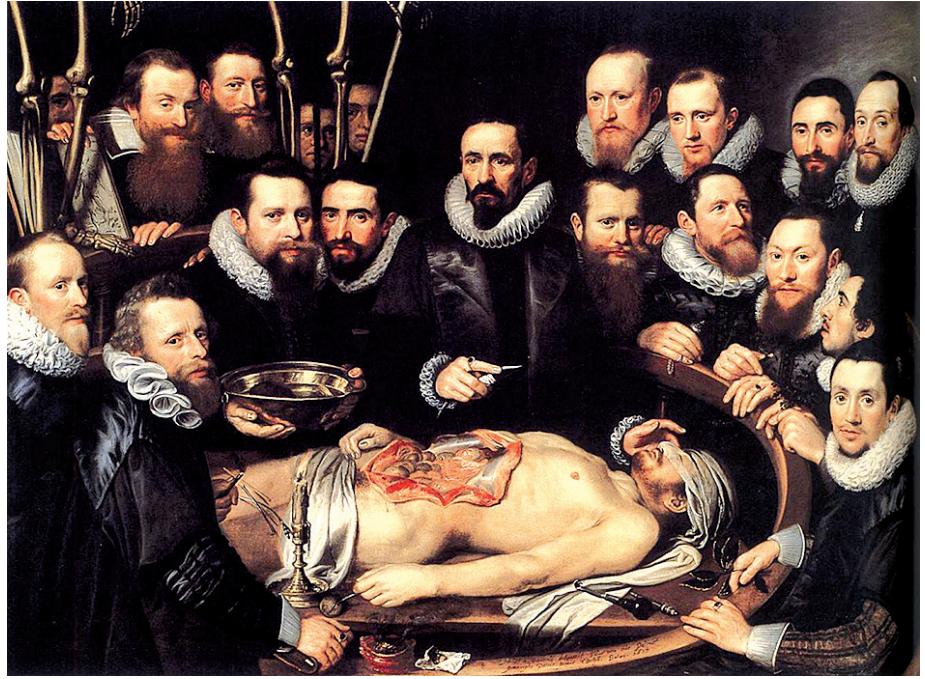


Fig. 3. *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Willem van der Meer*, 1617

that this topic began to appear more often in painting and graphics. The representations of anatomists and dissected bodies are shown in accordance with the iconographic conventions of that time. Very often, the participants of this medical “spectacle” are depicted in poses worthy of great leaders, thinkers or mythological heroes.

This is perfectly evident in paintings by Bartolomeo Passarotti [4], Aert Pietersz [5], Michiel Jansz van Miereveld [6] (Fig. 3), Frans Denys [7], Adriaen Backer [8] and Johan van Neck [9]. Although all of them are outshone by the fame of Rembrandt's painting. *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, painted in 1632, like other seventeenth-century paintings devoted to this subject is a collective portrait of surgeons [10]. In this particular case, they are members of the Amsterdam guild. Unlike other depictions, however, Rembrandt's painting is not a sequence of individual portraits but a dynamic image that evokes in the viewer the feeling of participation in the anatomy lesson. Moreover, the prelector, Dr. Tulp, starts the autopsy not from an abdominal opening, but from dissecting the left forearm, exposing two muscles: the superficial flexor and the deep flexor of the fingers. What is more, he not only shows where they are but also demonstrates how they work using his own left hand. In this way, through the autopsy, he presents the mechanism of the human body and, at the same time, the work of the Creator. This procedure is accompanied by an open book: *De humani corporis fabrica*, a popular at that time anatomic atlas by Andreas Vesalius. However, it must be clearly

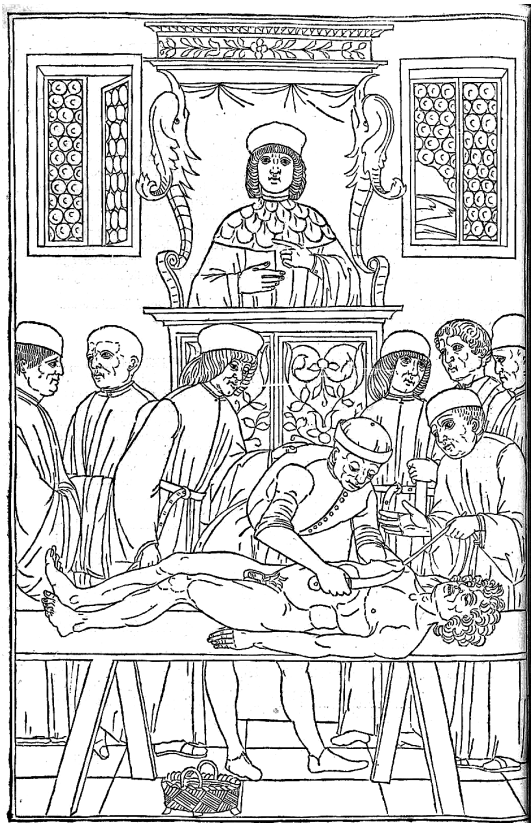


Fig. 2. Title page of *Fasciculus medicinae* by Johann de Ketham



Fig. 4. *The Anatomist*, Gabriel von Max (1869)

stated that Rembrandt's visions differ from other dissection depictions created in his times [11].

The eighteenth century did not bring major changes in this matter. Paintings depicting anatomy lessons give the impression of collective portraits in which the autopsy motif seems to be just an excuse to portray a group of elegantly dressed surgeons. A perfect example of this is *The Anatomy Lesson of the city surgeon Petrus Camper in Amsterdam* by Tibout Regters, from 1758.

A specific exception is *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Willem Röell*, from 1728 by Cornelis Troost. The painting, ordered by the Amsterdam Guild of Surgeons, was to replace Rembrandt's work destroyed in a fire. This was probably the reason behind Cornelis Troost's idea to follow the example of his predecessor and make the composition more dynamic by diversifying the arrangement of the bodies of the depicted figures and showing Dr. Willem Röell during a knee dissection. Unlike in *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* Cornelis Troost does not show in his painting the working princi-

ples of muscles or joints, as is the case in Rembrandt's work, but only the opening of the knee. Moreover, the painting was composed in such a way that our attention is focused on the elegant participants of this event, shown in theatrical poses.

The guillotine of the French Revolution, the terror of mechanical death changes the world and its perception. The 19th century becomes the era of rationalism where scientific achievements are appreciated. This has the effect of changing the depictions of anatomy

lessons. Collective portraits give way to images in which a crowd of listeners look at the pathologist performing the dissection; the viewer's attention is focused on him as well.

Velpeau will Conduct the Autopsy of a Corpse at the Charite Hospital by Auguste Feyen-Perrin from 1864 is another painting referring to *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolaes Tulp*. However, in contrast to Rembrandt's work, this depiction focuses on the person performing the autopsy. Velpeau is depicted as a stately, straightened up man, clearly distinguishable from the other characters. In contrast to the crowd of students and colleagues surrounding him, he is not looking at the corpse lying in front of him, but rather forward, as if he is noticing something in the distance



Fig. 5. Enrique Simonet's painting, *Anatomy of the Heart* (1890)



Fig. 6. *Fat Chair*, Joseph Beuys [13]

that the others are not paying attention to. The same applies to the *Portrait of Dr. Samuel D. Gross (The Gross Clinic)* from 1875 and *The Agnew Clinic* from 1889 by Thomas Eakins, which are in keeping with the tone of the hagiographies of the saints of the modern era.

The Romantic era brought with it yet another type of autopsy. The poetry of Byron, Goethe and Schiller had to be reflected in art, hence at the end of the nineteenth century there emerged depictions introducing the mood of anxiety caused by the interpretative ambiguity of the art. *The Anatomist* (1869) by Gabriel von Max shows a lonely, mature doctor sitting between his desk and a table on which lies a young, beautiful girl's body covered with a delicate fabric. With his right hand, the doctor pulls the cloth away, revealing the face and naked breast of the deceased. His hesitation is noticeable, as if he were so charmed by the girl's erotic beauty that he did not know where to make the first incision. But there is another motif here: gently pressed by the corner's hand, the left breast of the girl brings to mind



Fig. 7. Belzec Memorial ash field (photo: Roman Neczyporowski)



Fig. 8. Kantor's *Anatomy Lesson according to Rembrandt*, Foksal, Warsaw, 1969 [14]

the erotic infatuation of Faust. Nevertheless, Gabriel von Max's painting seems to be extremely intimate, showing an unspecified relationship between life and death (Fig. 4).

An even more dramatic scene is presented in Enriquer Simonet's painting, *Anatomy of the Heart* (1890) (Fig. 5). On one of the tables in the dissecting room lies the naked body of a beautiful young girl, next to which an old, bearded man is standing, holding a bloody heart in his left hand. This contrast of old life and young death brings to mind an abundance of romantic literature.

Two world wars, the extermination of the Armenians and the Holocaust, conflicts in the Balkans, Rwanda and other places around the world caused the human body to take on a new meaning in the twentieth century. The smoking chimneys of Auschwitz and the medical experiments of Dr. Mengele have become the borderline moment for our world [12]. In the face of the tragedy of the twentieth century, the artists became symbolic pathomorphologists, with art serving as their analysis. By cleaning a heap of bloody bones in her *Balkan Baroque* performance Marina Abramović drew attention to the massacre in the Balkans, Pieter Hugo showed the price of the conflict in Rwanda with his photo-book *Rwanda 2004: Vestiges of Genocide*, and the *Belzec Memorial* ash field by Zdzisław Pidek or Josef Beuys' *Fat Chair* are reminders of the Holocaust (Figs. 6, 7). All of these, however, were questions about the man and his condition.

This question about a man, about his inside, about his image was also asked by Tadeusz Kantor in 1969 through a happening titled *The Anatomy Lesson*

According to Rembrandt in the Warsaw Foksal Gallery. With his painting Rembrandt on the one hand illustrated a specific event, but on the other, he drew attention to the problem of searching for the human soul, the intangible sphere. Using the famous painting, Kantor follows in Rembrandt's footsteps. It can therefore be concluded that in both cases we are dealing with a question about a man (Fig. 8) [14].

This is far from what the world of ubiquitous pop culture offers us; the pop culture which, with thousands of pastiches, trivializes the message of Rembrandt's painting. Today we can see *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolaes Tulp* everywhere. This image has been processed by many artists, such as Yasumasa Morimura in *Portrait (Nine Faces)* from 1990, Freddy Fabris in a photograph from the *Renaissance Series* (2016) and Ju Duoqi in *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Pickled Cabbage*. But it also appears as a print on T-shirts, in advertising or as a motif of an exclusive edition of... toilet paper. In this way, the autopsy, which in the past was surrounded by a wall of taboo, which fought hard to make its way into social consciousness, which at one stage was a symbol of searching for God and immortality of the soul and later a determinant of the progress of science and the development of medical knowledge, has nowadays become a trivial element of pop culture. During the last five hundred years, artistic representations of autopsies underwent subsequent changes. In the post-mortem examination, the world of medicine sought answers to the burning questions posed by the developing science, the world of "onlookers" expected answers to the question of the role of God and the existence of the soul, while the world of artists tried to describe the condition of man. By depicting the autopsy and the whole *teatrum* that accompanied it, the artists showed what Michel Foucault called "the anatomo-politics of the human body" [15]. It is worth remembering that what now appears to us as a violation of an objectified body, in the past was often perceived rather as a melancholic lesson during which people looked at the work of God.

Acknowledgments

This text is a modest addition to the article by Beata Purc-Stępniań *Autopsies and Medical Demonstrations in European Painting and Graphics From 16th to 18th Century* [16].

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2. Wolgemut Michael. Woodcut 1493, Nurnberg.

3. Totentanz, Hans Holbein. 1525
4. The Anatomy Lesson for Artists, before 1592, Galleria Borghese, Rome.
5. The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Sebastiaen Egbertsz, 1603, Amsterdam Museum, Amsterdam.
6. Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Willem van der Meer, 1617, Gemeente Musea, Delft.
7. The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Joannes van Buyten, 1648, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp.
8. The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Frederik Ruysch, 1670, Amsterdam Museum, Amsterdam.
9. The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Frederick Ruysch, 1683, Amsterdam Museum, Amsterdam.
10. The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolaes Tulp, 1632, Mauritshuis Museum, The Hague.
11. In 1656, he created another painting devoted to this subject: The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Deijman, Amsterdam Museum, Amsterdam. Unfortunately, most of it was destroyed in a fire in 1723. The preserved part of this painting shows Deijman performing a brain dissection.
12. Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg use the term "transformative experience", vide: Milchman A, Rosenberg A. Eksperymenty w myśleniu o Holocaustie. Auschwitz, nowoczesność i filozofia (Experiments in Thinking the Holocaust: Auschwitz, Modernity and Philosophy), tr. Krowicki L., Szacki J. Warsaw 2003; 11 ff. Dan Diner calls this phenomenon "rupture in civilisation", vide: D. Diner, Vorwort des Herausgebers. In: id. (ed.), Zivilisationsbruch. Denken nach Auschwitz, Frankfurt am Main 1988, p. 7. However, the most radical in this respect is Philipp Lacoue-Labarthe, who treats Holocaust as a turning point in history in Hölderlinian sense, vide: Lacoue-Labarthe P. Heidegger, Art and Politics. The Fiction of the Political, Oxford 1990; 45.
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