

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

ANATOMIST: A PHILOSOPHER, SCHOLAR, SURGEON, NATURALIST AND ALONE, AS DEPICTED IN THE 18TH CENTURY BY JOSEPH WRIGHT

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ABSTRACT

The anatomist, since the beginning of human dissections, had always performed the most difficult task in medicine, the study of the structure of the human body. Religious and scientific barriers throughout the centuries made anatomists become isolated by both the scientific and civilian community. Anatomist rapt in cadavers and skeletal remains was usually depicted as an unsociable being, performing his task in secluded places.

Keywords: Joseph Wright, anatomy and art, anatomist, human dissections.

RÉSUMÉ

Anatomiste : philosophe, érudit, chirurgien, naturaliste et seul, tel que représenté au 18ème siècle par Joseph Wright

L'anatomiste, depuis le début des dissections humaines, avait toujours accompli la tâche la plus difficile en médecine, l'étude de la structure du corps humain. Les barrières religieuses et scientifiques à travers les siècles ont rendu les anatomistes isolés de la communauté scientifique et civile. L'anatomiste absorbé dans des cadavres et des restes squelettiques était généralement représenté comme un être insociable, accomplissant sa tâche dans des endroits isolés.

Mots-clés: Joseph Wright, anatomie et art, anatomiste, dissections humaines.

Dear Editor,

Since the era of the ancient Greek medico-philosophers in the Western world, the dead human body was considered sacred, not to be touched at

any cost. The highest respect of the ancient Greeks towards the dead, combined with rigor ethical and religion laws concerning the burial of the dead, even those of the barbarian tribes, was an insurmountable barrier for anatomical studies of the human body.

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Dissection and necropsy were considered a great impropriety¹. The Byzantines adopted the same dogma, mainly due to religious forbiddance. The Orthodox Church considered any lesion of the dead human body as a desecration, while a dissection was believed to be a part for a possible resurrection procedure of a mortal human. These beliefs were also adopted by the Catholics, who prohibited human dissections. Sinful as it was, human dissection was firstly allowed for scientific reasons in the Western European medicine during the 13th century AD². Although until the 18th century, a plethora of dissections was freely performed and a series of anatomic atlases was published based upon them, the concept of an unethical action seems to have been remained in the mind of the scholars of the era³.

Joseph Wright of Derby (1734-1797), an English painter, drew an elder philosopher engaged in anatomical study. The central figure, dressed as a hermit, is engrossed with a set of partially articulated human bones, while two nervous figures dressed as pilgrims, or simply commoners from a nearby village, approach with an evident anxiety (Figure 1). Wright, in this work, uses candlelight and strong chiaroscuro to create a sense of drama, which in this case takes the form of the trespass of the approaching figures into the mystique of a lonely person in an isolated world with the dead. Although dissection was then considered as a group activity, in this case a solitary act was to be interrupted. Immersed in his thoughts, in a hermit-monk environment, isolated in a cave, the elder philosopher examines the human skeleton. The rise of experimental natural philosophy in the early modern period, has suggested that an over-interest in solitary study could be seen as an unhealthy, psychic, disorientated and unable to re-engage in social discourse practitioner⁴.

Scottish anatomist, physician and a leading teacher of anatomy, William Hunter (1718-1783), once said „...if a man has not such a degree of enthusiasm, and love of the art, as will make him impatient of unreasonable opposition and of encroachments upon his discoveries and his reputation, he will hardly become considerable in anatomy or in any branch of natural knowledge“⁵. Although our Hermit looks pre-occupied, he seems not to really enjoy his practice. Whether he is tired of being socially withdrawn, or burned out due to his heavy task, is rather uncertain. An anatomist, even nowadays, stands alone with the deceased, with an expert knowledge of the structure of the human beings, but deficient in socializing, detached in his reality of dissected dead corpses and



Figure 1: A Philosopher by Lamplight, oil on canvas, 1769, Joseph Wright of Derby, Derby Museum and Art Gallery.

human remains. French influential author Bernard le Bouvier de Fontenelle (1657-1757) noted, „We anatomists are like porters in Paris, who are acquainted with the narrowest and most distant streets, but who know nothing of what takes place in the houses“⁶. Anatomist through the ages was a philosopher, scholar, surgeon, naturalist and alone. A foggy veil conceals his work, rendering it into a morbid action for the uninitiated. Wright succeeded in capturing such a depiction which is still engraved in our minds, even if it is not always real.

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