

Surface and Depth, Medicine and Art

By Stuart Johnson

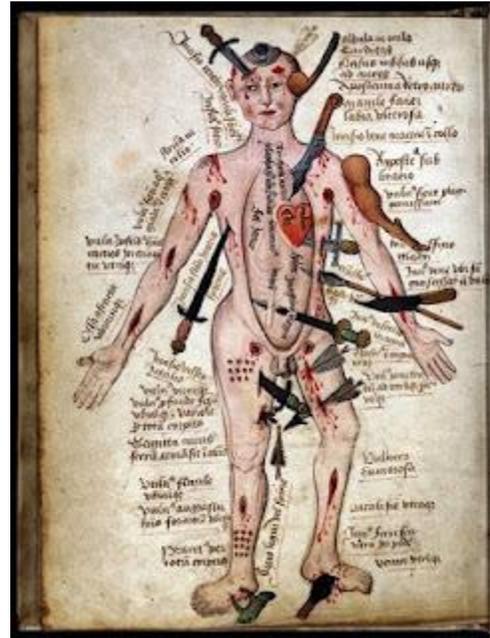
Review of *The Art of Medicine: Over 2,000 Years of Images and Imagination*, by Julie Anderson, Emm Barnes and Emma Shackleton (The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

The title of this volume signals a useful ambiguity. Medicine is a science, or a scientific practice, but it is also an art in the sense that the application of scientific medical principles to individual cases requires judgment and imagination. In that sense, the book asks us to think about medicine as an art. The book does so by presenting us with images that are in the traditional forms of “art,” though the images in many cases are scientific images. “The Art of Medicine” is thus a collection of works of art about medicine, understood as itself an art. The juxtaposition of these concepts presents art that is scientific, and science that is artistic.

The book collects works from the collection of Sir Henry Wellcome, amassed by the co-founder of the Burroughs Wellcome drug company. The images date primarily from the time after the acceptance in the fourteenth century of human dissection for the study of anatomy. Although Sir Henry died in 1936, the collection as represented in this book continues to grow, including digital art and images from technologies such as electron micrographs.

The book begins historically, following the development of medical approaches to the body and the development of the science of anatomy. The first chapter is wonderfully named “Mapping the Body.” In the same way that a geographical body is overlaid by the mapmaker’s markings, here the underlying image is the human body, almost as a blank “canvas,” and the artists or investigators overlay the body with a wide array of markers.

Many of the images in this book are images of various kinds of writing on the body. The early anatomy illustrations show bodies overwritten with labels of various body parts and components. Images from acupuncture show different approaches to labeling body pathways. Particularly striking is what the collection calls “Wound Man,” showing a man with wounds to various parts of his body, caused by assorted weapons (knives, arrows, clubs).* The weapons are still implanted, reminiscent of paintings of St. Sebastian pierced with arrows. This rather grisly image was intended as a cheat sheet for doctors, showing the wounds and their causes and possible treatments. But it also evokes a rich tradition of Christian iconography – depictions of martyrs similarly pierced and broken. The idea of writing on the body is reversed in the images from physiognomy, where the face itself is the writing, indicating the personality type of its bearer.



A curious aspect of some of these images is the rendition of the subject as both specimen and living person. One view of a woman’s back muscles by Jacques-Fabien Gautier d’Agoty (dated 1745-46) shows a woman with the skin of her back flayed and folded to the sides, but she is presented as fully alive and even perhaps flirtatiously glancing back towards the viewer. Similarly, the works of Andreas Vesalius, a highly influential anatomist who flourished in the 16th century, are illustrated by engravings of “muscle men” or skeletons in fully natural settings. A skeleton stands with legs crossed at the knees, leaning on his cocked hand, contemplating a skull.

Repeatedly, the dynamic is a back-and-forth between surface and depth. The desire – the scientific project – is to reveal what is beneath the surface, and that is done either by opening up the surface – as in the flayed and dissected bodies – or by marking on the surface what is supposed to lie beneath. For the medical practitioner, it is the inside of the body that matters. But the images keep returning us to the surface – the exterior of the body, which is the point of interaction with the world and the site where meaning is generated.

* Zeteo thanks the Wellcome Trust for permission to reproduce the image here.

The most strikingly beautiful images may be the most purely scientific in origin – photos of pathology specimens at extremely high magnification. In these images, the mere fact of extreme magnification transforms the specimens into strange and wondrous images, while still remaining tied to their reality as disease-causing organisms.

This is only a hint at the variety of works in this collection. We see scenes of medical treatment in various cultures and contexts (war hospitals, religious healings, deathbed services, caricatures). We have images of quackery, iconic diseases such as cholera, smallpox, colds and STDs, herbal medicine and mental illness. All of the images are presented with general commentary and specific identification. In each case the commentary is enough to provide context and orientation, but it is winningly modest. The book does not have an argument or a theory to advance, but the interplay of its images displays a search for a kind of truth that is both inside and outside, surface and depth, science and art.

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