



Activity 2: The Rise of Anatomy

Dissection of human bodies appears to have begun at the end of the thirteenth century. Initially, anatomy was used to illustrate the ideas of ancient writers – the act of dissecting the body was thought to demonstrate the accuracy of their ideas. However, as time passed, anatomy was increasingly used to discover new things about the body.

Today we take for granted that scientific and medical research is **empirical** (involving careful observation of the thing being studied). However, empirical approaches were in some respects new in the early modern period. Previously, studying the body had involved reading authoritative texts from the ancient world, rather than looking at the body itself. This was partly because medieval and early modern cultures tended to hold the ancient world and its writers in high esteem. There was a strong assumption that, if *they* had said it, it must have been true.

Empirical methods for understanding the body became increasingly prevalent after the groundbreaking publication of **Andreas Vesalius's** *De humani corporis fabrica* (On the Fabric of the Human Body) in 1543.



Image 1: *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, painted by the Dutch painter Rembrandt in 1632

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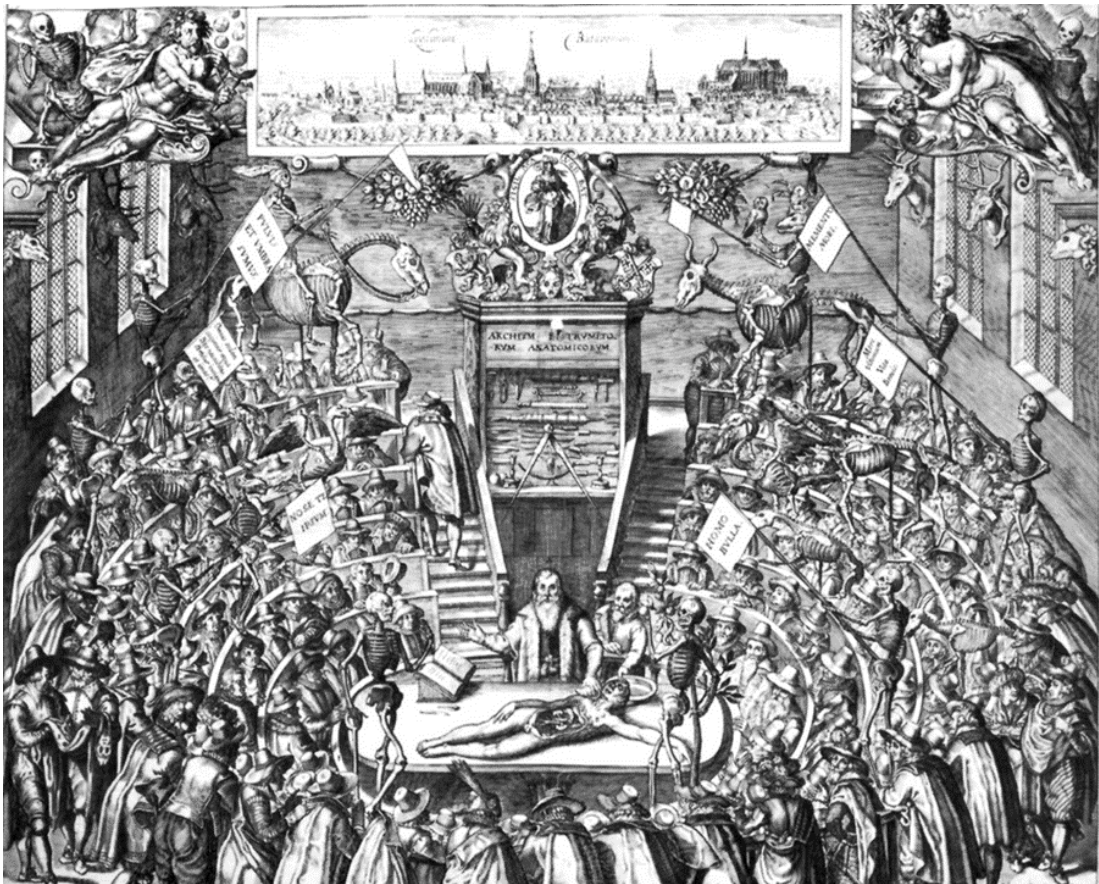


Image 2: This artwork is an anonymous engraving of an anatomy taking place at the Leiden Anatomy Theatre, from 1609.

Task

1. What are your initial reactions to these images of people watching anatomy? Do they make you feel queasy, or uncomfortable? If so, why do you think that is? What ethical questions does anatomy raise?
2. Why do you think the anatomy theatre (pictured in the engraving) is called a 'theatre'? What do you think this name implies?
3. Look at the oil painting by Rembrandt. What do you think the artist is trying to suggest about the people observing the dissection? Are we meant to identify with them, or with the person being dissected?

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Partitioning the body

Historians have associated the rise of anatomy with a more **mechanistic** (mechanical) view of the body, as opposed to the **humoral** model.

The older, humoral idea of the body tended to **analogize** the body and its environment. The body was seen as a container for four humours (yellow bile, air, phlegm, black bile), and these corresponded to the four elements: fire, air, water, and earth. Both the body and the universe were imagined as complete and analogous wholes. In the more mechanical view of the body, this integral relationship between the body and the world was no longer guaranteed. The body was treated increasingly as an *object* that is sealed off from the rest of the world – it was no longer a world in miniature.

This had consequences for the way that people thought about body parts. The older way of thinking about bodies tended to assume that each part fitted neatly into a single whole. Cultural historians have argued that the rise of anatomy and a more mechanical view of the body troubled this assumption. Anatomists would often cut off particular parts of the body in order to study them more closely. Carla Mazzio and David Hillman write that the body part 'is frequently imagined to take on attributes of agency and subjectivity' in this period. In other words, it seems to become an independent entity with a life of its own.

Task

1. Make a list of common phrases involving body parts. For each phrase, think about the associations of the particular body part. Write these next to the phrase (e.g. head = reason, self-control).
2. Why do you think that particular body parts have such strong associations for us? Why are body parts so strongly associated with aspects of human personality and behaviour?
3. Do you think that all cultures make the same associations?