

# Introduction

In 1538 some curious woodcuts made their appearance on the print market. They were published in pairs and represented the human body, in both its male and female forms. Some were coloured, a brief text was printed around them, and the figures were made of a series of layered strips of paper: lifted up in turn, they revealed the body's internal organisation. These images had an immediate and tremendous commercial success. Edition upon edition appeared in many European countries throughout the century and continued to do so until the end of the seventeenth century.

Anatomical fugitive sheets—thus have they been baptised by librarians, scholars, collectors and historians—have been studied and analysed since the mid-nineteenth century. First brought to the attention of historians of medicine by Ludwig Choulant in 1852, they were inventoried and catalogued in 1923 and 1925 by Le Roy Crummer. Since then other authors have reported the discovery of copies buried in libraries or hidden away in private collections, and endeavoured to classify the editions in terms of their iconography or their text.<sup>1</sup>

Four libraries possess important collections of anatomical fugitive sheets. That at the Wellcome Library in London is undoubtedly the richest; the others are the Le Roy Crummer collection at the Taubman Library of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, the collection at the Royal Library in Stockholm, and that at the College of Physicians in Philadelphia. But countless other copies and editions are dispersed through Europe, the United States and Japan, and to complete an exhaustive account of these sheets would be a desperately laborious endeavour. Over the past few years I have had the opportunity of working in a number of European and American libraries: in some I came upon fugitive sheets of whose very existence I was unaware; conversely, I often had to go away disappointedly empty-handed from potentially promising repositories. Apart from these

<sup>1</sup> The term fugitive sheets is unusual in current bibliography. The normal term for the objects discussed here is broadsheets or broadsides. Fugitive sheets is actually the literal translation of the German *fliegende Blätter*. It was used by L. Choulant, *Geschichte und Bibliographie der anatomischen Abbildung, nach ihrer Beziehung auf anatomische Wissenschaft und bildende Kunst* (Leipzig, 1852), the first to bring these printed images to the attention of historians. In his English translation of Choulant's book, Mortimer Frank chose to use the term "fugitive sheets" and since then other authors have followed suit: L. Choulant, *History and bibliography of anatomic illustration* (Chicago, 1920; rev. ed. 1945 with an additional essay by C. Singer; reprinted New York, 1962, and Cambridge, MA, 1993), pp. 156–67. A systematic survey can be found in the articles of Le Roy Crummer, 'Early anatomical fugitive sheets', *Annals of Medical History*, 1923, 5: 189–209; 'Further information on early anatomical sheets', *Annals of Medical History*, 1925, 7: 1–5; 'Check list of anatomical books illustrated with cuts with superimposed flaps', *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association*, 1932, n.s. 20: 31–9. These articles also discuss examples from his own collection, which is now divided among the Taubman Library at Ann Arbor (Michigan), the Medical Center Library of Duke University and the Huntington Library in San Marino (California). J. G. de Lint, 'Fugitive anatomical sheets', *Janus*, 1924, 28: 78–91, gives a general account. A catalogue of the London copies can be found in *Catalogue of printed books in the Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 1. Books printed before 1641* (compiled by F. N. L. Poynter, London, 1962, repr. 1996), pp. 14–15.

## *Paper Bodies*

explorations, and, given the impracticability of unlimited air travel, I have had to make do with consulting catalogues, printed and on-line, and bibliographies both old and modern. I have also written to over a hundred American and European libraries which I believed might hold anatomical fugitive sheets. This has borne much fruit and I am grateful to all the librarians who kindly helped and advised me.

There are two fundamental obstacles to conducting this enterprise with any hope of exhaustivity: the fugitive sheets had little value, they were probably sold at low prices, and destined to a short, ephemeral life. Many of those that have survived have done so because they had been bound inside other texts and thus preserved. But this also made it easy for them to escape the notice of the most diligent and alert librarians, and as a result they unfortunately are not always mentioned in library catalogues.

This book has two objectives. One is to give an up-to-date survey of the editions and copies I have identified, combining the research done by others with my own findings, and thus to expand on the check-list published by Le Roy Crummer over seventy years ago. In a sense I intend to set up a temporary database, which in turn could eventually be enriched by future research and findings. The second objective is to give, as I do in the introductory text, a comprehensive account of the historiographical issues relating to the production and use of anatomical fugitive sheets. The existing literature on the subject mainly focuses on describing the woodcuts, on identifying—as far as possible—their authors and producers, on reconstructing the iconographical sources and analysing their scientific content. In short, it belongs to a school of history that is rooted in the tradition of philology and erudition which, though providing an irreplaceable base for the history of science and culture, fails to address the questions that today can be asked of the sources. What kind of public did these images have? How were they used, and what for? What did their creators expect to achieve? What market demand did they meet? What kind of reception did they get? What is their relation to the anatomical iconography of the main Renaissance treatises? What are the cultural values inscribed in and diffused by these typographical artefacts? Such questions have so far been largely ignored by research on anatomical fugitive sheets, though they are clearly called for if one wants to attain a more up-to-date social and cultural history of knowledge.

In order to try and answer some of these questions I have sought to set the anatomical fugitive sheets within the context in which they were produced. The first chapter focuses on some aspects of the cultural climate surrounding what has been described as “the anatomical renaissance of the sixteenth century”. What I wish to bring to light here is the visual culture which pervaded all aspects of anatomy in the first half of the sixteenth century, from university teaching to individual research and observation, and the communication of this knowledge through printed objects. Anatomical fugitive sheets were in fact a fruit of the same culture that led to the definitive association, in anatomical treatises, of image with text. The use of images in anatomy came, for Vesalius as for the authors of fugitive sheets, from an acknowledgement of the limited capacity of language to describe facts that were derived above all from the act of seeing.

This is not the only meeting point between the general history of sixteenth-century anatomy and the particular history of these sheets, which contributed nothing new, or at any rate very little, to the knowledge of the human body. The second chapter attempts on

## Introduction

the one hand to give an account of the commercial success and diffusion throughout Europe of the fugitive sheets, and on the other to show how authors like Vesalius were also responsible for an increased use in printed matter of anatomical data that did not necessarily have an academic target: the subject had in fact acquired widespread popularity by the first half of the sixteenth century.

In the third chapter I endeavour to establish a genealogy of the type of image one finds in the fugitive sheets. Rooted in medieval illustrations of the human body but appropriately modified and adapted, it first appeared in Strasbourg in 1538, in the work of the engraver Heinrich Vogtherr the Elder. An analysis of the intellectual, religious and professional context in which it was produced led me to identify a network of connections, spread all over Europe, among small workshops and corner presses involved in the distribution of anatomical fugitive sheets: the actors were draughtsmen, woodcut designers, wood-block cutters, printers and small booksellers.<sup>2</sup> These are key figures in the history of woodcut, in that they contributed to the establishment of a professional group of independent printers who produced and published images and texts for the new print market. Crucially, the public for this market was of limited and modest culture, its members certainly had no Latin and its education was based primarily on images.

The various editions of anatomical fugitive sheets with superimposed flaps, which proliferated in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, constitute a paradigmatic example of the type of work produced by these small corner presses. One can determine from an analysis of the texts—undertaken in the fourth and last chapter—reproduced together with the anatomical illustrations, that they were conceived so as to be adaptable to various uses and types of public. Some editions were intended for doctors and medical students, others for barbers and surgeons, still others for popular use rather than for any particular profession. There was little difference between the texts that each broadsheet printer would insert around the same woodcut, though these texts were adapted for the public at which they were aimed. They were, however, also intended, indeed required, by the printer to circulate beyond their designated audience: Latin editions, ostensibly prepared for doctors and medical students, could be acquired by less educated readers such as barbers and laypeople in general. One common textual strategy was to link moral and religious themes to the anatomical discourse—self-knowledge, the transience of human life, the glorification of God through the contemplation of the hidden wonders of the human body—that allowed for a manifold and culturally varied use of the anatomical data present within the printed object. It seems to me, therefore, that in a sense the fugitive sheets support the thesis, expressed nowadays in debates about popular culture and the history of printing, that the relationship between cultural forms and specific social groups was reciprocal, not one-way.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> “Corner press” is the term used for a small workshop, usually with only one press, run by a printer who was also a designer, wood-block cutter and printseller. Such workshops produced booklets and other cheap typographical objects for a large public, popular as well as learned. On this subject see D. Landau and P. Parshall, *The Renaissance print, 1470–1550* (New Haven and London, 1994), pp. 219–31.

<sup>3</sup> See R. Chartier, *The cultural uses of print in early modern France*, Princeton, 1987, and, more recently, his ‘Lecture e lettori “popolari” dal Rinascimento al Settecento’, in *Storia della lettura*, ed. G. Cavallo and R. Chartier, Bari and Rome, 1995, pp. 317–35. For a discussion of the issues raised by the production and consumption of anatomical fugitive sheets within the context of the debate on popular and learned culture of science in early modern Europe, see A. Carlino, ‘Il braccionaggio dell’anatomia nell’Europa del XVI secolo: i fogli volanti anatomici come *imagines contrafactae*’, *Etnosistemi*, 1998, 5 (5): 19–36.

### *Paper Bodies*

These sheets, let it be said—though from a narrowly positivistic standpoint—are marginal to the history of science and medicine. Perhaps they are no more than a pleasant bibliophilic curiosity: the anatomy they diffused was erroneous and out-of-date; the images and texts remained the same for decades and centuries on end, while scientific research went on, riding high on its course of heroic progress. But if one considers, as I have tried to do, the larger social and cultural context in which these sheets were produced and used, their history not only becomes a part of the history of publishing and printmaking, and of the transformation of their public, but also shows the extent to which some elements of the anatomical discourse of the fugitive sheets actually contributed to the shaping of academic anatomy: for instance, the cultural meaning of anatomy as knowledge of the self. The theme here is one to which everyone is sensitive and which everyone, whatever their cultural and social background, can make his or her own.