Meeting 5: Anatomy: Geography of the Microcosm (2/27)
"Cartography" of the body; anatomical illustrations before, by, & after Vesalius; cultural & institutional context of anatomical dissection, naturalizing gender in anatomical representations of the male & female body.

Readings:


Synopsis:
There is again a 'reading strategy' for the selections for this week, as indicated by the sequence of authors given above. As in the case of cartography (specifically the mappaemundi and portolans of the last couple of weeks), we first need to get a 'feel' for the visual representations in pre- and post-Vesalian anatomy. This is the purpose of the 'random' selection of plates and accompanying captions from Roberts & Tomlinson. If you are not at all familiar with this material, you may first want to leaf through the plates just to get an idea of the range of representational strategies at play in the tradition(s) of anatomical illustration. We will use these plates as we did the color photocopies of portolans; i.e., as common points of reference as we discuss the ideas presented in the other readings.

In reviewing the visual materials, please recall the list of analytical categories we have been developing for cartographic representations (frame, centering, orientation, form, function, practices, style, symbolic content & conventions, intended audience, etc.), and ask yourself which ones apply to anatomical illustrations. More precisely, how should that list be modified and emended when deployed against 'maps' of the human body? While 'centering' and orientation' are useful in discussing mappaemundi, perhaps categories like 'pictorial background or scene' and 'posture of cadaver/écorché' would be useful in discussions of 'muscle-men' and 'bone-men' from Mondino, Leonardo, or Vesalius. By the same token, the representational strategies used in anatomy
are both similar to and different from those used in cartography: while there is certainly no need for the anatomist to concern himself with 'projection', say, there are questions of scope and scale that broadly parallel those of the chart-maker. More specific to the anatomist's challenge, however, are the representational strategies of 'rotation', 'transparency', transverse section', 'series', 'and 'superposition' that don't find immediate analogs in cartography. In other words, think about how we need to develop a list of analytical categories tailored to the challenges of anatomical representation.

Cazort provides a general overview of dissection-based anatomical drawing: it's beginnings in early 14th-century Italy (please note the coincidence with our previous two categories of representations, i.e., *mappaemundi* and portolans dating from the late 13th century); the encoding of cultural and indeed cosmic meanings in body parts and functions (i.e., the microcosm/macrocosm metaphor); the complexities of the anatomist/artist collaboration (note here possible similarities with the complexities between cosmographers and pilots in the production of maps of the New World); and the problems anatomists faced peculiar to dissection (rapid decay of the cadaver, variability of the age, gender and condition of the cadaver, and tension between representing the particularities of a given specimen vs. extracting the commonalities or universal traits found in all specimens).

Roberts ("Context of Anatomical Illustration") provides additional examples and insights, especially in regard to his definition of anatomy as involving both text and image (recall the definition of 'cosmography' I gave earlier in the semester), the continuity and plurality of conventions (like the 'frog posture' or the 'noble and life-like' écorché), and the cumulativity of anatomical illustrations after ca. 1550 (i.e., when images became "relevant and improvable".

Katy Park's essay looks at anatomy from an entirely different angle, one that really deepens and widens the cultural contexts of anatomical image productions insofar as they were based on dissections. Here we begin to see the extent to which notions of gender, secrecy (i.e. secrets of nature), professional legitimation, and patronage strategies become encoded in anatomical illustrations. In the context of the pieces by Cazort and especially Roberts, her arguments may seem provocative—great! It'll give us something to debate in class!

Carlino's chapter may in some ways fall in line with Katy's, though again from yet another perspective. Here the focus is more on the institutional context of anatomical theaters and the cultural norms that were either violated, modified, or incorporated into the practice of anatomical dissection. To appreciate both Katy's and Carlino's approach, we must keep in mind what an unusual thing it is in most societies to cut open a dead body and examine it for other than forensic purposes. It might be useful, therefore, to adopt something of the attitude of an anthropologist in reading these latter two essays. What tribe is this that engages in such a rare and bizarre practice? What meaning could it possible have for the "shaman" who performs with ritual act? What "totem" do they belong to? How are notions of "purity" and "contamination" (not in the sense of antiseptics but in the sense of cultural taboos) handled by the principal actors? What meanings do these ritual acts carry for the ambient society? How does the favor or displeasure of the gods play into these "ritualized mutilations"? "The past", as they say," is a foreign country".