

ICONOGRAPHY IN EARLY MODERN ANATOMICAL BOOK ILLUSTRATION

Dr. Peter Mitchell

7 April 2017

Imperial Hotel, Llandudno

In this talk, which may be considered a sequel to a talk given at the meeting of the Society in Cardiff, in October last year, I inquire into the iconography of early modern anatomical illustration, identifying and interpreting visual images and symbols not as merely peripheral to the visual communication of anatomical knowledge, but as indispensable to an understanding of the culture in which illustrated anatomical books were produced and read from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. Conventions governing the presentation of male and female anatomy and those comparing bodies to buildings or plants are related to the natural philosophy and theology that framed anatomical knowledge. We shall see how iconographic conventions emerged in which flayed and dissected figures gesture towards their divine origin, remind us of our own mortality, speak silently of salvation, and in imitation of either Jesus Christ or the depictions of martyrs in painting or sculpture, even submit willingly to their own death and dissection. The talk will examine the possibility that some of these developments may be understandable only in relation to the grim business of the public judicial execution of criminals whose bodies were procured by anatomists for dissection. Finally, it will be suggested that anatomical illustrations from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century attempted to convey a positive religious significance of health that supported scientific ingenuity's claim to deliver the body from morbidity.

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