

Early-modern anatomy prints at Harvard

By Christopher Shea
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When did modern medical instruction begin? There are many possible starting points, but two prints in the exhibition "Paper Worlds: Printing Knowledge in Early Modern Europe," at Harvard's Science Center, suggest circa 1543 as a plausible candidate.

The exhibition, which grew out of a seminar for graduate students in the history of science, includes a woodcut from a famous anatomy treatise, printed in Venice and dating to the 1490s. It depicts an anatomy class from that period: An elegant, robed scholar speaks from behind a podium while a working class "barber-surgeon" does the dirty work of cutting and sawing.

That stark division between theory and experience, that pre-modern approach, is parodied in another print displayed in "Paper Worlds": the frontispiece to a text by a reform-minded Flemish anatomist, Andreas Vesalius, published in 1543. In *his* anatomy scene, from the book *De humani corporis fabrica*, Vesalius himself is doing the cutting, while a skeleton is propped up where the pompous lecturer might have been. Vesalius complained about "that detestable procedure by which [those] aloft in their high chair [croak] things they have never investigated."



Old-school anatomy: 1490s



The hands-on approach (and a satirical skeleton): 1543