

The Washington Post

# HEALTH

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2002

## Body Of Art

A Visceral Display of Anatomists' Work Through the Ages Explores Changing Ideas About the Human Form

By SUZ REDFEARN  
Special to The Washington Post

For most of us, a look into an anatomy book—if we ever resort to it—is a search for a quick detail on a bone or a muscle, a bit of information on a body part that ails us or fails us. We close the text and move on.

But that's not at all the way scholars and the elite treated the first accurate anatomy texts 500 years ago. Back then, the painstakingly rendered books—affordable only by the rich—were as much whimsical, metaphor-heavy entertainment as they were education. Artists posed accurately detailed skeletons digging their own graves or leaning hopelessly on ancient ruins. Men devoid of skin stood proudly holding a dagger in one hand and their entire epidermis in the other, while the details of the digestive tract were framed by fanciful Roman warrior's armor.

It can be hard to imagine such artistic license with human guts when our only points of reference are the no-nonsense Gray's Anatomy or the bland plastic parts assembled on a shelf in a doctor's office. That's why the National Institutes of Health's National Library of Medicine (NLM) in Bethesda is presenting "Dream Anatomy," a fascinating, macabre exhibit that examines the intersection of anatomy, art and printing technology over the last five centuries.

"Art and the artistic imagination have always been an essential part of the science of anatomy," said Michael Sappol, the library's historian and curator and the author of "A Traffic of Dead Bodies: Anatomy and Embodied Social Identity in Nineteenth-Century America" (2002, Princeton University Press). "In fact, between 1450 and 1750, the boundaries between art and science as we know them didn't exist."

Beginning tomorrow, the library will display for the first time its rare anatomical books and prints from the 16th through the 19th centuries, allowing visitors to explore how artistic trends in anatomical rendering have evolved from the frolicsome to the gruesomely realistic to the detached clinical style we know today.

In addition to the library's rare texts, "Dream Anatomy" offers interactive exhibits that illustrate the art inherent in today's most common anatomical renderings: those produced by magnetic resonance imaging and CT scans.

Most of the interactive exhibits borrow heavily from the library's 1989 Visible Human Project (VHP), which created ana-



The image, right, of a skeleton seemingly extracting a splinter, was created in 1837 by Francesco Bertinatti. Above is a Bartolomeo Eustachii engraving, etched in the 1500s but colored and published in 1783.

