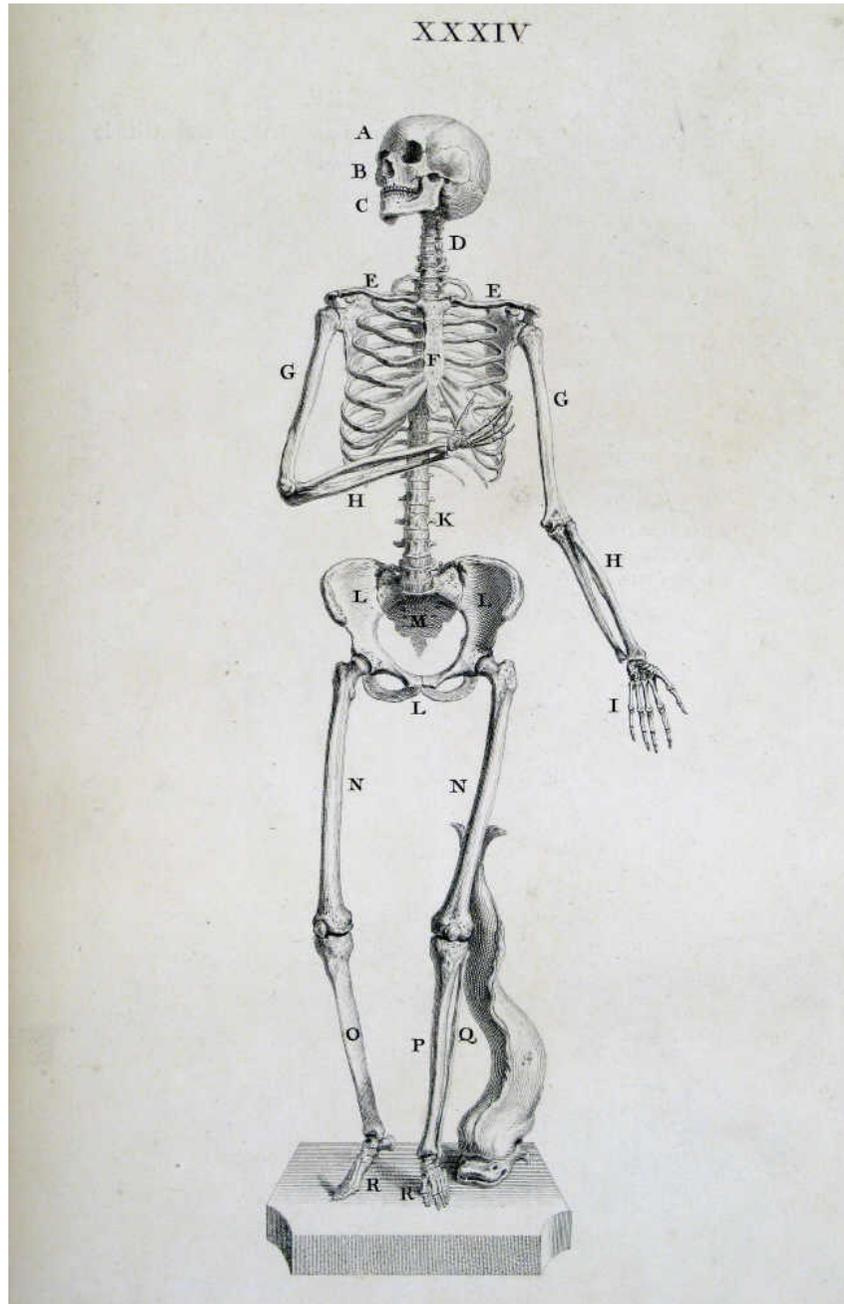


William Cheselden was one of many anatomists who went to great lengths to ensure their illustrations were accurate. For *'Osteographia'*, published in 1733, a camera obscura was used to make sure every part of the skeleton was in proportion. Despite this accuracy, when it came to which skeletons he chose and how he displayed them, he had the same influences as many other anatomists at the time. They often tried not just to accurately show what they saw, but wanted images of the human body in its 'perfection'. Some anatomists would carefully select a skeleton nearest this ideal for illustration, or overlook 'flaws'. Here, a male and female skeleton are shown in the poses of two classical sculptures (the Apollo Belvedere and the Venus of Medicis). At the time, these were felt to be the peak of masculinity and femininity.



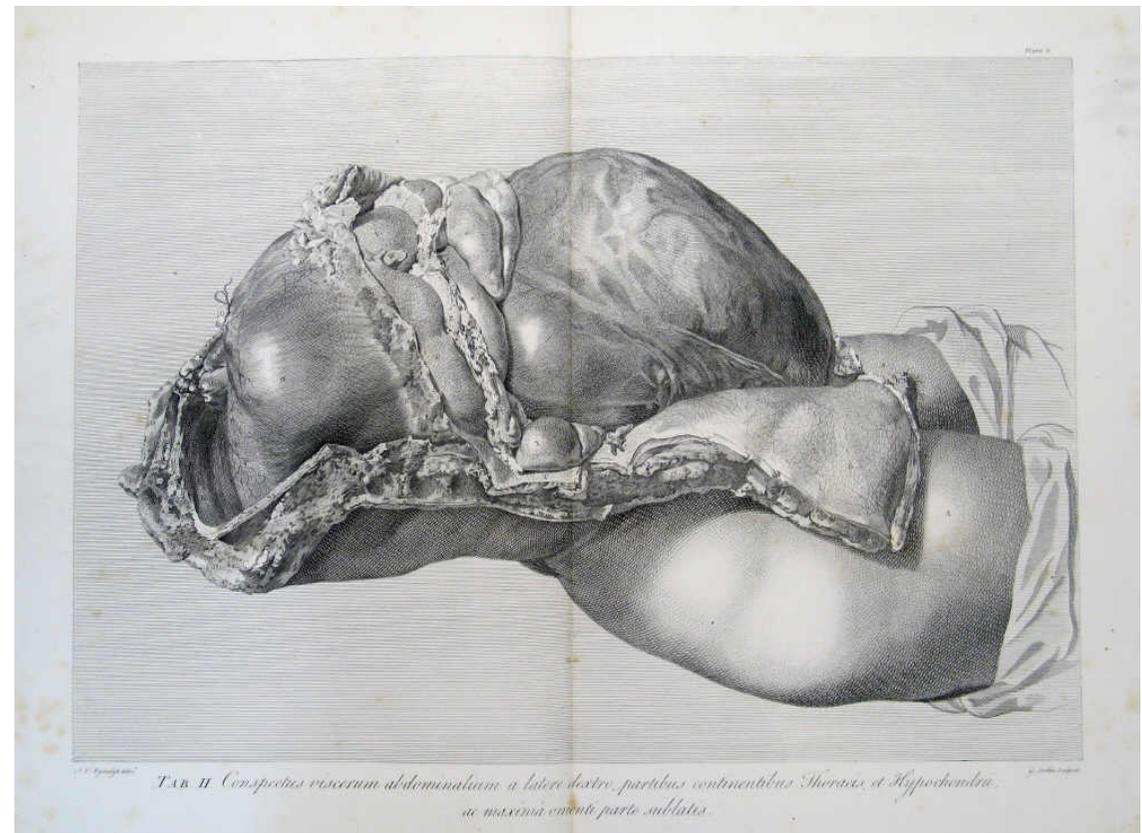


This was one of the earliest images of a female skeleton. Until the around the 1750's there was little interest in the anatomy of the female skeleton, and when this one was included in Chesledens '*Osteographia*' of 1733 he made no direct comparisons with the male skeleton. Much of the reason for this was that historically, masculinity and femininity were not seen as absolutes. Sex was more of a sliding scale, with physical and mental characteristics associated with each of the sexes but not restricted to them. This attitude is famously seen in Queen Elizabeth I speech "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a King". While the human body was seen as the peak of creation, women were thought to be generally inferior to men. Because authors wanted to show the perfect human body in anatomy books, male skeletons were generally chosen instead of slightly 'imperfect' female skeletons. Female skeletons were therefore generally overlooked. Later, the spread of liberal ideals forced anatomists to look at basic physical differences between the sexes to explain their different roles in society.



From the late 1700's there was a growing idea that anatomical study should be more rigorous. Some authors used the new techniques available to include highly detailed and richly coloured illustrations. They left out the imaginative props and backgrounds, and moved towards a 'hyper-reality', showing a tremendous detail and clarity that would never have been possible in simple observation. Illustrations like these generally aimed to show some 'higher' reality, with startling detail and colours, and often included idealised muscular bodies with curly locks. This can be seen here in the illustrations from *'The muscles of the human body'*, Quain (1836) and *'Traite complet de l'anatomie de l'homme: tome quatrieme'*, Bourguery (1836). Again they sidestepped some of the unpleasant associations by showing skin and muscle removed cleanly from otherwise healthy looking models.

One of the alternative styles was to try and show the reality of dissection. These illustrations showed every detail of the dissection, including things like equipment and even reflections from windows. The aim was to show exactly what was seen by the author, even if this meant that some of the detail was unclear. William Hunter used this technique in his *'The anatomy of the human gravid uterus'* originally published in 1774, and he supervised every element of the illustrations. He tried to take the viewer as close as possible to the dissection. He felt that illustrations that showed exactly what he saw, like the one shown here, had 'the mark of truth' and could not lie.



While the intention of these illustrations has always been to instruct, their 'style' has varied drastically. Today we have much more accurate techniques for illustrating medical texts. Imaging technology has come a long way. However, it is worth remembering that it is impossible to produce a truly neutral image. The authors of these texts would not have actively considered what influences were affecting their choice of illustration; to them the influences were a basic part of the medicine they were teaching. What might the images in our textbooks show about the influences in our medicine and our society?

For more information please contact the Plymouth Medical Society Historic Collection at historic.collection@plymouth.nhs.uk

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