The anatomy lesson

This exhibition celebrates 150 years of the Melbourne Medical School. The study of anatomy has always connected medicine to other disciplines. Art, architecture, dance, philosophy, poetry, zoology, botany and history have all found creative inspiration in the mysterious structure of the human body.

In keeping with the focus on the achievements of the university, this exhibition has been selected largely from the many extensive collections of artwork across the campus—paintings and works on paper from the University of Melbourne Art Collection, rare books from the collection of historical medical texts now housed with the Special Collections of the Baillieu Library, prints from the Orde Poynton Collection also at the library, and historical student works from the Victorian College of the Arts Collection.

The exhibition has been laid out as a giant body with the head at one end (in the smaller, east gallery) and the feet at the other. Like Dr Frankenstein, the necessity of working ‘in the dark’ with the materials at hand has caused some errors of anatomy. The creature that this exhibition has produced has a number of brains, some of them troubled by flocks of birds, one heart, one giant lung stuck to the side of its head; it has hairy legs, nine feet, and countless arms and torsos; it is both male and female, and has several nasty wounds.

Of the many lessons to be learnt from anatomy, the one most often evoked in anatomical texts and illustrations is the motto borrowed from Socrates: *know thyself*. For many of the artists and anatomists included in this exhibition the human body, in all its hybrid strangeness, is the starting point in the search for this knowledge.

Two other exhibitions are being held concurrently with *The anatomy lesson*. They are *The art of teaching: models and methods*, in the Leigh Scott Gallery, Baillieu Library, and *The art of teaching: the clinical schools*, in the Medical History Museum. A catalogue is available at the front desk on the ground floor.

*Guest curator* Jenny Long
Anatomy in books and prints

All the prints in this exhibition are from the Orde Poynton Print Collection, which was donated to the Baillieu Library in 1959 by Dr John Orde Poynton. Both Orde Poynton and his father, Dr Frederick Poynton, who collected the prints in London in the 1920s, were doctors. But this medical association is not the only reason for including these fine engravings, etchings and woodcuts. They are also evidence of the tremendous interest in anatomy among artists of early modern Europe.

The same period saw a revolution in the imaging of the human body, which was just as momentous in its time as the digital innovations of our own era. By the last decades of the fifteenth century the artist/anatomist was a well-established figure and, according to Vasari, artists such as Pollaiuolo, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael and Dürer all had access to cadavers for dissection and study.

This fascination with the relationship between muscle, tendon and bone was combined with a number of other factors including the transformative power of new technology in the form of printing—both of books and artists' prints. And there was another obsession of the age: the newly discovered sculptures of ancient Rome and Greece. Artists were very receptive to the potent combination of animated spirit and anatomical correctness to be found in these fragments of antiquity.

Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) wrote in 1550:

Success came to artists who followed, after they had seen some of the finest works of art mentioned by Pliny dug out of the earth; namely the Laocoon, the Hercules, the great torso of Belvedere, as well as the Venus, the Cleopatra, the Apollo and countless others, all possessing the appeal and vigour of living flesh and derived from the finest features of living models.

By 1543, when Andreas Vesalius published his wonderfully illustrated text *De humana corporis fabrica*, medical publishing had begun to take advantage of the expertise in anatomical drawing, which had become an essential part of the training of artists across Europe. In the decades which followed and into the seventeenth century, other anatomists publishing medical texts often included images which combined anatomical diagrams with references to classical sculpture in a rich and eclectic mix.
The teaching tradition at the National Gallery School was directly descended from the system first established in 1768 by Joshua Reynolds at the Royal Academy School in London. Anatomy played an important role in the teaching of the school in its earliest years. The famous anatomist William Hunter was the institution's first professor of anatomy from 1769.

This model had been more recently revived when Bernard Hall was a student at the Royal College of Art in London from 1875 to 1878. Study from antique casts was followed by drawing from life models, combined with the study of anatomy.

Hugh Ramsay, George Coates, Charles Wheeler and Constance Winifred Honey were taught by Bernard Hall at the National Gallery School in Melbourne using this method. They were all very successful as students. Hugh Ramsay and Charles Wheeler were favourites of Hall and won many prizes for draughtsmanship, while Coates and Honey were both awarded the prestigious travelling scholarship to study in Europe.

George Folingsby had established the study of anatomy as an essential part of the curriculum at the National Gallery School during his period as director of the school (1882–91). Students such as Tom Roberts are known to have attended anatomy lessons at the University of Melbourne in 1878. In 1896 Dr Septimus Bird was employed to teach anatomy to art students including Hugh Ramsay. For much of the twentieth century, anatomy remained a core subject. In the 1920s Albert Coates lectured in anatomy at the university and at the art school. And in the 1930s students were still required to visit the Melbourne morgue in what was the opposite of life drawing.