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Megan Tanner
Georgia Southern University

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Écorché figures in Mannerism as influenced by the reemergence of systematic human dissection

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the Betty Foy Sanders Department of Art.

By
Megan Tanner

Under the mentorship of Dr. Tiffanie Townsend

ABSTRACT
During the sixteenth century, many individuals became fascinated by the human form, which led to an increase in artistic and scientific focus on these subjects. Artistic interest in the human body resulted in a close relationship between artists and anatomists during the time, and the societal acceptance to public demonstrations of dissections, including flaying, was often converged with Mannerist ideals. It is historically evident that écorché figures during Mannerism were based on these, as well as torture methods during the time. As these demonstrations became more common throughout the sixteenth century, they began to be monitored in order to ensure that ethics were being followed. This, however, did not limit the relationship between anatomists and artists; in fact, many artists actively participated alongside the anatomists in their studies. As artists became exposed to new information on the human form, they were able to begin depicting the bizarre, highlighted by exaggerated contrapposto and figura serpentinita forms and amplified occurrences of écorché figures. These figures manage to maintain a calmness to them, accepting and, sometimes, participating in their own dissection. There exists a difference between artists documenting anatomical demonstrations and artists using these studies to further their works. This paper will address the ways in which artists co-opted the scientific studies to further their works: Andreas Vesalius devoted most of his time as a documenter, illustrating an entire book on the workings of the human body. Other artists such as Michelangelo and Titian focused on the aesthetic and symbolism of these figures.

Thesis Mentor: ______________________
Dr. Tiffanie Townsend

Honors Director: ______________________
Dr. Steven Engel

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During the sixteenth century, many individuals became fascinated by the human form, with increasing artistic and scientific focus on this subject matter. In art during the time, we see the limits of *contrapposto* pushed to its limits, with an even more exaggerated version of the *figura serpentinata*, which started appearing in artworks between 1490 and 1520. After 1520 and extending throughout the rest of the sixteenth century, artists delved deep into the human figure and began to depict the bizarre. A prominent example of this is seen in the continuous portrayal of figures in *écorché*, a result of anatomical studies during the time as well as the “major trend toward the rediscovery of nature.”¹ The artistic interest in the human body often resulted in a close relationship between the artist and the anatomist, and the societal acceptance to public demonstrations of flaying was often converged with Mannerist ideals. In particular, an emphasis on emotion and spiritualism find themselves entangled in the works of Vesalius, Titian, and Michelangelo.

The exaggerations of the body seen frequently throughout Mannerist art was not unprecedented. It drew heavily from the influence of the High Renaissance, which came immediately prior. The art academy also played a particularly important role in influencing the art style of the time. In the studios, many artists gained practice in their field through copying sculptures or models made from wax or clay; in particular, there was extensive focus on the forms which could be altered using the artificial light in the studios to create varying cast shadows. Edward J. Olszewski comments on the subject by noting that, “by observing the shadows cast by their models, both painter and sculptor discovered new ideas for pose and gesture, and an embellished taste from extended

forms.”² In addition to this, the academy began combining the efforts of artists and anatomists in an educational setting in order to further the knowledge of human anatomy.³ This led to the rising presence of écorché figures, which were typically presented as “skeletons and muscle-men dramatically posed against an Italian landscape.”⁴

Public demonstrations of flaying, which, when strictly for anatomical purposes, were often referred to as vivisections or dissections, became routine during this period. Human vivisections usually involved cutting into and opening up the bodies whilst individuals observed the scene as it occurred.⁵ This became such a common occurrence that they had to be monitored through various legal and religious frameworks in order to maintain more ethical integrity, although these practices continued to remain somewhat macabre.⁶ Katharine Park notes that the concern for many Italians during the time was often related to the “specific prospect that they or their loved ones might come under the anatomist’s knife.”⁷ Park further elaborates on this when she states, “Whether or not the sixteenth-century anatomical hunger for cadavers actually put the living at risk, it certainly forged unprecedented links between anatomists and the administrators of

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² Olszewski, Edward J. “Distortions, Shadows, and Conventions in Sixteenth Century Italian.” *Artibus Et Historiae*, vol. 6, no. 11, 1985, pp. 117-118.
criminal justice.”

Coincidently, a similar situation occurred in the third century BCE in Alexandria, Egypt with the physicians Erasistratus and Herophilus. Erasistratus and Herophilus utilized vivisections in order to understand the functions and anatomy of the human body and are noted to be “the only physicians before the Renaissance to perform the systematic dissection of humans.” These practices, as in the sixteenth century, were seen as hostile and cruel; however, instead of being regulated for ethical integrity, they were halted altogether.

Information gained from these demonstrations was incredibly beneficial to both artists and anatomists, so it was obsessively documented; one of the most memorable documenters of these topics was Andreas Vesalius, who devoted his entire book *De humani corporis fabrica* to the inner workings of the human form. Many artists began to work closely with anatomists because exposure to this material “offered the clearest visual link between the natural-philosophical, artistic, and metaphysical uses of anatomy.” Florike Egmond and Robert Zwijnenberg even note that:

> Many artists performed dissections themselves, some of which took place in the artistic academies. Knowledge of the inner body served not only to represent the human figure ‘correctly’, but also to enhance the status of their own art metaphysically.

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8 Ibid.
Vesalius’s *De humani corporis fabrica* is filled with artistic representations of bodies that express these ideals (Fig. 1). In addition to utilizing book illustrations, casts were often made of the bodies and their flayed body parts in materials such as plaster, terracotta, or wax. Sculptures of écorchés also became common and were created using similar materials; most notably, these included wax, wood, plaster, or metal.

As with any aspects of art, mastery of the human form opened doors for how artists during the sixteenth century were able to depict the skeletal and muscular representations of the human body. For example, one of the most prominent features of écorché images is the aspect of “human constitution that resulted in the outer signs of character and emotional expression.” The intellectual studies of past artists, like Leonardo da Vinci, metamorphosed with the most prominent qualities of the Mannerist period in Italian Renaissance. Raphaël Cuir stresses that écorché figures during the 1500s have a tendency to be represented as living beings rather than cadavers, stating that, “if Renaissance anatomists had wanted artists to represent flayed figures differently—notably as cadavers—then in all likelihood the artists would have done so.”

He also argues that the legal and religious regulations on dissections at the time, which

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14 For more information on the images in Vesalius’s book, see Meijer, Bert W. “Calcar, Jan Steven [Johannes Stephanus] Van.” *Oxford Art Online*, 2003, doi:10.1093/gao/9781884446054/article.t013110. Meijer discusses Jan Steven van Calcar’s contributions to illustrate Vesalius’s book; he is credited with anatomical illustrations, but how much he actually contributed is not known.


18 Leonardo da Vinci was not prominent during the specific time period discussed here; however, he was identified as being a rare case in terms of anatomical studying due to his specifically scientific approach, as well as his focus on one particular body part at a time. For more information on Leonardos’ anatomical studies, see Roberts, Kenneth B. “Anatomical Studies.” *Grove Art Online*, 2003, doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T002533.

pushed anatomists to pursue their studies on criminals and felons who deserved to have their identities forgotten, resulted in these life-like and emotional renderings. Cuir elaborates on this by saying that:

The anatomist is thought to have wanted to conceal the macabre origin of the dissected bodies—the corpses of criminals, procured from the gallows—and to dissociate himself from the executioner, to whom he might otherwise have been linked.

In other words, if artists were to portray flayed beings as simple cadavers, or objects of study, there would be no separation from the artist and the cruelty of the killer, even if they were considered deserving due to crime. Despite these efforts, the link between the two remained; Katharine Park notes that, “despite elaborate social, verbal, and pictorial strategies designed to distance himself from these associations, [the anatomist] nevertheless acted as an arm of the coercive state.”

Specific examples of the use of criminals for these matters include Alessandro Allori and Vicenzo Danti, who both utilized recently executed criminals for anatomical studies in the academy.

This strong concern among artists and anatomists is most likely due to the usage of flaying as a historical form of torture. Martin Kemp and Marina Wallace comment on flaying as a punishment, stating that:

The secular and religious laws that reluctantly sanctioned dissection of human cadavers from the later Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, generally reserved

21 Ibid.
the violation of dissection for those condemned to die at the hands of an executioner. To be dissected was a punishment pronounced to selected criminals while alive, serving to heap posthumous retribution onto the condemned man. While this ideology directly affected the anatomical studies at the time, it was not a new concept in society or in the Church. Katharine Park further discusses the execution and dissection of criminals in this manner as it relates to the Church when she acknowledges that:

… in addition to being an act of vengeance and a warning to others, it was also the culmination of a process that aimed to reconcile the criminal with those that condemned him through a final act of atonement explicitly identified with Christ and the saints … From this point of view the criminal’s subsequent dissection … resembled a sacrament—the penultimate act in a potential drama of redemption.

However, condemning criminals to a death that was painful and seemingly fitting for their crimes had been popular all throughout history, particularly in China and other Eastern countries. Perhaps the most notable of these examples is with Erasistratus and Herophilus in Alexandria, who carried out their procedures “on criminals who were supplied by the king”, which were then “cut open while they were alive, and … while they were still breathing.” Even in Europe, flaying has been used historically despite seldomly being documented; in his book “The History of Torture Throughout the Ages”,

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George Ryley Scott discusses notable examples of European flaying as a form of torture in 1366 and 1655.\textsuperscript{28}

Despite the lack of records on European flaying, this would have been an incident that artists in Italy at the time would have directly witnessed and would have been influenced by. In the 1570s, Venice was at war with the Ottoman Turks over the island of Cyprus. Venetian forces were eventually backed by other Italian states, but ultimately proved unsuccessful. The captain of the Venetian army ended up being publicly flayed.\textsuperscript{29} Flaying as a form of torture has historically proven to influence artist’s portrayals, and this can be seen in the multitude of depictions of the flayed Saint Bartholomew, the patron saint of tanners whose untimely demise was a result of the Armenians.\textsuperscript{30} Larissa Tracy discusses how the Venetian flaying influenced Titian’s painting \textit{Flaying of Marsyas} (Fig.2) when she notes that in this painting:

\begin{quote}
… [Titian’s] message to the observer is clear: no human would ever flay another human; the brutality is simply too inhumane. Except that a prominent Venetian, Marcantonio Bragadin, had just been publicly flayed. This punishment ordered by the Ottoman general Lala Mustafa Pasha following the surrender of the city of Famagusta on the island of Cyprus … may well have inspired the dark violence of Titian’s painting.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

The subject matter for Titian’s painting, while clearly drawing influence from events taking place at the time, is ultimately based on a story in Greek mythology, which refers

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\textsuperscript{28} Scott, George Ryley. \textit{The History Of Torture}. Routledge, 2013, p. 216.
\textsuperscript{29} D’Outremer, Melisende. “Marcantonio Bragadin.” \textit{Academia}, Academia, 2019.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
to a satyr named Marsyas who arrogantly challenged Apollo to an incredibly high stakes music competition.

In this story, Marsyas believed that he could beat Apollo in his musical abilities but immediately lost, and as a result, Apollo chastised him by flaying him alive.\(^{32}\) There are several variations of the story, including one where Marsyas is said to have won and was subsequently punished by being given the ears of an ass, one where Marsyas is said to have been whipped to death, etc. The scene that Titian depicts is quite evidently the version which results in Marsyas being flayed alive. Maria Maniates comments on the Greek myth, noting that since Marsyas proposed flaying alive as punishment in the event that he should lose, it “established the gravity of a contest in which the mortal contestant could forfeit his life.”\(^{33}\) In his painting, Titian elaborates on this by expressing that, as mentioned previously, gods can be as cruel as they want to be because they have the power to do so, but it seems impossible that a human would perform this act on another human.\(^{34}\) There is little to no ritualistic element to the scene, which further exemplifies the pure intent of torture to the victim.\(^{35}\) However, what makes Titian’s painting even more disturbing, according to Florike Egmond and Robert Zwijnenberg, is that “Marsyas expresses little of what is happening to him, rather than involuntarily cramping his muscles in pain, he simply hangs, head down from the tree, almost relaxed.”\(^{36}\) In fact, this is true of a majority of écorché figures, and it is very often perceived as being incredibly unnerving.

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\(^{32}\) Ibid, p. 68.

\(^{33}\) Maniates, Maria R. “Marsyas Agonistes.” Current Musicology, no. 69, 2000, pp. 118-162.


\(^{35}\) Maniates, Maria R. “Marsyas Agonistes.” Current Musicology, no. 69, 2000, pp. 118-162.

Elizabeth Stephens acknowledges that, “Écorché figures are often represented as holding the knives by which they were flayed, or as holding open their own flesh.” This is prominent throughout Vesalius’s work, with some of the figures even acting as participants in the flaying of themselves. Duke Pesta, on this subject, proceeds in saying that:

… the [écorchés] of Vesalius, with their emphasis on anatomical form, make for interesting theater in their ability to display the muscles in various true-to-life poses—poses that would be impossible to recreate in living bodies if they were flayed (Fig. 3). Aside from the work of Vesalius, multitudinous other flayed figures are shown in a manner which implies that they still have life. Agnolo Bronzino’s portrayal of Saint Bartholomew (Fig. 4) in 1555 shows a scene matching this exact description. Michelangelo’s Saint Bartholomew (Fig. 5) located in the Sistine Chapel is another example of this; however, this depiction shows the flayed skin acting more as a mask, as Saint Bartholomew remains completely skinned despite obviously holding his flesh and a knife.

The skin of a human was seen to be a barrier which separated the interior and exterior of a being, giving the figures in écorché a spiritual meaning in addition to their scientific implications. Michelangelo and his Saint Bartholomew prove to be a prime example of this, as “Many interpreters … note that Michelangelo’s poems and sonnets demonstrate a fascination with flaying and the possibility of spiritual regeneration that

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comes from sloughing one’s skin.”

His poetry, particularly of the spiritual genre, elaborates on these ideals by discussing “progressive ascent through purgation and contemplation” as well as “redemption as the consequence of an instantaneous and metaphysical transformation.”

In his depiction of Saint Bartholomew, Michelangelo seems to have intentionally inserted himself in the place of Saint Bartholomew, a tantalizingly ironic representation due to his continuous involvement in the flaying of cadavers. Overall, Michelangelo seems to view flaying as “a necessary part of the ritualistic apotheosis.”

Titian’s Flaying of Marysas also seems to represent these ideals, and, as Florike Egmond and Robert Zwijnenberg discuss:

Titian’s representation of skin … emerges that the very lack of decision between interior body and external skin, gives rise to the critical arguments concerning anatomy and its search for the hidden interior, and tackles concepts of identity, that are based on kind of ‘separating off’ from the environment.

This painting by Titian explores the relationship between life and death as well as the symbolism behind removing the skin from the body. Richard Carvalho touches on this by elaborating on the stages of life, noting that the symbolism of death is often characterized

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40 Ibid, p. 945.
43 Ibid, p. 950.
by ritual mutilation, as expressed in the *Flaying of Marsyas*. Carvalho also argues that “this painting is a depiction of the suffering of body and mind in the creative process.”

This seems to be a very similar ideology to what Michelangelo is trying to achieve. The topic of Titian’s *Flaying of Marsyas* in relation to these spiritual ideals is further explored by Duke Pesta, who identifies that:

> For Renaissance artists and anatomists, the flaying of Marsyas came to symbolize those rites of purification that stripped away the disfigured and sinful exterior of the human body to reveal the hidden beauty of the inner self, a hideous trial in which the Christian is torn free from fleshy form and reborn as spirit.

Thus, artists during this time not only depicted these flayed figures in a strange, life-like manner, but they also conceptualized the body in a new way.

It seems that the artists identify as an individual only when the flesh has been scraped away, meaning that one is not truly themself until they have reached this pinnacle point. Stripping away of the skin reveals the individual that is so often trapped in the skin like a mask. Richard Carvalho on this topic notes, “Nakedness implies the anonymity and therefore the symbolic death of the individual persons who have shed the outward signs of their identity so as to become interchangeable.”

This is a common interpretation, again, of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel Saint Bartholomew, as the figure

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45 Carvalho, Richard. “Titian’s Marsyas as an Image of the Creative Process.” *Journal of Romance Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3, Winter 2010, p. 30, doi:10.3828/jrs.10.3.27. Carvalho further elaborates on these ideals by explaining the different stages of life as they relate to the solstices, particularly the liminal or threshold phase, which focuses on passage from one life to another.

46 Ibid, p. 34.


holds the flayed skin in his hand while still remaining fully covered in flesh; this
mask-like depiction shifts the interpretation from being a simple commemoration to Saint
Bartholomew and his martyrdom to an uneasiness as one wonders what he could have
been hiding. Duke Pesta seems to find this imagery interesting in that it “seek[s] to
capture the elusive and liminal moment when flesh and blood become transposed into
something mysterious and divine,” which is exactly what the Mannerist ideals
encompass. With that being said, Elizabeth Stephens in “Inventing the Bodily Interior”
further discusses the idea of individuality within when she explains that:

A concept of bodily interiority can only emerge if the inside and outside of the
body are seen as separate and clearly distinguishable from one another … Early
modern écorché illustrations do not simply represent the peeling away of the
body’s outside in order to reveal it inside but … represent the establishment of the
skin as a border of the individuated self.

Humans are more than just bodies; they are complex and fascinating, and this is precisely
why the artists and anatomists develop such a strong desire to study and depict these
forms.

Depictions of flayed, or écorché, figures during the sixteenth century pose an
interesting juxtaposition between being scientific and practical works of art while at the
same time maintaining a sense of individuality and liveliness. The astounding rate at
which public dissections, rather shows of flaying, became accessible to the public played
an exceptionally sizable contribution to the artistic portrayals. A number of artists,

51 Ibid, p. 950.
52 Stephens, Elizabeth. “Inventing the Bodily Interior: Écorché Figures in Early Modern Anatomy and Von
Michelangelo in particular, had the opportunity to directly participate in these matters, which allowed for improved depictions of human anatomy and form. Though Mannerist qualities were able to make their way into even the most gruesome of topics, flayed figures began to be used as a means of spiritual indication between the interior and exterior, and many believed that “it was necessary for the artist to acquire mastery of the body as a functional system of motion and emotion.” These beliefs, as well as an attempt to separate the artists and anatomists from the executioner, contributed to the flayed corpses being rendered, in most cases, as calm, accepting, and active participants in their own dissection.

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Fig. 1. Andreas Vesalius, *Anatomy*, 1543, Engraving, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.
Figure 2. Titian, *The Flaying of Marsyas*, 1576, Oil on Canvas, 212 x 2017 cm, State Museum Kromeriz.
Figure 3. Andreas Vesalius, *Dissected human body*, 1543, Engraving, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.
Figure 4. Agnolo Bronzino, *Saint Bartholomew*, 1536, Accademia Nazionale di San Luca, Rome.
Figure 5. Michelangelo, *Last Judgment* (detail of Saint Bartholomew), 1537-41, fresco, Cappella Sistina, Vatican.
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