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# Art, Anatomy, and Political Theory in the Late Renaissance: Creating an Image of the Renaissance Body

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## **Abstract**

Universal access to the human body allows the body to serve as a common standard to which all things are measured against; an accessible analog. Societies cling to the comfort and stability of the universal human body when approaching new ideas. So naturally by the end of the European Renaissance (1450-1650) the prevalence of the human body in intellectual and artistic circles reflected the chaos brought on by new, unsettling Renaissance ideas. But with these new ideas and discoveries came a new understanding of embodiment: The Renaissance's cultural construction of the human body. Previous historians have emphasized the advancement of medicine and the establishment of personal hygienic routines as constructing popular conceptions of the human body during the Renaissance. However, these ideas disregard the inherent union of science and humanities in stating that the cultural construction of the body was established by a single facet of the intellectual field, that being the scientific field of medicine. This paper serves to establish that the Late Renaissance image of the human body was created through the interdisciplinary efforts of Renaissance thinkers in the fields of art, anatomy, and political theory.

*Keywords:* Renaissance, Art, Anatomy, Political Theory, Body Politic, Medicine

## **INTRODUCTION**

Bodies are a source of knowledge, not unlike books or maps. Easy access to the body allows anyone to observe and explore their own theories of the human body in both function and application. Many fields of study outside of medicine and anatomy utilize the body as a standard of measurement or a basis for comparison. As new and unsettling ideas emerged from the European Renaissance, such as religious schisms, the discovery of a new world, and the establishment of a heliocentric model of the universe, Renaissance thinkers looked to the body to help understand themselves and develop (or, in some cases, to reject) a new worldview. In studying and discussing the body, Renaissance thinkers constructed a cultural conception or image of the human body unique to their time. The fields of art, anatomy, and political theory were not only integral to the creation of this new bodily image, but dependent on each other as well. In anatomical dissections, the image of the body was uncovered and exposed. In political theory, the image of the body was projected to illustrate political ideas or assert power. Whereas some scientific disciplines such as anatomy sought to control the body, other fields of humanities, such art and political theory, sought to explain and understand changes in the world around them by crafting and appealing to analogies that corresponded to the human body. The cultural image of the human body was constructed through the interdisciplinary efforts of art, anatomy, and political theory and served to aid Renaissance thinkers in understanding themselves as well as the world around them.

## **DA VINCI, VESALIUS, AND (UN)COVERING THE IMAGE OF THE BODY**

No discussion of interdisplinary in the Renaissance is complete without a mentioning of Leonardo Da Vinci. Da Vinci excelled in interdisciplinary studies, especially in reference to the

body in art and anatomical dissection. Da Vinci echoes the poignant sentiments of his fore-runner, Leon Battista Alberti's, "On Painting", an impressionable text for Da Vinci which stated, "Before dressing a man we first draw him nude, then we enfold him in draperies. So, in painting the nude, we place first his bones and muscles which we then cover with flesh so that it is not difficult to understand where each muscle is beneath." (Isaacson, 2017, p. 212). Inspired by this, Leonardo da Vinci's works heavily emphasized perspective, as well as proportion, a skill that would later enable him to more clearly communicate his anatomical knowledge. Da Vinci's fascination with the human body is said to have begun in 1489 and resulted in the most impactful visualization of the human body, the Vitruvian Man (1489-90). Art Conservator David Bull notes Da Vinci's enchantment with the human body aided in his artistic skills, mainly in creating more naturalistic works of art (Bull, 2008). Evidence of this can be found in the development of Leonardo da Vinci's artwork. This includes Leonardo da Vinci's, *Lady with the Ermine* created in 1489 and *Ginevra de' Benci* created in 1474. Despite only a short period of time in between the creation of these two pieces of work, *Ginevra de Benci* was created before Da Vinci would begin his anatomical studies, thus there are staggering artistic differences. According to Bull, Da Vinci's *Lady with the Ermine* (created the same year as his famous Vitruvian Man) demonstrates how Da Vinci understood, "the full weight, volume, and movement of her body, even where it is covered by her clothes" (Bull, 1992, p. 70). Da Vinci was clearly manifesting Alberti's vision in his 1489 portrait. The accuracy of the anatomical details in *Ginevra de' Benci* is not nearly as developed as that of Da Vinci's *The Lady with the Ermine*, despite their similar goal to represent a body on a flat surface (Bull, 1992, p. 70). These figures, created over a decade apart, aid in demonstrating the practicality of anatomical knowledge in creating more naturalistic works of art.

**Figure 1**

*Leonardo da Vinci, Ginevra de' Benci, 1474-1478. Oil on wood, National Gallery of Art*



**Figure 2**

*Leonardo da Vinci, Lady with the Ermine, 1489-1490. Oil on wood, National Museum in Krakow.*



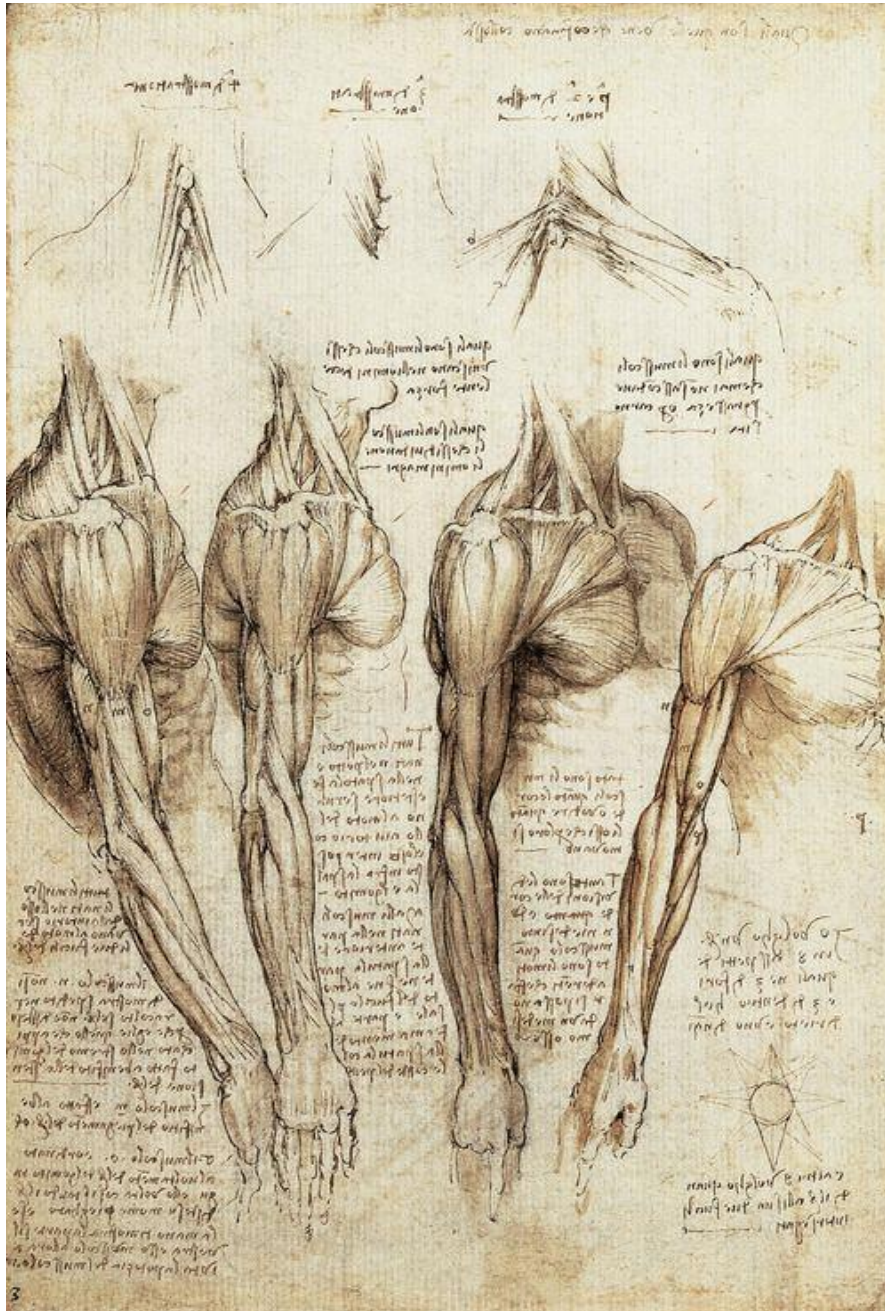
In the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, Leonardo da Vinci began detailing his experiences with anatomy in his journals. In an excerpt, “On Anatomy”, Da Vinci describes his experience with human dissection in which he:

dissected more than ten human bodies, destroying all the other members, and removing the very minutest particles of the flesh by which these veins are surrounded... since it was necessary to proceed with several bodies by degrees until I came to an end and had complete knowledge. (Da Vinci)

Human dissection was an essential part of Da Vinci’s artistic and scientific process, as it allowed him to develop a deeper understanding of the body and its composition, and thus create more naturalistic works of art. His most sophisticated anatomical representations, such as the sketch of the *Muscles of the Arms, Shoulder, and Chest* were created around 1509-1510 while he performed dissections with Marcantonio della Torre, an anatomist and university professor at the University of Pavia (Laurenza, 2012, p.13). This anatomical image is the very intersection of science and humanities during the Renaissance, in that scientists and artists were dependent on each other and frequently worked together to produce transformative works. To Da Vinci, anatomy was just as much of a part of the artistic process as sketching was a part of the anatomical process. The melding of science and art proved most effective for Leonardo da Vinci in that he is well recognized as a master of both fields. Da Vinci’s exceptional artistic and anatomical skill is not merely a flourishing detail in art history, but rather an indication of how the body was explored and subsequently reintroduced visually during the Renaissance.

**Figure 3**

Leonardo da Vinci, *Muscles of the Arm, Shoulder, and Chest*, 1509-1510. Pen, ink. The Royal Collection, Windsor Castle.



Only thirty years after Da Vinci's human dissections, Andreas Vesalius' *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* explored the artistic techniques that created the most anatomically accurate illustrations in his work. Vesalius' masterwork was based off a series of Paduan lectures which



introduced the technique of human dissection in the classroom to guide his anatomical discussions (Cavalcanti, 2009). The discussion and examination of organs would not have been possible in print form without the inclusion of artistic depictions of the body and its organs. Just as anatomical knowledge aided in artistic growth for Da Vinci, images and their artistic quality were essential to the profitability and influence of anatomical books. This resulted in Vesalius' *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*—despite Vesalius' reputation of an excellent anatomist—being best known for its anatomical illustrations (Cavalcanti, 2009). The significance of Vesalius' *Fabrica* laid not only in its pioneering anatomical work, but in its accumulation of science and art in creating a cohesive and illustrated publication of anatomical research, as well as its demonstration of the art-anatomist relationship (Cavalcanti, 2009). One key image from Vesalius' *Fabrica* includes the figure, *The Lateral Muscles of the Body*. This particular image was created through the woodcut technique in order to ensure volume was given to the forms in order to appear the most anatomically accurate (Cavalcanti, 2009).

**Figure 4**

Andreas Vesalius, *The Lateral Muscles of the Body*, 1543. Woodcut. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.





Without the inclusion of images, crafted with implicit anatomical and artistic intention, the written examination of the human body would not have adequately conveyed the image and function the human body. Just as artists would not have been able to portray naturalistic and anatomically correct bodies without the field of anatomy, anatomists like Andreas Vesalius would not have advanced the field of anatomy without the inclusion of intentional images like those in *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*. Although Da Vinci is more readily recognized for his fusion of art and anatomy, it was Vesalius a few years later who recognized the importance of art for the sake of scientific development. Vesalius's work allowed people to accurately visualize the body and its complexities; for once they could see the happenings beneath their flesh. Exposing the body for all to see.

### **THE IMAGE OF THE BODY AS A POLITICAL IDEA**

In her famous work *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas made the famous assertion, "The body is an image which can stand for any bounded system." (Healy, 2010, pp. 220-221). The body is a symbol of society; a microcosm of its surrounding environment. Thus, as images of the body became more sophisticated and the understanding of the body's functions grew, this in turn developed the way society was projected onto the body. As the body was visually reintroduced into society, due in part to the work of Leonardo Da Vinci and Andreas Vesalius, Renaissance thinkers adapted body politic to work in a new way, incorporating the new ideas regarding art and anatomy to illustrate or challenge their political landscape. Although the body politic has ancient origins, it was first "organic metaphor" of the body politic was elaborated by John of Salisbury in the twelfth century, where it later evolved into a staple of Western political philosophy (Shogimen, 2008, p. 78). Given that bodily metaphor was heavily reliant on anatomical knowledge, as anatomical knowledge developed, political discourse was transformed

as well (Shogimen, 2008, p. 94). This becomes obvious when comparing the bodily metaphors and imagery of the body deployed by John of Salisbury (1120-1180), Nicolas of Cusa (1401-1464), and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). In John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* (1159), he references the body politic through what he claims is Plutarch's idea in "The Instruction of Trajan," however this classical callback seems to be a creation all of his own (Liebeschütz, 1943). He goes on to designate the religious authorities as the soul of the body, the temporal powers as the head, the Senate as the heart, the judges and governors of the providences as the ears, eyes, and mouth, the soldiers as the hands, the treasurers and record keepers as the stomach and intestines, and finally, the peasants as the feet (John of Salisbury, 1159). John of Salisbury's twelfth century bodily metaphor references the mainly external organs which is representative of his anatomical understanding. Nicolas of Cusa in the *Catholic Concordance* and Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* both make reference to more sophisticated internal organs. The *Catholic Concordance* mentions, "the veins that start from the liver and spread through the whole body" as representative of legislative function within the Church (Shogimen, 2008, p. 95). Hobbes's *Leviathan* much like Nicolas of Cusa's *Catholic Concordance* also stresses more sophisticated internal organs, asserting "For what is the Heart, but a Spring; and the Nerves, but so many Strings; and the [joints], but so many [wheels], giving motion to the whole Body" (Hobbes, 1651, p. 9). The progression of greater anatomical detail in the bodily metaphors deployed in western political theory demonstrate the intersection between these two fields of study. The image of the body expands into more sophisticated particulars of the body allowing for a more extensive bodily metaphor, and thus a more poignant political critique.

Hobbes' most effective piece of bodily metaphor in *Leviathan* is not found scattered in the text, but rather on the front cover. The frontispiece of Hobbes' book is closely associated

with his argument, and for good reason. Because Hobbes' arguments are so thoughtfully translated into pictorial form, almost every modern edition of Hobbes' *Leviathan* has fully or partially included the frontispiece on or in the book (Vaughan, 2001, p. 465). Hobbes' masterful political treatise was written in the background of The English Civil War, spanning from 1642-1651. From Paris, in self-imposed exile, Hobbes witnessed the trial and execution of monarch Charles I at the hands of the prevailing parliamentarians. The result of these violent rebellions culminated in the constitutional precedent that the English Monarch cannot rule without parliamentary oversight. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes argues in the monstrous state of nature, in which men are inherently violent and unruly, peace and order can only be achieved through a social contract and the implementation of a sovereign. Without this social contract, Hobbes argues, order would be quickly dissolved by civil strife- a clear and present reflection of his current environment.

Hobbes' frontispiece for *Leviathan* demonstrates how the image of the human body was utilized to demonstrate political theory and ideas about the world. The frontispiece depicts a large figure of a man, representing the sovereign king, holding in one hand a sword, demonstrating political authority, and in the other hand a crosier, demonstrating religious authority. Under his right hand are panels depicting common associations with political power: a castle, a crown, warfare. On the left side, under the crosier are panels which signify religious power: a cathedral, a miter, and an orderly assembly in the parishes. The Sovereign King is comprised of smaller men in his arms and torso. These men have signed what Hobbes deemed a 'social contract'. This echoes Hobbes' sentiments that, "A multitude of men, are made one person, when they are by one man, or one person, represented; so that it be done with the consent of every one of that multitude in particular" (Hobbes, *Leviathan*). Hobbes' image of the body

was made to represent his idea of a sovereign, depicted as the large monster arising from the sea, ruling with the consent of his subjects, depicted by the men who make up the body of the monster.

**Figure 5**

*Abraham Bosse, Leviathan Frontispiece, 1651. Engraving.*



The Armada Portrait commissioned in 1588 is another example of an image of the body representing Douglass' idea of a 'bounded system'. Elizabeth I of England, determined to rule

her country independently had to address the cultural discomfort of a female sovereign, in order to do so, she ruled utilizing the body politic especially in regard to modesty and virginity (Healy, 2010, p. 221). Such is it in the image of Elizabeth I in *The Armada Portrait* in which the artist, George Gower, portrayed Elizabeth's body with strict intention in order to convey a specific political message. For example, Elizabeth's body is almost entirely covered by heavy masculine clothes to secure her virgin body signifying that England, under Elizabeth I's rule, was secure from foreign forces and invasions (Healy, 2010). The visual image of the body was used to extract a particular feeling from all whose eyes gazed upon it. The audience was made to look upon the image of Elizabeth I, the image of her body, and acknowledge, whether consciously or not, the magnitude of her power and the intentions of her rule. Her body is made to represent her rule.

**Figure 6**

*George Gower, The Armada Portrait, 1558, Oil on Panel, Woburn Abbey*

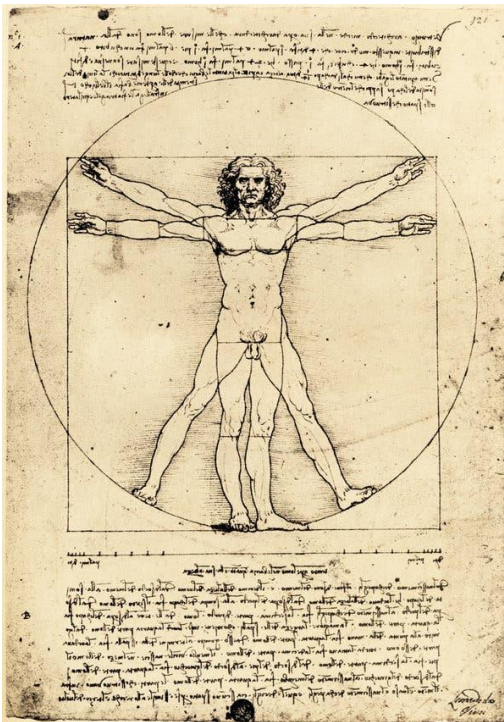


The way the image of the body had been reimagined and reorganized in the Renaissance by Da Vinci, Vesalius, and other Renaissance thinkers alike had its most tangible impact on the

psyche of individuals through the popularity of self-help regimes and pamphlets. Although one can see the consequence of a more sophisticated visual body politic through *The Armada Portrait* and Hobbes's *Leviathan* frontispiece, a closer look at these Renaissance 'Regimes' of the body provides insight in how these new ideas effected the individual. Medical regimes, or information regarding how one must conduct their body and health accordingly flew off the printing presses and played a critical role in escalating the amount of bodily knowledge in circulation at the time (Healy, 2010, p. 209). These pamphlets were crucial in demonstrated how one must present and maintain themselves regarding their diet and habits in order to produce a civil body. Although these pamphlets referred greatly to health and well-being, it was not purely medical information.

**Figure 7**

*Leonardo da Vinci, Vitruvian Man, 1490. Pen and ink. Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice, Italy.*



Historian Rudolph Wittkower assess how many Renaissance artists and architects, including Leonardo da Vinci, were inspired by the geometry which captured the order and

harmony of the universe, including that of man (Healy, 2010, p. 211). The most obvious example being Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man which illustrates an orderly and perfectly measured body. Significantly, sixteenth and seventeenth century medical pamphlets began emphasizing the urgency in self-governance in one's health habits to mirror the orderly and perfectly measured body, inspired by the anatomical and artistic visions of these men. These habits included precise diets, sleep, exercise, and even frequency and timing of sexual intercourse (Healy, 2010, p. 211). Once again, it is the mental and physical image of the body as orderly and retained that inspires these pamphlets and its audience. As Margaret Healy notes in her work *Fashioning Civil Bodies and "Others"* the emphasis on the individual's habits in these self-help books, inspired by the Renaissance artistic and anatomical phenomena, is reflective of the society as a whole. Healy asserts that "fashioning and preforming the civil body in the Renaissance context is inextricable from fashioning and enacting civil society." (Healy, 2010, p. 226). Disease, manners, and health are not merely issues of the individual but signifiers of the community.

## **CONCLUSION**

Knowledge about the body and its limits are inherently unstable and constantly developing. What people make of the vessels they inhabit is always unique to their time. But one thing remains constant: the human body has clear importance outside of its daily functions and private affairs. This significance prompts a cultural construction of the body that all people in every era of history can design and interact with. Renaissance thinkers active in intellectual and artistic movements fashioned how the body was perceived, and how the world was perceived through the lens of the body. The image of the body became more naturalistic through art, complex and exposed through anatomy, and a mirror to society through political theory. In art, the image body was illustrated in more naturalistic ways allowed by the advancements and



dissemination of anatomical knowledge. In anatomy, artistic depictions of human dissections supplemented educational texts allowing those studying medicine to further their anatomical knowledge. In political theory, the image of the body became a new lens to look at the world. In some ways the body represents a bounded system. Humans are imprisoned by embodiment and the limits the human body naturally experiences. However, the human body can also imagine a new reality or reject reality altogether. At the most basic level, all humans inhabit a body and can in turn use these bodies as a source of pleasure, pain, mystery, and information.

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