

Lifting the Flap

Killacky, Madeleine

History Today

Published: 07/07/2022

Peer reviewed version

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):

Killacky, M. (2022). Lifting the Flap: Anatomical pop-up books, introduced in the 16th century, took anatomy out of the lecture hall and into the home. *History Today*, 72(7).
<https://www.historytoday.com/archive/history-matters/lifting-flap>

Hawliau Cyffredinol / General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Madeleine Killacky

mdk19qfd@bangor.ac.uk

The Role of Anatomical Pop-up Books in 16th-Century Society

Modern readers often think of reading primarily as a mental activity. Medieval and Early Modern audiences saw reading as a physical activity as well. They did not just turn the pages of their manuscripts. They wrote in the margins, underlined and annotated, used blank spaces for recipes and handwriting practice, kissed religious images, and copied out quotations. Pop-up science texts evoke a period in which reading always meant physical engagement, and they remind us that reading was—and still is—an embodied experience.

The first illustration of a body with liftable flaps was printed in Germany in 1538 by printer and engraver Heinrich Vogtherr. An immediate hit, pop-up anatomies were soon being published in France, Italy, the Netherlands, and England: between 1538 and 1540 alone, at least fifteen different editions were published in Europe. Most consisted of single sheets—known as *fugitive* prints—that could be bound into books or pinned to the wall. The figures in these prints all look very similar: they sit bolt upright, eyes wide open looking as if they were alive, but a curious reader can peel back their skin revealing the layers of the lungs and liver, heart and guts, all the way to the thoracic cavity and spinal column. The material supports for these popular anatomical texts were usually pamphlet-style and the written text was often in the vernacular. These texts can, of course, be considered rough summaries of university anatomical handbooks, but they were also elaborate, if crude, typographical artifacts of a distinctly popular nature. Most noticeably, the images prevail over the text, which they sum up and simplify. Through these

paper surrogates, a non-specialist for the first time could delve deep into the furthest reaches of the human body.



Figure 1. Anatomical fugitive sheet: female figure with unborn child. Wellcome Collection.
<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/fqvvd9x>

In 1538, Andreas Vesalius published the *Tabulae*, which was a set of six large sheets intended to be a memory aid for medical students. Before this, university manuals generally had few, if any, illustrations. The *Tabulae*, though, was in no sense a substitute for the direct observation of anatomical practice, and the figures that accompanied its text would not enable anyone to acquire a *real* knowledge of the parts of the body. Although Vesalius recognised that

the illustrations could not replace real experience dissecting bodies, the images nonetheless provided users with a very good, 'eye-witness' account to the dissection of a human body. Most anatomical texts, however, had few, if any, illustrations and the writing was highly advanced and intended for a specialised audience. By contrast, the pop-up prints pioneered by Vogtherr in 1538 were attractive, striking, and provided a more accessible substitute to the comprehensive and complex diagrams of Vesalius.

The first two fugitive anatomical sheets were printed in Germany in 1538: one by Vogtherr and one by Jobst de Negker. The elementary terminology, simplicity of the metaphors (the stomach described as a harbour, for instance), and the considerable space devoted to illustrations as well as the fugitive sheet itself suggest that these prints were intended for a non-specialist audience. The figures of both man and woman are based on one drawing with only the head and paper flaps depicting the thorax and generative organs being changed. Each organ is marked in Latin with the vernacular name repeated in the frame surrounding the fugitive sheet. There are some rudimentary anatomical-physiological notes, which one critic suggests could be attributed to Vogtherr himself. Vogtherr's texts are short (usually 12-18 pages in length) and are bound in a pamphlet style. Frölich, another printer who knew Vogtherr, reprinted Vogtherr's fugitive sheets in 1551-1552, but coloured the figures to make them look less austere. There are also early sixteenth-century versions that started to include simple home remedies to accompany the fugitive sheets. In this way they mirrored medieval miscellanies and draw a line to the function miscellanies had in the medieval household: that is, the presence of home remedies in these anatomical texts suggest that they were circulating in private spaces, and that there was a general desire to know more about the inner workings of the body. This is perhaps most

obviously seen in the following fugitive sheet, which depicts a woman holding a sign with the words: 'Nosce te ipsum. Knowe thyself.'



Figure II. 'Anatomie très utile' c. 1559. Royal College of Surgeons of England.



Figure III. 'Anatomie très utile' c. 1559. Royal College of Surgeons of England.

Fugitive sheets allowed users to reflect on the meaning of life and death and on the frailty and transience of the human body as opposed to that of the immortal soul. Viewed in this way, anatomy left the university lecture halls to become a form of knowledge that had relevance to a much broader section of society. All of these bibliographic codes—the elementary terminology, vernacular language, lack of detail, pamphlet style, addition of colour, and miscellany-style composition—demonstrate that printers were responding to a call from non-specialists to know more about the human body, but, also, printers were attracting and shaping readerly interests by allowing anatomical knowledge to break away from the university lecture halls through their various, and ingenious, bibliographic coding.

Fugitive sheets by their very nature invite users to tangibly engage with these anatomical texts. As users *feel* their way through the various paper flaps, they activate the image and thereby generate meaning from the bibliographic code, rather than passively receive a prescribed message. The fugitive sheet also coincides with sixteenth-century thinking on the idea of repetition, which was mobilised as a powerful metaphor, turning abstract ideas into permanent, verifiable knowledge. Because the paper flaps of these pop-up sheets offer infinite investigations, the user is able to generate meaning every time they unfold the sheets. The fugitive sheet therefore plays an integral role in defining and controlling the production of knowledge throughout this cycle.



Figure IV. Anatomical fugitive sheet: female figure. Wellcome Collection. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/e2u9tub8>

Pop-up figures therefore provided users with an ‘eye-witness’ account to the process of dissection, however, the accuracy of the anatomy mattered less than the image’s overall impressiveness. Instead, the prints just needed to persuade their users of the importance of anatomical knowledge. This was an incredibly powerful way to communicate, and through these images, anatomical knowledge became accessible, literally graspable, to an audience who could not access knowledge about the human body through any existing class of publication.

NB: All images are in the public domain.

Madeleine Killacky is a PhD candidate in Medieval Literature at Bangor University, Wales. Her research focuses on Sir Thomas Malory’s *Morte Darthur* and 15th-century material culture.