

How the Study of Anatomy Influenced Medicine, Religion and Art

Beginning in the Renaissance

Thursday, October 24 to December 12, 2024, 10am to noon

Zoom Session

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Coordinator and Presenter: Dr. Myriam Nafte

Course Overview: Art and dissection anatomy share a long and intimate past. For several centuries, the dead human body has been infused with social meaning, comprising a site for religious, artistic, and medical trends. Contrary to popular belief, the Catholic Church played a central role in human dissection directly influencing generations of clergy, doctors and artists. This lecture series explores that role alongside the profound connection between “mystics, martyrs and medics” that ultimately gave way to beautiful art. Come along as we journey through archives and art galleries to uncover centuries of secret dialogue between the human body, religion and an emerging science.

Thursday, October 24: The Snake and the Staph

Symbols are everything, especially when they're shrouded in mystery. This lecture is an introduction to the origins of medicine and its magical roots where gods punish, and high priests mediate. The alchemy of the ancient past has never quite disappeared apparent in certain symbols and concepts. Find out how snakes, incantations and amulets have come to define and represent modern medical science.

Thursday, October 31: Walsh vs White

It all started when a 19th century Jesuit-run university opened a medical school. Distress and confusion were rampant on campus leading to intense debates on whether Catholics could dissect, or even handle human cadavers. Threats to close the school escalated and publications highlighted the ‘ongoing problem with Catholics and science’. This lecture sets the stage for understanding just how wrong the experts were and continue to be, on the topic of Catholics and human dissection.

Thursday, November 7: Relics and Resurrection

A closer look at the historical record reveals an interesting path interconnected with famous kings, popes, queens and corpses. This lecture is a journey into the world of martyrs and the art of relic making.. Learn what all of the cathedrals worldwide are built on, and what they must contain to be considered sanctified. We also discover why self-proclaimed Satanists and Exorcists are always on the lookout for these sacred items.

Thursday, November 14: Saints and Sinners

The act of peering into a splayed cadaver in front of curious witnesses was as much a religious act as it was as the beginning of formal anatomical knowledge. This lecture discusses where medicine evolved in the Middle Ages, and how dissection anatomy was translated artistically and socially.

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Thursday, November 21: Dismemberment and Display

The flayed body of a certain apostle made its first appearance in the early 1500's. Seemingly posed to illustrate musculature, representations of this saint forever changed the way anatomical knowledge was shared. We also discover an intriguing connection this martyr has to the alchemists of ancient Egypt.

Thursday, November 28: Symmetry is Sacred

The peak of the Renaissance is defined by the concept of beauty and perfection. The universe encompassed a high order, demanding that art and architecture reflect ideals of "as above so below". Here we explore the flowering of anatomical knowledge that led artists to pursue math, geometry and dissection to replicate the divine.

Thursday, December 5: In the Beginning

What did Genesis 2:7 mean to artist Michelangelo as he was dissecting cadavers in his home studio? Through his various bisections of kidneys and craniums, we take a deep dive into some of the more profound artistic translations of the artist's anatomical and philosophical studies.

Thursday, December 12: Computers and Cadavers

Through virtual dissection, the bad smells of the anatomy lab have disappeared. Medical illustrations are now digital renders with perfect representation of the body. While these programs are highly praised, critics insist that its graduates lack the fortitude that can only come from the experiences of 'the blood and guts' of traditional dissection. This final lecture explores my current research on the new art of human remains and asks whether anything virtual is good for medical students.

Biography

As a forensic anthropologist, Dr. Myriam Nafte is an active advisor and consultant for criminal casework across North America. She received a Specialized Honours BA in Medical Anthropology from York University, a B.Ed. degree in Science from Brock University and completed an MA and PhD. In Physical Anthropology [Skeletal Biology] at McMaster University.

Currently Dr. Nafte is an instructor at McMaster University where she teaches upper-level courses of Global Health, Infectious Disease and Narratives of Health and Illness.

Dr. Nafte is the author of numerous articles and books including *Flesh and Bone; An Introduction to Forensic Anthropology, Crime and Measurement; The Skin of Murder Victims* [Editor], and the forthcoming anthology *Trophies and Talismans: The Traffic of Human Remains*.

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