

From the Librarian's Desk

THE SKELETON AND THE RHINOCEROS

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An illustration in an antiquarian bookseller's catalogue of a skeleton driving a rhino before it aroused my curiosity in the work in which it was contained. The work was an anatomical book by Albinus, a famous Dutch anatomist which is in the Library.

Bernhard Siegfried Albinus was born in 1697 at Frankfurt and died at Leiden, where he had become professor of anatomy and surgery in 1721, in 1770. He started a new trend in anatomy when he advocated that illustrations of the subject should be based on precise mathematical and scientific calculations. He wrote 'To reproduce, not free hand (according to the view), as is customary, but

from actual measure: to reproduce what the best in nature displays: to reproduce, not as the demonstrators of anatomy generally do, by merely placing before the eyes of the artist what they have uncovered, but by collecting [data] from one body after another, and making a composite according to rule so that the actual truth will be displayed...'.¹

The artist whom Albinus chose to help him carry out his scheme was Jan Wandelaar (1690–1759), a native of Amsterdam. He 'had to be trained and guided and practically directed by me as if I were myself making the pictures, using him as a tool'.² But his master allowed that Wandelaar 'reproduced everything with truth and accuracy and with a marvellous refinement of skill... Still better is the fact that he draws beautifully and, what is even more important, draws the pictures on copper after the objects themselves'.³

Thus was produced *Tabulae sceleti et musculorum corporis humani* at Leyden in 1747 and its continuation, *Tabulae ossium humanorum* in 1753, the most important works of Albinus. In all there are more than 100 beautifully drawn and engraved copper plates which were all done by Wandelaar whose signature appears on most of them. There are twelve plates of skeletons and muscle men, each accompanied by an outline plate of the same size. It is these which have interesting backgrounds, including the two with the rhinoceros. The other plates represent the muscles and their parts; and all the bones of the adult.

To help to achieve accurate proportions, the artist used the device of two nets, one with large square mesh and the other with smaller squares. These were placed in front of the skeleton, the large mesh directly in front and the smaller mesh several feet in front. The artist himself sat about forty feet from the subject. What he could not see from this distance, he could see at close range and, by means of the squares of the net, draw the details in the correct proportion to the whole.

The carefully drawn backgrounds of the plates bearing the skeletons and the muscle men were done to enhance the main subject and 'preserve the proper light of the pictures'.⁴ The rhinoceros was part of the background which helped to give the skeleton an almost three-dimensional effect and prevent the figure seeming to be 'lifeless'.

Albinus claimed to have spent 24,000 Dutch florins in obtaining his illustrations. They may have cost a fortune but they represent a high point in the history of anatomical illustration.

REFERENCES

¹ Choulant, L. History and bibliography of anatomic illustration, New York: Schuman's, 1945: 277.

² *ibid.* 279.

³ *ibid.* 278.

⁴ *ibid.* 280.