

# Illustrating Continuity: Narrative and Movement in Early Modern European Print

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## Abstract

Scholarly discussions of Early Modern European print culture have long emphasized iconography and style, often treating printed illustrations as supplementary to text rather than as integral components of knowledge production. While art historians such as Sachiko Kusakawa and Susan Dackerman have demonstrated the epistemic importance of scientific imagery, existing literature has not fully addressed how continuity and sequence functioned as visual strategies across diverse print genres. In response to this gap, this thesis examines how printed images operated as relational systems that structured learning through progression, comparison, and spatial alignment. Focusing on Andreas Vesalius's *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543), I argue that its anatomical plates employ repeated poses, shared landscapes, and incremental variation to guide readers through a sequential unfolding of the body. Through formal visual analysis and book-historical methodology, this study situates Vesalius's illustrations within a broader visual logic also evident in Hans Burgkmair's monumental processional prints and Giovanni Botero's ethnographic imagery. These works demonstrate that continuity—achieved through repetition, alignment, and narrative progression—enabled viewers to construct meaning relationally rather than through isolated observation. By tracing a genealogy from pre-Vesalian anatomical imagery to later adaptations in vernacular and imperial contexts, this project reveals continuity as an evolving epistemological tool. Ultimately, this thesis argues that Early Modern printed images constituted a shared visual language that structured knowledge across scientific, political, and ethnographic domains. Continuity and sequence functioned not merely as compositional devices, but as foundational mechanisms through which viewers learned to see, compare, and understand the world.

## Introduction

- Early Modern printed books combined text and image to structure knowledge rather than simply illustrate it.
- Traditional art historical analysis treats book illustrations as isolated plates, focusing primarily on style or iconography.
- **However, books function sequentially:**
  - Meaning develops through page turning
  - Interpretation emerges through comparison and accumulation
  - Printed images therefore operate as part of a visual continuum across the codex rather than independent visual moments.
- **Key concepts:**
  - Continuity: repeated motifs, landscapes, and compositional alignment across images
  - Sequence: the temporal process of viewing images across pages
- **Central argument:**
  - Early Modern printed illustrations functioned as relational visual systems
  - Knowledge was constructed through repetition, comparison, and progression
- **Case studies examined:**
  - Hans Burgkmair—*The King of Cochin* (1508)
  - Jacopo Berengario da Carpi *Commentaria super anatomia Mundini* (1521) and *Isagogae breves* (1522, 1523)
  - Andreas Vesalius—*De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543)
  - Giovanni Botero—*Aggiunta alla quarta parte dell'Indie ... Di mostri* (1623)

## Methodology

- **Interdisciplinary approach combining:**
  - Book history
  - Print studies
  - Reception theory
  - Technical analysis of woodblock production
- **Emphasis on material aspects of printed books:**
  - Woodblock segmentation
  - Block reuse
  - Transport of printing materials
  - Page layout and impagination
- **Analysis focuses on how viewers interacted with images over time, including:**
  - Page turning
  - Visual comparison between plates
  - Mental reconstruction of dispersed imagery
- Digital visual reconstructions used to test sequential relationships between images.
- **Vesalius stitch reconstruction (Canva):**
  - Vesalius's anatomical "muscle men" plates digitally aligned
  - Demonstrates shared horizon lines and landscape continuity
  - Reveals figures forming a panoramic frieze across multiple plates
- **Botero image reconstruction (Canva):**
  - Illustrations of "monstrous races" digitally assembled
  - Shows repeated ground lines and environmental motifs
  - Suggests figures inhabit a continuous visual environment
- These digital collages function as experimental visual evidence supporting the argument that illustrations were conceived relationally.

## Analysis

- Evidence suggests Early Modern printed illustrations were designed to **operate sequentially rather than independently.**
- **Vesalius's *Fabrica*:**
  - Muscular figures progressively reveal anatomical layers
  - Shared landscapes connect figures visually
  - Page turning mirrors the temporal process of dissection
- **Burgkmair's monumental prints:**
  - Processional imagery demonstrates continuity through repetition and movement across blocks
- **Botero's ethnographic imagery:**
  - Repeated landscapes and ground lines align figures across pages
  - Encourages comparative viewing of bodily difference
- **Across scientific, political, and ethnographic imagery:**
  - Repetition and variation structure visual narratives
  - Images function as epistemic tools rather than decorative illustrations
- **Conclusion:**
  - Printed images actively shaped how knowledge was organized, interpreted, and retained.

## References

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DLH1C0Ok\\_0mlcUYjCxPTknMBLpgvemj3LpzoPjDe78U/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DLH1C0Ok_0mlcUYjCxPTknMBLpgvemj3LpzoPjDe78U/edit?usp=sharing)

## Future Directions

- Investigate **print workshop practices** to determine whether sequential designs originated from unified compositions.
- Conduct additional **digital reconstructions** of other Early Modern illustrated books.
- **Expand analysis to:**
  - Botanical atlases
  - Cartographic imagery
  - Natural history illustrations
- Examine **reader interaction** with illustrated books using reception studies and marginalia.
- Compare Early Modern sequential print strategies to **proto-cinematic visual storytelling.**
- Explore **continuity as a broader epistemological tool** across early scientific visualization.



Figure 1. Digitally stitched image of Botero's illustrated pages featuring monstrous creatures



Figure 2. Digitally stitched image of Botero's illustrated pages featuring indigenous peoples

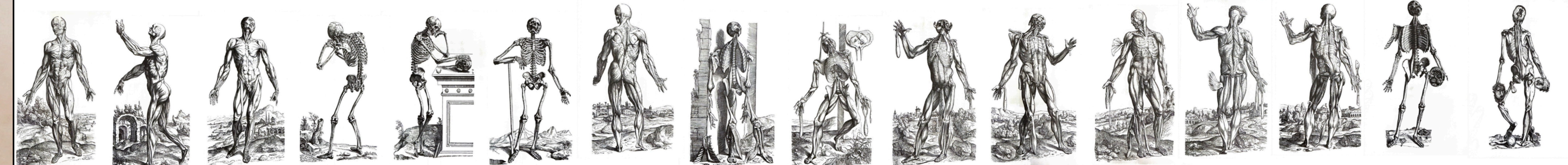


Figure 3. Digitally stitched image of Botero's illustrated pages featuring muscle tables



Figure 4. Illuminated version of Vesalius's *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*. This can be utilized in future studies to track continuity through textual embellishments.

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