

A NOTE ON THE VALVERDE MUSCLE-MAN

by

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IN a paper written to commemorate the quadri-centenary of the publication of the *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* of Vesalius, Meyer and Wirt (1943) examined in detail the relation which the illustrations in the *Historia de la composicion del cuerpo humano* of Juan Valverde de Hamusco, published in Rome in 1556, bear to those of the *Fabrica*. They concluded that in a total of 253 Valverdean illustrations only fifteen may be called non-Vesalian.

First among these non-Vesalian figures, Meyer and Wirt list 'the famous muscle-man holding his own skin in the right and a dagger in the left hand' (Valverde, Book II, Plate 1). This figure is reproduced in such standard works of reference as Choulant-Frank (1920) and de Lint (1926), as well as in the paper by Meyer and Wirt and in that of Szladits (1954). The ancestry of this composition has naturally attracted discussion from two points of view; on the one hand, its possible derivation from earlier anatomical drawings other than those of Vesalius; on the other, the iconographic ancestry of the motif implied by the skin and dagger.

Meyer and Wirt note that Valverde, although asserting his muscle-man to be a better representation than those of Vesalius, does not specifically claim it as an original production. The pose of the trunk and legs is very close to that of the two Vesalian figures, except that the non-supporting leg is more strongly flexed, so as to require a raised support under the ball of the foot. The left arm also is not greatly different from that of the first Vesalian figure, but the profile head and the raised right arm have no Vesalian counterpart.

In assessing such correspondences, allowance must be made for the extent to which all these figures may have been worked up from drawings of antique sculpture or of models posed in imitation of the antique. Roth (1892) pointed out that a number of the Vesalian figures could be based upon a classical prototype such as an Antinous in the Vatican. The two frontal muscle-men of the *Fabrica* belong to this group. The Valverde muscle-man might therefore have been worked up independently on a similar foundation. For the head and right arm of this figure there is a classical prototype, very familiar to the cinquecento artist, in which the face is similarly turned to the side of the raised arm, namely the Belvedere Apollo.

Much of the detailed anatomy in the Valverde figure could be regarded as derived from one or other of the two corresponding Vesalian figures. The head and neck, however, are quite unlike any Vesalian figure, and must therefore depend either on some other source or on an original dissection. If the last holds for this region, it may for other parts also.

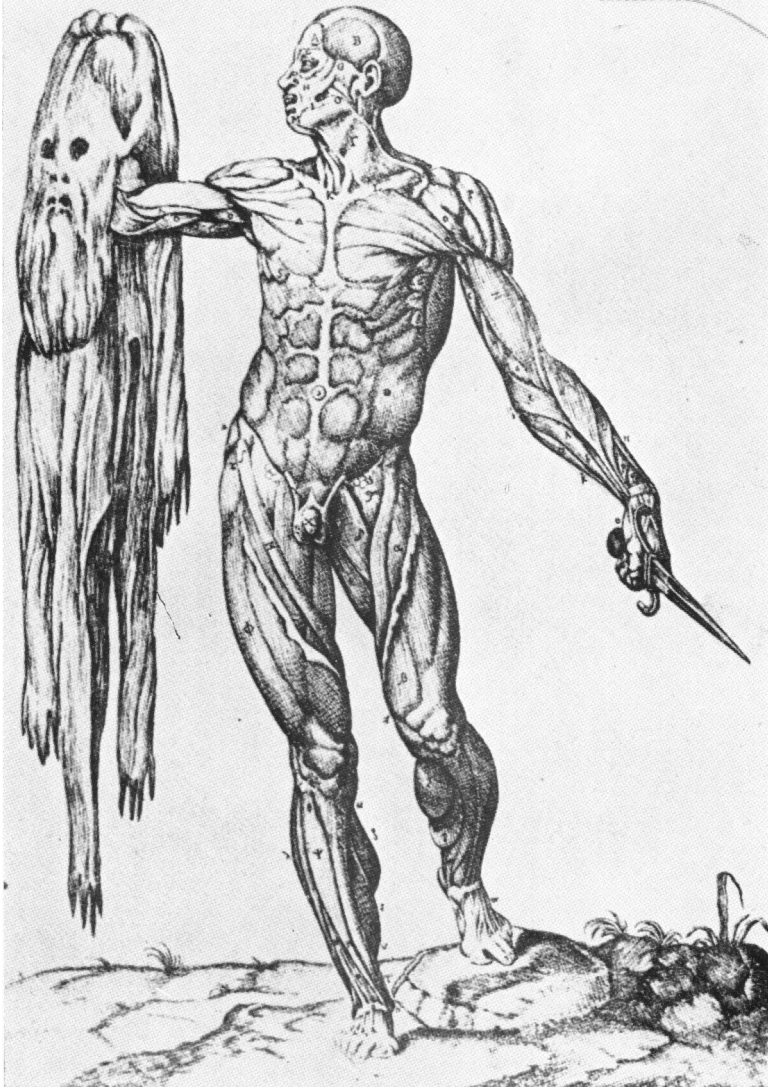


Fig. 1
The muscle-man of Valverde
From Szladits, 1954

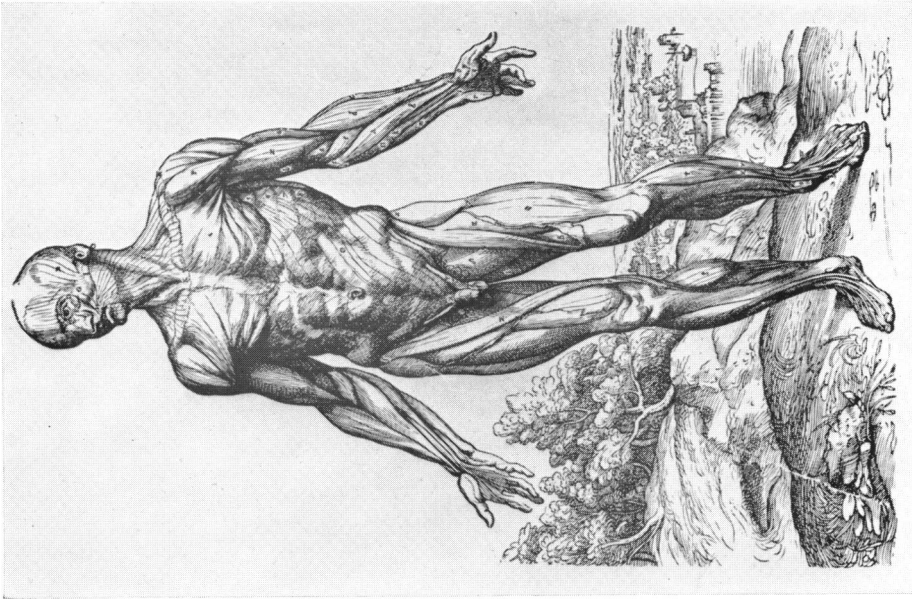


Fig. 3
The third muscle-man of Vesalius
From Saunders and O'Malley, 1950

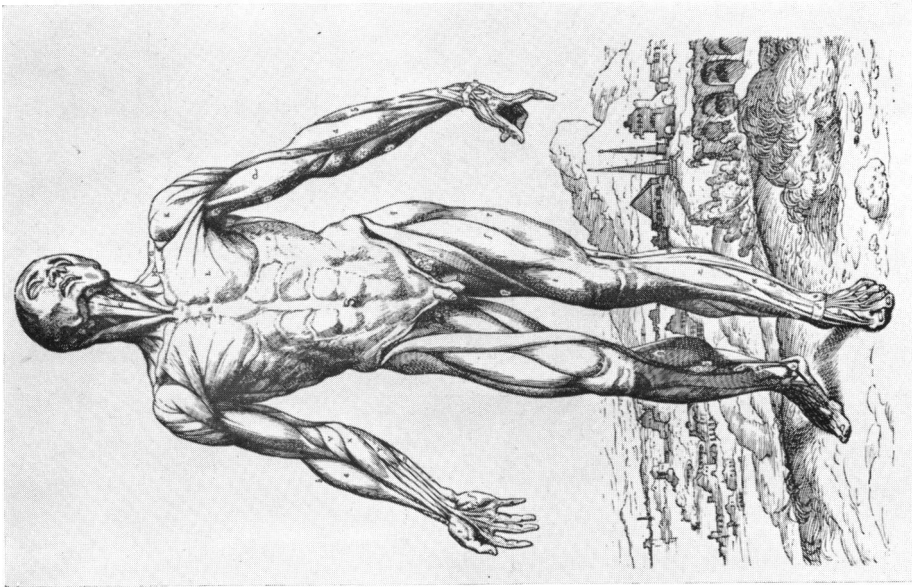


Fig. 2
The first muscle-man of Vesalius
From Saunders and O'Malley, 1950

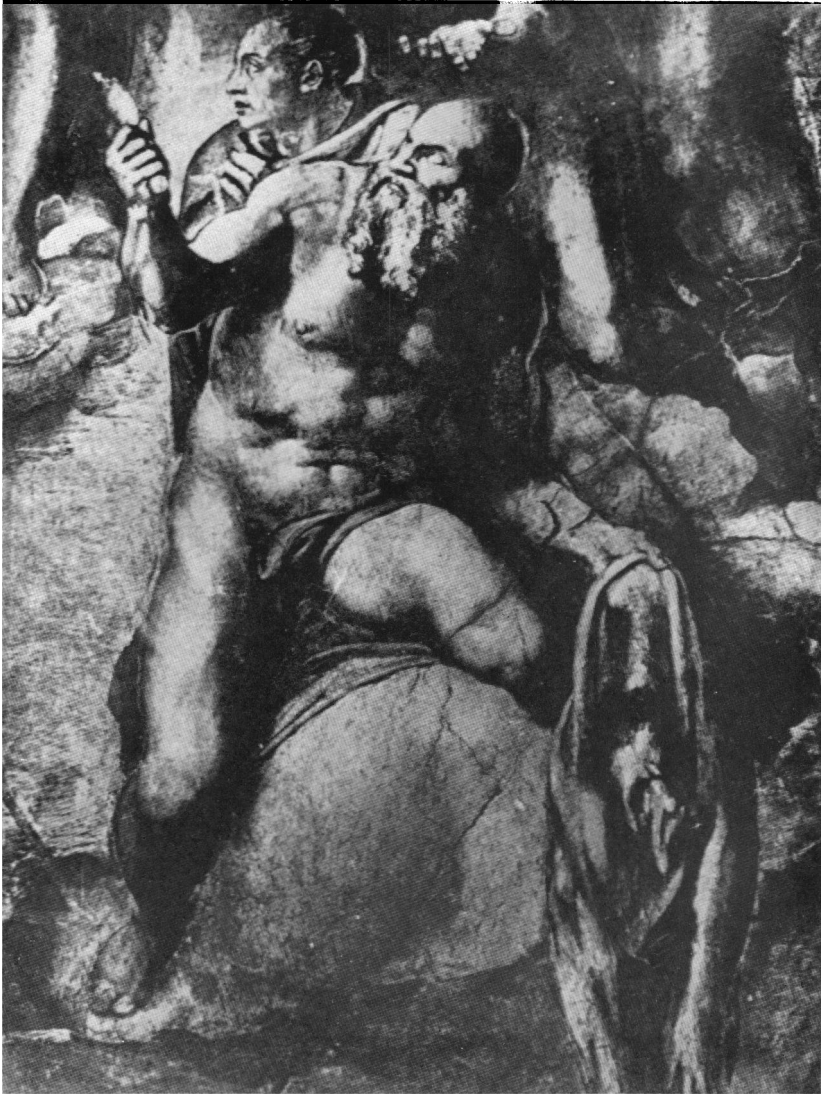


Fig. 4
Saint Bartholomew by Michelangelo
From Sztadits, 1954



Fig. 5
Apollo and Marsyas, engraving bearing the initials M.F. and the date 1536
From Meyer and Wirt, 1943

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Harvey Cushing seems first to have suggested that the motif of the skin and dagger derives from the Saint Bartholomew of Michelangelo's 'Last Judgement'. However, when the two are confronted, as has been done by Szladits (1954), the sum of the resemblance between them is seen to be that each holds a skin in one hand and a cutting tool in the other. The Valverdean figure therefore owes to Michelangelo at most the germ of an idea.

Meyer and Wirt more pertinently draw attention to an engraving of Apollo flaying Marsyas, which bears the initials M. F. and the date 1536 (this date has been called in question). The figure of Marsyas is, as noted by Singer (1950), a careful anatomical study, very remarkable if it is indeed pre-Vesalian in date. It has, however, no direct bearing on the Valverde illustration. The Apollo holds the skin of Marsyas in his upraised right hand and a flaying-knife in his left with very much the same gesture as the Valverdean muscle-man. The turn of the head towards the upraised arm is also similar, as is the general pose of the trunk, but the left leg, instead of being flexed at the knee, is advanced and externally rotated, giving an effect very different from that of the muscle-man.

It may be pointed out in passing that except for the head and right arm, the pose of the Apollo is remarkably similar to that of a considerably earlier figure, the painting of 'St. John in the Desert' by Domenico Veneziano, now in the U.S. National Gallery of Art. Cairns and Walker (1945) remark that in this painting the figure of St. John 'was probably inspired by some classical statue'. It seems quite possible that the Apollo derives from the same prototype, except for the head and right arm, which can confidently be regarded as a transcription from the Belvedere Apollo.

Apart from the pose, the Valverde muscle-man differs from the Apollo both in the manner in which the skin is held in the upraised arm and in the character of the implement held in the other hand. In the M. F. engraving, although the shoulder and elbow are covered by drapery in a manner again reminiscent of the Belvedere Apollo, the forearm and hand are free, the skin being grasped in the hand. The muscle-man grasps the skin from within, so that the vertically held forearm and hand are completely concealed, while the shoulder and upper arm are free.

Both in the M. F. engraving and in Michelangelo's painting, the knife is a practical flaying-knife, whereas the muscle-man grasps a double-edged fighting dagger. Meyer and Wirt comment that the substitution of dagger for knife is hard to understand, since the flaying plainly could not have been done with the former, and a dagger is not included in the anatomist's armamentarium as pictured by Vesalius and Valverde.

It may be suggested that the dagger in the hand of the muscle-man has a quite different significance, the intention being to present the figure in the character of a duellist with cloak and dagger. The manner in which the skin is held up is also consistent with this interpretation. The figure may well have been reversed in the engraving, so that in the original drawing the dagger was held in the right hand, which would make the motive clearer.

To justify the muscle-man artistically by giving him the character of a

gladiator is a conceit well in keeping with the manner in which Valverde and his artist have treated some of the Vesalian illustrations (Meyer and Wirt, 1943). Equally, that the muscle-man should put his discarded skin to one of the alternative functions of a cloak may be reckoned a very mild conceit. This does not of course exclude either Michelangelo's St. Bartholomew or the Apollo of the M. F. engraving as a remote source, but emphasizes the transformation which the idea had undergone by the time it issued in the Valverdean illustration.

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