A Museum of Living Books

The Museum für Medizinhistorische Bücher Muri

Interview by JAMES BLAKE WIENER

In this issue, James Blake Wiener sits down with curator Beatrice Green-Pedrazzini to look at Gustav Adolf Wehrli's collection of old medical books housed at the Museum für Medizinhistorische Bücher, Muri. Located in a monastery, the private collection is now open to the public. It has a permanent exhibition of rare scientific and medical books, as well as first editions from 1480 to 1800.

Previous page: ***Fasciculus Medicinae (1513).*** *By Johannes de Ketham (approx. 1415–1470).*
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Above: Books in the library

I am curious if you might comment on how the museum's collection of old books was first formed by the medical historian Gustav Adolf Wehrli (1888–1949). How and why did he amass all these titles?

Gustav Adolf Wehrli started collecting in his twenties. His interests were quite varied, ranging from amulets and votives to medicine, pharmacology, hygiene and health education, and even sports history. Wehrli increasingly moved in the direction of medical history and was able to eventually house a good part of his collection at Zürich University, after the Canton of Zürich bought it off him, consequently making him the collection curator. The private part of his collection of medical books came up for auction in 2010. Luckily the collection remained intact as the present owner managed to acquire it in its entirety. To come back to your question of how Wehrli amassed these books, it was a great passion for collecting, over a long period of time.

How many books are there in the late-medieval and early modern collection? Were these mostly acquired by Wehrli or at a later point in time?

I would like to put this into a wider context. Imagine a book collection built up by one person with a particular interest over many years. What you end up with is an invaluable insight into a subject field from one particular angle. Should the collection have been split up, this aspect would have been irretrievably lost. To prevent such a loss was the initial aim of the owner, Dr. Franz Käppeli.

During the following years, he acquired a number of additional books, many that you can see on display in his museum today. It is through these acquisitions that he felt the desire to share his enthusiasm for these precious works, and consequently he founded his museum.

Above: ***The initiator, founder, and owner of the MMBM, Dr. Franz Käppeli, in his museum.***
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Above: ***De Humani Corporis Fabrica. By Andreas Vesalius (1514–1564).*** *© Book Collection Dr. F. Käppeli, www.mmbm.ch*

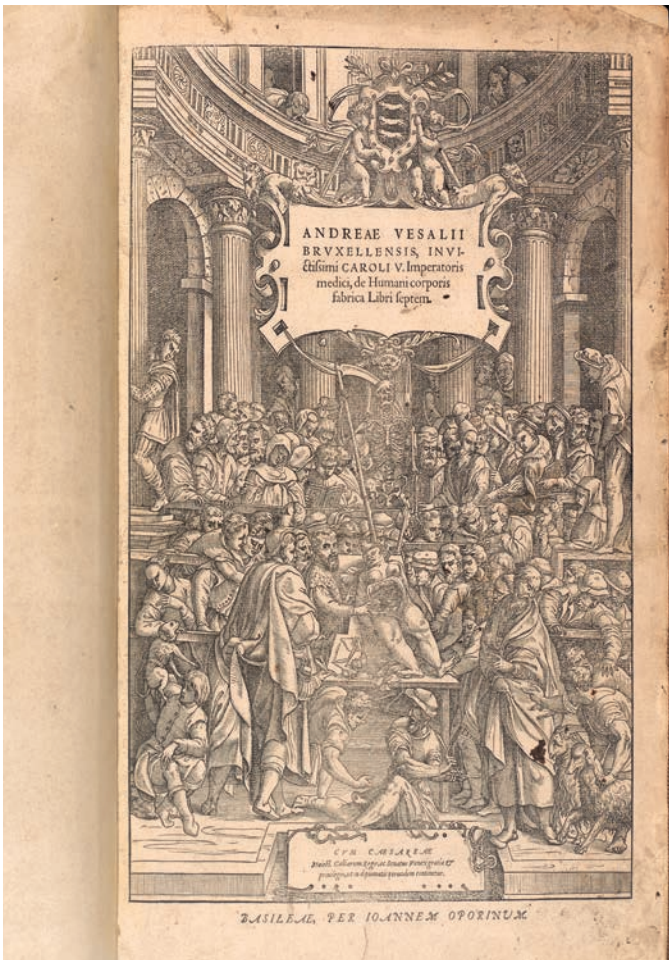
The museum contains a copy of the anatomical picture book *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* by Andreas Vesalius (1514–1564). What makes this title the most well-known historical medical work of all time?

New discoveries were something that Andreas Vesalius concerned himself with. At the time of writing his first edition of *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Libri Septem* in 1543, he was a professor teaching anatomy at the University of Padua, Italy.

Vesalius, along with few others, was critical of the way anatomy was largely taught. The theories of Hippocrates (active c. 420 BC) and Galen (active c. AD 200) had been hailed, translated, and believed in for hundreds of years. But anatomy was based mainly on animal dissections. Vesalius believed it needed to be looked at and questioned, with one's own eyes; thus, autopsy was born.

In order to visualize the change in teaching, I would like to juxtapose one illustration from our volume *Fasciculus Medicinae* (1513) by Johannes de Ketham (approx. 1415–1470) to the frontispiece of Andreas Vesalius' *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (2nd edition, 1555). The *Fasciculus Medicinae* is a compilation of medieval knowledge. In medieval anatomy, it was quite common for the anatomist to quote doctrines from books while a dissector was opening up a body, where students were to find evidence supporting the old knowledge. However, this also meant that there was no space for new findings.

When casting our eye on the Vesalius frontispiece we are shown the author looking at us confidently and directly, dissecting amidst a large audience. With this new method, medical insights improved and developed significantly. Along with his dissections, Andreas Vesalius made rough sketches and notes; ultimately he wanted to produce a book that could be used by students as well as specialists. The considerable advantage in producing a printed



Above: ***The Second Edition of De Humani Corporis Fabrica. By Andreas Vesalius (1514–1564).*** *The writing was designed by Claude Garamond; the Garamond typeface is still used today. © Book Collection Dr. F. Käppeli, www.mmbm.ch*

book versus manuscripts was the greatly increased availability of his teachings to his readership.

Vesalius wanted the book to be amazing in so many ways. He structured it making sure it was meticulous in its detail. The Flemish artist Jan Stevan van Calcar (1499–1546), a pupil of Titian, contributed. Vesalius crossed the border to Switzerland to have his book printed at Johannes Oporinus in Basel, a publisher that stood for excellence in medical prints. The ambitious young professor managed to produce a massive anatomical atlas, as well as a magnificent work of art. Maybe unsurprisingly, it is mainly the latter that is appreciated still today.

The museum also has a copy of the *New Kreuterbuch* by Leonhart Fuchs (1501–1566), which became the most important herbal treatise for doctors and pharmacists in the early modern era. Aside from showcasing the first representation of an ear of corn, what makes this book of interest to medical historians and specialists today?

From a detailed perspective it might be a coincidence that the following three ground-breaking works were all printed in the year 1543: *New Kreuterbuch* by Leonhart Fuchs, De Humanis Corporis Fabrica by Andreas Vesalius, and *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* by Nicolas Copernicus (1473–1543). Seen in the bigger context of the Renaissance spirit, it demonstrates that old teachings were exposed to questioning and thorough vetting. In botany, revisiting antiquity and authors such as Galen, Dioscorides, or Pliny meant going back to the source and not just relying on transcriptions that were preserved, passed down, and potentially diluted. Additionally, there were new plants that came into focus with the exploration of other continents. The experts were happy to tell the reader about the


Von Maurrauten. Cap. CCLXXX.

B Weinrauten blettern/doch mit kerffen zerspalten vnd kleiner. Dieselbigen sind auff der einen seiten glatt/auff der andern gewinnen sie goldgeel tipfflein/schier wie der Engelsüß. Bringt weder blümen noch samen. Die wurtzel ist wasche/ schwartz/vnd hat in der artzney keinen gebrauch.

Statt irer wachsung.

Die Maurraut wechßt auß den rissen vñ fügen der steynen vñ mauren. Wirt aber sonderlich gefunden an den alten kirchmauren/vnd dergleichen gebeuwen.

C Zeit.

Maurraut bleibt fast über winter grün vnd vnuerfert. Verdirbt nit/ es seyen dann zůuor andre junge blettlin vorhanden/ die kriechen järlich gegen dem Aprillen zwüschen den alten blettlin herfür/ gantz stumpff vmbgebogen wie die ersten bletter an der Hirtzzungen. Im Brachmonat aber ist sie zum hüpschen.

Die natur vnd complexion.

Die Maurraut ist on zweyfel truckner natur/vnd mittelmässig warm.

Krafft vnd würckung.

Maurraut in wein gesotten vnd getruncken ist nützlich zů der harnwinden/ vnd dem hergen. Treibt den harn/ bricht den stein in der blasen/vnd bringt den frawen jhre zeit.

Von Indianischem Pfeffer.

Cap. CCLXXXI.

Namen.

A Indianischer oder Thalecutischer Pfeffer würdt von dem Plinio Siliquastrum/von wegen der langen vnnd grossen schotten/genent: vnd Piperitis/darumb das sein sam am geschmack scharpff ist wie der Pfeffer. Der Auicenna hat diß gewechß meins erachtens Piper caninũ genent/ welchen namẽ es auch gehabt do mans erstlich in vnser land gebracht hat. Die andern Arabes habens Cordumenum geheyssen. Vnd ist demnach diser gegenwertig Pfeffer ein geschlecht der frucht so man zů vnsern zeiten in den Apotecken Giana Paradisi nent. Ich glaub das diß gewechß Actuarius hab Capsicum geheyssen/der vrsachen halben/das sein same in den hülsen odenlich/ wie inn einer truhen oder kisten/ verschlossen ist. Zů vnsern zeiten würt es genent Piper Hispanum/Piper Indianum/vnd Piper Calecuthicum.

B Geschlecht.

Des Indianischen Pfeffers hab ich vier geschlecht gesehen. Das erst bringt groß lange schotten/die sind an der farb schwartzbraun. Das ander geschlecht hat schotte den vorigen an der grösse vñ lenge gleich/aber gantz menigrot. Das dritt bringt schmeler bletter dañ die andern/die schotten seind auch schmeler/ lenger vnd menigrot. Das vierdt geschlecht hat groß vñ rund schotten/etlich seind gestalt wie die Spitzhürlin/ etlich wie die gemeinen Kürbs/ doch an der farb menigrot/wie wir in beschreibung jrer gestalt klärlicher wöllen anzeygen.

Gestalt.

Indianischer Pfeffer ist ein kraut mit einem braunlechten vierecketen stengel/ welcher elen lang ist/mit vil gewerben/vnd runden ästlin/welche mit schwartz grünen zarten blettern bekleydet seind/die vergleichen sich beynach den gemeinen Nachtschatten oder Lorbeer blettern/ seind aber schmeler vnd spitziger dañ des Nachtschattens. Zwüschen den flügeln der stengel vnnd blettern an dicken styln

Calechutischer Pfeffer. CCCCXVIII.

Mm 4

Above: Leonhart Fuchs, New Kreuterbuch, 1543. © Book Collection Dr. F. Käppeli, www.mmbm.ch

Above: ***Illustration of the working team. New Kreuterbuch, 1543.*** *© Book Collection Dr. F. Käppeli, www.mmbm.ch*

outcome; some, including Fuchs, were also happy to communicate if they were still a little unsure about something, or thought there was potential for more findings. Again, the printed book must have been an enormous driver to want to excel. The author would have the guarantee that his knowledge and beliefs would not be altered. It must have been important to Leonhart Fuchs, himself a follower of Martin Luther (1483–1546), to translate his Latin work *De Historia Stirpium* (1542) into the German New Kreuterbuch within a year.

The text was one aspect, the other was the illustration. Leonhart Fuchs was one of the first to understand the importance of employing an artist and highly skilled woodcutters to ensure accurate depictions of plants. He mentions his team, who are all depicted at the end of the book. It was novel to show plants with their root systems and often also in their various seasonal stages – all on just one plant, with a whole page given to each plant. The reader could feast his eyes but also focus on details in order to be able to clearly recognize plants when using them for remedies. It is not hard to see the attraction of the New Kreuterbuch to art lovers and illustrators to this day – just like *De Humanis Corporis Fabrica*.

What is an *incunabulum*? In the museum's permanent exhibition, there are four copies of these rare early printed books, which were produced before 1500.

The term originates from Latin and translates to "cradle." It describes the early stage after the invention of the printing press, with movable lettering for typesetting, by Johannes Gutenberg in the 1450s. Book production based on this new technology was still in its infancy. The change from manuscript to the printed book would have many advantages but also presented many challenges. Whereas manuscripts were produced on demand, books were printed and then sold. How many would they sell; what was the production cost?

Many incunabula were text only. Products such as classic literature, bloodletting calendars, Bibles, and liturgical writings were a safe bet. The print run before 1500 is estimated from around 100 to about 1,000 copies. On permanent display in Dr Franz Käppeli's museum is the very rare first illustrated printed herbal from Italy: *Incipit Herbarium* by Apuleius Platonicus (1481). "Incipit," meaning "it begins," literally meant just that – the book begins. Titles and elaborate frontispieces appeared more regularly some decades later.

Above: ***Museum für Medizinhistorische Bücher Muri.*** *The Singisen wing that houses three museums. © Book Collection Dr. F. Käppeli, www.mmbm.ch*

Alii porno. Alii Polypleron.
Nascitur in paludibus plurimum & pratis.
AD CAPITIS DOLOREM.
Herbae Plātagis radix collo suspēsa dolorē mire tollit.
AD VENTRIS DOLOREM.
Herbae Plantaginis sucus tepefactus fomētādo uentris dolorē tollit mire: & si tumor fuerit: tusa & impositā tollet tumorem.

AD DOLOREM INTESTINORVM.
Herbae Plantaginis sucus potui datus & interiora sanat: & thoracē bois purgat mirifice.
AD DISYNTERICOS.
Herbam plantaginem cum lente coquito & dato ad manducandū uentrem stringet.
AD QUI PVRVLENTVM EXCREANT CVM SANGVINE.
Herbae Plāgis sucū dabis eis bibere & sanabunt.
AD VVLNERA.
Herbae Plantaginis semen tunsū in uulnus sparsum uulnera cito sanat & refrigerat: & loca que nimia ui calere coguntur persanat.
AD VENTREM STRINGENDVM
Herba Plantago in aceto cocta in merū bibitur: mensura cyathi unius.
AD MORSVM SERPENTIS.
Herba Plātago trita & cū uino sūpta cōmoda erit
AD MORSVM SERPENTIS
Herbae Plantaginis radix alligata mire ꝓdesse creditur.
AD LVMBRICES.
Herbam Plantaginem contundes: & sucum eius de cochleari uel de ligula dabis bibere ipsāq; herbam tunsam in umblicum ponito.
SI QUA DVRITIA IN CORPORE EVENERIT.

Above: ***Incipit Herbarium (1481), First Edition. By Apuleius Platonicus (AD 124–170).***
© Book Collection Dr. F. Käppeli, www.mmbm.ch

The Herbal, written around AD 4, was a widely used remedy-book in the Middle Ages and lists the medicinal properties of plants as well as showing illustrations. It was printed in Rome by Sicilian printer Philippus de Lignamine (b. 1420), who tells us that he used a manuscript found in the Benedictine abbey at Monte Cassino as his copy. The content was meant to help the reader heal himself. In our copy, we can find eighteenth-century annotations in Spanish that show that the owner used his book – he even names the type of wine he used for the advised potion. For me, that fact enhances the immense importance of illustrations. In this *incunabula herbal*, the depictions are very schematic and partly rely on sources other than nature directly – in this particular case they are based on the Montecassino copy. While their simplicity is quite stunning, and most show some typical attributes belonging to each plant, there is room for misidentification.

Colored illustrations posed another challenge. These were still executed by hand until the eighteenth century, when intaglio and relief techniques were used – but the real breakthrough came via chromolithography in the nineteenth century. So how was it done before that? Ideally, coloring would still happen in the workshop under the observant eye of the author himself or with strict guidance. Quite often, however, it was done after the book had been acquired, and in these cases the choice of color could be arbitrary.

In your own words, why do you think it is important to preserve these old medical books and works?

Books, per se, provide an amazing amount of information. The old medical and natural history books in the museum never cease to amaze. They provide such varied aspects of our past and give

Above: ***A stunning work combining art and science.*** *By Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717), a naturalist and scientific illustrator. She documented insects and plant life in her works. This is an illustration of her work, published in Dissertatio de Generatione et Metamorphosibus Insectorum Surinamensium (1726). © Book Collection Dr. F. Käppeli, www.mmbm.ch*

us an insight that only writings can do in such an extensive and also accessible way. Many periods in history are based on looking back while also adapting, questioning, and repositioning to fit new findings according to the new technologies of the times and new experiences acquired. The continuity that can be pieced together again and again is fascinating.

So why would we not just scan all old documents, save them in neat files, and forget about the rather complex process of conservation? Scanning is one brilliant measure to provide access for research and allows it to be done from great distances. Scanning is also a good way of preserving knowledge should there be a disaster that would destroy the physical books. But to be able to conserve and display these amazing books in the museum and make them come to life by providing expert information with our new technologies in an entertaining and easy-to-understand way – that is a different thing altogether. These books are about us and our world, and hopefully, we will always be striving to understand more, just as our ancestors were before us.

I would like to give illustrations a special mention, too. First, they are a magnet for inquisitive minds. And as they are masterpieces in their own right, they are studied by art historians and looked to by artists today, as well as illustrators, looking for inspiration or different techniques. So, for me, the importance of preserving these books must be likened to preserving art pieces as well as snapshots of history.

To learn more about this museum, please visit:
https://www.mmbm.ch/home.html

ABOUT THE EXPERTS

Dr. Franz Käppeli, founder and CEO of Medica Laboratories, decided to create a museum to share his enthusiasm for magnificent historical volumes and their contents with interested people. Single-handedly, he financed the lavish reconstruction of the historical building, the scientific preparation of the exhibits, the digital implementation, and the modern presentation. Muri was selected because Dr F. Käppeli wished to promote cultural interest in this historically significant Swiss town. In his eyes, Muri was still a piece of home, and he felt a connection to it. It was thanks to his patronage that the famous Muri Monastery Museum became a reality. His family also donated a very large sum towards the Museum Caspar Wolf, located in the same building. Dr F. Käppeli purchased the Singisen wing of the Muri Monastery with a donation pledge to the MuriKultur Foundation. Sadly, Dr. Käppeli passed away unexpectedly this January.

Beatrice Green-Pedrazzini was appointed by Dr. Franz Käppeli to develop the concept of the museum, as well as curating the exhibitions, from its opening in 2016. With her background in interior architecture and a focus on historical developments, she is passionate about providing a space where the scenography is calming, giving visitors room to discover or simply admire the precious books.