



WILLIAM HUNTER AND HIS EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CULTURAL WORLDS

The Anatomist and the Fine Arts

HELEN McCORMACK

ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN ART HISTORY

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William Hunter and his Eighteenth-Century Cultural Worlds

The eminent physician and anatomist Dr William Hunter (1718–1783) made an important and significant contribution to the history of collecting and the promotion of the fine arts in Britain in the eighteenth century. Born at the family home in East Calderwood, he matriculated at the University of Glasgow in 1731 and was greatly influenced by some of the most important philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, including Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746). He quickly abandoned his studies in theology for Medicine and, in 1740, left Scotland for London, where he steadily acquired a reputation as an energetic and astute practitioner; he combined his working life as an anatomist successfully with a wide range of interests in natural history, including mineralogy, conchology, botany and ornithology; and in antiquities, books, medals and artefacts; in the fine arts, he worked with artists and dealers and came to own a number of beautiful oil paintings and volumes of extremely fine prints. He built an impressive school of anatomy and a museum which housed these substantial and important collections. William Hunter's life and work is the subject of this book, a cultural-anthropological account of his influence and legacy as an anatomist, physician, collector, teacher and demonstrator. Combining Hunter's lectures to students of anatomy with his teaching at the St Martin's Lane Academy, his patronage of artists, such as Robert Edge Pine, George Stubbs and Johan Zoffany, and his associations with artists at the Royal Academy of Arts, this book positions Hunter at the very centre of artistic, scientific and cultural life in London during the period, presenting a sustained and critical account of the relationship between anatomy and artists over the course of the long eighteenth century.

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The Anatomist and the Fine Arts

Helen McCormack

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Introduction

Art, science, curiosity and commerce

A correspondent of the *St James's Chronicle*, 25 May 1779, included in his letter to the editor an extract from the poem 'Ode to Curiosity', by the Rev. William Tasker (1740–1800), inspired by Dr William Hunter's Museum at 16 Great Windmill Street, London. The author lamented that, despite 'being much visited and extolled by Foreigners, I am the more surprised that it hath not been more taken Notice of by English Writers'. He went on to observe that the 'Ode', 'with no small Propriety, makes Dr Hunter's Museum the constant Reference of that fanciful Goddess... Curiosity': ¹

ANCIENT or modern, all we know,
To thy bright Origin we owe;
The Healing Art is thine;
With the Coan Sage was fraught,
From thee deriv'd that heavenly Thought,
Which stamp'd his Work Divine.
"GALEN'S great Mind, thou led'st to view
Man's wondrous Fabric, whence he knew
The Harmony of Parts;
In his dark Age, Anatomy
Languish'd in feeble Infancy,
'Mong rude unfinish'd Arts.
"Succeeding Sages caught the Flame,
More nicely icann'd the human Frame,
To trace the arterial Way. To trace the Veins from every Part,
Meandering to the Fountain heart,
Reserv'd for HARVEY'S DAY.
"To HUNTER thou hast lastly shown
(All that perchance shall e'er be known)
Of th' human Form Divine:
Thou didst direct his searching Eye,
The smallest Lymphaeduct to spy,
And Nerve minutely fine.
"Rais'd by the Wonder-working Hand,
Behold thy own bright Temple stand
Off spring of HUNTER'S Mind.
'Mid Learning's old and modern Lore,
And Nature's choice collected Store,

2 Introduction

There, Goddess, dwell ensrhin'd!
CURIOSUS

The poem describes how the foremost practitioners in the art and science of anatomy had been motivated by curiosity. William Hunter is singled out as the modern-day equivalent of Hippocrates – the Coan Sage, named after the island of Cos, where he was reputed to have been born, Galen and Harvey – and his museum, his ‘own bright Temple’, the repository of that inheritance, where the products of Nature, gathered under curiosity, are preserved. Tasker’s poem is rich in anatomical vocabulary, with vivid phrases such as ‘Man’s wondrous fabric’, the ‘harmony of parts’, ‘the smallest lymph duct’ and ‘Nerve minutely fine’ conjuring an imagery redolent of Hunter’s anatomical displays. He was a friend of Hunter, attending his anatomy lectures and presumably given free access to the museum while researching a highly illustrated book he had planned on the ‘History of Physiognomy from Aristotle to Lavater’.²

Anatomy, as Tasker’s ‘Ode’ confirms, was considered in this period both an ‘art’ and a ‘science’. This lack of a clear distinction between areas of expertise and knowledge is, of course, symptomatic of a more general integration of what were to become, during the course of the nineteenth century, ever more specialised forms of enquiry. In common with many *virtuoso* figures of the day, Hunter’s active pursuit of anatomical research informed and stimulated his interests, his ‘curiosity’, in other aspects of the natural sciences, as well as objects of use and beauty. His museum in Great Windmill Street brought natural and artificial curiosities into conjunction, encompassing minerals, shells, plant and animal life, corals, insects and birds, representative of Enlightenment ideas of the planet as a body, the earth as a living animal, where natural forms connected all living matter, as well as items of ingenious manufacture, of ancient and modern workmanship, drawn from Britain, the Continent and more far off, exotic locales, and including pottery, medals and fine art.³ There was a natural association between the study of antiquities and natural history, the collecting and appreciation of the fine arts and natural philosophy not only apparent in the vast and varied objects Hunter amassed, but also in his affiliation with various institutional bodies that included the Royal Society, the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Academy of Arts.

In his obituary of the doctor, the author Felix Vicq d’Azyr (1746–1794), anatomist and member of the *Académie des Sciences*, Paris, summoned together the various strands of the collection, establishing connections between the visible knowledge on display and the conceptual framework that had existed in the collector’s mind:

The precious and rare objects that can be admired there had not simply been arranged for the pleasure of the eye: each element of this great whole, was under Mr. Hunter’s hand, a centre of instruction and enlightenment; and their gathering must be seen as a storehouse where his mind would recapture a picture of all his ideas, the summation of all his observations. In the midst of his cabinet, Mr. Hunter was the most, learned; and his collection itself took on a new meaning, inspired a new interest. Now the chain of all these truths is broken; all is silent in this vast structure, or rather all proclaims the loss of a great man, whose debris still deserves our homage, while adding to our regrets.⁴

This book addresses those ‘objects’, not simply there for ‘the pleasure of the eye’, that comprised Hunter’s fine art collection and explores their place in both the ‘storehouse’

of the anatomist's mind and his Great Windmill Street home and workplace. Just as Hunter created a network of dealers and contacts in anatomy and natural history, so he was extremely well connected to the contemporary world of the fine arts. When he wrote to his friend and mentor William Cullen (1710–1790) in 1768, on the eve of the founding of the Royal Academy of Arts, saying that, 'I am pretty much acquainted with all our best artists and live in friendship with them', it was no exaggeration.⁵ As First Professor of Anatomy at the newly founded Royal Academy, William Hunter was at the very centre of a burgeoning London art world, during a period of rapid growth, expansion and professionalisation, marked by the advent of art institutions and an exhibition culture, widening audiences and an ever more vibrant print trade. Although the primary focus is Hunter's interest in the fine arts, with a particular emphasis on painting and printmaking, this is not to deny connections with other aspects of the medic's collections. Indeed, restoring the interconnectedness between the fine arts and the practice of science overall, principally in natural history, within William Hunter's original museum is of central concern.⁶ Hunter's role within the fine arts is explored by close analysis of specific examples that formed the collection, as well as examination of the doctor's connections to various artists and art institutions during the period. Rather than provide a comprehensive survey of Hunter's collecting activities or his dealings with the artistic establishment, however, this book explores the diverse factors informing the making of the collection, together with the anatomist's varied associations with artists and dealers in accord with their rather extemporised nature. This is not to suggest that Hunter had no formal plan for the incorporation of the fine arts within his overall project. However, the evidence presented here suggests that the acquisition of paintings, prints and drawings was often determined by a series of favourable coincidences, meetings and exchanges. The expansion of networks across Europe brought about by the Grand Tour, which opened up a much wider market for the fine arts, and the establishment of better, formal training for artists in Britain, together with the increase in economic growth as a whole, were all conditions that Hunter could not have foreseen.

Therefore, this book focuses on these indeterminant conditions and pursues Hunter's response to them. It requires that the study takes the form of a close, analytical exploration of these activities and connections in order to develop a more nuanced appreciation of how collections and collecting actually worked in practice in the eighteenth century.⁷ While the drawbacks of such a narrow focus mean that the wider aspects of Hunter's scheme may appear neglected, the advantages are that a previously little understood and seldom researched part of the collection will benefit from having its own historical context grounded in a firmer understanding of the period.

Contemporary authors such as Jean Lerond d'Alembert, in the preface to Denis Diderot's *Encyclopaedia or Universal Dictionary of arts, sciences, trades and manufactures* (1752), recognised the need to define the relationship between the various branches of knowledge, while allowing for the difficulties that this presented:

It is obvious upon Reflection, that the Parts of Knowledge have a certain Connection with one another, or, that the Arts and Sciences mutually aid each other; and are consequently all link'd together. But, if it be difficult to reduce any single Art, or Science, to a few Rules, or general Principles; it is not less difficult to reduce the infinitely various branches of human Knowledge into a single system.⁸

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Later in the preface, d'Alembert raises the problematic issue of representing this interconnectedness within the fine arts and in the imitation of nature specifically, anticipating debates that became such a strong feature of artistic discourse in the second half of the century:

As the direct Ideas which strike us strongest, are those we remember best; so we the more earnestly endeavour to reproduce them in ourselves by imitating their Objects. And though agreeable Objects strike us stronger, when real, than when barely represented; yet this Defect in Point of Agreeableness, is, in some Degree made up by the Pleasure we receive from their Imitation.... And in this Imitation of all Kinds of Objects, capable of raising lively or agreeable Sentiments in us, consists, in general, the Imitation of beautiful Nature.⁹

In this discussion, d'Alembert's approach to the imitation of nature in the fine arts is hesitant. He questions whether a direct imitation of nature is achievable or even desirable and suggests that it is only in an 'improved' vision of nature that the viewer will derive pleasure. This interpretation, drawing on a long European tradition advocating the abstraction of particularised nature, is in contrast to the attitude of naturalists working in a British tradition and indebted to the writings of Francis Bacon, such as Thomas Pennant. In his 1768 publication, *British Zoology*, Pennant confronts artists directly, confidently asserting the benefits supplied by a profound knowledge and experience of nature. After introducing the practical application of natural knowledge in determining and measuring mineralogical details in paints, pigments and other artistic materials, Pennant argued:

But these advantages are small, compared to those derived from the knowledge of nature in the representation of objects: painting is an imitation of nature; now, who can imitate without consulting the original? But to come to what is more particularly the object of our inquiries; animal and vegetable life are the essence of landscape, and often are secondary objects in historical paintings; even the sculptor in his limited province would do well to acquire a correctness of design with a perfect knowledge of the muscles of animals. But the painter should have all this and more: he should be acquainted with all their various tints, their manner of living, their various motions or attitudes, and their places of abode, or he will fall into manifest errors.¹⁰

How the visual arts might contribute to the furtherance of knowledge in the natural sciences and in forms of natural history is one of the abiding concerns of the chapters that follow. It is introduced here to emphasise how the study of nature formed an intense, at times obsessive, influence on Hunter's work, reflected in his incessant exploration of corporeal form and function, and to stress the ways in which his interests and concerns intersected with a more general cultural fascination with the relationship and the role of the visual arts in the collation and summary of knowledge across a range of fields.

In exploring these issues, this study makes use of a model of analysis Simon Schaffer has described as 'cultural-anthropological'. However, William Hunter's relationship with the fine arts and the consideration of his collection as a whole requires a still more complex model, one that combines biography of the kind advocated by Schaffer

with wider social concerns. This is provided by Bruno Latour's analysis of the history of travel and exploration, as explained in *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists through Society* (1987). Latour describes the system by which objects are brought back from far-flung places as a 'cycle of accumulation' and the museums and collections that they entered as 'centres of calculation'. These are designed to make sense of the distance that dictates their original production and eventual reception. Along with this 'accumulation', however, the idea of consumption is also prevalent in Latour's description of how the networks that facilitated scientific exploration were asymptomatic to those of capitalism; not identical, perhaps, but complementary. What is important for Latour is not trying to define the various categories of sociological or political ideas that are implicated in the formation of these cycles and centres, but attempting to capture the 'unique movement', typified perhaps in the eighteenth century by curiosity, that allows particular centres of accumulation to have an influence and act with agency over others at greater or lesser distances.¹¹

There are, clearly, similarities between the exploration of the world in terms of search of new products that will add to new knowledge and the seeking out of new commodities. The difference is, Latour explains, that these objects cannot constitute capital only, but have some other form of usefulness that means their function is not simply to be reinvested into another cycle of accumulation. Commodities, having a use and exchange value, are implicitly what constitute the cycle of accumulation, but it is their removal from the cycle of capital that Latour emphasises. While recognising the negative and positive aspects of this methodology, the objects at the centres of calculation are meant to combine both usefulness and curiousness.

Curiosity, merged as it was with commerce, was an important element in constituting William Hunter's collection, as it came to be formed during the second half of the eighteenth century; a period now characterised by historians as one of unprecedented consumer growth.¹² Despite the fact that the commodification of cultural pursuits is often associated with the early nineteenth century and the founding of national museums and galleries of art, curiosity and commerce both feature strongly as contextual conditions for the creation of Hunter's museum.¹³ During the eighteenth century, curiosity was emerging and developing from its association with early modern enquiry and virtuosity and, in Hunter's time, the term held connotations that were grounded in scientific enquiry, derived from the phrase's etymological sense ('cura' in Latin, meaning 'attention'), as careful and precise empirical investigation.¹⁴ This is discernible in works such as Lord Kames's *Elements of Criticism* (1765) that sets out to distinguish a rational and, therefore, positive sense for curiosity, amid increasing use of the word in a consumer culture, where the meanings of the term had become increasingly ambiguous and uncertain.¹⁵ He defends this interpretation of the word thus:

Curiosity is the cause, which is a principle implanted in human nature, for a purpose extremely beneficial, that of acquiring knowledge; and the emotion of wonder raised by new and strange objects, inflames our curiosity with respect to such objects.¹⁶

Kames's definition of curiosity, much indebted to the writings of John Locke, places emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge which is useful, beneficial and rational, and of benefit for the purposes of scientific enquiry and so the betterment of man's lot.

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This sense of the term is applied here to describe what must have been William Hunter's own understanding of the term. This is not to suggest that Hunter operated outside a commodification of culture as described by Jurgen Habermas, but that his early instruction in Scottish Enlightenment thought meant that he would not have considered these two meanings of the terms as a conflict of interest as they came to be perceived in the second half of the century.¹⁷

William Hunter was born on 23 May 1718 at his family's modest farmhouse, Long Calderwood, East Kilbride, Scotland. He was the seventh of ten children born to Agnes Hunter (*née* Paul) (1686?–1751) and John Hunter (1663?–1741). He was educated locally at Hamilton Grammar School and then enrolled at the University of Glasgow in 1731. As the university at this time was the locus of Scottish Enlightenment ideas, there has been no little speculation as to the extent of the influence of its leading figures on Hunter. It has been pointed out, in this context, for instance, that Francis Hutcheson (1649–1746) was Professor of Moral Philosophy (1730–46) while Hunter was a student.¹⁸ Hutcheson had already published *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1726), a text now recognised as instrumental in shaping Enlightenment aesthetics. His work has also been cited as an example of a moral justification during the period for the acquisition, accumulation and exchange of consumer goods as constituting a polite and civilised society.¹⁹ Specifically, his *Inquiry* makes it clear that it is possible to perceive everyday commodities as objects of beauty and that appreciation of their aesthetic qualities can provoke sensations of shared pleasure and desire among friends:

Had we no such sense of Beauty and Harmony; Houses, Gardens, Dress, Equipage, might have been recommended to us as convenient, fruitful, warm, easy; but never as *beautiful*; and in Faces I see nothing which could please us, but Liveliness of Colour and Smoothness of Surface: And yet nothing is more certain, than that all these Objects are recommended under quite different *Views* on many Occasions: And no Custom, Education, or Example could ever give us *Perceptions* distinct from those of the Senses which we had the use of before, or recommend Objects under another *Conception* than grateful to them.²⁰

Hutcheson's ideas, together with those of Lord Shaftesbury and, later, David Hume, provided a moral philosophy that responded to and corresponded with the development of a consumer culture in eighteenth-century Britain, explaining that the pursuit of wealth was a reflection of a civilised society. Therefore, William Hunter's education formed a moral basis for the equal treatment of the motivations of curiosity and commerce.

However, it is difficult to assess the full extent of this influence, other than in an anecdotal manner. It may have been that Hutcheson's style of delivering lectures in English, rather than Latin, that persuaded Hunter to do likewise. Alexander Carlyle (1722–1805), who attended the university a few years after Hunter in 1743, was to write of Hutcheson:

As his elocution was good, and his voice and manner pleasing, he raised the attention of his hearers at all times; and when the subject led him to explain and enforce the moral virtues and duties, he displayed a fervent and persuasive eloquence which was irresistible.²¹

This resembles descriptions of Hunter's own style of delivery, albeit in Samuel Foart Simmons's 'embellished' account:

As a teacher of Anatomy he has been long and deservedly celebrated. He was a good orator, and having a clear and accurate conception of what he taught, he knew how to place in distinct and intelligible points of view the most abstruse subjects of anatomy and physiology.²²

Hunter's first and closest mentor before he moved to London in the 1740s was William Cullen. Cullen was from a similar background to Hunter and their families were both connected to the community that surrounded the patronage of the Dukes of Hamilton. However, Cullen and other members of 'Scottish lowland intellectual elites', it has been suggested, developed a radical system of scientific investigation that paralleled similar enquiries into the nature of 'sensibility' and 'sympathy' by other Scottish Enlightenment intellectuals.²³ Medical historian Christopher Lawrence explains how the work by scientists such as Cullen was not unaffected by the social and, more importantly, the local influences on individual experience. From a cultural-anthropological perspective these local manifestations of Enlightenment thought clearly impacted strongly on Hunter's own work and career, shaping a shared system of beliefs among his network of close friends and colleagues.

William Hunter's educational background, whether general or local, has been a feature of previous biographies that have mapped the doctor's history through a series of professional stages. The emphasis on his professional career has to some extent obscured the history of his collection, however. As Susan Stewart has commented, one of the difficulties in writing the history of a collection is to separate the fictions of the individual's life from the contextual biography of the incorporated objects.²⁴ Arguably, in Hunter's case this has been done many times in previous histories of both the person and the collection. Samuel Foart Simmons's *An Account of the Life and Writings of the Late William Hunter, MD FRS and SA*, published soon after Hunter's death in 1783, conflates its subject's character with the objects that constituted his collection. Simmons's text is interspersed with mentions of the coin collection, anatomical specimens, books and anecdotes about Hunter's time as a Professor at the Royal Academy of Arts. John Hunter's (1723–1793) copy of this text includes a number of annotations which contrast sharply with the 'mythologising' espoused by Simmons.

He was an early riser and when business was over he was constantly engaged in his anatomical pursuits, or in his museum. (JH: he was not an early riser, rather indulged in his bed when he might, and [was] naturally indolent, loved ease and social company, but his good sense and desire to be at the head of his profession, or whatever he undertook, made him active).²⁵

More recently, Helen Brock's *The Correspondence of Dr William Hunter 1740–1783* traces the anatomist's life through his letters, with mention of the collections appearing only intermittently. The limitations of this study are that the objects become lost within the minutiae of Hunter's professional and personal correspondence and their significance to an understanding of the wider culture of eighteenth-century art and collecting is understated. Brock's purpose was to gather up the extensive letters and

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documents sent to and sent by Hunter and create a chronological sequence that roughly follows the pattern of his own career progression. However, in the process, the wider relevance of the doctor as a patron of the fine arts is concealed. The most recent addition to the historiography, *'My Highest Pleasures' William Hunter's Art Collection*, an exhibition catalogue edited by Peter Black, while taking a broader, more comprehensive view of the collection in incorporating information on his numismatic, anatomical and library holdings, focuses more especially on the painting collection.²⁶ This privileges aspects of Hunter's collection of classical antiquities, perhaps inevitably, but does not address any specific issues relating to his involvement with contemporary British art and artists, particularly with regard to the consumption of fine arts. It is a further aim of this book, therefore, to add to the significant research undertaken for *'My Highest Pleasures'* by setting out a critical understanding of Hunter's biography, positioning him as a provocative and controversial, while still clearly brilliant, figure within the culture of the period. This is also to acknowledge, however, that while the historiography of William Hunter's medical achievement is considerable his biography is still under researched, not least in terms of his extensive interest in and relationship to the contemporary art world.²⁷

As for the collection of paintings, Hunter's first recorded purchases derive from the sale of Dr Richard Mead (1673–1754) and are informed by his encounter with a group of highly influential anatomist-antiquarians in London in the 1740s and 1750s.²⁸ At Mead's sale in March 1754, Hunter bought the portrait of *Sir Isaac Newton* (1642–1727), after Sir Godfrey Kneller (1646–1723) (Figure 0.1). The portrait was significant for Hunter, of course, as a representation of one of the most influential figures in the history of science. He acknowledged Newton's legacy to



Figure 0.1 After Sir Godfrey Kneller, *Sir Isaac Newton*, (1642–1727), oil on canvas, 75.5 × 63.0, © The Hunterian, University of Glasgow 2016.

experimental theory and in his lectures on anatomy, commenting: ‘That doctrine was the source of Sir Isaac Newton’s and all of the improvements which have been made since the middle of the seventeenth century.’²⁹ Kneller, as the foremost portrait painter of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, is also credited with having introduced a new form of portrait style into British art, as codified in the artist’s so-called Kit-Cat Club pictures. This was a more intimate style, suited to the newly emerging professional class. This painting of Newton, at 75.5 × 63cm, does not conform strictly to the category of ‘Kit-Cat’ but does incorporate other characteristics of the genre: ‘Instead of striking a posture of aristocratic insouciance, Kneller’s sitters seem to fashion their muscles and facial expressions in a manner that implicitly acknowledges the presence of an audience.’³⁰

Therefore, Kneller’s portrait, placed in Hunter’s collection, signifies more than one ambitious scientist’s emulation of another, it provides evidence that artworks were no longer the preserve of the aristocracy and that the best artists were now attainable by the professional classes. The portrait is a reminder of the shifting nature of British cultural life during Hunter’s time and of the impact that other professionals such as Mead had on his collection. Ownership of an important artist’s work is not enough, however, to prove that easy social mobility was as yet a feature of eighteenth-century society. The gains made by William Hunter in his professional life were, of course, entirely dependent on the patronage of a previous generation of medical practitioners such as Mead. In Hunter’s case, the important role played by Dr James Douglas (1675–1742) is significant in that it was most likely through Douglas that Hunter became involved with the circle of professionals around Mead and Sir Hans Sloane. The book dealer and co-founder, with his brother Andrew, of the Academy of Arts in Glasgow, Robert Foulis (1707–1776) had given William Hunter a letter of introduction to James Douglas, a distinguished man-midwife practising in London during the first half of the century. Foulis acted as an agent for Douglas and it was surely Douglas who was partly responsible for bolstering the ‘lowland Scottish intellectuals’ within elite cosmopolitan circles in London. Hunter was to also benefit from aristocratic and royal patronage, serving as Physician in Extraordinary to Queen Charlotte at the court of George III – a position he owed, no doubt, to the sponsorship of John Stuart, 3rd Earl of Bute (1713–1792), then the king’s favourite. These networks of patronage and professional ambitions within the medical profession were replicated within the London art world, as artists too sought to gain recognition and elevate the status of their work in a commercial market.³¹

Tasker’s tribute to William Hunter, cited at the beginning of this introduction, emphasises the ‘monument’ that he built to house his collection (Figure 0.2). The Great Windmill Street Anatomy School and Museum originated in Hunter’s own plans for a national school of anatomy that he submitted to the 3rd Earl of Bute, during his short and highly controversial term as First Lord of the Treasury, ‘a short time before he resigned that office’, in late 1762 or early 1763.³² The anatomy school and museum formed part of the burgeoning world of exhibitions and culture of spectacle in eighteenth-century London, but as a private museum its audience might still have been restricted to invited guests, students and assistants. Rather than a fully commodified site, the displays bordered on the semi-public realm of a gentleman’s cabinet. The building at Great Windmill Street, designed by the Scottish architect Robert Mylne (1733–1811) is ‘reconstructed’ in this volume to reveal the innovative approach taken by the doctor and his architect to create a unique building in both scale and