In deciding on a topic for a presentation at this conference, I often begin with a single image that I've found striking and try to build a theme around it. The image that got me started on this year’s presentation is a photograph of two “pages” from Julia Barton’s “book” of embroidered leaves called English Gardens. I found this photograph in Thomasina Beck’s (1988) book, The Embroiderer’s Garden. On the left-hand side of Barton’s folio is a very realistic and detailed image of Dianthus (pink) and on the right, a rendering of a garden plot. It was the flower that caught my eye. I had never seen an herbal page created from thread before. It had never dawned on me that anyone would do such a thing, and do it so well—and then to make it into a book page so the similarity is even more striking. On the same page as the photograph of Dianthus, Beck also includes a photograph of the cover of English Gardens, “bound in green velvet with the title letters applied in red leather [with] the ‘end papers’ of marbled silk” (p. 95). In addition, she reproduces the page picturing Dianthus from an 1583 herbal that Barton adapted, so the similarity to an herbal illustration was hardly accidental. This becomes even more obvious in another page from Barton’s book, this one representing a lily, complete with a detail illustration, as is often found in herbals.

Barton’s book got me thinking about the relation between sewing and botany. I am doing research on an early-20th century botanist, Agnes Arber (1912), who wrote a history of early printed herbals and through this work, I’ve become interested in visual representations of plants. These are essential to progress in the science of botany; it is often easier to describe the subtle differences between two closely related plant species in pictures rather than in words (Kirchoff, 2001). Some observers go so far as to argue that botany could not progress as a science until the development of the printing press, which made possible the accurate reproduction of images of plants.

My interest in sewing primarily involves quilting, which I became involved in about five years ago, and soon became obsessed with. I quilt, but I also love to read about the history of quilting, and that has led me to the history of needlework in general, including embroidery—and hence to Beck’s book. I’ve managed to put a few plants in some of my quilts, including a few passable sunflowers but nothing of the accuracy or detail of Barton’s flowers. But perhaps it is the crudeness of my renditions that made me immediately appreciate her skill and led me to think about why someone would try to reproduce in thread what is much more easily done with ink and paint.

This is the issue that lies at the heart of this paper. It is an issue that has a great deal to do with how women have viewed themselves in the past and what counts as important for women today. It also has to do with what counts as valid forms of representation in science, and how the conventions of scientific illustration have developed. I will argue that while Barton’s flowers, no matter how accurately done, would not be considered as illustrations for a botany text, they may in fact have characteristics which make them more realistic than any drawing or painting could be.
In The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine, Rozsika Parker (1984) presents a feminist history of embroidery, and among the points she makes is that flowers have long been central images in women’s needlework. She focuses on the European embroidery tradition, particularly that of Britain, but it should be noted that flowers were commonly found stylized in Islamic needlework as well as in Asian embroidery (Krody, 2000). Parker points out that flowers have long had a connotation of frivolity and in the sixth century there was an edict forbidding nuns from depicting flowers. But later in the middle ages and in the Renaissance, flowers became popular subjects in tapestries, though these were hardly just done by women. Many of the embroilers and tapestry makers were men belonging to professional guilds, but women also did needlework in the privacy of their homes, and it is this tradition that came to be more significant in the 18th and 19th centuries.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, garden flowers were often depicted in needlework. Plants and animals were also prominent in Biblical scenes, stressing the wonders of God’s creations. By the mid-18th century, plants were so popular in needlework that “to flower” became synonymous with embroidery (Richter, 2000). Embroidery was seen as a fitting way for upper class women to spend their time, and instruction in needlework was an essential part of the education of girls. At the same time, gardens were becoming the province of women, and so it is not surprising that flowers retained their central place in needlework. One example of someone who combined interests in gardening, botany, and needlework was Mary Delany (Hayden, 1980). She is best known for the cutout flowers which she began to create when she was in her 70s. They are so accurate that botanists were able to identify the species depicted. But Delany was also a superb embroiderer. The dress which she wore to be presented at court was made of black silk and was ornamented with two hundred different kinds of flowers, all represented with great detail and accuracy. Delany and her husband were avid gardeners, so she had first-hand knowledge of plants as well as plenty of models for her art. She also consulted botany books and was friendly with such noted botanists of the day as Sir Joseph Banks.

While Delany’s work may not represent that of the average embroiderer, there are many examples of needlework that almost equal hers in quality if not in quantity. Embroidery had become associated with femininity, and so fine needlework was seen as a sign of other fine traits in a woman. But by the 19th century, several other themes were woven into women’s needlework. Some saw fancy and extravagant designs as signs of decadence. By the middle of the 19th century, needlework was sometimes seen as not a serious way for women to spend time unless it was closely tied to their roles as keepers of home and family. It was considered appropriate for women to embellish linen and upholstery, and perhaps even clothing, but not to excess. At the same time, the concept known as the language of flowers had become popular among women. This meant that different species of flowers were associated with different emotions and ideas. So when flowers were rendered in thread, they often carried messages of love, devotion, or longing. The language of flowers helped to further solidify the idea of flowers, and needlework, as appropriate to a woman’s sphere.

At the same time, the science of botany remained a male domain, as did all other areas of science. Women did study botany, but almost always as amateurs, though the study of plants was considered more appropriate for women than were other sciences. Botany was something that could be done close to home, perhaps even in one’s own garden. Botany texts aimed at women, and even written by women, became popular; botany was taught in academies and
colleges for women. And there were women botanists, such as Augusta Duvall Bussey (1843-1931) who combined botany and needlework; she created a botanical crazy quilt rich with embroidered flowers (Bowman, 1991). This was hardly a unique approach. Though we may assume that the flowers depicted here may be slightly more detailed and more realistic, flowers appeared in many crazy quilts, and in other kinds of quilts as well. In 2001, the Textile Museum in Washington, DC mounted an exhibit entitled “Fanciful Flowers: Botany and the American Quilt” in conjunction with the International Quilt Study Center at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. The exhibit included quilts with flowers ranging from the very realistic to the extremely stylized. Rozsika Parker notes that “the subject matter of a woman's embroidery during the 18th and 19th centuries was as important as its execution in affirming her femininity, but execution was still important (p. 11).”

I think there is a fascination with representation in a lot of art. It is about solving the problem of how to make an apple out of paint or thread or wood, how to translate a form and an image from one medium into another, realistically. That is at least one major impulse of art. And for women, sewing was their medium and the garden was their milieu so it makes sense that the two should come together. But there is also the idea of skill, of making the flowers as realistic as possible, and thread was a good medium for that. It came in many colors and those colors could be blended, by using thin strands. There is a delicacy to sewing that matches the delicacy of flowers, and here was a way to show the skill of sewing. Sewing for many women wasn’t necessary for utilitarian purposes, so the artistic side could flourish. This was the age of realistic art, so it is not surprising that the flowers should be done realistically. This was a way to show one’s skill and one’s femininity. It was a way to garner praise, and praise came with the extremes, the extremes of skill or of quantity of output or the smallness of the stitches. This was a way for women to produce something that was deemed worthy of attention.

While flowers were often the focus of attention, leaves sometimes also proved riveting subjects for quilts, as in the case of a striking mid-19th century quilt with its presentation of 36 different kinds of leaves (Binney, 1984). In the same vein and even more intriguing botanically is Iris Aycock’s 1994 quilt Hammered at Home (Austin, 1999). These two quilts show the contrast between two different approaches to botanical illustration. The first shows perfect leaves, the ideal or type form, while the Aycock quilt displays leaves in all their individuality and imperfection. In both cases, the artist has used the leaf itself as a model or template.

As far as present-day needlework is concerned I am more familiar with the world of quilting than of embroidery, though the border between the two is often fuzzy. As with 19th century quilts, the representation of plants on recent quilts runs from the highly realistic to the very stylized. To give outstanding examples of each, I want to show the work of Velda Newman and Jane Sassaman. For me, one of the most awe-inspiring quilters is Velda Newman (1996), whose sewing is all done by hand. She has only created about a dozen large quilts, which is not surprising because of the work involved in each. One of the most spectacular, Hydrangea, is 7-by-8 feet in size and is a close-up of the flowers of this shrub, with each floret made from an individual piece of fabric appliqued in place. It takes close observation of nature to create something so realistic and at the same time so artistically dramatic.

Jane Sassaman’s (2000) work is very different from that of Newman, though no less fascinating. She does machine quilting, her colors are bolder, and she plays with plant forms, using them as a starting point for very vibrant and lively takes on nature that convey the essence of the life
and organic growth of plants. Both Newman and Sassaman are trained artists who do numerous
sketches for their quilts, and always they go back to observing nature firsthand before
embarking on a project. This is also true of the work of Ruth McDowell (1998). Like that of
Sassaman, it is stylized but still shows a close observation of nature. In the extensive section
McDowell devotes to the St. Johnswort, she even includes a version with the tiny black dot
which she explains is a defense mechanism for such a slow-growing Alpine plant: it contains a
poisonous pigment.

Nowhere are quilts created today with more attention to botanical detail than in Australia and
New Zealand. Quilters there are especially proud of their biological treasures and create
beautiful quilts to show them off. In one issue of Australian Patchwork and Quilting were
instructions for making a wall hanging with Banksia carefully created in applique (Day, 2000)
and in another, an article by Frances Mulholland (1999) on her quilt depicting gum trees. The
New Zealand Quilter magazine ran a whole series of articles on making blocks, each with a
different native plant.

I could go on, because there are many more examples I could draw from. There was an exhibit
of quilts in Virginia, each displaying a plant that has been investigated for the presence of
substances that might be useful in the fight against breast cancer. And right now there is a
craze for making quilts with three-dimensional flowers and leaves, to heighten the realism even
more. And to draw from fiber arts other than quilting, I should mention that there are a
number of artists who stitch real leaves into their work, carrying realism to an even greater
extent. An Australian artist has created a jacket with eucalyptus leaves stitched all over the
body of the garment. At the other extreme, Anne Mudge has created TapRoot out of stainless-
steel wire rope. She has also made what looks like decaying seed pods in a work called Study
#73.

This work brings us a long way from the delicate flowers of Mrs Delany and other 18th and 19th
century needleworkers, but I think all these women do have something in common. They all
were careful observers of nature. They went to nature for their inspiration and used their
creative abilities to translate the beauties of nature into a very different medium, a medium that
has often been denigrated, even by women. This is particularly true of embroidery, which is
now seen as an almost exclusively female art form. I hesitate to use the term art form to
describe it because many people would consider it less of an art form than a hobby, and a
rather banal one at that. This is because it is often associated it with those stamped pieces of
linen found in kits. True, a lot of the women who do embroidery and needlepoint, even today,
do use stamped cloth and canvases. But they don’t have to. There are women, like Barton and
Beck, who bring a tremendous amount of creativity to stitching.

One example of such creativity says a lot about women and botanical art in all its forms, both
now and in the past. Mary Grierson has created a beautiful scene that combines embroidery
with needlepoint, and a great deal of botanical history as well. Grierson is someone in whom
the traditions of botanical art and needlework come together, even more intimately than they
did in Mary Delany. For many years, Grierson was the official botanical illustrator at the Royal
Botanic Gardens at Kew. In this needlework piece, she pictures a portion of the Gardens as
seen from the Marianne North room. North was a 19th-century botanical artists who also
worked at Kew and whose paintings cover the walls of this room dedicated to her work.
While Grierson’s needlework in pictured in Beck’s *The Embroiderer’s Garden*, her botanical illustrations can be found in Shirley Sherwood’s (1996) *Contemporary Botanical Artists*. Sherwood notes that only two out of every seven artists included in the book is a man. Twentieth-century botanical art is primarily the domain of women; this was hardly true in the past. Though there have been great female botanical artists for centuries, the most famous botanical artists of the past were men such as Ehret, Bauer, and Redouté. Sherwood raises the question of why this change, but can’t come up with an answer that satisfies her. Part of the reason may be economic. Many botanical artists cannot make a living at this work, but the compensation may be adequate for women who wish to work at home while taking care of a family.

Additionally, I think the case can also be made that by the 20th century, botany had become a second-class science. For example, throughout the century the place of botany in the biology curriculum has shrunk. Peter Bernhardt (1999), in a recent book on floral botany, notes that biology education moved steadily away from plants in the 20th century. A look at textbooks from the early years of the century indicates that plants, rather than being relegated to a short chapter or two, were given more than their share of attention. But today there is little parity between coverage of plants and animals in most introductory biology books. Perhaps the dynamism and fast pace of the 20th century had no place for organisms that don’t run around and have response times measured in hours and days rather than in seconds and minutes. It is telling that people find carnivorous plants fascinating. After all, they are the plants that most act like animals.

I would like to speculate that there is another reason for botany’s reduced status in the biological hierarchy. By the end of the 19th century, it became the science considered most appropriate for women. As it became a woman’s field, it became less appropriate as a man’s field. I admit that I am overstating the case, and that the thousands of male botanists in this country would vigorously protest my viewpoint, but I think there is at least a modicum of validity to it, it is at least one piece in the puzzle of why botany and botanical illustration have changed in the 20th century.

Now to the other side of my argument, the needlework side. All the images depicted in Sherwood’s book are paintings or etchings. There is no needlework in this volume, even the needlework of someone like Grierson. In addition, these images in this book, as with all botanical illustrations, are very formalized. Almost all botanical art presents a single species on a page with no background. It is a disembodied plant, and often a truncated plant that lacks roots. Such illustrations are rarely done in oils on canvas, so the idea of painting with thread would be unheard of. And while at least some botanical illustrations are now considered as art works, needlework is less well-received, and usually relegated to the world of craft.

It may not be a coincidence that botany and needlework are both considered rather second-rate in their respective realms, and both are closely associated with women. I would like to make the case that women’s perspectives on plants as illustrated through needlework have something valid to say scientifically and would enrich the science of botany, just as more traditional botanical art has done for centuries. Needlework flowers of the detail seen in Barton’s work, or in an example of Japanese shishu embroidery (Lang, 2001), display as much detail and are as true to life as many botanical illustrations. I would argue that they have a distinct advantage: their texture provides a better sense of the three-dimensionality of a plant than a watercolor
ever could. The texture also gives some sense of the texture of leaves and flowers. While I am
hardly suggesting that embroidery replace watercolor as the medium of choice in botanical
illustration, I do want to suggest that the whole field of scientific illustration needs to be
reconsidered and what counts as valid representation needs to be reevaluated.

In the 18th and 19th centuries wax anatomical models were commonly used for medical
instruction, and these models, at least those that remain intact, are now receiving a great deal
of attention. Some, referred to as wax Venuses, were rather seductive women with shapely, if
partially dissected, bodies. They sometimes had a string of pearls around the neck, and
carefully coifed hair. This was considered appropriate for medical instruction, though it would
hardly be countenanced today. In the 16th and 17th-century anatomy texts, figures were
portrayed against elaborate landscapes, something else that isn’t seen today. My point is that
the norms for scientific illustration do change over time. So why couldn’t embroidered images
of plants be among the appropriate forms of depiction in botany. It is at least an idea that is
worth considering.

In closing I would like to make the point that there is validity to the needlework
representations of plants both in the past and in the present in that they indicate the link
between science and art. In studying plants both for scientific and artistic reasons, there is an
intense observation needed which leads to a communion with the specimen. The observer
comes to know the plant on a deep level, this was what Barbara McClintock’s work on corn
illustrates (Keller, 1983). Her observations of plants in the field, of cobs of variegated corn, and
of the cells in the corn kernels were all at this deep level where there is union with the object
of study. Out of this union came her groundbreaking ideas on genetics, just as the union
created in an artist with her observations of a plant leads to a singular work of art—whether that
work is of paint or thread or fabric. Some artists choose paint as their medium, but others
choose thread or fabric, and the results can be equally worthy of our attention.

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1. MAIN POINT

I am here to advocate a closer collaboration between anatomists and artists. Such collaboration can help both anatomists and artists reconcile the human and emotional dimensions of their work with the scientific objective dimensions of their work. I’ve found this to be true in my own work making figurative drawings and paintings, and also in teaching figure drawing to students. And the medical students and faculty in the gross anatomy classes I’ve been involved with also have found this to be true.

In 1999, I spent my sabbatical auditing USC School of Medicine’s gross anatomy lectures and dissection. In addition to sitting with the medical students through the lectures and assisting with prosections, I spent time making quick studies of the cadavers at every stage of the dissection. I did this to improve my understanding of the human body and, to see what we are like when we are dead. While I was doing this I became aware of the parallel struggle that doctors have in balancing needed objectivity with equally needed humanity or subjectivity.

2. OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE

“Objective” and “subjective” are not ideal terms, and an examination of the history of their use shows them to be very slippery. For my purposes I focus on two dimensions to our interactions either as artists or as physicians with bodies, living and dead. The first dimension is part/whole. As we interact with bodies do we treat them as wholes—a whole human being—or as a collection of parts—femur, rib cage, etc? The second dimension is individuality. As we interact with bodies do we treat each one as an individual deserving special respect as an individual, or as an instance of a type—homo sapiens or what have you? For the purposes of this paper I will call an “objective” treatment of bodies that which focuses on types, not individuals, and, simultaneously, that where the focus is on parts, not wholes. I will call a “subjective” treatment of bodies that which focuses on individual wholes.

Objectively, the body is an intricate biological mechanism. But each “objective biological Mechanism” also is a human being. Each objective biological mechanism is a fully emotion bearing person and needs to be seen as such. We can call this the “subjective view” of the body.

This usage is not perfect, either historically or in its appropriation of contemporary usage. But it does capture an important dimension along which artists and physicians have struggled through history in their interactions with bodies. Neither pole, “objective” or “subjective” is correct, for each captures important elements of what it is to be human. Yet, it has proven very
difficult to find a full reconciliation here. My paper traces some of the movement back and forth along the dimension established by these notions of “subjective” and “objective” by artists and physicians.

3. THE NEED TO RECONCILE

These two views of the body have posed and still do pose problems for doctors. To be effective, a doctor in our culture has to understand how the body is a biological mechanism and how the mechanism is malfunctioning. Simply to get over the taboo against seeing and touching the body of a stranger, a doctor has to see the body less subjectively, more objectively. At the same time, medical practice would be deeply deficient if doctors neglected the humanity of their patients. Contemporary medical education appears to be trying to address this issue. In part because doctors have come under heavy criticism for taking an overly objective and uncaring view of their patients.

Artists who are interested in working with the figure also have struggled with finding a balance between the objective and the subjective views of the body. To make a convincing translation of an actual three-dimensional figure into a two-dimensional fiction, artists have to learn to see form. For instance, the human eyeball must be seen as form in space, not the window to the soul at least initially. Taboos also have to be suspended in a figure drawing class with nude models. These bodies have to be seen objectively as form in space, not as objects and seats of desire (or repulsion, or amusement etc.). In parallel with the doctor’s dilemma, however, depictions of figures that are anatomically accurate but devoid of humanity have no value as art.

4. HISTORICAL SKETCH

Looking at the evolution of anatomical images, the same polarity that I am referring to as subjective/objective can be seen in the history of these images. One approach to anatomical studies is conceptual and idealized; it favors working from several cadavers to find the “true” norm. Forms are simplified for the sake of clarity. Final drawings are composites. Another approach is naturalistic or realistic, and favors working from a single cadaver. These images frequently emphasize our mortality, and they do this, in part, by presenting an image of a dead body, cadaver or skeleton that simultaneously is dynamic, suggesting the life that once inhabited the body.

Some scholars have suggested this as a difference between medieval and Renaissance anatomical drawing. Da Vinci blended both approaches. Although he drew from many cadavers, and was interested in “general truths,” the drawings remain dynamic, expressive, and naturalistic. Vesalius and Albinus dominate anatomical representations after Da Vinci and before Henry Gray. They present, respectively, more subjective and more objective approaches to the body.

Vesalius almost certainly was influenced by Da Vinci. Vesalius, published around the middle of the 16th century, falls into the more subjective camp, and his style dominated anatomical drawing for another two hundred years. Albinus, published in 1747, marks a shift to the less subjective. There is more emphasis on the refinement of form, on measurement using several cadavers for one drawing. This represents an effort to find the “true norm.” This style
overshadowed Vesalius and remained very popular until Gray’s *Anatomy* was published in 1858.

Gray follows in Albinus’s footsteps. Medical illustration became a specialized “profession.” There was a shift in materials as well, instead of charcoal, wash, woodcut and etching, artists used pencil, colored pencil and watercolor, and, of course, photography. Using anatomical models made of wax became rare.

There was a short-lived—but significant—shift to the subjective side in England in the late 1800s. Several doctor/anatomist/artists, notably John Bell, George Stubbs and Peter Camper, integrated the artistic and medical approaches to the body. It would be incorrect to identify these scholars simply as doctors or as artists. In their work we find a more subjective approach to the body. Outside of this work, however, Gray’s became the model for anatomical drawing, and this remains true today.

In the Art Academies of the 19th century a tension remained between Vesalius’s and Albinus’s styles. It is during this period of course that one sees an obsession with measuring classifying and categorizing. These ideas influenced the way artistic anatomy was taught. The Beaux Arts Academy advertised itself as offering the “scientific method” approach to artistic anatomy.

**5. 20TH CENTURY DEPICTIONS OF THE BODY**

By the 20th century artists and anatomists were, by and large, entirely estranged from each other. But, perhaps reflecting the tenor of these times, both produced depictions that emphasized analysis into fundamental parts. In anatomy, this meant an emphasis on a cellular understanding of the body. In art, abstract expressionism sought to explore the fundamentals of mark making, brush stroke, color, pattern, isolating them from the burden of representation. The images that resulted are curiously similar.

An amazing and revealing fact: In preparing this talk I wanted to compare a full/complete skeleton depiction from one of the standard 20th century anatomy texts—Netter, Grant, Clemente”—with a Renaissance depiction. I couldn’t find one. *There is not one complete skeleton in any of the now standard anatomy texts.* We humans have been taken apart and, reduced to our parts.

Gunther von Hagens’s remarkable and controversial exhibit of plastinated cadavers is a marked departure from the lifeless anatomical depictions that have dominated the 20th century. He has sought to incorporate an aesthetic element in his cadavers, and the centerpieces of his exhibit are whole body cadavers in remarkably dynamic poses. The effect, however, is different from the whole body poses from the Renaissance. von Hagens’s cadavers seem almost alive, ready to continue fencing. Mortality is the last thing on their minds. Still the work is remarkably subjective—in the sense that I have been using the word.

It is instructive to contrast von Hagens with “The Visible Human Project.” The Visible Human Project is considered “the state of the art” in anatomical illustration. It is the hottest thing happening in the United States, and there is a remarkable difference between these—objective “Tupperware” depictions of bodies and von Hagens’ cadavers. It is the technology that makes this such a big deal.
6. COLLABORATION

Quite by accident I discovered that medical students like having artists around. One of the students who went through Gross Anatomy with me described her experience as follows:

I do remember seeing her there all the time, and I always wanted to go look over her shoulder and ask, “well what are you looking at now?” . . . The last day of anatomy class . . . Deanna displayed her sketches. I was excited to finally see them, hoping that I could finally get that peek over her shoulder. She laid them out in order for us: the order in which she drew them and the order in which we did our dissections . . . One by one, as I walked through our whole year’s dissection, I started thinking about the people who had given their bodies. . . . From that first step into anatomy class I completely forgot that these were once living people with real lives. I guess you have to do that to do the dissections, and seeing Deanna’s drawings brought out so many feelings I was obviously suppressing when I walked into the lab.

Working in collaboration with the Director of USC’s Anatomy Lab Lance Paulman, I have had an area of the Anatomy Lab set aside to exhibit my students’ and my own drawings, drawings based on our time in the Anatomy Lab. Paulman and I will follow this up with a questionnaire to the medical students to solicit their feedback on having these drawings in the Lab. So far all the informal comments I’ve received have been very positive.

The benefit to Art students to visiting the Anatomy Lab is a little harder to measure. I believe they come away from the experience with an increased sensitivity to skin texture and pallor, and texture in general. Their time in the Lab gives them a good lesson in the value of working from the general to the specific; doing so is absolutely necessary or they would be overwhelmed by the complexity of what’s in front of them. They also understand what it means to use all of your senses when you draw, the smell of embalming fluid, of dead organs, the utter stillness. When they draw from a live model after drawing from a cadaver, they seem better able to see the form as alive, a living, breathing, fluid-filled, heart-beating, mortal person.

Artists and anatomists would benefit from collaborating again. To appreciate life, we need to appreciate death; this is what is most deeply fundamental to our humanity. Through working together toward a shared understanding of our mortality we can create better art and better medicine.