

BODY OF EVIDENCE



The 'Atlas of Human Anatomy' revolutionised medicine when it appeared in 1854. As a sumptuous new edition is published, **Ed Caesar** dissects the remarkable achievement of its creators, JM Bourguery (left) and NH Jacob



In the age of the X-ray, when the CT scan and surgery by micro-camera have become everyday, it is hard to imagine just how revolutionary Jean-Marc Bourgery's *Atlas of Human Anatomy and Surgery* really was.

But, when it was first published in the mid-19th century, Bourgery's *Atlas* was a totemic achievement in medical history. Comprising four sections – descriptive anatomy, surgical anatomy and techniques, general anatomy and embryology, and microscopic anatomy – the massive tome remains, even now, the most comprehensive and beautiful of anatomical treatises.

Bourgery, the son of an Orléans haberdasher, began dissecting and analysing for his *Atlas of Human Anatomy* in 1839, to accompany a series of text volumes he had begun in 1831. The collection was not completed until 1854, five years after Bourgery's death, aged 52.

The hand-coloured lithographs, the defining feature of the *Atlas*, were by Bourgery's friend, Nicolas Henri Jacob. Jacob had studied with the French painter Jacques Louis David, and his images –

which were done life-size – are exceptional for their clarity and vivid colouring.

The revolutionary aspect of the *Atlas* was the reproducibility of its images. Lithography, a method of printing from a metal or stone surface on which the printing areas are made ink-receptive while the non-image areas are made ink-repellent, had become increasingly widespread since the start of the 19th century. What lithography meant, in practical terms, was that surgeons would increasingly be able to own detailed diagrams of body parts, without having to refer to a central medical library.

Bourgery's surgical contemporary Jules Germain Cloquet first realised the potential of the lithograph in his 1821 work, *Anatomie de l'homme*, but his volume was unwieldy and expensive. It was not until the *Atlas* that a comprehensive collection of

affordable lithographs would appear, and its presence by the operating tables of surgeons must have been a reassuring sight for patients.

In its final form, the *Atlas* was exhaustive. It comprised eight volumes of text with 2,108 pages and 3,750 drawings. This density is due largely to lithography, which Bourgery acknowledged "allows us to publish, at relatively low cost, very extensive illustrated works". But, even with the availability of such new media, Bourgery's own industry and dedication was staggering. He vowed, in the introduction to the original publication of the *Atlas*, that: "We will spare no effort to honourably complete the immense work that we have undertaken."

Viewing the work more than 150 years later, it seems like a promise fulfilled.

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 'Atlas of Human Anatomy and Surgery: The Complete Coloured Plates of 1831-1854' by JM Bourgery and NH Jacob has been republished by Taschen, £100. To order the book for £90 (free p&p), call 08700 798 897

