

Certainty of all the arts that



Man genius has discovered, this (anatomy) is by far the most useful, indispensable, difficult, and laborious."

-Andreas Vesalins, 1543

"I do not profess to learn and teach anatomy from the axioms of philosophers, but from dissections and from the fabric of nature... I follow the truth only and have bestowed both my pains and charges to that purpose."

-William Harvey 1628

# The Creative Scientist

FOR KEVIN PETTI, THE SURFACE IS JUST THE BEGINNING

[ITALY] The room is a lot smaller than one would think. It's old; it's not well lit, humble at best. Still, just walking through the door of that unprepossessing chamber in Ospedale Santo Spirito, near the Vatican, was enough to take Kevin Petti's breath away. And his reaction had nothing to do with the fact that back in the late 15th century, the smell of unpreserved cadavers would have been pungent.

"The sense of history alone is enough to make you gasp," he says. "To be in the room where Leonardo da Vinci performed dissections, well, everybody gets very quiet. Of course, that's the thing about Italy. It's too much to digest all at once. That's why you have to keep coming back."

While the group of anatomy and physiology professors from the U.S. and Canada that Petti shepherded around Italy for 11 days this summer did hit the usual tourist spots — Rome, Florence, Venice — sightseeing was just a side dish to the main course: Petti's "Anatomia Italiana 2012," tailor-made to provide a below-the-surface anatomical and cultural tour of the Italian Peninsula. "People go to Rome, and flock to the Vatican, go in droves to the Uffizi," says Petti '06 (PhD). "But when we go to the Museo di Palazzo Poggi at the University of Bologna, we're the only ones there."

If he has his way, there will be at least one group of tourists coming through every summer from now on, eager to wander through cool rooms filled with wax models of human organs and bodies — with skin peeled away to reveal the mysteries beneath. Why? Well, to hear Petti tell it, Michelangelo's Pietà couldn't have existed without late-night forays to Florence's Church of Santo Spirito, where the then 17-year-old prodigy first explored human dissection in hopes of uncovering the secrets of the body. It's fascinating stuff, and Petti revels in getting others as excited about the intersection of art and anatomy as he is.

"Italy is the fountainhead of the Renaissance, but it's also the fountainhead of the life sciences," he explains. "When you look at the Renaissance masters, there's no way that Michelangelo's David could have been done without the study of anatomy. That was knowledge that stayed with him throughout his career."

Petti is a dapper fast-talker with a neatly trimmed goatee and piercing eyes. At a summer lecture for life-learners at USD's University of the Third Age, he offered up a rapid-fire overview of the many culturally

significant spots in Italy he's toured, such as the Luigi Cattaneo Anatomic Wax Museum at the University of Bologna and the University of Padua's Anatomic Theatre.

While of course the delights of Italy's wine, fresh pasta and historic beauty are legend, can learning about the history of anatomy along the way compare to more mainstream tourist spots? Absolutely, says Petti, who holds dual U.S./Italian citizenship.

"The University of Padua, outside of Venice, has the oldest dissection theater in the world, dating from 1594. William Harvey, the father of cardiovascular physiology, did his dissection in that room," Petti says. "All these great people that we teach our students about, this is where they worked. I mean, I stood at Galileo's podium. That's one of the big things that people take home from a trip like this. They were in the actual rooms, at the actual institutions that are still doing this work. And we're doing it too, now, in another part of the world. It gives us a connection to the history of our discipline. I think that's very meaningful."

How did Petti, a professor in the departments of science and health at San Diego Miramar College, come to make the leap from musculature to the masters? As it turns out, it's really not that much of a stretch. "I was part of the first cohort to earn their PhD from the School of Leadership and Education Sciences in 2006," he explains. "And I took full advantage of the interdisciplinary option. Dean Paula Cordeiro is a big proponent of that approach; fully a third of my units were earned through the School of Nursing."

The notion that seemingly disparate studies are connected is interlaced through the courses he teaches at Miramar as well. "With everything I do, every course I teach, I really emphasize the multicultural, the interdisciplinary aspect. It's all interconnected." Petti says that for as long as he can remember, he's been intensely interested in bodies, in sport and in fitness. He had initially planned to spend his career working with athletes, but once he started teaching, he quickly changed his trajectory.

"My dissertation was really the impetus for Anatomia Italiana," he recalls. "That's when I started really thinking about weaving interdisciplinary studies into the undergraduate curriculum."

And his 2012 tour built upon the groundwork he'd laid on a 2009 trip to the Italian Peninsula. "I was astonished at how well it went this time," he says. "Everyone seemed to find it really meaningful, really impactful."

One of the 2012 participants, Peggy LePage, a professor at North Hennepin College in Minnesota, agrees. "It is difficult to describe how we felt standing in the exact spot [da Vinci] stood. In awe only comes close," she said in a blog post about her experience.

For Petti, it's really all threads from the same vast tapestry. "Look, anatomy as a science, it permeates art, culture, literature. Regardless of your faith, among all the world's religions, what's the greatest of God's creations? The body. And what is the body? Is it the vessel of the soul? If you're Christian, is it the vehicle for the Resurrection?" He pauses, waiting, then answers his own question. "Well, that's a big deal." — *Julene Snyder*