

FOR KEVIN PETTI, ANATOMIA ITALIANA IS ALL ABOUT HUMAN CONNECTIONS

Recognizing a Body of Work

It's spring at the University of Antwerp in Belgium and Kevin Petti '06 (PhD) sits in a room with anatomists, scientific illustrators and academic researchers — a group he calls “my people.” They have gathered for a scholarly symposium focused on anatomical education and how it is represented across disciplines. To his surprise, Petti is called forward to receive the inaugural Vesalius Health Humanities Prize, a culminating moment celebrating well over a decade of work, study and adventure.

The award recognizes achievement and contributions that “explore the intersections of anatomy, art, the history of medicine and the cultural representation of the body.” It's almost as if the award was created for Petti, who founded *Anatomia Italiana* in 2012. Each year he brings groups to experience the very locations across Italy where the human body was researched and expressed through art.

“It was an incredible honor because honestly when I started this whole line of thinking and research, I thought I was largely alone,” Petti said. “I realize now that there's actually a community of academics like myself who think that introducing the humanities into the sciences and having an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural educational experience is incredibly important.”

The namesake for Petti's award, Andreas Vesalius, was a Renaissance-era Belgian anatomist who walked the halls of the University of Padua and completed dissections in the school's theatre. Today, Petti takes groups to the same locations and stands in the same spots, carrying forward the legacy of research and anatomical exploration Vesalius established more than 500 years earlier.

Petti, who taught anatomy and physiology at San Diego Miramar College for nearly 35 years, has given talks around the world on his research. He's made connections with colleagues at some of the most notable — and lesser known —

locations across Italy that have made his academic experiences unique.

The idea for *Anatomia Italiana* was born at the University of San Diego when Petti, a doctoral student at the School of Leadership and Education Sciences (SOLES), pursued an interdisciplinary program at the encouragement of then Dean Paula Cordeiro, EdD, that included courses in the Hahn School of Nursing and Health Science. A family trip to Italy in 2009 sparked the idea of exploring Italian art and culture while taking a deep dive into the anatomical connections represented in masterpieces by the likes of Leonardo, Michelangelo and Bernini.

“[Anatomy] was part of their training because they had to then sculpt and paint the bodies we see and study today,” explained Petti. “When you look at the Sistine Chapel, there's great evidence that Michelangelo superimposed the shapes of human organs into the ceiling; like *The Creation of Adam*, where the cloak and cherubs surrounding God form the shape of a brain. When I point that out to students their minds are blown.”

Following his first official program in 2012, *University of San Diego Magazine* profiled Petti and his hopes for *Anatomia Italiana*. “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,” the magazine wrote at the time.

After 42 programs, covering five different itineraries and enrolling 900 people, it's safe to say Petti's vision has come to fruition. His academic itineraries range from expeditions with other scientists and researchers to a series of global seminars he developed for San Diego State University to provide busy science students with the opportunity to have an abridged study abroad experience.

In the past couple years, Petti also created unique programs for USD, including a pilgrimage tracing the steps of St. Francis during Holy Week as part of USD's 75th anniversary in 2024 and an excursion around Sicily for the European Alumni Reunion in 2025. He has also led academic itineraries in Northern Europe — including England, France, Belgium and The Netherlands — with plans for additional opportunities in the future.

“I hope that I left enough of a legacy with the people that have gone through my programs,” Petti said. “For my colleagues that travel with me, the plan is that they take the ideas learned and incorporate them into their classes.”

It's only fitting that Petti now has a visual reminder of Vesalius through the custom-made sculpture presented to him during the event in Antwerp. Created by artist Pascale Pollier, who happens to be a friend of Petti, the wax bust of Vesalius is split in half, one side whole and one side dissected, representing the continuing dialogue between anatomy and art.

— Russell Yost



Background sketches from Andreas Vesalius, *De corporis humani fabrica libri septem*. (Basel: Johannes Oporinus, 1543.)