ANATOMICAL DRAWINGS BY JACOBUS SCHIJNVOET

by William Le Fanu

The Osteographia of the famous English surgeon William Cheselden was acclaimed as a masterpiece of anatomical art from the time of its publication in 1733. The line engravings of which it consists are arranged in two series: 56 large plates (approximately 45 x 26 cm.) showing “every bone in the human body as large as the life” and 44 plates “for ornament”. These vary in size from a whole-page frontispiece (37.5 x 23 cm) to initial letters (5 x 5 cm). They illustrate the brief introductory chapters, and display skeletons of animals and birds in postures of life-like activity. They are among the earliest accurate illustrations of several of the species shown, and of the exotic species are almost certainly the first.

Cheselden says in his address “To the Reader” that two of the smaller plates (the head of a tyger and the tortoise) and all the large plates of human bones except nos. 8, 11, 21 and 31 were done by Gerard Vandergucht; “the rest were performed by Mr Shinevoet,
who left Holland his native land on account of misfortune. He had done in England before these some excellent works, particularly inside views of cathedral churches, which he was forced to suffer another man to set his name to, and e'er he had finished my work he died". The artist members of the Vandergucht family are well known, but who was Mr Shinevoet?

This question presented itself when, a few years ago, Mr S. C. Hutchison F.S.A. librarian of the Royal Academy, brought to the attention of Sir Zachary Cope F.R.C.S., the biographer of Cheselden, an album containing the original pencil drawings for the Osteographia. The President and Council of the Royal Academy generously deposited the drawings at the Royal College of Surgeons of England. The mid-eighteenth-century binding of the album was lettered CHESELDEN-ASTEROMPHA, apparently a pseudo-Greek formation meaning prophecy or forecast ("star-voice"). As the binding and the mounting-paper were much perished, the Royal College at the request of the Academy arranged for the drawings to be removed, flattened and individually mounted; this work was admirably performed by Mr E. Harding of the Victoria and Albert Museum. It was now possible to arrange the drawings in the order of the published engravings; the collection is not quite complete but comprises most of Vandergucht's and many of Shinevoet's drawings.

Dr H. Gerson of the Netherlands Institute for the History of Art kindly pointed out to me that 'Shinevoet' must be identified with Jacobus Schijnvoet of Amsterdam, who is known to have worked as an engraver in London in the early eighteenth century. His latest dated engraving is of 1733, which agrees with Cheselden's statement that his artist died before the completion of the Osteographia. What little is known of Schijnvoet's life was discovered by F. G. Waller¹ in the city archives at Amsterdam, where he was born in 1685. Some of his engravings are signed, and lists of his work will be found in Thieme-Becker and other dictionaries of artists. His authorship of these unsigned Osteographia engravings has not, however, been noticed and the drawings, also unsigned, were till lately unknown. It has sometimes been assumed that Cheselden himself made the drawings for his engravers, but he distinctly names his two artists and claims only to have "directed" their work, adding that "my engravers were not less skilled in drawing than in their own proper art". Indeed as early as 1735 John Douglas² rebuked Cheselden for claiming a personal share in the drawings for the Osteographia.

The large plates for the Osteographia were