Images of Embryos in Life Magazine in the 1950s

Embryonic images displayed in Life magazine during the mid-twentieth century serve as a representation of technological advances and the growing public interest in the stages of embryological development. These black-and-white photographs portray skeletal structures and intact bodies of chicken embryos and human embryos and fetuses obtained from collections belonging to universities and medical institutions.

Life images of human embryonic development were published in July 1950 in the article "The Human Embryo." The pictures are presented as an attempt to share with the public the growing body of knowledge obtained by doctors and students studying embryology. The article documents the process of development from an unfertilized egg to the formation of a twenty-eight-week-old fetal skeleton. Many embryological and fetal specimens are displayed as mounted objects preserved outside of the women's bodies for the purpose of embryological study and observation.

Descriptions of developmental changes are provided below each black-and-white photo in the article in order to explain what is happening to embryos and fetuses at corresponding times. Recognizable organs and body parts such as fingers and toes, eyelids, brain buds, and intestines are highlighted in the article, enabling the reader to trace the formation of these structures from the beginning of development to later stages. The length of each specimen and descriptions of internal development are also provided in the photographs' captions.

The institutions and universities that supplied the specimens for Life magazine often received the specimens as donations from gynecologists whose clients had lost their pregnancies as a result of spontaneous abortions. The array of specimens obtained for the 1950 article is a testament to the presence of embryology in reputable educational intuitions.

Three years later, the 30 March 1953 issue of Life featured a black-and-white photograph of the face of a human embryo in the sixth week of development. The image was taken by Swedish photojournalist Lennart Nilsson, who had obtained the embryo from Chester Heuser of the Carnegie Institution's Department of Embryology. The embryo's eyes, mouth, skin, and brain are described in the photograph's caption and the "human appearance" of the embryo is referred to several times.

Life later documented the embryological development of a chicken in the 1959 article "A Double 'A' in Biology." The article follows the class project of a tenth-grade student, Patricia Lowary, who chose to study the development of a chick embryo. Using one dozen fertilized eggs incubated in a photographic printer belonging to her father, Lowary opened one egg every few days, photographed what she observed, and preserved the embryos in formaldehyde.

The article displays a few of the color photographs from Lowary's report as well as some of her sketches and project outlines. The photographs are the first color images of embryological development in Life magazine. Red blood vessels, for instance, can be observed radiating over the yolk. On the fourteenth day the embryo is shown to be surrounded by a fuzzy coating, the first sign of plumage development. Images of fully developed, hatching chicks mark the end of the article.

Life's display of embryonic images in the 1950s represents some of the changes that were occurring in the field of embryology. Readers were expressing interest in embryological development and medical universities and institutions were sharing their specimens of study with the media. Black-and-white images of mounted skeletons and of preserved embryos and fetuses were being replaced with color photographs showing the channeling of blood through vessels surrounding the embryo. Technological advances such as color photography, laparoscopy, and incubators thus enabled the visualization of embryological development in novel ways.

Sources

1. “A Double ‘A’ in Biology.” Life, December 7, 1959.
2. “Embryo’s Face.” Life, March 30, 1953.
3. “The Human Embryo.” Life, July 3, 1950.