



Physicians as Painters

Avi Ohry MD

Department of Rehabilitation, Reuth Medical Center, Tel Aviv, Israel
Affiliated to Sackler Faculty of Medicine, Tel Aviv University, Ramat Aviv, Israel

Key words: medicine, art, poetry

IMAJ 2003;5:681–684

Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) regarded himself as a “surgeon-artist” who “would use his brush and camera to expose the sickly illusions of art during the Victorian era and confront, without flinching, the truth of the flesh.” “Rather than clothing the naked body in the ideals of ‘the nude’, he would insist upon the reality of the bare body” [1]. But Eakins was not a doctor; he attended anatomy demonstrations conducted by Dr. Joseph Pancost and others at the Jefferson College. *The Gross Clinic*, considered one of the greatest paintings of 19th century American art, depicts Dr. Samuel David Gross teaching a class in surgery. “The surgeon is shown pausing thoughtfully, his face aglow with intelligence as his assistants slice open the patient’s flesh. A woman covers her eyes aghast, but otherwise the atmosphere in the operating room is one of luminous scrutiny. In his bloody hands (no gloves, no apron, no mask), the great man holds his scalpel as a writer might hold his pen” [1]. Eakins also immortalized the Agnew Clinic (1889).

It seems that close and creative relationships existed between physicians and painters. Examples include the great poet-physician John Keats (1795-1821) and Joseph Severn; Francois Joseph Talma (1763-1826) – physician-actor whose friendship with the famous painter David led to Talma designing historical costumes for the theater; the friendship between the poet-writer-surgeon-satirist John Wolcot (his pseudonym was Peter Pindar) (1738-1819) and the painter John Opie (1761-1807), or the almost-doctor Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) who supported numerous would-be famous painters. Van Gogh’s physician, Paul-Ferdinand Gachet, was known as the impressionist painter’s patron. Dr. Paul Alexandre (1881-1968), Dr. (dentist) Maurice Girardin (Paris, 1884–1951) who left 420 paintings to the city of Paris, and Dr. Albert Barnes (Philadelphia, 1872-1951) were physicians and art collectors.

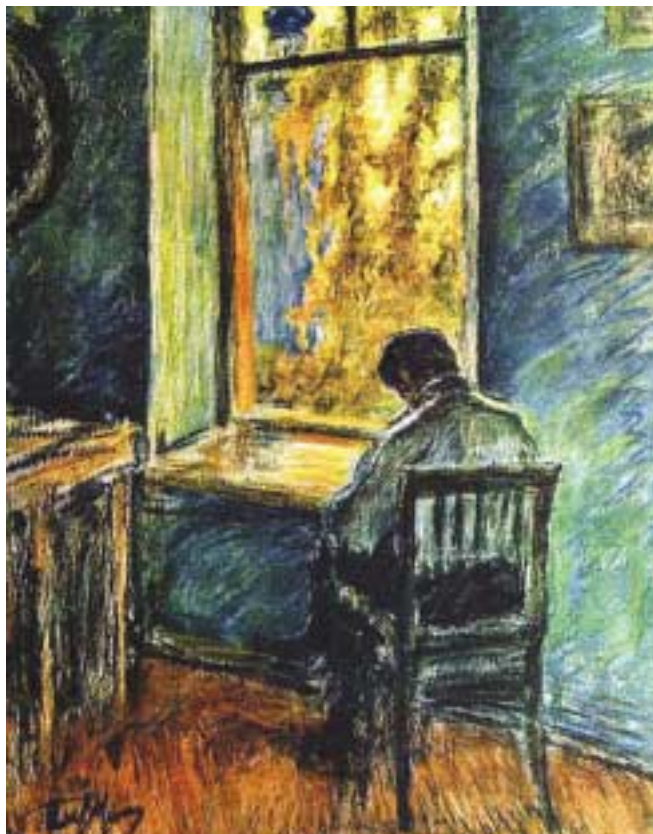
Painter-etchers or physician-painter-illustrators who entered the history of art or medicine through their anatomic or surgical illustrations are beyond the scope of this review. The examples are many: Da Vinci, Donatello, Raphael, Durer, Bosch [2], Estienne, Canano, Vesalius, Calcar [3], Eustachio, Casserio, Rembrandt, Sir Christopher Wren, Rymsdyk, Henry-Alphonse Perin (1798-1874), whose precise myologic anatomic sketches are in the Louvre (*Etude myologique d’une jambe gauche*), William Cheselden [4], Dr. Lewis Albert Sayre (1820-1900), who kept a private surgical case-book, Harvey Cushing (1869-1939), who left outstanding illustrations, the brothers John and Charles Bell, who created self-illustrated surgical anatomic books, etc. [5,6].

Let us focus our attention on physician-painters. Curiously, both professions share the same patron saint. St. Luke, born in Antioch, was known to have been a Greek physician who accompanied Paul after the ascension of Jesus. The third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles are attributed to St. Luke. He died in Greece and his body was taken to Constantinople and Padua. His evangelist symbol is a winged ox and his feast day is 18 October. Krateuas (or Crateuas), who lived in the first century, was a physician to Mithridates VI Eupator, king of Pontus. He was known as a physician, actor, chemist, and painter. He described and illustrated plants using natural colors, and some fragments of his works are included in the *Anicia Codex* of Dioscorides housed in the Vienna State Library.

This phenomenon existed also in the Orient. Wang Wei (701-761 A.D.) was a painter, poet and community health officer during the Tang Dynasty. He often used poetry and painting as a means of therapy. After his wife’s death his poems became melancholic. His name is associated with the Buddhist belief that the world we perceive is illusory [7]. He wrote:

*“On the bare mountain I meet no one, I only hear the echo
Of human voices
Sunlight flickers
Through the dense wood
And shines full
Upon the green moss”* [8]

This brief survey is not chronological but based roughly on place, beginning with Europe. Jacopo Berengario da Carpi (1460-1530) was a physician and anatomist and the first to describe the heart’s valves. He illustrated his books on anatomy as well as those of others. One of the great Dutch painters, Jacob van Ruisdal (1682-1629) from Harlem (his real name was Izack de Gooyer), was a physician in Amsterdam. His son, with the same name, was also a painter. William Thorenton (1759-1828), born on Jost van Dyke Island (today the Virgin Islands), was sent to Edinburgh and Aberdeen to study medicine. In 1887 he moved to New York and settled in Philadelphia. His artistic activity tended more to design. He submitted architectural plans for Capitol Hill but Jefferson and Washington preferred those of E.S. Hallet. He designed other official buildings and the Panama Straits (the Panama Canal). Evidently, he was multi-talented: he invented, together with John Fitch, a steamboat engine; he was a painter-writer, an anti-slavery activist, and taught deaf people how to communicate.



Leonid Pasternak: *At the window*

Carl Gustav Carus (1789-1869), born in Leipzig, studied medicine and became an eminent gynecologist. In 1814 he was appointed Professor of Obstetrics in Dresden [9] and served as the personal doctor to three Saxon kings. He was a close friend of Goethe, and the Dresden Medical Academy bears his name. He was known as a romantic painter, a philosopher and a writer. In his work *Die Psyché*, he states: "When man, sensing the immense magnificence of nature, feels his own insignificance and feeling himself to be in God, enters into this infinity and abandons his individual existence, then, otherwise only the mind's eye sees he becomes almost literally visible: the oneness in the infinity of the universe" [10].

Let us take a brief look at a group of French physician-artists. Francois Emile Camus (Dijon, 1829-1893) was a physician and sculptor who worked with bronze. Georges-Alexandre Chicotot, one of the first French radiologists, mostly painted medical paintings or scenarios. Paul Louis Collin, born in Thorigny in 1834, was a physician and painter who worked with Courbet. He mainly painted landscapes and still-life. Frederic Estre (Marseille, 1813 and Reuilly, 1902) was a psychiatrist and painter. He studied medicine in his home town where he worked in the psychiatric asylum. His paintings were exhibited all over Europe. Fromantin (1786-1867), a psychiatrist who worked at the Lafond asylum in La Rochelle, was known as a talented draughtsman. His son Eugene was a renowned painter and writer. Louis Girou de Buzareingues (1805-91) was a professor of anatomy who painted and sculpted but is better known as a patron of artists. Jean Noel Halle (Paris, 1754-1822), the son of a painter and a painter himself, is better known as a prominent



Harold Gillies: *Surgical-tutor*

physician for the poor, before and after the French Revolution. He served as physician to the Napoleon family and the last emperors, and was chairman of the government Medical-Physics and Hygiene department in Paris.

Other Europeans include Ludwig Scleich (1859, Stettin and 1912, Bad Saarow) a painter, musician, poet and surgeon. He studied medicine in Zurich, Berlin and Greifswald, worked as a surgeon in Berlin, and in 1900 was appointed director of Kreiskrankenhäuser (hospitals). He discovered the technique of using local anesthetic [11,12]. Another German was Telow, who belonged to the poets circle that included Richard Dehmel, August Strindberg, Detlev von Liliencron, and the physician-poet-fencer-laryngologist, Zionist and composer Dr. Franz Oppenheimer (1864-1953). Leonid Osipovich Pasternak (1862-1945) was a physician and an important artist with a reputation as a fine portraitist [13]. His son, Boris, was offered the Nobel Prize for literature for *Dr. Zhivago* in 1950, but was forced to renounce the prize because of political pressure. Leonid was a Jewish physician in Moscow and became a celebrated painter. Carlo Graziadio Levy (Torino, 1902-1975), a Jewish Italian physician, was also a writer, journalist, prisoner, exile, senator, humanist and painter. In 1939 he left Italy for France where he was an anti-fascism activist. He did not practice medicine, but during his exile in Gagliano in southern Italy the locals approached him for "good medical advice." The title of his magnum opus, which he wrote while hiding in a house in Florence during the war, was *Christ Stopped at Eboli*. Exhibitions of his paintings, watercolors, drawings and lithographs were held all over Italy. His autobiographical novel *The Watch* and *The Linden Trees* were very successful books. Alberto Burri (1915-1996), born in Citta de Castello, Italy, completed his medical studies in 1940 at the University of Perugia.

During the Second World War, while serving as a physician in North Africa, he was captured and interned in Hereford, Texas where he began to paint. In 1946 he was released and returned to Rome where his first exhibition was held at the Galleria La Margherita in 1947 [14]. Burri is regarded as an abstract painter who used unorthodox materials. In 1953 his work was included in the group exhibition "Younger European Painters" at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. His works were shown also in England and France.

In England, John Leech (1817-1864), educated at Charterhouse, began his medical studies at St. Bartholomew's but turned to art. His teachers were aware of his talent and urged him not to restrict himself to anatomic drawings but to do portraits as well. He left medical school in order to concentrate on etchings and comic sketches, which he submitted to weekly magazines like *Punch* and *Illustrated London News*. He also illustrated books, including Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. He contributed hundreds of sketches and etchings. He departed from the style of grotesque and satirical elements of the traditional English caricatures (e.g., G. Cruikshank) and developed his own style of comfortable, warmly humorous middle-class urbanity. With J. Tenniel he created the image of John Bull.* He died at the age of 47 from a heart attack [15]. Sir Francis Seymour Haden (1818-1910) was an English etcher, writer and successful surgeon in London who founded a hospital for patients with incurable diseases. He is better known as an etcher; some of his best works are exhibited in the New York Public Library, the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Among his many famous patients was Queen Victoria. He claimed that landscape etching and engraving helped discipline his hand for surgery [16]. Robert Bridges (1789-1858), another English physician-poet-painter, studied in London, Vienna, Berlin and Edinburgh. He wrote a memoir of his Icelandic voyage, with his own illustrations.

"I love all beauteous things,
I seek and adore them;
God hath no better praise,
And man in his hasty days
Is honoured for them.
I too will something make
And joy in the making!
Altho' tomorrow it seem'
Like the empty words of a dream
Remembered, on waking" [17].

On the other side of the ocean, Thomas Holly Chivers (1807-58), from Wilkes County, Georgia in the United States, completed his medical studies very successfully in Lexington, Kentucky in 1830. Although he was offered an academic post, he preferred to write poetry and to paint. The tragic death of his children affected his poetry profoundly. He invented a wool machine, corresponded with the poet Edgar Allan Poe and accused him (and vice versa) of literary theft. Nonetheless, Poe wrote to him on 6 July 1862: "You will not suppose me insincere in saying that I look upon some of your late pieces as the finest I have ever read" [18]. William Rimmer (1816-1879), whose father claimed their family was directly linked to the French royal family, was born in Liverpool and raised in Boston. Rimmer's career included medicine, anatomy, poetry, lithography and sculpture. He was the first American artist to sculpt the nude figure [19]. His paintings were varied in subject matter, including historical themes, portraiture, biblical subjects and romantic visionary fantasy. Francis Orray Ticknor (1822-74) was a poet, painter and physician at the Confederate Hospital in Columbus, Georgia. His well-known poem *Little Giffen* tells of a 16 year old Confederate soldier who was treated at that hospital, was taken by the Ticknors to their own home for convalescence, but the boy returned to the battlefield and they never heard from him again [20].

Another poet-painter-surgeon was Paul C. Boomer, born in 1868 in Watertown, New York, who studied medicine at Northwestern University. Until his retirement in 1928 he worked as a surgeon in Chicago. Boomer was one of the first physicians to use electrotherapy. Robert Tait McKenzie (1867-1938) was born in Ontario, Canada. In addition to being an anatomy instructor, orthopedic surgeon, spinal surgeon, watercolor painter and sculptor, he was also a champion athlete (high jump, hurdle, boxing, swimming, fencing). He and his close friend Dr. James Naismith (who invented basketball) helped to shape the field of physical education. During the First World War, McKenzie became a pioneer of physical and mental rehabilitation for the severely wounded [21]. George W. Caldwell (1866-?), born in Lincoln, Vermont, finished his medical studies in Denver in 1891. He worked as a surgeon at New York's Polyclinic, Dominican Convent, New Amsterdam Eye and Ear Hospital, and more. He went to Europe to further his studies in surgery, published many works on surgical techniques, and traveled around the world showing his paintings and writing books including a special instruction book on how to be happy...

Henry Lamb (1883-1960), born in Adelaide in South Africa, studied medicine at Manchester University Medical School and at Guy's Hospital before taking up painting. He was a founder of the Camden Town and London Artist Groups. During World War I he served as a medical officer, and later used his experiences as inspiration for large paintings, one of which was the *Palestinian War Picture*, 1919 (housed in the Imperial War Museum), which was used as an illustration in T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* [22]. During World War II, he was the official military artist and often worked in Dorset. His much acclaimed giant painting was *Advanced Dressing Station on the Struma* at Stourpaine in 1920. His best known portrait is of the writer Lyton Strachey in 1914, which hangs in the Tate Gallery [23].

* "John Bull" first appears as a character in a series of satires by John Arbuthnot (1667-1735). Arbuthnot was a Scottish author, scientist and doctor. His series of John Bull pamphlets, *The History of John Bull*, satirized Whig policy (1712) and introduced "John Bull" as the typical Englishman – "an honest plain-dealing fellow, choleric, bold, and of a very inconstant temper" (Law is a Bottomless Pit). "John Bull" is represented as a bluff, kindhearted, bull-headed farmer. He is often presented wearing a squat top hat, necktie, waistcoat decorated with the British flag, tailcoat, tight breeches, and boots. In political cartoons, he is the equivalent of the United States' Uncle Sam. His name has entered the English language as an adjective (John-Bullish) and noun (John-Bullishness and John-Bullism). You can see a picture of "John Bull" at <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/british/>.

Sir Harold Gillies CBE, FRCS (1882-1960), born in Dunedin, New Zealand, was educated at Wanganui College before moving to England to study medicine at Cambridge University and St. Bartholomew's Hospital. He founded the British Society of Plastic Surgery. During World War I he treated large numbers of patients with facial injuries. During World War II he converted the private wing of the Part Prewett Hospital in Basingstoke into a 120 bed plastic surgery unit, which became the leading center for plastic surgery. Gillies, the "master craftsman," emphasized the vital importance of hemostasis in flap reconstruction. As a painter-artist, he worked with the sculptor F. Derwent-Wood. His works were exhibited at the Royal Society of Medicine and at the Medical Art Society [24,25].

To conclude, only an art historian can answer the question whether the physician-painters' background had any impact on their artistic output. Some of them were truly great artists (like Ruisdal), some were quite talented (Carus, Leech and Hayden), and some were recognized as minor painters who are found only as footnotes of history.

References

1. Stevens M. Skin doctor. *New York Magazine*, June 24 2002:124.
2. Dequeker J, Fabry G, Vanopdenbosch L. Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516): paleopathology of the medieval disabled relation to the bone and joint decade 200-2010. *IMAJ* 2001;3:864-71 .
3. Joutsivuo T. Vesalius and De humani corporis fabrica: Galen's errors and the change of anatomy in the 16th century. *Hippokrates* 1997;1:98-112.
4. Sanders MA. William Cheselden: anatomist, surgeon and medical illustrator. *Spine* 1999;24:2282-9.
5. Tsafirir J, Ohry A. Medical illustration: from caves to cyberspace. The 8th International Congress on Medical Librarianship, 2-5 July 2000, London. <http://www.icml.org/tuesday/history/tsafirir.htm/>
6. Lavon E. The story of medical illustration. MD thesis, Tel Aviv University, November 2000.
7. <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/eacp/asiasite/topics/WangWei/painter/text-htm>
8. <http://www.cs.uiowa.edu/~yhe/poetry/wang-wei-poems.html>
9. Sarembe B. Carl Gustave Carus, the first director of the newly established maternity institute of the Dresden Royal Surgical Medical Academy 1814-27. *Zentralbl Gynakol* 1989;111:1055-67.
10. Carus CG. Extracts from "Nine letters on landscape paintings." <http://www.warwick.ac.uk>
11. Andreae H. CL Scleich, surgeon, poet, musician and painter as well as discoverer of local anaesthesia. Died 50 years ago. *Quintessenz* 1972;23:161-2.
12. <http://www.berlin-ehrungen.de/Strassen>
13. Leonid Pasternak: the Russian years. <http://www.thorenton.books.co.uk/Pasternak.htm>
14. A. Burri. http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_bio_25.html
15. John Leech. <http://www.victorian.web.org/art/illustration/leech/leech.html>
16. Sir Francis Seymour Haden. <http://www.encyclopedia.com/articlesnew/20294.html>
17. Robert Bridges's poems. <http://www.geocities.com/~spanuadi/poems/bridges.html>
18. <http://etext.lib.viginia.edu/>
19. William Rimmer. <http://www.byu.edu/>
20. Ohry A. Early American physician-poets. *Int J Arts Med* 1999;6:10-20.
21. Robert Tait McKenzie, 1867-1938. <http://www.user.fast./~shenning/RTaitMcKenzie.html>
22. Henry Lamb. <http://www.hpg.org.uk>
23. Henry Lamb. <http://www.TheDorsetpage.com/people/Henry-Lamb.htm>
24. Triana RJ. Sir Harold Gillies. *Arch Fac Plast Surg* 1999;1:142-3.
25. Harold Gillies. <http://www.surgical-tutor.org.uk/surgeons/gillies.htm>

Correspondence: Dr. A. Ohry, P.O. Box 2342, Savyon 56530, Israel.
email: aohry@post.tau.ac.il

I happen to believe you make your own destiny. You have to do the best with what God gave you ... Life is a box of chocolates, Forrest. You never know what you're going to get.

Famous line in the film Forest Gump, said by his mother (actress Sally Field)

I hate discussions of feminism that end up with who does the dishes. At the end there are always the damn dishes.

*Marilyn French (1929-), American author best known for her novel
The Women's Room.*

It's better to send middle-aged men abroad to bore each other than send young men abroad to kill each other

Robin Cook (1946-), British Labour politician, referring in February 1998 to UN negotiations with Saddam Hussein.

Erratum

In the article "Early administration of extracorporeal life support for near fatal asthma" that appeared in the August issue (p. 600), the names of two authors were left out. They are: Gideon Paret and Amir Vardi, of the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit, Sheba Medical Center, Tel Hashomer, Israel.