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Doctors and Artists

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Abstract

In "The Doctor's Dilemma," Bernard Shaw suggests that there is more antagonism than attraction between the doctor-scientist and the painter. The average doctor may, however, make some claim to be an artist. In his professional work, art plays some role, even if it is restricted to that much maligned professional accessory the bedside manner. Doctors in their hobbies sometimes display a wider taste in art-for instance as painters or collectors.

It is, however, my desire in this article to deal less with the links between doctors and art than with those between certain doctors and their artists. From the introduction of printing these links have been very close. The medical text-book has always required skilled illustration to make intelligible a letterpress which has not always been artistic. Many works of great medical importance owe their lasting fame as much to the perspicacity and skill of the illustrator as to any other inherent merit.

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DOCTORS AND ARTISTS

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In "The Doctor's Dilemma," Bernard Shaw suggests that there is more antagonism than attraction between the doctor-scientist and the painter. The average doctor may, however, make some claim to be an artist. In his professional work, art plays some role, even if it is restricted to that much-maligned professional accessory the bedside manner. Doctors in their hobbies sometimes display a wider taste in art—for instance as painters or collectors.

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My own interest in this particular subject arises from my browsings in the historical literature of obstetrics and gynaecology. In the various incunabula there appear a number of woodcuts. Engravers of modest skill have chiselled out the grooves to hold the printer's ink, and have printed, from these, illustrations which appear to us now to be quaint rather than instructive. Indeed it is not until the eighteenth century that really accurate pictures begin to appear, and the starting point for my consideration is actually in 1774, when the historic Atlas of the Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus was published by Dr William Hunter. It is doubtful whether William Hunter was a particularly skilful obstetrician, though he must have been one of the most successful. There is no doubt, however, of his massive contribution to the knowledge of the anatomy of his subject.

Copies of William Hunter's Atlas are found in many libraries, and probably in some private collections. The library of the Manchester Medical Society is fortunate in possessing a copy in very good condition. It is a large volume of the type referred to as an elephant folio. The title page, like the rest of the work, is in duplicate sections, one in Latin, the other in English. It sets out the qualifications of the author, which included the posts of Physician Extraordinary to Queen Charlotte (consort of George III), Professor of Anatomy in the Royal Academy, Fellow of the Royal Society and Fellow of the Antiquarian Society. The work is set in beautiful type and is printed by Baskerville in Birmingham. The subsequent pages show magnificent life-size illustrations, interleaved with parallel columns of prose in Latin and in English, which provide a most lucid description of the picture displayed. Incomparably the best of such pictures is one which shows the full-term child in the presentation position and attitude frequently adopted by the unborn infant. For precision and accuracy this picture is still quite unrivalled by any modern techniques of illustration.

William Hunter was singularly fortunate in having available an artist

whose greatness was fit to be measured with his own. Comparatively little is known about this particular artist. His name was Jan van Rymdyk, and it seems pretty certain that he came to London from Holland and may well have been introduced to London teachers of midwifery by Peter Camper, who was eventually Professor of Anatomy and Midwifery at the University of Leyden.

Van Rymdyk's name appears on each of the plates in Hunter's Atlas. His original drawings were executed in red chalk, and are preserved in the Hunterian Museum of the University of Glasgow. Undoubtedly, William Hunter must have thought highly of him, but the terms in which he acknowledges assistance received in the preparation of his Atlas make no reference to van Rymdyk by name:

"If it be allowed that the author has spared neither labour, nor time, nor expense in improving an important part of anatomy, this is all the merit that he can claim. In most of the dissections he was assisted by his brother, MR JOHN HUNTER, whose accuracy in anatomical researches is so well-known, that to omit this opportunity of thanking him for that assistance, would be in some measure to disregard the future reputation of the work itself. He owes likewise much to the ingenious artists who made the drawings and engravings; and particularly to MR STRANGE, not only for having by his hand secured a sort of immortality to two of the plates, but for having given his advice and assistance in every part with a steady and disinterested friendship."

It is not part of my present plan to discourse on the personal relations between William Hunter and his brother John. Suffice it to say that the paragraph quoted was in later years deemed by John Hunter to be an insufficient acknowledgement, while the entire lack of reference to van Rymdyk certainly wounded that sensitive soul. On the other hand, the flowery expression of thanks to Mr Robert Strange, upon whom van Rymdyk almost certainly looked as a mere engraver, may, in its way, have given equal offence.

Here we come up against one of the main differences between the delineating artist and the engraving artisan who prepares and transmutes the artist's work into graven lines suitable to receive the printer's ink. In general, the original artist is a creator, the engraver is a copyist. Ruskin says, "Engraving . . . is in brief terms the art of scratch." There seems no doubt, however, that William Hunter regarded his engraver as more worthy of specific thanks than he who originally drew the pictures.

Of the eighteenth century engravers, Robert Strange was probably the best known and the most successful, but William Sharp and William Woollett are still famous, while Hogarth himself first made a living as an artist by engraving family silver, door plates, seals and other commonplace articles. It is probable that many other famous artists of the brush or pencil passed through this particular apprenticeship.

Robert Strange was born in Orkney. His family came from the Kingdom of Fife. He was born in the year 1721 and after a classical education in Kirkwall he made his way to Edinburgh, where he was eventually apprenticed as a Writer to the Signet, to his stepbrother, who was already established in legal practice in that city.

There was a wide disparity in their years, but it is clear that the older man treated young Strange with quite exceptional kindness, tact and consideration. Strange has left a vivid account of the circumstances in which he idly occupied his time, drawing in pen and ink, "sometimes from my own fancy, others from the ornaments and title pages of books, etc." These

drawings he concealed from a certain sense of guilt, but the brother accidentally discovered them, and, recognising real talent, took steps to obtain the criticism of one better versed in artistic matters, as a result of which Robert Strange, with his brother's approval, discontinued his legal studies and became apprenticed to Richard Cooper, an engraver of some distinction.

Cooper was a Londoner. He maintained quite a large training establishment in Edinburgh. Cooper's son eventually became drawing master at Eton, but Strange himself seemed very likely to become the successor to his master in the expanding world of medical illustration in Edinburgh. He became acquainted with Alexander Monro, First, and engraved a number of plates for him. He tells that he became some sort of favourite of this great anatomical teacher, and it is probable that his first commission was to illustrate an anatomical specimen of unusual cranial ossification. The illustration is still extant, although it bears the name of Richard Cooper, not Robert Strange.

Whatever might have been the destiny of Strange, it was completely altered in the year 1745. At this time, Strange, already having certain Jacobite sympathies, was enamoured of a Miss Isabella Lumisden, whose Jacobitism was fervent and uncritical. It is said that she informed Strange that his advances would meet with no favour unless he joined the forces of the Young Pretender, which Strange did, becoming a member of the Prince's Life Guards, a rather curious cavalry formation commanded by Lord Elcho. Strange took part in the campaigns of 1745 and 1746. In addition to combat, his activities included the execution of a portrait of Prince Charles Edward Stuart, a portrait which was far from flattering but may be for all that a truer likeness of the so-called "Bonny Prince" than those which are now in circulation. Strange could not resist showing his latinity in the quotation from Virgil in which he described the Prince as sent to set right the times that are out of joint.

Another engraving which Strange executed at this time was a copper plate designed for the printing of bank notes. This was completed just before the battle of Culloden. The notes were never printed and the copper plate was lost in the rout, and remained lost until 1835 when it was accidentally discovered in Loch Laggan. Prints were recently made from this plate by the late Sir D. Y. Cameron. They are difficult to read and confused, but this is hardly surprising after 89 years exposure to the elements. From different sections of the plate a composite picture has been prepared, showing the Prince's cipher under a coronet decked with the three feathers of the Prince of Wales, with an entwining thistle for Scotland and a multitude of martial background subjects.

Little is known of how Strange escaped from the battlefield. It appears, however, that he made his way to Edinburgh where he was sheltered by Miss Lumisden, to whom he was married in 1747. There is a highly romantic story of how she sheltered him from searching soldiers under the wide hoops of her skirt, the while she sang loudly the Jacobite songs which she thought appropriate for the occasion. The authority for this story is Richard Cooper younger, the drawing master at Eton. It is, however, almost too good to be true.

When Strange was studying in Edinburgh before the rebellion, there dwelt only a few hundred yards from Richard Cooper's atelier, an eccentric wig-maker named Allan Ramsay. This man was well known as a bon-viveur, and had an easy taste for song-writing, and even for some major works, such as his pastoral drama "The Gentle Shepherd." He had a son, also named Allan Ramsay, some eight years older than Robert Strange. It is doubtful if they ever met in Edinburgh, but by no means impossible. They were certainly well acquainted in later life, for Allan Ramsay Junior, after studying in

London and in Rome became established as a fashionable portrait painter, and indeed in the 1750's he became THE fashionable portrait painter of London, proceeding in 1767 to become personal portrait painter to His Majesty King George III. The King was notoriously apt to present portraits of himself to his various friends, and Ramsay was rarely short of commissions. Before his royal appointment he had in fact amassed a considerable fortune, and through his charm and address became a person of no small influence. Even Dr Johnson, whom Lord James has described post-prandially as "that bellicose old boor," said of Allan Ramsay Jr., "You will not find a man in whose conversation there is more instruction, more information and more elegance than in Ramsay's."

About the year 1759 Allan Ramsay painted full-length portraits respectively of George III, then Prince of Wales, and the third Earl of Bute, later George III's very unsuccessful Prime Minister. Strange was approached by Allan Ramsay to engrave copies of these portraits for general sale and distribution, under the patronage of the Prince of Wales. Strange refused. The request was repeated directly by the Prince of Wales himself. Strange again refused.

The reason for Strange's refusals cannot now be exactly determined. The remuneration offered for the work (£100) was regarded as ridiculously low by 18th century standards, and the fee eventually paid to the engraver who did undertake the work was very much more. It seems quite certain, however, that Strange's reluctance to undertake this commission was attributed, if not attributable, to his distaste for the House of Hanover. At all events, the immediate consequences to Strange were very serious. In the great days of aristocratic patronage, royal disfavour was a serious professional handicap. Strange found it necessary to withdraw from London and spent the next five years in Italy. There he engaged in making chalk copies of works of the Italian masters, from which he subsequently prepared engravings, prints of which he published on his return to London about 1765. There seems no doubt that this was Strange's most useful service to art appreciation in Britain. The engravings were published with Strange's critical comments, and, while they could not in any way emulate the glorious originals, it has been said that "in several of the higher qualities of his art he is unsurpassed. His tender, flowing line gives a peculiar delicacy and transparency to his flesh, and his works are excellent in power, drawing and character."

Despite this distinction, grave disappointment awaited Strange. When the Royal Academy was founded in 1768, engravers were specifically excluded from its membership. Strange felt obliged to protest about this in print. In 1775, that is in the year after the publication of William Hunter's Atlas, Strange published an attack on the Royal Academy, prefaced by a letter of reproach to Lord Bute, now Prime Minister. This produced no favourable response, and Strange removed with his family to Paris, whence he did not return until 1780. We shall quite shortly note events following this, but for the moment I propose to call your attention to yet another artist, one Benjamin West. So far as I know, he had no close link with medicine, except through his friendship with Robert Strange.

Benjamin West was born in Springfield, Pennsylvania, in 1738. He was therefore 17 years younger than Robert Strange. West had a backwoods education. He is said to have had his first instruction in art from a Cherokee Indian. Nevertheless, he received early notice in the admirably liberal society of 18th century Philadelphia, and by the age of 18 he had set himself up as a portrait painter in that city. In 1760 when he was some 22 years old he went to Rome to study. He received much attention as a handsome young American, with a supposedly savage background. As his stay there corres-

ponded with one of Strange's Italian periods, it is more than likely that they met and established then their friendship.

In 1763, West came from Rome to England. His Philadelphia patrons introduced him to their friends—including Dr Johnson, Edmund Burke and Joshua Reynolds. Despite the alleged deficiencies in his education, he endeared himself to all. His particular forte was the imaginative production of historical pictures. His most famous include the Death of Wolfe, William Penn's Treaty with the Indians, and the Battle of the Boyne.

In 1772, Benjamin West was appointed historical painter to the king. His mural decorations to St. George's Hall, Windsor, are still in existence. In 1792, he was elected President of the Royal Academy, an office which he held, except for one year, until his death at the age of 82 in 1820. His private life was irreproachable. He was kind to young artists, free from jealousy, and generous beyond his means. He was offered a knighthood, but declined. So far as I know he is the only American to have held the office of President of the Royal Academy.

It was to Benjamin West that Strange applied for help on his return from France in 1780. Strange had conceived a wish to engrave two of the Van Dyck portraits of Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria with her family. These portraits were in Windsor Castle, and, through West's intercession, Strange was allowed to copy them there.

Although Strange's wife never lost her strong Jacobite affiliations, it seems likely that Strange was no longer rabid. George III, now aged 42, was probably less irascible than when Strange incurred his enmity in 1759. At all events, Strange was courteously received by George and by his family, who used frequently to visit him as he undertook the meticulous chalk copies of the famous paintings.

It was 1784 before the plates were ready. The prints proved an enormous success, and Strange, in gratitude, copied and engraved the picture which Benjamin West had painted to commemorate the lamentable death of two of the King's progeny, the Princes Octavius and Alfred. Known as the "Apotheosis of the Royal Children" this is no doubt a little sickly to modern taste, but it is possible that Strange admired it, and it is certain that the King was fond of it. From the Gentleman's Magazine of January, 1787, the following is extracted:

"January 5th, Friday.

Mr Strange had the honour of presenting to Their Majesties at the Queen's Palace, some fine impressions of the Apotheosis of the Princes Octavius and Alfred, which he has lately engraved from a picture painted by Mr West, in the royal collection. Their Majesties were graciously pleased to express the highest approbation of this last work of Mr Strange; and in consequence thereof, he was afterwards introduced at the levée at St. James, when His Majesty was pleased to confer on him the honour of knighthood."

There is a rather charming account of the manner in which the King informed Strange of his desire to confer a knighthood on him. "It is my desire, Mr Strange, to confer an honour upon you, that is, of course, provided you have no objection to receiving a knighthood at the hands of the Elector of Hanover." The wheel of fortune had come full circle. He who in youth rode in the bodyguard of the Young Pretender, now was admitted to the chivalry of George III.

There is an interesting little echo of the knighthood. The only portrait of Robert Strange which I can trace is an engraving in the National Portrait Gallery. It bears the legend: "J. B. Greuse, delineavit. R. Strange, eques, sculpsit"—Drawn by Greuze, engraved by R. Strange, knight. This dates

the engraving as 1787 or later. The date of execution of the original I do not know. Nor do I know where the original is housed. According to Charles Trotter, writing in the Dictionary of National Biography, Strange had the honour, during his Italian visit of 1760-64, of having his portrait painted on the ceiling of the print room in the Vatican. Perhaps this painting may still be in existence, and may be the original from which Strange prepared his copper plates. Certainly the portrait is more like that of a man of forty odd than one of 66, as Strange was at the time he received his knighthood. Strange died aged 71 in 1792. His gallant consort, still hoping for a restoration of the Stuarts, survived until 1806.

I have enjoyed my enquiries in this colourful chapter. I still think Strange, van Rymdyk and William Hunter made a fine artistic team. I would not have you think, however, that it is my opinion that medical art died with them. Far from it. With new graphic techniques, with the development of photography, and with the close collaboration between the delineating artist and the blockmaker, medical illustration still improves.

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