

# The Left Atrium

## An artful science

### The physician's art: representations of art and medicine

Julie V. Hansen and Suzanne Porter

Durham, NC: Duke University Press; 1999

141 pp. US\$54.95 (cloth) ISBN 0-9672946-0-6

US\$29.95 (paper) ISBN 0-9672946-1-4



The practice of medicine has at times been referred to as a balance of art and science. The recently published *The Physician's Art: Representations of Art and Medicine* illustrates this relationship between the fine arts and the evolving science of medicine.

This beautiful book is the catalogue of a remarkable exhibition mounted in 1999 at the Duke University Museum of Art in Durham, NC. The idea for the show was suggested by Albert Heyman, professor emeritus in neurology at Duke Medical Center, who has a long-standing interest in art and the history of medicine.

The book is divided into five sections: Art and Anatomy, The Surgical Arts, The Doctor's Practice, Obstetrics and Gynecology, and Non-Western Medicine. The objects illustrated in each section play two roles. They serve a role relating to the practice of medicine, either as instructional tools for the education of physicians or the public, or as instruments used in clinical practice. As artistic artifacts, however, they also reflect the aesthetic, cultural and spiritual atmosphere of a particular time and place.

A simple bone saw, for example, used for crude amputations in the early days of surgery, has decorative engraving and a finely carved handle — suggesting the significance of the instrument itself and of the surgeon who used it. Similarly, a series of woodcuts illustrating different surgical techniques displays “real” people in the garb of the upper classes of society.

In one of Vesalius' well-known woodcuts from *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543), an articulated skeleton

leans on a tombstone, its bony hand resting on another skull in contemplation of life, mortality and the role of God.

In the catalogue over 100 pieces are shown. They cover a wide range of material not adequately reflected by the titles of the five main sections. One of the oldest pieces is a 14th-century Persian drawing representing the human body. Although based on the work of the Greek physician Galen, it is presented in a manner that respects the Islamic tradition by not portraying the human form directly, but rather through an abstract, but clearly defined, iconography.

Also included in the eclectic mix are portraits of famous physicians. A series of items from the apothecary's realm of herbs, potions and poisons show their careful preparation and packaging in gold leaf, intricate bottles and fancy boxes. A beautiful illustration is also included from William Withering's famous *Account of the Foxglove* (1785).

Many of the pieces illustrate the evolving science of medicine and its relation to art. Art serves

as a tool to share this progress with the community.

A remarkable series of engravings from the mid-17th century, entitled *The Four Seasons*, is an exercise in anatomy. Each of the four plates has a series of flaps that can be lifted to reveal the internal organs of male and female models during the four major stages of life. Surrounding the two cen-



History of Medicine Collections, Duke University Medical Center Library

**Fetus in utero.** Copperplate engraving by J. Mitchel after a drawing by van Rymsdyk. Plate 12 from *Anatomia uteri humani gravidi* (1774) by the Scottish anatomist William Hunter. The catalogue notes, “The model ... died suddenly near the end of her pregnancy. Hunter dissected her body and injected the blood vessels of the placenta with colored wax in order to preserve them. The Dutch artist Jan van Rymsdyk ... completed ten life-sized drawings in red chalk of the woman's preserved uterus.”

tral figures are numerous symbolic images as well as references to disciplines such as alchemy, astrology, palmistry and uroscopy.

For artists of the 20th-century Surrealist Movement, the process of creating art was as important as the final product itself. The process that brought this medical art collection together is noteworthy, because it required the coordination and cooperation of the four medical schools in

North Carolina. It would be interesting to see what type of exhibition could be produced by collaboration among Canadian medical schools.

This catalogue, available in both hard and soft cover, is a work of art. Every page offers an image reproduced in exceptional detail and colour. The layout varies throughout the book but at the same time establishes a flow that mirrors the experience of strolling through the exhibition itself. The text is

clearly written and academically grounded, providing an intellectual resource far more than the usual coffee-table book.

This is an ideal book for anyone with an appreciation for art and history as they relate to the practice of medicine.

**Joshua Tepper**  
Family physician  
Toronto, Ont.