

The History of Medicine told in four paintings

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Abstract. The paper focuses on the volume “The history of medicine in four paintings”. Starting from this brief and original text, the article introduces a current reflection on the importance of the diffusion of medical - scientific thought and the educational role of the history of medicine, in particular on the ethical and cultural values that the study of this fascinating discipline has in training of students and future physicians.

Key words: history of medicine, Tomaso Oliaro, Minerva Medica

During the International Exhibition of Medical Arts, the International Festival of Scientific Medical Film and International Medical and Surgical Meetings held in Turin from May 29 to June 6, 1954, the book “The history of medicine in four paintings” was presented (1). The author of this original text was Tomaso Oliaro (1909-1986), professor of History of Medicine at the University of Turin and Director of Edizioni Minerva Medica S.p.a., a company founded in 1934 by his father Guglielmo.

Dr. Guglielmo Oliaro was a doctor in Turin, who was in charge of science, but also of literature, art and music. His son Tomaso has followed in his footsteps in the medical profession, but also in the passions, organizing during his career many initiatives that combine science and art.

In a few pages the History of Medicine is retraced. As a scholar of the subject, Oliaro introduces the reader into the historical-scientific world by stating that the History of Medicine is born and merges with that of man and how man is changeable and variable. He tells it through a “courageous undertaking” in four paintings (2), created by the painter and set designer Giuseppe Gheduzzi (1889-1957); the images of these paintings (which can today be seen in the meeting room in the Minerva Medica Palace in Turin) are shown at the end of the text. Each painting repre-

sents an era of medicine: ancient medicine, medicine of the Middle Ages, medicine of the Renaissance and modern medicine (3). On each canvas the images of the main scientific stages and their protagonists have been represented from top to bottom. In the first two pictures, we find the sun and the moon, together with the earth and the cosmos gave rise to empirical medicine (Fig. 1). The figure of Hippocrates stands in the canvas of ancient medicine; the corpus Hippocraticum and the humoral theories (later Hippocratic-galenical) on the physiology and on the origin of the diseases were the bases of the medical-scientific doctrine for centuries. The History of Medicine with Depictions of the Ebers Papyrus (1550 BC), the Code of Hammurabi (2000 BC), the cranial drilling of pre-Columbian America, prehistoric Venuses and the instruments of the first surgeons. In the second picture (Fig. 2) the representation of medicine during the Middle Ages is dominated by faith (placed at the top right), which at the time was believed to intervene in the healing of man and was repeatedly invoked by the sick, but medical science was also affected by the influences of the Arab world with Avicenna’s Canon, which combined medicine with philosophy. This picture shows the majolica vases representing the birth of pharmacies, the techniques of Rolando da Padova, the well-known Scuola Salernitana (the first example of a lay school for



Figure 1. Ancient Medicine from “La storia della medicina in quattro quadri”. Torino: Edizioni Minerva Medica, 1954.

the in the physicians Christian Middle Ages), the Ortus Sanitatis, an example of the medicine practiced by the monks and the therapeutic properties of officinal herbs; the second painting concludes with the image of



Figure 2. Medicine of the Middle Age from “La storia della medicina in quattro quadri”. Torino: Edizioni Minerva Medica, 1954.

the goddess Minerva and the inscription “Vi et mente”, motto of the same Minerva Medica publishing house. The painting representing Renaissance medicine (Fig. 3) illustrates the foundations of modern medicine. At

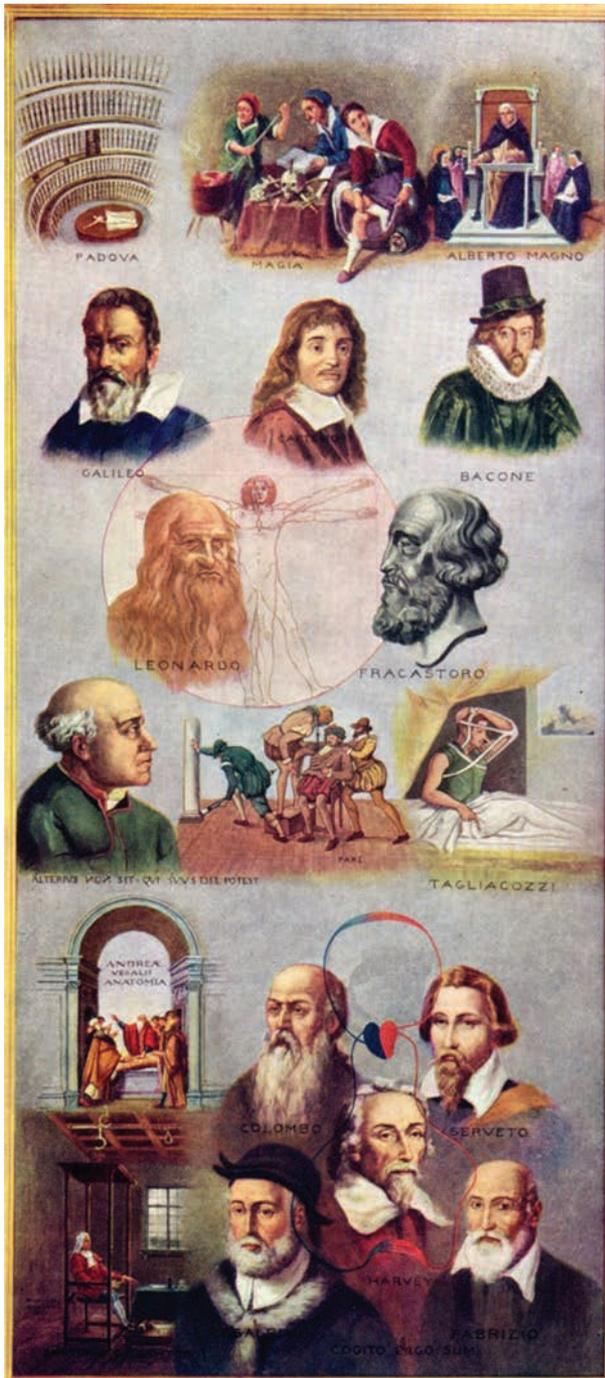


Figure 3. Medicine of the Renaissance from “La storia della medicina in quattro quadri”. Torino: Edizioni Minerva Medica, 1954.

the top are joined, as if they were opposed, but both existing realities, the anatomical theater of the University of Padua, which symbolizes the birth of the first major medical universities, and magic with its rituals,



Figure 4. Modern medicine from “La storia della medicina in quattro quadri”. Torino: Edizioni Minerva Medica, 1954.

its herbs and witchcraft. At the center of the painting is depicted Leonardo da Vinci, figure that best represents the spirit of the Renaissance and artist in which the manual skills merged with the scientific intuition

making it become one of the most famous lovers of anatomy (his works of art are masterpieces of scientific anatomy). Are then depicted among the many Andrea Vesalius, in which the anatomical study and artistic reproduction gave rise to high quality tables, Galileo Galilei, recalling the innovative experimental method, Gerolamo Fracastoro, recalling the studies on the epidemic diseases of 1500, the innovative surgeon Ambrogio Parè, Gaspare Tagliacozzi for plastic surgery and William Harvey, considered the father of modern circulatory physiology. The last painting is dedicated to a series of famous scientists who have enriched the panorama of modern medicine (Fig. 4). There are the protagonists of the Medical Clinic, Legal Medicine and Labor Medicine, Transfusion and Vaccination, Histology, Physiology, Biology, Radiology and Microbial Pathology. This last picture closes with the phrase of Leonardo da Vinci “Do not turn those who are stars fixed” as a warning to all scholars and scientists to never stop in research, experimentation and study.

This brief volume gives a good idea of how far the medicine and surgery has gone from its beginnings to today. The paintings evoke the past, but also look to the future, underlining how the study of the History of Medicine is fundamental in the training of young physicians and researchers (4, 5). The motivation and determination to produce new knowledge and to investigate stems from the example of the great figures of the past who have contributed with their work and their discoveries to the development of medical science. The continuous and progressive development of bio-medical sciences makes it impossible to think of exercising a health profession without knowing and understanding

the History of Medicine (6). This discipline is not only the history of medical pathologies and techniques, but it is also the history of man, places, environments and society in which physicians carry out their profession. The History of Medicine teaches us to reflect on the past, on what has been done and what we can do in the future, thus changing our behavior. The correct analysis of the past of medical science allows us to understand the progressive stages of medicine, helping to integrate and complete the preparation of those who will dedicate themselves to the medical profession (7).

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