

Medical History

Medicine in Art

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[Over the ages, the medical profession has been described and portrayed in various ways by artists. It is worthwhile to look at those portrayals in order to understand the relation between a society and its healers.]

This oil painting (Fig 1) by American artist **Thomas Eakins** shows a doctor (Dr Gross) performing a surgery in his clinic in 1875. As is seen here, the doctor is performing his surgery while also teaching his students. The very concept of antisepsis during surgery was absent then. So, the surgeons are dressed in full formal suits with no face mask or cap or gloves. Also note the fact that all the doctors and students (in the gallery) were male. No nurse is shown anywhere. The patient's mother is sitting right beside the operation table, cringing. Far before the advent of modern consumer-court based protocols, it was very common to keep the patient's relatives in the same room while performing gory procedures.



Fig 1 — The clinic of Dr Gross (Public domain)



Fig 2 — Doctor's Office : Norman Rockwell

The figure of the surgeon is portrayed almost like a painter at work, thereby showing the finesse required for the procedure. This painting is considered one of the greatest examples of American art of the nineteenth century. But operation theatre culture was changing quickly and this casually dressed surgeon would soon be a thing of the past.

The Fig 2 is a painting by one of the most famous twentieth century American painters : **Norman Rockwell**. This shows a boy standing on a chair while the doctor is preparing an injection, probably a vaccine. The boy is apprehensive and is peering at the certificates of the doctor hung on the wall, presumably to assess his authenticity and expertise!! This wonderful painting is a glimpse of a family physician's clinic in mid-twentieth century USA, before medical profession became a hospital-based juggernaut.

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