

## BOOK REVIEW

**Medicine's Michelangelo. The Life and Art of Frank MD**, by Francine Mary Netter, Hamden, CT: Quinnipiac University Press, 2013, 480 pages, \$39.95, ISBN: 978-0-9891376-0-7.

This biography of Frank H. Netter, MD, by his daughter Francine Mary Netter captures her father in a very personal and professional light, describing in detail the fascinating life and work of one of medicine's truly great medical illustrators. The biography is richly illustrated with 65 grayscale and 19 color illustrations from the Netter family's personal collection as well as from well-known published illustrations and photographs gleaned from over 75 years of Dr. Netter's career. One such illustration, drawn in pencil, is by Netter as an 11-year old showing his mother sitting in a chair peeling potatoes. This image captures in many ways what made Frank Netter a superb medical illustrator; he was an astute observer of people, even as an 11-year old, and loved drawing their expressive faces, taking note of their hands, their posture, and how they moved.

The Netter story begins in the late 18th century Alsatian wine-growing region of eastern France where the reader is introduced to Netter's great-great grandfather Jacob Netter who, as a young man, travelled around the world. The story then follows his descendants' travels across Europe and beyond, culminating in Dr. Netter's father's ultimate journey to the shores of New York City in 1889. The book is divided into six sections, and thirty chapters covering Netter's early childhood, formal training, and his transformation from practicing physician to full-time artist and medical illustrator, culminating in the last section "The Aged Artist (1989–1991)." Flanking these six sections is a brief Foreword and Introduction, and an Epilogue and Appendices. The Appendices include a comprehensive listing of Dr. Netter's medical pictures and publications (Appendix I), a listing of the Clinical Symposia (Appendix II), and a list of Dr. Netter's awards and honors (Appendix III). One of Dr. Netter's last honors included his Honorary Member Award given by the American Association of Clinical Anatomists, which was awarded in July 1990, at the annual meeting in Saskatchewan, Canada.

Francine Mary Netter, one of Dr. Netter's five children from his first marriage to Mary MacFadyen, has written a beautiful memoir of her father and of an extraordinary medical illustrator. She has thoroughly chronicled Dr. Netter's life in both a very personal and affectionate manner, but also in a very professional and somewhat detached way, so that the reader comes to appreciate the two sides to this accomplished and complex man. Frank Netter, first and foremost, was a humanist who loved life, enjoyed his simple vices (cigars, golf, and afternoon cocktails), was generous to his friends and family, but could negotiate a new book contract with his publisher that left little room for compromise.

Netter's artistic output was prodigious while simultaneously exacting and thorough. He would extensively research a topic prior to his initial sketches, meet with some of the most renowned physicians and scientists of his age to plumb their knowledge and perspectives, and won the respect and admiration of almost everyone with whom he worked. He

demanded excellence in himself and others. In Chapter 8, entitled "The Studio," the reader gains insight into the finer points of "making pictures," the term often used by Netter when referring to his own medical illustrations. In this chapter, Francine nicely describes the brushes, paints, illustration board, and style practiced by Dr. Netter in the sketches and final painting of an illustration. While Netter used various media, he preferred using opaque watercolors, often called gouache, because of their "broad, colorful effects," and their ability to render fine details. But, it was Dr. Netter's uncanny ability to capture the essence of an anatomical region or pathological process that separates him from most other medical illustrators. His perspective, his colorful depiction of human anatomy, his ability to draw the eye of the viewer to the essential message of the image, and his many "cut away" anatomical views in relation to the adjacent skin and healthy appearance of the surrounding head, body, or limbs, made his images more life like. In fact, it is these qualities that many beginning students of anatomy find most attractive and informative in the images of Dr. Netter. Francine Mary Netter superbly captures each of these elements in this informative chapter, from the initial planning of a picture to the final captions, labels and leader lines that complete the illustration.

To construct this intriguing portrait of Dr. Netter, Francine amply draws from her personal relationship with her father and a rich treasure trove of autobiographical notes, correspondence, private files, publications, public archives, and over 100 interviews with family, friends, artists, physicians, and scientists, many of whom collaborated with Dr. Netter during his productive life. Importantly, she also captures Netter's humanity and "pulls no punches" when it comes to how Netter felt about some of his colleagues, his disappointments, his human failings, and his difficult divorce from Mary and his second marriage to Vera. Francine recounts her father's difficult last year and a half when Dr. Netter's health began to significantly fail, culminating in his hospitalization during the last 11 months of his life.

After reading this biography you sense that in some small way you have really met Frank Netter, the father, the husband, the physician, the artist, and the person. He wasn't perfect, but his flaws were no greater than most mortals, and his contributions to anatomy and our understanding of complex anatomical relationships to clinical medicine certainly warrant his membership among the elite few in our pantheon of medical history.

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