Every one of us in medicine and educational art deeply appreciate Dr. Frank Netter’s artworks but few of us have any sense of what led to his art. Now, through “Medicine’s Michelangelo,” we have the opportunity to know Frank Netter the man thanks to his daughter, Francine. Her thoroughly comprehensive life story of Frank has resulted from a carefully documented recall of his professional and non-career-related life. It includes Frank’s childhood years, college and medical school experiences, a unique army experience, marriages, progeny, hobbies, and lifestyle. All of this is in addition to his incomparable career as an artist not only of anatomy and medicine but also of portraits, cartoons, Christmas cards, and personal experiences. Frank Netter’s death on September 17, 1991, was deeply felt across the medical and art worlds.

Frank Netter’s first wife, Mary, also a physician, was a most productive independent individual. She had numerous interests, started a successful antique business, and dealt skillfully in real estate and other ventures while continuing to practice medicine and serve as a wife and mother. Vera, his second wife, acquired the important social graces, home-decorating skills, and supportive skills important to Frank. His beloved children were proud and supportive of their Dad. This was particularly true of his daughter, Francine, whose devotion is amply demonstrated by the enormous study and labor required to assemble this book.

A tireless worker, Netter spent hours each day in his studio and with many of the world’s top specialty physicians as consultants to produce not just images but images that conveyed thoughts and feelings to viewers. Among the many treasured statements he is quoted as making are:

• “Before you can learn to draw, you must learn to see.”
• “I must understand it. I must internalize it.”
• “In creating an illustration, research and thought was 90%. Ten percent was painting.”
• “To draw it you have to know it. If you don’t know it, there will be a blank place in the drawing.”

“I wanted to portray it in all its aspects: historical, the mechanical, the anatomical, the functional and the physiological and also its prospects for the future” (describing the Jarvik artificial heart).

“What to leave out becomes at least as important as what to include. My goal was to picture or diagram the essence of each subject, avoiding the incidental or inconsequential.”

“Pictures do not depend on language and are universally understood.”

Among numerous comments complementing Frank’s art was that of Gina Dingle, managing editor of the of Ciba collection, who stated: “There is an added dimension to Frank Netter’s drawings that goes beyond rendering of the clinical condition. This is a
picture of a patient suffering from that condition. That is what sets this art apart.”

Armour Company hired Frank to do a series of paintings on “the Life of a Doctor.” He achieved this in 12 pictures tracing life in medical school training and practice during the 1930s and 1940s. These paintings remained in his many studios throughout his life.

Pfizer sponsored Netter’s anatomical and pathological transparencies in six booklets in the 1950s.

Most of his career was spent under contract with Ciba Geigy for whom, in his more than 50 years, Netter produced more than 4,000 illustrations. They appeared in the regular Ciba Clinical Symposia delivered regularly and without charge to physicians and medical students and in many books published by Ciba. Ernest Oppenheimer, chief pharmacologist for Ciba, called “Opy” by Frank, had a remarkably positive influence on Dr. Netter. In the production of the Symposia and books, Dr. Netter consulted thoroughly with the world’s top specialists, taking and giving advice in one-to-one meetings. The more than 100 specialists are well known and often personally known by those of us in the academic medical domain during the second half of the 90s and today. From every one of them, the repeated adjectives used when describing Frank Netter are gentleman, understanding, kind, modest, charming, cooperative, perceptive, determined, gifted, exacting, humble, honest, stimulating, and good humored. All agree with C. Everett Koop, who described Netter as “a teacher of teachers.” It is interesting to conjecture whether a modern-day Frank Netter could develop a similar relationship to the largeesse of the drug industry, given the concern over whether such an industry-sponsored gift unduly influences naive medical students.

In the New York Academy of Medicine newsletter in 1957, Frank Netter commented on the value of medical illustration publications in stimulating advances in medicine and surgery. He specifically mentioned renaissance artists Leonardo da Vinci and Vesalius (very dependent upon Jon Calcar, the Titian-trained artist who drew the diagrams for the famous Fabrica) and later the brothers John and William Hunter and Charles Bell. This book could alternatively be named for Leonardo or Vesalius as well as for Michelangelo in terms of its influence on medical education. It was 1976 when the Saturday Evening Post dubbed Netter “The Michelangelo of Medicine.”

His Anatomy Atlas was clearly a crowning achievement among all of Netter’s work and it remains the best-published educational tool for students.

It is no surprise that Netter received more than 35 major honors from organizations both medical- and art-related including my own American Association of Clinical Anatomy. His modest receipt of these well-deserved honors is typical Frank Netter. Lastly, just a few months ago, the Frank H. Netter MD School of Medicine of Quinnipiac University of Connecticut admitted its first class of medical students.

—Robert A. Chase, MD

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