

Book Review

Calendar for Pharmacists 1998

Wolfgang-Hagen Hein and Werner Dressendörfer (Eds.)

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I have not reviewed a calendar before, but this one is rather special. It is a work of art which contains 12 coloured prints of pharmaceutical/medical interest printed on stout artpaper. Each page (about 49 × 49 cm) contains a commentary in English and German. The first print 'The Quack' is by Thomas Rowlandson (1765–1827) who is considered to be one of the great English masters of caricature. This is one of the 36 aquatints that formed the 'English Dance of Death' the most significant danse macabre sequence since Holbein's magnificent interpretation.

February is depicted by 'Drug Jars' from the Heidelberg Town Pharmacy 'The Unicorn' while March has a print of the Cosmas and Damian (the patron saints of physicians and pharmacists) and Roch (the plague saint) reliquaries in the Sacred Treasure of Halle. The April folium is a print of a Medicine Kit of a Zurich field Surgeon in the second half of the 17th century. The detailed labels on the individual drawers presents a record of the limited remedies available to a field surgeon at that time.

May is depicted by the draughtsman Franz Christophe's colour print 'In the Pharmacy'. It shows a pharmacy interior at the beginnings of the 20th century. June has a print of two glass Apothecary Jars from the former Court Pharmacy of the Elector of Saxony in Pillnitz, near

Dresden. They were made at the end of the first quarter of the 18th century. They stand either side of a bottle from the 'Black Eagle Pharmacy' in Eger which was probably produced around 1880 in one of the nearby Bohemian glass works.

July shows a richly coloured icon (made 1812 on Mount Athos) of Saint Panteleimon, who according to pious legend was the private physician of the Emperor Maximian. The Saint was converted to Christianity and subsequently martyred; when beheaded, according to legend milk flowed instead of blood. August's print is two Hutterite Apothecary Faïences (17th Century). Both were made in the second half of the 17th century by potters of the Hutterite religious sect that fled from Northern Italy through Austria and finally settling in Bohemia and Hungary. September shows a Medieval Still and Ointment Jars which are in the museum of the knights estate Obergöltzsch in Rodewisch in the Vogtland area of Germany. The still and jars were reconstructed from fragments found in the moat and date from the early 16th century.

The pharmacy interior print for October is, to my taste, one of the finest examples of its kind. It depicts a Pharmacy Dispensary which is currently in the Medizinhistorisches Museum of the University of Zurich. The mid-18th century interior of a dispensary from the Rhenish electorates provides a fitting display for a number of faïence jars from a variety of periods and manufacturers; glass bottles, wooden boxes and pewter containers and the gold trim and turned pillars of the side cabinets give the dispensary an air of restrained elegance.

November shows a modern print (1984)—Simon Diettrich's 'The Pharmacist and Death'.

Prints of this type are a drastic reminder of mankind's fear of sudden death and the 'memento mori' remain a perpetual reminder of the inevitable fate. In this print Death appears in the pharmacy in the form of a skeleton boldly confronting the pharmacist in his white coat. Over the mortar, his bony hand wrests away the coloured tablets, symbols of life-prolonging machine. The print for December is of the late Gothic carved Altar from the Chapel of SS. Cosmas and Damian in Nußdorf, a village now incorporated into the city of Uberlingen. The altar was crafted around 1510 in the Ulm workshop of Jorg Syrlin the Younger. To the left of the Blessed Virgin and Child stand SS. Sebastian (patron of the plague-stricken) and Cosmas (holding a urinal) in full robes. S. Damian stands on the right of the Virgin holding an albarello in his right hand and St. James the elder, the patron saint of

Santiago de Compostella, completes the group. He is identified by the pilgrim's staff and the scallop shell on his cap.

Admittedly, this calendar has a functional use, it gives the date. But this is secondary to the insight that it gives each month into the religious and secular roots of pharmacy. It is good to look back occasionally at some of the history and traditions of pharmacy and this calendar acts as a perfect aide mémoire for moments of quiet reflection of what has been. In practical terms it would make an excellent New Years present for a colleague or indeed for anyone with an interest in pharmacy's rich history.

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