

'The Healing Presence of Art' by Richard Cork

A new book on the history of art in western hospitals is a comprehensive survey of a rich artistic heritage that traces the different roles art has played in the care of the sick, writes Charles Saumarez Smith

Years ago, when I was doing an A-level in Art History, one of the questions was 'What work of art would you hang in a hospital?' It was a puzzling question and I remember my history master saying that it wasn't clear whether the answer should be an anodyne picture of flowers or the *Isenheim Altarpiece*.

Richard Cork, who was recently elected an Honorary Fellow of the RA, has now provided the definitive answer to this question in a comprehensive and magisterial monograph. The Italians had a benign view as to what should be depicted in order to encourage suffering patients. In the Ospedale di Santa Maria della Scala in Siena, Domenico di Bartolo depicted acts of mercy in his fresco, *Care of the Sick* (1441-42), and in Borgo San Sepolcro, Piero della Francesca painted the Madonna wrapping her cloak round the patrons of the local hospital, which was built just outside the town by the Compagnia di Santa Maria della Misericordia.

In northern Europe, the sick were not so lucky. In the hospital built by Cardinal Rolin in Beaune, Rogier van der Weyden's depiction of the Last Judgment (1443-51) shows God weighing up souls and sending the majority to Hell. Most terrifying of all was Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, in which patients were forced to contemplate the full horrors of the plague. Cork relocates these works to their original circumstances as weapons in the war against sickness.

When it comes to the history of British art, Cork brilliantly conveys the extent to which hospitals provided a public arena for the display of art, long before the existence of museums. Indeed, some of the greatest works of art were commissioned for hospitals, including Caius Gabriel Cibber's wonderful carvings, *Melancholy* and *Raving Madness* (1872-78) which welcomed one into the gates of Bethlem Hospital, Sebastiano Ricci's painting of the Resurrection of Christ in the apse of the Royal Hospital, Chelsea (c.1714) and James Thornhill's ceiling painting for the Royal Hospital in Greenwich (1708-27). William Hogarth offered to paint the staircase in St Bartholomew's Hospital for free in order to prevent a foreigner, Jacopo Amigoni, securing the commission and he encouraged his friends and contemporaries to donate paintings to the Foundling Hospital in order to establish a public gallery of art.

We do not nowadays think of hospitals as obvious places for displaying art. They are antiseptic places for curing the sick. But they used to be regarded in terms of the care of the soul, where art would exercise its therapeutic qualities.



Piero della Francesca 'Madonna della Misericordia' (detail of Misericordia Polyptych) 1445-61. Pinacoteca Comunale, Sansepolcro. © 2010/Photo Scala, Florence/Courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali.



Matthias Grünewald, 'Temptation of St Anthony' (detail), a panel from the Isenheim Altarpiece, 1506-15. Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar.