

'The Man Who Paints Those Dreadful Pictures...'

Francis Bacon and The Oral Diseases Textbook

David McGowan

Medical illustration is part of the spectrum of artistic expression as well as serving a more prosaic practical function. The drawings and paintings used in the past have perhaps a power to shock and disturb beyond the ubiquitous clinical photographs of today. Francis Bacon (1909-1992) the Anglo-Irish painter who was famous for, amongst others, his 'Screaming Pope' picture was apparently inspired or even obsessed by, an illustrated textbook on oral diseases, which he found in a Paris bookshop when living there as a young man in the 'thirties.' His work often features dramatic elements based on these images. Far from the decorative, Bacon's output reflects his tortured life experience in unforgettably dramatic images. In an interview for *The Guardian*, David Sylvester asked him, 'The open mouths - are they always meant to be a scream?' Bacon replied:

"Most of them, but not all. You know how the mouth changes shape. I've always been very moved by the movements of the mouth and the shape of the mouth and the teeth. People say that these have all sorts of sexual implications, and I was always very obsessed by the actual appearance of the mouth and teeth, and perhaps I have lost that obsession now, but it was a very strong thing at one time. I like, you may say, the glitter and colour that comes from the mouth, and I've always hoped in a sense to be able to paint the mouth like Monet painted a sunset."

He referred to this source again in another interview with Sylvester:

"Another thing that made me think about the human cry was a book I bought when I was very young from a bookshop in Paris, a second-hand book with beautiful hand-colored plates of diseases of the mouth, beautiful plates of the mouth open and of the examination of the inside of the mouth; and they fascinated me, and I was obsessed by them. And then I saw — or perhaps I even knew by then — the *Potemkin* film, and I attempted to use the *Potemkin* still as a basis on which I could also use these marvelous illustrations of the human mouth. It never worked out though."

The on-line *Wikipedia* notes that, "Bacon visited Paris in 1935, purchasing there a second-hand book on diseases of the mouth containing high quality hand-coloured plates of

both open mouths and oral interiors, which both haunted and obsessed him for the remainder of his life. (Bacon had sinus problems since childhood and had undergone an operation on the roof of his mouth at some stage in the mid-1930s.) He also saw, for the first of many times, Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin* in 1935, the scene of the nurse screaming on the Odessa steps later becoming a major theme in his paintings, with the angularity of Eisenstein's image often combined with the thick red palette (sic) of his recently purchased medical tome."

In his biography of Bacon, Michael Peppiatt also links the nurse's scream with the oral diseases text book and states that:

"If Francis had not seen Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* in Berlin he certainly did so in Paris: in that masterpiece, it was the nurse's bloodied face and terrified scream in the Odessa step sequence which riveted him. Shortly after he settled in Paris, this obsession led him to find a medical book with hand-painted illustrations of diseases of the mouth. The 'beautiful colours' which it showed of the inside of the mouth fascinated him: he bought the book and later kept it to hand in his studio, referring to it constantly when he came to paint his own versions of the human cry. This early interest in pathological conditions no doubt reflects an inherent morbidity in the young man, but it is also worth remembering that the Surrealists were drawn to clinical photography....later

Bacon kept sheaves of old clinical photographs in his studio showing extreme cases of hysteria in both men and women; and he was particularly fascinated by those in which the manifestations of the illness were indissociable from those of sexual ecstasy."

Note: Which textbook was the source of Bacon's inspiration, and who was the artist responsible for such an influential image? Have our readers any suggestions?

REFERENCES

Title quotation from Margaret Thatcher.

1. Series: 'Great Interviews of the 20th Century' *Guardian*. Extracts from interviews with Bacon, 1963, 1966, 1979.
2. *Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma*, Peppiatt M., Weidenfield and Nicholson, London, 1996, p. 34.

Author: David A McGowan, Emeritus Professor of Oral Surgery, Rhu.



The Head, Francis Bacon, 1948.
Wikipedia.



The Nurse. Still from Eisenstein's, *Battleship Potemkin*.