

An anatomist among the artists

William Hunter at the Royal Academy of Arts.

R. COLL PHYSICIANS



Show 'em how it's done: physician William Hunter explains the details of the human form to an audience of artists. He also used his position to lecture on the relationship between art and nature.

Martin Kemp

When the newly founded Royal Academy of Arts appointed William Hunter, the Queen's obstetrician, to be their first Professor of Anatomy in 1769, they were following European precedent, albeit belatedly. From the sixteenth century onwards, academies of fine arts, dedicated to elevating art from craft to intellectual pursuit, had taught anatomy, perspective and other branches of knowledge deemed essential for the 'learned' painter or sculptor.

No doubt the academy expected its new professor to 'stick to his last' — a phrase derived from Pliny's anecdote about Apelles' reply to a shoemaker. When a cobbler criticized the great Greek painter for mistakes in his portrayal of the sandal, Apelles was happy to listen, but when the artisan went on to criticize the painting of a leg, the painter's riposte was blunt. Hunter's specialist 'last' would have been to instruct aspiring masters in the structures of the human body, above all the bones and muscles that determined posture and expression.

In the event, the academy got more than it bargained for. In his series of lectures, preserved in incomplete notes in the University of Glasgow, Hunter ranged far beyond the ostensible subject of his teaching. He volunteered firm views on that

most vexed of subjects, the 'imitation' of nature. His view, as a man of British eighteenth-century science committed to an unrelenting empiricism, was that the role of art was to achieve as exact an imitation of natural appearance as possible.

He declared that "the superiority of Nature over Art seems to shine forth in almost every thing". Thus, "in the Fine Arts the more precise the imitation of Nature is ... the more striking I should suppose the effect will be". He concludes that "a painter or sculptor ... cannot copy Nature too exactly, or make deception too strong". His models of perfect imitation were the coloured casts of wombs and foetuses that he had made in conjunction with his great 1774 book of obstetrics, *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*.

The ambitious president of the new Academy, Joshua Reynolds, would not have been able to stomach such a radical view of naturalistic imitation. He was committed to the idealizing aesthetic traditionally promulgated by the academies. He told his audience in his own lectures that "nature herself is not to be too closely copied", as "a mere copier of nature can never produce anything great". Reynolds's ideal was to imitate the great masters of antiquity, and their peers, such as Raphael and Michelangelo.

The presence of Reynolds at one of

Hunter's lectures is recorded in a fascinating painting by Johann Zoffany (above), now on show until 27 November at the National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh, in an exhibition celebrating 500 years of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh.

Hunter is actively engaged in demonstrating anatomical points from a living model. He is also accompanied by a suspended skeleton and a life-size cast of a flayed criminal. Reynolds, along with fellow academicians and a few token students, listens to the good doctor through his ear trumpet.

Reynolds might have marginalized Hunter's views, dismissing them as coming from someone who was not a professional authority on the Fine Arts (even if he was a significant collector). But the future was to lie more with Hunter's direct and raw access to nature than with the president's lofty idealism. The naturalistic tendency, epitomized in Britain by John Constable's landscapes, was to become a rising force in European art, redefining the 'science of art' in the direction of empiricism rather than the Platonic ideals espoused by the academicians. Hunter's insistent voice clearly played a role in this process.

Martin Kemp is professor of the history of art at the University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 1PT, UK.