nature cell biology

The art behind the science

Scientific images should not be seen as by-products of scientific research but as art in their own right. As science funding bodies are now coming to realize, exhibiting this artwork can also serve to highlight the science that created it

Cell biology is one of the most visual branches of science, and generates beautiful pictures of complex scientific results in an array of Technicolor fluorescence. You only have to look at the covers of *Nature Cell Biology* since our launch to appreciate the beauty that microtubules, mitotic cells, *Drosophila* wing discs and more can generate. The front cover of this very issue is a beautiful and striking image that illustrates the complex interaction between adhesion and signalling. This image and others throughout the issue are works of art in their own right, and are probably not appreciated as such by scientists and the public alike.

However, the link between art and science has not gone unnoticed by everyone and nowhere is this link more apparent than at the Harvard University Museum of Natural History, Boston (http://www.hmnh.harvard.edu). The museum plays host to an amazing collection of 830 glass plants, which was started in 1886 and took 50 years to finish, by Leopold Blaschka and his son, Rudolph. These anatomically and scientifically accurate reproductions of flowers, seeds and diseased plants, would, even today, be an asset to any undergraduate lecture on plant development. No one who visits this exhibition, scientist or not, will fail to be enthralled by the endeavour needed to generate this collection or the beauty of its results. Whether the public actually appreciates the science behind the art is unclear, but hopefully some seeds of interest in plant biology will be cultivated.

Here in the UK the potential links between art, science and the public are also constantly explored by the British Association for the Advancement of Science (http://www.britassoc.org.uk). The association has realized that one of the best ways to generate interest in science is to bridge the gap with the 'other culture' and display science in the most visual way possible. For example, its recent festival (http://www.creatingsparks.co.uk), featured exhibitions of pictures and plays with scientific themes by top British actors and actresses to emphasize the use of artistic media to portray science. Other big players in the UK science and art scene also provided financial support for events at the festival, emphasizing the eagerness of these societies to portray the art behind the science. These visual exhibitions are often the best way to attract public interest in the science behind the art and to encourage the art culture to bond with its scientific neighbour.

In addition, the SicArt scheme, run by the Wellcome Trust, increases the bond between artists and scientists by taking art into the lab. The scheme provides sponsorship for collaborations between scientists and artists (http://www.sciart.org). These collaborations lead to new artwork on a scientific theme and allow the scientists to develop their creative side!

Perhaps it is time to step back and appreciate the beautiful images generated by scientists through their everyday work and to realize that one of the best ways to generate public interest in science is to expand its visualization. The literal beauty of scientific results is often ignored, but so is the visual beauty of these achievements. Outstanding graphics, whether they are fluorescent images, complex representations of models, movies or photographs, should be given the prominence they need to encourage public interest in science. As we all know, images generated in the lab make excellent posters, slides for talks, figures and front covers, but they can also become great advertising material for the science behind the art — long may we continue to see excellent front cover images here at *Nature Cell Biology* and a global appreciation of the art behind the science. □