

The artistic heritage of the Mexican National Academy of Medicine: two important pieces

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The following work was presented as part of the 150th anniversary celebration of the *Academia Nacional de Medicina de México* (ANMM), on April 24th 2013. It refers to two important assets possessed by our Academy: the statue of Asclepius and *The Painting of the Academicians in 1923*.

The ANMM keeps custody of a variety of objects, the richness of which probably does not depend so much on their number or economic value, but on their meaning and what they represent in the history of our corporation. These are material objects that are witness and testimony of different and varied events, phenomena and situations; things that have an intimate nature and a history, which are palpable signs of the moment and circumstances in which they arose, of the motive they resulted from. Let us address first the statue.

The Asclepius Statue

The statue currently standing in the auditorium of the ANMM is not the one initially located in that place (Fig. 1). The first one was donated in 1926 by Dr. Florestán Aguilar Rodríguez, an honorary member of the ANMM and odontology professor by the University of Madrid, who arrived to Mexico for personal reasons. He made many friends among the physicians of the ANMM and, prior to his return home, he presented the statue, which was placed in a solemn session on October 1st 1927. Speeches were delivered by doctors Tomás Perrín and Everardo Landa, president of the ANMM in those days. Dr. Víctor Espinoza de los Reyes said about the statue: "Since then, his superb image has been staring at us from the left of the presidium with his serene head rested and calmed grace, for many years." Dr. Vicente

Guarner added: "One happy day, by his own foot, he appeared and stayed with us", and, personally, I add that he adapted and was happy for many years, watching the best Mexican physicians passing from 1927 to 1985.

But one day, nature showed us its strength and we suffered the terrible earthquake that we all remember with uneasy feelings. Asclepius fell off his pedestal and the stucco structure broke into a thousand pieces.

In 1991, being general secretary, Dr. Víctor Espinoza de los Reyes looked into the damages left by the earthquake, he saw the hundreds of boxes containing books and documents belonging to the library and the archive, paintings and valuable objects; some got lost and others were found later. Then, he embarked on the task of cleaning, ordering, and searching. With regard to the destroyed Asclepius statue, he thought that among the lost goods, something had to be found that would provide information on its background. Nothing was retrieved in that moment. The search became an obsession: "If we didn't replace it, the premises of the



Figure 1. Statue of Asclepius, currently found at the ANMM auditory.

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Academy would not have its current category". Finally, Dr. Espinoza found or obtained a photograph that became our lead.

In those days, an uncle of mine, Francisco García Valdecasas, pharmacologist, professor at the University of Barcelona and very interested in Mexican history and painting, was still alive. He had visited Mexico several times. With Espinoza de los Reyes' consent, I sent him the picture in order for him to investigate its origin. He answered immediately, informing us that the original was found in the Anthropology Museum of Barcelona and he gave us a review of its history. Furthermore, he added: "I will be travelling soon to Mexico". He had been appointed academician by the Pharmaceutical Sciences Academy of Mexico.

It should be mentioned that, when he received the picture, accompanied by Dr. Moisès Broggi i Vallès, he went to the Anthropology Museum, which was located on a hill at the Santa Madona-Parc de Montjuïc. There, they found the Asclepius statue and verified it was the same as the one in the photograph we had sent.

At his arrival to the country, he was impressed with the amount of debris the Academy and its objects had turned into. As a consequence of his visit, short after, in 1992, I travelled to Barcelona with doctors Víctor Espinoza de los Reyes, Carlos MacGregor, Francisco Durazo and Adolfo Martínez Palomo, all of them academicians and former presidents of the ANMM. Then we were able to observe the original statue of Asclepius in the Anthropology Museum, occupying an important space in order to allow for it to be admired. In that occasion, Espinoza de los Reyes said: "We had the pleasure of listening Professor García Valdecasas say that the manufacture of a copy of Asclepius was almost assured".

Dr. Broggi and Professor García Valdecasas spoke with the director of the museum, Professor Ricardo Batista, and explained their wish to obtain a copy of the Asclepius statue. He told them that, sadly, the only artist capable of making that work had retired. However, at their insistence, the director gave them his address, but warned them that he was a difficult man, that wouldn't accept his retirement in spite of having the required age, arguing: "I'm not a laborer, I am an artist; I don't accept to be retired as a laborer". Nevertheless, they went to visit him at his place and exposed their wish; the artist refused to do the work, adding that he was not going to change his mind at all. On their way out, Valdecasas turned to Broggi and told him: "It is such a pity, since Mexicans are going to be left without their statue". When he heard them, the artist uttered: "Mexicans? What do they have to do

with this?". The Catalonians explained him the situation, the man remained silent and, after a while, he finally said: "If it is for Mexico, I will do it, and for free". And, indeed, this is exactly what happened.

From the result of this conversation, some have deducted that this man was also the first creator of the statue. It has also been speculated that he had some relative in Mexico. I have not found any proof of this or that, but the truth is that the word Mexico changed his decision. His name was Javier Mayas and, as previously mentioned, he did not charge for his work.

In early 1993, the good news was confirmed: the statue was finished and a series of procedures had to be followed in order to enable its transportation from Spain to Mexico. Since it was an international shipment, paperwork had to be done before the Generalitat of Catalonia, the Catalonian Council, etc. Just think that it was the first time something like this was done and there were no precedents. Additionally, customs authorities found the shipment description "Academy to Academy" very strange, and wondered who was going to cover the taxes.

Very well packaged and protected, the statue arrived to Mexico, transported free of charge by the Spanish Airways Company, but something similar happened here: it was classified as an artwork and assigned a value of five million pesos, which meant an enormous amount of taxes. Espinoza de los Reyes handed me the tax receipt and told me: "Let's see if you can fix this, because neither the Academy, nor you or me, have this amount".

It was then that I got convinced that Asclepius is a god. I happened to remember that my daughter Frida worked at the Ministry of Finance and, besides, she was convinced that the phrase "Academy to Academy Donation" was truthful, since she had heard many times talking about the problem of the Asclepius statue at home. I told her about the problem and she explained to me how to demonstrate to the treasury authorities that it was truly a donation. This way, we managed to release the statue from customs for an affordable and fair amount; I believe it was 12,000 pesos.

When the box arrived to the Adademy, Dr. Espinoza de los Reyes decided not to open it right away; this task would be entrusted to a woman friend of him, who was a specialist in the subject. He explained to me: "It would be terrible that, after all the distance this statue has travelled, we would damage it due to rush or carelessness".

The statue arrived by one o'clock in the afternoon and the next day arrived the expert who, with extreme care and with the help of staff from the Academy,

unpacked the magnificent Asclepius, placed it, and illuminated it properly. Once exposed, I sent for the young man who took care of multiple and diverse activities in the Academy and asked him if he had been in touch with the statue; he answered that he had dusted it every day. "Then, do you know it well? – I said –. Would you please examine the one they sent us? Observe it carefully from every angle, maybe you'll find something different". He inspected it thoroughly and acknowledged that it was identical, that I could rest assured. If I remember correctly, his name was Alejandro Moreno.

The ANMM did not make any expenditure and, indeed, the donation denomination was respected.

To express its gratitude and to unveil the Asclepius statue, on April 30th 1993, the ANMM organized a solemn ceremony. The auditorium was full and the audience looked pleased and happy. All academicians who were currently members were present. Asclepius was where he was supposed to be and the unveiling ceremony was carried out with great sobriety and category. First, the lights were turned off and everything remained in darkness; then, the statue was suddenly illuminated. It didn't take long for an ovation to break out; all academicians welcomed the statue with a big round of applause.

The act was spiced up by a chamber orchestra and there were two speeches, one by Professor Francisco García Valdecasas, on behalf of the Catalonian Academy, and the second, by Dr. Víctor Espinoza de los Reyes, on behalf of the ANMM. They were warmly cheered. Later, Dr. Pelayo Vilar organized a dinner full of liveliness and comradeship. The Catalonian professors were very pleased.

The next day, a paella was organized to congratulate the Catalonian professors for their appointment as academicians by the Royal Academy of Medicine of Catalonia and their acceptance in the ANMM. They were mainly doctors Jacint Corbella, Broggi I Vallès, Francisco García Valdecasas, José Massons and Josep Laporte I Salas (back then president of the Royal Academy of Medicine of Catalonia); some other doctors escape my memory.

Dr. Moisès Broggi I Vallès, at that moment former president of the Royal Academy of Medicine of Catalonia, merits a few special words. An excellent physician and big humanist, he was persecuted by Francisco Franco since the war was over, which kept him from working, in spite people being very fond of him. He survived with great effort, since everything was banned to him. He recovered when Franco died. He was a

good friend of Dr. Pelayo Vilar Puig, former president of the ANMM. Due to the Spanish civil war, there were many cases similar to that of Dr. Broggi, who, being president of the Catalonian Academy of Medicine, came to Mexico, which made him very happy. A memory is also deserved by Dr. Hugo Aréchiga, restless organizer of this adventure.

In addition to Asclepius' statue, other very beneficial results were obtained: relations between both academies, Catalonian and Mexican, were strengthened, scientific support agreements were signed and, since then, academicians from both countries have been received at both academies, in numbers already being considerable.

Thus, since 1993, Asclepius, god of Medicine, keeps presiding over the ANMM sessions with dignity and wisdom.

The painting of the academicians in 1923

When stepping out of the ANMM auditory, at some moment before crossing the external door, the sight inevitably stops at the academician's painting hanging from the upper wall (Fig. 2). The painting is a source of multiple and rich information on the history of the ANMM.

In 1955, José Joaquin Izquierdo named it *The painting of the academicians in 1923*, and with this name it is still known nowadays. In 1923, the academician Dr. Daniel Vélez had the painting made, which represents a solemn session at the ANMM. At that moment, he wasn't occupying any post in the board of directors; actually, he never did, and it has not been possible to find out if he paid for and donated the work to the Academy.

The painter was Daniel del Valle, who made it between 1923 and 1924. The dimensions of the painting are 1.30 x 2.20 m and it includes the 69 members the ANMM had then.

The author took a picture of almost all academicians posing the way he had decided to group them and, later, in his workshop, he made the individual study. They all appear gathered in the big boardroom of the Ministry of Health premises, where the Academy used to hold its sessions back then.

In 1923, the president of the ANMM was Dr. Gabriel Malda, and vicepresident, Dr. Fernando Ocaranza, who later became president in 1924, when the annual secretary was Isidro Espinoza de los Reyes, father of Víctor Espinoza de los Reyes, who, being president, had the painting restored in 1989.

In 1925, the painting was placed in the Palace of the Old School of Medicine, entering into the small room



Figure 2. The painting of the academicians in 1923.

al the left, from where the assembly hall used to be accessed. Due to construction works made in the building, the painting was stored and remained forgotten for 20 years, a situation that unavoidably damaged it. In 1951, it was found by Dr. Luis Gutiérrez Villegas, in those times vicepresident of the Academy; he had it restored and, in 1952, he placed it in the boardroom and library. It should be mentioned that the original work was modified with this repair, a circumstance that will be addressed later.

At some moment, the painting was hung in the main auditory of the Congress Unit of the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social but, like the Asclepius statue, the painting was terribly damaged with the 1985 earthquake and was stored in the basement until, in 1989, it was newly restored by Jorge A. Meave Villaseñor, being president, as previously mentioned, Dr. Víctor Espinoza de los Reyes.

Doing a little background on the painting, in 1955, the architect Federico Mariscal, a friend of José Joaquín Izquierdo, expressed the following opinion: "It is quite rare finding a painting depicting a society that makes us faithfully know its members, without being a mere overcrowding of figures. But it is even rarer to find a painting that, in spite of the great difficulties in presenting so many people, shows variety in the different

groups, interest and unity as a whole. It is easy falling into ridiculous or inexpressively affected details in such large ensembles. The artist did not only avoid those defects, but he managed to raise interest and obtain variety in the composition. It is a pity that the restoration altered the tones and blurred some figures or part of them. The green color of the background is monotone and heavy, and some of the dickies of the shirts in the last row have a false blueish hue."

The painter Daniel de Valle was the last of Salomón Piña's pupils, who in turn was taught by Pelegrín Clavé. According to the same architect, he experienced the decline of the Academy of Fine Arts, which paralleled the decline of Porfirio Diaz regime. Meave Villaseñor points out: "While great inspiration and displays do not shine in his works, he was always discrete and thorough. Let's not blame those who, in an era of decay, were not able to overcome an aged and deeply rooted school".

The architect's opinion on the painter is harsh. Del Valle was also the author of the painting *Moctezuma II visits in Chapultepec the portraits of his ancestors*, oil on canvas, currently under the care of the National Museum of Art of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA), which earned a contest organized by the former National School of Fine Arts. During the 20th Century, the

search for a national identity produced an exceptional rise in the diffusion of history through arts, which was echoed by Del Valle, who grew in the middle of an era of revolutions in culture and art, with scientific thought and positivism settled firmly in their core.

Experts say that Del Valle stood out as a portrait painter, since he was gifted in capturing the essence of faces and making the eyes of the character follow the observer to any point. Del Valle died in 1935, and currently he is hardly known in the annals of history.

Although he does not admit it openly, there is suspicion that Izquierdo orchestrated the 1951-1952 restoration. This allowed for him to make slight changes in the painting as well as to make a very personal interpretation of it, not necessarily reflecting the opinion of the academic community. According to him, the painting depicts three categories of men that, in 1923, represented the evolutive moment of the Academy: those who witnessed its past, those who promoted a better present and, finally, those arriving as promises of a new future. It is not difficult imagining that he placed himself in this last category.

Naturally, the attention is directed to the three characters performing the experimental demonstration. They are José Joaquín Izquierdo, Fernando Ocaranza and Francisco de P. Miranda. In other words, the promises of a new future. Who decided that they should be the focus of the painting? We don't know. In 1923, Izquierdo was 30 years old and he had already been in Harvard, but not in Cambridge. He had joined the Academy in 1923 and became president the next year. He decided to appear performing a bilateral resection of the deferent canal of the guinea pig, as a testimony of his works on physiology of the testicle. Both Izquierdo and Ocaranza were admirers of Claude Bernard and loyal followers of what they themselves called "physiological thought".

Sitting behind appear Ricardo E. Manuell, Ricardo E. Cicero and Jesús Arroyo, who might correspond to those promoting a better present.

Those occupying the places of the board of directors, without precisely being members of the board at that moment, are Manuel Villada, Manuel S. Soriano and Manuel Toussaint. Clearly, they were the witnesses of the past; all three were born before 1850.

In 1955, Izquierdo refers with warm approval to Villada and Soriano, but he fails to mention Toussaint, the prestige of whom was international.

In general, the painting is an excellent allegory of Mexican medicine and the Academy of that time.

Izquierdo describes 1923 as a difficult year for the Academy, but he comforts himself adding that "the center of the painting has the starting point for future advances, where the artist makes the attention of all academicians converge". He also adds that professors of the very novel Military Medical School, who participated in the foundation of the Mexican Society of Biology, were starting to arrive to the Academy. These lines would correspond to his identikit picture, which also can be seen, since in the original painting, of which only a very bad photograph exists, the two parallel red lines on his trousers appearing in the current painting and that bear testimony to his military background, are missing.

I reiterate that the painting suffered changes when it was restored in 1951. Particularly, I was able to notice this when I discovered the presence of a character that attracted my attention as an investigator for several years: Dr. Daniel Vergara-Lope Escobar. In the 1923 version, he is looking to the left, and in the 1951 restoration he is turning to the right. I ignore what could have been the cause for this modification. From 1895 on and until his death in 1938, this physiologist devoted himself to refute the barometric anoxemia theory, which proposed that the inhabitants of the Valley of Mexico had intellectual anemia for living in a zone with lower oxygen concentration. For many years I studied his scientific work without having the slightest idea on how his face looked. *The painting of the academicians in 1923*, in addition to being an artistically appealing work, is very valuable from the historical point of view, since it depicts an era and the human beings that once comprised the ANMM.

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