

Making History: Lessons from the *Great Moments* Series of Pharmaceutical Advertisements

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ABSTRACT

The authors shed light on present-day pharmaceutical advertisements by looking back to an important early chapter in pharmaceutical company-sponsored promotion: the *Great Moments in Medicine* and *Great Moments in Pharmacy*, a series of commercial paintings produced by Parke, Davis & Company between 1948 and 1964. Beginning in the early 1950s, Parke-Davis delivered reproductions of the *Great Moments* images to physicians and pharmacies throughout the United States and Canada and funded monthly pullout facsimiles in key national magazines. The images also appeared in calendars, popular magazines, and “educational” brochures. By the mid-1960s, articles in both the popular and the medical press lauded the *Great Moments* for “changing the face of the American doctor’s office” while describing the painter, Robert Thom, as the “Norman Rockwell” of medicine.

The authors’ brief analysis uses source material including popular articles about the *Great Moments*, existing scholarship, previously unexamined artist’s notes, and, ultimately, the images themselves to explain why these seemingly kitschy paintings attained such widespread acclaim. They show how the *Great Moments* tapped into a 1950s medical climate when doctors were thought of as powerfully independent practitioners, pharmaceutical companies begged the doctor’s good graces, and HMOs and health plans were nowhere to be seen. The authors conclude by suggesting that the images offer important lessons for thinking about the many pharmaceutical advertisements that confront present-day doctors, patients, and other consumers.

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Between 1948 and 1964, Parke-Davis Pharmaceuticals commissioned portrait artist Robert Thom to create a series of 85 oil paintings entitled *Great Moments in Medicine* and *Great Moments in Pharmacy*.¹ The expressed purpose of these images was to memorialize highlights in the histories of medicine and pharmacy from antiquity to the “present day.” As explained by George Bender, Thom’s collaborator and a Parke-Davis pharmacist, the *Great Moments* paintings depicted stories of outstanding persons and events whose contributions “moved medicine

forward” while providing a medium through which doctors, pharmacists, and the general public could reach a better understanding of “what advances in medicine, throughout the centuries, meant to the better health and welfare of our modern-day civilization.”²

Starting in 1951, Parke-Davis distributed boxed sets of reproductions to physicians throughout the United States and Canada and subsidized monthly inserts of each image in *Modern Pharmacy* magazine.^{2,3} Prints with subject matter ranging from “Avicenna: The ‘Persian Galen’ ” to “Pasteur: The Chemist Who Transformed Medicine” (Figure 1) to “Röntgen: Invisible Rays That Save Lives” soon adorned the walls of countless waiting rooms, pharmacies, and private homes. The images, which were widely reproduced in calendars, popular magazines, and educational brochures, became the subjects of a full-length promotional movie that explained the “story behind the story” by retracing the production of each image. Thom’s original oil paintings also toured medical conferences throughout the United States and Canada, where they were shown in special exhibitions. By the

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Figure 1. "Pasteur: The Chemist Who Transformed Medicine." Used with permission, courtesy of Pfizer Inc.

mid-1960s, articles in both the popular and the medical presses lauded the *Great Moments* for "changing the face of the American doctor's office" while describing Thom as the "Norman Rockwell" of medicine.^{4,5}

Why did these seemingly kitschy images achieve such success? Commentators in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s attributed the unexpected popularity of the *Great Moments* series to Thom's and Bender's ability to recreate defining moments in the history of medicine and pharmacy with an attention to detail that provided viewers with an unmediated glimpse of prior eras. Numerous articles described the two men's "intensive research," passion for "accuracy," and nearly obsessive concern with the "authenticity" of clothes, mores, medical instruments, and other particulars, of ancient Peru, turn-of-the-century Britain, revolutionary France, and other epochs and locales.^{5,6} Thom himself was quoted as saying that "You can't fake history. You have to know how people lived, what they wore, their physical surroundings, the architecture and furniture of the time, the tools of the physi-

cians and the household instruments. My responsibility is to make you forget they're paintings and feel that you're actually there."⁷ "Twenty years from now," the artist explained, "people will forget the paintings were done today."⁴

From today's perspective, however, it seems clear that, rather than the historical periods they claimed to depict, the *Great Moments* reproduced the circumstances of their production in the 1940s and '50s. Far from being transparent recordings of real events, these authentically "historical" paintings were actually early pharmaceutical advertisements. This notion was perhaps easy to miss, since the *Great Moments* images per se displayed little overt connection to Parke-Davis or its brand-name medications. The corporate name appeared only on the easily discarded cover letter that accompanied the boxed reproductions, explaining that "this project has been undertaken by Parke-Davis as a service to the public and to the medical profession in an endeavor to portray the rich heritage of scientific and humanistic endeavor which forms the foundation from which today's med-



Figure 2. "Benjamin Rush: Physician, Pedant, Patriot." Used with permission, courtesy of Pfizer Inc.

ical service arises."⁸ Yet the paintings revealed a great deal about medicine's "scientific and humanistic endeavor" and seemingly almost nothing about Parke, Davis, and Company. "Benjamin Rush: Physician, Pedant, Patriot" (Figure 2) focuses entirely on the "professional, moral, and physical courage" of an exhausted Dr. Rush, who leans beside a patient's bed during the 1793 Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic. And in another painting, English surgeon Joseph Lister removes dressings from an uninfected wound in "Lister Introduces Antisepsis." In these and other instances, Thom and Bender portrayed men whose interventions undoubtedly changed the course of medical diagnoses and therapeutics. Yet in each case, as in the series as a whole, these interventions carried no obvious connection to Parke-Davis.

Instead of promoting specific products, the *Great Moments* promoted a company image. As examples of 1950s "institutional" or "corporate-image" advertising, the paintings were meant to convey Parke-Davis's respect for scientific advancement while promoting its positive reputation and "good

name."⁸⁻¹¹ Clinicians were asked to hang images of Rush, Pasteur, or Lister in their waiting rooms with the tacit assumption that the reproductions would be both appreciated as art and connected with a favorable opinion of Parke-Davis. In a rare moment of transparency, the cover letter's claims about Thom's and Bender's methodical precision and accuracy ("the author-artist traveled nearly a quarter million miles over a 10-year period doing research for the stories and pictures in this series, visiting, whenever possible, the actual sites at which the events took place") were connected to similar claims about the company: "For the past century, Parke-Davis has been closely identified with the great advances which have been made in medicine."⁸

In the images, this promotional effect was attained by linking the little-known public image of Parke-Davis with the image of medical practitioners that was widely accepted in the 1950s—while unsubtly promoting pharmaceutical research and practice as fundamental components of medical expertise. To this end, Thom and Bender depicted popular

tales of Marcus-Welby–like great doctors and, to a lesser extent, great pharmacists who, in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds, single-handedly created procedures, devices, or interventions that changed the world. Thom and Bender painted “history” in this manner, in large part because of the prevalence of heroic narratives in popular depictions of doctors in the 1950s,⁶ while at the same time subtly connecting this lineage not only to Parke-Davis, but also to the individual practitioners who hung its promotions on their walls. For instance, boxed portfolios of Thom’s “medical milestones” sent to physicians throughout the United States in the 1950s contained instructions for framing the prints in order to enhance the “professional atmosphere” of an office. “Without realizing it,” the instructions explained, “viewers will be impressed with Medicine’s rich heritage of dedicated service and its continuing efforts to improve the health and well-being of mankind.”⁹

Thom and Bender also repressed aspects of “history” that did not fit with the desired corporate image. For instance, even in the 1950s, historians of medicine understood that what might today be called the “great man” approach to the history of invention was an oversimplification of the ways in which ideas developed as a result of time, numerous economic and social forces, sheer happenstance, or the help of unacknowledged collaborators, in addition, of course, to the contributions of the individual. In a seminal article examining the production of the *Great Moments*, historians Jacalyn Duffin and Alison Li describe how Thom and Bender showed little patience for academic scholarship that complicated their single-inventor–focused approaches to historical narration.¹¹ Instead, in such images as “Benjamin Rush,” “Lister,” “Pasteur,” and “Laennec and the Stethoscope,” to name but a few, the *Great Moments* condensed temporality, geography, and the contributions of countless invisible others onto the body of a lone, often white male who, in a moment of creation, employed precision, exactitude, and perseverance to “revolutionize” the practice of patient care.

In one particularly troubling example, the notion that J. Marion Sims “discovered” the surgical treatment for vesicovaginal fistula in 1849 was roundly called into question by awareness of the sordid history of Sims’ surgical techniques. Sims himself had admitted to “perfecting” the technique by performing the procedure repeatedly on African American women slaves between 1845 and 1848.¹² Nonetheless, Thom’s painting of “J. Marion Sims: Gynecologic Surgeon” collapses this troubling past into a single moment of “creation.”

Thom and Bender also molded “history” to fit a certain image through their selection and depiction of bodies, specially positing a 1950s body ideal as timeless. A worried mother in ancient Greece looks for all the world like Grace Kelly, while papyrus makers in pharaonic Egypt appear to have stepped right out of the local gymnasium. This consis-

tency was far from coincidental, because Thom quite literally painted 1950s bodies—and even the bodies of 1950s pharmaceutical executives—into historical scenes. Work on “Hippocrates: Medicine Becomes a Science” (Figure 3) was probably the best-known example of this method, as Detroit newspapers proudly touted the fact that “local people” appeared as the characters in the painting. The *Detroit Times* reported on February 3, 1958 that George W. Barton, a retired pharmacist and friend of Thom’s, was chosen to play the role of the Father of Medicine after Thom remarked to Barton, “Your nose is the same as Hippocrates [sic], would you pose for me?” Two of Barton’s neighbors, “Mrs. W. C. Patterson, wife of a Michigan Bell Telephone Co., vice president, and their son, James, aged 10” were quite literally added to the historical scene, despite what the article reported to be James’s concerns about “being seen when his dress was limited to a bare minimum.”¹³

Did it work? Precise data on exactly how Thom’s images helped Parke-Davis’s profitability are not available, and may never have existed. However, one episode documented in a 1953 company-wide Parke-Davis interoffice memo entitled “How Robert Thom Sold 1,000 Vials of Penicillin” illustrates the promotional functions of the *Great Moments*. The memo details how a Seattle branch salesman used the “beauty of the paintings” as a strategy to overcome the resistance of the buyer at a certain Washington hospital. He had tried “all the ideas I had to see Sister ____, including a box of candy, asking to check out-dated stock, check for black specks in Sinkamine, bringing catalogue up to date.” But when he took two framed *Great Moments* pictures in and

showed them to the receptionist, really going into rapture over the artistry, colors etc. . . . Sister ____ sent word for the Parke, Davis man to come into her office...I started right away about the pictures and raving about their beauty and how nice they would be hanging in her office...She liked them at once and had to take them out for some of the other Sisters to see. . . . After she examined all of the pictures the subject of our 1,000 vial contract ‘just happened’ to come into the conversation and when I walked out I had an order for \$1,000 worth of Penicillin besides some other items...they all have their HOT BUTTON [sic]. I feel that Robert Thom has found this hot button for me with this previously impenetrable hospital. When I left I felt that the door to this hospital was starting open and I would like to express my thanks to Mr. Thom for this business which I am now enjoying.¹⁰

Perhaps only in retrospect did it become clear that a promotional technique that based its claim to authenticity on a transparent reproduction of the “past” depended, in fact, on a representational system intimately concerned with recreating specific details about the “present.” Instead of shocking



Figure 3. "Hippocrates: Medicine Becomes a Science." Used with permission, courtesy of Pfizer Inc.

their viewers with the unfamiliar sights, smells, and mores of societies from vastly different points in time, the *Great Moments* conveyed a sense of comfort and familiarity that allowed viewers to easily connect past with present, and medical innovation with the good name of Parke-Davis. The telling of history unfolded in ways that effaced the potentially disorienting differences between such disparate locales as fifth-century-BC Greece and eighteenth-century France, while at the same time linking past eras with 1950s America. Doctors, pharmacists, and hospital buyers were then asked to see themselves in the images, and to feel reassured of the timelessness of their highly contextual values, competencies, and identities. It was assumed that such connections bolstered these practitioners' identification with Parke, Davis, and Company in a manner that came to mind when ordering vials of penicillin, bottles of Nutritive Capsules, or other Parke-Davis products.

How ironic, we might think, that this very notion of medicine ultimately locates these pharmaceutical ads in the 1950s. Paintings once lauded for producing unmediated glimpses of recorded time now instead offer glimpses into the almost unimaginable time when doctors were thought of as powerfully independent practitioners, pharmaceutical companies begged the doctor's good graces, and HMOs and PPOs were nonexistent. In subsequent decades in the United States, the doctor-centered system of medical care that Thom and Bender held up as everlasting shifted in direct relation to the influence of corporations such as Parke-Davis. Perhaps not coincidentally, most present-day ads, which similarly convey a set of values and belief systems, relentlessly promote the names of drugs and drug companies. These ads claim that "Allegra treats your allergies" and that "Celexa relieves depression," implicitly suggesting that pharmaceuticals are the agents of change. Meanwhile the clinicians who

were, in the *Great Moments*, held up as the embodiment of medicine's noble past and boundless future, are nowhere to be seen.

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