The art of surgery

Trish Groves

Professor Sir Roy Calne transplants livers and carries heavy responsibility: when patients die he feels that he has betrayed them and their families' trust, but the practical demands of surgery leave him little room to express himself. Last year he began to paint his patients and staff. He says that painting is just as hard as liver transplantation, save for the fact that unsuccessful paintings can be thrown away.

Roy Calne has painted and drawn since childhood, encouraged by his aunt and by his art teacher at school, the son of the painter Russell Flint. As a medical student at Guy's Hospital in London he spent much of his spare time in galleries, particularly the Tate, where staff assumed that his careful copying of work by Degas was an art school assignment. But painting was just a hobby until about five years ago, when he began to seek more technical training. Chinese surgeon Earl Lu showed him how to use oriental brushes to apply broad sweeps of colour, and artist Ron Ranson helped him to translate this into his personal style. Since then Calne has taken every opportunity to learn: he believes that thorough knowledge of technique is essential to good art. His large paintings are executed in oil and acrylic, and he also enjoys doing quick impromptu portraits in watercolours and charcoal.

In May 1988 at Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge, the artist John Bellany had a liver transplant. He astounded and moved everyone by asking for paper, paint, and a mirror within hours of leaving intensive care. By painting himself and the ward before his speech returned he described the experience of recovery from transplant surgery. During this period Calne

asked to paint Bellany as a technical exercise, but the resulting portrait meant much more than that: it was a chance for Calne to express his personal view of his

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Trish Groves, MRCPsych,
editorial registrar

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FIG 1 (left)—Child recovering from a liver transplant operation. FIG 2 (top right)—Attacked by an alligator. FIG 3 (above)—The moment of truth

FIG 4—*The People and their Army*

surgical work. Doctor and patient continued to paint each other and became friends, a special relationship that received considerable publicity with the exhibition of Calne's portrait of Bellany at the Royal Academy.

Painting his patients gives Calne the chance to get to know them. Figure 1 shows a girl of about 18 months, with spindly legs and clubbed fingers, recovering from a liver graft. She was terrified of doctors when she came to hospital, but Calne's visits with paper and paints helped her to trust him. The boy in figure 2 cheerfully explained to his friends that his abdominal scar was an

alligator bite. Calne adds, "I've been called many things in my time..." He has also been able to pay tribute to the staff of the transplant unit by painting them in their work.

Many of his paintings hang in the surgical wards of Addenbrooke's Hospital, and Bellany's work "*The Visit*" holds prime position in the glamorous shopping mall at the hospital's main entrance. Calne has sold some of his paintings and put the proceeds into the transplant research fund. "*The moment of truth*," showing Calne about to graft the donor organ (fig 3), remains in the administrative corridors of the department of surgery: some people (although not Calne) think it too gory for public view.

Calne believes that most important painting arises from strong feelings and cites his statement about the massacre in Tiananmen Square, Peking, last June (fig 4). He used his son and daughter and her friend as central models. He says, "How strange it was for doctors and nurses to concentrate all their efforts on trying to save a few doomed souls while the People's Army were ordered to destroy thousands of their own people." Calne did not paint this immediately; he needed time to think. He was particularly moved by a personal account of the tragedy written by two doctors (22 July, p 269).

When I interviewed Professor Calne he and three other surgeons had performed nine transplants in 11 days. Despite this kind of pressure he is an increasingly prolific and varied painter. He finds time at weekends, on holidays, and in the early morning for major works, and now that he feels more technically competent he can execute quick sketches in odd moments of spare time. He does not know how his work will evolve but wants to learn more, particularly from hard criticism: he suspects that most of his audience is inhibited by politeness.

Why I paint

John Horder

Children enjoy painting pictures when small, but most of them have given up by the age of puberty. Why? And why do a few go on? Obviously other activities, attractive or imposed, compete with painting and perhaps extrude it. But might there also be a different sort of reason? Small children enjoy expressing something inside themselves through colours and shapes on paper. What they first express may look chaotic and unintelligible to others, though not to themselves. They are already beginning to represent the world around them and to imitate the way others do it, and grownups praise this. But the more they learn of the world, the more difficult it becomes to represent it by painting, the more frequent their disappointment with the result, and the less their scope for freedom of expression. Most give it up.

A few, however, go on. I did so—at first clumsily and occasionally—and I owe it to my close family. One older sister was a sculptress; one uncle was an architect; my father loved beautiful buildings and furniture; my mother was a musician by profession. Creating in some way or other was a family assumption. The family also influenced the topics chosen and the forms created.

Harmonies that satisfy the eye

I still have the decisive picture, done at the age of 12. The cottage and the trees are far too dark, the sky far

too light. But that is still the contrast that excites me most and makes me go on painting. I still fall in love with the play of light on land, sky, and water and on some of the buildings made by men. This external influence is essential to me. Others rediscover the child's fascination with things imagined; they create paintings that are more internal and abstract. It is they who have dominated professional art in this century. But amateurs do not need to watch the fashion. One paints for oneself, without regard to what others expect.

Possessing and preserving

If one falls in love one wants to possess and preserve. This is true for visions, whether seen or imagined. It is especially true when a vision is transient. The painter quickly learns that the same scene can change out of recognition within minutes. So why not make a photograph? After all, the photographer also wants to recall and preserve and the camera responds quickly. The best photographs can satisfy the eye and count as works of art.

If painting served only the purpose of recording—or if this were its most important aim—photographs would by now have replaced it. This has not happened. Painters have challenges, freedoms, satisfactions, and risks that go beyond those of the photographer, and their products show this. There is the freedom to

98 Regents Park, London
NW1 8UG
John Horder, CBE, FRCP,
visiting professor, Royal Free
Hospital

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