

An approach to family doctors and their imprint on the history of art

Alain Areces-López¹ , Roxana Vitón-Moreno¹ , Lisbet Labrada-Placeres¹ 

¹ Universidad de Ciencias Médicas de La Habana. Facultad de Ciencias Médicas Artemisa. Artemisa, Cuba.

RESUMEN

Introduction: the practice of general and family medicine transcends the scientific field itself and has had an impact on the most dissimilar facets of life and human creation. **Objective:** to describe the importance of the family doctor in different artistic manifestations throughout history. **Method:** a bibliographic review was carried out in which 19 materials related to the disciplines of Medical Sciences, Public Health, Literature and Art History available in specialized magazines were consulted; they were processed through empirical methods such as observation-description, and theoretical methods such as analysis-synthesis and historical-logical. **Development:** in a context that demands retaking the importance of Primary Health Care and revitalizing the family doctor model, this article delves into its historical and social impact through art. The family doctor has been present in literary works by Honorato de Balzac, Franz Kafka, René Favaloro, Guillermo Franco and others. He has starred in paintings by Rembrandt, Jan Steen and Vincent van Gogh. **Conclusions:** the figure of the family doctor has been the protagonist in several works of universal art, being represented by great artists in literature, plastic arts and more recently on film and television.

Keywords: Art; Primary health care; Literature; Motion Pictures; Public health; Television.

The dizzying progress of science in general, and of medicine in particular, the ever-increasing access to information and new technologies, as well as the constant development of market strategies and human resource management, has resulted in specialization of medical knowledge, and with it, the emergence of complex health care systems in the world¹.

Even so, the humanistic training of those who practice medicine, together with political strategies that reinforce the importance of Primary Health Care, have not undermined the importance of the family doctor, who is confirmed within this sector as the undisputed heir to the traditional practice of medicine¹.

Medical practice has gone through the different stages of humanity adjusted to the socioeconomic context of each culture. It is precisely this social and historical bond that has shaped the image and functions of the family doctor, who, regardless of the region or time in history, has been attributed a singular importance in the lives of human beings².



OPEN ACCESS

Corresponding author: Alain Areces-López
email: alainareces@gmail.com

Published: November 26th, 2021

Received: August 10th, 2021; **Accepted:** August 28th, 2021

Cite as:

Areces López A, Vitón Moreno R, Labrada Placeres L. Un acercamiento al médico de familia y a su huella en la historia del arte. 16 de Abril [Internet]. 2021 [citado: fecha de acceso]; 60 (282): e1406. Disponible en: http://www.rev16deabril.sld.cu/index.php/16_4/article/view/1406

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

The practice of general and family medicine, aimed at comprehensively and continuously guaranteeing the well-being and health of individuals and the community, transcends the scientific field itself and has had an impact on the most dissimilar facets of human life and creation. The doctor becomes not only the protagonist in the fight against disease and death, but also an indispensable actor in modern society, and in this sense, his imprint is reflected by those who have used the human being as a resource to express their vision of the world through art^{1,2,3}.

In today's complex world context, which does not exclude Cuban society, modern medical care is facing what many have called "the crisis of the clinical method" and the "commercialization of health". It is thus imperative to continue addressing the importance of Primary Health Care, and with it, the revitalization of the family doctor and nurse model as pillars of any health system that prioritizes preventive medicine and comprehensive medical care.

This article proposes a new approach to the historical practice of general and family medicine, from the perspective of the doctors themselves and their patients, who left evidence of their professional work in works of art that today constitute testimony of one of the oldest medical specialties.

The objective of this review article is to describe the importance of the family doctor in different artistic manifestations throughout history.

METHOD

A bibliographic review was carried out between September and October 2019 in which 19 materials related

to Medical Sciences, Public Health, Literature and Art History were consulted. This information was obtained through a bibliographic search in physical and virtual texts, available on the internet, which were accessed through the Google Scholar search engine using the combination of the terms "Art", "Primary Health Care", "Literature", "Cinematographic Films", "Public Health", "Television". Articles of historical interest were considered, in English and Spanish languages, which were mostly published after the year 2000. They were processed through empirical methods such as observation-description, and theoretical methods such as analysis-synthesis and historical-logical.

DEVELOPMENT

The family doctor in literature

In universal literature there are numerous exponents who have made the family doctor the protagonist or main character of their literary creation, supported by the drama of the doctor's life and the influence she/he exerts on other people's lives⁴.

Precisely because of that social and personal burden attributed to the professional practice of medicine, numerous essays, short stories, novels and poetic works have been written, which, due to the lengthy comment that would be required, only those that have had the greatest importance are mentioned below.

The French writer Honorato de Balzac (1799-1850), the pinnacle of the universal novel, and undisputed founder of literary realism, left in *The Human Comedy*, the proof of his immense talent: he wrote 91 novels and created 2000 characters, many of which are part of the narrative mythography of all times. Balzac belongs with Cervantes, Stendhal, Dickens, Tolstoi, Galdós, and perhaps Proust to the aristocracy of the Western novel^{4,5}.

In 1833 his work "The Country Doctor" (*Le Médecin de campagne*) was published. It tells the story of Dr. Benassis, a philanthropic doctor, who carries out a gigantic task of improving the living conditions of the population in the Dauphinat. He is a great character in his sense of goodness, a human archetype, but also a creature with his weaknesses and shortcomings⁵.

The novel is in itself a tale of tales, because the characters who concur with the doctor, offer their personal adventures, but also their opinion on the divine and the human, starting with the political and social reality that France was living in the early years of the liberal monarchy of July. Through his protagonist, Dr. Benassis, the author seems to be inclined towards an authoritarian utopia, whose point of view goes beyond the pragmatic immediacy that fueled the fervor of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels⁵.

What matters today about the novel are three fac-

tors in particular: the author's fabulous storytelling ability, the psychological profile of the creatures, and the universal ambition of the doctrinal debate that the text arouses.

Benassis is a doctor, a good country doctor, who does exceptional humanitarian and scientific work. Only that Balzac does not see him as such a doctor and takes him as a springboard to fly much higher. The critics of his time blamed the author for the heterogeneity of his speech, his lack of concentration; but today, those are great virtues and not flaws.

Franz Kafka (1883-1924) was a writer of Jewish origin whose work, written in German, is considered one of the most influential in universal literature. It is full of themes and archetypes of alienation, physical and psychological brutality, parent-child conflicts, characters in terrifying adventures, labyrinths of bureaucracy and mystical transformations⁶.

His long list of works includes novels such as "The Trial", "The Man Who Disappeared", the short novel "The Metamorphosis" and a large number of short stories. In addition, there is an abundance of correspondence and autobiographical writings that associate his peculiar literary style with the artistic philosophy of existentialism and expressionism⁶.

Kafka's story "A Country Doctor", from 1919, has as its protagonist and narrator, a doctor who is torn between his sense of duty and the need to save his maid, a beautiful girl who is about to be raped by an insane coachman. With the sacrifice of Rosa's honor, he achieves nothing, because he fails to save the serious patient he is visiting 10 miles from his home, which shows the error of not weighing legal assets of equal protection before the State, such as the life of the girl and that of the patient, but he had a greater obligation to the young woman⁷.

The figure of the family doctor has not only been approached from the perspective of full-time writers, but the doctors themselves, on many occasions, have made use of their literary skills and exposed their personal and professional experiences.

René Favaloro (1923-2000) was an Argentine educator and heart surgeon who achieved success among the medical and scientific community for having developed the coronary artery bypass using the saphenous vein⁸.

Favaloro published more than 300 papers in his specialty. Due to his passion for history, he wrote two research and popularization books on General José de San Martín. He is also the author of the autobiographies: "From La Pampa to the United States" and "Memories of a Rural Doctor"⁸.

In these works, the author analyzes and describes his activity as a doctor. Between the mid-1950s and early 1962, Favaloro, who would later become the most renowned doctor in Argentina, worked as a rural doctor⁸.

These twelve years of work were the ones that

most marked both, his professional and personal life. The same doctor who will become an eminence years later in Cleveland, working with the most prestigious professionals in international medicine, began his career in the interior of Argentina, and it was that work base that most marked his vocation⁸.

Guillermo Franco Salazar is a Cuban doctor graduated in 1949, Second Degree specialist in Internal Medicine, full member of the Cuban Society of Cardiology, Honorary member of the Cuban Society of Psychiatry, Honorary member of the Society of Neurosciences in its Epileptology branch, associate member of the Cuban Oncology Society, former professor of Internal Medicine at the University of Medical Sciences of Havana and founder of medical teaching in this subject at the Schools of Medicine of Santiago de Cuba and Holguín⁹.

His book "Prisoner of Memories: Memories of a Cuban Doctor" was published in 2002 and offers entertaining, interesting and refreshing stories that manage to catch the reader's attention both for their anecdotal aspect and for their human content¹⁰.

Its brevity prevents us from fatigue and although we are dealing with medical histories, at no time does the specialized terminology overwhelm those unfamiliar with the subject. The prose used fully fulfills its functions within the objective set by the author, which is to transmit his experiences¹⁰.

In the same way, the Spanish Pío Baroja, José Ilic Toro, Felipe Trigo, Ernesto Serigós, Joaquín Carrillo Espinosa, José María Sanz, Marino Gómez Santos and Ernesto Fera Jaldón join the list of authors who dedicated works to family doctors^{4,11}.

The family doctor in painting

The portraits of some doctors, probably well known in their time and in the locality in which they worked, became famous not so much for themselves, but for those who painted them. In the Rijksmuseum there is a portrait of Dr. Efraín Bueno, by Rembrandt. There are also portraits of Dr. Rodrigo de la Fuente by El Greco, Dr. Pietro María de Cremona, Lucía Anguissola and Dr. Alphonse Le Roy by Jacques Louis David³.

Probably one of the most famous portraits ever made of a doctor is that of Dr. Paul Ferdinand Gachet, who treated Vincent van Gogh in his last months of life and was immortalized in a painting that fetched a record price of over \$ 82 million at auction¹².

Dutch painter Jan Steen is best known for his genre scenes depicting somewhat chaotic interiors, often depicting funny, messy, and somewhat rude incidents of family life. His artistic heritage includes several paintings that are variations on the theme of the doctor's visit, giving us a glimpse into domestic life of 17th-century Holland. This was also a recurring theme in the work of Jean Georges Vibert, Gabriel Maetsu and Egbert Van Heemskerck¹³.

The family doctor in film and television

The seventh art has also witnessed multiple attempts to bring the public closer to the lives of doctors. Several films reflect the work of health professionals in hospitals and clinics, and many others delve into the lives of general practitioners and their relationships with patients, their personal conflicts and daily challenges^{2,14}.

Doctor Bull (1933) is the first installment of a trilogy starring Will Rogers and based on a novel by James Gould Cozzens. It tells the story of a doctor from a small town in Connecticut. The protagonist is an elderly doctor, full of experience and good sense, who has spent decades trying to heal his patients or, at least, help them in the hard transition to the afterlife when he cannot heal them¹⁵.

El Viejo Doctor (1939) is an Argentine drama that takes as its starting point the different approach to the practice of medicine of a recently received doctor and his father, who has been practicing medicine for 25 years. The conflict between both characters and the contrast between the two professional conceptions is unleashed as a result of a bad and inopportune medical practice performed by the son to one of his father's patients¹⁶.

El Señor Doctor (1965) is a Mexican film, directed by Miguel M. Delgado and starring Mario Moreno "Cantinflas" who plays a doctor who works in the outskirts of the capital, that is, a rural doctor. He comes across many and diverse technological advances in the field of medicine, so he needs to adapt to new technologies².

In the world of television, the figure of the family doctor has been reflected in series such as the successful "Doctor Quinn" (1998) and "Everwood" (2002), both produced in the United States; "Family Doctor" (1995) and "Doctor Mateo" (2009) in Spain^{17,18,19}.

CONCLUSIONS

The figure of the family doctor has been the protagonist in several works of universal art, represented by great artists in literature, plastic arts and more recently on film and television.

AUTHORSHIP

AAL: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, research, methodology, resources, original writing-draft, writing-review and editing.

IMSM: conceptualization, project management, supervision, validation, visualization, writing-review and editing.

LLP: conceptualization, data curation, research, methodology, resources, original writing-draft.

FINANCING

The authors did not receive funding for this article.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- González BP. Los cuatro pilares de la medicina de familia. Arch Med Fam [Internet]. 2004 [cited 09/09/2020]; 6(2):31-33. Available from: <https://www.medigraphic.com/cgi-bin/new/resumen.cgi?IDARTICULO=9435>
- Ciuffolini MB, Didoni M, Jure H, Piñero A. Cine y literatura como elementos para la mediación pedagógica: Una experiencia desde la medicina familiar. Arch Med Fam [Internet]. 2007 [cited 09/09/2020]; 9(3):142-145. Available from: <https://www.medigraphic.com/cgi-bin/new/resumen.cgi?IDARTICULO=17670>
- Topolanski R. El arte y la medicina. Montevideo: Sindicato médico del Uruguay; 2004.
- Barbado Hernández FJ. Medicina y literatura en la formación del médico residente de medicina interna. An Med Interna (Madrid) [Internet]. 2007 [cited 11/09/2020]; 24(4):195-200. Available from: http://scielo.isciii.es/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0212-71992007000400010&lng=es.
- Tonnellier F, Curtis S. Medicine, landscapes, symbols: The country doctor by Honoré de Balzac. Health Place [Internet]. 2005 [cited 09/09/2020]; 11(4):313-321. Available from: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1353829205000158>
- Brod M, Humphreys-Roberts G. Franz Kafka: a biography. New York: Schocken Books; 1960.
- Kafka F. Un médico rural. Barcelona: Ediciones Brontes S.L.; 2013
- Belén SS, Salas DFA, Ruiz RJM. René Gerónimo Favalaro: Su trayectoria y su polémica decisión. Cir Gen [Internet]. 2012 [cited 11/09/2020]; 34(3):206-212. Available from: <https://www.medigraphic.com/cgi-bin/new/resumen.cgi?IDARTICULO=39854>
- Morales Sales ES. Cuba: historia y sociedad como motivos literarios. Rev Ágora Trujillo [Internet]. 2006 [cited 09/09/2020]; 9(18). Available from: <https://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA173788697&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=13167790&p=IFME&sw=w>
- Franco Salazar G. Prisionero de los recuerdos: memorias de un médico cubano. Sevilla: Editorial Renacimiento; 2002.
- Ilic Toro J. Memorias de un médico rural: treinta años en Villa Alegre. Santiago: Editorial Andrés Bello; 1992.
- Starobinski J. A modern melancholia: Van Gogh's portrait of Dr Gachet. Psychological medicine [Internet]. 1993 [cited 09/09/2020]; 23(3):565-568. Available from: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/psychological-medicine/article/modern-melancholia-van-goghs-portrait-of-dr-gachet/913D26217B2894DAB3C6B5BC18399A7B>
- Heppner A. The popular theatre of the Rederijkers in the work of Jan Steen and his contemporaries. Journ Warburg Courtauld Instit [Internet]. 1939 [cited 09/09/2020]; 3(1/2):22-48. Available from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/750189>
- Weber CM, Silk H. Movies and Medicine: An Elective Using Film to Reflect on the Patient, Family, and Illness. Fam Med [Internet]. 2007 [cited 09/09/2020]; 39(5):317. Available from: <https://www.stfm.org/fmhufm2007/May/Catherine317.pdf>
- Klemenc-Ketis Z, Kersnik J. Using movies to teach professionalism to medical students. BMC Medical Education [Internet]. 2011 [cited 11/09/2020]; 11(1):60. Available from: <https://bmcomeduc.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1472-6920-11-60>
- Lumlertgul N, Kijpaisalratana N, Pityaraststain N, Wangsatunraka. Cinemeducation: A pilot student project using movies to help students learn medical professionalism. Medical Teacher [Internet]. 2009 [cited 09/09/2020]; 31(7):327-332. Available from: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01421590802637941>
- Pintor-Holguín E, Rubio-Alonso M, Herreros Ruíz-Valdepeñas B, Corral-Pazos de Provens OJ, Buzón-Rueda, Vivas-Rojo E. Series médicas en televisión vistas por estudiantes de medicina. Educ Med [Internet]. 2012 [cited 11/09/2020]; 15(3):161-166. Available from: http://scielo.isciii.es/pdf/edu/v15n3/09_original4.pdf
- Gabe J, Bury M. Television and medicine: medical dominance or trial by media? London: Routledge; 1994.
- Comelles JM, Brigidi S. Etnografía, realidad y ficción en los médicos y enfermeras en las series de televisión. España: Publicaciones URV [Internet]. 2016 [cited 11/09/2020]. Available from: <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=6216598>

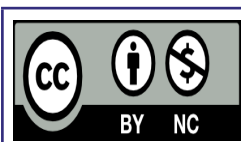
Un acercamiento al médico de familia y a su huella en la historia del arte

RESUMEN

Introducción: el ejercicio de la medicina general y familiar trasciende el propio ámbito científico y ha repercutido en las más disímiles facetas de la vida y la creación humana. **Objetivo:** describir la trascendencia del médico de familia en las distintas manifestaciones artísticas a lo largo de la historia. **Método:** se realizó una revisión bibliográfica en la que fueron consultados 19 materiales relacionadas con disciplinas de Ciencias Médicas, Salud Pública, Literatura e Historia del Arte disponibles en revistas especializadas; fueron procesados a través de métodos empíricos como la observación-descripción, y teóricos como análisis-síntesis y el histórico-lógico. **Desarrollo:** en un contexto que demanda retomar la importancia de la Atención Primaria de Salud y revitalizar el modelo del médico de familia, el presente artículo profundiza en su impacto histórico y social a través del arte. El médico de familia ha estado presente en obras literarias de Honorato de Balzac, Franz Kafka, René Favalaro, Guillermo Franco y otros. Ha protagonizado pinturas de Rembrandt, Jan Steen y Vincent van Gogh. **Conclusiones:** la figura del médico de familia ha sido protagonista

en varias obras del arte universal, siendo representado por grandes artistas en la literatura, la plástica y más recientemente en el cine y la television

Palabras clave: Arte; Atención Primaria de Salud; Literatura; Películas Cinematográficas; Salud Pública; Televisión.



Este artículo de [Revista 16 de Abril](#) está bajo una licencia Creative Commons Atribución-No Comercial 4.0. Esta licencia permite el uso, distribución y reproducción del artículo en cualquier medio, siempre y cuando se otorgue el crédito correspondiente al autor del artículo y al medio en que se publica, en este caso, [Revista 16 de Abril](#).