

**MEDICAL MUSEUMS: WITH  
SPECIAL REFERENCE  
TO THE ARMY MEDICAL  
MUSEUM AT WASHINGTON**

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Medical museums: With Special Reference to the Army Medical Museum at Washington by  
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# MEDICAL MUSEUMS,

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MEDICAL MUSEUM AT WASHINGTON.

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*THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS.*

*Delivered Before the Congress of American Physicians  
and Surgeons, September 20, 1888.*

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BY

JOHN S. BILLINGS, M. D.,  
SURGEON, U. S. A.

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## ON MEDICAL MUSEUMS.

*With special reference to the Army Medical Museum  
at Washington.*

By JOHN S. BILLINGS, M.D.,  
SURGEON, U. S. A.

GENTLEMEN OF THE CONGRESS: Our articles of confederation require that the President shall give an address. In endeavoring to comply with this regulation I must ask your indulgence, for, while I think I have something to say, I cannot give you such a discourse as would befit the audience, the occasion and the subject.

The prominent characteristic of the great majority of the societies composing this Congress is that their members have, as a rule, been chosen because they have either made some valuable contribution to medical literature, or have, in some way, rendered aid to the profession; in other words, they are supposed to be men whose labor and thought have not been confined to their own interests, or to those of their own patients. It may, therefore, be assumed that you are all interested in medical science, not merely as a means of giving new modes of diagnosis or of treatment, but also for its own sake, for the sake of knowing, for the pleasure of investigation, and in the hope of helping others, and that, while the majority have devoted themselves more or less to special branches, they have not, in so doing

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lost interest in what may be for the general good of the whole profession.

I am here as the representative of the medical departments of the general government, which has need of the best knowledge of all the specialties, and is beginning, in its turn, to do something for each.

The physicians in the government service are all general practitioners, and are expected to have such an education and training as will fit them to deal, alone and without consultation, with the diseases and injuries to which men, women, and children are liable. You have been, and still are, their teachers—in the lecture-room and the hospital before they entered the service—in your text-books, monographs, and contributions to journals or transactions which follow them to their widely scattered posts of duty. They are your warm friends; the more you discover, the greater your skill, the more recognition which your work receives, the better they are pleased.

Within the last twenty-five years the general government has, in its turn, done something for medicine and for you, by founding and maintaining a medical library and museum in Washington under the direction of the Medical Department of the Army.

I have had occasion several times to call attention to the library, which no doubt is that part most immediately useful to physicians, and which has attracted most attention. To-night I propose to speak of the other branch, in whose proper development it is desirable that you should take an intelligent interest, and after giving a brief sketch of the development of modern medical museums we will consider more especially our own national medical collection as it is, and as it ought to be.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As a "museum," in the original sense of the word, is a building or place in which are collected objects of interest to the muses—that is, objects of art, literature, etc.—the phrases "medical

The origin of collections of objects of natural history was possibly, as suggested by Beekman, the custom of keeping curious objects in temples; but we have no record of the formation of any collections specially connected with anatomy or medicine before the sixteenth century. It is true that human anatomy had been introduced in the schools by Mundinus in 1306, and that no doubt in Bologna, in Paris, and a few other places, a skeleton or two was preserved for purposes of instruction; but alcohol was unknown as a preservative before the end of the fifteenth century, anatomical details were of no interest until Vesalius had stirred up controversy with the Galenists, and injected preparations were not thought of until after Harvey's announcement, in 1628, of the discovery of the circulation of the blood.<sup>1</sup>

The introduction of the use of the microscope at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and the collections of preparations for use with this instrument made by Leeuwenhoek and Ruysch, gave a powerful stimulus to formation of museums of this kind. The most famous

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museum," "museum of pathology," etc., would have seemed quite improper in the days of Hippocrates, just as the prevailing pronunciation of the word mu'seum grates on the ears of the elders accustomed to the strictly proper way—*i. e.*, muse'um. Custom has, however, so strongly sanctioned the use of the word museum in the sense of a collection of different articles, that it would be folly to attempt to give it a more limited signification, and, though lexicographers still recognize only the word as accented on the penultimate syllable, the tendency to accent the first syllable is so strong and constant that it is safe to predict that mu'seum will, in popular usage in this country, ultimately win the day.

<sup>1</sup> For accounts of the collections formed between the days of King Solomon and the end of the seventeenth century, consult tome ii. of the *Musei Museumum* of Michael Bernhard Valentin, in folio, published at Franckfort in 1714, wherein are curious engravings of many of the wonders contained in these museums. See, also, Hagen (H. A.), *The history of the origin and development of museums*, *American Naturalist*, 1876, x. p. 80.



of these collections was that of Ruysch, purchased in 1717 by Peter the Great, and sent to St. Petersburg. Ruysch was practically the first to prepare injected anatomical specimens for permanent preservation, and, if the stories told of his work are true, he made preparations which have never been surpassed. His museum was a very ornamental one, the bones and skeletons being arranged in various devices, the plants in bouquets, while scattered through the whole were beautifully engrossed sentences from the Latin poets.

The most famous medical museum in the latter half of the eighteenth century was that founded by Fontana, at Florence. This still exists, filling a series of rooms, and consists mainly of wax preparations, beautiful to look at, but inaccurate, and of little scientific value.<sup>1</sup>

During the first half of the present century a number of private collections were formed by anatomists, pathologists and surgeons. Most of these have become public collections, either by gift or purchase, and the rest have been dispersed or destroyed. There is not in existence, at the present time, any large collection of specimens pertaining to human pathology which is the

<sup>1</sup> The first use of wax models to represent pathological specimens or dissected preparations of parts of the human body is attributed to a Sicilian priest, Gaetan Jules Zambo, who lived in the latter part of the seventeenth century, and who had been accustomed to make wax models of diseased or deformed hands, feet, etc., to be used as *ex voto* offerings at the shrines of certain saints. The fame of these induced a Florentine surgeon, Ricci, to visit the priest and to get him to model some pathological specimens which he furnished. A Franciscan, named Desrones, brought this art to France, and made many such models between the years 1703-1706, and Bianchi formed a large collection of the same kind in Italy. It was scattered after his death, and the last vestiges of it were two models representing a healthy and a diseased liver, which were to be seen in Innsbruck in 1766. (Percy et Laurent, in *Dict. des Sci. Méd.*, Paris, 1818, vol. xxxv, article "Museum.")

property of an individual, and is at all comparable to those made by John or William Hunter, Astley Cooper, Howship, Liston or others. Commenting on this fact, Sir James Paget writes me that he does not know of any large private pathological collection, and that he believes the change to be entirely for the better.

The necessities of modern progress in anatomy, physiology and pathology, have led to the creation of medical museums in all parts of the civilized world. In most of the continental capitals these are connected with universities supported by the state. In Great Britain and in this country they are, as a rule, connected with private, or semi-private institutions for medical teaching. This difference is connected with the relative position which medicine holds in the educational machinery of the state in different countries. Where medical education is furnished by institutions directly supported by the government, the museums, which are a part of the apparatus required, are, of course, also supported by the government.

Through the aid of friends, whose kindness in replying, or in obtaining replies, to somewhat troublesome inquiries, I cannot sufficiently acknowledge, I have obtained certain data with regard to some of the most important medical museums now existing in the world, and a part of these data are summarized in the table before you.<sup>1</sup> Evidently the city having the most valuable aggregate of anatomical and pathological specimens at the present time, is London, which contains the collections of the Royal College of Surgeons, of St. Thomas's, Guy's, St. Bartholomew's, St. George's and other hospitals, and of University College, the College of Physicians and others. The oldest public anatomical museum in London is probably that of St. Bartholomew's, which, in 1726, had

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix.

a room set apart for the purpose under the charge of John Freke, and which received the private collection of Abernethy. The most important medical museum in the world, and the one which has exercised the greatest influence in giving direction to anatomical and pathological studies, and in serving as a model for the formation of other collections, is undoubtedly that of the Royal College of Surgeons of London, the foundation of which was the collection made by John Hunter, purchased by the government in 1799. In one sense it is not a government institution, the funds from which it is now supported not coming directly from government grants; but, in another sense, it is truly such, since the College may be looked upon as an agent of the government having special charge of matters connected with medical education, as it is the principal examining body for those proposing to practise surgery in Great Britain.

The great value of the Hunterian collection lies in the breadth of its scope, which includes every branch of medical science; but it is preëminent in illustrations of human morphology and its abnormalities. The museums of the great hospital medical schools are relatively richer in the department of pathological anatomy, specimens of which they have greater facilities for obtaining. Among these there is, of course, a certain amount of duplication of matters of interest; but no two pathological specimens are precisely alike, and the question discussed in the Paris school one hundred and fifty years ago, viz.: "An pro distinctis ægris ægritudines diversæ?" is one that often occurs to a curator as he examines new specimens which differ but little from those already in his collection, but which do differ in some respects, and with regard to which he must decide as to whether, upon the whole, they are worth the trouble and cost of preservation.

Edinburgh and Dublin have also each large and valu-