

BOOKS

In search of medical riches

Hidden Treasure: The National Library of Medicine

Michael Sappol, editor

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The National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, are best known for their high concentration of medical research laboratories; amid the sprawling campus is also the National Library of Medicine (NLM). The NLM has been located there since 1962, but the origins of this institution stretch back to 1836 with the few volumes that constituted the Library of the Surgeon General's Office, which became the Army Medical Library and later the NLM. From then until now, the library grew to become the largest repository of medical knowledge in the world: its collection of medical books, journals and manuscripts is immense, but this library also spearheaded the digital revolution through pioneering medical data storage and retrieval systems, like MEDLARS, which morphed into programs such as MEDLINE and PubMed. At present, scholars, clinicians and researchers access available NLM online resources over a billion times annually.

To celebrate its 175th anniversary, the NLM undertook the production of *Hidden Treasure: The National Library of Medicine*, a lavish compendium depicting the world of medicine since the 15th century. With 450 full-colour illustrations and 83 sections written by recognized subject experts, many of whom are internationally renowned scholars, this book is as beautiful as it is reliable. As *Hidden Treasure* is a showcase of the bounteous holdings of the History of Medicine Division (HMD) of the NLM, it is not a history of the whole library per se; readers who wish to know more are recommended to consult Wyndham D. Miles' *A History of the National Library of Medicine: The Nation's Treasury of Medical Knowledge* (1982). The United States Army was responsible for the Library of



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the Surgeon General's Office, which in turn became the Army Medical Library, that was itself inextricably linked to the Army Medical Museum, both under the farsseeing direction of the amazingly industrious military surgeon Dr. John S. Billings. Interested readers are encouraged to refer to Carleton Chapman's *Order Out of Chaos: John Shaw Billings and America's Coming of Age* (1994) and Michael G. Rhode's and J.T.H. Connor's "A Repository for Bottled Monsters: The Evolution of the Army Medical, Museum" in Amy K. Levin's *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America's Changing Communities* (2007).

Hidden Treasure is a book that can be easily dipped into. Indeed, now that this "coffee table" book is available free of charge in its entirety online through the NLM (www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/index.html), it can be savoured with coffee at home, or at the lab or clinic, or in transit. But it is also one that can be read sequentially and continuously, for there is an intellectual structure to it. Opening with an overview of Aristotle's views on the soul, as interpreted by Thomas Aquinas based on commentaries published in Cologne in 1485, *Hidden Treasure* closes with a discussion of the copper-plate engravings of *The Dance of Death* (1744) by Jacques-Antony Chovin — overall suggesting the cycle of life. In between, there are thematic clusters of

essays that span Europe, United States, China, India and Africa focusing on topics as varied as anatomy, botany, dermatology, dentistry, mesmerism, palmistry, psychiatry, teratology, tuberculosis and X-rays. Perhaps to recognize the NLM's historical indebtedness to government funding via the US Army, a substantial number of topics relate to medicine and warfare: public health and malaria, syphilis, and gonorrhoea prevention in World War II; wounds and disabilities during the US Civil War; reconstructive surgery; "Hitler as seen by his doctors;" and the effects of the atomic bomb.

Cutting across these topics, *Hidden Treasure* shows how varied are the holdings of the HMD and also the myriad media that medicine deploys to communicate, to teach, to train and to inform: Not just exquisite hand-printed, as well as mass-produced books, but also ephemera — commonplace paper items that tend to be discarded, destroyed or otherwise lost over time — such as calendars, commercial advertisements, pamphlets, posters and trade magazines. Documentary and animated films, photographs, lantern slides, cartoons, wooden blocks and dolls similarly comprise the HMD/NLM collections. Taken collectively, most of these media also drive home the dependency medicine has had on the use of colour to attract, to enthrall and to embrace its various audiences.

Hidden Treasure is the textual analog of the Renaissance *wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities. Contained in it are specimens of the beautiful and the bizarre, the universal and the unique, and the wonderful and the weird. So, go in search of *Hidden Treasure*, for there you will discover medical riches.

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