The Basics and the Sophistication: A Country Doctor and the Art of Grandma Moses

Marek H. Dominiczak*

A picture of a doctor doing rounds in the countryside seems very distant from science, and yet even with all the achievements of biomedicine, the image of a doctor seeing a patient remains a very powerful symbol. It represents seminal interface at which medical science is adjusted to the individual’s needs. For centuries, medicine has been seen as both science and art. In the technological era, the “art” stands for the judgment, skills, and experience of the physician. To describe them in formal terms would require a complex mix of natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. The issue is that each of these domains is normally explored by a separate community of specialized scholars.

There is a certain tension between “hard” medical science and the “softer” aspects of medicine that deal, for instance, with perceptions of illness and care: this tension surfaces periodically in discussions on medical education. It is just part of the wider issue of the relationship between science and the humanities. It was brought to light in the 1950s by C.P. Snow in the Rede Lecture, entitled “The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution,” which he delivered at Cambridge University (1). The lecture sparked long-lasting international discussions and controversy. Snow talked mostly about what he saw as the division between science and the humanities in Britain. His aim was to place science and scientific education on par with the literary culture, which was then that of the power elite. He saw refoousing education on science as a precondition to exploit the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution. Although many of Snow’s original arguments now sound either parochial or simply dated, the discussion continues to this day (2–4). Kagan recently discussed the cultural significance and relationships between the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities (4). What emerges from these explorations is the cultural complementarity of these 3 domains, which ask—and aim to answer—different questions. Whereas science discovers and interprets facts, the humanities explore meanings, something scientific methodology is unable to address. This complementarity has potential to clarify goals, enhance sustainability of the applications of science, and prevent ethical disasters; however, how to achieve and maintain it—particularly in educational systems—is far from clear.

The painting in Fig. 1 was created by an American artist, Anna Mary Robertson Moses, known as Grandma Moses (1860–1961) (5–7). She was born in Greenwich, in upstate New York. After her marriage in 1887, she lived for a period in Virginia and in 1905 returned to New York, where she settled in Eagle Bridge. Artistically, Grandma Moses was entirely self-taught: In fact, she had done embroidery first and turned to painting only after arthritis made it difficult for her to hold the needle. Her paintings were spotted in the local drugstore by a passing art collector. In 1939, her work was shown in the Museum of Modern Art at an exhibition entitled “Contemporary Unknown American Painters.” Grandma Moses was then 79 years old. In 1940, she had a show in New York City, entitled “What a Farm Wife Painted,” at the Galerie St. Etienne, the art gallery founded by Otto Kallir. Eventually, the work of Grandma Moses became immensely popular.
Images of her paintings appeared on Christmas cards and were reproduced on tiles, plates, and fabrics. She achieved celebrity status, with her picture appearing on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1953. By the time of her death at the age of 101 years, Grandma Moses—although not recognized by the art establishment—was arguably the most famous artist in America (8).

As a style, Grandma Moses’ work belongs to American Regionalism, an art movement that contained elements of folk culture and that was strongly linked to particular localities. Regionalism was popular in America at the beginning of the 20th century. Then in the 1940s, this movement competed with the emerging Abstract Expressionism for the claim to be the essence of American art. The Regionalists lost and consequently ceased to be seen as part of the art establishment. The art world focused on the elitist “high art” strongly promoted by critics, the most prominent being Clement Greenberg (1909–1994). Folk art was partially revived in the 1980s in the context of multiculturalism as so-called Outsider Art; however, Greenbergian elitism is still clearly visible in the art history literature. There are supposedly serious works on American art history that do not even include Grandma Moses in their index. A reappraisal of her art was published in 2001 (9).

Folk art created by untrained (labeled naive or primitive) artists is unquestionably part of the artistic landscape. It has often served as inspiration to the most accomplished artists, such as Pablo Picasso or Vasily Kandinsky. The most famous “primitive” painter who successfully established himself on the art scene was Frenchman Henri Rousseau (1844–1910), called “Le Douanier” (The Customs Officer). In Paris he exhibited at the *Salon des Indépendants* and became—not without suffering mocking attitudes—part of the Parisian art world. His works can be seen today in major museums across the world.

Culture tends to weave between the basic and the sophisticated: It is as true for medicine as it is for the arts, and we are constantly reminded that sophisticated edifices can hardly exist without basics, be it folk art or a country doctor.

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**References**