Acts of mercy : the Middlesex Hospital paintings by Frederick Cayley Robinson (1862-1927) / [text by William Schupbach].

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Acts of Mercy

The Middlesex Hospital paintings by Frederick Cayley Robinson (1862–1927)

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"Their hushed atmosphere, tense geometry and subdued colour scheme respond to the grim anxieties of the Home Front, as well as to their original classical setting. The figures wait – for the doctor, for food, for peace. A columnar tree cuts across ashlar. Greys tending to lilac, mauve and olive green set off the plain white bowls of the orphans and the clean bandages of the wounded. The glowing oil lamp in the foreground and the sash window illuminated in the sober terrace beyond are at once marvellous and mundane"

Nicholas Penny, *London Review of Books*, 17 April 2003

Acts of Mercy

The Middlesex Hospital paintings by Frederick Cayley Robinson (1862–1927)

'Acts Of Mercy' is the collective title of four large oil paintings on canvas painted by Frederick Cayley Robinson between 1915 and 1920 for the Middlesex Hospital in London. They had been commissioned for the Hospital in 1912 by the Australian-born mining tycoon and art lover Edmund (later Sir Edmund) Davis (1861–1939), a Governor and benefactor of the Hospital.

The set forms one of the most ambitious schemes to endow a hospital with programmatic paintings about its mission since the frescoes painted by Domenico di Bartolo and two other painters for the Hospital of Santa Maria della Scala in Siena in 1440–44.

The Middlesex Hospital paintings form two pairs, a pair of interior scenes traditionally called 'Orphans' and a pair of exterior scenes called 'The Doctor'. In each pair, contemporary and realistic elements are fused with timeless and symbolic features in a dreamlike ensemble.

In the Middlesex Hospital, the four paintings were placed in niches in the entrance hall, both in the original building and in the new building constructed on the site of the old one in 1930–35. The pair of 'Orphans' was shown in series (alongside one another), while the pair of 'The Doctor' was shown in counterview (facing one another), a distinction that called for a different type of composition for each pair. In the once-smoke-filled waiting area, they became very familiar to generations of patients, visitors, students and staff. One consultant wrote: "My life was made happier by the presence of these paintings", while another called them "a daily pleasure and inspiration".

The Middlesex Hospital paintings were acquired by the Wellcome Library in 2009. The intention is that they will be displayed at the entrance to the Library when they are not exhibited elsewhere.

Wellcome Library no. 6725071 (set of four paintings)

'Orphans'.

'The Doctor'.

Wellcome Library no. 39168i

This etching by Alfred Mills (above) from around 1800 shows in the background the Middlesex Hospital, designed by James Paine and built in 1755–80. The four paintings by Cayley Robinson were installed in that building between 1915 and 1920. The people in the foreground of the etching demonstrate the charitable purposes of the institution: helping mothers and children, the sick and the aged. The Cayley Robinson paintings present an updated version of the same continuing ideals. They were summed up in three words in the motto of the Middlesex Hospital Medical School: *Miseris succurrere disco* ('I learn to help the wretched').

The Middlesex Hospital, situated in Fitzrovia half a mile south-west of the Wellcome Building, was established in 1745. It was one of the 'voluntary hospitals' – including Guy's, the Westminster and the (Royal) London – which were founded by groups of charitable donors to supplement the hospitals that had grown out of medieval monasteries such as St Bartholomew's, Bethlem and St Thomas's. Like several other such institutions, it was named not after a saint or parish but after its county, Middlesex being the county that included most of the present Greater London north of the river Thames.

The Middlesex Hospital closed in 2005, and its functions were transferred to University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust. In 2008, the Hospital building was demolished, and in 2009 the 'Acts of Mercy', previously displayed in its entrance hall, were acquired by the Wellcome Library to add to the Library's extensive collection of pictures dating from the 14th to the 21st century.

The title 'Acts of Mercy' derives from the seven Corporal Works (or Acts) of Mercy, which are the main principles underlying the historical development of hospitals. These seven Acts are: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, giving shelter to the homeless, visiting the imprisoned, attending the sick and burying the dead. Six of them received their authority from the words of Jesus Christ in a parable in the Gospel of Matthew, 25:35–40:

> *For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me…Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.*

The Middlesex Hospital entrance with the Cayley Robinson paintings being moved during building works, 1930. Photograph by courtesy of UCLH NHS Foundation Trust.

With the addition of burial of the dead from the book of Tobit, these words were systematised by St Cyprian (d. 258), St Ambrose (*c*.337–397) and, most thoroughly, by St Thomas Aquinas (1225?–1274). Thereafter they became the standard rationale for charitable institutions, were set out in hospital charters and, updated to modern times, were depicted in mural paintings such as those in Siena.

In continuing this ancient tradition into the 20th century, Cayley Robinson brought his own contributions to the theme. He seems to have emphasised the contrast between the wretchedness of the inmates and the grandeur of the hospital building. This was a view that had long been voiced by critics of palatial baroque hospitals such as those at Chelsea and Greenwich. However, any criticism in the paintings is muted and can easily escape attention. It is perhaps most subtle in the right-hand painting of the orphans (pp. 12–13 below), where the surprising vacant gap below the window can be understood as a rendering of emptiness.

Cayley Robinson was renowned as a sensitive painter of the child's-eye view. That reputation was founded on his costume designs, stage sets and book illustrations for Maurice Maeterlinck's play *The Blue Bird*, which was performed with great success in London in 1909. The play opens with two poor children (Mytil and Tyltyl) who look out of the window at Christmas and watch the rich children enjoying their presents. They are approached by the fairy Bérylune who asks them to help her to find the blue bird that can cure the illness of her sick child. In the course of that quest they undergo adventures that bring home to them the blessings of life, the force of imagination and the value of good deeds. Cayley Robinson's choice of orphan girls in hospital as a theme enabled him to reprise many of his Maeterlinck motifs: children constrained by adult prohibitions, the temperaments of the cat and the dog, poverty and extravagance, the tyranny of officialdom, the vanity of luxury, blue birds in the distance, and several others. In this booklet, these motifs in the Middlesex Hospital paintings are interpreted, where feasible, according to their more explicit meanings in *The Blue Bird*.

Hospital of Santa Maria della Scala, Siena: the reception, bringing up and marriage of girls entrusted to the hospital. Photograph by Fotografia Lombardi Siena, 1890s, of fresco by Domenico di Bartolo, 1441–42. Wellcome Library no. M13665

'Orphans' (left painting of two).
Signed and dated "Cayley Robinson 1915".
Wellcome Library no. 6728311

This painting and its pair show the historical role of the hospital in bringing up and sustaining orphans. The Spedale degli Innocenti in Florence (built in the 15th century) and the Foundling Hospital in London (established in 1739) are well-known examples of hospitals for which raising abandoned children was their main function. Orphans are not explicitly mentioned in the Corporal Acts of Mercy, but St Thomas stated that the formulations given there are only summaries: for example, guiding the blind and carrying the lame are not mentioned because they should be understood as being contained in visiting the sick. People using the Acts were therefore free to adapt them to real circumstances: the Siena hospital shown on p. 9 above included the care of orphans in its services, hence the painting by Domenico di Bartolo of the reception, raising and marriage of orphan girls entrusted to that hospital. It is likely that Frederick Cayley Robinson had seen that painting, for he had spent three years studying art in Tuscany in 1898–1900. He had treated the subject himself even before his Italian sojourn, for his painting 'The Foundling', in Leamington Spa Art Gallery, is dated 1896.

On the left of the present painting the uniformed girls enter the refectory through an arched staircase. The staircase derives from Edward Burne-Jones's celebrated painting 'The Golden Stairs' (1876–80; in Tate Britain), in which musicians descend the stairs as they play. Here the procession down the winding stairs illustrates the queueing and regimentation of institutional life.

The column and the cylindrical stone drum at the bottom of the staircase turn the corner into the room, and the serpentine line that they initiate continues in the next painting in the pair. The two paintings of orphans were placed in the Middlesex Hospital on the wall facing the front door, separated by the door leading to the wards: this explains why the left painting sets off a rightwards movement, which is resolved in the next painting.

In the corner where the two lines meet stands a thoughtful woman wearing a patterned dress, not a uniform: she is an adult, free to wear what she likes, illuminated by a lamp as a model to the girls, but perhaps reflecting that she is not much freer than they – certainly less free than the swallows that fly away from the campanile in the background (a motif that Cayley Robinson had introduced in *The Blue Bird*).

'Orphans' (right painting of two).
Wellcome Library no. 672832i

Here the uniformed girls proceed to their place at the table. They continue in the foreground the rightwards flow of the serpentine line that started in the first painting, and then, in the back register, bring it round and back to the left, where it balances the previous painting and draws attention to the centre of the room. The cat also turns round, to look across the divide at the pouring of the milk.

To get to their places the girls have to circumvent an obstacle in the form of a draped column, representing the wealth and status of the institution: the girl resting her hand against the shaft of the column plays the same role in turning round the composition as the girl on the left of the previous painting who touches the surface of the drum. The bust in the window and the Ionic pilasters on the right remind the girls that they are the beneficiaries of their patrons' largesse. The deep sloping window embrasure with no view out on to the street appears in several of Cayley Robinson's paintings: it implies a dungeon-like interior in which children and young women are confined by social conventions that they did not create. They are not trusted with sash windows like the illuminated one glimpsed through the window on the far side of the Fitzrovia square.

The orphan girls are not only bereft of home and family: they represent the generation in which a large number of men were killed while young in World War I, leaving young women to support themselves by pursuing such careers as were available to them. One of those careers was of course nursing. The suggestion may be put into the viewer's mind that these are the future nurses of the Middlesex Hospital. Certainly the painting would not be greatly different if the orphans' uniforms were replaced by nurses' uniforms, as we see on the left of the next painting.

'The Doctor' (left painting of two).
Signed and dated "Cayley Robinson 1920".
Wellcome Library no. 672829i

Here we see the home of the orphans from the outside. The hospital is a temple-like structure of load-bearing stone, approached through arches, colonnades and Vitruvian openings. A photograph of this painting in 1930 shows in the background the entrance to the Middlesex Hospital with some similar features (p. 7 above). The grandeur of the building represents power and authority, and contrasts with the frailty of its inmates, here all men. The colonnade of three columns on the left provides a support for the pipe-smoking invalid to lean against, and thus shows the positive benefits of that power. On the right, a pompous equestrian statue of a warrior glorifies those powers of the state that have brought suffering on its people through war.

On the terracotta-tiled landing between two flights of stone steps we see soldiers who had returned from World War I and were prevented from working by war wounds or psychological trauma: "a scene of gaunt haggard faces and listless soldiers, gathering for fresh air during convalescence, on the steep steps of the hospital's pillared entrance. One soldier wears carpet slippers, with his military jacket draped uselessly around his bandaged arm in a sling; another leans on a crutch at the top of the steps, looking toward a group of elderly and unemployed men" (Willsdon).

The foremost figure on the right is a tuberculous-looking man wearing a top hat and a white scarf. He stands apart from the others on the edge of the landing. This marginal man reappears in another painting by Cayley Robinson as a hungry street violinist, hunched up in the snow outside a pub on a wintry night.

The two paintings of 'The Doctor' were placed in the Middlesex Hospital facing one another on the two side walls of the entrance hall: hence each has a strong central motif. In the present painting, the hospital is placed in the centre ground between slices of life to left and right.

On the left, a sunny morning dawns and a nurse rings a bell to waken the hospital community to its work of service, like the tolling of the matins bell in a religious house. On the right, evening falls on a terrace of Georgian townhouses. The yellow electric light shining in a top-floor flat exemplifies a favourite device of this painter: the contrast between a cold exterior lit by pallid daylight and the warm glow of artificial light suggesting domestic comfort and security. The industrial chimneys beyond show the sources of that heat and light in power stations miles to the east.

'The Doctor' (right painting of two).
Signed and dated "Cayley Robinson 1916".
Wellcome Library no. 672830i

In symmetry with the previous picture, day dawns on the right, bathing in sunlight a courtyard outside the hospital in which representatives of the civilian population wait. The courtyard tiled in warm terracotta continues from the previous painting. The people, wearing costume of different periods, include a mother nursing a baby, children and mature people. On the left is a man wearing a scholar's cloak: he resembles the artist himself, Frederick Cayley Robinson, who was Professor of Figure Composition and Decoration at Glasgow School of Art from 1914 to 1924. Of the group, only the unattended mongrel communicates with the viewer.

The traditional architecture provides an aged man with a ledge to take the weight off his legs while he waits to have his medicine bottle refilled.

On the right a woman kneels at the entrance to the hospital to thank a doctor for treating her young daughter. A nurse holds a ewer of water, the attribute of Hygieia, the daughter of Aesculapius. In the centre, a dead tree with a snake in its branches bears an ambiguous message. In the pagan world, the serpent entwined around a stem is the emblem of Aesculapius himself, representing the ingenuity of the physician (look back at the 18th-century print shown on p. 6 above). In the Christian world, however, as the serpent in the garden of Eden, it reminds human beings of their fate as the descendants of Adam and Eve: "Dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return". Cayley Robinson had published a set of illustrations to the book of Genesis in 1914.

The terrace of Fitzrovia houses settles into the dusk; a comet passes through the sky; and doves dart away towards their resting place.

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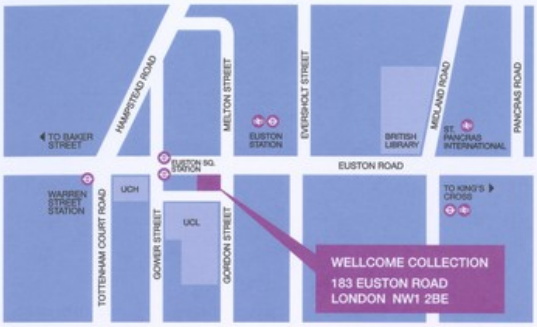

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