



26 SEPTEMBER 2014 - 4 JANUARY 2015

THE GENEROUS GEORGIAN

DR RICHARD MEAD

‘DR MEAD LIVED
MORE IN THE BROAD
SUNSHINE OF LIFE THAN
ALMOST ANY MAN’

SAMUEL JOHNSON

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Richard Mead (1673-1754) was widely admired by his contemporaries, and he remains a figure who can be held up as exemplary, especially for medical practitioners. He was, by all accounts, kind, knowledgeable, well connected, and public spirited. Yet he is not especially well known among the general public, compared, for instance, to his contemporary Dr Hans Sloane (1660-1753), whose collections formed the core of the British Museum. Mead's reputation deserves to be re-established, even if he has no great discoveries or clinical innovations to his name. His life is full of interest, and, as this exhibition demonstrates, it was marked by generosity to institutions as well as to individuals. Mead was a famous and successful physician, a man of learning, an enthusiastic collector, famed for his hospitality and sociability. He mixed with artists and writers, historians and men of science, travellers and philanthropists as well as other doctors, many of whom shared his wide interests, for example in the classical past.

One indication of his qualities may be found in the memorial in Westminster Abbey erected by his son and namesake. Beneath the portrait bust, its Latin inscription presents him as 'the leading physician of his age', praising him for being 'mild and merciful in healing the sick and ever ready to assist the poor free of charge'. It also draws attention to him as 'a matchless patron of letters and the learned'. He was equally generous in his support of painters and sculptors.

Mead's best qualities are evident in his relations with the Foundling Hospital. We know that he sometimes dined with the Hospital's founder Thomas Coram (1668-1751), that he supported the venture from the very beginning, remembered it in his will, and that he attended to the health of the children there. Inoculation against smallpox and giving children fresh air were both advocated by him. He was close to the Scottish artist and writer Allan Ramsay (1713-1784), whose magnificent portrait of Mead is one of the greatest treasures in the Museum's collection. That Mead was so well connected by the time the Foundling Hospital was founded certainly added to his value for Coram's project, which depended on prominent and high-ranking members of society putting their weight behind an innovative and controversial plan. Mead was a royal physician, he knew and treated Sir Isaac Newton (1643-1727) and Alexander Pope (1688-1744), and was

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Allan Ramsay, *Dr Richard Mead*, 1747, oil on canvas, © Coram in the care of the Foundling Museum

active in both the Royal Society and the College of Physicians. With Pope, he was one of the people who ensured that a monument to William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was erected in Westminster Abbey in 1740. In Richard Mead we have a well-known and much admired public figure manifesting his beneficence for the sake of vulnerable children.

The potent allure of the classical world for Mead and his associates is clear in the so-called *Arundel Head*, named after an earlier owner, the renowned courtier and collector, Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel (1585-1646). Made of bronze in the second century BC, it represents an older man, whose identity is uncertain, but he is likely to have been a thinker or a writer, such as Sophocles. Given to the British Museum in 1760, and deemed one of Mead's most prized possessions, it shows us how objects became associated with their owners, and how elaborate the classical associations were for people who knew Latin and Greek, acquired ancient artefacts, and were themselves depicted in classical dress, using forms such as the portrait bust.

Another highlight of the exhibition is the Gold-headed Cane, owned by Mead and inherited by him from the great physician John Radcliffe (1652-1714) after whom a library and a hospital in Oxford are named. It was passed on to three more doctors before coming to its resting place in the Royal College of Physicians in Regent's Park. In 1827, a charming 'autobiography' by the cane was published; authored, we now know, by William Macmichael (1783-1839), who, like all the owners of the cane, was a royal physician. According to the cane, Mead's hospitality was 'unbounded' and his 'kindness of heart never deserted him'.

A picture of this medical man with wide interests can be built up where the main themes of the exhibition – generosity, philanthropy, collecting and medicine – emerge as central parts of London life in the early eighteenth century. We can see overlapping circles of public-spirited, sociable and educated people, who gave their knowledge, time and money in a spirit of improvement. Children, especially those who were at risk, were especially worthy recipients of generosity at a time when a growing population of sober and industrious men and women was considered highly desirable. Mead, then, was generous in a broad sense, in desiring and working towards general social betterment. His vision remains an inspiring one: knowledge and culture, including beautiful and interesting things, have the capacity to help people, and it is the responsibility of those fortunate enough to have wealth and possessions to share them. Thus philanthropy, medicine, collecting, and sociability can be viewed as natural partners in Georgian London.

Ludmilla Jordanova



Above: Dr Mead's gold-headed cane, eighteenth century, wood, gilt © The Royal College of Physicians

Left: The Arundel Head, 2nd century BC, bronze, © The Trustees of the British Museum

FURTHER READING

Robert Anderson et al, eds, *Enlightening the British: Knowledge, Discovery and the Museum in the Eighteenth Century*, London, 2003

Mungo Campbell, ed., *Allan Ramsay: Portraits of the Enlightenment*, Glasgow, 2013

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[William Macmichael], *The Gold-headed Cane*, London, 1827 and many later editions

Iain Pears, *The Discovery of Painting: the Growth of Interest in the Arts in England*, New Haven and London, 1988

David Solkin, *Painting for Money: the Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-century England*, New Haven, 1993