The Pam & Rolando Del Maestro Family William Osler Medical Student Essay Awards

October 12th, 2020

*Colourful Innovations in Neuropathology*

*Robert Hooper & the shift in portrayal of the morbid brain in the nineteenth century*

**Reflections on the experience with the Osler Library of the History of Medicine**

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With the gracious assistance of Dr Richard Fraser

Over the summer and fall of 2020, I had the enriching experience of participating in the Pam & Rolando Del Maestro Osler Essay Contest. I had been introduced to Hooper’s *Morbid Anatomy of the Human Brain* by Dr Del Maestro early in the year and became interested in completing a project on this remarkable volume. Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic produced a challenge in accessibility of the many historic volumes available in the Osler library, and my work with the library waws entirely remote. However, my reliance on virtual resources multiplied my appreciation for the comprehensive library resources and made me further recognize the essential work of librarians in maintaining these resources.

Since not all historical works in the Osler Library had been digitized, I relied on the gracious assistance of librarian Mary Yearl to find digital versions of the pathological atlases of Hooper, Baillie, Cruveilhier, and Richard Bright. Their books were found on the non-profit library *Internet Archive*, which allows access to many books, website and software for free. Since the pandemic had created restrictions on library staff, I also learned that the Library had a large backlog of resources that needed to be digitized. This recognition made me appreciate the hard work and resources needed to create faithful digital versions of historical documents, which I relied heavily on for my essay. I was also able to appreciate the vast accessibility of these resources, either provided for free on *Internet Archive* or easily viewable for McGill students and staff. I also learned of other digital resources for historical documents and artwork, such as The Royal Society Picture Library and Jubilothèque. I am confident that my newfound knowledge of these digital resources will increase my scope as a researcher even after the pandemic, as I have learned of ways to access materials that may not be available at a library close to me.

The Osler Library also possesses individual pieces of Hooper’s plates, which contained incomplete versions of the illustrations found in the final product. I was kindly provided with pictures of a selection of these plates by Mary Yearl. I initially wanted to analyse these individual illustrations to learn about Hooper’s methodology in creating the final product. This was because my essay was going to have a deeper focus on the printing technique of lithography, which was believed to be the medium used by Hooper. Unfortunately, the incorporation of these individual plates became difficult when we learned that the printing technique used by Hooper was contested. However, this challenged me to adapt, and I used the *Internet Archive* to incorporate pathological works by other authors into my essay, such as Matthew Baillie’s *A Series of Engravings* (1799).

When we learned that there was controversy in the technique used by Hooper to achieve his illustrations, I had the opportunity to consult with Dr Mary Hunter of Art History and Communications Studies Department at McGill, and Dr Richard Taws of the History of Art Department at the University College of London. I learned about shifting printing techniques the nineteenth century from the perspective of art history, which was a rewarding experience. This enriched my research skills for the future, as I learned to embrace information from interdisciplinary sources. Of course, a conclusive analysis of the technique used by Hooper was not possible by only observing digitized versions. However, discussion of the controversy increased the depth of my essay by opening a new area of research.

To conclude, although the experience of the Osler Essay Contest was different in 2020, I learned many unique skills as a researcher. I learned about many digital resources and archives that are available to the public, completely free of cost, which will be useful to me in later research project. I also acquired the skill to rapidly adapt my project to changing information. Finally, I gained a greater understanding of the value of interdisciplinary discussion, as this expanded the depth of my essay.