**Reflective Essay**

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For the Pam and Rolando Del Maestro William Osler Medical Student Essay Contest

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October 8, 2019

With renovations currently underway on the Osler Library in the McIntyre Building, this was a unique year to be a part of the William Osler Essay Contest. I felt very grateful that the invaluable collections remained not only undamaged by the fire but also accessible to us as students on the fourth floor of McLennan Library. I look forward to the return of the original Osler Library, but in the meantime, I am happy to see that the institution and community around the library are flourishing, and that its treasures extend beyond the walls of its original site.

My essay for this contest began with a stroke of good fortune and some timely, generous help from Osler librarian Mary Hague-Yearl. With a former background in History and East Asian studies, I came to the Osler collection with an interest in finding classical Chinese medical texts that might spark a research question. I was also intrigued by anatomy atlases, and so Mary was able to help combine these interests and show me the collection’s assortment of anatomy atlases and books from Japan. After leafing through a variety of fascinating and diverse drawings within Japanese anatomy books from the mid-1800s, I finally opened a scroll that had quietly sat behind the pile of possible materials.

The image that unfurled on the table nearly knocked me out of my chair—a decapitated woman lay with blood streaming from her neck. And in the next frame, the beginnings of a detailed, meticulous dissection of her body were revealed. Immediately, questions started to come to mind over what I was observing. Where was this taking place? Why did they decide to dissect this woman? And what was the context of all of the graphic illustrations? In the last frame, a smiling baby is seen attached to a placenta, which led to a torrent of new questions. Why did they dissect a pregnant woman?

After comparing the scroll to other Japanese (and European) illustrations in the Osler collection, I began to formulate a research question for my essay. The illustrations of the dissection are displayed in stark realism, yet they also contain stylized motifs present in other Japanese illustrations. Comparing the scroll to other European medical atlases from the period, one can see similarities and argue that the scroll worked as a continuation of an existing tradition of documentation, but it was also a new form of knowledge production in Japan, one that applied Western values of scientific distance and realism. I wanted to understand how that process of creation took place.

Through the help and guidance of Mary Hague-Yearl, I was fortunate to connect with Dr. Mikhaël Bauer, assistant professor of Japanese Religions at McGill. Through our lengthy conversation, I was able to develop a stronger sense of the relevant literature that would go on to ground my research. Dr. Bauër led me to explore a diverse array of secondary sources. To understand the religious and political changes happening in Edo Japan, I read Richard Bowring’s *In Search of the Way*. I learned more about the history of sexuality and the body in Japan by reading Gregory Plugfelder’s work *Cartographies of Desire.* And to gain a better understanding of abortion and conceptions of the fetus in Edo Japan, I looked to William Lafleur’s wonderful book *Liquid Life.*

As I continued to read and learn about the exchange of anatomical discoveries in Europe and Japan around 1800, a strange and exciting phenomenon occurred. Sources and names started to link back to one another, and more interestingly, my reading in books and research online lead me back to McGill’s own Osler Library on multiple occasions. In one instance, I came across an essay by a past Osler travel award recipient, Margaret Carlyle, and found that her writing helped illuminate my own understanding.

I also gained valuable inspiration from the ideas and illustrations presented in Dr. Del Maestro’s very own exhibition on Leonardo DaVinci displayed on the fourth floor of McLennan Library. On a return trip to the materials in the Osler Collection, I spent time considering the Japanese scroll in light of DaVinci’s anatomical drawings. I returned to databases and searched for more specific DaVinci drawings on childbirth and saw that they presented a different understanding of the notion of the fetus than what I had seen in the scroll.

My participation in the essay contest helped me grow valuable skills as a researcher and medical student. The scroll forced me to consider a multitude of mediums and sources, and it led to me engage with ideas far beyond anatomy. In reading multiple descriptions of medicine and health in Japan in the 1800s, I was also reminded of how our current body of medical knowledge is built upon a long tradition of debate, political change, and cultural transition. I also learned a significant amount about abortion and sexuality in Japan and grew to understand the roots of unique practices that resonate today. And ultimately, in gaining a deeper understanding of the scroll and how the Japanese doctors attached to it were able to work in novel ways, I realized how scientific inquiry can transcend existing power structures—they were able to find something that their Dutch teachers had never envisioned.

It was a privilege to participate in the Pam and Rolando Del Maestro Family William Osler Medical Student Essay Contest and to learn so much about an area of knowledge that had been so unknown to me previously. I would like to thank Dr. Mary Hague-Yearl, the Osler Library Team, the Committee, and especially, my advisor Dr. Mikhael Bauër for their support and for making this rare opportunity possible.