EXHIBIT REVIEW


During the second half of the nineteenth century, American women made a stunning breakthrough into a male-dominated occupation, medicine. Unlike teaching, clerical work or switchboard operation, which gradually became "women's work" once the gender barrier had been breached, doctoring by the 1880s showed signs of becoming a profession for men and women practitioners alike. To be sure, the largest proportion of women doctors specialized in gynecological and obstetrical work, but the creation of ten women's medical colleges and the inclusion of women students in other previously all-male institutions seemed to have opened the way to a permanent place for lady physicians on the American scene. This dramatic achievement and the women who participated in it are the focal points for an ambitious exhibition, first mounted at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in the fall of 1985 before being taken on the road for viewing in New York City, Lexington, Massachusetts, Chicago and St. Louis.

Given the strength of recent research in both medical and women's history, and the fact that the first and most durable women's medical college was founded in Philadelphia (1850), both the timing and the site for the exhibition are appropriate. The producers, Paraphrase, Inc., a New York group headed by Ruth Abram, take as their starting point the graduating class of 1879 from the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania, offering visitors first a taste of their educational experiences, then follow-up snapshots of their careers in private practice, institutional and missionary work, and teaching. In addition, the lady physicians' roles in medical societies and in family and community life are profiled, after which the viewer encounters a contextualizing overview of women in American medicine from the 1830s through the First World War. The exhibit closes with panels which treat the steady decline of women's medical education in the early twentieth century and document the tremendous strides made in the last generation at prying all-but-closed doors open again. By the 1980s it is plain that women doctors are becoming ever more numerous and are no longer ghet-
toized in the practice of treating "female complaints" (only 6 percent of current practitioners specialize in Ob-Gyn).

The strengths of "Send Us a Lady Physician" stem from its designers' selection of a first-rate, accessible organizing theme—the career experience of a cohort of new doctors a century ago. The comments of WMCP students on their schooling enrich the opening panels with frank critiques. Of her sisters starting their first year in 1875, Harriet Belcher remarks: "There is quite a large class of students, most of them refined, earnest, cultivated women. There are some strange looking specimens, but very few." Having to deal with male students in clinics which drew from several Philadelphia medical schools, Rachel Nichol observes: "The most absurd of all things is coming . . . here to attend a woman's medical college and then to attend clinics with five or six tallow-brained, dough-faced specimens of the genus homo." The evident hostility with which women were received by their male counterparts is reinforced by a context panel which recounts the admission of Elizabeth Blackwell as the first female student in an American medical school (1847) as a scene of great hilarity. Her application to the Geneva (New York) Medical College was presented by the faculty to the assembled students for consideration, itself an intriguing item. The lads "voted 'Aye' with the waving of handkerchiefs, the throwing of hats, and all manner of vocal demonstrations," signalling the silliness of the whole matter. To their chagrin, Blackwell matriculated, endured and became the touchstone for the aspirations of generations of women physicians.

In other engaging touches, artifacts from the kit-bag of the Victorian doctor are displayed in cases, ranging from fear-inspiring implements to a specially-designed china cup with a long spout for pouring liquids into invalids. The provision of an 1870 edition of *Gray's Anatomy*, opened on a dictionary stand for perusal, invites the visitor to interact with the scientific milieu of contemporary physicians. Nicely, the copy made available is one published by Philadelphia's Henry Lea, a firm whose successor, Lea and Febiger, remains to this day one of the city's prominent medical publishers.

Yet with all these positive elements, it must be said that in critical and essential ways this exhibition does not work. It is wordy, noisy, and spatially disorienting for the visitor. It is visually repetitive rather than arresting in its use of photography, and the total absence of simple handouts for visitors leaves its audience bewildered. Let me take these issues in turn. Prolix labels are the bane of museum exhibitions. They give the impression that the curators are attempting to summarize a book-length study, and if presented in succession, are soon ignored by the public. This was certainly the case during each of my three visits to "Lady Physicians." Facing panels whose text ranged from 300 to over 1500 words (six double-spaced pages),
individuals whom I observed read the first few carefully, paused briefly at the next few, and ignored the rest.

One of the more effective exhibit techniques which has come into wide use in recent decades is the employment of taped recreations of the thoughts of historical figures. Here this was painfully overdone, with half a dozen separate voices sounding through the space at once, overlapping one another in a babble. Mercifully, on my last visit, the entire apparatus had been silenced by the Historical Society staff, but this ironically left the hall silent, dominated by the wordy panels and thus even less magnetic. Spatially, the exhibit is intelligently mapped, but the design thrusts were lost on many visitors. One enters into an arched pair of panels detailing the WMCP school activities and is led toward a central gazebo where part of the commencement address to the Class of 1879 is (or was) played on tape. The careers of graduates are recounted in half-circle displays on either side of the gazebo, the embracing context of their efforts being chronicled in panels surrounding the whole central area. Sadly, despite the care and funds lavished on the gazebo, no one thought to erect any simple indicators to guide visitors through the subsequent sections. Spatial arrangements, like historical documents, do not speak for themselves. The provision of the most elementary mimeographed handout, perhaps a condensation of the three-page gallery guide distributed in the press packet, with a map and appropriate arrows on the back, would have vastly increased the intelligibility of the exhibit. Failing this, confused visitors wandered through the whole in random fashion or simply left.

It may be that the visual record of Gilded Age women doctors is meager, given that they struggled to present a sober, proper front on many formal photographic occasions. Still, the opportunities available to use blowups to emphasize the handful of dramatic, biting photographs that are reproduced in the exhibit were almost universally missed. Shots of women dissecting a cadaver, of an extraordinary basket of newborn foundlings, or illustrations of the damage done to women’s bone structure by close corseting are engulfed by acres of stiff portraits, posed group photos and building exteriors. Only once does this boring pattern break, in a marvelous panel on nursing, featuring sizable, powerful photographs of one nurse comforting a child in a hospital ward, others descending an ornate circular stair in New York’s St. Luke Hospital and a cluster of nurses curiously vigorous and vibrant at the New York Infirmary’s World War One station in France. Somehow, I think, the producers of this exhibit failed to consider adequately the process of communication and focused so relentlessly on content and detail that the result, which might gain rapturous reviews as an academic volume, proves severely disappointing as a museum experience. It might be added that the catalog/book which was produced in tandem with the exhibit, and
is being published by W.W. Norton, was not available to visitors in Philadelphia, having been delayed in its release. Perhaps at other sites, that text and this exhibition will together yield a satisfying whole. But here, despite the historical significance of its subject, "Send Us a Lady Physician" is more frustrating than illuminating, for its form obstructs its content.

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