Obituary

Frank Netter
1906–1991

Dr. Frank Netter, considered the world’s foremost medical illustrator, died on September 17, 1991, at the age of 85 years. His distinguished career spanned an extraordinary six decades, and his more than 4,000 illustrative renderings of every area of human anatomy, physiology and pathology educated generations of medical students and served as a valuable resource to hundreds of thousands of physicians worldwide. Born on April 25, 1906, in Brooklyn, N.Y., USA, young Netter showed an early interest in art. While he was enrolled at the City College of New York, Netter devoted his afternoons to art classes at the National Academy of Design and the Art Students’ League. When his other grades began to suffer, his mother called him and asked where he had been going every day. Netter confessed to his art classes and told his parents that he wanted to be an artist. Despite his parents’ warnings about the ‘evil lives’ that artists led, and his mother’s urgings that he become a doctor instead, by the mid 1920s Netter had become a successful commercial artist. His friends included other rising young artists like Norman Rockwell, who was painting covers for the Saturday Evening Post.

By the end of that decade, however, Netter decided to honor his mother’s wish that he pursue a medical career. He entered the New York University School of Medicine, where he put his artistic talents to use illustrating his lecture notes to help himself learn. Netter’s drawings soon came to the attention of his professors, and many asked him to illustrate their professional books and articles.

Dr. Netter finished his surgical residency in 1933, during the depths of the depression. He was at a crossroads: art or surgery? Fortunately for thousands of medical students and practicing physicians, he turned to medical illustrating.
During his long and prolific career, Dr. Netter illustrated some of the most revolutionary
discoveries in modern medicine. He recorded the beginning of open heart surgery, organ
transplants and the replacement of human joints. Dr. William C. DeVries invited Netter to record
the first artificial heart implant. Dr. Netter’s work became so well known that his reputation
transcended the medical profession.

Dr. Netter was best known as the illustrator of the Ciba Collection of Medical Illustrations, a
series of 13 books that portray in detail the major anatomy, physiology and
pathology of all the systems comprising the human body, self, acknowledged as his ‘Sixtine
Chapel’, was the critically
His illustrations have also appeared in more than 200 Clin- praised Atlas of Human Anatomy, published in late 1989 by
ical Symposia. Both the Ciba Collection and Clinical Sym- the Medical Education Division of Ciba-Geigy Corpora-
posia have been translated into German, Italian, Spanish, tion. This comprehensive single-
Portuguese and Japanese editions. Today, a set of the Ciba 514 color plates, received
considerable acclaim from both
Collection is in every medical school library in the United States, and the first 25,000 of the more than two million Altman for the New York Times Booh Review, who said:
copies that have been sold are considered collector’s items. ‘This atlas should be useful for premedical students, health
Dr. Netter’s last major accomplishment, which became workers and anyone curious about
what lies beneath the
the crowning achievement of his career and which he, him- skin.’ W. Lierse, Hamburg
Awards and Honors 1966 Townsend Harris Medal, City College of New York 1969 The Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award, American Medical Writers’
Association 1973 Distinguished Service Award, National Kidney Foundation 1979 Resolution of Commendation, Florida State Legislation 1981 Distinguished Service Award, American College of Cardiology
Honorary Degree, Doctor of Science, New Jersey College of Medicine and Dentistry
Honorary Degree, Doctor of Science, Georgetown University Life Achievement Award, Society of Illustrators
The Solomon A. Berson Medical Alumni Achievement Award, New York University School of Medicine
Honorary Degree, Doctor of Science, University of Sherbrooke, Canada Lifetime Achievement Award, Association of Medical Illustrators
Dedication of Netter Library, Ciba-Geigy Corporation
Honorary Member, Radiologic Society of North America Honorary Member, American Academy of Neurologists
Honorary Award for Contribution to Knowledge of Musculoskeletal System, American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons
Honorary Fellowship, Medical Artists Association of Great Britain 1990 Award of Special
Recognition, Association of Medical Illustrators
Honored Member Award, American Association of Clinical Anatomists
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