



MEDICINE AND HEALING

A trail exploring art and medicine in two London collections

This trail brings together objects and paintings from two very different galleries in London. The Wellcome Collection's Medicine Man display is an extraordinary treasure trove of curious and beautiful objects from Sir Henry Wellcome's collection, created as a place to explore medicine, health and wellbeing. The National Gallery is home to one of the greatest collections of Western European painting in the world. Its works reveal human stories of emotion, compassion and drama.

We encourage you to see the objects for yourselves at both destinations. These unique collections offer the opportunity to investigate what it is to be alive how we respond to birth and death, how we find relief from pain, and how we navigate the relationship between scientific understanding and faith.

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We'll start our trail with an object found on entering the Wellcome Collection Medicine Man display.



Birthing chair

18th or 19th century

At first glance we may be repelled by this object, with its direct visual references to pain and suffering. The carved handles suggest the tight grip of a body in agony. On closer inspection we see that it is designed to ease the discomfort of childbirth: the back of the chair reclines and foot-rests fit into grooves at the base. The elegantly shaped back panels reveal the domestic use of these chairs – it can be folded and stored away for use over several generations. Rather than a piece of clinical equipment, it is part of the family home. In the 18th century, a woman using this birthing chair would be supported by female friends and family, and perhaps a 'man-midwife' or doctor. However, she would be alone in her pain, with no effective anaesthesia available until the 19th century. For many, childbirth represented a profound fear of pain, complications or death.

Moving to Room 30 of the National Gallery, we'll find a woman with an unlikely birthing companion.



Saint Margaret of Antioch

Francisco de Zurbarán, 1630–4

Dressed as a shepherdess and brimming with confidence, who is this woman who fixes us with her defiant stare? The clue is at her feet: a green dragon, with twisting tail and vicious teeth. According to Christian legend, Saint Margaret was devoured by a dragon while in prison, having been tortured for refusing to marry. However, she burst out of the dragon unharmed, by holding up her crucifix. This miraculous 'rebirth' led Saint Margaret to become the patron saint of safe childbirth. In cultures around the world, women have drawn on a combination of faith, folklore and superstition during pregnancy and birth. Written accounts of Saint Margaret's story were placed on the abdomen of women in labour to invoke her protection and paintings such as this could act as a focus for prayer.

We'll follow the story from birth to the early stages of childhood, in Room 34 of the National Gallery.



The Graham Children

William Hogarth, 1742

These are the children of Dr Graham, Royal Apothecary, at home in their London town-house. The handle of their gilded go-cart is decorated with a dove, mirroring the live finch suspended in a cage above. Images of birds and flight have often been used to symbolise childhood, to remind us that youth, like life, is fleeting and impermanent – before we know it, the birds have flown the nest. Behind the playful smiles, this painting reveals the ever-present threat of child mortality, at a time when only 25 per cent of children reached their fifth birthday: baby Thomas, seated on the left, had died before the picture was finished. He

reaches heavenward towards the cherries; above him, on the clock, stands an infant Grim Reaper. Even the father of this prosperous household, a renowned apothecary, wasn't able to protect his child from an untimely death.

Another feathered friend for a child is found in the **Beginning of Life** cabinet, in the **Wellcome Collection Medicine Man** display.



Amulet in the shape of a turtle

North America, 1871–1900

Hundreds of coloured beads decorate the leather shell of this Native American object. It is the size of a child's toy but it's not a plaything – amulets such as these were pinned to children's clothing to protect them from illness and ensure a long life. Turtles were thought to give protection to women and this amulet would have been worn by a girl until she reached puberty. The significant threshold of adolescence is also suggested in Hogarth's painting of the Graham children, where

the eldest daughter's mature glance and motherly role signals the end of childhood and safe passage into adulthood. Amulets or talismans are kept by people all over the world, believed to have magical or spiritual powers. This turtle may contain a piece of human umbilical cord, giving it symbolic strength to heal and protect the body.

The next object is another remnant of the human body. Find it in a wall display case, beside the **End of Life** cabinet in **Medicine Man**.



Hair, said to belong to King George III

This unassuming lock of ruffled human hair may at first seem out of place in a museum display cabinet. While unwanted hair is usually discarded, there is also a long tradition of keeping a lock of hair as a personal memento of a loved one. This hair may have belonged to King George III, although very little is known about it. It has recently undergone scientific analysis, in the

hope of extracting further information about the king's mental illness; from 1789 until his death, George III experienced frightening episodes of apparent insanity most likely caused by the hereditary condition porphyria. This fragile remnant is a compelling reminder of a man's struggle with prolonged illness. However, there are many questions surrounding this object: why hasn't the hair been carefully groomed and bound in a ribbon, or kept safely in a jewelled locket?

In the 18th century, specialist makers supplied their clients with jewellery settings for treasured locks of hair. One such bracelet can be found in our next painting, in Room 36 of the National Gallery.



Queen Charlotte

Sir Thomas Lawrence, 1789

This portrait of George III's wife, Queen Charlotte, was painted shortly after the king's first bout of illness. Queen Charlotte had been reluctant to sit for the artist, explaining that 'she had not recovered sufficiently from all the trouble and anxiety she had gone through'. Although only 45 she had aged prematurely and was described as pale and quiet, her hands cold to the touch. Lawrence attempted to enliven the queen's face with a flickering hint of a smile, and to brighten her dull grey dress by painting it in lavender blue. Even so, perhaps we sense a careworn expression in her eyes. Charlotte's devotion to her beloved husband is displayed around her wrists: on her right arm, a portrait miniature of the king; on her left, his monogram is inscribed in diamonds and set on strands of the king's own hair.

Please note that, in the National Gallery, a painting may occasionally be removed from display. If this is the case, you can view a reproduction of it on ArtStart screens around the Gallery.

Explore further paintings and objects at www.nationalgallery.org.uk and www.wellcomecollection.org

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