

Plastic surgeons find joy in the creation of art

*"Life is short and the art long."
- Hippocrates (460-370 B.C.)*

BY JIM LEONARDO

Fine art and plastic surgery share the common intersection where imagination meets motor skills. The result is the formation of something new, exciting and aesthetically pleasing.

It would be no surprise if many, if not most, plastic surgeons consider themselves artists and have the works of art to prove it. Five plastic surgeons contacted by PSN agreed to share with readers the seeds of their art, their methods and inspirations.

The seeds of art

A ruptured appendix may have been the break Burt Brent, MD, needed to get his start as an artist.

"I was really sick for a couple of weeks, and my parents would bring a lot of clay with them when they came to visit me in the hospital. I created models of little animals, and I remember my father commenting on all the detail that I put into the pieces. I always thought I would be an artist," maintains Dr. Brent, Woodside, Calif.

"My first real hobby was taxidermy, and I've built miniature furniture and several 5-string banjos from scratch. But I've always been involved in artwork in some form, and about 10-12 years ago I started doing serious animal sculpture in bronze - mainly because I'm very interested in the natural world. I tend not to do humans; I do that all day long in the operating room," he says.

Jane Haher, MD, New York, says there is a very simple reason she pursues oil painting. "It's like asking, 'Why do you like to breathe?' I have to do it. I can't live without doing it, and there's never a day that I don't. It's like a part of my life.

"I don't want to sound like 'Pollyanna' with this, but I think so many artists are very spiritual and see the beauty of the world around us, and we just want to capture it and let people see what we're seeing," maintains Dr. Haher. "We want to share it with somebody."

She created her first works of art at a very young age, a fact recently confirmed by the discovery of an old photograph taken during one of her family's summers in the Hamptons in upstate New York. "I must have been age 3 or 4 in the photo, standing at this big easel with my little paints nearby. My husband said, 'My gosh, you still use the same pose when you paint?'"

Stanley Taub, MD, New York, knew he had a knack as an artist after he picked up a photograph of his grandmother and sketched a picture of her. Years of sketching were interrupted by an epiphany that came through an art teacher and sculptor.

"In the early 1960s, I became friendly with Nathaniel Kaz, a phenomenal sculptor and Art Students League teacher. I had gone to his studio and was absolutely bowled over by the quality and volume of his work," Dr. Taub recalls.

He thus had begun his long association with sculpture. "Shortly after visiting his studio, I walked past a bank that

was being razed in Brooklyn and came across several large pieces of marble. I trundled some back to my apartment and started carving on them," he says. "It turns out the pieces were granite, and it was a lot harder to carve than I had imagined. But I did manage to carve a head out of it."

Mary Powers, MD, Long Beach, Calif., began oil painting at age 6 after her parents, motivated by what they saw as her emerging talent, gave her a set of oil paints.

"I remember going to painting lessons at age 6, and then I started to pick up different types of arts and crafts work in school," recalls Dr. Powers. "I found that I liked water color because I learned how to wet-stretch the paper, and that's something that's very hands-on."

"Throughout grade school, I was the person in class who usually did very well in art class or won the art awards. I won a poster-creating contest for the local credit union in sixth grade. The theme was, 'Spend a little time today to make tomorrow a better world,' for which she drew an image of the earth and sectioned it into quarters, drawing into each segment a scene that represented ecology and humanity, Dr. Powers recalls.

Jeffrey Rosenthal, MD, Fairfield, Conn., always marched to the beat of his own drum, creating things that were beyond the ken of his then-young classmates.

"I recall that in social studies class I had a project that involved the explorers Lewis and Clark. I made a big relief map instead of just a drawing," he recalls. "Later, in biology class, I drew a picture of the human body, which always fascinated me, and used a pump and plastic wire to show how fluid coursed through the veins. In another course, I made an incandescent bulb out of a glass jar, wire and transformer."

"In college, I really enjoyed black-and-white photography and then developing and printing the images in an inspired way. In medical school, I decided that I wanted to learn how to draw with pen and ink, so I bought pen and paper. During one psychiatry class I was drawing an Oriental couple with an umbrella. The instructor walked by, looked at it and smiled. He didn't bother me about it. I was lucky he was a psych professor," Dr. Rosenthal says.

"Preferred medium
Dr. Haher has dabbled in other media such as clay, iron alloys, water colors, lithography and etching, but the permanence of oil paints exert a stronger pull. "You can work on a painting over and over again and change things; you can leave it and return to it later. Oil lends itself to the way I work. It's longer lasting, and it's a medium I grew up with," maintains Dr. Haher.

"Most artists, even the masters, didn't



Jane Haher, MD, who painted "The Heart of the Village" in the late 1990s, has won numerous awards for her artwork.

only work in one thing; they did many, many things," she notes. "But there was always one thing they sort of tended to do, whether it was because of the ease of doing it or whether they just had the materials at hand.

"I've sculptured, working steel and iron and all sorts of alloys," Dr. Haher says. "The reason I didn't proceed that way because you need a tremendously big studio. Lithography and etching - I'd love to do more of that, but again, you need an etching press, you need lithography stones, and a huge studio to do either one. I just don't have that," Dr. Haher says.

Dr. Powers says water colors, pastels and acrylic paints lend themselves quite well to her lifestyle and time commitments. "It's because of the ease with which I can pick up the water colors and put them back down when I'm ready. That's not easy to do with oil-based paints," she notes.

Dr. Powers says she finds herself at peace as she creates her art. "Especially when I'm at the point where I say, 'Ah, it's turning out the way I want it to and how I've envisioned it.' I think the other plastic surgeons will understand that feeling: They're in the midst of their operation, and

they think, 'I'm where I want to be with this patient.' That's how I feel when I'm painting. When it's goes very well, the same kind of creative energy develops."

Dr. Taub gradually evolved his art to include creating bronze sculptures of objects as small and isolated as a pair of hands to full-size replicas of human subjects, including John Curry, a world-renowned Olympic and world champion British ice skater, a sculpture that currently is en route to a new ice arena in Nottingham, England.

"I've always sketched and painted; I had done that for years before becoming a sculptor. I found art was something I could do," he says.

"I particularly like to do life-size sculpture, but I found I could work with

any size. The most amazing thing for me was that I could do it from photographs. That was really exciting, and it had the added benefit that people were spared from coming over and having to pose for me," Dr. Taub says.

Dr. Rosenthal is a self-trained artist, author and poet who feels his lack of formal training works in his favor. "I'm not conversant with the theories and standard methods of art, so I have no limitations on what I can do and can't do; I have no boundaries," he maintains.

Therefore, his choice of media is as limitless as his imagination. "I pick up leaves, stems and flowers that strike my eye, and I will paint with them, make impressions on canvas or paper," he says. "I once went to an art store, saw acrylic paste and asked, 'What happens if I mix the paste with the paint?' I bought it and mixed it up, the result being a medium that was almost like using oil paint: There's a thickness and texture to it that I use for layering. It's like having a three-dimensional painting on my walls. I now use the mixture often and even pipe it out, like a baker decorating a cake."

Art and plastic surgery

Dr. Rosenthal finds that the challenges of art are somewhat similar to other challenges he faces in life, including plastic surgery. "I love the process of creating and of thinking how I'm going to get something done. I have always been of the ilk that if I set my mind to it, I can accomplish it. Even if I don't know how to do it now, that doesn't mean that in a week, month or year's time, I won't come up with the answer on how to do it."

"My artistry is not limited to canvas or a hunk of clay," Dr. Rosenthal adds. "It's all in how I view my surroundings, and since I'm uninhibited in my thought process, I can just pick anything up and think, 'Why can't I do this?'"

Dr. Brent also is a self-taught artist who's talent may be genetic. "It is a direct pipeline from my maternal grandfather, who created tons of art," he notes. "He was a decorative house-builder who started painting as an art form at age 73, and he became very good at it. We're really the same people. We look alike, we have the same sense of humor. I look at my artistic talent as a gift from him," says Dr. Brent.

He, too, feels that art is more of a calling than an interest. "I've never known not doing art. I really was born doing art, and I always thought I would be an artist," Dr. Brent notes. "But my dad was a GP, general surgeon and OB/GYN all rolled into one. We had an office in the basement of the home in Detroit where I grew up, so I really grew up with medicine.

"My dad made house calls, and he had a floodlight attached to his car near the driver's window so he could look for addresses, and I used to ride along. Because of his influence, I decided to go to medical school, where I used art to help patients," Dr. Brent says.

Dr. Powers knew from a young age, too, that she wanted to be a plastic surgeon. "My grandmother asked me at age 5 what I was going to be. I said that I didn't know. She said, 'You know, if your grandfather can be a doctor, you certainly can be.' (My grandfather and uncles on my mother's side are doctors.) So I said, 'Sure, grandmother.' When I was 7, my mother asked, 'By the way, what kind of a doctor are you going to become?' I told her I didn't know. She said, 'Why don't you become a plastic surgeon?' I said, 'OK,' and I just kept going from there."

Dr. Powers also feels her art gives her a unique perspective into the world of

He had traveled years ago to the central Italy town, not far from Florence and famous for its sculptors, spending a summer there to work on his art. But he hadn't finished before he was forced to return home. "I left the sculpture of my son in a foundry. I returned 12 years later to spend another summer in Pietra Santa, and I found the unfinished piece. It was amazing.

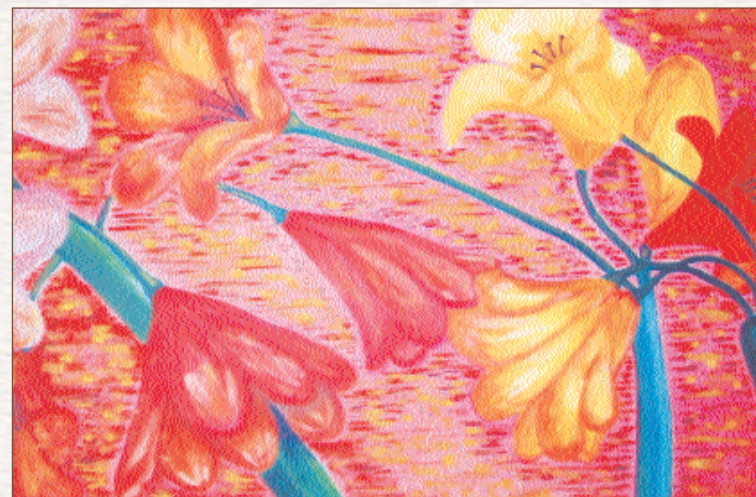
"They had moved the foundry and took that piece with them, figuring I'd come back eventually," Dr. Taub says. "They had piled the marble in one spot, and when I went to look at it, I noticed that one large piece was different from the rest. I climbed over to it and saw the head, arms and shoulders of my son, and said, 'Oh, my god.' He was covered in moss and there was water in the crook of his arm." He finished the sculpture that summer and shipped it home.

Dr. Brent says his criteria for his favorite artwork is simple. "It's the one you're working on at the time," he says.

"I feel the same way about my patients. I take care of children born with missing ears, sculpting their rib cartilage into an ear. My favorite kid is always the one I'm working on right now," he maintains.

The highest form of art

"Many of my patients see my art hanging



Mary Powers, MD, took the inspiration for "Flowers Scattered in Pink," one of several of her paintings included on her Web site, from the back of a calendar.

in my office," Dr. Rosenthal explains, "and sometimes say that they'd like to see more or buy some, but I tell them that the only art I ever 'sell' is when I 'sculpt' one of my patients. To me, working on the human body is really the highest form

of art I know. My art is all unique; each piece is very personal to me, so I couldn't bear to part with it, an exception being a brooch I designed and made for my wife, Catherine. She also has a suede sports coat that I designed and had finished in Mexico," Dr. Rosenthal explains.

Dr. Powers employs some of her paintings as art elements on her Web page. All are flowers, as are most of the images she paints. Her inspiration? "The spark or inspiration is different for each work. The poppy on my Web site came from a postage stamp. A lotus flower painting of mine, called 'Lotus Dreams,' came from a Smithsonian magazine cover. Many other works were from the back of a calendar," notes Dr. Powers.

Favorites

In Dr. Haher's Manhattan home hangs a portrait of her grandmother. The oil painting, finished many years ago, is one of her favorites, she says.

"It captures the spirit and soul of my grandmother, who was getting older and becoming forgetful, and the great strength and fortitude she had. My grandfather had died when she was a relatively young woman, and she raised several children by herself. I tried to bring out that strength while showing her age and infirmities. It's one of my better paintings," Dr. Haher notes.

Among Dr. Taub's favorites are the Curry sculpture and bronze sculptures of pianists Vladimir Horowitz and Arthur Rubenstein, actor Clint Eastwood and a marble statute of his son, which Dr. Taub found and completed 12 years after he left it in Pietra Santa, Italy.

try to incorporate into my artwork," she adds.

"You'll notice on my Web site that I like colors, and that's why I made it more colorful than the average Web site. My approach is color and openness, as opposed to what many other people want: cooler, darker, more sophisticated and sexy. Mine's more of a Web site that says, 'Let's just sit down and talk.'"

Dr. Haher says her favorite artist are the masters. "One of them is Diego Velazquez, the great Spanish painter, and of course, everybody loves Rembrandt. Others I love are John Singer Sargent and Joaquin Sorroila y Bastida. They are able to capture something - like the soul of the being. There's something intangible about their work that makes it genius. And so you keep looking at it and asking, 'What makes it so great?' And you try to emulate that."

Dr. Taub admires the work of contemporary sculptors Kaz and Bruno Lucchesi, and "as far as the antiquities, it would be Michelangelo," he says.

Having fun

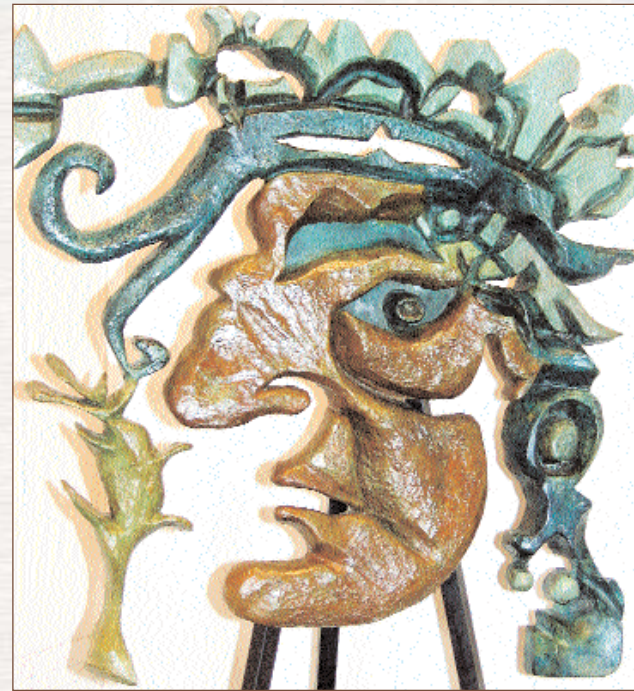
Dr. Taub says he stumbled happily into stone carving and sculpting, and he once was given a sculpting tool that came from the studio of Auguste Rodin, famous for his sculpture, "The Thinker."

"While in Pietra Santa, an artist who lived next door to me and who came from a family of sculptors gave me a hammer that he said came from Rodin's studio. I didn't put too much emphasis on that; I didn't know too much about Rodin at the time. I was just having fun doing what I was doing," Dr. Taub recalls.

"I kept the hammer for a while, working with it, and it became pretty beat up. Years later, I found a photo of Rodin in a book. In the photo there was a hammer, resembling the one I had, lying on the floor of one of his studios. I don't know if it was the same one, but it certainly was of the same time period. But over a period of time, I lost the hammer," he laments.

Dr. Brent has created works for the San Diego, San Francisco and Seattle zoos, as well as the Houston Children's Zoo and several other institutions. All have been about animals, but none has been more taxing to create than his polar bear. "The polar bear was cast in nine pieces," Dr. Brent notes. "Rodin's 'The Thinker' was probably cast in 40 pieces, for example, because it's impossible to cast that huge a volume of metal at once. You have to begin with a clay sculpture, from which you make a rubber mold. Wax is poured into the rubber mold to make a wax 'positive.'"

"The wax model is then encased in a ceramic



Jeffrey Rosenthal, MD, cast "Mexican Aztec" in bronze, built the stand and applied the patina to the 100-plus pound artwork that greets office visitors.

mold. The metal - in this case, bronze - is poured into the empty ceramic (the wax having melted away at one point), which, when cooled, is cracked. What remains is the bronze sculpture," he explains.

"My final preferred medium is bronze, but you always start out with clay. It's like modeling flesh, and it's very nice to work with," says Dr. Brent.

"If I weren't a plastic surgeon, I wouldn't be a physician," notes Dr. Rosenthal, whose children's books, paintings, masks, sculptures and photographs have been the focus of many art shows. "There's no other field of medicine that would allow me to create and be artistic and inventive. I approach things from many vantage points. I like to reflect a lot, which allows me to care for my patients in a caring and thoughtful manner."

"I'm really amazed when someone says you cannot do something. There's always a way accomplish your goals," Dr. Rosenthal believes. "You just have to figure out the right path in order to reach that end point."



Burton Brent, MD, sculpted a bronze polar bear for the San Diego Zoo. His work adorns zoos and medical institutions.