

An Exploration of Painting Art's Distinct Role and Multifaceted Characteristics in Enhancing Medical Narratives

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Abstract: This paper endeavors to investigate the distinct role and standing of painting art within the realm of narrative medicine. Initially, it illuminates the intersectional relationship between painting art and narrative medicine, emphasizing painting as a pivotal humanistic visual expression and an emotional conduit within medical narratives. Furthermore, by conducting an analysis of renowned painting artworks pertaining to medicine and healthcare across diverse eras and cultures, this study elucidates the multifaceted characteristics of painting art in medical image narratives. These characteristics encompass its representational quality, metaphorical nature, symbolism, emotionality, storytelling capacity, and cultural significance. Collectively, these features enrich the connotations of medical narratives. Lastly, the study delves into the significance and applications of painting art in medical image narratives, which encompass enhancing emotional resonance in medical narratives, expanding the visual dimension of medical education, fostering a deeper integration of medical humanities and arts, and realizing its potential therapeutic value in clinical practice. This research not only uncovers the intimate connection between painting art and medical narratives but also furnishes new perspectives and insights for the future progression of narrative medicine.

1. Introduction

Amidst the vast tapestry of human civilization, art and medicine have coexisted, jointly charting humanity's journey in unravelling the mysteries of health and disease. Painting art, as a vital conduit for articulating human sentiments and concepts, has maintained intricate ties with the realm of medicine. With the ascendancy of narrative medicine, these ties have acquired renewed vitality. Narrative medicine underscores the significance of apprehending illness, affliction, and medical interventions through narratives and tales, thereby fostering a holistic and empathetic approach to healthcare delivery.^[1] In this context, painting art has emerged as a pivotal modality within medical narratives, with its image-based narrative functions gradually unveiling distinctive values and

implications.^[2]

Currently, a substantial discourse has emerged concerning the nexus between painting art and narrative medicine, as well as its applications within medical narratives. However, interdisciplinary research that integrates the theories of painting art with narrative medicine remains scant. There is a pressing need for a more profound exploration of the unique attributes of painting art that align with medical image narratives, such as their representational quality, metaphorical nature, symbolism, emotionality, storytelling capacity, and cultural significance, and their implications and practical worth within the context of narrative medicine. This paper endeavors to bridge this gap, aiming to comprehensively explore and underscore the role and potential of painting art in narrative medicine.

2. The Integration of Painting Art and Medical Image Narratives

Narrative medicine, as a medical practice centred on patients' narratives and experiences, is gradually reshaping traditional healthcare paradigms. It underscores the importance of physicians listening to and comprehending patients' stories as the cornerstone for delivering more compassionate and efficacious medical care. In this milieu, painting art, with its unparalleled narrative prowess, has become an indispensable component of narrative medicine.

2.1. Modes of Expression in Narrative Medicine

Narrative medicine employs diverse modes of expression, encompassing patients' oral narratives, physicians' medical records, and various visual art forms. Among these, painting art stands out as a salient means of expression due to its immediacy and profound emotional resonance. Through painting, patients and physicians can visually depict and comprehend disease manifestations, treatment trajectories, and recovery phases. Furthermore, painting facilitates the articulation of patients' inner fears, anxieties, and aspirations, thereby enhancing emotional communication and understanding between physicians and patients.

2.2. The Vital Role of Painting in Medical Narratives

In medical narratives, painting art assumes a pivotal role. Firstly, it serves as an autonomous narrative instrument, leveraging images to narrate patients' illness experiences and therapeutic journeys. Image narratives, which employ images as the primary vehicle for storytelling or information dissemination, possess a rich history, predating written language. Even in prehistoric times, ancient humans chronicled their lives through rock paintings and stone carvings.^[3] Throughout the expansive landscape of art history, numerous visual artworks related to medicine and healthcare resonate profoundly. These works, imbued with deep emotions and ideas, masterfully integrate image narratives through intricate lines, vibrant hues, and distinctive forms. This form of image narrative not only enriches the expression of medical narratives but also renders them more vivid and tangible. Secondly, painting functions as a bridge in physician-patient communication. Physicians can gain deeper insights into patients' inner landscapes and needs through their paintings, enabling the development of more personalized treatment plans. Concurrently, patients can augment their comprehension and trust in illnesses and treatment options by viewing and interpreting physicians' artworks. Lastly, painting possesses therapeutic potential, aiding in patients' psychological alleviation and rehabilitation. Through engaging in painting creation or appreciating artworks, patients can release internal tensions and emotions, elevate self-awareness and self-esteem, ultimately fostering comprehensive physical and mental recovery.

3. Narrative Characteristics of Medical Imagery in Painting Art

In the dynamic interplay between painting art and narrative medicine, the narrative function of medical imagery manifests unique characteristics. These characteristics not only diversify the forms of medical narratives but also deepen our understanding of disease, healthcare, and life itself. The following sections will delve into the representational quality, metaphorical nature, symbolism, emotionality, storytelling capacity, and cultural significance of painting art in medical imagery narratives, with illustrative analyses of specific painting works.

3.1. Representational Quality

The representational quality in painting art refers to the artistic rendition of real-world objects, figures, or scenes with meticulous attention to detail and precision. This style employs readily comprehensible methods to convey ideas, enabling medical imagery to communicate information and emotions in a direct and expeditious manner. In medical narratives, representational quality is paramount as it aids viewers in swiftly grasping disease symptoms, medical procedures, and patients' emotional experiences. Rembrandt's "The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp" exemplifies this precision and mastery in depicting the intricacies of a Dutch medical anatomy class. The artist's signature chiaroscuro technique, known as "Rembrandt Light," utilizes stark contrasts of light and shadow to accentuate the primary figures and crucial details. For instance, Dr. Tulp, holding surgical scissors, stands out prominently under illumination, while the surrounding figures recede into a relatively dark backdrop, creating a potent visual hierarchy. The vivid facial expressions and varied gestures within the painting transport viewers to that historical moment, revealing not only the state of medical education in 17th-century Holland but also the students' yearning for knowledge and the professor's professionalism.

3.2. Metaphorical Nature

Metaphor, a prevalent expressive device in painting art, conveys profound meanings and ideas through visual elements. In medical imagery narratives, metaphorical nature transcends mere depictions of reality, offering profound reflections on life, disease, and healthcare. Metaphor "transcends the limitations of words, conveying thoughts and emotions inarticulable through artistic visual expression, constituting a linguistic form of creative artistic practice with significant implications for picture book therapy and broader art therapeutic domains".^[4] Francisco Goya's "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters" (*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*) metaphorically depicts the emergence of inner demons when reason wanes, surrounding a slumbering figure with terrifying illusions. This holds vital heuristic value in medical narratives, emphasizing the need for vigilance regarding patients' mental health and psychological disorders.

3.3. Symbolism

Symbolism, a narrative characteristic integral to painting art, transcends simple object representations, encompassing brushstrokes, colours, and lines. From a semiotic perspective, symbols in paintings possess continuity, development, and narrativity.^[5] In medical imagery narratives, symbols often carry specific medical meanings and cultural connotations, conveying richer and deeper information through ingenious combinations of symbols and visual elements. Ancient Egyptian medical murals illustrate this, using plant, animal, and deity images as symbols for diseases and treatments, reflecting contemporary beliefs and understandings of medicine. Similarly, the enduring association between snakes and medicine, traced back to ancient Rome, persists in Gustav

Klimt's "Medicine," where the spiral-shaped golden snake enhances the symbolic meaning of rebirth associated with the golden bowl. In modern medical imagery, symbols like electrocardiogram waveforms and medicine bottle shapes visually signify medical content, evoking associations and reflections in viewers.

3.4. Emotionality

The emotionality of painting art lies in its capacity to touch hearts and evoke emotional resonance through visual elements such as colour, line, and composition. Expressing emotions is not merely a presentation of content but an understanding and clarification thereof.^[6] In medical narratives, emotional transmission is vital, deepening empathy for disease, suffering, and treatment processes, fostering stronger emotional bonds between doctors and patients. Patients' feelings and experiences are paramount, and painting reveals their inner worlds through visual elements. Edvard Munch's "The Sick Child" poignantly portrays vulnerability and helplessness, while Vincent van Gogh's "Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear" conveys the artist's profound melancholy and pain post-self-mutilation. These emotional outflows facilitate empathy, communication, and understanding between doctors and patients in medical narratives.

3.5. Storytelling Capacity

The intrinsic storytelling nature of paintings imparts them with the capacity to narrate comprehensive medical narratives, unravelling the plot through visual images and thereby enabling viewers to comprehend medical events and experiences with greater immediacy. This storytelling facet of paintings is multifaceted, encompassing not merely the direct content portrayed but also the personal interpretations of the audience, the artist's creative intentions, and the intricate interplay between the artwork and its sociocultural milieu. Painting facilitates a complex and rich narrative engagement for both artists and viewers, fostering emotional exchanges and intellectual dialogues.^[7] This storytelling approach not only augments the vivacity and appeal of medical narratives but also facilitates a deeper understanding and retention of medical knowledge.

The Gross Clinic by Thomas Eakins exemplifies the storytelling prowess of paintings, meticulously documenting a bone surgery performed by the renowned surgical professor Gross. At the centre of the canvas, Dr. Gross diligently conducts the procedure, surrounded by attentive students, while the patient's distraught family members weep, their faces concealed, creating a poignant contrast and dynamic interaction. These intricate details not only authentically capture the ambiance of 19th-century American surgical operating rooms but also convey profound emotional nuances and character dynamics through facial expressions, actions, and spatial arrangements. The masterful utilization of colour and light further accentuates the emotional intensity and narrative tension within the painting. The entire work resonates as a static drama, inviting viewers to delve into its underlying historical, cultural, and social implications, showcasing the distinctive allure of painting as a narrative medium.

3.6. Cultural Significance

The cultural dimension of painting art is evident in its status as a societal phenomenon, with its aesthetic experience open to sociocultural anthropological interpretations. This underscores that painting artworks are not solely expressions of individual creativity but are deeply embedded in the symbolic expressions of their respective cultures. The cultural aspect of painting art manifests not only on the symbolic level as cultural expression but also in its role as a conduit for communication and understanding across cultures, as well as its influence on individual cognition and socialization

in educational contexts. There exists a complex, dynamic, and interactive interplay between art and culture, which evolves in tandem with societal and cultural transformations.^[8]

In the realm of medical painting, the cultural aspect is embodied in its capacity to mirror medical concepts and societal customs within diverse cultural frameworks. Paintings from various eras and regions offer invaluable insights into the interplay between medicine and society, while also reflecting the historical context and cultural backdrop of medical advancements.

Li Tang's "Village Doctor," a masterpiece from the Northern Song Dynasty, vividly portrays a scene where a village doctor attends to an elderly man's back abscess during that period. The attire, props, and treatment modalities of the figures in the painting are emblematic of the era, highlighting the prevalence and application of traditional Chinese medicine among the populace during the Northern Song Dynasty. The doctor's focused demeanour, the elderly man's pained expression, and the postures of the assisting figures collectively constitute a compelling medical vignette. This painting poignantly illustrates the widespread adoption of traditional Chinese medicine among the common folk in late Northern Song China, with itinerant physicians traveling to rural areas to address the health needs of the populace. It reflects the developmental status and folk medical practices of traditional Chinese medicine at that time, underscoring its cultural distinctiveness.

Similarly, the annals of Western medicine are replete with medically themed paintings of profound cultural significance. Renaissance medical illustrations, with their exquisite brushstrokes and vibrant compositions, vividly illustrate the contemporary understanding of human anatomy and physiological functions. These paintings not only serve as a rich repository of visual materials for contemporary medical education but also offer invaluable insights into the evolution of Western medical culture.

4. The Significance and Application of Painting Art in Medical Image Narratives

The fusion of painting art and narrative medicine has not only enriched the semantic depth of medical narratives but also imparted significant impacts on medical practice. This convergence is particularly evident in the application of medical image narratives, manifesting itself in various facets: amplifying emotional resonance in medical narratives, showcasing therapeutic efficacy in clinical settings, broadening the visual horizon of medical education, fostering a profound integration of medical humanities and art, and exerting a pivotal influence on the future trajectory of medical narratives.

4.1. Enhancing Emotional Resonance in Medical Narratives

Medical narratives transcend mere technical narratives of diseases and treatments; they encapsulate patients' emotional journeys. Painting art, with its unique visual vocabulary and emotional expression, profoundly amplifies the emotional resonance within medical narratives. Rita Charon, a pioneer in narrative medicine, underscores creativity as the cornerstone of healthcare, believing that patient care is an art form. Narrative techniques facilitate deeper bonds between doctors and patients, enabling them to confront the challenges of illness collaboratively. Artistic experiences foster understanding and empathy in medical practice.^[9] For instance, a painting depicting cancer patients' resilience and indomitable spirit amidst illness evokes stronger emotions than textual accounts alone. This emotional resonance not only aids patients and their families in comprehending the disease and treatment process but also strengthens communication and trust between doctors and patients.

4.2. Therapeutic Value in Clinical Practice

Painting art has demonstrated remarkable therapeutic potential in clinical settings. As a non-

pharmacological intervention, art therapy has gained widespread acceptance in mental health care. Painting offers patients a respite to reflect on personal experiences, fostering new perspectives on thoughts and emotions. It enables patients to delve deeper into their illness and treatment journey. Painting facilitates the non-verbal expression of profound emotions and ineffable experiences, particularly beneficial for managing complex illness-related emotions. Through painting, patients can articulate their feelings, release internal stress, and attain spiritual solace. Additionally, painting fosters a positive outlook on life, enhancing self-awareness and self-esteem.^[10] In the treatment of depression, for example, painting serves as an expressive art therapy tool, with patients creating contrasting images of darkness and light to express inner turmoil and hope, thereby catalyzing the self-healing process.

4.3. Expanding the Visual Dimension of Medical Education

Traditional medical education primarily emphasizes theoretical knowledge and practical skills development, whereas the integration of painting art imparts a fresh impetus. The application of painting art in medical education introduces a novel visual dimension to conventional learning modalities. By seamlessly incorporating painting into medical curricula, students can comprehend and explore the intricacies of human anatomy in a more intuitive manner, thereby deepening their understanding of core concepts such as anatomy and physiology. Furthermore, painting plays a pivotal role in nurturing students' observational skills and imagination, both of which are essential for medical professionals. In anatomy teaching, for instance, by creating anatomical illustrations, students not only enhance their comprehension of human body structures but also hone their meticulous observational abilities and precise expression skills in practice.^[11]

4.4. Advancing the Integration of Medical Humanities and Art

Painting art occupies a pivotal position in fostering the integration of medical humanities and art. Medical humanities attend to patients' psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions, whereas art embodies an emotive and creative mode of expression. The confluence of painting art and narrative medicine blazes new trails for the harmonious integration of these two domains. Narrative medicine underscores the importance of attending to patients' narratives and comprehending their emotional journeys, whereas painting art offers an intuitive and emotionally charged avenue for expression. By synergizing these elements, medical personnel can gain a profounder understanding of patients' inner landscapes and nurture a more nuanced approach to humanistic care. Additionally, painting enables medical staff to transform patients' narratives into visual imagery, deepening the comprehension of patients' emotions and fortifying medical professionals' empathy and communication abilities.^[12] For instance, showcasing paintings that depict harmonious doctor-patient interactions in public hospital spaces can foster a comforting and nurturing medical ambiance, thereby alleviating patients' anxiety.

5. Conclusion

The integration of painting art and narrative medicine introduces fresh opportunities and challenges within the medical realm. By delving into the distinctive characteristics and profound significance of painting art in medical image narratives, we can gain a richer understanding of diseases, suffering, and treatment processes, ultimately delivering more humanized and innovative medical services to patients. This endeavour contributes to the integration of medical humanities and art, enhancing the quality and warmth of medical care, and ultimately advancing the shared aspiration for human health and well-being.

As medical models evolve and patient needs diversify, future medical narratives will increasingly

prioritize patients' subjectivity and emotional experiences. Painting art, as a distinct narrative medium, will assume an even more prominent role in shaping these narratives. Through painting, we can further explore the intricate impact of illnesses on patients' lives, the complexity of doctor-patient relationships, and the ethical dilemmas inherent in the medical system. This exploration will facilitate the construction of a more humanized, comprehensive, and profound medical narrative framework.

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