

Promises, Promises: The Art of Selling Snake Oil

By PETER EDIDIN

PHILADELPHIA — Visitors to great museums of art are liable to be moved in any number of ways by what they see there, but almost never to laughter. This seems a pity; museums regard themselves as educational institutions, and the human condition, after all, is often as funny as it is noble or tragic.

A small exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art subverts high art's often relentless sobriety. "Quack, Quack, Quack: The Sellers of Nostrums in Prints, Posters, Ephemera and Books" is a funny and instructive look at four centuries of greed and folly, seen through artistic depictions of medical fraud.

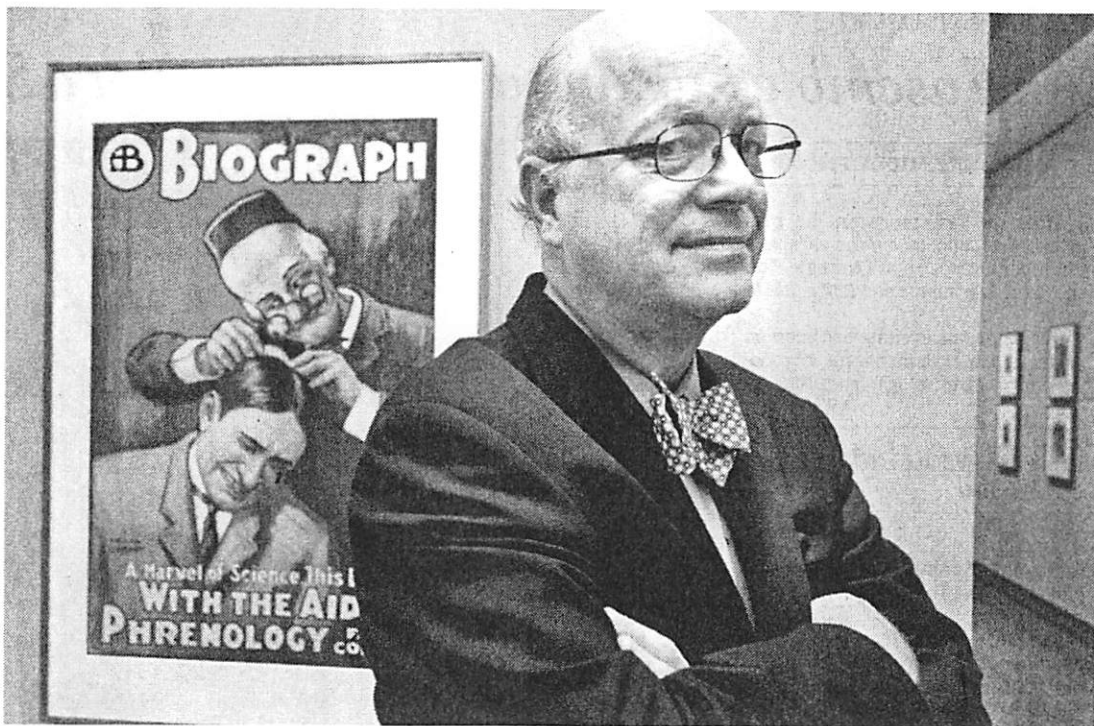
"The quack has always been a popular subject for artists," said John Ittmann, the museum's curator of prints, who helped organize the 75 works in the show, which is on view through June 26. "Back to the Middle Ages, when they showed up at a country fair, everybody came. After all, they were salesmen, pitchmen, who brought their own music makers and clowns and rode in their own caravans."

"Fair at Impruneta," a large etching from 1620, is by Jacques Callot, whom Mr. Ittmann calls an etcher and engraver of genius. It shows a crowd of perhaps 1,000 people at a town near Florence, Italy. But the viewer's eye is directed to a raised platform in the lower right-hand corner, where a quack ballyhoos his cure-all assisted by a motley fool holding out a large snake to attract the gullible.

There are works by other famous names on display — William Hogarth, Honoré Daumier and Maxfield Parrish — but the exhibition's strength lies in the ephemera: advertisements, song sheets, political broadsides and other works on paper that were part of the disposable popular culture of the moment.

For example, there is an anonymous 1803 portrait etching, "The Famous Mr. Martin Van Butchell," of a celebrated London quack. A squat little man with a bowlerlike hat, bushy beard and long hair sits astride an equally squat white pony covered with painted purple spots and outfitted with artificial teeth (Van Butchell's specialty). He also had his wife embalmed and placed in a case with a glass lid in his sitting room.

The exhibition continues through June 26 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 26th Street and Benjamin Franklin Parkway.



Laura Pedrick for The New York Times

John Ittmann, curator of prints at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, helped organize "Quack, Quack, Quack."



Philadelphia Museum of Art

"The Travelling Quack" (1889), a lithograph by Tom Merry.

A Dutch print from around 1600, the earliest in the show, depicts a popular cure for mental illness. The quack would make an incision in the scalp and, using sleight of hand, seem to remove disease-causing rocks from the patient's head.

By the 19th century, "Quack, Quack, Quack" demonstrates, the itinerant fraud was giving way to the mass marketer, who used posters,

newspapers and other advertising to sell products. Morison's Pills, a powerful vegetable-based laxative, was among the most successful of these enterprises. Customers were told to take as many as they felt necessary — potentially deadly advice — and one satirist showed a man turning into a hybrid vegetable because of them.

With industrialization, quacks also modernized, hawking electrical and mechanical contraptions. The Genuine German Electro Galvanic Belt, for men, promised to cure "liver, stomach and kidney diseases, diseases of the blood, catarrh, skin diseases, lung troubles, rheumatism, female complaints, paralysis, nervous debility, etc."

The quack was such a ubiquitous figure, in Europe and the United States, that he was often used as a stand-in for corrupt politicians. For instance, a lithograph, "The Travelling Quack," mocks William Gladstone, the four-time prime minister of England, for proposing "An Infallible Home Rule Ointment" to resolve the nation's problems with Ireland.

Most of the work in "Quack, Quack, Quack" was donated to the museum by William H. Helfand, a retired pharmaceutical executive, or is owned by him. Mr. Helfand, 78, is a New Yorker who has been collecting medical prints and ephemera for al-

most a half century and, as he says, "I'm still finding new things."

"Until the mid-19th century," Mr. Helfand said, "if you were sick you stood no better chance of improving by seeing a regular physician instead of a quack."

In fact, the British medical journal *The Lancet* has noted that quacks, because they often used natural ingredients in their nostrums, may have done less harm than physicians, who tended to favor harsh chemicals. That may be why, in "The Company of Undertakers," a 1736 Hogarth print in the show, three London quacks are literally placed above 12 of its celebrated physicians. Still, the piece carries the Latin phrase meaning, "And many are the faces of death."

Before the rise of scientific medicine, Mr. Helfand noted, people commonly moved back and forth between quacks and physicians. "Boswell," he said, "went to a regular doctor and to a quack for venereal disease. Venereal disease was a big business for these people."

Ultimately, Mr. Helfand said, "Quacks will always be with us." He takes a reasonably broad-minded view of that fact, adding: "These are my ancestors, after all. If it were the 16th century, I would probably have become one myself."