

B O O K R E V I E W S

Renzo Dionigi-Filippo Maria Ferro, “Non è la prima volta...Epidemie e pandemie. Storie, leggende e immagini”, Varese, R & F (edizione on-line), 2020, pag. X + 88.

The book, just released in an online-only edition, is the work of two doctors who, while practicing their profession at high levels, one in the surgical field and the other in the psychiatric field, have cultivated historical disciplines in an equally professional way (history of medicine and history of art). The theme of the book is the pictorial representation of epidemic diseases, with particular regard to the plague epidemics that afflicted Europe in the fourteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the book, preceded by a passionate preface by Alberto Lolli, some medieval miniatures on the subject of pestilence are remembered and described. The figures of some saints who over time have been invoked by the population as protectors and healers in times of plagues are then sketched: San Rocco, San Sebastiano, Santa Rosalia and especially San Carlo Borromeo. Some pictorial and sculptural representations of these saints are splendidly represented and analytically commented in the book. There is no shortage of curious news such as those concerning the Caladrio, a fabulous animal that in the Middle Ages was considered the bearer of reliable prognostic signs on the auspicious or inauspicious outcome of the epidemic disease that had afflicted the individual sick. A chapter is also dedicated to recent scientific representations, processed through the electron microscope, of the coronavirus responsible for the last modern pestilence: the COVID-19 pandemic.

The text of the two illustrious doctors, as well as esteemed university professors, can be defined as a “divertissement”, as Gianmarco Gaspari already suggests in the afterword. According to the Treccani dictionary, this French word indicates in the Italian language an “activity (even demanding) done for fun or leisure”, according to the Garzanti dictionary a “literary or artistic composition characterized by the playful elaboration of

a theme”. In fact, the two authors deal with undoubted competence, but also with undisguised pleasure, the theme they have assigned themselves. They talk about topics that they know very well (the history of art and the reflections that the history of medicine produces on artistic manifestations), but they do not fail to emphasize the socio-political aspects of art and medicine. As scientists as they are, they also make some encroachment into the medical-biological disciplines, expressing their opinion on the pandemic in progress, on the prophylactic measures adopted to combat it, on its consequences at an individual and community level.

The reader, fascinated by the text and by the elegant graphics, is left with the regret that the two authors, with considerable historical skills in both the medical and artistic fields, wanted to limit their treatment only to some of the many plagues that humanity encountered in his long journey and among the many representations that artists of various eras and geographical areas have provided of such plagues.

Massimo Aliverti

Ottaviani R. (a cura di), Percorso tra i meandri della storia dell’Arte Medica, Sesto Fiorentino (FI), <<apice libri>>, 2019, pag. 302.

The volume contains a large collection of lessons on historical-medical topics that the curator, together with prof. Paolo Vanni and other university professors from the Florentine area, held for several years at the “University of the Free Age” in Sesto Fiorentino.

The curator, to better orient the reader and provide a greater organicity to the text, has divided the lessons into some distinct sections: “History of medicine”, “Disease and prevention”, “History of surgery”, “History of nursing”, “History of hygiene”, “History of the Red Cross”.

In each section, the topics covered are many. As regards the general history of medicine, there are les-

sons on the most ancient Florentine hospitals, on the role of women in medieval medicine, on Giacomo Leopardi's pathography, on the cosmetics used by women over the centuries. In the same section there are also lectures on illustrious doctors of the past such as Giovanni Battista Morgagni (1682-1771) and Karl Landsteiner (1868-1943). With regard to diseases and their prevention, lessons appear on individual diseases (tetanus, scabies, leprosy, Spanish flu), but also on love sickness and the Mediterranean diet. As regards the history of surgery, lessons on heart transplantation, bowel surgery and orthopedic surgery are reported; there is also a brief lesson on Giuseppe Garibaldi's famous wound in his right foot. The section on the history of the nursing profession is entirely dedicated to some women who, from the Risorgimento to the Great War, honored this health activity. The history of hygiene is summarized in a few lessons dealing with Public Health. A larger group of lectures is instead dedicated to the history of the Red Cross, in particular to the birth of this international organization and to the figure of its creator Henry Dunant (1828-1910). In this last group of lectures, there is also the history of the Order of Malta's health activity.

As a whole, the volume is perhaps a little too affected by the occasion that gave rise to it: the curator's desire to produce a paper documentation of the commitment made by her, as by other experts in the history of medicine and health, in many years of lessons at the University of the Free Age of Sesto Fiorentino

(but also at the Red Cross History courses organized by Prof. Vanni). Not all lectures appear to be of the same tenor, alternating developments supported by in-depth historical-medical research, with others of a prevalently popular nature.

The volume, however, has the merit of mentioning, even in a collection of texts essentially intended for a non-specialist public, little-known figures in the history of health, deserving of a rediscovery by the experts. I mention the Tuscan doctor Giovanni Torgioni Tozzetti (1712-1783), interested in the problems of public health and environmental hygiene of the Grand Duchy which recently passed under the Lorraine dynasty. I mention the Tuscan doctor Pietro Betti (1784-1863), an important administrator of Florentine healthcare and reformer of medical-surgical teaching in Florence. I mention the Milanese princess Christina of Belgioioso (1808-1871), organizer of the hospital system of the Roman Republic and a pioneer of social and health care for the disadvantaged classes. I mention the Swiss doctor of Italian origins Louis Appia (1818-1898), one of the first supporters of the idea of the Red Cross alongside Henri Dunant.

A further merit of the volume now printed is to pay homage to prof. Paolo Vanni, passionate student of the history of medicine and tireless scholar of the history of the Red Cross, as recalled by the same editor in the first pages of the book.

Massimo Aliverti