



Original Article

Three Portraits, 2 Artists, and 1 Harvard Department of Anaesthesia: the Brigham Chairs and the Artists Who Rendered Them[☆]

John A. Fox, MD^a, Erin Poor, MA^b, Sukumar P. Desai, MD^{a,*}

^a Department of Anaesthesia, Harvard Medical School, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, MA

^b Assistant Curator of Education, Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE

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ABSTRACT

Background: Many forms of art accurately depict physical attributes of their subjects. But how precisely do portraits capture personal, emotional, and behavioral aspects of individuals holding leadership positions in academic departments of anesthesiology?

Methods: We examined formal portraits of the first three academic chairmen of anesthesiology in our department – Leroy D. Vandam, Benjamin G. Covino, and Simon Gelman and obtained information about the artists (George Augusta and Marc Klionsky) regarding how they conducted research on their subjects, and the methods they used to depict significant character traits into their art. We then correlated the artistic depiction with known biographical and behavioral qualities of these leaders.

Results: We found that the artists were remarkably astute in their observations and that they successfully captured both physical and emotional aspects of these chairmen in their portraits. Moreover, in one instance, significant early life experiences were added to the composition with subtlety. Individuals familiar with these chairmen and aware of their management style can easily appreciate the techniques employed by the artists.

Summary: We conclude that art successfully depicted personal and executive attributes of these three academic anesthesia chairmen.

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Background

Although the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital (PBBH) in Boston, MA, was established just over 100 years ago in 1913, the Division of Anesthesia within the Department of Surgery was not chaired by an academician until the arrival of Leroy David Vandam, MD, in 1954, and Harvard Medical School did not establish an independent Department of Anesthesia until 1969.¹ Chairs who succeeded Vandam were Benjamin Gene Covino, PhD, PhD, (Chairman, 1979–1991), Simon Gelman, MD, PhD, (Chairman, 1992–2002), Charles Alfred Vacanti, MD, (Chairman, 2002–2015) and James Phillip Rathmell, MD, (Chairman, 2015–).²

Chairs influence departments in a myriad of ways, including conduct of patient care, research performed and clinical procedures they introduce and encourage. Additionally their influence on the faculty they mentor and the trainees who graduate from their programs

are a reflection of their personality and management style. Many lead by personal example, others hire able lieutenants to carry out their vision, and yet others take a laissez faire approach allowing their faculty freedom to grow and impact their department.

PBBH merged with Robert Breck Brigham Hospital and the Boston Hospital for Women in 1980 to form BWH.² Some institutions commission formal portraits to honor retiring chairmen; portraits of our first three chairmen grace the walls of Bornstein Auditorium, the primary amphitheater-style meeting space in our hospital. We examine the personalities of these chairmen, the marks they left on the department and the careers of the artists who created their portraits. In particular, we discuss how successfully these artists captured the characteristics of the chairmen, and the techniques that were employed to achieve these results.

George Vance Augusta, Jr.: Portrait Artist of Leroy David Vandam and Benjamin Gene Covino

George Vance Augusta, Jr. (1922–2012)³ (Figure 1)

Born and raised in the Boston suburb of Dorchester, George Augusta was a soldier, a linguist, and an artist. He served in World

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* Corresponding author at: Department of Anesthesiology, Perioperative and Pain Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital, 75 Francis Street, Boston, MA 02115. Tel.: +1 617 732 8510; fax: +1 617 277 2192.

E-mail address: sdesai@partners.org (S.P. Desai).



Fig 1. George Vance Augusta (1922–2012), a self-portrait. © George Augusta. Used by kind permission of the artist's estate.

War II as a code breaker, deciphering Luftwaffe codes in North Africa and Italy. While in Italy, Augusta encountered the enormity of visual history stored in renaissance palaces, baroque churches, and countless museums. His European experience transformed him into an artist who relentlessly analyzed his physical surroundings and translated them into images. Upon returning from the war, the young New Englander sought formal training as a painter.

The 1940s were an explosive time for artists, critics, and students. During the wars the European avant-garde fled oppressive regimes and arrived in America to spark artistic revolutions that would resonate well into the 21st century. One such revolution was the Surrealist movement, which was influenced by the psychoanalytic studies of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). Surrealists saw Freud's work as a viable framework through which the unconscious mind could be probed and the power of imagination released. Other artists working during the first half of the 20th century adopted the language of abstraction to break from the restrictive conventions of art academies. They experimented with new materials, techniques, and uses of color to transmogrify the subject in an attempt to emancipate it entirely from reality.

Historians, critics, and institutions, through the publication of books, essays, and the mounting of exhibitions, helped to establish Modernism as the dominant narrative of the late 19th and first half of the 20th century. However, these radical proclamations of "newness" happened while other artists continued to work in the more traditional fields of history painting and realist figuration. Several artists interested in the preservation of traditional techniques, subject matter, and media were working in the Northeast and became known as the Boston School. Combining fine academic draftsmanship with a love of color borrowed from the Impressionists, they blended rigorous technical skill with a Modernist interest in light and hue. Artists such as Edmund Tarbell, Frank W. Benson, Joseph DeCamp, William Paxton, and Ernest Lee Major combined French academicism and Impressionistic palettes to usher in a new and long-lasting regional style. Of this group, Major had perhaps the most significant role in passing on the traditions of the 19th century.

Ernest Lee Major (1864–1950) was born in Washington, DC. He studied art in Washington, DC, New York City, and Paris before settling in Boston and accepting teaching positions in the area's schools. In 1896, Major joined the faculty at the Massachusetts Normal Art School (now Massachusetts College of Art and Design), where he taught drawing and painting to eager new generations of artists for more than 40 years. Among Major's many students was a young, gifted painter named George Augusta.

Studying directly under Ernest Lee Major, Augusta spent years developing his draftsmanship, scrutinizing a subject for hours, and then painstakingly rendering a likeness with the highest fidelity to reality. To this technical element he added a dazzling color palette that captured the fleeting effects of light, in the style of the *en plein air* painters of France. It was a nearly quixotic feat: balancing calculated naturalism and the loose, dynamic brushwork of Impressionism. Yet Augusta achieved great success, capturing a subject faithfully while also conveying the unique essence of his sitter. Augusta's gift was spotted immediately, and he quickly became one of the most sought-after portrait artists of the 20th century. Notable subjects of Augusta's portraits included the wife of President Jimmy Carter, Rosalynn Carter; the former president of Harvard University, Derek Bok; the 64th Governor of Massachusetts, Francis W. Sargent; and the 15th Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court, Warren Burger. The products of his prodigious efforts hang in countless auditoriums, memorial halls, museums, and private collections.

Leroy David Vandam (1914–2004)

Leroy David Vandam was recruited by Chairman of Surgery Francis Daniels Moore (1913–2001) in 1954. At PBBH, he was the first physician specifically trained in anesthesiology and its first Harvard Professor of Anaesthesia. Over a decade earlier, at Massachusetts General Hospital, Henry K. Beecher was appointed the first Henry Isaiah Dorr Professor of Anaesthesia at Harvard. Dorr, from the Philadelphia Dental School, is recognized as the first professor of anesthesiology.⁴ Vandam was born at home in New York on January 19, 1914. Growing up in New York City, Vandam showed intellectual prowess at a young age, leading him to skip ahead in school and matriculate at Brown University at age 16 and gain acceptance to New York University Medical School. Vandam had been interested in art from a young age, and his work was featured on the cover of his high school year book and in magazines. He took art classes while in medical school and became an accomplished artist. Watercolor was his preferred medium and 4 of his paintings graced the covers of the Journal of the American Medical Association (Figures 2A–D).

Upon graduating from New York University College of Medicine (1938), he trained as a surgeon at Boston's Beth Israel Hospital (1938–42), finishing as Chief Resident (1942–3). He enlisted for service in the US Army during World War II after completing surgical training in 1943, with the rank of First Lieutenant. However, a few months later in September 1943, he developed a series of poorly understood medical complications in his left eye, ultimately resulting in its loss.⁵ While undergoing medical treatment for 2 years he was absent from clinical work, after which he undertook a research position at Johns Hopkins University (1945–47).

The resulting loss of 3D vision compelled Vandam to explore a career in another medical specialty and led him to join the Department of Anesthesiology at the University of Pennsylvania as a resident in 1947 and as a faculty member in 1949. Although monocular vision likely interfered with laryngoscopy, he did not appear to have any difficulty with airway management and tracheal intubation. During this period, he formed a lifelong association with Robert Dunning Dripps (1911–1973) and James Edward Eckenhoff (1915–1996). Together the three wrote a popular American textbook devoted to anesthesiology, *Introduction to Anesthesia—The Principles of Safe Practice*,⁶ a work

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