

Visualising Venereal Disease in London c.1780 - 1860



1858



1733



1845

We have come to accept an innate visual culture within modern medicine. Whether a microscope or an MRI, visualising technologies permeate medical practice from research to diagnosis. Yet the visual was not always guaranteed this centrality.

Engaging in an emerging field investigating medicine's visual culture, my PhD thesis explores the role of visual representation of venereal disease in the creation of knowledge of this condition during the period c.1780 – 1860. This was a period in which the identities of such diseases were undergoing profound changes. From an emphasis on illness as humoral misalignment in the early modern period, the late eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of a view of disease that was based on its visible, pathological signs on and within the body. As diseases came to be conceptualised via their visible symptoms, ways of creating and communicating knowledge of them came to reflect this, and visual representation began to play a key role in conceptualising disease.

Focusing on London's thriving and often chaotic medical sphere, this project examines the place of these representations in the classification, medical teaching and practices surrounding venereal disease, as well as social reactions to the disease in the period. I argue that visual representations, whether in the form of illustrations in medical atlases, paintings of patients created in hospitals, or images used in the education of medical practitioners, played a vital part in forming new knowledge about venereal disease.

All images used courtesy of the Wellcome Library, London.

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