

This special edition of Dr. Phil's Art Corner takes you inside the corner to meet the artist himself. After 5 years of printing works of art by Philip Alexander, M.D., we sat down with him to discuss how art, music, and medicine intertwine in his professional life.

ART AND MEDICINE WITH DR. PHIL

Laura Gerik, M.S.

It's hard to pin down Dr. Philip Alexander as a left brain or right brain type of guy. On the left side, he recently retired from a 41-year career as an internal medicine physician and has been a section editor of the *Methodist DeBakey Cardiovascular Journal* since 2012. On the right, he started his career as a musician, and that journal section bearing his name features not medicine but art. To Dr. Phil, there's no contradiction in his seemingly divergent paths; being an artist makes him a better doctor, and vice versa. "Anything we do to enlarge ourselves makes us better at all things we do," he says.



Philip Alexander, M.D.

Of Woodwinds and White Coats

Before Alexander became Dr. Phil, he was a successful oboe player from Conroe, Texas. After graduating from the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, Alexander returned to his home state to teach music at Texas Tech University. But after a year, he found himself itching for more.

"I was on top of the heap when I left," he says, "and I still wanted to do music, just not exclusively." He followed his left brain east to Houston, enrolling at Baylor College of Medicine and launching an entirely different kind of career. It was at Baylor, where he was a student, intern, and finally resident, that Dr. Phil worked alongside some of Houston's cardiovascular legends. "[Don] Chapman, [H. Liston] Beazley, [William] Winters, [William] Spencer, and [Dick] Cashion—that was 'The Group,'" Alexander reminisces.

That early connection resurfaced decades later when Dr. Winters, then starting his fledgling journal at Houston Methodist, wanted to add humanities sections to liven up the medical content. Winters thought of his old friend from Baylor. "I learned recently that he'd been publishing and printing artwork done on the computer, so I approached him to see if he'd be interested in publishing his art in the journal," Winters recalls. Alexander was surprised when he received the phone call "out of the blue," but quickly warmed to the idea. And thus, Dr. Phil's Art Corner was born.

The Evolving Artist

Since then, journal readers have enjoyed their quarterly glimpses into Alexander's colorful world. At times, his art seems startlingly realistic, with sunlight sparkling on water or airplanes knifing through an endless sky. ("I always liked to draw planes and girls," he confides, "but in Brazos County, you'd better stick to the planes!")

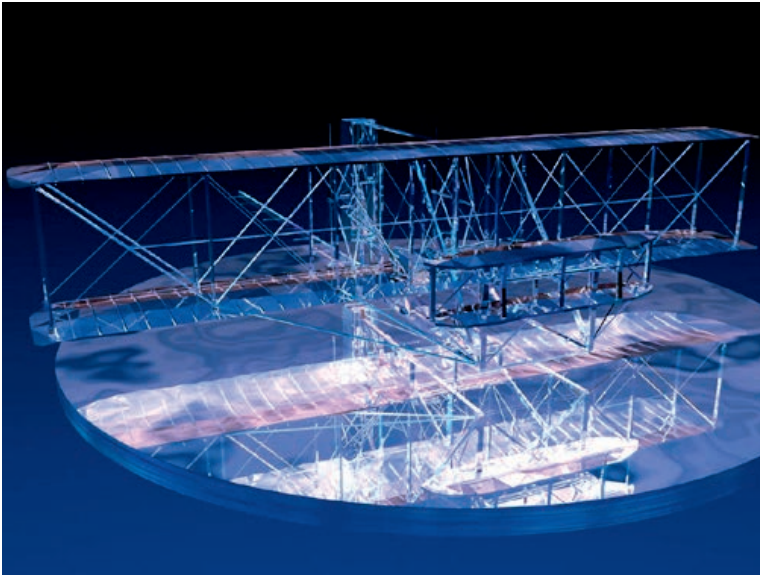
In other frames, he ventures into fantasy, whether painting swirling swaths of colors or meticulously detailing his own imaginary space station. He once created a whole series of crystalline still lifes (see "Crystal Wright") just to play with a new skill. "I learned how to do facets. When you learn how to do facets and one turns out well, why not do another?" he quips.

Although he's best known for his computer art, Alexander started out the old-fashioned way, with pencil and paper. When his wife Beverly bought him Betty Edwards' book *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* in 1980, neither of the Alexanders knew what they'd started. Alexander dove into his new hobby armed with a 6B pencil, playing with shadows and negative space to create realistic portraits and scenes. "Then computers came along, and I put the pencil down and picked the mouse up," he says.

Using Photoshop, Alexander now creates intricate, colorful scenes as lifelike or otherworldly as he can imagine. "The medium really dictated my evolution as an artist," he says. "It's hard to select and change a whole color with pencil, and there's no way to add light and brilliance over and above the color of the paper."



Tomcat Patrol (Photoshop). Planes have always captured Alexander's imagination and are a favorite subject for his art.



Crystal Wright (Photoshop), *Eye Candy 2* (Photoshop). Although best known for his air and seascapes, Alexander often tries out new techniques in fantasy scenes.

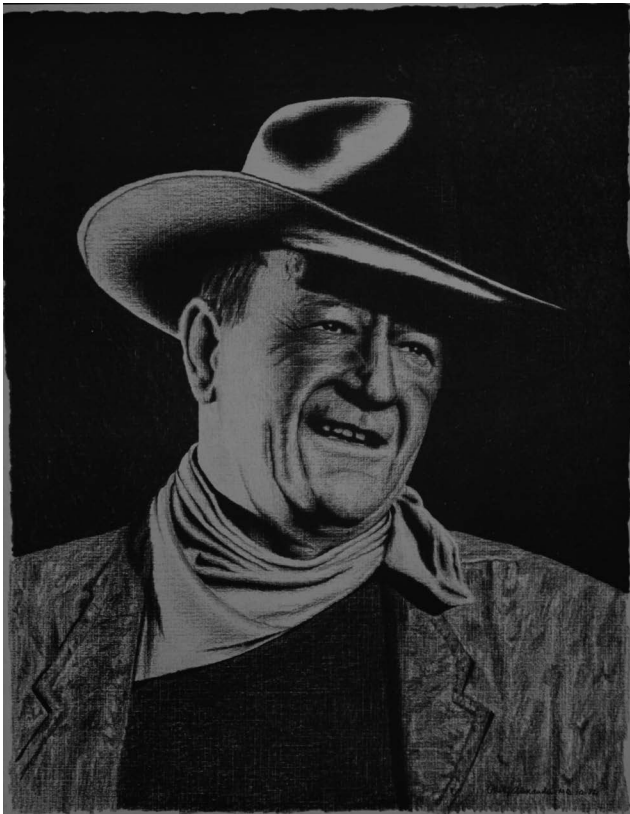
Despite the software’s claim to fame, Alexander doesn’t look at photos as he creates his drawings, preferring to gaze out the window and let his imagination take flight.

The Medicine of Art

In the journal’s 2016 readership survey, the humanities sections—art, poetry, and essays—received overwhelmingly positive feedback. For Dr. Phil, the news came as no surprise; to him, the

worlds of art and medicine are naturally intertwined. Throughout his career, he used art—both visual and musical—as a form of escapism, a way to relax and let his creative side take over after a stressful day in the clinic. “The medical world is all left brain,” he says. “The left brain tires, but the right brain is tireless.”

Indeed, medicine and the humanities share a long history together. Consider the poets Oliver Wendell Holmes and John Keats (featured in this issue’s “Poet’s Pen”), or 18th-century engraver



John Wayne (graphite). Alexander started his art career using a 6B pencil.



Mr. President (1983, graphite on linen paper). Nancy Reagan selected Alexander’s pencil portrait of Ronald Reagan as one of the president’s official portraits in 1984.



Tiger (Photoshop). Alexander stitched together dozens of photographs to create a dizzying image up close that resolves into a tiger from a distance.



Alexander uses his art to calm his patients and take their minds off their troubles. From the moment they walk into Alexander's practice, patients and visitors are surrounded by a fantasy world of planes, landscapes, exotic animals, portraits, and scenes from outer space.

Charles Bell, all trained as physicians. Art, poetry, literature, and music were long considered part of a well-rounded physician's repertoire, although some argue that those subjects largely fell to the wayside as science dominated the 20th-century medical education.^{1,2} However, in the last decade, there's been a resurgence of art and humanities programs in medical schools such as Harvard, Yale, and Penn State. Medical educators recognize that pairing art with science helps students become more empathetic, observant physicians.³

It's a concept that ties in neatly with Alexander's philosophy and one of the reasons he's passionate about including art in a medical journal. For Dr. Phil, exercising that right brain through art comes down to one thing: soul. He explains, "I'd want my doctor to have played Beethoven's Seventh on stage last week, then the next day made morning rounds. I'd see that person differently."

Likewise, Alexander recognizes the soothing power of art and music for patients. "What's the one common denominator in a doctor's office? Fear. Diffuse that," he says. "What's the mechanism for getting the patient into the right brain? It could be a CD of Beethoven's Second, or a picture of a P-38 bomber or a little farmhouse." Alexander decorated his College Station, Texas prac-

tice with his own art (which, at his partner's request, remains on the walls even after his retirement), but the oboist admits that he discontinued his practice of playing classical music for his patients about 10 years ago.

What changed? "Probably my visits to the dentist," he observes wryly. "Because they played what they liked to listen to—as did I." Perhaps the experts at Harvard and Yale are on to something with this empathy idea, after all.

References

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