

## Exhibition Review

---

**A VISION OF HISTORY: THE WELLCOME INSTITUTE FOR THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE.** An exhibition to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Wellcome Trust, 1 September 1986 to 10 April 1987.

The first sight to greet visitors to the exhibition gallery of the Wellcome Institute is a triptych: in the middle is the portrait of the founder, Sir Henry Wellcome, and on either side, panels showing pictures of the Institute and Library yesterday and today. What was it like then? What is it like now? How has the Institute changed and developed up to the present day? How has it succeeded in realizing the historical interests of its founder? What was done in the past, and what sort of activities are going on now, in order to make Wellcome's vision of history accessible to the world? What has the Wellcome Institute to offer the public today?

This exhibition answers all these questions. Like a huge family album, it tells the story of the Wellcome Library and its collections, and reveals the present life and work of the Institute in pictures and photographs.

The first, exciting chapter of the story is the formation of the unique Wellcome collections from 1897 to 1936, which coincided with the last golden age of collecting activity, when bulk acquisitions of manuscripts, rare books, and other objects were still possible. The second chapter shows how the Museum and Library struggled for years to gain adequate space for their materials. The present solution, however, separates them according to their different characters and functions. The Museum is now located at the Science Museum in South Kensington, where it occupies two large galleries and attracts many visitors. The Library remains in the Wellcome Building on the Euston Road, and its collections form the base for the wide variety of research being carried out within the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine.

This exhibition concentrates on the resources and research work of the Institute. It documents, by various means, the efforts that have been made, under the magnanimous stewardship of the Wellcome Trust, towards making a modern academic centre for the history of medicine. A rich selection of resources—manuscripts, archives, and rare books, as well as materials from the Oriental, American, and Iconographic Collections—is on display in generous proportion. Although these represent only a small fragment of the Institute's whole collection, visitors can gain an impression of its incredible richness, and can be highly delighted at the sight of some unique and unusual items.

The exhibition also shows how the Library makes these resources available to scholars and readers, most obviously through the catalogues which reveal different aspects of its holdings. Sample volumes of the various printed catalogues are on display, as well as copies of *Current Work in the History of Medicine*, a quarterly bibliography of recent literature in the subject. Other pictures show the Library itself, which has now become a well-frequented centre of research. Photographs of the Reading Room, the busy Library Desk, the offices, and members of the Library staff, reveal something of the everyday life and inside workings of the Library. What cannot be shown by pictures is the devoted work and helpfulness of the staff, which are well known to all the readers.

### *Exhibition Review*

It is even more difficult to show by the limited means of an exhibition the enormous activity of the Institute's Academic Unit, which was formed in 1977. A part of their research work is documented by their numerous publications, both books and articles, which cover the whole history of medicine in the widest sense. But their teaching activity, which attracts more and more students and young research fellows, their other educational efforts, and the various successful seminars and symposia which they organize, can hardly be revealed by pictures and charts. Some panels, however, offer a glimpse of the range of this activity, for they show the places all over the world where the members of the Academic Unit and other members of staff have given lectures or acted as consultants over the last five years. The broad range of countries and institutions, and many other details, prove the growing influence of the Wellcome Institute, in which the activities of the Academic Unit undoubtedly play a leading role.

This exhibition, which celebrates only one side of the Wellcome Trust's activities over the last fifty years, reveals how the Institute has become a leading international centre for the history of medicine: it points to its achievements, in both past and present, and offers a glimpse even behind the scene. Those who are unlucky enough not to be able to see the exhibition in London may gain an excellent impression of it from the beautiful exhibition catalogue, *A vision of history*, which is available from the Institute (183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BP) at the remarkably low price of £3 or \$5.

Maria Szlatky  
Simmelweiss Medical Historical Museum, Budapest