



“Crucifixion, seen from the Cross,” by James Tissot. Public Domain

Painted perspectives

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Crucifixion, seen from the Cross is a late 19th century watercolor painting by James Tissot, a French artist.¹ Unlike most portrayals of the Crucifixion, this

powerful painting portrays the bystanders from the perspective of Jesus, his feet shown at the very bottom edge of the painting extending toward his mother Mary immediately below. The painting transports the viewer into the eyes of Jesus, seeing the world from a new perspective. Missing in the painting are the crown of thorns, the nails in his hands and feet, the whip marks on his body; missing is the evidence of suffering. Even though there is no objective proof of pain, viewers can feel the melancholy and empathize with the suffering, emphasized by this subjective change in perspective.

Similar to most portrayals of the crucifixion and other snapshots of history, be it *Washington Crossing the*

Delaware or *American Gothic*, the subject is often painted in the third person. The painting's viewers passively observe the subject and can only conjecture as to the subject's human perspective. The very same phenomenon pertains when physicians watch the patient rather than become the patient.

In 1989, Robert Pope broke the tradition when he created the painting *Visitors* with acrylic on canvas while undergoing treatment for cancer.² It bears a striking resemblance to



"Visitors," by Robert Pope. © 2021 Robert Pope Archive.

Tissot's *Crucifixion, seen from the Cross*. The painting, shown from the perspective of the patient, portrays Pope's support system, their faces conveying a spectrum of emotions from anger and confrontation to reconciliation and sharing, as they surround his legs, clad in silky pajama bottoms outstretched on a hospital bed.² There are no lines or tubes, no bandages: no objective signs of suffering. Yet, viewers know that the patient is suffering from the visitors' faces. The powerful shift, peering out of the eyes as the patient—instead of at the patient—plants seeds of empathy to understand, appreciate, and truly see both the pain and the beauty.

One may wonder, how does this lesson in art history relate to medicine? In one sense, it starts with remembering what the word patient means in this art form called medicine. The Latin root, *patiens*, means to suffer.³ The word patient, first used in the 14th century as a noun, has been defined as "a person who suffers patiently."^{3,4} Therefore, for centuries, patients have been labeled as people who suffer, and providers have sought to be worthy to serve and relieve this suffering.

Like most painters, providers often view patients as subjects in the third person. Perhaps this is because it is easier to convey sympathy than to feel empathy. Even more so, this perspective may have become a defense mechanism to protect against the providers' own suffering. However, wholly serving patients requires not only a passive

observation of suffering, but also an active understanding of that suffering. This necessitates a change in perspective, seeking to see the world through patients' eyes, understanding their passions and fears, seeking to know about their hobbies and homelife, and valuing the spectrum of emotions represented on the faces of those at their side who love them and who are loved by them.

Although physicians try to minimize pain for patients and themselves through frank objectivity, the

truest way to serve the suffering is a change in perspective; taking on the pain and recognizing that it is not a burden but rather an opportunity to look out and see the beauty that remains even amidst misery.

References

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