There are probably many very good and scientific reasons why learning from diagrams and pictures is easier than learning from the written or the spoken word. Why this is so is not important at the moment, but that it is so is borne in upon the observer who stops to look at prints which have in common subject matter of medical interest. From prints the layman rather quickly gets a glimmer of the history of medicine, its emergence from a cloud of superstitious fear and ignorance, and its progress towards scientific knowledge.

One of the prints in the Museum’s collection, the fifteenth-century Ferrarese Saint Sebastian with Two Archers, is in reality a medical print, even though it simply shows the saint’s martyrdom. The devastating mortality of the plague epidemics of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Europe turned men’s minds towards prevention rather than cure; owning a picture of Saint Sebastian, it was thought, would prevent the plague, for he was the patron saint whose special duty it was to ward off this disease. A print of Saint Sebastian was within the financial reach of more people than a painting would have been and was just as efficacious. Usually shown pierced but unharmed by the arrows of Diocletian’s staff of executioners, Saint Sebastian probably received his responsibility in connection with the plague because arrows had long been used as an emblem of pestilence.

One of the handsomest woodcuts in Johannes Ketham’s Fascicolo di medicina (Venice, Gregorii, 5 February 1493), a collection of fourteen medical treatises, is an illustration for Pietro da Torrignano’s tract on the plague. It shows the dying plaque victim in bed, attended by three women and having his pulse taken by a doctor who is holding a pomander over his nose and mouth to preserve himself from infection. Though Torrignano’s tract contains the idea of contagion, for the causes of the disease he still relies on astrology; celestial emanations and climatic conditions, he believes, bring about epidemics of plague.

A truly scientific attitude toward medical research has, in many cases, been shared by doctor and artist alike. John of Calcar, one of Titian’s assistants, drew for Andreas Vesalius’s De humani corporis fabrica (Basel, 1543) the first accurate description of the human body and did it so well that anatomical textbooks, especially those for doctors, but also those for artists, have copied and recopied the plates for four hundred years. John was not content to draw his figures as partially dissected cadavers on operating tables; he endowed them with the ability to stand on their own feet—be they just bones, bones and muscles, or bones, muscles, and flesh. Against a sixteenth-century Italian landscape background they walk, move their languid heads, and extend their arms, which drip with partly sloughed-off layers of skin or muscle.

An eighteenth-century anatomy theater is the background for Hogarth’s Reward of Cruelty. Hogarth, a satirical preacher rather than a scientist, could think of no more horrible fate for the wretch who starts as a boy torturing dogs and progresses through various stages of cruel behavior than his eventual dissection by a group of doctors in an anatomy lesson. The wretch pulled to pieces by the students is destined to be simmered in a cauldron, his bones wired together and displayed as a dusty skeleton dangling in some quack’s office.

Thomas Eakins, an American painter interested in photography, felt that, in order to paint the human body, he had to know the structure of bone and muscle at first hand; so, like Leonardo before him, he did his share of dissecting. Through his association with the Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia he had an opportunity to see and to paint Dr. Samuel D. Gross in the operating theater, scal-
Saint Sebastian with Two Archers. Engraving, Italian (Ferrarese), xv century.
Dick Fund, 1928

pel in hand, lecturing on bone surgery. The canvas, with its accurately painted incision, so shocked the Philadelphians of the 1870's that it was refused by the art commission of the Centennial Exhibition and was finally hung in the medical section. An India-ink drawing of the Gross clinic, made after the painting, is owned by the Museum. There are some interesting parallels between Eakins’s picture and the woodcut of an anatomy lesson in Johannes Ketham's Fasciculo di medicina. Both are group portraits showing famous doctors lecturing on the human body to a group of students and both depict what would be considered today most insanitary operating conditions: the participants, for example, are wearing their ordinary, everyday clothing.

Although distinctions between barbers, surgeons, doctors, alchemists, sorcerers, astrologers, and apothecaries existed in a few professional minds as far back as the fifteenth century, they were not well defined until the nineteenth century. The barber’s basin and the stuffed crocodile in Cornelis Dusart’s Village Surgeon are evidence of the confused early heritage of the surgical profession. In Lucas of Leyden’s Surgeon the knife handle has two bells attached to it to warn of a shaking hand and an unsuccessful operation.

Two treatments, blood-letting and clyster-
ing, that were likely to be prescribed for almost any sickness in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are shown by Abraham Bosse in his prints The Surgeon and The Apothecary. That different courses of treatment, like the dieting, appendectomy, or psychoanalysis of recent years, should rise to the height of fashion at various times is nothing new. Daumier’s satirical Médecin hydropathe shows a victim helpless under the ministrations of a doctor intent on a water cure.

Water cures of a slightly different but even more fashionable kind are hinted at in an anonymous British eighteenth-century aquatint view of the Parade at Bath. At this time Bath was filled with flirtatious adventurers and nouveaux riches determined to be seen at the right places. The resultant housing problem and the influx of freely spent wealth led to new building and commissions for the brothers Adam. People of every social background and in every condition of health thronged the streets, assuming for the public eye as elegant and gay an aspect as possible. Only the more discriminating observer saw the sham of the Pump Room. The variety of diseased people bathing together in the same pool at Bath was described by Matthew Bramble in Tobias Smollett’s Expedition of Humphrey Clinker (1771). “But,” Bramble continued, “I am now as much afraid of drinking as of bathing; for, after a long conversation with the Doctor, about the pump and the cistern, it is very far from being clear with me, that the patients in the Pump-room don’t swallow the scourings of the bathers.”

Equally unsavory is Hogarth’s picture of the interior of an eighteenth-century insane asylum, complete with heavily barred cells, chains, and a smirking feminine visitor who has come to see the sights. It is a relief to turn to Abraham Bosse’s etching of the Infirmary of the
Charity Hospital in Paris. Here one sees a spacious, high-ceiled ward filled with neat, curtained beds, tended by quiet, efficient monks, and visited by several elegantly charitable seventeenth-century ladies. Only when travel books of the period are consulted does it appear that Bosse, exercising the prerogative of his profession, carefully selected, rearranged, and generally idealized his material. That there should be only one patient in each bed, that so many nurses, both secular and religious, should be present, and that everything should be so neat and unhurried in a charity ward is too good to be true.

Even in nineteenth-century America the condition of most hospitals, especially those under municipal management, left much to be desired. The public, however, slowly became aware of the duties and requirements of hospitals. It was not until the 1820's that Bellevue Hospital sorted its inmates into the following categories: the contagious, the insane, the destitute (as Bellevue was also an almshouse, these people were not necessarily sick), the foundlings and orphans, the incurables, and the prisoners. Gradually the City of New York began to build separate institutions for the insane, the contagious, and the prisoners, making a sort of colony on Blackwell's Island (now called Welfare Island). In 1834 the Board of Aldermen heard from Dr. James MacDonald an excellent statement of the requirements of a building to house the insane (Document No. 101, Board of Aldermen, March 10, 1834). In describing the functions of such a building Dr. MacDonald found himself fighting against an almost overwhelming ignorance of insanity. In January, 1835, the Board of Aldermen adopted a set of plans for the Blackwell's Island Insane Asylum drawn up by Alexander Jackson Davis, the prolific architect who designed the famous Egyptian façade for the Tombs prison of 1834. Davis did his best to meet MacDonald's requirements and at the same time to turn out an inexpensive building with a stylish Vitruvian Tuscan exterior, but political exigencies of one kind or another prevented the building from being a success. In his own list of his work Davis commented: "The building was most miserably caricatured in execution, and only in part built." His copy of the plan and elevation for the asylum is owned by the Museum.
When a layman looks at prints illustrating medical subjects he appreciates the advances that have been made in medical techniques since the days of Ketham. Having seen the plague-ridden dying in the streets, the men being stretched in torturous bone-setting machines, the hollow-eyed incurables in hospitals, the blood-lettings, the cuppings, the formidable clysters, he understands what John Evelyn was talking about when he wrote from Paris in 1650: "3rd. May. At the hospital of La Charité, I saw the operation of cutting for the stone. A child of eight or nine years old underwent the operation with most extraordinary patience, and expressing great joy when he saw the stone was drawn. The use I made of it was, to give Almighty God hearty thanks that I had not been subject to this deplorable infirmity."

*In celebration of the one-hundredth anniversary of the founding of the New York Academy of Medicine an exhibition of prints of medical interest has been arranged in Gallery E 15. It will be on view through May 4.*