

The art and neurology of Paul Richer

A arte e a neurologia de Paul Richer

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ABSTRACT

In the 1890s, one of Charcot's most important protégés, Dr. Paul Richer (1849–1933), drew and sculpted a series of representations of the main types of nerve pathology. That series included drawings of pleomorphic hysterical crises and sculptures depicting patients suffering from labio-glosso-laryngeal paralysis and myopathy, as well as Parkinson's disease. Richer was a resident at *La Salpêtrière* and, in 1882, became head of the Charcot museum. Early in his career, despite having no formal artistic training, he could represent masterfully, in drawings and sculptures, people's tragic suffering from neurological diseases. Later on, with the same tools, he expressed the beauty of human movements in health.

Keywords: Paul Richer; drawings; sculpture; neurology; art.

RESUMO

Nos anos 1890, um dos mais importantes protegidos de Charcot, o doutor Paul Richer (1849-1933), desenhou e esculpiu uma série de representações figurativas dos principais tipos de patologia nervosa. Essa série incluiu desenhos de crises histéricas pleomórficas e esculturas de bustos representando pacientes que sofriam de doenças tais como: paralisia labio-glosso-laríngea, miopatia e doença de Parkinson. Richer foi residente de *La Salpêtrière* e, em 1882, foi nomeado chefe do museu de Charcot. Na primeira parte de sua carreira e sem qualquer treinamento artístico formal, ele conseguiu representar, como ninguém, em desenhos e esculturas, o trágico sofrimento das doenças neurológicas. Mais adiante, com as mesmas ferramentas, ele concebeu a beleza do movimento humano na saúde.

Palavras-chave: Paul Richer; desenhos; escultura; neurologia; arte.

Paul Marie Louis Pierre Richer was born on February 17, 1849, to a family of linen and fabric merchants in Chartres – a region in Centre-Val de Loire, south-west of Paris. When he was young, every day on his way to school, Paul would go past the famous cathedral embellished with countless figures, which stimulated his imagination. Watching the stonemasons repairing the structure, as he passed by, certainly contributed to Richer's fondness for sculpture¹.

The young medical student lacked any formal artistic training, but came to Jean-Martin Charcot's attention in 1874, when Charcot chaired the committee for Henri Meillet's thesis, entitled *Permanent Deformations of the Hand from the Point of View of Medical Semiotics*, and was captivated by the beauty of Paul Richer's drawings. The master immediately proposed that Paul join him at *La Salpêtrière* to finish his house officership¹. In the next year, Marc Sée published *Research on the Anatomy and Physiology of the Heart*, a 90-page book illustrated with 26 beautiful drawings by Richer, showing the heart from various angles². It is worth mentioning that Richer was profoundly disappointed to find out that his name appeared nowhere.

Encouraged by Bourneville and under Jean-Martin Charcot's direction, Richer began working on his thesis,

which was defended in 1879, and served as the basis for the book entitled *Clinical Studies on Hysterical-Epilepsy or Great Hysteria*³, with 105 figures and nine engravings (Figure 1). Richer used his drawings of Mlle. Blanche (Marie) Wittman to illustrate the great hysterical crises in different periods⁴.

Charcot claimed that Richer's drawings were accurate enough for a doctor to diagnose the illnesses depicted. That was the motivation for appointing him, in 1882, as head of the *Musée Charcot at the Hôpital de la Salpêtrière*⁵. Both Charcot and Richer published a series of scientific reviews on artworks that appeared in the *Iconographie de la Salpêtrière*, a journal published from 1888 to 1918, and coedited by Richer himself³.

Paul Richer was color blind, which explains why his work is solely composed of sketches and drawings and, later, engravings and sculptures, but never paintings.

In the famous painting by Pierre Andre Brouillet, *A Clinical Lesson at the Salpêtrière* (1887)⁶, one may recognize many of his assistants surrounding Charcot, who have left their names in the history of neurology, like Babinski, Gilles de la Tourette, Pierre Marie, and others. Paul Richer was the only person represented twice: sitting next to Charcot and on a canvas on the background, where he depicted a hysterical crisis in *l'arc de cercle* (Figure 2).

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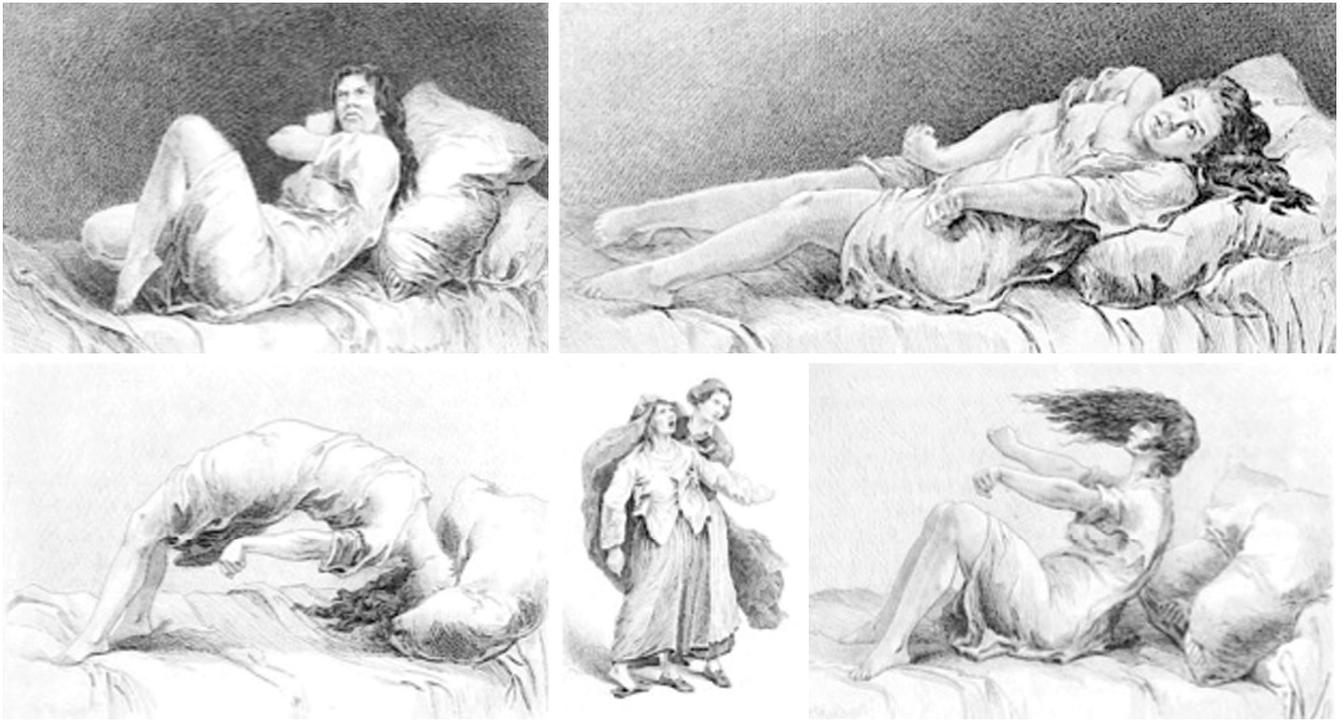


Figure 1. Paul Richer's drawings. Top: Passionate attitude period – sad phase (left). Epileptiform period – phase of tonic immobility or tetanism (right). Bottom: Contortion phase *l'arc de cercle* (left). Prodrome - agitation and partial contractures (middle). Period of Clownism - phase of great movements (right)^{1,3,11}.



Université Paris Descartes, Musée d'histoire de la médecine, Paris (author's photograph).

Figure 2. *Clinical Lesson at the Salpêtrière* by Andre Brouillet (1887). Screen of a woman in *l'arc de cercle* posture (short arrow). Paul Richer (long arrow).

Richer was a member of the Academy of Medicine from 1898, and in 1903 assumed a chair in artistic anatomy at *l'Ecole des Beaux Arts*. He mastered anatomy, physiology, drawing and modeling with equal skills, and created monuments glorifying French medicine, such as his tributes to Alfred Vulpian (Figure 3).

In a studio attached to *La Salpêtrière*, Richer produced his drawings and began to create a collection of statues destined for teaching neurology. Three of these sculptures became very famous. According to Henry Meige⁷, these patient portraits

were thought to be perfectly objective, 'like a photograph in three dimensions'.

In 1893, Richer portrayed a bust of a 26-year-old man called Henri 'Bonn'. The bust of a *Young Man Suffering from Myopathy* illustrates a study of sufferers from amyotrophy, in which muscles waste away because the nerves supplying them are diseased (Figure 4A)⁵.

The Woman Suffering from Labio-Glosso-Laryngeal Paralysis (circa 1894), a life-size half-body plaster sculpture evokes extreme pathos (Figure 4B). The viewer's focus is the figure's finely-modeled face and hand, which reveal delicately-rendered veins underneath her skin, and her facial expression⁵.

Richer's most well-known pathological sculpture portrays a *Woman Suffering from Parkinson's Disease* (Figure 4C). A patient called, simply, 'Gell' represents the almost-perfect clinical schema of Parkinson's Disease. In that 47 cm high sculpture, you can see the typical sufferer as having an expressionless visage, a head and torso inclined forward, a sunken chest, and flexed arms and legs: in a word, "the look of an old person who has been welded together"⁵.

In the golden age of Salpêtrière (1862–1893)⁶, four people, Paul Richer, Albert Londe (1858–1917), Henry Meige (1866–1940), and Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893), who were all skilled in drawing themselves, had always been keenly interested in documenting images of diseases as an art form. Londe was an influential French medical researcher and chronophotographer. In 1878, Jean-Martin Charcot hired Londe as a medical photographer at *La Salpêtrière*. In 1882,



Paris (author's photograph).

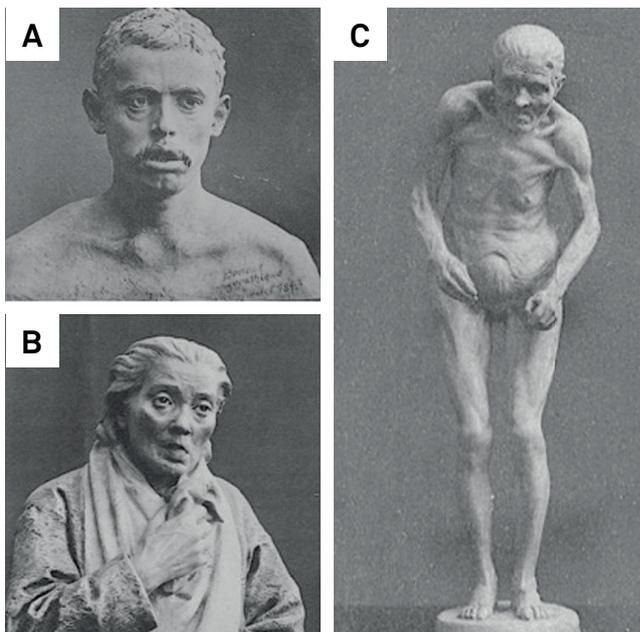
Figure 3. Alfred Vulpian's sculpture at the end of Rue Antoine Dubois, a short distance from the Faculty of Medicine.

he devised a system — a 12-lens camera — to photograph the physical and muscular movements of patients, including individuals diagnosed with hysterical conditions and epileptic seizures. Meige was a physician, an exceptional anatomist, an excellent draftsman and a privileged illustrator. In 1924, he succeeded Paul Richer as a professor of anatomy at *l'Ecole Nationale Supérieure de Beaux-Arts de Paris*⁷.

Charcot and Richer made the claim that science and art were one and the same: “Science and art are nothing more than two manifestations of the same phenomenon, two faces of the same object”⁸. This art affinity resulted in the publication of two books: *Les Démoniaques dans l'Art* (Paris, 1887)⁹ and *Les Difformes et les Malades dans l'Art* (Paris, 1889)⁸, in which they diagnosed illnesses in artworks of the past.

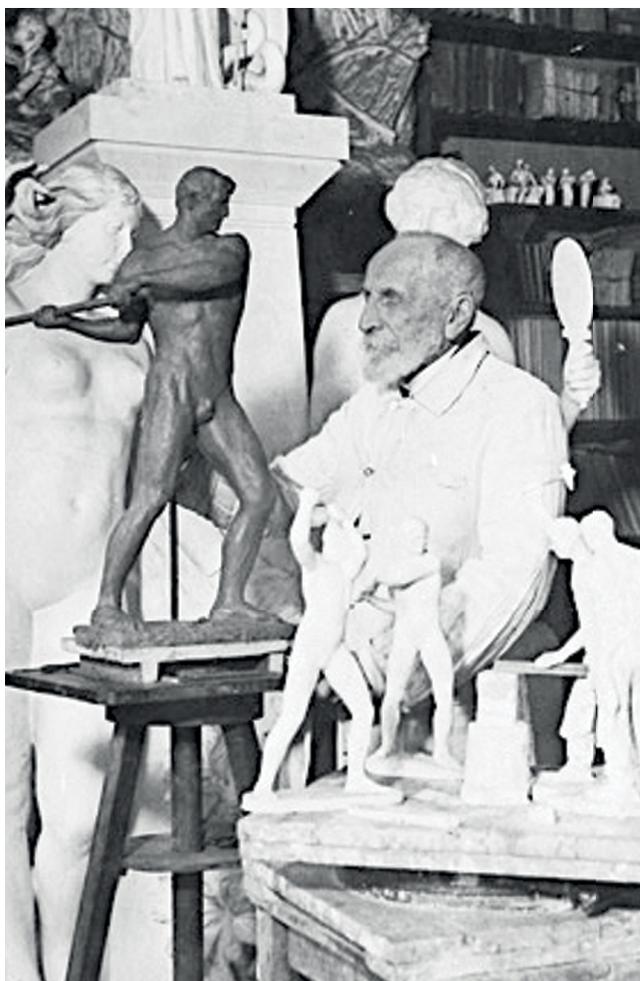
Paul Richer continued engraving, drawing and publishing for the rest of his life, but he shifted focus in the second half of his career from pathology to health. An interesting aspect: his book *Introduction à L'étude de la Figure Humaine* (1902)¹⁰, despite the title, has no drawings whatsoever. Richer moved from the expression of what was conventionally considered ugly to what was considered beautiful. He exhibited his sculptures of anonymous athletes — runners, boxers, a shot putter — in the Parisian salons and even at the Universal Exposition of 1900.

Richer ended his career as the general inspector for drawing instruction. His retirement did not dampen his productive energy (Figure 5). He continued to produce medals and statues. He passed away on December 17, 1933, at the age of 84 years old.



From: *Nouv. Iconogr. de la Salpêtrière*. Phototype Nég. A. Londe. (Accessed 2016 Nov).

Figure 4. Sculptures by Paul Richer: Bust of a Young Man Suffering from Myopathy (A). The Woman Suffering from Labio-Glosso-Laryngeal Paralysis (B). Attitude and Faces in Parkinson's Disease (C).



(Extracted from: <http://www.faoablog.com/blog/?p=10900>. Accessed 2016 Nov 28).

Figure 5. Richer working on his studio.

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