

If these ladies were your patients... Some thoughts by 1st year medical students on the importance of confidentiality and the work of John Brack.



The work, Latin American Grand Final by John Brack prompted us to reflect and consider issues of confidentiality in the doctor/patient relationship. One of the striking elements of this piece is the sense of vulnerability and insecurity as the dancers engage in their dance – a blurred crowd can be seen scattered in the background of the painting, and a distant and faceless observer can be seen on the right intruding into and scrutinising the personal sphere of the performers.

This notion of the boundary and trust that exists between our individual private worlds (the ladies), the members of our social community (their dance partners) and the broader public (the blurred background and faceless men) is one that goes to the very heart and soul of the concept of confidentiality. We confide in our friends, in our family, in those we know and trust but we keep these confidences protected from a more public view. Yet, one might argue that in this piece the ladies do actually possess the capacity to preserve their sense of self: this is symbolised by their vivid portrayal and embodiment of the emotional content of the music. Therefore, they are actually assuming a façade as they project a superficial veneer of facial expressions. Thus, paradoxically, the ladies are equally faceless as the men in the background; their confidences remain their own.

The essence of confidentiality is epitomised by the trust inherent in the couples. The men are providing physical and emotional support for their female counterpart as they liberate themselves in the passion of the dance. This is analogous to the support provided by a doctor to a patient. In considering how best to protect this trust, this confidence, a doctor will inevitably be forced to contemplate and reflect on the very foundation of trust and the various elements that can disturb and erode it as well as the elements that nurture and feed it.

The artist has placed himself into this piece as a faceless man, blurring, confounding and threatening to undermine the social and emotional boundaries of the relationships of the dancers. He presents as temptation does to a doctor to break one confidence, to disclose one secret, to destroy the boundaries so carefully constructed to allow for rapport to be established between the partners so that they might be a successful team. A doctor who does not establish an equally good rapport and sense of unity with their patient will also fail to achieve their purpose.

In conclusion, medicine and being a medical doctor is about dealing with the human condition and all its intricacies and complexities. On a daily basis, we are confronted with not just the biological but also the emotional, social, cultural and ethical dilemmas that are integral to the human experience. And thus an appreciation of medicine within the wider context of the humanities – philosophy, medical history, literature and fine art are an indispensable component to not only being a competent doctor but a virtuous doctor with the wisdom to understand the importance of compassion, empathy, integrity and honesty as a core component of their character.

John Brack *Latin American Grand Final* 1969 oil on canvas National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Purchased 1981

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