

## Harrison Fisher's Depiction of the Beauty of Nursing

One of the artifacts found in the Dolan Collection was a 1916 drawing titled "Compensation," by a prestigious artist named Harrison Fisher. In this detailed sketch, a female nurse can be seen reading a book to a wounded soldier during World War I. When looking at the red cross on the nurse's hat, it can be inferred that this woman was one of the 23,822 people trained and sent to care for the men during this war by the American Red Cross (American Red Cross, 2016). Although Harrison Fisher portrays the role of a nurse during this time as uncomplicated and rather simple through this drawing, the work that these nurses were expected of doing was anything but easy. You can read more about nursing and medicine during World War I here: <https://ceufast.com/news/nursing-and-medicine-during-world-war-i>



### *Properties*

This two-dimensional drawing has been preserved in a gold-colored frame with a three-dimensional embroidered flower pattern. The frame has some obvious wear on it, from dark red paint marks and splotches to tarnish along the border of the frame, but the drawing itself appears to have remained flawless. When noting the colors of this work of art, Fisher did not use a wide variety of them. The vast majority of the drawing only contains shades of gray and white, while he utilized blue, red, and yellow in a small portion of this piece. When observing Fisher's work more closely, one can see that the colors were emphasized in the nurse figure. From the red cross on her hat to the blue book in her hand and blonde glow of her hair, it is clear that the woman was meant to be the highlight of this drawing. The nurse appears to have rosy cheeks, soft pink lips, healthy skin, and she is full of life. On the other hand, her patient is wounded and likely dying due to the injuries he sustained while fighting on the front line in the war. He has dark circles under his eyes, appears to have pale-pink lips, and he lacks color in his face. Although the soldier is likely near his death, the life and obvious positivity that the nurse portrays is enough to allow this man to listen to her read just one more page of the book to him.



### *About the Author*

Harrison Fisher was known as an artist who depicted women as people who were meant to be idealized. The women he drew, like the nurse in *Compensation*, were “recognized as the epitome of feminine beauty in America during the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century” (National Museum of American Illustration, 2012). For approximately twenty years of his career, he created nearly every cover for *Cosmopolitan* magazine, which primarily focused on women’s issues, relationships, sex, celebrities, fashion, and beauty. During the 1920s Fisher was named as the *World’s Greatest Artist* by *Cosmopolitan*, and the magazine went on to say that “his ideal type has come to be regarded as the type of American beauty: girls, young with the youth of a new country, strong with the vitality of buoyant good health, fresh with clear-eyed brightness, athletic, cheerful, sympathetic, and beautiful” (National Museum of American Illustration, 2012). You can read more about Harrison Fisher and his career here:

<http://freepages.misc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mspeed/fisher.html>

Although men were viewed as superior at the time in which Fisher created this work of art, nurses were leaders who had the responsibility of caring for many wounded, sick, diseased, and dying soldiers. Most may have simply viewed nurses during World War I as caregivers, but the duties that nurses had during that time were much more complex than reading a book to a soldier while he was lying in bed. Due to Fisher’s talent of drawing, sketching, and painting beautiful women though, he solely depicted the good looks of the nurse without presenting the rigorous responsibilities that a nurse had during wartime.

### *Emotional Response*

Nursing and caring are so closely related that they can be given the same meaning. Caring is about instilling hope in patients when they are at the most vulnerable stages of their

lives; it is about pulling up a chair next to their bed when they simply need someone to listen. Nursing involves knowing that someone is not their disease, but instead seeing that person as a valuable member of society. It is being able to walk into a patient's room and provide care with a nonjudgmental approach, while striving to understand who that patient really is as an individual. It is also about being able to see that each patient has the strength and resilience needed for recovery. A nurse is able to look beyond a patient's physical symptoms and treat the entirety of the person, while empowering patients to realize that they are more than their diseases and struggles. When looking at this drawing I see a woman who was able to embody the wholeness of a nurse. She went well beyond caring for the physical health of the patient, as she seems to have also valued the soldier's emotional health. She has obviously been sitting with this patient for a great amount of time since she has already read him half of the book. Despite this soldier's condition, the nurse has been able to focus on making him comfortable, tending to his hygiene, creating a healing environment, and distracting him from any pain that he may be experiencing. Embracing both the physical and emotional aspects of the profession is what portrays this woman as a true nurse.

### *Implications*

As it relates to nursing history, Fisher's piece of art reminds us that the soldiers during World War I did not fight the battles on their own. Without nurses to care for them when they were sick and wounded, the war would have ended much sooner than it did (and likely with more casualties). World War I also gave nurses the opportunity to act as leaders, prove that they were hardworking and good decision-makers, and change the image of nursing. Yes, nurses did act as caregivers during the war, but they also embodied great mental and physical resilience. Their responsibilities were truly endless. In terms of today's education, this artifact represents the

importance of holistic nursing care. Fisher's work of art shows that nurses do much more than treat physical illnesses. In order to provide a patient with excellent care, a nurse must treat the entirety of the person.

#### References

- American Red Cross. (2016). *World War I and the American Red Cross*. Retrieved from <http://www.redcross.org/about-us/history/red-cross-american-history/WWI>
- CEUFast. (2015-2016). *Nursing and Medicine During World War I*. Retrieved from <https://ceufast.com/news/nursing-and-medicine-during-world-war-i>
- National Museum of American Illustration. (2012). *Harrison Fisher: American Imagist*. Newport. Retrieved from <http://www.americanillustration.org/artists/fisher/fisher.html>
- Speed, Melissa. (2011, August 25). *Harrison Fisher and the American Beauty*. Denton: University of North Texas School of Library and Information Sciences. Retrieved from <http://freepages.misc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mspeed/fisher.html>

Cassandra Arpin (UConn Nursing Class of 2016) comes from Lisbon, CT. She hopes to pursue psychiatric mental health nursing. She was recently accepted into the Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner Program at the University of Saint Joseph in West Hartford, CT, where she will begin attending in fall 2016. This article was prepared for Dr. Thomas Lawrence Long in NURS 4265 Nursing's Past as Prologue during the spring 2016 semester.