

in the name
of
medicine
& art

*By Elizabeth Sekine
Photos by laird*

The Collection of Lewis Obi, M.D.



Dr.

Lewis J. Obi believes medicine is truly an art and of all the various specialties plastic surgery stands out as symbolizing medicine's contribution to art. For more than four decades the cover of the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) has featured art with informative narrations. The father of modern medicine, Sir William Osler, proposes "A way of life" in his lecture to the graduating class of 1913 at Yale University. Dr. Obi cites Osler's treatise as an assertion that physicians should live their lives in an artful way. Osler further stated that, "The practice of medicine is an art, based on science."

Dr. Obi, a Jacksonville plastic surgeon, has always strived to live life and perform his craft in an artful way. His attempts at defining what art is or means have been diverse and numerous. Dr. Obi quotes one of his favorite artists, American Modernist Manierre Dawson. In 1911, Dawson was queried by an observer of his work, "What does it mean?" "What does it represent?" they asked. Dawson replied, "Art is a human invention. In nature there was no art except that all creations of the Almighty are part of that Almighty. 'Art' as a word for us to use, describes the invention of that part of creation that is man."

Born and raised in Jacksonville, Dr. Obi joined the Marine Corps when he was 16. While serving in a war-torn country he decided to fuse his interest in art with a dedication to medicine, more specifically, plastic surgery. Lacking resources to collect art, Dr. Obi's earliest foray into art was capturing images with a camera. His first collecting occurred during the residency training years and reflected a diverse interest. The germinal foundation of Dr. Obi's collection included the Victorians, Pre-Raphaelites, Orientalists, biblical illustrators, and other 19th century British works. For the past 15 years the collection has been jointly developed by Dr. Obi and his wife, Myra Bairstow. Myra is a playwright and art curator. Much of her professional base is in New York City. Ms. Bairstow is also the director of the Catalog Raisonne' project for Manierre Dawson.

Dawson was an early pioneer of American Modernism and perhaps the first abstract artist in the world, predating abstract works executed by Arthur Dove and Wassily Kandinsky. He sold his first painting to Gertrude Stein during a European tour in 1910. Dawson is represented in more than 30 museum collections and participated in the famous Armory Show of 1913. A large collection of Dawson paintings and sculptures were acquired by Dr. Obi in 1979. Since then, the importance and stature of Dawson has grown immensely through scholarship, museum shows, and gallery exhibitions. Dr. Obi and Ms. Bairstow have donated paintings and sculptures to numerous museums including the Smithsonian National Museum of American Art, The Milwaukee Art Museum, The Illinois State Museum, The Swope Art Museum, The Santa Fe Museum of Fine Arts, The Alexander Brest Museum, and the Jacksonville's Museum of Contemporary Art. 2006 was a big year for Dawson as one of his paintings was installed in the Modern room of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Dr. Obi and Ms. Bairstow are currently considering a request by New York's Metropolitan Museum to donate Dawson's *The Three Graces*, a 1912 cubist painting.



The Three Graces by Manierre Dawson, oil on canvas, 1912


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Aphrodites Interpreting the Wisdom of Phoebe, 1987, oil on canvas, Daniel Samuels; a water color painting of a lotus plant by Dr. Obi, 1971; Elamite Woman, 1953, novoply sculpture, Manierre Dawson

An early influence and inspiration for Dr. Obi was British artist Daniel Samuels FRSA "Daniel," as his paintings are signed, was a student of Greek mythology and of the Pre-Raphaelite painters. Daniel's chance meeting with air craftsman Shaw, better known as T. E. Lawrence or "Lawrence of Arabia," in 1935 also influenced his later style. Daniel's paintings combine symbolism with classical mythology and are executed with advanced techniques of enameling as implemented by the old masters but with a Dali-esque touch. Dr. Obi first met Daniel in 1971 and immediately became an avid collector of his work. In 1983 Dr. Obi established the international firm of Obiarts in order to promote Daniel by producing a portfolio of lithographs and stories. As a result of this British endeavor, Dr. Obi was inducted as a Fellow to the Royal Society of Art (FRSA) in 1986. The Royal Society of Art is the oldest and perhaps the most prestigious art guild in the world. Recently Obiarts, Inc., acquired the international copyright for all of Daniels work and a major book on Daniel is in progress.

Obi's current projects include completion of the Manierre Dawson Catalog Raisonne' Project, as well as the planning of future Dawson exhibitions. In recent years, major New York and Chicago shows were co-curated by Dr. Obi and his wife, Myra Bairstow. Several major donations of art are also scheduled for this year. Last year, a set of 12 biblical paintings were donated to the Joel Osteen ministry in Houston and future donations are being considered.

"My patients appreciate the profound beauty and creativity of the art."

Dr. Obi enjoys sharing his collections with patients, friends, and associates by exhibiting and rotating art in his plastic surgery clinic. The earliest art work dates from the 15th century but the bulk of art was generated during the 19th and early 20th centuries. In addition to Dawson and Samuels, the collection includes Salvador Dali and a set of 19th century water colors. A large number of major American and European contemporary artists are also represented in the collection. Patient's reactions to Obi's collection are always positive and inspiring. "My patients appreciate the profound beauty and creativity of the art," says Obi.

When asked what he would recommend for aspiring collectors of art, Dr. Obi said, "First become a student of art by reading and visualizing books and catalogs." Of the many magazines and catalogs Dr. Obi views every month he recommends Art News as an initial source. Part of the educational process should also include visiting museums and galleries and there are abundant sources available locally. Another word of advice is to, "view art in a fresh way with each new painting or sculpture." The three criteria Dr. Obi has used with his art acquisitions are collect what you most enjoy viewing, carefully assess the quality and creativity of the work, and professionally assess the long term investment value. Finally Dr. Obi recommends specialization for new collectors keeping in mind that it is better to acquire one quality work of art rather than a large number of mediocre pieces. **D**

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