

Under the Cover: M Therese Southgate, Art, and the Journal of the American Medical Association

Janet M Torpy

For more than 30 years, M Therese Southgate has selected the art displayed on the cover of the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*. Her words enlighten readers about art, history, philosophy, and her own special viewpoint on life. In 1962, she arrived in Chicago armed with a medical degree and a desire to pursue medical journalism. While she worked as a senior (later deputy) editor at JAMA, her talent for clear, crisp, and precise written communication emerged. John Talbott, then editor of JAMA, spearheaded the placement of works of art on the JAMA cover. Soon, through Southgate's nurturing, the tradition of cover art evolved: A small anonymous paragraph about the art blossomed into a full-page essay.

Gazing over the city of Chicago and Lake Michigan, Southgate allows her mind to wander as she contemplates one of several cover stories in progress for JAMA. Different phases of essay production clutter her writing area and five desks—a studio carved out of what many would consider prime condominium space. “The table is my mother's dining table; I did homework there as a child”, Southgate said. In addition to the built-in desks with filing space, books fill two walls, and a sofa graces the atelier decorated in the hues of the Great Lakes. “The colors of Lake Michigan have many moods”, she said, describing the pewter, putty, green, and gray of the room.

A self-described “Great Lakes person”, Southgate writes mostly at the computer with a view of the lake and uses the desks

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M Therese Southgate

as staging areas for her many projects. In addition to working on cover stories for JAMA, Southgate has fiction—a novel—in progress, and her memoir is in the development stage. She is also compiling material for *The Art of JAMA III*, the third volume in her series of selected cover art and the accompanying stories. She works near her well-used dictionaries and encyclopedias, dipping into them with great frequency to check the accuracy and precision of her words. A small room alongside serves as the archives, where she keeps all source materials for every cover story she has written. “I even have manuscripts from when we used to write with pencil and paper. I learned at my first journalism job, in 1951, to never, ever throw any source material away.”

Seeing the skyline and lakeshore appears essential to Southgate's creative process. “I get a sense of claustrophobia in the mountains. I need to see for 50 miles to

be comfortable.” When first writing JAMA cover stories, Southgate spent entire days in the Art Institute of Chicago's library. “I encountered John Ruskin's five volumes just on clouds, how they should be painted, and thought, ‘How boring!’” Now, she said, “I live where I'm able to see and able to understand five volumes about clouds, why he could see so much in them; there is motion and color out there.” Southgate remembers an April in London many years ago. “I could finally understand where English painters like Turner and Constable were coming from. It looks like it is dreary, but it's not. There are lots of colors and things are so changeable”, she said. She believes that the weather and the clouds may be responsible for the British painting style, even their literature.

Although she had no formal art education and states “I am not an art historian”, Southgate has an amazing grasp of art appreciation. She explained, “You have to listen to the painting, like a physician would listen to a case history. Why is the patient coming to you now, at this time, and with this complaint? It is just like looking at the painting, listening to it. Why did the artist paint it at this time, not earlier or later? What was going on in the world at that time?”

Middle 19th-century artist Paul Cézanne fascinates Southgate. Puzzling on a Sunday morning in the 1970s over Cézanne's *The Basket of Apples*, Southgate recalled, “I didn't know where to go. When I came back from church, all of a sudden I got a ruler and extended the lines in the painting, off the page, and I began to see what Cézanne was trying to do.” She said that she owes Cézanne the greatest debt for teaching her to look at art and that she understands why many 20th-century artists trace their beginnings to Cézanne and his work.

Regarding artists, their work, and their lives, Southgate said that she has several friends who are artists. She has seen her friends' works, but "we never talk about their work. We are able to share their art without having to talk about it." Asked if she has an artist (living or dead) whom she would like to meet, she said, "I don't know if I'd like to meet any of them. Just because you like their art doesn't mean you're going to click!" However, she said that some of the 15th- or 16th-century painters would be interesting to meet because "there are some wild stories told about them."

Representative of the early 16th century, Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* appeared on JAMA's cover in October 1992. His sfumato technique, the purposeful blurring of distinct lines, lends mystery to both the subject's smile and his relationship to her. Careful study of the beautiful woman seated in da Vinci's most famous painting reveals La Gioconda's uncanny resemblance to La Southgate. Da Vinci's depiction of the Mona Lisa's eyes invites speculation about her thoughts; when Southgate smiles, her eyes maintain that same air of quiet enigma. Sometimes Southgate seems to use that same sfumato style in her writing, blurring her usual literary clarity to illustrate a point or to tell her story better.

Southgate believes that art proves the commonness of the human spirit. When one views a work of art, one may see something that the artist did not knowingly place there. "What the artist puts there and what the viewer sees there are sometimes different", she said. Explaining that seeing divergent images is not an accident, she said that the artist and the viewer communicate with each other in unintentional ways. "That is why art is visual. Artists need no words. If they had words, they wouldn't need to put it on canvas."

Because the human element inextricably links art and medicine, Southgate feels strongly that art belongs on the cover of a major international medical journal. "An artist has to be totally focused on the brush, just as a physician focuses totally on the patient." Regarding education and humanism, she thinks that philosophy,

languages, art, music, and literature need inclusion as early as possible in the educational system—best taught so that the pupil does not even recognize that the humanities is a separate subject. Southgate explains that by the time a person reaches medical school, "it's too late. If you are not inclined to be a humanist, medical school won't make you one."

Southgate has written the majority of the cover stories through the years, but she has supervised several other authors, including the Morris Fishbein fellows in medical editing at JAMA. She served as mentor and director of the fellowship for a time when she was deputy editor at JAMA. Learning Southgate's methods requires activity, not passivity, on the part of the pupil. She demands perfection, precision, and accuracy. "Learn to go to the dictionary. You will find that the word may not convey exactly what you mean." Even after more than 40 years of writing in a specific genre, she said, "I'm always going to the dictionary."

Southgate links JAMA's present to its past, having spent 44 years as an editor. She remains the repository for the institutional history of the journal. The editor-in-chief of JAMA, Catherine DeAngelis, said, "I have been an admirer of hers forever, since long before I became editor of JAMA. I thought the covers were spectacular." Noting that the cover stories are integral to JAMA, DeAngelis continued, "Other journals have emulated the covers, but nobody does it like Terry. She has a unique style. This is her baby."

Because Southgate has been with JAMA for so many years, she has watched the ebb and flow of editors and other personnel. She enjoys the annual Editorial Board meeting and remembers the inception of the Editorial Board concept. "That is where the Contempo issue (later Contempo Updates section) was born. We asked each member of the Editorial Board to contribute a summary of his or her specialty", she said, reflecting on how the Editorial Board and JAMA have changed through the years. She thinks that "the wheel is reinvented every 5 years or so" in terms of

medicine as well as scientific journalism, probably because of cycles of turnover, although slightly altered and applicable to different circumstances. Like the resurgence of the miniskirt so popular and loved by Southgate in the 1960s, trends recycle, she said, and "though I loved wearing those skirts then, it would be a mistake for me to wear them now."

In addition to sage fashion advice, Southgate offers these words for those just beginning, at whatever life stage, to learn about art. "Art is not just important, it is essential. Read the JAMA cover stories every week. That is the exact reason I decided to do them." She follows with counsel about life, stating that she is still learning life lessons herself. "Do what you love because opportunities will happen all by themselves. You have to be receptive, in kind of an opening, listening, vulnerable mode; ready to accept; or things will pass you by." She believes that some things need to be done just for their own sake, like listening, sitting, walking, or looking at a painting. "Relaxing for a purpose destroys it, although it is hard to do. Children play because they enjoy it, not because it will advance their career or get them something. It is done for itself."

The ending sentences of her cover stories serve as the *pièce de résistance*, in Southgate's unique manner. They often summarize the essence of an essay in a few words. Southgate's own last sentence is, we hope, many years away. Her faithful readers look forward to each cover story and anticipate the treat she has in store. When we read her words, they pique our attention. We exclaim, like Alice in Wonderland, "Curiouser and curiouser!" Southgate tempts us to scramble down the rabbit hole, searching for knowledge and wisdom, lured by the promise of her most excellent prose. 🍄