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ANESTHESIOLOGY REFLECTIONS FROM THE WOOD LIBRARY-MUSEUM

A Beautiful Anesthetic, Methyl Chloride in the Belle Époque



Not merely a destination for elites seeking the art and culture of the Belle Époque (“beautiful era”), Paris was a European center for medical education in the mid- to late 19th century. In contrast to lab- and lecture-based medical schooling in the United States, Parisian academe provided access to hospital patients, live surgical demonstrations, and cadaver dissections. In Paris, methyl chloride was pioneered as a local anesthetic and novel treatment for neuralgias. Skilled Parisian instrument makers such as Mariaud built siphons to store and dispense that volatile solution. A typical device, the methyl chloride siphon, is pictured above (*boxed, right*). Popular in the 1890s, the black cylinder was filled with volatile liquid and stored under pressure. Dispensed in a stream through a nozzle, the methyl chloride evaporated on the skin (*left*) to topically relieve neuralgias or to provide local anesthesia for minor surgeries. These siphons were such well-constructed devices that they were frequently repurposed for laboratory use. Fortunately, the Wood Library-Museum found this one intact. (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists’ Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology. www.woodlibrarymuseum.org)

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