

ArtScience: The Essential Connection

HOWARD FLOREY: PHOTOGRAPHER, CINEMATOGRAPHER AND SUNDAY PAINTER

During World War II, Howard Florey (1898–1968) collaborated with Boris Chain and a team of chemists to transform penicillin from the laboratory curiosity that had attracted Alexander Fleming's attention in 1929 into a mass-produced wonder drug. All three men were awarded Nobel prizes in physiology or medicine in 1945 [1,2].

Among the keys to Florey's success were what his wife, Lady Margaret Jennings Florey, called his "keen visual sense" and "deft and steady hand" [3]. He exercised both in his artistic avocations of photography, cinematography and painting, sometimes in the service of his science and sometimes for his own pleasure.

Florey began taking photographs as a young man [4]. In 1934, he bought a 35mm Leica viewfinder camera that he used for the rest of his life [5]. The family estimates that he took several thousand pictures with it, including family portraits, travel photos and landscape [6–8].

Sometime around 1930 Florey also began shooting 16mm movies. He seems to have carried both still and movie cameras with him everywhere [9], recording laboratory processes, experiments using penicillin to heal wounds, people he met and places he visited for both professional and personal reasons. The content and quality of the resulting films was notable enough that 19 of them, produced between 1933 and 1953, have been preserved in the National Film Archive of the British Film Institute in London [10]. Some of Florey's still photographs have been deposited there as well. Others reside at the William Dunn School of Pathology and the Royal Society (London) [11].

Florey's artistic output was significantly smaller than his photographic production but was often linked to it. A handful of ink and colored wash drawings from 1914 and 1915, probably copies of photographs from magazines, show that he had developed reasonable skill as a student of sixteen. The family does not know

whether he was an autodidact or took art lessons in school [12]. Florey's daughter recalls him doing watercolors when she was a child [13], but if this is accurate, none have survived. Florey's wife does not recall him painting until many years later. Nonetheless, Florey was certainly competent enough to illustrate four of his research papers himself in 1932 and 1933, augmenting his own photomicrographs with colored drawings that more clearly illustrated and drew attention to the relevant cellular structures [14].

Florey took up oil painting as a hobby in 1955. Florey's wife recounts that she had been taught watercolor painting as a girl and always carried a sketchbook and paints with her on their vacations.

One day in 1955, sitting beside the river in France, [Howard] asked to borrow my paints and brushes, and with them produced a small picture. This stirred his interest, but water colour techniques are difficult for a beginner, and I suggested that he might find oil-paints more amenable. He took this up with enthusiasm, and thereafter always carried paints and canvases with him on holiday [15].

He learned the relevant techniques by reading books, closely examining paintings in museums and experimenting with the techniques he learned from both sources [16–19]. "His technique," says his son, "was interesting because it was still a photographic one. He [sometimes] took photographs . . . and projected the photographs on to the canvas and then painted" [20]. In this way, Florey would rework paintings begun outdoors in his study at home [21]. He also attempted a set of family portraits from projected photographs; all except his self-portrait were too realistic to be flattering [22,23].

The seriousness of his interest in painting can be judged by the fact that "he kept an easel and paints at the Sir William Dunn School of Pathology," where he worked [24]. It is clear from some of his public talks that he became familiar with modern art [25], using artistic analogies to help his audiences understand scientific research. This knowledge led him to explore brightly colored, non-representational painting near the end of his life [26,27]. He produced some 50 canvases, all unsigned, purely for his own enjoyment [28–31].

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