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Those Id- Words

STANLEY M. ARONSON, MD

Psychiatrists have captured the Latin word, id, which they derived from the ancient Greek word, es, meaning self. They have then expanded its meaning to encompass the primal emotional urges of humans as well as their idealized source of instinctive energy. The root, id-, has then become etymologically central to a variety of medical and general terms.

A cluster of commonly employed words (identify, identity, idem) then became available in general discourse. A derivative English word, idea, originally meant form or nature or even species. In Latin, it broadened its meaning to include image or shape. And in English, then, to signify learning or seeing (in the sense of understanding). Again, a cluster of currently used words arose, including uncommon terms such as eidograph, idol, idolatry, idyll and even kaleidoscope. (The Greek root, eido-, is secondarily derived from es.)

The English word, idiot, is from the Greek, idiotes, meaning personal or private; and later, in Latin, a common person or one without any specialized knowledge. In the 19th Century, physicians defined brain damage, particularly if hereditary, as idiocy (eg, amaurotic family idiocy). The patronizing use of the word idiot is recent.

Two similar prefixes – idio- and ideo – also stem from the Greek root, es via Latin. Ideo- forms the basis for rarely used words such as ideology, ideokinetic, ideomotor and ideograph and originally meant shape or symbol, evolving into words such as idol and idolatry.

The current English word, idle, meaning lazy, originally meant something worthless (as in a phrase such as ‘idle threats’). The Greek root, idio- is from the word, idios, meaning something personal, private or uniquely fashioned. Idiosyncracy is thus a compound word which additionally incorporates a prefix (syn-) meaning together and -krasis, meaning a mixture; and when combined, defines one’s personal mixture of traits, often idiosyncratic. And then there are medical terms such as idiogenesis, idiopathic and idiospasm.

Amazing how many great-grandchildren the one-syllable Greek word, es, has generated. And many do not even look like their very own cousins.
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Dr. Throop exemplifies new RISD Museum show: Making It in America

BY MARY KORR
RIMJ MANAGING EDITOR

PROVIDENCE – For more than a century, the portrait of Dr. Amos Throop, a founder and the first president of the Rhode Island Medical Society (1812–1814), has occupied a wall in various RIMS’ offices, casting a benign and learned countenance on the comings and goings of Society members over the millennia.

The portrait is now on display at the RISD Museum’s new exhibition, “Making It in America,” which contains paintings, sculpture, furniture and decorative arts from the museum’s collection. The selections illuminate the connection between American ambitions and the making of art from the pre-Revolutionary era to the early 20th century.

In this context Dr. Throop played a central role, not just as patriarch of the medical society, but as a member of the General Assembly who argued for ratification of the Constitution during his first term in the GA in 1788. His efforts did not convince the majority of staunch anti-Federalist politicians or populace, who rejected the Constitution in March 1788 by popular referendum. However, faced with threatened treatment as a foreign government, a ratifying convention was called in 1790, and Rhode Island ratified the Constitution by the narrowest margin (two votes) on May 29, 1790, the last state to do so.

Dr. Throop was also engaged in finance, and was a founder and president of the Exchange Bank in Providence.

The portrait of Dr. Amos Throop, first president of the Rhode Island Medical Society, was painted circa 1795 and attributed to James Earl. It was presented as a gift to the Rhode Island Medical Society in 1890 by Henry Dorr, Dr. Throop’s grandnephew. In 2012, as part of RIMS’ Bicentennial celebration, it was sent to the Williamstown Art Conservation Center for cleaning and repairs, and is now on permanent loan to the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design. It is on display until February 2014 as part of the “Making It in America” exhibit.
When the observer pauses to study his portrait, freshly restored during RIMS’ Bicentennial in 2012, one sees the be-wigged physician/politician/financier of about 60 years seated in a Windsor chair and looking out with large luminous eyes in his 18th-century garb – gloves, velvet-lined cloak, and a lace-trimmed shirt. Behind him are the current scientific and medical books of the era.

The portrait, originally thought to be the work of American painter Ralph Earl, is now almost certainly that of his younger brother, James Earl (1761–1796), a Massachusetts native who studied in London for 10 years, and then returned to this country and painted Dr. Throop on a visit to Rhode Island in 1794.

Indeed, several other portraits by James Earl in the RISD show bear a strong stylistic similarity, particularly that of Capt. Samuel Packard of Providence, a successful ship captain, merchant, and ship owner of Throop’s era.

Upon leaving RISD Museum’s Chace Gallery, site of the exhibition, one only has to walk down the street to 118 North Main St. and see Dr. Throop’s brick, Georgian-style home (now elevated above a storefront) looking exactly the same as it did during his lifetime and where the portrait no doubt hung.

Dr. Throop died in 1814, followed by his wife, Mary – a drug compounder and shrewd businesswoman – several months later. They are buried in the North Burial Ground on North Main Street in Providence, not far from their home.

The exhibit is on display through February 9, 2014.

For more information on the history and restoration of the portrait and Dr. Throop, visit http://www.rimed.org/about-throop-portrait.asp