

## **THE SEXOLOGISTS**

In 1937 a well-known sculptor by the name of Malvina Hoffman was invited by a 70 year old gynecologist Dr. Robert Latou Dickinson to collaborate with him on an exhibition about maternal health that was to be shown at New York's World's Fair in 1939. Malvina declined, apparently because she suspected she wouldn't be paid enough, but she suggested a young Scotsman by the name of Abram Belskie with whom'd she'd sometimes just a few blocks from here at the studio of Robert Baillie in Closter. In 1929, at age 22, Belskie had arrived in New York only two months after the Stock Market and he was happy to accept a paying job – whatever the amount. Dr. Dickinson planned to make a series of two dimensional drawings of fetal development in utero but Belskie convinced him to work in 3-D – making full-sized, flesh colored simulations in terra cotta. Eventually two million people viewed the Dickinson-Belskie Birth Series at the World's Fair and that began a twelve year collaboration until Dr. Dickinson's death in 1950. In later years the two men began making medical models to be used as teaching tools. They switched to latex and plastic which were more lifelike than clay and more than 160,000 models were sold to schools and museums. Several years before his death Dr. Dickinson wrote a warm letter of appreciation to Abram Belskie in which he expressed paternal affection.

In those days Dickinson's office was located at the New York Academy of Medicine and Belskie sometimes wandered across the hall to the library's Rare Books Collection (Arlene Shaner who's with us today is the current archivist for that collection.) As a result of what he read there, Belskie developed an interest in medical history and after his mentor was gone, he began teaching medical illustration at New York Medical College. He also began making commemorative medallions and medals all of which are stored here in the basement. And, in fact, when Dr. Dickinson died, Belskie was commissioned by the Academy of Medicine to create this bust of him (demonstrate).

But Dickinson's reputation was based on far more than medical models. Some would say that he was the father of the emerging field of medical sexology which, of course, is today's subject. So I'd like to spend just a few minutes discussing him before turning the program over to our guests – the Sarrels.

Robert Latou Dickinson was born in Jersey City in 1861. He completed his medical studies at Long Island College Hospital in 1880, but because he was only 20, he had to wait a year before he could get a license. He was a talented artist and spent that year off making illustrations for a textbook on gynecology written by a famous Brooklyn gynecologist Alexander Skene. It became a classic and contained 161 of the young man's drawings. Dr. Skene advised his students to specialize in women's diseases and in due time Dickinson did just that and

became one of Brooklyn's busiest gynecologists. In his daily work he constantly encountered tragedies resulting from venereal disease, illegal abortions, and marital dysfunction and he attributed much of this to widespread ignorance and maladjustment about sex. He was convinced of the necessity for enlightened scientific response and he took up the task with missionary zeal.

He was distinctly unusual for his time because he routinely questioned his patients about sex and contraception. He compiled more than 5,000 detailed sexual histories of his married patients, accompanied by his sketches -- and eventually, these served as the basis of his emerging ideas. He was a prolific contributor to medical journals and as a medical lecturer, he railed against such social matters as tight corseting and encouraged women to exercise more -- particularly on bicycles. But his main focus was to encourage physicians to talk about sex with their patients. As he said, it was a subject which "bristles with difficulties and misunderstandings and aversions and false constructions and temptations to evil-mindedness, [but the physician who is] clean of mind and happy in his marriage [is the only person with the knowledge and objectivity] to save his people from their ignorance." What was required for mutual satisfaction between married couples was frank discussion and mutual sensitivity: "It is all wrong if just submitted to -- or seen as a duty -- in most cases "patience and desire and the use of Vaseline will overcome all difficulty."

**When he retired from office practice at age sixty, Dr. Dickinson moved to Manhattan, lived off his investments and launched what he called his “second career” and only then did he dare to publicly advocate contraception. In 1923 Dickinson founded the Committee on Maternal Health (CMH) which included prominent medical specialists and became a clearing house for research and information concerning contraception. It was based at Dickinson’s office in the New York Academy of Medicine, and promoted “a broad program to improve the quality of life” by liberating married women from disease, disability and ignorance – as he said, sex was a force to be accepted and enjoyed -- “children should be wanted, planned -- and spaced.”**

**In 1933 he published Human Sex Anatomy, an atlas with 174 of his illustrations of the genitalia including during intercourse. It was lambasted as pornography but, undaunted, in 1937 he was able to get the conservative AMA to endorse contraception as a legitimate medical service and to encourage teaching of sexology in medical schools.**

**He often made common cause with Margaret Sanger who aggressively advocated “a woman’s right to birth control.” Her slogan was that women should raise more hell -- and fewer babies. Sanger and Dickinson had an on-again, off-again relationship -- sometime rivals, other times collaborators but they disagreed over who should control reproduction – the**

women themselves or their doctors. His position was that “we as a profession should take hold of this matter (of contraception)] and not let it receive harm by being pushed in any undignified or improper manner.”

There also was a dark side to his story for like many intellectuals during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Dr. Dickinson was an ardent eugenicist and favored mandatory sterilization for certain categories of people -- but that's a subject for another time. In 1943 Robert Latou Dickinson, by now a vigorous octagenerian, met a much younger biologist from Indiana who would succeed him as the country's leading sexologist -- Alfred C. Kinsey. Legend has it that when the two first met, the older man tearfully exclaimed, “At last! At last! This is what I've been hoping for all these years.” Kinsey's early work involved the mating of wasps (in small letters) and later he acknowledged that he'd been inspired by Dickinson's work (WASPS).

In 1946 Dr. Dickinson won the prestigious Lasker Award for his career contributions as “America's leading medical sexologist.” This was two years before Kinsey's first book appeared and when Dickinson received his copy, he wrote a letter of thanks to Kinsey saying, “I have my copy at last. Glory be to God.”

When Robert Latou Dickinson died after surgery for prostate cancer in 1950 at age 89, Kinsey rushed from Indiana to New York to lay claim to the papers that he'd been promised by the

old man. Many of them are housed at the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research -- for which Dickinson had designed the official bookplate in 1946.) And here's the bust of Dr. Dickinson that was made by Abram Belskie. It was commissioned by the Academy of Medicine and this model resides downstairs in the Belskie workshop among many of his other works.