

The art of colour blind neurologist Paul Richer

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Paul Marie Louis Pierre Richer was born on February 17, 1849, to a family of linen and fabric merchants in Chartres – a region in Centre-Val de Loire, south-west of Paris. When he was young, every day on his way to school, Paul would go past the famous cathedral embellished with countless figures, which stimulated his imagination. Watching the stonemasons repairing the structure, as he passed by, certainly contributed to Richer's fondness for sculpture.

Paul Richer as young medical student lacked any formal artistic training, but came to Jean-Martin Charcot's attention in 1874. Charcot claimed that Richer's drawings were accurate enough for a doctor to diagnose the illnesses depicted. That was the motivation for appointing him, in 1882, as head of the Charcot Museum at the Hôpital de la Salpêtrière. Both Charcot and Richer published a series of scientific reviews on artworks that appeared in the *Iconographie de la Salpêtrière*, a journal published from 1888 to 1918, and coedited by Richer himself.

Paul Richer was color blind, which explains why his work is solely composed of sketches and drawings and, later, engravings and sculptures, but never paintings.

Paul Richer's drawings. Top: Passionate attitude period – sad phase (left). Epileptiform period – phase of tonic immobility or tetanism (right). Bottom: Contortion phase l'arc de cercle (left). Prodrome – agitation and partial contractures (middle). Period of Clownism – phase of great movements (right)



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In 1893, Richer portrayed a bust of a 26-year-old man called Henri 'Bonn'. The bust of a young man suffering from myopathy illustrates a study of sufferers from amyotrophy, in which muscles waste away because the nerves supplying them are diseased (Figure A).

The woman suffering from Labio-Glosso-Laryngeal Paralysis (circa 1894), a life-size half-body plaster sculpture evokes extreme pathos (Figure B). The viewer's focus is the figure's finely-modeled face and hand, which reveal delicately-rendered veins underneath her skin, and her facial expression.

Richer's most well-known pathological sculpture portrays a woman suffering from Parkinson's Disease (Figure C). A patient called, simply, 'Gell' represents the almost-perfect clinical schema of Parkinson's Disease. In that 47 cm high sculpture, you can see the typical sufferer as having an expressionless visage, a head and torso inclined forward, a sunken chest, and flexed arms and legs: in a word, "the look of an old person who has been welded together".

Sculptures by Paul Richer: A. Bust of a young man suffering from myopathy. B. The woman suffering from Labio-Glosso-Laryngeal paralysis. C. Attitude and faces in Parkinson's disease.

