The virtue of a profession

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Andrea Pisano (1290–1348). Panels of the bell tower of Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence. The Medicine.

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Fig. 1 Medicine, with permission

Fig. 2 Astronomy, with permission

Fig. 3 Jason stone, with permission

The sculptural reliefs over the base of the bell tower of Santa Maria del Fiore, in Florence, were done by Andrea Pisano and his school; they depict the arts and professions in hexagonal panels in the lower row, with overlying diamond panels representing the deeds of mercy and virtue, science and the planets.

The whole cycle was conceptualised within a single idea, as was common in the Middle Ages, so that no element is explained by aesthetic criteria alone. Rather they obey precise and profound meanings. In particular, each hexagonal panel is closely related to its overlying diamond panel: each profession underlies its own virtue.

The third panel on the southern face of the tower represents Medicine (Fig. 1). A physician is depicted while performing uroscopy, which in that period was a common icon of medical activity, together with wrist palpation. His posture and movement are the same (but a mirror image) of the first character of the panels on the same side of the tower: Astronomy (Fig. 2). Planet or urine, stars or excrement, it makes no difference. The dignity of the work depends upon its meaning and not on the subject treated.

In addition, the physician operates on behalf many patients and not only one: this image is not an allegory, but the sign of a real need made of ill patients and not only of the disease itself.

Unlike other sculptural figures of ancient medicine, for example the Jason stone (Fig. 3), the physician is no bigger than his patients; he only stands on higher ground. Excellence in this culture does not only derive from skills and attitudes, but also depends on the place where one fixes one's heart.

The last intriguing remark is that the virtue associated with medicine is hope. Cure and care move towards this achievement: hope of *salubrity* and *salvation*, which in their Latin root “*salus*” are firmly joined, just as *health* and *holiness* share a common etymological origin in *wholeness*, suggesting how the care for the diseased person relies in the entire accomplishments of humans.