



# THE ART OF SURGERY

PAINTINGS BY JOSEPH R. WILDER, M.D.

IN HIS PAINTINGS OF  
LIFE IN THE OPERATING  
ROOM, NOTED ARTIST  
AND SURGEON JOE  
WILDER, A GRADUATE  
OF DARTMOUTH  
COLLEGE, OFFERS  
REVEALING INSIGHTS  
INTO A MILIEU THAT IS  
AT ONCE AWESOMELY  
TECHNICAL AND  
PROFOUNDLY INTIMATE.



“Everything passes—robust art alone is eternal. The bust survives the city,” wrote 19th-century French art critic Théophile Gautier. A contemporary case in point may be the works of 1942 Dartmouth College graduate Joseph Wilder, M.D.

A retired surgeon as well as an artist of note, Wilder has produced numerous oil paintings of what transpires in the operating theater—images that will surely survive the shiny suites they depict. For in Wilder’s operating rooms, surgery becomes not the most high-tech of specialties but the epitome of the intimacy inherent in the physician-patient relationship—a process where one human being probes the innermost recesses of another.

The *New York Times* has called Wilder “a Renaissance man.” He has two books of artwork (as well as two surgical texts) to his credit—*Athletes: The Paintings of Joe Wilder, M.D.* (published in 1985 by Harry Abrams, a noted

publisher of fine-art books) and *Surgical Reflections: Images in Paint and Prose* (published in 1993 by Quality Medical Publishing). He was one of nine *Ageless Heroes* featured in a 1998 PBS special on the vitality and potential of men and women over age 65. His artwork has been covered in major magazines and art books.

Wilder's paintings in this article are excerpted from a book that he is in the process of completing, titled *Paintings of Life in the Operating Room: The True World of Surgery*. It includes commentary, some of which is reproduced here, from the worlds of both medicine and art—insights by Wilder himself; by his fellow Dartmouth alumnus C. Everett Koop, M.D., Sc.D.; by noted transplant surgeon Thomas Starzl, M.D., Ph.D.; and by art critic Donald Kuspit, Ph.D.

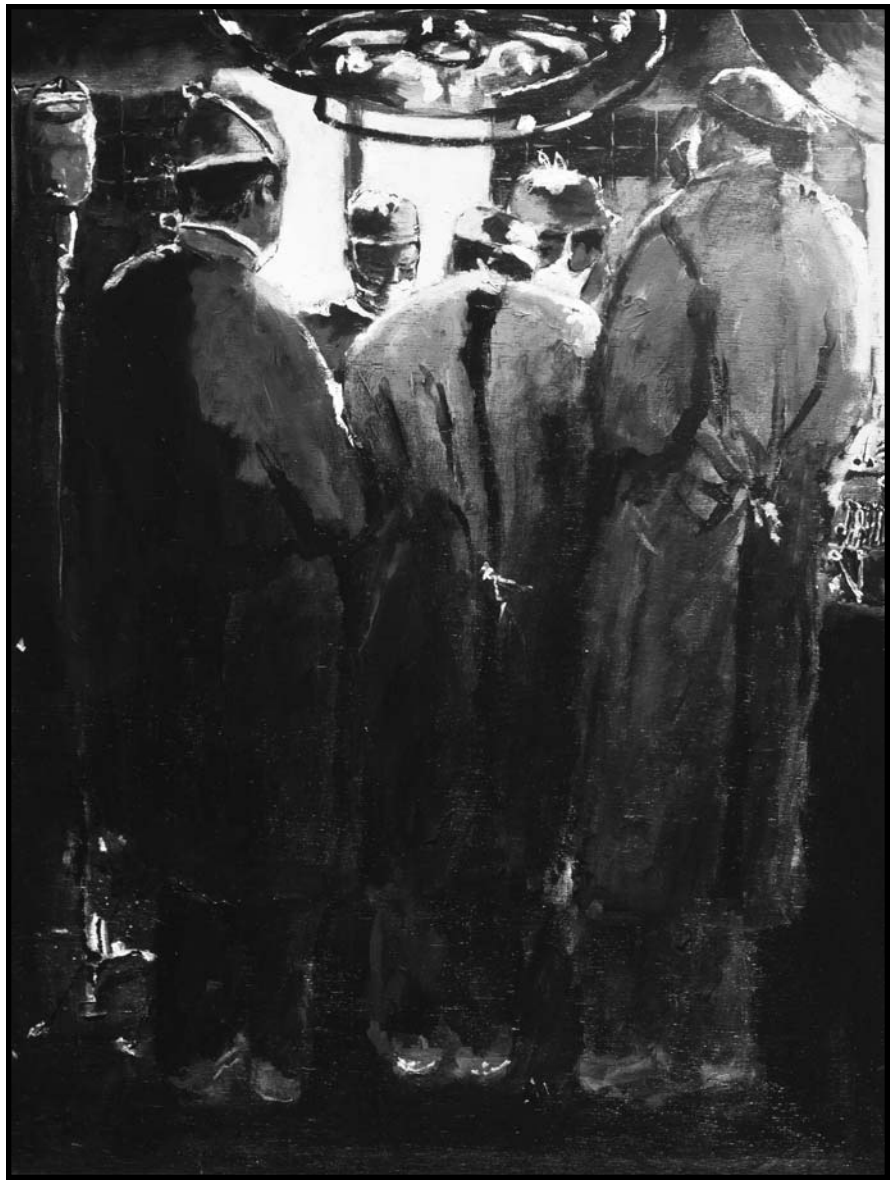
Kuspit is a professor of art history and philosophy at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. He holds a Lifetime Achievement Award for Distinguished Contribution to the Visual Arts from the National Association of Schools of Art and Design, as well as the College Art Association's Frank Jewett Mather Award for Distinction in Art Criticism. He is the author of more than 20 books.

Starzl is the director of the University of Pittsburgh's transplantation institute, which bears his name and is the world's largest transplant program. He holds 18 honorary degrees, the Medal of the Boston Surgical Society, and the Medawar Prize of the Transplantation Society and has to his credit thousands of scientific publications.

Koop, a 1937 graduate of Dartmouth College, earned his M.D. at Cornell and is known as "America's family doctor" for his tenure as U.S. surgeon general from 1981 to 1989. But he spent the bulk of his career as a pediatric surgeon. He was a professor of pediatrics at the University of Pennsylvania; surgeon-in-chief at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia from 1948 to 1981; and editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Pediatric Surgery* from 1964 to 1976. He holds 35 honorary degrees and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian award. Now head of Dartmouth's C. Everett Koop Institute, he is also the Elizabeth DeCamp McInerney Professor of Surgery at DMS.

Wilder himself graduated in 1942 from Dartmouth College, where he was an all-America lacrosse player, and earned his M.D. at Columbia. Before his retirement, he was chief of surgery at New York's Hospital for Joint Diseases and a professor of surgery at Mt. Sinai Medical School.

He has painted for many years but has been able to devote much more time to his brushes ever since he set down his scalpels a decade ago. On these and succeeding pages are evidence of his efforts.



## FIVE SURGEONS ▲

"Sports records are made to be broken, not treasured," says surgeon Thomas Starzl. "Similarly, in an active field of the life sciences, including surgery, almost everything occurring more than five years ago is dismissed as obsolete. Consequently, there is little sense of history in medical literature. In his dual roles as a surgeon and artist, Joe Wilder has turned the tables. Seen through his creative lenses, everyday scenes in the operating theater and support areas provide a cumulative profile of surgery that can only be called heroic." (This particular scene is also reproduced in color on the cover of this issue.)

"Wilder's style, which at first glance suggests hardy realism, has a certain brooding spontaneity to it," observes art critic Donald Kuspit. It "conveys the tense inner life of the outwardly calm surgeons, absorbed in their seemingly ritualistic tasks."



## **SURGEONS AS HEROES ▲**

Kuspit adds that “Wilder is the surgeon in many of the pictures—a surgeon triply privileged in that he not only performs an operation in as careful and caring a way as possible, but is aware of his own state of mind as he performs it, and can express his state visually. . . . Wilder has the subtle skills of an impressionist Chardin,” the critic continues. “He is clearly the master of the inanimate thing—showing, in fact, that it is implicitly alive. . . . These subtly expressive paintings, with their deceptive straightforwardness, epitomize Wilder’s most basic interests as both a surgeon and an artist.”





### PREOPERATIVE EXAMINATION ▲

"The handling changes in the pre- and postoperative works, which focus on the doctor-patient relationship," explains Kuspit. "It is softer and more fluid" than in the operating-room paintings, "which for all their expressionistic force convey a sense of determined solidity. . . . I think Wilder truly understands what Hippocrates meant when he wrote, 'Wherever the art of medicine is loved, there is also the love of humanity,'" Kuspit adds. This statement "is, in effect, the motto that explains the motivation of his surgeon paintings."



### SCRUBBING HANDS ▲

The surgeon "must be ever mindful that carelessness can create a critical infection, undoing a skillful operation," points out Wilder. Even "before the team scrubs and gowns, the chief surgeon thoroughly reviews the patient's chart while checking the major pathology and dozens of recorded tests on the chart to be doubly sure that all is in readiness for this major assault on the body. The experienced healer-surgeon trusts no one," emphasizes Wilder. "Complications are best handled when anticipated, rather than encountered."

### GOWNED AND GLOVED ►

"The relationship of the surgeon to the patient is intimate, one on one," says Wilder's fellow surgeon C. Everett Koop. "The surgeon knows that he is responsible to the patient and also to the family, his colleagues, the hospital where he works, the profession he represents, the community of the patient, society in general." And, Koop adds, there is a "spiritual responsibility as well. The patient's soul, this patient's spirit, inhabits a body which now I am attempting to invade, to improve, and to avoid violating. The intimacy the surgeon enjoys with a patient," he admits, "has its drawbacks. When I was a young surgeon there was a time before every operation when I would have to come to grips with that relationship and try to diffuse my emotional attachment to the patient."

Art critic Kuspit picks up on the same dichotomy when he observes that in this series of paintings, "the lower part of the surgeons' faces are hidden behind an impressive mask, making them seem remote and inhuman—scientific and detached. But their haunted eyes betray their intense feelings and profound sympathy . . . [their] peculiarly vulnerable awareness of the human condition."







#### ◀ CONTEMPLATION BEFORE SURGERY

"My favorite painting of Joe's is *Contemplation Before Surgery*," says Koop. "I know the surgeon has just scrubbed his hands and arms to the elbow and while doing so was subconsciously or consciously going over the details of the operation. His body and mind are now as prepared as they will ever be to engage the surgical challenge ahead. He is also . . . communicating at all times with the other team players, for their contributions are significant if the surgery is to be successful."

#### ▲ SHARP DISSECTION

This image captures what art critic Kuspit calls "Wilder's obsession with the demanding intimacy (far beyond ordinary collegue-ship) of the operating room."

And says Koop of this series of works, "When I look at Joe's paintings, I remember and feel once again" the aura of the OR. "The way his figures stand, their body language, their very attitude propel from the page into my mind. . . . At times I used to think, 'This is as close as I will ever get to the precision of ballet dancing.'"





### CONCENTRATION IN SURGERY ▲

"Intense concentration is the hallmark of successful surgery," explains Koop. And Wilder himself believes "that the operating room should be seen as a cathedral, in which all occupants must respect the sanctity of the place. All attention must be focused on the patient and the operative procedure. . . . A quiet ambience must be pervasive, with the same respect that we show in our place of worship."

And art critic Kuspit, referring to a 19th-century painter of several noted works with medical themes, says of Wilder, "This is not Thomas Eakins looking in on an operation and trying to identify with the surgeon, but the surgeon himself showing us—in great detail—what it looks and feels like to practice surgery."





## ◀ THREADING THE NEEDLE

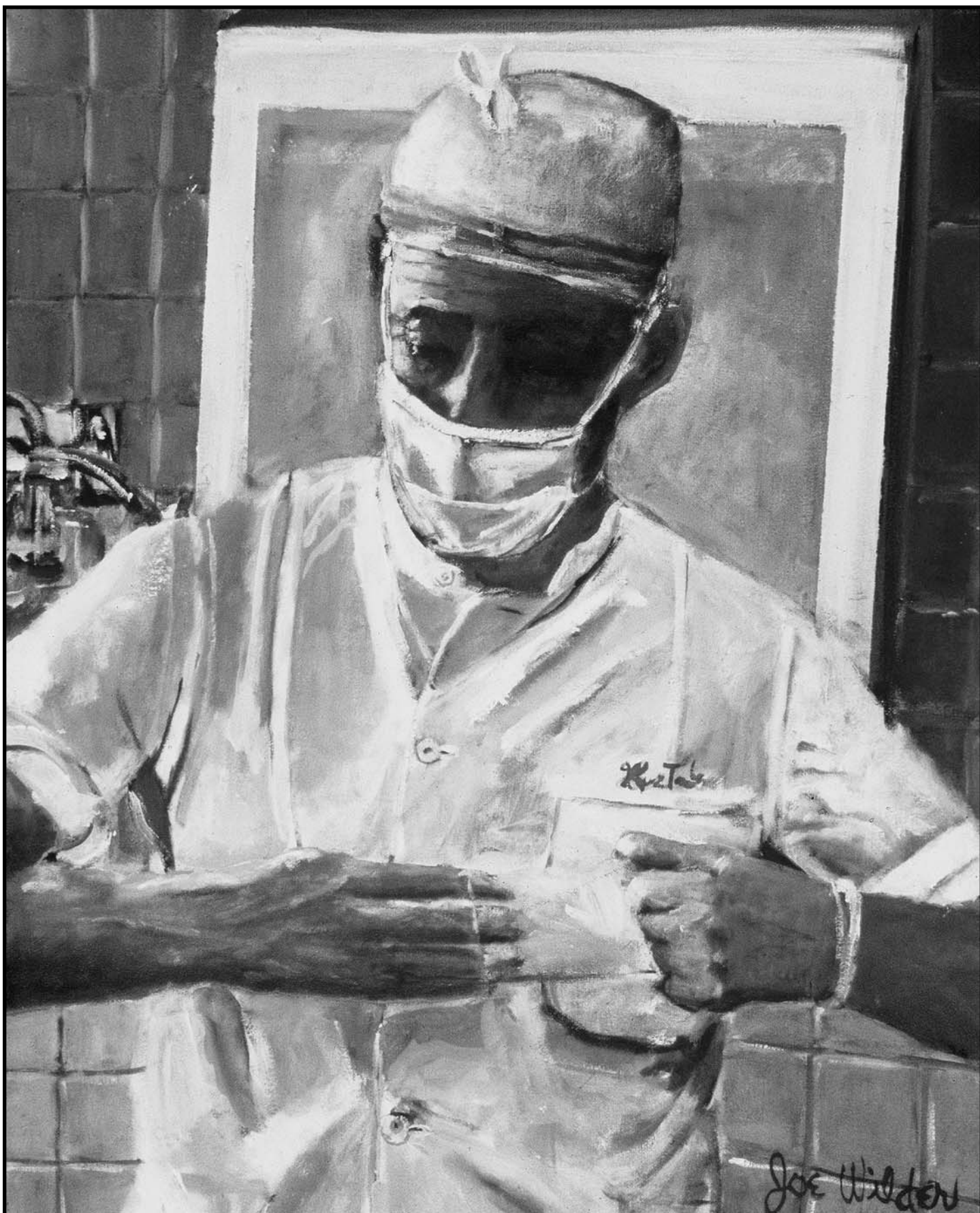
"Wilder uses the impressionistic-expressionistic interplay of light and darkness to emotional effect," says Kuspit, "thus restoring Rembrandt's visionary idea of significance."

"Wilder's surgeons are sturdy oaks," he adds, "but they are also bamboo reeds that bend with the wind and thus do not break. Surgery is necessarily realistic and scientific, but it is also expressionistic and artistic . . . which is no doubt why Eakins regarded it as a model for realistic art and why Wilder regards painting and surgery as parallel activities, for both integrate hand and mind."

## DEEP IN SURGERY ▲

"The surgeon, like the priest, struggles with first and last things," points out Kuspit. The surgeon "is in the special position of the caretaker and healer in a world which is not very caring and more pathological than healing. Bodily illness may not be the wages of sin in Wilder's pictures, as it was in medieval times, but it has a profound psychic effect on both doctors and patients. Wilder's surgeons may not be saints or priests, but he clearly views surgeons as heroes."

Yet the practical details of Wilder's paintings are also significant. "There is a tendency for most of us to focus on the patient and surgery team when we think of the operating room," the artist himself observes. "However, there are numerous objects resting near the patient that are lifesaving. . . . The simple bottle, tube, and needle are essential for safe and successful surgery."





## ◀ REMOVING GLOVES

“Why is a work of art so enduring compared to the fleeting fame of the event or subject it captures?” asks surgeon Starzl. “One reason may be that students, teachers, and critics of art are preoccupied with the perpetuation, refinement, and continuous reevaluation of what already has been done or learned. An aura of history hangs heavy over a superb painting of a person, an accomplishment, or even some simple thing.”

Wilder himself observes about one of the seemingly “simple” elements in this particular painting that “hands are the most difficult part of the human anatomy to paint. Indeed, many artists fake them.” Yet a surgeon’s hands, he adds, represent “coordination, beauty, and delicacy. For these anatomical structures make the difference between poor, good, and great surgeons. Good hands give you good surgery.”

## RECOVERY ROOM ▲

“It is in the numerous images in which Wilder shows the surgeon . . . before or after the operation that the depths of the surgeon’s feelings become apparent,” writes Kuspit. “It is then that his professional and human pride become one—that the tough-mindedness that he shows before operating gives way to tenderness and warmth. Wilder’s surgeons have hearts as well as minds.” ■