

A Dangerous Journey: Giving Birth in the 1800s

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Last month, we described the traumatic birth of Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine. This month's picture is very different, a refined portrait rather than a crude woodcut, but it does contain a visual reference to one of Asclepius' medical daughters: the goddess Hygeia. Her spirit is personified in the maid, pouring (hopefully warm) water behind the parturient woman, the illuminated focus of this intense painting.

This month's picture (22" × 18") was made in oil on paper bound to a wood panel by an unknown but possibly French artist in the year 1800. It is an intricate and intimate portrait of birth at that time. The clothing of the participants in the delivery is full and almost formal; the mother is still wearing stockings and garters, despite her many hours of labour. The furniture is neoclassical. The toothless crone-

midwife seems attentive and perhaps wise, but almost passive as the baby delivers into the bed. The husband is present and engaged, but also focuses on the baby rather than his wife. His right hand is raised; what is he signalling, and to whom? Perhaps a fifth person is standing outside the frame—a sister or mother-in-law—waiting to step forward? And the most important of the participants, the mother, has an almost rapt expression, close to relief as she feels the pressure of birth begin to abate. The image is one of an intense and allegorical picture of a delivery at the turn of the 19th century. A dangerous journey towards new life for mother and baby.

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