

# The Art of Charcot: An Outstanding Caricaturist

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## Abstract

Jean-Martin Charcot is considered the father of modern neurology; alongside his work as a physician, professor, and researcher in this area, he was also artistically gifted with a taste for caricature. This historical note summarizes 8 caricatures by Charcot that exhibit a mixture of humor, satire, irony, and sarcasm.

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## Introduction

Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893) is considered the father of modern neurology as well as the 19th century's most important professor of this subject [1, 2]. In addition to his numerous scientific contributions to neurology in general, Charcot's research also involved neuropathology, neuropsychiatry, and neuropsychology [1–5]. Alongside his scientific activities, Charcot had a great appreciation for the arts and significant artistic skills [3–

9]. He was also known to have a secret, complex personality and a taciturn profile with elements of authoritarianism, tyranny, austerity, ambition, sarcasm, and skepticism [3–6].

We selected 8 of Charcot's caricatures (Fig. 1–6) [7, 9, 10]. These images represent different stages of Charcot's life, drawn during his youth (1842), his tenure as a professor of medicine, and even into his old age (around 1870). This historical note discusses Charcot's artistic side through his caricatures.

Like Charcot, a number of neuroscientists were also skilled artists and draftsmen: these include Charles Bell (1774–1842), Pierre Samuel Toussaint Fromentin-Dupeux (1786–1867), Frédéric Estre (1813–1902), Paul Richer (1849–1933), and the brothers Santiago (1852–1934) and Pedro Ramón y Cajal (1854–1950) [11–14]. The Cajals and Bell used these skills to illustrate their work [11–14]. Bell combined his varied artistic and scientific talents in detailed anatomical and surgical illustrations and paintings in several books. These include his 1811 text, *An Idea of a New Anatomy of the Brain*, as well as the first textbook on the anatomy and physiology of facial expression, entitled *Essays on the Anatomy of Expression in Painting* (1806) [12, 13]. Santiago Ramón y



**Fig. 1.** Young student in the *Quartier Latin*. From the collection of Olivier Walusinski.



**Fig. 2.** Professors: Professor Chevreul (a) and Professor Pierret (b). From the collection of Olivier Walusinski.



**Fig. 3.** Platypus. From the collection of Olivier Walusinski.



**Fig. 4.** The Aeropagus. From the collection of Olivier Walusinski.

Cajal drew and studied histological slides of the nervous system in great detail; in 1891, he proposed the law of dynamic polarization, establishing that the information flow within each neuron generally moves from the dendrites toward the axon [14]. Pedro provided Santiago with all his histological preparations and made a number of his own drawings from his histological findings [11]. Henry Tonks (1862–1937), a British surgeon, used his impressive drawing ability more like Charcot, with caricatures [12, 13]. However, while Tonks dedicated more time to this area and studied in the evenings at the Westminster School of Art, Charcot was always self-taught. The young Jean-Martin had already shown specific artistic abilities. His father had suggested that his son should become an artistic painter [7, 8, 12, 13].

Charcot's caricatures express his characteristic style mixing humor, irony, satire, and sarcasm [15]. Our first example (Fig. 1) was drawn when Charcot visited the Latin Quarter of Paris at age 17 years and depicts a bohemian student, probably inspired by Charcot's encounters

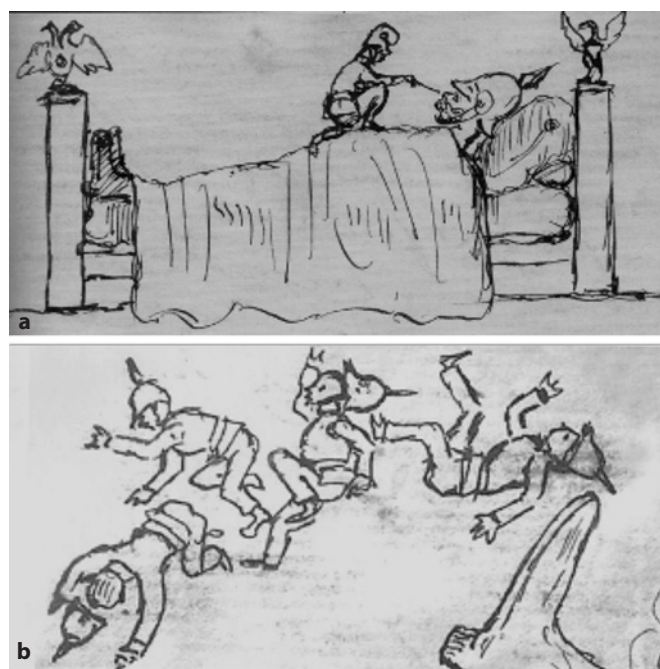


**Fig. 5.** Faculty procession. From the collection of Olivier Walusinski.

with what Meige describes as the type of student immortalized by caricaturists of that era [7].

The second drawing (Fig. 2a) represents Professor Michel Eugene Chevreul (1786–1889) during his visit to a Tuesday session at the Academy of Sciences in Paris around 1885 [7]. Charcot was seated behind him, and his caricature highlights the scholar's halo-like hair; the cartoon was instantly recognizable to anyone who knew the old professor, who by this time was approximately 99 years old [7]. Charcot also drew his own students, as seen in Figure 2b. This image depicts a hairy, bearded man concentrating on his work. This was Antoine-Auguste Pierret (1845–1920): first Charcot's student, then one of his first collaborators, and a traveling companion and friend who himself became a professor himself [7]. The sketch features an enormous forehead, a disproportional nose, and a matching chin [7]. Another caricature by Charcot is more humorous (Fig. 3) and depicts an old companion from his youth nicknamed "Platypus," on an excursion in the mountains of Switzerland while heavily loaded with tools, saddlebags, boxes, and cartons like a mule [7].

Charcot famously professed a singular disregard for all human antics but demonstrated tenderness toward and extreme indulgence of animals, particularly dogs and monkeys [7, 16, 17]. According to his biographers, Charcot furiously opposed hunters but tolerated all the fantasies of a dog [7, 16, 17]. Following the example of the Flemish Baroque painter David Téniers, whose satires depicted busy monkeys doing the work of men, Charcot portrayed his own colleagues at the medical school in Paris in a similar and sharply ironic manner [7]. At the time that he drew the Areopagus comprising apes, Charcot was already on the faculty (Fig. 4) [7]. Next was another ironic caricature of his colleagues at the Paris medical school in pompous costumes during a procession, which he also entitled "Areopagus" (Fig. 5). The leader is bent



**Fig. 6.** Franco-Prussian War. **a** The great inert Prussian soldier. **b** *L'Avenir* (The Future). From the collection of Olivier Walusinski (a); reference [11] (b).

under the weight of his heavy silver caduceus staff and is followed by a parade of professors: tall and short, fat and thin, bald and shaved, hairy and bearded, some with glasses and some without, and some with heads held high and others with their noses practically in their gowns, in the words of Meige [7]. One figure depicts Charcot himself. The final 2 images portray his indignation during the Franco-Prussian war (1870); the first is untitled (Fig. 6a), depicting a tiny French soldier atop an enormous, inert Prussian one, and the second he called "*L'Avenir*" ("The Future," Fig. 6b) [10, 18].

## Conclusion

This historical note briefly describes 8 caricatures drawn by Jean-Martin Charcot during the second half of the 19th century in Paris, demonstrating his artistic gifts that blend humor, satire, irony, and sarcasm.

## Statement of Ethics

We confirm that approval of an institutional review board was not required for this work. We confirm that we have read the Journal's position on issues involved in ethical publication and affirm that this work is consistent with those guidelines.

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There is no conflict of interest to declare.

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