Laënnec’s 1819 Stethoscope

An asthmatic “consumptive” with a keen sense of musical pitch, French physician René Théophile HYacinthe Laënnec (1781–1826) enjoyed watching children play near the Louvre as they listened to the scratching of pins from the opposite end of a long stick. To think that such play would later inspire Laënnec (by 1816) to invent the stethoscope! Both a flautist and a woodturner, Laënnec soon found himself turning walnut-wood cylinders into shorter, wider versions of flutes sans finger holes—stethoscopes. Finally, physicians could abandon direct “ear-on-chest” auscultation in favor of the stethoscope, an innovation which preserved (particularly female) patients’ modesty and physicians’ professional distance. In 1819 Laënnec handcrafted a stethoscope (see above, courtesy of the Wood Library-Museum) for a Strasbourg colleague. That Laënnec creation was acquired by telephone auction in 1991 by a quick-dialing curator.

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