

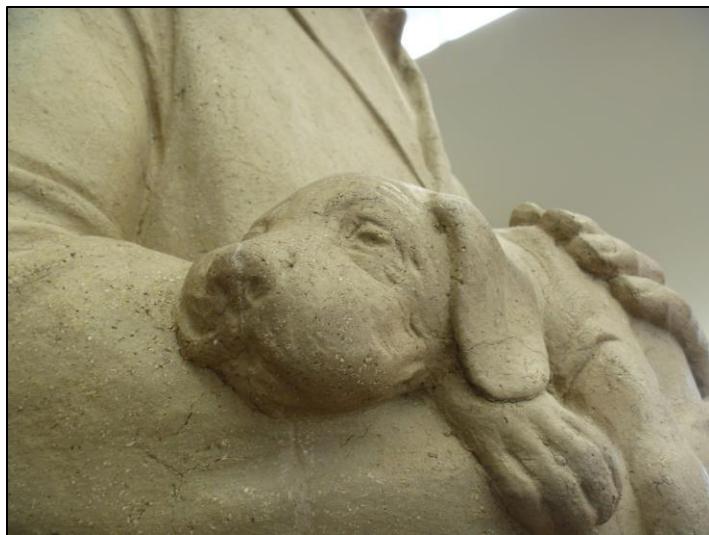
Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Gentle Doctor: The Iconic Face of Veterinary Medicine

By Melena Hagstrom (Guest Author and Research Assistant)

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The first time I crossed paths with the seven-foot gentle giant was while visiting Iowa State University (ISU) for an admissions interview in the veterinary college. The bronze doctor stood in the entrance plaza, but his eyes did not meet the curious gazes of visitors. Instead, his focus was on the small, injured pup he embraced. The doctor's eyes held a note of understanding and compassion that were more than human. These emotions seemed to be instilled in the statue's viewers, as the nose of the pup has been worn smooth from visitors' touches since its birth in the late 1930s.



The Gentle Doctor, detail

By Danish-American artist and sculptor, Christian Petersen

(homemadeiowalife.blogspot.com/2012/03/gentle-doctor-sculpture.html)

This statue, the *Gentle Doctor*, is considered one of the greatest and most iconic pieces of artwork to represent veterinary medicine. Its message goes far beyond simply illustrating man and animal side-by-side. The hands and feet of the man are disproportionately large, emphasizing their importance in the veterinarian's daily work. The kindness in his gaze is unguarded, revealing the deep human emotion behind his craft.

Despite the popularity and reputation of this sculpture, its origins are actually quite humble. Danish-American artist and sculptor, Christian Petersen, relocated to Ames in the 1930's to create works to display on campus. An old horse stall acted as Petersen's studio as he assumed the role of the only sculptor-in-residence of any US college or university at the time. Early in the

creation of the *Gentle Doctor*, Petersen met an aspiring veterinary student, L.M. Forland, who was working as a janitor on the campus to earn his way through school. The model reflected back on his acquaintance with Petersen: “If we had a few minutes’ time, he would ask me to stand for him while he carved away at a small pile of clay. He told me to hold a small pillow between my forearms in a position similar to that of a little pup.”¹



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Afterwards, Forland would resume his janitorial duties, starting with Petersen’s studio. “I remember too well how heavy his garbage cans were!”²

The finished sculpture was placed in the courtyard of ISU’s state-of-the-art veterinary quadrangle, originally constructed in 1912. This was 1938, two years after the death of Dean Charles Stange, whom many say the statue commemorated.

Directly behind the *Gentle Doctor* was a massive mural depicting the broad history of veterinary medicine. A cow is restrained, being examined for foot-and-mouth disease to promote herd

health. Kneeling men work with a calf, symbolizing the creation of the small pox vaccine that helped eradicate the deadly disease. This piece is another Petersen work, assisted by research conducted by his wife, Charlotte. The figures present in the bas relief panels of the *Veterinary Medicine Mural* are meant to capture the intricate human-animal relationship that has resulted in the improvement of both human and animal health.

When the veterinary medicine program moved to a newly built college in the 1970s, Peterson's work moved with it, though he was then deceased. Today, the original terra cotta *Gentle Doctor* resides in the Scheman Building at the Iowa State Center, but a bronze copy stands in the entrance plaza of the veterinary college for future visitors and students to observe, admire, and perhaps reflect upon. Decades have gone by since the statue was constructed, but the standards in veterinary medicine and the occupational motivation have not changed.

Looking at the artwork is like looking into the face of veterinary medicine itself.

¹ Iowa State University, College of Veterinary Medicine, [About the College, Gentle Doctor](#).

² Ibid.

KEYWORDS:

Iowa State University
Veterinary Art
Christian Petersen
Gentle Doctor

TOPIC:

US Veterinary Colleges

LEADING QUESTION:

At what United States veterinary college does the *Gentle Doctor* sculpture reside?

META-SUMMARY:

The story behind the Gentle Doctor sculpture at Iowa State University.

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