

Insights into Portuguese Medical History

From the Birth of the Art of Asclepius



Edited by

Maria do Sameiro Barroso
Christopher John Duffin
João Alcindo Martins e Silva

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Medical History

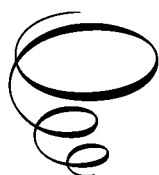
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CHAPTER 6

HISTORY OF SPECTACLES - PORTUGAL IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

MARIA DO SAMEIRO BARROSO¹

Abstract

Spectacles constitute one of the most remarkable and helpful inventions of the Middle Ages, first emerging as convex lenses helping to produce magnified images of objects mainly to correct presbyopia, a condition characterized by gradual loss of the ability of the eyes to focus on nearby objects in people over forty years old. Spectacles appeared mainly in monasteries and were available to members of the clergy and nobility, as well as learned and wealthy people. In the sixteenth century, these costly and valuable objects were manufactured and sold all over Europe. In this essay, I will briefly survey their invention, manufacture, trade and classification, focusing on paintings and reports about their use in Portugal, and presenting an unpublished collection of specimens from the Museum of Aveiro, former Monastery of Jesus from Aveiro (Mosteiro de Jesus de Aveiro), founded in 1458. The Monastery became illustrious when Princess Joanna (1452-1490), daughter to King D. Afonso V (reigned from 1438, being six years old up to 1477 under the regency of his uncle D. Pedro, Duke of Coimbra (1392-1499) and 1477-1481), entered the monastery in 1460, after refusing marriage proposals from European monarchs.

Key words

History of visual aids; Spectacles; History of Ophthalmology; Monastery of Jesus from Aveiro

Resumo

Os óculos constituem uma das invenções mais notáveis e úteis da Idade Média, tendo surgido primeiro como lentes convexas ajudando a produzir imagens ampliadas de objectos principalmente para corrigir a presbiopia,

¹ Unless otherwise stated, English translations are by the author.

problema ocular caracterizado pela perda gradual da capacidade dos olhos de focar objetos próximos em pessoas com mais de quarenta anos. Os óculos surgiram principalmente nos mosteiros para membros do clero e nobreza e pessoas cultas e ricas. No século XVI, eram objetos caros e valiosos, fabricados e vendidos em toda a Europa. Neste estudo, procederemos a uma breve retrospectiva da sua invenção, fabrico, comércio e tipologias, abordando pinturas e referências à sua utilização em Portugal, apresentando uma coleção inédita de exemplares do Museu de Aveiro, antigo Mosteiro de Jesus de Aveiro (Mosteiro de Jesus de Aveiro), fundado em 1458. O Mosteiro ganhou notariadade quando a princesa Joana (1452-1490), filha do rei Afonso V (reinou desde 1438, tendo seis anos até 1477 sob a regência de seu tio D. Pedro, Duque de Coimbra (1392 -1499) e 1477-1481), entrou no mosteiro em 1460, após recusar propostas de casamento de monarcas europeus.

Palavras-chave

História das ajudas visuais; Óculos; História da Oftalmologia; Mosteiro de Jesus de Aveiro

Introduction

According to Dr Plinio Pioreschi, physician and medical historian, the invention of eyeglasses stands as one of the most remarkable inventions of the Middle Ages. Most would agree that eyeglasses, the indispensable gadget used daily by untold numbers of human beings, are one of the most useful discoveries that technology has ever produced (Pioreschi 2003, 83).

The earliest eyeglasses consisted of convex lenses, which rectify presbyopia, a natural physiological change due to ageing. Presbyopia affects all types of eye in people from their early forties onwards; it is caused by the loss of elasticity of the eye lens, which reduces accommodation, resulting in focusing difficulty on nearby objects. Convex lenses also rectify farsightedness (hyperopia) a common condition caused by a refractive error in which visual images focus behind the retina, the vision being better for distant than for near objects (Allen 1972, 365 and 347).