In a 1970 design contest, the United Nations (UN) selected a lithograph of a sculpture entitled Hiroshima for a new pair of commemorative stamps, issued to highlight refugee initiatives and garner international support. The UN released these commemoratives (Scott #216-217) in March 1971.

The statue, Hiroshima, was created in 1965 by Norwegian-born sculptor Kaare Kristian Nygaard, a Mayo Clinic-trained surgeon and researcher. In Hiroshima, Dr Nygaard represented the refugee experience by depicting 2 figures carrying their belongings and moving forward together. Dr Nygaard initially did not title the piece; he stated that it could have represented displaced people from any tragic event, including the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. However, because the piece was cast around the 20th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, it became known as Hiroshima.

Kaare Nygaard was born on November 24, 1903, in Lillehammer, Norway, to Emilie and Johannes Nygaard. His father owned a grocery, and his mother was a midwife. Nygaard’s father died before his 3rd birthday; he could have represented displaced people from any tragic event, including the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. However, because the piece was cast around the 20th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, it became known as Hiroshima.

Kaare Nygaard was born on November 24, 1903, in Lillehammer, Norway, to Emilie and Johannes Nygaard. His father owned a grocery, and his mother was a midwife. Nygaard’s father died before his 3rd birthday; his mother later remarried and had 7 additional children, 3 of whom died at an early age. Throughout his childhood, Nygaard maintained a close relationship with his grandfather, a blacksmith, which prompted a life-long interest in tools and metal-working. Nygaard also had a strong interest in music and was a flutist for the Lillehammer Boys’ Band. He briefly contemplated becoming a professional musician, but ultimately chose a career in medicine.

Nygaard attended the University of Oslo and graduated cum laude with a medical degree in 1929. He briefly practiced general medicine in Norway before immigrating to the United States in 1930 to train as a surgeon. Dr Nygaard worked for a short period as a surgical assistant at the Gundersen Clinic in La Crosse, Wisconsin, before completing his training at Mayo Clinic. He served as a fellow in surgery and then assistant to the staff at Mayo Clinic from 1931 to 1940, then moved to Scarsdale, New York, and continued his surgical practice at White Plains Hospital in White Plains, New York, until his retirement in 1980.

In Dr Nygaard’s 4 decades of clinical practice, he cared for tens of thousands of patients, including more than 4000 sick and injured Norwegian sailors in a special ward he established in White Plains Hospital during World War II. This humanitarian effort earned him the honor of Knight’s Cross of the Order of St. Olav, First Class, bestowed by King Haakon VII of Norway.

In 1933, he married Ella Frey, a physical therapist whom he had met as a student in Norway in 1927. They had no children and she died in 1976. In January 1989, Dr Nygaard married Gail Delgado, a registered nurse.

Along with Dr Nygaard’s clinical practice, he was an active researcher with a strong interest in blood coagulation disorders. He published nearly 50 scientific articles on this subject and contributed to the invention of the first machine to use photoelectric principles to analyze blood clotting.

As a surgical fellow, Dr Nygaard and his colleague Dr George Elgie Brown (1885-1935), a Mayo Clinic consultant in medicine with a special interest in vascular diseases, coined the term “essential thrombophilia” in a 1937 case series in which they described 5 patients with sudden occlusion of large arteries that coexisted with venous thromboembolism. Historically, this constellation of findings was referred to as Nygaard-Brown syndrome.
Dr Nygaard devoted the same energy to his artistic work as he did to his surgical practice. At age 15, he produced his first sculpture, a bust of his grandfather. In more than 40 years he created approximately 100 sculptures. He also taught as an artist-in-residence and associate professor at the State University of New York at Purchase.

Dr Nygaard’s works can be found today in private collections around the world. A substantial number were donated to St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, after his death. In 2000, the Ella and Kaare Nygaard Foundation also contributed to a $1 million gift to support art education at St. Olaf.

Dr Nygaard continued to maintain a relationship with Mayo Clinic throughout his life, and donated his statues Cancer and The Surgeon to the Clinic, as well as an Alexander Calder mobile. After his death from prostate cancer on April 22, 1989, and burial in his native Lillehammer, his widow continued this philanthropic support of Mayo Clinic and established a travel award in his memory for young surgeons.

Dr Nygaard’s philosophy toward balancing his artwork and medical practice was simple: “First the physician, then the artist.” Still, one may ask: By the end of Dr Nygaard’s life, did medicine remain a priority above art, or did the work of the surgeon and the sculptor become intertwined?

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**Correspondence:** Address to David P. Steensma, MD, Department of Medical Oncology, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, 450 Brookline Ave, Suite D1B30, Boston, MA 02215 (david_steensma@dfci.harvard.edu; Twitter: @DavidSteensma).

**ORCID**
David P. Steensma: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5130-9284; Robert A. Kyle: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4763-4580