

Impact Statement

Brandon Hanaoka, Grade 10

***Infant Eyes*, 2025**

Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 16 inches

Independent Study, Lakeside School, Seattle, WA

Unsung Hero: Martin Couney

Fighting against controversial credentials, relying on the uncertainty of ticket sales, and working with limited resources, Couney's resilience through unfavorable conditions inspired me to advocate for his story. His genuine passion for saving premature infants remained unique in a world where the personal benefits of holding titles drove much of the world. Couney immigrated from Poland to the United States at the age of 19, claiming to be a physician from Germany, yet many questioned his credibility. He enrolled himself in carnivals around the country, advertising his invention: the baby incubator. Made of a sliding glass door and a steel frame, the incubators were designed to provide a space for premature babies to safely develop before they would graduate to go home with their mothers. The infants were displayed in sideshows, often drawing crowds of families in to view the exhibit.

Couney's endeavors were funded by the carnival's entry fees, as he never charged families or hospitals to use his incubators. Additionally, a lot of the equipment and materials necessary for supporting the babies had yet to be invented, so Couney and his team were forced to be resourceful. Nurses created solutions such as using dolls clothing for the premature babies, as shops had yet to create garments small enough to fit them. Couney's constant upwards battle of working in a field where a substantial amount of resources were either scarce or not yet available is something that I admired and the value that I centered my artistic vision around.

In my painting, the composition, mellow colors, and visual story are intended to express Couney's perseverance and passion around his incubators. First, I primarily focused my painting on Couney cradling an infant with a family standing in the background and with carnival banners soaring by. The main subject of Couney and the baby is meant to show his unrelenting focus and consistent hard work put towards his incubators. Despite possessing a massive opportunity to monopolize the incubators by making families pay for the service, Couney creatively utilized carnival entry fees to support the cost of running the machines. Throughout Couney's entire career, his drive to help the infants always overpowered greed, status, and recognition. The bare background made of a soft blend of blues, greens, and browns is also meant to direct the viewer's attention to Couney and the baby and emphasize a genuine care that fueled his mission. Lastly, I included a soldier, his wife, and their baby in the background, in hopes to emphasize Couney's compassion towards the families he provided for. His charitable

ideas and elegant roll-out of the incubator allowed it to be accessible to many. Couney also welcomed families with different classes, races, and varying situations, and with all patients being welcomed and without the need to pay, his incubators had a substantial impact in all communities. The soldier and his family are meant to embody an example of just how accessible Couney's machines were, and how much of a diverse cast of people they had helped.

The extent of Couney's impact in the world of medicine is still present today, as I, along with many others, were put into an incubator after being born early. Couney's incubator, while modernized and more technologically advanced than during Couney's time, allowed me to survive until I reached a healthy enough spot where I could thrive on my own. Many of our friends, family, and loved ones wouldn't be alive without Couney's incubator; the impact of his invention is significant, widespread, and far outlasts his life.

Overall, learning about Couney and getting the opportunity to paint his story has allowed me to see how underrepresented he is in the medical field. Even as someone who had been positively impacted by his incubators, I had never heard anything about how they came to be. With my art, I hope to advocate and share his story, so that people saved by his work can credit the person behind it. I have been sharing Couney's story with my other incubated friends, and hope that by creating this piece and sharing it with the ARTEFFECT community so that more people will be able to provide Couney with the recognition he deserves.

Reference:

Prentice, Claire. "The Man Who Ran a Carnival Attraction That Saved Thousands of Premature Babies Wasn't a Doctor at All." *Smithsonian.Com*, Smithsonian Institution, 19 Aug. 2016, www.smithsonianmag.com/history/man-who-pretended-be-doctor-ran-worlds-fair-attraction-saved-lives-thousands-premature-babies-180960200/.