

The Family That Built an Empire of Pain

The Sackler dynasty's ruthless marketing of painkillers has generated billions of dollars—and millions of addicts.

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An addiction specialist said that the Sacklers' firm, Purdue Pharma, bears the "lion's share" of the blame for the opioid crisis.

Illustration by Ben Wiseman

The north wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a vast, airy enclosure featuring a banked wall of glass and the Temple of Dendur, a sandstone monument that was constructed beside the Nile two millennia ago and transported to the Met, brick by brick, as a gift from the Egyptian government. The space, which opened in 1978 and is known as the Sackler Wing, is also itself a monument, to one of America's great philanthropic dynasties. The Brooklyn-born brothers Arthur, Mortimer, and Raymond Sackler, all physicians, donated lavishly during their lifetimes to an astounding range of institutions, many of which today bear the family name: the Sackler Gallery, in Washington; the Sackler Museum, at Harvard; the Sackler Center for Arts Education, at the Guggenheim; the Sackler Wing at the Louvre; and Sackler institutes and facilities at Columbia, Oxford, and a dozen

other universities. The Sacklers have endowed professorships and underwritten medical research. The art scholar Thomas Lawton once likened the eldest brother, Arthur, to “a modern Medici.” Before Arthur’s death, in 1987, he advised his children, “Leave the world a better place than when you entered it.”

Mortimer died in 2010, and Raymond died earlier this year. The brothers bequeathed to their heirs a laudable tradition of benevolence, and an immense fortune with which to indulge it. Arthur’s daughter Elizabeth is on the board of the Brooklyn Museum, where she endowed the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. Raymond’s sons, Richard and Jonathan, established a professorship at Yale Cancer Center. “My father raised Jon and me to believe that philanthropy is an important part of how we should fill our lives,” Richard has said. Marissa Sackler, the thirty-six-year-old daughter of Mortimer and his third wife, Theresa Rowling, founded Beespace, a nonprofit “incubator” that supports organizations like the Malala Fund. Sackler recently told *W* that she finds the word “philanthropy” old-fashioned. She considers herself a “social entrepreneur.”

When the Met was originally built, in 1880, one of its trustees, the lawyer Joseph Choate, gave a speech to Gilded Age industrialists who had gathered to celebrate its dedication, and, in a bid for their support, offered the sly observation that what philanthropy really buys is immortality: “Think of it, ye millionaires of many markets, what glory may yet be yours, if you only listen to our advice, to convert pork into porcelain, grain and produce into priceless pottery, the rude ores of commerce into sculptured marble.” Through such transubstantiation, many fortunes have passed into enduring civic institutions. Over time, the origins of a clan’s largesse are largely forgotten, and we recall only

the philanthropic legacy, prompted by the name on the building. According to *Forbes*, the Sacklers are now [one of America's richest families](#), with a collective net worth of thirteen billion dollars—more than the Rockefellers or the Mellons. The bulk of the Sacklers' fortune has been accumulated only in recent decades, yet the source of their wealth is to most people as obscure as that of the robber barons. While the Sacklers are interviewed regularly on the subject of their generosity, they almost never speak publicly about the family business, Purdue Pharma—a privately held company, based in Stamford, Connecticut, that developed the prescription painkiller OxyContin. Upon its release, in 1995, OxyContin was hailed as a medical breakthrough, a long-lasting narcotic that could help patients suffering from moderate to severe pain. The drug became a blockbuster, and has reportedly generated some thirty-five billion dollars in revenue for Purdue.

But OxyContin is a controversial drug. Its sole active ingredient is oxycodone, a chemical cousin of heroin which is up to twice as powerful as morphine. In the past, doctors had been reluctant to prescribe strong opioids—as synthetic drugs derived from opium are known—except for acute cancer pain and end-of-life palliative care, because of a long-standing, and well-founded, fear about the addictive properties of these drugs. “Few drugs are as dangerous as the opioids,” David Kessler, the former commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, told me.

Purdue launched OxyContin with a marketing campaign that attempted to counter this attitude and change the prescribing habits of doctors. The company funded research and paid doctors to make the case that concerns about opioid addiction were overblown, and

that OxyContin could safely treat an ever-wider range of maladies. Sales representatives marketed OxyContin as a product “to start with and to stay with.” Millions of patients found the drug to be a vital salve for excruciating pain. But many others grew so hooked on it that, between doses, they experienced debilitating withdrawal.

Since 1999, two hundred thousand Americans have died from overdoses related to OxyContin and other prescription opioids. Many addicts, finding prescription painkillers too expensive or too difficult to obtain, have turned to heroin. According to the American Society of Addiction Medicine, four out of five people who try heroin today started with prescription painkillers. The most recent figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggest that a hundred and forty-five Americans now die every day from opioid overdoses.

Andrew Kolodny, the co-director of the Opioid Policy Research Collaborative, at Brandeis University, has worked with hundreds of patients addicted to opioids. He told me that, though many fatal overdoses have resulted from opioids other than OxyContin, the crisis was initially precipitated by a shift in the culture of prescribing—a shift carefully engineered by Purdue. “If you look at the prescribing trends for all the different opioids, it’s in 1996 that prescribing really takes off,” Kolodny said. “It’s not a coincidence. That was the year Purdue launched a multifaceted campaign that misinformed the medical community about the risks.” When I asked Kolodny how much of the blame Purdue bears for the current public-health crisis, he responded, “The lion’s share.”

Although the Sackler name can be found on dozens of buildings, Purdue’s Web site scarcely mentions the family, and a list of the

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