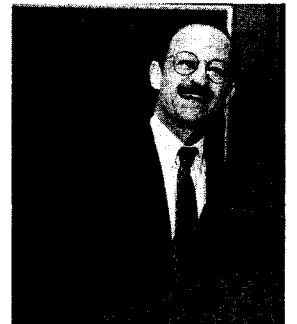


Varmus Portrait Dedicated in Bldg. 1

By Rich McManus

Three years after leaving directorship of NIH to head Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, Dr. Harold Varmus returned on Jan. 15 for the formal unveiling of his portrait—a tradition observed by all past NIH directors. At a Wilson Hall ceremony attended by many of his former colleagues and recruits, Varmus gave an art history lesson explaining the portrait, which includes him in the foreground, seated and looking gregarious in an open-collared shirt, and a prominent backdrop featuring a famous painting, executed by Jacques Louis David in 1788, of French scientist Antoine Laurent Lavoisier and his wife Marie Anne Pierrette Paulze.



Former NIH director Dr. Harold Varmus shares his observations about new portrait in Bldg. 1.

The Varmus portrait is the work of

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artist Jon R. Friedman, whose renderings of former National Academy of Sciences president Dr. Frank Press and of Dr. Maxine Singer, an NCI scientist who now heads the Carnegie Institution of Washington, had impressed Varmus. Friedman spoke briefly at the ceremony, also attended by Varmus's wife Connie Casey, who unveiled the artwork.

NIH director Dr. Elias Zerhouni emceed the affair, and read a letter from former Rep. John E. Porter (R-Ill.), a prominent friend of NIH while on the agency's congressional appropriations committee, who could not attend. Porter's letter hailed Varmus as the model and "gold standard" of an NIH director, and praised his organizational skill—"closely analogous to herding cats."

Even greater than Varmus's success winning large NIH budgets from Congress, Porter said, was his ability to achieve "vastly increased public awareness of the benefits of science."

Offering more of a traditional roast of the day's honoree was Dr. Steven Hyman, whom Varmus recruited to direct NIMH, and who now is provost at Harvard University. "So what do you say about a man who is truly larger than life?" he began. Hyman said NIH appeared, at least from an extramural perspective, to be in the doldrums prior to Varmus's arrival in 1993. "With Harold's arrival, things really seemed to change quickly and with an upward trajectory that I don't think anyone could have predicted."

Hyman said Varmus's great gift was an insistence on quality science and its benefits for society. "He believed in talking honestly and directly, with no funny business...Nothing is more effective than frank communication.

"The thing about Harold," he continued, "is that he is relentlessly about content." Varmus was rather less tolerant of the minutiae and procedure of bureaucracy, Hyman added. "When that stuff came up, his eyes glazed over and a look of boredom and disapproval swept over his face...If you were so dense that you didn't know your conversation with him was over, he'd give another hint by going over to his desk and reading his email.

"Harold was all about high standards and being honest about what good science was—this, and his integrity, made him a great boss. Harold always protected your back. Even remarkably radical reforms could go forward (under his direction), if they bettered science. He really made the job of being an institute director incredibly rewarding."



Varmus chats with NIH director Dr. Elias Zerhouni and former NIMH director Dr. Steven Hyman (c) at the event; Hyman, now provost at Harvard University, spoke candidly about Varmus's tenure as NIH director.

PHOTOS: JOHN CRAWFORD



Varmus and Zerhouni stand beside the finished work, which features Varmus sitting before a famous old painting by French artist Jacques Louis David.

Hyman praised Varmus's skills as a recruiter, noting that candidates should have interpreted it as a sign of respect when Varmus met them while still dripping wet from exercise, or when Varmus took them to Bethesda's no-frills restaurants for recruitment pitches. He noted that, under Varmus, "the necktie was demoted at NIH as a symbol of polite dress."

Hyman concluded, "Harold was all about substance, content, high quality science, and he was entirely unapologetic about it. He wasn't about marketing or making compromises. His tenure led to enormous morale and camaraderie. That sense of



Just after Varmus announced his intention, in fall 1999, to leave NIH, some colleagues put up a mock portrait featuring artwork that had accompanied a New Yorker feature on Varmus. The proto-portrait only remained on view for several days.

putting science first was such a positive influence, and a spectacular asset for NIH and the American people."

Zerhouni then spoke of how influential Varmus had been in helping him to decide to take NIH's directorship. He divulged that he at first turned down the position, but reconsidered when the White House approached him again. Zerhouni won an exception to the White House rule barring nominees from talking with anyone about their job offer; "I told them I needed to talk to Harold Varmus about it, and they agreed. We met at the Harvard Club in New York, and those hours were very influential,"

Zerhouni said. "Ninety-five percent of what he told me turned out to be true."

Zerhouni said Varmus's major strength was winning bipartisan support for NIH. He created a safe harbor for politicians at NIH. They can meet here with no overriding political stress." Zerhouni said one could measure Varmus's status by the number of new buildings he launched, or by his effort to double the budget within 5 years, but proposed another way to measure the outcome of his tenure: "What if the director's portrait changed in size, relative to his or her accomplishments?" he

Artist Jon R. Friedman spoke briefly at the ceremony. His portraits of other scientific leaders prompted Varmus to select him for his own official portrait.



wondered. "The portraits would range in size from postage stamps to frescoes. And you, Harold, would cover all the wall downstairs."

Varmus then took the podium, thanking everyone for attending. "This is a very happy event for me, in part because I really like this portrait...I didn't expect to say that. I'm also glad that it hangs here, not me."

He credited NIH with turning him into a scientist, while he served as a clinical associate here from 1968 to 1970 as a way of avoiding the Vietnam war. He then described why the background portrait of Lavoisier—"founder of modern chemistry and reductionist science"—was important to him. "The painting celebrates science in four ways," he said: it emphasizes the connection between science and art; it highlights the relationship between science and words (Lavoisier can be seen working on his *Traité élémentaire de Chimie* or *Elementary Treatise on Chemistry presented in a New Order according to Modern Discoveries*, published on Jan. 17, 1789); it depicts the benefits of science and marriage; and it shows the relationship of science to politics (Lavoisier was a member of the French ruling class).

Varmus concluded that it was important to him that the portrait "puts me in the backdrop of my own image." He noted, ironically, that both he and the original David portrait occupy opposite ends of 84th St. in New York—his apartment is at one end, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which displays the roughly 7x9-foot portrait, is at the other.

After guests enjoyed a reception in Wilson Hall, the Varmus portrait was installed on the first floor of Bldg. 1, just outside the director's office. ■