Hope in Jars

Herbs, roots, spices, ointments, lochos, electuaries, syrups, aromatic waters, et cetera—The European apothecary from the Middle Ages onward gathered or prepared them and put them into numerous jars that sat side by side on his shelves. Many of his jars were of albarello or modified-albarello shape: cylindrical, wide-mouthed, flanged, covered with parchment membranes or leather, and narrow-waisted so that he could readily slip his fingers into a line of jars to grasp one. Each promised a cure, or at least a measure of relief.

Irritated skin? Try basilicon ointment (far left, below), in a jar from Venice, circa 1575. Constipated? “Ell Poter,” next in line, is a potion that Jack Eckert, reference librarian at the Center for the History of Medicine in the Countway Library of Medicine, thinks might be of hellebore, used as a cathartic. The jar is from Faenza, circa 1550, and bears an oval cartouche enclosing an armorial crest with lions and an eagle. Wounded? The little ovoid-shaped jar (top left), decorated with a unicorn eating from a bowl of fruit and dating from circa 1650, contains agaric, a fungus, used as a styptic. Ulcers or other difficulties ranging from syphilis to snakebite? Take “S.D. Piantagine” (second from right, below), seeds of the Plantago major plant, in a flowery jar from Florence, circa 1520.

So great was the apothecary’s need for jars that he caused the foundation of potteries, creating robust economic health among makers of tin-glazed earthenware (variously called maiolica, faience, or delftware), as Rudolf E.A. Drey writes in Apothecary Jars: Pharmaceutical Pottery and Porcelain in Europe and the East, 1150-1850. The apothecary wanted his containers for materia medica to be not merely practical, but pretty, and potters met his wants. The Italian examples shown here are from a collection of about 350 apothecary jars formed by Rosalind and Elbert McLaury and Suzanne and Harold Spear, M.D. ’47, and given to Harvard in 1998. About 250 of them are on permanent display in the Aesculapian Room of the Countway Library.

“A splendid decorative array of drug-jars,” Drey writes, “was the ambition of any pharmacist who disposed of the necessary means.” And perhaps even the afflicted patient buying “Semi di Petros” from a jar made in Faenza circa 1625 (center, below)—a dose, that is to say, of the root and seed of parsley, used as a carminative, aperient, diuretic, and emmenagogue—might smile bravely to see the gay jar, with its bird, a star flower, and what might be taken for a hippocamp.