

Introducing the Wellcome Image Awards

Judges Beau Lotto, Reader in Neuroscience and Head of Lottolab at UCL, and Catherine Draycott, Head of Wellcome Images, explain what the Wellcome Image Awards are all about.

BL: Obviously a lot of public engagement is about raising people's awareness about science and how it relates to them. I think they should also be more than that, I think they should be making people think of questions that they don't normally ask.

CD: It's that sort of combination if you like of aesthetic impact, biological background and then the physics and the chemistry of how those images were created as well.

Wellcome Images is actually a free resource that's available to anybody online, you can just access it and download images, you can use them in study, they can be used in teaching and publishing and broadcast, and they cover biomedical science, clinical medicine and history of medicine. There are over 150 000 images available online.

The Image Awards are a way of recognising the best of the images that we've acquired since we last held the Awards, so it's a retrospective thing, but we are selecting from what is already a very selective collection, because when we're acquiring images we're not having stacks of images submitted to us throughout the year; we are actually going out and looking for these images, selecting them very carefully, speaking to the scientists. We then create a shortlist of between 100 and 150 images and those are the images that are shown to the judges on the day.

BL: Actually what was really interesting about doing the judging is listening to the thoughts of the other judges and because you might have someone who's brilliant at microscopy or someone who is a designer, you suddenly start seeing these images through their eyes and you start seeing things that you didn't see initially because of course you're seeing the image according to your own filters.

CD: This year it's very varied, we have 19 winners. The techniques range from the scanning electron micrograph, which essentially is a surface map of the subject – and so for example the bird of paradise seed looks like something from outer space, it's crisp and clear with perfect depth of field – to confocal microscopy looking right into the depths of the sample. We also have images created using light microscopy; some of them are the most interesting in the show. The celebration of the tenth Wellcome Image Awards, what we're doing this year is also celebrating some of the other images that we're acquiring into the collection, so photography *per se*. We're also acquiring images created by artists, so illustrators who might be trying to convey either a complex scientific concept such as genetic engineering, which can't really be conveyed by a microscopic image or a photograph. So it's halfway between art and science really.

This year we've created a website for the Awards that allows you to delve beyond the images, so you can view the images on your screen and then find out why they were created, find out more about the scientists, more about the illustrators, the photographers and the stories behind the images, and people will be able to find out more about the techniques used as well and be able to

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actually see the scientists at work making those images, using that equipment – and it's quite interesting, having seen the image, to see the piece of kit that's involved in creating it.

BL: I think people respond to images if only because they're images of stuff that they don't normally see, even if they've seen the subject matter before, they're not necessarily presented in a way they've seen before, and as a consequence potentially they have a new understanding or a new insight.

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