Gustave Doré (1832–1883) Les Mendiants de Burgos (detail). 1875. 64 x 119 cm, 25.2 x 46.85 inches. Oil on canvas. Courtesy Galerie Michel Descours, Lyon, France

A Fragile Dignity Despite Their Rags and Tatters

Byron Breedlove

Gustave Doré, born in Strasbourg, France, in 1832, was one of the most prodigious artists of the 19th century. According to Dan Malan, one of his biographers, his nearly 10,000 engravings and 3,000 book editions made him the most prolific and popular illustrator of all time. Doré also produced around 400 oil paintings as well as watercolor landscapes, mixed media sketches, and sculptures. According to another Doré biographer, "The speed with which he drew was legendary, and his output was as noteworthy for its quantity as for its quality."

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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.3201/eid2010.AC2010

Vincent van Gogh referred to Doré as an "Artist of the People" because Doré directed his work to the masses through his popular literary folios. He worked as a caricaturist and professional illustrator when he was just 15 years old. Doré illustrated texts by Dante, Rabelais, Perrault, Cervantes, Milton, Shakespeare, Hugo, Balzac, and Poe, plus the English Bible. The publication of his engravings in Dante's Inferno in 1861 brought him international fame.

Doré contributed 180 engravings to the book London: A Pilgrimage (1872), written by Blanchard Jerrold. Though commercially successful, the book spurred criticism as Doré included stark images of the poverty and despair he encountered during his time in London. The Westminster Review noted, for example, that "Doré gives us sketches in

which the commonest, the vulgarest external features are set down."

Throughout his career, Doré was sensitive to poverty, social misery, and human suffering. He traveled widely and sketched beggars, acrobats, and performers, often on the spot. He painted *Les Mendiants de Burgos* (or *Beggars of Burgos*), this month's cover image, in 1875.

Here a group of Castilian beggars cluster before a whitewashed wall as though they have assembled for a portrait. Most are dressed in tattered blankets, threadbare shawls, and disheveled clothing, though some wear colorful sashes and hats. A young mother, perhaps a recent widow, sits alone holding her infant. A crippled man lies in a small wooden wagon, his hands wrapped in leather or rags. Near the center, a tall man leans on walking sticks; one family with two small children stands to his left, while a couple sprawl on the sidewalk with an infant and a dog. Others beggars seen at the edges of the painting include a woman with a tambourine and several men who may have once been soldiers or tradesmen fallen on hard times. Whatever their stories, Doré paints these beggars, bound by poverty and lassitude, as still having a fragile dignity.

Now, as then, the poorest people, such as those depicted in Doré's *Les Mendiants de Burgos*, often live in the worst environments, are crowded together, lack adequate shelter, do not have clean water or sanitation, and suffer malnutrition—ideal circumstances for infectious disease transmission.

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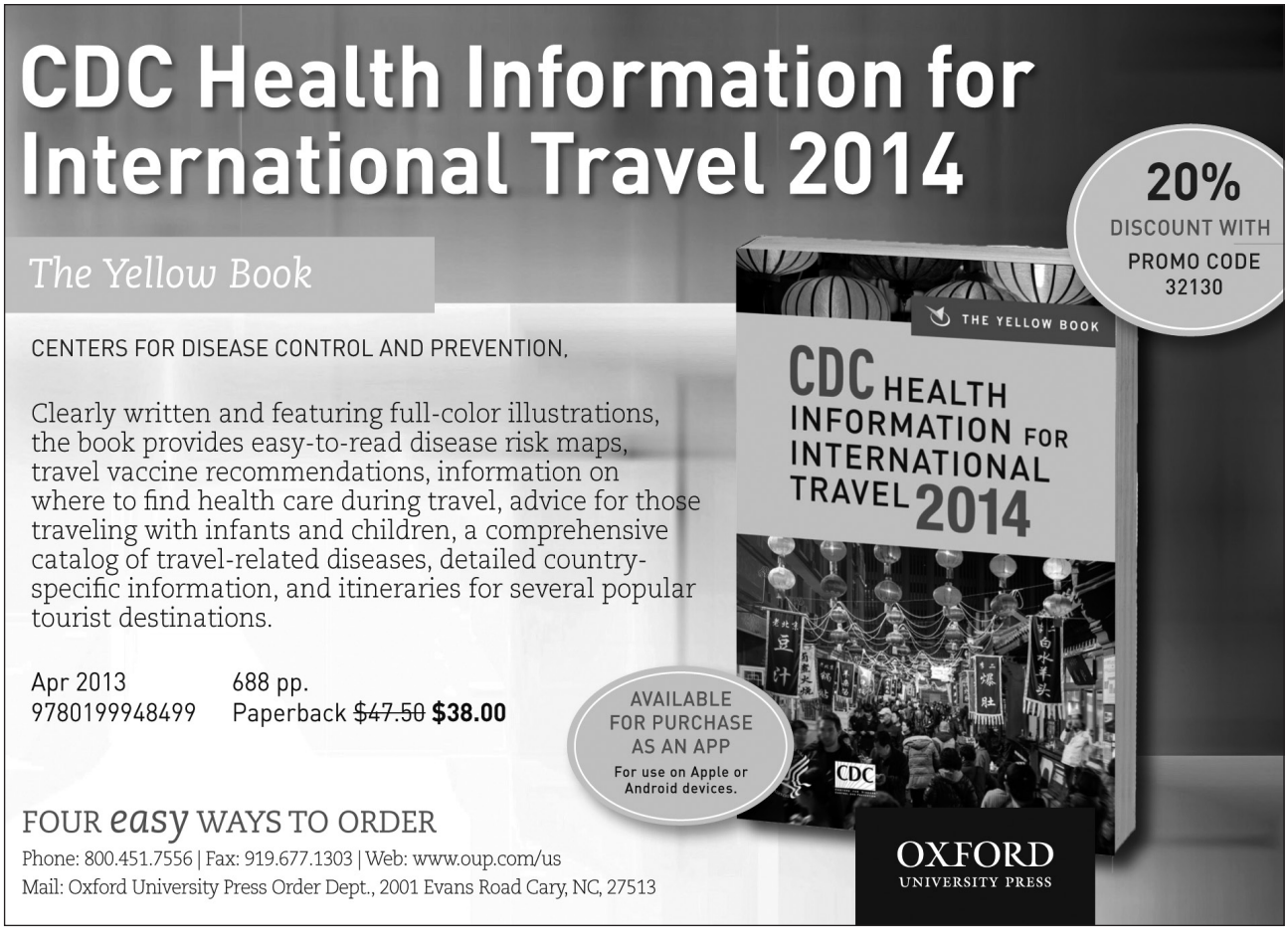
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