

BY DR. LEE | PHOTOS BY CYNTHIA SMALLEY

Spotlight on

ARTFUL SURGERY



Surgical Precision, Mixed with an Artful Eye, Leads to Beautiful Results

Board Certified in Plastic Surgery and past Board Certified in General Surgery, Dr. Elizabeth Slass Lee brings together top-notch surgical skills, careful consideration for her patients' concerns and desires, and the eyes and hands of an artist. Her practice can be perfectly defined by its name, Artful Surgery, as well as by its tagline, "A Surgeon's Hands, A Woman's Touch". Dr. Lee's path was not chosen outright, but developed throughout her course of education and her love of artful creations.

"My father was a dentist and from the time I was a small girl, my mother read the bedtime stories, and then my father would come in and answer my questions about how the body worked. I don't even remember when I decided to become a physician, I just always knew from when I was tiny, that this was my future," says Dr. Lee. While attending a very competitive high school, studying hard and enjoying science, she developed a love for other, non-academic interests besides school work. She became extremely passionate about art and acting and was a professional puppeteer, a silversmith, editor of the yearbook, and swimmer. "During high school, I had a silversmith shop in my parent's basement. I fabricated, set stones, and designed jewelry. My father, the dentist, also had the equipment in his office so I could do lost wax casting of pieces. Creating things has always been a great source of comfort, calm and satisfaction." While weighing the thought of acceptance to medical school, Dr. Lee was most afraid of giving up all her other interests during college in order to perform to the level needed to qualify. Luck provided an opportunity to enter a combined program, accepting students to

medical school directly out of high school. She enrolled in the six-year medical program at Northwestern University that afforded her freedom from the stress of the medical school application process. "When I went to college, I could not take my oxy-acetylene torch to the dorm. No hotplates and no torches were allowed, sadly. Another creative outlet was needed, I discovered knitting. I knit through all six years of school." College became a time to take academic risks on classes that might have been difficult to entertain, had the focus been on achieving a high GPA. Dr. Lee remembers, "I took more higher-level literature and philosophy courses in this program than I would have felt comfortable taking otherwise."

"My love for working with my hands naturally transfers to my practice," says Dr. Lee, "Plastic Surgery is an art form."

Medical school proved to be hard work. After rotating through all the major specialties, she settled upon doing her first year of post-medical school training in Internal Medicine at The New York Hospital in Manhattan. "Internal Medicine was very cerebral. The illnesses often fit together like puzzles and the process was slow and methodical. The year of Internal Medicine training made me a

really good doctor, seeing and evaluating patients as a whole, not focusing solely on the surgical issues. After a year, I made the decision to switch to General Surgery residency. Surgery was much more fast-paced. The patients were often really sick, needed help fast, and then got better quickly." She went on to complete her residencies in both General Surgery and in Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. After a year abroad with her husband and children, the family relocated to San Francisco in 1995, for her fellowship training in Surgery of the Hand and Reconstructive Microsurgery at the Buncke Clinic at Davies Medical Center.

Residency training of 120 hours a week, coupled with becoming a new wife and mother, did not allow much time for anything creative. There were 10 years of working very hard and losing touch with her artistic pursuits. She credits her husband Joseph for recognizing how much she missed creating art, and for encouraging her to pick up a beading project while away on a week of vacation. Little by little, after creating her own practice, she gained more control of the structure of her daily life. Jewelry and knitting design and fabrication have now become an everyday escape. "The designing of something beautiful, using the nature of the yarn, or of the stones and metal, is a meditation for me. I create with what the raw material brings to the project, in much the same way as I work with what each patient brings to the office in both their vision and their physical selves."

Her love for working with her hands naturally transfers to her practice. Dr. Lee states, "Plastic Surgery is an art form. Removal of a gallbladder, a common operation for General Surgeons, is pretty

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much the same operation from patient to patient, but Plastic Surgery is different for every single person who comes to the office. We are all shaped differently and have our own areas of concern.” Her core philosophy on the practice of Plastic Surgery rests on relationships. She believes in listening to the patients’ concerns and not assuming that what the patient sees from the inside is the same as what we see from the outside. Dr. Lee strives to know exactly what drives a person to want Plastic Surgery. “I love having the opportunity to listen, to teach about options, and the various benefits of each type of process, to guide each patient to the best outcome. The artist in me loves having the chance to bring the patients’ visions to life.” Her greatest motivator when working with a client is achieving natural results. “We all recognize cosmetic procedures that have been done badly. Good work is subtle and restorative. My favorite patient feedback from a facelift patient is, ‘everyone asks me why I look so great. They think it is a new haircut.’ Cosmetic surgery can be so empowering for patients. Relieving the negativity someone may feel about their appearance, really frees them to be powerful and positive in daily life and work.”

There are challenges to the industry as a whole. The internet allows the public to do a lot of research prior to visiting a surgeon. “I always acknowledge their baseline understanding of what is available. But what can be available on the internet can be overwhelming and to a large extent, un-curated. Patients are relieved to allow me to address their research and use my expertise to sometimes debunk what is out there in the wide, wild world of the web.” Her practice relies on forming a successful working relationship with each patient and sometimes, what they read on the internet feels more relevant to them than the information a professional can provide. Fortunately, Dr. Lee’s expertise can shine the light on any misconceptions, “It is concerning to me that these patients may be driven by unproven, inexperienced, un-curated information to not get the optimal treatment and care. But for some, that is what happens. There are many providers of cosmetic procedures that don’t have the education and training of Plastic Surgeons certified by the American Board of Plastic Surgery. I think most people would agree that they would not want to fly with a pilot that was not properly and fully trained and certified to handle a plane in all its configurations and possible

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emergencies. There is a lot of misleading advertising out there, and it is often difficult for the public to discern the differences between the multitude of providers. Unfortunately, this can lead to exposure to less than optimal procedures and outcomes.”

To some degree the future of Plastic Surgery rests in technology, however technology is an adjunct to the practice of plastic surgery, and plastic surgery will always be a process that rests on the skills of well trained plastic surgeons. While it is important for a practice to stay on top of the latest and greatest treatments, Dr. Lee believes it is even more important to be careful when choosing what works and

avoids what does not work so well. Much of what is “new” has actually been around before and is just being rebranded. However, there is a new “Botox” coming out that she is looking forward to trying. “Some of the newest additions to my practice are two processes by Sciton laser, the Halo and the diVa. With these two tools, we can really make skin glow and help women with intimate health. Using technology to improve skins health augments both the healing and the overall benefit of a facelift.” She also sites CoolSculpting as one of the best technologies available, truly shaping bodies without surgery. Having non-surgical options keeps a practice essential to and in tune with those patients who may not be ready for a surgical procedure. With a full range of surgical and non-invasive procedures at

hand, Dr. Lee can design a treatment plan to truly match what the patient is looking for. Fillers, great skin care, gentle laser treatments, and body shaping with CoolSculpting can all work to rejuvenate. And if it is time for surgery, the patients are in the best of hands.

What exactly is on a wish list for a plastic surgeon? “I want to be able to do just what I am doing for many years to come. I love that I can have a positive impact on my patients.” What cosmetic technology would she like to see? “I would love to see a fabulous and effective treatment for cellulite and loose skin. We are not there yet, but hopefully someday.” **110°**

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