



Robin Gross

At Some Medical Schools, Humanities Join the Curriculum¹

By Randy Kennedy
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¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/17/arts/design/17sina.html?ex=1179460800&en=6879fa505f2486c6&ei=5070>



Art and medicine have worked hand in hand for a long time. To improve his art, Leonardo dissected bodies. To improve his anatomy treatise, Andreas Vesalius relied on the artistry of Titian's workshop.

But the other day, in the European paintings wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a group of seven would-be doctors had a different kind of reason to appreciate the 17th-century Dutch biblical scene before them: course credit. Three years ago, the Mount Sinai School of Medicine began an art-appreciation course for medical students, joining a growing number of medical schools that are adding humanities to the usual forced march of physiology, pathology and microbiology.

This year, for the first time, the course is required for third-year students, providing them not only with a blinking-into-the-sun break from medical rotations but also, said Dr. David Muller, the school's chairman of medical education, a lesson about how important, and underrated, the art of looking is to the practice of medicine.

"To make a better doctor means to me — and I can't speak for everyone — one who sees the person and not just the patient," he said, "not just an organ system that is screwed up."

The course is similar to ones established in the last few years at Yale, Stanford, Cornell and a few other medical schools, but traditionalists at Mount Sinai have not always looked favorably on it.

When asked why, Dr. Muller said, "I think if I answered that question strategically, I would say that in any big medical center there is always a very broad spectrum of opinions."

But at least one study, published in The Journal of the American Medical Association in 2001, has found that looking at painting and sculpture can improve medical students' observational abilities. It could also, wrote Dr. Irwin Braverman, a Yale medical professor and an author of the study, eventually help apply some salve to that long suppurating wound, health-care costs. "With heightened observational skills," he wrote, "physicians can often ask the questions necessary to make correct diagnoses without relying too much on costly blood tests and X-rays."

Such utopian hopes seemed a distant concern for the seven students who gathered in the Met's lobby on a sunny afternoon. They had other things on their minds: all had survived a grueling surgical rotation but were approaching the time when they would have to pick a specialty.

"Not only do we have to learn what we're learning but we have to remember how to write a C.V. again and basically decide what we're going to do with the rest of our lives," explained Risa Small, 24, one of the students, summing up the year.

So a few minutes later, standing in front of Nicolaes Maes's "Abraham Dismissing Hagar and Ishmael" (1653), a dark scene of high Baroque drama, they seemed happy to lose themselves in the painting and to wonder aloud what was happening in it. Shirley Delaleu, 25, pointed out the brooding late-evening sky in the background and how Ishmael's body awkwardly twisted as he descended a set of stairs away from Abraham, his father.

"It just looks like there's this great big world that he has to go out into, and it looks ominous," she said.

With the typical ardor of medical students, others pointed out that all three figures wore some red clothing, that they didn't make eye contact with one another, that their figures formed a triangle, that Hagar looked alternately angry and ashamed, that she was the only one who went barefoot and that her hands were rough and manly, making it hard to tell whether she was a man or woman.

Rebecca Hirschwerk, an art educator who is the course's instructor and one of its creators along with Dr. Muller, explained that the idea for the course developed while her husband was a resident at Mount Sinai. She began to think about how, in listening and poring over charts, doctors sometimes had little time actually to look at their patients, especially under the pressures of today's managed medical care.

"I can't think of many places outside art where you can be in a moment, and just look, for as long as you can take it," she said. "Think about what it would be like if you were with a patient and could freeze the moment to really pay attention to everything that patient was trying to tell you. It's



hard to do when you have only 15 minutes with patients, 20 times a day."

Partly intended to make better doctors by making better-rounded human beings, such art courses are being joined by other, mostly elective humanities courses — and in some medical schools, like the one at the State University at Stony Brook on Long Island, whole humanities departments — that bring playwrights, poets, actors, philosophers and other imports from the liberal arts into the world of medicine.

Ms. Hirschwerk said that in choosing the eight works that the students see in two visits to the Met, she tried to stay away from blockbuster paintings that might be too well known. Works like the one by Maes, she said, had enough ambiguity, body language and detail to reward long observation. On that particular visit, she next led the students to another Dutch Baroque work, by Gerard ter Borch, of a preening young woman and her maid, and then to Giacometti's spectral "Three Men Walking II" from 1949, before ending at "The Proposal," a light-infused genre painting of a man and woman by Adolphe-William Bouguereau, a 19th-century French painter.

Ms. Hirschwerk asked the students to study "The Proposal" for several minutes and then to turn away from it and recall the painting's details, which they did in great detail, from the cat sitting at the woman's feet to the almost invisible strand of thread stretched between her fingers.

Dr. Muller said that students were not graded in the class, in part to give them a break from their academic grind, and so it was hard to tell whether their art-appreciation was improving their diagnostic skills. But in anonymous journal entries from previous classes, the students — who take the course during their geriatric rotation, making home visits to elderly patients — seem to pay closer, and more empathetic, attention to their patients.

"It was clearly taking a toll on her, and she was close to tears several times during the interview," one student wrote, of seeing a patient with Alzheimer's disease, and talking to the man's wife. "Her husband sat next to her apparently oblivious to her distress. He was distracted, quietly picking a piece of tape with his name off his cane."

For the most part, the students seem relieved to have a chance to leave any thoughts about medicine and disease outside the door of the Met. "It sort of reminds me of life before medical school, back when you were still a regular person," said Komal Kapoor-Katari, 27.

But their profession was never far away.

In front of the Maes painting of Abraham, Ms. Hirschwerk explained that she had chosen it because it showed a moment of decision, one that — according to the biblical story — would be fateful for world history. Then she steered that weighty theme back to the students themselves.

"There's a chain of reaction for every decision that you make, and you're part of that chain yourself," she said.

The observation was met with a long silence, one possibly filled with thoughts of malpractice. "Well, on that happy note," she said, finally breaking in, "let's go look at the next painting."



Robin Gross

Artful Observation™

By Robin Gross and Mark Damitio

The group of fourteen officers from various Kansas law enforcement agencies stood absorbed before a 14th century painting for almost three minutes. Not a word was uttered and barely a motion made. To the curious museum goer, they would have seen uniformed and plain-clothed officers with guns strapped to their belts and wondered, "Why are they looking at that painting so intently?"

The answer is they were learning to "look" vs. "glance". Instructor Robin Gross tells them numerous times over the next two and one half hours, "There is a difference between looking and glancing".

Thus began a unique training experiment, sponsored by the Kansas Law Enforcement Training Center (KLETC). KLETC has become the first state law enforcement training center in the nation to offer this cutting-edge training.

These officers learned the difference as they stood looking at the painting and discussing what their eyes were keying upon. The scene was one of multiple deaths, with three obvious victims. Ten minutes into the shared looking process one officer said, "There are four dead bodies in this painting". The instinctive first reaction was disbelief as the whole group took a step closer to get a better look at the painting. And then each began to see the fourth body, "ah, there are four dead bodies here, I didn't see that."

Which is one of the main objectives of Artful Observation™ program based upon two fundamental concepts:

- "looking" and "glancing" are different
- "interpretation" can be objective or assumption

Artful Observation™ is an experiential program that accesses visual art to expand observation skills. "Art knowledge" is not a prerequisite for looking at visual art and increasing the ability to use one's eyes with greater awareness. Questions guide participants to actively and dynamically use their eyes, to express penetrating observations, and to reflect upon professional as well as personal implications and applications.

The idea of using art to teach professionals "observation skills" began earlier this decade when several east coast museums worked with local medical schools and law enforcement agencies. The New York PD and London's Scotland Yard both use similar programs. Medical schools, also, use art to train their students. Yale Medical School conducted controlled-study research that verified medical students' visual diagnostic skills improve with this training.

Program feedback from the group of fourteen officers mentioned above indicates the session was, in fact, beneficial. The officers said they would recommend this program. Some of their comments included:

"Our reports have to be objective and backed up by facts; [we need to] pay attention to subtle details."

"I can better break down a photo or crime scene for facts vs. interpretation."

"I learned to look for objective facts without making immediate inferences."

"This will assist me in paying closer attention, seeing minor details and the bigger picture."

"This is a good course idea. Our agency could use this. I think we naturally begin interpretation before really looking deep. This course will help with that."

A deeper appreciation for and use of "looking" and "interpreting" are critical skills for the law enforcement professional. Artful

Observation™, an excellent investment in time, refines these critical skills which directly impact investigations and public service.

The Kansas Law Enforcement Training Center intends to repeat the 2.5 hour program in the 2008 calendar year. The course will be presented at the Spencer Museum on the University of Kansas campus in Lawrence. Prospective attendees should watch for the dates in the 2008 KLETC Annual Training Catalog, and the online training calendar at www.kletc.org.

Robin Gross is formally educated as an MBA with Organizational Behavior emphasis. Robin has worked in a wide-range of organizations including public, private, Fortune 100 companies, and family owned-operated businesses. She has worked within a multitude of operational areas including IT, engineering, sales & marketing, product development, strategic planning, and human resources. Her "hands-on" work experience ranges from line operations, staff roles, and management before becoming an external consultant. Because of her aptitude for translating technical/foreign information to lay audiences, Robin has filled the role of liaison between diverse groups. Exposure to fine art has enriched and expanded Robin's understanding that Organizational Development (OD) and change is more 'art' than 'science'. Having practiced in the OD field for 25+ years, Robin is experienced at assisting leaders and organizations with both the soft and hard side of recognizing, planning, and executing change. Mark Damitio is the Deputy Assistant Director at the Kansas Law Enforcement Training Center, and is responsible for the unit that conducts continuing education, specialized training, distance education and in-service training.