

# Meaningful Engagement: Using Art to Improve Observational Skills in Health Care

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## BACKGROUND

The objective was to find a rigorous pedagogical approach to teaching with works of art from the Princeton University Art Museum in collaboration with Medical Humanities and health-related courses. The curator and faculty member were interested in grounding discussions in historical context and visual analysis, while also addressing topics covered in each class.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the last several years the Museum curator worked closely with courses focused on the cross-cultural significance of medicine and interdisciplinary approaches to illness and caregiving. In 2019, Laura Giles and Veronica White co-curated the exhibition *States of Health: Visualizing Illness and Healing* (<https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/object-package/explore-states-health-visualizing-illness-and-healing>), featuring over eighty works of globe-spanning art that collectively illuminate the role that art has played in shaping our perceptions and experiences of sickness and recovery. Related programming included an interactive gallery discussion with faculty featuring Kevin Liou, an integrative medicine specialist at Memorial Sloan Cancer Center, who is interested in bringing together medicine

and the arts (Liou, 2016). The group posed questions about the roles that interpretation, communication, and empathy play in medical practice.

The curator subsequently led a variety of group discussions of *States of Health*, including for local pediatricians and the NJ Board of Public Health Education, as well as for courses in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, Molecular Biology, and Psychology. Students examined several works, including Carlo Coppola's *The Pestilence of 1656* (Fig. 1) and *Twin commemorative figures (ere ibeji) with tunic* of the late-19<sup>th</sup> -early 20<sup>th</sup> century by a Yorùbá artist. For each discussion, the curator first provided historical context for the works, and then encouraged the students to point out their observations while guiding them with visual analysis questions developed with colleagues across campus (<https://teachwithcollections.princeton.edu/guides/>).

## RESULTS

The faculty and the curator found that these discussion methods encouraged students to engage with the works more carefully before interpreting them. For João Biehl's Medical Anthropology class, students considered the visual analysis questions mentioned above as well as Sontag's 2003 text considering a viewer's reaction to disturbing photographs. Carolyn Ureña's Writing seminar focused on Contagion looked at the 1996 photograph by Mary Berridge from the series "A Positive Life: Portraits of Women Living with HIV." Contemplating the ambiguity of the scene, Ureña and the curator encouraged the students to reevaluate their initial impressions about the work and to engage with it in more depth to empathize with the figures (Mangione, 2018; Slavin, 2023).

## DISCUSSION

The curator has continued to work closely with faculty in the Medical Humanities and with students preparing for a career in medicine. For each course, the professor and curator meet in advance to develop a lesson plan which includes a historical framework, guided formal analysis, and a reflection on specific prompts from the readings. These class discussions repeatedly demonstrate how a work of art can communicate human experiences related to health in ways that language alone cannot.

## CONCLUSION

Such exchanges provide an opportunity for museum curators to gain valuable insight into scientific approaches to diagnoses and treatments, and for pre-med students to learn to look closely, challenging their initial assumptions and further developing understanding for the ill.



**Figure 1.** Carlo Coppola, Italian, active ca. 1635–1672. *The Pestilence of 1656*. Oil on canvas. 76 × 99 cm (29 15/16 × 39 in.). Frame: 96.8 × 119.7 × 5.4 cm (38 1/8 × 47 1/8 × 2 1/8 in. Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Caroline G. Mather Fund. y1963-36

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