

# The Feel of Visual Clues: Object-based Workshops of Medical Students at The Chinese University of Hong Kong

*Josh Yiu<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Art Museum/The Chinese University of Hong Kong; [jyu@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:jyu@cuhk.edu.hk)

## BACKGROUND

Medical training in Hong Kong begins at the undergraduate level, and the tightly structured curriculum leaves little room for the humanities. When the CUHK Art Museum introduced the Yale program pioneered by Friedlaender and Friedlaender (2013) to the CUHK Faculty of Medicine, the Faculty Dean agreed to initiate object-based training as an optional elective. Student feedback was sought afterwards. The program ran in 2018, 2019, and 2024.

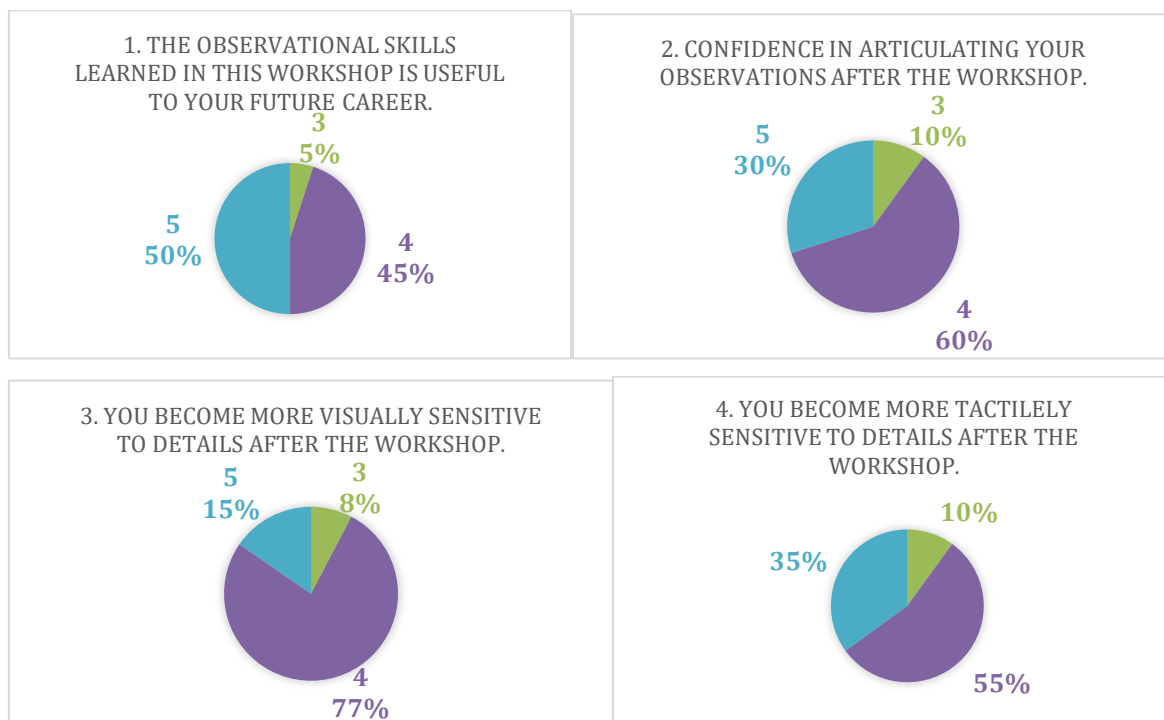
## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The workshop differed from the Yale model and involved art-handling of various types of Chinese art objects, including jade, ceramics, and scroll paintings. Students were taught to handle artworks with care and confidence, like a surgeon. Some artworks were covered, and students were asked to sketch the shape and describe

the texture of the objects. Porcelain shards were also used for students to deduce the original form and function of the object. Led by the Museum Director and Dean of Medicine, the two-hour workshop was limited to 15 students per session.

**RESULTS**

Feedback by the participants suggests that the object-based workshop contributed to medical training. 90% or more of the participants agree (score point 4) or strongly agree (score point 5) on the following:



The strong statistics on the relevance of art to medical training was backed up by the qualitative feedback:

<p>What did you learn about yourself as an observer after this workshop?</p>	<p>What principles of observational skills did you learn from this workshop?</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Pay attention to every detail, no matter it is a picture or an x-ray diagram. A good doctor had to be a good observer.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● We need to have the comparison between normal and abnormal conditions, describe the details from inside to outside or vice versa. We may</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Albeit being able to observe visual details, I was not too aware of the tactile details. The workshop today is eye-opening in that it highlighted the importance of other senses in the deduction process.</li> <li>● I realized that I have a lot of blind spots and missed a lot of details when looking at the artefacts. Sometimes I make assumptions too quickly and overlook other possibilities.</li> <li>● I need to be more patient and pay more attention to details. Could have observed the world around us more.</li> <li>● The major takeaway was how the art of handling such works are parallel to how a doctor should behave in a clinical setting, such as making detailed observations to make a diagnosis.</li> </ul>	<p>use simple words to communicate with patients.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● I learnt that curiosity is a very important aspect when observing objects – noticing abnormalities, hence being curious about the reasons behind the abnormalities!</li> <li>● Do not be distracted from your ungrounded assumptions.</li> <li>● To look at something in an organized way such as from outside to centre. Don't just rely on sight but touch as well. Use common sense.</li> <li>● Look at the objective details first, then combine the details so as to make a deduction.</li> <li>● how much we can know from a fragment</li> </ul>
--	---

## DISCUSSION

Students were surprised to find that handling an object had enhanced their understanding of it. For instance, an overglazed, porcelain brush-pot had a coarser feel than the soft palette suggests, and a neolithic jade with a visible crack felt smooth to the touch. Touching not only informed, but also altered, what they thought they saw, thereby leading them to ask more pointed questions about the objects, e.g. how come underglaze porcelain was smoother to the touch and whether the neolithic jade was structurally compromised or damaged later.

## CONCLUSION

While many art-training programs for medical students focus on paintings and music (Honan et al., 2016), Chinese art objects offer a novel way of seeing and handling delicate things, especially for undergraduate medical students with little background in art. Art-handling workshops have enabled them to grasp that clues to correct diagnoses are not merely points to be studied and memorized. Rather, clue-making is a process of discovery, and this skill can be acquired through art-handling.

## REFERENCES

- Friedlaender, G. E. & Friedlaender, L. K. (2013). Art in Science: Enhancing Observational Skills. *Clinical Orthopaedics and Related Research*, 471, 2065–2067, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11999-013-3000-0>.
- Honan, L., et al. (2016). Looking is not Seeing and Listening is not Hearing: A Replication Study with Accelerated BSN Students. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, Vol 32, No. 5S (September/October), S30–S37, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.profnurs.2016.05.002>.