Interpreting the Art of Curating: How an Art School Presented at a Medical Museum

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School of the Art Institute

Hosted in the Art Institute of Chicago, SAIC is one of the premier art schools in the nation.

Ranging from animation to sculpture, SAIC offers degrees in the fine arts, as well as the use of Chicago as a classroom.

Students often gain experience throughout both the Art Institute of Chicago and various sites throughout the city.
Excavating History

- Taught in Spring semester every year at SAIC.
- Lead by artist and professor, Rebecca Keller.
- Each year it is hosted at a different Chicago area museum.
- Students work closely with museum curator and staff to create their final art pieces.
- ‘Excavating’ means to look deeply at a historical building or place.
- Final pieces showcased within the museum.
Why a medical museum?

- IMSS is hosted in an old mansion: the excavating portion!
- Collections reflect a transformative timeline throughout human history.
- “We all feel pain, and we all have wanted to feel better.”
- Ideology of the doctor as savior.
- What stories and narratives are created from this piece of history?
The International Museum of Surgical Science

- Housed in historic Lake Shore Drive mansion.
- Built in 1917 for Eleanor Robinson Countiss, heiress to the Diamond Matchsticks fortune.
- Purchased in post-World War II period by the founder of the International College of Surgeons, Dr. Max Thorek.
- Started as collection for surgeons, expanded into museum.
- Now serves 20,000 visitors a year in Chicago, including visiting scholars, surgeons, and students.
The Influence of Historical Medicine

- What does ‘medicine’ mean in art? What does art mean in medicine?
- Especially so for surgery, which has a tumultuous history.
- Who is a doctor? What do they look like?
- How are we healed? What heals us?
- What role does science play in art?
Pieces of Art, History and Medicine

• Students used each room to ‘excavate’ a piece of history to interpret.
• This included performance art, live movement (of a liquid), 2d printed art, rotescopes, paintings, collages, and more!
• Some even encouraged visitors to engage with them; a challenge for visitors who assumed this was true with other artifacts.
• An opening event was allowed for students to showcase their work to visitors and museum members.
• Worked closely with staff members to incorporate into field trips and tours.
Some Challenges

• Had some issues over whether or not this was relevant to surgery.
• Argument was that the presentation of art and artifacts reflected the stories of the collections and the museum itself.
• Some messes!
• Some visitors confused, or could not find information that was not properly labeled.
Final Results
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Take Away Message

- Students were able to incorporate the collections in their artwork.
- Allowed a new relationship between artists and the museum.
- Museum was able to benefit from new ideas and art.
- A new narrative was allowed to be present in the museum.
Questions?