

Osler Library and Osler Library Board of Curators Essay Contest

REFLECTION

When I started this essay, I had only a vague idea of what my topic would be. I knew I wanted to write about something related to art and medicine, but I had no thesis in mind. Before I started work on my essay, I went to the library website to find books related to various combinations of the words “art” and “medicine”: “art and medicine”, “art in medicine”, “medicine in art”, “medical art”, etc. I chose books, wrote down their call numbers and went off to the shelves in search of them. Being arranged by topic, my search for one specific book, led me to explore the expanse of other books on the same shelf, covering similar topics. In this way I was able to expand the scope of my topic and explore further into the field of art and medicine. I had never borrowed a book or even looked for a book at any McGill library before. The process of scouring the Osler Library for a specific essay topic and art pieces to discuss in my essay taught me the numbering system of the call numbers, the differences between the “normal” shelves and the “folio” shelves and made me appreciate how by going in search of one topic, you end up learning about so many more related topics.

As a child I always loved going to the public library to smell the musty pages of old books and to get lost in imaginary worlds. Going to the library in search of research material however was always a daunting task. Now I realize that even though it might take a bit more time, exploring the library is just as easy as using the web, and a lot more tactile and engaging; the only downside being the weight of all the books I wanted to take home with me. From the library workshops, I learned how to search using Pubmed and MeSH, as well as

how to easily reference using citation tools such as Refworks. All of this has helped me develop as a researcher and broaden the set of research tools available to me.

My essay topic went from “The Portrayal of Illness, Treatment and Healing in Art” to “Observation in Art and Medicine” — two topics related, yet very different. I realized that before one can analyze artwork to write about the former topic, the latter topic was essential. Thus, while trying to develop the first topic, I settled on my final topic for the essay. Whereas the first topic would have been simply an analysis of the human experience of medicine and illness as portrayed in art, the second would show the significance of the study of art in medicine. As I continued research in my chosen topic, I also stumbled upon news articles and studies objectively quantifying the value of art observation in medicine and so my essay developed one step further. I would not only talk about the importance of observation in both art and medicine, but also show how artistic observation is an important aspect of medical education. These elaborations were able to transform my original essay topic into a deeper, more significant topic that was also able to offer a thought-provoking look into further developments in the medical curriculum. Although only a few of the artworks I looked at made it into my final essay, by looking through all the books and paintings as I was selecting specific art pieces to convey my ideas, I was able to improve my own observation skills just as I suggested in my essay. All in all, I really enjoyed this opportunity to venture outside the world of medical sciences to explore the more artistic side of medicine often forgotten in class.