

# Rx/Museum: Utilizing the visual arts to cultivate empathy and humanism in medicine

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## ABSTRACT

The Rx/Museum initiative is an online medical humanities curriculum that launched in July 2020 in response to the emotional toll of the pandemic and the relentless novel challenges facing physicians amid the COVID-19 era. (1) Developed by a consortium of educators and physicians at Penn Medicine and the University of Pennsylvania, Rx/Museum features a curated series of 52 artworks from the collections of three leading art institutions in Philadelphia: the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Slought Foundation, and the Barnes Foundation. Every Monday for a year, subscribers receive a weekly emailed “dose” of art and reflection. Each dose includes an artwork from our partner institutions’ collections and an essay followed by questions for reflection, which examine the work through an interdisciplinary lens of clinical medicine, medical anthropology, art history, and social justice. (2)

## OBJECTIVES

- **Cultivate** personal and professional well-being through durational visual arts engagement. (3)
- **Integrate** an arts and humanities curriculum into the continuum of medical education.
- **Provide** an intentional space for collaboration among clinicians, art historians, and learners. (4-7)
- **Translate** the visual arts into a practical and accessible tool for a physician or trainee’s well-being armamentarium.

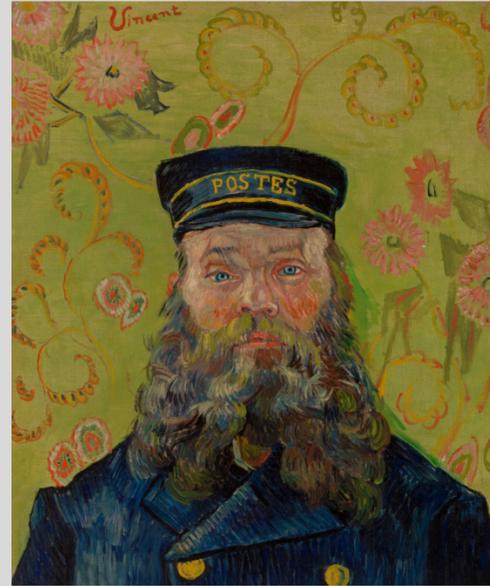
## FORMAT

- **Digital:** Fully virtual, self-guided curriculum to accommodate physicians’ demanding schedules and closures of museums and galleries during COVID-19. (8, 9)
- **Durational:** In-depth exploration of works of art every Monday for 52 weeks.
- **Thematic:** Diverse selection of visual art organized by humanistic and professionalism competency-based themes (i.e., autonomy, inequity, well-being). (10)

## OUTCOMES

- Over 1,200 individual subscribers, 8,081 website users, 14,155 page sessions, 30,369 pageviews. (11)
- Established cross-disciplinary collaborations among the University, health system, and Philadelphia arts institutions.
- Recognized by the Association of American Medical Colleges as a resource for medical educators to teach and assess professionalism. (12)
- “As humans, our health connects us to uncertainty, mortality, faith, autonomy and more. So does art — and Rx/Museum, a thoughtful project that connects art and medicine, finds themes of health and humanity in both.” –Erin Blakemore, *The Washington Post*

## A WEEKLY DOSE OF ART AND REFLECTION



Vincent van Gogh, *The Postman (Joseph Étienne-Roulin)*, 1889. Courtesy of Barnes Foundation.

*Themes: Relationships, Transformation, Memory, Identity*

During the emotionally turbulent two years before his death, van Gogh the artist struggled with poverty, mental illness, and eviction threats from fellow Arles residents. One of his few reprieves was found in a postmaster by the name of Joseph-Étienne Roulin. *The Postman* may have been created from memory after Roulin and his family moved from Arles to a nearby town. In his absence, van Gogh seems to have exalted Roulin as a paternal sage of sorts in his imagination. In each of the sitter’s six portraits, Roulin is shown wearing his dark blue postal uniform and cap, emblazoned with “Postes.” This intentional declaration likely signaled that portraiture was no longer reserved for aristocracy. In what van Gogh described in a letter to his brother Theo as a “modern portrait,” he sought to portray the essence of his sitter through the vivid independent life of color.

## REFLECTIONS

*The Postman* is, at its core, a representation of a caring relationship, a model for caregiving and caring for others. In this way, friendship is portrayed as indispensable to our individual well-being and to a democratic society—it can move through adversity and expand communities, cross class and racial divisions, contest hate and segregation, and provide an alternative form of kinship and solidarity. Now, more than ever, it is essential to gaze with duration at the bonds that sustain us. How can we better position and acknowledge friendship as integral to the moral fabric of society, and a nidus for fostering empathy and compassion at the most intimate scale? How can medicine better recognize and foster critical informal networks of support for individuals traditionally isolated, excluded, or marginalized by the academy?

## STRENGTHS & LIMITATIONS

- **Strengths;** Highly transferable collaborative arts and medicine model for implementation at other institutions, unites stakeholders across the spectrum of medical training, creates intentional space to reflect on humanistic dimensions of caregiving, functional in a variety of clinical and educational contexts.
- **Limitations;** Challenge of meaningful artwork engagement and loss of group dialogue outside of the gallery setting, lack of empirical evidence to demonstrate impact of year-long arts curriculum on physician well-being.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- **Assess** impact of Rx/Museum curriculum on physician self-care and well-being.
- **Incentivize** faculty participation with continuing medical education credit.
- **Establish** a substantive online medical humanities community within the Penn Medicine health system for this moment and beyond.



Righteous Dopefiend  
A perpetual crisis.  
Slought Foundation



The Pink and Blue Project  
The accumulation of things.  
Philadelphia Museum of Art



The Riffian  
The authenticity of representation.  
Barnes Foundation

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