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Toeing the Line between Offense and Education

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Abstract

Medical history can be gruesome. People shy away from blood and guts and images of death perhaps because it makes us question our own mortality or perhaps because it reminds us a bit too much about the origins of that hamburger we ate for lunch. Whatever the reason, a lot of humans cannot stomach the truly heinous.

[excerpt]

Keywords

Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Exhibits Intern, Fortenbaugh Internship, Civil War, Civil War Medicine

Disciplines

Library and Information Science | Museum Studies | United States History

Comments

The Interns at Gettysburg College's Musselman Library captured their internship experiences since the spring of 2011. Over time the blog has featured Fortenbaugh, Smith, and Holley interns. They shared updates on semester long projects, responded to blogging prompts, and documented their individual intern experience.

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Toeing the Line between Offense and Education

October 17, 2013

By: Natalie Sherif '14

Medical history can be gruesome. People shy away from blood and guts and images of death perhaps because it makes us question our own mortality or perhaps because it reminds us a bit too much about the origins of that hamburger we ate for lunch. Whatever the reason, a lot of humans cannot stomach the truly heinous.

Being a generally squeamish person myself, I can absolutely understand the sentiment. Nothing makes me almost faint quite like the thought of needles. Yesterday I thought to myself, *then why do you love learning about medical history?* I think the key is this: firstly, I am not the one getting my arm amputated, and secondly I love to learn. That is ultimately what I want this exhibit to address. I want people to walk away from Special Collections in the Spring of 2014 with a deeper understanding of why history, and in this case medical history, is important and relevant to the twenty-first century. The bottom line is, history *is* important.

I had a meeting yesterday with Robert Hicks and Evi Numen of the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia and I asked them how they navigate their exhibits — all about medical history — around what some people might consider offensive or frightful material. I think it is important to note that the Mutter, while an absolutely incredible museum for learning about how we can learn from medical history, is by no means easy on the senses, so the question itself was ironic. What Robert and Evi told me was that all of their material served a purpose. They never displayed anything that could not be used to advance someone's education and they advised that I do the same. "Never display something simply for shock value," Evi said. While I love staring at amputated limbs and pictures of surgery and the mortally wounded (I am completely serious. There is something about seeing it up close that provides so much insight into the delicacy of the human condition), I cannot throw a gangrenous finger into the display only because I think it is cool. I have to ask myself *why should this be here and how will it serve to advance my overall mission?*

I went back to the drawing board today during work and listed out, case by case, the objects I want to use and *why* I want to use them. Under which theme do they fall? Are they the best objects to represent this topic? Will they enhance or detract from the overall exhibit? Though it is a rough sketch, I think I am onto something worthwhile.

No material is truly offensive *if* it serves a greater purpose. Who knows what will end up in the exhibit cases in February? Swing by in five months to find out!

Titillating Medical Fact of the Week: The College of Physicians of Philadelphia which was founded in 1787 and includes the Mütter Museum, is the oldest professional medical organization in the United States. To learn more, visit <http://www.collegeofphysicians.org/>

<http://blogging.musselmanlibrary.org/2013/10/>