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## The Intersection of Art and Medicine: Tanya Sheehan Breaks Down the Boundaries Between Disciplines

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A woman with dark hair, wearing a white blouse with a ruffled collar and a red necklace, is looking down at a large, detailed drawing on a table. She is holding a pair of glasses in her left hand. The setting is a library with bookshelves in the background and a wooden door with a decorative window to the right.

## *The Intersection of Art and Medicine*

Tanya Sheehan breaks  
down the boundaries  
between disciplines

By Gerry Boyle '78

Tanya Sheehan arrived at Georgetown University intending to become a medical doctor. She aced her organic chemistry lab section, eventually was turned off by the rote memorization the program emphasized, and then discovered art history and film studies. “That changed everything,” she said, “but I never forgot about science and medicine.”

In fact, Sheehan rarely leaves a discipline behind, instead incorporating it into her multifaceted academic interests.

She has undergraduate degrees in art history and English, but expanded her art history graduate work at Brown with serious forays into science and technology studies. Sheehan ultimately wrote her doctoral thesis on the relationship between studio portrait photography and medicine, scholarship that produced the material for her first book, *Doctored: The Medicine of Photography in Nineteenth-Century America*.

An associate professor of art at Colby, Sheehan teaches American art history, tapping the vast collection at the Colby College Museum of Art. The museum, along with Special Collections in Miller Library, has been a trove of material for her course Medicine and Visual Culture, which has been oversubscribed since she began teaching it last year. The course explores the relationship between medicine and Western visual culture from 16th-century anatomical illustrations to the “doctoring” of digital photographs today. (Fact: “scientific” images of the female skeleton in the 18th century showed enlarged hips, small ribs, and a tiny skull to support stereotypes of women as made for motherhood and little more.)

Sheehan says she was surprised by how much material at the Colby museum relates to her medicine course. She takes students to the museum to study the work of the contemporary painter and printmaker Terry Winters. She also uses 19th-century paintings by Thomas Wilmer Dewing and Abbott Thayer as they relate to a nervous condition of the time called neurasthenia.

Beyond the museum, Sheehan uses illustrated medical treatises from Special Collections and the archives at Bowdoin and Bates. Students love to see original materials, she said, and being able to consider the images in context.

The art majors immediately recognize similarities between particular illustrations and famous Greek sculptures, Sheehan said. The premed students will zero in on how the illustration and the text might get the science “wrong.”

Colby is one of many institutions recognizing the important connections between art and medicine, Sheehan points out.

One-third of medical schools are teaching students through visual analysis, in the belief that closely reading artworks improves clinical observation and empathy. First-year students at Yale Medical School are required to take part in a clinic that explores the patient-doctor relationship—at the Yale Center for British Art. This spring Karen Pardue from the University of New England will visit Colby to discuss her training of nursing students through the visual arts.

For the past two years, most of the students in Sheehan’s Medicine and Visual Culture have been premed, majoring in biology or chemistry. Some are art majors. Others are majoring in science, technology, and society. They create a mix of perspectives and lively discussions.



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—Tanya Sheehan

At Colby the mix of majors makes for a sum that is greater than its parts. “Together they have wonderful discussions about the choices the artist made when representing the anatomical body,” Sheehan said. “Those choices are artistic and scientific, but I help the students see that they are also social, cultural, and political.”

And Sheehan does that by reaching out across campus. She counts Professor of Science, Technology, and Society James Fleming, Associate Professor of American Studies Laura Saltz, Pat Burdick and Erin Rhodes in Special Collections, and museum curators Lauren Lessing and Shalini Le Gall among her collaborators in helping students make connections across the arts and sciences.

“Colby is one of the few places where the boundaries between disciplines can be challenged and innovative thinking can emerge,” Sheehan said. “That’s what I love most about it.”