Hospitals Embrace the Healing Balm of Visual Art

by Barbara MacRobie

“I remember soon after we launched our first art exhibit at Des Peres Hospital,” said Simone Valle, the hospital’s director of marketing/communications. “A gentleman walking past turned to me and said, ‘I’ve been here for five days with a family member. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate having something to look at as I go down the hall.’

“I thought, ‘That’s the whole purpose.’”

Go into any hospital, medical center, or doctor’s office these days, and you are more and more likely to see artwork. Healthcare institutions are increasingly finding that visual art is an essential part of a healing environment.

Three Missouri hospitals are especially strong on extensive and ongoing art displays for the benefit of their patients, visitors, staff, and community at large: Boone Hospital Center in Columbia, Des Peres Hospital in suburban St. Louis, and SoutheastHEALTH in Cape Girardeau.

- **Boone Hospital Center** has more than 450 works of painting, drawing, photography, mixed media, and sculpture permanently displayed in key locations. The hospital’s commitment to art accelerated in 2010 when artworks were thoroughly integrated into the new patient care tower. The collection keeps growing, because every new project undertaken at the hospital now includes a budget for artwork.
Des Peres Hospital always has nearly 120 works of art on the walls of its three patient floors. The twist is that twice a year, all the art comes down and a completely new group of works goes up. Art @ Des Peres Hospital began in October 2012 and has become a tradition. Art Saint Louis coordinates the show, joining with the Foundry Art Centre in St. Charles, MySLArt.org, and the St. Louis Artists’ Guild to feature the work of about 20 local artists in each six-month exhibit. The exhibit is free and open to the public during visiting hours, 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily. The current exhibit will be up through November 2.

SoutheastHEALTH is in the 22nd year of Art for the Health of It in partnership with the Arts Council of Southeast Missouri. For two months each year, the walls of a prominent corridor at Southeast Hospital become a gallery of juried works by regional artists. The current exhibit, which features 32 pieces by 20 artists, opened on June 28 and runs through August 26. It is free and open to the public during visiting hours, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily.

These hospitals haven’t made such a concerted effort just because art makes their buildings look pretty. The links between healing and visual art are supported by a growing body of research.

Evidence for the healing power of viewing art

“The arts in healthcare movement has really blossomed in the U.S. over the past 20 years,” said Sarah Colby, coordinator of the Arts + Healthcare program at Barnes-Jewish Hospital in St. Louis. The hospital is currently hosting a temporary art exhibit by Art Saint Louis called Tranquility.

“A lot of work has been done on the whole idea of art in hospitals,” Sarah said, “The National Endowment for the Arts wrote a huge paper in 2003. People are now doing research not only on the overall benefits of art in healthcare environments, but on what kinds of specific kinds of artwork one should have in a hospital—what would be great for emergency rooms, psychiatric units, elderly care units.”

In the NEA’s study, Cultures of Care, nearly 50 percent of hospitals nationwide had arts programs. Among the hospitals with programs, visual art was the front-runner. 73 percent of the hospitals had permanent displays, and 32 percent had rotating exhibits.
“There’s a whole field of study called evidence-based design that is very popular in all aspects of healthcare design,” said Henry Domke, M.D., who was a family practice physician in Jefferson City for several decades before shifting his career to his art. His company, Henry Domke Fine Art, which he started in 2003 while he was still practicing medicine, is specifically dedicated to “nature art for healthcare.” He assiduously follows the latest research, maintains an active blog about art in healthcare, and has gathered many of his posts into a book, Picture of Health: Handbook for Healthcare Art.

Evidence-based design is defined by The Center for Health Design, an international community of designers and healthcare professionals, as “the process of basing decisions about the built environment on credible research.” “One very important aspect,” said Henry, “is the way healthcare design deals with art.”

Images with a purpose

Nearly all the artworks at Boone Hospital Center depict the natural world—landscapes, waterscapes, plants, flowers. This is deliberate. “Research findings are very consistent that nature images are by far the most popular and the most likely to reduce stress,” Henry said.

Henry takes many of the photographs that create his art in his own unusual backyard: his 600 acres in New Bloomfield that he is developing as the Prairie Garden Trust, a nonprofit public nature garden. His work ranges from hyper-closeups of flowers to sweeping landscapes.

“The whole philosophy at Boone Hospital Center is to bring nature indoors to help speed the healing process,” said Rene Heider, the hospital’s independent art consultant. “I constantly look for beautiful outdoor scenes. It’s like people can take a mini-vacation looking at the picture. They can imagine themselves in that space, can go to a happier place.”

A distinctive touch among the nature images at Boone Hospital Center is that many are of dogwoods, Missouri’s state tree. “We carry the dogwood theme through five floors of patient care units,” said Mary Beck, vice president of patient care services. “We’re saying, ‘Here’s our state and we’re proud of it.”

The juror for this year’s Art for the Health of It at SoutheastHEALTH, Wendy Kurka Rust, chose several landscapes, including two by fellow Cape Girardeau artist Dave Carter. His paintings depict one of his favorite places, San Diego, where he lived in the mid-70s. “I took my wife, Sally, and our kids there for a trip in 2012, and I took like 3,500 photos! From those photos, I’ve created 35 paintings.” Dave and Sally moved to Cape Girardeau from Kirksville just last summer, when she accepted a position at Southeast Missouri State University. Dave’s work has previously been in Art @ Des Peres Hospital, is featured through July 17 at the Cape Girardeau Public Library, and will be in a Best of Missouri Hands show July 7-31 in O’Fallon.
Henry pointed out that along with nature scenes, art depicting people with positive faces in relaxed settings is also strongly backed by research. Such a work is *A Café in Buenos Aires* in this year’s *Art for the Health of It*.

The oil painting by Mary Ann Hartman of Zalma shows a happy young woman at a table holding out her cell phone. “She’s inviting the viewer to communicate. She’s saying that you’re not alone, and friends are important,” said Wendy, who gave the painting one of the show’s four Juror Awards. “The different layers of paint done sensitively with the surprising flicks of color bring an element of joy.”

“I look for art that will create a calming atmosphere, with clean lines, soothing colors, and positive scenarios,” said Rene Heider.

“A lot of art is challenging, and that’s great,” said Henry, “but that may not be appropriate for the healthcare setting. You must consider the response of the patients, visitors, and hospital staff. You have to consider the function of art in healthcare.

“What can you do to provide imagery that reduces stress? That’s at the core of all the art I do.”

**Helping people find respite**

St. Louis watercolor painter Andrea Vadner started thinking about the healing power of art about 15 years ago after she had been a patient herself three times for breaking her arms. “I thought, okay, part of my goal is to make art that if it were in a hospital, would make people feel better. So when Art Saint Louis made me the offer to have my art actually in a hospital, I was delighted.”

Andrea has been a member of Art Saint Louis since 1993, when she moved back to Missouri from Houston, Texas. By day, she carries mail for the U.S. Post Office. She exhibits in Missouri, Texas, and Tennessee. In 2014, *Creative Art Gallery & Framing* in St. Louis showcased 40 of her paintings in a solo exhibit, *Under the Moon*. All eight of her paintings in *Art @ Des Peres Hospital* come from that show.

“My art is feel-good. It’s affirming, invigorating, always in motion,” she said. “And it’s pretty!”

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*A Café in Buenos Aires*, oil, by Mary Ann Hartman, Zalma; Juror’s Award, *Art for the Health of It*, June 28–August 26, 2015

*Moon Under Jupiter*, mixed media watercolor on paper, by Andrea Vadner, Richmond Heights; *Art @ Des Peres Hospital*, May 11–November 2, 2015
When the Arts Council of Southeast Missouri asked Caroline Kahler, chair of the art department at Southeast Missouri State University, to be the juror for Art for the Health of It in 2013, she immediately thought of her own experiences. “My husband had bypass surgery when he was 49. My daughter had pneumonia when she was small. My mother was a professor of nursing. I’ve spent quite a bit of time in hospitals,” she said.

“It’s not only hard to be a patient, but it’s very hard to be in that environment visiting someone who is ill. But when there is art, you can walk with that person down the hall and talk about the art. It helps to break the tension in that space. So I looked for art that created an atmosphere that was soothing and restful.”

“We know a hospital is not a fun place to be,” said Simone Valle. “Nobody says, ‘It’s Friday night, let’s go to the hospital!’ Art can take people out of that stressful moment for even just a little while.”

“I’ll be walking down a hallway at Boone Hospital Center,” said Mary Beck, “and will see a family member who has stopped and is just staring at a piece of artwork. People will say to me, ‘This is such a relief. It takes me away.’ Our art helps people find respite.”

“Sometimes patients are so sick they don’t care,” said Simone. “But as they get better and are able to walk around, they notice the art.”

Solace for the staff

“Art is a distraction for people who are hurting,” said Joyce Miller, retired staffer at SoutheastHEALTH who coordinated the art exhibit for more than 20 years. It’s not only patients and visitors who need distraction.

“Art is important for the people who work at a hospital—that their life is not just full of endless hallways,” said Caroline Kahler. “When they enter that space, they feel they are being welcomed to their workplace, that the institution itself has a sense of caring about the employees as well as the patients.”

“Des Peres Hospital employees love the exhibits too,” said Simone Valle. “Everyone gets so excited when it’s time for a new one! When we start hanging the art, we don’t have the show tags ready yet, and people love to see what’s new and imagine names for the pieces. Then it’s such fun to see the names the artists themselves gave the piece. It starts a great conversation.”

“Our staff at Southeast enjoy the art so much,” said Joyce, who continues to work at the hospital as a volunteer. “We get complaints when we take it down!”

Olga Riney has a unique appreciation for staff reactions. She works in the housekeeping department at Southeast, and she has two oil paintings in this year’s Art for the Health of It.
A resident of Cape Girardeau since she came to the U.S. six years ago from Kazan, Russia, Olga joined the staff of Southeast only a few months ago and had never seen the exhibit. But at one of the Arts Council’s First Friday with the Arts downtown art walks, she talked with Liz Montgomery, the Council’s gallery manager. “Liz encouraged me,” she said. “So I decided to submit my flowers and bee because the flower to me is sunshine, and my sunset because it puts your mind to nature’s beauty. Now my co-workers and many other people can see my work.”

“Hospitals who spend that little bit of extra effort to make their environments more cohesive and transformative have workers who are happy,” said Caroline Kahler. “It does help!”

**Unexpected connections**

The hospital displays also benefit the artists and arts organizations.

“Art for the Health of It is wonderful exposure for the artists and the Arts Council,” said Murielle Gaither, Arts Council executive director. “By our estimate, the show is seen by 20,000 to 30,000 people in the two months it’s up. That’s huge for us. It is our most seen exhibit.

“And the artists are reaching a broad and diverse range of people—from medical personnel to people who are coming in for treatment from rural Missouri. Most of these people are not going to get in their car and drive down to our gallery. Art for the Health of It gives us the ability to place art where people are not expecting to see it.”

“It’s important to take art into the community,” said Caroline Kahler. “I applaud the Council for doing this.”

Des Peres Hospital, in addition to placing identification labels on the walls next to the artwork, enables viewers to learn more about the artists by producing a guide for every show. The brochure is available online and in print at the hospital. “We always give the story of the artist and where they’re from,” said Simone Valle. “It’s such fun to see the talent that’s all around.”

“But even if viewers never take note of the backstory or who created the piece,” said Art Saint Louis Executive Director Chandler Branch, “our hospital shows certainly make a connection between artists and audiences who would not have otherwise discovered each other.”
Making the commitment

How does a hospital become dedicated to art as a key player for healing?

At Boone Hospital Center, longtime board of trustee member Barbara Weaver got the arts ball rolling in 2006 when the hospital was building its Center for Advanced Medicine outpatient tower, said Mary Beck. “Barbara was determined that we were going to have a healing environment.” The board of trustees formed an arts committee and commissioned local artist David Spear to create Columbia Rising, a 10-foot painting of a view looking east from the hospital across the city, for the new building’s lobby.

Then in 2010, when construction began on a patient care tower, the board decided to saturate the entire environment with art. “We vowed to use mid-Missouri artists as much as possible,” said Mary. “We’re a community hospital. We wanted to say, ‘This is about our community.’”

The board enlarged the artistic oversight committee to include Columbia artists and also engaged local art consultants, including Rene Heider, to help select and acquire the art. About 300 works were installed throughout the tower, including in every one of the 132 patient rooms. David Spear was commissioned to create a companion piece to his earlier painting: Columbia Sunset.

Rene is now looking for art for the hospital’s new medical office building set to open in December 2015. “I poke through Columbia’s wonderful galleries, go to the Columbia Art League’s Art in the Park and other events, scour the Best of Missouri Hands website. Then I present ideas to the committee. They pick the art or the artist if they’re going to commission a work. My company procures, frames, and installs the works.”

“Every time we do a new building, a remodel, or a refresh, the art committee gets together,” said Mary Beck. "I'm really proud of the trustees for their ongoing commitment to the difference that art makes for our staff, our patients, and their families."
At Des Peres Hospital, the impetus came in 2011 when John A. Grah was appointed the hospital’s chief executive officer, said Simone Valle. “He had worked at other hospitals with arts programs. He also thought Des Peres needed to do something that would help tie us more into the community,” she said.

“We met with the Regional Arts Commission to get their advice. They brought together other groups to talk with us about things we could do to bring art onto our campus. Art Saint Louis said they could pull art from a bunch of different groups and curate an exhibit.”

“It’s a real pleasure,” said Chandler Branch, “to get to genuinely collaborate. The art at Des Peres Hospital happens because multiple arts organizations work together and because the hospital has an exceptional commitment to making art a priority as part of their total service to the community.”

In addition to the continuous exhibits at Des Peres, Art Saint Louis is also engaged in the third of its three exhibits at Barnes-Jewish Hospital in St. Louis. In the south lobby is Tranquility, 16 works “evoking resolve, contentment, and peace” by 16 local artists. Running through October 14, the free exhibit is open 24/7.

SoutheastHEALTH’s Art for the Health of It was started in 1993 by the hospital’s beautification committee. The Arts Council of Southeast Missouri puts out a call for art and engages a noted artist as the juror who decides which works to accept from those submitted and which will be honored by the show’s awards. The cash awards are sponsored by the Cape Girardeau County Area Medical Society Alliance, Cape Girardeau County Area Medical Society, and SoutheastHEALTH.

“We are so indebted and thankful to SoutheastHEALTH for their support all these years,” said Murielle Gaither. “It is wonderful that they have identified the arts as an important factor of providing quality service to their patients and their medical staff.”

"Street Cat Napping on a Display Carpet, Azerbaijan, acrylic on canvas, by Mary Edwards Wertsch, University City; Art @ Des Peres Hospital, May 11–November 2, 2015"

"Parks Freedom, watercolor and colored pencil on paper, by Kathy Ann Duffin, Bridgeton; Art @ Des Peres Hospital, May 11–November 2, 2015. Her nine works in the exhibit are inspired by architectural details on Art Deco and Art Nouveau St. Louis-area buildings."
As well as *Art for the Health of It*, SoutheastHEALTH has two significant permanent displays. Across from the surgery waiting room in Southeast Hospital is the Close to Home Gallery, a showcase of 12 huge photographs of regional landscapes by the late Dr. David Crowe. In the Southeast Cancer Center, there are more than 175 multimedia works “that resonate with a sense of life, hope, and journey—the bywords that form the focus of patient care at the center,” said Sally Owen, corporate communications manager.

**Beauty where sorely needed**

Sarah Colby stresses, as the mission statement of Arts + Healthcare says, that “art is an integral part of hope and healing.” “I believe the more we are geared toward patient-centered healthcare, the more that art is incredibly important,” she said.

“Art in a place that is a not a traditional place to view it has even more power. It normalizes. It celebrates.”

“When you find yourself in a space you would prefer not to be in, for reasons you have no control over, an artist’s gift can speak to that situation,” said Chandler Branch. “Artists can add color, flavor, and beauty where these were not expected and where they are severely needed.”

“Art gives people a place where they can go emotionally, distract them from the anxiety and conflict they are dealing with, lose themselves inside the piece of art,” said Caroline Kahler. “Art can help them see that there is light at the end of the tunnel. That life does go on.”

*All images are courtesy of the artists, arts organizations, and hospitals featured.*

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