



Summer, first in a series of four oil on canvas paintings titled *Seasons* by Alison Mary Kay, Lindsborg, Kansas. Photo courtesy of Ruth Cathcart-Rake

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Dedicated for use in training future physicians and nurses, medical and nursing school buildings often are sterile educational institutions that overlook the value of art. However, there is no better place to display and enjoy art than in the school and/or workplace, where students, educators, and staff spend a majority of their waking hours.

This may be especially true in rural communities where easy access to art museums and other art venues may be limited.

Adding works of art to health care education facilities can expand the understanding and experiences of both learners and teachers, and make them consider their chosen career in more holistic and humanistic terms. The health care professional may develop a connection with the artists' ideas and motivations. Conversely, commissioning artists to create works for a health care education institution gives the artist an opportunity to connect with health care professionals, and gain a deeper appreciation of their calling.

Medical education

In 2011, the University of Kansas School of Medicine opened a four-year regional medical school campus in Salina, a community of 50,000 in north central Kansas. This regional medical campus admits eight students each year, making it one of the smallest medical school campuses in North America.¹ Its mission is to train medical students to become excellent physicians, assist them in following the career paths of their choosing, and allow them to experience the rewards and challenges of medical practice in a rural environment. The hope is that graduates will choose to practice in rural Kansas.

Kansas University School of Medicine-Salina (KUSM-S) was originally housed in an old nursing school building adjacent to the local hospital (Salina Regional Health Center). In 2016, KUSM-S partnered with the Salina Regional Health Foundation (SRHF) and Kansas University (KU) Endowment Association in initiating a capital campaign to raise funds to purchase and renovate a vacant building in downtown Salina to serve as the new health education building. The fundraising campaign was successful, and a state-of-the-art health education building, which nearly tripled the floor space of the old building, was completed in June 2018. In 2017, Kansas University School of Nursing decided to open a regional nursing school campus in Salina to address the regional nursing shortage. Recognizing that physicians and nurses comprise a team dedicated to healing, sharing an educational facility and promoting interprofessional educational opportunities seemed like a logical step. KUSM-S shared its old facilities with the new nursing school campus, KU School of Nursing-Salina (KUSN-S), for the 2017–18 academic year. The two schools moved to the new building in June 2018.

During the building renovation, a decision was made by the dean of the Salina campus and the director of SRHF to include commissioned works of art in the new health education building in order to:

- Enhance the beauty of the Salina educational building, and create a place that promoted conversations around human concerns expressed through art;
- Continue the history of robust community support for the arts in Salina; i.e., an existing connection between artists and the community at-large; and
- Expose students to the role art can play in their lives now and in the communities they will serve in the future.

A call for works of art

A leadership team composed of the dean of KUSM-S, the executive director of SRHF, the director of the KU Spencer Museum of Art, and community members was formed. The leadership team drafted a request for proposals (RFP) for new works of art. The RFP detailed the unique rural setting of the campus, and specified that the missions of the two schools should inspire and be embodied in any commissioned art.

Artists were asked to submit a resume, photos of previous artwork, and a statement of interest in the project, including a brief description of how their new art would address the missions of the schools. Applicants were encouraged to participate in professional development opportunities supported by a partnership with the SPARK Artist Resource Exchange, a unique grant initiative program on arts and healing in Salina formed in collaboration with Salina Arts and Humanities and dedicated to integrating artists' work into downtown Salina and local health care environments.

Response to the call

Fifty artists representing a variety of media and perspectives on rural health submitted proposals. The majority of respondents lived and worked in central and eastern Kansas, although several were non-Kansans. An art selection committee, composed of representatives of KUSM-S faculty and administration, SRHF, the building architects, the interior design team, a medical student, and community members reviewed all proposals.

Ten semi-finalists were selected and invited to tour the new health education building and view the proposed art sites. The artists were then requested to submit more specific proposals for commissioned art, including design, scale, material, imagery, content, and a budget for creation and installation of their art. The artists then presented their respective proposals to the committee, and responded to questions.

After lengthy deliberation and discussion, five artists were selected to receive commissions to produce original works of art for the new building.

All art was installed by the time the new facility was opened in June 2018. Artist selection was based on quality of past work, their proposal demonstrating what they envisioned for the building, and how well their proposed creation related to the environmental setting of the campus and the missions of the medical school and nursing school. The five artists commissioned to produce original pieces for the new medical education building represented a variety of media: oil painting, glasswork, sculpture, and collage.



Study, low-relief alabaster sculpture with backlighting, by Alan Tollakson, Emporia, Kansas. Photo by author



Astral Plane, wood, metal and blown/fused glass by Dierk Van Keppel, Merriam, Kansas. Photo by author



Three of the 13 contiguous panels comprising *Through the Scars to Stars*, a large glitter on paper and aluminum sheets collage, by Dylan Mortimer, Westwood, Kansas. Photo courtesy of Ruth Cathcart-Rake

The artists and their artwork

A commissioned painter created a series of four 4' by 6' oil on canvas paintings titled *Seasons* for the main lobby. The artist stated that “the four paintings are a meditation on the processes of living and dying. Using the inhabitants of the garden metaphorically, characters participate in the cycles of life found within the natural world, fecundity, decline, mortality, and renewal.”

A sculptor used alabaster and light to create low relief light sculptures titled *Study* installed on a wall in the student study lounge. He commented, “I use stone and light as a metaphor to examine what emanates from the many aspects of our universe—both internal and external. By using light to expose qualities that reside inside the stone, *Study* encourages us to look deeply into the human condition. My hope is to elicit an atmosphere of reassurance and healing for students to carry forth in their practices.” Another artist, who successfully underwent a double lung transplant to treat his life-threatening cystic fibrosis, created an 8' tall by 55' wide collage titled *Through the Scars to Stars*, a play on the Kansas motto, *Ad Astra Per Aspera* (Through Difficulty to the Stars). This massive piece brightens the walls of a large meeting room. On each end

of the collage are stylized scars representing the actual scars the author incurred following transplant surgery. Between the scars is a network of cells illuminated with glitter in a “baroque celebration of healing, overcoming difficulty, and imagining regeneration and new life.”

Astral Plane is an allusion to the mystical world of celestial spheres crossed by the soul in its astral body on the way to being born and after death—a place beyond the normal. This glass piece is in a student lounge. Wood and metal are used to depict the horizon line of a sunset over rolling hills, inspired by the Flint Hills and Smoky Hills of central Kansas. Rising out of the sunset are three panels of blown and fused glass. The artist commented that “the glass is intended to transcend our surroundings and allow a glimpse of a beautiful and serene plane in our imaginations that may be hidden in our subconsciousness, or may exist in a way that we can only know through our dreams.”

A 28' long mixed media work *Pulse* has nine alternating panels of layered dress patterns, painted birch plywood, and laser-burned text in sheer silk fabric. It is mounted on the curved walls dividing classrooms from a student study lounge. The creation was inspired by conversations the artists had with faculty and students regarding the

Healing art and the healing arts

tools used in practice, and the time demands on physicians and nurses. The artists explain that the series of linked panels “evokes the cycle of hours of the day, with the center panel conceived as a gift of extra hours, a place to dream out of time. Old sewing patterns donated by community members were used to create skin suggesting the architecture of the body. The painted panels include rootedness and healing as central concepts, with imagery derived from science and medicine. Finally, the poetry of N. Scott Momaday and Elizabeth Dodd are featured on the text panels. An EKG horizon line and an original schematic for healing moves across all panels connecting the individual with a community.”

Reactions to the artwork

The immediate reaction by many individuals seeing the artwork was how much the vibrant colors added to the walls of lobbies, study areas, and meeting rooms. Another common theme voiced by viewers was that each installation tells a story, although viewers interpret the stories differently.

A medical student commented, “The artwork can be viewed from a physician’s or patient’s perspective. I look at the alabaster sculpture *Study* from a physician’s perspective. Light trans-illuminating the stone allows internal examination not unlike that revealed by radiographic imaging. And, the large collage created by the lung transplant recipient makes me appreciate the artist’s personal ordeal with a medical intervention.”

A faculty member remarked, “Having major art around, and having a campus philosophy that values art, reminds us all in subtle ways every day that we are treating a mother or father or child, and that it is our goal to bring the art of human existence into medical care.”

Saralyn Reece Hardy, director of KU’s Spencer Museum of Art, stated, “I was impressed by the ways the artists expressed unique aspects of rural health, providing us all with new ways of thinking about the interdependencies and artistic collaborations inside a close-knit community of learning. One of the distinguishing characteristics of the art is the focus on human rhythms, cycles and natural systems—summoning attention to the whole person in order to sustain health and foster learning.”

Understanding the community

KUSM-S and KUSN-S recognized the importance of artwork in contributing to the beauty of and the experiences in the educational space and the importance of challenging the viewer to think beyond what is seen at first glance. Each



Pulse layered dress patterns and painted wood panels, by Geraldine Craig and Nelson Smith. Photo by author

of the selected artists expressed an understanding of the mission of KUSM-S and KUSN-S, appreciated the schools’ relationship with the community, and had well-developed ideas on how to creatively express the themes of place, purpose, connections, and healing in their art.

The artists were invited to explore the different motivations for choosing a health profession, the relationship of the caregiver to the community, and the obstacles and rewards presented to the learner, the practitioner and the patient. They answered the call to create works of art that invited the viewer to discover a deeper meaning to training in the health care profession.

The viewers—students, faculty, staff, and visiting public—are challenged to explore what the artist might be communicating, and to contemplate a personal meaning. Both students and artists are invited to think more holistically about the work, and in doing so, a connection between art and the healing arts is established.

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REFERENCES

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