

# “This institution was never meant for me”: the Impact of Institutional Historical Portraiture on Medical Students



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Many academic institutions are reexamining their relationship to historical artwork in shared or public spaces, and questioning the continued commemoration of figures who participated in and benefited from slavery, colonization, and the oppression of marginalized populations.<sup>1–5</sup> This qualitative project examined how Yale School of Medicine (YSM) students responded to institutional portraiture at Sterling Hall of Medicine (SHM)—the flagship building on the medical school campus.

## METHODS

We conducted a qualitative interview study of Yale medical students from the classes of 2018–2021 to assess their perspective on institutional portraiture. Students were recruited by email. This study was approved by the Yale Human Subjects Committee. Confidential, one-on-one interviews were scheduled with one of two interviewers (EF, NA) who developed the interview guide (Table 1). Twelve of 15 interviewees answered a brief demographic survey: 5 identified as male, 7 as female. Self-reported ethnic identities (respondents selected one or more) included: African-American ( $n = 1$ ), Black ( $n = 1$ ), East Asian ( $n = 2$ ), Hispanic ( $n = 2$ ), North-African ( $n = 1$ ), South Asian ( $n = 3$ ), and white ( $n = 4$ ). Interviews ceased when thematic saturation was reached, as determined by no new themes emerging during coding of transcripts. Interviewees were asked open-ended questions about feelings of belonging and the SHM portraits, which consist of three portraits of white women and 52 portraits of white men.

## RESULTS

We identified four major themes. Table 2 provides representative quotes:

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1. Institutional values: Many interviewees described the portraits as a visual demonstration of YSM’s values, which they identified as whiteness, elitism, maleness, and power. Some noted that the portraits exacerbated feelings of being judged and unwelcome at the institution, but also saw the potential for change, and imagined a visual culture that could include and inspire them.
2. Resignation and coping: Some interviewees expressed an attitude of resignation regarding the visual culture, since portraits of white men seemed to be the status quo at similar institutions. Students who found the portraits alienating described coping mechanisms, such as making jokes and avoiding areas where portraits are displayed.
3. Contemporary consequences: Many interviewees commented on how the paucity of diverse role models, both among current faculty and in the portraits, affected their sense of belonging at YSM. For some, the portraiture underscored the feeling that they did not belong, saying: “This institution was never meant for me.” They believed that many classmates, particularly white men, were indifferent to the portraits. Many interviewees questioned the process of determining who deserved a portrait. Most believed the portraits commemorated YSM’s most impressive faculty and donors, but wondered if any had benefited from slavery and colonization, or opposed the admission of women or non-white students to YSM. Some respondents indicated that by displaying these portraits, YSM implicitly endorsed those values as well.
4. Erasure of history: A few students believed that history would be altered if the portraits were removed. Others felt that the existing portraits downplayed the real or potential racist or sexist beliefs of the commemorated figures, and erased contributions of women and people of color.

Table 1 Select Questions from Interview Guide

Can you walk me through your experience the first time you walked through this part of Yale School of Medicine?
What images or symbols come to mind when you think of the Yale School of Medicine?
How do you feel about the institutional portraits at YSM?
How do you relate to these portraits personally and professionally?
How do you think other people feel about these portraits? Friends? Peers? Faculty? Administration? Staff?
Do you feel you belong in this institution? Why or why not?

**Table 2 Themes and Representative Quotes Regarding Medical Students' Views of Institutional Portraiture**

Institutional values	<p>"I think if you are going to put someone's portrait up you are kind of saying 'this is someone we aspire to be.'"</p> <p>"It was 100 years since the first women graduated from here or went here. It's been 100 years and all the pictures on the wall are still men, and it's like, what in the world?"</p> <p>"I think ultimately the only relic of a person that we see in the institution like this is a picture or a named lectureship or named professorship or something. So, it's a direct representation of the institutional values, or at least the staying power of the institutional values."</p>
Resignation and coping	<p>"For me, I think I block it out."</p> <p>"I'd probably say that the majority, if not all, of my interactions about the portraits have been with other students who I think either really are critical to the content of the portraits or, they just make a joke about it that's kind of like: 'Oh look, there's another one,' or 'When do you think they are going to put up someone who's not bald and white and you know?'"</p>
Contemporary consequences	<p>"I think if these portraits could speak, they would not be so excited about me, I feel they would totally not be so excited about me being a student here, they might spit at me."</p> <p>"I think it's just like this is the space that clearly is not for me, it's a space that I'm just passing through."</p> <p>"I think for other students of color, it's frustrating to always see people that do not look like you held in esteem, to be bombarded with this imagery of these white—of elitism and power. I think it sends the message, that that is what we should make synonymous with those words I described. That white men equals success, power, elitism, money, whatever."</p> <p>"And we are absorbing a lot of what the artwork reflects, whether we realize it or not. I think the artwork can affect people's moods, it could affect people's self-esteem. I think it's art as a really important aspect of our daily interactions with the school in terms of the physical environment and how we feel about ourselves and our institution."</p>
The erasure of history	<p>"I think some students could not care less, and those students are probably white men."</p> <p>"As we already know, some of these portraits that are hanging on these walls are portraits of slave owners or people who invested in slavery and Yale's money is deeply tied to slavery and we should not stand for that. And they should be taken down from the walls; that is not acceptable. I do not care what else they did, that's irrelevant."</p> <p>"It's not like I think that we should not honor these people, I just think that honor should not come with erasure of—if they did other things, other parts of their past. And also, honor other people too."</p>

## DISCUSSION

Institutional portraiture affects students' sense of belonging. Sampled students consider portraits active reflections of the institution's current values, rather than passive or apolitical relics.

For many interviewed students, the portraiture signified that they did not fit the model of the ideal Yale physician. While

some felt that their accomplishments were appreciated, they wondered whether YSM would recognize them or other women and non-white students over the longer term.

Interviewed students described a disconnect between YSM's stated values of diversity and inclusion and the promotion of figures who may have benefited from slavery, colonization, or structural oppression. Some felt that YSM did not value their lived experiences or recognize their discomfort with the portraits. Some feel resigned to this and have developed coping mechanisms.

## CONCLUSION

Visual culture can be experienced by some as encoding an institution's values and providing messaging to its members about belonging. For our sample, historical portraiture and visual culture in medical schools often had a negative impact, experienced as reflecting the values of the institution with regard to racial and gender diversity. Institutions should reflect on the implicit message they may be conveying with historical portraiture.

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**Compliance with Ethical Standards:**

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that they do not have a conflict of interest.

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