

Visualizing a Century of Public Health: A Graphic Art Retrospective

For over a century, public health campaigns have used eye-catching visuals to educate and inspire action. Galter Library's new graphic art gallery brings this rich history to life with a series of 22 historic posters spanning the early 20th century to the 1970s. From early Red Cross appeals to mid-century warnings about germs, vaccination campaigns, and Chicago's own public health efforts, these posters tell the story of how visual media has shaped the perceptions of health and disease.

Public health posters emerged as a powerful tool in the late 19th century, coinciding with advancements in printing technology that made mass communication more accessible. Originally used to sell pharmaceuticals and raise funds for disease victims, posters quickly became a medium for public health messaging, particularly during the First World War. As health campaigns sought to reach wide audiences, posters evolved alongside advertising trends, using bold colors, striking imagery, and minimal text to grab attention and convey urgent messages.

Galter's graphic art gallery is divided into five thematic categories:

- **The Red Cross** – Posters from the early 20th century showcasing the Red Cross's role in World War I, emergency response, and public health.
- **Germs Spread Diseases** – Mid-century campaigns warning against the spread of disease and promoting hygiene.
- **Preventive Health** – Posters encouraging healthy habits, from eating fruit to seeking medical care.
- **Chicago History** – Local public health efforts addressing vaccination, syphilis prevention, and tuberculosis. All the posters in this section were created by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Art Project in Chicago.
- **Cancer** – Posters underscoring the importance of early diagnosis and medical care in the treatment of cancer.

Each poster reflects the health concerns, cultural norms, and artistic styles of its time. In today's world, filled with digital health messages, these historic posters offer a glimpse into how design has played a significant role in shaping public health awareness.

[Visit the library's Mezzanine](#) to explore these striking, high-quality reproductions of historic public health posters, curated from the National Library of Medicine Digital Collections, the Library of Congress, the National Archives and Records Administration, and other repositories. Whether you're interested in medical history, design, or public health communication, this collection offers a fascinating glimpse into the past—and a reflection on how we continue to tell stories of health and wellness today.

You can see images of the posters below or follow this link to our exhibit webpage to learn more about [Visualizing a Century of Public Health: A Graphic Art Retrospective](#).

The Red Cross

Posters from the early 20th century showcasing the Red Cross's role in World War I, emergency response, and public health.



1. American National Red Cross. "To Rescue the Drowning." [Washington, D.C.]: Office for Emergency Management, [between 1941 and 1945]. Source: National Archives and Records Administration.
 2. Roeg, Herman. "Help the Red Cross." [Washington, D.C.]: American National Red Cross, [1917?]. Source: National Library of Medicine Digital Collections.
 3. King, W. B. "Hold Up Your End!" New York: American National Red Cross, 1918. Source: Penn State University Libraries Digital Collections.
- Not pictured: Schlaikjer, Jes Wilhelm. "Blood saves lives." New York: American National Red Cross, 1948.

Germs Spread Diseases

Mid-century campaigns warning against the spread of disease and promoting hygiene.

1. Railways Studios. "Danger! Don't spread disease." Issued by the New Zealand Department of Health. Wellington, New Zealand: E.V. Paul Government Printer, c. 1950s. Source: Wikimedia Commons.
2. U.S. War Department. "Before. Never give a germ a break!" [Washington, D.C.]: Government Printing Office, 1944. Source: National Archives and Records Administration.
3. U.S. War Department. "When a fly wipes his feet on your food he's spreading disease." [Washington, D.C.]: Government Printing Office, 1944. Source: National Library of Medicine Digital Collections.
4. Krause, Erik. "Keep clean." [Rochester, N.Y.]: Federal Art Project, [between 1936 and 1939]. Source: Library of Congress.



5. Railways Studios. "Coughs and sneezes spread diseases." Issued by the New Zealand Department of Health. Wellington, New Zealand: E.V. Paul Government Printer, 1963. Source: Archives New Zealand.

Preventive Health

Posters encouraging healthy habits, from eating fruit to seeking medical care.



1. "Eat fruit – be healthy." [New York]: Federal Art Project, [between 1936 and 1938]. Source: Library of Congress.
 2. U.S. Public Health Service. "Don't You Get Hooked!". Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1970. Source: National Library of Medicine Digital Collections.
 3. Keely, Patrick. "Sepsis: get first aid." Issued by the Ministry of Labour and National Service. London: Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, 1943. Source: Wellcome Collection.
 4. District of Columbia Society for the Prevention of Blindness. "Wash your hands before touching your eyes." [Washington, D.C.]: Office for Emergency Management, [between 1941 and 1945]. Source: National Archives at College Park.
- Not pictured: C.E. "He who treats himself has a fool for a doctor." Issued by the National Tuberculosis Association. Philadelphia: McCandlish Litho Corporation, 1931. Source: Wellcome Collection.

Chicago History

Local public health efforts addressing vaccination, syphilis prevention, and tuberculosis. All the posters in this section were created by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Art Project in Chicago.



1. "Don't Gamble with Syphilis" Chicago: Illinois WPA Art Project, [between 1936 and 1940]. Source: Library of Congress.
2. Chicago Department of Health. "Is your child vaccinated?" Chicago: Illinois WPA Art Project, [between 1936 and 1941]. Source: Library of Congress.
3. Cook County Public Health Unit. "Take part in America's crusade against tuberculosis." Chicago: Illinois WPA Art Project. [1940]. Source: Library of Congress.
4. Chicago Department of Health. "Diphtheria strikes unprotected children." Chicago: Illinois WPA Art Project, [between 1936 and 1941]. Source: Library of Congress.

Cancer

Posters underscoring the importance of early diagnosis and medical care in the treatment of cancer.



1. "Fight cancer - delay is dangerous." [New York]: WPA Federal Art Project, [between 1936 and 1938]. Source: Library of Congress.
2. "X-Ray, radium, surgery - the three recognized treatments for cancer." [New York]: WPA Federal Art Project, [between 1936 and 1939]. Source: Library of Congress.
3. Railways Studios. "Cancer Take Warning." Issued by the New Zealand Department of Health. Wellington, New Zealand: E.V. Paul Government Printer, 1958. Source: Archives New Zealand
4. "Cancer: early diagnosis would save 50,000 lives every year." U.S. Public Health Service, [19--]. Source: National Library of Medicine Digital Collections.

Selected References

- National Institutes of Health. (2008). An iconography of contagion. U.S. National Library of Medicine. <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/topics/contagion/index.html>
- National Institutes of Health. (2003). Brief history | visual culture and health - profiles in Science. U.S. National Library of Medicine. <https://profiles.nlm.nih.gov/spotlight/vc/feature/history>

Galter Health Sciences Library is open only to the faculty, staff, and students of Northwestern University and its affiliated hospitals. Visit our [Library Access page](#) to learn more.

Printed: Monday, April 21, 2025 4:30 PM

Source: <https://galter.northwestern.edu/news/visualizing-a-century-of-public-health-a-graphic-art-retrospective.pdf>