



View Over 8,000 AIDS Education Posters!

A new exhibition and book showcase 165 posters selected from a vast online collection.

March 28, 2022 By [Trent Straube](#)

On a Boston subway car around 1990, during the early days of the AIDS crisis, Edward C. Atwater, MD, noticed a poster depicting two hands unwrapping a condom packet. Fascinated by the illustration's ability to clearly inform the public about sensitive topics—especially considering the prevailing discourse of 35 years earlier, when he attended medical school and it was illegal to teach contraception—Atwater procured his own copy of the AIDS poster. Over the years, he would acquire more than 8,000 others spanning 130 countries and 76 languages.

Before Atwater died in 2019 at age 93, the rheumatologist and medical historian donated his posters to the University of Rochester in New York, where they make up the AIDS Education Poster Collection within the River Campus Libraries' Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation. Amazingly, the entire collection has been digitized and can be viewed online (aep.lib.rochester.edu/browse).

For the first time, an exhibition and accompanying book cull from the collection to explore the myriad themes, narratives and histories found in the images. *Up Against the Wall: Art, Activism, and the AIDS Poster* runs through June 19 at the University of Rochester's Memorial Art Gallery. It includes 165 posters, ranging from 1983 to 2018 (though the collection continues to grow, thanks in part to Jessica Lacher-Feldman, a special projects manager at the university).

Throughout the HIV epidemic, posters have remained one of the most popular, direct and cost-effective methods to educate the public, inspire compassion, incite protests and, when misused, to frighten and stigmatize—just think of all the images that associated an HIV diagnosis with death, a link no longer tolerated.

Posters make an “immense and profound impact,” says Donald Albrecht, the exhibit's curator, adding that he was astonished by “the wide range of content and styles represented in the posters, from slick advertising-style graphics to simple hand drawings, from expressions of grief to humor and irony.”

The show organizes the posters into topics such as “AIDS Is a Women's Issue,” “AIDS—Hidden Danger,” “I Have AIDS. Please Hug Me” and “Care Enough to Love Safely.”

In addition, a number of health experts, artists and advocates—including Avram Finkelstein of the Silence=Death Collective, Esther McGowan of the nonprofit Visual AIDS, artist Sur Rodney (Sur) and Anthony Fauci, MD—share their cultural and historical insights about specific posters.

“It is my hope,” Albrecht tells POZ, “that these posters from the past provide models for action today.”



“Get Carried Away With Condoms,” 1990; San Francisco; by the San Francisco AIDS Foundation Courtesy of the University of Rochester AIDS Education Collection

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