

The Potrero View

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Museum of Vision an Unusual Sight to See

By Sasha Lekach

Jenny Benjamin thought she'd be employed by an art gallery after receiving her master's in museum studies from George Washington University. Instead, she's been working with eyeballs for the past decade. Benjamin serves as the curator, director, and sole staff member at the Museum of Vision, located in the offices of the American Academy of Ophthalmology, a job she finds fascinating.

Formed in 1896, the academy is one of the few medical associations based in San Francisco. Its headquarters in Fisherman's Wharf has been home to the museum and its exhibits since 1980. The oft-overlooked offices, staffed by 180 individuals working in the field of ophthalmology, are wedged between an art gallery and an Irish pub. Tourists constantly mill past, and sometimes wander in, though more typically the free, 30-minute tours are booked in advance by roughly 150 visitors a year. According to Benjamin, the museum shows what being an eye doctor is all about, "These are the wonderful things we do for patients."

The exhibit starts in what looks like a first-floor office hallway, because it is one. Large posters line the walls, each detailing various eye diseases, starting with cataracts, one of the most common ocular ailments to befall Americans. Almost one and a half million cataract surgeries are performed each year for those suffering from clouded lenses.

Next up is glaucoma, followed by macular degeneration. On the other side of the hallway a color blindness test from 1916 developed by Dr. Shinobu Ishihara in Japan is displayed. Another case exhibits eyeglasses from 1750, 1850 and 1950, along with a lorgnette collection; spectacles with a long handle. The academy has an astounding 3,000 vision aids, from telescopes to monocles. "You don't have to be a physician or an eye doctor to be interested," Benjamin assured. "As we get older our eyes require more care."

The tour jumps to the third floor, with the elevators opening to a collection of eyecups. Toward the end of the 19th century the devices served as a way to keep eyes clean with eyewash made of boric acid. "It would have burned a smidge," Benjamin noted. Eventually the cups –made out of pewter, ceramic, glass and in varying designs – were replaced by eye drops.

The heart of the museum is its changing exhibit room. For the past year "Contagion" has been featured in cases and on the walls. Contagion is mostly about epidemics, and the history of examining the underlying causes of diseases. There are medical books from the 1500s, and glass eyes from 20th century medical classrooms that provide examples of unsightly things, like a corneal ulcer or horn. The exhibit closes this month, to be followed by a survey of how science fiction portrays or misrepresents real medical practice. The special exhibits are permanently accessible on the museum's website.

"After 12 years you would think I would run out of subjects," Benjamin quipped. She said questions from visitors often spur thoughts for new displays. She then works with a committee of academy members to develop a topic and research area. Visitors, usually physicians who show a keen interest in

ophthalmology – classified as “eye medicine,” according to Benjamin, which dates back to the Greeks, and emerged as its own specialty in the 1870s – can also tour the fourth floor, where medical furniture is displayed along with history about the academy itself.

The museum sometimes travels, with exhibits displayed at the academy’s annual meetings, where about 25,000 eye doctors and researchers network, learn and connect. This year’s meeting was held in New Orleans in November. As part of archive efforts, Benjamin’s duties also include conducting oral histories – 84 each year – and compiling legacy projects.

The museum is listed in the [Atlas Obscura](#), a guide of odd and obscure attractions, which draws in tourists and those looking for something off the beaten path. Benjamin will be speaking at “Nerd Nite” at the Rickshaw Shop later this year.

The usual reaction after visiting the museum is “I learned so much,” Benjamin said. Visitors typically tell her that they were drawn to the tour by curiosity, a penchant for things out of the ordinary, or a keen interest or personal connection with eyes, medicine or certain diseases.

From Potrero Hill visitors can take the 19-Polk Muni bus to the museum, located at 655 Beach Street. For more information: museumofvision.org or 561.8502