

EXPLORING THE CITY

BY JIM MURPHY

Ars Medendi

If you like word puzzles, riddles, or enigmas, take a walk down Walnut Street near 10th in Center City. You'll be right in your element.

Just go past the Winged Ox — over to the western side of Thomas Jefferson University's Scott Memorial Library — and you'll come across an unusual copper cylinder with letters punched out of it.

If you're like me, once you notice the sculpture, you'll be fascinated by it and by its companion trapezoidal wall on the west side of 10th Street closer to Locust Street.

**The cylinder is interactive**, interesting, and maybe even a little infuriating. But chances are you'll take a little extra time to look at the sculpture and try to understand the artist's purpose.

Titled *Ars Medendi* for "the Medical Art," both pieces were created by Jim Sanborn and contain historic texts from world medicine.

Sanborn is best known for *Kryptos*, a copper wall at CIA Headquarters in Langely, Virginia. It contains a secret code that has taunted codebreakers for over 20 years.

The letters on both the cylinder and wall at the Jefferson University site represent a variety of alphabets and languages. The cylinder's letters run backwards and forwards at the seams, and you can look through the cylinder and read them in either direction.

When the cylinder is illuminated at night, the letters appear both on the wall of the library building and on the ground, creating a dramatically different effect from daytime.

**The wall's text** is easier to understand, and there is a bench nearby for comfortable contemplation.

Both sculptures remind me a bit of photos I've seen of the ancient Egyptian Rosetta Stone or Babylonia's Hammurabi's Code. There's information to be gained there, but it certainly takes some work.

The cylinder includes sections from the human genome code, names of rainforest plants, plus quotes from Louis Pasteur, Pavlov, Galen, and more.

The screen offers advice from Pliny, Leonardo da Vinci, Dr. Samuel Gross, Qi Bo, Gray's Anatomy, and the Seneca Nation, among others.

Interestingly, other than a local blog, "Ornamento" by Martha Aleo, two minimal references by Thomas Jefferson University, and some photos on Flickr, there is almost nothing about these sculptures anywhere on the web.

**It's almost as if they don't exist.**

Sanborn's own website doesn't mention them at all. To quote Joe Pesci's character in the movie, "JFK" (or its originator, Winston Churchill speaking about Russia) the work is "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma."

A search does show that Thomas Jefferson University commissioned the sculptures in cooperation with the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Philadelphia's One Percent for Public Art Program 2006.

**Mysterious as they may be**, interacting with these "word" sculptures is a unique experience. You can actually see right through them.

At the very least, you may take a few extra moments to really look at words and the meanings they convey — in something other than a smartphone or computer screen format.

There's actual wisdom to be gained here, letter-by-letter, word-by-word, in a non-digital medium. What a concept!

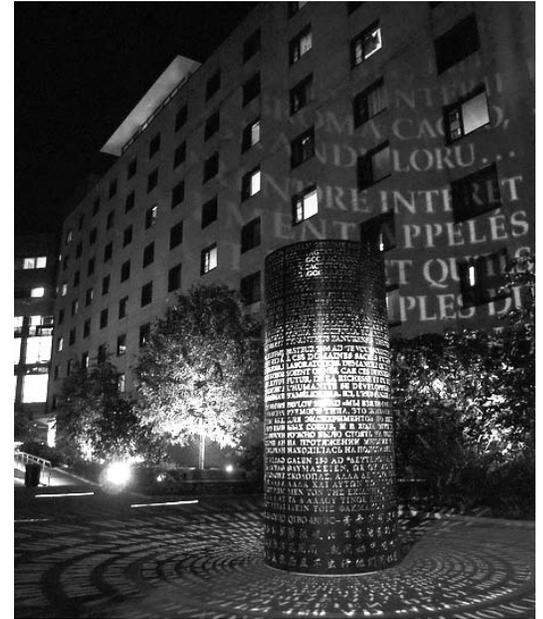


Photo courtesy of Laura Swartz

Mysterious sculptures at Thomas Jefferson University will intrigue and engage you

FAST FACTS

Artwork: *Ars Medendi* (the Medical Art)

Artist: Jim Sanborn

Location: Campus of Thomas Jefferson University

Number of Sculptures: 2

Cylinder: 2009, East Side of 11th Street, South Side of Walnut

Screen: 2008, West Side of 10th Street, South Side of Walnut

Other Important Work by Artist: *Kryptos* — an encrypted sculpture at CIA Headquarters, Langely, Virginia.

**Answer Key:**

For those who want to know what both sculptures are saying, translations are available online. The cylinder: [www.stoopphilly.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Jefferson\\_Cylinder\\_Plaque\\_Proof.pdf](http://www.stoopphilly.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Jefferson_Cylinder_Plaque_Proof.pdf) The screen: [www.stoopphilly.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Jefferson\\_Screens\\_Plaque\\_proof.pdf](http://www.stoopphilly.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Jefferson_Screens_Plaque_proof.pdf)