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Journal
2022-23

Considering our Freedoms

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We are now in our third year of a global pandemic. Despite this reality, I still experience moments of disbelief regarding how our daily freedoms were drastically impacted in early 2020. Getting groceries, seeing loved ones, enjoying culture out in the world. Who would ever have thought that museums around the world would have to close their doors? Thus, I am pleased to announce that the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum will finally open this fall to all our audiences.

It is especially meaningful to re-open MHCAM with *vanessa german—THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH*. As an activist artist dedicated to reshaping dominant systems and spaces through social healing and repair, german is a particularly significant artist for both MHCAM and the Joseph Allen Skinner Museum at this moment in our history. Indeed, part of her exhibition, *MUSEUM OF EMANCIPATORY OBJECTS*, is a site-specific installation that responds to the 19th-century colonialist origins of museums.

With many freedoms in daily American life still not given to all (and some actively being revoked), it is our fervent commitment at the Museum to give freedom to voices and perspectives not always amplified or celebrated. While we continue to critically consider whose stories we share with our public, we still have much work to do. In addition to german's incisive and inspirational exhibition, a smaller show, *Considering Indigeneity*, exemplifies the ways in which MHCAM staff are actively expanding the narratives in our galleries through both acquisitions and display. This truly collaborative project brought together multiple curators and writers to present an innovative display of objects ranging from Paleolithic artifacts to contemporary art.

Indeed, it takes a village for all our work to be done. Thus, before I close, I would like to commemorate two people who were part of our village. Kristin Ann Mortimer, who passed

away in July 2022, served as director of MHCAM from 1990 to 1993. An important initiative led under her tenure was an exhibition drawn from the collections of Mount Holyoke alums and friends of the College, *Collective Pursuits: Mount Holyoke Investigates Modernism*. The corresponding catalogue included an essay by then Professor of Fine Arts on the Alumnae Foundation, Robert L. Herbert, who passed away in December 2020. Already a pioneering scholar of 19th-century French art when he arrived at Mount Holyoke in 1990, Herbert taught art history until his retirement in 1997. We hope our continued work honors their memory.



Director Tricia Y. Paik
chats with artist vanessa
german and film director
Chris Ivey.

Jon Western (1963–2022)

IN MEMORIAM

The humanities help us understand the enduring human condition, and the sciences and social sciences help us understand the gaps in between.

–Jon Western

Jon Western said this during my job interview in July 2016. Even though I attended a liberal arts college, I had never heard anyone describe it so eloquently. I was already excited by the prospect of joining Mount Holyoke so meeting Jon and hearing these words affirmed my wish; I said to Jon, who had just begun his tenure as Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty, “Sign me up!”

Since there are many places where one can learn about Jon’s life and incredible achievements, I will share some of my own recollections and how he championed the Museum on campus. As Dean of Faculty, Jon was a strong advocate for our Teaching with Art program that serves the MHC curriculum. I remember distinctly how Jon’s face lit up when I shared that the Museum had now become a planned stop during some campus faculty interviews. Immediately he recognized that faculty who regularly teach at the Museum viewed us as a notable recruiting tool to attract new talent. In turn, he would proudly share these various stories with others when talking about the Museum.

In March 2017, MHCAM was honored to host Jon and acclaimed photographer Pete Muller, who was then serving as the Cyrus Vance Visiting Professor in International Relations. Jon led an interview with Pete Muller that addressed the complex relationship between masculinity and violence and how such gendered violence is represented in photography. What was clear in this wide-ranging conversation was Jon’s ability to make challenging topics accessible to many.

From my perspective, this ability stemmed from Jon’s own humanity and authenticity, which was palpable in any setting, whether academic or not. Indeed, among my most indelible memories of Jon was from the 2018 Faculty Show. During one skit, he and other professors poked



fun at themselves, as they reenacted the jubilant flash mob choreography danced by faculty during MHC’s 2016 convocation. What I saw was Jon’s sheer joy and abandon as he danced to Justin Timberlake’s “Can’t Stop the Feeling;” he was unafraid to share on stage his authentic humanity for everyone to see. I believe that is what will endure whenever we remember Jon Western’s legacy at Mount Holyoke.

Tricia Y. Paik, PhD
Florence Finch Abbott Director

Jon Western (left), with
photographer Pete
Muller, April 19, 2017

Exhibitions

Skinner Museum 75

vanessa german—THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH

September 2, 2022–May 28, 2023

vanessa german* (b. 1976) is an artist, activist, performer, and poet. *THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH* is german's response to the Joseph Allen Skinner Museum, an early 20th-century cabinet of curiosities at Mount Holyoke. For the exhibition, german began with a question: how do we decolonize a thing, a museum, a collection? Her answer turned into an emancipatory endeavor—to touch every object in the Skinner collection. In this way, the story of the Skinner Museum is recentered and retold. Visitors to the exhibition will encounter more than a dozen of german's iconic power figures and other assemblages displayed in her installation *MUSEUM OF EMANCIPATORY OBJECTS*, created with materials and words gathered from the Mount Holyoke College community. This project commemorates the 75th anniversary of the 1946 Skinner bequest to Mount Holyoke College (delayed due to the pandemic).

This exhibition is made possible by the Susan B. Weatherbie Exhibition Fund and the Leon Levy Foundation.

**lowercase letters are the preference of the artist*

Form and Figment: Highlights from the Permanent Collection

September 2, 2022–May 28, 2023

Ranging from portraits to fragmented figures, the works in this exhibition serve as meditations on physical and psychological states of being. The suggested presence—and sometimes absence—of the human figure evokes a tension between the mysterious and the concrete, the real and the imagined. Whether through the pain of loss or the promise of renewal, these embodied forms invite us to contemplate ourselves, and others, in an ongoing process of transition.

This exhibition is made possible by the Joyce Marcus Art Exhibition Fund.

MHCAM Journal, Issue 9, 2022–23

Editor: Kendra D. Weisbin

Photographer: Laura Shea, unless otherwise noted

Top: Unidentified Melanesian maker(s), *Lime container*, 20th century, made in the Sepik River region, New Guinea, bamboo, charcoal, and tree sap, Gift of Cedric H. Marks, 1964.2.V.SIX.

Right: Willie Cole (American, b. 1955), *Street Dragon I*, 2018, shoes, wire and screws on a metal stand, Purchase with the Susan and Bernard Schilling (Susan Eisenhart, Class of 1932) Fund, 2021.8 © Willie Cole.

Cover: Photograph courtesy of THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH. Back cover: vanessa german. Photo: Laura Shea.

Considering Indigeneity

September 2, 2022–May 28, 2023

Throughout history, the conceptual boundaries of Indigeneity have been predominantly shaped, broadened, and constrained by settler colonialism, imperialism, and white supremacy. Rather than an authoritative or oversimplified display attempting to present all facets of Indigeneity, this exhibition attempts to reveal the complexities encountered in these objects, of the communities they represent, and the societal structures that brought them to the Museum. What is Indigeneity? How is it defined and who does the defining? What can museums do to acknowledge their past and present roles in this conversation—both harmful and, ideally, reparative?

This exhibition is made possible by the Susan Davenport Page 1931 and Margaret Davenport Page Fales 1929 Art Fund and the Leon Levy Foundation.



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vanessa german—THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH

September 2, 2022–May 28, 2023

vanessa german interviewed by Aaron F. Miller, Associate Curator of Visual and Material Culture and NAGPRA Coordinator, and Kymberly S. Newberry, Assistant Curator of Special Projects

Skinner Museum 75 celebrates the 75th anniversary of the Joseph Allen Skinner Museum bequest to the College in 1946. *vanessa german—THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH* is the second in a two-year exhibition series to mark this important anniversary (delayed due to the pandemic). In 2017, german* was invited to study the Skinner collection and came to campus in 2019 for a series of visits and to create a new body of work inspired by what she encountered. german (b. 1976) chose to physically touch every object in the Skinner Museum's collection, and out of this experience came her vision to emancipate Skinner's decontextualized objects and, ultimately, herself. In the guise of her RAREST persona, german reached out to the Mount Holyoke College community to join her in the creation of a body of emancipatory work. With MHCAM interns, german created a series of prompts and calls for materials on campus, which resulted in an outpouring of words and belongings. german used these to create the artworks on view, which include her iconic power figures and other compelling assemblages.

The following text comes from a conversation between vanessa german, Aaron Miller, Associate Curator of Visual and Material Culture and Kymberly Newberry, Assistant Curator of Special Projects.

Kymberly Newberry: What do you want a visitor to the Museum to know about you that they didn't know when they walked in the door.

vanessa german: I want people to know that I enter every opportunity in my wholeness. I do not separate any part of myself from the

wholeness and the possibility of that which can arise through being a whole human being inside the process. I am not entering the process just to pluck some crystallized idea from it and then work simply from the single idea.

Every opportunity is alive and awake for me to have clarity in myself as an artist, to become my political and spiritual self more fully. This has been an entirely alive process, so the ideas that existed when this process [at MHCAM] began several years ago gave birth to the work that exists now. Even though the ideas have shifted, it took everything. It took a pandemic, it took shifting through the relationship with the space, it took working through different incarnations of ideas. It has been a living process and in that living process each ingredient has given forth all of its gifts into the next blossoming of ideas.

Kymberly: Who comes with you in this process?

vanessa: My mother was an artist. My mother raised us to be artists and activists. We were raised with the spirit of creativity and courage in every aspect of our lives. We also understand that we are in a really long line of makers and that, if the rupture of the transatlantic slave trade did not exist, we would be able to trace the line of makers to times before language. I have a way of working instinctively and intuitively, which is really special for this show specifically. Sometimes I'll make an entire body of work purely on instinct and then historians were like, "Oh you're doing this thing that has been done for thousands of years," and I had no idea what it was. So we recognize that we're in a long line of makers. We're in a long line of materiality, of people who work within transformation of not

*lowercase letters are the preference of the artist



only physical material but spiritual material. We recognize that this is within us—the collective of souls that make up my being, but also my siblings and other lines of my family. We recognize that we are from a long line of people who have the capacity to transform both the material and spiritual worlds. We recognize that there's also a distinct rupture because of the transatlantic slave trade. There are certain artists who are called upon to bridge that rupture without necessarily a whole library of materials, you have to bridge it from your soul.

Aaron Miller: Why was it important to gather materials and thoughts from Mount Holyoke College community members?

vanessa: We live in a world that is very noisy, where there's a lot of static, a lot of information, a lot of images, a lot of language. To find a way and a process to remove the static from your own frequency can be very difficult. People meditate, do yoga, do all these different things, but what I find is that the mining, the excavation, the gathering, the seeking is a really important clarifying process.

There was an invitation to respond to prompts and bring forth materials from this community of Mount Holyoke. We recognize the magic that is involved in this entire process. We are here now together, we recognize that things are meant to be and that more than one thing is always happening at the same time. We recognize we do not need to control every single theme and when we surrender this place of needing to control what ingredients, and who is submitting the ingredients, then we allow for the experience to be as alive as possible for every single human being who is involved in it.

We created a treasure trove of materials and information from the Mount Holyoke community. There were going to be maybe three to five very strong currents that rose up to help define the purpose that we moved forward with. So we created with intention, even if the inten-

tion is just love and even if the intention is just creativity. What they gave contributes to the intention and the purpose of the work, which then allows me in the studio to be active in a sort of communion of time. We're asking these questions, right now, and after a pandemic, when stress and the world and war, and all these things are present. There are so many human beings who contributed to that treasure trove and we are together in a way that is also very important and powerful at this time.

Aaron: Can you help us bridge the conceptual part of this work and the creation of the emancipatory objects?

vanessa: The Skinner collection was made at a certain time when the world was a certain way. So I'm having this real conversation about what does it mean to decolonize something, and can you decolonize something joyfully? What does it mean to get your heart back—to get your soul back? What does it need to be undone and to undo yourself from the chains of a system? That's where the creation of *THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH* came from. Decolonization is really to turn a story, to have the power to turn a story in your own favor. This was me trying to turn the story of the Skinner collection to my own favor. People know you can't touch stuff in the museum. But I start touching the objects and it's very touching, it's really moving, it kind of shakes me and it awakens something inside of me. It awakened more of my spirit—that part of me that I did not recognize existed even to be awakened.

Decolonization is really to turn a story, to have the power to turn a story in your own favor. This was me trying to turn the story of the Skinner collection to my own favor. People know you can't touch stuff in the museum. But I start touching the objects and it's very touching, it's really moving, it kind of shakes me and it awakens something inside of me.

—vanessa german

A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT

Partnering with MHCAM student education interns Cortnei Edwards '22 and Domenica Guaman '22, vanessa german invited voices from the Mount Holyoke College community to participate in her emancipatory exhibition project. Working with the artist, Cortnei and Domenica crafted thought-provoking prompts, such as “What do you need forgiveness for?” “What are you currently learning and un-learning?” They then designed posters and installed collection stations across campus to gather written responses and personal objects and clothing from the campus community. german incorporated these anonymous responses and materials into the art she created for *THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH*.

In keeping with this collaborative process, the exhibition also features stunning photographs taken by Laura Shea, the Museum's photographer. Shea was on site during german's project at the Skinner Museum, documenting the progress and capturing meaningful moments between german and many of the objects and spaces she encountered.

So for me, there was an immense emancipatory ritual in touching every object. At the beginning of some rituals, you can name a place that you want to go, but the ritual will not tell you how you're going to get there, or who you'll be at the end of it. But it will get you where you need to go. The ritual is smarter than you are. Coming into this place I had a really transformative experience.

As a creative person, as a maker, what I do is transform material with purpose, with love, and with spirit in purpose. This is why I'm a citizen artist. This is about being a citizen of the planet Earth. So I moved forward from this place of awakening in this ritual to create. For there to be more emancipatory experiences you can't always define the end in the middle of it. This is not a recipe for roast chicken. We're not just building a building and following a set of plans. We went from 'how do you decolonize this collection?' to 'how do you turn the story?' How do we turn the story of the Skinner Museum into a story that alters my reality—the reality of someone who, at the time that this collection was built, would never have been able to do this because of the system and the structures that existed? We turned it into a story of a rare, exceptional, triumphant, untouchable, Black woman who touched everything and was touched.



MHCAM education interns Cortnei Edwards '22 (right) and Domenica Guaman '22 (left) with the artist vanessa german outside the Skinner Museum. Photo: Ellen M. Alvord

Considering Indigeneity

September 2, 2022–May 28, 2023

Aaron F. Miller, Associate Curator of Visual and Material Culture and NAGPRA Coordinator

ON VIEW

Last year, the idea arose to create a thematic gallery to share objects from Indigenous communities across the globe. Most of the proposed works had rarely, if ever, been on view before. Initially, the idea was to showcase these works and highlight the Museum's collection of Indigenous artworks and objects—a straightforward exhibition that would bring new objects out of storage and show the breadth of the collection and the potential for future updates to the permanent collection galleries. However, more and more questions emerged about how to appropriately display, discuss, and even label these objects from more than a dozen Indigenous communities. An exhibition like this required a very thoughtful approach and ideally one with many stakeholders in the process.

Concurrently, as part of a Five College Mellon Grant, Isabel Cordova and Sydney Nguyen were hired by the consortium as Post-Baccalaureate Assistants for Indigenous American Collections. Conversations with the two blossomed into a collaborative enterprise and Isabel and Sydney joined me and Stomberg Curatorial Intern Claire Louise Wagner '22 as co-curators.

From the start, we wanted to make this exhibition about conversations rather than assertions. Museums across the globe are in a moment of reflection regarding their collections and the problematic structures of collecting, display, and interpretation. In *Considering Indigeneity*, the exhibition design and gallery texts attempt to reveal the complexities encountered in these objects, the communities they represent, and the societal structures that brought many of them to the Museum. Historically, the conceptual boundaries of Indigeneity have been predominantly shaped, broadened, and constrained by settler colonialism, imperialism, and white supremacy. This is a global history reinforced across the centuries and into the present by institutions like univer-

sities and museums. With a legacy of extracting, labeling, and displaying with the intent to define and confine Indigeneity, is it possible for a museum to enact meaningful change? Our goal was to think beyond established notions and inspire critical conversations, creating a space for dialogue and discovery. Most importantly, we hoped to magnify and honor the right of communities to physical, cultural, and spiritual sovereignty.

As the plans were coming together for this exhibition, Sabra Thorner, Assistant Professor of Anthropology, was developing an innovative new version of her course "Decolonizing Museums."

Stan Natchez
(Fernandeño Tataviam
Band of Mission
Indians, b. 1954)
Homage to Warhol,
2012
Oil on silkscreen on
canvas
Purchase with the Anne
and Fredric Garonzik
Acquisition Fund
2022.5
© Stan Natchez



Osei Bonsu (Ashanti, 1900–1977)
Queen mother figure, possibly from a Sika-rebewu-epere (musical performance) group, late 1920s
Wood with gold paint
Purchase with the Belle and Hy Baier Art Acquisition Fund
2020.12

The grant-funded class brought to campus three generations of Indigenous Australian artists led by matriarch Maree Clarke to work with students and campus partners to create a possum-skin cloak. Traditionally, these cloaks of southwest Australia accompanied an individual from birth to the grave. Their making was all but lost until community members worked to bring them back. The collaborative creation of this cloak at Mount Holyoke and the sharing of this reparative work was truly a profound experience for all involved. Museum staff had the honor of

being involved in the making of this incredible object and the cloak will be on view alongside the captivating photographs of members of the campus community wearing the cloak. Juliette Gagnon Strong Heart '24 was the community-based learning mentor for Thorner's course and collaborated with the artists on the beadwork portion of the cloak. "It was unforgettable," she says of the experience. "I deeply value the connection created with the artists. To be able to see, let alone be wrapped in, a shared art, is quite familiar and also new. When folks see the cloak, I hope they are able to feel how meaningful it is."

This exhibition also showcases recent acquisitions that enrich the conversations we can have at MHCAM regarding Indigenous communities in both the past and present. A visually captivating and exciting new painting acquisition by the artist Stan Natchez, *Homage to Warhol* (2012), was acquired and will be in conversation with *Sitting Bull* (1986) by Andy Warhol. The incredible recent acquisition of the *Queen mother figure* (1920s) by renowned Ashanti artist Osei Bonsu will be on view alongside two stunning Yoruba figural objects lent to the Museum by Cynthia Sahagian Cross (Class of 1960). These works, in juxtaposition, will bring up conversations about representation and agency in reference to the African diaspora and Indigeneity.

This exhibition introduces important and complicated object-based conversations about homelands, connections between people and place, histories of collecting and display, and how Indigeneity is defined. We are not presenting a solitary institutional voice or viewpoint—instead, the objects and accompanying texts engage in complex and nuanced conversations. We invite Museum visitors into this ongoing conversation in the spirit of collaboration, critique, and a desire for positive change.



Form and Figment

September 2, 2022–May 28, 2023

Ellen M. Alvord, Associate Director of Engagement and Weatherbie Curator of Academic Programs and Kendra D. Weisbin, Associate Curator of Engagement and Interpretation

Drawn from the Museum's permanent collection, the artworks in this exhibition reference the human body in both realistic and abstract forms. The works span from the mid-twentieth century to the present, foregrounding art by women and artists of color, while also highlighting important recent acquisitions, such as Charles McGill's sculpture *Black Again* (2013) and Zanele Muholi's photograph *Thulani I, Paris* (2014), both gifted to the Museum in 2019 by Pavel Zoubok and a photograph by Andargé Asfaw, given in 2020 by Charles and Blanche Derby. Ranging from portraits to fragmented forms, these works serve as meditations on physical and psychological states of being. The suggested presence—and sometimes absence—of the human figure evokes a tension between the mysterious and the concrete, the real and the imagined. For instance, Dorothea Tanning's Surrealist painting hints at embodied but absent forms. In her meditative self-portrait, *Still in the Studio* (1979), a formless mass creeps along the window frame, at turns mirroring Tanning's own figure and at others defying any recognizable form. Asfaw's photograph grapples with absence in a different way. An Ethiopian cross is presented for the viewer, displaying its ornate details yet obscuring the face of the person holding it.

Another thread that runs through the exhibition is that of otherworldliness, with references to both spirituality and to dreamlike or altered states of being. Edward del Rosario's playful and confounding image, *Civilization II* (2013), seems to teeter on the edge of reality, while David C. Driskell's *Chieftain's Chair* (2011) presents an abstract rendering of a potent symbol of spirituality and authority. Audrey Flack's photorealistic *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* (2013), walks the line between these realms, with a partial depiction of a Baroque sculpture of the saint in her famous trance-like state. Underneath her image, Flack prints Saint Theresa's description of her vision of an angel piercing her with an arrow: "I saw in

his hand a little gold and at the point a little fire. He thrust it into my heart and pierced my very entrails. . ." Flack plays with this imagery, pairing the text and image with a tube of lipstick with a fiery red tip.

The materiality of the objects—from layered veils of oil paint to found object collages—signal the act of transformation. Willie Cole stacks and angles vintage high-heel shoes until the objects themselves melt into one another and become a greater whole—a face staring back at us with wide red lips and gold eyes, a *'Street Dragon'* (2018). Charles McGill's powerful composition, *Black Again*, transforms leather golf bags—taking these symbols of luxury and twisting them into undulating and jagged forms on a canvas stretcher, becoming a meditation on abstract painting. While each artist has engaged in transforming physical materials, the subject matter of each work also hints at a continuous state of emerging or becoming something new. Whether through transformed materials, embodied forms, or a sense of absence, the works in this show invite us to contemplate ourselves, and others, in an ongoing process of transition.

David Clyde Driskell
(American, 1931–2020)
Chieftain's Chair, 2011
Serigraph
Partial gift of the
Experimental Printmaking
Institute, Lafayette
College and purchase
with the Jean C. Harris
Art Acquisition Fund
2016.2.19
© Estate of David C.
Driskell



Creativity in Action

Ellen M. Alvord, Associate Director of Engagement
and Weatherbie Curator of Academic Programs

As in-person teaching resumed at the College last fall, Museum staff were thrilled to welcome students back into the galleries for class visits. The galleries were once again abuzz with conversations and close looking, and being together in the physical presence of the art opened up the full sensory experience impossible to replicate virtually. Interacting with original works of art can also activate other ways of learning and expressing beyond the verbal. This past year a number of classes integrated active making into their visits. The following classes exemplify the diverse array of creative responses students engaged in.

In the fall, Assistant Professor Shakia Barron scheduled two Museum visits for her first-year seminar, “Rooted Movements: Black Dance Culture.” The objective for the initial visit was to have students build skills of observation and analysis. For the second visit, they creatively responded to contemporary works of art. Students looked at works by Faith Ringgold, David C. Driskell, Aaron Siskind, and William T.

Williams, paying special attention to their formal arrangements, lines, shapes, color palette, rhythms, and sense of movement or musicality. Participating in an act of mini-curation, they found another work in the galleries to pair with the initial artwork, thinking about how the two spoke to one another.

For the second Museum visit, students looked closely at two contemporary works of art, exploring each work’s relationship to Black dance culture. After the initial discussion, students responded to the art by creating written poems or movement pieces in small groups. This exercise gave them an opportunity to practice meaning-making through the translation of visual media into an alternate artistic form, and in the process, expand their own understanding of the work itself. For example, one group chose to create a movement piece inspired by Lorraine O’Grady’s *Dancer in Grass Skirt* (from her *Art Is. . .* photographic series) (1983), which depicts a smiling woman holding up an empty gold frame to spotlight the face of another performer during a parade in Harlem, NY. In their movement piece, the students decided to animate and give life to the spectators barely visible in the photograph’s background, expanding upon the artist’s vision that avant garde art is for everyone.

In the spring semester, Museum staff hosted a class session with Associate Professor Ligia Bouton’s studio art majors to look at *Remainder* (2021), on view in Lenka Clayton’s *Comedy Plus Tragedy* exhibition. This conceptual work included an eclectic array of vessels from around the world, organized from largest to smallest across a long pedestal. After studying this work closely, students participated in an exquisite corpse drawing exercise. Each student drew the top part of one container, then folded their paper in half and gave it to another student to draw the bottom half of a different

Students in Shakia Barron’s first-year seminar create a movement piece in response to Lorraine O’Grady’s *Art Is. . .* (Dancer in Grass Skirt).



vessel. They paid careful attention to the unique curves, shading, and decorations of their chosen vessel. The new composite forms the students created were charming, quirky, and unexpectedly beautiful. Subsequently, this same class also had the opportunity to engage creatively with Clayton during her visit to campus. In a special studio session, Clayton introduced herself by passing out a ball of clay to each student, asking them to put it behind their backs and giving them one minute to fashion the clay into the shape of an elephant. The results were remarkably diverse and full of personality, as the students were not able to overthink the process, instead they had to work quickly and intuitively. Both of these exercises gave students new entry points for thinking about their own artistic process.

Another benefit of incorporating creativity exercises during Museum classes is the opportunity for each student in the class to contribute

to a larger collaborative endeavor, enabling everyone to experiment and take a playful approach to seeing, processing, and making. This was the case for Assistant Professor Anna Maria Hong's "Korean American Feminist Poetry" class. After spending extended time looking at and discussing two captivating prints by artist Jiha Moon, students were asked to take notes about their observations and select five standout words from their writing. Next, they wrote their five words on index cards, one word per card. The students were divided into two groups and each group was asked to combine their words into one collaborative poem. The resulting poems created vibrant counterpoints to the visually complex prints. The students in each of these examples enjoyed the chance to be creative, and the inclusive format promoted an energizing and thought-provoking class experience.

Artist Lenka Clayton (kneeling left) leads a creativity exercise with students from Associate Professor Ligia Bouton's and Guest Artist Rebecca Davis's Advanced Studio classes.



Five College Faculty Seminar on Ancient and Modern Silk Roads

Kendra D. Weisbin, Associate Curator of Engagement and Interpretation

Ajay Sinha, Julie '73 and Helene '49 Herzig Professor of Art History, and Yao Wu, Jane Chace Carroll Curator of Asian Art at the Smith College Museum of Art, discuss a selection of artworks in the Museum's Carson Teaching Gallery. Photo: Ellen M. Alvord

Five College faculty seminars are a unique way to connect faculty across disciplines and institutions. Spurred by the success of a similar seminar in 2018, and by the recent gift of ancient artifacts from Afghanistan, the Museum hosted eleven scholars from Mount Holyoke College, Smith College, Amherst College, and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Museum staff worked in collaboration with Bettina Bergmann, Professor Emeritus of Art History, and Kavita Khory, Ruth Lawson Professor of Politics and Carol Hoffmann Collins Director of the McCulloch Center for Global Initiatives. The goal of the seminar was threefold: to expand the scope of Silk Roads studies, advancing

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Yao Wu, Curator, SCMA



conversations about cultural connections into the present, with an emphasis on the ethics of archaeology and collecting; to encourage object-based exploration in Silk Roads studies across disciplines; and finally, to consider how these conversations can and should impact installations of art from these regions.

Our first session, hosted in March, introduced the idea of object-based learning. After participants described their interest in the field, we began a discussion about how to approach and define the Silk Roads. We then turned our attention to thematically-clustered groups of art and artifacts, considering how students might benefit from using objects as primary sources. In session two, we focused on collecting, displaying, and teaching with Silk Roads artifacts. Yao Wu, Jane Chace Carroll Curator of Asian Art at Smith College Museum of Art, presented SCMA's recent ancient gallery reinstatement project. The group discussed whether, in adopting a thematic approach, the reinstatement achieved balance between highlighting connections and preserving cultural specificities.

From this installation-based conversation we moved to a discussion led by Kavita Khory on the topic of ongoing conflicts and how these have

FACULTY PERSPECTIVE

The Silk Roads seminar demonstrates the enduring value of cross-disciplinary inquiry and collaboration with colleagues from Mount Holyoke and the Five Colleges. The collection offers a remarkable opportunity for students to engage directly with artifacts from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Indus Valley. I will be incorporating objects from the Silk Road into my courses on international politics, migration, and nationalism to show the relevance of history for contemporary politics, how trade and migration have long connected geographic regions that are often studied in isolation, and the use—and abuse—of archaeological sites, museums, and antiquities by nationalist movements and armies in times of war and peace. Working with objects creates a powerful sensory experience for students, as they learn new ways of thinking about material culture and its place in contemporary societies.

—Kavita Khory, Ruth Lawson Professor of Politics and Carol Hoffmann Collins Director of the McCulloch Center for Global Initiatives

Bettina Bergmann, Emeritus Professor of Art History, and Jason Moralee, Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, examine files related to a new gift of Gandharan art. Photo: Ellen M. Alvord



impacted archaeological sites and artifacts. Aaron Miller, Associate Curator of Visual Material Culture and NAGPRA Coordinator, introduced the history of the ancient collections at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, including those from the Egyptian Exploration Fund, the cuneiform tablets “rediscovered” on campus, and artifacts in the Skinner Museum, among others. Aaron Miller and Bettina Bergmann augmented this discussion by introducing the student seminars that they co-taught on these collections. Museum staff provided a brief introduction to the layout of the Museum galleries as

a way to prompt questions for our final session: how might we visualize a reinstallation of the Asian, ancient, and other galleries at MHCAM?

Our third and final session had the participants engage in a critique of the current layout of three permanent collection galleries, considering how the professors might reinterpret and reinstall the space and how to integrate challenging objects like those discussed in the seminar, including sacred objects and those from grave contexts. The three sessions laid important groundwork for future collaborations and interdisciplinary curriculum development.

Snapshots: Family Memories of Joseph Allen Skinner

Joseph Allen Skinner's grandchildren interviewed by Aaron F. Miller, Associate Curator of Visual and Material Culture and NAGPRA Coordinator

Skinner Museum 75, our two-year celebration of the Joseph Allen Skinner Museum, offered a unique opportunity for MHCAM staff to come into contact, for the first time, with some of the grandchildren of Joseph Allen Skinner. Through a series of conversations, we learned so much about the person behind the Museum. The following interview took place with four of Skinner's grandchildren on his daughter Martha's side.

Aaron Miller: What do you remember about your grandfather?

Elisabeth "Polly" Logan Taussig: Grandpa Skinner was wonderful, I loved him! He always made time for us, and always appeared genuinely interested in us and our projects, whatever they were. He always seemed available and was generous to a fault. Grandpa's favorite exclamation was: "Great Caesar's Ghost!"

Joseph Skinner Logan: I was 14 years old when my grandfather died. I remember him as a kindly, relaxed gentleman, proud of his family, generous, whose father built up the silk business where he worked. We stayed in a house he owned next door to his home (The Orchards) during several summers. We were always welcome in his home and frequently had dinner there with him and my aunt Polly (Elisabeth Skinner).

Jonathan Logan: I remember sitting around the radio [with my grandfather] listening to the news when London was being bombed.

Do you have any memories of the Skinner Museum?

Polly: Grandpa took us around and showed us things. He showed me how to work the broom-making machine. He would demonstrate

how things worked. He loved to share his collections and the things stored where the carriages were kept.

Joseph: I visited the Museum many times and saw the things he had collected there. It was, and is, a fascinating and diverse collection.

Martha "Mattie" Logan Bicknell: I have been to the Skinner Museum many times and taken my children there. The items which stay in memory are the millstone in front of the Museum, the schoolhouse, Native American artifacts, fossils, dinosaur footprints, bicycles, and the broom-making machine. I loved the carriage collection too.

Why do you think your grandfather collected?

Polly: He had a huge curiosity about people and their work. It was genuine—not to show off. If you picked up a stone alongside the road and took it to him, he was interested.

Joseph: He liked to travel and apparently picked up lots of souvenirs, many of which may have found their way to the Museum.

Mattie: I was told that he brought home many things from his travels to share with our grandmother. She was unable to travel the world with him, so he brought the world back to her. He enjoyed collecting things which interested him.

Why do you think your grandfather created a public museum?

Polly: Because his house became too small! I think he wanted to share his collections and he was avidly interested in all the things he collected.

Joseph: He had a generous and intellectually-curious character.

Did Joseph Allen Skinner's collecting impulse leave a legacy in your family?

Mattie: Some of us have carried on the tradition of collecting. I was encouraged to start collecting as a child and remember hearing my parents repeat a Skinner saying frequently in my life, "There is always room for a good thing." My children have heard me say it as well.

What do you want a visitor to the Museum to know about your grandfather?

Polly: He was larger than life and people were drawn to him. A gentle giant. To be with him was a treat and he never made me feel insignificant. He was generous with time and money in all respects, it was his nature. If you went into the mill and saw him with his employees, you saw genuine respect and friendship. People smiled and really liked Grandpa. They called him "Mr. Joe" and he was liked everywhere. He was approachable, in no way intimidating. I never met anyone who didn't like Grandpa.

Joseph: I believe he treated his employees at the silk factory very well (better than many factory owners of the time) and was admired by the community.

Mattie: I have no memories of my grandfather, but have a collection of articles, photos and memorabilia about him gathered from my mother and aunt. My impression of him is taken from this collection as well as stories shared by my mother. My grandfather was a gifted man of many interests. He was a silk manufacturer who traveled for business as well as for pleasure.



He was kind, generous, inquisitive, and innovative. He appreciated fine art and fine things. He loved, and was beloved by, his family. Joseph Allen Skinner was a man of faith, a deacon in his church, a Sunday school teacher, a collector of all manner of things, a photographer and benefactor.

Joseph Allen Skinner and daughter Martha, 1912
Photo courtesy of Martha Logan Bicknell

Thank you for this opportunity to share what we know of our grandfather.

New Acquisition: A Work by El Anatsui

KyMBERLY S. NEWBERRY, Assistant Curator of Special Projects

El Anatsui (Ghanaian, b. 1944)
Bird, 1992
Carved and incised wooden panels
Purchase with the Madeleine Pinsof Plonsker (Class of 1962) Fund and the Art Acquisition Fund
© El Anatsui. Photo courtesy of Bonhams

Ghanaian artist El Anatsui once declared, “I wish that I spoke more languages because I think each language. . . it’s a new window. I, at times, regret I’m not very good at languages, I would love to have more windows opening to me.”

Drawing from his enduring love of language, Anatsui, in his early work, employed the chainsaw to construct a new artistic language. Like the innovative stretcher-less canvases of Sam Gilliam, or the novel dripping technique of Jackson Pollock, Anatsui’s new medium of the chainsaw gave rise to gestural flourishes

of abstract, symbolic, and textual marks on wood panels. The violent brutal lashings of the chainsaw, primal and powerful, doff their cap to history and its fractures, from the vanishing of ancient societies to the instability of post-colonial nations.

Born in Ghana in 1944, Anatsui studied at the University of Nigeria Nsukka, where his artistic fervor was kindled by a supportive intellectual and artistic community. After a brief dalliance with wood carving in the 1970’s, Anatsui laid it aside until a studio residency in Cummington, Massachusetts, in 1980. While cutting logs with a chainsaw, he recognized the possibility of the chainsaw, like the painter’s brush or the potter’s wheel, as an instrument of artistic creativity. Of his use of the chainsaw, Anatsui said, “The chainsaw is a tool that I found useful for shaping. Sculpture is about shaping. Any media that you can shape is a sculptural medium and any process with which I shape is a sculptural process. . . Each process has its own peculiarities or language.”

His early wood sculptures, rendered and scorched with a chainsaw, conjugate the violent gashing and mangling of Africa by European empires in the age of colonization, another language fluently spoken by Anatsui. This leads us to *Bird*, a carved and incised wood panel sculpture, completed by Anatsui in 1992. *Bird* is a cenotaph that addresses movement, not just the movement of people, but the indefatigable spirits of people forced into movement by the mercilessness of history. As we watch the reruns of history today, it becomes even more urgent to usher work such as *Bird* into the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum. *Bird* arrives to us like a thousand year old West African baobab tree, whose hollowed out trunk we sit in and take shelter while listening to its wisdom, sent to us by a Ghanaian master of many languages.



The chainsaw is a tool that I found useful for shaping. Sculpture is about shaping. Any media that you can shape is a sculptural medium and any process with which I shape is a sculptural process. . . Each process has its own peculiarities or language.

—El Anatsui

NEW ACQUISITION



Jabari C. Jefferson, *Return of the Ascended Masters*

MHCAM is pleased to announce the acquisition of *Return of the Ascended Masters*, a new work by mixed-media artist Jabari C. Jefferson (b. 1994).

Made in 2021, the arresting large-scale composition combines collage and oil on canvas and is one of Jefferson's

recent additions to his ongoing *Library Series*. The work was purchased with funds from Patricia Perkins Andringa (Class of 1966), a longtime supporter of the Museum and a former Museum board member, who was instrumental in bringing this artist to our attention.

Jabari C. Jefferson (American, b. 1994)
Return of the Ascended Masters, 2021
Mixed media oil on canvas
Purchased with funds from Patricia Perkins Andringa (Class of 1966)
2021.7
© Jabari Jefferson

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