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Teaching with Art at Mount Holyoke College Art Museum Gains Strong Support from Mellon Foundation

Visual literacy training for college students has become a broadly shared goal for a wide spectrum of departments on campuses today. Colleges have long emphasized the need for students to think critically when reading; a focus on visual literacy training teaches them to think critically when looking.

Thanks to a \$500,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in 2008, the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum (MHCAM) realized an opportunity to promote visual learning in disciplines beyond the arts and humanities. Now the announcement of a second \$500,000 grant from the Foundation will put the Museum on the road to making these strides permanent.

“The Mellon Foundation’s support has transformed the MHCAM into an increasingly vital component of the College’s overall goal to offer liberal learning for purposeful engagement in the world,” says Lynn Pasquerella, President of Mount Holyoke College.

According to John Stomberg, Florence Finch Abbott Director of the Museum, academic use of the Art Museum has more than tripled since the initial grant. “Our coordinator of academic affairs, Ellen Alvord works with faculty from a wide range of departments to develop curriculum that can make use of the Museum and its 17,000 objects. This past year 82 different College courses representing 24 disciplines visited the Art Museum. “As word has gotten out, those figures are likely to be surpassed,” said Stomberg.

Faculty members request objects relevant to their courses and meet with their students in a specially designed classroom at the Museum. Beyond the works on already on view, more than 1,500 objects are pulled from storage specifically for classes each academic year. This allows faculty and students to have access to original works of art of the highest quality across a wide cultural spectrum, and from antiquity to the present. Recent courses have included art, chemistry, biology, physics, mathematics, history, languages, anthropology, sociology, art history, philosophy, religion, and other disciplines.

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Beyond the broad expanse of subjects taught in an interdisciplinary fashion in the galleries, the Museum has also focused on promoting visual learning in depth. Adapting an initiative developed for Yale University medical students, it now conducts a program on close observation for all introductory undergraduate biology students. Through this Mellon-supported project, the Museum helps to provide students with critical tools for their future, including close looking, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation.

In the words of one recent student, *“Before this lab, I was unaware of the similarities between lab observation and art criticism, but now I see that such similarities are absolutely striking. Analyzing individual elements of a work of art requires the same diligence as analyzing the contents of a petri dish or animals in their natural habitats.”*

The Museum, which is celebrating its 135th anniversary this year, is free, open to the public, and fully accessible. Hours are Tuesday to Friday 11 AM to 5 PM, Saturday and Sunday 1 PM to 5 PM, closed on Sundays. It will be closed from June 4 to July 9 for installation.

The Mount Holyoke College Art Museum in South Hadley is a leading collegiate art museum. Its comprehensive permanent collection of 17,000 objects features Asian art, 19th- and 20th-century European and American paintings and sculpture, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman art, Medieval sculpture, early Italian Renaissance paintings, and an extensive collection of works on paper. For more information, visit www.mtholyoke.edu/artmuseum or call 413-538-2085.

Electronic images are available upon request.

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