

A global timeline unfolds: Mount Holyoke College Art Museum reopens after nine months

Celebrating its 150th anniversary, the museum trades thematic rooms for a chronological layout that brings hidden treasures out of storage



Tricia Paik, the director of the Mount Holyoke College of Art Museum talks about the latest renovations and placement of art in the museum. CAROL LOLLIS / Staff Photo

After a nine-month closure, the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum in South Hadley is ready to reopen and celebrate its 150th anniversary with a new layout and a number of previously unseen works.



The museum will reopen on Tuesday, Sept. 8, following a major renovation — the first to its permanent collection galleries since 1971. The project aims to overhaul the gallery spaces into a chronological arrangement and make the museum more accessible, both by improving physical navigation and representing more visitor demographics through the art itself.

What's more, many of the permanent collection works now on display have either never, or almost never, been exhibited at the museum before.

“A number of years ago, we realized that we really wanted to best display our collection, which is quite unique for a college museum of our size because it spans antiquity to the present,” said Tricia Y. Paik, director of the museum. “But we had some amazing treasures in storage that we didn’t bring out because the galleries that we had all these years were very thematic, whether Asian, American, [or] Italian Renaissance, so we weren’t able to bring out the breadth of our collection.”



Tricia Paik, the director of the Mount Holyoke College of Art Museum, talks about the latest renovations and placement of art in the museum. CAROL LOLLIS / Staff Photo

It was Kendra Weisbin, staff curator and head of interpretation, who had the idea to display the permanent collections chronologically instead of thematically, a shift Paik said “allowed for a global hang.”

“Conceptually, we really wanted to be able to better show the breadth and diversity of our collection. Ultimately, we’re really thinking about our community here — not just visitors, but certainly our students and our faculty,” Weisbin said. “We want every student who comes in to feel represented in these spaces and feel cultural and personal touchpoints with what they’re seeing on view.”

To that end, the museum organized its permanent collection into four main gallery spaces— “Art Before 700 CE,” “Art From 700 To 1700,” “Art From 1700 To 1900” and “Art After 1900” — and three special exhibition spaces. Two of the main gallery spaces were created by knocking down walls that previously divided four smaller rooms.



New renovations at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum. CAROL LOLLIS / Staff Photo

“[700 to 1700] is a very vast period in time and would take many, many acres of space, for example, at the Met. But here, we are smaller and we can collapse that time in a more interesting way,” Paik said.

Standing in the “Art Before 700 CE” gallery space, Paik explained the new layout’s flow. “We decided, when you come in here, let’s have a moment where you stay, versus [moving] immediately forward, so we let you linger and look at the art,” Paik said. “We’re trying to create better spaces and flow.”

“The element of discovery was important to us, that people really explore and engage,” Weisbin said.

The museum also lowered the pedestals on which some artworks, such as busts, are displayed to a height of 36 inches. They are bringing in new lighting as well as custom museum benches made from a beloved copper beech tree that grew at Mount Holyoke for 120 years before a storm knocked it down in the summer of 2024.

“[Benches with backs] force a perspective. So if we put a bench with a back here ... we’d be saying, ‘Look at these European paintings. Definitely don’t look at this blue and white porcelain,’” Weisbin said, indicating a space between two different displays in the “Art From 700 To 1700” gallery. Instead, the museum will install what are called “conversation benches” featuring two backs that face opposite directions.



Kendra Weisbin the curator and head of interpretation at the Mount Holyoke College of Art Museum talks about the latest renovations and placement of art in the museum. CAROL LOLLIS / Staff Photo

The renovated museum has a focus on sightlines between rooms and on showcasing the works on display in a less Eurocentric way than before. For example, Weisbin noted that the curatorial team wanted a collection of Peruvian blackware “to actually become a real focus of the gallery rather than being sort of shunted to the side somewhere.”

This proximity puts works of art in conversation with each other. A painting of St. Sebastian, for instance, hangs next to a Thai statue of the Buddha, creating one of many “cross-cultural moments,” as Weisbin called them. In the same room, a Persian carpet, likely given as a wedding present, hangs above an Italian “cassone,” which is a marriage chest.

In another room, Albert Bierstadt’s “Hetch Hetchy Canyon” — which depicts a dramatic, warmly lit landscape with deer, large trees and a small waterfall — hangs near a contemporary work, “Sierra Ravine,” by Cherokee painter Kay WalkingStick. WalkingStick’s piece also depicts an American landscape but uses a more muted color palette, featuring a traditional Washoe basketry pattern in the lower right corner.

The Bierstadt piece is an important cornerstone of the museum’s history, acquired just before the building opened 150 years ago. However, his view of the land is “more romanticized, with not much evidence of the Indigenous peoples,” Paik said. Pairing it with a work by a Native American artist that explicitly features an element of Native American culture seemed fitting.

“It was really important for us to tell a new story of Yosemite,” Paik said.

The museum doesn’t just function as a traditional gallery space — it also houses a classroom that professors across various majors can utilize. Faculty from departments seemingly unconnected to art, like biology and chemistry, regularly use the collection for lessons. In fact, the museum’s public reopening will take place just one day before Mount Holyoke’s first day of classes.

“Our students are the reason we do what we do, the reason we continue to push ourselves, to continue to experiment,” Weisbin said. “I think we’re all very excited to have the students back and in their new galleries.”

Admission to the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum museum is free. The museum will be open Tuesday through Friday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. For more information, visit artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu.

