

Breaking Out of the Frame

The Art Museum Isn't Just for Art Students Anymore

MANY OF PROFESSOR RENAE BRODIE'S first-year biology students start the semester confident that they know what to expect in an introductory science course. But one day during the first few weeks of class, they're analyzing not cell structure under a laboratory microscope but a seventeenth-century Flemish painting—in the MHC Art Museum. Applying the scientific process in a new setting, they observe a painting from a distance for several minutes, then move closer to note details. Finally, they describe and explain the paintings to one another, offering evidence for their interpretations.

Brodie's students are hardly alone. Sixty-two professors in twenty-six academic disciplines brought their students to the museum in the past year. In fact, eighty-five courses held at least one class session in the Art Museum.

What's the draw? Learning skills that will help students succeed now and long after graduation. John Stomberg, museum director, has a vision of the museum as a campus crossroads where art meets ideas—and students—of all kinds. And the vision is becoming reality.

For the past four years, Ellen Alvord '89 has been the museum's primary connection to faculty and students. As its Mellon Foundation-funded coordinator of academic affairs, she helps professors shape lessons and select which of the museum's 17,000 objects best fit each class.

Alvord is busy: the museum logged 2,782 student visits last year. (Some students visited in more than one course.) One of her office file drawers is labeled "Ellen's Hatchery," and indeed many inventive ideas have incubated there. "We're reexamining what a liberal-arts college can provide in the twenty-first century that's important and relevant to training the leaders and innovators of tomorrow," she explains.

What future leaders need—and what Stomberg and Alvord believe the museum can help students develop—is captured in a multiyear plan emphasizing three things: working across disciplines, developing creativity, and enhancing visual literacy.

Working Across Disciplines

Interdisciplinary work was an early success. Alvord says the museum is "a natural place to have people experiment with new ways of teaching. Faculty here have interdisciplinary interests and are willing to try new things."

Biologist Caleb Rounds teamed science majors with art majors and had them use wooden dowels and elastic bands to create sculptures that could be compressed without breaking. This illustrated the concept

Art Helps Premedical Students Improve Diagnostic Skills

A group of future physicians clusters in the museum's Carson Teaching Gallery for their postbaccalaureate introductory biology class. "To be great at medicine, your powers of observation need to be stellar, because patients don't tell you everything you need to know," says guest speaker Dr. Jill Griffin. So the students—who previously have practiced precise description using seventeenth-century Dutch paintings—say what they see in a series of clinical photographs.

One is obviously a common blister, but Griffin pulls the students back from rushing to a diagnosis. "OK," she says, summarizing their observations. "We see a thumb with a red ring around the outside, topped by a fluid-filled sack of skin." Students add details until they deduce, Sherlock Holmes-style, that this patient's hand was burned by splashes of hot liquid.

"Art forces us to look at the world differently," says Emilie Heidel '10. "I think the point was to teach us how to stop making judgments and to let the data tell us what it has to say—a useful skill for both artists and scientists."

Dean of prehealth programs David Gardner explains that this method, developed by the Yale Center for British Art and Yale School of Medicine, helps premed students "because those who are trained to be more precise in their observations will be better at making diagnoses in a clinical setting." Stomberg describes the advantage using more artistic language. "To a doctor, the difference between having an ear infection or not is the difference between having your ear be Veronese red versus Titian red."

of "tensegrity" (tension plus structural integrity) central to the work of sculptor Kenneth Snelson, whose work graces the museum's contemporary gallery. Elise Croteau-Chonka '13, who visited the museum with a biology class, says, "the work strongly emphasized the intersection between disciplines that I am looking for as a student at a liberal-arts institution."

Some exhibitions are particularly adaptable for interdisciplinary use. Professors in fourteen disciplines used the recent exhibition *Kara Walker: Harpers' Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)*, in which the contemporary artist comments on race and racism by altering nineteenth-century prints. Students in English professor Sara London's course *Verse* wrote poetry collaboratively in response to this exhibition. History students in professor Mary Renda's *US Women's History Since 1890* course compared Walker's visual work with a century-old essay on the same topic by activist/journalist Ida B. Wells. "The way students got to interact in the museum with one another, with the visual material, and with the reading set the tone for what became one of the most terrific courses I've ever taught," says Renda.

Art history and anthropology classes joined forces to shape the 2011 exhibition *Transported and Translated: Arts of the Ancient Americas*, proposing ideas as teams, revising them, then making final decisions on the show's themes, title, contents, even the color of the walls. That exhibition turned up in unexpected courses too, such as *Explorations in Algebra*. Coteachers Charlene and Jim Morrow used it to help students think visually about the abstract concept of symmetry. "It is at the heart of much higher-level algebra, and our visit to the Art Museum played a crucial role in deepening students' understanding," they say. Using *Transported and Translated* objects, students discovered ways symmetry was used functionally and as decoration. The Morrows say, "It was fascinating to hear students' surprise and delight in seeing all the symmetry in the world around them."

Stomberg says the museum collection's depth and breadth serve the College well. "We've found that some of the best-quality objects in the collection are also the best teaching objects—ones that professors return to again and again," he says. Take, for instance, *Masaniello*, a nineteenth-century French oil painting depicting a workers' revolt against Spanish rule. A biologist will talk about how the artist's use of red makes the retina perform a certain way; a historian or theatre professor might focus on the soldiers' uniforms; and social scientists will talk about the class differences depicted. "They're all having meaningful engagements with the same work of art, but each is totally different from the others," says Stomberg.

As coordinator of academic affairs, Ellen Alvord '89 (facing camera) is the Art Museum's primary connection with faculty and students using the museum for coursework.





Assistant Curator Rachel Beaupre (left) helps Professor Wes Yu and his Surrealist Poetry students examine a collage by Joseph Cornell.

Poetry Students Find Words in Visual Art

English professor Wes Yu's tutorial in Surrealist Poetry begins not with words, but with a silent film by artist Joseph Cornell. Images of the moon, volcanoes, and other natural phenomena are intercut with deliberately unrelated shots of upper-class women. "This fragmentation of style offers what?" asks Yu, whose students soon move on to examine eight of Cornell's collages. Guided by Yu, Assistant Curator Rachel Beaupre, and Ellen Alvord, students inspect the collages, turning each over gingerly to read words pasted on the reverse of some. The artwork they focus on reveals itself, ten minutes in, as a complex collection of images with layers of meaning that they tease out. At the end of an hour, fragmentation of experience—a key concept in surrealism—is clear. ("It's about how you interpret what the artist represents," concludes Najwa Aswad '16.) Only now is it time for the students to consider poetry.

Yu says, "In an art museum, I can ask a student questions that train her eyes to observe, comment, and inquire based only on what's there. A museum visit can help transfer the experience of observation from visual works of art to written ones."

Creativity Can Be Taught

Many people believe that creativity is something one either has or lacks. Stomberg disagrees, and has adapted the work of Steven J. Tepper of Vanderbilt University, who argues that creativity can be learned by practicing these behaviors:

- Observing closely
- Approaching problems in nonroutine ways
- Asking "What if?"
- Risking failure and facing uncertainty
- Revising and improving through critical feedback
- Communicating in multiple ways (speaking, writing, etc.)
- Working collaboratively

"We believe creativity can be encouraged through our role as the creativity crossroads on campus," explains Stomberg. This matters, he says, because "almost every field of endeavor identifies creativity as one of the most salient characteristics of emerging leaders."

Here's how the process worked for Five College Senior Lecturer in Music Robert Eisenstein's Music and Technology students, who created a modern version of Musorgsky's nineteenth-century suite *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Each student chose an artwork at the museum, studying it closely as inspiration for her own original composition. Students translated the visual into sophisticated pieces of contemporary electronic music, then wrote about the connections between the two. Alex Trost '14, who selected a statue of the Buddha, composed music she describes as "dark and magical—as close to mystical chanting as I could get using a computer. Seeing the actual art helped me explore the feelings it manifested in me and to 'listen to' the piece."



Top: Museum Director John Stomberg speaks to a class about the Kara Walker exhibition, which was used in fourteen disciplines. Above: Neurobiology students learn how the brain perceives color by recreating a black-and-white Ansel Adams photograph using colors of similar value.

The Neurobiology Behind Color Perception

Students in Professor Susan Barry's Neurobiology of Art and Music course comprehended color perception in a novel way—by recreating a black-and-white photograph by Ansel Adams using torn pieces of colored paper. Brian Kiernan, the museum's technician and an artist himself, invented the exercise to teach the concept of luminance. The challenge was to select colors with the same luminance as each shade of grey, then to arrange the colored scraps to create the same shading and depth effects as the original image. Sure,

Barry could just have lectured about luminance, but, she says, "there's nothing like doing work yourself to really understand a concept."

Completing an art exercise was initially intimidating for some of her science students, Barry admits, but she says they enjoyed it. "I take them out of the lab—an environment they're used to—and put them in the museum, where what they see is for the most part new to them," she says. "There's plenty of neurological evidence that we learn best when presented with novelty."



Developing visual literacy involves close observation, asking questions, considering alternate points of view (center: English professor Elizabeth Young's first-year seminar); working collaboratively; and communicating in multiple ways (below: premed students discussing a nineteenth-century painting).



ART IN ACTION

Put yourself inside three classes taught in the Art Museum. Visit alumnae.mtholyoke.edu/artvideos.

The “creative campus” movement sparked by Tepper is widespread, but having an academic art museum take the lead role in fostering these skills is new, according to Ellen Alvord. The Matisse Foundation recently awarded MHC’s museum a grant for this innovative initiative.

New Life for an Old Museum

This generation of college students has grown up bombarded by visual images but in many cases hasn’t been taught how to think critically about them in the same way they’re taught how to analyze written or spoken material, says Stomberg. “More than ever, we have to develop visual literacy, by extending critical thinking to the visual world.”

English professor Elizabeth Young does this with her first-year students. They have read Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, and Yann Martel’s *The Life of Pi* for a seminar on The Nonhuman, and now they’re looking at artworks featuring dogs, horses, and insects. Young inquires, “What do you see? What choices has each artist made? What’s ambiguous? What’s missing?”

Patently, she solicits observations and interpretations to develop students’ descriptive language skills. Works ranging from Henry Fuseli’s eighteenth-century fantasy painting “The Nightmare” to William Wegman’s contemporary photograph of a dog draw reflections on power, class, gender, and wildness vs. domestication.

“This museum experience is revelatory for students,” says Young. When she asked them to write about a museum object, she recalls, “they did very well and seemed to enjoy it too. It is the rare paper assignment where students have complained that they wished the paper were longer!” Young adds that her use of the museum “has been unquestionably one of the highlights of the last few years, and has deepened my own scholarship as well as my teaching and collegial life at Mount Holyoke.”

For both students and faculty, one benefit is clear: “A chance to slow down and observe closely is a luxury these days, and the museum is the perfect place to hone this skill,” says Alvord.

Mount Holyoke students have learned from art since its earliest days. But the Art Museum serves a particularly important purpose in this digital age, according to John Stomberg. “The more we digitize, the more people come to the museum as a place for real-life engagement with objects that exist only in one place,” he says. “When students hold a Rembrandt or an ancient Roman coin in their hands, something astounding happens. Our 137-year-old museum is taking on the challenge of being a generator of ideas relevant to the future, not just a storehouse for the past.” 📷



At the Skinner Museum, history students encounter how early American women lived.

Art Immerses History Students in Their Foremothers’ Lives

“I taught here for years without realizing what a resource the museum is or how I could use it,” admits Mary Renda, associate professor of history. In her Gender and Power in the History of Mount Holyoke course, Renda brought her students to the College’s Skinner Museum to get a visceral sense of women’s lives during the Mount Holyoke Seminary era. Getting a hands-on sense by handling objects—a rack for drying flax, a butter churn, a cooking pot, an open hearth—“is so different from just reading documents,” she says. For instance, students realized how strong early American women had to be by lifting a forty-pound cast-iron pot used to dye cloth. “As a historian, I want them to look with new eyes at documents, and that is enhanced by the visual work we do in the museum,” Renda says.

Working collaboratively in small groups is a key tenet of the museum’s efforts to teach creativity.