Object Lessons

MHC'S COLLECTION OF COLLECTIONS · PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES GEHRT

You've read some of Williston Library's 750,000 books. You've viewed some of the Art Museum's 15,000 objects. You've strolled among the greenhouse's vast plant collection or lingered under one of MHC's 250 acres of trees. But you probably didn't think of the objects you saw as parts of a set. They are, and represent only the merest fraction of MHC's collections.

Visit the campus's nooks and crannies and you'll discover multicolored eggs, barometers, a lock of Mary Lyon's hair, tiny shoes for bound feet, a hippopotamus skull, mathematical models, antique microscopes and telescopes, early Japanese photographs, dinner plates used by the MHC Seminary students, a 500-million-year-old trilobite fossil, handwritten manuscripts for Wendy Wasserstein's plays, President Gettell's World War II ration book, and early valentines.

Making these scattered treasures more visible and available to faculty and students is the goal of a project headed by Art Museum Curator Wendy Watson. While encouraging use of the art collection for teaching and research, Watson says she realized "just how many other collections there were across campus, and made it a project to find them all." Mellon-grant-funded intern Theresa Antonellis FP'10 has documented some two dozen collections, and the list is still growing.

From a glass microscope slide of the world's smallest insect to a life-size horse skeleton, from dinosaur footprints

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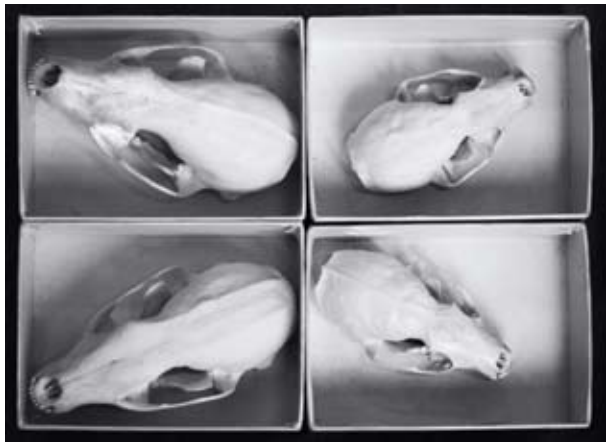
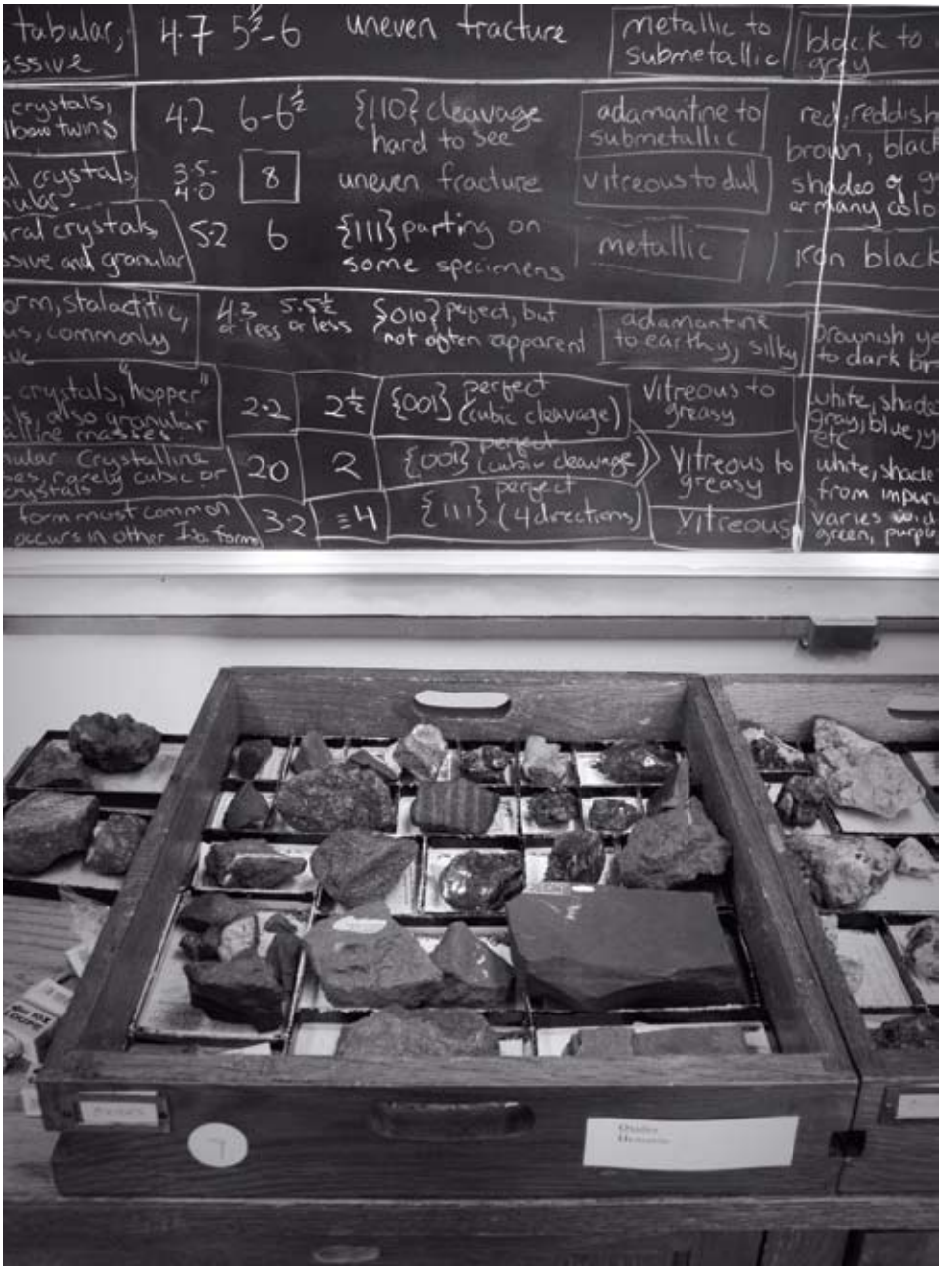


Clockwise from top left: ancient scroll with the book of Esther in Hebrew from the religion department collection; window in Talcott Greenhouse; zoisite from the geology teaching collection; skulls of the American marten (*Martes americana*) used in courses in evolution; Mary Lyon's spectacles, a manuscript in her handwriting, and the famous green velvet bag in which she collected coins to establish Mount Holyoke. Previous page: a staircase abalone (*Haliotis scalaris*) shell used in labs for Introductory Biology and Invertebrate Zoology.



Clockwise from top left: Elie Nadelman's *Ideal Head of a Woman*, one of the Art Museum's 15,000 objects which range from ancient Egypt, China, and Peru to contemporary America; Williston Observatory's Alvan Clark refracting telescope, which has been used at MHC since 1881, surrounded by a Ross camera and newer telescopes; specimens used in teaching GEOL 201, Rocks and Minerals (the blackboard has a summary of the physical properties for the minerals covered that week).

to newly sprouted seedlings, from early athletics apparel to fancy dress costumes, from outer-space meteorites to artifacts sacred to earthly religions, the collections vary in every possible way.

Some—including the library's archives and special collections, botanic gardens, and Art Museum collections—are well curated, documented, and preserved. Others gather dust in rooms that aren't climate-controlled. "Yet all of these remarkable collections provide opportunities for our students to do the kind of research that most students only get a chance to do in graduate school," says Watson.

Here, students can get true hands-on experience. For a project on whales and whaling, Taylor Minton '10 is using not only the text of *Moby Dick*, but also harpoons and whale-oil lamps from the Skinner Museum. Historian Mary Renda brings a gender studies class there too. "Students literally get a feel for the physical intensity of the work early nineteenth-century women did on a daily basis," says Renda. "If you feel the heft of an nineteenth-century cooking pot, you understand something about women's work that you didn't understand before," adds Watson.

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Clockwise from top: hats are just part of the costume collection, which includes an early 1800s Shaker dress and a monkey-fur ruff; a barometer from the collection displayed in Kendade Hall's atrium; prepared specimens of local birds, which have been used in ornithology classes.

Talcott Greenhouse displays a living collection of plants from around the world. It has supported faculty and student plant research and classroom work since it was built at the end of the nineteenth century. The permanent collection includes orchids, cacti and succulents, ferns, begonias, bromeliads, and aquatic plants as well as other tropical and subtropical plants.

web link

WHAT'S *YOUR* FAVORITE MHC OBJECT?

Share your stories of discovery amid MHC's collections (or collections elsewhere), read about curators' favorite objects, and see extensive photo galleries of MHC collections, at *alumnae.mtholyoke.edu/go/collections.*

Clockwise from top left: the Skinner Museum's "cabinet of curiosities" includes myriad objects both delicate (glassware and ceramics) and sturdy (arms and armor), mundane (dairying equipment) and exotic (travel souvenirs from far-flung countries); moths (in the genus Catocala and Antheraea polyphemus) collected by current students for a research project, also used in introductory biology courses; an 1820s-vintage ship's figurehead from the Skinner Museum; this cuneiform tablet from the ancient Near East displays the world's oldest known writing system, and has been used in ancient archaeology courses.

Using objects, Watson says, "is one way of training people to be more visually acute in an age where we are so awash in images that we stop looking closely at them." Sohail Hashmi and Vincent Ferraro's students in an interdisciplinary course on war surely thought differently about a nineteenth-century battle sword after it was pointed (carefully!) at one woman. "*This* is how close you'd have been to your enemy if you fought in the Civil War," was the message.

And such objects have become part of lesson plans for varied disciplines. For example, Art Museum paintings have been used by mathematician Mark Peterson (to discuss math and perspective); by neurobiologist Sue Barry (to study visual perception); and by environmental studies professor Timothy Farnham (to explore diverse views of an ideal landscape).

Use of the less-known collections is still spotty, so Watson's trying to "dig them out of the basements, and make them more obvious and evident on campus." Slowly, MHC's hidden treasures are becoming less hidden.—E.H.W.