



Campus Updates

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A new gift of ancient objects



Gandharan (from Afghanistan) frieze fragment from Buddhist stūpa, 1st century BCE - 7th century CE. Photograph by Laura Shea.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20201202191338/https://www.mtholyoke.edu/sites/default/files/Frieze.jpg>

By [Keely Sexton](#)

<https://web.archive.org/web/20201202191338/mailto:ksavoie@mtholyoke.edu>

Things left behind by ancestors long since passed have brought new life to the [Mount Holyoke College Art Museum](#)

<https://web.archive.org/web/20201202191338/https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/> and the Mount Holyoke community at large.

A donation of archaeological objects from an alumna has changed not only the way the Art Museum will hang future displays, but has inspired new questions, new thinking, new insights and new research into the pieces of history that had long been forgotten.

The alumna, who wishes to remain anonymous, gave more than 200 ancient objects from Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Indus Valley to the Art Museum “in the hope that, for many generations to come, people can experience the passion which inspired artists from the past and appreciate how vital the arts were and are to the human experience.”

The objects in this collection — including Gandharan stone reliefs, jewelry, idols, toys and coins — span the era between about 5,000 BCE to 300 CE and reveal similarities between long-ago ancestors and humans of today.

They arrived in sealed crates, unstudied and uncleaned. [Bettina Bergmann](#)

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20201202191338/https://www.mtholyoke.edu/people/bettina-bergmann>), Helene Phillips Herzig '49 Professor of Art History, developed two advanced seminars around the collection. The first seminar served both to expose students to hands-on archaeological research techniques, and to clean and catalog the objects.

Displaying the objects in a museum in an engaging and educational fashion is the subject of Bergmann's second seminar. Working with the [Fimbel Maker & Innovation Lab](#) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20201202191338/https://www.mtholyoke.edu/Fimbellab>), students have created 3D printed scale models of key objects and of the gallery space itself. Using digital models and specialized software available in the Fimbel Lab, students can experiment with lighting and color and their own gallery designs.

"It's been really exciting. I never thought I'd be working on this kind of collection. There is so much we don't know," said Bergmann, whose position was endowed in 2005 by Helene Phillips Herzig '49, a generous supporter of both the College and the Museum.



When the pieces were unpacked and cleaned, Caroline Horvitz FP'15, who majored in [art history](#)

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20201202191338/https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/arthistory>) and did post-graduate work in classical archaeology, returned to Mount Holyoke to research the objects in order to determine what they were, how they were used and what they revealed about the cultures they came from.

Horvitz, who was born profoundly deaf with spastic quadriplegic cerebral palsy, was so drawn to the collection that she put endless arduous hours of research into the project, seeking parallels with other objects in museums and databases around the world to find answers to the basic questions: What were these objects? Where did they come from? What do they tell us?

While the research is time-consuming and painstaking, Horvitz persevered with the aid of an assistant and an interpreter with whom she speaks in a hybrid of Signed English, British, French, Italian, Modern Standard Arabic and Greek.

“It gives us a peek into the past and shows us that we are not all that different from our ancient ancestors,” said Horvitz. “Children played with toy animals, people and wagons. Men and women liked jewelry and nice things for their homes. Business matters were very important and people worried about forgeries and having their identities stolen.”

Many of the pieces show a mix of cultural influences in their art and symbology, a reflection of their location along the Silk Road, which connected China to the West through a network of overland trading routes.



While the ancient gallery at the Art Museum currently focuses on objects from Rome, Greece and Egypt, [Aaron](https://web.archive.org/web/20201202191338/https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/profile/aaron-miller)

[Miller](https://web.archive.org/web/20201202191338/https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/profile/aaron-miller) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20201202191338/https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/profile/aaron-miller>), associate curator of visual and material culture, sees the recent gift as an opportunity to expand the scope and reenvision the gallery and pieces displayed.

“We are looking at ways to push beyond the current Eurocentric display to create a more expansive and inclusive material history of the ancient world,” he said. One installation idea may include a blown-up wall map of the Silk Road with objects placed geographically in separate cases in order to demonstrate their relation to one another in space, Miller noted. Another idea may be chronological, with similar objects from the same time period but from different cultures displayed alongside one another.

Horvitz feels that giving context to the objects will allow people to envision them in relation to their own lives.

“I feel that galleries should be set in themes that the public can relate to,” she said. “For example, burial rituals remain similar. People were and are buried with objects of value, in their best clothes. Even organ removal in ancient times can be tied to our current practice of organ donation.”

Whatever the ultimate design of the gallery, the gift of this collection will reinvigorate the ways in which we conceive of and look at objects, both ancient and new.

“We are grateful to the alumna who generously donated this intriguing collection and to Caroline for her painstaking commitment to researching these objects,” said [Tricia Y. Paik](https://web.archive.org/web/20201202191338/https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/profile/tricia-y-paik) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20201202191338/https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/profile/tricia-y-paik>)

[_ga=2.85949145.1138208392.1580735597-300281408.1555683209](#)), Florence Finch

Abbott Director of the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum. “Caroline’s research reveals the universality of material objects through time.”

As well as demonstrating the consistency of human objects over time, the collection demonstrates the

connection of Mount Holyoke alumnae over time and the transformative work that can come from it: An alumna donated the collection; the collection was studied in seminars taught by Bergmann, whose position was endowed by an alumna, Helene Phillips Herzig; And the deep research of this collection was conducted by Horvitz, another alumna, who as a student studied with Bergmann.

“Indeed, this is the inspiring activity we like to encourage at the Art Museum, fostering telling connections between the interests of our alumnae in order to benefit our students today,” said Paik.

Curator Miller explained how this recent gift and conversations with students, Horvitz, Bergmann, and other professors, are prompting the Art Museum staff to rethink more than just the ancient gallery.

“This collection was a catalyst for us to think more deeply about implementing a more global approach to how we present the Art Museum collection in such a way as to facilitate new conversations about society, history and culture across time,” said Miller.

That opportunity is at the heart of the Art Museum’s mission, said Paik. “That’s what we endeavor to do every day — to make our collection of art and material culture relevant and consequential to all our audiences, no matter the time period. All art was once contemporary, as I like to say. So in this case, what we want to do is make the stories about the ancient world come alive for our students here in the 21st century.”



Thursday, February 6, 2020

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