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ARTS & LIFE

Freshening up the collection at Mount Holyoke College Art Museum

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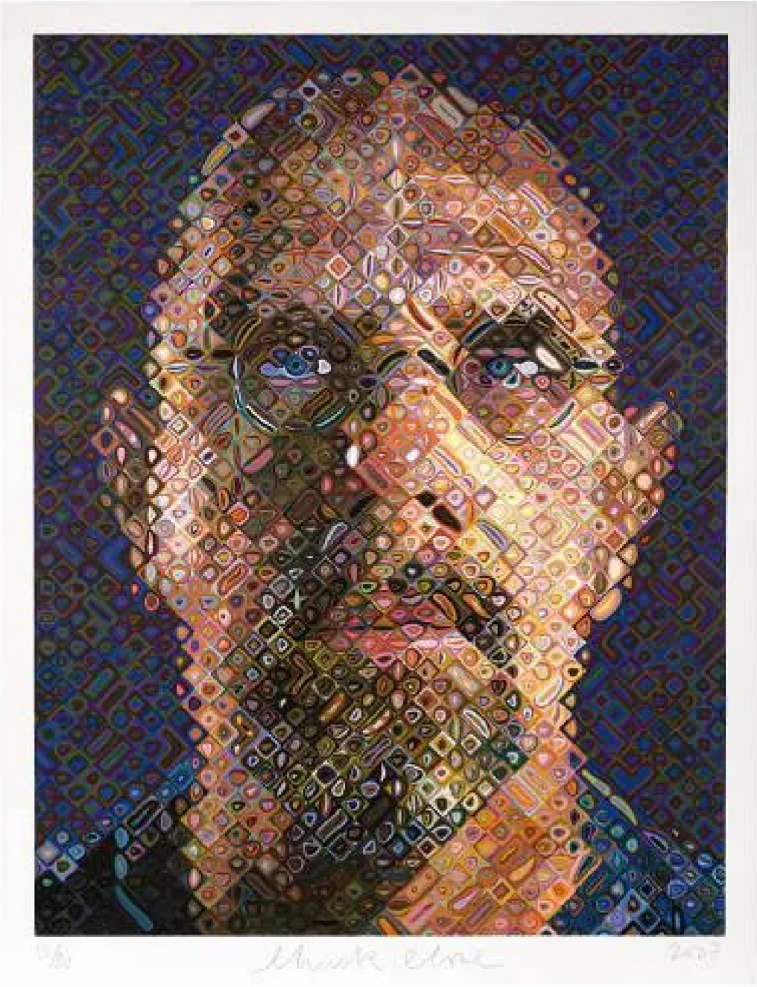

"Self Portrait Screenprint," Chuck Close, 2007 Credit: Courtesy of Mount Holyoke College Art Museum

Historic anniversaries are often recognized in increments of 50 years, judging by some commemorations in recent years: the 50th anniversary of the Beatles playing on the Ed Sullivan Show, the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic, the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg.

The Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, though, has been celebrating its 140th anniversary this school year, and it's doing it with 140 new artworks acquired through a five-year gift-giving program that ultimately attracted contributions from over 100 people and special endowed arts funds.

The museum's "140 Unlimited" campaign, begun in 2011, aimed to add 140 artworks across different genres — photography, painting, sculpture, folk art — both to broaden the collection and add resources to enhance the museum's role as a "teaching museum" for both students and faculty.

In an email, Associate Curator Hannah Blunt said most of the new artworks were donated by alumnae, their estates, even individual artists, while financial gifts were earmarked for museum staff to buy specific items.

The museum is particularly interested in expanding its collection of African art, Blunt noted, and to that end purchased a Sowo wui dance mask from Sierra Leone.

Among the many new works, which are exhibited throughout the museum, are several Asian ceramics and sculptures dating as far back at the 1st century AD; European paintings from the 17th and 18th centuries, as well as 19th century American landscapes; early 20th century Pueblo ceramics; and an Andy Warhol screenprint of Sitting Bull, the famous Lakota chief, based on an 1881 photograph.

In several cases, the new acquisitions, like "Coriolanus Taking Leave of his Wife" by 18th century painter Etienne Aubry, have been integrated with similar work from the museum's collection. Other new works have been given their own space, like the 1620 Flemish painting "The Penitent Magdalen" and the large 2007 screenprint "Self Portrait," by painter/photographer Chuck Close.

Close bases his work on blown-up photographs of his subjects, which he then divides into small grids that are proportionally recreated on a canvas and painted in different colors. Up close, his self portrait — over six feet by five feet — appears like an abstract painting, with 203 colors and myriad patterns, but from about 12 feet away the artist's face clearly emerges from the swirl of color.

Through a camera's lens

Of particular note are significant additions to the museum's photography collection. One large gallery space is devoted to new contemporary photos, with work that focuses in part on people who face or have faced hardship or discrimination.

"Photography was definitely an area of interest," Blunt said, adding that it's "an incredibly rich medium for teaching, as it so often deals with contemporary issues, visual culture, and questions of identity, authorship,

and audience."

For instance, the exhibit features three images by Lynsey Addario, a photographer who's extensively covered modern war zones for the The New York Times, magazines such as Newsweek, Time and National Geographic, and other major publications.

In "Two Burqas," Addario depicts two veiled woman in a barren, mountainous section of Afghanistan, standing by a pair of blankets on the dusty ground. It's an almost otherwordly image, given not a trace of the women's features can be seen; their bright blue burqas stand in vivid contrast to the sandy brown landscape. (The two women, a pregnant woman and her mother, were waiting for the return of the younger woman's husband).

Another photo recounts the ordeal refugees from Syrian's bloody civil have faced. A woman and three children squat in a makeshift "tent" set up in a dismal camp on the Turkish-Syrian border, a few possessions piled behind them. A chain link fence topped with barbed wire can be seen in the background, along with a line of parked cars.

In a different vein, a portrait by South African photographer Pieter Hugo shows two men, lying side by side on a bed, who achieved worldwide notice in 2013 when they were married in South Africa's first gay tribal ceremony. As the caption notes, though, homosexuals in South Africa still face widespread persecution.

Perhaps the most arresting image is Livia Corona's aerial view of thousands of miniscule homes on the outskirts of Ixtapaluca, a city southeast of Mexico City, crammed together like sardines without any amenities like schools, parks, grocery stores or public transportation.

As many as 2,500 of these houses might be thrown up in one day, according to the photo caption, as part of a public housing project initiated in Mexico in the early 2000s to build two million homes.

Next to her aerial picture is another of Corona's images, showing the interior of one of these houses: a family of four is in a cramped room, with stacks of boxes, plants, a battered refrigerator and a table piled with paper seeming to hem them in.

Also of note: "Bromwell Corners Road, White Creek, N.Y." by Stephen Lorber, a former realist painter who brings painterly qualities to his photos by using archival pigment prints. This image, of a young woman tying up her hair in front of a weathered house as two ducks wander nearby, is part of series of photos Lorber has made of rural communities in New York state.

When in Rome…

While the gods of ancient Rome are still well known today — Jupiter, Mars, Neptune, Venus — the Romans also paid fealty to numerous smaller deities that they asked to bless their homes with good health, safety and happiness.

In "The Legends of the Lares," the Mount Holyoke museum offers a smaller exhibit that looks at what's known as the *Lares familiares* ("family guardians") that Romans represented with small statuettes or painted figures that were displayed in household shrines.

Using 27 small antiquities — statuettes, incense burners, a tiny shovel, libation bowls — from 10 different collections, the exhibit explains how Romans worshipped these small gods by mounting them in wall niches, painting frescoes on the walls, or building an *aedicular,* a miniature temple, to house statues and objects.

A highlight of the show is a recreation of one such mini-temple, with ornate pillars and a roof housing artifacts made of bronze, stone and clay; it's modeled on one that was discovered in Pompeii, the town famously preserved beneath volcanic ash from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD.

Exhibit text includes a quote from Marcus Tullius Cicero, arguably ancient Rome's most famous orator and writer, that nicely sums up the theme: "The most sacred, the most hallowed place on earth is the home of each and every citizen … [it is] the very center of his worship, religion, and domestic ritual."

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Both "140 Unlimited" and "The Legend of the Lares" are on display at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum through May 28. For additional information, visit artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu.