

AT THE MUSEUM

The Art of Discovery



LAURA WESTON



Top: "I've waited my whole life to do something like this," exclaims a student as she prepares to lift a tiny glass jar from *Pharmacy Chest*, an assemblage sculpture by the American sculptor Joseph Cornell (1903–1972).

Middle: Professor Anthony Lee and his students discuss photographs by Diane Arbus (1923–1971), who is known for her portraits of nudists, dwarfs, giants, prostitutes, and transvestites.

Bottom: Professor Maria Gomez's chemistry students examine the underdrawing in a Northern Renaissance painting, *The Holy Family* by Joos van Cleve, using infrared reflectography.

Opposite (left to right): Students in Chris Benfey's Introduction to Literature and Susan Barry's Neurobiology of Art and Music classes

It's not surprising to find art students studying in a museum—but biology and English students? On any given day, visitors to the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum might encounter a class in international relations, Italian, or religion. With some 20,000 objects from antiquity to modern times in its permanent collection and at the Skinner Museum (the College's collection of early American furnishings and decorative arts, shells, and minerals), the museum, says curator Wendy Watson, is a multidisciplinary resource for students in all subjects and works to help faculty maximize "the breadth and depth of our resources."

The result? In the 2007–2008 academic year, 34 classes from 15 disciplines used more than 1,000 items as part of their course work during visits to the museum. While art students have the works of Diane Arbus and Andy Warhol to inform their studies, others relate geometric designs to the mechanics of sight or survey historical ephemera to enhance their understanding of culture. "Thinking creatively about how we could work specifically with individual professors on their particular courses was the key," Watson noted. "We needed to link their subject matter and syllabi to works of art in the collection, both here at the Art Museum and at the Skinner Museum."

ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

For three years, professor of biological sciences Susan R. Barry taught Neurobiology of Art and Music in a traditional classroom. When museum fellow Laura Weston '07 noticed Barry's students working on an assignment in the gallery last year, she contacted her to ask about the course—and the two realized the class should be taught in the Art Museum itself. Though it's the last place Barry ever envisioned herself teaching, that's precisely what she's doing this year. "Over the last decade, neurobiologists have grown increasingly interested in the connection between the brain and our ability to draw, sculpt, and sing," she said. "How does the organization of the visual system, for example, influence the way an artist paints? The presence of the real items engages the students in a way a PowerPoint presentation never could."

VISUAL CULTURE

Professor of German studies Karen Remmler has occasionally worked with museum director Marianne Doezema and Watson to coordinate public programs with exhibitions. The experience exposed her to the extent of the materials at the museum, and she became interested in incorporating some of them into her courses.

"I brought students from a first-year seminar on the politics of memory in postwar German and Japanese cultures to the museum to view images related to war, such as propaganda posters, drawings, paintings, and artifacts," Remmler said. "They had the opportunity to examine the images and the artifacts up close and to make connections with seminar readings. Some of my students have since developed an interest in visual culture, ranging from abstract art to film."

MUSEUM AS LAB

Chemistry professor Maria Alexandra Gomez recently taught students in her Atomic and Molecular Structure class to use infrared light to examine the museum's *The Holy Family*, a painting by Joos van Cleve.

"This was a nice way for them to see that the spectroscopic technique used to probe vibrations in molecules



could be used to see charcoal underdrawings in paintings and paint underlayers," she said. Lara Patel '10 described the visits as "the pinnacle" lab experience.

"By using lenses that allowed only certain wavelengths, we could see the underdrawings," she said. "We could even make out the first failed attempts at painting hands and feet and the artist's internal indecision on how plump the baby should be.... Under normal lab experience, it would never have occurred to me that the chemistry of vibrational frequencies has such a significant application in art conservation and analytical studies."

WOMEN AND WORK

Associate professor of history and gender studies Mary Renda took students in her Gender and Power in the History of MHC course to the Skinner Museum, predicting that seeing museum items related to a woman's daily duties would dispel any stereotypical notions her students might have held about women of the early nineteenth century being "weak."

"They could really understand the kind of work involved in a woman's daily routine," said Renda. "They were surprised at how heavy the items were to lift and at the amount of hard, physical labor involved in what

these women were doing." Kristina Bolton '12 and classmates were asked to try to identify some of the domestic tools. "I was given historical background on the object but had to figure out the way it was used. I wouldn't have been able to do that inside of a traditional classroom setting," she said.

Lucy Abbott '12 said visiting the Skinner Museum helped her "gain a much more detailed perspective on the history of domesticity.... Being able to touch the artifacts made our readings so much more relevant and understandable."

SCIENCE AND ART

Tara Guclu '09, a student in Barry's neurobiology class, was surprised to learn about the profound effects of art on the brain. "Science and the arts are too often perceived as distinct disciplines, but they are actually quite interrelated," Guclu said. "We were able to stand in front of original, full-scale paintings and perceive the fine details and depth lost in just two dimensions. This gave us a more complete understanding of art and, therefore, the visual perception of art."

"It was refreshing—and completely appropriate—to attend a neuroscience class in an art museum." ■

By the Numbers: Object-Based Learning

The Mount Holyoke College Art Museum and its collection provide rich source material for many MHC courses in art and art history, as well as in other disciplines. In fact, this year the museum has seen a surge in the number of visits by faculty and students for class work. Here's the evidence.

34 Number of classes that visited the museum in the past year	59 Number of coins pulled from the permanent collection
15 Number of academic disciplines represented	22 Number of war posters pulled from the permanent collection
1,053 Total number of objects pulled for faculty and student viewing	80 Number of Egyptian objects pulled from the permanent collection
327 Number of prints pulled from the permanent collection	3 Number of Asian scrolls pulled from the permanent collection
42 Number of paintings pulled from the permanent collection	5 Number of sculptures pulled from the permanent collection
479 Number of photographs pulled from the permanent collection	18 Number of different mediums represented by the objects pulled