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Classroom Meets Gallery



Andrew Henderson for The New York Times

Graduate students train to teach in the Yale Art Gallery's K through 12 programs. [More Photos »](#)

By RANDY KENNEDY

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AT [the Yale University Art Gallery](#), which fully reopened in December after a painstaking expansion that spanned 14 years and cost \$135 million, a sunny new fourth-floor gallery was filled recently with a collection of artworks highly unlikely ever to meet in such proximity again.

In a conventional museum, it would be almost impossible to imagine them sharing a room to begin with: an ashen Anselm Kiefer painting from 2001, looking like a patch of scorched earth, on the same wall as an early Renaissance "Annunciation" in tempera; across the way, a thousand-year-old wooden figure from modern-day Sierra Leone and a collection of coins from India almost a thousand years older still; around the corner a deadpan 1966 Diane

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Arbus photograph of a Brooklyn family and, dominating the whole gallery, Ellen Gallagher's eye-popping "[DeLuxe](#)," a 60-piece contemporary print work

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What thread could possibly unite these works? Not a purely curatorial one, of course, but a thread that wends its way through the often wonderfully murky territory where art appreciation meets education. The room, the Levin Study Gallery, is given over to professors — from art history but also from African-American studies, South Asian studies, gender and sexuality studies, among others — who choose pieces from [Yale](#)'s vast collection to serve as teaching tools. The unorthodox space, open to the public as well as students, serves as a potent visual metaphor for what is happening throughout the institution, the nation's oldest university art museum, and in a broader movement to embed campus art collections much more deeply into university curriculums.

Academically affiliated museums are often described as the jewels of their campuses. The term can carry the hidden implication that such collections, while treasures, are mere accessories, attached to universities but with no clear connection to their academic priorities.

That criticism, explored in a long-range study by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in the 1990s, burst into public view in 2009 when Brandeis University, in financial turmoil, briefly proposed selling its highly regarded Rose Art Museum collection. The fight over the Rose's future exposed deep tensions between the university and the museum. "In our view," a university committee later wrote to the administration and board of trustees, "the Rose, like many of its fellow university museums, has been oriented too much toward the art world and not enough toward the academy."

Up until a decade or so ago, the Yale art gallery could easily have been in that group. But during the renovation and expansion of its buildings and collections, it began to make fundamental changes to move the museum much more fully into the life of its campus and the neighborhoods of New Haven that surround it.

It began to train undergraduates to conduct thematic tours of the holdings. It greatly expanded its collaborations with local public schools, bringing in students (more than 8,000 last year) who are taught about objects in the collections by Yale graduate students. It began a program to allow students from many different disciplines — not only art history — to serve as curators for special exhibitions. (A group of graduate students and undergraduates is now at work on a show of works donated to Yale by the influential New York collectors Herbert and Dorothy Vogel.) It built a new classroom complex, where works can be brought for study from storage or from the gallery walls. And it worked with Yale academic departments to sharply increase the number of courses — from languages to the hard sciences and even business and management — that use the museum's galleries as classrooms.

During the 2011-12 academic year, 48 courses from departments other than art history or art were taught in the museum; counting the art courses, 578 individual class sessions were held there during the year, said Pamela Franks, the gallery's deputy director for collections and education. "We don't really tell anybody what they should be doing with the collection or saying about the collection."



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The jazz historian Willie Ruff uses Stuart Davis paintings as teaching tools. Students in an undergraduate English course, “Cultures of Excess,” use hyper-charged works like Joseph Stella’s [“Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras”](#) to jump-start literary debate. A bioethics class uses works about family ties, by artists like Käthe Kollwitz, as catalysts for discussions of the issues surrounding organ donation.

On a recent morning, a half-dozen first-year Italian students wandered through the European collections, taking part in an exercise in which they secretly selected a work, described it out loud in Italian and hoped they did so well enough for their fellow students to be able to identify it.

“Come si dice ‘sculpture?’” asked Cordelia de Brosses, a freshman, as she searched for the right words for Giovanni Paolo Panini’s 1741 painting [“A Capriccio of the Roman Forum,”](#) with its wistful view of towering colonnaded ruins.

“After you come here and see so many great Italian works of art,” Ms. de Brosses said later, “it does make you want to work at least to be able to describe them in good Italian.”

Over the last year, there has been a burst of new research and debate about how to make such crossovers between art gallery and classroom work. In October, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation published [“The Campus Art Museum: A Qualitative Study,”](#) based on extensive interviews with museum staff, faculty members and students around the country. At the same time, the Cultural Policy Center at the University of Chicago released another research effort, [“Campus Art Museums in the 21st Century: A Conversation.”](#)

Betty Farrell, the executive director of the policy center, noted that art museums have always been odd ducks within the academic structure, which is built around departments. But, she said, they are starting to find ways both to fit into their universities and to use their neither/nor status to serve as cultural gathering places for both students and the public. “Academic disciplines are pretty strongly walled,” Ms. Farrell said, “and it’s very hard to jump across them, but it’s happening. It hasn’t happened everywhere, obviously.”

Yale curators like to show off a place easily overlooked amid the flash and filigree of the renovation, where such walls have been breached altogether. Until a decade ago the university’s [ancient coin and medal collection](#), one of its earliest holdings, was under the jurisdiction of the university library. It had been “basically stuffed, as it were, into a broom closet,” said William E. Metcalf, who teaches classics and is the gallery’s first curator of coins and medals.

But within the expanded museum, the collection has a roomy new home next to a windowed study center, where an undergraduate was sitting the other day studying a 1,600-year-old Athenian coin. Later that week, a class on the Peloponnesian War would gather at the same conference table.

“This is the only department in which students are able to actually touch the works of art,” Professor Metcalf said proudly, looking over his new domain. “Of course, we want them to wash their hands first.”

Randy Kennedy is a culture reporter for The Times.

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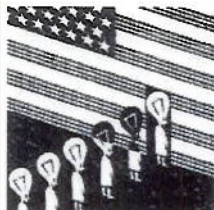
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