

Is it an Art? A Case Study of Teaching at the CU Art Museum
Jessica Brunecky, director of visitor experience
Hope Saska, curator of collections and exhibitions

The Association of Academic Museums and Galleries positions university museums within the broader museum context as follows:

While all museums are educational in purpose, academic museums are unique in their mission to teach and train succeeding generations of students.¹

We couldn't agree more.

The CU Art Museum is a vital resource for object-based pedagogy at CU Boulder, providing opportunities for formal learning and curricular engagement beyond the typical classroom. The art museum fosters a participatory learning environment through its collection and staff, creating a bridge between academic research and professional practice. By supporting and expanding curricular activities, the art museum upholds values outlined in the chancellor's strategic imperatives to shape tomorrow's leaders by "understanding, sharing and engaging diverse perspectives," and positively impacting humanity through "broaden[ing] and expand[ing] research, scholarship and creative work and articulat[ing] the [positive societal outcomes](#) they advance."

The art museum's desire to impact university pedagogy by increasing use of our collection and promoting staff as vital campus resources is in line with nationwide trends among academic art museums and the campus communities they serve. As centers for learning, academic art museums have the potential to impart skills across disciplines, modeling applications of "transfer learning" where knowledge gained in one domain is applied to another.² Among the skills cited in a recent study on the benefits of transfer learning via the museum are "observation, interpretation, evaluation, association, problem finding, comparison, flexible thinking . . . engagement focus and ownership of learning as well as the ability to draw informed conclusions and think conceptually."³

What we do now

We work with students from the beginning of their college experience through to the final projects before graduation. Through visits to our exhibitions and our collection study center, art museum staff provide

¹ Association of Academic Museums and Galleries, Professional Practices, <http://www.aamg-us.org/wp/best-practices/>

² Milkova, Liliana and Steven S. Volk. "Transfer: Learning in and Through the Academic Museum." *A Handbook for Academic Museums: Advancing Engagement*. Volume III. Editors Stephanie S. Jandl and Mark S. Gold. 2012. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Page 44.

³ *ibid.* Page 41.

students with experiences in close looking and object-based inquiry through direct examination of cultural objects from ancient to contemporary. In the 2016–17 academic year, students from more than 50 courses visited CU Art Museum exhibitions, and 38 classes visited the collection study center. So far in the 2017–18 academic year, 38 classes have visited art museum exhibitions, and 18 have visited the collection study center, putting the art museum well on track to increase curricular visitation by about 40 percent. The majority of these visits were guided by art museum staff who collaborated with faculty to discuss curricular goals, creating customized experiences, exemplified by this sentiment shared by first-year student Ellie Bowers:

Seeing behind the curtain—the methods, practices, and work that go into creating an exhibit—was fascinating in and of itself. It was also a rather unorthodox and interesting way to explore the relationship between the viewer and the viewed. Creating, or at least suggesting, the relationship that the audience has with the artwork, rather than merely discussing it, allowed for a hands-on learning environment unique to the museum. It was great.

During the fall 2017 semester, art museum staff worked with six faculty members to bring four First-Year Seminars, and more than 70 students, to the collection study center, where art museum staff facilitated direct encounters with cultural objects. One of these seminars, "Saving the World: Museums, Collection and Archives," had extended interaction with art museum staff and collections in the production of a small exhibition titled *Arguseum: Curating the Controversial*.

A case study

Curated by Thora Brylowe's First-Year Seminar, *Arguseum* is the type of curricular exhibition project that exemplifies the sustained object-based exploration and "high-road" transfer learning the art museum endeavors to facilitate. Over the course of a semester, students learned why and how people and institutions collect and display artifacts. Working singly or in pairs, students selected and researched works in the collection with controversial origin or with controversial content. Students were challenged to produce a cohesive exhibition that addressed themes of the course, and they were responsible for interpretive labels that demonstrated respect for the objects and museum visitors. Additional constraints, such as adhering to the museum style guide and exhibition requirements added a layer of complexity to their tasks. Class member Ellie Bower's quote above illustrates the power of reaching beyond the classroom for innovative coursework.

Arguseum was also the result of engaged dialogue between CU faculty and art museum staff who share the goal of reaching beyond traditional

classroom teaching and creating a new model for mobilizing campus collections. Based on the success of this collaboration, the art museum is eager to develop additional collaborative projects and has designated gallery space for such collaborative curricular use.

Moving forward

To increase our pedagogical presence on campus and further develop dialogue with faculty, the art museum recognizes that universitywide support is necessary and could be bolstered with the following means:

- **Support for museum staff.** As leaders in the museum field, art museum staff accrue status to our Tier 1 research university. We would have greater impact within the university and among national peers with additional university support. To stay current with best practices within the museum field, this support should take the form of sabbaticals for research. We ask for: equal status to apply for pedagogical grants within the university framework to ensure we can more easily develop courses that use our collections and professional skills; PI status on joint research projects; removal of barriers to interdisciplinary projects, such as equal opportunity to apply for Innovative Seed Grants and other funding.
- **Support for faculty.** Their work with the art museum should bear weight toward tenure and promotion. They could be incentivized to co-teach using our collections, bridging disciplines, if co-teaching were more easily implemented. The art museum suggests the creation of new faculty incentives—let's provide junior faculty an opportunity to apply for a fellowship to work on development of courses using object-based learning through the art museum's collection.

Numerous white papers already submitted to the Academic Futures Initiative illustrate ways in which the art museum could further integrate into the teaching efforts at CU Boulder.⁴ We encourage the Academic

⁴ Papers of note include:

1. *Re-Imagining Teaching and Learning through Material Culture* (Guinn-Chipman, et al.) https://www.colorado.edu/academicfutures/sites/default/files/attached-files/guinn-chipman_et_al.pdf
2. *Proposal to Create a CU-Boulder Institute for the Arts* (Amerika, Auguiste, Boord et al) https://www.colorado.edu/academicfutures/sites/default/files/attached-files/boord_et_al.pdf
3. *Teaching and Learning Center Academic Futures White Paper* (Kuskin and Learning Center Committee Members) <https://www.colorado.edu/academicfutures/sites/default/files/attached-files/kuskin.pdf>

Futures Committee to support the art museum in our efforts to increase object-based pedagogy and museum research at our Tier 1 research university.

