

The Principia School of Nations Museum

Vol. 4, No.2 /School & College edition

June 2009

Have you noticed that the term “museum” includes the word “muse”? Cultural objects can be intriguing. If I may personify them, they might tease the viewer with questions, such as, “-What am I? Who fashioned me? Why? How? Where have I traveled? Whose lives have I touched?” This edition features programming on both campuses.
—Nancy Boyer-Rechlin, director



The Redolent Object (COLLEGE) Spring term, the museum partnered with College English professor Dinah Ryan and visiting scholar Susan Vreeland to select 50 objects from our collection for display at a **May 27 creative writing workshop, titled “The Redolent Object.”** Vreeland, whose best-selling fiction is often inspired by works of art, invited 15 student writers to discover how an object—perhaps an old typewriter, a rough-hewn tool, or a child’s high button shoe—can act as muse to their imagination.

Vreeland asked participants to free write about their selected object; to use concrete words to paint a “still life” poem about the object; to consider the history through time of component materials; to imagine people who may have interacted with the object, to consider the meanings those people might have attached to it; and , finally, to consider the whole texture and plot of a story that could revolve around that object. Vreeland, who taught high school English for 30 years before launching her second career as a novelist, first used this exercise with her creative writing students.

RESOURCE NOTE: Copies of “*The Redolent Object*” lesson plan and innumerable intriguing objects are available from the museum. **This was a college workshop, but the technique can be adapted to all levels.**



Teacher Becky Rymer and her Preschool Juniors enjoy an impromptu “Punch and Judy” puppet show during their weekly gallery walk. One visit included a “surprise” flute concert by two Upper School musicians. Visit themes are linked to stories or concepts studied in the classroom. (Doug Miner photo)

The “I spy” Object: (EARLY CHILDHOOD) Most every Thursday during winter and spring terms, a group of **pre-school juniors** paid visits to the museum. Guided by teacher Becky Rymer, the children practiced their skills of observation to notice colors and shapes, to look for flags, instruments, clothing—or merely to enjoy the wonder of a special place.

The Touchable Object: (UPPER & LOWER SCHOOLS) On the final day of an Upper School exhibit about President Franklin Pierce, Lower and Upper School **American History** students met with Ken Kooyman, a descendent of Pierce who had loaned for display many Pierce family heirlooms used in the White House. They learned of the personal sorrows and daunting responsibilities that faced Pierce during his administration, a time Americans were battling over states rights, and the spread of slavery to new territory. They had the opportunity to handle items from the display.

Upper School Social Studies teacher Howard Bay called this “a serendipitous moment” for his U.S. History class, which happened to be studying events leading to the Civil War and the Pierce administration that week.



Upper Schooler Stephanie Romero, above, examines an inkwell from the Lincoln White House. Mr. Kooyman, right, invites questions from sixth graders.

RESOURCE NOTE: We loan artifacts for classroom display, and prepare special gallery exhibits for class visits. *Some museum artifacts may be handled gently.* According to Howard Bay, “One of the more popular activities for **World Geography students** is the day we take a mini field trip to the museum to see and touch artifacts from all over Africa.” Doug Hoff’s **second grade world cultures unit** includes a changing classroom “museum” of cultural objects from every continent. Students love handling the touchable items included in these displays.

The Sacred Object: (COLLEGE)

Students in Mike Hamilton’s winter term course, “**Living Religions of Asia,**” visited the museum gallery to examine objects associated with Hindu, Buddhist, Shinto and Taoist religious traditions. The class also took a field trip to the St. Louis Art Museum to see its Asian religious art. While the city museum showcases large, outstanding examples of world culture, our own collection invites a more intimate look at smaller scale cultural objects.



Miniature carved image of Buddha. Ivory.

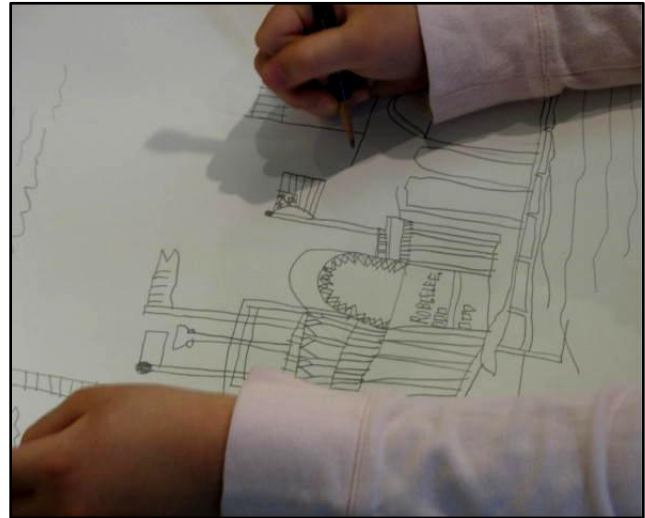
“The objects [in the College museum gallery] brought students closer to the religions they studied,” Hamilton wrote us. “We were able to view many of them without a glass barrier between us. The immediacy of the experience was valuable to the students--and to me.”

QUESTIONS TO PONDER: *Sacred objects might pose special questions for the young metaphysician or anthropology student. It’s intriguing to consider what an African ritual headdress, a Hopi Kachina, a Greek Orthodox icon, and a Hindu idol have in common. How and why do humans invest material objects with symbolic spiritual power? **What is sacred to you?***

RESOURCE NOTE: We are creating a digital photo catalog of our Asian art, including Japanese block prints. Interested faculty should contact the director to access these images. The College library has some intriguing books on the significance of cultural objects and museum studies. See “The Art of Small Things” by John Mack.

The ART Object:

(LOWER & MIDDLE SCHOOLS) Both pencils and powers of observation are sharpened when students bring their sketch books on museum visits. This year, **fourth graders** studying Missouri history took time to sketch prints of works by George Caleb Bingham, Remington, and lesser artists, depicting events in Missouri history. **Lower and Middle School art students** in Louise Elmgren-Carlson’s classes borrowed museum artifacts, books, and posters to serve as reference materials for art projects inspired by quilts, Hopi Kachinas, Greek vases and Spanish music.



A fourth grader in Barb Maurer’s class learns about an event in Missouri History as she sketches from a Currier & Ives print titled “The Great Mississippi Steamboat Race.”

(COLLEGE) At the College, students in **Marrin Robinson’s mono print studio art class** visited the museum to gain inspiration from texture, pattern, and color in museum objects.



College art student Heather Libbe, upper left, used the colors and patterns in this Persian-era ceramic bowl as inspiration for a series of mono prints, including the print pictured here.

On Exhibit in a class, display case or digital file near you:

This past year, the museum staff:

- Provided objects and programs to support **more than 24 classes or courses** on the two campuses.
- Created **36 large and small exhibits** for display cases and galleries on both campuses. Most exhibits were linked to current events, such as the presidential election last fall, or to special campus programs, such as the Public Affairs conferences on the College campus, or Production on the St. Louis campus.
- Mounted **a major exhibit of Southwestern textiles** in Holt Gallery on the College campus. The exhibit and a detailed guide were researched and designed by guest curator Christina Bell of St. Louis
- Hosted **receptions, meetings, classes, and pre-concert open houses** in our St. Louis gallery space. Nearly **200** people visited the gallery in connection with the Upper School Spring Production, *Cinderella*. About **150** visitors enjoyed the museum galleries before performances of the Town and Country Symphony.
- Began **major photo inventory projects** on both campuses, creating a digital record of Native American and meso-American artifacts, of Japanese prints and of a variety of poster visual aids in the collection. Student workers contributed to these projects.



Exhibit Opening: Weaving in the Southwest tradition.



A College class meets in Holt Gallery, near some of the Navajo and Chimayo textiles exhibited winter and spring quarters. A program prepared by curator Christina Bell provided background information on the social and political history that influenced the colors, techniques, and styles exhibited in the 17 pieces selected for the show. (Doug Miner photo)