



Professor Alan Levenson describes the story behind "Nikan Napew, Nikan Iskew" (First Man, First Woman).

TRAVIS CAPERTON

"The Artist's Bible" course allows students to explore the museum's galleries for related images.



ERIKAH BROWN

COLLECTIONS MAKE THE CONNECTION

OU's treasured art museum becomes an extended classroom for any academic discipline through the Focus Gallery.

B Y L A U R E N E M E R S O N



TRAVIS CAPERTON

"The Triumph of Mordecai," ca. 1641, an etching by Rembrandt van Rijn.



Students listen as Levenson explains an original Rembrandt etching based on the Book of Esther.

ERIKAH BROWN

ON A CHILLY SPRING morning at the University of Oklahoma's Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, students gather around Rembrandt's "The Triumph of Mordecai" and listen to Professor Alan Levenson explain the historical context and nuances of the 1641 etching. As he prompts a student to recount the story behind the depicted scene—chapter 6 of the Book of Esther—the rest of the class examines the original artwork.

"The Artist's Bible—From Mosaics to Graphic Novels," which focuses on visual art depicting Biblical scenes, was only the second course to utilize the museum's new Focus Gallery. The gallery serves as a nexus of partnership between the FJJMA and OU professors each semester to provide a visual art component for class subjects.

"We work with faculty to develop an installation related to their course," says Hadley Jerman, the museum's Eugene B. Adkins senior curator. "The course doesn't have to be art-related at all. In fact, the first installation was for a biology class; they discussed photographer Patrick Nagatani's series, 'Nuclear Enchantment,' which is about nuclear history in New Mexico. Students then made their own images in response to his series."

The Focus Gallery is located in an alcove on the ground floor of the museum, tucked away from visitors' view. In addition to artwork hosted in the space, there is seating for students and a television screen where course-relevant videos can be played.

Professors apply online to use the Focus Gallery; Jerman says the space will accommodate as many installations as possible each semester.

"Taking my students through the Focus Gallery enabled us to discuss multiple different styles and eras of carefully curated art," says Levenson, who holds OU's Schusterman/Josey Chair in Judaic History and co-led the course with Hebrew linguist and Price College of Business faculty member Yael Lavender-Smith.

"The works gave students a sense of how an artist can internalize the Biblical message and creatively express it in their own idiom. The museum was a fantastic partner."

Though some might not see a natural connection, Jerman believes art can relate to every academic subject.

"On a practical level, looking at art and describing it is beneficial for students of any discipline in the process of honing their skills of observation, description and interpretation," she says. "Looking at art also builds empathy. It helps us to see from another's perspective and to see ourselves differently, too. Whether it communicates through a naturalistic, representational style or complete abstraction, art can both challenge us and express that which we have difficulty expressing in words."

The Focus Gallery was established in 2022 following conversations between Jerman, the museum's Learning+Engagement Department—Amanda Boehm-Garcia and Karen Bowles—and the museum's director, Thomas Smith.



Professor Alan Levenson describes the story behind "Jael and Sisera," created in the 1730s and attributed to François Boucher.


TRAVIS CAPERTON

"We saw a need for a space in the museum that could be programmed for specific courses," Jerman says.

Jerman, Boehm-Garcia and Bowles meet with each course's professor to discuss goals for the class, the class's subject matter and the syllabus. While Boehm-Garcia and Bowles offer insight on potential assignments, Jerman puts together a list of relevant artworks in the museum's permanent collection. The professors then select which artworks they want displayed in the gallery.

"It really is a collaborative process, and, I hope, enjoyable. Faculty members can insert object-based learning into their course, and my colleagues and I get the pleasure of learning about artworks in our collection from the perspectives of scholars and students outside our field."

To Jerman, the alliance between OU academics and the museum adds a new layer to the work the FJJMA does.

"Our audience differs somewhat from other art museums in the state, in that we have a community of students and scholars right outside our doors," she says. "When I walk through the galleries, I love seeing students gathered around an artwork and talking. Being part of that campus community of scholars and learners provides a great potential for interdisciplinary partnerships and creative and intellectual collaboration." 

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—ALAN LEVENSON

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