Arts & Humanities

# Art on Campus

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**In a small village or rural county,** a college or university may be the linchpin of local cultural life, and the campus gallery one of the most visible buildings in town. Not at Columbia. Sarah Elliston Weiner ’85GSAS, director of the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, notes wryly that a visitor has to be “quite motivated” to find the Wallach, in business since 1986 under the auspices of the Department of Art History and Archaeology, on the eighth floor of Schermerhorn Hall. “Columbia seems like the hinterlands to many people,” Weiner says. “There is always the question, Can they find their way from the subway to the eighth floor of this building with an unpronounceable name?”

It seems they can. Last winter, artists and art historians from around the City and along the East Coast came to the Wallach for the first retrospective of works by Jean Fautrier, an exhibition organized with Harvard’s Fogg Art Museum and the Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University. A member of the French Resistance during World War II, Fautrier was a painter and printmaker whose heavily textured surfaces now seem emblematic of the turmoil of his time. The Wallach also sponsored a day-long symposium offering the perspectives of such internationally acclaimed scholars as Benjamin Buchloh, a professor of art history at Barnard, and Yve-Alain Bois, a professor of art history at Harvard. The exhibition catalog also includes translations of critical writings by André Malraux, the French art historian, philosopher, and Resistance hero.

The Wallach organizes temporary exhibitions, usually three or four a year. Its mission is to provide a venue for graduate students and faculty, primarily those in art history, to develop shows related to their research, and to publish catalogs that disseminate, in a lasting way, the scholarship that goes into each exhibition. The Wallach provides opportunities for undergraduates as well, as a few are selected

each year to gain exhibition experience and to develop educational programs for local high school students. Columbia's master's program in Modern Art and Curatorial Studies, a two-year program begun last fall under the leadership of Meyer Schapiro Professor of Modern Art Rosalind Krauss, a specialist in twentieth-century art, provides a separate opportunity for curatorial work. An internship at the Whitney Museum of American Art is built into the program, which will enable some graduate students to write their theses under the supervision of a Whitney curator, Krauss says.

The Wallach also provides a public arena for the display of the University's substantial archival collections, many of which have broad appeal. In "Mastering McKim's Plan," celebrating the l00th anniversary of the Morningside Heights campus, designed by Charles McKim (the University originated on Park Place, near City Hall, and moved in the 1850s to what is now midtown), the gallery displayed gorgeous watercolors of the proposed buildings culled from the more than 400,000 works on paper housed at Columbia's Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, as well as works from the New-York Historical Society and other collections. The catalog from that exhibition remains an important source for architects, architectural historians, and anyone interested in the history of Columbia.

Now up at the Wallach are nearly 90 prints by 11 visiting artists produced at Columbia's LeRoy Neiman Center for Print Studies, in the School of the Arts. In the eight years since painter LeRoy Neiman endowed the professional printshop, such well-known contemporary artists as Eric Fischl, William Kentridge, Alexis Rockman, Kiki Smith, and Sarah Sze have created works there. New prints are regularly displayed in the Neiman Gallery, an exhibition space in Dodge Hall, but the current Wallach exhibition brings them all together for the first time.

Weiner also wears a second hat, as curator of Art Properties, a position within the library system. This places her in charge of the artworks that belong to the University, except those that appropriately fall into other collections—for example, the architectural drawings that belong to Avery Library. There are all kinds of unexpected art objects around campus, including some that came to the University as part of literary collections, such as paintings by Tennessee Williams. On permanent display in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, in Butler Library, are portraits of British and American literary figures, including Charles Dickens. The Library also houses several theatre collections, including 350 three-dimensional stage models by architect and set designer Joseph Urban, ten of which were shown

in 2000 at the Wallach in “Architect of Dreams: The Theatrical Vision of Joseph Urban.” And Butler’s Kempner Exhibition Gallery mounted “Columbia’s Cornerstone: The Core Curriculum” in spring 2003. In the show, drawn entirely from Columbia holdings, are, in very early form, works familiar to every undergraduate, including a Shakespeare First Folio of 1623 and the typescript of Gertrude Stein’s essay on Picasso.

Some of the most spatially dynamic exhibitions on campus can be found in the Arthur Ross Gallery, in Buell Hall, the only building on campus to predate Charles McKim’s designs. Each year the work of students in the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation culminates in multimedia installations that wend and bend around every available square foot of Buell. The most recent show there was an expansion of last year’s seminal exhibition on the French mid-century architect and designer Jean Prouvé, admired for his sleek metal-and-wood furniture and modular housing.

Any account of art at Columbia must, of course, give *Alma Mater* pride of place. She was commissioned from Daniel Chester French, perhaps now best known for the figure of Abraham Lincoln in Washington’s Lincoln Memorial. The beloved matriarch’s l00th birthday party will take place this year *chez elle*, on the steps of Low Library. An exhibition up now in the Rotunda of Low gives some background on French, who derived the figure from the Columbia seal. It also sheds light on the sculpture’s role in campus life. Weiner calls her “the best known work of art” on campus. Nestled in her skirt is a small owl, a symbol of wisdom, which students sometimes touch, for good luck, on their way to exams.

*Alma Mater*, of course, graciously shares the campus with scores of other artworks. To list only a smattering: Auguste Rodin’s incomparable *Thinker* sits outside Philosophy Hall, Henry Moore’s ’74HON *Three-Way Piece: Points* resides on the bridge over Amsterdam Avenue, and Jacques Lipschitz’s *Bellerophon Taming Pegasus* stages a colossal battle over the entrance to Greene Hall, at the law school. In the Rare Book Reading Room of Avery Library, Florine Stettheimer’s whimsical paintings reflect the aristocratic, bohemian milieu of the postwar art salon she conducted with her two sisters, one of whom left these works to Columbia. The School of Dentistry is graced by two pieces by Seymour Lipton ’27DOS, the sculptor who represented the United States at the 1958 Venice Biennial, and the School of the Arts is the home of Agnes Martin’s ethereally serene canvas *Little Child Responding to Love* (2001), a gift from the artist. So although acquiring art has

never been a goal at the University, which has long cited the rich resources of the museums in New York, Columbia has had so much bestowed on it that the “hinterlands” may seem richly populated to art soldiers trekking north to the campus from SoHo, Chelsea, and 57th Street.

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