



# A CLEAR VIEW

The Wellin Museum of Art creates a new model for the university museum.

BY STEFANIE S. JANDL

On a recent spring day on the campus of Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art was a hive of activity, inquiry and discovery. A Japanese art history class was in session in the Overlook, the museum's state-of-the-art smart classroom. In the galleries, sculpture students were huddled around a site-specific installation and engaged in thoughtful discussion with their professor.



Left: Archive Hall at the Wellin Museum of Art.

Above: Professor John McEnroe discusses art objects in Archive Hall cases with art history students.

Elsewhere religion students quietly studied individual objects for a class assignment. Just beyond the galleries, museum staff held meetings, worked with objects and placed art for class study in a seminar room. And a few out-of-town visitors stood in the center of Archive Hall, captivated by the soaring 27-foot-high glass cabinets that showcase the museum's collections.

This was a typical day for the busy teaching museum—and the building's spectacular glass-filled interior made each of these diverse encounters with art visible to everyone. "The museum is designed to be a teaching tool and a laboratory," explained Wellin Museum director Tracy Adler in her comments at the opening of the museum. Supporting the educational mission of Hamilton College through object-based learning across the

curriculum—conducted within a largely transparent space—the new Wellin Museum of Art advances the model for what a college art museum can be.

### A Transparent Teaching Museum

Dedicated in the fall of 2012, the Wellin Museum of Art is the first phase of a campus arts complex designed by Machado and Silvetti Associates. The Boston-based architecture firm is known for sensitively integrating contemporary museum design within more historic contexts; their work includes an addition to the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, and the renovated Getty Villa. The second phase of the Hamilton project—a theater



and studio arts building located across the street and axially opposite the museum—will open in the fall of 2014. The completed arts complex will connect the two sides of campus with much-needed sight lines and pedestrian paths.

The design of the 30,537 square-foot Wellin Museum reflects and enhances the core function of the building: a teaching museum on a college campus. The exterior is comprised of square and rectangular shapes harmoniously fitted together and warmly clad in terracotta. Entering the museum, visitors discover Archive Hall, an open, light-filled space named for the group of monumental, take-your-breath-away open-storage glass cabinets that rise two stories high. Though the concept has its origin in 19th-century cabinets of curiosities and, more specifically, in the college's former Knox Hall of Natural History, Machado and Silveti gave a 21st-century interpretation to these cabinets with sleek, all-glass encasement

and concealed hardware. Archive Hall forms the building's central axis and is flanked by 6,200 square feet of flexible gallery and object study space, two seminar rooms, object and painting storage, conservation and prep areas, and administrative offices. Most of these spaces are intriguingly visible through the glass cabinets and open corridors of Archive Hall.

The transparent design of the museum's interior invites the acts of looking and discovery, which have critical resonance on a college campus. Climbing the central staircase, students and other visitors ascend along the glass Archive Hall cabinets and view exhibited works from changing perspectives and multiple angles that reveal the objects' details, facets, flaws and even accession numbers. There are no object labels here, but information about works on view is available at the front desk. "The objects were installed so they could be perceived visually first," says Adler. With



Associate Director Susanna White discusses the curatorial process with art history students.

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Archive Hall's challenge to conventional notions of museum display, Adler notes, "there is no mistake that we are introducing new ideas about learning through interaction with objects."

The transparency of Archive Hall also invites inquiry about museum practice, typically located out of view. "Making that whole process visible is very appealing to me," says Adler, "because it's all about engagement, and the best way to engage people is to show them how it's done." Indeed, the work of museum staff is on view through and beyond the glass cases as visitors move about the building. "You don't just see a painting hanging on a wall. You see people doing condition reports, people cataloguing things, measuring them, reframing them," comments recent graduate Kiernan Acquisto (13), who plans a career in museum work. Equally important, museum staff members see students and other visitors looking at, and engaging with, art objects on display. And

students, the principal audience, have the opportunity from the classroom, seminar rooms or the comfortable second-floor lounge to observe—and learn from—museum visitors in the act of looking. The effect is of a museum turned inside out.

### Elements of Success

It is easy to feel the enthusiasm and pride that the Hamilton community has for its new museum. Although the Wellin's handsome modern design is an anomaly on this traditional northeastern campus, students have nonetheless embraced the building and its place in the curriculum and daily life on campus. "We live on Hamilton and Hamilton is our home, so [the museum] feels like an extension of that," comments Clarke Rudick (16). Of the Overlook, the stunning, versatile classroom cantilevered over the museum's entrance, Professor Steve Goldberg enthuses that "it is such a joy to teach in this space." Other professors speak of the value of holding class discussions with art objects within a space that so naturally fosters looking and learning. Hamilton President Joan Hinde Stewart says of the new museum: "I love it. It feels right. It feels like exactly the museum that we should have put up on this campus. We got it right."

How did Hamilton College get the museum planning and design so right? What can other college campuses seeking to build an art

museum, or expand an existing museum, learn from Hamilton? While there was a confluence of many important factors, including visionary leadership, dedicated committee and staff members, and extraordinarily generous donors, three factors particularly stand out to account for Hamilton's success.

It began with a critically important foundation: the campus culture. Hamilton College has a long tradition of including art in the curriculum. This commitment is stated in the college's declared academic goals, which emphasize aesthetic discernment, creativity and understanding of cultural diversity. Before the Wellin Museum, the college had a collection of more than 5,000 art objects that was housed in the small Emerson Gallery. Gallery staff, including Susanna White, now associate director and curator of the Wellin, mounted several exhibitions each year and worked closely with faculty to make the collection in storage available for academic engagement. While art history and studio art faculty regularly taught with the collection, so did faculty from other disciplines such as religion and music. When President Stewart arrived in 2003 and embraced the museum project, she was able to secure cross-disciplinary and broad campus support to get it launched. It was not long before the museum's lead donors, Wendy and Keith Wellin (the museum is named for Keith's parents), stepped forward with major funding. This gift in turn attracted about a dozen other substantial gifts that, together, enabled museum construction to be entirely gift-funded. The Hamilton community's widely shared belief in the transformative role of art in the curriculum played a crucial role in

realizing the museum.

The second critical factor of success was an inclusive, transparent planning process. The Campus Planning Committee for Arts Facilities, chaired by professor of music Samuel Pellman, was a dedicated group comprised of Susanna White, faculty from art history, studio art and other academic departments, and Ian Berry, then associate director (now director) of the nearby Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College. The experienced, multi-disciplinary group asked a lot of questions, invited meaningful community conversation with stakeholders—trustees, alumni, students, faculty, staff—about the new museum and arts complex, and they listened. They also made site visits to numerous academic art museums, including those at Amherst, Skidmore, Smith and Vassar colleges. In time a shared vision emerged that reflected and would augment the unique role of the arts within the curriculum at Hamilton College.

The final factor of success was perseverance. The college was rigorous in the planning process and ensured that each decision moved the project in the right direction. The first step was to prepare a preliminary strategic plan, completed in 2002, that identified the central issues for art facilities—including theater and studio art as well as the need for an art museum. Two years later, Polshek Partnership Architects (now Ennead Architects) compiled a more detailed and far-reaching strategic plan that projected future curricular needs. As planning continued, the proposed site for the museum shifted around campus several times. "The first [museum] design was higher than the budget allowed," Adler says, "and Hamilton



decided to step back and take some time to look at alternate designs,” resulting in the eventual engagement of a new architecture firm. In all, the project took more than a decade of rigorous work, the courage to change course when necessary and extraordinary patience.

### Academic Art Museums Today

The Wellin Museum of Art arrives at a dynamic time for academic art museums and joins a community of innovative institutions. Academic art museums have long made significant contributions in exhibition, research and scholarship while also supporting their companion art departments. Over the past 25 years, however, many such museums have expanded their vision of what they

can be and what audiences they can serve. This shift in identity arose from a recognition within the profession in the late 1980s that many campus art museums had, to varying degrees and for multiple reasons, diverged from their parent institutions’ academic missions. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, through its College and University Art Museum grant program (1990–2005), played a leading role in supporting these museums as they realigned themselves more closely with their campus curricula—both within and beyond art departments. Other foundations, notably the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, have also supported academic art museums and their expanding roles. And the profession has benefited greatly from committed, visionary leadership by many museum directors, curators and school administrators.



Today most academic art museums are, or are emerging as, vital partners in advancing the educational goals of their parent organizations. “These academic institutions are now clearly enjoying a renaissance of sorts as their curators and educators refine both traditional and innovative ways by which artworks can be actively researched, displayed, viewed and discussed in order to stimulate and inform any interested young mind,” observes Jock Reynolds, director of the Yale University Art Gallery.

What characterizes thriving academic art museums today? First, they have physical facilities that are inviting to faculty and students and allow for meaningful interaction with art objects in a variety of ways. For most museums, this means classroom space, object study rooms, flexible galleries and accessible, adequate storage. Constructing new facilities, or renovating existing ones, to align with this emerging new standard continues to be a trend among academic art museums. Michigan State University opened

the new Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, designed by Zaha Hadid, just a month after the Wellin Museum opened. Not long after, the Yale University Art Gallery completed an extraordinary 14-year expansion and renovation project that enables the museum to exhibit more of its collection, provide numerous study and teaching spaces, and enrich its role in the school’s curriculum.

Progressive college and university art museums, by culture and by mission, are focused principally (but not exclusively) on their faculty and students. They have staff positions that are dedicated to serving their campus constituencies. They reach out to individual professors across the curriculum to initiate collaboration, they encourage faculty to approach them with ideas for teaching with the collection and developing exhibitions, and they create educational opportunities for students outside the classroom. These museums are open-minded and flexible, and they accommodate curricular activities whenever possible.

Finally, exhibition programs at college and university art museums tend to be innovative and bold, making these museums particularly stimulating for any visitor—not just students and faculty. The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College, for example, has a long record of interdisciplinary exhibitions on topics such as hair, molecules and astronomy that pair the museum’s expertise with that of faculty from across the disciplinary spectrum. And the Williams College Museum of Art organized an exhibition that examined Hitler’s early years in Vienna and their impact on his later political and aesthetic views. This inherently difficult exhibition (which was critically acclaimed and drew record crowds) was ideally suited to a college campus, where open dialogue on complex topics is ideally an integral part of the educational process.

### The Wellin Museum: Looking Ahead

“University and college art museums are places for learning,” notes Katherine Hart, associate director and curator of academic programming at the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College. “They invite exploration and the traversing of boundaries, both between and within curricular disciplines and across cultures. In this they are unique institutions on college campuses, and are a vital resource within the liberal arts environment.” The Wellin Museum has clearly identified itself as such a museum and has the key elements in place to fulfill its promise.

Under Adler’s dynamic leadership, the museum has initiated an ambitious exhibition program that concentrates on contemporary artists—established and emerging—and contributes to scholarship through catalogues that extend learning beyond the gallery. Exhibitions are developed for their

ability to enrich the curriculum and advance experiential learning. For the exhibition “Dannielle Tegeder: Painting in the Extended Field,” Adler says, “we had 30 students work on the wall drawing with the artist, a student interning with Dannielle in New York as part of Hamilton’s New York City program and another music/art major work with Dannielle on developing the sound component for one of the major works in the show.” The museum also works with faculty guest-curators on exhibitions that complement their teaching.

Adler and her staff are creating a welcoming, accessible campus profile for the Wellin. “As a new museum and one that takes a very integrative innovative approach,” she says, “I am constantly engaging with faculty and students in different disciplines and inviting them to think of the museum as a site for their classes.” And when faculty approach the museum with ideas for incorporating art into their teaching, Adler says, the staff asks an all-important question: “How can we make this happen?”

In its first nine months of operation, the Wellin Museum welcomed more than 9,000 visitors, including students in nine courses representing seven disciplines. In the years ahead the museum will be able to build on this success and on its considerable assets—the building, the campus culture, its staff and programs—to become a core partner in fulfilling the educational mission of Hamilton College and as a vibrant member of the academic art museum community. «

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*Stefanie S. Jandl is co-editor of the two-volume set, A Handbook for Academic Museums (MuseumsEtc., 2012), and is the former Andrew W. Mellon associate curator of academic programming at the Williams College Museum of Art.*