

Augustana's Gift to the Community

Written by Steve Banks

Tuesday, 10 January 2006 18:00

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It is rare to find the research work of a freshman published alongside that of the college president, but Augustana College has done just that, and in a very public way. With its new Origins of Modernity exhibit and the accompanying catalog, Augustana is giving the community an opportunity to experience this innovative educational process.

On January 11, Dr. Catherine Carter Goebel will publicly unveil the impressive *Origins of Modernity* at a 10:30 a.m. slide presentation at Centennial Hall. The show and catalog are the culmination of a year of intensive work and were designed to complement the first-year liberal-studies curriculum. Under the auspices of Goebel, a professor of art history and Paul A. Anderson Chair in the Arts, more than 80 authors from the Augustana community have conducted research and written more than 100 essays exploring concepts of Modernism. The results can be found in the 260-page, fully illustrated color catalog based on the works in the exhibition.

Origins

, which runs through March 22, utilizes paintings, sculptures, pottery, and etchings as a basis to stimulate discussions and learning – beyond art and art history – regarding the rise of the Modern era.

The exhibition, which contains nearly 100 artists, is populated with mostly colorful and dramatic paintings and etchings from the late 18th through the early 20th Century. The show is punctuated with a carved marble statue, bronze pieces, blown-glass containers, African-carved wood masks, ceramic vessels, and woodcuts. Some of the pieces date from the Renaissance period to reflect the fact that some scholars point to events during that time as the start of Modernism. Some ancient pieces, specifically Greek pottery and Roman glass work, are included because images, ideas, and motifs from antiquity were often the source for works during what is referred to as Neo-Classicism (a period within Modernism starting around the time of the French Revolution).

The beginning of Modernism is usually pegged to the Age of Enlightenment in the mid-1700s. The era is characterized by a new school of thought that rejected the stifling decrees of

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dogmatic churches and opulent and dysfunctional monarchies in favor of a more humanistic and rational approach to art, science, philosophy, and literature. The population started to migrate toward cities and industries. The middle class saw a dramatic increase in its numbers and political, economical, and social power. Larger numbers of people became educated, causing a resurgence of interest in the intellectual climate that produced the artwork and philosophy of antiquity. Once the dominant patronage for arts and science wasn't coming from the church, art and literature began to explore ideas and motifs drawn from everyday life.

Some of the most important and influential movements in art, such as Impressionism, Cubism, Fauvism, and Surrealism, fall within this time frame. This period also contains some of the biggest of the big-name artists, including Picasso, Matisse, Kandinsky, DiChirico, Gauguin, Kollwitz, Toulouse-Lautrec, Goya, Calder, Boudin, Whistler, Thomas Hart Benton, and Grant Wood – all of whom have works represented in the *Origins of Modernity* exhibition and catalog. *The Great American Thing*, which recently closed at the Figge Art Museum, covered a small slice of time within Modernism.

Origins of Modernity marks the third and largest project in which Goebel uses artworks as a departure point to explore ideas, innovations, attitudes, and events within various academic fields. Her first catalog was *The Paul A. Anderson Art History Collection* (2001), followed by *Tracing the Line Through Time* (2002). What really distinguishes this project is how broad of an influence the artwork has achieved.

Goebel said she is motivated to make the art accessible to students and is also concerned with “not making art too precious.” During our talk, Goebel showed me a First Century Roman marble bust and a small Roman mosaic that she brings to classes so students can actually see them up close. This kind of contact for the students fosters a profound and usually unattainable empathy for the cool smoothness of marble or the textures and directional masses of the tesserae (small tiles of stone or glass typically set in concrete or plaster) that cannot be achieved by the traditional academic diet of viewing slides or photographs alone.

This project appealed to the idealist in her, Goebel said. The underlying principle is that the various academic areas of study – such as art, science, theatre, literature, history, and philosophy – utilize the common ground of various visual images (the artwork) to explore topics within their fields, but through a common starting point are able to cross-pollinate the studies in other areas. It has moved beyond idealism to become a manifestation of interdisciplinary learning, a concept that many other colleges merely pay lip service to.

Goebel has amassed what she refers to as “pedagogically-based art collection,” aided by a gift of two large crates filled with nearly a lifetime's collection of artwork from her mentor, Professor Thomas B. Brumbaugh, and numerous contributions from other donors/lenders (many of them locals who offered work from their private collections). This teaching collection showcases works from important artists and art movements without getting lost in the intellectual morass of material value tied to a small handful of works.

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The dynamic and growing collection of artworks at Augustana College serves as a visual, intellectual, and ideological springboard for ideas, discussions, and papers within many disciplines throughout the college. *Origins* boasts essays contributed from the Art History, French, Classics, and English departments, as well as from emeritus faculty, the president of the college, alumni, and current students ranging from second-term freshmen through seniors, all of them writing on different topics that find their genesis in the artwork.

An image by John James Audubon is the starting point for an effective and articulate essay by Kady Fairfield (class of 2008). In Audubon's study, *Whippoorwill* (1830), we see three birds on a leafy branch with two butterflies and a caterpillar (posed by Audubon) arranged to show the birds from different angles and engaged in different activities. Instead of a cold and analytic display of the birds, Audubon tries to capture some of the essence of their environment in addition to the observed detail of the animals. In her essay, Fairfield explores how Audubon's sketches and paintings of birds were a marriage between art and science. As Fairfield wrote: "His artwork further advanced science into the realm of art, utilizing the natural ability of one field to complement and further inform the other."

Augustana President Steven C. Bahls (a lawyer, CPA, and former law-school dean) also contributed an essay. He explores the historical underpinnings and interpretations of the work *Justitia* (Philip Galle after Pieter Bruegel, 1559). In this piece, we see several dense groupings of figures surrounding the pedestal where the blindfolded and apparently aloof lady justice stands. She is holding her sword in her left hand and a balance in her right. All around her horrors are being doled out in her name – a beheading, hangings, someone having a hand cut off. Bahls plunges into a brief historical examination of the evolution of the lady-justice image, but also some of the religious and political persecution of the time.

Through a grant written by Goebel and her students, the exhibition catalog is free. "Anyone can have a catalog and take it home," she said. This allows the value of the exhibit to expand well beyond the borders of Augustana College and into the community as an ongoing visual and academic resource. I detected a slight smile of satisfaction when she explained that the show and the catalog were "Augie's gift to the community."

Although the topic is vast and the volume and variety of work might seem overwhelming, both the exhibition and the catalog have been thoughtfully constructed in such a way as to break down the aspects of Modernism into short and understandable increments. The show contains some knock-out pieces by Emma Ruff, Edgar Melville Ward, and John Constable to name only a few, and the catalog is filled with excellent color photographs of artwork and succinct writing. It's a welcome addition to any library.