

# Art

## History Lessons

An exhibit at the Arthur Ross Gallery offers a revealing look at some treasures of the University's art collection—but a walk around campus works, too. **By Molly Petrilla**



**It's** a brutally hot morning in early July, and as the temperature gallops toward 100 degrees, Lynn Marsden-Atlass is leading me on a treasure hunt of Penn's scattered art collection. The director of the Arthur Ross Gallery since 2008, Marsden-Atlass was named curator of the University's art holdings earlier this year. As we step out the doors of the Fisher Fine Arts Library, where the gallery is

housed, we're headed for Van Pelt Library first, where she plans to show me a pair of Albrecht Dürer prints from the turn of the 16th century. But before we even reach the building's front steps, a trio of works on College Green catches her eye.





Campus visitors can always search out Claes Oldenburg's *Split Button*, the *LOVE* sculpture (inset), and Alexander Calder's *Jerusalem Stabile* on College Green. Niki de Saint Phalle's *Standing Nana* (center) is included in the *Naked* show.



"We have amazing art everywhere on this campus," she says, gesturing to the *Split Button* in front of her, the *LOVE* sculpture farther down Locust Walk, and the 1899 bronze statue of a seated Benjamin Franklin (not to be confused with the striding Young Ben outside Weightman Hall or Ben on the Bench at 37th and Locust Walk). "A major portion of the University's collection is out in public spaces, and since we don't have a museum [to house Penn's art collection], that's a really appropriate use of the works."

Look closely, and you'll spot these artistic treasures all around—an Auguste Rodin figure study tucked in a corner of Steinberg-Dietrich Hall; David Rittenhouse's massive *Orrery* clock in Van Pelt Library; Alexander Calder's *Jerusalem Stabile* outside Meyerson Hall. The University owns about 6,000 works in all, the vast majority of which are sprinkled throughout campus, visible to any student, faculty member, or other passerby.

"The strength of the collection is its variety and diversity," Marsden-Atlass adds. "It's also very much a public collection; I think Benjamin Franklin would like that. It's art for the people—very democratic."

## Getting Naked with Renoir, Rodin, and others

Before coming to Penn, Marsden-Atlass worked as senior curator of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and curator of American and Contemporary Art at the Chrysler Museum. Juggling her duties directing the Arthur Ross and as curator of Penn's art collection has been smooth so far, she says, since both are "the same in a sense—it's the love of the artwork."

On this steamy morning in early July, she's knee-deep in arrangements for her first exhibition as University curator—a show she says was inspired by the next stop on our campus art hunt: College Hall. About a year ago, well before she became curator, Marsden-Atlass stopped into the building to drop something off in the President's Office. "I was admiring [Pierre-Auguste] Renoir's *Grande Venus*," she says as we enter the building, gesturing to where the sculpture sits to the left of the main staircase, "and then when I went into the president's office, I was looking at the *Standing Nana* sculpture [by Niki de Saint Phalle]. I realized that these two great sculptures, both owned by the University, could make a wonderful

exhibition, and that's how the idea of the *Naked* show came about."

To create *Naked: The University Collection Unveiled*, Marsden-Atlass has transported 35 depictions of unclothed subjects from their usual display cases, walls, and hooks around campus—inside College Hall, Van Pelt, and the Inn at Penn, among others—to the Arthur Ross Gallery, where they are on view until October 31. "My goal is to bring these pieces to light, some of which people may walk by on campus and not notice," she says. "I want to present these in a new format so that people discover some of the University's collection."

The depth and breadth of Penn's art holdings will be apparent in *Naked*, Marsden-Atlass adds. The show ranges from a statuette of Aphrodite from the first century BCE (a loan from the Penn Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology) up through works by contemporary artists such as Marisol Escobar, three of whose lithographs are included in the show. "Our goal was to have a variety of media and a variety of subject matter," Marsden-Atlass adds. "We tried to focus on the human body in all its forms—athletics, maternity, studies of movement and gesture. This exhibition is all about the body and how it's been idealized or humanized over the years."

For instance, there's the Rodin piece in Steinberg-Dietrich mentioned earlier—*Jean D'Aire*, a figure study for the *Burghers of Calais* monument that the artist com-

**The statue of a young Ben Franklin arriving in Philadelphia is one of 178 works in the University's collection by sculptor and Penn faculty member R. Tait McKenzie, whose studio was on the top floor of Weightman Hall. Right: *Mother and Child*, by Henry Moore.**





pleted in 1889. The full-size sculpture serves as a historical monument of the Siege of Calais. “City heads were told to wrap the keys of the city around their necks and they would be sacrificed,” Marsden-Atlass says. “Rodin was trying to capture in each one of these individuals what goes on in a man or woman’s mind before they face their own death. I think that’s very interesting.”



After admiring *Jean D'Aire's* posture and form, Marsden-Atlass is on the move again, across Locust Walk and Walnut Street to the Inn at Penn. “There’s a lot of Tait McKenzie work in the collection,” she’s saying as we climb the thickly carpeted stairs to the second floor. “His focus was on athletics and the human body, so if you go in the athletic building, you’ll see a lot of works by him as well, but there’s a treasure-trove of these works here in the Inn at Penn. He reminds me a lot of the gestures and study of [Edgar] Degas.”

There are a total of 178 McKenzie works throughout campus—including the young Benjamin Franklin sculpture outside Weightman Hall—and four of them will appear in *Naked*. These large numbers are perhaps unsurprising given the artist’s Penn connection. Robert Tait McKenzie was a physician, physical therapist and physical educator who served as the University’s first professor of physical education from 1904-1929, the J. William White Research Professor of Physical Education from 1931-37 and, after that, professor emeritus. He began creating sculptures to illustrate points in his anatomy lectures, and eventually devoted himself to the medium. He worked in a private

studio at the top of Weightman Hall, and often used Penn athletes as models for his work. A fan of his “wonderful sense of movement and athleticism,” Marsden-Atlass will exhibit McKenzie’s sculptures *Competitor* (1906) and *Flying Sphere* (1920) along with his small studies for *The Diver* (1911) and *Winner* (1932).

Marsden-Atlass says the McKenzie and Rodin works are prime examples of her desire to “break away from the stereotype of the male artist” in *Naked*—that old belief that male artists are only interested in admiring and depicting the beauty of a woman’s body. To that end, the exhibition includes works by men of men, works by women of women, and men/women, women/men combinations, too. There are plenty of familiar names as well—artists whose works run the gamut in medium, time period, and subject matter: Amedeo Modigliani and Marc Chagall, Albrecht Dürer and Helmut Newton, Man Ray and Henry Moore.

The exhibition is “a great way for people to see all of these magnificent works,” she adds, “because not everyone comes into the director of the library’s office or Steinberg-Dietrich Hall or the Inn at Penn or the reception room of the vet school.”

Pierre Auguste Renoir’s *Grande Venus*; *Girl at Window*, by Raphael Soyer; *Polyhedron Forms (Black Forest)*, by Robinson Fredenthal.



## The past, present, and future of Penn’s collection

Associate University Curator Albert Porter joins Marsden-Atlass and me on our second trip to Van Pelt Library, and up on one of the top floors, they discuss the University collection as it extends beyond the upcoming *Naked* show. Porter stops mid-sentence to point out a portrait titled *Dr. John Hunter*. “This is a recent gift,” he says. “Someone called us from a nursing home and they had found the work in a closet and didn’t know what to do with it. It wound up being a [piece by early American portraitist] Thomas Sully, which we took and had restored.”

It’s a not uncommon story among Penn’s artworks, the vast majority of which have been gifts, rather than purchases. “We found that in [former Penn President Martin] Meyerson’s office when we cleaned it out after he died,” Porter says, pointing to the next painting on the wall, Giorgio de Chirico’s *Landscape with Angels*. “We get a lot of calls [about potential donations],” he adds. “We’ve even had people unrelated to Penn approach us and offer huge collections.”





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"We have strengths in a number of different areas," Marsden-Atlass says. That includes an assortment of early American works by Charles Wilson Peale, Sully, and others from when the University was first established, along with sizable collections of photography, prints, and portraits (many of past University higher-ups), she says.

Porter estimates that about 75 percent of the 6,000-work collection is out on campus, both inside and outside each of the 12 schools, all of the University hospitals and the Morris Arboretum. "Many of the major pieces are outdoor sculpture," Marsden-Atlass adds. "I think they're an important part of our campus, and a very visible illustration of Penn's commitment to arts and culture."

Among those outdoor works is what Porter and Marsden-Atlass consider a "gem of the collection": Claes Oldenburg's *Split Button* sculpture. The 5,000-pound, 16-foot broken white button sits outside Van Pelt library, and was purchased in 1981 under the city's Percent for Art Ordinance, a 1959 public-art initiative—and the first of its kind in the country—that stipulates 1 percent of construction costs for municipal projects must be set aside for fine arts projects.

Other outdoor sculptural works include Alexander Archipenko's *King Solomon* (just behind Van Pelt Library), the life-sized *Ben on the Bench* (in which Franklin is reading a copy of the *Gazette*) at



**Adam**, by Henry Moore; detail from *Jean D'Aire*, by Auguste Rodin, a figure study for the sculptor's *Burghers of Calais*; Alexander Liberman's monumental *Covenant*.

37th and Locust Walk, and Alexander Liberman's interlocking large, red steel pipes that form *Covenant* at 39th (another Percent for Art acquisition). They are joined by some 30 others throughout campus, ranging from the seven-foot *Spring* fountain by Ulrich Pakker in the Dental School's courtyard to *Scholar, Football Player: A Drinking Fountain*, by Alexander Stirling Calder, in the Quad. (The only hitch with all this outdoor art, Marsden-Atlass says, is that it "requires

a little extra care" due to vandalism or regular wear and tear from the weather.)

One of the University's best-known works, Thomas Eakins's *The Agnew Clinic*, is on loan right now, appearing in a Philadelphia Museum of Art Eakins exhibition through January 2011. The painting was commissioned in 1889 by Penn's medical class of that year as a tribute to retiring professor D. Hayes Agnew. Eakins modeled it after *The Gross Clinic*, which he had created 14 years prior for alumni of





Thomas Eakins' *Agnew Clinic* is currently in a show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art with the better-known *Gross Clinic*, but this statuette of Aphrodite from the first century BCE (top right) and Tait McKenzie's *Flying Sphere* are part of the *Naked* exhibition.

Jefferson Medical College, and which also depicts a doctor/professor performing surgery in front of his medical students.

Considering these and the other notable works in Penn's collection—which include a vast range of time periods, genres, styles, and media—Provost Vincent Price says the collection is “one of the true treasures of the University.” Adds Marsden-Atlass, “These works are a tremendous asset for the University, and make it an even greater artistic and cultural resource. They also

greatly enhance everyone's quality of life.”

She's already looking ahead to the next University-collection show, which will likely center on Penn's photography holdings. And, in the meantime, Marsden-Atlass will continue watching as her treasure map expands further, with new works filling the campus-wide gallery that Penn has become. ♦

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## Playing Favorites

We asked arts-oriented faculty and staff members across the University to name their favorite artwork at Penn.

Julie Saecker Schneider, chair of the undergraduate fine arts program:

***Kelly Hand Gates* by Mark Lueders at the entrance of Charles Addams Fine Arts Hall.**

“The blend of bronze casts, steel, disciplinary references and the creepy hand from the Addams family always make me nod and smile as I walk into the building.”

Michael Leja, American art professor:

***The Agnew Clinic* by Thomas Eakins.**

“This painting does not get nearly as much attention as the famous *Gross Clinic*, and it certainly isn't as radical or historically important, but it is easier to like, in part because the attitudes of the students in the audience are so entertaining.”

Christine Poggi, modern and contemporary art professor: ***125 Years* by Jenny Holzer.**

“It commemorates the 125th anniversary (celebrated in 2001) of women students being admitted to Penn with an anti-heroic monument ... You can never take in the whole work, just the parts you choose to look at as you walk through it. I like the fact that it can be missed, but also discovered by passersby who don't expect any kind of monument in that location.”

Ty Furman, director of University life arts initiatives: ***Fisher Fine Arts Library*, designed by Frank Furness.**

“I have loved the Fisher Fine Arts Library since I first set foot on campus; the color, the windows, the gargoyles—it's such a cool building.”