Buying art for a museum's permanent collection is a task usually reserved for staff with doctorates in art history. But on one occasion late in 2008, Elizabeth Barker, director and chief curator of the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College in Amherst, Massachusetts, assigned this important responsibility to a group of students. Specifically, she asked these 16 “docents” (who volunteer to lead tours of the museum) to make the inaugural purchase with monies from the Trinkett Clark Memorial Student Acquisition Fund, which honors the Mead’s former curator of American art, who died of cancer in 2006. Their budget: $2,500.

First Barker explained to the docents that art museums build their collections not according to curators’ personal taste, but in service to their institutions’ long-range needs, weighing considerations of legality, authenticity, condition, size, quality, significance, and relevance to the existing collections. (For museums affiliated with colleges and universities, relevance to the curriculum is also a factor.)

Ultimately, the students decided to focus on contemporary works on paper because they are generally inexpensive and would address a need in the Mead’s holdings. Looking to buy in New England, the
MAKING THEIR CASE

In April 2009, the docents were ready to formally present their selections to a mock acquisitions board. Its members were Barker; Susan Anderson, the Mead’s interim coordinator of college programs; Nick Clark, the widower of Trinkett Clark and also chief curator of the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst; Randall Grifey, the Mead’s current curator of American art; Jill Bierly, a University of Massachusetts doctoral student in anthropology who was coordinating the docent program; and Edward

Gideon Bok (b. 1966)
Wingate Studios with Allo’s Press #2: No Sleep till Hinsdale
2008, Hardground etching, aquaint, sugarlift, whiteground, and drypoint on paper, 20 x 44 in. (sheet), Edition of 20
Created at Wingate Studio, Hinsdale, NH

Student Katherine Eisen makes the case for acquiring Ahmed Alsoudani’s print.
Photo: Samuel Masinter
O’Connor, an assistant at the Mead and also a docent coordinator.

First, student Katherine Eisen ’12 made the case for an abstract etching created in 2008 by Iraqi-born Ahmed Alsoudani (b. 1975). “We think it’s probably a distorted human face,” she said of the untitled work, noting its “chaotic and violent” mood. “He is reacting to the horrors of war.” She added that it might be a self-portrait, one that would complement Picasso’s Dream and Lie of Franco etchings and Goya’s Ravages of War print series, both already in the Mead’s collection. “This is a good chance to get the next Picasso before he moves out of our price range,” Eisen concluded.

The board responded with questions: What college courses could make use of this print? “Amherst has a class titled War,” replied Eisen. How many prints were made? “It’s the sixth impression out of 30.”

Next, Timothy Clark ’12 argued in favor of Wingate Studio with Aldo’s Press #2: No Sleep ’til Hinsdale (2008), a color etching and aquatint made by Gideon Bok (b. 1966) about the collaboration between artist and printer as time passes in the studio. With its hollow, ghost-like figures, this piece epitomizes Bok’s style, Clark noted. He also suggested that it would fit well into an exhibition featuring Thomas Cole’s The Past and The Present, both already owned by the Mead.

Barker asked, “What classes outside the art department could use this?” Chemistry courses might want to consider printmaking as a chemical process, the students replied, and the American studies program offers courses in material culture and New England history. Moreover, Bok attended Hampshire College nearby and thus might be willing to lecture on his piece during a future visit to the Mead.

Finally, Margaret Tato ’09 presented Garlic Scapes (2008), a silvery, monochromatic print by Richard Ryan (b. 1960) that pays homage to 16th- and 17th-century Flemish still-life paintings. With its “smoky and elusive” greys, Tato observed, this work is a fine example of the “sugarlift” printmaking technique — and indeed would become the only example of it in the Five College consortium that includes Amherst, Hampshire, Smith, Mount Holyoke, and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. She added that Garlic Scapes would help students learn about the evolution of sugarlift and that it could enhance future exhibitions about vases, plants in art, and artworks that use only black, white, and grey.

THE VERDICT

Once their presentations were concluded, Barker sent the students out of earshot so the board could quickly narrow the candidates down to two: the Alsoudani and the Bok. (The Ryan is a “technical marvel,” they agreed, but its light colors might “disappear” on the wall.) Barker described Bok’s work as “local in many ways” and added that philosophy courses might use it to explore issues of memory and time. Nick Clark praised the “aesthetic merit” of the Alsoudani and felt the Bok would have resonated with his late wife. “I’m torn between the two,” he admitted.

Having reached a consensus, the board called the docents back into the room and delivered their verdict: Bok’s work, which so clearly reflects the long history of printmaking from Rembrandt through today, would be the first work purchased through the Trinkett Clark Memorial Student Acquisition Fund.

“Also,” Barker announced, “I have unexpected good news to share: We’ve had a very generous offer to purchase the Alsoudani as a gift to the Mead. So that print will enter the collection as well.” The students cheered and the donor, Nick Clark, smiled. “I did it,” he said later, “because I was so impressed with those kids.”

EMILY GOLD BOUTILIER is the editor of Amherst magazine. This article is adapted from a piece that originally appeared in that magazine.

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