

# The Work of Art

KU's Spencer Museum explores ideas that take down the walls between the arts, humanities and sciences. A new grant will help redouble the museum's efforts to immerse its collection in teaching and research.

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**KU Endowment must raise \$1 million to complete an endowed fund supporting a new director of academic programs at the Spencer.**



The images — all ice, sun and water — can cause the viewer to lose any sense of scale. In one photograph, taken from a small aircraft, Greenland’s glacial cliffs rise above the sea, but are they 30 feet tall, or 300? Other images, shot on the ground, showcase more subtle beauty: delicate ferns and lichens.

Chicago photographer Terry Evans’ images, part of the Spencer Museum of Art exhibition “Climate Change at the Poles,” explore this land of extremes. They also raise questions: How have people survived here? As the earth warms and ice diminishes at both poles, what will be the effect on those of us living thousands of miles away?

The exhibition delves into past perceptions of the poles, too — through maps, the oldest drawn in 1570, from KU’s Spencer Research Library archives. It also showcases artifacts collected by Lewis Lindsay Dyche, KU natural history professor and explorer, on an 1895 trip to Greenland. The largest, an 18-foot sealskin kayak driven by Inuit hunters through the open ocean, would have given the seafarer an intimacy with water unmatched by today’s kayaks.

For years, the Spencer has brought together scholars from fields as diverse as economics and physics to help create fresh exhibitions and programs. These interdisciplinary efforts are based on the belief that, especially in an academic museum, art and artifacts shouldn’t sit cloistered in boxes on shelves or hang on a wall mute and disconnected from the present.

“A museum is a place to explore ideas and raise questions. It’s not just a storehouse,” said Spencer Director Saralyn Reece Hardy. “How do we treat our collections responsibly and make them relevant by relating them to current issues? That’s the big question for us now.”

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Visit [www.spencerart.ku.edu](http://www.spencerart.ku.edu), and you’ll find information and images on past, current and upcoming exhibitions. What’s posted there gives of a hint of how big the job of developing and overseeing related programs has become.

For years, Hardy and the museum’s curators and staff handled this interdisciplinary programming project by project. They saw the potential for how much could be accomplished with a full-time staff member dedicated to the job. So last year, the Spencer submitted a proposal to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for \$1.2 million to support a new position: director of academic programs. And they got it.

The first \$200,000 covers the new staff member’s salary, benefits, travel funds and program support for two years. The remaining \$1 million must be matched by other gifts. The result will be a \$2 million endowment that permanently supports the position, which the museum hopes to fill by the end of 2009.

The Mellon Foundation, New York, is a key supporter of the arts in academia. Its College and University Art Museums program is aimed at sustaining collaborations between museums and academic departments — and strengthening art’s educational use. The new grant is the Spencer’s fourth from Mellon.

The examples on the following pages offer a glance at recent and ongoing Spencer exhibitions and projects, along with programming that reaches well beyond the museum.

**Art meets climate change: At left, a visitor takes in Terry Evans’ photographs of Greenland’s coast and ice sheets. The Spencer commissioned Evans to travel with KU scientists and gather the images in conjunction with a larger exhibition, “Climate Change at the Poles.”**



**Top left:** When this map was drawn in Belgium in 1570, Europeans had no direct knowledge of Antarctica—only a conviction that it must exist to balance the Arctic regions. This vastly oversized rendition was entirely imaginary.

**Top right:** This blanket was made from the skins of more than 100 eiders, large sea ducks that are well insulated for deep dives. The birds' natural markings create the blanket's pattern.

**Left:** Angela Watts, assistant collection manager, holds a small kayak, probably made by an Inuit father to introduce his child to kayak-building. The life-size version is mounted on the wall next to her.

## Climate Change at the Poles

This exhibition showcases changes in lifeways, technology, knowledge and society at the North and South Poles. Photographs, cultural artifacts, clothing, tools and maps are among items that reveal shifts both fast and slow. Items related to the North Pole are in the museum's north upper gallery; items related to the South Pole are in the south upper gallery. The exhibition coincides with the fourth International Polar Year. Visit [www.spencerart.ku.edu/exhibitions/](http://www.spencerart.ku.edu/exhibitions/).

### Exhibition highlights:

- The fur suit Lewis Lindsey Dyche commissioned from an Inuit woman upon his arrival in Greenland in 1895
- Three original Inuit kayaks: a two-inch ivory miniature, a two-foot toy and an 18-foot sealskin vessel, with harpoons and spears
- Images of ice cores and ice-penetrating radar scans from Antarctica
- A series of maps illustrating increasingly accurate knowledge of the South Polar area over centuries, starting with a 16th-century map showing a vastly oversized Antarctica

### Related events:

- "A Greenland Glacier: The Scale of Climate Change," exhibition of a collection of photographs by Chicago-based artist Terry Evans, commissioned by the Spencer, in the Spencer's Asian Gallery II, through May 24
- Performance of "The Ice Wolf," a play based on an Inuit story, at the Lawrence Arts Center
- Series of polar-themed talks, films and book discussions at the Spencer, co-sponsored by the Lawrence Public Library
- Musical performances at the Lied Center
- Children's art appreciation classes at the Spencer

### Participants:

- The National Science Foundation's KU-headquartered Center for the Remote Sensing of Ice Sheets (CREGIS)
- Academic departments across campus
- KU Anschutz Science Library
- KU Spencer Research Library
- Haskell Indian Nations University, Lawrence



**Above: The Spencer's 20/21 Gallery displays works from the current and previous centuries.**

**Below: Thomas Hart Benton's "The Ballad of the Jealous Lover of Lone Green Valley."**

## 20/21 Gallery

This gallery, on the museum's fourth floor, re-opened in 2007 after extensive redesign and redefinition. It focuses on works of the 20th and 21st centuries (hence the name). A "collection" area covers three walls, with works arranged chronologically. This is a relatively stable exhibition, though items such as quilts and prints are rotated in and out to preserve them. A "conversation" area occupies the fourth wall and extends into the room. It displays works on a common theme, such as "language" or "construction/destruction"; the displays change several times a year. Visit [www.spencerart.ku.edu/20/21/](http://www.spencerart.ku.edu/20/21/).

### Exhibition highlights:

- "The Ballad of the Jealous Lover of Lone Green Valley," a 1934 painting by Thomas Hart Benton depicting a murder described in an old folk song
- A quilt made in 1932 to mark George Washington's 200th birthday
- "Untitled #751" (Craig's Piece), a wax and wire sculpture by Petah Coyne
- A flat-file cabinet containing photographs, prints, jewelry, fabric items and more, protecting them from light exposure while providing access to a variety of items in a small space. The objects change regularly, offering visitors the chance to view seldom-seen works in the collection.
- An interactive musical sculpture of 180 steel rods mounted vertically on a square base, intended to be lightly strummed by the visitor

### Participants in redesign:

- Faculty from the departments of American studies, art, art history, economics, English, geography, history and physics; the School of Architecture; and the KU Honors Program



- Students in an architecture studio class, who proposed design solutions, including models
- Students in an environmental studies and cultural geography class, who proposed ways to enrich the gallery as a cultural landscape
- Students in a print connoisseurship seminar, who suggested groupings of paintings, sculptures and works on paper
- Spencer staff members



**Above, left and right:** These two images came together in an exhibition of works related to 20th-century revolution. In the Spencer's Teaching Gallery, classes from three KU departments viewed the exhibition, including "Body and Soul: Gloria Steinem and Dorothy Pittman Hughes" (detail), photographed by Dan Wynn circa 1970, and "Zapata" (detail), a 1932 lithograph by Diego Rivera.

**Left:** Museum staff members prepare materials in the Spencer's print room. Visitors can walk in here most Fridays and ask to see items in the museum's print collection.

## Teaching out

To embed the permanent collection into research and teaching at KU, museum staff members put together short-term topical collections for specific classes. The two-room Teaching Gallery is set aside for these displays. For a similar experience, guests can walk into the third-floor Print Room and request to see selections from the Spencer's 15,000 prints, photographs and drawings (open most Fridays, 10 a.m. to noon and 1 to 4 p.m.).

And for a truly worldwide reach, the museum has made virtually its entire collection available online at [www.spencerart.ku.edu/search/](http://www.spencerart.ku.edu/search/).

### Activity summary:

- More than 100 KU classes from across the university toured the museum during the fall 2008 semester.
- More than 30 departments used works from the museum in their teaching and research during the 2007–2008 academic year.

- Nearby institutions that use the museum's collections include Haskell Indian Nations University, Washburn University, Emporia State University, Johnson County Community College, Neosho County Community College and the Kansas City Art Institute.

### Recent highlights:

- An intermediate Spanish class viewed Latin American and Spanish art with themes of social and political dissent, including works by Francisco Goya, Pablo Picasso and Diego Rivera.
- Classes from the departments of Slavic Languages and Literatures and East Asian Languages and Cultures, as well as the Latin American Area Studies Program, viewed 20th-century art related to the idea of revolution.



## Trees & Other Ramifications: Branches in Nature & Culture

Imagine every metaphor related to the ideas “tree” and “branch”: flowchart, family tree, biological taxonomy, part vs. whole, river and stream, organizational chart, wood. This exhibition explores trees as metaphor, inspiration and resource in nature and in human cultures. It’s based on a varied collection of tree-centered images from the Spencer’s collection and then it, well, branches out. It’s on display through May 24, in the Spencer’s Central Court and The Commons at Spooner Hall. Visit [www.spencerart.ku.edu/exhibitions/](http://www.spencerart.ku.edu/exhibitions/).

### Exhibition highlights:

- “Structure of Thought 15,” a large recent work by Mike and Doug Starn combining an image of a tree with a microphotograph of neurons
- A bower: an elaborate courtship structure built of twigs by a bowerbird and brought from New Guinea by a KU graduate student
- Maps illustrating research predicting future geographic distribution, under different climate change scenarios, of tree species shown in some exhibited works

### Related events:

- During the first three weeks of May, world-renowned sculptor Patrick Dougherty, Chapel Hill, N.C., will craft a unique sculpture from locally harvested saplings on Jayhawk Boulevard in front of Spooner Hall

Above: Steve Goddard, senior curator of prints and drawings, organized “Trees & Other Ramifications.” Behind him, “Structure of Thought 15,” by Mike and Doug Starn, combines a microphotograph of neurons with a photograph of the famed Camperdown Elm in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Above, left: Among other images in the exhibition are, top, “Programmable Do-Gooders” (detail), etching, by Valerie Lueth, and “Tree Farm, Zibao,” (detail), photograph, by Pok-Chi Lau, KU professor of design.

- Exhibitions related to trees at five galleries in Lawrence and Kansas City, Mo., plus two student-organized shows on campus
- Dance and musical performances based on the ideas of trees and ramifications

### Participants:

- KU Natural History Museum & Biodiversity Research Center
- KU Spencer Research Library
- KU Department of Dance
- KU Department of Design
- KU School of Architecture and Urban Planning
- Charlotte Street Foundation, Kansas City, Mo.
- Emporia State University



### ART IS FOR LEARNING

To help match the Mellon Foundation grant supporting the new director of academic programs, contact Jim Mechler, [jimechler@kuendowment.org](mailto:jimechler@kuendowment.org) or 785-832-7328, or give online at [kuendowment.org/spencermatch/](http://kuendowment.org/spencermatch/).