Curator Brings DU Art Collection to Life  
by Janette Ballard

The DU art collection has grown to more than 3,400 works of art, and Dan Jacobs, curator of the University Art Collections and director of the Vicki Myhren Gallery, has been instrumental in making the collection accessible to students and art lovers alike.

Jacobs and his graduate student assistants have catalogued every piece of the collection, from the first Albert Bierstadt painting donated by the artist himself in 1890 to the second Albert Bierstadt painting acquired in 2016 as part of the Madden Collection. In between is an eclectic mix of art styles and periods, from 19th century English landscape drawings to 1960s Andy Warhol pop art.

Jacobs is intent on keeping the works out of storage and in the public eye. The Hampden Art Study Center, located off campus, was created in 2013 to transform the collection into a teaching resource for students of art history, museum studies and studio art.

“It's a facility dedicated to student and research access to artworks, and I think it's a regional model for teaching from objects,” said Jacobs. “The impact of this facility on student opportunity has been outstanding. When collectors see what we're doing there, they are most often struck by the fact that potential gifts of art are put immediately to use in our teaching mission, rather than locked away in deep storage for years at a time.”

As director of the Vicki Myhren Gallery, Jacobs features many historical works in exhibitions, including one of his favorites, “Warhol in Colorado” in 2011, which featured several artworks from the 160 pieces donated by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

Earlier this year, he and co-creator Jeffrey Keith featured "Learning to See Color," an innovative project that included art of all periods and styles in an overview of artist's strategies for using and grappling with color. “We're in discussions now about a possible touring version of the show,” Jacobs said.

Until recently, the Gallery was the only location to display the art, with occasional placements around campus. “Now, with the addition of the Madden Museum in Greenwood Village,” said Jacobs, “we have another venue for showing historic art. This allows us to rededicate the Vicki Myhren Gallery to work by living artists, which was its original purpose.”
Jacobs joined DU in 2005 as the first curator of the University Art Collections. Previously he had worked at the Denver Art Museum and the Getty Conservation Institute. He has an M.B.A. with a concentration in arts management from UCLA, and an M.A. in art history from the University of Colorado/Boulder.

Every couple of years, Jacobs teaches a graduate-level curatorial practicum, in which MA students in art history get real-world experience organizing an exhibition at the Vicki Myhren Gallery.

“I love the fact that this way I get to work with the majority of those students on our museum studies track, as well as some advanced undergrads in art history,” he said. “It’s really a mentoring relationship.”

“Many of my students have continued working with me as employees, and then gone on to great professional positions at other institutions,” he added. “I’m looking forward to expanding this teaching role as we add more opportunities for academic internships, including some at the Madden Museum.”

Coming September 29th, the Gallery will feature "The Wall/La Pared," a platform for a half-dozen regional Latin/x artists to explore questions of identity, artistic and otherwise, in the run-up to the presidential election.

“Jeffrey Keith, who did such a great job with our ‘Learning to See Color’ exhibition, is organizing this one as well. As a practicing artist, I think he's doing a great job of keeping us ‘out of the way.’ It's about the artists expressing themselves, and exposing our students to their process along the way. There will be some great activities in connection with the exhibition, including a poetry slam at the Mercury Cafe in early October, and a panel discussion on campus.”