Gwen Chanzit, director of the museum-studies program in DU’s School of Art and Art History and curator of modern and contemporary art at the Denver Art Museum, made history in June with “Women of Abstract Expressionism,” the first museum exhibit to focus on the female artists of the postwar art movement.

Chanzit oversaw the creation of the show, which features 51 paintings by 12 artists, including Lee Krasner, Helen Frankenthaler, Mary Abbott, Grace Hartigan and Elaine de Kooning. The exhibition, which closes Sept. 25, travels to North Carolina’s Mint Museum in October and to the Palm Springs Art Museum in February.

Chanzit says the seeds for the show were sown in 2008, when she saw an exhibit in New York that centered around the critics of abstract expressionism. “It was mostly the usual suspects, but there was an area that mentioned some of the people we don’t know very well—and it made me think,” Chanzit says. “I have a PhD in art history, I know a lot about this time period, and these were names I hadn’t heard. It really bothered me. On the plane ride home, I began to realize that though there were some men I didn’t know—particularly men of color—there were many women I didn’t know. I thought, ‘Wouldn’t that make an interesting exhibition?’ I got home and I started researching, and I discovered that no major museum exhibition had ever been mounted on women of abstract expressionism.”

When her work on the show began in earnest in 2012, Chanzit enlisted the help of two alumnae of DU’s museum studies program: Jesse Laird Ortega (MA ’13), who served as project assistant; and Renee Miller (MA ’11), Chanzit’s full-time curatorial assistant in modern and contemporary art.

Ortega conducted research, communicated with private collectors and other museums to secure loans, hunted down photos documenting the artists’ lives and worked extensively on many aspects of the exhibit catalog, including a chronology of more than 40
artists whose work spanned the years 1945–60. A part-time, contract employee when she was hired as project assistant, Ortega now has her MA in hand and is a full-time curatorial assistant in the DAM’s New World department.

“The strong connection between the DAM and DU is invaluable to DU’s museum-studies students,” Ortega says. “The ability to work in your field of interest while attending classes helps you learn how to balance work and school. Professor Chanzit also introduces students to every department [at the museum], so they can gauge where they fit best in the museum environment. The program gives students a leg up in the museum job market, which can be very competitive.”

Miller, meanwhile, “had a hand in everything,” Chanzit says. “Our curatorial assistants do the kind of professional work that curators do in smaller institutions, so she’s been a great help. She has really picked up a lot of the responsibilities for this exhibition working with me. She did all of the image rights for the catalog—that was a big thing.”

Miller says that working on “Women of Abstract Expressionism” was incredibly rewarding—and a lot of fun.

“Professor Chanzit was a year into researching this show when I started interning at the DAM in 2009,” she says. “There was always a buzz in the department, with interns, including myself, researching artists and compiling artist files. I feel lucky to have been a part of this project so early in its development.”

“Women of Abstract Expressionism” has been a hit with critics and the public—so much so that Chanzit hopes this area of collecting becomes another niche for which the DAM is known. During the organization of the show, the museum acquired eight new paintings and three promised gifts from women abstract expressionist painters.

“Exhibitions are ephemeral; they’re here for a short time and then they’re gone,” Chanzit says. “I felt it was important to leave a legacy of this exhibition. I hope in years to come, people will visit the Denver Art Museum to see paintings by women of abstract expressionism. We’re making a commitment to this material.”