

John F. O'Brien Fund Teaches Students Art Acquisition, while Adding to the Center's Collection

NEW HAVEN – Through the generosity of John F. O'Brien, a longtime Friend of the Yale Center for British Art, the Center recently purchased an intriguing pen-and-ink drawing by David Wilkie (1785–1841), *Naval Figures Aboard a Ship*. The process allowed eleven student guides from the Center to gain hands-on experience in acquiring art.

O'Brien, who majored in economics and history in college, endowed the fund for this inaugural program. "I wanted students to understand the business aspect of the art world but also to come away with the understanding that art is accessible and can be a part of their lives," he said.

Students who have worked at the Center as guides for at least one year were eligible to participate. Scott Wilcox, the Center's Deputy Director for Collections; Gillian Forrester, Senior Curator of Prints and Drawings; and Linda Friedlaender, Senior Curator of Education, initially met students in the Center's Study Room to provide training in connoisseurial skills and to acquaint them with the Center's process for acquiring art for the collection. Subsequently, accompanied by O'Brien, Wilcox, Friedlaender, and the Center's Director, Amy Meyers, the students traveled to New York and visited an art fair, *Master Drawings in New York*. The group viewed sixteen objects offered by four dealers and made initial selections. The program culminated in a competition in which students presented their research in separate teams, each advocating for one of three pieces of art. The Center staff conducting the program made the final selection for acquisition.

"I could not believe it for a good three seconds! And then I was just really, really excited—and proud. I can't wait to welcome the drawing 'home' to the YCBA!" said Olga Karnas (SM '16), one of the students who had presented the winning artwork. A Center guide since her freshman year, Karnas found the idea of contributing to the Center's collection irresistible. She also enjoyed learning about a collector's strategy and the preparation involved in choosing a work of art.

Her presentation partner, Daniel Leibovic (TC '17), noted that the Center has seventy-four works by Wilkie but only four brown-ink sketches. He said the sketches are important to understand Wilkie's artistic processes, since they represent the first stage

David Wilkie, *Naval Figures Aboard a Ship*, (detail), pen and ink, image provided by Martyn Gregory Gallery, London; Students present research; Linda Friedlaender and Gillian Forrester; Daniel Leibovic and Olga Karnas



in the artist's commitment of an idea to paper. "Among the sketches we do have, this *Naval Figures* is undeniably the most raw, uninhibited, and embryonic exhibition of Wilkie's process. It is quick and spontaneous, and it reveals so much about how Wilkie transformed his initial conceptions into a real implementation," said Leibovic.



Leibovic pointed out commonalities between the newly acquired sketch and the others by the artist. "The main figure in this sketch is drawn with similar posture, garb, and facial structure to some of his other more polished sketches. This comparison is valuable to our collection, because taken in isolation, neither *Naval Figures* nor a more polished sketch would have told us much about Wilkie's approach to drawing central figures. But together, we see that regardless of the briskness with which he sketched out his ideas, he still approached some things the same, such as placing emphasis on a main figure."

Friedlaender said this program gives students a fresh, new kind of learning opportunity, often rare for college-level students. "Working with the galleries and art dealers in New York City as a living laboratory adds a new dimension to their appreciation and knowledge of art," she said.



O'Brien's greatest joy in the program came in witnessing students learn, bringing together his interests in scholarship and his passion for art. His personal experiences as an undergraduate at Georgetown University inspired his idea for this gift. While in school, he began visiting galleries in Washington, DC, meeting and working with dealers. The experience proved invaluable as he formed a significant collection of Japanese prints and Italian paintings. He wanted to share similar inspiring experiences with future generations.

Additional participants in this year's program included Yonadav Greenwood (BR '16), Matthew Hennessy (TD '17), Kathryn Kaelin (SY '15), Caroline Kanner (JE '17), Rebecca Levinsky (MC '15), Anna Meixler (ES '16), Daniel Roza (SM '15), Katharine Spooner (TD '16), and Ari Zimmet (CC '17).

Director Amy Meyers believes the program exemplifies the spirit of the Center, with its emphasis on research and education as it raises public consciousness about the importance of British art. "The students' hard work, research, and commitment, clearly evident in their thoroughly prepared presentations, spoke to the success of this program. We are deeply honored by and grateful for John's generosity in establishing such a meaningful learning opportunity, which nurtures a tradition of mentorship. We look forward to having student participation in our acquisitions process for many years to come."



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YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART

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PRESS CONTACT

Betsy Kim: +1 203 432 2853 | betsy.kim@yale.edu