A Passage to India
TO APPRECIATE A CULTURE, LEARN TO LOVE ITS ART

Cynthia Packert is the Christian A. Johnson Distinguished Professor of History of Art. This professorship honors men and women whose presence at Middlebury enriches not only the curriculum of a particular department or field, but the entire intellectual life of the College.

Few faculty members have contributed more to the life of the College than Johnson Professor Cynthia Packert, who has been teaching and mentoring Middlebury students for 25 years. She came to Middlebury from Harvard, where she earned both a Master of Arts degree and a PhD in fine arts. She earned her BA degree at the University of Pittsburgh, majoring in both the history of art and religious studies.

Packert teaches courses on all aspects of Asian art history, with a special focus on India. Recent courses include “Monuments and Ideas in Asian Art,” “Krishna: the Art of Devotion,” “Approaches to Islamic Art,” “Sacred Japan,” and “Art, Change, and the Global Environment.”

An effective and popular teacher, she is also a respected authority in her field. She has written two books and a number of articles on Hindu temple sculpture and iconography and on the history and visual culture of the worship of Krishna. She has received fellowships and grants from the American Institute of Indian Studies, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Ada Howe Kent Fund, the Mellon Foundation, and the Whiting Foundation, and she is much in demand as a speaker on topics ranging from Hinduism and the arts to Bollywood cinema.

Packert’s fascination with Asian culture and art began at a very early age. As the daughter of a foreign-service officer, she was exposed to many different cultures as she moved from school to school in Japan, India, Taiwan, Ethiopia, and the Philippines. But it was in a

“Being chosen to fill an endowed chair is a defining achievement for any faculty member. It identifies that professor as a scholar among scholars, a teacher among teachers. And with this recognition comes funding that supports the professor’s continued research, writing, and work with students outside the classroom.”

—ANDI LLOYD | Dean of Faculty and Philip Battell/Sarah Stewart Professor of Biology
lecture hall at the University of Pittsburgh that she decided Asian art would be the focus of her career. She was taking a course in Asian art with renowned archaeologist Katheryn Linduff when, she says, “This light bulb went off in my head. I thought ‘Oh! I like art, I like all of Asia, I like religion, I like to travel, I love languages, and I’ve always been hyper-verbal.’ And then I thought ‘College professors get paid to talk for a living!’”

**BRINGING ART TO LIFE**

In her own classes, Packert emphasizes the importance of looking at art within a broader cultural and religious context. She introduces her students to Indian and Middle Eastern music, cooks some of her favorite Indian dishes for them, and brings textiles and other everyday objects into the classroom. “Asian art is very interactive,” she explains. “So when I bring in all these things, I’m trying to say, ‘Let’s touch them. Let’s see what a sculpture feels like, or a prayer rug.’”

The Johnson Professorship provides funding that has enabled Packert to travel widely in India, conducting research for her books and articles, and she has brought back many teaching resources, including books, artwork, and stories. During her next sabbatical, she plans to create a documentary about building Hindu temples, and she looks forward to screening it for her students. Although a great deal can be learned from a textbook, reading about a work of art is nothing like experiencing it in person, so Packert insists that her students spend some time looking at original works of art. She often schedules trips to the Middlebury Museum of Art, where students have the opportunity to see sculptures, paintings, and pottery. During one such trip, she brought her students to the Asian art gallery to see a Vishnu sculpture. “What I have grown to really appreciate about that sculpture,” she says, “is how much teaching I’ve been able to get out of it. ... It embodies the full spectrum for me. I can talk about style, religion, and aesthetics.”

In addition to making local museum trips, Packert also uses faculty support funds to cover trips to New York and Boston where she and her students visit art galleries, exhibitions, and museums. These trips not only give students a chance to see famous works of art, but also afford them the opportunity to meet alumni who are working in the fields of art and architecture. Faculty support has also made it possible for her to take students to India to conduct research on gods Krishna and Ganesha.

**A LEGACY OF MENTORING**

Throughout her tenure at Middlebury, Packert has mentored students in various capacities, enriching both the College’s academic and social communities. Whether serving as faculty head of Wonnacott Commons—a position she held for several years—or hiring students to help her conduct research, she engages and inspires every student she encounters.

Gale Berninghausen ’05, is one such student. Now a PhD candidate in art history at Columbia University, she ascribes much of her interests in South Asian art and architecture to Professor Packert’s guidance and support. “Cynthia’s teaching and mentoring encouraged me to explore, to learn difficult languages, to try to master tough subjects, and to engage enthusiastically with my peers, and now with my undergraduate students. She is highly talented and wonderfully ambitious, but also sincere and generous as an academic. Those are all traits I value and try to maintain in my own academic life.”

Faculty support can extend a professor’s ability to mentor students outside of the classroom by providing research positions for undergraduates. During the summer of 2014, Victoria Hidalgo ’17, a newly declared art history major, will help Packert to conduct research for her next book. “I am extremely excited about working with her,” Hidalgo says. “It will give me the chance to see whether research is right for me.”

Generations of students reap the scholarly benefits from such research positions, which introduce them to aspects of an academic profession that they would not ordinarily see. “Ultimately,” Packert says, “I want to open doors for my students, and I can think of nothing more rewarding than exposing them to a world that they didn’t know exists.”