

October 2015

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Recommended Citation

Sims, Pat (2015) "Explorer: Muheb Esmat sees Museum open Doors to History," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 104 : Iss. 2 , Article 29.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol104/iss2/29>

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Explorer

Muheb Esmat sees museum open doors to history

By Pat Sims

Muheb Esmat '17 made a significant discovery when he came to Colby. Actually, he made more than one.

Esmat arrived on Mayflower Hill from Kabul, Afghanistan, by way of Massachusetts (four years at Deerfield Academy) and Jordan (a postgraduate year at King's Academy) and decided to explore. He took geology, psychology, English, and, in the same spirit of exploration, his first foray into art history, a class on East Asian art with Professor of Art Ankeney Weitz. He had loved the architecture classes he took in high school, and now it occurred to him that architecture and art could go together. "This," he said, "is something I would be able to do for the rest of my life."

Esmat was off and running, to the Colby College Museum of Art, a resource he describes as a treasure. "I have classes where I have written papers about pieces that are in the museum," Esmat said. "That is a different feeling than writing about something that you only see on a website or you only get to see in a book."

In his sophomore year Esmat declared art history his major. As part of a Jan Plan with Weitz, he curated an art exhibition, visiting the studios of artists who had immigrated to Maine from Taiwan and China and selecting works to show at Waterville's Common Street Arts gallery. Last summer Esmat became a Mellon Research

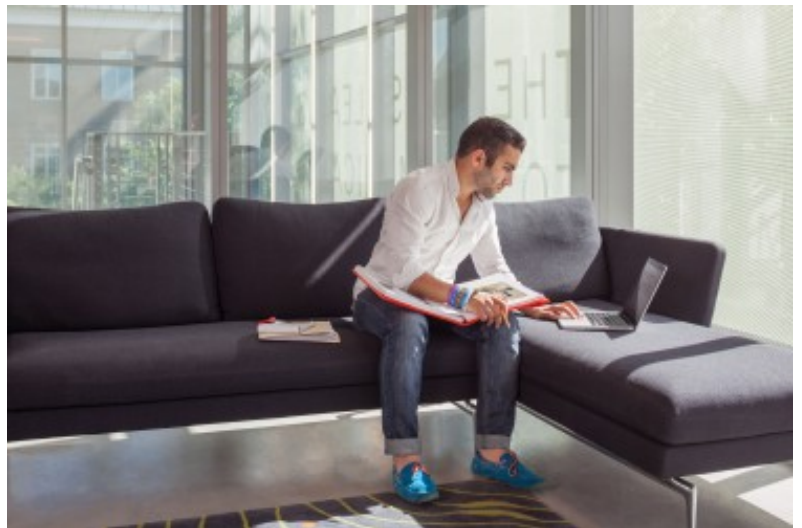
Assistant, working with the art museum's Curator of Academic Programs Shalini Le Gall. One of his tasks was to help set up the Davis Curricular Gallery, which features art chosen by faculty members and museum staff that will be used for class work.

Esmat also assisted Le Gall in discovering not only the provenance of a piece of art that had been donated to the museum decades before, but the historical context in which it had been created, an absorbing and compelling project that required considerable art detective work.

At first glance, the work was simple enough. Its backstory and the mystery unraveled by Esmat '17 were anything but.

As Mellon Research Assistant to Le Gall, Esmat was asked to determine the provenance of a simple pencil and gouache sketch. The museum acquired the piece in the 1960s, but little was known about it. Assistant Professor of Russian Elena Monastireva-Ansdell and Addis Mason, a faculty fellow in history, translated the Russian inscription on the back of it.

The title was "The Slave" and, as Esmat and Le Gall discovered, the artist was most likely European painter Alexandra Exter (1882–1949), known for being active in avant-garde circles. Exter had done set and costume designs in the Kamerny Theater in Moscow and had spent time in Paris, where she became friends with such luminaries as Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, Apollinaire, and Gertrude Stein.



Exhibited at the Venice Biennale of 1926, the sketch of a futuristic figure was a preparatory design for a costume in the silent film *Aelita, Queen of Mars* (1924), about space travel, directed by Soviet filmmaker Yakov Protazanov and based on a 1923 science fiction novel by Aleksey Nikolayevich.

After several viewings of the film, which he located on YouTube, Esmat was able to spot a character who looked familiar. "She's only in the movie for a small amount of time," he said, "but the costume is very similar to this piece."

Further digging produced information that the work, along with many others, had been donated to the Colby museum by Jere Abbott, a Bowdoin graduate, the first associate director of MOMA, and friend of Hugh Gourley (director of the museum from 1966 until 2002).

Curious how Abbott acquired "The Slave," Esmat dug a bit deeper and found that Abbott had made a trip to Russia in 1927 during which he visited the Kamerny Theater in Moscow and, providentially, kept a diary, later donated to Smith College's art museum. Obtaining an electronic copy of it, Esmat was able to determine that Abbott had bought four artworks while on the trip.

He discovered that MOMA owns other sketches from the film as does the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio, Texas. He also found that as Exter's work has grown in popularity over the years, so too have forgeries of her work. But he and Le Gall could turn up no evidence that any other collections had this sketch, a bit of information that seems to point to the work's authenticity.



For a story about Linde Family Foundation Coordinator of School and Teacher Programs Margaret Aiken and her outreach work at the Colby College Museum of Art go to [Art School. Margaret Aiken strengthens connection between museum and community.](#)



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