

# INDIA



Labeltalk 2013



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LABELTALK is an innovative exhibition series that celebrates the rich teaching potential of art across a range of disciplines. Each exhibition presents works of art from the museum's collection accompanied by texts written by Williams College faculty from various departments. The goal is to reveal and explore how multiple perspectives inform a single work of art, which in turn underscores the purpose and value of a college art museum.

*Labeltalk 2013: India* highlights a key strength of the collection. Indian art came to WCMA by way of several important donors including Mrs. Horace W. Frost, Peter and Jane Stewart, Catherine and Ralph Benkaim, and Karl Mann. The Institute of Museum and Library Services awarded us a grant in 2009 for Jim Gipe—Pivot Media and Stephen Petegorsky to digitally photograph all of the ancient and Asian works of art in our collection. The images that resulted are available to the public online and in this publication.

The museum is grateful to the 27 professors who participated in this Labeltalk exhibition. These professors represent a broad range of departments on campus: anthropology, Arabic, art, astronomy, athletics, biology, chemistry, classics, comparative literature, computer science, dance, economics, English, environmental studies, geosciences, history, mathematics, music, philosophy, physics, political science, psychology, romance languages, and theatre.

The Labeltalk series began in 1995 with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. This exhibition was curated by Elizabeth Gallerani, Coordinator of Mellon Academic Programs. The series embodies the museum's mission to advance learning through lively and innovative approaches to art.

—**Christina Olsen**, Class of 1956 Director, Williams College Museum of Art



Unknown (Indian, Mughal)  
*A lady carrying a lighted lamp*

ca. 1760  
 opaque watercolor on paper,  
 heightened with gold  
 Bequest of Mrs. Horace W. Frost  
 91.15.37



The richness of the pigments, the beauty and wealth of the subject, the exquisite detail, the intent of the patron—so much to consider in one small object! But I find myself wondering most about the artist (or team of artists, as was common for such miniatures) and his craft. How many years of training were required to pass down skills from

master to apprentice? How long before he was entrusted with the most costly pigments, the most important subjects? Did he make for himself the astonishingly fine brushes needed to create the detail and precision of each line in the folds of fabric or the gleam of the jewels? Was there enough light to work by? How long would his eyes last? Would they give out before the steadiness of his hands? Is his individual touch and style obvious (though perhaps not to us) in this piece?

**Lee Park** Professor of Chemistry

One can make many observations: late Mughal; symbolism of light and dark; mystery of who she is and where she is headed. Surely there are motifs here that the expert would recognize.

But one can also note that the verso of this painting (unseen here), like so much art that was brought to the West from the East, appears torn from its context. The flip side contains lines in Arabic from various *hadith* (traditions), unrelated to this image. Not an uncommon practice: random pages are taken from different books, showcased as exotic, repackaged for Western consumption. Here, the focus is on image, standing alone, cut away from its context. Flip this over and you have beautiful Arabic calligraphy. Flip it back and you have a beautiful late Mughal image. Choose the side you want. But don't worry about context. It is all so pretty.

**Leyla Rouhi** John B. McCoy and John T. McCoy Professor of Romance Languages

I succumb to reverie when I look at this painting—it is so very simple and yet not. Much of the image is silent, dark and obscure, but much can be sensed in that quiet too. Tiny noises—click of pearl, whisper of veil, shuffle of foot...furtive purpose is so well rendered here. Clearly, the artist was an accomplished craftsman, and clearly too, he was a pragmatic entrepreneur. Consider the paper trail: Salvaging an older manuscript, an Arabic religious text, the artist cut out a page and painted a picture, a nocturnal scene conveniently blanketing prior words with a little mystery. Perhaps one of many comparable products, this piece is evocative but generic, telling no particular tale. More craftiness for the marketplace? Such an image (so frameable!) would appeal to just about anyone wandering past, resonating differently for every viewer.... What about you, WCMA visitor? What does this exquisite enigma do for you?

**Holly Edwards** Senior Lecturer in Art

No mouths are open, and yet this large image says it all. The painting proclaims that the universe moves to music even though no one sings and Krishna's flute is absent. Instead, birds and human and celestial musicians provide for the sacred dance. The dance of Krishna and his *gopis* represents the procreative potential of rhythmic movement.

Music and dance function as both the pictorial content and cosmological meaning of this image. Like Indian music and dance, this painting involves repetition and exquisite ornamentation. Time in Indian music is structured as a *tal* (cycle) and these dancers visually represent circular and patterned time in their choreography and grouping. Perhaps the eight images of Krishna represent the eight *rasas* (emotional states) that Indian art strives to evoke and that culminate in a ninth, peace, represented by the central image of Krishna. Even without words, this painting spoke profoundly to worshipers. Can we hear its sacred sounds today?

**W. Anthony Sheppard** Professor of Music and Department Chair

Almost everything in this image is prescribed by the text it illustrates (Krishna's dalliance with the Gopis in Canto 10 of the *Bhagavata Purana*), and almost everyone looking at it hanging in its temple would have known this story well and seen countless almost identical images. So what is this hanging for? What was it designed to do? Like many sacred story-images, its purpose is less to *tell* than to *show* the story: to celebrate its all-at-once presence. The artist shows reverence in making, the beholder shows reverence in looking. In the middle ground, where Krishna multiplies himself to be with each Gopi simultaneously, both perspective and time are set aside in celebration of Krishna's beauty. For the worshipper, for the artist, for the Gopis, for Krishna, the story has happened, will happen, is happening, all at once, in its circle, an ecstatic, multiple, eternal *now*.

**Peter Murphy** Dean of the Faculty,  
Professor of English

What a wonderful universe! Space and time are fluid and illusions replace reality. Krishna has expanded time so that this single night of dancing with the gopis of Vrindavan lasts for billions of years. And the huge rasa-mandala dancing area has been reduced to a small, manageable circle. Providing (unnecessary!) encouragement, celestial onlookers hover in floating chariots, showering the dancers with flower petals. Or are they meteors?

Of course that must be an observatory high on a hill in the center background, topped by the overhanging full moon. Though I doubt anyone in this lush, enchanted scene would care, the sky looks pretty boring, its repeating pattern of stars resembling dotted Swiss fabric. But never mind; earthly physical laws hold no sway here. These spellbound dancers, both human and divine, inhabit their cosmos in blissful camaraderie.

**Karen Kwitter** Chair and Ebenezer Fitch Professor  
of Astronomy





Unknown (Indian, Rajput, Nathdwara)  
*Rasa lila: Krishna dances with Radha  
 and with each of the village gopis*  
 early 20th century  
 opaque watercolor on cotton  
 Gift of Karl Mann  
 92.12.4



Unknown (Indian, Rajput,  
Bundi)

*Krishna and the villagers  
celebrate Holi*

late 18th century

opaque watercolor on paper,  
heightened with gold

Bequest of Mrs. Horace W. Frost  
91.15.1



A piece of mathematics generally has a clearly stated purpose. A piece of art, on the other hand, admits multiple purposes and interpretations. When I first saw

"Krishna and the Villagers...", I saw a brutal assault by men on women, with some women fighting back. The full title, however, names the spring festival Holi, celebrated by the throwing of paint and colored water at other celebrants, all in good fun.

Perhaps the artist perceived a certain injustice and even brutality in the culture, and used the cover of the festival to portray them openly. The hot colors and sharp angles convey a sense of tension and strife belying the idea of a festival celebration. At a primal level the watercolor presents a puzzling and troubling scene, fueling the viewer's sense of indignation at social injustice.

**Frank Morgan** Atwell Professor of Mathematics



Scenographic space is often more about the *idea* of place than its realistic representation. It sketches in what is needed to locate ourselves, but is primarily in service of narrative. Roughly split between warm and cool colors, this narrative stretches from freneticism to stillness: a series of ever-larger scenes, slowly elongating in time as they wend upwards. Scale is time, not space. Tiny at bottom right (just-exploded gold pigment underfoot—scene!), then side-step to the river (two stories, single setting) where the gaze of the women refilling their 18th-century Super-Soakers points to—new scene!—a long, exquisitely choreographed stage battle. Interlude at the temple, pale greens (foreshadowing) before returning to pink and red for a quiet, flirtatious two-hander. Ascending to a different realm, then, cooler, slower: jade horizontals lead inevitably to Krishna and his consort. Final tableau: an eternal pause in anticipation of action, a long blue fade to twilight on the cyclorama behind. Curtain.

**David Evans Morris** Assistant Professor of Theatre

I'm coming to this cold and it's a stumper!—rather like translating French without a dictionary by assuming that French words that look vaguely like English words must mean the same thing. Error is inevitable; complete misunderstanding a real possibility.

The figures seem oddly generic—placeholders rather than individuals (but should I find that odd?). Except the blue figure, of course—he must be a Deity—no doubt conveys great meaning to those in the know. The mood seems light and happy; the men and women rush together but—what's this?—guns?? Can't be. But then what the heck are the men carrying? Perhaps, like Cupid's arrows, a device to induce amour? There's definite flirting in the lower right corner (but what's with the pot?). So this is, then, an ancient pre-cursor to Bollywood-style mass love? I wonder if the little guy with the bell is lonely.

**Kevin Jones** McElfresh Professor of Physics

This representation of idealized beauty clearly arose from a male perspective. Though viewed here in isolation, hundreds of similar figures (male and female) would have adorned a Hindu temple's walls and illustrated the path to the divine through the perfection of all aspects of one's life, including the sexual.

The fine grain-size and hardness of the sandstone allowed the carving of delicate features, such as the pattern in the sari that drapes the lower torso. The texture of the sari accentuates the contrast between fabric and skin which, at a distance, would not be seen as easily as the necklace or armlets. Erosion of the figure is more pronounced where exposure to weather was greatest over the last 1000 years.

Portrayals of women in Western religious art of the same period reflect the Judeo-Christian idea that divine love is chaste, in contrast to this portrayal of female divine "power."

**David Backus** Lecturer in Geosciences

There is no sign of obvious life and recognition, a head and feet. The absence of these identifying features is okay. The hand of the sculptor, and in turn the figure's life, is on display with the chiseled, bejeweled necklace and beads that hang from the curving shoulder and necklines, the feather bands attached to defined biceps, and the decorative cloth that dangles from the figure's hands only to enrapture its sculpted hips and veil its long crossed legs. As if levitating, the figure hangs attached to a narrow and column-like concrete slab at the viewer's eye-level. What I want of the figure is for her to defy the allusions of her sensuality and to be a flying goddess whose elegance reflects her mystical strength and influence. Perhaps, all she desires is the anonymity and seclusion that comes with time, geographic distance, and restoration.

**Drew Thompson** Gaius Bolin Fellow in Art and History

This is not a beautiful carving of a woman, because it lacks constituents integral to carvings of women—most notably, head and feet. But it is a beautiful fragment of a carving of a woman. It is beautiful because it has all it needs to be such a fragment, and needs all it has to be the fragment that it is. Being beautiful, it has the capacity to aesthetically delight human beings—but not all human beings, whenever they are exposed to it, will be aesthetically delighted. It retains its beauty, hence its capacity to delight, whether or not, at any given time, that capacity is activated.

It follows, from what is said in the preceding paragraph, that all beings are beautiful. If this is so, then we are surrounded by opportunities for aesthetic delight. What we make of them is up to us.

**Alan White** Mark Hopkins Professor of Philosophy





Unknown (Indian)  
*Celestial being*

ca. 1000  
sandstone

Museum purchase, with funds provided  
by John T. Winkhaus, Jr., Class of 1935  
69.45





Unknown (Indian,  
Chandella, Khajuraho)  
*Sardula rearing*  
10th–11th century  
sandstone  
Museum purchase  
78.4



Here we see tiny warriors trying to restrain or mount a ferocious mythical beast called a *sardula*. According to Heather Elgood, *sardula* figures represent “the mind’s attempt to master or control his wilder physical, instinctive, and emotional nature.” In the Khajuraho temple façade reproduced below, we see eleven *sardulas* repeated like an architectonic drumbeat, filling the spaces between dramatic, out-thrust carvings of voluptuous dancers, warriors, kings, lovers, and deities. This carving is but one of many almost exactly like it.



Amidst the richness and panoply of the fleshly life to which the *sardulas* are but punctuation, the effort of the mind to control the physical becomes thematized. The ferocity of the beast, the almost pathetic inadequacy of the tiny figures that seek to restrain it, the symbolic repetition of our attempts to restrain our passions all the time, every day, give the *sardula* a much deeper and richer meaning than it has in isolation.

**Peter Just** Professor of Anthropology,  
Chair of Interdisciplinary Studies Program

Looking at art in the WCMA makes me nostalgic. As a student, I came here to cultivate my kinesthetic and visual appetites. I see the twists and torques co-opted by modern dance, the archaic profile postures I had to master to become an “acrobat of God” in Martha Graham’s repertory. The torsos spiraling upward, rising heroically from grounded pelvises, were the basis for her dance landscape. We dancers were like the small figures surrounding the beautiful beast that was Martha, supporting and worshipping her legacy. Her vision electrified me, as did the mythological worlds she created for us to inhabit. For a long time I acted as the figure on the bottom, supporting the ideal, but in the shadows. Later, I too danced on the back of the giant. But in the end, the creature of creative genius is elusive, and the dance ephemeral. As Graham said, “we have so little time to be born to the instant.”

**Erica Dankmeyer** Acting Chair and  
Artist in Residence in Dance

How do objects enter a museum? What path did this architectural fragment take from India to Williamstown? Who carved it out from its temple? And why? Who took it from the continent? Who sold it? And when did the head of the warrior mounting the Sardula break off?

When the object was sold to Williams College in 1978 by the Peter Marks Gallery in New York City, no information was provided regarding its provenance from Khajuraho in central India to the United States. UNESCO tells us that of the 85 temples constructed in the village of Khajuraho during the Chandela dynasty, only 22 remain.

So what history does this rearing Sardula carry with it? What violence of displacement does its immaculate exhibition conceal? The regular and steady strokes that grace the sides of the fragment are the scars of its extraction. What can they tell us? And how do we listen?

**Katarzyna Pieprzak** Associate Professor of Romance Languages and Comparative Literature

We know little about the provenance of this watercolor, and it strikes me as much older than the date associated with it. The style recalls the great miniature tradition of Mughal artists dating from the 16th to the 17th centuries. Yet this work was supposedly painted in the early 19th century in Udaipur, India. The British East India Company was well established by that time and full power over the subcontinent was transferred to the Queen in 1858. Yet one would never guess from looking at this work with its celebration of an Indian *darbar* and careful attention to the lavish embroidery on the garments of the courtiers, the monarch himself, and his royal armchair. In short, the imperial presence of the British is absent from this depiction of what appears to be a native Indian Raja with members of his court and military (or are they foreign guests?) engaged in an act of exchange or counsel. Whether commissioned by a patron or given as a gift, the work appears to celebrate the insular world of Indian nobility that would soon collide with the British colonial project. Thus this painting seems deeply nostalgic. The artist likely wanted to memorialize a golden age of Indian ascendancy and courtly order that was beginning to vanish before him.

**Mara Naaman** Assistant Professor of Arabic and Comparative Literature

Was it better to be in charge back then (when?) and there (where?) or what? You're telling me Barack Obama wouldn't trade his job for this guy's? Mr. A-Celestial-Body-Rises-Behind-My-Head has it all. Courtiers fanning, kneeling, and bowing instead of self-interested Cabinet secretaries and campaign surrogates advancing their own careers? Check. The ability to do (presumably) anything he pleases without begging Congress for approval or facing resistance from governors? Check. Lounging on a plush chair in flowing garb rather than sitting in a stiff mahogany chair at an oak desk in a dark suit with a red or blue tie? Check. We often call the President of the United States "the most powerful man in the free world," but even in the best of times, he only *presides*—over a democratized citizenry, within a decentralized government, subject to formalized procedures and norms. This guy doesn't seem constrained by rules; *he* rules.

**Justin Crowe** Assistant Professor of Political Science





Most striking about this depiction of Raja Umed Singh holding court is the hierarchical arrangement of his council. Is that just for show? Or does it help structure the noblemen's discussion?

One of my research areas, complexity theory, relies heavily on hierarchy to categorize problems according to difficulty. While most of the problems considered at this durbar probably lent themselves to politically-savvy answers, complexity theory focuses almost exclusively on problems with binary responses: yes or no. But questions with simple answers can be deceptively difficult to solve. Sure, some are easy (should we sharpen our swords today?) and some are hard (should we invade the adjacent desert kingdom?), but some are so ridiculously hard that finding the answer is probably *impossible*.

The leader Umed Singh likely knew he couldn't answer every problem, but maybe, by imposing order onto his council, he hoped to achieve some clarity.

**Brent Heeringa** Associate Professor of Computer Science

Unknown (Indian, Rajput, Udaipur)

*Durbar of Raja Umed Singh*  
early 19th century

gouache on paper

Gift of Peter J. and Jane B. Stewart  
M.2006.2.9





Chateri Gumani  
(Indian, late 18th century)  
*The Lion Hunt of Maharao  
Umed Singh of Kota*

1779

opaque watercolor on paper  
Museum purchase, Vaccariello Fund  
and Karl E. Weston Memorial Fund  
83.6

Look at the enclosure that divides the frame at a vertiginous diagonal. Take your time. This painting makes you woozy. Beaters would drive animals into such pens for the raja. Today we would call this a canned hunt. Does it matter that there were almost no lions left to kill in Rajasthan? Maybe. You are gazing at a violent fantasy. This is what makes animals' life with us so hard. Their domination can be shockingly beautiful. It gives us precious things: skins, meat, paintings. Look at the raja, high in a tree at the bottom right corner, pointing his gun from a safe distance while others do the dirty work. What a hero. But do you truly feel disgusted? The artist's adoration of nature can barely be contained. It spills across the canvas. Everything is wildly alive. If you were there, would you not hunt? Can you see yourself in this picture of cruel, destructive love?

**Nicolas Howe** Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies



The composition is unexpected, providing the beholder's viewpoint in each of several discrete parts, while taking an aerial view of the whole for narrative clarity. The hunters are confined to the periphery, though swords and banners break the drawn frame in an assertion of their physical presence. The lions occupy the more central positions. The trapped lion, circumscribed within the edges of the net, becomes an easy target, only lightly overlapped by a few trees. The second lion, who has turned to confront the men, is shown compositionally "in the thick of things," parrying and snapping the hunters' spears. The narrative focus is the lower right corner: one of the hunters has turned to flee while, at the edge of the frame, the beaters carrying drums look on with alarm. Meanwhile, Umed Singh, the smallest of the foreground figures, seated calmly on a hunting stand at the very bottom of the frame, takes careful aim.

**Steve Levin** Professor of Art

The star of this painting is the vegetation. I particularly love how the layering provides depth that is missing in individual elements. It's also interesting that people are largely restricted to the edges. Even more striking is that the lions themselves aren't "center-stage." I'd like to think that a core wilderness remains untouched by humans—the success of this hunt occurs only at the periphery where humans and lions come together. Ultimately, the persistence of large carnivores may require some sort of spatial refuge from humans. Another possibility is suggested by a recent paper exploring modern-day conflicts between humans and tigers in India. (Lions have been rare there for a long time, so it is likely that this hunt would have targeted tigers.) The optimistic message of the paper is that tigers and humans may be able to coexist at fine spatial scales because their activity patterns are temporally separated—thankfully, tigers come out when we're sleeping!

**Manuel Morales** Associate Professor of Biology

What intrigues me about this painting is the position of the Company painter—Indian artists tasked by new British patrons to paint mementoes of India. They melded Indian and European techniques, and represented “India” for this new audience. This painting, from a series of studies of social and ethnic groups, impeccably renders details of dress, ornament, and weaponry. The woman seems transposed from an Indian figure painting onto this generic background, save the shadowing at her feet. The more awkward figure of the man offers a glimpse into the artist’s travails. I imagine he was asked to depict the man in  $\frac{3}{4}$  profile, and in meeting this challenge rendered the head too large in proportion to the body and the woman. The man’s outward gaze, however, becomes the focus of the painting, riveting the woman’s gaze upon him and, with its dolorous expression, asking the viewer, “so what *do* you make of us?”

**Anne Reinhardt** Associate Professor of History

The only art I’ve commented on before were my young daughter’s “Picasso-esque” masterpieces: “Wow, that’s amazing!”

With this painting, I noted the trees, clouds, shadows, rounded ground, and of course clothing. I was trying to frame everything from my professional background as an outdoorsman. Was this truly an “outing” of some sort—the guard does have a bow and quiver. But where was the picnic basket or water? And those shoes, OUCH! What was the guard looking at? Questions kept coming, but I kept focusing on the shoes, OUCH. I couldn’t help thinking of all the hiking I do and how those poor folks must have been in such pain tramping in stylish yet non-functional shoes!

I studied the details, the mastery of brush to create such fine work and color. I finally looked past the shoes, clouds, and trees, took in the whole, and said to myself, “WOW, that’s amazing!”

**Scott Lewis** Assistant Professor of Physical Education  
and Director of Outing Club





Unknown (Indian, Maratha, Tanjore)

*A royal guard and his wife*

ca. 1800

opaque watercolor on paper,  
heightened with gold

Gift of Catherine and Ralph Benkaim  
81.10.15

In 1799, the East India Company, with nominal support from Indian allies, defeated its most

formidable military opponent: South Indian ruler Tipu Sultan. This was an event of enormous military and political significance—the Company was now clearly the most powerful player on the sub-continent and its dominance could be foreseen. At this triumphant moment, victory needed to be buttressed by social commentary: What was just and honorable Britain doing at war on the subcontinent? And what was the society that both warranted and could not resist such intervention? Perhaps one ruled by authoritarian yet weak despots. The royal guard does not look martial; his body language is almost dainty. His demeanor is not that of a warrior, but rather that of an artist's subject, conscious of a brush. The woman, though, has eyes only for him. She does not see the artist/victor, the western "other" who has defeated the "oriental" whose only remaining despotism is the one at home.

**Anand Swamy** Professor of Economics



Unknown (Indian, Deccan  
or possibly Kashmir)  
*Sohrab and Rustam fighting*  
(from a *Shahnameh* of  
Ferdowsi)

ca. 1600

opaque watercolor on paper,  
heightened with gold

Bequest of Mrs. Horace W. Frost  
91.15.14



It's hard to detect any fear in the faces of these men, or any of the overwhelming grief about to wash over them. Such emotions shouldn't be shown by warriors, by men bound by honor. One of the horses may evince some horror, but what do such animals know of heroism? It is a lofty thing, honor, one that boys throughout time have been taught explicitly and implic-

itly, often by their fathers, to defend at all costs. This father has shared nothing with his son but his traits of valor and strength, and these gifts are about to destroy them both. It is not coincidental that the horrific psychic pain that this fight would soon discharge, like blood from a gaping wound, is not evident here. We are enthralled by the ambition, the competition, the honor. It is only later that we live, and die, with the consequences.

**Steven Fein** Professor of Psychology

The Shahnameh is a sweeping epic that chronicles the history of the Iranian people from the beginning of time until the Arab conquests of the seventh century C.E. In modern times, successive Iranian governments, scholars, and intellectuals have utilized this prodigious narrative to articulate and reinterpret what it means to be an Iranian and to rethink Iran's place and relations with the outside world.

Given our current geo-political climate, how could we interpret this scene depicting the dramatic battle? The heart-breaking aspect of this tale is the breakdown in communication. Sohrab did not realize he was fighting his father. Rostam was not aware that he was about to kill his own offspring. He who Rostam thought was a vicious enemy was actually his greatest admirer and potentially his most loyal ally. Tragically, this encounter was a lost opportunity for reconciliation—a lesson that governmental officials in Iran and the United States should take to heart.

**Magnus Bernhardtsson** Professor of History, Chair of International Studies Program

*Papa was a rolling stone.  
Wherever he laid his hat was his home.  
(And when he died) All he left us was alone.*

Visually, the combatants are perfectly balanced. But a viewer familiar with this tale knows that Rostam, weary and worried about his prestige, is about to twist Sohrab's wrist, disarming him. The hero will kill his son Sohrab with Sohrab's own knife before Tahmina arrives on the scene weeping and reveals to her child's father what he has unwittingly done.

What do this scene and the many similar tales it recalls tell us about ancient models for being a father or son? Fathers and sons will wrestle one another, and will be nearly perfectly matched. A father may win the contest by subterfuge, but not by strength alone. If the two combatants do not recognize one another in time, their struggle will end in tragedy.

**Amanda Wilcox** Assistant Professor of Classics



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Inside front and back covers: Detail of *Rasa lila*:  
*Krishna dances with Radha and with each of the  
village gopis*





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COLLEGE  
MUSEUM  
OF ART**

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