

**Mellon/ACLS Community College Faculty Fellows  
Sample proposal from previous awardee**

This document contains selected portions of an application previously awarded support through the Mellon/ACLS Community College Faculty Fellows program. We share this not as a model, but as one example of how to organize a successful proposal. The projects supported through the Mellon/ACLS Community College Faculty Fellows program represent a wide range of methodologies, subjects, time periods, and geographies. Individual submissions will therefore take up an array of formats, as unique as the proposals themselves.

Please note: this document represents only the five-page narrative proposal and does not include the project timeline with budget estimates; for additional guidance please consult our timeline and budget sample which can be found on the program page here: <https://www.acls.org/Competitions-and-Deadlines/Mellon-ACLS-Community-College-Faculty-Fellowships>

Project Title: "African Visual Art and Culture: A Survey of the Mesa College World Cultures Art Collection"

Awardee Name: Dr. Denise Rogers

Institution: San Diego Mesa College, San Diego, California

San Diego Mesa college is one of California's largest community colleges and it is celebrated and beloved in our local community, in part because of a campus culture that reflects a strong commitment to equity, an impressive transfer rate, and many successful high-profile programs. But as any college faculty or staff member knows, college campuses hold hidden gems; the amazing student-run restaurant, the volunteer-staffed organic garden, the corner behind the music building where the student jazz ensemble holds weekly free concerts. One such truly amazing hidden gem at Mesa is the *World Cultures Art Collection*, founded in the 1970s by my late colleague Professor Barbara Blackmun. Dr. Blackmun had initiated our college's first course in African Art, and when she realized that there weren't many local opportunities for her students to study African artworks in person she began building a collection on our campus. Over the decades that collection has been studied by hundreds of art history, anthropology, history, and museum studies classes on our campus, and it has grown to include more than 1,200 museum quality objects. I took over management of the collection in 2010, and have been working for the past decade to make it more and more useful to our campus and to the broader San Diego community.

Over this next year, I will be working with our campus's OER (open educational resources) librarian to create a free open-access textbook for African Art courses that features objects from the collection and texts that help to set those objects within their broader cultural contexts. This fellowship would support the research, writing, photography, and design involved in creating the OER textbook, along with an information-rich companion website that can make our amazing hidden gem of a collection into something that can be useful to students and teachers of African Art everywhere. In addition to the OER textbook and website, this grant will provide support for the final stages of developing two exhibitions that will make objects from our collection available to the broader community: one at the San Diego Museum of Art, and one at the San Diego Public Library.

### **A brief history of the *World Cultures Art Collection***

In 1974 Professor Barbara Blackmun returned from five years of teaching art history in Malawi to join the faculty at San Diego Mesa College. Courses in African Art were relatively rare, particularly at community colleges, but Dr. Blackmun worked to build a strong program of transfer-level courses that allowed students at Mesa to specialize in African Art. Blackmun's connections in the world of African Art collecting allowed her to build a small selection of museum-quality objects so that Mesa students could experience artworks in person and use them to build their visual literacy and research skills. As the decades progressed and word got out about the project, the college received several large, high quality, and carefully documented donations, and our community college became the custodian of one of the most comprehensive collections of African Art in San Diego.

Since the 1990s, arts faculty at Mesa have worked to make the *World Cultures Art Collection* more and more useful to our campus and the broader San Diego community. For most of the past thirty years artworks from our collection have been featured annually in on-campus exhibitions (first displayed in empty classrooms, and then – once it was built—in our campus art gallery). In the early 2000s, a generous donation funded the construction of a permanent glass gallery: a large, temperature controlled display case situated on the ground floor of our campus library, a high-traffic area that allows artworks from the collection to be seen by students and the general public all year round. Working with students from Art History, Black Studies, and other related disciplines, I organize rotating thematic exhibitions from the collection and display them in the glass gallery every semester, along with short student-written object histories and informational panels.

Over the decades the *World Cultures Art Collection* has also had a major impact on our local community: a grant in the mid 1990s allowed Mesa students to create an elementary-school level workbook based on the collection, presenting lessons from it at local schools each semester, and demonstrating various artworks in workshops they brought into the students' classrooms. Nearly thirty years later, a display of artworks from our collection is still maintained at Kimbrough Elementary School. Just this past year, (2018-19) I worked with the Monarch School (which serves homeless and foster youth here in San Diego) to create interactive programming based on artworks from the collection. Monarch students were able to experience some of the artworks in person in their classrooms, and they developed written and visual projects of their

own that built on what they'd learned. Objects from the *World Cultures Art Collection* have been part of many other local exhibitions and outreach programs—too many to list here—so I invite you to peruse our website for more details. <https://www.sdmesa.edu/campus-life/galleries-and-attractions/world-cultures-gallery/collection-history.shtml>

### **Our Open Access Textbook**

The Mellon/ACLS Community College Faculty Fellowship would support the creation of an open access textbook, a companion website, and two community exhibitions, but the largest share of my fellowship year would be focused on creating the textbook. The initial phase of my work on this project would involve cataloging recently donated artworks that have not yet been added to our online database. Students from our Art History and Museum Studies programs at Mesa will assist with cataloging, creating a valuable opportunity for them to gain some professional experience. Once the entire collection is cataloged, I'll select the images for the textbook, have them photographed, and conduct in-depth research on each artwork. The book's collection of texts will be a mix of extant scholarship and my own supplemental essays. I'll be working with our college's OER librarian to ensure that the text adheres to copyright laws, as I plan to include Creative Commons critical historical essays by noted scholars in the field. I'll be contributing multiple essays to the book, and will also create shorter informational sections to accompany each specific featured artwork from the *World Cultures Art* collection. Any interested student or teacher will eventually be able to access this text online via the web or major online hubs for OER materials, but our local students will be able to visit the collection on our campus too, offering them the rare opportunity to experience the objects they read about in person.

It is particularly important to me that this textbook be a free and open educational resource, mostly because that is what the student population at my college—and at most community colleges—really need. A 2016 task force on our campus conducted a survey of San Diego Mesa College students and found that roughly 30% had at some point dropped a class because they could not afford the required textbook, while 50% struggled to complete a class without the textbook because they could not afford it. Unfortunately food and housing instability have increased among our student population since that study was conducted, so it is

likely that a survey today would find an even higher percentage of students who can't succeed in our courses because they can't afford the course materials. The majority of our faculty who teach histories of Western Art no longer use high-cost textbooks; there are many excellent free resources that work just as well, or better, than a traditional art history text. But for Non-Western Art History courses the options are much more limited.

Though most transfer-level introductory courses in African Art are designed to be general surveys from the prehistoric to the present, there are currently no up-to-date survey textbooks on the market that competently cover the broad sweep of African Art History. Instructors often need to combine multiple publisher texts, which create even higher costs for students. When it comes to free open-access resources for African Art History, there is one strong site—the University of Iowa's *Art and Life in Africa*—but it does not provide enough in-depth information or a broad enough range of artworks to work as the sole required text for a survey course. The OER textbook I will develop based on Mesa's *World Culture's Art Collection* will fill in those gaps. Once it is created, it can be combined with the University of Iowa site and the small but excellent set of free resources on African Art created by the *SmartHistory* organization to provide a truly comprehensive and 100% cost-free set of resources for any introductory course in the history of African Art.

### **Our Website**

The OER book I've been describing will be available to all, but since it is formatted as a textbook (and will include in-depth critical essays and be structured as an historical narrative) it will be of most use to students taking college courses. In order to broaden access to the *World Cultures Art Collection* I will also be updating and enhancing the collection's website. The site will highlight photographs of objects from the collection (selected from those that I choose to feature in the textbook) along with critical essays that will discuss and contextualize each artwork. My goal is to mimic the format of the Metropolitan Museum's excellent *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, but with a focus on African Art represented by pieces in the Mesa collection (current external website: <https://sdmesaworldcultures.wixsite.com/sdmesaworldcultures>).

Over the past few years, and with the help of many Mesa students, I've developed an extensive catalog of much of the collection, as well as many helpful drawings and descriptive texts, so our site is well

on its way already. The fellowship will support updates and a redesign of our extant website, and will develop in tandem with the OER textbook and draw on the same research and photography. Both the OER book and the updated website will be of immediate use in Mesa's African Art History, Oceanic Art, and Art of the Americas courses, as well as our Black Studies department's Cultural History of Africa course. They will also be made available to the 25,000 students who take courses in the Humanities, Cultural Anthropology, Black Studies, Fine Art, Fashion (ethnic costume), and Music (Music of Africa) every year at Mesa college. And of course, by virtue of being online, open-access resources, countless students and instructors will be able to access those materials and adapt them to their teaching and learning however they see fit.

### **Our Exhibitions**

As I briefly outlined in the short history above, selections from the *World Cultures Art Collection* are exhibited regularly on our campus, and over the decades the collection has been central to a range of outreach programs in collaboration with local schools and community organizations. As part of this fellowship, I'll be building on pre-existing relationships with the San Diego Museum of Art and the San Diego Public Library to create two thematically driven exhibitions using objects in our collection. The research undertaken to develop the OER textbook will inform these exhibitions, which will also serve as celebrations of that text's completion and our updated website's launch.

### **Conclusion**

San Diego Mesa College's *World Cultures Art Collection* is a truly special and unusual feature of a community college campus. It is—and always has been—a labor of love, and the many volunteer hours that art history students and faculty have put into it over the decades have helped to preserve it, document it, and make it available to our campus community and beyond. The Mellon/ACLS Fellowship will allow me the time and resources I need to fill in research and cataloging gaps that are the final barrier to the creation of an open-access textbook, a companion website, and two related exhibitions. These projects will give our collection a wider reach and help to fill in a gaping hole in the scholarship when it comes to textbooks and online resources for histories of African Art.