Early this year the Museum made a remarkable acquisition, the illustrated Apocalypse described in the following article. What was remarkable, however, was not so much the high quality of the book as the fact that the Museum bought it on the recommendation of a student. The student, Anne Palms Chalmers, was one of twelve participants in a unique curatorial training course – Museum Training and Connoisseurship II, a graduate seminar conducted by the Museum for the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University. For the past twelve years the Institute and the Museum have collaborated in the training of young curators in a two-year program leading to a Master's degree in art history and a certificate in museum training granted jointly by both institutions.

Under this program, a student who wants to explore the possibility of a museum career takes an introductory course in his first year of graduate school. That course, taught in the last few years by A. Hyatt Mayor, Curator Emeritus of the Museum's Department of Prints, concentrates on the history of museums and art collecting, and involves behind-the-scenes visits to a series of museums. Rigorous screening reduces the students to the group of about fifteen who are admitted to Museum Training II.

In this seminar the students meet with Museum curators in their offices and storerooms, to study works of art and to discuss them with the particular concerns of a curator in mind: their authenticity, their quality, and their condition. Here many students have their first chance to handle original works – to turn small bronze sculptures, for example, or to examine delicate porcelain pieces – to know the objects more intimately, and to experience some of the pleasures the artist intended the owners to feel. Frequently the students are asked to discuss the objects on the spot. Gaps in their training become obvious, and they quickly learn that discipline and precision are as indispensable to the curator as they are to the academic scholar. Last fall, for instance, Dietrich von Bothmer, Curator of Greek and Roman Art, put in front of his students without any ceremony a bronze object with a head of Medusa in relief (published a little later in the October Bulletin). He asked them to describe it and tell what it was used for. Medusa is a familiar enough image to a graduate student and bronze is not a difficult material to recognize, and yet the students were surprised to learn how hard it can be to describe something precisely, how little they knew about materials and the way such pieces were made, and how revealing physical data can be. From this data and other evidence, Dr. von Bothmer showed them how he had deduced that the piece was probably a finial from a Roman ship. At another meeting of the seminar, Richard Ettinghausen of the Institute (now Consultative Chairman of the Department of Islamic Art) put five very similar plates on the table, and asked the students to arrange them in chronological order. In this case a Chinese plate had been the model for a series of Islamic ones. Just to
begin their job, the students had to spot the peculiar dryness and misunderstandings of detail that are symptoms of copied decoration; then they had to apply logic and some imagination to reconstruct the sequence. They did fairly well, but their struggles gave them new respect for the complicated interplay of eye and instinct that makes an effective connoisseur.

This year the twelve students had a particularly difficult final examination of their skills as connoisseurs and their abilities as scholars. We asked them to put themselves in the place of curators in the Metropolitan Museum, and to go out into the New York art market and locate a work of art suitable for purchase. They understood that they were limited to $1,000, and that they were to borrow their object and bring it to the Museum for an exhibition, and then present it to a special purchasing committee. In past years students in this course had bought objects with $25 of their own money and defended them in a mock presentation. But $25 had seldom bought much, and it was buying steadily less. We felt that a $1,000 limit would expose the students to art of some real quality, and that a presentation to an actual purchasing committee would give them a taste of what a curator has to do for the Trustees several times a year.

Nervous but for the most part elated, the group scouted dealers for several months, consulting the records of the various departments of the Museum to check prospective purchases against the existing collections. In early January they brought their objects to the Museum and held a "dry run" of their presentations, just as the curators do before meetings of the Trustees' Acquisitions Committee. Then an exhibition of their pieces was installed in the Board Room, with a catalogue and labels prepared by the students, to which the staffs of the Museum and the Institute were invited.

The students had found some interesting and beautiful things. There was a Peruvian mask, probably of the Early Mochica I style, unusual in being made of copper and in excellent condition. Another student assembled a group of three preclassic Mexican figurines, one perhaps as old as 800 B.C., with much of their original paint beautifully preserved. There was an Indian miniature painting, thought to belong to the Bhagavata group of the late eighteenth century. As might have been expected, however, most of the objects were European. Among them were several fine drawings, such as one by the prolific Venetian Giuseppe Bernardino Bison, and another by an unknown Italian whom the student identified as Pietro da Cortona. There were a number of small sculptures and an imposing, two-hundred-pound fragment of a Syrian frieze of the fifth or sixth century A.D., decorated in relief with the alpha-omega monogram of Christ. Perhaps the most unprepossessing object was Mrs. Chalmers's Apocalypse, a book that one could fully appreciate only by turning the pages and by knowing its place in the history of bookmaking and graphic art.

Twelve days after the exhibition opened, the special purchasing committee met to hear the oral presentations. It was chaired by the Director, Thomas P. F. Hoving, and included the senior curators of the Museum and many of the faculty of the Institute. One by one the students came to the head of the table to give their reasons for recommending their objects, and the pieces circled the table for examination. Questions from the committee were direct and sometimes unsettling. To the student who presented the Indian miniature: "You didn't say anything about the condition. There seem to be losses and repairs here. Are there?" To another student, about his seventeenth-century German alabaster relief: "That's all very well, but do you think it's good? I find it mushy." Sometimes there were quick and satisfying answers, sometimes not. There were intense little conferences between colleagues, and occasionally a member of the committee would suddenly provide the answer to some unresolved question. When the student who presented the Syrian relief fragment pointed out a cut-off ornament at one side, for instance, Carmen Gómez-Moreno, Associate Curator of Medieval Art, immediately identified part of the ornament as the rear quarters of an animal, making it clear that the decoration was not only continuous but richer than the student had suspected.

Most of the students argued their cases with remarkable poise, drawing on painstaking art-historical research. But not all of them were fully prepared for the questions that are often asked in museums, but seldom in the classroom: "Couldn't we do better for the money?" "Why do you like it?" "How does it compare to what we already have?"

After the last student was heard, the committee met over lunch to decide its choice of an object. It was quickly agreed that six works were worth serious consideration. The ensuing debate concerned the relative importance of the six contenders, and several were soon dropped; on this count, for example, the committee concluded that although the drawing by Bison was lovely, acquiring it would not make a truly significant difference to the collection. On the last poll Mr. Hoving found the committee almost unanimous in its choice of the illustrated Apocalypse, and it was decided to buy it for the Museum. But the committee was sufficiently impressed by two
other works to urge that the curatorial departments consider them for purchase. After the meeting, the Syrian relief fragment presented by Elizabeth Stark Ward was moved to the Department of Medieval Art for examination, and several weeks later it, too, was bought for the Museum.

Many of the students in this year’s course will go on to complete the Museum Training Program by working as interns in the various departments of the Museum. There they serve a many-sided apprenticeship that is not unlike a doctor’s internship, learning through full-time work and through frequent conferences with older colleagues in the Museum. Some will be given fellowships under a new $416,000 Ford Foundation grant, which will provide two and a half years of support for Museum Training students who want to resist job offers and go on for the doctoral degree, the traditional hallmark of advanced scholarship. Curators with Ph.D.s are encountered more and more, as the realization spreads that museum work requires no less knowledge or discipline than academic work, and that in fact curators can combine teaching with their museum duties logically and usefully.

At times, this year’s presentations to the purchasing committee may have had the aspect of an ordeal or a ritual initiation to curatorship, but the experience taught the students invaluable things about how and why museums acquire art. And through it some of them will be better prepared for the time, coming soon, when as curators they try to convince genuine, skeptical trustees of the significance and the beauties of a work of art.

Photograph: Michael Fredericks, Jr.