Render Us Rapturous: Reflections on Three Years of ART 101H Field Trips
by Adam Tavel, Associate Professor of English

While a field trip enrichment experience has always been an integral component of the curriculum for standard sections of art history, I’m proud to say that the museum trek that I take with my Honors students each spring is marked by a rarefied wonder. Since the inaugural offering of ART 101H in 2009, my students and I have visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City as well as the National Gallery of Art in our nation’s capital twice. The many benefits of such an experience are legion. Improved class camaraderie, increased creativity, reduced anxiety, and the rejuvenated perspective gained on one’s semester from these brief hours spent off the Eastern Shore are all tangible rewards from this perennial adventure.

The chief benefit, of course, is the matchless opportunity to encounter several artworks from the Western canon, and to stand mere inches away from the brush strokes of Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Van Gogh, among other masters. At the risk of parroting the dozens of eloquent and moving reflections composed by my students, such an experience is unequivocal proof that no textbook reproduction—no matter how colorful and glossy—can capture the nuance, vividness, and spirit of a painting or sculpture. As savvy intellectuals living in this digital age of globalization, it is ironic how often we forget that a viewer must ultimately view.

We also lose our sense of scope when we engage our world exclusively through a textbook, cell phone, or tablet. While the whimsical fluidity of Monet’s impressionism is palpable in thousands of books and countless websites, it may be surprising to learn that when framed, his Woman with a Parasol is nearly four feet high and three feet across. As one who stood dumbstruck before this very painting, suspended as I was in a state of appreciation beyond all material pressures of our world, I assure you it was a forceful reminder of art’s ethereal power to remove us, if only temporarily, from our daily lives and render us rapturous.