used to be that Stephen Murray, professor of art history and archeology, carried bulky slide trays to his classes to use during his lectures. He would hook them up on a projector and push a button for every new image he’d display on the big white screen at the front of the room. Murray—who has taught art history for over 30 years—would discuss each for a few minutes and invite students to stare long and hard at the reproduction. He had to; unless they Xeroxed a textbook copy at the library, this was the only chance the students would have to see the images.

That is, until the day when Murray stepped onto an elevator with Mike Crow, then executive vice provost. They chatted about Crow’s vision for making digital technology more accessible in the classroom through the Center for New Media. Murray listened to Crow’s enthusiastic ideas and he wondered if his own department could do the same.

“I had no idea how to set up a center,” says Murray. “But I did have an idea of how to make a work of art exciting to students. Now because of digital technology, I can click the computer and show the class an image, an image that is no longer one-dimensional. What’s more, students can look as many times as they like at the image on screen at the front of the room. Murray initially encouraged Crow to apply for start up funds from the Provost’s Office, as well as a challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, to develop materials for the core curriculum. He did, and with support from many of the faculty in the department, the process of historic sites, monuments, research with the Department of History has become more interactive, and accessible to students across disciplines.”

Murray says that the database created by the Media Center for Art History, Archeology and Historic Preservation (MCAH) where Murray now serves as executive director, includes some 200,000 images (and growing) to serve a variety of sophisticated digital projects designed by a staff that includes Juliet Chou, JamesConlon and Jeremy Stynes. That means students and faculty alike across disciplines can tap into the wealth of images for their coursework, research or interests.

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“The visual arts can be difficult to understand. You need a range of contextual information about the period, patrons, technique, artist, etc. to really grasp a work of art,” says Robert Carlucci, manager for education and research with the MCAH. “But what technology allows you to do is to bring together a whole universal of information germane to an object that helps students engage a range of issues fundamental to a successful learning experience. We have a new lens through which to see the work.”

The goal of the MCAH is “to examine and extend the ways of interpreting images, objects, buildings, and sites and to reinforce Columbia’s historic strengths in core education for undergraduate students, graduate student training, and faculty research.”

Though the MCAH specializes in art history, archeology and historic preservation, it serves many other departments and faculty across campus, and has built natural affinities with Lamont-Doerner Earth Observatory, Teachers College, other arts and sciences departments, and the schools of architecture, engineering, journalism, and International and Public Affairs.

Carlucci says that the database has provided a rich resource for the various departments. For instance, when Terry D’Altroy, professor of anthropology, taught his course, “The Rise of Civilization,” the MCAH worked with the Center for New Media, Teaching and Learning to develop a visual supply of some 1500 images for the class. Likewise, the MCAH is now developing programs that will be useful to courses taught in EALAC and the department of religion. In other words, materials usually seen in museums, books or in slide shows now can come into a student’s dorm room, a classroom or a professor’s office.

Specifically, students or professors can take a virtual tour of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Fallingwater house in Bear Run, Pennsylvania. Or they can visit an excavation at Amheida in Egypt’s West Desert as a field center for cross-disciplinary scientific, environmental, cultural, and archeological research and education, or marvel at the 360 degree panorama view of the Church of La Madeleine in Vezelay, France. And of course, they can store and study as long as they want any number of paintings and photographs.

Through the many tools of digital technology, the MCAH is now helping bring to the learning process historic sites, monuments, and works of art in three dimensional, photo-realistic models, animations, and video with links to a database of thousands of images. By so doing, the process of education has become more interactive, personal, and accessible to learners across disciplines.

“This is not a luxury,” Murray says. “We’ll not be able to continue recruiting the best students unless we have this kind of facility and resource available to them. This kind of technology is a wonderful tool that combines humanistic content with teaching. It’s terribly exciting.”