Twenty European and American masterworks from the 16th-20th centuries in the collection of the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College are on display in the galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York during spring and summer 2010. The works are integrated into the Met’s galleries, giving visitors the rare opportunity to see them with those by the same artists or from similar contexts from the Met’s world-renowned collections.

The AMAM’s Ter Brugghen painting St. Sebastian Tended by Irene, one of the most important Northern Baroque paintings in the United States, is displayed with the Met’s The Crucifixion with the Virgin and St. John by the same artist. These two works appear in Only in America: 100 European Masterpieces in American Museums Unmatched in European Collections (2006); there Pierre Rosenberg, former director of the Louvre, singled out the AMAM painting as the one painting in an American museum named most often by art historians and curators worldwide as unparalleled in Europe.

AMAM paintings by Domenichino, Sweerts, Turner, Monet, and Cézanne are also seen alongside important works by those artists in the Met’s collection. Despite its much smaller size, the AMAM has also loaned works by artists not found in the Met’s permanent collection of paintings and sculpture: paintings by Erhard Altdorfer, the Cavaliere d’Arpino, Giovanni Battista Gaulli, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner—along with the AMAM’s wooden sculpture by Kirchner—add new voices to the Met’s extensive holdings.

The AMAM’s Rothko, Gottlieb, and Newman paintings are displayed in the Met’s Modern galleries; the first two were instrumental in the early definitions of the importance of abstract art in the United States in the early 1940s.
The works on loan are a testament to the perceptive collecting practices of former AMAM directors and curators. Former director Charles Parkhurst, Professor Wolfgang Stechow, and Professor Ellen Johnson are among those whose foresight enabled the AMAM to be considered one of the five best college and university art museums in the United States. Parkhurst was responsible for the acquisition of the Ter Brugghen, the Kirchners, and many other of the works on loan, while the Rothko and Gottlieb paintings were given in honor of Ellen Johnson by Barnett Newman’s wife Annalee Newman.

A large group of masterworks from the AMAM has not traveled outside Ohio for almost 50 years. In 1954, the museum loaned 29 works to Knoedler Galleries, New York, and 32 works to Kenwood House in London in 1962. A further group of works was loaned to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in 1966. In 1975-76, the museum loaned a group of works to the Cleveland Museum of Art during construction of an addition to the Cass Gilbert building, designed by Robert Venturi, John Rauch, and Denise Scott Brown. The AMAM is similarly loaning 20 17th-19th century works to the Cleveland Museum of Art this year.

The AMAM’s current building renovation project has provided the opportunity for works from the collection to travel widely. The project includes a comprehensive renovation of the museum’s electrical, mechanical, plumbing and other systems and an expansion of art storage. Many sustainable components are incorporated, including 18 geothermal wells. The renovation seeks to achieve a Gold LEED rating from the U.S. Green Building Council.

The exhibition of AMAM works at the Met is accompanied by a gallery talk series featuring prominent Oberlin alumni and other scholars (http://www.oberlin.edu/amam/lectures.html); a walking-tour brochure indicating locations of the works; and a podcast series (http://www.oberlin.edu/amam/AMAMatMet.html).

The exhibition will travel to The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., where it will be on view from September 11, 2010—January 16, 2011. It was organized by Andria Derstine, AMAM Curator of Collections and Curator of European & American Art, and Stephanie Wiles, AMAM Director, and is being overseen at the Met by Maryan Ainsworth, Curator in the Department of European Paintings and an Oberlin College alumna (1971).