Students of John J. Curley are getting up close and personal with 31 of the most celebrated artists from the 1950s.

The assistant professor for modern and contemporary art at Wake Forest University has designed his seminar, “Abstraction and Meaning,” to coincide with the Modern Masters from the Smithsonian American Art Museum exhibition at Reynolda House.

This prestigious touring exhibit, examining the complex nature of American art in the mid-20th century, represents a unique opportunity for 14 of Curley’s students and for the entire community to experience these influential paintings firsthand.

Reynolda House is one of only six museums in the country (and the only one in North Carolina) to host the exhibition.

“I have always been a big believer in teaching art history in front of actual art objects,” says Curley. “The materiality of the paintings on display at Reynolda House transforms them in the minds of students — from something flat and lifeless on the page of a textbook or digital slide into something tangible and exciting.

“A slide is easy to ignore, but a painting by someone like Franz Kline is not.”

Through Curley’s classes, students not only gain a deeper understanding of the paintings themselves, but they also learn that these works of art have their own history as objects, spanning their journey from creation to this touring collection.

“By bringing the subject matter to life, Professor Curley left me with both a deeper understanding of the artwork and a truly unique experience.”

— Mary Gigler (‘12)

For Curley, putting students face to face with works of art as part of his teaching has another benefit. “My expertise is in the art of the 1950s and 1960s in the United States as well as in Western and Eastern Europe,” says Curley. “Looking at paintings with students always yields new insights that I incorporate into my work.”