Recognizing and Supporting Excellence

The Dorothy & Lewis B. Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at The New York Public Library
The Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers opened in 1999, supported primarily by the generosity of Dorothy and Lewis Cullman, imaginative philanthropists with a magnificent commitment to The New York Public Library. The concept of creating a center for research and writing that draws on the extraordinary resources of the Humanities and Social Sciences Library at Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street grew out of conversations between Paul LeClerc, the Library’s President, and the historian Robert Darnton, a Library Trustee. For the planning and early support of the Center, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation provided invaluable series of grants.

The Center awards fifteen fellowships a year to outstanding academics, creative writers, and independent scholars whose work requires a period of sustained, intense immersion in the collections of one of the world’s great research libraries, as well as time away from their normal duties. It provides Fellows with resources to pursue the solitary work of study and writing, while at the same time creating a vibrant intellectual community rich in cross-disciplinary exchange. Moreover, crucial collaboration takes place between Center Fellows and the Library’s staff. Individual curators and research librarians help guide Fellows to materials they might not otherwise find, and the questions Fellows pursue often lead to new discoveries by Library staff members as well as to enhanced collection development.

Behind the founding of the Center lies the conviction that first-rate scholarly and literary work will enrich the lives of individuals across a wide social and cultural spectrum. Through the impressive and growing list of books published by Fellows based on their time at the Library, and through diverse public programs, the Center actively promotes The New York Public Library’s larger mission of advancing knowledge, curiosity, and access to its superb collections.

"You walk the corridors of the Library with the acute sensation that what has been bestowed upon you, amongst all these books, is a sense of what matters. You enter a silence that requires humility, grace, and the deepest thanks."

—Colum McCann (Fellow 2004–2005), novelist and short-story writer, worked at the Center on his novel Zoli.
The Center places high value on quality and clarity of writing, for academics as well as for independent scholars and creative writers, in order not only to stimulate the interchange of ideas within each class but also to extend public intellectual discussion to a broad, educated audience, giving the Center a significant voice in New York City’s cultural conversation.

The Summer Seminars

In 2004, the Center created a program of Summer Seminars for High School English teachers. Each July, former Fellows lead seminars for teachers chosen through a competitive application process. The program aims to give the teachers, most of them from New York–area public high schools, the opportunity to work closely with a practicing writer or scholar: reading, writing, doing research, and learning about the exceptional collections and electronic resources of The New York Public Library.

During the school year, many of the teachers bring classes of students in for a day of similar immersion in the Library. One teacher described the Summer Seminar as “a luxurious exercise in learning with the finest people and resources.”

The Cullman Center in Practice

The Center occupies a handsome space designed specifically for its use on the second floor of the Library. Each Fellow receives a generous stipend and an office with a computer, bookshelves, and filing cabinets. The office surrounds a lounge area furnished with sofas, current periodicals, and tables for informal lunches and conversations.

Weekly lunch presentations and some evening programs take place in the Margaret Liebman Berger Forum, a hall adjacent to the Center. Informal interactions among the Fellows continue throughout the year, over lunch, during coffee breaks, after hours—and often after the end of the fellowship term.

At the weekly lunches, Fellows present their work-in-progress to the entire class, an extensive range of invited guests, and members of the Library’s staff. Fellows also participate in an ongoing series of dynamic public programs hosted by the Center. Past events have included a panel on “The Changing Face of Harlem,” three forums on “Science & the Literary Arts,” a conversation between Fellows Cohn-Tibbitts and Francisco Goldman on their forthcoming novels, and another between Fellow Wendy Lesser and the British writer Geoff Dyer on photography. With W.W. Norton & Co., the Center sponsors an annual three-lecture series, which Norton publishes in book form. Norton Lecturers have included the editor Jason Epstein (The Book Business), the Nobel Laureate Dr. Harold Varmus (The Art and Politics of Science), and the Center’s first Director, Professor Peter Gay (Savage Reprisals).
A Selection of Fellows Working with the Library’s Collections

The following sample of Fellows, their projects, and work from the collections they used give an idea of the range and diversity of the program.


Recent exhibitions from Photographs of British and Chinese Harbours, 1843, between November 1849 and early 1850. A selection of prints from the fields of the Middle Ages.


Theresa de la Salle in a black and white, the daughter of Jose de la Salle’s wife. Used for research on the art of the 16th century.
Each year’s Fellows are chosen from a large field of applicants by a careful process of review and selection. Fellows from all over the United States and abroad work at the Center for a term that runs from September through May. The Selection Committee looks for diversity in gender, race, and age, seeking talented young writers and scholars as well as those with established reputations. The principal criteria for acceptance are the excellence of the applicant’s previous work and the significance of the new project’s need for sustained access to The New York Public Library’s Humanities and Social Sciences research collections.

To learn more online about The Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers, or about the Summer Seminars program, please visit www.nypl.org/csw. Applications may be downloaded from that site. For additional information regarding applications, send e-mail inquiries to csw@nypl.org, or write to The Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers, The New York Public Library, Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street, Room 225, New York, NY 10018-2788.

The Center may grant up to five fellowships a year in conjunction with the American Council of Learned Societies. For information regarding the separate ACLS eligibility requirements and an ACLS application, write to the American Council of Learned Societies, 633 Third Avenue, 8th Floor, New York, NY 10017-6795, or send an e-mail to grants@acl.org.
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“This year’s fellows counted themselves fortunate indeed, for we were treated to an almost magical spirit of camaraderie and generosity...” George Chauncey (Fellow 2004–2005), historian, worked on his new book, The Strange Career of the Closet: Gay Culture and Politics from the Second World War to the Gay Liberation Era.

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