Pablo Picasso, Marc Chagall, and Andy Warhol's works line museum walls all over the world. But, thanks to MIT and Harvard's art loan and rental programs, you can also find them hanging on the walls in less conventional places: students' dorm rooms and apartments.

As part of the universities' art lending programs, undergraduate and graduate students can rent or borrow art from the programs' collections for the academic year. Jessica Diedalis, curricular registrar at the Harvard Art Museums and head of Harvard's Student Print Rental Program, stresses that it's living with the art—not just viewing it at a museum—that gives these programs such value.

"Students may select a piece of art, put it in their dorm room, and then over the year explore new details and learn the piece and get more comfortable with it," she says. "A lot of students have expressed that it's brought them joy on days that they're feeling down, or if they've just finished a stressful exam, they might come back and look at their peaceful scene and just feel the stress drift away."

Ariana Webber, registrar at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, agrees that living with original...
art is a unique, hands-on learning opportunity for students. “What we really hope that students will get out of it is the appreciation for living with real artwork that was created by artists, and kind of what it means to collect art,” Webber says.

MIT’s Student Loan Art Program began in 1969, years before the center’s establishment in 1985. Today, the Student Loan Art collection includes over 600 two-dimensional, framed works, which are loaned out for free to undergraduate and graduate students for the academic year.

Harvard’s Student Print Rental Program began just a few years after MIT’s, in 1972—a “rental” program as opposed to a loan program, as undergraduate and graduate students pay $30 to rent an artwork for the academic year. This fee supports updates and improvements to the works for the following year, according to Associate Curator of Prints Elizabeth Rudy. The Harvard Art Museums had 271 up for rental through the program this academic year, Diedalis says.

While the programs might not appeal to all students, it’s safe to say that both programs are popular, according to Diedalis and Webber, both lend or rent out every single one of their available works each year.

There are plenty of works by well-known artists available in the programs, but they both also contain works by local artists—a deliberate choice in an attempt to support up-and-coming artists while also exemplifying the types of artwork exhibited year-round at the museums.

Emily Garner, campus and public programs coordinator at the MIT List Center, hopes that, by using the Student Loan Art Program as a way to expose students to contemporary art, the List will engage students beyond the pickup and drop-off of their prints.

“The rest of the year, we’re a contemporary art gallery and showing cutting-edge new art and artists pushing the field of contemporary art, so [the Student Loan Art Program] gives us an opportunity to expose students to what we do the rest of the year by collecting out of people that we exhibit,” Garner says.

Rudy explains that an artist’s fame hasn’t been the top consideration in building the Student Print Rental collection at Harvard.

“There are quite a lot of prints by local or just generally domestic artists ... some of whom, really their careers took off and they really became quite well known, and some who did not, but the work is still meant to be fresh and have some connection in some way to our student body,” Rudy says. As the collection grew, wall and all the walls are covered, and it’s amazing to see. And it’s such a varied collection, too. I always find something new when I’m walking through.”

Those who don’t receive one of their top choices can choose from unassigned pieces before “Last Call” of distribution week, when people can pick from the works that are still not claimed, Webber explains.

The rental days at Harvard are held on the fourth floor of the Harvard Art Museums, where students pursue works in bins or on easels and art ledges. Students enter a lottery that randomly assigns them a time to come choose a work to rent. Those who don’t receive a time slot can come the next day for an open rental period or enter into the lottery at the Harvard Art Museums’ kick-off event, Student Late Night, Diedalis says.

Both programs’ collections continue to grow from both purchases and gifts.

“At the annual Student Loan Art Program exhibition they always try to feature ... some new acquisitions each year, just to allow people to know that it’s an active collection, that it’s not something we just did and then this is the finite amount of things that we own, that it’s continually growing,” Garner says.

Rachel Thompson grew up in a rural part of Texas. There were no art museums in her neighborhood, the first museum she ever visited was the Museum of Fine Arts when she came to Harvard for her undergraduate education. Now, thanks to the Student Loan Art Program, she has an Alexander Calder print in her Kendall Square apartment while she attends MIT for her masters degree in comparative media studies.

For Thompson, the experience of choosing a print at Harvard—one of her first up-close experiences with original artwork—underscored the program’s mission of making art accessible to students.

“Walking through a room with a bunch of artwork that you get to flip through, almost like records or books, I think that really brought it back to the ground for me,” she says. “It made

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surprised that a program like this could exist.

"I was like, "You can have a print on your wall" and people were like, "Oh, do you mean like the Monet water lilies that you print out on ... nice paper and hang it up?" and I was like, 'No, it's a real original artwork." Thompson says. "I had to keep reiterated how they were defining the word 'print' because people just couldn't fathom having something like that on their wall."

At both Harvard and MIT, students have to sign a contract at the beginning of the loan or rental period, but neither university has ever had an issue with students damaging works, according to Diedalis and Garner. Diedalis says that student appreciation for the art itself may be one reason why.

"They take this responsibility very seriously," she says. "They really grow to love this piece and appreciate it, and it becomes a very personal experience for them."

Garner draws a parallel between students' stewardship of these artworks and their respect for the MIT community as a whole.

"They're very invested in the MIT community, what it has to offer," Garner says. "They're exposed to the top-notch lab equipment in the world and producing things, and so we're trusting them with a large amount of different types of technologies and so forth, and exposing them to that, and they take real pride, I think, in what they're part of. So I think that's a large part of the reason why we haven't had any issues."

According to Diedalis, there are a total of 11 colleges and universities across the country with art loan or rental programs for students. While each runs its program differently, their experiences with students' respect for the artwork is the same.

"They really have had the same experience, that students have been wonderful as renters and borrowers," she says. "So when people reach out, it's nice for them to hear, too, that ... these are our experiences, and it's been a very positive one from both our standpoint as well as the students' perspective."

By participating in these programs, students become part of a larger web of people who have rented or borrowed these works, Webber explains.

"It kind of creates networks of students who do receive art. They get in touch with each other and they've kept track of who's gotten which artworks, they all share around with each other and get really excited when they find out who won which artwork in the lottery," Webber says.

Staff at both programs are working on strengthening their student networks. Garner has created a Wiki page for MIT students to share reflections on living with the art for future borrowers to read. Diedalis began a similar program last year in which each Harvard renter is able to leave a message for whoever rents the work the following year.

Garner says that this student network adds an exciting element to the program.

"You never know where these students go, so there's an interesting kind of history that can be built there. You see this person's name and you've got 25 years from now they could be a CFO in a different company and you just never would've known that they lived with that artwork when they were a college student," she says. "And so it's about building that history of like, where are these pieces living and who are they living with?"

Thompson has noticed labels on the back of her artwork that name its previous borrowers. The loan art program helps students truly engage with the art of their schools and communities, she says.

"I really appreciate ... the idea that it's putting [the artwork] back in the students' hands," she says. "And I think that's an empowering thing [and] that there's not really another way to do it."