MADISON, Wis. (June 5, 2018) – Recent graduate Alexa Machnik (B.A. ’18, Art History) has received the 2018 Iwanter Prize for Undergraduate Research, an annual award administered by the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Center for the Humanities. The $2,000 prize is given to a graduating senior who, through a senior thesis and general academic distinction, demonstrates outstanding humanities-based scholarship of a broad and interdisciplinary nature.

Machnik’s senior honors thesis, “Deified Beauty: Yang Guifei’s Cultural Legacy and Manifestation as Kannon in the Sennyu-ji Temple,” investigates how a Buddhist statue of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, originally made in China and brought to Japan in the medieval period, became understood as, at the same time, a statue of a well-known Chinese imperial consort. Temple visitors worship the statue for its relationship to feminine beauty—despite its mustache. Machnik’s thesis works through the packaging and repackaging of this artifact, and studies it through the lenses of art history, gender studies, religious studies, and even chemistry.

Machnik conducted original research in Japan in the summer of 2017 while on a competitive Hilldale Fellowship. Under the direction of Professor of Art History Yuhang Li, Machnik produced a thesis that the selection committee found best represented the ideals the Iwanter Prize is intended to recognize: originality, clarity, interdisciplinarity, and scholarly depth.

After graduation, Machnik will pursue a career in art conservation. “For me, conservation offers a harmony of interdisciplinary interests,” Machnik says, “and it is the opportunity that the field offers to unite scientific analysis with art historical research that transformed my curiosities into a long-term career goal.”

Emma Strenski (B.A. ’18, History and International Studies) has garnered the $500 Honorable Mention prize for her dual-honors thesis...
“The Brcko Arbitration: A New Way of Governing Ethnicity in Bosnia and Herzegovina.” With the breakup of Yugoslavia into individual nation-states, the multiethnic and multi-religious city of Brcko needed to be placed on a side of a cultural dividing line, to join the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which had a primarily Bosnian-Muslim population, or Republika Srpska, the Serbian area of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In her thesis on the arbitration of Brcko, under the direction of Assistant Professor of History Kathryn Ciancia, Strenski discusses the history of the region, the ethnic and political conflicts of the 1990s, the success and failure of American intervention, and the complicated and evolving definitions of ethnic and religious identity.

Strenski took a research trip to both Brcko and Sarajevo in the summer of 2017, funded by a competitive Davis-Gerstein Undergraduate Research Award from the Department of History at UW-Madison. There she met with politicians and local people, and toured schools and other state institutions. As a winner of the prestigious Fulbright scholarship, Strenski will head to Bosnia and Herzegovina for the 2018-19 academic year, where she will continue her research on the region.

Strenski was drawn to her thesis topic by a personal connection—her grandfather, Ed DeLaney, was an attorney on behalf of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Brcko arbitration. “I grew up hearing stories of this arbitration and it has always intrigued me,” says Strenski, “and I am honored to be able to historicize a moment in which my grandfather played a major role because it will preserve his legacy and is a symbol of passing the project from one generation to another.”

The Iwanter Prize itself is about legacy and the passing of intellectual curiosity from one generation to another. The prize was established in 2000 by alumnus Sidney E. Iwanter (B.A.’71, History), a native of the Greenbush neighborhood in Madison. While an undergraduate, Iwanter’s own curiosity and will to document the knowledge of the previous generation led him to secretly record the lectures of Professor of History and political activist Harvey Goldberg. In 2004, Iwanter generously donated these “bootlegs” to UW-Madison (the lectures are available from the Harvey Goldberg Center: goldberg.history.wisc.edu).

Iwanter, who now lives in Los Angeles, continues to support the undergraduate humanities and the love of learning at UW-Madison, stemming from his belief that “a well-rounded humanities education is the keystone to an informed electorate and a healthy society.”

More information about the Iwanter Prize and past winners can be found on the Center for the Humanities website: humanities.wisc.edu/research/iwanter-prize