Armanda Dingley-Rodie ’08 found her first two years at Oxy difficult. The Asian studies major from Eugene, Ore., almost transferred to another school. She felt lost until she found her passion—Asian art, specifically, the tiny carvings called netsuke that were attached to kimono sashes and used to hold a purse—during a class that she took her sophomore year. “Netsuke began as simple, utilitarian pieces of wood or stone and evolved into complex artistic carvings,” she explains.

After discovering netsuke, everything fell into place for Dingley-Rodie. The financial aid department made it possible for her to spend her junior year studying at Doshisha University in Kyoto, Japan. She earned a Richter grant to study netsuke at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London that summer. “In London I explored museums, shops, galleries, and auctions in order to investigate how netsuke are displayed, looking specifically at modes of presentation and their significance,” she says. “Through these experiences, I quickly learned how to travel, live, and study independently.”

Dingley-Rodie also interned at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in the Japan Pavilion, writing essays for the netsuke displays, and organized an exhibit in spring 2008 at the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena.

“The most important thing I learned from my years at Occidental was how to transform my interests into scholarly research topics,” she says. “In addition, Occidental’s commitment to quality forced me to learn how to write well and create convincing and interesting arguments. From the beginning of freshman seminar, to the end of my senior thesis, my teachers consistently worked with me on a one-on-one basis to improve my writing. I really doubt that I would have gotten the level of individual support at a larger school.”

Dingley-Rodie ended up graduating with honors, magna cum laude, and Phi Beta Kappa. She recently completed her master’s in Japanese art history at Oxford University. She is currently in Japan studying at the Inter-University Center for Japanese Language Studies run by Stanford University, a one-year program.