This interview has been edited for clarity, readability, and length.

Rebecca Tucker (RT): Hello, you are back with Art History on Fire, the interview series exploring the current state of the field of art history through conversations with a variety of U.S.-based art historians. Once again, your hosts are myself, Rebecca Tucker, I'm professor at Colorado College, and…

Deborah Hutton (DH): Deborah Hutton, professor at the College of New Jersey. We're here to talk about the future of our field. As we all know, higher ed and the arts are facing a variety of threats. And the discipline of art history is certainly not exempt.

RT: And yet, at the same time, we've been noticing that art history is in a dynamic and innovative phase. When we attend museums, we see that attendance is up, and general interest in the arts is surging.

DH: So, in this series, we talk to art historians on the ground to learn from them about what is happening, and why, and to gather ideas for moving forward.

RT: It is my pleasure to introduce our interviewee for the third installment of our series. We speak with Dr. Michael Fowler, who is Associate Professor of Art History in the Art and Design program at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tennessee. Professor Fowler is an award-winning faculty member and a prolific scholar in the field of art and architecture of the ancient Mediterranean and West Asia. He works on a wide variety of topics, including material, religion, the visualization of violence, time and memory. The social construction of identity and human-animal relations. That's a lot of things. As an interdisciplinary scholar, Professor Fowler is affiliated with the departments of Classical and Medieval Studies, Religious Studies, and Women's Gender and sexuality studies programs at East Tennessee State, an impressive individual that we are excited to talk to.

DH: Absolutely. And as always, you can find a transcript of this interview, as well as more information on Dr. Fowler, and this interview series on our substack, Art History on Fire, and on the project's website hosted by Colorado College.

RT: Let's get started!

DH: We are delighted to welcome Dr. Michael Fowler. Michael, thank you for agreeing to be part of this interview series. Rebecca and I are excited to hear more about your work and your thoughts on the current state and future of art history.

Michael Anthony Fowler (MAF): Thanks for having me, I'm really looking forward to today's conversation.

RT: Absolutely, we are so pleased to have you here. In our intro that precedes this interview, we give a very brief summary of your work as a scholar and teacher. Though we left out some details, including the very important fact that you are a graduate of Colorado College! Besides that, we didn't go into much detail because we wanted to give you the opportunity to define yourself and your work. To that end, here's our first question for you. How would you describe yourself and the type of art history that you practice?

MAF: So, I will say briefly at the outset that I would describe myself as a historian of the visual and material culture of the ancient Mediterranean and West Asia, but before I proceed any further into discussing those choice descriptions of myself, a great segue from discussing that I did my undergraduate degree at Colorado College is that my path into art history was rather indirect, really quite circuitous. When I was at Colorado College, I never set foot in the art department. I didn't take an art class, I didn't take an art history class. I was a sociology and philosophy double major. So, I was steeped in the humanities and the social sciences - and went on from there. I developed an interest as an undergrad in religion and the history of religion, which has persisted with me through my work to this day. It's one of the main topics that I work on as an art historian. But I didn't arrive at art history in particular until after an intermediary graduate degree in religious studies. I first went to do my Master's in Religious Studies, and then a classical Archaeology degree, and then only at my PhD level did I actually formally study in a department of art history.

RT: It was our loss, Michael, not to have you with us all those years.

MAF: I'm flattered. But in some ways, maybe that is by design, right? I don't believe in some kind of teleological guidance of me towards art history, but why I mention this unusual background is, it'll be relevant later to what I imagine will be some conversations about my pedagogy and how I connect with students, many of whom come from very similar backgrounds as my own. I can return to that in a moment, but my approach as a scholar of antiquity is thoroughly interdisciplinary. And that is informed, I believe, by the fact that I benefited from so many different disciplinary perspectives and methodologies, analytical approaches, before I even started thinking about the material and visual world, culture, as one primary category of evidence through which I could think about all the things that in the humanities and social

sciences that I'd studied previously were actually what I was interested in. But ultimately, through graduate work, I realized that I wanted to work not with text primarily as my source for the history of religion, because I realized that one of my main interests is from the social science perspective. I would say my approach as an art historian is really anthropological in at least two main senses. One is that the kinds of questions that drive my interests are, at their heart, human questions. They are phenomena and experiences that confront human beings across the entirety of our modern human beings' history - so far as we can go back in time, such as when I'm teaching something like Paleolithic art. One of my main selling points is that art is the oldest surviving form of communication human beings have. Not texts. I love dance, I love music, right? They certainly existed, but how do we actually reconstruct or talk about them? So, art for me, in a kind of anthropological sense, is this conversation happening across time and across cultures that doesn't privilege linguistically based cultures. We can find some kind of visual or material expression across the history of humanity. But then, of course, that connects with the kinds of questions I'm interested in: material religion, or violence, or gift-giving as a phenomenon, or monuments and commemorative practices. Things that we can locate across human societies and history and can think about comparatively alongside one another. The other side of why I'm interested in visual material culture (and I don't say art), is that I'm not just interested in fine art or “high” art, those kinds of cultural expression. I'm interested in humanity broadly construed from the most popular and so-called “low” manifestation of culture all the way up to the “high.” And so that's where the archaeologist and the art historian in me are always in conversation about the different kinds of information that compliment, sometimes contradict, or offer different perspectives than the textual record may offer us. Materials sources offer insight into people who otherwise would go unremarked in history if we don't look at certain kinds of visual material evidence. That interdisciplinary perspective, that social science background, has really informed how I approach the history of art.

RT: I'm curious about this broad definition that you give of the way you practice in the field. Do you find that you sit comfortably in an art history space, as a scholar, as a teacher, as an academic? And is that because art history itself has that interdisciplinary permeability? Or is it particularly true for classical studies where you have a lot of archaeology and religion already happening?

MAF: I would say I exist rather comfortably, I think, within art historical space, precisely for the latter explanation that you gave, that I think art history is inherently interdisciplinary, and I think that's a corollary to my earlier remarks about my interdisciplinary background. I found my way to a discipline that, although it has its own history and its own kind of institutional boundaries, its own proper methods and primary information it is looking at, is itself thoroughly interdisciplinary. Art History is pretty willing to incorporate perspectives from different disciplines and adapt them,

and make them work. I think that was a natural place for me, where not only are art historians looking at the kinds of things that I wanted to look at, but Art History is also a space where interdisciplinarity is part of our practice and is encouraged rather than discouraged.

RT: That is part of what we love about it!

DH: I think all three of us would say that [interdisciplinarity] is a strength of Art History, but I also wonder if that's some of its downfall, that the interdisciplinarity which makes it such a rich field also makes it seem like other people in other fields also can do the things we're doing. I'm thinking, Michael, about your hesitancy around the term Art History, because you want to talk about all different kinds of visual and material culture, and I'm totally with you. Does that descriptor, “Art History,” seem so limiting that then people in other fields feel like they're doing things art historians aren't doing because they're looking at material culture? In other words – this has come up in earlier conversations Rebecca, and I have had – is the name itself, “Art History,” part of our crisis? Is the name of what we do referring to this older idea that it's only about [certain types of] objects and not really about the people who use those objects?

MAF: I think that emphasis I had earlier on the social, scientific, anthropological angles is that I really want the human to be centered in that conversation. But also, I'm a little bit of an animist as an art historian. I'm very much Interested in the treatment of the object as a thing that has agential power and is actually embedded in social relationships with us. So, I extend personhood to the objects of our study. For me, the social approach also involves the things whose affordances we are interacting with.

DH: Oh, I love that.

MAF: I don't want to lose the thread of your earlier point, which is really excellent. I think we struggle with, on the one hand, the terminology, something like “Art History.“ It is a similarly fraught situation with other kinds of area studies, like women's and gender studies. Their methods have been so thoroughly incorporated into other fields that people begin to question what is the need for a standalone discipline when everyone has learned from the insights of the pioneering theorist of gender and sexuality, right? I feel that maybe our interdisciplinarity, the adaptability of our methods, can, in a way, be absorbed. And I think we've struggled with that even from the turn of the millennium. Other art history programs were adding visual studies or different kinds of fields as part of the movement towards democratizing or expanding the scope of the kinds of culture that we were interested in. But I think there are unfortunate consequences of that step. I think this could be a place where we re-emphasize or reassert the distinctiveness of art history: (with no shade to the digitization of a lot of our culture) we are “thing” people. We are materiality people. What gets lost in visual studies is that we too quickly move to speaking

about the thing in front of us as an image dematerialized from the objects that we are studying. I think that is something that we have in spades as a discipline - is confronting, not just the dematerialized image, but the medium as the vehicle for the thing that we are seeing. The material and the making are the factors that are significant components of what we're studying. Even with the digital! I talk with my students all the time about how the digital very often has some kind of support or medium in interaction or through which we're appreciating the digital. We've swung so heavily into materiality as a lens and an approach, in particularly my sub-discipline of art history, with materiality studies, and affordance theory, and the social biography of things, these are a bit more distinctive of our approach to things.

DH: I love that in an age where everything is more and more screens and separate, that you go back to engaging with objects in person more. That's wonderful. We named this interview series “Art History on Fire” in large part because the title can be taken in both a positive and negative way. So, let's start with the positive. Your department at East Tennessee State has seen a lot of growth. At the same time that Art History programs elsewhere are struggling, or even closing, could you tell us a bit about your program and institution, what's working, and why?

MAF: Yes, and I'll try to do so very concisely. ETSU is a public, regional, R2, with current strong aspirations to an R1 status. That is due primarily to the doctoral generation and research output of our medical sciences, which are nationally recognized. We're really a strong medical school, with social sciences and humanities programs that are also part of the university. We are very much serving a regional student body, a significant proportion of which are first generation and come from working and middle-class families. In other words, a similar background as my own, as a first-generation, working-class, middle-class person, so that's one reason why I really enjoy working where I am! The people that I'm working with on a daily basis are folks that I see reflections of my own experience. The very best of higher ed is that it creates opportunity and improves the life of one generation to the next. So, just a plug for the important work that the institution is doing for the people of the region. It's very much a mission-led institution. I'm in an art and design department, which is NASAD accredited. We have 3 main baccalaureate tracks. There is a professional BFA in studio art or graphic design, and then there's a BA, a traditional kind of liberal arts degree that you can take with either a studio art or an art history concentration. Being in a place like this is certainly different than my training in very “pure” Art History departments at Columbia, where the art school was on one side of the campus, and the Art History department was on the other! It was quite an experience to adapt my pedagogy to be relevant to 3 different degree tracks. I had to think about: how do I serve these making and creative-oriented programs, one of which is professional in its orientation, and also provide my historians with what they need? To say nothing of the fact that we participate in general education and what do my general education students need to get out of this? I'm teaching for

artists and designers, for historians, and for general ed, and then other departments which our courses serve. When I arrived at ETSU in 2019, there had been two recent retirements of folks who'd been serving for decades, and the program had really dwindled in enrollment. We had one declared minor and no majors when I was hired.

DH: Oh, wow. Okay.

MAF: I was hired after a visiting assistant professor stint, so I was a known quantity for the department. They had a sense of whether I could deliver on the hope to do something with this program, and I had the blessing of a tenured faculty member who had multiple appointments and administrative roles and didn't have the bandwidth to teach quite heavily in the program. As of today, we are around 15 majors and 13 minors. I would love it to be even larger, but I'm pretty proud of how healthy it is. That is a sustaining number, where we are at least bringing in every year as many new declarations as we're graduating out.

RT: So impressive, Michael, wow.

DH: Yes, seriously.

MAF: In the beginning, I was hustling myself, but now, thankfully, our growth has allowed us to hire a new tenure-track assistant professor who is an East Asian specialist, so now we have a three-person team. It used to be one full-time and one half-time, so we definitely have seen some growth. The question is, well, where is this growth coming from at a school that is so medical- and natural-, health-sciences focused, right? How are students being convinced to study this discipline under siege, and whose relevance is being questioned?

RT: That's my question! How do you answer it?

MAF: For the people who may tune into this interview, I think the relieving thing I will say is that I made some very basic changes that I think can be implemented anywhere. I'm not about to present some very particular, over-the-top, or costly set of solutions. I went back to the basics, to the foundation and made some changes. I did one thing which cuts against the grain of recent practices. At least since the 90s, we've been increasingly frustrated with the surveys, as thoroughly compromised by their own Western, colonial, institutional, nation-state, entwinements - there's all kinds of problems with the survey and the canon. A lot of schools are increasingly doing away with the survey and trying to find other ways of teaching it. I decided to keep the surveys and to acknowledge, through the pedagogy and the way we construct the course, that they are overtly imperfect and flawed courses. I build that meta-level of disciplinary and historiographic awareness into the course. I don’t disagree with the critiques that have

been levied against surveys, I think they are well put, but to do away with those surveys would, from a very practical perspective, complicate the general education curriculum and our role and participation in it. It [dropping the surveys] would create questions about the studio art and design needs, to say nothing, of course, of art history. So, I doubled down and committed to the surveys, and globalizing and diversifying the content. My Survey 1 became one-third non-Western, even though it's a Western course. I was trying to push the limit proportionally of what I could do. Two-thirds of my first majors and minors I personally recruited out of survey classes. So, that's one immediate result. If I dispensed with those [courses], I'm not sure what my recruitment avenue would have been. I embraced the imperfect, adapted it, for a lot of students who were gen ed. Some of my first majors were nursing students, who said, I'm not interested in nursing and then made the switch, made the leap. Parents were variously pleased with that decision. One of them just finished at the Corcoran School at GWU [George Washington University].

DH: Oh, wow.

MAF: She was one of my very, very first students. How do we answer the call to think more critically about our discipline? But we also have to keep the pragmatic side of how universities function and the different constituencies we're serving. We might actually be cutting off our nose to spite our face in recruitment by removing a class that, for me, has proven to be a boon for personally recruiting clearly talented students who have a knack for analyzing visual material culture. So that's one, I think, can be applied not just at ETSU. Think about what a survey might look like as not only a basis foundation for the discipline, but as an important recruitment “ambassador” kind of class. At the other end, I’ve been innovating the curriculum by consolidating the old-fashioned periodic classes. We used to have, believe it or not, a Northern Ren, an Italian Ren, a Baroque, right? Rebecca is cheering. But we are a faculty of 2.5 full-time people, who don't have that very specific training. The question was not only how do we adapt this curriculum to make it run more efficiently with the human resources and expertise we have, but as much as I love that period of history, does it need that kind of outsized proportional presence in the curriculum when there's so many other things that need to be taught?

RT: And as much as I would like to say, “yes, it does!” obviously, “no, it doesn't.” I confront those issues all the time as a factor of my own training. You're right that the structure has to be undone and done a different way.

MAF: So I collapsed those three classes into an early modern class, which has its own imperfections. That's something I've gotten over as a teacher, is the fear of imperfection. I lean into the incomplete and the imperfect. And I leverage that as an opportunity for conversations in the classroom. That decision created space for other kinds of courses with the very real reality

that I'm on a 3-3 [course load], and so I can only rotate through so many courses on a 4-year rotation. So, how do I more efficiently cover things as a generalist? Which I did not mention, I was hired to be a generalist. Talk about comfort zones!

DH: I am right there with you. I am now completely a generalist, too.

MAF: I spoke about this at CAA. I'm a big fan of generalist pedagogies. I think more programs should be teaching not just specialization, but competencies for cutting across our comfort zones. Some of the most rewarding experiences I've had in the classroom have been in classes where I am really being stretched almost every week. I'm prepping for something that I certainly was not doing in graduate school. That's how I got to classes like The Monument in History, or Art and the Sacred, Violence and Visual Culture. In these upper-level classes we are dispensing with a survey format. Instead we front-load them with theoretical considerations relevant to that subject, and then it's a series of historically and culturally specific case studies. We take a global, cross-cultural, and comparative approach. Students go through those surveys, problematic as they are, but then I started designing thematic or topical classes that allow us to think about humans around a common subject. We think about their commonalities, but also, importantly for comparative methods, the ways that we're distinct culturally as well. All these themes were also expressly designed to be topical in their timeliness. They were things that were going on around our own particular moment, so they were relevant, right, in the students' eyes, even as they're also timeless. So, that was part of the curricular innovation.

And then finally, devise assessments and projects that transcend, even if they complement, the traditional art history research paper that was the primary means by which our art history teachers assessed our knowledge and skills. There are select contexts in which I still assign the art history research paper, very object-oriented, but I've begun to think about other real-world, practical assignments that students can engage in that achieve the same results of honing their research skills or critical thinking and close looking without it resulting in a kind of assignment that feels increasingly irrelevant to the kinds of work they might be doing when they exit the academy. One of the other things I did is recognize that art history can't exist on an island. Not only do I need to exist within the ecology of an Art and Design department, but also the courses that I previously described were deliberately designed to engage with existing academic units outside of art and design. My *Monuments* class is currently being added to the Heritage and Museum Studies program. My Medieval and Classical classes are in the Medieval and Classical Studies curriculum. *Art and the Sacred* is in the Religious Studies curriculum as a course. I teach a class called *Women and Queers in the Arts*, which is part of the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program. So, I've also insinuated art history into as many different parts of our university as possible. That is another way of reaching out, demonstrating relevance and value

by engaging in other kinds of interdisciplinary interactions and improving enrollment and other pathways into the degree.

Those are things that I think any university or any faculty member can experiment with, and if you've already done them and they're not working, I apologize! I started with the basics rather than overthinking it. Those changes have really paid dividends for us.

DH: That's amazing. Can I ask a couple of practical questions? Do you use many adjuncts to teach art history classes, or is it primarily what you and your colleagues can offer?

MAF: We unfortunately do have a pretty heavy utilization of contingent faculty, not just in Art History, but in Design and Studio as well. We limit the adjunct teaching in Art History to the survey-level courses. So, all the upper-level instruction is done by one of the faculty who have a terminal degree and at least a full-time appointment. Those adjunct-led courses tend to be our online sections, rather than our brick-and-mortar sections. Special things, in my view, happen in brick-and-mortar classroom settings. We really try to keep those as spaces where the [full time] faculty – the ones that students are going to have continuity and a relationship with – are there. And of course, I'm not expecting an adjunct at their pay level to engage in additional work like recruiting students into the major.

DH: Right.

MAF: I want to be that faculty member who is their first point of contact in a brick-and-mortar class. That's an admonishment I'll make of any colleagues who avoid the survey in similar classes because they're bothersome to teach. That is missing an opportunity as an expert in your field to convey passion and get folks on board in those first experience classes. If we just “adjunctify” the most important classes, we're missing an opportunity. How can we convey that we care about a field if we're relegating some of these critical courses to those who have a contingent relationship with the department?

DH: And they are often finding out a couple weeks before the semester whether or not the course is even going to run, right?

MAF: Absolutely.

RT: Well, I love hearing all these strategies, Michael. It sounds like you've been doing some exciting things in that very strategic and thoughtful and intentional way. I want to turn to the other side of the equation and ask a bit about the challenges that your program is facing and maybe hear a bit from you about where you would identify pressure points for Art History as a

discipline. You just talked about the contingent faculty issue, which is across higher ed these days, so I agree that's particularly one challenge. Do you have others?

MAF: The best practices of what our various centers at our colleges and universities are telling us is the best way for students to learn is not evident inour teaching spaces, at least at ETSU. We are not keeping pace to implement those best practices. For instance, flipping a classroom. Flipping a classroom requires a certain kind of architectural setting and furnishings that are conducive to flipping. One of my classrooms is in a large hall with chairs bolted in frontal orientation towards the proverbial stage. There's not a lot that I can do to mitigate the architecture that is telling everyone that this is an old-fashioned lecture space, and that's how this course is going to be taught. Or, there's only one screen, rather than multiple screens around the room that I can subdivide with movable chairs and tables, for groups to work on, pair and share, come back, report, like, things that we know are high-impact teaching strategies. At ETSU, we have very few spaces that can be reserved or dedicated to that kind of teaching. So, even in my wildest dreams of how I want to teach, I have to get really creative. Art History does not even have a dedicated room at ETSU. We share them with the Registrar's office, with Chemistry and Speech and Debate, and a wide range of courses that have different needs in those classrooms. I can't tailor a room to reflect the specific disciplinary needs that I have, so that is a challenge. We don't need a lot of really expensive equipment, but even so, I find that our teaching spaces don't keep apace with those more technologically and equipment-heavy fields where those things are replaced and kept up a lot more.

RT: As you say, it's not a huge ask, right? A couple of projectors and some non-bolted tables and chairs. It's not like you're looking for a new press, or a darkroom, or you name it.

MAF: Exactly. I also referenced earlier that our discipline is arcing toward a more diverse and inclusive and self-critical approach to institutional and disciplinary history. What are we doing? How are we doing it? Why are we doing it? There is really good and important work that's occurring within our discipline, and is important to the question of relevance. Are students seeing themselves in and the value of what we're doing? This work of diversifying and being inclusive, and accessible is part of a political dynamic now. And when you're working at a state institution like I do, it can create some pain points for how we design, title, make our reading lists, decide what kinds of material we're dealing with. We know in our discipline where we need to be going, but there is the surrounding socio-political atmosphere, where some of that work can put scholars in professional peril. Certainly, in Tennessee, we have several laws that have recently been passed on the books. One is called the divisive concepts law, where the spirit of the law is protecting the intellectual marketplace, and the free exchange of ideas, intellectual ecological diversity at the institution. But the way that things are written leaves much up for

interpretation, and the laws can have a chilling effect on faculty who may not want to broach certain kinds of topics that might elicit strong reactions, emotions, or thoughts in the classroom.

RT: Certainly, we're seeing examples of that across the country, so it's not as if Tennessee is in any kind of unusual space in these kinds of ways. I agree with you that that tension between the work of the discipline to do better versus the particular cultural moment we are in – that is a pressure point, for sure, for all of us. Even in the supposedly sacrosanct private halls of learning. I'd like to think that thinking about these issues is being responsive to our audiences as well. That we're not just existing in our own intellectual bubbles where these are the core issues but really thinking about how this debate is playing in the world of our students and their parents. That said, navigating through is really complicated.

DH: I sometimes wonder, and I'm saying this as someone who studies South Asian and Islamic art, so, it's coming from that view of traditional art history, that another way of framing it is this: it is not that the work that we're doing to be more global is only about diversity or inclusion or equity. It also could be making art history more accurate. We could just recognize that the art history we've been teaching is actually really inaccurate. It's focusing on a very small percentage of the world (Europe and the United States). Do we want to make what we're teaching more representative of the world in which we live, in a very straightforward way? It is not about teaching something divisive – we are just trying to do better in terms of being more accurate. The troublemaker in me would say, Art History has always been about identity politics. It's been about one group, and we're taking that [privilege] away and trying to be more accurate.

MAF: I agree with you that there are other ways of framing it outside of some of the buzzwords that get treated under the rubric of woke or wokeness. But because the political can't be separated from what we do, even the articulation you just gave for branching out from the traditional core could still be perceived as a threat or a challenge to the hegemonic narratives that our discipline has trafficked in. I'm trying to find a way around this, not using those words that really trigger folks depending on their political persuasions. But, in my dark moments, I do question whether, even reframing in that way, if I'm still being perceived as detracting due attention from something that a group thinks should still remain the point of attention, or correcting the record. Here's where we get on to the work of cultural heritage narratives and the power of monuments, and the agency they have over our collective memory, even perhaps more so than textbooks and academic things. Sometimes we see being a historian as just being accurate and factual – but if that accurate representation of the past cuts against someone's identity-based narrative of how the past was, that's where I think we get into these tensions. What we might see as correcting the record can be seen as an attack on someone's sense of

self, or a group's sense of self. That's the tension of the *Monuments and History* course: are monuments about history?

DH: Right.

MAF: A lot of what we consider our history is more in the realm of heritage, and people get uncomfortable in truly historical spaces because we have to question things. Disrupt or unmoor certain taken-for-granted ideas that anchor us or position us in the world. It is like our understanding of ourselves in the world gets challenged as soon as we engage in historical inquiry.

RT: I'm sorry, but is that not education? That is the whole point of education, is it not?

MAF: Yes, but this is tying back to one of the reasons why our discipline is under siege right now, is that the things that we're talking about that are so inherent to what we do are political.

DH: Yes, this is art history's relevance: it's always been political. It's always been about these things, and that's why it matters. But saying that at this moment, for sure, is dangerous depending on where you teach, and who you are and what your status as a faculty member is. And actually, I'm going to jump ahead to a question that we were going to ask you later on, but it's completely relevant. In your scholarship and teaching, you work on tough topics, like visual representations of violence, like contested heritage sites. So, we've talked about the difficulty here… how are you handling it right now in the classroom?

MAF: I will say, first, just to preface that these courses are upper-level courses, so their enrollments are, by design, small to facilitate discussion. But I also require any student who registers for a course, certainly one with a sensitive topic, they have to have a correspondence with me where I inform them in advance what this course is going to be about, what the content's going to be, and some of the guidelines and expectations for conduct. Everyone in the class has to actually agree that they are going to be prepared to do the work and confront the topics of the course and be respectful and open-minded. I do all of that before I even issue a permit for them to come into the course.

RT: And do students then step away, or do they all jump in?

MAF: Some say, you know, that's maybe a little heavier, a little more difficult than I imagined it was going to be. Or some will say, I love the class, but I'm in two other seminars this semester, that's going to be a little too much work for me. But that response is before I get into the controversial discussions and how we manage that side of it – it is the effort involved as an

upper-level class. I ask a lot of my students in upper-level classes in terms of workload. I try to be respectful of the fact that my first-generation students are very often working jobs to get through school, and are often primary caretakers for aging parents or grandparents. I want them to make an informed workload decision about their next semester before they get into a class is going to demand a lot intellectually and emotionally from them.

RT: That makes total sense. You don't have to unpack your whole pedagogy, but if you have a couple of thoughts or tips…

MAF: I would say, I mean, one of the reasons why I want to teach these classes is that I think our classrooms and courses like these that deal with these controversial topics, are maybe some of the only remaining contexts where we can come together in good faith with certain ground rules to be open-minded, to listen to the other, where the ethic of the classroom is to understand, rather than to win an argument. Or to lob talking points at us. So, one of the reasons I teach them is the larger, high-minded goal of education, the democratic mission of education, that we are hopefully producing people who can engage in respectful discourse, where you're truly, actively listening to someone else, and not assuming the worst of your interlocutor, not making assumptions, but really engaging in that difficult work. So, that's one of the ethical reasons for why I'm teaching these classes. They're incredibly relevant, but I would ask, how do I approach this? Or how do I deal with these things? Some of this I've learned through engagement with Centers for Teaching and Learning, again, benefiting from people who know a lot more than I do about how to teach effectively. For planned discussions - because I prepare my classes the way that I do, I don't often get unexpected flare-ups in class, so that's one thing we can speak to if we want, if you want. I'll talk more about these planned discussions that we have: to make sure, first and foremost, that the purpose for even broaching the topic that we're broaching is clearly communicated as well as its relevance to the course. People aren't just left to speculate as to “why in the world are we talking about this?” I preface the conversation with, why are we having this conversation? What is this about? I establish ground rules for discussion. I keep students focused on the common issue, try to keep us from straying too much from that focus oriented around whatever sets of readings, monuments, works of art or visual material culture. Keeping us where we have a common set of curated things that I've intentionally selected for a reason, so that we don't free associate too much. I see myself as a facilitator of the flow and focus, so when we get to an impasse, or people are getting reticent to speak, I will sometimes just cut that kind of difficult pregnant silence. I’ll offer a question like: “Why do you think we're having trouble or difficulty right now?” I’ll articulate what we're thinking, and give that space for a moment for maybe someone not to think, oh, I gotta be an academic point all the time, but someone to maybe express the emotion that they're feeling. I’m not assuming that when students aren't talking, it's because they didn't do the readings or because

they're not prepared. Sometimes we don't feel comfortable talking for a reason that we might lean into that could be productive for the discussion. And then, finally, I try to end those conversations with summarizing, as objectively and as well as I can, what we talked about, what the different viewpoints were, and then what the main takeaways from that discussion actually are as they relate to the course. Because again, with the expectations we have from legislatures, we need to always keep the course relevance and our respective expertise in mind, so that we don't stray into areas where they are not course-related or we're speaking out of professional turn.

DH: I have to say, it sounds like you're an amazing teacher. I feel like I want to take a class with you now.

MAF: I appreciate it. Likewise, I wish I'd had more, certainly more Islamic, art and architecture exposure when I was in school. That was a woeful blank spot that I've had to remediate as I'm teaching.

RT: Alrighty, my wheels are turning, Deborah. Maybe we should add a field trip component to our research project.

DH: Oh, yes! Yeah, go visit people, sit in their classes, absolutely.

RT: Well, I love hearing your strategies, Michael, and it sounds like the students are coming out of those experiences really feeling good about what you're offering them in terms of that democratic ideal of education. Maybe this is a good point to segue into some of the other learning models that you use. In your university profile, there's a mention of experiential learning and practical training, and things like that. I'd be curious to hear about what those approaches look like for you. And again, thinking about this in a larger disciplinary sense, is that a pathway for art history or a role that art history can play in preparing students for work and life outside of academia?

MAF I think so. I think that we certainly will continue to produce for the foreseeable, immediate future, teachers at varying levels, and museum professionals, auction house dealers, and the kind of bread and butter [jobs]. That will continue to occur, but we also need to respond to the shifting economies, and the different pathways that students have outside of academia. I mean, we are in an increasingly image-oriented world and market, right? So, leaning into the strength of Art History, we can impart those critical analytical approaches to not just consuming imagery, but really thinking about what we're looking at. In terms of experiential learning and practical training, I've approached that on 3 different levels in my classes. First, this is, again, practical advice for folks who are like, “how do I land soft, or, maybe not do something grand?” I think you

can start by doing independent or collaborative in-class exercises. Not an entire class, not even an assessment that you're going to grade, but something that folks can work independently or collaboratively on, where they are demonstrating their assimilation of the material through some kind of active doing and practical application. I'll just give an example. I was teaching a few semesters ago, a course on collecting and the history of collecting. And we were in our unit on the Cabinets of Curiosity, great early modern European topic. They had just read and discussed some primary readings on this phenomenon in the history of collecting. I actually brought to class hundreds and hundreds of random objects, raw to finished materials, of the kinds of things that one might expect to find in a Cabinet of Curiosity in the early modern period. I actually put them out, I put up masking tape shelves on the walls and I had them construct their own Cabinet of curiosity by picking various objects. They had to report back to the class as that collector, why they amassed the objects they did, and what the objects say about themselves or their understanding of the early modern globe. So, very low-tech hands-on activity where you can practically demonstrate that students actually understand, conceptually, what's happening in a Cabinet of Curiosity.

Second is individual or collaborative class-wide assessments. So, one class I taught was the history of printmaking which was a global class. And that class was taught in COVID, so I also had to adapt to the remote learning context, but thankfully, I'd already anticipated, whether it was brick and mortar, doing a collaborative class exhibition using ArtSteps, which is a VR gallery space. They had to write a joint proposal for an exhibition to me, they had to divide up the research tasks, what parts of the gallery different groups were going to do, they had to select the objects, they had to come up with a plan, so they had to basically execute an exhibition over the course of the semester. I had several class days that were studio days, rather than traditional art historical discussion or slideshow days. They had just work session days. That class chose an exhibition on contemporary Black women engaged in print. I learned a lot from that class, because I was expecting them to pick something obvious - Rembrandt or something. They ended up working on a topic that actually is quite challenging to research and write about, which also stretched my capacities as an instructor.

Another class that I taught last semester is called *Art in Appalachia*. Because our institution is based in Appalachia, it is expressly dedicated to Appalachia and serving the region, and we have a university museum. Its collection strategy is Appalachian material and visual culture. We actually taught in the museum. Not only did we integrate objects into every single unit, which was also about handling properly, thinking about the preservation, conservation, archiving of these objects, but also every student was assigned or picked an object that had never been studied before in the collection. Through the course of the semester, they cataloged, studied, researched, and wrote catalog essays that now are part of public knowledge. They're on our

public-facing website, so students were contributing knowledge about an object that would hitherto not ever been researched. That was really great as we're not in a region with a lot of major museums, so getting students in front of actual, physical material objects and getting them to think about how you handle them, how do you look at them, as physical things, not digitized pixels on a screen, or something like that.

Fourth and finally are entire classes that are experiential or practically based. The *Art in Appalachia* [class] is also an example of that, because they're learning about navigating the space of the museum. It is actually a meta-level metacritical course about Appalachia and the problematic cultural narratives that are written about this region, and how the artifacts and architecture are used to buttress that notion in problematic ways.

I also do a study abroad class in Greece that I co-teach with a graphic design colleague, who brings expertise and perspective that I do not have. It is based in Athens for 3 weeks, and we do 3 case studies, one ancient, one medieval, and one early modern. We confront students with a specific cultural heritage, tourism, or interpretive problem that confronts an individual site in Athens. So, the Acropolis, the Daphne Monastery and Ottoman Athens. We make students work in collaborative interdisciplinary teams to solve real-world cultural heritage problems, ranging from problematic interpretation to practical things like wayfinding and accessibility. So, they really are thinking about other pathways for a historian or designer to be thinking about. . This important work of historical research and the narratives that we're telling is a public-facing history. Our histories aren't going to be very useful if the typography of the signs isn't usable, or the spaces that we want people to interact with aren't accessible to varying bodies. They're thinking about a variety of issues that confront our discipline that we can't often appreciate when we're sitting in a classroom looking at things that can be decontextualized and are difficult to keep contextualized. Students realize that the things we're looking at have biographies. The Acropolis if we just fix it to the 5th century [BCE], we're not talking about the church, or the mosque, or the blown-up monument, or the post-independence monument scrubbed clean of any Ottoman trace, right? They're really thinking that this thing is in the flow of time, and we are also intervening with it and making meaning with it. Those are a few kind of examples of varying from just quick assignments in class all the way up to entire classes that are dedicated to being embedded experientially and practically on various kinds of problems.

DH: I'm thinking with the Athens class, but also the one set in the museum, that they're doing public art history, in a way. Pivoting to another question about that for you, that you've done a lot of work with Smarthistory, which is a digital online platform, open access. How does that compare to you as a form of public scholarship, in comparison to the things that you're doing in these classes, or to exhibitions, or art criticism, or things like that?

MAF: I really love that you summarized it that way, Deborah, because that is something that those experiential-based assignments are meant to do - give students a sense that they're not just doing assessments because I need to grade something. I want them to feel like they are making some meaningful contribution to society, to the public. The Art Steps exhibition is published, publicly viewable for folks to learn more about contemporary Black females who are making awesome prints. Or this idea of designing for better cultural heritage, represents that spirit of making art history not just relevant, but open and useful and available to a wide number of people outside the academy, outside the hallowed hall in which we're engaging in certain kinds of conversations. That, I think, is a virtue of Smarthistory. As well, it is free. If you have internet, you can access it, you don't have to pay any money. There's a kind of democratic accessibility to this site, presuming you can read English, which is the language in which all of this is published. These are high-quality, expert-written and expert-vetted contributions. My contribution that I wrote was peer-reviewed by 4 people. I've never even had an article in a journal reviewed by 4 people. So there is a scrupulousness, a dedication to the informational quality of what's going up there, which is a great antidote to the massive mis- and disinformation that just floats out in the internet relevant to art and architectural and general cultural history. I also love that then I can cut the cost of my students. I use Smarthistory for my survey classes, so they're not buying a really costly book. I love that it's global, it's cross-cultural, that it enlists dozens and dozens and dozens of scholars around the world to write these essays, which allows art history to be dialogic. The traditional survey book is one, two authors who don't have the expertise to talk about all of these different chapters of the book. They have a kind of red thread, a master grand narrative that they're trying to tie all these chapters together. Smarthistory leans into manifold and multiple, conflicting, different kinds of narratives, and letting different authorial voices and styles emerge. It is not presenting a tidy history, but leaning into history, actually being plurivocal and unresolved and unfinished work. And speaking of the unfinished, it's dynamic. If we learn something new, we can update the art history website or the essay, right? It's not this published thing that now is fixed in form. It is dynamically updatable, and can be kept current with wherever we are as art historians. I feel like I'm pitching Smarthistory. I have no monetary benefit!

RT: It sounds like you found it rewarding, personally, to be part of that endeavor to make Art History active that way.

MAF: Absolutely. I would say it made me a better scholar. I would say if there's one kind of selfish reason one might get more involved in public art history is that once we have to try to convey information to a population beyond the small group of specialists who understand our jargon, and take for granted the self-evident importance of what we're working on, when we

have to actually explain the importance of what we're working on, convey to an educated layperson the topic at hand, it has actually made me a much better communicator in my more specialized research. It actually made me speak to a broader audience than I had been before I started engaging in public art history. I'm optimistic that our field is becoming more receptive to public art history as a legitimate kind of scholarly activity. That wasn't always the case. But I think even engaging in it ends up improving even your more specialized scholarship, because I had to stop and really think about it: have I really conveyed why I'm working on this, why this is important, clearly? You can't write obfuscating dense text for Smarthistory.

RT Hopefully, your peer reviewers would edit that out. It sounds like a win across the board, though, right? Obviously, it's successful out in the digital world, it's successful for students of all types, and successful for you to be part of it. We learned from our interview with Laura Holtzman that the notion of an engaged art history was a positive practice that could move the field into spaces where maybe it's only really dabbled before.

MAF: I think exhibitions are great, but you've got to go to them, right? So, there are barriers, right, to exhibitions, whether it's traveling, or admissions fees, or even the fact that museums are not always spaces that folks really feel like they want to be in. Art criticism can be really alienating in its own way, in the very particular rhetoric and terminology that particularly contemporary art criticism engages in. It feels like you need to be initiated into a specialized kind of knowledge to really understand what it is.

RT: Just to be fair, there are critics who are trying to fight against that, and there are certainly vehicles, digital and other. I think about Jason Farago's work - but I hear what you're saying.

MAF: That is exactly the kind of work that I think pairs well with Smarthistory, where accessibility is not just about connectivity and the freeness of it, it also is the pros extending a hand and inviting someone into a conversation, rather than kind of erecting this ivory tower of, “oh, well, this discourse is for this group of 5 people who met at a conference somewhere...”

RT: I wonder about two things off the top of my head. I wonder about density and overload. If all of us, to make the case for our existence, have to go out into the world and do this, at what point do we saturate the market? We can't all write for Smarthistory, although that'd be sort of interesting. And second, operating in the public sphere requires certain sets of skills, and it's not always a friendly place. Most of us are trained and conditioned to work within higher ed, within the academy. So, are we doing good work out in the public realm, or are we, in fact, exacerbating some of the problems that exist in our field, and that we're trying to be critical about.

MAF: I definitely think public art history has to proceed in the ethics of good social justice and community-engaged work. We also have to be collaborative and open-minded and have humility that we may not have certain knowledge, or that other people we may be interacting with and serving are better placed or have forms of expertise that we need to appreciate. Certainly not going in and saying, here's the service that I'm providing you, aren't you happy? We have to come with the humility of meeting people and also listening to what folks want to say.

RT: Not to be stereotypical, but those are not adjectives that are normally applied to art historians: “humble,” and “good listeners,” and “collaborative.”

MAF: It goes back to why my way to art history was so circuitous, and Deborah even mentioned how art history has certain connotations. I was from a working-class, blue-collar, first-gen family. I was like, “that's not for me, that is not a space or a discipline where folks like me have a place.”

RT: I keep thinking about the art historian in the Woody Allen movie, *Midnight in Paris*, who is such a snob, and is just so off-the-cuff pretentious and annoying...to Deborah's point, that's part of what we're fighting against. So, the kind of public art history that your students are doing, that you are doing, is actually really important in countering those stereotypes that are out there. Our final question, what do you think the future of art history is? There's an easy one. In particular, are there actions we can take now to ensure the best income outcome? Sorry, income would be interesting too, but the best outcome for our field? And just to be clear for our listeners, that's a question we've asked all of our interviewees.

MAF: Yeah, this is definitely the toughest question, of them all, because we spend so much of our time as historians thinking about the relative or more distant past, so orienting ourselves towards where we're going, or where we anticipate going, definitely is a feat of its own for the historian. There was one recent op-ed published by Joan Keys, the director of the Institute of Fine Arts, at NYU, published in the *Brooklyn Rail*, called “Why Art History Must Leave Its Home.” There's this memorable quote towards the beginning of the article, that kind of sets up the piece, saying: I wonder what might happen if we stop defending our institutional patches and started flooding other fields with critical visual analysis. And then she goes on to develop this concept of applied art history, albeit not in the sense that we might think of: preparing art historians for specific vocational, highly technical jobs, which you might argue is what we have been doing for a while. But honing in on, for her, what is this quintessential thing that art history can teach, and enable others to do? It's actually teaching visual thinking, a certain kind of slow, still, deep, engaged way of looking, that, for her, actually has democratic and social and political implications. She says we should be getting into these interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary spaces where we're teaching medical students, not just by looking at European painting, how to

look at bodies in a particularly acute or attentive way, but actually to look at the history of medicine, it's illustrations, it's photographs, formally, to think about ways in which bias is encoded in the very ways that we represent. Representation is not this neutral thing, as it's so often treated (as a kind of documentary form) in other disciplines. That supposed neutrality of these documentary media is exactly where art historians intervene and say, well, actually, let's talk about the history of racism, or sexism, or various kinds of phobias as they manifest in the visual record of medicine.

RT: That's super exciting.

MAF: I can't follow her all the way to her conclusion, where she wants us to abandon the ramshackle “home” of our institution, and to get out there and do this work of essentially engaging these other disciplines and getting them to think visually in the way that they might benefit from thinking. I think there are still some repairs and foundational kinds of adjustments that can be made to the proverbial “home.” I'm not willing to completely abandon art history as a discipline. And I think that gets back to a point I made earlier. I don't think I've pushed it far enough for myself at my own institution, but the fact that I am trying to connect with different disciplines through the courses that I'm designing is one of those steps. I think, without abandoning the house, we can extend the hand and start engaging other curriculums on campus to help demonstrate the utility and the value of our particular way of thinking. The visually driven way of thinking can actually affect transformations within those disciplines. Hopefully not, Deborah, to the point where we've been appropriated and are no longer needed because they've learned and they've taken a page from us. Maybe Joan Key would say, if we've done that, what an amazing accomplishment, let's close shop. If everyone has assimilated the toolkit, we have improved the democratic notion or character of society, and now people are thinking about images in critical ways, exposing the ways in which images have served some pretty unfortunate ends throughout history.

DH: I love that you are very optimistic. You have an optimistic view of what our history can do. I'm thinking about discussions on my campus, and right now, our African American Studies and Women and Gender Studies departments are very much at that phase of people saying, well, but we do that in our classes. I think that happens a little bit to Art History also: “oh, we deal with visual material in our courses.” My thought back is - and here I'm criticizing academics, and I would include art historians in this - all of us are thinking that we don't need other people, we can do it. So how do we convince these other disciplines that we have something unique to give to them? Convincing the students isn't the problem, it's convincing our peers when we're operating in institutions where there are limited resources and there's a sense of competition between the disciplines.

MAF: Unfortunately, I'm not sure what the solution would be. Certainly, I think that the students are an easier sell, as you pointed out, but we are in a situation where we have a not dissimilar budget model at my institution, which is very much student credit hour-generated. So there is a kind of “divide and conquer” effect that occurs - sending your students to another discipline is to give up a certain cache of dollars that are so desperately needed to support our department. I'm not an administrator, so I don't typically have to confront some of those realities, but that point is well made that there is this contest over a finite number or amount of resources. That, on a very practical basis, hinders work that might otherwise be done. Maybe I'm too much of an optimist. I thought maybe if we remove some of these things, some of our colleagues might be more willing to acknowledge the particular expertise that we have that just can't be reduced to, “well, we work with visual things too.”

DH: And maybe I'm too cynical. Maybe it's also both ways–that art historians also need to be more open. That we need to model this in both ways.

RT: Both of you are pretty optimistic, right? Just looking at this article, which I obviously need to read more fully, but in the last paragraph Key says, “or we can walk away from it.” That's a little easier to say when you're the director of the premier art historical institute in the country. It's a little harder to do when you're the sole faculty member at a regional university.

MAF: Right. I did get left thinking, okay, applied art history, I can see where this might go, but I'm not sure where the perpetuation of the kind of close analytical and critical thinking that we're trying to promote [happens] if we step outside the house. How are we actually generating, across generations, that competency? Because it needs to be taught. We can't take for granted that once it's conveyed, it's just going to self-perpetuate. There need to be people who are there, reminding people that the visual requires critical engagement. It is not this transparent form of communication. It needs to be dissected.

RT: Maybe that's the optimism that I'm hearing from both of you: that fundamentally, we believe in the discipline and what it contributes. We just have to figure out these little minor logistical problems.

MAF: What I'm not wanting to do is retreat within the house, spackle things up, and say, let's just keep producing professors and curators. I don't want to ban that either in an era where more and more and more people are actually going to museums, right? But maybe we can refurbish or remodel or add an addition to the house.

RT: A porch.

MAF: And a porch, less hostile architecture, to use the metaphor, that invites different people in. So maybe having a house isn't the problem, maybe it's the architecture.

RT: Maybe we need an ell that would attach to the garage and bring more people in. Okay, we've probably pushed this metaphor enough! Michael, thank you so much for your time and for this great conversation. It has been terrific to hear about all your successes, and I really do appreciate the optimism about the field. It's heartwarming.

MAF: I'm an optimist to a fault, but also, in the times we're in, for me, it's a necessary bulwark.

DH: Well, it was wonderful and really, truly inspiring to hear all the things that you're doing in the classroom. Thank you so much for engaging us in this conversation.

MAF: Thank you, it's my pleasure.