

The interview with Drs. Karen Barber, Anne Arundel Community College, and Gretchen Gasterland-Gustaffson, Minneapolis College of Art and Design, was conducted on 6/22/2026. This transcript has been edited for clarity and readability.

Rebecca Tucker: Once again, this is Art History on Fire. Here you'll find our interviews exploring the current state of the field of art history, in the form of conversations with U.S.-based art historians. We aim to illuminate a variety of perspectives on undergraduate teaching in the field of art history. We're hoping to find out what is happening, good and bad, to ask why it's happening, and to gather ideas for moving forward. Your hosts are myself, Rebecca Tucker, I'm professor at Colorado College, and...

Deborah Hutton: Deborah Hutton, professor at the College of New Jersey. We imagine everyone listening knows that there are major transitions happening across higher education in the United States as well as elsewhere, stemming from a variety of factors, including demographics, institutional funding, social change, and politics. Art history is certainly implicated in those changes. We've made the case in this series that today's art history is dynamic, innovative, experimental, and exciting, but also facing very real external pressures, such as demonstrating to those outside the field the value of art history.

RT: Indeed, and our two guests today for the eighth installment of the series have taken that challenge head on. We're pleased to introduce our two guests, Dr. Karen Barber and Dr. Gretchen Gasterland-Gustafsson. Karen Barber is a specialist in the history of photography and curatorial practices, and is currently assistant professor of Art History and Director of the Cade Art Gallery at Anne Arundel Community College in Maryland. In addition to teaching a wide range of courses in art history and museum studies, Karen is a current member of AACC's Center for Liberal Arts Work, which emphasizes seminar-style teaching and learning.

DH: Dr. Gretchen Gasterland-Gustafsson is Professor of liberal arts at Minneapolis College of Art and Design. With a background spanning comparative literature, art history, and fine arts - printmaking and weaving to be specific - Gretchen not only teaches a range of courses for the college and publishes on Swedish design. She also currently heads costume design for Out on a Limb Dance Theater Company and School, chairs the board at Soo Visual Arts Center, and serves on the Second Shift Studio Space Board, among many other things. Both Gretchen and Karen have contributed to Smarthistory and together they are currently working on the project "The Value of Art History," which aims to gather comments from art historians on why what we do and what we teach matters. We are really looking forward to the conversation.

RT: We are. As always, check out our Substack and our webpage hosted by Colorado College for transcripts, audio, and more information, such as bios of Dr. Barber and Dr. Gasterland-Gustafsson, and a link, as well, to their survey on the value of art history. So let's get started.

DH: For our eighth interview in the series, we are delighted to welcome Dr. Gretchen Gasterland-Gustafsson and Dr. Karen Barber. Thank you both so much for joining us today. We are really looking forward to speaking with you.

RT: We're so excited to have you. Thank you for making time for us, and we are happy to have this wonderful conversation with you both. As we do for all the interviews, we have a pre-recorded introduction where we briefly introduce you, but we keep those introductions deliberately brief so that you have the opportunity to introduce yourselves here. So, that brings me to our first question, which is the question we're asking everyone at the beginning, and that is: how would you describe yourself and the type of art history that you practice? So we're going to have each of you answer this question, if you don't mind, and Karen, would you begin for us?

KB: Sure! That's an interesting starting point. And I feel like I have to go way, way back. I feel like I've had a fairly traditional background in art history. I did my BA, my MA, and my PhD in art history. I started at the University of California, Riverside, actually, doing a BA and an MA there, and it was actually while I was doing my master's, and I was working with at the time, Amelia Jones, who's a really amazing feminist scholar, and she really opened my eyes, I think, to a number of things - on the one hand, the power of feminist art, but also photography, which would become my subfield and my specialization. But she also opened up my eyes at that particular moment to curatorial work, because she was working on this phenomenal exhibition at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles on Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* in feminist art history. And it was this foundational moment for me where I just thought, I want to be this person. I want that kind of cachet in the field, and I want to be able to work with objects and artists, and I want to do curatorial work, but I also want to be a serious scholar, and so it really was this moment that, I think, shifted things for me. I ended up doing my master's thesis with her as my advisor, and then ended up working at the LA County Museum [of Art] in their photography department as a curatorial fellow. I had done an internship previously in a photography museum, but my introduction to large museums and what they do and my love of objects really came from my work at LACMA. And it was there that I decided that I wanted to do curatorial work, and really understood that I was not going to be able to get the kind of curatorial job I wanted unless I got a PhD. So my path into the PhD was maybe a little bit different, because academia was never my end goal. It's been, in some ways, a circuitous journey. I was really much more interested at that moment in curatorial work, so I ended up going to the Graduate Center at the City University of

New York, where I worked with Geoffrey Batchen, who is a really amazing photography scholar. I had worked in a collection that was very much a 20th-century collection. He opened my eyes to the breadth of what photography could be, that it was not just a fine art medium, and I really fell in love with it. So, on the one hand, I feel like I'm very much a generalist, because the Graduate Center really is very good at training art historians to be generalists, to be teachers, to be professors. I was a little bit of an anomaly at the time, because I was interested in doing curatorial work. But in some ways, it all came together while I was there. I feel like my current position as a Gallery director and an art historian within the context of a community college has really come out of all of those things. So, that's a very long-winded way of saying that I think my approach to art history is on the one hand based in that idea of being a generalist, especially because I work at a community college, so I have to be. I am the only art historian, so I can't be anything other than that. But I'm also very much an objects-based art historian, and I feel very strongly about museums and about exposing our students as early and often as possible to museums. So, I would say that certainly my approach comes from that background.

RT: I love how you sketch that slightly winding path through the various fields that we consider part of art history. I just want to say, there have been plenty of times where I have wanted to be Amelia Jones, or at least write like Amelia Jones in my career! You must have had a great time working with her.

KB: It came off as being a bit of a fangirl there, but...

RT: I would have done exactly the same. Gretchen, how about, on your side?

GGG: Well, if you're interested in a winding path, do I [have one]!

RT: All right, I can't wait.

DH: We're ready.

GGG: As an undergrad, I was actually a studio art major, but I could have double majored in art history. I went to Carleton College, and I worked with some really great scholars there, including Alison Kettering, who was a fantastic professor.

RT: I just have to say that I'm such a fan of Alison, she's been instrumental in my thinking as well, so kudos to Alison.

GGG: I figured, given your field, you must be, because she's kind of tone-setting. But I went on and got an MFA in printmaking with a concentration in fibers, and from there I was able to get a

Fulbright to Sweden in design weaving. I was outside of the university system in Sweden, working directly with a weaver in Arild, in Skåne in southern Sweden. And from there, I enrolled at Lunds University in a discipline they call *konstvetenskap*, which is really “art science.” It’s their equivalent of art history, but I think they call it art science for political reasons. I worked with Jan Gunnar Sjölin and Torsten Weimarck (now deceased) there. I stopped short of a PhD there, ending up with a degree they call a Fil. Lic. which licenses you to teach art history at the university level. The reason I stopped is my department was in danger of being defunded, and I had a kid. My husband and I moved back to the United States, where I looked into places in Minnesota where I could continue my studies, and I looked at the art history department at the University of Minnesota, and concluded that for the things that I was studying at the time, it was probably not the most appropriate place, because they had not yet hired Jane Blocker, unfortunately. And at the time, I was really interested in African American art, you know, studying African American art in Sweden. Why? Well, because I was fascinated by it. I was looking particularly at Glenn Ligon and David Hammonds, and Adrian Piper. So, one of the esteemed members of the University of Minnesota Art History Department suggested that perhaps for my varied interests what I should look at was the Cultural Studies department. My PhD is actually in Comparative Studies in Discourse and Society, where I worked with the dearly departed Jochen Schulte-Sasse. I wrote my dissertation on design for living in Sweden and Germany in the early 20th century, so I took a hard turn away from African-American art into design history, no regrets, and now I work as a professor of Liberal Arts at Minneapolis College of Art and Design. And, for example, in the fall I will be teaching African-American art and Bauhaus design. So, I feel like I’ve found my place where it all comes full circle. And I just finished a translation of Ellen Key’s 1899 text *Skönhet för alla* [*Beauty for all*], which was never really properly translated in full into English during all of these years, because Mamah Borthwick was supposed to do it and she was tragically murdered, and I guess nobody took up all of these threads [save one chapter translated in a book edited by Barbara Miller Lane called *Modern Swedish Design: Three Founding Texts*]. Aino Press here in Minneapolis will be publishing this new translation, so I’m edging my way back into Swedish design as well. I feel really lucky to teach at an art school, where I can teach arts students like myself, none of whom come to the school to study art history particularly but all of whom are required to study art history before they graduate. The liberal arts department serves the entire student body. There’s nobody that can escape art history, and that’s just the way we like it.

DH: It’s so interesting to hear people’s different paths and their approaches. I want to get back into both the museum studies side with you, Karen, and the liberal arts side with you, Gretchen. But now I wanted to move onto our next question, which is: we named this interview series Art History on Fire because the title can be taken two ways. It speaks to the exciting things going on in the field—like what you all just discussed—but also the challenges we face. I know that you both are aware of the challenges, because I think those headwinds are what motivated your joint

project exploring the value of art history. I got to hear you present on that [project] at CAA. Would you tell us a bit about that project, how it came to be, what it entails, and what you've learned so far?

GGG: Yeah, do you want to start, Karen, or should I...

KB: Yeah, you go ahead.

GGG: Originally, the project was actually cooked up by our friend and colleague, Dr. Kris Belden-Adams, who pitched it as a panel. It was not taken up as a panel, but a very similar panel was taken, and so we applied to present this paper within that new panel. And Kris, fortunately or unfortunately, got another paper accepted, and so you can't do two, and so I was able to invite Karen to tag team with me on this endeavor, and we decided that many voices are better than two. It's such a wide and varying discipline, and I always have a little bit of a hard time saying that I'm an art historian, because that's not what my PhD is in. So I felt like I needed the weight of somebody who does have a PhD in the discipline, and so Karen and I got together and conceived of our set of pretty straightforward questions. I think we had... was it 17?

KB: Fairly modest.

GGG: Probably modest but really rich answers [to the survey] from the people that chose to engage with it. We made our PowerPoint and presented it at CAA. Karen - anything more to add?

KB: No, I think we both felt, in part because the panel that we were presenting on was called "The Value of Art History," that we really wanted to start addressing some of these core questions that I think we all are having to address, both as art historians ourselves, but also as people who are having to deal with different constituencies (whether it's our students, or parents, or administrators), and trying to understand how to position our discipline as something that has value, and how we can also think about it as a discipline that has a future that is relevant beyond just what sometimes feels like an insular group of art historians. But what we do is really impactful for students outside of art history, and outside of art, because certainly I also teach within the context of a visual arts department, so I am also trying to understand what we as art historians and as a discipline have to offer. I think that was part of our initial title - thinking about expanding visual literacy and what that means, and what visual acuity skills are really important for everyone in our society, especially given this moment of AI and deepfakes and all of those kinds of issues that it's become more important than ever to try to expose as many people as possible. So this was a really great way of being able to survey (at least on a relatively small scale at the beginning here) what some of our colleagues were experiencing and how we might start extrapolating from some of that data.

RT: Could you tell me a bit about what your conclusions were? What was the takeaway from these 17 responses? Did you find consensus around what the values of art history were? Because it seems to me that there's two issues, right? What is it that we all agree is the value, and then how is that understood by our audiences, those groups that you just laid out, Karen. Students, parents, administrators, fellow academics... I'm curious about both sides of that equation.

GGG: Everybody agreed that one of the values of art history is fostering critical thinking and visual acuity and being able to ascertain certain things through the visual sense. Obviously, right? And being able to employ analytical skills to talk about them in ways that open them up. Those are highly transferable skills. It's not just in art history that those skills come to bear, and so art historical training, yes, can lead one to become an art historian, but it can lead to so many other directions as well. I think Karen and I would both agree that the time to decide your career is after your undergraduate education rather than before.

KB: I do think that one of the other things that came up as we were reading responses to our survey was how many people really spoke to the interdisciplinary nature of art history, and that we are, by nature, interdisciplinary, and that we really need to continue to push that as maybe the way forward. That we are not just this – despite what I just said about being insular! – that we are, in fact, very relevant to a number of different fields, and that we do, as Gretchen said, teach very transferable skills that our students are taking into medical school, or law school, or any number of other areas. Certainly we always talk about museums and cultural institutions, but I think art history has value far beyond those areas. And some of our responses really started to dig into some of that, which was really great to hear.

RT: I'm relieved, in some ways, to hear that there was consensus, particularly around these core things that I think we all know that we do. For me, the challenge then is: okay, if we agree that what we do has value, and we agree what it is that we do, why is it that we're having so much trouble with our audiences [that] don't necessarily value what we're doing. Go ahead, Deborah.

DH: I was going to say, maybe that's connecting with what Karen said about insular versus interdisciplinary: that we are interdisciplinary, but maybe we're insular in that we're not very good about communicating outside of our discipline what it is we do, and the value of that?

KB: I would say that's probably accurate. I think, for better or worse, many people still think of art history in a very narrow sense, right? That what we do is we look at art of the past, we're not really thinking about our current moment and what it means. I think they're not necessarily thinking about the broader implications of what art history actually is. Over the last year or two, because I've been at a community college [I'm] really having to rethink the way that I'm teaching in some

ways, or at least, interacting with my own field and with the college as a whole, because I am the only art historian. I'm thinking in terms of my own, or maybe my degree program's future, that I need to be more nimble in my approach to how the discipline is being taught. I just did a whole workshop with an anthropologist colleague of mine, [and] someone who works in archives, somebody from our library. We did this great project on zines that was really around archives and archive building, and thinking about how all of our disciplines ask very similar questions. But we're so siloed that we don't really think about the things that we share. We just think about the things that separate us. And I think we maybe need to do a better job about how we speak to those similarities. One of the things that I've been thinking a lot about in the context of my own program is trying to expand on our museum studies program and make it something that's more interdisciplinary, that is going to bring in these other voices, from anthropology, from history, from architecture and design, as a way to try to start expanding some of those conversations.

RT: And you're leading beautifully into my next question: I want to lean into the different kinds of institutions that you all are in, and how you're seeing art history grow and develop in those two institutions. But just to wrap up about what you all did in that talk, if you feel like there's any other takeaway we should know about.

GGG: There was a lot of energy in the room for that talk. People were excited to be talking about this together, and I think your project "Art History on Fire" is very closely linked to the concerns that we were treating in that room, and I think there's a lot of hunger for keeping this conversation going. So, that's what I felt my takeaway was. I would be interested, and Karen and I have talked about reopening that questionnaire, and seeing if we can get more participation, and collating all of our results and writing an article, much as you are doing with this project.

DH: But I think I've heard both in conversations I've had, and looking at some recent conversations on listservs, that people are perhaps a little bit frustrated that there's not more of a conversation that's being led by CAA or some other sort of professional organization about what's going on with our field. So I think without that happening, things like your project or our project are really, I think, crucial at this moment, so I hope you do.

GGG: Yeah, that's the plan.

KB: I think especially in this moment when discussion of the Big Beautiful Bill, and what that's going to mean for all – I don't even think it's just art history, I think anyone in the humanities has got to be just scared to death about what this means for our future. That we have to actually be able to demonstrate that our students are going to be able to have a living wage at the end of their degree is really a frightening prospect. Especially in a community college where my students are getting an AA! so it's really concerning that we're in this moment where we really have to be

thinking about not just the process of learning, which should be really what's motivating us and our students, but in fact, where they end up, and whether or not they're able to get that job. Being at a community college, I think that's really something that is at the forefront of the conversations right now.

RT: Sure. I think we're all struggling with that "operationalizing of learning" that you're describing. Obviously, your students can do many things after they've been with you for the degree. They just aren't necessarily going to slot into some kind of job pathway that has a set salary or something like that. And that's true, as you say, across humanities. So, yeah, there's some challenges for us to articulate that value and get it received. So that's super interesting, and keeps me up at night.

GKG: I also feel like it's not my job to be a corporate trainer. That's not what I was trained to become. I resent the fact that this is being asked of us, that we are being asked to suit our graduates for jobs immediately upon graduation, because it's more expedient for corporations to get readily trained recruits, but there's no way that we can do this, because their needs change all of the time. I mean, I don't know about the rest of you, but I learned Quark Express. And so, that's a completely obsolete software. The software programs that my students are now learning are going to be obsolete by the time they've graduated. There will always be a need for jobs to train their own workers ... that's not really what we do for undergraduate students. We train our students to be able to roll with the punches and the changes, and to educate themselves, and to nurture their curiosity, and to be well-rounded citizens, too. And I think art history is a crucial part of that, because if art is one of the pinnacles of what we do as humans, especially in the face of looking at AI programs trying to replace that, I think the humanities are really poised to make a comeback. Because they're necessary, right?

RT: All right, let's dig in a little bit into the types of institutions you all are in, and I think we might be able to parse out some of these possibilities. You both come from different types of institutions, and art history is located differently in the two places where you work. Karen, you're at Anne Arundel Community College, which offers, as you said, the AA, the Associate of Arts degree in Art History and Museum Studies. I'm super interested in that. Can you talk a bit about that program and the role that Museum Studies plays in an art history program?

KB: Sure. I should probably preface this, however, with saying that I am in my second year in my current position, and so I am still very much getting my bearings in this institution. I came from a four-year institution. I was teaching at the University of Mississippi before I came to the community college. I was really excited by the fact that we had a two-year program, a degree program in art history and museum studies, because it seemed to speak so well to my own background, as someone who has a foot in both of those worlds, right? The curatorial world of museums, but also art history.

DH: So the degree already existed before you got the job. The major was already in place.

KB: Yes, it was already in place, and I should say that my position is also split. So, I am both the art historian, the only art historian at AACC (that's our acronym). So I'm the only art historian, I run the art history and museum studies degree program, but I also run the art gallery on campus. So, my position is very insane. This might be the only word that I can use that really adequately encompasses my current position. But it was also what attracted me to the job, because, again, I do have a foot in both of these areas, so I was excited about the idea that I could potentially use the gallery as kind of an incubator, like a laboratory space, where I could help students who were interested in museum studies to be able to understand and professionalize what otherwise they might not have access to until they got to the four-year institution. Because typically museum studies programs are taught in the context of four-year programs. But, what I realized on taking this position (because, as I said, I'm still relatively new), was that the museum studies part of the program had been languishing. There hadn't been anyone in this position for any extended period of time, for maybe more than 5 years? Our museum studies courses had not really been taught for many years, it seems, so I'm now in a position which is both exciting and also a little daunting because I am having to essentially revamp my entire curriculum. Because, for example, our survey classes are not globalized. I felt very strongly when I came in that I needed to globalize the survey courses. I just don't feel right teaching a survey class from the Western perspective.

RT: We agree, 100% agree, so well done, you!

KB: That was one of the things that I did just this last year. I'm slowly trying to rework the curriculum in a way that is going to make sense. I did just teach the Intro to Historic Preservation [class], which is one of our only real museum studies classes, which was really exciting because Anne Arundel County is between Annapolis and Baltimore. We have very close proximity to great museums in Baltimore and amazing museums in DC, so it's really exciting to be able to expose students to that. For me, that was really exciting. The curriculum is something that's evolving, I would say, and the museum studies part of our program is something that I'm trying to rethink. Because I want it to be something that, for example, I don't currently have a practicum class or an internship class, that would allow my students to go and get the kind of practical experience that they would need, or that I would like them to have as they're heading into a four-year university. My goal is to give them a leg up as they're heading into whatever the next step is. Because I feel like that's such an unusual thing at the community college level to really be able to give students that kind of experience. And if I can help them at least get some experience in the gallery which I run, so that's fairly easy for me to do. I've had some really amazing students over the last year who've helped me with the gallery and have helped me create databases and archives. They help me with all aspects of the gallery. That's been a really rewarding experience,

but it's still something that is very much in process. I think from the community college standpoint, I know the college feels very strongly about the museum studies part of our program, because for them it's a way to instrumentalize what we do as art historians. For them it's really attractive. And I've noticed that that's in some ways how [our] administration is positioning art history as a viable career option for students: "look, we also have this museum studies component that is going to allow you to get this experience, and it's going to give you something to work towards." In fact, I have a couple of students who ended up with gallery jobs this year, so it's actually working. As an art historian, I do worry a little bit that my program is being pushed in a direction that is away from the art history that I went into initially. Which is not to say that I think museum studies has to be separate from it. But museum studies, I think, needs to be very interdisciplinary, especially in order to be able to blossom within the context of the kind of institution that I'm in. So I have mixed feelings about that. I'm not sure if I'm articulating.

RT: The tension that you're describing reminds me of the discourse around art studio and art ed 15 years ago. They were operationalizing having a studio degree by also adding art ed in there - you could teach! You're not just going to be a starving artist in an attic somewhere, but you could be some sort of functional member of society. I think it's super interesting, because of course, museum studies as its own field has really been focused on the grad level. It's not something that we've seen that much till fairly recently in the undergrad level, let alone at the community college level. I don't think I know any other community college program that does museum studies the way you all do, which is so super fascinating to me. You're doing it, and you're in the process of figuring out what it is.

KB: Right, right. I think for me, that's really exciting, because it gives us another way of reaching students and getting them excited about art history and what we do. I think because we are so close to major museums I've been able to make some good relationships with museums and curators over the last couple of years, so that's helped a lot, and we've got so many historic houses, and so there's a lot here that really lends itself to that kind of program. I think it's going to continue to grow.

RT: And just to be logistical and then I want to hear from you, Gretchen, about what you're doing over at MCAD. How many students do you have each year that you're sending through your major program?

KB: Well... It's not as many as I would like.

RT: Join the club, right?.

KB: We're lucky if we have 4 or 5.

RT: That's great. Are you feeling pressure from your administration around your numbers? Obviously, everybody's feeling enrollment issues.

KB: Yes, absolutely. We went through something called Academic Program Review right as I started, actually two years ago, and they were looking very closely at graduation rates. People who didn't hit certain numbers were in danger of having their programs cut. I learned right off the bat that my program was on the margins - you know, we were very close. I think they gave me a bit of a reprieve, because I was just getting started, and I hadn't had a chance to do anything, let alone try to turn those numbers around. So, it's a constant, it's an ongoing concern. Of course, my colleagues – because I'm in a visual arts department - they will tell me, “oh, well, you don't have to worry about your job, because our studio arts folks are always going to need art history.” Yes, that's true, and I'm always happy about that. But I'm also really excited about being able to teach people within the context of an art history program and museum studies, because for me, that's how I became an art historian, was that first class I took at a community college. So if I can do that for another student ... I feel like I lose that a little bit, if I lose the program.

RT: One of our other interviewees pointed out that actually our students, the students that we were and that we attract, are actually not often coming out of a studio program. That they often come out of history, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, etc, that's where our people are. So there is a kind of tension, I think, structurally, in the way art history is always presented as an ancillary to a studio. But Gretchen might change my mind about that completely.

GGG: Well, I have to preface this by saying my introduction to art history came from Normandale Community College, where I did PSEO [post-secondary enrollment option] classes as a high school student, and I mean, that got me interested in taking further courses at the University of Minnesota, and then at Carleton College. I think the community college art history training is absolutely vital. It opens possibilities. I work in a service department, you know? The Liberal Arts department at Minneapolis College of Art and Design, until this coming fall, did not have a major. And the first major that we have is creative writing, actually. So that's what we're leaning into. We have an art history minor, and, because I've been fighting for it for the last 10 years, we now also have a curatorial studies minor and I've been teaching those courses. I've been outlining a lot of the coursework and doing a lot of the teaching that feeds that minor. And it's been great! Both our art history minor and our Curatorial studies minor are healthy and growing in numbers. Our students are at least interested in that knowledge, while they are majoring in, you know, fine arts, illustration, product design, graphic design, photography, film, animation, or comic arts. We have all of these wonderful hands-on making majors. But yeah, art history becomes an ancillary discipline, and most of my students, I would say, are not terribly familiar with historical art. I have students who are taking my curatorial classes because it's a Tuesday, and they have that spot in

their schedule, but they have not actually ever entered a museum. They came to MCAD perhaps to study animation, because what they like is animated films, and so I have to start at the very beginning. Like: this is what a museum is, this is what a gallery is, this is what an art exhibition catalog is. I can't assume that they have any familiarity with any of these kinds of standards of what we do as art historians or curators, and it's been fascinating. Because the ones that are motivated learn it very, very quickly. One of the reasons why I really wanted us to have a curatorial minor was to get our students excited about showcasing each other and get excited about learning about each other's arts, and working on the grassroots level. We're lucky in Minnesota that we have a lot of arts funding per capita for practicing artists. So, getting our students excited about creating projects where they can work together and show their work and create an audience that then feeds this curiosity further is really what it's been all about for me.

DH: Now, Gretchen, are you the only art historian in the liberal arts faculty?

GGG: Absolutely not. Actually, we have a wealth of art historians. Two of our full-time faculty are art historians. We've got Jessica Dandona and Anna Chisholm, who are art history proper. I "play an art historian on TV" when I have to. But I teach a lot of art history classes, because I like to, and because I can, and because it's necessary. We are, unfortunately, like so many, about an 80% adjunct dependent institution, and we have a large number of adjuncts that are proper art historians as well.

RT: You mentioned the curriculum has students taking art history as part of their program, regardless of their track.

GGG: Yep.

RT: So what does that look like?

GGG: Well, I believe everyone has to take the first half of the Art History Survey class, which covers roughly from caves to the invention of photography. And then the Creative Entrepreneurship students— It's a very small major at our college, and they get a BS degree, rather than a BFA—do not have to take the second half of the art history survey, which is photography to the present. Every student that is getting a BFA has a number of art history electives that they have to take, and there are distributions within that slate of electives.

RT: Interesting. So it's, as you say, a service role, but also plays an important enrichment, and expansion.

GGG: It's an integral part of every major at the college.

RT: I can imagine - I work at a small liberal arts college - but if every single student had to take the intro survey, wow, I could do a lot with that!

GGG: Yes.

RT: There's a separate question about getting students into art history to begin with.that is more in your zone, Karen, of: how do you track students? How do you keep them? How do you grow them? How do you launch them? Those are slightly different in an art school setting.

GGG: Yeah, they are. They are. And one would assume that anybody who is entering an art or design field would want to know about the history of the field they're entering, and one would be a little bit wrong in that assumption, perhaps. It's not everybody that's super motivated to learn this, but I would say we do a good job in making sure that we foster all of their individual needs and curiosities over the course of the semester. Even if they took the class because it happens to fit their schedule, we find a way to engage them.

DH: That's one of the things that's really come to the fore in these conversations, is how important good art history teaching is. Because if you are working within a studio department, as many of us are, [its] service. Some of the students come in maybe less motivated or nervous because it's an academic class, and that's not where they see their skill set in. Or they're coming from other majors, they don't have experience with art history, and we have this pressure to get numbers up, and that good art history teaching really makes a difference in those things, but, as we move to, less and less full-time positions, adjuncts just don't have the time. They can't afford to give the time that's required of good teaching, and so it feels a little bit like we're in a bind there.

GGG: We are. But I would say at MCAD, our adjuncts are all fantastically dedicated instructors.

DH: That's wonderful.

GGG: They are worthy art historians, even if they don't have the full-time recognition that they've earned.

RT: It's just such a trap for so many folks who are in it.

DH: I don't want to disparage them, it's not about their skills, it's literally about what they're getting paid per hour.

GGG: Right, and unfortunately, every adjunct is exploited, because their skills are invaluable, right?

DH: Yeah.

RT: Okay, so I'm going to move on to our final question, which is, of course, the zinger. What do you think the future of art history is? More specifically than that, do you think there are actions we could take? You know, if you were Director of the universe, are there things that you would put into place for art history that would give us the best outcome, or something like that? I will let you two decide who wants to take this fun question first.

GGG: Take it away, Karen.

KB: Okay, well, I think I started to say earlier that I love art history. I do. I mean, I did it from the time that I first started college, and I followed it all the way through, so it's never been in doubt for me, the value of art history, and that it would continue on into the future. And as long as we continue to make art and make cultural objects, I don't think the discipline will ever really go away. But I do think that we need to probably diversify and start maybe thinking about how to be - we've always been- interdisciplinary, but how can we really embrace that in a way that is going to open up the field to people outside the strict confines of art history? And I think we're seeing that with visual studies (which is not new), and material studies. One of the colleges that is one of our transfer partners essentially got rid of their art history program and started a visual and material studies program. There was this part of me as an art historian that was just like, "ugh." I mean, [it's] just sad to see art history as an academic discipline of the sort that I went through in my own training going by the wayside in lieu of this other kind of approach. But on the other hand, I'm also very much an objects person, so I understand that there's value in shifting to an approach that would perhaps arm students for the future, for whatever their future role might be. And I think that is something that's going to be really important moving forward. I don't know. I want to be optimistic. I don't want to think that we're a dying breed, because I don't think we are. But I do think that, as you mentioned earlier, it's about communicating what we do in a way that is going to be more effective for people who might not be drawn to the discipline. Because you hear these stories over and over and over again about students who took that first art history class, and it opened up a whole new world for them. And I was one of them, so I understand what that kind of inspiration looks like. I think part of what we're dealing with is that communication problem. How can we communicate that in a better way? I think we just need to be - I don't want to say better, because better is not a good word - but more vocal advocates for our own value in our own discipline. I think what you're doing here, and certainly what we tried to do in our CAA presentation, is maybe one small step in that direction.

RT: I hope you're right, and I don't want to be the “downer” here. But for the students who we all were, who found [art history] and loved it, and dedicated their careers to - it's hard to do if there isn't an art history program.

KB: That is true.

DH: I will say, Karen, I'm really rooting for you, because my fear is that art history is going to survive at places that are elite schools, where people come from a certain economic background, where they've been introduced to art history early on. I worry, what about these students who that just wasn't their background, and they're going to school, how are they going to be introduced to art history? Because to keep the field vibrant, we need people from all sorts of backgrounds who become art historians.

RT: Right, that animation student, who just loves animated movies.

DH: Or the first-gen student who never occurred to them in a million years, who had never been into a museum until they stepped into the class. And that's my fear. I think it will survive, but it's who will it survive for?

GGG: I think the steps that museums and galleries are taking to break down the elitism that has unfortunately been prevalent until very recently. I think this is a way to create public spaces where art historical work can be vivid and on display and fascinating, and it can open doors if we maintain the lines of communication between public education and museums, to the degree that that's possible, and create public programming that interests wide swaths of the population - you know, summer camps for kids, all of that kind of community outreach work we do is actually really, really vital to keep the discipline going and to encourage young minds to invest in it.

DH: A public art history. That's what we [need].

GGG: That's definitely got to be a component of it.

KB: I live in Baltimore, and we this last year had the Amy Sherald exhibition, and that, I think, was the largest attended exhibition in BMA [Baltimore Museum of Art] history. Because I think it spoke to this population that felt underrepresented, underappreciated, undervalued within the context of Baltimore. So I think Gretchen is onto something there, too.

GGG: We had a similar experience here with the Dyani Whitehawk show at the Walker, which, you know, was not only a phenomenal show, visually, but it really brought in people who had not been previously motivated to visit the Walker for very strong reasons.

DH: This makes me think about both of you, Gretchen, the curatorial studies minor that you put together, and Karen, the museum studies part of your major. Those look good for creating pathways to jobs, but they're also the public side of art history. Maybe we do need to lean into those things as a way to get that public art history out there, in conjunction with diversifying the kind of art that we teach about, so it's more inclusive to a broader audience.

KB: Absolutely, and I would say, too, that up until recently, I was a contributing editor for Smarthistory, so was also feeling really passionate about trying to get art history out to as many people as possible, and making it as inclusive as possible. Certainly Gretchen has written a number of things, along with our friends.

GGG: Thank you for those opportunities!

KB: A friend of mine, Dr. Belden Adams and I were both contributing editors for photography, and we took on that role because we felt like we really wanted to try to expand that history, and make it more accessible, but also make it more diverse, and that it's really speaking to the world that we live in right now and not just the textbooks of the past, so I think all of these things together really make a big difference.

GGG: Not that the past isn't important.

KB: Oh, no, absolutely.

GGG: I mean, the past is super important, and we have lots of lessons to learn, not just about art, but about how people lived their lives by looking at what they created, right? Getting students excited about that part of it, too, is vital.

RT: Kudos to you, I think Smarthistory's been a really important force in some of this work. And that success there has been transformational in many ways. So I appreciate your positive feedback on the future of the discipline, that we have a future.

GGG: Yes, of course we do!

RT: And your two programs really are, to Deborah's point, preparing students to live on that, in that space of bringing art history out into the world and making it the kind of force we want it to be. So maybe it's our students who will make the case for us that this is why it matters?

GGG: I hope so. That's really what we want them to do, is carry this forward, because they're the only ones that can, right?

RT: Yeah, okay, I like that, art history as a force in the world. Well, y'all, thank you so much for giving us so much of your time, and for sharing your insights and thoughts, and all the work you've been doing. It's really been a pleasure chatting with you.

KB: Thank you for including us. This has been a treat to talk a little bit about what we do.

GGG: Absolutely, yeah, I really appreciate being included. So, thank you so much.

DH: Thank you both, and best of luck to both of you.