

IN THE FOREGROUND:
CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING
A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

“MOVING ACROSS THE THRESHOLD”:
ALISA LAGAMMA ON CURATING
THE ARTS OF AFRICA

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Transcript

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Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host and Director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In this series of conversations, I talk with art historians and artists, about what it means to write history and make art and the ways in which making informs how we create not only our world, but also ourselves.

In this episode, I speak with Alisa LaGamma, a specialist of African art and curator in charge of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Alisa discusses the formative influence of her childhood in Africa and Italy, her abiding interest in Renaissance art, and she reflects on several of her exhibition projects that have sought to anchor African art historically and conceptually.

Alisa LaGamma

Matisse and Picasso, in their brilliance, absorbed the formal qualities of works of African art, but they were not at all intellectually curious about the original significance of those works. And that really is the history of modernist engagement with this material, that it was really void of content, except for the associations that the West framed it with.

Caro Fowler

So usually, these interviews are kind of an intellectual history and biography and background for people, and so one part of your biography that's often published or cited is that you were born in the Congo. And so I would just be curious to know, did you grow up in Africa? When did you first come to the US? Were African arts part of your life growing up kind of how? How was art history introduced you as a discipline?

Alisa LaGamma

Mhm. Yeah. So I was born in Lubumbashi, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as the child of a US foreign service officer. And I spent all of my formative

years living in different African countries, except for the ages between 6 and 12, when my family was in Italy for six years. And art was very much present in our life, in many different contexts across Sub-Saharan Africa, as it was obviously in Europe, where we lived in Florence. And that is a place where the history of art really was very vivid in my youthful imagination.

Caro Fowler

[Laughs].

Alisa LaGamma

I would say that in my formative experiences, when I was an infant, the cradle that my parents prepared for my arrival was actually carved by a Congolese Luba sculptor. They commissioned it from him. And it's quite a wonderful work of sculpture with creatures -

Caro Fowler

Wow.

Alisa LaGamma

- from the natural world assembling and intertwined and engaging -

Caro Fowler

That's wonderful, wow.

Alisa LaGamma

You know, African sculpture was really the first thing that I saw.

Alisa LaGamma

I mean, I don't think that I ever consciously made it my professional path until very late in my college years.

Caro Fowler

[Laughs].

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Alisa LaGamma

For example, one of the places that we lived was the Ivory Coast. And we were there from the time I was three to six. And during those years - Ivory Coast is a very culturally vibrant place - and at one point, Susan Vogel, who is a colleague who was actually the first curator of African art at the Metropolitan, came out as a graduate student to do her field work. And she was working on Baule sculpture, and she was staying with us when she was doing her research.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Alisa LaGamma

So when we were in the midst of places where I was exposed to the work of Baule potters and Senufo dyers, and the active presence of works of sculpture being performed in lots of different kinds of local contexts, and it just seemed like very much a part of the world that I grew up in. And then it was just a very fluid transition to be in an environment like Florence, where, similarly, culture was so rich and so valued. And so I've always - as an art historian, my personal connection to places that had such an important impact on me, and wanting to continue my connection to them was one of the major motivators for my going into African art.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Alisa LaGamma

But I always very much wanted to position my, my love of African art in a global context, and not to see it necessarily as something so separate than other great regional traditions. And so if for that reason - you know, when I was actually a

graduate student at Columbia, we were at that point in the late 80s, we were expected, if we were interested in African art, to only take courses in non-Western art history. We were expected to take the courses in pre-Columbian art, in Oceanic art, and Native American art.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Alisa LaGamma

And that really took me aback. I chose the program because it was renowned for the seriousness with which it trained people in the field of African art. But I entered the program fully expecting that one of my other majors would be Italian Renaissance art.

Caro Fowler

[Laughs].

Alisa LaGamma

It was puzzling to me. And eventually, I managed to have a minor in Quattrocento Italian painting.

Caro Fowler

Oh, really? [Both laugh].

Alisa LaGamma

It was, you know, it was very a confusing back and forth with the department at the time. And it's such a different program now. I think a very short period of time in the biggest scheme of things, the field has changed so significantly.

Caro Fowler

When you went to graduate school, did you know that you wanted to be a curator?

Alisa LaGamma

Not at all. I actually never was especially interested in being a curator. I really was very much drawn to the idea of teaching and working in a university and I pursued the PhD with that very much in mind. And I think that it was very much a complete accident. The fact that I wrote my dissertation as a Whitney fellow at the MET, and part of those fellowships is you're expected to contribute a certain percentage of your year to projects in the department. And I actually did my year at a time when there wasn't a curator. Kate Ezra, who had been the curator for many years, had recently moved to Chicago, and they had a couple of years of running a search. And for that reason, there wasn't anybody in the position the year that I was writing. I was asked to help with certain urgent tasks that would arise relating to the collection. It was a very productive year for me. I completed the dissertation, I was on the job market, I interviewed for a number of teaching jobs. And at the end of that process, I was ready to begin a position at an undergraduate university. And at that point, the search at the Met hadn't yielded a successful senior candidate, which had always been the goal. And so I was asked if I would reconsider my decision to take a teaching job, and instead become an entry level curator at the Met.

Caro Fowler

Wow.

Alisa LaGamma

And so, that created a great deal of unexpected personal turmoil [both laugh], because all of a sudden, out of left field, people who were close to me were saying, you just have to make the list of the pros and the cons -

Caro Fowler

[Laughs].

Alisa LaGamma

- and be very clinical about it. And, you know, I have to say that it was a bit of a wrenching experience, because many of my professors who I had so greatly

admired, they didn't necessarily encourage my choice, in the end, to work in a museum. They said, you know, it's a very big difference in terms of what you're going to be doing, and if you don't like it, it won't be so easy to reverse course. And I thought about it long and hard. And I think that, at that time, one of the things that I came to appreciate being in a museum environment was the opportunity to at once do deeply satisfying research of your own, but also to have a very meaningful collaborative partnership with other museum professionals, from graphic designers, to exhibition designers, to conservators. And being immersed in that sense of professional colleagues who could really produce something quite wonderful together as a team. For me, individually, I think that that's what in the end was especially compelling because teaching, in my experience of it as a teacher of art, humanities and things like that previously, is at once a burst of performative engagement, and then a lot of isolation. And I liked the conversations that were ongoing within and without and beyond the museum. No, it really became apparent to me at the time that I was a fellow at the Met, what some of the basic questions and assumptions members of the general public have about this part of the world that I care about so deeply, but it's so unfamiliar to so many. And one of the very powerful experiences that I had when I was in the first months at the Met as an assistant curator, was listening to a woman taking her child through the Rockefeller Wing and hearing her say, you know, this is the African art, this art has no artists. And that just hit me like a thunderbolt. And it meant that - one of the requirements that I was presented with on day one, was that I had to organize on my own a focus show in our Rockefeller Wing gallery. And I had never had anyone explain to me, how do you create an exhibition. I had been purely trained in an academic compartment. And so I was a bit overwhelmed with that assignment, and I didn't know what topic to pick. I was a bit floundering. And when I heard that parent say that, it just said to me, okay, so I know what I should do my first show on. I'll do it on the individual artist in Yoruba art. And that can be an opportunity to talk about the different role that an artist can have in society, and how are people remembered, and how do we identify individual hands in the Yoruba context. And so that was very much a project where I was pulling together the research that already was very rich in our field and trying to bring it to life for a general

audience. I've always, since that time, taken seriously the need to develop projects that are addressing topics in art history, but that also address basic questions that people who are visitors to museums might have about how does the material culture of this region relate, if at all, to other things that are celebrated in an institution like the Met.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. What are some of the basic questions that you see some of your other exhibitions answering, like Congo or the Sahel exhibition?

Alisa LaGamma

Another early show that I developed was looking at African art in relation to quest for knowledge. Developing that through what were quite iconic works in the African art corpus and explaining that at their source were these incredibly complex frameworks that were both intellectual and spiritual, was a topic that I developed. The idea of portraiture - you know, some of the great figurative traditions in African art and who are their subjects? There is this assumption that everything in African art is just the artist's pure imagination that was not really tied to historical figures. So that was something that I was really interested in developing. And that took the form of an exhibition called "Heroic Africans." You know, one of the things that has been particularly appealing to me, is to place the great works of African art in our collection in dialogue with parallel traditions of the institution. That is an idea that is becoming more and more embraced in other institutions and by our new director, Max Hollein, who really wants to push a museum like the Met to not think in terms of departmental frontiers, to be encouraging people to think in very expansive ways. We are now living in a moment when artists are interested and probing the content. Matisse and Picasso, in their brilliance, absorbed the formal qualities of works of African art. But they were not at all intellectually curious about the original significance of those works. And that really is the history of Modernist engagement with this material, that it was really void of content, except for the associations that the West framed it with. It really is quite rewarding to be in conversation with

contemporary practitioners who are curious and are seeing this material with fresh eyes, and that often have very deeply personal connections to it.

Caro Fowler

One other thing about your role at the Met is that you - so I guess you came in as assistant curator, and now you're head of department - how has your understanding of the institution changed as I imagine you've taken on more of an administrative role as well? And also, how does administration change your understanding of, not only museums, but also art history more broadly?

Alisa LaGamma

Well, I think that one of the conversations that many of us are having in museums at a time like this is both - well, first of all, it is important to recognize that to have a successfully functioning museum requires dynamic curators who are deeply knowledgeable, but to bring to life their ideas and their vision. You need a lot of other professionals who are caring for the works of art, who are probing them to answer different research questions on a technical basis, that are coming up with treatments for them, that are housing them properly. And that's an enormous investment that museums make in a deep bench of museum professionals who don't always get the kind of public recognition.

Caro Fowler

And here, are you thinking conservators and registrars and preparators?

Alisa LaGamma

Yeah, mhm, yea. Installers. These are quite large operations that are assembled by institutions. I'm always a big fan of my incredibly talented curatorial colleagues - who I have such enormous respect for and I adore - but I think that also my deep understanding and awareness of what other people bring to the work has only become much more part of my day to day life. This renovation that we're reimagining of the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, the curators have brilliant ideas. And, the most invaluable member of the team is actually the

conservator, who continually has a grasp of how many decisions are going to play out on a practical level.

Caro Fowler

Throughout your own history in curating African art, in many ways, it's been about bringing to a wider public central aspects that you see within African art that have been overlooked, or that have have been diminished, or have not been considered part of the narrative. And in the installation of the Rockefeller Wing - I mean obviously you're dealing with pre-Columbian, art of the Americas, Africa and Oceania - and so, all of those regions have their own misconceptions and perceptions within art history. What are kind of the overarching narratives that you're hoping to tell in the reinstallation?

Alisa LaGamma

Yeah. Well, I think that one of the first things that kicked off this initiative was my realization, as a curator working in the Rockefeller Wing, of the fact that no one had the marvelous opportunity to develop special exhibitions and really do a great deal of object specific research that also addressed big ideas. But that was not as easy, to then introduce that content when the exhibition was over, into the permanent galleries.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Alisa LaGamma

I think that a lot of people who work in museums, when they inherit brick and mortar arrangements of works of art, you realize how that really sets the tone for people's experience in a very powerful way. I also was very much aware of the unintentional assumptions that our galleries are beginning to contribute to people's thinking about non-Western art that I don't want to perpetuate. And one of the things that happened early on in my time at the Met, was that the Greek and Roman galleries were part of this wonderful project to infuse many resources into them, and the skylights above those galleries were opened, and it

gave a completely different feel to spaces that are directly adjacent to the Rockefeller Wing.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Alisa LaGamma

And all of a sudden, the modernist, beige, uniform look of the Rockefeller Wing looked like it was a cave, and it looked like it was intentionally dark.

Caro Fowler

[Laughs].

Alisa LaGamma

And I've even heard - you know, Fred Wilson has spoken on a program on public radio about his assumption that it is intentional that you go from the light into the dark. And no, that's actually the fact that we haven't updated the African galleries or the Rockefeller Wing. One of the things that always sticks in my mind about how people spoke about the Rockefeller Wing when it was a new addition to the Met, that first chapter of the arrival of so much of the history of art into the footprint of the Met was really about a museum within a museum. It wasn't really about necessarily relating this material, but it was just recognizing it. It really was exciting to have a conversation, to think about how we could radically re-envision the Wing that we share, but to make clear that it houses three different art histories. It fortuitously coincided with the fact that some very major infrastructure improvements needed to be undertaken. And as a department head, I was able to say, well, you know, it really isn't about just replacing the glass wall that abuts Central Park; it's about something bigger. It's about reintroducing these traditions, decoupling them, and making sure that the relationships between Africa and Greek and Roman are underscored as being as important as the ones between Africa and Oceania.

Caro Fowler

Well, that's really exciting. It's such a great project, Alisa. Thank you so much for speaking to me today.

Alisa LaGamma

Thank you for having me.

Caro Fowler

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground Conversations on Art & Writing*. For more information on this episode and links to the books, articles and artworks discussed, please consult clark.edu/rap/podcast. This program was produced by Caitlin Woolsey, Samantha Page, and myself, with music by lightchaser, editing by John Buteyn, and additional support provided by Jessie Sentivan and Alice Matthews.