

***IN THE FOREGROUND:
CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING***

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

**“TO SPEAK ACROSS TIME”: GABRIELE FINALDI ON
MUSEUMS**

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Transcript

Caro Fowler

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 of *In the Foreground*, I speak with art historian Gabriele Finaldi, who since 2015, has been the Director of the National Gallery in London. He discusses the influence of Baroque art on the medium of drawing, and his scholarship and thinking, and more broadly, he reflects on the evolving role of conservation and education in museums today.

Gabriele Finaldi

I think any collection has to respond to contemporary concerns, even if it's a collection which is fundamentally historical like ours is. I think museums need to become places of many voices.

Caro Fowler

Thank you so much for doing this. I really appreciate it. You must be so busy right now.

Gabriele Finaldi

It's a great pleasure.

Caro Fowler

And so I'd love to hear from you about your experience of doing the PhD at the Courtauld: if there were any seminars that were really important for you, how you came to do a PhD in art history, if that was an obvious career path to you, or how you came to it in the first place.

Gabriele Finaldi

Yeah, absolutely. So I'd been at the Courtauld as an undergraduate. And to be honest, I didn't really seriously consider going anywhere else. From a young age--probably from about 16--I knew that I wanted to do art history. And my father had an association with the Courtauld Institute as a teacher of Italian. He'd been teaching some students there, and he knew one of the professors called George Zarnecki, who was a very distinguished medievalist who lived down the road from him in North London. So I rang him up as a boy. And I said, "I'm considering doing art history. Do you have any recommendations to where I should go?" He said, "absolutely, no doubt at all, you should go to the Courtauld." So in the end, that's what I did. So I did both my undergraduate studies there--I did an MA too, and then went on to do a PhD, which I started in 1989, and finished in 1995. So the Courtauld is a very stimulating environment. It's a highly focused institution. It essentially does art history. It does history of dress as well, and some conservation. But fundamentally, it's art history. So you were in a very rarefied and focused environment with a very good library, very good photo libraries, good connections, and some very good teachers as well. My PhD director was somebody called Jennifer Fletcher, who specializes in Venetian painting--Bellini and Titian in particular--but she was teaching courses on 17th century Spanish painting. And my PhD ended up being on Ribera, the Spanish painter who worked in Naples. And she proved to be a very effective thesis director, and was very sympathetic and very understanding, although it's certainly not her area of socialization.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. How did you come to Ribera as a dissertation topic?

Gabriele Finaldi

So interestingly, my first love was the Florentine Renaissance, and I had initially intended to work on Andrea del Castagno as my PhD subject. Things turned out in a rather odd way. I got married in my third year at university, and it slightly diverted my plans. Little by little, I started focusing on 17th century painting. It also seemed to me that Florence was pretty crowded as a research arena, and it was going to be pretty tough working in the Florentine area. And it was probably

just as well to look to an area where there's just much more space, and many more opportunities. My background is Neopolitan actually. So I had an interest in Neopolitan art, and I thought that Naples was always a very--from a cultural point of view--interesting city. It was the classic melting pot city right from its origins--right from the title of Magna Graecia--and it continued to be that right into the 17th century and beyond. And it seemed to me that with Ribera, who is a Spaniard originally from Valencia, who spent some time in Rome as he becomes a sort of Caravaggesque artist, and then goes to Naples, to become a TK of a very distinctive, local school. It just seemed to me there were so many interesting things happening then that it was worth focusing on him too. The literature on Ribera was quite thin in the 1980s. It's grown hugely since then. Some good work had been done by the Italians, by the Spaniards, and in particular by Jonathan Brown in the States. So I felt there was the opportunity to do more there. And very fortunately, 1991 was the artist's centenary of his birth (he was born in 1591). Big shows were planned both in Naples and in Madrid, and eventually in New York as well. So I thought there was an opportunity to contribute to those exhibition efforts, which involved bringing the research up to date, [and] publishing a very powerful catalog. So it seemed the right time. Everything sort of came together very nicely.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. Your work on Ribera's drawings is really exemplary, and I would love to know, first of all, how does one gain that kind of training to know how to look at drawings? I think this is a huge debate right now at the Getty Paper Project and other things, and concerns around the loss of connoisseurship. And so I'd love to hear your own experience in gaining that training and confidence to attribute a drawing. But not only that--the catalogue is so much more than putting together--that is so much to put together his oeuvre and drawings, but the learnedness within the entries, and the contextualization, both within the theoretical and literary discourses at the time, is really extraordinary. How did you come to the drawings? How did you train in working in drawings?

Gabriele Finaldi

That's a good question. My daughter has just finished her third year at the Courtauld. She submitted her last exam today, which she'd been doing remotely. I think there's quite different emphasis now, compared to what there was in the 1980s and early 90s. I think connoisseurship was still quite an important part of the Courtauld training. I think it's much less so now. And probably the discipline has grown very significantly, and connoisseurship is just one part of a very broad historical discipline. So I was very fortunate in some ways, because I was working with some lecturers at the time who were very interested in the process of creation of a work of art, and took us to see drawings at Windsor, [and] at the British Museum. So we did a Palladio course, and spent quite a bit of time looking at Palladio drawings in the RIBA [Royal Institute of British Architects] in London, and then we looked at drawings at Windsor too. And you just acquire both, on the one hand a familiarity, and on the other a sort of enthusiasm for these flimsy bits of paper, which carry on them the marks of centuries ago, which are the place where some very interesting sort of flames were ignited--I don't mean that literally of course [both laugh]. But where ideas were tried out, and where the origin of a composition of a very successful picture maybe--the place where you can get to grips with almost the internal dynamic of an artist's mind. So all of that was very fascinating. And I went to see drawing shows, and went to print rooms across the world, and had a lot of help from drawing specialists in those places. A very good friend of mine was and is Aidan Weston-Lewis, who's a curator in Scotland, and who had been working very intensively on the Carracci. And of course the Carracci is a real focus for the study and understanding of drawing, and the role of drawing in the process of formation of an artist, but also in the process of creation of a finished work of art. So drawing becomes a place to teach, a place to learn, a place to experiment, a place to try out, a place to develop something that you thought of before, and move on to something new. So the Carracci was a good learning space in a way to work on drawings.

Caro Fowler

What do you think is particular about Ribera's contribution to a history of draftsmanship? I mean, so many of the great draftsmen have a very particular

way in which they thought about the medium. What do you think is particular to him?

Gabriele Finaldi

So Ribera's drawing oeuvre--although only about 160 drawings by him have been identified so far. That's the number that I included in the catalogue raisonne that I published. I didn't do on my own by the way, I had some very good helpers (Ed Payne and Elena Cenalmor who worked with me), but it's about 160 drawings, which is not huge for 17th century artists. For centuries, even in the Netherlands, or even in Spain, and in Italy, there's quite a few artists who've got a bigger oeuvre. But Ribeira is quite wide-ranging in subject matter. It's also quite wide-ranging in the techniques used. So clearly, even in this what must be only a representative selection observed, there must have been many 1000s of drawings at one point. Here's an artist who's adventurous. He's thoughtful. He's experimental. Sometimes his subject matter is on the edge of dangerous in the kinds of subjects he treats. He's often treating pretty violent subjects. There's elements of sexual violence in his drawings as well. And then there are some very beautifully and highly refined red chalk drawings, finished figure studies, drapery studies, and so on. So it's very varied. And while the links with his painted oeuvre, which is much--in some ways--easier to get to grips with, because his style is pretty recognizable throughout his career--except for the early period, which has been the subject of a lot of work recently--the connection between drawings and paintings are always evident. If you think back to 20 years ago when we knew less about his drawings, and you'd show me that group of drawings and that group of paintings, it wouldn't have been readily evident that they go together. Very few of them are clearly preparatory drawings. That's the way you normally build up an artist's oeuvre. You look at preparatory drawings for paintings. Paintings are sometimes documented or signed, and so we can be confident that they are by that particular artist. You build up the drawing oeuvre by making a link between the drawings and the paintings. Well, that wasn't particularly the case. There were remarkably small number of preparatory drawings in Ribera's oeuvre. Again, I don't know if that's a significant fact in itself, because I think 160 is not quite enough to be able to

draw very big conclusions about his drawing practice. But interestingly also with Ribera, there are contemporary comments on his drawings. It's very interesting for example that commentators say that in Naples, generally speaking, artists didn't draw. They tended to move too rapidly to the canvas, without a due graphic preparation. These are things often the Florentines say, and the Florentines are of course, very keen on very thorough training and preparation in drawing when working towards a finished work of art. But Ribera, he darts between very highly finished usually red chalk, sometimes black chalk, and then these very sketchy scratchy things in pen and ink, often on a very small scale. It's quite surprising actually how modest some of his sheets are. I mean, they're fragmentary. They're not necessarily in great physical condition. And often they're on quite a small scale. His figure drawings were no more than that sort of size. But it was a fascinating world, and I think it throws light on--we're always interested in complex characters, aren't we? Whether we're studying literature or art, and I think his character becomes especially complex when you put in his drawings as well.

Caro Fowler

Yeah, that's interesting. So did you know you wanted to go the curatorial route when you did your PhD, or were you debating whether you wanted to go into teaching? Was there an exhibition you saw at some point in your life that was really formative for you for thinking about what museums can do as institutions?

Gabriele Finaldi

The first exhibition I remember was actually a drawings exhibition. It was 1975, I was 10 years old, and my father took me to the British Museum to see the Michelangelo TK drawings show. That clearly must have struck a chord with me, and I've still got the catalog that my father bought for me at that time. And clearly I was brought up to believe that the Italian artists were the greatest [both laugh] by an Italian father, and Michelangelo was the greatest of them all. But clearly, seeing that exhibition of drawings, it must have struck me that you were very close to a tremendous kind of creative force. And that's often the impression you get from being close to drawings. I remember in 1984--so moving

on a few years--there was a big show in Naples called TK Napoletano, which was a big sort of all-embracing show that covered ceramic, sculpture, silver work, drawings, paintings, prints, and so on--one of these big shows that the Neapolitans used to do, and I remember seeing there the big painting on copper, about four meters high, which was from the Cathedral of Naples from the Chapel of San Gennaro, which had been cleaned especially for the show. And it was a miracle of San Gennaro being saved from the fiery furnace. And the picture was so brilliant, and so powerful. You felt that you were sort of yourself being drawn out of the furnace. And then when I looked at the label, it turned out to be by this artist Ribera, whom I'd heard of but knew very little about, and it sort of stuck in my mind. So even before I'd been thinking of working on 15th century Florentine painting, Ribera had struck my brain.

Caro Fowler

[Laughs] Fair enough. And so working now in the National Gallery in London, which has such an obviously extraordinary collection across the board of the Western European canon--one of the great challenges in museums now is how to make these collections, which are primarily based within a Western European history that many people have argued has excluded many other voices. How do you as a museum director think about making that collection relevant for audiences today?

Gabriele Finaldi

That's a good question. Clearly, we inherit these collections, and then we play some role in forming them. But I'm director of a collection nearly 200 years old which is very established. I'm conscious that it's been established according to certain principles. Also, it's drawn on other collections to become what it is today. Fundamentally, our collection comes from British private collections--British aristocratic collections. So the kind of collecting that the National Gallery has done over its nearly 200 year history has been very influenced by the collections it's drawn on. So all of these things are very interesting, and need to be explained. Every collection has a particular character. But then I think it also presents certain challenges. So I think we need to look at what we've got, and

then come up with a narrative that helps put it into context, but also enables us to allow those works to speak across time. I think if we didn't think that the works would have that ability to speak across time, [then] personally, I don't think I'd be quite so interested in doing the job I do. So we do believe that there's a sense in which these works, while they were made in the 16th century for a particular context in France or in Spain--there is something about them, which has an appeal beyond time and space, and enables us to reinterpret them in the light of what we know and experience today. So particular concerns about time I think we can see expressed in some way in those pictures there, and particular problems that we confront, as a society or as a nation today--we can look back and find the way that those similar issues have been dealt with by artists in the past. And artists obviously speak to their own time and place, but I think if they're great artists--let's put it that way--then their work has an ability to reach across time.

Gabriele Finaldi

Yeah. And why do you think it seems that in many ways Baroque painting right now has a particular resonance for contemporary artists? What do you think it is about the 17th century and today that is having this conversation?

Gabriele Finaldi

That's a good point. I think you're right, there is a lot of interest in Baroque art amongst contemporary artists. I think there's something in contemporary artists now which is rather--there's a tendency towards the grand gesture, a certain kind of showiness, a certain virtuosity as well, which you can say has its roots in a Baroque aesthetic. The idea of the total work of art--the work of art that you kind of enter into--I suppose has its theoretical origin in the 17th century. And so those are all things that interests artists a lot. I also think that there's an elemental passion, and there's a deep sense of humanity, I think, in a lot of Baroque painting. Whereas when you look beyond Baroque painting to the Renaissance, sometimes there are different sorts of qualities on display. There are deeply spiritual qualities, or qualities which are to do with mathematical rationalism. It just seems to me that our time is more interested in a very direct

relationship with a work of art--something that has the ability to grab hold of you. It may have to do with the fact that we're surrounded by so much noise that we're looking for things that are striking, and my goodness, there's a certain portion of Baroque painting and Baroque art that is extremely striking. You can think of Rubens, think of Bernini, [and] think of the Cortona ceiling at Palazzo Barberini, but also think of those elaborate monasteries in Germany as well where you feel you're entering a sort of kingdom of its own.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. Is there an artist in your career as an art historian that you've struggled with to wrap your head around or appreciate? Or is there an artist for you that you think about in a way that's hard for you to embrace emotionally or intellectually?

Gabriele Finaldi

Yeah, I mean there are artists who you've grown to understand better. I ended up doing quite a lot of work on Murillo. Murillo was not an artist I had a huge amount of sympathy for, or interest in to begin with, but through circumstances, partly to do with curatorial responsibilities, and partly to do with the responsibilities I had in Madrid as director of collections, you're obliged to think and focus. And generally speaking in life, I think if you give things or people time and consideration, and give yourself time to understand them, they inevitably turn out to be much more interesting, [and] more complex than you expected. So that was certainly the case with Murillo for me. I've also spent quite a lot of time working on Velasquez, and Velasquez is that definition of a mystery that sometimes you hear, which is not something that you can't understand, but something you can never quite get to the bottom of. He's an artist who reveals new facets. Certainly Rembrandt is one of those--and actually I'd say Rubens too--very complex, very interesting artists, who has so many things to demonstrate over a long career as well. So there is a very significant kind of development over the course of a long career where other interests come to the fore. Things that he was very keen on at the beginning recede. People say to you, "who's your favorite artist?"

Caro Fowler

[Laughs]

Gabriele Finaldi

Well I've got lots of favorite artists. "Is there any artist at the National Gallery you don't like?" Well actually, there isn't. Because I think if you're prepared to give them time and sympathy, there's something to discover actually in every single one. And at the very least, you can have some sympathy with what they were trying to do.

Caro Fowler

Yeah, definitely. One thing that I appreciated on your website is that you cited exactly how many female artists you have in your collection, and the fact that they are predominantly absent within your collection. And as you've already addressed, there's a way in which--especially these collections that have been in the making over centuries--there are reasons for the ways in which these collections are formed that are historical, and yet, museums again are facing the fact that they have to now address these structural inequalities in their collections today. So beyond acquiring works by artists like Artemisia Gentileschi, which don't come on the market that often, how do you think about addressing these inequalities within a collection, which, as you said, has been in the making for a very long time?

Gabriele Finaldi

Well, the first thing I think--you've pointed it out--you have to do is say, this is the collection we've inherited, there are particular reasons why it has this particular character, and we have to understand that ourselves. And then I think we need to explain it as well. You don't stop there of course, because I think any collection has to respond to contemporary concerns, even if it's a collection which is fundamentally historical like ours is. So I think there are various ways of addressing this. I think museums need to become places of many voices. When I joined the gallery as a curator back in 1992, we had the impression, I think, that

the gallery was very much in the hands of the curators. But over those years--over the 1990s--it became apparent that the gallery didn't just belong to the curators. It belonged to a much broader sort of province. And it was appropriate that it should be taken possession of by other people--by other specialists. And there were lots of things that one could draw out the collection that went beyond the immediate remit of an art historical curator. So I think that idea of many voices was very important. Artists, of course, had a very significant voice already in the 1990s--that has grown. And I think one of the ways in which--maybe it's not quite to redress the balance, but I think it's important that women artists have their opportunity to contribute to the National Gallery story. So several of our associate artists, and most recently a major commission from Bridget Riley--it's important that happens too of course. I also think that we can work with our teaching program. We have a tremendous power to draw attention in the national collection. So when we acquired an Artemisia Gentileschi, in a sense, we were in a position to say, "look, we've acquired this work, here's an artist who is really interesting, this throws light on the fact that there are a significant number of really important women artists in history, we've not taken that much of an interest in them before, and traditionally in our museums they're not well represented. So let's look at this. Let's discuss that. And let's put on exhibitions that are drawing attention to the significant presence in art history of women artists." So it's a combination of all those things. We're not in a position to say, "we have 2500 pictures, we need some kind of mathematical symmetry, and need to buy lots of works by female artists." I don't think that's the way forward.

Caro Fowler

Yeah, of course. Have you seen over the course of your career education departments grow, and take on more of a leadership role within museum institutions because of this reason?

Gabriele Finaldi

Oh, I'd say generally, anyway, I think it's a great phenomena of the modern museum that its educational mission, or its learning vocation has come much more to the fore. It's sometimes caused a little bit of tension within institutions.

Caro Fowler

Of course [laughs].

Gabriele Finaldi

Because who owns the narrative on the collections, I guess, is the principal reason why. And in some ways, you could say that people who come from a learning environment or from an educational perspective are sometimes much more adventurous than gallery curators. But I think [at] the National Gallery in particular--I'd say also the Prado, the other Museum I worked in--the relationship between the two areas has been very fruitful. But I do think that it's been very much education departments that have helped to open up interest in historic collections with some very thoughtful, new approaches to the collections, which are often very directly audience-focused/audience-related.

Caro Fowler

How has the relationship between working in both of these essentially state museums--how does the relationship between state and administration, and the museum and the world of culture and its funding--how does that differ for you in Spain versus the UK?

Gabriele Finaldi

So I suppose the first thing to say is that in some ways they are quite similar museums. Both are national museums. Both are supported by the government. Both are the prime national institutions in their area, let's say. So in that sense, there's a big overlap in the way we worked in the two museums. What I would say is that in Madrid, there is this very strong sensation that the Prado somehow encapsulates something of the Spanish soul, and so your responsibility is tripled. It's not just caring for the works of art in the collection. It is something to do with the national psyche, and the impression that the country has of itself, [and] the

people of that country have of themselves, and of their relationship with the outside world. Remember that the Prado is a collection fundamentally. It's a royal collection that became a public museum. And so it's a collection that reflects the history of Spain, its relationship with other parts of Europe, which was sometimes very conflictive, but has this very rich dynamic that brings together Italy, Spain, France, the Netherlands, and so on. And so you get this real sense that these are the interstices of history that you're that you're looking after, or that you're the custodian of for a short while. And it's your duty to explain those things to the public--to study them, research them, and then make them available. I suppose that sense almost of spiritual mission is not so clear for the National Gallery in London. There's different sorts of collections--a collection formed by art historians is one that wants to attempt or always attempted to tell a narrative, which sees the art of the painting of Europe developing from medieval times through different centers throughout Europe, and eventually bringing us into the modern age. So you're almost curating a narrative at the National Gallery. The National Gallery, I think, has also been very pioneering in some of the things it has done. And I have to say, I think, partly my job at the Prado was to try and bring some of the things that we'd achieved at the National Gallery into the Prado. And one of those things was a very close relationship between curators, scientists, and conservators in order to understand the work of art in the round. And we were very fortunate in Madrid that we had the opportunity to create a whole new building to house our conservation facilities and our scientific research department. And it gave us the opportunity to rethink the whole way in which we did those things. And I think it was a significant success. But for me, it's been fantastic to come back to London after 13 years abroad, and to a collection, which I'm very familiar with, [and] which I love a lot, [and] to a public, which is very engaged with a collection, and [have] a lot of opportunities to do very exciting things. So we say that one of the great things about working in the National Gallery is that when you ask other people to collaborate with you, whether it's to write something for catalog, or to lend you something for an exhibition, or to work with you on the radio, whatever it might be, you almost never get a "no." So it's really pleasing to have that sort of affection and that commitment to collaborate around the world.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. One thing that you brought up that's interesting is that it seems that within museums, the role of conservation is taking on a new kind of visibility within the public sphere. There there have been many debates, like the debates about the National Gallery and the cleaning of its pictures. But it seems that the science around conservation, especially with digital technology, and movements forward in that sphere, is changing the ways in which museums think about interfacing with its more scientific aspects of its work with the public. How do you think about that as a director of a museum? Do you think it's important to make conservation legible to a wider public? How does it change understanding a work of art?

Gabriele Finaldi

So it's very important for people to realize that what they're seeing on the walls of a museum is the end of a process. And I think people have become much more interested in the processes themselves and how you get to that stage. And frankly, it really is very interesting. There's a lot that goes on backstage at the National Gallery, and there's a lot that's very high level science, and very forward thinking conservation work: fantastic developments in the last two decades on imaging, which has revealed a huge amount about how works of art are made, [and] how paintings are made. And we are keen to tell that story as well. We don't feel that that's something that should be kept as it were offstage, and so you only see the final theatrical performance. It's of enormous interest to us how you get to the stage where a picture gets put on the wall of the Sainsbury Wing, and I think people are very interested in the process of how a work of art is made: What's it made of? Why is it made in a certain way and not in another? What is it that we're seeing that is original from the artist, and what is it that's been added later? What are the processes involved in making a selection for a national collection like ours? And it's probably true that the National Gallery in the past has been a little bit reticent or a bit reluctant to tell that story. But I think back to that series of shows called Art in the Making, which were pioneering shows in the 1980s and 90s, [and] which were about how works of

art were made. And the gallery produced very useful literature that has become standard literature in some cases, about--whether it's on Rembrandt or early Italian painting--looking at our own collections, and then making all that available for study and for students. So I think, increasingly, people are interested in process and how you get to a particular--we only need to go online and see all those videos about how buildings are made, or how furniture is made.

Caro Fowler

[Laughs]

Gabriele Finaldi

We clearly have a fascination with process and how you get to--in some ways it's to do with understanding the secret of great art--if we can ever fully understand it--but to understand a little bit how artists work, what their priorities were, and how things have changed over time. And so I think there's great interest in that.

Caro Fowler

Yeah, that's true. Well, and another area in which the National Gallery has really innovated is within its digital initiatives, and its online presence. But it's also interesting now, because as museums are closed right now, people are also really missing seeing the works themselves. So I'm curious how you think about this tension between the need for museums to develop these online presences, and reach new communities, and extend beyond their borders and their hours, etc. And yet also, the experience of seeing a work of art in person cannot be replicated online.

Gabriele Finaldi

Yeah, I think that's the premise that you start off with: the experience of seeing a painting by Vermeer or Michelangelo in the National Gallery--there's nothing that can substitute it. It's something to do with aura, as we all know, but it's something to do with physical scale. It's something to do with being in the physical presence of a work of art, and a work of art that has a three dimensional

character. Of course on screen everything becomes rather similar in format-- rather similar in size as well. So I think once you've established the premises is very important. Then you say, but of course, digital gives us fantastic new opportunities. And that's what we have to try and understand, develop, and embed as well in the way we deal with our collections. I think that [the] National Gallery took some steps a few years ago to embed digital in the gallery, which I think have stood us in good stead since the lockdown. Our gallery has been closed now for what is it? It's about 70 days, I guess. And we've had a very strong online presence. Now that's not the same as walking through the doors at Trafalgar Square, and standing in front of a Velasquez or Van Gogh. But it certainly can do things that are different from that experience--extend that experience. They don't quite substitute the experience. But while our doors are shut, they can give the National Gallery and the collection a presence. The other thing is, you can have a worldwide presence, as we all know. I'm thinking back to the kind of broadcasts we used to do in the 1980s and 90s on television where traditionally in this country our programs would go out rather late at night. And you might have at the most a few 100,000 people viewing. All of a sudden, now all you need is a mobile telephone to do a live broadcast, which can be viewed simultaneously in Peru, Tanzania, and Australia. And you can get immediate reaction. So that sense of reach of your museum through digital is tremendously exciting. I don't think we've sorted out quite what the best way of using that astonishing power is. But I think we're trying lots of different things. And I think [for] the gallery, particularly during this time, it's been very helpful to stay in contact with people who love art, who love the gallery, who want to learn. There's been special programs, as there are with so many museums, for children and families during this lockdown period, which is so difficult for many people.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. We've already touched on many of the things that are specific about being a museum director today, from changes and conservation to digital initiatives, to expanding collections' accessibility. What do you find most challenging about the role today?

Gabriele Finaldi

I guess a museum director today is expected to do many more things, and to be competent in many more things than a director in the past. And you never quite feel that you measure up. But I think for me, it's a question of recognizing how far my expertise goes, and where other people's expertise needs necessarily should be brought into play. And to just keep that sense of this we're doing together. And the gallery needs to be able to call on the finest talents in order to do what the gallery is there for, which is to study, and to share the collection. I suppose what I've been surprised by--I was Deputy Director for Collections and Research at the Prado, and became Director at the National Gallery in 2015. My children often say to me, "Papa, what does your job actually involve?" It's involved in looking at a lot of works of art and deciding if this is by this artist, or by that. And in fact, most of my job is talking to people, and listening to people. Whether that's gallery benefactors, whether it's the curators, whether it's the press people, whether it's the learning team, or whether it's talking to audiences outside the gallery. So there's just an awful lot of communication. The communication bit in all its variety: whether that's digital communication, or is simply communicating with staff, either on an individual level or on a broader town hall meeting level. I suppose the job is fundamentally about communication and communicating what our museum is about, and ensuring that those messages get out.

Caro Fowler

Thank you so much for talking with me today. I really appreciate it.

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 Gabriel Almeida Baroja, Alice Matthews, and Yubai Shi.