

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

“WHERE THE IMPOSSIBLE IS POSSIBLE”: SAUNDRA
WEDDLE AND LISA PON
ON COLLABORATION
AND RENAISSANCE STUDIES

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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, I speak with two scholars of Renaissance art and architecture: Sandra Weddle, professor of architecture at Drury University, and a Clark fellow in the fall of 2020, and Lisa Pon, professor of art history at the University of Southern California. We discuss how they met one another by chance in a hostel while studying in Italy as graduate students, and how their 30-year friendship has shaped their professional work. Sandra and Lisa each reflect on their experiences conducting research in archives, and share their perspectives on where the field of early modern art history is headed.

Lisa Pon

For being an academic especially, there are many times it's lonely work. I think writing monographs, writing articles that one single authors are incredibly lonely, difficult, solitary procedures. And so to be able to nurture and cultivate relationships that can sustain you, even in that type of isolation, I think, has been for me really important.

Caro Fowler

Well, thank you so much for joining me today, Sandra and Lisa. It's such a pleasure to have both of you here.

Sandra Weddle

It's a pleasure for us, too.

Caro Fowler

Well, I was inspired to do this interview when I was having coffee with Sandra. And she was telling me about how the two of you met in a hostel in Italy.

Sandra Weddle

So I arrived late at night in a youth hostel in Perugia, where I was going to be setting Italian for the summer. And I woke up in the morning and climbed down from the bottom bunk. And the person who had been sleeping below me was Lisa and her knapsack or her book bag was open and her copy of Vasari was there. And so of course, a fellow art historian you gravitate to that. And you see that and you know that you see a kindred spirit. So we've been friends for 30 years.

Lisa Pon

Perugia was a stop on my summer after-, actually it was my first extended stay in Italy. I had spent I think six or eight weeks in a language program that was run by Washington University where I did my master's program. And I spent the rest of the summer with one of those kilometric passes going from place to place trying to see as much as I possibly could. And indeed, in Perugia, it was one of many youth hostels. I was getting a little tired of the youth hostels. [All laugh]. But it was such a joy to bump into Sandra, and again, it's true we have that secret Masonic handshake, Vasari thing.

Lisa Pon

So it became quickly clear that we had similar interests. And I remember, Sandra, that you were staying in Petroot in Perugia, but I was passing through. But we went to Orvieto together, is that right? On the train? I was going to Rome, and we went to the cathedral together. I remember later that summer I swung by Perugia for one reason or another, and you had by that point moved to an apartment, and you fed me the first of many, many, many wonderful meals your various kitchens. [All laugh].

Caro Fowler

So how did you both choose—and I'm sure the past are very different because it's different for everyone—but how did each of you come to doing a PhD in the Renaissance, essentially? And I know that you both took different tracks. Sandra is more focused in architecture and Lisa more within the visual arts, not excluding architecture, but not solely. How did you each come to the path of pursuing a PhD in the humanities, in art history?

Lisa Pon

Well, I would have to say my path is probably a terribly uncommon one and one that will become more uncommon now as higher education is putting a lot of focus on utility. I felt very lucky to have had a true liberal arts education. I had gone to a high school that specialized in the math and sciences. And so I did well enough that I was always encouraged to continue on that path. So I was a major in biochemical sciences, and it was because there was this distribution requirement for giving their students breadth. [Laughs]. That in the fall of my senior year, I had to take a literature and Arts B course. And I stumbled in for various random reasons, in to see more slides course on Rembrandt and his contemporaries.

Caro Fowler

Oh, wow.

Lisa Pon

Which was huge course. It was maybe, I don't know, 500 people. It was in the Norton Lecture Hall on the bottom of the Fogg. And they were truly spectacular lectures. He was a really gifted teacher. And in addition to that, we met in the Fogg. We had sections in the Fogg Art Museum, and they hold out stuff for us to look at every week. And he also curated two exhibitions in the course of our semester, and sent us off to the Boston museums. So it was a real quick and deep immersion in art that you could look at in person, that you were asked to analyze in person with objects in front of you. And it really did change my life. This is one reason I take very seriously the responsibility for teaching entry level courses for people who might not yet embrace the visual, because I think -

though, I don't expect all my students to change fields quite as dramatically as I did - I do feel like it's exactly the type of learning experience that I would wish for any undergraduate to be able to have, the chance to think about something they know very little about.

Caro Fowler

Yeah, that's great. And what about you Sandra?

Sandra Weddle

So my path was also very circuitous as an undergraduate. I was a communication major, and in the fall of my junior year, I studied abroad in Strasbourg, France, where I had my first art history class. And I was immediately taken with the subject. And I think a lot of it had to do with some of the things that attracted Lisa to the subject. We were on site, we were seeing works in person, and there's just no substitute for that. And I think the immediacy of the material was really moving and stimulating for me. When I returned to campus in the States - I was an undergrad at Penn State - when I returned, I started taking art history classes alongside my major, which I didn't change at that time. So it took it was a longer path for me because after undergrad, I knew that I wanted to follow this course of study. But I also knew that to do that, I was going to have to really build up a foundation in coursework that I hadn't been able to develop as an undergrad. So it was a bit of a path, but it's been really rewarding and I'm really glad I made the sacrifices I had to in order to pursue this, this discipline.

Caro Fowler

What kind of sacrifices that you have to make?

Sandra Weddle

For example, after I graduated from undergrad and I was pursuing these classes, one at a time, trying to prepare to be a credible candidate for graduate school, I was working full time in communication. I worked in advertising actually. And so balancing all of that to kind of make ends meet on the way to graduate studies was not easy, but it was really rewarding.

Caro Fowler

I sounds like both of you would do a PhD again in Renaissance and art history, and you both have great careers, and they've been very rewarding. But I guess something I struggle with now with advising students and graduate students is the viability of pursuing a PhD. And also a lot of questions that didn't occur to me when I was in my 20s ,like saving in a 401k or buying a house or having control over where I live geographically. And, you know, as much as the discipline talks about diversifying in terms of economic stability, and generational wealth, I mean a PhD in the humanities is does not necessarily generate that kind of stability. From your positions now, what do you think about the viability of this as careers for the future?

Lisa Pon

That's a difficult question. And that's a question that I think is on the minds of many people, especially given the current pandemic, which is, I'm sure, going to really radically change how higher education looks. Like it's already changed how we teach and how we interact with each other. And I think whatever ends up coming back is going to look different. And it's not all going to be bad different, but it will be different. And I mentioned earlier, I feel like there is a great premium these days on utility, even though I think it's quite difficult to tell in advance what might become useful later. The humanities seems to be pushing it's useful skills, such as critical thinking and clarity of writing, and argumentation. And I think these are all wonderful things. But it is going to be harder to encourage people to do doctorates, I think, because I think certainly in our fields, it's not a growing field, as it was some decades ago. And so I think it is going to be more difficult. I have always thought that a doctorate is a difficult and challenging achievement that one should only do if one desperately wants it. [Caro and Lisa laugh]. Now, one's desperation must be of an even greater level, I would believe.

Caro Fowler

Yeah. But I do remember a mentor of mine at NYU said to me, it's a great life, if you can make it work. And one of the things that I think is really beautiful is Italy and living in Italy. And both of you have spent extensive time there. And that is one of the fun things about being an academic, if you are inclined that way, is living abroad. And I would be curious to know how working in Italy and working in the archives in Italy, how you began that work and what that work was like when you were graduate students. Graduate students aren't necessarily taught how to work in the archives, you're just kind of thrown off a cliff and you figure it out [laughing]. And then also how that work has changed in Italy over the past 30 years. I mean, I know for my husband, there was this revolution, when suddenly the archives in Venice were suddenly allowing photography—which I think they then cancelled like a month later, but it was it was this high point for everyone for a month. So I would be curious to hear how you began your dissertation work in Italy, and also how it's changed over the past 30 years or so.

Saundra Weddle

Yeah, I mean, I think that the archive is really this hub that draws scholars from all over the world, and it's this central meeting place. Like you said, it's a little bit of a trial by fire. And I think that shared experience also helps form that bond with others in the field. There was really no training in how to approach working in the archives. In graduate school, I remember going to the Archivio di Stato in Florence, and Karen Barzman introduced me and showed me how to order documents, and how the inventories worked, and all of that. And it didn't take long to become part of a community there. And it's true that the senior scholars in the archive in Florence were just incredibly supportive and welcoming, and really treated graduate students like peers. You really felt like you were inserted in a community that was cooperative. And just very generous. So when I was first doing my dissertation work in Florence, it was the beginning of the Berlusconi years. There were lots of strikes, funding for cultural institutions was really starting to decline. And I would say over the last 30 years, that's gotten worse in Italy. I think the challenges for archives and libraries are significant. The number of documents that you can consult in a day has declined, the number of hours at archives and libraries has declined, the number of personnel has declined, and

the demands on those personnel have increased. So especially now with the pandemic, of course, libraries and archives have been closed for a lot of the year, but when they have been open, access has been really limited. And so I think that may have an impact on our field going forward. But it's a magical place to work and surprising things emerge all the time. And I think those small victories are the things that make you addicted to the archive work and make you want to continue. And also, of course, the relationships that are formed there are so important.

Caro Fowler

Have you seen that same decline within the print rooms, the print and drawing rooms within Italy, Lisa? Or have those stayed relatively stable over the past 30 years?

Lisa Pon

Well, I think there have been changes, and there have been some high points, like the Ufizi's new works on paper study room is really glorious. But I do worry a lot about the fact that it does seem that getting access and being able to get material has been getting more difficult, given cuts in personnel and so forth. So I am similarly concerned. One of the things that I especially recall about my first visit to Venice - and especially, I think it was not the archive, but it was the Biblioteca Marciana, where I first encountered this - was they had these little moduli that were in triplicate, these little forms where you had to write really hard with a pen because you had to write through three carbon copies.

And then you had to tear out these little things, they gave you one, and you took one, and one got put in the book. It was like this choreography. You would give them your tessera, and they would give you the book, and you would give them the third from left, or the third from the right, and they would stick it in the front page [laughing]. It was very complicated. It was really fun, though. And being someone who has always been interested in paper and writing and that type of knowledge passing back and forth, I remember being fascinated -

Caro Fowler

[Laughs].

Lisa Pon

- with paper and I kept many of them. You had to plan your day because you had to put in your *richiesta* before 11 or before noon or something, and you could only put in three, so you would run to the archive and put in your stuff there, and then you would run to the library and put your stuff in there, you would run back and, you know, see what had come up [laughing]. It made me also think of speaking with John Shearman because, of course, his posthumous publication of the early Raphael documents has been such a boon to scholarship and also I'm sure he would think it was an easy fix, because I remember he was telling me about studying the Raphael letter about antiquities in Rome. And he had to go from library to archive transcribing each one and he couldn't believe how easy it was for us because it was published and we could just look at it in the library. And that was so easy, what's matter with this generation? [All laugh]. His experience of having to excavate these texts out of separate archives and manage his own notes in order to do the most basic types of comparisons. Even before you get to analysis, just thinking about surveying the field of study requires intense travel, intense engagement with archives and collections that were not necessarily easy to access, and the ability to synthesize on the fly. I think every time I open his two volume thing, especially to the index, I'm like, thank you for this index John, thank you so much. [All laugh].

Caro Fowler

Well what you also bring up, Lisa, is the way that there are always these different generations within any discipline, and generational divides in studies. And I'm curious for both of you in terms of teaching and teaching graduate students and undergrads, how-, kind of two things. One, how you aim to make the Renaissance palpable for students today. And then also what you think is specific to this generation of upcoming students in terms of their engagement with the Renaissance as a field.

Saundra Weddle

My situation is quite different from Lisa's because I teach in architecture school. And I don't teach graduates. And so I'm not preparing historians, and the role of the history classes that I teach, it's for architecture students. And so the framing of the material, I think, is quite different than what it would be if I were preparing students to be art historians. So, my focus for them tends to be more related to theory, and really the extrinsic forces that affect things, themes like practice and construction and technology. But of course also the life of the built environment. Because I think there are always lessons in the determinants, the forces that are at work in shaping any artifact. But when I'm teaching, those issues are always at the front of my mind. I do feel that the field itself is evolving. This isn't so much an answer related to teaching, per se, but I think in art history and in Renaissance art history, maybe in particular, I think historians are looking at a much wider range of objects than we once did. I think there are much more diverse methods of research and interpretation than there once were. Studies that might previously have been considered inconsequential or minor are coming to the fore and making really important contributions to our understanding of the culture. And Lisa's work is a great example of this. We're not only talking about major artistic centers anymore, we're also considering other sites. And so I mean, in some ways that sort of goes to the question of the evolution of the discipline. I suspect that all of those things are integrated into Lisa's teaching much more than mine.

Lisa Pon

Well, I would say... First of all, one of the things I've always admired about you, Saundra, is the breadth of your knowledge, and also the deep historical specificity you have in our shared field. So I mean, I think those are things that your students and students anywhere would be lucky to encounter. And it's also something I admire about museum professionals. These curators, sometimes they have such exquisitely hands-on and intensive knowledge of particular fields, such as Renaissance engraving, or etching, let's say, for example. But also this immense span in which to situate that deep knowledge, and I think it's a beautiful thing. I think that in itself is something that all students need to learn,

that it's important to understand the, let's say, zoomed-in type of knowledge, but also how to contextualize it. And one of the things that I've seen during my years of teaching, is the fact that it's gotten much easier to zoom in really quickly because of Google, basically. And Google Scholar can get you into some pretty specialized literature really, I think, too quickly. Then you have these little bits, and you don't know how to put them together in a manner that makes sense. So when I first started teaching history of the booktype classes for my undergraduates, for example, it was very difficult to get them to actually look at the book as an object of study because it was so transparent to them. They did not hardly even see the material artifacts because it was so familiar to them. And about 10 years ago, I started noticing that my students were changing. I started teaching these history of booktype courses or courses largely cast to include things like electronic books. And a grant from the dean at SMU made it possible for me to buy for my class one of the first Kindles that was available. We had sessions where someone would take the Kindle home, they would have the Kindle for a week, and they would do their reading on the Kindle. And we would talk about how it was different for readers.

Caro Fowler

[Laughs].

Lisa Pon

And that was a generational shift, right? I am so insistent on the idea that right now we should be studying what paper is. Right now we should be studying what reading is, because these practices are undergoing such radical transformations, just in the generation that we're seeing now in college. I taught a course, my first course that USC was called "What is a Book?" And I told the students that I had chosen them because they were this bridge, and they had to be the cultural memory. So I was going to try and help them.

Caro Fowler

Well, and one thing that I love that's coming out, Lisa, is the ways in which you're making so palpable how the study of the Renaissance continues to be so relevant

in terms of thinking about our contemporary world. Both of you work on Venice in different ways, so I'd be curious to hear from both of you what you found so compelling or important about thinking about Venice. As much as we're moving away from the early modern Italian city-state as a typology of study, Venice still kind of holds a particular fascination, I think.

Saundra Weddle

I have the good fortune of taking students to Venice. And so I try really hard to help them think about it as a living place. So our students have, for example, participated in protests against the big cruise ships. We've spent days cleaning up graffiti in the city with a local group that is trying to clean that up. And that was an activity that helped us all really see the city through different eyes. So I think one thing that people don't understand if they don't spend much time in Venice, is that it remains a living place and the residents there work so hard to maintain that. And I think there's a certain energy in a place where the locals are so invested in the culture, in the past, in preserving it, but also making it vibrant and alive now. It's kind of a battle, and I think that battle creates a certain energy in that place, which is very attractive. I don't know if you were so much asking about what's attractive about Venice now, what attracted us to being in Venice, or what was attractive to us as researchers?

Caro Fowler

I mean, I think kind of both. And I guess, also, I think this is true with so many cities, but Venice in particular, in terms of its geographic positioning, and the ways in which the relationship of Venice politically and economically more towards the Levant and the Middle East and then even further East. And then also in terms of its relationship to the North, in places like Nuremberg and Figaro dynasty. I think I was just kind of curious to ruminate on Venice, also, as this early modern entrepôt or one of the first really global early modern cities, and the ways in which that still seems to come out in the research. And also even within contemporary phenomenon like the Biennale that happens there.

Saundra Weddle

Right. I mean, for me, Venice was very much a choice that came in the middle of my career. I began by focusing on Florence and I only started working in Venice about 10 years ago. And the contexts that you're pointing to were precisely the ones that attracted me. In my Clark lecture, I use this phrase, messy vitality. And I think that that really describes what's happening in Venice in the early modern period. The complexity, the diversity, the mixing of that place made it very attractive. And then there was, for me also, the combination of the built and natural environment. All of those things together raised new research questions for me. And I realized that I had to completely change my frame of reference, not to mention learning a whole new archive and a set of libraries and dialect and all of that. So, very complex. But I think it was precisely that dynamic context that you're describing, Caro, that really laid the foundation for me and drew me in.

Caro Fowler

Yeah.

Lisa Pon

And for me, you know, Venice, it is an exceptional place in many ways. And I was drawn to study at first because of my interest in print culture, and so I was very much interested in the print industry which flourished in Venice early and continuously for a while. So going to Venice for me, I did quite early in my career. It was truly a lovely thing. And I have to, again, thank The Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation for supporting my work in Venice from that first trip while I was a doctoral student through what was supposed to be this past summer. It's wonderful to have to have support to study a place as special as Venice. And it's difficult to get to and it's difficult to work in, because as Sandra was saying, Venice is not an easy place. And I think you said to me once early on, Sandra, you said, you loved Venice because it taught patience.

Sandra Weddle

[Laughs].

Lisa Pon

And I remember that first Delmas trip to Venice, when I was living in Rome during my doctoral research. I had a whole list of things, I was exquisitely well prepared, I was ready to do all this stuff. And they told me I couldn't have that busta, and I was like, why can't I have this busta? They say, because the ladder is broken. I was like, the ladder is broken? [All laugh]. Do you know I came a gazillion look at this one busta [laughing]? But, you know, the ladder is broken. [All continue laughing].

Sandra Weddle

You know the saying - I learned this when I was first working in Florence, this might have come to me through Nicolectia - she told me that Italy is the place where the possible is impossible, and the impossible is possible.

Lisa Pon

That is such a wonderful statement.

Sandra Weddle

It's true.

Lisa Pon

It's true. It's true.

Caro Fowler

It's true. Well, one reason why I was also interested in interviewing the two of you together is, the trope of friendship, it's a renaissance theme. I mean, it's a period in which there are many treatises written on friendship - primarily male friendship, although not all. But thinking about models of scholarship within models of friendship, which I feel like isn't always a model that's positioned in graduate school, although maybe with the rise of digital humanities, it's becoming more of a model. But I would be curious to hear for both of you how friendship and collaboration plays out both within your scholarship and has influenced your own understanding of being an academic today.

Lisa Pon

I think friendship is very important for any person, academic or not. And I feel really blessed to have friends like Sandra in my life [laughing]. It is a very special thing to have some people who know you from decades and decades, it's a wonderful thing to be together for so long. And I say that especially because we have never been together in the same place, in the same institution, in the same whatever. Our physical paths, our institutional paths have always been divergent. But that has made those points where we can see each other in person and the times that we connect in other ways all the more special. I remember going to RSA, and like the best thing about going to RSA was seeing Sandra. [All laugh]. Like forget all the [inaudible]. Seeing Sandra and having a great dinner, like it was always a great [inaudible]. And as you say, the archive can be a place where these encounters happen. To look up and to see you in the Saladi studio, that was like pure joy, you know? And to be able to run over and say, look what I found. Or, can you read that? [All laugh]. This was really wonderful and special. And I think for being an academic especially, there are many times it's lonely work. Like I think writing monographs, writing articles that one single authors are incredibly lonely, difficult, solitary procedures. And so to be able to nurture and cultivate relationships that can sustain you, even in that type of isolation, I think has been for me really important. And in fact, with this pandemic, the sudden breakdown of many possibilities for interaction, one of the things that I ensure has kept me sane in these past months is the fact that I had just begun a writing group that was supposed to meet in person, it was a working group, actually, and one of the things that we were going to do was have writing times together. That went all online, and it had continued entirely through this whole period where everything else was so disruptive.

Sandra Weddle

I think academics is such a challenging profession. Early in our careers, when you're looking for jobs and you're working in the archives, and people tend to feel a bit protective of their material, I remember Lisa saying very early on, there's enough to go around, you know? [Laughs]. And I think it has always been

a pleasure to just work with people who are generous and open and have that collaborative spirit. It's such a gift to be able to draw on the perspectives and experiences of so many people. Lisa had mentioned The Renaissance Society, and I think that it also merits talking about the importance of that conference, because I don't know many other subspecialties that have that scale of interdisciplinary gathering. So I think the nature of that conference even broadens your network. Your network extends beyond historians of art and architecture, to musicologist and social historians and literature scholars, and so on. And I think that also really enriches collaborations. Obviously, it enriches your friendships.

Lisa Pon

I think we have so often been trained in grad school, and even before grad school, to critique. And I think it's actually really important for us to consider training junior scholars also to maybe first see the strength of an argument, or the strength of a paper, or its connections to other works, or how it diverges in ways that are productive. And in my teaching, I have always tried to push that, in part because I see it as a very different skill set that needs to be practiced as well. So one of the things that I have done with some success in my grad seminars - we'll see how it works this spring on zoom - but we have a co-laboratory, or a colloquium - a colloquium I think was Joseph Koerner's word for it - where you work with a partner and your partner presents your research.

Lisa Pon

And is the facilitator for discussion of your work. And you do the same for someone else. And first of all, everyone understands that they have a reader, like who do I write for? And it teaches you to speak about someone else's work and try and understand someone else's work from inside, in order to be able to hold a discussion that is going to be productive for a group. These have always been exhilarating events. They have been ways for people to see that even in what they consider working alone is still an act of working together. And I think that's a lesson that every one of us can learn better, especially in these days.

Caro Fowler

Oh, wow. That's so true, Lisa. Well, I think that's a pretty good note to end on.

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.