

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

“TO GIVE SHAPE TO A WAY OF SEEING THE PAST”: SHIRA BRISMAN
ON THE INTIMACY OF WRITING THE HISTORY OF SOCIAL ART

Season 6, Episode 2
Recording date: August 7, 2024
Release date: March 12, 2024

Transcript

Caroline Fowler: Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art and 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.

Sara Houghteling: For this season, you'll hear from me, Sarah Houghteling, Special Projects Coordinator in the Research and Academic Program. I'm also a novelist. I'll be speaking with four art historians about the craft of writing as it relates to their scholarly practice. In this episode, I speak with Shira Brisman, Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Pennsylvania and a historian of early modern art. She's the author of two books, the first on Albrecht Dürer and the second on the career of Christoph Jamnitzer.

Shira Brisman: *I was interested in what happens socially when a culture that lives with art to which some people have access and others do not. A culture in which some people are addressed by the art and others are not. What is the impact of the social formation? How does art draw people together? How does it shape communities? This question could really inform the kind of art history that I wanted to write. I thought of it not as a social history of art so much as a history of social art.*

Sara Houghteling: Shira, welcome to In the Foreground. It's such a pleasure and an honor to have you here with us today.

Shira Brisman: Thanks so much, Sara. I'm a fan of the podcast and have done a lot of listening and learning from it. So I'm very happy to be here.

Sara Houghteling: I wondered if you could start by telling us a bit about your background and how you became an art historian and particularly a scholar of early modern northern European art history and print culture?

Shira Brisman: In 2004, when I was applying to PhD programs in art history, I did so from a place of conviction and doubt. I was certain about the ability of art to instigate the imagination and to arouse passion, right? I knew that art could do this, and arouse passion also in the religious sense—that it could activate belief.

But I was harboring an uncertainty, a real question. I wasn't sure how a work of art could work on somebody who is no longer in its presence. This was in contrast to something like poetry, which I love to memorize. I memorized a lot of poetry as a child, a lot of inappropriate poetry that I certainly didn't understand, but I loved the rhythm and sound of language.

And I felt that poetry was something that I could always take with me. It wasn't something one needed money to appreciate. It wasn't something you even needed a pocket or anything in a pocket to have and to hold and to make your own. But I felt that art, while incredibly powerful when standing in its presence, I just wasn't sure whether the way that it acts on a beholder continues once that encounter is over. I entered graduate school with this question. And within a few years, John Onians published *Neuroarthistory* in 2007/2008 about the visual brain and its response to art. And that wasn't the question I was asking. I wasn't interested in what was happening to us biologically or even emotionally when we stand before a work of art. I wasn't interested in the affective responses of our bodies, but I was interested in what happens socially when a culture that lives with art to which some people have access and others do not. A culture in which some people are addressed by the art and others are not. What is the impact of the social formation of being in the presence, and then no longer being in the presence, of this art?

So I found in graduate school that this question—how does art draw people together? How does it shape communities?—that this question could really inform the kind of art history that I wanted to write. I thought of it not as a social history of art so much as a history of social art. This question not only describes my time in graduate school, but it was also really the motivation for my first book, and I think it describes something of the trajectory from the first book to the second book.

The Dürer book is really about how art draws people together. The second book project, which is about Christoph Jamnitzer, the Nuremberg goldsmith, and his metalwork objects, is about how works of art operate as divisive objects, things that tear people from one another, that create divisions.

Sara Houghteling: I'm struck by that description of how art can speak to us when we're not in its presence, and particularly, I'm thinking of one of the

early images that you discuss in the Dürer book—about the way in which the image seems to turn away from the viewer, but that it also invites a dialogue with the viewer, or invites the viewer to take over the role of interpretation and of writing a story of what could possibly be happening. That that occurs across great swaths of time and space is very moving. You've given us a hint about your love of poetry, which I'm not surprised to hear, actually. The verbs in your writing are so wonderful and descriptive and specific. Could you tell us more about your development as a writer? If there were any teachers or experiences as a reader that shaped your approach to the writing process or even how you edit your sentences? Or as a companion question, any editorial or writing advice you've been given that has been key to your own writing process?

Shira Brisman: I think I can answer that question by thinking about what craft means, what the craft of writing art history means. Because as I mentioned, my second book project is about Christoph Jamnitzer, a goldsmith who is making metalwork objects. So I've been thinking a lot about craft, which is an English word that of course comes from the German word for skill or ability or ingenuity, which later came to mean specifically manual skill. So I want to answer your question, Sara, by saying something first about writing as a craft on the level of crafting sentences, producing something where words are the medium. And then I want to say something about writing history as craft, what it means to be shaping a way of perceiving the past, to give shape to a way of seeing the past.

And, you know, in terms of on the level of writing, I would say that I really learn from the authors that I read. That's where I feel that I've learned to write. So for each book length project or even article length project that I work on, I summon a what I call an offstage bibliography. So of course I have my official bibliography, which is the primary sources I'm reading, the secondary sources I'm reading, maybe even the theoretical texts. But the offstage bibliography is a bibliography of poetry, of novels, sometimes of plays. It's what I'm reading while I'm thinking through the problems that the project addresses. The offstage bibliography is where the prick of language forces a new experience of the topic. When I was writing the Dürer book, for example, part of what was on my offstage bibliography were texts like James Baldwin's *Down at the Cross (A Letter from a Region in My Mind)*. So this was an interview he did with Elijah Muhammad for *The New Yorker*. And there's a sentence in there where Baldwin says to him, I'm a

writer, I like doing things alone. And I just thought about that so much when I was writing the Dürer project because I was so interested in the relationship of the intimacy of writing to the imagination of a large address.

I was also reading W. H. Auden's poem, *In Memory of W. B. Yeats*, which is an elegy in three parts. And the poem starts in the third person: "He disappeared in the dead of winter." So he's talking about Yeats' death. The second part of the poem is a second person address, where he says, "You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:/The parish of rich women, physical decay,/Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry." And I love that line. I feel like it stabs me every time: "Hurt you into poetry." What does it mean to be not compelled or intrigued or drawn into what you're writing about, but to be *hurt* into it? And then the third part of the poem is a kind of convocation or a chant. He addresses, "Earth receives an honored guest:/ William Yeats is laid to rest." So I was thinking about how this poem moves through different modes, and it occurred to me that I could structure my book also by thinking about these different modes of address.

For the current book project, which really takes up the problem of property in engaging with these gilded silver objects, part of my offstage bibliography involves novels that engage the problem of property. I've been thinking a lot with Louise Erdrich's novel, *The Roundhouse*, which is about the rape of a mother on an Ojibwe reservation in North Dakota, told through the experience of her 13-year-old son, who experiences his mother after this violent attack. And the boy's father is a tribal judge, but the crime can't be prosecuted because it was committed by a non-Indigenous attacker on tribal lands. So the book is about, in some ways, the problem of jurisdiction, of tribal law versus federal and state law. And the moment I picked it up and read it, I thought, "Wow." The first line is, "Small trees had attacked my parents' house at the foundation." And Erdrich goes on to describe these cracks in the stones as these trees are pushing through.

And then from that, I've found my way to a poem by Jericho Brown called "Four Day in the Morning," which is about his mother planting the small patch of land she owns. He describes her planting to give some color in the yard, as he puts it. And the last line of that poem is, "My God, we leave things green." So I've been thinking with these texts as a way of finding my way into alternative propositions for what property can mean, how it can be

experienced, how property can even be the site of small domestic violences as well as small pleasures and small acts of claiming.

Creating an offstage bibliography is something I really love to do with my students when they're planning dissertation projects or large research projects.

We work very carefully together on the formal bibliography and then I sort of relax a little in my seat and I'm like, "Okay, let's get to the fun part. Let's talk about the offstage bibliography." And it's been such a joy to read novels with my students that we just want to share with each other because we can talk through how the problems that they're having or that my students are interested in may be addressed through another framework, another medium through something like magical realism or science fiction or some other kind of way that literature can allow encounters to happen outside a realm of the responsibility to history.

Sara Houghteling: It's very clear how lucky your students are to have you to think with them and think through these problems and these resonances with them.

It's really fascinating just to think about all the layers of the invisible books that influence us, either on the level of the sentence or the structural level or the thematic level. I'm noticing a connection that you were alluding to with the Auden poem about Yeats, that it's a three-part poem, and it moves in these different ways. And your Dürer book, *Albrecht Dürer and the Epistolary Mode of Address*, also has three primary sections, and each of them is catalyzed by a different kind of movement. So it's wonderful to see those deep connections between poetry and the way in which you structure your scholarly argument.

Shira Brisman: Well, thank you for noticing that. I think for me the offstage bibliography, it's like setting one's own metronome. And often those texts don't appear in the footnotes, they don't even appear as epigraphs. They're really something that I feel generates my own ideas and creates rhythm for my thinking and my writing, even if it doesn't appear on the surface.

I wanted to address the second part of the craft of writing, which is to think about the shape of an argument that unfolds over multiple chapters, because I'm concerned that this is an attentiveness that we are losing by we, I just mean people who teach, are less inclined to assign full books to

students. And I think that this is due in part to a desire for polyvocality, to assign multiple voices by multiple authors. So a chapter from one author against maybe a short article by another. I know in my department, for example, we don't ask students to buy books, so we are providing the text for the class often through PDFs or through online books.

I find that my students come to the moment of trying to draw up a prospectus and they have never written an argument that has sustained over multiple chapters. So I try to encourage them to think early on about the shape of a book. I actually just got a grant from the Sachs Foundation here to purchase books at Penn for students in my graduate seminar so everyone will literally be on the same page. We're building their libraries.

I want to say something about the books that I've been thinking about lately, where the shape of the argument has really motivated my thinking about what can be accomplished in this medium of a book. So one book, it's not a work of art history, but it is a work concerned with history and the expressiveness of art, and that's Angela Davis's book, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. The book is centered around the blues music of Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday. Davis is thinking about these women who are singing the blues in the 1920s.

And Davis is analyzing both the lyrics, which center around expressive modes of freedom in post-slavery experience. So she's looking at lyrics that deal with sexual choice. Choosing one's partner, as well as travel, the ability to move from one place to another. Some of the songs are overtly about sexual abuse or about sexual competition, but Davis reads these very carefully to show that they're also about the solidarity between women who may be competing to buy things for their men or to keep things, or their men are leaving them. There's a song by Ma Rainey called "Counting the Blues," which recalls the West African practice of Nommo, which is a ritual pronouncement of names. But here Ma Rainey uses this to enumerate the different kinds of blues.

And this is really an exceptional book because it's an example of what we might think of in terms of craft as fine motor skills—the fine motor skills of analysis that Davis is employing both in her reading of the lyrics and in the way that she talks about performance, how the lyrics are performed. And it's through something improvisational, like the use of repetition by a singer or the way that a singer might jump in her voice or inflect her voice with irony to distance herself from the words that she's singing. These songs

become real expressions of radical, political, feminist resistance in a period that is historically pre-feminist.

Sara Houghteling: I'm going to ask you to read both from *Albrecht Dürer and the Epistolary Mode of Address*, and also your forthcoming book, *The Goldsmith's Debt, Conceptions of Property in Early Modern Art*. And perhaps before you read from them, I wondered if you could give us some background to them.

Shira Brisman: Sure. The Dürer book, which, as you mentioned, is called *Albrecht Dürer and the Epistolary Mode of Address* and really looks at the experience of writing, sending, and receiving letters at the turn of the 1500s and argues that this experience shaped how artists, particularly printmakers, were conceiving of the message bearing properties of art: how a work of art could communicate that it was bearing a message, both through the use of text, but not always.

And I thought I would read a passage that's from the third chapter, which is called "Relay and Delay." And I thought I would start with this moment in 1512 when the Emperor Maximilian I commissions a printed triumphal procession which imagines a procession that celebrates his lineage and his military victories.

So it is as though this this work of art is documenting an event that took place, although the event is fictive. This resulted both in a collaborative project by Hans Burgkmair and others who began to design woodcuts for this project, and when the Emperor died in 1519, 137 of them had been executed, including two blocks by Dürer. But the project was never finished in its entirety because of the Emperor's death, so it was intercepted by his death. And another work that I deal with here is two blocks called "The Small Triumphal Chariot," which were designed by Albrecht Dürer, of a float showing Maximilian's wedding to Mary of Burgundy. And this was isolated and drawn out as a distinctive work that Dürer worked with his friend Willibald Pierkeimer who choreographed this allegorical chariot. This allegory was frescoed on the Nuremberg Town Hall in 1521 to 1522 and was destroyed in 1945 so it's no longer extant but we have copies after it so we know what it looked like.

"The Triumphal Procession involves two levels of fiction. One is that a pageant is taking place with horses, riders, and marchers parading forth.

The other involves the stories unfolding within the built devices that these revelers bear. In his conception for the chariot representing the Emperor's wedding, Dürer connects the two figures responsible for motion by placing a laurel wreath in Victory's hand and another around the head of the cart-pushing landsknecht. [A landsknecht is a mercenary soldier.] These figures belong to the same narrative register. Both are participants in the ceremony, while the other figures—the three maidens on the platform, the four winged cherubs atop the columns, and the emperor and his bride who flank the heraldic shield—are part of the furniture of the display. By breaking with the convention of having male members of Maximilian's court serve as the active agents in the cavalcade, Dürer establishes the possibility of a slippage between the allegorical figures and the celebrants in the pageant. He invites the mind to lose track of the distinction between the event of the procession and the many actions and motions taking place within the maid worlds that are being pulled along.”

And now I want to skip ahead in the section called “A Separate Time”:

“The conceit of the image elicits the passage between modes, from the representation of an event conceivably situated in the present to the depiction of a condition of transcendence beyond ordinary circumstances of time and place. The difference between these two pictorial states might also describe the relationship between Dürer's *Small Chariot* and *Great Chariot*. The former reasonably, if anomalously, participates in the sequence of woodcuts that constituted the completed portion of the *Triumphal Procession* at the emperor's death. The latter had its roots in this company as well. The *Great Chariot* was initially conceived as Maximilian's triumphal car, the segment of the procession where the emperor moves amid his parading courtiers. In the early pen design by Dürer, where the emperor is seated with his family in a carriage pulled by mounted riders, Dürer's instinct elicited an energetic quadriga. The speed of the horsemen would find a feminized and classicizing expression in the draperies of the Virtues and Ratio's windswept locks.”

So, I think I'll end there and just say that what I found so fascinating here was that the art object itself deals with these various levels between the fictive and the imaginary. But the research that went into this, and what I go on to describe, is the way that composition of this multi-paneled project

was negotiated through the writing and receiving of letters, and that Dürer actually includes in the printed version of the *Great Triumphal Chariot*. He publishes Maximilian I's letter from 1522, where Maximilian basically says, this is good work, where he basically sends his stamp of approval. So I found it so interesting that this letter—we do have the official version of it is in the Stadtbibliothek in Nuremberg—makes its way into print. And the letter authorizes the image in this sense.

Sara Houghteling: It's the ideal back matter blurb, right?

Shira Brisman: Exactly, right? Yeah, get the emperor to blurb your book. And I have to say, I'm somebody who's always been uncomfortable around court art.

I don't feel myself drawn to works of art that are often commissioned by people in power with a lot of money. I'm interested in the kind of low rumblings that are produced. This has often led me to print, but in this case, print is doing the work of something much more grandiose. And it is staging its own legitimacy for doing so, in this case, by using the language of authorization by the emperor.

Sara Houghteling: I'm struck that, so often, in reading your work and in hearing you speak about it today, about that kind of kinetic energy that still energizes Dürer's work. You reanimate it for us in this way that feels very powerful and returns to your opening comments about how can art matter, and why does art history matter. And that those power dynamics are very much at play. Perhaps we could turn to the second passage you brought for us today?

Shira Brisman: It centers around the figure of Christoph Jamnitzer, who was born in 1563, and he died in 1618. He is also a Nuremberg artist like Dürer, but much less of a household name. Art historians of early modern Germany, or the history of craft, or the history of mathematics and art, might be familiar with his grandfather, Wenzel Jamnitzer. Christoph Jamnitzer is known to print scholars because he produced one book of etchings published in 1610 called *The New Book of Grotesques*. And my colleague Madeline Viljoen has written about this exquisite book of etchings. And I'm interested in the relationship of those etchings to the gilded silver vessels and figurative shapes that Jamnitzer produced.

The book is largely about vessels, about drinking cups, and the book takes up, by looking at these crafted objects, the problem of property—the problem of property in the sense of that which is *proper* to oneself. The definition of property is that which you can exclude others from because it belongs to you. And in the history of law, property is—what's just distinctive from a possession, something that someone can use or has access to versus property is defined legally as that which one has the right to alienate. So you don't properly own something unless you can either give it away or sell it: unless you have the power to let go of it. Only then do you properly own it, and the book is set at a time when movable goods are competing with immovable property, that is land, in terms of their capacity to speak to inheritance, to the succession of generations within a family. This is a period where within the *Kunstammer* of princes and within the collections of patrician families, they begin to mark objects, precious objects, as property that is not to be deaccessioned.

Sometimes these are written in documents in a will that will say, “This is not to leave the family, it is to be passed down from generation to generation, it may not be sold or given away.” And sometimes it's actually marked on the object itself with an inscription. Or sometimes this desire of the movable property to act like inalienable property is inscribed through its figurative language. And this is what I'm arguing about the works that Jamnitzer makes. So I'm looking at iconography of genealogy, of inheritance, of land possession through these figures at the stems of these vessels, such as peasants who are holding up the cups. And what I'm arguing is that these vessels, while they are movable objects and taking the place of or behaving like land, they're in fact instantiating the very principles that they're allegedly meant to replace. So these objects are re-instantiating very conservative values about how property is transmitted through inheritance.

This really is the argument of the second half of the book, which is about what property meant for those who commissioned the works by goldsmiths. But the first part of the book takes up the matter of what property meant for craftsmen.

And here I argue that property was not embodied in an object so much as it was embodied in the skill, the education, the training. This is what property was for a goldsmith or for a maker. It was what they could do, and this skill, this training, is what gave them access to social representation.

The passage that I'm going to read is from Chapter 3, which is called "The Mold of the Master."

And this is not about a vessel, it's about a small plaque that the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York acquired during the time that I was working on this book. So I was very excited to have a metalwork object by Jamnitzer in the United States.

Sara Houghteling: Wonderful. Thank you, Shira.

Shira Brisman: So, from "The Mold of the Master":

In a gilded silver plaquette by Christoph Jamnitzer, the figure of Narcissus encounters the reflection of his own form. What is mirrored is not only his visage, but a responsive body that bends forward as if rising up from the water's surface. The grounded Narcissus, older and larger than the one he yearns for, is a figure in prominent relief. Seen straight on, his strong jawline appears in profile, but when viewed from the side, his face reveals itself in full, with two eyes, a complete mouth and an entire head of hair. In Ovid, the tragic infatuate is described as sixteen, and seeming "both boy and man." Rather than interpret this in-betweenness as adolescence, Jamnitzer splits adult and youth on either side of the encounter. The grown man reaches his arms toward his likeness, which is diminutive both because it is foreshortened, but also because it appears puerile, like a child with large hands that extend in mimicking gestures. It seems less that Narcissus is catching his own gaze in a moment of optical interlock—as so many two-dimensional depictions of Ovid's telling would have it—than that he is lunging toward a version of himself that he has outgrown. Or perhaps he is stretching for the promise of a reproduction of himself as a filial fulfillment that the myth, in its condemnation of his autoeroticism, will not grant. This effect, that the gap of non-requital is also generational, is enhanced by the differing techniques used for the two figures. In a painting of the scene, an outward glance produced by pigment on surface would fix upon eyes materialized in the same manner, accentuating the tragedy of a desire that a layer of solvent cannot requite. It is Narcissus himself, once aware of what he beholds, who laments: "By a thin barrier of water we are kept apart" (this is again from *Metamorphoses*). But here in gilded silver, a body nearly fully developed in three

dimensions through a combination of parts that have been cast or raised leans towards one whose formation through delineation with incised lines entraps his legs as part of the liquid's surface. The wanting body takes on Ovid's description that he is "like a statue carved from Parian marble." The reflection of Narcissus has neither feet nor ground on which to stand. This apparition's chest and head, gently embossed, are only just beginning to rise in prominence yet they are not quite articulated as elevating beyond the shallow plane from which they are formed. Thus, a figure matured into relief pines for but cannot grasp this younger version of himself who has not yet—and will never—fully corporealize into being.

Sara Houghteling: I'm just dreaming of rushing over to the Met and seeing the object in real life, having heard you describe it. Could you give us a gloss editorially—what you're thinking about or balancing as you crafted a passage like this one that you just read for us?

Shira Brisman: I was thinking about the question of what it meant to work in high relief versus shallow relief, particularly because, as I mentioned earlier, I'm reading these metalwork objects against the text of *The New Book of Grotesques*, which is the book of etchings that Jamnitzer produced. And I think that what's interesting is that the lack of protuberance in a print is something that Jamnitzer himself calls attention to in a dedication, the dedication of his printed booklet of designs to a potential patron. And Jamnitzer refers to his images with the adjective "*schlecht*." He says, "*meine schlechte Arbeit dieses Grotteßken Werckleins*"; in Middle High German the word "*schlecht*"—which we think as perhaps meaning "bad"—meant "simple" or, literally, "flat."

So he's not saying that his work is bad; he's saying that this is low or flat work, right? Because etchings are small markings, incisions into a metal plate that's been beaten down into a thin sheet. And so this two-dimensional design on the page is a waiting being called into space, into substance through the charge of a commission, through a patron who says, I want this—I want this to be made for me. I want this to come into being. I want it to materialize as an object. And the image is something that can come into being through the power of somebody else to call it into being. That charge of a commission is the kind of background through which I'm looking and thinking through this Narcissus scene where the narrative

emphasis is really delivered through the prominence of metal that is protruding from the surface. And here I think Jamnitzer is really affirming his investment in the formation of sculptural shape as his skill, as his craft, as his property.

Sara Houghteling: I'm struck also just by perfect your description of it is, and the echoing again across time and space—of both the form and the content. In the same way that Jamnitzer has been commissioned to materialize—to make it come into form. Through your language, you're also enacting that same materialization for us.

When you write descriptions like this, are you conscious of the moves that you're making between the material object itself (the language of its cast, and it's raised, and it's these incised lines, and it's embossed), and the different kind of historical or economic connections? Do you sort of tell yourself, “This is just going to be a purely visual description or one that refers to the technique, and then I'll go into these other elements?” or is that descriptive proportion something that comes naturally as you're examining the object and transforming it into prose?

Shira Brisman: I have to say that to write this book, I really had to learn a new language. I never studied metalwork vessels. I didn't know how to look at them. And I had to break them down almost like when one breaks down a sentence: when you're first learning a language and your teacher writes a sentence on the board and says, “Where's the verb? What's the participle? Where's the subject?”

And I felt like I was doing that with these objects. I was so lucky to have colleagues in museums, curators, and conservators of metalwork objects who not only wanted to look at them with me, but in many cases were happy to take them apart, to unscrew them. I have wonderful photos of the conservators sometimes disassembling these objects to show me how many parts they worked in. It was like running exercises for myself. I would say, “Okay, so I think this is made this way. I think this is cast. I think this is chased. I think this is raised. I think this is etched.” And I did this with my colleagues at the Met. I've done it at many institutions in Europe where Jamnitzer's works are held. And I felt like I was working through all of the various kinds of manual skill that go into making these objects. But I think that level of research was the kind of diagrammatic way of thinking about it. So that's kind of the learning process as I'm learning to look at what my object *is*.

But when I sit down to write, I want to write from a place of fluency with that language, or a feeling that I've gained enough fluency in that language to write not a descriptive diagram of how the pieces fit together, but a narrative of how form bears meaning through the exercising of a craftsman's skill.

Sara Houghteling: Shira, as you speak, aware of how lucky your students are to be in your classroom, and I know that you've received several awards for your teaching. Could you talk about how teaching shapes your writing, and if there are ideas about writing the history of art that you find yourself returning to each year in the classroom, or advice you repeatedly give to your grad students?

Shira Brisman: I think my investment in the classroom is really helping students name what it means to identify a historical problem and to write a history of an object. When I give undergraduate lectures, I do so in a manner that's very different from the lectures I received. When I was an undergraduate, I enjoyed sitting in classrooms where the narratives that the professors were giving were confident, seamless, and solid foundations. I found when I started to lecture, that there were so many holes; there were so many apertures, and places of uncertainty in the stories, and in the histories that I was giving, that I didn't want to cover those over, even for undergraduates. I wanted to name them and call attention to them to give undergraduates a sense of what it means to see one's field as being open for new work, being open for new kinds of research.

So I often will point them to a controversy, to two scholars who don't agree about something, or to the overriding of an earlier truism that is now no longer the case because of some kind of research; or to a problem that I think hasn't been solved or addressed yet. In my graduate seminars, I really conceive these around topics that are unfinished for me, topics that I'm just drawn to and I don't feel that I understand yet, but I'm just beginning to formulate questions.

So, at Penn, I've taught a graduate seminar called "Scarcity in Early Modern Art." I've taught a seminar on "Nature and Labor," in which we looked at one of the most over-theorized concepts of early modern art, which is nature, and I think one of the most under-theorized, by which I

mean people writing in the period were not theorizing what artistic labor meant in as explicit a way as they were about the relationship of labor and art to nature. And this fall I'm teaching a graduate seminar called "Envisioning Abolition in Premodern Art," which takes up the matter of how premodern art is critical of systems of criminal punishment, and how art can also propose alternatives to violent and brutal forms of administering justice.

And the way that I organize my seminars is for each week, I present my students with a primary source text, a secondary source text, which is some piece of art historical writing, and then a theoretical text. And what I really want to do is make two things clear. One is how to read primary sources creatively. I love a boring bureaucratic document! I love taking a boring bureaucratic document and treating it as though it is a manual for understanding something wildly imaginative or unfamiliar to us about the period in which I'm writing.

And I want to share that perverse joy with my students. But I also want to model for them a way of reading theoretical texts, which is not to look to theory to answer questions about the premodern world, but to really look to theory to pose questions—to demand of the objects fashioned in the premodern world—to use theory to explain answers to these questions in ways that are deeply historically bound.

Sara Houghteling: On some levels, the new book on the Nuremberg goldsmith Christoph Jamnitzer seems to be a departure from your previous work on Dürer. You've talked about the change in media from printmaking to metalwork, but also turning towards the property-based elements of his work in this new book. But there also seemed to be some shared deep themes. The joyful mystery of bureaucratic documents perhaps is one of them. And so do you see the new book as part of a continuum, or more of a departure?

Shira Brisman: I think I return to the question that I posed in answer to your very first question to me about my relationship to the discipline and what drew me to it, which is: I'm interested in the ways that objects create communities and also the ways in which they can be divisive. And I think that what I have found with the metalwork vessels is that the conceit of these objects is that they are welcome cups, right? The conceit of the object is that it will be filled and passed around a table to create a

communal setting. And this is something that this drinking cup that is communally sipped from was something that not only we know that people did, but that foreigners who came to Nuremberg or to other places in Germany would complain about. In fact, I have a document in the new book by a Swedish diplomat who complains that the Germans make people drink from these cups. And he's writing, "This is unsanitary. It's disgusting!"

What I want to point to is that these objects are divisive not only because their materials tell the histories of extractive labor—my project does not take us too deeply into the site of mining; this is not a book about new world extraction or the coercion of forced labor—but it's really about how a work of craft can be fashioned as an agent of legitimacy. I'm trying to answer the question in this book: what does it mean for a work of art to make a legal claim? How does that work visually? How does it work materially? How does *form* work in the service of making a legal claim.

Sara Houghteling: That's fascinating. I very much look forward to reading that next book. In closing, could you tell us about an object or a place or a question that has your attention right now?

Shira Brisman: I'm really thinking a lot about a word, and what that word meant and how works of art worked in the service of that word in the 15th through 17th centuries. And that word is "equity." I've been really drawn to thinking about not so much how works of art and craft in the early modern period were expressions of natural philosophy, but how they were expressions of moral philosophy, how they could make comments, how they could make arguments about the distribution of resources, about *who* had access to *what*. And what I find fascinating is that the word "equity," which we think of in our day as meaning the obligation to give more to those who have less, as opposed to the word "equality," which means evenly distributing resources among all, right? Equity is about acknowledging and compensating for social unevenness.

In the early modern period, the concept of equity existed, but it was something to be preserved. You gave more to those who had more because they were "legitimately" more "deserving." I'm really interested in this principle of equity and in thinking about the ways that visual and material language can be expressions of political theory in the premodern period.

Sara Houghteling: Shira, it's been such a pleasure. Thank you so much.

Shira Brisman: I've had such a good time talking to you, Sara. I've really enjoyed it and I'm all admiration for you and your colleagues at the Clark and the work that you're doing at RAP.

Caitlin Woolsey: Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art and Writing*. For more information about this episode and links to the resources referenced in the conversation, please visit clarkart.edu/rap/podcast. This program was co-created by Caroline Fowler and myself, Caitlin Woolsey and produced by me, with music by Light Chaser, sound editing by C. J. DeGennaro, and additional support provided by Annie Jun and Sara Houghteling.

The Clark Art Institute sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these homelands by colonial settlers. A federally-recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge-Munsee community. As we learn, speak, and gather at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors, past and present, and to future generations by committing to build a more inclusive and equitable space for all.