

Transcript of Interview of Heidi Strobel by Tory Schendel Cox

Interviewee: Heidi Strobel

Interviewer: Tory Schendel Cox

Date: 03/21/2020

Location (Interviewee): Evansville, Indiana, United States of America

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Transcriber: Kathryn Jue

Abstract:

In response to COVID-19, the Evansville Museum of Arts, History and Science launched the mini-series, "Cultural Insights: Interviews in the Creative Sector," to highlight colleagues and professionals working in the same or similar field of museum professionals. Heidi A. Strobel, Ph.D., Professor of Art History, Curator of the Peters-Margedant House, Associate Dean, William L. Ridgway College of Arts and Sciences, University of Evansville shares how COVID-19 has shifted her teaching and professional experiences.

Tory Schendel Cox 0:03

Hi, my name is Tory Schendel Cox. I'm the Virginia G. Schroeder Curator of Art at the Evansville museum. And today with our telecast, we have Dr. Heidi Strobel, and Heidi, thank you so much for your time, I'm going to turn it over to you.

Heidi Strobel 0:14

Great, my pleasure. Hello, everybody, I hope you're safe and healthy and can stay at home. Um, I teach Art History at the University of Evansville, I'm in the Archaeology and Art History department. I am the art history of that. I'm also the curator of the Peters-Margedant House, which is a small house that was designed by Evansville's own Wes Peters, it's 552 square feet. It's on the campus of the University of Evansville. And the other thing that I do at U of E is that I am the Associate Dean of the William L. Ridgway School of Arts and Sciences, so I have a long title like Tory does. Um, so what I would say is I spend a lot of my time on those first two jobs, and I'm kind of a lieutenant for the third job. So when my dean asked me to do things, to follow up on things, that's what I do with that job, that's probably the easiest to explain. And the job that maybe has been the least affected by being at home. Um, the first two jobs, the job of professor and the job of curator have been profoundly affected by what's going on right now. Um, and I will add another part of my, my professional personality, I guess, is as a writer. Um, tomorrow, my manuscript was supposed to be done. It is a book that I'm writing on a textile artist named Mary Linwood, and it was supposed to be submitted to the publishers. Now, there are very few positive things about a pandemic, I would say, there aren't any really, but giving, I can give myself a lot more leeway for asking for an extension, on a manuscript script deadline when

something this profound is going on around me. So that's an important part, I think of many academics too, depending on the institution. But certainly a lot of my colleagues at the University of Evansville are also writers, studio artists, they do things outside the classroom that help them to be better inside the classroom as well. And so I'd say that part of my life has also been affected by what's going on in our world right now. And I'll talk a little bit more about that. But in a little bit, but I want to talk about the teaching first, because that's really the kind of the core of my life. So right now I have two classes that I'm trying to teach. One of them is a class that's devoted to the Peters-Margedant house. And it is a change lab class, which is an experiential type of education. And there are a lot of upper class men and women in that class. And they are working on different projects for the house. So I have somebody who's working on interior design, somebody who's working on social media, somebody who's working on landscaping, they all have their own tasks. I would say that this is the class that's been the least affected by what's going on the by the Coronavirus, because most of these students were ready to get out and be doing their own things, anyhow. I had them paired up with somebody who was kind of like a lieutenant. And now they, the only way that they can really talk to their lieutenant so to speak, is either by text or zoom or whatever. But that's, that's okay. Like that's, you know, that's a really mild imperfection in the whole scheme of things. So we made the transition to zoom pretty easily. So that's great. So I'm really heartened by the progress that I see in that area, I would say the only challenge with that is the the one student who's assigned to landscaping, because we have to figure out how to do that without getting ourselves within six feet of anybody else.

TC: 4:10

Right.

HS: 4:10

And so I'm in the process of figuring out how to do that. But I mean, I'm totally fine working six feet away from him. And with a face mask on, or whatever, you know, I I've done many things in my life as an art historian that they didn't tell me about in graduate school, including vacuuming regularly. And so I'm fine. And in fact, I like the idea of helping to landscape our house, the Peters Margedant house. So the tours have been suspended there. So that is a frustrating part of this, but I'm working with a colleague in my apartment and my assistant for the house, Jordan Hall, who's really wonderful and works full time in the admissions department at Nui UE is also my curatorial assistant to think about creative ways of, um, trying to get the Peters Margedant house out to more people, you know, so then that will, you know, involve probably at some point tik tok or something just have not gotten to that point quite yet. [Laughter] So then my other class that I've been teaching, I would say has been more challenging in terms of what's going on, I really like teaching my survey classes because I get a combination of archaeology and art history majors, so our own majors, and then students who are in there, they might be nursing, they might be theater, they might be a studio art about a bunch of different backgrounds. And it, I really like guiding them through the process of understanding art, and the different periods of art.

TC: 5:48

Yeah.

HS: 5:49

And I know some of my colleagues who I've gone to grad school with, some of them might be like, Oh, I just like to teach upper level classes. And those are fun, because you can have a different conversation. But I always feel invigorated by both, or I usually feel invigorated by both. And so I guess I've missed teaching that class in person a lot. Um, I haven't chosen zoom as the platform for that class, because I already had an online version of that class ready to go. So while I would say, physically, it was easier to transition that class to an online class, I think emotionally was more difficult because it really was so far away from what I wanted to do class.

TC: 6:30

Mmm-hmm.

HS: 6:31

And they just completed an exam this morning. And that's been also a challenge because out of 25 students, I have six internationals, four from Oman, one from Paris, and one from China. And out of those six, five have gone home. And so I've been trying to figure out how to accommodate students who are in different time zones, first of all, which isn't I mean, that's just a logistical thing. But they also don't know what their internet's gonna be like, in quarantine.

TC: 7:10

Yeah.

HS: 7:11

And so, you know, I've had to talk to some of my close friends, who are my colleagues and just say, What do you think, you know, what's the bottom line here? Do they need to be tested in exactly the same way? Or can we test them a little differently, because I want to be compassionate here. And I also don't want to drive myself crazy with trying to come up with a solution that's going to work, you know, and so that's what I would say is like, and I also just miss having that dynamic in the classroom where there are six students who are visibly from different countries, you know, that or you can hear as soon as they open their mouth, and having our, you know, the non ESL population. So I, so that's been kind of an even this morning trying to, you know, figure out what the guy in Paris, like, you need to do this, what haven't you done, like go through. So it's been that kind of stuff. That's just that is frustrating. That is the and I'm

lucky, because I had this class pretty much ready to go. I had, I taught it a couple summers ago. So I had the assignments kind of mapped out that I wanted to do. You know, and so then there's always I mean, not always, but here in, um, my situation, there's also having to juggle other, um, needs for zoom calls in the households and troubleshooting internet [Background noise] technology for children, my own. You know, and, you know, again, I'm not, you know, I've helped with that. But it's just, it's a completely different ballgame. [Background noise] You know, you find yourself, like, I was trying to solve something last night for one of the international students and, um, end of the day, but there's, you know, I felt like I needed to kind of take care of it, then. I'm tired. There's noise going on, you know, so it's that kind of, that's what I'm finding to be so challenging. So yeah, so that's, I think that's it in not really nutshell. But that's what I do. Now, I have other a few other deadlines that are out there. I'm doing. I've been asked to be a reviewer for an exam, um, on a college on the East Coast, and that's been transitioned to online and that's fine too. But it's that kind of stuff where I'm like, Okay, did I remember this is this, you know, and I like things to go according to schedule, and I'm a Type A and so this on a very basic level. It's challenging, you know, it's really kind of hitting those, you know, my Achilles heel, I'll put it that way. And just also, you know, just remember. I feel like right now there's so much email. That's what that that, you know, and that is distracting and can pull you away from grading completely away from, from, you know, from. I haven't done writing for, you know, a couple days, but it can pull you away from editing or just, you know, putting your attention completely on one thing. So, yeah.

TC: 8:46

Absolutely. Now out of curiosity, could you share what type of strategies that you've come up with or that you're able to implement to have diverse test materials?

HS: 10:38

Yes. Um, so that, actually, you will like this, because, um, because it has to do with one of the books that you that you loaned me. So I was trying to think about how to work with my students who might have unreliable internet during the quarantine. And so what I decided to do is to give them the option of, um, reading and reviewing, either Chasing Aphrodite

TC: 11:05

Mmm-hmm

HS: 11:06

And I haven't done the assignment like it's the assignment still in my head right now. Or the the Thieves of Baghdad.

TC: 11:13

Lucky!

HS: 11:14

Yeah, so and I may throw one more in there, just depending, but I think, and so I think what I'm gonna have them do is do like a summary analysis. Now, all of these students are archaeology majors, and some of them are art history majors as well, or minors. So this is particularly relevant. I'm lucky in that, right?

TC: 11:36

Yeah

HS: 11:37

So I can say, okay, yes, this isn't memorizing [sigh] what the Council of Trent said about Caravaggio.

TC: 11:45

Right

HS: 11:46

Which is what is technically what I should be focusing on. But again, what is what's the greater good here. They're back home. I don't know what their internet is like, I want to give them an assignment that's relevant. I want to give them something. And in fact, that's probably going to take longer than the actual exam. But it gives gives me some flexibility gives them and then and then also, you know, their English is really pretty good. But they can get those books in Arabic, if they want, you know, they can get an Arabic version of that. And that'll be easier for them. So that's what I've landed on after talking to my colleague, Jenny Ebeling, in the department, because she has a class that's it's a similar situation. And she didn't she didn't, that was not her solution. But that was the solution that I came up with. Because it just seemed like for me, for them for this particular class for this lower level class. That that was a substitution that I was absolutely fine with. So and it's also good, too, because I mean, it's teaching if they choose the the Thieves of Baghdad, then they're choosing to research something that's close to where they're from, you know, closer than Indiana.

TC: 13:11

Yeah.

HS: 13:12

So, yeah.

TC: 13:13

There's a lot of great supplementary materials with that, too. So if you get by curious by anyways,

HS: 13:19

Yeah.

TC: 13:20

I'm just a huge fan of that book. I really am.

HS: 13:22

Yeah, yeah. Well, and also, Jenny Ebeling, introduced him at a conference a couple years ago at an ASOR conference, because I was telling her about the book. And I said, I was almost done. And I said, Tori would probably let me borrow it or loan it to you. Yeah. So she said, Do you know that he was at an ASOR conference, so American Society for Oriental Research, and, um, old fashioned name, but she is really involved. And she's been on the board of a store. And she had great things to say about him. And she said that he stuck around at the conference, he gave the keynote. And then he stuck around the conference for a couple days afterwards, and was really good about working with the people at the conference and not removing himself from the conference once you've given his talk.

TC: 14:07

Mmm-hmm

HS: 14:07

So, um, yeah, so I thought that that was a solution that I was totally fine with. And, um, it wasn't, I think I came up with it, but it was just, I just talked it through with her.

TC: 14:24

Mmm-hmm.

HS: 14:25

And so I'm fortunate, I guess, to that's another part of my, um, I think sanity keeping my sanity here is that I'm able to kind of talk my way through some of these assignments with some of my colleagues here and some of my colleagues, you know, in different institutions. Whether I'm texting with them or facetimeing, or whatever. So, yeah, so that's, that's one strategy. Um, I just, you know, it's hard because you want to do really well and you want to maintain authority, and I feel like I'm still learning how to use zoom. So when I start my zoom class in an hour, I can only imagine how much fumbling I'm going to do. So that's I guess, it's not an assignment that I've come up with. But it's something of just a realization I've had to make that I, this is going to be so imperfect and so not not that I'm perfect in the classroom, but it's going to be so unlike the way I'd prefer to deliver this information. So.

TC: 15:23

That makes sense.

HS: 15:25

Yeah.

TC: 15:25

You put your heart and soul into what you do like it just in the mind. It's it has to be perfect. And to have this uproot of just uncertainty come in. It's, it's crazy.

HS: 15:37

Yeah, and, you know, we start advising next week. Yeah, it's next week, we start advising, and, you know, are we going to be back in the classroom in the fall? You know, because we could have, that's some of the stuff that if I think about it too much, it's gonna drive me nuts. Because, um, you know, hopefully, the quarantine will be lengthy enough here to get us out of danger. And I'm very thankful to be I mean, not that there isn't Corona in Indiana, but I'm very thankful to be where we are right now. And to be able to do things like, you know, to quarantine, but, you know, there's a, we don't know how this, we know that this virus mutates. And so, are we going to have another uptick in it in the summertime? And does that mean, then we will be online again, the fall, you know, which I know that I will have more time to so the challenge, I would say, for a lot of people at UE, and I'm speaking more on behalf of I mean, I was in a fortunate place to, but was to transition so quickly.

TC: 16:51

Yeah.

HS: 16:51

So, you know, how do you transition a class? You know, you helped us a couple weeks ago with my colleague, Dennis Malfatti, you were so kind to host us Tory at the museum? You know, how do you transition a class like that is a choral class and ensemble class to online? You know, how do you it's hard to do with theatre to, you know, how do you do that. And so we didn't have a lot of time to do that. I mean, the positive thing about if we go online in the fall, we should know, with more time, we should have more time to prepare for this. So. So I think that that that is a pressing concern as well. But yeah, that's another kind of component of being a faculty member right now, I would say, and things like conferences, you know, obviously conferences, and for you too, have been canceled. And that's, that's okay. But you know, that's, for a lot of us academics, that's often where we get and museum professionals. That's where we get our kind of, oh, get to see our friends, we get to present our research. And that's, you know, that can be transitioned to zoom. It's just not the same thing.

TC: 18:00

Right.

HS: 18:02

Yeah.

TC: 18:02

Totally. It's, um. Why I like the conferences so much is yes, you get the newest information, what's going on your field to the conference topic, but it's an opportunity for you to get revitalized as a professional.

HS: 18:16

Yes, yes. I feel like electric when I'm there, like I feel electrified. It's hard for me to sleep while I'm there. You know, I just feel really like, I get to see and hear about all this cool stuff. And, you know, yeah, so that's, that's a frustration. I will also say there was another assignment. And that was kind of, I was bummed about this. But I had an assignment for my my lower level class, the one with a lot of internationals, and it was meant to compare work of art they could see in person to a work of art that was in their textbook, and it was a formal analysis paper, you know. And you and I had just been, I've just been at the museum and I've taken pictures of works of art

in the museum, and I was I had just shown them right before spring break. And I'm like, here are all kinds of options you could write on here at the Evansville Museum. And I showed them the Carol Walker, I showed them who's the I'm forgetting his name, the guy who did the, the kind of the piece the riff on Caravaggio, that's, that's the one with the woman -

TC: Ernest Vincent Wood III.

HS: 19:28

Yes, I was thinking, Will, Will, I couldn't. So I mean, I showed them that piece I showed them, um, some other ones that we looked at and so I was really excited about them going and seeing something in person and so that's had to be transitioned, you know, and I don't usually like saying yes, it's okay. If the other work of artists, something that you see online

TC: Mmm-hmm

HS: 19:51

That I don't know what else to do. And I mean, I said to them, You can, you can do that or you can go out and you might have art in your house. You can use or you can do it with architecture, because you can certainly get out and look at buildings and things like that. So

TC: 20:05

Mmm-hmm.

HS: 20:05

Anyhow, so that's my other kind of assignment that I've had to tweak for this and things like presentations to like, it's just not the same. But it'll have to be really imperfect and have people recording their voices. And that's just going to have to be how it is.

TC: 20:21

Yeah, absolutely. Luckily, it's a free technology. So I'm grateful to zoom to even letting us do something like this. So.

HS: 20:28

I know, I know.

TC: 20:29

Yeah.

HS: 20:29

That's true. That's true. So yeah, so those have been kind of the challenges that we've encountered, I think. And again, I'm in a fortunate place, I have colleagues that UE who have over 50, advisees, you know, and they would normally meet with each of these advisors for a half an hour. So, um, my hats go off to those colleagues, because they're doing, you know, they're doing a Herculean thing, and now they're doing it in a different format, and probably stumbling a little bit, you know, with learning that format. So.

TC: 21:06

Absolutely. Yeah. Well, is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

HS: 21:12

Um, I don't think so. Just support, you know, I mean, I'm preaching to the choir. But, you know, when we all get to a position where we are, you know, able to get out of our houses and make donations, whether, you know, monetary or otherwise, just, you know, please support our cultural institutions, small, medium, and large. And I'm really grateful to Tory to have an opportunity to speak with you all today.

TC: 21:39

Oh, absolutely. We appreciate it to experience, I thank you for your time, this is great insight. And it's interesting to see how our academic community is transitioning to and getting more insight what that looks like. So I know that I've spoken with other academics, and it'll be a good way for us to talk about what's going on and how we can make these transitions and be successful. So that if we do have to prolong it, like you said, there is time to prepare, but at least we've had a little bit of trial and error period. So it will be appreciated.

HS: 22:08

Yeah, I think I mean, that's been the conversation at the upper levels, like how do we pivot next, like if this happens again, you know, and we were our timing was lucky and that we were on spring break when this happened. Well, when the quarantine time, right, because I think we could come see it coming for a while. And I feel like I think it was like two weeks ago. Yeah, I mean, a little bit after I saw you last it was that's when it really tightened. And so we could, you know, some of us could could, I mean, we had a little bit of lead time, but we didn't have the

kind of lead time that you really need to make a class successful. And then there are I mean, I think of our adjuncts, too, right. So I'm, again, fortunate in that. I've been at the University of Evansville for 16 years. And I have, you know, I'm at the midpoint of my career now. I'm not at the beginning. So I have this kind of, stockpile of experiences of different classes and things like that. And,

TC: 23:14

Mmm-hmm.

HS: 23:15

Again, I have the utmost admiration for people who are doing this for a lot less money, you know, and who have a lot less experience and who needs to go to conferences in order to get a job like I am, you know, and I, I think that that my colleagues are doing a pretty good job of creating those kinds of virtual places that that can happen. In fact, Jenny Ebeling, came up with a really good idea for our alumni. And I love this idea. So we have a pretty vocal alumni, Facebook and Instagram group. And she's having one of our alums who lives in Boston now, organize virtual panels, things like you know, what to do after graduate school, what to do if you go into something other than archaeology, or art history, or classical studies. Um, adventures, you know, in the field adventures in the museum. And so these are things and I think that when we're in this period of seclusion, people are thirsty for this kind of contact, right? Because you're sick of seeing the same people.

TC: 24:18

Yeah. [Laughter]

HS: 24:20

You again? Oh, right, you live here. Yeah, so I, you know, there, if we can be those as positives coming out of this. I guess there are some positives in that. We have. No, that's a type of connection that maybe this wouldn't have happened if we weren't stuck at home.

TC: 24:40

Absolutely.

HS: 24:42

Yeah.

TC: 24:42

All about the silver lining to the end of the day.

HS: 24:45

Trying. I'm trying. [Laughter]

TC: 24:48

Absolutely. Heidi, we definitely appreciate your time. Seriously. Thank you so much for spending your afternoon to share right before class to speak with us and on behalf of our viewers, this is a Evansville museum recording. Thank you again for your time.

HS: 25:02

Thanks Tori.

TC: 25:03

See ya.