

Transcript of Interview with Donna Canada-Smith by Tori Schendel Cox

Interviewee: Donna Canada-Smith

Interviewer: Tori Schendel Cox

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Location (Interviewer): Evansville, Indiana

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.

Donna Canada-Smith, 12th Grade Dean, English and French Teacher, Bentley School in Lafayette, California

Tori Schendel Cox 00:00

Hi, my name is Torie Schendel Cox. I'm the Virginia G. Schroeder Curator of Art the Evansville Museum. And today we have Donna Candace Smith for our telecommunication, and Donna, I'm gonna hand it over to you.

Donna Canada-Smith 00:10

Hi, Tori. Thanks so much for having me today. I'm going to talk a little bit about who I am and what I do, and tell you guys a little bit about what I'm doing in my classes. So, I teach high school English and French at the Bentley Upper School in Lafayette, California. I'm also the 12th grade Dean. And I really love teaching English and French together because it allows me to draw from my training and my PhD work in French studies. And ever since my grad school work, I have loved forging interdisciplinary connections between what I'm researching and what I'm teaching to enrich the perspective from which we're looking at a particular subject. Like many educators out there, we're all figuring out what it means to teach classes remotely and how to best do so during this difficult time, so thought I'd share with you some of the resources that I'm using in my classroom that have helped to liven the discussions.

Tori Schendel Cox 01:10

Great.

Donna Canada-Smith 01:11

So right now, in my French classes, I'm teaching a unit on Louis XIV, and I rely heavily on the arts for this unit. I am so grateful to all of the museums and institutions that have made a lot of their material available to the public sector and to educators because it's a game changer in the classroom. Particularly the French National Library, the Bibliotech Nasional has a wealth of images, text, and audio on Louis XIV, which allows students to view primary source material to zoom in on it and really see those rich details that are included in artworks from the 17th century. Then they can listen to audio and read text that's been put on there to live in the experience, much like they would a museum label if they were

seeing this in person. And it's just a really fantastic way for students to have choice in what they're what they're seeing and really feel like they're leaving their home for a little bit to explore some of the riches that are- that are out there in the world. From that virtual maps and tours and materials, models of Versailles in the Louve have been key to illustrating this time period and keeping it alive. Students really get the opportunity to experience all of this wonderful material, I think, in the most authentic way possible, given the circumstances right now. And I feel like this was really noticeable when students presented work on architects such as Louis Laveau, a 17th century architect, Charles Lucca, and then Louie the 14th gardener, Andre Le Notre; they were able to really have brought in primary source material into their work. And, you know, if you're doing that at the ages of 14 to 18, I think you're doing something pretty awesome.

Tori Schendel Cox 03:13

[laughter] Yeah.

Donna Canada-Smith 03:14

I'm really, really proud of them. I also was gonna tell you a little bit about the English seminar I'm teaching to juniors and seniors this year, called art and literature. And let me tell you, I wish I had a whole year to teach this because there's so much you can do with- with the subject. Um, so I'll tell you a little bit about what we're doing this trimester. We're really looking at the intersection between words and images. And we're using this to explore how art is discussed in literature. So, we're looking at questions like, how is a masterpiece defined, and who gets to make that designation, who gets to determine what- whether something is a masterpiece or not. And we're looking at a lot of how art and literature come together to express the intricacies of human emotion. And then in our final unit, we're looking at questions and issues of provenance, which are issues that are so topical in the museum world today. So we started off the year by defining the word, 'art,' and I think students at first blush thought this was going to be a really easy assignment. So, a word they use all the time, you know, they see it in their everyday life. But they pretty quickly began to realize just how complex this term is, when you're really trying to pin down how people are using it and how it can be used differently in different contexts. And I was so impressed with the way that they approached this task. And hopefully we'll get to hear a little bit about that later from the students themselves because they looked at the- beyond the material aspects of what consists of art, the material aspects of an artwork, and they explored the emotional, the financial, and the social implications and influences that change how one can understand, appreciate and define art. And this allowed them to forge really nuanced ideas around this concept and then later translate those in different ways based on the literature we're reading. So ultimately, students created their own video essays. Yay, digital platforms.

Tori Schendel Cox 05:23

Yeah. [laughs]

Donna Canada-Smith 05:24

On the value of art. And one of the common questions that came out of this was, “Who gets to decide the value of art? Whether it be the social value, the personal value, or the emotional value.” And students really took the time to explore, you know, what does art mean to them as people? What does art mean to those who they interact with on a regular basis? And then more largely, “Is this the same for society as a whole, and what makes it different?” And a lot of what they looked at was the emotional connection that you might have to appease; how memory plays into this and nostalgia. And they came up with some really fascinating ideas around that. So, I'm hoping to share some of those with you here in a little bit. And then for the rest of the trimester, we're going to be focusing on questions and issues around provenance. Students who have been reading a novel where they learn about a single painting and how it moved between different ownership. And, not only, you know, whether someone gifted it or purchased it, or it was loaned, but really the emotional connections and how those transcended the sell gift loan of the piece. And this is really preparing us for a look at Edmund De Waal, the Hare with Amber Eyes, where we'll get into issues of provenance and talk about how those are still affecting the museum world in different countries and societies today. And then lastly, we'll look at the role of the artist and their relationship to the art that they produce and come back full circle to this definition of art. How does that definition change when art is released into the world and the viewer sees it? How does that change from the intent of the artist? So yeah, that's us.

Tori Schendel Cox 07:17

Wow, so can we take that class too?

Donna Canada-Smith 07:20

I would love that. [both laugh]

Tori Schendel Cox 07:22

Wow, like I got like, curatorial goosebumps, like, ah, you can just feel it in the heart because that is pretty much the embodiment the human existence with having that written document, that visual representation of what this looks like and getting to study that and intimate level. How many students do you have in this class, out of curiosity?

Donna Canada-Smith 07:41

So, I teach one section of the seminar. So right now, I just have 17 students, and they're doing brilliant work. I couldn't be more proud.

Tori Schendel Cox 07:50

Wow, yeah. Well, yeah. [laughs] Because I have a friend who teaches at the university level, and that's a junior senior seminar for her. So, I think it's just absolutely outstanding that when you give opportunities like that to younger- younger students, and you watch them thrive, I mean, it's just gonna set them up for success. Even if they don't study art, it's- it's really, that's going to be a new appreciation and understanding the complex literature, analytical skills and being able to dive into that “so what.”

Donna Canada-Smith 08:20

Absolutely, I really hope at the end of this, you know, whether they become art historians or- or scientists that they can see the connections, with art to everything that they study, whether it be in math, science, history, English, you know, you name it. There are ways that all of these things intersect and come together in a really beautiful way.

Tori Schendel Cox 08:42

Oh, absolutely. Out of curiosity, do you have a favorite piece of literature and corresponding artwork that you're teaching right now?

Donna Canada-Smith 08:49

Oh, that's a great question. Um, I really love the first play that we teach. It's a play called "Art" written by Yasmina Raisa, and it explores the friendships of three individuals and how all of that changes when one of the individuals purchases a piece of modern art. And I don't know that it's necessarily meant to be super humorous, although there are humorous moments to it, but just the back and forth of how one of the characters despises the piece while the other person loves it and- and all of the conversations there, and I find it to be really interesting to read, discuss, and dissect.

Tori Schendel Cox 09:36

Was there corresponding artwork to that?

Donna Canada-Smith 09:38

Not as such. There is an artwork that is mentioned within it. Um, but I think that one could take this reading and go out to, you know, any, any museum and kind of find connections with it with the art that people are viewing. In one of the other texts that we're reading, it's about Vermeer, predominantly. But I really enjoy the way that the author in- interjects different pieces of art into the conversation where you can go and look up that piece of art and then see how the character is being characterized and compare the image you had in your head with the painting that the author is referencing. And I think that's another really interesting connection between the words and the image and kind of challenges our preconceived notions of the way that things should look, based on our reading, so...

Tori Schendel Cox 10:33

Oh, absolutely. So out of your personal opinion and experience, what is your definition of art?

Donna Canada-Smith 10:41

That's a great question, too, Tori. [both laugh] Giving me all the hard ones. I think art can be anything, I think it can be anything that gives you a feeling of joy, of wonderment, of curiosity. Um, something that you can engage with that, that transcends sort of the normal everyday object, which I don't mean to suggest that the everyday object can't be art, but- but something that makes you think about it a little bit

more, and pursue it further. Just thinking of, you know, all the different museums that we have here in the Bay Area, you know, and all of the different types of art that they house just connecting to those objects or even too, you know, a piece of music or, or a visual art, performance, just something that you can connect to as a human being and maybe feel something a little bit different than you do going about your- your every day.

Tori Schendel Cox 11:46

And that's definitely what enriches our existence, I think, and that's why our institutions are important.

Donna Canada-Smith 11:53

Absolutely, 100%. It's that human connection.

Tori Schendel Cox 11:57

Well, that is it. Is there anything else you'd like to share with our viewers today?

Donna Canada-Smith 12:01

No, but thank you so much for- for having me. Teachers, I hope that if some of you are out there watching, that you find some value in these resources and ways to use them in your classrooms, and really just a big thank you to all of the museums out there for- for helping us educators by making these available.

Tori Schendel Cox 12:23

Oh, absolutely. Well, Donna, thank you so much for your time, and just remember, this is an Evansville Museum recording, and we hope to see you soon, and we'll be keeping tabs, and we'd love to learn more about your coursework with that correspond in literature, the word and artwork, so don't be a stranger.

Donna Canada-Smith 12:37

Thank you, Tori.