

Joan Kjaer:

Hello, and welcome to WorldCanvass from University of Iowa International Programs. I'm Joan Kjaer, and we're here in MERGE in downtown Iowa City. Thank you all for joining us tonight.

Joan Kjaer:

The topic of tonight's program is the future of museums and it's an intriguing subject for everyone who enjoys visiting museums, galleries, libraries or other spaces where archival and historical collections are held. We go to these amazing spaces, but sometimes we don't think or know much about how and why they're organized or laid out as they are. We have a terrific collection of guests tonight who will take us behind the scenes and give us insight into just how galleries, libraries, archives, and museums capture the essence of the cultural moment and reinvent themselves as expectations change.

Joan Kjaer:

I'm pleased to welcome Katherine Wilson and Liz Crooks to the conversation. Katherine Wilson is the manager of collections and exhibitions at the University of Iowa Stanley Museum of Art. Thank you for being here, Katherine.

Katherine Wilson:

Thank you for having me.

Joan Kjaer:

And thank you especially for coming this evening on rather short notice. Lauren Lessing wasn't well tonight, so thank you for taking her place.

Katherine Wilson:

No problem.

Joan Kjaer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative), and Liz Crooks is just next to me and she's the director of the University of Iowa Pentacrest Museums. So Katherine, I think I'll start with you and get things rolling. Like everything else in life, museums change and so do the needs and the desires of the people they aim to serve. After being without a permanent home for the collection since the floods in 2008, we've now broken ground in the new building for the university's Stanley Museum of Art, and it must be very exciting for all of you working at the museum.

Katherine Wilson:

We're thrilled.

Joan Kjaer:

Yeah, yeah.

Katherine Wilson:

It's happening.

Joan Kjaer:

Yeah, yeah, and the expected date for the opening is?

Katherine Wilson:

Oh, of all the things, fall 2022.

Joan Kjaer:

Great, great, not too long to wait considering how long it's been.

Katherine Wilson:

It's on my Excel sheet.

Joan Kjaer:

No problem. So tell us a little bit about this new building and what it might allow you to do, both in the display of the art objects and the paintings, and then also gathering spaces for visitors.

Katherine Wilson:

Yes. So the new museum is going to be adjacent to the main library, the university's main library, and the ground floor will be our lobby and event space where we will have programs, lectures, that sort of thing. Then, on the second floor we have all galleries, and we are currently working on picking out what's going to go into those galleries, which is exciting that we're at that point, and then on the third floor we have administrative offices, collection, storage, and then, too, we have an open storage, which is for display of objects that are fairly tightly spaced. Museums call it open storage. It's, that's what, and then we have a visual classroom, which is where we'll have classes come in and they can request to see art and they'll put it on display. So students will get a one on one interaction with the art, which is something we currently do, but it'll be a lot easier having the whole collection together.

Joan Kjaer:

Well, some of us listening to the program were in the prior Museum of Art and there were a lot of spaces there for contemplation. You could sort of walk the gallery space and you would feel a lot of openness around you. Will this be-

Katherine Wilson:

I think it will have a lot of open feeling to it. The design of the galleries is so that we can really make each exhibition fit the space and be able to instill an open feeling in each area. We're really thrilled. We're really thrilled about this new space and we're excited to see all the different ways that we can activate the space.

Joan Kjaer:

So one of the questions I thought we would sort of really try to embrace at the beginning of the program and then touch on throughout is what is the museum of the 21st century will be like? When I say "museum," it could really be any kind of museum, any kind of public archive where you expect to have visitors. Is there a difference in the way we think about a museum in 2020 from the way we would have thought about it a hundred years ago?

Katherine Wilson:

I think there definitely is one thing that I think museums have always attempted to do, but it's not been easy to do, is to provide access to the collections, and now that we can have our collections online, people can see what sort of objects we have. They are able then to know that, "I want to go to Iowa and I want to see these pieces," and because of the internet we're able to get all of that information out to people. I think access--the 21st century's all about access. If you're not providing your users with access to your collection physically, digitally, or any other way, you're not really a museum.

Liz Crooks:

That's 100% correct. Yeah. The digital age has really changed the ways in which people expect to interact with museums or these sorts of GLAM spaces. They expect that accessibility, and they should.

Joan Kjaer:

Yes.

Joan Kjaer:

Yeah. Well, I think some people might think, "Oh, well, if I can see it online, I don't have to go all the way to the Stanley Museum to see this in person. I can just look and see what's online," but that's not the way it's working out in real life.

Katherine Wilson:

No. I would say that having digital access means that more people know about the work they want to see, and other museums want to borrow that work. It makes it a lot easier to know what you're looking for and you can decide if you need to go see something. I think our loan requests from other museums have gone up dramatically with our collections being online. I don't think that digital representations of our collections have inhibited us in any way as far as our importance as a museum.

Liz Crooks:

And at the Museum of Natural History, that digital access allows researchers to find our collection. So if you're a researcher who was looking at changes in Eastern and Western meadowlarks over the last 150 years, you know that we have vast numbers of both from the late 1800s, and you can contact us and either request to come in and access them or we do loan objects, specimens to other museums. We're a living database on time machine, so there's so much information that people can get from those objects that you can't always make it accessible online, and we also can't imagine how people will use our objects in another 150 years. So, it's really exciting to see that unfold.

Liz Crooks:

One of the things I like about being part of GLAM, the Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums group on campus, is that we can talk about how we have made our collections accessible. How can we do it in a cohesive fashion so that there's ideally, one day, a one stop shop where someone can come to the University of Iowa and look up whatever it is that they're researching and know who has access, or who has that in their collection and how they would access it? Ethnographic objects, for example, are held in collections all over campus. So if you're looking at a particular ethnographic group, the art museum may have some objects. We may have some objects, the office of the state archeologist may have some objects. So you know, "Oh, if I make a trip there, I'm going to want to look at all of these things."

Joan Kjaer:

So is there currently a resource, a single resource at the university?

Liz Crooks:

No. Would you like to help make that happen, Joan?

Joan Kjaer:

Yes.

Liz Crooks:

I can send you our meeting schedule.

Katherine Wilson:

What we do have currently is the libraries have the Iowa digital library, and our collection has been on that, so, and I think we get a ton of traffic because it's easy for people to search the library's website, and then the results also come up on Google. So because we have that connection with the library, it really helps both of us, the libraries and the art museum, as far as being able to support users.

Liz Crooks:

And that's something that the museums--the Museum of Natural History, in particular--have started to, a place we've started to upload our images and objects to as well. We have things on biological research databases all around, but not on one university site, so that would be a nice hub. Absolutely.

Joan Kjaer:

Yeah. Well, I know one of the things that the Museum of Art has been involved in intensely since the very beginning is education K-12 schools.

Liz Crooks:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Joan Kjaer:

Do you, I know that kids come into the Museum of Natural History and adore the place.

Liz Crooks:

Yes.

Joan Kjaer:

Do you also-

Liz Crooks:

Yes, yes, thousands of them every year.

Joan Kjaer:

Yeah, yeah. These educational outreach programs, will they be continuing? I mean, is this going to continue to be important in the future?

Liz Crooks:

Yes. We always, we will always be a home to a number of K-12 activities. One of the more exciting things that we're doing now is expanding and targeting undergraduates with our programming and our activities as well as integrating ourselves into classrooms, because a lot of our students now have grown up going to museums, have been to a number of activities. They expect these kinds of things, and so are more comfortable in a museum setting.

Joan Kjaer:

What has been new? You've both been working in the museum setting for a long time. As you look back over the years, you've been doing the work.... What are the new kinds of questions you get from visitors, from patrons, from people who are helping you raise money to sustain the museums? What are the concerns coming in from the public or the desires?

Katherine Wilson:

For the art world, it's always changing as far as what the best practices are regarding art that you've collected and how, did we do it ethically, should we rethink how we collect art from around the world, what do we do with something that is not, doesn't seem like we got it in the best sort of way? So those questions are evolving and changing constantly, and people are very interested in what's happening and what is the current thought and what are we going to do about it? What are we going to be able to say that we're good stewards of these collections?

Liz Crooks:

Yeah, I would agree. People are very interested in the context in which an object came from, and particularly in the last 20 years with repatriation of Native American objects. That's really raised people's awareness, and the Museum of Natural History, it was founded in 1857. Collecting practices have changed. We no longer send graduate students out for two years to the Northwest Territory and tell them, "Bring back whatever you think is interesting." So we do have some really challenging stories to tell, but I think that that's okay too. We need to talk about that and not hide those things.

Liz Crooks:

It would be my dream at some point to have a symposium that looked at the history of the ethics of collecting and how they've changed, and you can get a feel for that in some sense when you walk through our mammal gallery. We have-- exhibitions have changed throughout the years and it's very much reflected. Collecting practices have shaped that. So, I'd really enjoy having a look at it, and we're not unique in that. All museums are dealing with that.

Joan Kjaer:

Yeah, right, right.

Liz Crooks:

And they're good questions to ask. People should be asking them.

Joan Kjaer:

Uh-huh (affirmative), and I suppose with each object, the ethical, there may be the same ethical question as an overarching question, but for each individual piece, there may be a different rationale that would help you decide what you do. Finances for these museums.....is the financial stability always, always an issue?

Liz Crooks:

I think about that every day.

Joan Kjaer:

Yeah.

Liz Crooks:

Every day.

Katherine Wilson:

Yeah.

Liz Crooks:

All day.

Joan Kjaer:

Yeah.

Liz Crooks:

I'm going to invite you to my development meetings.

Joan Kjaer:

Right. But, so I suppose that it naturally follows that the greater community connection you can have, the greater accessibility you can give people, the more you sort of prove your value to the larger community, the better off you are?

Liz Crooks:

Absolutely.

Katherine Wilson:

Yes.

Liz Crooks:

Yeah.

Katherine Wilson:

If we're not valuable, we won't stay open, and that is something that we think about daily, and, "How can we be more accessible? Who do we want to reach? How can we reach them?" And trying to work with communities rather than imposing, "I bet you really want to know about this," when we say....
"We're going to help you. Let's-"

Liz Crooks:

"We're going to show you, teach you."

Katherine Wilson:

"We're going to show you, teach you," and now the thought is, "How about have the communities come to us and tell us what they want, and then how we can work together?"

Liz Crooks:

For us at the Stanley also, it's about storytelling. It's letting people know all of the amazing things that happen in the museum that they may have no idea all of those things, that our poetry class has come in and are using our mammal collections in storage as prompts for poetry. That's a fun class to tag along with, because when you open up a drawer, the a reaction is amazing, but those are the important things for people to understand. Particularly as a university museum, we're here first and foremost for our students and our campus community, and then our larger statewide community, and then circles out from that. So, that's a fun story to tell.

Joan Kjaer:

Oh, yeah. Yeah. Well, and one of the other stories that, of course, the university has been telling for a long time and will, I'm sure, forever is the story of the Jackson Pollock painting, and, of course, it has not had its home here for some time, but it will come back. Yeah. But yeah, it's a good calling card. You go around the world with painting like that and-

Katherine Wilson:

We're able to talk to people about the logistics of that. It's-- the logistics to move Mural is amazingly difficult, and to be able to go and talk to different museums and figure out how they would deal with physically getting the painting into their building is fascinating, and we find out new things pretty much every museum we go to. Then, we can share that with our public, which that sort of thing is fascinating.

Joan Kjaer:

Yeah, and a painting like that, which, you know, the very brief version of the story, you can correct me if I'm wrong, but given by Peggy Guggenheim, not really recognized for some time as being, as having the impact that it currently has, and hence the international reputation.

Katherine Wilson:

Yes.

Joan Kjaer:

I suspect there are other things like this that you become aware of in the collection that maybe have been sort of sitting on a dusty shelf or really not looked at for a long time, and then you recognize that maybe because of something else happening in the art world, "We have one of those pieces."

Katherine Wilson:

Yes. Mural came to the University of Iowa because we were the only museum who would pay the \$75 to ship it. That is why we have Mural. So it wasn't valued as much at first, and we have other collections that we've acquired fairly recently that weren't valued particularly highly, and now we get requests from all over the world to borrow pieces from this collection, and if you had asked me, I would have said, "Never. No one's going to be interested in," but the world's tastes change.

Joan Kjaer:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, and similar stories I suppose?

Liz Crooks:

Oh, absolutely. We have over 130,000 objects in our collections between the two museums, and there's always something that you find. A huge tropical fish that one of the former presidents of the university caught in the late 1800s, and it was taxidermied. He never paid the bill, so we still have the fish. So, that's kind of cool. It's really ugly, though, and it's huge, so maybe his wife spoke up and that's why we still have the fish. I don't know.

Katherine Wilson:

Yeah.

Liz Crooks:

But yeah, there are those stories everywhere in every drawer that we open, everything that we find. We had a student working with our mussel collection, shells, not human. We don't have any of those, but our mussel shell collection and she spent an entire summer cleaning off all of the coal dust and tar deposits, because the building used to be heated with and lit with coal. So cleaning all of these absolutely amazing shells that were from the Iowa or, yes, the Iowa River and the Mississippi River, species that don't exist anymore, and they're gorgeous and their stories are incredible. To find all of the shells that were collected and were used as button blanks, and so they have all of the button holes punched in them, it's amazing. There are amazing things in our walls. So, it's a lot of fun.

Joan Kjaer:

What is the split between youth visitors, kids connected with school visits, and the general public at the Museum of Natural History?

Liz Crooks:

Ours annually is probably 60/40, 40% youth groups, kids, summer camps.

Joan Kjaer:

Yeah, yeah.

Liz Crooks:

We do a lot of things in the summer with summer camps, and then 60% families, more family oriented or students who are in for classes or come as a, it's a sanctuary for them during study times. So, it also depends a lot on the exhibits that we have open, so that can really skew things.

Joan Kjaer:

Some years ago you created a, is it a biosphere?

Liz Crooks:

Yes, the Biosphere Discovery Hub.

Joan Kjaer:

Yeah.

Liz Crooks:

Yes.

Joan Kjaer:

Fabulous.

Liz Crooks:

It's amazing. Yes, it's really a very special place that looks at the biodiversity of our state and how it's changed over since the introduction of intensive agriculture in our world.

Joan Kjaer:

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Well, you have mentioned earlier in the discussion a couple of times, GLAM, and it stands for Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums. But this GLAM initiative here on campus, is it formalizing in some way the sort of casual partnerships and connections that had always existed, but this is a much more intentional?

Katherine Wilson:

Oh, yes, absolutely.

Joan Kjaer:

Yeah, yeah.

Katherine Wilson:

For the art museum, we've worked very closely with the libraries more and more. We are working on getting more students involved across the different museums and the libraries. We're trying to share, and just being able to do this in a methodical way, when we, when the GLAM initiative started, our directors didn't think we collaborated very much, but we collaborated more than they thought.

Liz Crooks:

Yes.

Katherine Wilson:

So it was a lot of formalizing the relationships and thinking more strategically about how we can help each other succeed.

Liz Crooks:

The resources that we could share, we all have the same concerns and challenges too. They may take different forms, but mostly they're all the same. How can we speak together with one voice, all of these different groups on campus who are working towards similar goals, and help advance each other's causes? For me, that one voice of advocacy has been the most rewarding part of the endeavor. I know there've been a lot of other really funny little things that have happened.

Liz Crooks:

We had exhibition walls that we didn't use anymore and a call came out from the libraries, "Does anybody have exhibition walls? We need some." And, "Why, yes, we do. When would you like to come pick them up?" They were exactly the same brand and size as the ones that they needed. So being able, and they're really expensive. It's not like, and hard to get. You can't run to the convenience store and pick them up. So to be able to share those kinds of things and the expertise, there is a vast body of knowledge on this campus, and to be able to tap into that so easily is wonderful.

Joan Kjaer:

Well, I think the future looks pretty bright with you guys working on these things here, and regarding these next few years, is there any big, big thing that's going to happen prior to the opening of the museum? I mean, have you got something special coming up? I know there's a symposium happening in, I think, March related to, we'll hear about that later on, related to the future of museums, and there'll be much deeper conversation I guess there, but what are the big things you look forward to?

Liz Crooks:

I have a goal at the Museum of Natural History to be able to conserve and restore our Laysan Island cyclorama.

Joan Kjaer:

Oh, great.

Liz Crooks:

It has been relatively untouched since it went in in 1914 and its condition is very precarious, and we don't have a lot of time to save it before it's past the point of no repair. So, personally, as the director now, that's one of my main goals-- to undertake that fundraising project and then also to start that work.

Joan Kjaer:

Is there an opportunity for volunteers to help once the physical part of that begins?

Liz Crooks:

Probably not.

Joan Kjaer:

Yeah.

Liz Crooks:

It's very, there are only a few people in the world who have the skill set necessary, because again, we're talking about objects that were collected 110 years ago and have been exposed to all of the elements, and the coal dust, and the soot and all of those things. They're seabirds, so they're already a little oily, and so they just, even now, even today, it's amazing, they just suck that stuff right up. So it's a very special skillset, and again, the mural that's behind it has to be restored and that's a whole 'nother set of skills. Yeah, but it will be really exciting.

Katherine Wilson:

Yeah, and for me, as the collections manager, the next two years will be moving the collection back from Davenport, so that's all I'm thinking. [crosstalk 00:25:03].

Joan Kjaer:

Well, I can't thank you enough, Katherine and Liz, for starting us off tonight. I really appreciate it very much, and good luck-

Liz Crooks:

Thank you for having us.

Joan Kjaer:

Good luck with all of this. You bet, and to all of you, we'll be back with part two of this program in just a moment. Thank you.