

Joan Kjaer:

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

Joan Kjaer:

We're talking tonight about the future of museums, and our guests in this segment are responsible for activating collections. We'll discuss what that means in just a moment. My guests are Joyce Tsai, chief curator at the University of Iowa's Stanley Museum of Art, and associate professor of practice in the School of Art and Art History here at the university. Thank you, Joyce, for being here.

Joyce Tsai:

Thank you.

Joan Kjaer:

Next to her is Margaret Gamm, the head of Special Collections at the University of Iowa Libraries, here at the university. Thank you so much Margaret.

Margaret Gamm:

Thank you.

Joan Kjaer:

And at the far end we have Heidi Lung, lecturer and program director of Museum Studies here at the university. So, great group. Glad to have you here. And I think, Joyce, I have to start with you and ask you what it means, in the context of the Stanley Museum of Art, to activate a collection?

Joyce Tsai:

So first off, for those who are listening at home, I just want to thank everyone for coming out this evening. It's so satisfying to see members of the general public, our museum supporters, and also our students here along with our faculty. It reminds us of the reason why we exist.

Joyce Tsai:

The University of Iowa museum collection actually began a long time ago, before the museum even existed. These collections emerged, in part, to support the establishment of the very first MFA program in the country. That was here at the University of Iowa. So this is how we started collecting artworks. They were bought, we bought Max Beckmann's painting, Carnival, just three years after it was painted in '46. We were the recipient of the Pollock Mural. And over the years, as the renown of the collection grew, we needed the infrastructure to take care of these collections.

Joyce Tsai:

Artworks don't last forever. And they need constant care and special attention to allow them to exist, but also so that we can have access to them. So that's a kind of brief history and background of how these collections came to being.

Joyce Tsai:

But the museum itself wasn't even built until the 1960s. And it was really the result of a lot of community investments and support that we gathered the resources to build the museum. And since the flood, our community of supporters have really rallied with us so that we're actually at the point right now where we're on the cusp of opening our new building. So, all of that is background to giving us a sense of why we exist, for whom.

Joyce Tsai:

And to the whole question of what it means to activate collections. Museums are not just repositories. We have artworks, or artifacts, objects that have meaning. They were collected because they had meaning for different communities. But the meaning of something changes over time, values change over time.

Joyce Tsai:

So today we got the terrible news that Beverly Pepper has passed away. She was one of the most innovative women sculptors, she was one of the first to really work with COR-TEN steel. We have one of her sculptures, and we also have some other works by her.

Joyce Tsai:

But Beverly Pepper's work wasn't necessarily valued as highly during her time when she was doing all of these innovative things in the '60s and '70s. But now, she is internationally renowned. Again, it speaks to how, there are objects that come into our collections at an earlier moment, and it's through the act of showing, through the act of exhibition, and through the act of research that we activate these objects that they enter into circulation.

Joyce Tsai:

I feel particularly privileged to be working in the context of an academic art museum, so that we can build these partnerships with faculty members, certainly, but also with other units across campus. We've worked very closely with the libraries and also other museums and collections across campus. We've mounted collaborative exhibitions. And we've also, in the audience, in the next session, I've worked very closely with Jen Buckley on research projects and publications. I've worked with other faculty members on exhibitions. So these are all different ways of activating the collection.

Joyce Tsai:

But there's also other ways that our collections are activated. Next week, next Thursday, a student group, the African American Student Association, is coming into our space to do a poetry reading. So it's a group that's going to come in and take a look at our collections, and there are going to be musical performances and poetry meetings. That's another way that our spaces and our collections become active.

Joan Kjaer:

Well, I can add one more to that. When the museum was no longer able to be used, we had to stop doing a program that I had done with the public radio stations in the museum for many, many years. A program called Know the Score, which was so nice because it involved music and discussion, sometimes about the artworks, but sometimes about an historical period to which people could make a connection with the art when they later walked through the museum.

Joyce Tsai:

Yeah. Absolutely.

Joan Kjaer:

So all of these opportunities, to bring people together, to explore new ideas, or think about things in a different way, I think, are so, so important.

Joyce Tsai:

Yeah. And I'd love to take this opportunity to plug some of the programs that Kim Datchuk has put together. So she's launched this program called Saturdays at the Stanley, where it's a more informal format, around two o'clock, on Saturdays. The last program that they held was music at the Stanley, or one of the last programs that they held included musical performances. In April, I'll be talking about art conservation. And so that's an opportunity for us to have all sorts of different sorts of conversations in front of artworks.

Joan Kjaer:

Well, I think all of us want to give a lot of credit to those of you who have worked at the Stanley Museum of Art for all these many years when the main large building was no longer available. All of the work it takes to both use the room in the IMU, and then the Figge, and so on and so forth. It's a monumental project, and not easy.

Joyce Tsai:

Yeah. And it requires so many different kinds of partnerships. I mean the Figge Art Museum has been absolutely crucial to our success. They have not only provided space for our collections, but have allowed us to present robust exhibitions within their space and to build these partnerships.

Joyce Tsai:

And I have to say, I've learned so much looking at their exhibitions and looking at their programming. So those kinds of partnerships across the state have been really important. And the partnerships that we have on campus have been really vital. And the kind of steadfast support of our community, of our supporters, has been really inspiring.

Joan Kjaer:

And is it true that the museum, once it opens here in a couple of years, will continue to be free?

Joyce Tsai:

Yes. Absolutely.

Joan Kjaer:

That is amazing.

Joyce Tsai:

That is something that we are absolutely committed to. I also have to say, just because you're free, doesn't mean you're accessible. And so, accessibility is something that we are working on very actively,

in terms of, to piggy back off of the conversation before, to really think through how we serve our different constituents, communities, faculty, the general public, students, Iowans. I mean, we are a collection that belongs to the state of Iowa. That's something that we believe, and it's part of our mission, and it's part of our identity.

Joan Kjaer:

Well, let me just move next, to Margaret. Special collections is another one of those amazing treasures here at the university. Some of the things you have there, perhaps you can even later talk about some of the really special works that many in our audience may not know about. But how do you think about activating the collection when it's really so very special and needs such special care?

Magaret Gamm:

Right. I mean, special is in the name, for sure. So I guess I'll start with what is in special collections. So we have rare books, manuscripts, maps, archives. I think the things that a lot of people do tend to think about are those very expensive books. The ones that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, if not millions.

Magaret Gamm:

Those certainly exist. But what we see many researchers using are the archival collections, those really unique holdings, that only we have, that nobody else has accessed, or nobody else has in their collections. I'm thinking of some of the more recent acquisitions, like the papers of Tom Brokaw, for example. Those caused quite a stir when they arrived here on campus, and we had an exhibit that kind of tied into those later with The Greatest Generation.

Magaret Gamm:

Speaking of The Greatest Generation, we really were able to pull from a lot of our collections focused on World War II during that time. So diaries and letters from all across special collections proper, the university archives, and the Iowa women's archives.

Magaret Gamm:

Excuse me. So I think activating those collections ... I mean, exhibits are one way to do that, for sure. But working with our colleagues across campus. Thinking of the exhibits, Joyce herself just recently curated an exhibit held within special collections, and we had some wonderful turnout for that and for events tied to that.

Magaret Gamm:

We also have an exhibit right now on the pull of horses down in the main library gallery, which is a relatively new space. We've only had it for about three or four years now. But I think it's really opened up the possibilities for bringing in material from other collections, and for really exposing a bigger audience to those special collections that we have, that a lot of people are only used to accessing in the reading room, which requires going up to the third floor of the main library and knowing where we are. It's kind of a tall order sometimes.

Joan Kjaer:

Well, I know that every time I learn about this, I feel a little shocked. If someone does go into the reading room and asks to look at, really, a priceless work, books, let's say, maybe an illustrated manuscript from the Middle Ages, that is brought right out to the person sitting at the desk. And depending upon the piece, maybe you can or cannot touch any of the pages. But I mean, that's just incredible. You go to the Museum of the Middle Ages in Paris, and they don't bring out a book for you to just turn the pages and flip through it as you like.

Magaret Gamm:

For sure. It's one of the wonderful things about special collections, is that we are open to everybody, and it is entirely free to use. We don't have any registration requirements. You don't have to be a formal researcher working with an institution in order to use our materials. Anybody can come in the door whenever we're open and just take a look at those materials and handle them.

Magaret Gamm:

We, of course, do have handling requirements. So you can handle that illuminated manuscript, but we might have some guidelines for you on exactly how to do so. We have cradles, and recommended conservation methods from the preservation department, and just best practices within the field. But yes, any of you are welcome to come in anytime.

Joan Kjaer:

What's your background, in terms of the library work you do now? Have you always concentrated in the special collections area?

Magaret Gamm:

Yes, I have been in special collections now, since before I went to graduate school in library science. But I think people arrive at special collections in a number of ways. Some people have museum studies backgrounds, others have library science, others have history or English. It can really vary. And the composition of special collections staff, I think, really adds a lot of subject expertise to any given collection, and can help shape the collection in new ways that are a benefit to the people who come in and use those collections.

Joan Kjaer:

Well, you mentioned the Brokaw Collection, which is a recent addition. And there might be a temptation to think, "Well, special collections is this thing that lives there. Special collections is sort of complete. They have what they're going to have." But that's not true, is it? You're constantly hearing about and perhaps pursuing pieces you would like for the collection.

Magaret Gamm:

Yes, absolutely. We're growing in new ways all the time. One of our other large, very large, major acquisitions recently has been the Ruth and Marvin Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry, which added thousands of items to our holdings. And that's been a particularly exciting addition, and one which really promises a lot of collaborative opportunities between museums on campus and the libraries.

Joyce Tsai:

It's astounding.

Joan Kjaer:

So I take it you're working together on how you might-

Joyce Tsai:

Yeah. What's really great about working in a university context is that the art museum has its own strengths, but the special collections has other strengths. And part of that has to do with the histories of collecting. The library collected things that, back in the day, art museums didn't take seriously. So the library was acquiring things like ephemera, artist ephemera, zines, Dada, Fluxus materials, and concrete.

Joyce Tsai:

Now, with the collection of concrete and visual poetry, those are all things that, they complement the strengths that we have in the museum, but we don't have those things. So it's really thrilling to be able to borrow these things right down the street. And a couple of years ago, I actually did a show that drew very heavily from the Dada collection. It was a really exciting ... Dada Futurism is what it was called. It was a lot of fun.

Magaret Gamm:

It was a great exhibit.

Joyce Tsai:

Yeah.

Magaret Gamm:

Yeah.

Joan Kjaer:

Well, so Heidi, you direct the museum studies program here. And first of all, maybe you can explain what that program is all about, and the certificate, and so on. But then, tell us how you interact with all of these other spaces on campus.

Heidi Lung:

Well, I feel very fortunate. Before coming to the university, I was in the museum field for 20 years. I worked at the St. Louis Art Museum for 10 years, and then at the St. Louis Science Center for almost 10 years. So I have a varied background as a educator and community outreach with the different types of museums. And so coming to the university, and now, I'm charged with training the future of museum professionals.

Heidi Lung:

So this is very exciting, to have access to all these wonderful collections, whether it be the art museum, or special collections, or our Pentacrest Museums, or any of the other numerous collections that we have on campus. I mean, It's just a wealth of riches that I can have students engage with and learn from.

Heidi Lung:

So when I think about activating collections, and I see some students out there, so I might quiz you, but we talk about the three functions of museums. And you've heard the panelists before this panel talking about these kinds of things. There are three things that museums do. They preserve, they research, and they communicate ideas, whether that be through publications or exhibitions. And so this is really important. This is something that I train students in, and we think about these things.

Heidi Lung:

But an even bigger idea than that, the big idea from activating collections is to move beyond the object itself. So objects are evidence, correct? They're evidence of our ideas, our creativity, our history, our culture, our identity. So getting students when they're thinking about preserving, and researching, and communicating about these things. That the object is important, but more important is the person who stands in front of the object.

Heidi Lung:

And early in my career, I was hypnotized by engaging with the public because it was this thing that happened when people got in front of different art or different historical objects, where it was like museum magic. I called it museum magic before I had the background to really understand what it was. And it's really just this point where visitors, you bring your own identity, you bring your own experiences. Everybody interacts with objects differently.

Heidi Lung:

And so it's really important for students to understand that, yes, they need to know the research behind the object. They need to know how to preserve the objects. They need to be able to communicate ideas. But they also need to be able to listen, and listening to the audience, and being responsive.

Heidi Lung:

So over time, I didn't come to this right away, you learn about the objects, and you want to share that information. But over the course of my career, I've been able to listen more closely and really observe how people interact with objects. So this is something I tried to share with students. To realize that, as you have a career with a special collection, or with the objects of the Stanley, you watch how people interact with the objects at different times. And that can change. It can change, not only because you could go to the museum every day and see the same object, and you would see something different, you would feel something different. But what's really important is to be responsive to the things that are happening in the community.

Heidi Lung:

And I think that, that's something, when we talk about activating collections, that's where the power lies, where museums can really be transformative spaces. They can move beyond ... I mean, education is a wonderful thing to be. And a place to preserve and collect ideas is great. But these places, where there's the power to transform our community, our identity, our ideas, and really come together and share those different perspectives.

Joan Kjaer:

Yeah. And I imagine that one of the things you both, when you're training students, and then also when you label work, so when you think about putting works together. It's already been mentioned in the program, that the way we see things, the way we understand things, culturally or historically, changes. And can change in very dramatic and important ways that you have to be aware of. You need to be sensitive to questions about certain kinds of pieces.

Joan Kjaer:

So when you teach your students, are they just sort of sucking all that in and really, really appreciating the importance of being able to really figure out, not only what is the piece and its dimensions and whatever else, but on the one hand, how to engage audiences, but on the other, how to represent a larger context as appropriately as they can do it at any given time.

Heidi Lung:

Well, I think, with students, it's a lot about doing the work themselves. And of course, these collections that we have on campus allow us to do this. And there's nothing more powerful than being in front of the authentic.

Heidi Lung:

And I think the other thing that's helpful is, museum studies is an interdisciplinary field. And so we have historians, we have art historians, we have business majors, we have all kinds of people that come to museums. And so my students have varied backgrounds and varied perspectives. And so when they come to a piece, they listen to each other.

Heidi Lung:

And I think that's kind of where they gain some experience about different perspectives, and how different audiences bring different things, and how we engage with those in different ways. It's very powerful. Even for me, I'm continuously learning through my students to see how they're interpreting, and processing, and sharing ideas with each other.

Joan Kjaer:

Yeah.

Joyce Tsai:

If I could piggy back off of that idea. I mean, we have launched a paid internship program. So we have graduate fellows and also undergraduate interns who work very closely with myself and my colleagues. And they do really important research, and they do very important work.

Joyce Tsai:

Beverly Pepper, who I just mentioned, the sculptor. One of the students that we had, she did extensive research on the condition, and it really helped us better understand how it was made, what the materials were, and what the kind of best practices might look like in treating it, so that we can prepare it to be installed in the new museum. That is work that was incredibly invaluable. And it was done by a student. And that prepared her for her own kind of future path.

Joan Kjaer:



Well, and as the new museum goes up, connected really to the library itself, which is now such an interesting hub space for students to do all kinds of more social things than was the case many years ago. It seems like a natural collaboration will follow there.

Heidi Lung:

Absolutely. I think that's one of-

Magaret Gamm:

I think we're looking forward to that. As we've mentioned before, we have done so much collaborative work in the past, but I think the proximity of the two buildings is really going to open up the opportunity, especially for more classes to come into both spaces.

Magaret Gamm:

We've had classes be interested in coming into both special collections and The Museum of Art before, but they often have to split that over multiple days just because of the physical time that it takes to walk. So I think that, that will be a lot of fun to see what we can do with that.

Joan Kjaer:

Yeah. Gosh. Well, thank you so much, all of you. Heidi, Margaret, Joyce, really appreciate you being here this afternoon. We have one more segment ahead of us, so please stay with us. And say thanks to our guests.