

Podcast with Evonne Levy recorded April 10, 2017 transcribed

[brief music interlude]

Evonne Levy (EL): Our world is just *run* by images, and one of the interesting things I'm finding as a historian teaching, you know, Renaissance and Baroque art is that my objects are not less relevant now. In fact, I would say that students are finding them to be *much more* relevant, that Instagram and Renaissance portraiture are not that far apart, and the students are really hungry for a certain historical depth. They are all image-makers, even if they're not studying the visual arts, if they're not making art themselves. We're all image-makers.

Carla DeMarco (CD): For today's guest on View to the U podcast, one of the challenges of being an art historian is to show students that our image-filled contemporary culture has deep historical roots. Professor Evonne Levy discusses her varied interests in art and in her discipline of art history and how she was drawn to the field.

[Theme music]

CD: Hello, and welcome to View to the U: An eye on UTM research. I'm Carla DeMarco at U of T Mississauga.

View to the U is a monthly podcast that will feature UTM faculty members from a range of disciplines who will illuminate some of the inner-workings of the science labs and enlighten the social sciences and humanities hubs at UTM.

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Professor Evonne Levy has been a faculty member in UTM's Department of Visual Studies and in the Department of Art at U of T since 1996. She is an eminent expert on the history of art history, and her research areas include Renaissance and Baroque art and architecture writ large. She has worked on the art and biographical legacy of 17th-century Italian sculptor and architect Gian Lorenzo Bernini, the art of the Jesuit order, the runaway religious order of the 16th century, and more recently has started working on the transatlantic Hispanic Baroque.

Also, in relation to UTM's 50th anniversary and having worked on the campus for twenty years, Evonne will speak to some of the changes she's observed at UTM over her time here, and, because her interests often align within the area of aesthetics and architecture, she reflects on the expansion and maturation of the campus with regards to its structures and spaces.

CD: I just wondered if you could explain, perhaps, what exactly Baroque art is and give an overview of your current research program, which I know includes area of

specialization on the Jesuit order, and on the work of Bernini. And so I just wondered if you could explain what that is.

EL: Baroque art is generally identified with art of the 17th century. If you go to Latin America, people would say that the Baroque doesn't really end until the 19th Century. But basically it's sandwiched between the Renaissance and the Rococo. If you're talking in stylistic terms, and Baroque is a word that's been very important to my research – the history of the term – that has come to identify a whole period of production. It's, as all terms are, very imperfect. It captures some things and not other things, but it has actually been quite central to my research, the question of what Baroque has meant to scholars over time.

So, starting from that point, I can tell you that I do work in a variety of areas. I have sort of three or four different beats in Early Modern Art History. One is the Jesuit order; the art and architecture of the Jesuit order, and that's really where my research started.

I started as an Italianist working in the Jesuit archives in Rome. I spent three years doing dissertation research in Rome, and my first monograph, which was called *Propaganda and the Jesuit Baroque*, which took quite a while to rethink after the dissertation came out of that archival work and a lot of thinking about what it means to call a work of Baroque art of the 17th century “propaganda” using this very modern term. And I continue to work on the Jesuits quite a lot, though it's not quite at the center of my research right now.

I've also worked on, after an initial period of shying away from Bernini, who is the central figure of the Italian Baroque, probably because my dissertation advisor is a preeminent Bernini scholar, but I eventually got back to it, especially through teaching because I teach Bernini regularly at the undergraduate and the graduate level, and I've had several graduate students working on dissertations about Bernini's art.

So, I have, over the years, edited now three volumes, sort of, tackling different problems in Bernini studies – his portraiture, there was a major exhibition in Ottawa of Bernini's portraits, I brought students up to see that exhibition, organized a conference and edited a volume that came out out of that.

I've also worked on Bernini's biographical legacy because there are two book-length biographies of Bernini, which was rather unusual in the 17th and early 18th centuries. And so Bernini studies have been very tethered to these books, and so we thought it was time for a kind of critical look at how those biographies have really shaped the literature on Bernini.

And, most recently, I did work on Bernini's, a volume called *Material Bernini*, which arose again out of a very exciting teaching initiative in which I ran undergraduate and graduate seminars on Bernini's clay works in conjunction with a major

exhibition of those works that took place at the Metropolitan Museum of Art [in New York]. And so all of the students went down. We had a fantastic seminar with students from NYU and Rutgers University, who had all also seen the exhibition and were working on this stuff. And then we had an international conference here and a volume just came out on that. So Bernini has been a sort of consistent interest of mine.

And then about seven years ago, or eight years ago now, I was invited into a MCRI project on the Hispanic Baroque. This is a Major Collaborative Research Initiative [through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, SSHRC], and I hadn't done much work on colonial Latin American Baroque art, but I was invited into it because of my work on the Jesuits. The Jesuits were a globetrotting religious order, and once you work on the Jesuits, you can start to work globally in very interesting ways, some spreading from Rome outwards.

And so that collaboration took me to South America on several occasions and I started getting really interested and developing an expertise on colonial Latin American art, which I am starting to publish on pretty regularly now. So I became a kind of global Baroqueist over time, and this really arose from my work on the Jesuits. It was a kind of foundation that allowed me to spread my wings quite a bit.

And then there's one further area that I work in, which is the history of art history, or on the historiography of art, and over the last, really, 15 years, I kind of headed north to Germany, Switzerland, Austria – to all the German-speaking hubs of art history, which is really the strength, or rather the origins of the discipline. And I wrote a book, which took me into new types of archives, the modern archives of art historians. And I started to focus on figures whose work had really defined the Baroque from about 1850 to the present, and especially at the intersection of politics.

And my aim there was to really show how art history's terms, like the Baroque, the Baroque specifically, arose from specific circumstances, especially political circumstances, and that it was always inflected by, defined by, the political views of the art historians themselves.

So a big part of my project was to give a face to art history, to attach abstract ideas of intellectual history to particular people, to give it a heartbeat, if you will, and to particular times. So those are the areas that, that I've been working in.

CD: I know that you, um, did start a project with some undergraduate students that it was the Principles of Art [History] with Heinrich Wölfflin

EL: Wölfflin [correct pronunciation]. Yes, how could I forget? [laughs]

CD: But so I'm just curious, though, how did that, I'm assuming you sort of inspired that project, but I know they did like a documentary film, and I wondered how that came about.

EL: Yeah, I should, I neglected the Wölfflin project in my research.

The Wölfflin project is a historiographic project, and it grew out of my work on the history of Baroque art and the concept of the Baroque, and it has been my SSHRC grant for the last five years. And that project is, um, a deeply collaborative one, which follows the reception history, the reading of a classic text in art history, Heinrich Wölfflin's 1915 *Principles of Art History* globally, because it is one of, I think, less than a single handful of books that you can say – in art history, that is – that you can truly say has been on the bookshelves all over the world. And is still a book that people if they may not have read it know what it's about and how it works.

It's a work of formalist art history, it was a, kind of, not the first formalist art history, but a kind of laying out of, of how you can write a history of forms, and it was concerned with early modern art Renaissance and Baroque art, and it's a very controversial book. And the ambition of that project, and I'll talk about the student project in a moment, is to, kind of, write a history of the discipline globally through the positive and negative reactions to a single text because it's a text that everybody knows, everybody knows something about, many people have read, it's been translated into over 20 languages.

So, you can write a history of art history, follow the vicissitudes of various methodologies, because people often rejected *this* work over and over again when they were setting out a new methodology in the field. So it's a kind of perfect encapsulation of the mood of the field, and so, one of the components of this project was a new English translation of Wölfflin's book. It has been floating around since 1932 in a very good, but by now, very cranky, outdated kind of English. And so with a collaborator in Switzerland, Tristan Weddigen, we edited a new translation by a very talented British translator, and also gave it a proper apparatus for the first time – introductions, historical contextualization, some footnotes, you know, comparison to manuscripts – it was the first time the book had really been taken seriously as the classic that it is.

And we're happy to say that this has stimulated new translations in other languages, and we did a huge conference in Washington at the Art History Research Centre called CASVA [Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts] at the National Gallery, in which we invited what I like to call the G16 of art history, kind of, many of the major places where art history is an important discipline, and had, really, commissioned and encouraged people to try to write the history of the text in their country. So Mexico, Germany, ah, unfortunately, Russia couldn't be there, we had someone from China, from Japan, um, Latin America, and that volume will be published in a series that CASVA edits.

So, it's a project that, obviously, you can't do by yourself. I can't write the history of art history all over the world, and it takes a bit of cajoling to ask people to turn their attention to a very specific question, but the conference was really fantastic and rewarding, and I think everybody realized that this really was a good way to open up the history of the entire discipline through a single focus.

So the student project that you asked me about, I also did graduate and undergraduate seminars on this. Um, I like to call them "workshops." I know some people like to talk about "laboratories." I think the workshop, for me, is a much more apt term to describe the atmosphere of discovery, of research together with students.

And, on the occasion of the year of the 100th anniversary of Wölfflin's text, which was 2015, my undergraduate students put together a documentary film, an hour-long film, in which they simply interviewed the art historians in town. They interviewed 14 of my colleagues, including myself, and asked them about the text, and edited it together into a very effective film. And the faculty, I have to say, was very pleased by it, and excited, and the students really had a tremendous sense of accomplishment for what a real piece of research it was, how revealing it really was about the book and about art history as a whole, and they found it *very* illuminating to talk to the different faculty about this book that they had read in the context of our seminar and they got a whole set of new opinions on it, and they found that very revealing.

CD: Well I watched, I know on your website, there was a clip that you could watch, 18 minutes of the hour-long documentary [<https://youtu.be/39MoKbmqzbQ>], but I found it so fascinating because, as you say, all the different faculty members are, sort of, talking about what that's meant to them, and how it's influenced them, and I just thought it was just really well done.

EL: It really drew them out on their histories, their past, everybody came from different training, in different fields, so how is it that this text that is read by people all across the spectrum of art history, art historical studies, so it's a very useful thing to do. I hope other people will do it, too.

CD: Oh, and exploring the narrative of people's backgrounds and influences, and everything, I think that's important.

EL: Hmhm.

CD: I wondered if you could talk a little bit about how you initially got into this field to begin with, like, overall, art history?

EL: Um, well it's a story I often tell my students because at UTM we have a lot of students in this joint Art History and Studio program, and I was a joint major in

studio art and art history at Brown University, and really wasn't thinking about an academic career at all. But there was a point where I was given a choice in a course on pre-Raphaelite art to do a creative project and I decided to do a set of collages to try to illustrate some things I believed about pre-Raphaelite art, and I ended up having to write an essay about it, to explain the collages. They were completely cryptic, and it was at that very moment that I realized that it would be much more direct if I just wrote about them, that that's really what I was interested in doing, so I guess that that was a bit of an "aha moment."

And then I had some a professor gave me a kind of ridiculously high mark on an essay, which kind of got my attention and made me think that maybe, maybe this is something that I should think about doing. But I wasn't...it took a while before I really decided I wanted to do a PhD, it took a couple years to sort that out. I did an MA on the way, still wasn't sure, hadn't really thought about being an academic. I'd never met any professors when I was growing up, it was just not a profession that was on my radar really.

CD: Yeah. Oh, interesting.

And what do you feel is the biggest impact of your work?

EL: I think there are a couple of different impacts. Certainly my work on the Jesuits continues to have a lot of impact, and not just in art history, I would say, actually, in neighbouring humanities disciplines – literary scholars, historians, theorists, people who are wanting to read something about the Jesuits and art, but not necessarily from inside of art history. So I keep being asked to do things, and they keep getting more and more visible, so I have to say that the Jesuits question has been the biggest one for me.

But I think also in historiography I'm having an impact. The work on Wölfflin has gotten a lot of people's attention, partly because we've just had so many collaborators, and as an extension of that project in 2015, we also ran a kind of global webinar where we had colleagues in different countries also teaching a graduate seminar on the subject of the global reception of Wölflinn's *Principals*, so, there's a bigger conversation going on about historiography.

But also my work really coincided with a kind of explosion and interest in these questions, and because I've done more sustained work, people tend to kind of duck in and out of it, you know, write an essay here, write an essay there. I guess I've become one of the people who's had a kind of sustained attention to it for the last 15 years so that work has gotten some attention as well.

[Interlude music]

CD: Coming up: UTM at 50. Evonne reflects on UTM's development over the course of the past two decades, and as someone who's interested in architecture she notes

the physical changes of the campus, but also the evolution of the Department of Visual Studies.

[Interlude music fades out.]

CD: And so, I know that I've explained that our first season of the podcast is focusing on "UTM at 50," and I understand that you've been at UTM for 20 years now, and I'm just asking people for their overall...your impressions of how the campus has changed. Ah, you could also speak to how your department has changed, and maybe the kind of change you see on the horizon for Visual Studies or UTM.

EL: Well, certainly the campus has grown up in the most, kind of, gorgeous way. Maybe the campus was like a kind of eight-year old heading towards braces when I got here and I used to have to kind of, you know, not really look too closely at the buildings because it was...a little depressing, I have to say.

[Both laugh a bit.]

EL: But that's far from the situation now, I mean. Starting with the Student Centre, which there was a huge competition for when I first got here. And in fact [Professor in UTM's Visual Studies] Jill Caskey and I organized a conference about it because we were so impressed by the level of the judges that had judged it, and there was this huge turnout in terms of – I think it was the first competition for a building in Ontario in quite a while – so over 100 submissions.

So we were excited to see this interjection of contemporary architecture on the campus, and people may not know that that building was *so* rejected by the students when it was first put up. It replaced their pub in the woods, which was in a kind of metal, temporary building, really, but it was theirs and it was private, and so they lost control of it. And so it was like they rejected the new baby.

[Both laugh.]

EL: So, but luckily that era has passed, and the ambition of the architecture has been really high on this campus. I'm really proud of the buildings on this campus, and I've had students write essays about it just to call their attention to the kind of monumentality of the buildings: they're really spectacular.

The CCT Building, which I have my office in, is a particular favourite, and it's just really ambitious architecture, it's a work of art. And every time I walk into it I have to say I'm really thrilled. And it's not the only building. Sometimes I go up to the library, to the garden on top just to look at the views of the auditorium, and the planes, and landscaping of the CCT Building, and the new Health Sciences Building with its shimmering surfaces. It's an interesting place to be, it really is. And so I'm

really thrilled that architecture and the landscape has been taken so seriously here. I think the students are really lucky.

CD: Yeah, I agree. When I look around at the spaces here and some of the study spaces, I think, wow, the students have it pretty good.

EL: Yeah. The new courtyard between CCT and the South [Davis] Building, and even the South Building has a certain gorgeousness about it, we just have to bring it out.

CD: Yeah, I agree.

EL: Yeah, so. But beyond the campus, our students have changed a lot. I remember when I first got here that it really did feel like a very diverse campus, but it's much more diverse now, but also the places where people are coming from. So many of our students are first or second generation immigrants, um, to Canada, and they've changed quite a bit in very interesting ways. It's always a positive thing to see, that diversity. I remember there were a lot of Eastern European students when I first got here, and that's really not the case anymore.

But the students are also different by virtue of what they're growing up with, and so those of us who are older are continually challenged by trying to figure out what are the best ways to teach, and what are the best ways for students to learn, so we really have our hands full adjusting to what the students are bringing in terms of preparation but also the ways that they're learning, and....

CD: Do you find they're more distracted? Because that's what I can't help but think when I go around the campus, it's just, you know, the devices and it's like well maybe they were distracted before, by other things, and I just really didn't clue in?

EL: Yeah, it takes a lot more work to be connected for students today. They have a lot more to do, and I think that they do take their connectivity as an obligation in their life. They have a lot less time, there's more going on in their life – more jobs, more sociality – that's really required for them. And, yes, it is harder for them to sit and work, I think. We're not assigning as much reading as we used to, and, well I'm thinking about it differently, too – what I want them to get out of it. But, you know, maybe I should have done that before.

But I think that there is also a different expectation of what the university is, and I think that we can't take it for granted that the students are signing up for what we think they're signing up for when they come into the classroom. So that's part of the process of teaching is arriving at agreed-upon ideas of what it is to be a student.

CD: And has there, do you find that there's been a lot of change, though, in the Visual Studies Department as a whole?

EL: Yeah. Oh, well Visual Studies has totally transformed since I got here. There were three Art Historians; it was all Western art, from ancient to modern. And now we're actually a very contemporary-looking department. Art History changed and expanded and morphed into initially Visual Cultural Studies and Visual Studies. And our department really encompasses *all* of the aspects of Art History and Visual Studies that are out there now. So I think that students who study with us *now* will really see the kind of range of approaches that you might encounter at a variety of different universities but all in one department here.

So we have people teaching film, television, photography, visual culture across media, and art history, um, of different periods. And we have more geographic diversity, although we would like to have much more than we're able to have, but we are all very aware of the need to be global in our thinking, and so there are many courses, which are Western courses, but which reach outside of, ah, the West and problematize it as well.

One of the really major changes that has taken place in Visual Studies in the past 20 years is a massive expansion of the objects of our study. So, students are not just studying Botticelli and Bernini and Delacroix and major works of architecture, but there is an expanded view of what constitutes visual culture. This means that Visual Studies is an incredibly relevant discipline *now*, and one of our goals when we started rethinking the department profile years ago was to really produce critical image-makers. We have a number of programs that are collaborative and in which students are doing studio art, in the CCT program where they're doing digital-media art, and lots of our students are going on to careers in the media arts so we are a heavily theoretical department but we are really expansive in terms of the objects of our study.

And so, you know, UTM is a campus that doesn't have the full range of humanities departments that you might find on the St. George department, but I think that Visual Studies is one of the most relevant departments. Our world is just *run* by images, and one of the interesting things I'm finding as a historian teaching, you know, Renaissance and Baroque art is that my objects are not less relevant now. In fact, I would say that students are finding them to be *much more* relevant, that Instagram and Renaissance portraiture are not that far apart, and the students are really hungry for a certain historical depth. They are all image-makers, even if they're not studying the visual arts, if they're not making art themselves. We're all image-makers, and so I'm finding it quite interesting, and I'm not sure all of the places it's coming from, whether it's the revival of board games in Germany, which are heavily historical, but students are coming into the classroom with a different set of sources for their interest in history and the history of images. And I'm finding that I'm not teaching courses that are considered really irrelevant – on the contrary. They're finding them to be quite relevant to today.

CD: That's amazing. And I don't know if you want to talk about this, but a new position for you....Did you want to talk about that?

EL: Well, um, sure. [Laughs.]

I've just been asked to be a guest professor at a Max Planck Institute, the Bibliotheca Hertziana, in Rome, which is where I was a pre-doctoral fellow many, many years ago. It's one of the Max Planck's Art History Institutes and the position is called the Rudolf Wittkower Guest Professor, and it comes at an interesting time for me because I'm just starting a new project on early modern intermediality, and it's a project that is best done in Europe and in Latin America, it's, um, taking me to various places, but it's a good time for me to be going back to Italy where I haven't spent much time in quite a long time.

CD: And what does that mean, "intermediality"?

EL: Intermediality is about, well, what I'm interested in is what happened when drawing became a really crucial part of art-making in the preparatory stages? And this was a technological change that took place with the new availability of paper in the 15th century, and it became kind of the unifying practice of all of the arts, but it introduced what can be called an intermedium between a medium paper, between thought and a sculpture, between thought and a model, an architectural model and three-dimensional space, and between paper and painting. And so I'm interested in, sort of, what happened when this new step was introduced between the different arts.

CD: That is very...so interesting because I think that that has a lot of relevance for today because I'm thinking even when people are, say, starting a movie project or a video, they usually do storyboarding, which maybe, to an extent, some of that's done now on a computer, but I think people still sort of map out their ideas on paper before they actually start developing the full script or their scenes.

EL: Right.

CD: Well, that probably covers most of the questions I had for you today, but I wanted to thank you so much for coming in and to, ah, be speaking about your work. It's just fascinating, and I don't think we get to hear enough about what's going on in the Visual Studies Department, so hopefully this is the start of this new highlighting.

EL: Well thanks for having me.

[Wrap-up music]

CD: I would like to thank everyone for listening to today's show. I would like to thank my guest, Evonne Levy, for talking about her research and giving us her insights on visual culture.

Thanks to Office of the Vice-Principal, Research at UTM for their support. Thank you to everyone who has been helping to promote this podcast, particularly Nicolle Wahl in the Office of Marketing and Communications at UTM.

Special thanks to Tim Lane for the music for the show, which you might be bobbing along to now, and for his technical expertise.

Thank you.