

Understanding the Role of Art Historians in a Changing World

Speakers:

Samuel Shaw

Mark Hallett

Sria Chatterjee

Martin Myrone

Sarah Turner

SAMUEL SHAW: Hello. I'm in the study room of the Paul Mellon Centre in London, which is a place I spent a lot of time myself as a researcher. I'm here to talk to four art historians about what they do and how and why they do it. You'll be hearing from them about how they found their own critical voice, how they reach new audiences, and also hearing them share their thoughts on art history as a discipline. What changes has it gone through recently, and what changes might it be about to go through in the future?

MARK HALLETT: So my name is Mark Hallett. I'm the Director of the Paul Mellon Centre. We're a centre that supports research into the history of British art and architecture. But the developments in that field have mirrored changes and developments in the discipline more generally. I see that we've needed to become, in relation to British art studies, much more global in our focus. And we've been looking at ways in which British art operates within a global context.

This is something, and I've come increasingly to believe this, that artist history must engage with other disciplines in a much more proactive way if it's to thrive and survive.

SRIA CHATTERJEE: I'm Sria Chatterjee, and I'm Head of Research and Learning at the Paul Mellon Centre. A part of the learning programme is to think through how we can make the kind of research we're doing at the centre and the kind of research that's happening in art history more generally accessible to a wider range of people.

MARTIN MYRONE: I'm Martin Myrone. I'm Head of Grants, Fellowships and Networks at the Paul Mellon Centre. And that means that I work with colleagues on delivering our programme of grants and fellowships. We hand out over a million pounds a year to support British art researchers. I also work with our networks, which are professional networks connecting people in the field.

SARAH TURNER: I'm Sarah Turner. I'm the Deputy Director of the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art. I think the process of research and finding your own voice is always quite complex. For me, personally, there's always a moment in any research project where I find it overwhelming and I'm a bit daunted by the prospect of what's ahead.

But I've sort of learnt that that for me is part of my creative process and part of my research process, that I've almost got to be a bit terrified of it and think, oh, this is making me feel a bit

sick and a bit anxious. And by going to that place, I find something and I think, OK you've got to simplify this. Find some perspective on it. Boil it down, like what is it about? What's at the heart of it? And I think that process of finding your own voice, as well, takes practice.

MARK HALLETT: Having been the child of two artists and art teachers, and someone who, throughout my childhood, was really fascinated by art and visual arts and graphic arts more generally, really excited about comics, made comics and serialised a comic in a local newspaper when I was in my teens. I studied history, because I'd become fascinated by American history in particular during my adolescence, but very quickly realised that I wasn't an especially brilliant historian, but really was most excited about art history.

The work I've been happiest about that I produced over my career has been those moments when you feel you're both being as creative and as original as you can and have your own very distinctive voice. But it's also harnessed to a really powerful argument, structure of argument, and a very clear format for readers.

And so when I was taught as an undergraduate, I was taught about how one would write an essay, and I was given absolutely clear instructions in a tutorial about how one writes an essay, and exactly how an essay should be structured. And I still follow it now, 40 years later, in some ways.

But at the same time, as time has gone on, I've become much more confident about playing around and outside and pulling that structure around. But still, it's important for me to have that combination of discipline and of freedom.

SRIA CHATTERJEE: I've always been interested in the arts but I grew up partly in India, and art history isn't a thing there really. So I didn't really know that it existed as a discipline until kind of I was at university and doing English literature. But even when I studied art history, I was quite interested in disciplines such as anthropology and material culture studies.

And for my PhD, I was working quite closely with history of science, I was sort of doing art history and history of science and bringing the two together. So I think that has been a really important and fundamental process in the development of how I maybe approach my work.

I didn't have a lot of control over a lot of decisions that I took in terms of where I went in my career. I needed a visa. And I think this might be relevant to a lot of students, depending on where you're from, the sort of degrees you do, can an institution sponsor you? That is an important question. Can they pay you? That was really important for me, so scholarships, immigration things.

So I think this idea of also being able to participate in a global art history often is important to see what structures are behind it and how it can be an equal playing field. So I think in terms of my ... I don't see my studies as being different from these challenges.

MARTIN MYRONE: Why did I focus on British art in the first place? I think there's a couple of factors there, one of which, like many British people, I don't have the language skills. I was never very good at languages in school. So focusing on a topic where the literature is in English, that was a part of it. And it was also, at the moment at which I was an undergraduate and a postgraduate researcher, British art still felt relatively unexplored. But there were some very exciting new developments in that field, as well.

That was attractive because there were clearly topics, and areas of research to undertake, which felt fresh and felt under explored.

SARAH TURNER: Not a lot of people meet the term art history or history of art at school. It's not something that's widely taught. And there is a bit of an image problem around it. There's this sense that it's an elitist subject, that it's only open to a few people. And I think we do have to think about the pipelines if you do a history of art degree or an art history degree or an adjacent degree, what are the options open to people after that. What will they do with it? And I think we've got to, again, be quite expansive and help people see the ways in which it can be used in really many different contexts. Because it is a very expansive and quite a young field of study. It's been a lot, pulled in from a lot of other disciplines, whether that's history or cultural studies, feminist scholarship, social sciences. Art historians are constantly remaking the field.

MARK HALLETT: One of the ways in which art history can reach new audiences today is to think not only about the kind of content of the work being produced, but also in terms of media. I think that art history has the potential to move in lots of different directions in relation to the media in which it's expressed.

SARAH TURNER: Well, I can speak from a recent experience of writing and co-hosting a podcast called *Sculpting Lives*, which I did with Jo Baring. And the process of doing that was really revealing to me as an art historian because I did have to think about having a more public audience than, say, if I was publishing that work through a journal article or a book. But it really made me think about different formats and experimenting with styles of communication. And the amount of research and the amount of thought that I put into each episode or that we put into it - again, collaboration is quite an interesting process - was just as much as writing a book or curating an exhibition. The work, the kind of thinking, the complexity, was all there.

It has made me think about how I write and when I give a paper, as well, to an audience. How do I get ... How do I start off? How do I hook people in and keep them with me? So I think different formats of whether it's writing or different formats of writing a label or exhibition making, podcasting, they just help you experiment with different ways of doing something.