LWAG Talks

A podcast by Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery

Ep 17: *Expressions of India* with the Berndt Museum of Anthropology and LSAC

Published on 17 December 2020

Transcript of a conversation between Berndt Museum of Anthropology staff Michael Houston and Sofie Nielsen and members of the LWAG Student Advisory Committee Maya Quinn and Jeremy Passmore.

Narrator:

LWAGTalks is Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery’s new podcast, bringing you insights and ideas with artists, curators, educators, writers, and more.

Jeremy Passmore:

Hi, I'm Jeremy Passmore, I'm a fine arts and history of art student at UWA.

Maya Quinn:

And I'm Maya Quinn. I'm a history of art major with a minor in English and cultural studies at UWA. And on the, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, Student Advisory Committee and really excited today. And before we get fully into the questions, an acknowledgement of country: so we wish to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we’re meeting on the Whadjuk Noongar people. And we wish to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and their contribution they make to the life of this city in this region.

Jeremy:

And with that, we'd like to welcome today Sofie Nielsen, and Michael Houston from the Berndt Museum of Anthropology, co-curators of the Berndt upcoming digital exhibition *Expressions of India: From the Ronald M. and Catherine H. Berndt Collection*. Guys, could you please tell us a little bit about your work for the Berndt and how you got involved working there?

Sofie Nielsen:

Yeah, well, first of all, thanks for having us guys. It's really exciting to be able to speak to you today. So I'm Sophie, and I'm the curatorial assistant here at the museum. I studied here at UWA and completed an arts practicum as part of my degree here at the Berndt Museum, to try and give me some insight into the museum world. From there, I volunteered for about a year, which was a solid slog, but very rewarding. Before I yeah, I was given a position here, which was awesome. It’s great working here. My role now predominantly involves assisting in exhibition development and research. But I also work on digitising and accessioning photographic collections. And I'm also make a lot of coffees.

Jeremy:

Very important job. super important.

Michael Houston:

I'm Michael Houston, like Sofie I'm an alumni from UWA as well. I did a Bachelor of Fine Arts. I worked in the commercial art industry for about 10 years predominantly working with Indigenous Australian art forms. I trained as a conservator, which is why I was brought on at the Berndt, to bring their painting collection to a displayable and stable standard, which we achieved. Yay. And since then, I've kind of managed to stick around as you do, and I'm often kind of called upon to review and consult on the condition of objects and their continued preservation. I also assist where I’m needed, whether we have access requests or cataloguing, digitization, and so on, and obviously, with exhibition production. Just another hat to put on.

Maya:

Yeah, great. Well, speaking of exhibition production, can you tell us a bit about this exhibition and how it came about?

Sofie:

Sure, so *Expressions of India* was originally envisioned by our past director who had a strong interest in revitalising the Asian collection held here at the museum, which predominately comprised of the large bequest from Catherine Berndt’s private collection of Asian material, which is near 1000 items. So it's quite an extensive collection.

Michael:

Yeah. Also, like with the university’s, well, I don't know if you guys know much about it. But we're often bombarded with it. The University’s 2030 Strategic Plan, they're putting a lot of influence on our place in the Indian Ocean Rim. So with such a prominence on that, we kind of deemed it an opportune time to showcase material celebrating the culture of some of our neighbouring nations.

Maya:

Yeah, great. Sophie, you mentioned thousands of objects and art objects. And how did you go about researching those pieces or the ones in this exhibition?

Sofie:

Did I say thousands, I think I meant near a thousand. We do have thousands of objects here, but for that particular bequest, around 950, I rounded it up. But yeah, so obviously, we had the focus on India. And we through the process of things that we wanted to explore, we decided to choose three different painting styles that we wanted to do, the Kalighat, Pattachitra and Court paintings that we have at the Museum, which sort of compressed it down a lot.

Maya:

Great.

Jeremy:

So with that compression, did you find you had any challenges when you're bringing the elements together? Things like conservation challenges, or did you have to bring in other elements outside the collection, to sort of really help focus in on what you're trying to display?

Michael:

When it was initially going to be a physical exhibition. There were obviously some considerable conservation challenges. So we reviewed all the work that related to India with an external conservator who specialised in paper. And there were some kind of instability issues with the paint films and the primary supports, so the paper and canvases, and so that was going to be an endeavour to get those works stable so that they can be framed and displayed for the length of time of the exhibition. So that was going to be an issue, but swapping to a digital exhibition, obviously, those issues aren't as important because all you need is a really good High Definition photo to kind of work from. So obviously, that is one of the benefits of a physical exhibition is that you kind of bring out these works and revitalise them, make sure they're stable and kind of a new lease on life. And then you know, that when they're going back into the collection, they're in a really good condition. So we kind of missed out on that opportunity.

Maya:

Kalighat is a depiction of everyday life, but it can also be sensationalised, bold, highly figurative and impacted by individual artistic expression. Do you think the Kalighat paintings in this exhibition can help to facilitate an understanding of everyday life in 19th century India? Or do they more accurately reflect the influence of made for market trends, cultural images, British commission and Indian artistic response?

Sofie:

So to break this down a little bit, all cultural material is a reflection of the context of the time which was created. The Kalighats weren’t intended for British commission, but to help aid domestic worship however, yeah, there were attempts to expand the audience. Yeah, not to say there was that the western presence is not evident in the paintings, there are examples of Kalighat and Pattachitra styles of painting, depicting secular content and attempt to reach that wider audience. But we don't have any example of these in the Berndt’s collection as a result of the Berndts’ particular interest and focus in religious iconography. But the artists also did indicate their animosity towards the foothold of Western powers within India, through depictions of demons dressed in western clothing. So there's several of the Kalighats which show demons wearing like European style buckled shoes, which is quite interesting.

Michael:

In line with what you're asking, perhaps it's better to consider the collection of the material and know that people were buying them as tokens of the “exotic”. I say that in quotations because you won't see me, or for the use of as examples of idolatrous beliefs, clearly incongruous with the predominant Christian belief systems that the Western kind of powers had, and the kind of the attempts of the Christian missionaries to expand their influence in India, which is if you guys have read Kate Riverbank’s paper, which is really covered in that, and it's kind of a particularly prominent part of the history of the Kalighat collection that we hold that museum.

Maya:

That's great. I think Jeremy and I both read that for a class or at least I did

Jeremy:

No, you definitely did. I haven't read it. Now, because that sounds like an absolutely fantastic read.

Maya:

But it really focused quite heavily on the Kalighat selection. So could you tell us more and differentiate a bit between the Court and Pattachitra styles as well?

Michael:

The Pattachitra paintings are predominantly, well the ones we have are predominantly from the mid 20th century, we're pretty sure the birds collected most of them in the 1960s when they travelled to India themselves. They were doing kind of a survey of anthropology and sociology departments in India, they got some grant money to go over and network and make connections and they had a lot of interest in bringing Asian studies over to Australia. And kind of really, early worked out the importance of doing that kind of thing.

Yep, back to the Pattachitra paintings, Pattachitra painting on cloth, pretty simple. And they kind of started off as a around Jagannath temple, which is in Puri, in Odisha, so just a bit further south down the east coast from Bengal where all the Kalighats are from. And it really is kind of started off as a practice where when Jagannath temple was closed, all the iconography obviously wasn't accessible to the pilgrims and people who just wanted to go and worship. So they brought out these large paintings on cloth of the idols and the symbols and things like that, for people outside to devote and worship to, and then kind of from there it became a thing where pilgrims wanted their own little Pattachitras of the iconography to take home with them. And then from there, it even expanded out again to just Hinduism narratives and stories and things and it became a real market for devotional iconography. And then we have the Court paintings, which kind of range from 18th to 19th century, the ones we have, which are predominantly from Rajhistan, which is the North West kind of area of India. And these, this kind of a bit different because there's a lot more historical influence, you're getting Islamic influence of the kind of the Sultanates that conquered and held India for quite a while. And then you have the Mughal Empire, which came down from Central Asia. And they brought with them Persian court painting styles. And so the Indian kingdoms there took on this style of painting. So you're getting a real kind of prominence on portraiture of important figures, Kings, and things like that you're getting a kind of a glimpse into palace life. So whether it's there's Zanona, were kind of the inner sanctum where the women were kept away, or Hindu narratives, you're getting the illustrations of poetry, as well. So there this beautiful kind of interplay between written narratives, painting and stories.

Maya:

Yeah, I mean, I have a just a little side question on that. I've studied a little bit of like Persian epic poetry and those kind of manuscripts of illustrations. And was the format of the Court paintings impacted by that? Are they separate pieces that came from a manuscript? Or do they feature calligraphy in that same kind of way that you would find in a Persian epic poem? Or?

Michael:

You mean, like written calligraphy?

Maya:

Yeah.

Michael:

Let me just start by saying no, like, not the ones we have do. But yes, certainly, other examples of the same things we have often do. So whether it's a, you know, a Baramasa or in, which is a poem about a season, a time in a year. And it's kind of a visual representation of what the mood is of that season, and things like that. So you will often get some kind of calligraphy to go with that. We don't have any of that.

Maya:

Thank you so much. That's really deep, the whole world and the distinctions between the three so thanks.

Jeremy:

It's just sounds like such a diverse range of items that you're trying to represent. And

you mentioned earlier that for the physical exhibition that brought in an off site conservator, to sort of stabilise the paper for display, and things like that. With this switch to digital, In some ways, it must be easier, but there must have been some other challenges. So can you tell us a little bit about what the process was like to develop this as a digital exhibition as opposed to the physical one? Because I imagine it can't just be taking photos and simply putting them online? There must be more to it?

Sofie:

Yeah, well, you use the same process initially in developing digital exhibitions. So we had chosen a series of works that we wish to display and explore further. And so we looked at our database, which is like a compiled notes and annotations that the Berndts possibly had written or museum directors, past museum directors had written down for like information about the works. And then so from there, we looked at external sources or publications, we have a lot of books here at the Berndt in our reference library that we can use, and further explore the narrative. Michael and I had absolutely no experience in Hinduism or Indian art. So I was starting from very a blank canvas. So yeah, I was definitely a bit overwhelmed with stuff, like not understanding. Yeah it was super interesting, we're getting a bit more familiar with the stories that were portrayed. We also cross reference with a lot of other institutions, exhibitions, and there are quite a few that are online. So that was really helpful. And we also got in contact with a professor here at UWA, who is professor in Asian Studies, and she was able to help us help us a lot throughout the process. And from there, she also put us in contact with a professor in art history in India, who helped us through some of our queries. So that was really great. But yeah, definitely still some challenges, kind of like different hurdles, same race, although we have a lot of challenges to do with physical exhibitions, like we're gonna display things or conservation issues and all that, there are limitations, especially because we haven't done this before. And the university hasn't necessarily done an online exhibition before. So their website platform is limited in a way but we're working through it.

Jeremy:

It sounds like you've just sort of really had to sort of tackle it full force absolutely.

Sofie:

Yeah.

Jeremy:

Staying on that difference between digital and physical. How are these objects constructed? Is there a distinct visual difference between the cloth and the paper of the Kalighat paintings. And obviously, when you're looking at an image of an artwork or an icon online, some things could potentially be lost. Basically, what I'm asking is, what is the audience going to potentially miss out on seeing - is there details that just can't be represented on the screen, like the presence of the object as you stand before it? So do you feel that with the research that you've obviously been doing that that information is still going to be conveyed?

Michael:

Definitely. I mean, there's nothing quite like standing in front of something physically. And unfortunately, yes, there will be elements that will be overlooked, I suppose, like viewing anything on the web, it's hard to get a sense of scale, especially. So for example, the Kalighats, which are probably the largest works, and because they're on worked on mass produced paper, they're all kind of the same size and same scale. And you're not really get that the Court paintings, and the Pattachitra has a whole different kind of sizes and formats and things. So obviously, scale is a big issue. Also the kind of fragility of the paper for the Kalighats as well. You'll see this damages, little tears and things around the edges, because the paper is so fine. It's almost translucent.

Jeremy:

It almost sounds like it they're dealing with Ross paper or something.

Michael:

Yeah. Well, it just wasn't designed to last. And so you know, when you do try and preserve it indefinitely, yeah, these issues come up. So yeah, they're very fragile, very kind of crispy. That's a technical term. Yeah, so that you're not going to kind of get that as much as you would physically with them. Also, things like the Court paintings have a huge amount of gold on them, ground up gold leaf painted onto them, you'll see that there is gold, but you're not going to get that beautiful shimmer that you get as you walk around them from different angles and things. Yeah, so the Kalighats have ground in a beautiful kind of silver linework as well.

Maya:

Does that stuff have a texture as well to it on the surface?

Michael:

Definitely, the tin, it’s definitely got a protrusion, just the fact that it does kind of shimmer makes you do feel like it's kind of just sitting almost like kind of floating on the surface, because obviously it catches the light and stands off.

Jeremy:

That special, almost magical moment that an extra layer of dimension can give to an image to sort of take it from something that's on paper to something that's *more*, you know.

Michael:

Exactly, Yeah. I mean, there's just a few examples. But yeah, definitely.

Maya:

Well, given that we've talked about all that we've lost moving online, our next question is

about whether there's actually been any benefits to moving online? And will this be a focus in later exhibitions?

Sofie:

Yeah, definitely. So it's opened the door for future opportunities to present material from the collection on another platform. So as Michael said, earlier, scale is far less relevant on a digital face, which will allow us to showcase collections which might get lost or wouldn't necessarily fill our physical space. So we are planning to do a digital exhibition next year sometime, on Japanese Netsuke, which are teeny tiny little small carved ornaments, especially made of real wood, which are worn as part of Japanese traditional dress as a toggle attached to the sash. So if we were to display those in our exhibition space, it would be like, one cabinet. Yeah.

Jeremy:

You'd have no idea how you probably do, because you saw me just pumping fists in the air, how excited I am for that, like that is just an absolute passion of mine. And the fact that you can bring what, admittedly is a rather niche form of art practice that might not necessarily get it’s sort of moment in the sun that you can display digitally, just like, if you need a thumbnail for anything, it's just me pumping fists, because that's, that's awesome. That's right. I love that you're sort of bringing from the shadows, these these beautiful, beautiful objects that are often overlooked.

Michael:

Yeah, they're pretty cool. And I think it was gonna end up being a physical show, you'd obviously have to bring in other elements to fill the space. So you'd have to maybe look at bringing in kimonos and things like that, and other Japanese dress culture and stuff like that.

Sofie:

Like, you want a narrative don't you?

Michael:

Yeah. Yeah, really cool.

Sofie:

I'm just drawing on like, the benefits of doing this exhibition online is that we were especially with the Kalighats, we were able to just display so many more, to be able to conserve all of those and make sure that their exhibition ready would have taken so much time and money.

Michael:

Yeah, I think when we were discussing it, it was maybe like, five out of 60 that we might have been out. To have ready to frame and display.

Sofie:

Now we've got about 33.

Jeremy:

That's a significant broadening of scope.

Michael:

Yeah, you know, it's a timely and costly endeavour, and certainly with COVID-19, and the the situation that the university is in now, not viable. So it's been a great opportunity to push the exhibition through anyway. And yes, you do lose some things, but you also gain a lot. And thankfully, the works have such rich narratives behind them, that that is significant, it's pretty important to talk about the culture that they're touching on. And the broader narratives that they're illustrating and exploring, which we've tried to do, it's going to be a text heavy exhibition, especially because as Sophie said, we have no real understanding of Hindusim going into this or to the narratives that were kind of being explored or the history. So it was a massive learning curve for us. And I think that really highlighted to us how important is that everyone else has an understanding of this, if they were in that situation, I'm not saying that everyone's as clueless as we were. But we felt there's some really amazing things being talked about and explored. And we want everyone to be able to grasp that as well.

Maya:

That's great. And speaking of kind of curatorial creativity, and like going from five, Kalighat paintings to 30. And thinking about, just like the sightlines in the space of an online exhibition, we wanted to know, does the ability to have complete control over a digital space, make curating an exhibition like this more freeing in a sense, or does working within the limitations of a physical space help the curatorial process?

Sofie:

There were equally, the same number of limitations, I would say, we didn't have to worry about the safety of objects, or how they were to be displayed as you would in a physical exhibition. But yeah, as I said, though, no conservation requirements and issues with the digital space, it’s just different.

Michael:

Obviously, there's costs a lot more costs involved with a physical exhibition in a building the space, if you want to change it, you're painting the walls, you're getting vinyl printed, you're having your didactics printed and designed and your banners and your whatnots made, obviously a lot of labour involved in that. So one of the benefits of the digital exhibition is that we're nearly working on zero budget. So there's that. But yeah, I mean, certainly, there's still a lot of restrictions. Obviously, we're working with into the UWA web platform on which Sophie said, it's not designed for an exhibition. And so it's been difficult negotiating all the hoops that we have to jump through and the kind of the limitations of what we're working with, the platform that we're working with. But we've been doing it it's been happening, we're getting there. Yeah, I wouldn't say there's a lot more freedom.

Maya:

Is it as simple as just like, we're going to take the concept of this exhibition and the vision and shift online? Or did you also have to do some conscious shifting of like mission statement and what you wanted the exhibition to express when you move to online?

Michael:

Well, definitely, I touched on when we're talking about the amount of explanation that we wanted to give to some of the work, that was definitely something that was far more viable in a digital setting. So when we can have an extended label for every work, which if it was a physical, probably they would be as big as the actual works themselves. You know, which is very overwhelming, if you've got a block of text next will work less than A4. So we do have the advantage of being able to hide that text behind a click to expand and things like that. So that was something we definitely kind of considered and thought, Oh, that's great, because that works well.

Sofie:

And it was difficult trying to grasp how that narrative would flow online. Because you don't necessarily want people just scrolling down forever. Like you. Yeah, we wanted to be quite fluid and

Jeremy:

You didn't want to create a Tumblr post or something like that.

Sofie:

Yeah, no exactly. So that was quite difficult to envisage but we're getting there. Trying to like explore each, because we obviously have out three distinct painting styles that we're focusing on. So how to like separate those, but make it really user friendly.

Michael:

And yeah, you can't, you know, like in the physical space, you can obviously play works off each other people can directly compare and contrast and things. So I think going into a digital platform, we really had to think about how we were going to present the works and how it was going to be different. And we would have to kind of sacrifice, the ability to do those kinds of things.

Maya:

Thank you so much. It's been really cool to hear about how you've had to deal with and work within the weird and bizarre circumstances this year.

Jeremy:

Yeah, no, it's been absolutely fascinating hearing how you've sort of put this expression has been your exhibition together. Just sort of want to focus a little bit Now if we can on the Berndt in general, if you don't mind, could you tell us a little bit about the broader mission of the Berndt and how you see this exhibition connecting to it?

Sofie:

Well, the general mission of the Berndt Museum is in I would say, is to preserve and provide access to an array of cultural material, celebrating diversity in regards to people in place and time. So in this exhibition, there's a strong connection to the Berndts themselves. The material is directly tied to their research, and relationships with community when they were over in India, and obviously their personal interest in Asian culture, history,

and life.

Michael:

And the Berndts believed that material culture was not merely about static objects, but more insight into the surrounding context and stories they tell. They championed the activation of an object's utility, and that by researching and displaying this material, one is kind of breathing new life into these works.

Maya:

Well, Jeremy and I are current students, and the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery is on the UWA campus. And both of you are UWA alum. So how do you see the Berndt’s engagement and connection with UWA students? Are there any initiatives or projects that you would like to grow?

Sofie:

Yeah, for sure. Currently, the museum provides a practicum placement once a semester for students. So that's what I completed in 2017. We've had quite a few students come through with that, giving an insight into the realities of working in museum.

Michael:

Underlined ‘realities’.

Jeremy:

I love that sinister chuckle. Thank you work for the art, but (laughs).

Sofie:

We also conduct regular tours with student groups, typically, often anthropology groups, but also future students through the Aspire program. We we contribute engagement, knowledge development through our public programmes, publications, which for Expressions of India, we’re also during an occasional paper, and exhibitions, and even podcasts like this. And also, I might mention, Jeremy, your exhibition on MY COLLECTION. So that was a little student endeavour.

Jeremy:

That was such a fun experience. I was actually gonna tack on to Maya’s question a little bit about that, in the student engagement, some of the initiatives that you offer, like the MY COLLECTION are just incredibly rewarding and valuable. And I know personally, from my experience of going through the archives, and doing the research and helping curate even just a small part, it's propelled my learning immensely, and has opened up so many opportunities, and it's such a valuable service. And I love that it's an active mission statement from every angle.

Michael:

That's one of the initiatives. That's kind of a collaborative thing with the Lawrence Wilson. So obviously, working with them provides some really cool, interdisciplinary initiatives.

Sofie:

And I'd say just but anyone looking to get into the industry, get out there, try and do those practicums and those placements and see if you like to volunteer in pretty small fields, say yes to everything. Yeah.

Jeremy:

There's a small slice, everyone knows everybody.

Michael:

Be nice to everyone as well.

Jeremy:

Yeah. Definitely be nice in these trying times.

Michael:

But also, looking into the future, we strongly feel that a permanent object related learning space will provide significantly greater opportunities for us and engagement with students. We're also hoping to work towards digitising the collections. So making it accessible online, obviously, kind of broadens our reach and engagement, both nationally and internationally. So that's something we're really hoping to get off the ground.

Maya:

Well, thank you so much for your time. It's been really valuable and very educational as well.

Sofie:

Thanks for having us, Maya and Jeremy. It's been great.

Jeremy:

Thank you. Thank you so much for your time. We really just can't wait for the exhibition to go live. Do you have a date for that at the moment?

Sofie:

I think the 11th.

Jeremy:

So it goes live on the 11th. And then we're all looking forward to the eventual reopening of the museum itself. And thank you so much, guys. It's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you.