

Friends of York Art Gallery

A Q&A series where curators answer questions about policies and practices in dialogue with Judith Glover

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Peter Trippi

Former Director, Dahesh Museum of Art, New York



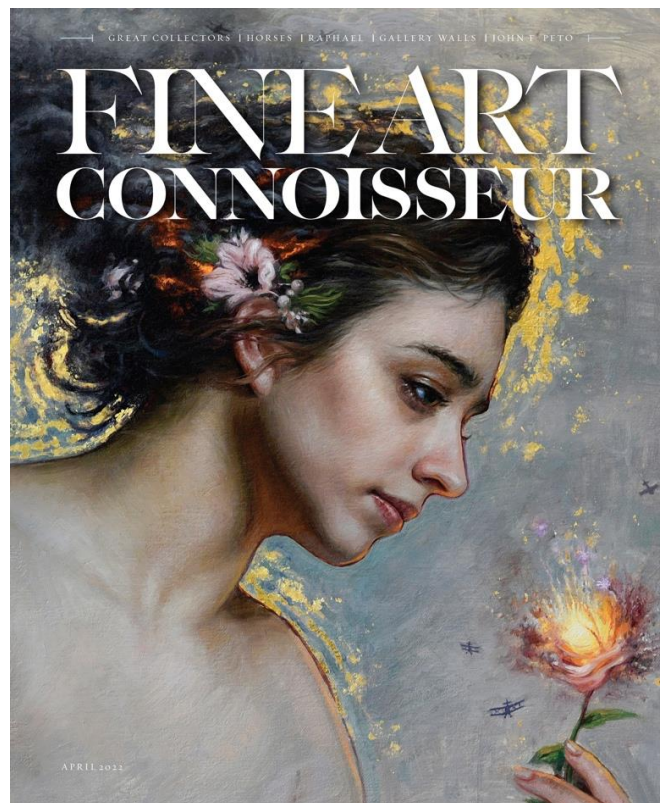
Peter Trippi's home office overlooks the Hudson River, a historic cemetery, and the skyline of Midtown Manhattan.

Can you describe your present role?

Since 2006, I have been fortunate to pursue a range of curating, researching, writing, editing, and lecturing opportunities through my consultancy, Projects in 19th-Century Art, Inc. I am both its president and 'bottle-washer'; I have no assistant and work alone in my home office

overlooking the Hudson River. New York City is an ideal base for such work because it is an art capital and has such good travel links to the rest of the U.S. and the world. Although I loved working full-time in museums from 1994 through 2006, my role as an independent art historian suits me better and is somewhat more in sync with 21st-century workways.

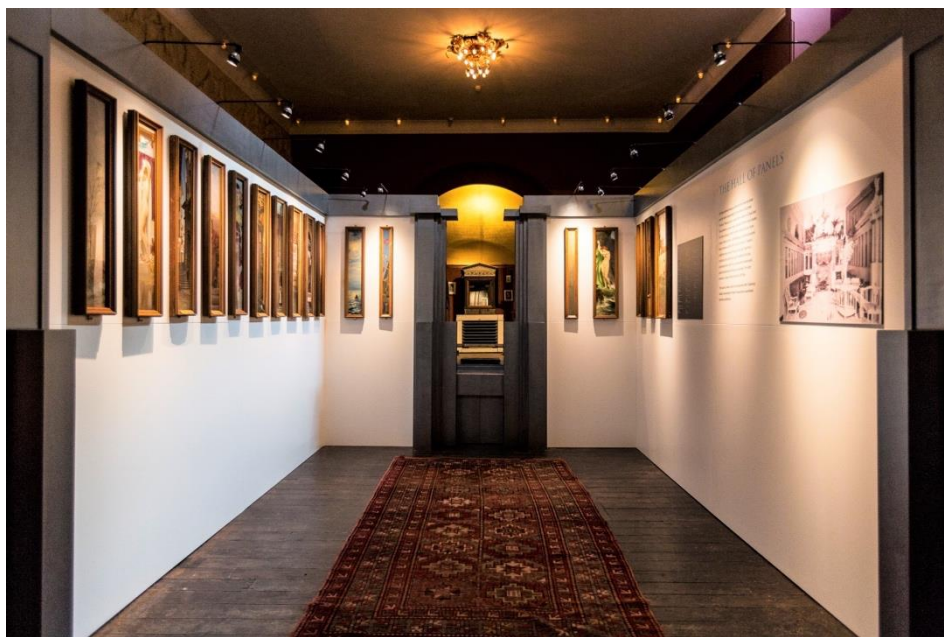
My primary client is the magazine [*Fine Art Connoisseur*](#), where I have been editor-in-chief since 2006. This is a bimonthly magazine for North American art collectors, distributed by Streamline Publishing every other month throughout the U.S. and Canada. Its focus is contemporary and historical realist paintings, sculpture, drawings, and prints—especially figurative work—and I'm glad to say that such magazines have survived the digital revolution. Subscriptions and advertisements are steady, and we are pleased that public interest in contemporary realism is on the rise.



My other clients are an array of museums, art schools, commercial galleries, historical societies, and other cultural entities that hire me to perform a specific service. My most frequent role is that of 'exhibition guest curator', which I particularly enjoy because I had previously worked in museums and thus appreciate what my temporary employer needs. In this role, I refine the exhibition's 'argument', propose artworks for inclusion, network with colleagues worldwide to determine if those pieces are locatable and borrowable, collaborate with designers to determine the

most effective arrangements, and then write wall labels and catalogue essays/entries about the works. Very often my contract also includes presenting a lecture (online or in-person) or participating in a panel discussion or gallery tour.

Over the past 16 years, for example, I have been privileged to co-curate two international touring exhibitions of Victorian art with my colleague Prof. Elizabeth Prettejohn (University of York) – one on the painter [J.W. Waterhouse](#) and another on the artistic family of [Lawrence and Laura Alma-Tadema](#).



One highlight of the Alma-Tadema exhibition at Leighton House (2017) was the regathering of many long-separated painted panels that once adorned the Alma-Tadema family's home in St John's Wood.

Photo: Kevin Moran

We are now collaborating with other colleagues on an exhibition of Pre-Raphaelite and Italian art to be presented at the [Musei di San Domenico in Forli, Italy](#), opening in 2024.

In 2020–21, I co-curated the exhibition *Artful Stories*, which gathered 45 master paintings that normally hang in various mansions and storage rooms owned by Historic New England, one of America's largest networks of such properties. Starting with field visits to these sites and then conducting my research in New York City (which has superb art libraries), I collaborated with the organization's senior curator, Nancy Carlisle, to

select and interpret the pictures, creating a [permanent website](#) in the process.

That project led organically to a relationship with the time-capsule-like mansion in Cambridge, Massachusetts where the Victorian poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow lived. Today this [National Park Service property](#) is filled with art collected by him and his cosmopolitan family, yet surprisingly little attention has been paid to it. I will write several articles about the artworks and then commission other scholars to prepare articles on other topics—all to be posted on the free online journal, [Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide](#), which I founded in 2002 with Prof. Petra ten-Doesschate Chu.

My client list is long, but perhaps three more examples can suggest the diversity of my work. Last summer I was hired by [Sugarlift](#), an innovative commercial gallery in New York, to curate a [show of contemporary flower paintings](#) by five artists from the U.S. and Scotland. This past February I delivered two original lectures: one online for the [Victorian Society in America](#) about the Edinburgh-based Arts & Crafts artist-designer Phoebe Anna Traquair, and the other in person at Connecticut's [Lyme Academy of Fine Arts](#) on ten American realists who flourished in the 1960s and 70s—decades usually associated with abstraction and minimalism.



What led you to become a curator?

The range of material described above is broad, yet it all ties into a few subjects I have long relished. I was fortunate to be introduced to art and museums through my late mother, who worked at the Smithsonian Institution and National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., where my family lived. By accompanying her to work every summer, I learned that museums are staffed not only by guards and guides, but also by fascinating people who work behind-the-scenes making the magic happen 'out front'.

My interest in the 19th century blossomed during my mother's stint in the Victorian landmark on the National Mall known as the [Arts & Industries Building](#), which in the mid-1970s was transformed into a re-creation of the 1876 Philadelphia world's fair. What child would not love a display featuring artworks from around the globe, a locomotive, an elephant, a carousel, and much more?



The Smithsonian Institution's Arts & Industries Building on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.; photo courtesy Wikimedia Commons

My interest in Britain emerged at age seven, when my generous parents brought me to London (including, amazingly, a West End musical titled *I & Albert*), and at sixteen when I lived with a family in central Scotland through a Red Cross volunteers exchange programme.

Arriving at university (the [College of William & Mary](#) in Williamsburg, Virginia), I intended to study economics and political science—the lifeblood of my hometown—but detested those courses and excelled instead at art history, which came naturally thanks to all those museum visits. I spent my final year not in Virginia but at the University of St. Andrews, where during a slide lecture I was astonished by the trippy, technicoloured Pre-Raphaelite paintings of Rossetti, Millais, and Holman Hunt. In the 1980s their daring creations were unknown in the U.S. and had only just been ‘rediscovered’ in Britain. I was smitten, and although I enjoyed earning a M.A in art museum administration at New York University, I hurried back to London to take a M.A. focused on Pre-Raphaelitism at the Courtauld Institute of Art.

Back in the U.S., I landed a job writing grant applications at the Baltimore Museum of Art, which was finalizing a [touring exhibition of masterworks from the Victoria and Albert Museum](#). I ended up writing two of its catalogue essays and offering lectures and tours on site. My next post, at the Brooklyn Museum in New York City, also involved fundraising, but by then I had been commissioned to write a [monograph on the ‘modern Pre-Raphaelite’ J.W. Waterhouse](#), ultimately published by Phaidon Press (London) in 2002.



*The cover of Peter Trippi's 2002 monograph on the 'late Pre-Raphaelite' painter
John William Waterhouse (1849–1917)*

While building a collection, what are the factors you keep in mind when adding an object to a collection, whether purchasing or accepting a donation?

The success of the Waterhouse book led to my being hired as director of New York City's [Daheh Museum of Art](#), the only U.S. institution devoted to 19th-century European academic art (including a Waterhouse oil study). It was there I worked most intensively on enhancing a permanent collection with our four curators and the trustees. In 2003 we received

considerable attention upon opening a [new facility](#) on the same block as Tiffany's and Trump Tower; this led to a flow of generous collectors approaching us to donate artworks. Fortunately, the museum also had some funds for acquiring works at auction. Because our mission focused so tightly on a specific period and region, it was relatively easy for us to find and present eligible artworks for consideration by the trustees. Almost all were acquired in 'ready to display' condition and, beyond the sumptuous storytelling pictures you would expect, we collected drawings that visualize the rigorous technical training required of most 19th-century artists.

Have you experience of working with supporters of the museum/gallery, such as the Friends? If so, can you talk about their role?

At the Dahesh Museum we had a robust membership programme, and I am still in touch – sixteen years later – with many members who proved to be 'kindred spirits'. The membership and patron programmes at Baltimore and Brooklyn were larger and more wide-ranging, and I particularly enjoyed supervising Brooklyn's seven 'friends councils', each devoted to a curatorial department. One great privilege was visiting the homes of major New York collectors with these groups, watching how strangers who are excited about objects and ideas can stoke each other's connoisseurship. In the U.S., most museums were founded not by municipalities but by individuals; that model of citizens taking responsibility for the museum's fiscal health and also for the flow of artworks into it is inspiring, and I remain grateful to have observed such a high standard of both quality and generosity at Brooklyn.

What are the main challenges that curators face both currently and in the long term?

Setting aside the severe fiscal challenges at many museums these days, my chief concern is the public's apparent antithesis to 'experts'. I embrace the growing involvement of visitors who contribute their unique insights, initially during community consultations and later through educational activities. Yet I also embrace the fact that curators know more about artworks and the stories behind them; it's essential we keep those experts flowing into our field and 'give them the microphone' so they can help audiences connect with artworks meaningfully. None of us wants an

amateur in the hospital operating room slicing our abdomen open; we want a trained professional there, and so we must recognize that art historians/curators possess their own hard-won skills that can benefit others profoundly.

I have been fortunate to consult with institutions that welcome my expertise and truly collaborate in organizing the exhibition. This must involve mutual respect and a candid back-and-forth: I may know the subject better than the coordinating co-curators at the host museum, and of course they know, among other things, what their local audiences will or will not want from the experience. Listening is essential, and I recall it happening repeatedly throughout the Waterhouse and Alma-Tadema tours. Liz Prettejohn and I found that openness particularly gratifying as the exhibitions crossed many borders: Waterhouse was presented in Groningen (The Netherlands), London, and Montreal, while Alma-Tadema visited Leeuwarden (The Netherlands), Vienna, and London.

Is there any particular issue that you would like to raise that has importance for your role?

As suggested above, I have been fortunate to work as an independent professional in an era when the Internet and relatively easy travel links make it possible to be in touch with colleagues worldwide. Our globalist zeitgeist has been impacted by pandemic-era restrictions, but I am fundamentally optimistic that museums and other arts organizations can sustain the ‘big picture’ interconnections we have fostered over the past quarter century. Still, as wonderful as digital communication can be, there is nothing like seeing art in person, nor conversing with a kindred spirit face to face. All of us must work hard to ensure that virtual reality never replaces our live encounters.

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