

WP: Hi everyone! Welcome to episode 1 of *Between the Lions*, the six-episode podcast series that features museum officers and shop staff members from the Bowdoin College Museum of Art. I'm Whitney, and I'm very happy to welcome Paulla to the show. Thank you so much for joining me today.

PE: Thank you for having me!

WP: I'd like to start by asking how long have you been working at the BCMA?

PE: I have actually only been here about six weeks. I just started.

WP: Okay, amazing. And what is your position here at the museum?

PE: Just shop assistant, you know, in the gift shop. Greeting people, selling merchandise, that's basically it.

WP: What drew you to working at Bowdoin and the BCMA specifically?

PE: Oh, my goodness, well, I've lived here 27 years, and I've heard all the time how wonderful it is to work for Bowdoin and just what a calming, inspiring environment it is. And so I have been looking for years just for something part-time, because I do have another career, but I wanted to do something just to get in. And then a friend of mine began working at the shop a couple years ago, he's still here, and told me about it, and I said, oh, I hadn't thought of the museum. You know, I love art museums, and so I applied and, well, I didn't then, but I kept telling him, if you hear of any openings, let me know. And last summer, he did, but then whoever was leaving changed their mind. I don't blame them. And then this year, there was an opening, and I was the lucky one to get in.

WP: Yeah, that's great! Well, we're so lucky to have you at the museum.

EP: I realize I didn't fully answer your question about what drew me to the museum. I mean, there's more than just wanting to work at Bowdoin, if that's okay.

WP: Yeah, absolutely.

EP: Well, I mean, I grew up on art. My mother's an artist, and I grew up with it in the home. And she had prints of a lot of the Impressionists, of Georgia O'Keeffe, of Renoir, and Albert Bierstadt, and Rembrandt. I mean, there were just so many pieces around our home. And then my mom also painted, and so her pieces were around the home. There were portraits, and nudes, and landscapes, and oceanscapes and whatnot. And so it was always just there, and I didn't even appreciate it. And then she took us to museums, and, I won't mention all the places we went, but we did go to the Louvre a couple times, which was really cool. And then she worked in the National Gallery while I was in college, and so I would take the metro over there and have lunch with her sometimes. And that was just a really informative experience. So I love museums, especially art museums, so that was a big draw.

WP: Could you describe your career pathway?

EP: Oh, goodness. It's a very long and winding road, I'll make it brief. I got an English degree from George Mason University right outside D.C. and didn't really do anything with it. I substitute taught for a few years. I was a single mom, and then I got married, and was a Navy wife for several years. I homeschooled my children. It was not what I saw myself doing, but on the side, I was always writing. Writing stories, and writing essays, and little articles, a few that were published, you know, back before the Internet, in the dark ages. And then six or seven years ago, well, I had other jobs, and then six or seven years ago, I went back to school for my MFA and got an MFA in creative writing. And now I'm a book coach, and a ghostwriter, and an editor, and I've been working on my own memoir for about forever. And yeah, so that's what I do normally. I work at home, but it's

not consistent, and it's not very social. I mean, other than with the writers, but most of it is just writing. And so this is a great social outlet, to come to the museum.

WP: I know that you started working at the BCMA very recently. What was your first impression of it?

PE: Oh my goodness, the very first day, when Rachel, the shop manager, took me around, she introduced me to just about everybody in the back, from the directors to the guards. And I mean, every single person, she would stop and they just acted as though they had been waiting for me. I mean, they were just so kind and friendly. The vibe here is just one of such inclusion, and friendliness, and safety. And I really felt that from every single person that I've interacted with, it's been, it's just really unusual, and so it's been such a welcome surprise.

WP: What has been the most challenging part of your job so far?

PE: Oh gosh, challenging. You know, I don't think there is much of a challenge. I mean, you know, it's four-hour shifts so it's not really hard but it's also, I mean, when things get busy, but I wouldn't even classify that. I don't think anything's been hard yet. I haven't been here long enough.

WP: Sure. What is the most rewarding part of your job so far, if there is one?

PE: Yeah, oh, there's so many. I mean just to be around the art. I feel like there's just an energy there at the museum with having these pieces that were, you know, some that were made thousands of years ago and some in more recent centuries. But still, everything is, or a lot of it is, before my time, before most of our time. And it's, just to know that there's a piece of history there that somebody, you know, a living, breathing person created that out of something in their heart or in their mind. And I feel like it just kind of brings us back to our humanity and how important it is to look at other people,

look at their differences, and see where people are coming from. I'm not articulating this well, but I feel like it's such, I feel like everybody needs to spend time in art museums, all museums, but art museums. And I think people need to not go in with preconceived notions, just kind of open. And I heard somebody say once, in fact, it was in a book I read about a guard in an art museum. It was called *All the Beauty in the World*, and he said that when his mother used to take him to museums as a child, she said don't think about the period of the piece. Don't think about trying to analyze it. Just think about how it makes you feel. And I just thought, yes, that's what this is. It's like we need to know how to feel and how to connect on that level. So that's been, I don't know if I answered your question.

WP: Yeah, no, definitely! I think that you articulated that beautifully, actually. And it's funny, 'cause I feel like you were almost like in my brain, like I feel like I've thought so many similar things, and it's part of what drew me to art history specifically when I was a senior in high school. 'Cause I had taken world history classes and things, but there was something about art history and looking at objects that someone had made, just, thousands and thousands of years ago that just, it really stuck with me.

PE: It's just staggering when you really think about it.

WP: Definitely.

PE: I mean we can talk about it, but when you stop and think, oh my gosh, you know, this person, and not only, they didn't have the resources we have now, they didn't see everything like we do on the Internet, and it's just amazing to me.

WP: Yeah, it's very impressive. And especially, I mean, in that class, we were looking at pictures on a slideshow.

PE: Oh, sure.

WP: Whereas, you know, being at the BCMA or any museum, there's nothing that can really compare to standing in front of the actual piece.

PE: Yeah.

WP: Even if it's in a case or whatever, but there's a different kind of energy,

PE: For sure.

WP: Do you have a favorite exhibit that has been on view at the BCMA or a favorite piece in the museum's collection? Or any piece outside of the museum's collection?

PE: I think, gosh, at the BCMA, that's really tough. I keep thinking of...

WP: You're welcome to expand outward, if that's easier.

PE: Yeah, I do have one piece in general that's not at the BCMA, but I will say this. The Gordon Parks exhibit, the photographs of the people, and that's another, it sort of connects to what I said earlier, just looking [at] people at such a different time. There really wasn't, in the big scheme of things, it wasn't that long ago. It was in the 1940s, I believe, that he took the photographs. And we've looked at those and how there's just kind of a different look. People just look kind of hardened by life, a lot of them do. And there was one popular one, the man's name is Herklas, I wanna say, Herklas Brown, is that it? Yeah, and his family came in last week, I think it was. And just to see, wow, you know, I think of those as so long ago. It was decades before I was born. But then, oh, here's his descendants, and they're here to see a family member. And that just was really impactful for me. And then, just on the huge scheme, when I used to go visit the National Gallery, there's actually a set of four pieces called *The Voyage of Life*, and I used to, I grew up in religion, very strict religion, and so it really spoke to me. Because

it's very Christian-based, and it's creation. And you see the baby coming in on a boat, and then the second painting is a young man, and then the third is an older man, and then the fourth is a man that's close to death. With Heaven in the background, you know, that he's heading there. And so that was really something I was searching in in my college years. And then I've since departed from that, but the painting still really speaks to me. I feel like it's such a message of hope, and it's like things are going to get tough, and life's going to be hard, and here come the rapids, but there's going to be peace at the end. And I don't know if I'm articulating that well, but it's *The Voyage of Life* by Thomas Cole. I don't know if I said that, yeah. It's really good.

WP: Yeah, it's actually funny that you bring up *The Voyage of Life*, because I was listening to a podcast a couple days ago, and she was talking about that exact series of paintings.

PE: Really? Oh my gosh, wow.

WP: Yeah.

PE: Have you seen it?

WP: I have, it's a podcast, but she also films them.

PE: Oh, nice.

WP: And there's like a green screen, so she can put images up. And so she projected them, and I did get a chance to see them. And so, yeah, I'm so glad that you brought that up, because I saw them so recently. And I also loved what you said about the Gordon Parks exhibition. I think that the black and white makes it feel so much further away than it actually was.

PE: That's a really good point.

WP: Especially, and I think about that, even looking in history textbooks of MLK or, kind of any figure where the photos are in black and white. I think it creates a certain sense of distance, but then it's always important to remember the 40s weren't that long ago, not even 100 years ago.

PE: Right, yeah, yeah.

WP: And, yeah. I don't think I realized that his family, Herklas Brown's family, was at the museum.

EP: Yeah, they came in, and I didn't know who they were, and then one of the directors was interacting with them and taking them in, and when they came back out, she introduced them to us, and we were just like, oh my gosh. So that was, it was exciting.

WP: Yeah, I can't even imagine what it must have been like to see a gallery kind of centered on your family.

PE: Yeah.

WP: Yeah, it's really amazing.

PE: So amazing, yeah.

WP: My next question for you is, do you have a favorite piece of merchandise in the shop?

PE: Oh, there are so many! Oh my goodness, you know, the one that I keep picking up, is, there's a book called, I believe it's called *The Maine [House]*. And one of our guards,

Dan, I hope it's okay that I'm mentioning his name, has his house in there. It's about homes in Maine that are being showcased. And I'm not even sure what the theme is, but they, I've only flipped through the book, I haven't read anything, I've just looked at the pictures, but they're beautiful photographs of these homes that are kind of made comfortable by found items. And I know that Dan, the guard that I'm speaking of, he speaks of that, that he'll find things or he'll go to garage sales, things like that, and find items. And so it's very rustic homes, but his happens to be painted in these bright, fire engine red walls, and lime green frames on the paintings on the wall, and he has multiple paintings across the walls. And you know, if the general public were to try that, it just would look like a menagerie. But he is so gifted with his art that it looks beautiful. So, yeah, I pick that up all the time and look at it. But the jewelry is amazing, and the children's book selection. There's a lot of great stuff.

WP: Is there an interaction you've had with a visitor that has been particularly memorable?

PE: You know, there's so many that, I feel like we get all kinds of people, obviously, but there's, I feel like there's either the people that really know art, and they know what they want to see, and they know why they're here, and then there are the people that come in. And they almost apologize, like I don't know anything about art, I just wanna, you know, tell me what to see. And I remember seeing that at the bigger galleries, like in D.C., my mom was a docent, and so she got that all the time. And I feel like art is accessible to everybody. I feel bad that people think they have to have some kind of knowledge to come in and, like that book said, to come in and feel something. But there have been, I can't think of one person, individual, but there have been several, like young couples that look like they're not far past college age. I don't know, everybody looks young to me now, but, and they've come in and just kind of been like, well, you know, and you can tell, it's sometimes they don't even have to say anything. They just look kind of shell shocked, and like I don't know what I'm doing, and I just want to say, oh, honey, go in and just let the pieces speak to you, and let it change you, or let it, you



know, whatever it does to you. Just let it happen. And it doesn't take an art degree, and it doesn't take any kind of special knowledge. It's just like the author of that book's mother said, just how does it make you feel?

WP: Is there anything you would love to see or see more of at the museum?

PE: I mean, I don't know if we need more of this, but I'm a sucker for Impressionists, so I would always vote for those. Lots of flowers and color and sunshine. You know, in dreary Maine, we need all that we can get.

WP: And my final question is, how do you like spending your free time?

PE: Oh my goodness, I have a German Shepherd that I walk every day in the woods and many miles so that she will stay calm. And I write. I love to write. I don't only do it for a career. I do it for fun, and so, yeah, love it. That's my artwork.

WP: Thank you again, Paulla, for taking the time to speak with me on the show, and thank you all for listening! Feel free to tune in to the other episodes of *Between the Lions*, out now.