

WP: Hi everyone! Welcome to episode 4 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 Tom to the show. Thank you so much for joining me today.

TM: Thanks so much for asking me.

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

TM: So actually, I started in February of 2025. I'm a relatively new member of the team. But it came at a good time in my life and so far, it's been great.

WP: And what is your position here at the museum?

TM: I'm a museum security officer, where I'm responsible for ensuring the art is secure and safe as well as ensuring that the public have a really good visit.

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

TM: The mission. I love the combination of art and community engagement. The Bowdoin College Museum of Art has been around for literally decades and decades. And I had been to it years ago, but when I saw the advertisement post up on the Bowdoin job site, I thought, oh, I really think that the mission of not just being an art gallery but one that combines that college, student, and community engagement seemed to fit where I would feel most comfortable.

WP: Could you describe your career pathway?

TM: Yeah, so it's not necessarily art, directly. I spent most of my life as an environmental educator, spending a couple decades as a professor at Unity College, now Unity

Environmental University, teaching parks and forest resources. And then I've been the executive director of a number of non-profit and environmental organizations over the years. But that combination of environmental education is not strictly nature, but it's also that combination of human and environmental intersection, and art is a real big piece of it.

WP: Yeah, absolutely. And what did you study in school and how would you say that shaped your career path, and I guess how you ended up here?

TM: Yeah, so actually I started off with wanting to study forestry at Virginia Tech, but after about a couple—we were on the quarter system at the time—after a couple of quarters, I decided that, while it had a great forestry program, it wasn't for me because it was very restricted in electives. So I switched to horticulture and have a degree in horticulture. Lots of free electives, which actually blends itself well with the fact that the art here at the museum is not just classical art, but it's a combination of many different media. You know, natural but also portraits, and photography, and visual as well as audio art. So that feeling and sense of wanting to have a holistic approach to my career. And so after working in the field, doing programs at a local nature center outside D.C. where I had spent most of my life younger, all the museums, lots of museums, I decided to get a graduate degree from George Mason [University] and that led to more of an administrative type of viewpoint. But, still, my career has been that intersection of nature, art, human interactions.

WP: Yeah, I love that. And a degree in horticulture, I mean, that's amazing.

TM: Yeah, well, I knew I wanted a basic plant science because that's instrumental when you're working in nature centers. But along the way, I took some amazing courses in greenhouse production and floral arrangement, and actually it was a great scientific but still great basic and holistic type of approach. And I had lots of free electives in

entomology and, well, I took a lot of forestry classes, took astronomy and bird watching, bird ornithology, so, you know, it was a great blend.

WP: Yeah, well, it's great to hear about that experience, really. What role, I think you mentioned this a little bit, but what role would you say that art and museums have played in your life?

TM: Oh, well, having grown up outside of the D.C. area and having parents who were very engaged with making sure that our education and appreciation of art stretched well beyond just the traditional classic school experiences, so I went to almost all of the Smithsonians multiple times throughout my life. Usually not in the summertime 'cause it was too hot and too busy, but the rest of the year, you know, lots of Sundays were spent at either the National Gallery of Art, or the Freer Gallery, or others. The Hirschorn or, you know, the classic Natural History Museum or Air and Space, but my parents also felt it was really important that I have a musical background. So I studied piano, and trumpet, and french horn, and—badly, but still had it—violin, of course. But then also we went to lots of concerts. My parents were classical music fans and so they had a subscription to the National [Symphony] Orchestra and so we [were] routinely going to musical events at, then it was the Daughters of American Revolution Concert Hall, Constitution Hall, and then it moved to the Kennedy Center. And so I just had that sort of background of music, and art, and nature, and science. So, sort of has continued throughout my life, although I do like more than just classical music, though.

WP: What would you say your favorite genre or genres of music are?

TM: Oh, well I do like classical. But I also like, you know, so when I was in high school and college, but I roomed with a high school classmate for a number of years, we lived in the same house. And he had a, back then and today, still, there was, you know, most things were records. And he had a real vinyl habit. So by the time he graduated and left

undergraduate school—he's an architect in St. Louis now—he probably had about 3 or 4,000 albums.

WP: Oh, wow!

TM: Yeah, it was pretty amazing. So I actually had a really eclectic experience because, you know, my roommate is really into music. So I had a lot of folk, a lot of early country, but also some classic rock 'n roll, and heavy metal. I mean, he had everything, so I had exposure for everything. So there isn't too much music I'm not fond of. And then I have three kids, and they all like music, but one of them is, his name's Zach, and he is a hip-hop artist. He's routinely doing hip-hop throughout New England at venues throughout, and he hosts a really great, every other Monday, down in Portland, Monday of the Minds. And it's a community hip-hop [collective], so lots of shows.

WP: Wow, that's super cool!

TM: Yeah, it's at The Flask in Portland, and it's a really nice, you know, it's a small bar venue but good crowd every time. But he's a very community-oriented musician in that he does, besides shows throughout the northeast, his organization, his Monday of the Minds, hosts public hip-hop shows down in Portland. I think it's Longfellow Square, I think, the main venue down there. And so, if the weather's nice, once a month they have shows, free.

WP: Yeah, wow, that's really amazing. And yeah. Just the way that art, and music, and the arts generally, they have a way of bringing people together.

TM: Yeah, they do. And that's really what's made my intersection of stuff, like when all the nature centers and environmental centers that I've worked at over the years, we also, I always felt it was very important that it's more than just nature walks and bug study, which is great, I love that too. But I would always host different types of musical

events. They had an environmental type of theme, you know, regular performances as concerts for families and individuals to come and enjoy. So that intersection of nature, art, music, that triad is almost like the legs of a stool. You can't do one without the other.

WP: I love that. I also, I really enjoyed hearing about your experience growing up around museums and going to museums. I feel like I had a similar experience. I'm from New York City, and so I grew up going to the Met, and the American Museum of Natural History, and the Guggenheim with my family but then also on school field trips, and there were just so many institutions.

TM: Right, yeah, so much richness. Yeah, so that's one of the things, when I was, you know, raising my kids when they were younger, we would go to New York once or twice a year. You know, of course we'd do all the museums, and we went to the Met, but we also went to, and I can't remember the name of the artist at the time. But one memorable trip in February, we were down, and it was a very warm day for February. It must've been in, I'm sure it must've been in at least the 40s, maybe the 50s, which is, you know, not too unusual. But the artist, and I'd have to think about who it was, but he and his wife had put up these flags all through Central Park. And it was amazing, actually. And it brought out thousands and thousands of people to enjoy this art in the park. And that's, you know, Central Park, beautiful in itself. Frederick Law Olmsted, amazing architect, landscaper, who changed the landscape completely of what was just a big swamp. But for people to gather in a green space, which was so important for everybody now but especially then. Again, that combination of art and nature is something that is a powerful tool for humans, people, to escape from the, in some cases, the drudgery of life but just to expand their horizons.

WP: Thank you for sharing that memory, I'll try to find that project.

TM: Yeah, yeah. You know, he just died just in the last 10 years, and his wife I think passed away shortly before him. It was a one name artist, I'm sorry I can't remember his name.

WP: No, that's okay. I'll find him.

TM: Yeah, but he was famous. He also wrapped an island in a pink type of fabric once.

WP: Oh, wow! Okay.

TM: He was definitely, you know, an engaging, out-of-the-box type of artist.

WP: What is the most challenging part of your job?

TM: Well, I would say as a museum security officer, one of the challenges is two things that come to mind. And this is partly because I'm relatively new, only having started in February. One is I don't know everything about all of the art pieces, and so, you know, I'm fairly well knowledgeable in art in general, so I can answer most questions, but sometimes I get stumped. And I don't know the background of something, so it means I usually have to say I'm not really quite sure, but I'll find out for you. And then I get back to them, which is nice. And the other one is, you know, my primary responsibility is to ensure the safety of the art and with that, the enjoyment for the visitor. But sometimes it can be really quite busy, and you worry about the accidental touching of art or the unintentional touching. Like, you know, the Assyrian tablets are just like, people just wanna touch it, you know? And so I try to do it nicely but with some humor as well. And I've never had a bad experience. Most people are like, oh my goodness, I forgot! Or whatever, so. I'm so sorry! But that's, you know, trying to do that in a way that's not confrontational nor making them feel terrible along the way. I mean there's millions of dollars worth of art in the museum and [we] just have to protect it.

WP: What is the most rewarding part of your job?

TM: Oh, the visitors' expressions and the engagement they have. You mentioned it in your introduction about your series that you're doing in that we are the front line for the visitors. The folks up at the gift shop, they have a huge, important interaction with people, so it's important that they have really good customer service and visitor engagement. But on the floor of the galleries, it's the museum security guards who are actually the front line. And obviously the staff behind it, yourself included, if we had any particular questions or follow-up, you'd be a great resource that we could call upon. But more often than not, people will turn to us and they sort of expect, think that we might know more than just the casual visitor. So the research that's necessary is really important too so that we can represent the museum to the best of our ability.

WP: Yeah, I wanted to focus this series on the museum officers and the shop staff just because I feel like we can get a little caught up, you know, we're here in the back, in the offices, and we don't have that face time with visitors in the way that you do.

TM: Yeah, right, exactly. And we do, except for when I have a rotation into the back room to look, check people on the monitors, I'm out on the floor probably seven of the eight hours that I'm here. And it's, of course, I try to read all the exhibit materials, but at the same time, there's a lot more than just that. And the patrons, the visitors, they do ask great questions. And I try to be as professional in my approach about it as possible.

WP: Yeah, you just see so much, and I really wanted to spotlight that.

TM: Oh, yeah. And it's not just, you know, I would say that most of the visitors that I've seen skew a little bit older, but that doesn't mean that we don't have young folks and children but also young adults coming as well. I have experienced a couple of the student nights, and they're a blast. They're more than just appreciation of art, it's also a

social event, which is great. But at the same time, a social event surrounded by amazing art is a beautiful thing as well.

WP: I agree. What was your first impression of the museum, since you haven't been working here for that long?

TM: Well, the first impression I had of the job was that, wow, there's a lot of information I need to know to ensure that I'm doing my job correctly. It's not really complicated but, I mean, there's a lot of security things that I wasn't trained [in] and haven't really had that much experience before. All the facilities I worked at before might've had like an alarm system that you just came in and turned off, that was it. You know, it wasn't like you're checking the doors, and checking this, and lights, and like glass breaks, and stuff. So that was, the learning curve was a little steep. And the staff, my supervisor, were all really patient with me, so that's great. I obviously feel more comfortable now. But with the art, I was struck by the visitors seemingly really wanting to learn more, but also the engagement and approach by the staff was very, I would say, unique in many ways. They were really friendly to the security officers. I don't feel like we're just the guards, we're part of the team.

WP: Yeah, absolutely.

TM: It makes me feel really good about coming and working for the museum. Plus, quite frankly, Bowdoin is a college. We're part of a bigger institution, and that has been really great also.

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

TM: So, there's two things. I can answer that in two parts. One is I was really deeply impressed with the Monhegan exhibit, which just closed a couple months ago. And that's



partly due to the fact that I lived on the coast of Maine in New Harbor for a good portion of my time since I moved here in the late 90s and have been to Monhegan personally probably at least 25 times. So the connection was a personal connection, also. It was amazing art, too, but it was a personal connection of knowing the land and having seen it transformed even in the last 25 years made that connection really strong. And then up in one of the galleries, there's a couple portraits of James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, and I always liked portraits in general. I do like traditional portraits of that nature. Big fan of Madison and Jefferson as a fan of Revolutionary times, literature, and art, so those two pieces speak to me as well.

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

TM: Well, actually, yes. There have been, when the Monhegan exhibit was here, there were numerous interactions with people who were struck by, you know, you came in the front doors of the first gallery, and right there was immediately a Jamie Wyeth painting of the sheep, the ram, rather, on the island right next to Monhegan. And one of my jobs was I was the executive director of the Herring Gut Coastal Science Center, which is up in Port Clyde. Great little museum education center focused on marine science, and Jamie Wyeth's wife was the founder of it. And so she had passed away back in the late teens–2000, teens–but I met Jamie on a number of occasions because he came to the Herring Gut. And so I was struck by that because it's a very striking picture. People loved seeing it, and then I could actually have a really positive experience letting them know that, oh, Jamie Wyeth, you know, he still lives up in Tenants Harbor, and he has a gallery out on Tenants Harbor, and he owns a couple different islands, actually. And he's a very approachable man. I could share the story, a personal story of meeting and chatting with Jamie, not that he would remember who I am, but, you know, at the same time, a really positive interaction realizing that just because he's a famous artist doesn't mean that he isn't a really nice guy. And so people enjoyed seeing that and hearing that.

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

TM: Well, in the future I would hope that they continue to, the museum directors along with the staff, plan, you know, works of Maine artists, whether photography, or paintings, or whatever. And I think that's important because, you know, we can certainly, I hope the museum continues its broader approach in having people from across the country but not lose the focus that is showcasing the Maine artists as well. Of which, you know, Maine has been an amazing spot for artists. But if you ask me, one artist that I would love to see is Howard Pyle. I wouldn't mind seeing or, I'm trying to remember Andrew Wyeth's father, who, I know some thought to be more illustrative as opposed to art, but I love that sort of characterization a lot. But, you know, maybe sometime in the future.

WP: Maybe. And finally, how do you like spending your free time?

TM: Oh, well, I like the outdoors. My wife and I go hiking, camping, kayaking, so the outdoors. My wife's a big gardener, and I've always enjoyed gardening because I was a horticulture major also, so spending time outside is an important aspect of things. And I also like to read. Yeah, so.

WP: Well, thank you again for taking the time to speak with me, Tom, and thank you all for listening! Well free to tune into the other episodes of *Between the Lions*, out now.