

WP: Hi everyone! Welcome to episode 5 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.

TR: Oh, you're welcome.

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

TR: Almost a year and a half now.

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

TR: I am a museum guard. I am also the only full-time museum guard for apparently quite a few years, [the] first one they've hired back in to be full time. So I'm here quite a bit.

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

TR: My wife and I moved to Maine, I saw there was an ad for a museum guard, I thought it would be a fun lark. And after the interview, they said do you want to go full-time? And I wasn't sure. And then [I] went home, talked to my wife, and she said yes, it's full-time, you're doing it. So I went okay!

WP: Yeah, fair enough. Could you describe your career pathway?

TR: My career pathway to get here?

WP: Yes.

TR: Oh my god. Born in Michigan, but I consider myself to be raised in a small town in Minnesota. I always hung out with the smart kids. I kind of still am doing that even to this day, because I'm surrounded by a group of very, very smart people. Didn't know what I wanted to do, tried college, ended up working at the factory literally three blocks from my house for about two years before I [decided] I wanted to go to school.

Discovered I liked school but didn't know what I wanted to do. After working in the factory for 16 years and taking school as much as I could on the side, I discovered I just love learning. Decided to leave the factory, go out west. Became a professional ski instructor, where I worked at some very high-end ski areas in Colorado. Met a doctor, married her—a PhD doctor, not a real one—and then I started discovering that one of her perks was that some of the colleges and universities she worked at, I could go to school for free as long as I never graduated. So I have between 130 to 250 credits, of college credits.

WP: Oh, wow!

TR: Because I never graduated. Which is, it's fun to brag about, but having that piece of paper could definitely help. I just still haven't picked what I wanna do. She ended up getting a job here at Bowdoin, I followed, and go to previous statement of how I got the job here. I applied and they said do you wanna work here full-time, and I went sure!

WP: Thank you for sharing all of that.

TR: That's the shortened version.

WP: What role would you say that art and museums have played in your life?

TR: From my background, art and museums, they're a reference point for me. There's a book out there called *Steal Like an Artist*. If you completely, totally copy somebody else's style, you've stolen it. You're fake. But if you take an aspect, oh, I like that point right

here, what they're trying to emulate. But if you combine it with this person's here, and oh, do it with what I'm doing, it's something completely new. So everything is a complete and total reference. A museum to me, it's a library of ideas that you can't read. It's a visual image. My wife accuses me of having, like the music students here are constantly thinking music, she hears me talk—I'm able to visualize things in a way, and I don't know what to do with it, in three-dimensional spaces. For camera movements and stuff like that, which is what I do while I'm guarding. I'm editing movies in my head.

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

TR: The most challenging part of the job is seeing how the guests come in, and they see something beautiful. And it's a natural thing to reach out and want to touch it because our entire, everything is like oh, this is so cool, can you just reach out and touch it? And it's like, you can't. 'Cause it's not yours, it's not mine, it may not even belong to the museum if it's a loan from another museum. And trying to get the people to, there's a little bit of etiquette here. You're here to look at it, not touch it. And watching people try to touch something, in particular, maps. Maps. Everyone, every time there's a map, it's like, oh, I'm here, and you just watch them. And it's like the slow-motion thing in a movie where all of a sudden they start moving, and you're like no! And then hopefully you catch them before they do it.

WP: I didn't realize that maps were such a big draw for people, but I guess it makes sense.

TR: It is! You know, my generation, we had paper maps. That's what pirates had, you know. Sorry, I got all these voices that come out, pay rent. There's at least six generations, maybe twenty generations, between her age and mine. The people that are a phone generation. I love paper maps, the tactile stuff.

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

TR: Watching the delight, and a lightbulb, or just the fascination or...Okay, I used to teach. One of my jobs teaching is watching the lightbulb come on and go oh, I get this. But I guess the aspect of that here would be the awe of, I've only seen these in a book, or on television, or a movie. And they come around the corner, and they see this thing that's only ever existed there. But it's not in these other mediums, it's right before them. And they just stop. In particular, at the top of the steps, when they come up for the reliefs for the first time, everybody just stops. It becomes like a weird traffic jam if there's a bunch of people. And everyone's like, the look of, their jaws drop, their eyes drop, they freeze, they start moving in slow motion, literally. And going, I never thought I'd see one of these. And we have five, which is really fun. Or realizing the paintings, some of the paintings in the Bowdoin Gallery. In particular, the Thomas Jefferson. People'll go like, I've seen this before. Yeah, I'll say, Google it: Thomas Jefferson portrait. And they whip out their phones, and I say go [to] Google, go [to] Images, and it's usually the third or fourth one. Sometimes, yesterday, it was the second, literally. And they went, yeah, I've seen this before. I said, yeah. It's right there. And then they're like, literally, the air in the room gets sucked out. And then they do slow-motion up to it. It's wonderful. That to me, that never gets old. When, all of a sudden, 'cause they're like little kids again. When you take someone and make them remember the wonder. There it is: the wonder of what they're seeing before them. Wow, that was a long way to get through that sentence.

WP: Yeah, no, that's beautiful. I've mentioned in other interviews that I've done, but that visitor interaction is something that I feel like we miss back here. Because we're in the offices, and we're not there with people nearly as often at all as you are or the members of the shop staff and so it's great to hear about those experiences, for sure. What was your first impression of the museum?

TR: So, you know, it was a beautiful building on the outside. The dome is, it is your quintessential, if you think of a museum at a small college and a small museum, and the fact that it has a museum—I was like, well, this is kind of interesting, let's see what's

in here. And you walk in and the first floor that you see, the lower galleries, they're flipping more, every five to six months, each gallery, so it's different. It's not more of the quote unquote permanent collection. Upstairs is more what I consider, people will be walking around, looking at stuff on the lower galleries, and I say, if you're looking for the more traditional museum art, it's upstairs. And then, you watch, oh, good. Because sometimes what's in the lower galleries pushes some boundaries for some people's tastes. But they get upstairs and it's the paintings and the reliefs themselves, the display of the antiquities from the archaeological sites that's usually in the Walker Gallery. That's the gallery where all the pottery is, the old pottery, just for those who don't know, listening in. You sit there and you're like, oh, this is here. And oh, wow, I didn't expect that after looking at what's downstairs. And then, oh, and then the first time I saw the Gilbert Stuart [portraits] of Jefferson and Madison. I sat there and went, oh, I've seen those posters before. Oh my god, that's not a poster, that's the real painting. And then you go up and you're like, it's here. I mean, I had the same thing. I didn't believe that it was here. And I went, where am I? I'm at a college that I've never heard of in a state that—the first time I'd ever been here was when I drove the moving van across the border—and there's this incredibly famous, like, where am I? But my working here, I do research stuff, the Bowdoin College Museum of Art is the sixth oldest museum in the United States. And considering that, it's pretty impressive. And it's in Maine, you know, a section that was probably incredibly difficult to get to when it was established, so, yeah. It's pretty impressive.

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

TR: I love the Assyrian reliefs because I never thought I'd see those. But I also love the antiquities that the professor that's in charge of those in the Walker [Gallery], which would be like the old broken pottery. Walking around the corner and going, oh, look, there's a Picasso. It's just a sketch, but it's here. The Rotunda is gorgeous, and, if you stand in the right spot, is a fantastic room in which to sing *Silent Night*, but only at

Christmas, 'cause otherwise people think you're weird. But hearing somebody one time do the Harry Potter theme, that is...oh, man, you're trying to nail me down on one. That's tough. You know, it's really a toss up between the Bowdoin, anything in the Bowdoin Gallery, and the pieces that are picked by the professors for the antiquities classes. I grew up on documentaries and watching stuff on National Geographic, and going on digs, and I always wanted to do that. And like I can't, but I work with people who have. And they're now teaching the classes that, if I'm lucky enough, my shift is right, I can listen in on the class and remember just enough trivia to make it sound like I'm smart.

WP: Yeah. Professor Higginbotham is great. He was actually my pre-major advisor, and I took his Roman Archaeology class my freshman fall and got to come to the BCMA and look at ancient Roman coins up close and, yeah. He's a wonderful person, and *Flora et Fauna* is definitely one of the highlights for me.

TR: Yeah, it is. It's a great exhibit. What he's impressed with, he realizes that I'm here more than any other guard. And I will catch snippets of his classes. And then the next time I see him, which may be a month, a month will go by. But I've had a month to think about this stuff that I'm looking at, and I've put together. Hey, you spoke this in your class, and then you pointed out this piece, and then I've been looking at it for the past month and, then started piecing together. And he's like, how did you figure that out? And then I'm like well, you left me enough clues, they're all right here. And he said, but you're not in the class. Yeah, but I heard just enough. And his challenge was, with the reliefs, he said Ashurnasirpal, King Ashurnasirpal [II]'s name was on the relief. And he gave me some hints, and then he said, I'll give you two years to find it. And I was able to do it in nine months, and it only took me nine months because I didn't see him for like three or four months. I was pretty sure I had found it. And I had. And then the other guards [said], you're here way too much. I said, no I'm not. They said, well you found the king's name. I said, yeah. Have you found it on the other reliefs? He said it was there. And it took me three more days to find it on all the reliefs. Not that I'm here a lot, but I have found his name, so. Yeah. What was the original question?

WP: Talking about favorite pieces in the museum's collection.

TR: And you started talking about Jim stuff.

WP: Yeah, yeah, I started talking about...

TR: But there's some recent stuff that I figured out, and I pointed out 'cause my background, also, is I used to run Renaissance festivals. And if you want, I can come up and tell you what I figured out. And he was like, that's impressive, Tom. And he was like, how'd you figure it out? Well, and then we got at this point where I went, nothing's changed in 3,000 years. And he's like, no, it's still the same. 'Cause it's really nice to hear about the kings and the leaders and stuff but who made the king's bed? You know, who made his soup? Who made his shoes? Those people, outside of here, those are the people I hung out with for real. And so my point of view is like, well, who made the pottery? How'd this happen, you know? The king's great, yeah, and he's gonna write about himself, but who cooked the eggs for the person painting the room, you know? What's that person like? 'Cause they had to be there. And I put it together from that point of view of looking at all the art up there, and Jim's been pretty impressed with some of the stuff I've come up with. And he's like, you nailed it, and I went, yes!

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

TR: Well...positive or negative one?

WP: Either.

TR: In an exhibit that's left, there was a painting in the exhibit that had not been seen for over 100 years by the public. And this person, just standing there, looking at it. You know, hands by their side, looking at it, there's lots of layers of paint. And as fast as I'm

saying this, reached out and just took their hand and went the entire length of the painting, up and down. And I was 15 feet away, there was no way I could've stopped it. It was just like, looking, hands at side, reach out, swath right on top. And that's memorable. Because no one had seen this painting in over 100 years except for the people who owned it, and that was memorable. I can't do anything about that. But, let's see, a positive one. Kids. There we go. If parents [are] coming in and you're watching the poor kid, and it's like, why are we here? What's going on? You know the age because it's not fun, we can't touch anything, I can't have my water, I can't have my candy. Why am I in here? And then you find something that the parent or the grandparent is kind of interested in, and you just kind of go, well, do you know why they're interested in this? And I'm not supposed to talk to the kid, I'm just supposed to observe. But, I'm sorry, there's a kid there, and they're like why am I bored? And I said, well, you know, is there something here you like? Yeah, why? And it's different, and it's not often that this happens. But all of a sudden you'll say something, and all of a sudden the kid is now interested in the museum. And I've had parents, and grandparents, look at me and go, oh, I'm sorry, I spoke too much. They said, are you kidding me? You got my kid interested in this stuff. And they're eight, they're nine, they're ten. And I went, and you're okay with that? They're like, yes. So, if you can, and it's hard, it's a hard audience, but yeah. That to me is getting them to flip.

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

TR: The running joke is armor. We would need to see more armor. We don't have enough armor here. I know people, so we could get some armor here. That's a fun joke, but I've heard from some of the past exhibits and different times of something where, there was one exhibit where there were like 1,200 a day and as many as 1,800 people a day coming here to see, you know, some paintings that, I honestly don't remember the name of the artist. And that's probably my weakest point here, is that everyone else I work with, they know about the art, the artist, [whose] canvas is up there, and that's not my background. Like, I've made some movie references. I speak movie, and I'll make



comments from movies or quotes, and everyone looks at me like I've just [spoken] a foreign language. But then they start speaking brushstrokes, and painting, and this person, and I'm like, oh, I better figure out what they're talking about so I can at least look in. But, man, the idea of that, something I'd like to see more of. Just something that overwhelmingly delights the public so much that we have those lines going out the door. And as much as it would be hard on all of us as guards to be keeping that many people out, 'cause the busiest day I've ever seen is about 650, and that was a lot of folks. But, man, and whatever it is that drew them in. That. I don't know what that thing was, but if we could have whatever that is, that'd be cool. But then, you know, armor. And, you know, armor would be cool. But, you know, some really nice paintings of armor. Now I'm just getting silly, so.

WP: Well, my last question is how do you like spending your free time?

TR: You mean when I'm not here?

WP: Yep.

TR: Actually, what I've been doing with almost all of my spare time for the past year and half is I'm building a studio in my basement. I'm up at 5, by 5:30 every day. I usually [have] my breakfast by 6. I didn't have to be here until 9, so I had an hour and a half of me going downstairs. I went and worked until about...I got home at about 5:30. Changed into my work clothes, was downstairs by 6:30. Had already run out of supplies, gone to Home Depot and came back, and I didn't have dinner until 8:45. And, I mean, it's all I do. That's my fun stuff, otherwise it's just, you know, mowing the lawn, painting the house, shoveling the driveway. But yeah, I've just been trying to get this studio, because I had a shop where I made stuff. And it's all in boxes. I see it every day. It's like all these boxes of stuff. But I'm close. So, ask me a year from now what I do with my spare time, and that might be better. Right now it's just building something to figure out what I'm going to be doing with my spare time for fun.

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