

This interview was recorded on September 8, 2025. It has been lightly edited for readability.

Rebecca Tucker (RT): Hello! This is Art History on Fire, an interview series exploring the current state of the field of art history through conversations with a variety of U.S.-based art historians. Your hosts are myself, Rebecca Tucker, professor at Colorado College, and...

Deborah Hutton (DH): Deborah Hutton, professor at the College of New Jersey.

DH: We're here to talk about what the future holds for our field. Higher education and the arts are facing a variety of threats, well known to all of us, and the discipline of art history is certainly not exempt.

RT: At the same time, it is also true that art history is in a dynamic and innovative phase. Attendance at museums is up, and general interest in the arts is surging.

DH: In this series, we will talk to art historians on the ground to learn from them about what is happening and why, and to gather ideas for moving forward.

RT: For the first installment in the series, we, Rebecca and Deborah, will interview each other as a way to introduce ourselves and give more context for the project.

DH: As always, you will be able to find a transcript of this interview, as well as more information about us and the project, on our substack, Art History on Fire, and on the project's website hosted by Colorado College.

RT: Okay, so for this first time that we're doing this, it's time for us to introduce ourselves to the greater world.

RT: At least to give some more context for this project we're taking on. So, why don't we just jump in? Okay? So, Deb, why don't you introduce yourself and describe what you do and your position in the field?

DH: Okay, great. So, my area of research speciality is South Asian art, specifically art made between the 16th and early 20th centuries for the Muslim courts in the Deccan region of South Asia. But I'm also very much a generalist. I teach at the College of New Jersey, which is part of the New Jersey Public university system. We are a mid-sized, primarily undergraduate institution

with a few master's programs. And even at our art history program's largest, it was quite a small program, so I was responsible for teaching all of the Asian and Islamic art history classes.

DH: And over time, I've become even more of a generalist, and I've also gotten very interested in the work being done to make art history more global. And a lot of my efforts, both inside and the outside of the classroom over the past decade or so, have been in that regard. Specifically, since 2014, I've been working on a series of global art history textbook projects with a team of authors and publishers, and so I do see myself both as a South Asianist, but also as a generalist who's interested in global art history.

RT: And those are such exciting projects. It's been so wonderful – not to watch you work through them, because I know they're a ton of work – but to see the book come to fruition and, you know, be out there in the world of art history as a viable textbook. It's so exciting.

DH: Well, thank you. Yeah, I'm really excited by the changes in the field of art history, and how much I've learned through the process, and the perspectives I've gained. So how about you, Rebecca? How would you describe your position in the field and the type of art history that you do?

RT: So, like you, I am by nature a generalist, because I teach in a small program. Unlike you, I teach in a private college, a small liberal arts college. I work at Colorado College in Colorado Springs. So, some of the framing of my department and my curriculum that I teach is set up by the fact that we're a liberal arts institution. As an art historian, I'm also more canonical. I teach in the Western European tradition, primarily artwork from the early modern era. Most of my research is in the northern part of Europe, and I work a lot on issues of patronage, collecting, and display. But as you said, the world is global, even in the “olden times,” and I teach a lot of global themes as part of the early modern era. I certainly talk about colonialism, I teach about Mexico and Peru, and India, and we can talk about our projects together on that. But, my department is like yours on the smaller side. Even though we are joined together with a studio program, the art historians are a smaller segment, I would say, of the student major population. And so some of the things that we think about in our department are not only how do we embody a liberal arts approach to learning, but also how do we situate art history in a liberal arts curriculum?

DH: And your department is Studio and Art History, there's not any other programs in your department?

RT: That's correct. We can certainly talk about details about how does one structure and art history curriculum. We do have museum studies opportunities for our students. We have a design

studies concentration. There are ways that we've diversified the studio / art history standards. So I would say that we're a department that has, in the way we teach and what we teach, has really tried to embrace some of the newer things that have been happening in the field in the last 20 years. I think being in a liberal arts environment is obviously a privilege, but it has its challenges as well.

DH: Sure. So what are... what are some of those challenges? What, for you, do you see as the biggest challenges facing your art history program?

RT: Well, can I start with the good stuff?

DH: Absolutely, yes, of course!

RT: The good stuff for a small liberal arts college is, of course, you know, the focus on the time-honored (traditional, if you will) approach to learning across disciplines, and learning for the love of learning, right?

DH: Yes.

RT: With – I'm going to say it - you know, the life of the mind as the end objective. That doesn't mean that our students don't need to go out and get jobs, they certainly do, right? But we still have that mission kind of baked into what we're trying to do here. We're trying to train people to be thinkers and lovers of the best life, as well as successful members of society. So that's, you know, that's a really wonderful privilege. Other challenges, of course, are some of the practical things. The enrollment numbers aren't always where we want them to be. They've certainly been declining in recent years. Do we feel that low enrollments are an indicator of changing student interests?

DH: And by low enrollments, you mean both in the classes and the number of majors?

RT: Mostly in the number of majors. Our classes are pretty well filled.

DH: Okay, good.

RT: We've taken certain steps to try to facilitate double majors, or interdisciplinary programs or things like that, but definitely the numbers have been on the decline, I would say gradually, over the last 15 years. And for me, that's a worrisome trend. Obviously, it might connect to things like the enrollment cliff and other enrollment or demographic changes. But it might also indicate changing student interests, that somehow art history's lost its relevancy on my campus in ways

that I think are...challenging, right? And not just relevancy, but the value of the major as something that's rigorous and worthwhile to pursue. So that's certainly a challenge.

DH: Or fits with what students see as their interests or concerns in the world, maybe.

RT: Yeah. We're all long been familiar with the fact that the students don't know anything about art history until they get to the college level, right? So I'm certainly not saying that they should come prepared to want to study art history, but it's unlike in the past, the transition from a high school environment into a college environment doesn't seem to be translating into more majors in the field. And I think that that's fairly typical across the field. That's one of the things I was hoping we would talk about with other people, try to figure out what is going on.

DH: Yeah, absolutely, and I think it's interesting because you do have a period where they can figure out what major they want to be, whereas at my institution, my administration, my admissions office, they really want students to come in with their major already chosen.

RT: That's interesting. Yeah, we don't do that.

DH: It makes it very difficult for what are called discovery majors, like art history, right? There's very few students that have the time to figure out that that's what they want.

RT: So, enrollment's a challenge, I think, across the board. I think relevancy is a challenge across the board for art history. I think some of the elitist, baggage that art history carries is a challenge.

DH: Yep.

RT: Particularly for, you know, someone like me who teaches the dead old white guys. Honestly, I don't just do that, I swear. But living with and undoing the canon is a challenge, for sure. The new global agenda is exciting and thrilling and challenging. We're not trained that way, so becoming a generalist is a process, that can have its moments, right? So I think that there are a number of challenges for me, for my institution, but also, you know, writ large for our field.

DH: Sure, yeah, absolutely.

RT: I think that there might be something that we can extract from talking to other folks about all the different situations that art history is in across the country, and all the different kinds of environments. I mean, you're more familiar with the constraints of working in a state system.

DH: Right, exactly. And being at an institution that doesn't have a very large endowment, or doesn't have any sort of financial safety net in that way. So, I would say that it's interesting, some of the problems that we're having are similar to the ones that you're having, and in other ways, they're quite different. So, my school did a retirement incentive, and with that, there were a lot of retirements, and I am now the only, tenured, tenure-track, only art historian at my school. And my school very much looks at the number of majors, and what majors they see as growing for allocating tenure-track lines, so there's no...

RT: You went from a three-person department with a major and a minor to...

DH: Yep, 3 full-time faculty and adjuncts with a major and a minor, to now it's just me, and we've had to, sadly, stop the major, and we have just the minor now. Now I'm in a department that is, studio arts, art education, and art history, and we also have a big graphic design program that also takes art history classes. It's very interesting that we always offered a fair number of classes, and they always ran at 100%. They were always full. But because we don't have the number of majors, that determines how many tenured faculty we can have, or even part-time faculty. We're not getting that either. So now, for example, in doing the spring schedule, we had to cut down the number of sections we could offer by a third. That's just two-thirds of what we did last year, or the year before, and, we're going to have to save seats for the students who need to take art history classes for their majors. They've had to cut back the number of art history classes they can require, because we can't staff them.

RT: There's a cascade there, right, between the enrollment and the funding, and then the curriculum, and then enrollment again.

DH: Exactly, so now it's going to look like we're teaching less students, which we are, but not because there is an interest in art history, but because we can't staff the classes. And so there's just this sense of art history disappearing on campus.

RT: Yeah.

DH: It just was not a place structurally that was going to have a large art history major, because so many students had to come in with their majors already decided, and we have a lot of students who are first-generation college students, or students with economic issues, where they're not the type that are going to know at 17 that they want to be an art historian, right?

RT: So, in theory, my school is opposite of that, right? We're a highly selective, small liberal arts college. And that cohort, whatever you think about that cohort, we should have students who are in the discovery mode, right? Who probably had experiences with travel and museums, and

cultural exposure, right? And yet, we don't. Our majors are slipping. So, you would think that you would have a sort of polarized narrative that you and I would have, right? Things are going south over there, but they're really happy over here in the land of the elite. But that's not true either.

DH: Yeah, and this is why I think we're both so curious to interview other people in the field who work at other institutions to see, is this happening other places? Are there places where art history programs are growing? And if so, why? What's going on there?

RT: Absolutely. I think that even just looking at our two stories, we need more information before we can draw any conclusions. And that's one of the things we've always done over the years that we've known each other, which is now a number of years, what, 25?

DH: Yes.

RT: That we've worked together, since those years where we were both visiting faculty at Skidmore College, which is how we first got to know each other. And since then, in all the projects and publications we've done, etc, I've always been grateful to be able to bounce ideas off you and be like. "Hey, what do you think about this thing that's happening?" That's what we are doing again, but in a different format.

DH: Yes, exactly. So, absolutely, we've, we've done research projects together. We've also been each other's, sort of career coach, in a way, or just, like, about, like, oh, hey, I'm taking on this big service role, how do I handle this situation? What about this change that's going on? And it's always been absolutely so helpful to have your perspective, and one of the things I've learned, especially in the research we did, that gaining other perspectives allows you to have an analysis that's more than the sum of the parts, because you just can't get that overview. No matter how much you want to incorporate other perspectives, you really need to hear from other people.

RT: Also, for me, is the life and research-changing understanding of what collaboration can do.

DH: Since we're not trained in collaboration in this field, or in the humanities in general.

RT: It's certainly a skill that you've helped me learn, and it is foundational, I think, to the way the discipline needs to be going forward. So, yes, it's been a wonderful collaboration. And I'm excited to expand it to even more people.

DH: Me too! I really want to hear how other people are experiencing this moment, because it does feel like there's this avalanche? Cascade? I don't know, maybe?

RT: Well, now you're using disaster terminology, so I want to ask you, do you think people will be put off by our title?

DH: Art History on Fire.

RT: Are we too dramatic here?

DH: I don't think so. Do you want to explain? Since you're the one who came up with the title, which I love, by the way, do you want to explain how you came up with it?

RT: Well, I liked the double nuancing of it, right? That being "on fire," is a good thing.

DH: Right? Yep. We are making stuff happen, there is energy and excitement and dynamism and all the things.

RT: And art history is, which is certainly true. I think the field is in a really exciting place, both in research and in engaged teaching. And certainly we're at a cultural moment where visuality matters more and more and more, right?

DH: Absolutely, yeah.

RT: I think you can make a case, as some folks have done, that art history is important for democracy, or critical thinking, or for being engaged and thoughtful members of today's society. So I like the positive of, yay us, we're "on fire"!

RT: I think there's also that other side of it, you know, that things aren't always so rosy. We need to pay attention to our discipline and see what we can do to keep it from going down "in flames," if you will. Also, you know, I am a pop culture fan, and so I couldn't help the Hunger Games reference, and the Katniss Everdeen overtones, and I thought it was funny.

DH: So I will confess that I've never watched The Hunger Games, or... they're also books, right? I haven't read them, I haven't watched it, so I totally did not get that reference, but I liked it for the same reason that you did, that, like, there's this optimistic side where absolutely good things are happening. Like, I feel like, when working on the Global Art History textbooks, I saw this change happen.

RT: Right.

DH: Right around 2020, 2021, with COVID, and then Black Lives Matter, up to that point, when we would send out versions of the textbook, we would get these anonymous reviews back from various people in the field. And these are people who are on board with the general idea of global art history. But... and for years, they would still say, like, "oh, but...we still have to preserve the Western canon." Or, "oh, but do we really have to talk about race? You know, like, let's be careful." And then there was a switch where it was like, "no, we need to talk about race, we need to talk about colonization and imperialism, that we need to have these conversations, this is why art history matters." It was this really exciting shift, and at the same time, because of COVID, all these museums put all these things online, so there were videos, there were podcasts, Smart History was putting things online, like, all of a sudden, there was all these resources, and so it felt like... Wow, art history is becoming more inclusive and accessible at the teaching level. I think that research-wise, these questions were already happening in terms of looking at race, or looking at the history of colonization and nationalism, but now it was happening at the teaching level, and that was really exciting. And so that's the "art history on fire in a good way," right?

RT: Yes, yes.

DH: But then the flip side of it was that, you know, COVID exacerbated economic inequalities in our society, and that's true for higher ed as well. And so the institutions with big endowments, their endowments got bigger, and institutions that were struggling became struggling even more. We saw, right after that, art history programs start closing, often at institutions that were not wealthy institutions, public institutions that have been struggling. So that's the bad side of "Art History on Fire." And of course, as time goes on, more and more majors are disappearing, mine included. And not just for financial reasons: in some cases, it's state legislatures passing laws. We also are now seeing attacks on academic freedom coming, or, scrutinizing museums and how they talk about issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. And then there's AI! It feels like the problems facing us are multiplying.

RT: Don't forget the demographic cliff, right?

DH: Yeah, exactly.

RT: And the pivot to career readiness as the point of education, and... oh, and administrative bloat, don't forget.

DH: Exactly. And so it feels like this moment of deep irony, where right when the field was becoming more inclusive and accessible in terms of what we were teaching and how we were teaching – now it feels like in a few years, where art history is going to be offered is only going to be at these elite institutions that can afford to keep this major, and so what it be.

RT: I get what you're getting at. Those institutions are more elite than mine, but even on the fringes of eliteness (if that's such a thing), I do think there are concerns about survival.

DH: Absolutely. I mean, the question is, in a decade, will it be Princeton, Williams, and NYU and Stanford, if you want to go get art history, right? And I think that that'd be a shame, because I do think that there's a way that art history can be so important.

RT: And there is good data, there's positive economic data, if you want to go that far, for art history. Part of me, in thinking about this question of relevancy and accessibility to students as a worthwhile field of study, can't help but go back to 10 years, 11 years ago. It was pretty common for art history to be bashed in the media. Barack Obama did it, David Letterman did it, like, weekly. So, how much are we living the legacy of allowing our discipline to be the butt of jokes?

DH: Right. It's not translating into...

RT: into this reality, right? When in fact, there is economic data that shows art history majors do better out in the job world than computer science majors, or finance majors, or others... I don't want to cherry-pick the certain types of media-produced data that's available out there, but I think that we're looking at an immediate crisis since 2020, COVID, and in this particular cultural moment we're in and the particular political moment that we're in. But it can also be traced back longer, and that for me is really worrisome. This is not a blip.

DH: Right, and the question is that there is this kind of popular view that art history is frivolous. That it's elitist, it's superfluous, disconnected, yeah. I think there's controversy to bringing this up, but it's also a discipline that's gendered female, largely feminized in many ways. I think the report that came out recently by the Academy of Arts and Sciences shows that the vast majority of chairs of art history programs are women.

RT: Which is reflective of the discipline as a whole, and so...

DH: That undervaluing of even history, say, straight-up history discipline versus art history. And there's a lot of controversy there in saying that, because we don't want to say "oh, we need more men in the discipline," that's not what I'm saying, but I do think it's important to think about why there is this perception of this particular part of the historical endeavor, right?

RT: You and I, and anyone who cares about art history, would see it as something that's a rich, interdisciplinary, vibrant lens to understand the world today, and the world from before.

DH: Right.

RT: I do have days where I'm thinking, how did we get here?

DH: Absolutely, and I am so curious to hear other people's thoughts on this. So that's what this interview series is about. We want to bring in people who work at a variety of different types of institutions, or a variety of positions in the field, often ones that we don't hear from, because they're not at the big institutions (but we might also bring in some of those too). So the goal is to have these interviews of different people over the course of the year. They will be available as audio, but also transcripts for people who'd rather consume them that way. And then you and I will at the end of the year reflect on it and see what we've learned. So it's sort of a research project, one where we're putting all of the steps of the research out there for people to listen to.

RT: Absolutely, and I think as practitioners, we are not necessarily the ones who know the answers. But we are, just like everyone else out there, doing the work on the ground, and we are so excited to talk to other folks who are doing this work. We can celebrate the things they're doing, which are amazing. They're "on fire." And share some solidarity around some of the solutions we need to come up with. The talk of "exciting futures ahead" is going to be a lot of fun.

DH: Yeah, absolutely. I'm looking forward to it.

RT: Well, thanks, everyone, for listening, and stay tuned for the next installment.

DH: Thank you. Bye.

RT: Bye!

RT: Please look out for our next interview when we speak with Laura Holtzman, one of the founders of Engaged Art History. Laura is Professor of Art History and Museum Studies at the Herron School of Art and Design at the Indiana University in Indianapolis.

DH: We are so excited to speak with Laura. So please look out for that conversation, which will be posted on our substack, Art History on Fire. You also will find links there to a transcript of this interview, further material, and contact information. We welcome your feedback. Thanks!

RT: Thanks for listening.