

I Bachinski Chu Choose You! w/ Christina Smylitopoulos - Transcript

<https://soundcloud.com/whereartsthou/wat-ep1>

Paul: Hey Danielle! What are you doing in my office?

Danielle: Hey Paul, uh, do you want to start a podcast?

P: Yeah, sure!

[Theme music]

P: Where Arts Thou!

D: Where Arts Thou...

D: Well that came together quick!

P: Yeah, sure did! Uh, I forgot to ask, why are we doing this?

D: Well, I thought it was time that we shine a light on the College of Arts here at Guelph, we just have so much going on, and it's time the world knew about our departments.

P: Like, the School of Fine Art and Music?

D: And, the School of Languages and Literatures...

P: Ahh, how about the Department of Philosophy?

D: And the Department of History

P: And the school of...

D&P: English and Theatre Studies!

P: Jinx on you!

D: No you!

P: You can't speak until they say your name! Danielle.

D: Oh, thanks Paul.

P: Okay, so what do we do now?

D: Well, now I think we have to get a guest.

P: A guest... But, who would want to talk to us?

D: Maybe Christina Smylitopoulos?

P: From art history?

D: Yeees, the School of Fine Art and Music! So she's an associate professor there.

P: Cool, what else is she doing?

D: Well, among a ton of other things, she's also working on something called the Bachinski/Chu.

P: Uh, Bachinski who?

D: Bachinski/Chu.

P: Gesundheit. Heh heh.

D: No. No, it's an art gallery.

P: Uhh, I'm pretty sure it might be a mythical beast.

D: No, no no no no let's just call her and find out.

P: Alrighty then, let's just get this skype system modulation set up...

D: Okay...

[sounds of buttons clicking, phone dialling]

P: And there we go, just one more, and we're off.

D: Perfect!

[Sound of phone ringing and being picked up]

Christina: Hello!

D: Hi!

P: Hey!

D: Christina how are you?!

C: Paul? Paul is that you?

P (laughing): That's me!

C: Hi Danielle, Hi Paul!

D: Hi Christina!

P: Christina, can you answer me one question real quick? How do you pronounce your name, your last name?

C: My last name is, uh, Smylitopoulos [Smill-uh-top-oh-luss], it's not as difficult as it first appears; it can be quite intimidating, and everyone should be very thankful that I didn't hyphenate.

D&P: Ohhh.

P: Your kids should be thankful for that. And any sports team they might play on.

(C laughs): There isn't a hockey jersey large enough.

D&P: No, it would have to go down the arms.

P: Like wrist to wrist.

D: Absolutely.

C: Ha, so, Smylitopoulos.

D&P: Okay, great.

D: So, uh, I think we just want to know a little bit about you, and what your role is here!

C: Well, I am an associate professor in the School of Fine Art and Music in the area of Art History, and my research area is British art of the long eighteenth century, but at the moment I'm actually wearing two hats in the School of Fine Art and Music; I'm also the faculty curator of The Bachinski/Chu Print Study Collection.

P: Okay, and that's what we have a question about. Nobody is sure what a Bachinski/Chu is,

D: Right, or what it DOES chew.

C: Right, well most people say "gesundheit" after I say it out loud.

D (laughs)

C: But the Bachinski/Chu—

P: Stole my joke, by the way.

C: Ha ha, did I? Did you already embed that in the script?

P: Totally. I had it written down.

D: Ah, that's alright.

C: This is actually a quite remarkable resource that we have in the School of Fine Art and Music, as well as in the University more broadly. It is an art collection that was built by Walter Bachinski and Gene Chu, and it started 50 years ago, almost to the day.

P: Who are those guys?

C: Those guys were, they are now retired fine arts professors who used to teach in the School of Fine Art and Music, but at the time, they were very active in teaching print processes to their studio students. And both of these professors actually came from artistic traditions that had in their training, um, access to a print study collection, and they found it to be incredibly helpful in their training.

So they started these incredible annual print sales of student work to raise money to make acquisitions. And over the years the collection has been built and built and built, and it has grown and grown, and it now has over 2200 works that span the 16th century to almost yesterday.

D: Wow.

P: Wow.

C: And it shows the technological innovations of print, of the print medium in fine art, from in this period. So, I mean, it's really quite an exciting collection, and in recent years, we have

opened up the collection, to, you know, not only to studio art students, but also to art history students who are keen to develop their skills in collections management and curation. So it's been a really exciting time.

D: Wow. So, which artists do you have in the collection?

C: Yeah, there's some pretty amazing things. I mean, it's exciting, because my area is 18th century art history, I'm actually learning quite a lot about more modern art, and so I'm learning a huge amount. But, we do have, sort of, some of the highlights in the collection would be two Picasso pieces, we've got, our oldest piece in the collection is an Albrecht Durer piece. Um, we have works from Rembrandt, and you know, Matisse, Daumier, as well as Motherwell, Golub, and one of my favourites, we have almost a complete series of Goyas, which has been a really exciting thing for students to examine.

D: Absolutely.

P: Now, how close can they actually get to these prints?

C: Well, here's what's really exciting. In many of the university art collections, there's lots of rules and regulations about what students can access, and this is for insurance purposes. And there's very good reasons for not having students be able to handle works of art, because of the immense monetary value. But, because this is a study collection, and because the whole purpose and our mandate is about studying, studying the works themselves, studying the processes at work in making these fantastic art prints, but also, how do you move objects in space, how do you manage a collection, how do you put objects together in a critical way that examines their various and multifarious contexts, and—

P: Very carefully.

C: Very carefully. But, you need to learn how to do this, and those opportunities for students are pretty thin on the ground. So, because it's a study collection, students get to handle these works far more than they probably would in other collections.

D: Right. Is this type of collection common in other universities, or is this truly a unique Guelph experience for these students?

C: I think what's really unique about this particular collection is that it was built by students, for students. In other words, although we've had some fantastic donations of works in the past, the majority of the collection was created, or was amassed or put together with funds that students actually raised themselves by selling their own work.

P: The student print sale in March.

C: You got it, the one in November and in March, which I go to religiously and my entire house is basically a result of those print sales.

P: I have several prints in my house from that print sale.

C: I mean, it's a really exciting way of engaging the community in the work the students are doing. It allows you to build an art collection; even if you don't have a ton of money, people can get engaged in what the artists are producing in a way that's affordable. And it's really exciting to buy a piece from a student, when I actually buy a piece from the sales, I try to write to the students and let them know that I've purchased it, because I, um, because I think it's really exciting for them to know that there are people out there that are really enjoying their work. And so, I mean, for them it means they actually get to have some of their work supported financially, but also means they get to contribute to this fantastic collection that they get to use. And of course, we all get to enjoy.

P: I do. I mean, I haggle and lowball them all the way. And so, we have very different strategies. I have a four foot version of the Queen's, uh, a print of the Queen's head.

C: You know, I almost bought that one (laughs)

P: Beautiful, I love it.

D: Yeah, that's great.

C: There's some really great finds that you can find in those print sales, it happens during Fair November in the fall and again during the spring events that are on campus. And people really look forward to it, I mean, they put it in their calendars, they know they're gonna come and buy something. I, I always blow my budget; you know, it's one of those things where you know you put some money aside because you know you're gonna find some prints, and then, you know, inevitably you find more work that's really exciting, but, I mean, for the past 50 years, we've been, I mean, this is how the students were able to purchase a Picasso print. This is how they were able to buy a work, one of the most recent acquisitions was a Damien Hirst. So, in other words, these artists are working, they're training, they are examining these pieces, but they are also in the process of building a collection, and so for me, it's a real honour to be able to contribute to that collection.

P: Now, with that collection, other than being really good art thieves, Bachinski and Chu, how are they able to manage to buy these, knowing that the students were able to raise money, but these things can be pretty pricey, so...

C: Yeah, no, that's a really great point. In the early days of the collection, late 60s, early 70s, some of these prints were going, I mean, they could be purchased fairly inexpensively. They were pretty accessible. And you're quite right, lately, print has become a lot more popular. And

so we have to be very careful about our acquisitions, and to be strategic in some of these purchases. And to be honest, we haven't made many acquisitions in the last few years.

Part of this is because the Bachinski/Chu is going through a bit of a Renaissance, itself. We are actually, this summer, beginning some construction to address some of our infrastructure needs within the collection. For example, we are replacing the compact storage units within the collection so that we can get a little bit more space for our framed works, and also, start to engage more with our faculty and their teaching by creating spaces built, for example, a pedagogy wall, where faculty can say, "I want the students to look at a bunch of different examples of lithographs." So our students can pull that material, place it onto a wall, so that the students can examine really closely that particular technique at play.

So, I mean, it's been really exciting lately to improve some of those infrastructure parts of the collection to increase the access to the collection, but what that's meant is, we've had to be really careful and conservative about any kind of acquisitions. Um, once we have a space, once we have some improved storage, then I think the next thing on the list will be some kind of strategic acquisition.

P: You haven't mentioned some kind of locks or security system, and I'm going to recommend that right now.

C: Oh yeah, I mean, not knowing where this is going, we have security!

D&P: Haha, okay, good.

D: Let everyone know now!

C: Yeah, we absolutely have security, so do not try to steal from the Bachinski/Chu (laughs).

D (laughs)

C: But, I mean, our storage is the main area that we're trying to improve so that, you know, students can have a little bit more room to manoeuvre, that we can hang the walls critically, intellectually, as opposed to just in terms of storage. Right now the framed prints are cheek to jowl in a proper 18th century hang, but we'd like to give the students a little bit more room to explore the potential of more strategic, more thematized exhibitions.

D: Right. So, I can't wrap my brain around the fact that there is a Picasso piece and a Rembrandt piece in Guelph, I think.

C: Yes!

D: That just blows my mind. So, how do, how did we acquire that? How did we acquire these types of pieces here, in Guelph, Ontario?

P: Yeah, is there a paper trail, where it came from?

D: Yeah!

C: Well, in the olden days—ha, in the early days...

(D&P laugh)

P: Yeah, are you talking about the 80s?!

C: (laughs) Terrible. In the early days, most of those selections were made through catalogues. And so, auctioneers, art dealers, people who specialized in print, would put together these amazing catalogues and send them out. So you could actually send away for them, and see what was available to purchase. So in those time periods, you know, collecting print wasn't as popular as collecting, say, painting, or even works on paper that were drawings or sketches. Uh, print was, I mean, part of the reason why print became so exciting, even in the period that I study, was because it allowed for people who ordinarily couldn't purchase art and be involved in those kinds of aesthetic debates and those kinds of aesthetic trends, could actually be involved because print was more affordable. So, I mean, those are the kinds of things that for a print study collection, it's really exciting, because you get to actually look at the print practices from artists who are known more for their painting than for their experimentation in print.

P: Now, it is the Print Study Collection, so it is 100% only prints?

C: Well, it's not entirely true. We do have some outliers, we've got a pastel work which is very interesting and we're still tracking artists and some attribution issues with that particular piece. We've also got a painting that's been donated that we're not entirely sure what to do with. (Laughs) But for the most part, I would say, 98% is focused on print. And this is really exciting for the University of Guelph, because we have a working print studio in our art school, and not every university has that. So they really are quite symbiotic, and we are excited to make them even more symbiotic in the years to come.

P: Now, what would you say is the oldest piece that you have?

C: The oldest piece we have is a piece from one of the Small Passion series of Albrecht Durer. And the Small Passion series were small, very intimate little engravings, copperplate engravings of scenes from Christ's Passion, the events leading up to His death. And it's an absolutely charming little piece, it's really beautifully done. So that one, I can't remember the exact date on that one, but that is our, sort of,

P: The oldest.

C: Yeah.

D: That's the one.

P: I remember, sort of, being in art history, and Albrecht Durer, he always kind of, when he did a self portrait, it would always be done in the style like Jesus. He really loved himself.

(D laughs)

C: Yeah, I mean, he was a very spiritual man, he's a very important figure in the Northern Renaissance, and so having a piece of his in our collection is really exciting.

P: Would that be pre-Gutenberg Press?

C: It, 1509 is the date, I just remembered, and it is—the piece is actually *The Nailing to the Cross*, as part of that Small Passion series, and I said it's a copperplate engraving, but I'm actually incorrect, it's actually a woodcut. Yeah, so I mean it's a really lovely woodcut, and so students get a sense of, sort of, the beginning stages of the 16th century, when print became more popular with artists as a medium by which they could disseminate their work with a longer reach.

P: Oh, they could see how art was made without wifi. Or Photoshop.

D: Yeah.

C: Yeah. I mean, if you think about the kind of exchanges that happened in Renaissance Italy, and in a Northern Renaissance in Nuremberg, paintings and frescoes, etc, are not portable, as much. And so having print, studies in print, allowed them to exchange ideas that were unprecedented.

D: So, can you tell us, out of curiosity, which piece actually has the highest value?

C: Actually, I'm not going to tell you that, mostly for security reasons.

(D&C laugh)

C: So, we have, what I will say though is that our prints are, you know, incredibly valuable intellectually, and in terms of training,

D&P: Yeah.

C: A lot that goes into value, particularly with print: what kind of condition the paper is in; what kind of condition the actual print is in; what state of the print it is, whether that is an artist's proof; if it is something that's been corrected over the course of the development of the matrix, I mean, there's lots that go into—

P: Corrected over the development of its matrix. Meaning, people have...?

C: It just rolls off the tongue, doesn't it?

D&P: Yeah. Yep.

P: I mean, I went cross-eyed when you said it.

(D&C laugh)

P: Now, what does that mean? Like people forging or fixing it, or–

C: No, an artist as they go through, I mean, just like if you were sketching or drawing, and you have, for example, you want to make a correction, you might do a test print run and sort of see how everything looks.

D&P: Oh, okay.

C: And then, what that results in is a print from various states of the process. And so, a print that is a result of early stages may not be as fine as something that the artist has actually changed.

P: I thought you meant over time, someone had corrected, been like “this guy needs a red hat... there’s not enough orange in this picture...”

C: Well, we do have those as well, which is kind of exciting. I work on a publisher whose name is Thomas Pegg, who is not terribly well-respected in history because one of the things that he liked to do was to buy old, worn out copper plates, and reprint old engravings to make money.

P: That’s brilliant.

D: Yeah.

C: I know! Not exactly terribly respected as a print publisher, but nonetheless a fantastic business model.

P: You’ve got it, Rodney Dangerfield of the fine art print industry.

C: No respect!

P: No respect.

(D,P&C laugh)

P: Alright, cool! So now that we see the state of the Bachinski/Chu is,

D: And what it is!

P: And what you guys have got there, what are we gonna do with this thing? We’ve got some renovations coming up, anything else?

[Sound of line disconnecting]

D&P: Oh!

D: Okay, um, I think that was by accident?

P: Maybe you shouldn’t have asked the money question.

D: Maybe you shouldn’t ask such long questions, Paul!

P: Oh, just kidding listeners. Due to technical difficulties, we lost connection via Skype.

D: But, not to worry, she will be back for a part 2 in another episode, so stay tuned for that! Additionally, we have some upcoming events for you to mark in your calendars: in early September, we have the Eden Mills Writers Festival, and the beginning of October, we have Gryphons Read, which will be Eden Robinson's *Son of a Trickster*. Make sure you grab your books!

P: Well, super! Thank you so much Danielle, and I'd like to thank all the listeners for enjoying our first pilot episode of *Where Arts Thou?*!

D: Don't forget to rate, review, follow, and subscribe, and follow us on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter [@uog_arts](https://twitter.com/uog_arts).

P: Anything else College of Arts-related, check out at uoguelph.ca/arts/!

D: We'll see you real soon!

P: Stay artsy! Or not!

(D laughs): You don't have to.

[Theme music]

P: Where Arts Thou!

D: Where Arts Thou?