

***IN THE FOREGROUND:***  
***CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING***  
A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

**“BETWEEN THE PERSONAL AND THE HISTORICAL”:  
ASMA NAEEM ON LISTENING TO ART AND VISUAL  
CULTURE**

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**Transcript**

**Caro Fowler**

Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host and Director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In this series of conversations, I talk with art historians and artists about what it means to write history and make art, and the ways in which making informs how we create not only our world, but also ourselves.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

I'm Caitlin Woolsey, Assistant Director of the Research and Academic Program and in this final episode of our third season, I speak with Asma Naeem, Chief Curator at the Baltimore Museum of Art. We discuss her circuitous path into the discipline, from her early sensitivity to the visual landscape of her childhood in an Indo-Pakistani immigrant family to the formative challenges of practicing law in a district attorney's office in Manhattan; how she eventually arrived at researching intersections between sound technologies and 19th century American painting; and how her tenacious passion for art history has led her into museum work.

**Asma Naeem**

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**Caitlin Woolsey**

Thank you so much for joining me today to speak about your background and your experiences in curating and art history. We usually open these conversations by asking broadly for you to reflect [on] how you first became involved in an art history or what drew you to the visual arts more broadly. How would you start to trace some of those through lines?

**Asma Naeem**

Before I begin, let me just [say] thank you, Caitlin, for this wonderful conversation. My path was circuitous. I came to the United States from Karachi, Pakistan. When I was about one and a half, I moved to Baltimore City with my parents and then we eventually moved to the suburbs in Baltimore County. I would say, ever since I was a young child, I was deeply attuned to my

surroundings, to the visual force of my surroundings, to the beauty of clothing, of self-presentation, and also the various dissonances I saw between the circles I moved in as a young student in elementary school and visiting white American homes and black American homes, and then going to my other fellow immigrants, who had come over from India and Pakistan, going to their homes. I was just always very sensitive, you know, how some people notice things around them, and other people don't. So, I always noticed things around me, but I also wanted to say that I started to try to draw and paint pictures. I was in a photography class. I was in many art classes in high school. I was designing my own Pakistani clothes at an early age because we always worked with a tailor to create the clothes that we would need to wear to certain events and functions. I was really into designing my own bedroom and looking through interior design magazines. So, it was all [of] this--and also, of course, fashion magazines and makeup--that very much interested me. But what's interesting is that--as you can surmise--I haven't said anything about art. It wasn't actually fine art, [it] wasn't actually visual arts, that I was getting influenced by, per se, even though I was trying to make my own kind of drawings or photographs or paintings. I didn't have any source material, if you will. That led me to go to other sources which were in popular culture, which were in my family's archives of photographs or textiles or the clothing that we would wear to some of these events. That was really my visual inspiration. But in terms of my path to art history, it was through the appreciation and the force of aesthetics, and the ways in which aesthetics can telegraph something about us. I found that deeply fascinating. So then, I went on from high school--after realizing that I was not a good enough artist--to major in English because I also loved the written word, I loved music, and I was really moved by some of the foundational texts, [which for me were] Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. So, I majored in English, and then, by chance, I took an art history class, a Renaissance art history class, with Professor Charles Dempsey at Hopkins and I was hooked from the minute the lights went down, and he started talking about a Poussin painting, I was hooked. Here was an entire class that was talking about looking. I found that absolutely fascinating because, as I was saying, I love to look, and I didn't realize that I was...not everybody in my family felt the same way. People didn't even notice certain things that I would notice in my surroundings. So, the fact that I was [surrounded by] a class of colleagues who were interested and curious about how certain shapes and forms could show a history or show a narrative, that was fascinating, and then also the ways in which art history--and I'm sure you know what I'm about to say--entwined so many unrelated

disciplines so magically. I was suddenly learning the history of so many different kinds of narratives of empire, and biography, and materiality. And then I was also learning mythology. I was learning about the history of Christianity. There were so many new things I was learning as I was looking at this painting, which I think is a credit to Professor Dempsey, but I do think that the draw was the fact that we could spend a whole hour asking questions about a painting. I'd never had that opportunity before.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Well, and as you suggested before, there's something sort of magical about being able to take a single picture or single object--it's like peeling back all these different layers--but then open [it] up [to], as you suggest, not only all these different disciplines, but all these different points of connection that lead out into like a much bigger, complex world beyond just the single object. I think there's something illuminating about that that is different, at least in my experience, from even a novel or other kinds of artistic, creative production.

**Asma Naeem**

I absolutely agree. It's that beautiful collision between the visual and all the other things that we find so much pleasure in, in non-visual art forms.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Absolutely. And so, at that point, did you sort of switch your focus more towards art history?

**Asma Naeem**

I switched from English to art history and political science because one thing that I didn't mention is that my uncle was a political science professor at the National University of Singapore, and so we would have really wonderful conversations about current events. I remember he would always bring over the *International Herald Tribune*, or *The New York Times* and he would have all of these articles that had underlines and notes on the side, and he would try to educate me about the various geopolitical conflicts, and I just loved that. So, I switched to political science and art history.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Well, one thing in my experience--coming also from a background that started out more grounded in literature and poetry, and then moving into art history--I

feel like art history has this--as you already suggested--this capaciousness that you can sort of bring...there are so many natural and compelling ways to weave in the concerns of literature or an undergraduate English degree within art history that don't feel like an imposition, but feel very, very natural, and particularly within modern and contemporary art. At the time, were you thinking about art history as having a sort of political or specifically, historical valence? Did you see those double majors as two distinct areas of exploration and study for you?

**Asma Naeem**

Oh, that's such a great question, Caitlin. I can't remember precisely, but I took a class on the Sun King and his time at Versailles, Louis XIV, and I remember--I'm sorry if this is a minor detail, but I think it will get to your question--I remember walking with my professor Orest Ranum and saying, 'Professor, I really I don't understand the nature of this assignment that you've given us, you want us to talk about the ways in which the world-making that Louis XIV engaged in reflected his philosophies. And you know, I'm really interested in the gardens of Versailles, and the various kinds of architectural motifs, like the Hall of Mirrors, but I don't know if I can make that argument. I don't know if I can make that argument.' And he literally had to walk me through what a visual theorist, a cultural theorist, an art historian has to do in making those kinds of connections. So, I think there was a part of me that was reluctant to see those larger signifiers that are embedded, and I think that that eventually collided--as we talk about my career later on. But you're right, it was distinct for me.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

And so, either in undergraduate or moving into graduate school, were there other--you mentioned a few already--professors or mentors who are particularly important to you in shaping your thinking, your methodologies, your approach, or even your career trajectory?

**Asma Naeem**

I think, for me, the art history department was an important place at Johns Hopkins. I will also say it was quite an intimidating place at Johns Hopkins. So, I didn't necessarily feel completely at ease. But I also think that was just the time in my life, when I was still trying to understand who I was. I will say that I worked with Yve-Alain Bois who was there at Hopkins for a brief while before he went on to Harvard and Professor Bois...my French was very strong at that point and Yve-

Alain had had some time in Northern Africa and Morocco, and so he was very friendly to me because he knew that my name had a Middle Eastern heritage and I had a Middle Eastern heritage, and so I ended up spending a lot of time with him and his classes. We took field trips to BMoA, I was babysitting his children, and he became quite a quite a close mentor for me.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

After you completed your undergraduate degree, if you can put yourself back to that state of mind, what was next at that juncture?

**Asma Naeem**

At the time, I felt very much a strong desire to fulfill a cultural expectation that wasn't necessarily ever articulated or forced on me. My parents were born in India, and they migrated to Pakistan during partition, but education was a huge focus for them and for their families as well, and so, my father was a nuclear physicist, and my mother is still practicing as a physician. The sciences were very heavily emphasized in our family. So, I didn't have an art historian, I didn't have anyone to model for me what that path would look like, I didn't even really have an academic in the family because my uncle was so far away in Singapore, and we would see him every other year. So, for me, the other option was a lawyer. I should mention my uncle in Singapore, his wife was a patent lawyer and she spoke very beautifully and wrote very beautifully and I always, as I said, loved the power of the word. So, I started to say, 'well, I don't necessarily love organic chemistry, and I don't necessarily love biology, those to me are snooze fests, but I do think that given all of my all of my passions for the word and for the human condition, that maybe law makes sense.' So, I took that political science degree and started funneling all of those energies towards this goal. You have this desire to [be] like, 'I have to have a goal. I'm in college. And what am I going to do after college?' So, that goal, for me, became law school. So, I was in the pre-law society. I realize now that I also at the same time was keeping this wholly separate universe to myself, but also oddly too that I would show others at very strange points in time my art history passion. So, I went back to Professor Dempsey, and I said, 'I want to apply.' I can't remember what it was, but it was some kind of post undergrad program in art history. I don't think it was a master's, I don't know what it was, and I said, 'I'm thinking about applying to this, Professor Dempsey.' He was so encouraging. I don't remember what happened with that. I also did...you know how you can write into your alumni association and give them updates about what you're doing...I also wrote in this

very strange update the year that I graduated, [saying] that I was planning to go on to law school, and then after that go on to get my doctorate in art history. I wonder where that came from?

**Caitlin Woolsey**

You had that the 10-year plan underway already.

**Asma Naeem**

I guess so. So, then I went off to work. I took a year off. I worked for my aunt in her law firm in Singapore. My eyes were opened to the world, from that time in Singapore, to the ways in which the United States became a subject position versus an object. So, talking with my new friends in Singapore, and seeing how America was shaped, very differently from how America was shaped with my Pakistani family or my Indian family. [This] was something that was eye opening for me. I also had gone on the pilgrimage to Mecca when I was a senior in college. So, at that point, I was beginning to understand that there are all sorts of living conditions and the ways in which in Far East Asia, my aunt and uncle who were living a very comfortable life and had servants who were coming in from Indonesia and helping them sustain their household, versus going to India and Pakistan and seeing a very different kind of set of living conditions that were barely above poverty, to the comfortable life that I had in the United States. All of those things started to, again, create these kinds of dissonances for me and disconnects. At the same time, my mother had a medical clinic in West Baltimore in a very underserved area, so I would go in with her sometimes and help her just kind of entertain the patients as they were waiting out in the waiting room and talk with them, sometimes take their blood pressure. So I had that kind of that patchwork of lives around me that I saw, and so getting back to Singapore, seeing my aunt, who was a patent attorney, and whose clients included Gucci and Chanel and Lancôme--I believe that her job was to make sure that there were no counterfeits which were frequently made in that part of the world to be sold elsewhere--I would go to these meetings and lunches and kind of be the fly on the wall, as she would negotiate with these very powerful companies how to better protect their interests. I couldn't care less. I was like, 'yes, these bags are beautiful, [but] why can't we have fakes? Why are they going after these small-time makers?' That to me was another aha moment where I was realizing that I felt something for those who didn't necessarily have a voice, but at the same time, I very much loved the beauty of these objects.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

But then you did indeed go on to law school, is that right?

**Asma Naeem**

So, I was able to go to Philadelphia to Temple University School of Law and I picked that place because of that institution's focus on public service and also, they had this excellent moot court program and I loved public speaking, but I also loved the fact that it was deeply embedded in North Philly and there was such a vibrant city all around it. I ended up applying for the Manhattan District Attorney's office, I moved into Manhattan, I worked as an assistant district attorney first learning the criminal justice system, setting bail for criminals who had committed misdemeanors, and then going on to have trials where I would be prosecuting a defendant for such things as...one of my first trials was a domestic violence case. So, I became quickly very involved with the social work system and the ways in which domestic violence victims need to have an array of support--institutional support, mental health support--and so I started to specialize in domestic violence. I still had the normal caseload of undercover 'buy and busts,' of narcotics, larcenies, etc. But I began to see, as you can imagine, how people hurt each other. I was becoming very conflicted about how I could stand in a position to judge some of these defendants and prosecute them for things that were circumstances that they didn't necessarily want or circumstances they were born into. So, I started to have a lot of philosophical crises, existential crises. I prosecuted the brutal beating of--or I tried to prosecute the brutal beating of--a defendant, a black defendant, by trying to ask why he was so black and blue and puffy and bruised by the time he was arrested. I asked a number of police officers, white police officers, who were involved in the arrest, and I couldn't get anywhere. So, you can sense here, I think, the ongoing disillusionment that I started to accrue. I was going to art museums all during this time in New York, I was reading all my undergrad professors' work on the side, and I was seeking solace in art, really, from all of this pain because I couldn't absorb it. I couldn't absorb it, Caitlin.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

At what point did you make the pivot or the shift towards art history and more direct involvement with museum work?



**Asma Naeem**

I think it was definitely after I left the Manhattan District Attorney's Office. We moved to Maryland. We moved back close to my parents. I got a position at the Washington DC Office of Bar Council. I decided to take an art history class at American University in the master's program, but I hadn't matriculated as a master's graduate student. [I was] just taking a night class. I would sleep on the couch of one of my friends who lived in DC for that class. It was a post impressionism class taught by the feminist scholar Dr. Norma Broude and I just wanted to know more, I was just obsessed, I was always so hungry. So, I matriculated full time. I continued to work as a lawyer full time because we were starting a family and we needed the money, and I was committed to get my doctorate because if I do something, I do it all the way. So, it was a terminal master's program at AU--fantastic feminist tradition, Mary Garrard and Norma Broude and Helen Langa, among many others. They gave me the tools to go on to apply for a graduate degree at University of Maryland, and that's where I got my doctorate. I still had that passion throughout the entire course of that ten-year-plus trajectory. I realized that as I was entering the doctorate program, the master's program, many of my colleagues were very well apprised of the academic world and of methodologies, deconstruction, Foucault, and feminist thought. I don't really remember any of that from my Hopkins time. So, I went into the American program unaware, and I guess I was a closet feminist, a stealth feminist, because I very much had been rebelling against some of my community--meaning my Muslim community--conversations that I would overhear about the role of women. I would always point to my mother and other women around me who were immigrants who were in really powerful positions. So, I guess I was a closet feminist, but I loved the program, I ended up writing my master's on Shazia Sikander and Shirin Neshat, two artists whom I got to know during that time because of Helen Langa's class. We had to write two masters [theses] at American and so my other master's was on a painting at the National Gallery by Edouard Manet, *The Old Musician*. So, I was toggling between the historical and the personal, so to speak, because both Shirin's work and Shazia's work obviously deals with issues around the Muslim world and coming from non-Western societies.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

During that time, when you embarked on your doctoral trajectory, were you already thinking about curating and that sort of professional world?

**Asma Naeem**

That started to come in during my graduate degree, absolutely. I interned at the Baltimore Museum of Art, while I was pregnant with my twins. My second or third year, in the French department, one of my most incredible mentors was Professor Franklin Kelly, who was a curator of American...he still is a curator of American art, he went on to become the deputy director at the National Gallery of Art. So, he would frequently weave into our coursework ways to look at objects that my other professors didn't necessarily, or to handle objects, or the commerce--that are in the economies that these objects were in--that my other professors didn't necessarily discuss. So, I started to realize that there was this other world. But you know, at that point, also, I had still been in contact with Professor Bois and I could see how he was navigating both curating and being an academic.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

What did you write on, specifically, for your dissertation?

**Asma Naeem**

At some point in my doctoral program, I switched from 19<sup>th</sup> century French, from Manet, to 19<sup>th</sup> century American because of Frank Kelly, particularly the Winslow Homer seminar that he had. And as I was studying for my orals, I was typing on my laptop and I suddenly had that moment, this out of body experience, [where] you're looking down on yourself. [It was] like 2am in the morning, the kids were asleep, my husband was not at home or at the hospital, and I was looking at myself and I'm like, 'I look like I'm playing the piano.' So, I went down this crazy rabbit hole of starting to look at that moment, the history of the invention of the piano. So long story short, the history of the invention of the typewriter is based on the piano and there is a multitude of discourses that have examined this from every single possible angle, including the gender implications. So, I started to become really fascinated by that and I started to look at...I love the work of Thomas Eakins because to me he was one of the most powerful carriers of Manet's chiaroscuro and his handling of paint in the American tradition. So, looking at some of Eakins' piano paintings, and having had that beautiful work by Michael Fried--we had read that text on the influence of writing and Thomas's Eakins' biography with his father's writing master--I started to create all of these very strange connections between technologies of sound and what I've found to be really pervasive themes of expression in non-aural or non-sonic modalities [in artworks]. I started to force those connections, being led by the paintings that

[inaudible] the most strongly about them. So, I ended up writing my dissertation--to answer your question--on three artists in the 19th century, Thomas Eakins, Thomas Wilmer Dewing, and Winslow Homer, and looking at the ways that the developments in sound technologies, in the understandings of sound as an epistemological line of inquiry, were really blossoming at the same time that these artists were exploring motifs of sound in their work, and the ways in which they were thinking about sound and painting them.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

At the University of Maryland, were there people there, either within art history or outside of the department drawing on media studies or sound studies or in the music department, that informed your thinking? Or was it really kind of delving into the writing and these other disciplines, and then the pictures themselves that shaped your thinking on the work and your argument as you moved forward?

**Asma Naeem**

You know, that's a really wonderful question and I should say that the faculty at University of Maryland, they could have shut me down very quickly in this kind of strange inquiry, but my advisor, Sally Promey; Renee Ater; William Pressly; so many folks were so encouraging. I think because there's this general kind of direct connection between the music field and the visual artistic field. But it was really at my time at the Smithsonian as a pre-doctoral fellow that I was able to research and think more deeply about the technologies of sound, go to the libraries like the Dibner to look at various kinds of ephemera and archival materials around the developments of sound as a body of knowledge and the sound technologies, and then talk to music historians, throughout the Smithsonian. That was really my fertile period, my fertile ground, that I had in mind. I'm a little bit of a contrarian, and so for me, the fact that I was able to say to folks--you know, you think you're such a whiz kid when you're a grad student--but they would say, 'what's your dissertation on?' It'd be like, 'sounds in art history.' I would just kind of have that look on my face. So, I like confounding people, which I think is also the reason that I liked being an Americanist [as] somebody who wasn't born in the United States. But then going outside of my discipline, to look at our discipline, was also another way...I just really enjoyed talking to so many other intelligent people to provide a perspective on our highly visual field.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

And your book *Out of Earshot*, which I assume grew out of that dissertation project, it draws on a lot of archival material. I was curious to ask you about how you've approached archives or thought about archives in relation to sound, in particular. It's something that in my own work, I'm always thinking about. Both the question of the archive and sound in art history, but then also how it relates to the writing of art history. How do we write about sound and about the aural dimension of objects and ephemeral experiences and histories that we don't have direct access to?

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Yeah, I think that's really beautiful, Caitlin. I will say this. Archives are inherently aural to me. I'm the kind of person who, whenever I'm reading something, I'm hearing those words. Reading is an aural engagement. So, for me, the archive was always this boombox--if you will--[it has] different voices and different soundtracks. But also, just to get back to your original question, the archives of the artists are really important as well. I went to look at Thomas Wilmer Dewing's letters at Columbia University when he was corresponding with Thomas White. I went to look at his letters with Freer at the Freer Museum. I really wanted to try to understand Winslow Homer in all of his enigmatic written communications and telegraphs from his remote place in Maine. So, trying to understand and hear their voice was also very important to me, and the ways in which they communicated with the people around them, the women around them and the ways in which, when they painted other subjects that weren't male, how they would depict them or [subjects who] weren't white. I started to get really interested in that. I didn't find out too much in terms of issues of how they depicted blackness, but I did find some interesting things about their attitudes towards women--how women should speak, when they should speak, what kind of voice they should have at that point in time. For me, that was another important facet, trying to lift myself out of my current moment back into their current moment and imagine them as engaged human beings moving through a day, and how those movements throughout a day would then find themselves on the canvas.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Do you think about it differently when you're when you're looking at objects in a gallery or curating an exhibition?

**Asma Naeem**

Absolutely, I think multisensorial is really an important word. I think about the ways in which, again, our environment attunes us to perceive certain things, and create meaning out of certain things. So, that[’s] [the] environment, I need to create when I’m curating. I need to create that sense of an experience, that sense of an emotional valence around these objects that in working with the artist--if it’s a contemporary show--or working with the historical objects, that I feel is appropriate. For me, I think the most important thing is the sense of psychic powers, [the] psychological powers that art has, the moods it creates, the ways that colors can create a sense of a certain calm or an agitation, or the ways that certain shapes can do that. All of those kinds of typical ways that we now analyze a work of art in terms of its formal qualities and the ways in which, for example, when you look at the work of Titus Kaphar--whom I worked with when I was at the National Portrait Gallery--the ways in which he is creating these cut out canvases that specifically highlight the stark and brutal history of the transatlantic slave trade and the ways in which black people have been marginalized and black bodies have been used by various notable figures in our American history. I wanted to make sure that we created an environment that allowed you to appreciate that across different kinds of modes of expression. We had labels that I very much wanted to speak in a colloquial voice, in a vernacular voice, in a voice that would reach across ages because Titus’s pictures have this capacity to speak across different subjectivities and different levels of knowledge. So, I really viewed the labels as a multisensorial extension of what he was doing. So, for me, as I said, I think of written words as being spoken words. So, I made sure that they had a certain kind of questioning rhythm to them.

**Caitlin Woolsey**

Well, thank you so much, Asma. It’s been a pleasure to speak.

**Asma Naeem**

I can’t thank you enough for how generous this was of you.

**Caro Fowler**

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. For more information about this episode, and links to the books, articles, and artworks discussed please consult [clarkart.edu/rap/podcast](http://clarkart.edu/rap/podcast). The Clark Art Institute sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these

homelands by colonial settlers. A federally recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge-Munsee community. As we learn, speak, and gather here at the Clark we pay honor to their ancestors past and present, and to future generations by committing to build a more inclusive and equitable space for all. This program was produced by Caitlin Woolsey and myself, with music by lightchaser, editing by John Buteyn, and additional support provided by Jessie Sentivan.