



Lesley Wright will be retiring from Grinnell College at the end of the semester, where she's worked for 22 years as the Director of the Museum of Art. Photo by Alex Fontana.

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## Lesley Wright reflects on her 22 years at Grinnell College

Ingrid Meulemans · December 7, 2021

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After 22 years at Grinnell College, Director of the Grinnell College Museum of Art, Lesley Wright will retire at the end of the semester.

When Wright graduated from Swarthmore College in 1979, she wasn't exactly sure what her next steps would be. Four years earlier when she started school, she thought that she would study biology. Now, she was graduating with a degree in art history, a decision she constantly second-guessed despite, for the first time, feeling fully challenged and invested in this discipline that united her academic interests with her love for the visual arts. So, Wright gave herself five years to figure out a plan. During this time, she relocated to California's Bay Area, and had, as she remembers, only one rule.

“You must have a job,” said Wright. “I decided that I could try different things, but I had to work. That was an order.”

In retrospect, Wright claims that this “break” was one of the best things she ever did. And after three years, while she was working as an administrative assistant at a local art museum, things began to click. For the first time since graduating, Wright was having fun.

“I went to talk to one of the curators,” said Wright, “and I said, ‘how do I do what you’re doing?’ And he told me that I’d have to get a graduate degree.”

So, Wright went back to school. With a clear direction in mind, the money and time she invested in her Ph.D. felt justified, and even rational. Wright graduated with her M.A and Ph.D. in American art history from Stanford University in 1993.

Despite the moment of clarity she had experienced years earlier while working as an administrative assistant at an art museum, Wright initially struggled to land an academic job.

In 1992 she moved to Iowa when her husband, Dr. Donald B. Doe, was hired by Grinnell College. After moving to Iowa, Wright became a curator for the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art.

“It was my first curating job,” said Wright. “I just adored it. It was the best thing, [and] I still enjoyed teaching, but I really loved the curatorial work.”

Meanwhile, as Wright graduated from Stanford and began working in Cedar Rapids, Grinnell College was undergoing some serious changes of its own. Until Bucksbaum Center for the Arts was opened in September for 1999, the College did not have an official gallery on its campus.

“Besides the print room [in the basement of Burling Library],” said Wright, “which had been there since 1983, there was no museum on campus. And, while some people knew about the print room, it was kind of a well-kept secret. It was a place where classes went and they held little exhibitions, but it wasn’t very well known.”

Along with the opening of Bucksbaum as an academic building, the College welcomed the community into the Faulconer Gallery of Art, now the Grinnell College Museum of Art (GCMOA). The Faulconer Gallery was built in an effort to bring the visual arts onto the College campus and integrate it into Grinnell’s studies.

When Wright was hired as the Museum’s director in 1999, she knew that the success of the College’s new gallery depended on student and community outreach. Under the direction of President Russell K. Osgood, Wright initially focused her attention on efforts to make the College’s new museum known to peer institutions.

“The press mandate from President Osgood at the time was to use the museum to expand the

reputation of the College into the community and beyond,” said Wright. “They really were looking for a vehicle that was going to bring the name Grinnell to all sorts of people. So, we did big national and international shows, and published catalogs and did mailings.”

After a couple of years, however, Wright realized that by focusing on the outside community, the Museum was neglecting a huge source of interest.

“A lot of the shows we were doing really didn’t dovetail particularly well with the teaching on campus,” admitted Wright, “and we felt we were missing an opportunity to make the museum even more robust by being able to tie in education. So, we started to rethink our mission statement and our position on the campus.”

During her 2003 show, “Layers of Brazilian Art/Camadas da Arte Brasileira,” Wright made a special effort to invite professors and students studying Brazilian culture to the exhibition and include them in conversations about the works. There were not, however, many related scholars based on campus. Using “Layers” as inspiration, Wright began to realize the impact an exhibit could have on the undergraduate students.

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– Lesley Wright

“We’ve been more intentional in recent years to bring in exhibitions that have some curricular tie,” said Wright. “And we will work with any department on campus. From day one, we said we are a museum for this campus, we are not just here for the art departments. At a small school like this, you can’t be that specialized.”

Over the past 22 years, Wright has curated too many shows to count, but she is proudest of her exhibitions that unite academic disciplines in surprising and timely ways.

In 2018, Wright worked with the late Professor Jackie Brown to curate “Making Life Visible: Art, Biology, and Visualization.” Despite not graduating with a degree in biology like she originally planned, Wright felt that she was finally able to revisit a passion of hers and work with a close friend and colleague.

Wright is also quite proud of the “Roots of Renewal” show, which showcased American Gothic art. After spending so many years in Cedar Rapids, Wright was very aware of the dismissive way people in the art world often speak of the Midwest, and she wanted to do something to address it.

“I feel strongly that if you’re going to run a museum in the Midwest, you should support Midwestern artists because the art scenes on the coasts will not pay attention to them. There’s a sort of a provincialism about the art world where if you’re not living and working in New York, you’re not really making art. Which is baloney, but it’s what the art world tends to say.”

In recent years, Wright has faced many challenges in the success and popularity of the Museum, including, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the evacuation of campus in 2020, Wright has heavily relied on technology to reach the dispersed College community. Despite the ability to communicate and share art via social media platforms, this transition was reminiscent of the lack of student foot traffic that followed the construction of the Joe Rosenfield Center (JRC) along 8th Ave in 2007.

“I feel like we struggle a little bit now to get student interaction with the museum because the JRC was built. When we opened, the student center was in the forum,” explained Wright. “And so, a lot of the energy on campus was more at the south end of campus because of the forum and the library and the fact that Bucksbaum was a new building. It was all very exciting. And now, student life has moved two blocks north, especially with the building of the HSSC. So, it’s a little harder to woo students down to our end of campus.”

Regardless, Wright realizes that the problems she faces as director of the Museum are constantly evolving with priorities and issues of the current student body. Being in touch with those concerns is something she believes is integral to her job as a curator, educator and advocate for the Museum.

After 22 years, Wright can say with confidence that the Museum, and as a result her influence, is woven deeply into the fabric of the College.

“When you’re around for 22 years, alumni get to know you, right? There are 22 classes of alums who have gone through the College having a museum, so they know what the museum is. And then a lot of other alums have gotten to know us over the years coming back for reunions or reading about us in the magazine. And that gives us a whole lot of people who are excited about what we do and eager to give us support. It really makes us feel like part of the community.”

Wright is set to retire at the end of December. To recognize her time at the College and officially close the “Queer/Dialogue” exhibit currently installed in the gallery, a celebration open to students, faculty and staff will be held in the GCMOA on Dec. 11, 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. The event will also be held virtually.

While Wright will officially be leaving Grinnell’s campus, her influence as a curator, an educator and a historian will continue on.



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## Ingrid Meulemans

Community Editor

Ingrid Meulemans is a fourth-year studying English and environmental studies so she can professionally read outside with her dogs for the rest of her life. Every day, she gets up and actively defies the stereotype that English majors prefer cats. It is VERY hard work. When asked about her journalistic interests, Ingrid famously said, "I only cover one thing: houses, style, and gossip."

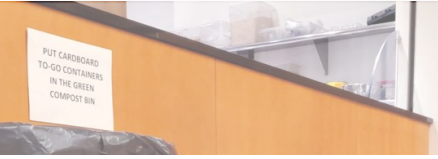


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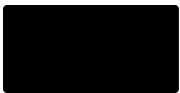
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