

# Inside the Exhibition: Paris 1900

## SPEAKERS

Brian Ferriso, Mary Weaver Chapin, Jon Richardson

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**J** Jon Richardson 00:04

You're listening to the Portland Art Museum podcast, a community driven show that exists because of you, the listener. The idea for this episode comes to us from Clint Kamstra, a Museum member since 2016, and talented photo journalist. You can see his work at [kamstra.co](http://kamstra.co). And don't forget, you can submit your idea for a podcast episode at [pam.to/podcastidea](http://pam.to/podcastidea). Clint decided to give us control over the recording process, so the voice you will hear throughout will be me, Jon Richardson, this podcast's producer. Clint wanted us to explore the curation of our upcoming exhibition, Paris 1900: City of Entertainment, which was originated at the Petit Palais Museum of Fine Arts in Paris, France, and has traveled to the First Museum in Nashville, the Cincinnati Art Museum. And now, to Portland. It is interesting to talk about an exhibition that is coming to us from another institution and gives us an opportunity to talk about how we plan our exhibition calendar. To speak a little more about that. Here's Brian Ferriso, the Marilyn H. and Dr. Robert B. Pamplin, Jr. Director and Chief Curator. So Brian, thank you for sitting down with me. Would you mind just telling me a little bit about the process of deciding on an exhibition calendar for a year?

**B** Brian Ferriso 01:29

Sure. So it's a great question, Jon, because you know, the exhibitions are sort of the lifeline for us as a museum. And it just gives us a connection to the community, which is so important and our audiences and I think it's also an opportunity for us to expand our

audiences, introduce the Museum in new ways as we rotate ideas and objects throughout the Museum. Here, and one of the approaches I've taken is very much about investing in our curators bringing great curators to our city and our museum. And we've had great success and then finding out, you know, where their interests lie where, where's their intellectual curiosity taking us and trying to capture that. So a lot of the exhibitions that we've done first and foremost are generated by our curators. We have the Hank Willis Thomas exhibition coming up. Recently, Grace, as you know, did 'the map is not the territory', about the regional area, and really reflecting on that. So you know, those exhibitions in particular are always something that we strive to and invest in. From there, we think about how do we create a sense of hope, sense of wonder, how can we create empathy? How can we inspire? How can we educate? So all of those adjectives or ideas or values, let's say go into an analysis of, of our exhibition program and the exhibitions that we present. So in addition to having curators have their exhibitions from The Portland Art Museum on display, we also look to complement their work and their investment in their time and efforts. And we've been very good at sort of this idea of bringing the world to Oregon and Oregon to the world, and we think that's important. And this Museum as an encyclopedic museum has many different roles, so we can be the historic museum, so for example, our partnership with The British Museum in "The Body Beautiful", bringing those great antiquities to Portland, but also bringing Oregon to the world. So for example, our work with, let's say "Poetic Imagination" that Maribeth did, reflected on work from the region, but it historically significant and globally impactful. Our John Yeon project, which was looking at a regional architect, collector, designer, was an opportunity for us to celebrate what makes us unique, generated by this museum and bringing it out to the world.

J

Jon Richardson 04:03

And I'm going to quickly interject and mention that the exhibitions that you're mentioning for our listeners, there will be links in the episode's description to material about those exhibitions if you're curious to learn more. Now, this particular episode is because of a listener suggestion, a member of the Museum named Clint suggested that we kind of look into the process of how a an exhibition comes about focusing on Paris 1900, which is interesting, because this is one that is coming to us from other institutions. This will be its fourth time is that correct, being shown?

B

Brian Ferriso 04:38

Yeah, it was an exhibition that was generated by the Petit Palais in Paris. And it was a project that was shown there maybe five years ago. And it really looked at this important

moment in the transition of Paris. And the global impact that Paris was trying to make at the you know, late part of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century. The origins of it are we have some partnerships with the Petit Palais, we're part of an organization called FRAME, French American Museum Exchange program, which we've been a part of as a museum for almost 20 years. And that is a program that connects regional museums in the United States with regional museums in France, and the Petit Palais is one of them, so that was a connection that we had and a relationship that we had. Additionally, we have a partner that we've worked with a lot in the Frist Museum of Art in Nashville - Susan Edwards, the Director, and I thought about this project as an opportunity. And what I love about this project in particular, is it really touches on relevant topics and issues. In addition to art, and culture, and decorative arts, and painting, and sculpture, it looks at this important transition that was happening in Paris at that time, and we're talking about 1880 all the way up to 1910, where they were investing in technology, in art, in culture, in education, and infrastructure and the city was transitioning, and transitioning in a very profound way. And as we thought about this show, I think the romance of Paris and France is always something that is in the American imagination. Certainly the Eiffel Tower, it means many different things to various people. But we thought it was relevant, and we're always trying to say how do we, as a museum, the Portland Art Museum, maintain relevancy and we feel, and I think many of our listeners can understand, the transition that's happening in our city. And there is the progressive developments and the ideas that infiltrating the city and part of our DNA, and there's also a downside of what's happening. There's displacement, and, you know, As cities advance, and as cultures move forward into the future, some people are left behind. So I think this show also reflects a little bit what was happening on that level in Paris in addition to the technological and artistic advancements at the time. And I think we, as an audience here in Portland, Oregon can very much relate. And I think there's a lot for us to learn.

J

Jon Richardson 07:21

Can you talk a little bit about some of the past exhibitions that we've had the Museum during your time here? I mean, you've been here, what, 11? 12 years now?

B

Brian Ferriso 07:30

Yes.

J

Jon Richardson 07:31

Can you talk about some of the other exhibitions that have been here in your time that have come to us from other institutions?

B

Brian Ferriso 07:37

Yes, I think the the first one that was quite important to us was China Design Now, and that was a partnership with the Victoria and Albert Museum and I think was about 2009 or 10. And that was looking at China's transition from moving from just a producer to a creator and a creative economy. And I think that's such an important topic, China at that time, and we were, I was looking at this project was investing, you know, millions and millions of resources and dollars into art schools and creative industry. So there was something big happening there. So we partnered with the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, we brought that show here. I think it was quite impactful because it was also expanding our curatorial vision, or our curatorial breath, where we were looking not only at the traditional arts, but in looking at design, and the ideas behind designed and an entire country was quite significant. And in many ways, I think that expanded our curatorial vision, and the Museum's vision of what can be in the Museum. From there, we did shows on bicycles, I think, great automobile design, important fashion from Italy. And all of those shows have been a common thread to, I think, the last 10 years of objects and ideas that are very accessible because people live with these in a day to day basis. And then what does it mean to show them in a museum at the highest level of, of aesthetic quality or design quality?

J

Jon Richardson 09:08

Is there anything else you'd like to talk about? While we're on the subject of the exhibition planning and exhibition calendar, factoring in traveling exhibitions, or maybe even exhibitions with guest curators? I mean, you mentioned John Yeon, LAIKA would be another one. Is there anything that you might want to touch on with regarding those in the exhibition calendar?

B

Brian Ferriso 09:30

Yeah, I think I think our you know, upcoming shows are important. And I think the Hank Willis Thomas exhibition that will be here in the fall, generated by both our curator Sara Krajewski, the curator of modern contemporary art, and Julia Dolan, curator of photography, speaks to our exhibition program. And Hank is a very impactful conceptual artist who has really changed the narrative and I think what's happening in the contemporary world he's a great reflector of or helps us understand of what's happening.

So I think that project in particular is important. But then we transition after that and look at Robert Colescott, and that's a partnership of a guest curator, who is by the name of Lowery Sims, who's a specialist on Colescott. And Colescott in particular was a teacher here in Portland State, but went on to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale in 1997. And that's, again, a partnership with a guest curator, but an important project and I think both of those exhibitions speak and demonstrate sort of the things I've been talking about, and our thread moving forward.

**J** Jon Richardson 10:41

Brian mentioned bringing the world to Oregon in Oregon to the world. That's become somewhat of a mantra for the Museum. And this is not likely to be the only time that comes up on this podcast. By bringing these depictions of Paris at the turn of the 20th century to the Museum, it gives us an opportunity to explore that story with the Museum's visitors here in Oregon. I had a chance to sit down with Mary Weaver Chapin, our curator of Prints and Drawings, who is overseeing the presentation of Paris 1900 here in Portland. Mary's interest in Paris during this era helps us further connect our world with that of a more romanticized time and place.

**M** Mary Weaver Chapin 11:19

Paris 1900 was a really exciting time. And by exciting I mean, complex, difficult, many layered, we think of it for its fine art and the flourishing of music and fashion. But it was also a time that was struggling with really fraught political issues and social change. And so this complexity I think, makes it one of the most fascinating periods in art history to study.

**J** Jon Richardson 11:46

Paris during this era is often depicted in film as being a place of great merriment. movies like Moulin Rouge!, Coco Before Chanel, Gigi and many others depict a glamorized Paris around 1900. How accurate would you say these portrayals are?

**M** Mary Weaver Chapin 12:01

Yes, I think the popular view is that Paris at the turn of the century was an endless series of cafes, dance halls, glittering restaurants, but the reality was really much more complex. So a certain segment of society certainly enjoyed that type of lifestyle. But it was also a moment when there was a lot of uncertainty politically. In the 1890s, there were what we

might call the first terrorist attacks were launched by anarchists in Paris, they set off bombs, they cause great disruption. And we tend to forget that the 1890s were really complex and very difficult times. Towards the end of the decade, the country was consumed by what we call the Dreyfus Affair. And that's when a Jewish officer in the army was convicted of treason, and the country was completely polarized on defending Dreyfus, they're are Dreyfusards, and then the Anti-Dreyfusards and it was as divisive as anything we can imagine today, splitting families, disrupting friendships, and really causing a severe crisis in the French social and political body. And there was also a time of really rapid social change where women were advocating for more rights, there was a strong push to reunify the Catholic Church. And so it was really, as I said, very complex. And I think that's what's missing from these wonderful movies that we all enjoy about Paris as an endless feast and banquet.



Jon Richardson 13:40

Are there any references to political unrest in the exhibition? Or as the title City of Entertainment suggests, Is it more of a celebration?



Mary Weaver Chapin 13:49

This exhibition, I think, is really a celebration of the idea of Paris 1900. And so we do see a little bit of the growing pains of the city. For instance, the first line of the metro system was inaugurated in the year 1900. And in order to build this really important infrastructure, thousands and thousands of people were displaced. In order to dig the tunnels necessary. Other issues come up, such as there's one painting by an artist by the name of Pelez. And he depicts a young boy, it's called "the Violet Seller", a young boy, obviously impoverished, he has no shoes, his feet are dirty, and his head is shorn because of lice. And it does show just a tiny glimpse of this hardship, this life of hardship that existed for a great number of people in Paris 1900.



Jon Richardson 14:42

You had mentioned that this is a time of social change for women in Paris, could you tell us a little bit more about that?



Mary Weaver Chapin 14:47

Well, one, the aspect I really like about the exhibition is that it focuses a little bit on the introduction of the bicycle to Paris. And we think of the bicycle as a wonderful form of

transportation, a sporting event, recreation, but it also had a pretty profound consequence in giving women a new type of freedom. And not only that, but in order to ride bicycles, they had to invent a culottes, some sort of, you know, pants, what we would call pants, which was considered really quite scandalous. In fact, they wouldn't even call them pants, they refer to them as bifurcated garments. And the bicycle had a wonderful influence, it's just starting to open up the space where women had a little more freedom, and also helping to spell the demise of the corset. So it's a really interesting idea to follow how this means of transportation, this means of leisure had all these other consequences. And so you do see that a bit in the exhibition.



Jon Richardson 15:50

Women's rights is certainly a topic that applies to our modern era. Brian had mentioned that there were other parallels between Portland today, and Paris 119 years ago, could you touch on that?



Mary Weaver Chapin 16:01

We think of Paris 1900, for the fashion and the art and the entertainment. But it was also a time of great scientific innovation. The first metro line was built at this time, electricity was becoming more widespread. And it's hard to overemphasize how important and revolutionary electric lighting was to the city of it was also a time of great advances in medicine, Paris became a center of, of learning and experimentation in the sciences. And one can take this whole topic and really just view it through a lens of technology, science and industry. And one of the goals of the Paris 1900 World's Fair was to show off their advances. One of the most popular expositions within the fair was the Palace of Electricity. And then right beside it, the Optical Palace where viewers could look through a telescope, really for the first time. So when we think of Paris 1900, we would be amiss not to consider the technological advances happening at that time.



Jon Richardson 17:09

It's interesting that you mentioned the telescope. In this exhibition, the Méliès film, "A Trip to the Moon" will be projected in one of the galleries, and it features telescopes quite prominently. Is that a parallel visitors should consider when viewing the exhibition?



Mary Weaver Chapin 17:22

Absolutely, yes. And it was we should think of the telescope and also the microscope at

the same time. So it felt like new worlds were being discovered, you know, right here around us. The discovery of microscopic life forms and then the chance to look at the moon through the telescope. I think it made the world seem that much bigger.

**J** Jon Richardson 17:45

If you could travel back in time to Paris in 1900. What are the types of things that you would want to do?

**M** Mary Weaver Chapin 17:50

Oh, that's a great question. Well, that would be a very full itinerary, I would definitely want to stroll in the beautiful parks in Paris 1900. It was so much part of daily life where people would go to enjoy the fresh air and the gardens, but also to see and be seen. One would certainly want to attend the theater. It was the high point of French Theatre in many ways. And Sarah Bernhardt was the reigning actress on the stage, she's known as The Divine Sarah, she was considered just the pinnacle of, of tragic acting. And then of course, one would want to see go see the can can And for that, I would probably recommend the Moulin Rouge. A little bit risqué, but gotta do it. And the fine dining was extraordinary. So if you had time in your itinerary, you'd want to hit some of these beautiful restaurants that the cuisine was outstanding, but also the decor and the service, and the whole experience of dining in Paris. And because I'm an artist historian, I certainly would have wanted to go to all the salons to see the annual official salons hosted by the government but also the unofficial exhibitions hosted by artists who are trying to forge a new direction. So there would be a million things to see in Paris 1900 and I would try to take them all in.

**J** Jon Richardson 19:23

Thank you for listening to the Portland Art Museum Podcast. Paris 1900: City of Entertainment opens on June 8 2019, and runs through the first week of September. Visit [portlandartmuseum.org](http://portlandartmuseum.org) for more information. We will further explore Clint Kamstra's episode idea about what goes into curating and exhibition in later episodes. If you have a suggestion for an episode of the podcast, visit [pam.to/podcastidea](http://pam.to/podcastidea) and we'll do our best to bring it to life. I'd like to thank Clint, Brian Ferriso, Mary Weaver Chapin, and you, the listener.