

BAUHAUS LEGACY – INTERVIEW #8

Interviewee Name: Lynette Roth

Interviewer Name: Christopher Brown

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Christopher Brown:

This is the eighth interview of the Bauhaus Legacy interview series. It is Monday, February 9th, 2026, and we are here at the Harvard Art Museums at 32 Quincy Street in Cambridge, Mass. So, let's begin with an introduction. What is your name?

Lynette Roth:

My name is Lynette Roth.

CB:

And what is your profession?

LR:

I am an art historian and a curator.

CB:

Okay. Where do you work? [both laugh]

LR:

I work here at the wonderful Harvard Art Museums. My official title is Daimler Curator of the Busch-Reisinger Museum.

CB:

Okay. And what are your responsibilities as a curator?

LR:

Well, as the Curator of the Busch-Reisinger Museum, I oversee the whole of that museum's collection. So, the Harvard Art Museums are three museums in one, the three art museums at Harvard University, and the Busch-Reisinger Museum is one of those constituent museums. And it has a very unique history, which we can talk more about. Its unique history basically means that it focuses on the art of Central and Northern Europe, primarily German-speaking countries, but it does that from the Middle Ages to the present day. So, it's actually the only museum in North America that has that focus for the study and research of central and northern Europe.

CB:

And what does a typical day of work look like for you?

LR:

Oh, it's many different things at once [laughs], kind of constantly. I feel like there are often days where I go home and I think, what did I actually do? Because it's a combination of correspondence; a lot of email; if I'm lucky, some research; some scholarly exchange; teaching with the collections and also here in the museum, in our galleries or in our art study center. A lot of meetings just like anywhere else. And the core of the work, as I see it, is really the collection and everything that we can do with the collection, including teaching, research, scholarship, but also the caring for that collection. So, the work I do with our conservators, with our installers - there might be a day where we're actually reinstalling the galleries, we're lending an artwork out for loan, we have to change things around. So, the wonderful thing about it is it's a really close hands-on work with the artworks that are in our care.

CB:

And do you have the responsibility of acquiring new artworks, of locating them, bringing them in?

LR:

I do. Yeah. And that's a lot of fun as well. And I think that's also the important part of being a curator who cares for a collection, is both looking to the past, thinking about how the museum's collection has evolved over time, and also how it will continue to evolve today and into the future. So, especially for the Busch-Reisinger Museum because it has a very specific focus, it means really thinking anew for our current moment - what does it mean to have a museum that has a focus like the one that we have?

CB:

Can you talk a little bit about your educational background and how you ended up in this line of work?

LR:

So, I first actually studied German and German languages and literature, and only when I was going back to graduate school for my PhD did I focus primarily on the history of art. And so bringing those two fields together, German language was something that I was very comfortable in - German history, literature, film - and then becoming an art historian really allowed me to keep a lot of that focus but then narrow in on my eventual desire to become a curator. And the Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard was really, from the time I was a graduate student, my dream job because it unites obviously the museum work, the academic work here at the university, and then also my specialization, which really is Germany, 20th and 21st century. So, I really started out as a specialist actually for the interwar period, to the period that we'll be talking about today, primarily thinking about Walter Gropius, and the collection and the work at the museum has also pushed my own research in new directions. So, it started with the language really and kind of just took off from there.

CB:

So, your undergraduate degree was in German language specifically?

LR:

Was German language and literature. Yeah, so I was a Germanist and also did an interdisciplinary degree, which included some art history - art history, film, comparative literature. So, it was really, I went to the University of Michigan, it was a degree that was really made to sort of allow you to explore all different fields within the liberal arts.

CB:

And what sparked your interest in German language and culture to begin with?

LR:

It was really the program that I went to at the University of Michigan. It's a very intensive living language program, and that really got me started. It was a difficult language to learn. I had some family background that we thought maybe was German, although the more I've learned about it, the less, I think, they were German. [laughs] I think they were actually much more from the very often shifting border lands of Eastern Europe and what is now Germany. But yeah, so that was really the language and I just really enjoyed it. I was also pretty good at it, which always helps. Then the more I learned about the culture, I found Germany was in many ways at the center of so much of what happened in the 20th century. Negatively, of course we know, but also in very positive ways. And I think that really appealed to me as a student, that there was just, I felt so much that I could sort of learn about the world by thinking about Germany as a case study in a way.

CB:

So, it sounds like your interest really sparked when you were in your undergrad program, but it's not something your average person just jumps into. Did you have interest in childhood or your teenage years in German movies, for example, or literature or language?

LR:

No. [laughs]

CB:

No. So it really did start in your college years?

LR:

Yeah, and art history as well was not something that I was exposed to until college. So, it was really something that I came to, I guess relatively late. And then I kind of just took it to the extreme and I ended up moving to Germany, working there, studying there for a bit. And then because it had become such a focus in my studies, when I went to get my PhD in art history, I retained that focus. And so, then I felt especially qualified for the role here at the Busch-Reisinger Museum. And it's a great field - art history of Germany or Germany, Austria, Switzerland. A lot has changed in the decades. There's just a really incredible, incredibly vibrant scholarship that's been going on for a number of decades. And so it was exciting to be a part of that as well.

CB:

And where did you live and study in Germany?

LR:

Mostly in Cologne, probably for about six years maybe altogether. But that also, of course, living there, working there, studying there, having friends there really made it... I mean, it really is now very much a sort of second home. And a lot of the work that I do for the museum takes me to Germany on a regular basis. We have a large group of supporters for the Busch-Reisinger Museum that is based in Germany, and that's been around for more than 40 years now. And so that's also a lot of the work that I do for the

museum, is stewarding our supporters and keeping them abreast of everything that we're doing here at the museum and hoping for their continued support.

CB:

So, the Harvard Art Museums are in fact three different museums, which used to be in separate buildings that are now combined and housed under one roof. Can you talk a bit about, briefly at least, what the three museums are and their history and what their collections contain?

LR:

Yeah. So, I'm best with the Busch-Reisinger Museum, obviously [laughs], because that's my collection. But Harvard had three art museums that were distinct and as you said, had their own buildings. And the Fogg is the oldest of those. So, when you enter the now Harvard Art Museums, you're actually entering, from Harvard Yard, you're entering in what used to be the building of the Fogg Museum, a brick façade building that was built in the 1920s. So, they were the first of the three museums already in the 19th century and really collected across the board. But their focus was, as many American institutions were at the time, was on Italian, French art, and there was a growing sense within the German department at Harvard in the late 19th century that Americans didn't really know anything about German art, and they knew German music or German literature, but really the visual culture of Germany.

And we have to remember, when we think back - Germany was very important for education around that time in the United States. If you were a student, you often went to Germany to study. Universities were built on the German model, you learned the German language, often. And so, German did have a place at Harvard and they decided to start a Germanic Museum, which is what our museum was previously called. And it was officially founded in 1903, and the idea was to really keep Americans, and often in the way that it gets talked about back then, German-Americans, so Germans who had come to the United States, to not forget their own history and culture. This at a time when the German nation was relatively young, so you have Imperial Germany, and you have the founding of this museum, which actually then ends up getting the support of Emperor Wilhelm II who gifts, we were primarily a collection of replicas, so plaster casts primarily of sculptures and architectural monuments. And a lot of that was sort of defined by an idea of what was German or Germanic art and culture, and we became, in many ways, that sort of outpost for, also at the time a kind of burgeoning idea of what a German national culture would look like. And that was really sort of our early beginnings.

And we had many different buildings over the years as well. So, I always say museums are not buildings, museums are collections. Museums are the people that work and study with those collections - what we do with that collection rather than the sort of building that it's housed in. But we had several different buildings, and one is actually still a part of the museums on Kirkland Street, just a few blocks away. You can visit Adolphus Busch Hall, and that is the historic home of the Busch-Reisinger Museum that still exists and still houses actually our foundational collection of plaster casts. And then the Fogg Museum, I believe in the 1980s, also sort of took its Asian and Mediterranean collections, and out of those were formed the Sackler Museum. And so that was the third of the art museums.

And again, we all had separate buildings, although administratively for quite a long time, certain things were shared at the museum, so sort of behind the scenes, and the decision was then made rather than asking our students, our public audience, to choose which museum am I going to go to at Harvard - the decision was made to bring the three museums under one roof. And that is the current building that we opened in 2014. It was designed by Renzo Piano, and it really has made so much possible for the collections and also how they really are in dialogue with one another. So, I'm sure that we're now free to

the public, free to anyone, and no one has to make a decision - now I'm going to go to the Busch-Reisinger Museum because I'm interested in art from Central or Northern Europe, or I'm interested in Asian art so I'm going to go across the street, which is how it sort of used to be. Instead, I'm going to come to the Harvard Art Museums and all of these collections are available. And we also work very closely together, the entire curatorial team. So, I'm the only curator of the Busch-Reisinger, but the Fogg was a much larger institution and so they have curators of specific media. I work very closely with my colleagues, and this situation allows us to really do that and teach, I mean, it's how we teach art history. We don't sort of break things down the way that institutions might have conceived of them when they were initially conceived.

I should add that I still, I'm a strong advocate of the Busch-Reisinger Museum as an institution within the larger institution because we have such a unique history. I mean, you can really read, and I know that we'll get into that when we talk about Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus, but you can really read the history of the late 19th and above all the 20th century through the developments of the Busch-Reisinger Museum, especially of course German and American relations, but also the impact of two world wars, the Cold War. And so I think it's actually, as a focus of study, the museum itself and its own history, what we call historiography, is also incredibly rich, and I think only has in more recent decades really begun to be kind of explored as a case study for how to think about how institutions are built, how identities are formed within those institutions, and how then those institutions also impact reception of art and artists and understandings of other cultures as we move beyond. I'm an advocate for actually thinking locally, even if I have a museum for European art, for thinking locally about how that collection was both built in the past, but also what can it do now to speak to our audiences which are very international but also very young - the students at the university, local high schools, children. So, what is it that this collection, or how can this collection speak to them now in 2026?

CB:

So, roughly how many pieces are in the Busch-Reisinger Museum?

LR:

So, we have more than 50,000 objects in the collection. And for the Bauhaus, which is our subject today, we have counted more than 30,000 that we would somehow connect to the Bauhaus. So, this is also the thing - once you start to get into data and what sort of data lives in the database, how do you catalog things? Of course, you have to make decisions about how to categorize different movements or different schools and so we decided, when we think about the Bauhaus, it's really sort of anyone who taught at the school, studied at the school. So, it's quite expansive. So, we have, for example, not just the Walter Gropius archive, but we also have the Lyonel Feininger archive. We have the Otti Berger, the largest collection of textile samples by the weaver Otti Berger, in the thousands. So, 1,100 samples by Otti Berger. We have 5,000 Lyonel Feininger sketches alone. So, the numbers, of course, increase based on just those three figures. But again, 50,000 objects is everything from the Middle Ages to literally art that was made last year. So, when you sort of break it down across that and think also about collections of photographs, photographic negatives... Lyonel Feininger, we have thousands of those as well.

So, it's not quite as big as it sounds. Often the question is, "Well, but you only show just a handful of those works of art". And that's, I think, always true with every museum. And yet for us, a lot of that work is actually light sensitive, and so we can't show it in the galleries for an extended period of time because of the light exposure can actually detrimentally affect the work of art, fade, and so we have very strict rules about how long a watercolor or a drawing or a photograph can be on view. So, that's why typically

when you come to a museum, often there's a lot of paintings, a sculpture, works that are able to be on pretty much permanent view, and then we always do rotations of light-sensitive materials as well.

CB:

How often does that occur?

LR:

About every six months. And it depends. I mean, it will depend on the medium of whatever we're showing. So, I have, for example, works by Hanna Nagel up now in this gallery, and those will be up for six months. They're ink, ink drawings. If we have a watercolor, maybe it has to kind of rotate out after about three months or something. So, it really depends. We've worked together with the conservators to sort of decide what are the best ways to care for each individual object. And I would say that the special exhibitions that we've done over the years are also largely drawing on, they're inspired by and they're largely drawing on the collection. So, it's also an opportunity to show another focus of the collection that is maybe not out on view more in its entirety. So, we've done exhibitions that focus on other time periods or a particular artist, and that gives us an opportunity to bring out more and put it on view for the public if it's not in this kind of rotating cycle of things.

And the Harvard Art Museums is very lucky that we also have an incredible Art Study Center, and that has really in some ways formed the heart of this new building by Renzo Piano, that you can request to see pretty much anything that's in the collections unless it's too large or might be stored offsite. And that allows me at least to feel like, okay, maybe I have two paintings by Lyonel Feininger on permanent view, maybe I do a rotation of works by Feininger in the gallery every now and again. But the collection is actually accessible and available for teaching or it's shown in a special exhibition. We had a great show last fall called "Sketch, Shade, and Smudge", which drew from drawings collections of both the Fogg and the Busch-Reisinger and showed a lot of drawings that I hadn't actually incorporated recently into these galleries as well. So, there's a lot that we can work with, and a lot of things though that people also expect to see when they come. And so, those are sort of icons. It's actually very difficult to not have those on view. If people make an extra trip and they want to see the light prop by [Laszlo] Moholy-Nagy [laughs] then well, that's always on view, but...

CB:

I was going to say, this is your responsibility then to choose what is on exhibit. Is that up to you?

LR:

Yes.

CB:

And that must be difficult being such a fan and a scholar of the subject matter that you have *that* many pieces and only a tiny percentage can be on view.

LR:

It is, it is. We always say curators would always love to have more space, and then there's something to be said about having to focus it in. And this installation has been more or less the same, I'd say, for about a decade. So, we are hoping, we have a lot of new curators on the staff, hoping to maybe also approach a reinstallation of the museum that might allow us to sort of change where certain points of

emphasis are. But for the Busch-Reisinger Museum, the Bauhaus Expressionism, our medieval collections, these are really core parts of the collection that will always have an important place in the galleries. Yeah, but it's very difficult [laughs] and someone else would do it completely differently. And people tell me how they would do it, and I say, "That's great". So, I think that's really one of the fun parts.

CB:

So, let's talk a little bit about the art. Bauhaus has, I think, a style associated with it, but do you think there really is such a thing as "Bauhaus Art" as a distinct style? Or is it better thought of as, because really, the different artists that were there are all pretty unique. [Wassily] Kandinsky and Paul Klee, for example, are very different styles.

LR:

Yep.

CB:

Is there a Bauhaus style that can be defined or is it more a unique collection of artists who happen to be working under one roof with the same philosophy?

LR:

I think that's a great question, because I think if you say Bauhaus, I think a lot of people think primarily of Bauhaus design, and even then they think maybe of a few kind of iconic artists, designers. So, I think in some ways we're so accustomed to modern design that really is so inspired in coming out of the Bauhaus that I think we all sort of feel like, oh, well, this is something that we're familiar with. And it really was, as you say, it was quite a broad range of artists that were teaching and also studying at the Bauhaus. They were also politically coming from very different places. Most of the Masters, the Bauhaus Masters as they were called, or teachers, were actually painters. And yet, it's not really maybe the first thing we think of when we think of the Bauhaus, which is also why I'm often conscious in our galleries that we have so much painting on view, largely because of the reasons that I mentioned, rather than works on paper or textiles, we have a very strong textile collection, because they're light sensitive, they're not on a permanent view because we don't necessarily always think about painting first, and it's maybe a more traditional way of thinking about artwork in the first half of the 20th century.

So yeah, you had artists who were coming from Expressionism, you had artists who had dabbled in all kinds of different things. Constructivism is playing a large role and just a sort of general interest in a kind of geometric abstraction. Cubism is making itself seen. And I think also as art historians or students of art history, we like to think about our "isms" [laughs], maybe less so now than we used to. And I think in the Bauhaus, by bringing all of these very different artists together under a much more common idea and a pedagogy and an emphasis on how one teaches young aspiring artists, designers, architects, weavers, metal workers. So, it was, in some ways, the idea was always to think across media. And so even if a Master was primarily working in painting or printmaking, they may also have dabbled in photography even before there was a workshop. So, I think that sort of dynamic quality is really what made the Bauhaus what it is.

And I think why it continues to fascinate us today, because you can always go even further and dig in even more and discover also other artists who maybe were working in other media at the Bauhaus and then go on to have a very different career doing something else. So, it's incredibly complex. And that's

also how we get to our 30,000 objects, or more than 30,000 objects in the collection, that relate to the Bauhaus because where do you draw the line? If someone was sort of teaching there for a certain amount of time, but then they go on... you know, I'm sitting in front of Moholy-Nagy, he goes on to develop a lot of these ideas after he was at the Bauhaus. But a lot of those interactions, discussions, debates, things that were happening while he was at the Bauhaus, impacted that trajectory. So, that's a very long answer to your question. Basically, you're right. [laughs]

CB:

And it's interesting because as you're talking, I'm thinking how the Bauhaus really does seem to have a cohesive identity or a style or a philosophy associated with it, but it's so diverse in what was happening there. I mean, even, you say, okay, well there isn't a clear style, there were different artists of different types coming in, but philosophically everybody was on the same page, but not even that, right? Think of Johannes Itten with his spiritual beliefs...

LR:

Oh yeah.

CB:

... and then Hannes Meyer with his strong communist beliefs, and Gropius was kind of holding it all together. Do you think that Gropius was one of the reasons that it did have such a cohesive, that it all worked, that he was kind of the glue?

LR:

I think for the time that he was director, surely. And then the question is, well, what does it mean to sort of hold it all together? I mean, if you have a lot of strong personalities, you have a lot of people also coming and going. You have guests coming to lecture, you have students in some ways sometimes teaching the teachers. I mean, in some ways, I think at least the way that I understand it is Gropius in some ways created the infrastructure, the sort of container of an idea for this. And even himself, as we know, shifted the focus by 1922 to be more about art and industry and the idea of moving into the world and impacting... I mean, the vision was huge, but how that often looked in the reality of the school or even the success and the partnerships with industry or, these are much more complicated nuanced stories that I think... Isn't there always, there's sort of a vision and then there's sort of the reality.

I mean, we work a lot now in the field on the women artists of the Bauhaus. There's been incredible scholarship really dedicated to the women. And if you look at the scholarship from the 1970s, maybe you'll find a reference to a few of the women, especially if they ended up being a Master like Marianne Brandt in the metal workshop or something. But so many others who went sort of unnamed, unmentioned. And so what the Bauhaus looks like, I think, is also constantly changing as time changes and also perhaps as we get even further away from the time of its, I mean, we celebrated already, what, seven years ago, the 100th-year anniversary, and the field of art history has changed - the way that we think about, I think, what makes someone a defining artist of the Bauhaus, I think has changed drastically as well. So, I think our Bauhaus today is very different than when the Busch-Reisinger did an exhibition on the Bauhaus in 1971. You compare those two catalogs, they couldn't be more, well, in fact, it's literally some of the same artworks, but the focus really couldn't be more different.

CB:

Do you have any particular favorite artists from the Bauhaus, if you had to name a couple?

LR:

Well, I mean, I am partial, I think at this point, also based on the work here at the Harvard Art Museums, to Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. I think...

CB:

Well, we picked a good frame to shoot this. [laughs]

LR:

Yes, you did. Also, just spent a lot of time in the years that I've been at the museum actually activating the light prop, one of his most significant works, and he's an artist where we have really some of these very different core examples of the work. I'm now also, I'm very interested in some of those artists who were working, let's say in photography, but outside of maybe the way we even think about what Bauhaus photography looks like. So, I recently acquired a work for the museum by an artist named Elsa Thiemann, and she was using camera-less photography at the Bauhaus to make wallpaper designs. So, again, it's this sort of intersection of using the techniques and the technologies that were being taught but then applying it in a sort of different way. And wallpaper design actually being something that we also have in the Busch-Reisinger Museum collections, and was actually one of the most profitable aspects of the Bauhaus. So, not everything... the Wagenfeld Lamp that we have here in the gallery actually was too expensive to produce and wasn't on everyone's night table, but wallpaper and these other sort of everyday household items did bridge the divide in some ways to the everyman, everywoman of the Weimar period. So, Moholy-Nagy and maybe some of the women artists, a lot of the weavers that we have in the Busch-Reisinger Museum. And yeah, I think it's kind of hard to choose, right? It's like asking your parents who their favorite child was. [laughs] You can't really answer that, I guess.

CB:

You mentioned a few times the female artist there, and I know Marianne Brandt is notable, especially for having become the Master of the metal shop...

LR:

Yes.

CB:

...which was a very male-oriented, because I know a lot of the women did go to the weaving shop, I'm thinking Anni Albers, for example...

LR:

Yeah, they were kind of funneled into the weaving.

CB:

That's kind of where I'm going - the Bauhaus was so progressive in just about every way. As far as gender equality, was it...

LR:

Well, I mean, I think the jury is still out on that. I think, we don't think it's maybe quite as progressive as we would like from today's perspective in the fact that many of the women were encouraged to join the weaving workshop. But then there are many examples of women who are then working in other media, or someone like Marianna Brandt who really made her career there in a field where she wasn't maybe necessarily destined to be at the outset. So, I think it just also shows the women that were at the Bauhaus were also in many ways defining what they wanted the Bauhaus to be for themselves. So, that's very exciting. I think progressive, it's always, I mean, 1919 in Germany was when women were allowed to study at art academies at all. So, you have a lot of women who are starting to study at art academies, even, in painting. I mentioned Hanna Nagel who's on view in the gallery right now. She was then able to study drawing in Karlsruhe. So, there is a sort of real surge of women who are maybe finally being given these opportunities, but it doesn't necessarily mean that their careers went the same way as their male colleagues. And that's actually, I think a lot of the scholarship has dealt also with how many women of the period actually were sort of adjusting to these new realities and embracing new opportunities and often facing the backlash for that as well. So, it wasn't all easy, I don't think.

CB:

As you said, we need to consider that even if it's not up to our current standards, let's say - this is a hundred years ago. So, it's amazing how progressive it was, and the time in general, the Weimar Republic era, how much was changing.

LR:

Yeah, and I think that's, for me, that's what makes the Bauhaus so important, and I think why it has the staying power in both the public interest, but also the scholarly interest, is that it really was this kind of moment in the Weimar Republic where you had, even this idea that you could have this school and it was international - it was pushing the boundaries of how one understood education or media specificity. And as we know, that then in many ways comes to a halt in Germany with the onset of National Socialism. And the Bauhaus is sort of the perfect example for that because of course it has those same dates. It starts in 1919 and it ends in 1933. So, a lot of my work has actually been on how it's also much more complicated than that. So, a project I did in 2018 called *Inventur: Art in Germany, 1943–55*, actually looked at those artists who stayed in Nazi Germany during both the '30s and then all throughout the Second World War, as in some ways a counter to what we could represent here in the Busch-Reisinger Museum, which are primarily the artist emigres or the artists who tragically like Otti Berger were murdered in Auschwitz, that there are also many artists who didn't leave Germany and stayed and continued in some ways to teach Bauhaus legacy, or after the Second World War were the ones who then in Germany begin to really make a case again for modern art, while many of their former colleagues had long emigrated to the US and other places. So again, it's like "isms" and dates. There's always more to it.

CB:

So, you mentioned "isms", we're talking about styles, and the Bauhaus is so legendary and iconic, but there were a lot of different modernist movements happening around the same time. I'm thinking of, you mentioned Constructivism, or Dadism, which was also in the German-speaking world, or Futurism or De Stijl in the Netherlands. And I, correct me if I'm wrong, but I think all of those movements came a little, maybe just a year or two, before the Bauhaus, or even further back. So, I'm wondering if you could talk about that narrative arc of these modern movements and how the Bauhaus fits into that timeline.

LR:

Well, I think it's very much, I mean, it's coming out of the spirit of that. I know that in, one of the questions that you had, had been about the First World War, and I think we see a shift towards what we now consider to be Modernism already much earlier. I think often true abstraction, complete abstraction, is typically now dated about 1910. So, these things are also in the air, and they're happening kind of all over and sometimes sort of independent of one another. And I think what Gropius did was he took a school, and in some ways threw out the old idea as so much was being sort of overturned, upturned. We think about the Weimar Republic as somehow this kind of forward-thinking sort of movement, but it was a time period. But it was also incredibly volatile and I think that allowed, in some ways, for artists who'd had very different backgrounds... You know, Feininger, we also show in our galleries of early Modernism together with Cubist painters, because that's also what he is looking at. Lyonel Feininger was also a caricaturist. He was coming from a very different background.

And I think that sort of coming together then with artists, specifically because it was artists who had very different trajectories up until that point, that maybe is what made it such a hotbed for ideas and new ways of thinking about color and form and composition, and as we've talked about, the intersection of different media and allowing geometric abstraction that might have been in Moholy's paintings to impact exercises he's doing with his students and show up later in the breakdown of what a lamp looks like or whatever. So again, I think it's kind of hard to break it down into this very specific question of direct influence. And it's not really, I think, actually the most interesting way to think about it. I think thinking about it as a place, or three places eventually before it closed, where that kind of discussion was encouraged, where students were also asked to not look at maybe what had come before in the art historical trajectory, but to actually really start with the basics. I mean, the whole idea of the preliminary course is about... it's not about, okay, learn what happened up until now, but actually look at the material, look at the shape, look at the..., and from that, I mean, that's what [Josef] Albers' pedagogy became so well known for, was let it kind of guide what the result is going to be. And so in some ways, it doesn't really matter [laughs] where it was coming from specifically.

And I think we often think too about artists' trajectories. I'm not a huge fan of monographic exhibitions because I often think to look at an artist in a vacuum, unless they really were working in a vacuum, I find it much more helpful to put them together with their contemporaries or with artists working other media in order to sort of draw out what was that kind of zeitgeist. Even if we can't narrow it down for the Bauhaus, I think those, that's why we love those pictures of the Bauhauslers gathered together. And I think we're looking at something that we can't even maybe put our finger on about it as a place. All we can do now is look through the works of art, look through the documentation, look through the work, in some way sort of reconstructing what it might've been like. I don't know if that makes sense.

CB:

I'm wondering too, you think about these other movements, the Bauhaus is unique in that it was a school, it was less of a movement, it was actually a school. And I'm wondering how that influenced the output. I mean, do you think that it sparked maybe a sense of discovery and curiosity that was enhanced because of the learning environment that was surrounding it?

LR:

Oh, for sure. I mean, being someone who works in a learning environment, I think actually, or they always say, you don't really know until you teach it. [laughs] And I think in some ways, if you're an artist who's actually been successful, I mean, we're talking about artists who had already had extremely

successful careers that Gropius was initially bringing to the Bauhaus. But even there, they then discovered new avenues for their work and new media. And I think there is something to that, both in discussion with others, but also as certain trends began to change and shift throughout more than a decade. So, we're also talking about, it's not a monolithic thing. And what's interesting about the collection here at the Busch-Reisinger Museum is because it was largely put into place as a result of Walter Gropius being at Harvard, it is also very much a kind of Gropius-centric collection. If you had a collection under the next two directors of the Bauhaus, it might look very... if they had been driving that story, it might've looked very different. And so I think, again, it's shifting, it's changing even within the course of its existence in important ways.

CB:

And it's interesting thinking about a school that was so art-centered and that Gropius, and actually none of the heads of the Bauhaus, of the three of them, were artists themselves. And Gropius was sort of notorious for even as an architect not doing any sketching. What effect do you think that had, to have somebody running things, that it was such an artistic place, who himself... I mean, he was clearly a visual artist in the architectural sense, but we talked about that a little with him being kind of the glue that held things together. But any other thoughts on that?

LR:

Yeah. Well, I mean, I think he was an advocate for Modernism in all of its many forms. So, I think in some ways, I think often if you have a sort of strong personality with, again, an idea, and the idea shifts and changes as the times change. Yeah, I don't know. It's a good question. I guess I never really thought about it in quite that way. Like, what was his role [laughs] other than willing it into being? I mean, honestly, I've worked, I shouldn't say that now that we're in the middle of a Gropius interview, but I've actually worked much less on Walter Gropius than on other figures at the Bauhaus. Yeah, and I think architects approach him from that perspective.

CB:

I almost feel like architects are visual artists, it is a visual medium, but it's also a very earthy medium. You're dealing with concrete and stone and all these kind of grounded materials. It's almost like having an architect in charge held the space, and then all these creatives could come and just go wild with these ideas. That's what's coming to me.

LR:

Well and he did in some ways. He literally designed the space.

CB:

Yeah.

LR:

So, those workshops that we know and now you can visit, or the way that the Masters lived together side by side. When I went through those, I thought, oh, I don't know what it would be like [laughs]. So, he had an idea about what that proximity looked like and I think that can be intense in good ways and bad ways, I'm guessing.

CB:

And they needed somebody, I think, with the passion and the drive to make it happen and deal with the funding.

LR:

Yeah. Yes, yes.

CB:

And my impression was that he was very good at dealing with all of the political drama and just, again, holding that space, making it possible so that people could create there.

LR:

That's right. That's right. And that's what a good director does. Yeah.

CB:

So, we talked about World War I having an impact, and I think of how much Vietnam influenced the late '60s creative output and cultural shifts. If World War I had never happened, do you think that there would've been such a forceful movement of change in creativity during the Weimar years?

LR:

I don't know, it's hard to say. I mean, you already had, in Germany, you already had Expressionism prior to the First World War, so there was a sort of push against a kind of academic tradition already at that time. I think it would've taken very different form. I mean, it's hard to imagine. Without the war, are we still talking about an imperial Germany with sort of strictures and codes around what is acceptable art making and what is not, and these kinds of things. Yeah, I mean, there were many in Germany in advance of the First World War who felt very much in favor of it, felt that it was time for some kind of renewal, some kind of change. Of course, they were horribly disappointed and disillusioned, of course, as soon as they hit the battlefield and realized what that actually meant. But yeah, really hard, I think literally impossible to say. I think much more so the Second World War. We already then had in advance of that a real vibrant arts, modern art and modern art scene in Germany and I think that has obviously forever changed through the Nazi period, through the Holocaust, Second World War, and so many of the artists that we lost and that either left Germany or didn't survive the war, the Holocaust. And that's something that I think I have actually thought quite a bit about, that you can see sort of continuities there, but certainly there's such a disruption for German art and culture as well.

CB:

But you think about the Nazis holding these Degenerate Art Exhibits, right? It's anybody who was in the modern movement was branded that way, and they tried to stamp it out. But ironically, I think, would you say that it actually, once the smoke cleared from the war, my impression is that Modernism really became the norm in Germany of the '50s and '60s, of the home decor, and it became much more mainstream. Do you think that, obviously the Nazis' efforts failed, but in a way, did it help almost spread these ideas because it certainly resulted in people leaving and bringing those ideas around the world?

LR:

Well, this is definitely true. And I think the sort of turn and acceptance of Modernism in Germany after the Second World War was hard won. I think there were artists in the '40s who worked very hard

actually to reintroduce and reacquaint a public that had been indoctrinated for years against modern art. On the flip side, because of the defamation of modern art by the Nazis, it actually really contributed to the acceptance of it, especially German art, in the United States. So, I think about that a lot because we as a museum really were able to turn the story as a number of American institutions and curators and gallerists, dealers did to basically... sort of, the '20s, there's a very fledgling interest in German art in the United States, and it's primarily fed by German-American directors, like at the Detroit Institute of Arts. But it's small. It's certainly not at the level of the acceptance of French art, for example. And then as soon as, it's the art that Hitler hated, it becomes something much more interesting and much more palatable to American audiences. And that's really when, I mean, the Busch-Reisinger was already collecting Paul Klee and other artists, like Otto Lindig, the ceramicist at the museum, already in the early '30s. So, it didn't just come with the Nazi defamation of modern art, but it definitely drove the wider and broader acceptance of German art for the United States. And as we know now, many artists who were not keen on their work not being accepted by the Nazis later rode that wave as well [laughs]. So, I mean, that's a whole 'nother story.

CB:

So, Gropius of course advocated for a break away from the excessive ornamentation of prior styles and his architecture certainly, and architecture of the Bauhaus itself, Mies van der Rohe, for example, certainly follows that highly pared-down aesthetic. But the art, to me, is a contrast to that because, certainly there's a lot of primary colors, there's some simple geometries, but the art is pretty vibrant and complex and inherently decorative in the sense of you put it on your wall.

LR:

[laughs]

CB:

Do you see any contradiction between this getting away from ornamentation to the fact that it was an art school producing a lot of ornamented-type artistic output?

LR:

Well, I feel like we're getting though into a sort of, what is decoration and what is sort of not. I mean, I think probably the best example that I can think of for getting at what you are describing is a photograph in our collection that my colleague, Laura Muir, has worked on quite a bit. And it's a photo of Lucia Moholy's of, I believe it was actually her and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's living room in the Master's houses at the Bauhaus. And she edits this photograph prior to it being used to promote the Bauhaus architecture by taking out the pillows that they had on their sofa, or even the light fixtures on the ceiling. So, she's actually, in some ways, editing out aspects of what actually was there in this building designed by Gropius to actually, in some ways, and that's something that Laura has argued, sort of clean it up to get back to these kinds of clean lines and this sort of, so even in the very homes that Gropius designed, life happened, life was there, people had some cushions on there. So, this idea also that anyone could live maybe in the strictness or, again, it's an idea, it's an ideal. And I think in many ways, that was not necessarily something that many of the artists who worked there or produced there prescribed to in the same way. I mean, well, then why would you make wallpaper? And that's what they were producing, wallpaper they were producing. So again, I think it's the danger of trying to distill it down to one aesthetic or one idea - you're just going to end up with all kinds of contradictions. And I love the films they produce to promote the design and the architecture, and it's fabulous. It's being

marketed in that way. And I honestly don't think that your geometric abstraction by Moholy-Nagy would feel decorative or sort of out of place in that context either.

CB:

Well, I'm thinking about the Gropius House where I have the privilege of giving tours. And I mean, the house itself is extremely pared down - the outside, it's white, it's very simple geometries, but the inside is just full of decorative art. I mean, there's incredible art pieces in there. So, it makes me think of what the idea that came to me as we were talking about Gropius holding the space. He creates a very kind of simple, streamlined container. And then within it, as you said, life happens and it's vibrant and it's...

LR:

Yeah. And isn't that great? I mean [laughs], and we have wonderful photographs in the archive, in the Gropius archive here at the Museum, of the Gropius House as it was through the years, and the interiors and all of the things, all of the things that we live with that we collect, and the photographs and the... so again, I think to me, the Bauhaus is not sterile, right? It's actually the opposite.

CB:

So, let's talk about the collection here a little more. One thing I wanted to throw out that I learned as I was reading up on the museum... So, Adolphus Busch Hall, which was built in 1917 to house the collection, the Germanic collection, was designed by an architect, German Bestelmeyer, who was extremely anti-modernist...

LR:

Oh yeah. [laughs]

CB:

... so much so that he was part of a group called The Block, which was the antithesis of Der Ring, which was a modernist group in the '20s that Walter Gropius was a part of [laughs], and Mies van der Rohe apparently as well. So, I'm wondering...

LR:

I told you, you can learn everything you want to know about German art of the 20th century by looking at the Busch-Reisinger Museum. [laughs]

CB:

So again, how interesting that the museum holding the Germanic art was very, at least by the designer of the building, anti-modernist. So, I'm wondering, how did that shift occur? What was the first modernist art to come here? Did it come from Gropius when he was working at Harvard?

LR:

No, no, no, no, no. So, that's another sort of complicated moment. Gropius doesn't come to Harvard until 1937 and already...

CB:

I'm sorry, I do you remember you saying 1930 was the first modern...

LR:

Yeah, so the first work of art, modern work of art, acquired by the museum is actually the Ernst Barlach, *The Beggar*, the sculpture that's out here in the courtyard. And that was acquired in 1931. And then Klee, Lindig, [George] Grosz, and that is largely attributed to the second curator of the Busch-Reisinger Museum, then still the Germanic Museum, so the name doesn't change until 1950, and his name was Charles Kuhn. And Charles Kuhn becomes curator in 1930 and then begins also in addition to what had been then primarily replicas, plaster casts, really a study, it was considered to be a sort of study collection so that you could learn about these things without having to travel to Germany. It did also include photographs and original paintings and sculptures. But Charles Kuhn really shifted to, he was also a trained medievalist, so he continued to collect really some incredible works of art from the high Middle Ages. But he also began to collect modern art and actually goes on a trip to Germany in 1934, so already during the Nazi period and was buying work from living artists in Germany at the time.

And so, there was real fertile ground, let's say, for the work that then happened together later with Gropius, not until 1947, to really start to amass a Bauhaus archive. And Charles Kuhn called it, he called it a study collection, a research archive. So, it was really intended in some ways, like the original foundational cast collection of the museum, as a means to study. And that's what made it such a good place for the Bauhaus, because it wasn't too concerned if things were a sketch or a plan or a photograph of architecture. So, it was in some ways, from the very beginning, conceived of by the curator as an expansive idea of an archive that included what we now consider to be works of art. And it's fascinating because there is a list, and the archives were basically the names of many of the Bauhausers that Gropius knew, are listed, typed up on a list. And Charles Kuhn is kind of going through and he's writing to them all, and he's asking them if they would be willing to give work to the museums or sell work to the museum and that was really the beginning. In 1948, you get this kind of large group of about 300 works that started to form the core of that collection. But it was a coming together of... if there hadn't been a German museum with this focus, with this kind of commitment, and then also Charles Kuhn, who had already recognized many of these artists as the major artists of his time, if this idea that Gropius had would've come to fruition, let's say, had he been somewhere else.

And then it was all of the artists that they wrote to and their families, and that then really built that collection, which now is really the core of our holdings. And we continue to acquire and expand and ensure that that also doesn't remain a kind of static collection, but that it continues to grow, as we said at the outset, as our understanding of the Bauhaus also continues to grow. And so, that's been one of the important things is both promoting new scholarship on artists who've maybe been more overlooked or really being open to thinking about what other directions that the collection could take, to compliment. But it sort of starts already in the early '30s with Kuhn and then really gets that push in the '40s with Walter Gropius. And then, this Feininger, for example, Lyonel Feininger's *Gross Kromsdorf III*, was a gift in the '60s from his family. And so, the light prop by Moholy-Nagy came from Sibyl Moholy-Nagy after it had been on view at the New Bauhaus in Chicago for a number of years. So, after Moholy-Nagy dies, Sibyl Moholy-Nagy gives it to the museum. So, there's so many makers of this collection and many, many artists who were involved, and they got involved because Gropius asked them to and made that happen. He was very concerned at the time about what's happening, what was happening after the war in Germany, how would *his* legacy of the Bauhaus be preserved? And the other archives of the Bauhaus, which of course are major in Berlin and Dessau and also in Weimar, they were formed *after* our collection began to be formed. So that's also, in thinking about it as a constellation of Bauhaus archives, it's sort of the German archives and Cambridge.

CB:

It's really kind of the perfect coming together of forces in the sense of here you had the only Germanic-focused museum in the country, and then you have Gropius coming here and teaching at Harvard during a time when all this material was still relatively new and in danger maybe of being lost during the war, and that he could bring things over and connect with people who were still alive. It's kind of amazing.

LR:

Yeah, and he, I mean, he also gave not only his own archive or then his wife Ise gave portions of his archive later, he also gave works by other artists. So, the tea glass holders that we have here on view in the gallery by Josef Albers were Gropius's. Or you have Anni Albers selling basically her thesis work, her textile, to the museum that has the watermark where it had been used to put a vase of flowers on it. So, I mean, there are things about this collection too that are so intimate and show, I think, still this network that we were talking about - bring this coming together of people at this certain time in this certain place, but then also, what happened to those artists? What happened to those ideas? How did they develop those ideas in their own careers beyond the Bauhaus? And then, how did they, many of these objects, come back together at this site and under this museum's care?

I mean, I think it's really, it's super fascinating and it's something that we focused on then in 2019 with the centennial of the founding of the Bauhaus. We said, well, we have such an incredible Bauhaus collection, we can't possibly show it all. It's always the first thing. We lent a lot of works to other museums for their centennial exhibitions. And we really decided to focus on the story of how this collection came to be here, but also the stories that had maybe not been told before, and also how we use that in our teaching. And so, the catalog actually came out after the exhibition was over. I'm just going to grab it. It's actually out of print, so I'm not making a plug for it because you can't even buy it anymore, [it's] called *Object Lessons*. But the idea was that it showed also how we are continuing to learn from the objects in the Bauhaus collections at the Busch-Reisinger Museum and have faculty contributors, curatorial fellows, students contributing to the volume itself, also contributing new research on those collections.

And that was really for us, I think, the most important thing. I mean, I've said it probably a couple of times now that it's not this sort of static.. even, we think of the word "archive" - we think it's just sort of, I think you said it at the beginning of our conversation, like something that's put away and sort of dusty, but actually how do we continue to make that legacy live? And that was sort of the goal of the exhibition. And before that, we had a curatorial fellow who designed a special collections website. So actually, if you go to the website of the Harvard Art Museums, you can be introduced to the whole history of the Bauhaus at Harvard and then also have a searchable tool so that you can search those to make basically those 30,000+ objects, give them some kind of sense. Because we also wanted to encourage people to look not just for the names, maybe that they know, but this allows them to search the collections as a whole and hopefully find new avenues for study. There's also a map of the Boston area and all of the Bauhaus-related sites, including the Gropius House in Lincoln, [a] bibliography, and a lot about what the strengths of our collection are for those that are interested in diving in more.

CB:

Do you have a close connection with the, you mentioned the museums and archives in Germany - the Weimar, the Dessau. Is there a partnership between the Harvard Museum and them? Do you exchange items, for example?

LR:

Well, I mean they also have incredible Bauhaus collections, so it's actually rare. And it'll depend if they're doing a special exhibition, maybe, that we would lend something to them. We are in contact, for example, the Bauhaus Archive Berlin, which is undergoing a massive renovation project right now, did a project together with the artist Judith Raum. Judith was someone who was here actually for our centennial program as well because she deals a lot with the artist Otti Berger, she's done a lot of research on her work, and they did a volume recently on Otti Berger and we have basically the largest collection of her work. And so there's no way that we're not going to collaborate in order to make that possible. And it was very exciting for us that they were committing to Berger and to featuring her legacy.

In fact, I have that book too. That's this. It's a beautiful, beautiful volume. So, not only was there the Germanic Museum, Kuhn's interest in modernist artists, but also Harvard was the site of the first Bauhaus exhibition in the United States by the society, Harvard Society for Contemporary Arts. So, it was actually a group of three students who had started already in 1928 this society and were doing exhibitions of very contemporary artists at the time, and in some ways kind of prefigured the Museum of Modern Art, which, Harvard Society for Contemporary Art was founded in 1928 and MoMA two years later. So, that was also, it was clear that there was an interest here in Cambridge in the Bauhaus from very early on.

CB:

Okay, so let's wrap it up here and just briefly talk about the legacy that it's left behind. So, Gropius was obviously a major presence here at Harvard, teaching at the Graduate School of Design. Can you just describe briefly his influence on campus as far as, let's say, the built environment?

LR:

Oh yes. So, that's actually one of the, I mean, Gropius brings with him obviously, eventually, this whole network of emigre artists that he was associated with from the Bauhaus. They teach here, they visit out in Lincoln. And so, there's that kind of impact also on students and also other faculty in other places, like the Black Mountain College is a very important Bauhaus legacy. The New Bauhaus in Chicago. Newcomb College. So, we actually have student work from all three of those places as well. So, we actually don't just then collect the Bauhaus as it was in Germany, but also what we call Bauhaus legacy into the United States as well. And Gropius on campus designed together with The Architect's Collaborative, really the first modern buildings or suite of buildings on campus and that's the Graduate Center, which they designed in 1950. And also, in addition to that, commissioned artists to make murals, large-scale sculpture, and the Busch-Reisinger Museum houses also many of those works.

So, for example, Herbert Bayer's *Verdure*, a very large-scale painted mural, which is now in our collection. The Graduate Center itself is a part of Harvard Law School and can still be visited and some of the works are still on view *in situ* there. But that was something where the campus was forever changed because of Gropius and the Graduate Center. And it has been also a focus of our work on the collection and the exhibition in 2019 really looked at the commissions of artwork by Hans Arp as well for Harvard. And that shows again that he's thinking about the architecture, the space that students will be using, dormitories, a kind of common space, but he's also imagining them as a place for works of art and had his artists that he felt whose work should be included in that. So, it's a piece, right? You were talking earlier about, is it kind of hanging something on the wall? He's really thinking about it in this kind of expansive way.

CB:

Holistically.

LR:

Holistically. Yes.

CB:

Yeah. So finally, I'll ask, are there any lessons that you think should or could be applied to modern society or maybe more specifically modern art and design from the Bauhaus?

LR:

I mean, in some ways we're sort of living the legacy, right? I mean, even some of the things we're sitting on [laughs] or the way that we think about what's clean or what's modern. I think maybe some of the lessons that we learned from the Bauhaus were also about, in some ways, what doesn't work. That we can sort of have an aspiration for something that everyone is going to have and change the way that we think about things that maybe didn't come to pass in their own time. But I mean, look at Ikea. I mean, what we sort of think of as clean and modern, this is all coming from that place. And I think, as far as a lesson, I love that Laura Muir decided to call our book *Object Lessons* because I do think that returning to the objects, to the works of art, to the design, to the architecture, I think in some ways it is a very hopeful moment and it is a moment that's sought, I think, to think internationally, certainly transnationally at the time. And I think that's something that we should keep in mind rather than these kind of "isms" and the breakdowns, the nation state. And I think we find ourselves in difficult times, and sometimes the best thing to do is bring young minds and also quite brilliant thinkers and creative people together and give them an outlet, give them a place to be, an exchange of ideas. And that's something that's so attractive for us as a university art museum is also, it really was a school and it was a pedagogy. It was a way of thinking about the world, seeing the world. And I think that's something that we can all be inspired by.

CB:

Well said.

LR:

[laughs]

CB:

I think we'll leave it at that.

LR:

Yes, alright.

CB:

Thank you, Lynette.