

Collective Report

Spring 2022 Curatorial Project

This past semester, the Art History Curatorial Project embarked on a monographic exhibition of Leonard Baskin using a diverse collection of his works that are from recent donations to William & Mary and the Muscarelle Museum of Art, as well as prints from the Swem Library Special Collections. Over the course of the semester, the class collaborated with the museum to conduct research, explore the process of putting together a thoughtful exhibition, and present it to the public. Throughout the experience, there are a variety of key takeaways, positive and negative, that are important to contemplate and consider when designing the next iteration of the course. Below, the class has compiled a list of these points, including a discussion of process, an analysis of successful and unsuccessful actions, and an overview of the project's outcome and future suggestions.

Maeve Marsh '23, Emma Jackson '24, Alice Baughman, Anna Scott, Yijun Huang '22, Tara Vasanth, Miles Piontek '23, Gabrielle Buffaloe, Carter Helmandollar '22, Anna Wilkinson, Donovan Watters '23, Ellie Kurlander, Isobel Collins, Ivana Genov

Process

Section Breakdown

When we first began to divide the research sections, we each chose a thematic element of Leonard Baskin's portfolio that we had available to us, and presented our thoughts to the class. As it turned out, many of us had similar ideas with regards to grouping and themes. We then separated ourselves into groups of 1-4 people based on thematic elements we observed in Baskin's work.

Collaboration Techniques

We combined all the scholarly articles, quotes, the catalog of works, brainstormed ideas, bibliography, and summary of the articles in the shared Google Drive for everyone to view and develop their ideas. We would also pitch ideas that required peer feedback to the class (e.g. logo design, exhibit names, exhibit themes, etc.)

Research Methods

When it came time for the actual research to commence, we worked both individually and in our respective groups. Since the class only meets once a week, we would research our topics throughout the week, communicating with those in our group, and then updating the rest of the class on our progress at our weekly meetings. One of our main steps after the initial research and structuring was writing a press release and exhibition summary to provide to the Muscarelle. We also collaborated on a logo (produced by one student and consulted/brainstormed as a group). We communicated nearly every week via email with the Muscarelle to update them on our progress/future needs. This limited confusion or miscommunication and allowed us to get a better understanding of their expectations. Towards the end of the semester, we were more focused on the layout of the exhibition, and we learned from the Muscarelle staff what kinds of things to consider (spacing between works for wall text, sight lines, transitions between sections, etc.). A few of us were able to come in and assist with hanging works and fixing the vinyl text to the walls. A last step in our process was an initial walkthrough of the exhibition, discussing our research and analysis with the docents.

Analysis

Successes

The initial research at the beginning of the course was really broad which gave us all an opportunity to learn a lot about Baskin's work as a whole before being assigned a specific theme for ourselves which was effective. Splitting up into separate groups after this initial broad research was really helpful as it meant that we could organize our thoughts more effectively and get a more in depth specialized knowledge on one aspect of Baskin's work that we were personally

drawn to. This was really effective as it meant that prints flowed together well because we could start to imagine the gallery layout after splitting into specific groups.

Receiving specific deadlines upfront from the Muscarelle made it easier to plan/prep for class meetings, and they were generally really helpful in guiding the organization and setting up of the paintings, whilst also helping with some curating ideas. In addition, Professor Palermo gave us lots of freedom to explore Baskin's work how we wanted and we had flexibility throughout.

Areas for growth

1. It was a bit too democratic at times. Voting on every decision and collective writing were not always the most efficient ways to accomplish what we needed to produce.
2. Some decisions were difficult to make when they were abruptly brought up without prior information or the time to prepare our opinions.
3. Occasionally the in-class tasks felt like time-fillers– as mentioned above, we tended to fill time with excessively democratic discussions of student compositions – outlining our goals and expectations for the class early on might help with this.
4. Composing group pieces of writing proved difficult, especially when conflicting interests caused dissension. Breaking into smaller editing groups may remedy this.
5. It took us several hours to write the press release as a class, because we were going back and forth about word choice, commas, and little details, etc. (perhaps more division would be efficient).
6. Sometimes expectations were unclear for assignments, and while it was nice to have more freedom, it was also easy to get lost or not know exactly what to accomplish for the next class.

Outcomes

A major accomplishment of the class was practicing researching a single artist in depth and becoming as knowledgeable as possible about his works and style. Additionally, we were lucky to gain hands-on experience with the inner workings of museums and exhibit creation, including several key steps:

- We wrote informational text for each piece/section
- We researched Baskin and works
- We designed the layout and flow of exhibit
- We gained experience handling and hanging art

Additional outcomes from the class included the opportunity to make connections with other students and with experts in our field at the Muscarelle.

We collaborated actively with a diverse group to accomplish a real-world project to share with the Williamsburg community, which was extremely gratifying.

Artist and Works

The first day of the course, we were presented with a task: to create a monographic exhibition on Leonard Baskin's prints. Practically, we saw how this made sense (the Muscarelle has a large collection of his works, and Baskin is well-known enough to gain public attention but not overly-researched, allowing us to do some real work to find material about his prints, rather than his more famous sculptures). One thought we had is that it could potentially be nice if there were a few options for the exhibit as opposed to one artist or theme being assigned before the class (then the first day could be spent researching multiple possibilities and practicing the skills that curators probably have to use to "pitch" an exhibit).

- Idea of doing one artist rather than multiple artists
 - While broadening our focus to include multiple artists may have allowed for easier group break-up, using works by only one artist allowed for more streamlined research and more in-depth analyses of each piece. On the other hand, it may be interesting to see how an eclectic selection of media from a range of artists and studios could all unite under a common theme or cause (i.e. "The Art of Wellbeing" or "The Amazon Rainforest").

Suggestions for Future Success

Class structure

- Possibly having more structured class periods with specific agendas, sometime we took a long time to collect our thoughts on what needed to get done and it increased the amount of time spent on each activity
- Limit all class simultaneous group editing
- Be aware that this is a project that could be done successfully with 3-6 people, so more structure is necessary to split the work up into a 15+ person project
- Sometimes it's easy to zone out in class. A classroom with windows might contribute to the attentiveness of students. Also, having a twice a week class instead of one three hour block could help with this.
- Providing a syllabus with clear expectations, deadlines, and grading criteria could be helpful for students' reference throughout the semester
- Clearer, more structured communication with the team at the Muscarelle would prevent misunderstandings that occurred (sometimes we realized late that we were not on the same page regarding pieces, when texts were due, etc.)

Expansion of tasks/skills practiced

- It may be beneficial to include students in the publicity/marketing of the exhibit (such as poster design, social media information for the Muscarelle's platforms, articles on the William & Mary website, etc.)
- Students may also benefit from more handling experience with the pieces (seeing storage in the Muscarelle, how they have to sort/order things, etc.)
- Collaboration with studio art classes to create an exhibit and collection from scratch with student-made art dictating the exhibit—choosing the art in a more “commissioned” format to create a community experience

General Commentary & Reflections

This class was such a great opportunity to do meaningful work with our peers that would be truly appreciated by the public. I especially enjoyed getting to know fellow majors, the people at the muscarelle, and professor Palermo in a more sincere way.

– Ivana Genov

This opportunity really sparked a whole new side of my interest in art history and it is beautiful how the exhibition came together in the end through collaboration and teamwork. It is a unique experience to see a project like this from start to finish and have every portion of it truly be student directed. Unless you go into curation, this is definitely a powerful once in a lifetime opportunity where tremendous academic and personal growth can occur. I am so grateful for this experience and it has certainly made a lasting impact on me as a student and art historian.

– Maeve Marsh

I really enjoyed this class because of the freedom we had within our class to explore what we found personally interesting. I also loved Baksin as a choice for an artist to explore and found his works really thought provoking with lots of depth to them.

– Isobel Collins

This class placed us in a unique position to engage with each other as collaborative curators, which is not something seen often in the field of Art History. I am indebted to Baskin, my peers, and Professor Palermo for facilitating a space in which I could explore curating and research in a way I have never encountered before.

– Emma Jackson

The Curatorial Project provided myself and my peers with an opportunity to work in a hands-on setting with a great degree of intellectual freedom. We were constantly pushed to take the lead in all areas, and I feel that throughout the course of the semester I grew my abilities as a writer and creative problem solver while adding curatorial skills to my repertoire. Learning by doing is so powerful because the concept becomes more than a memorized or understood process, it's an experience.

– Anna Scott

I loved that The Curatorial Project was a different format from other art history classes I've taken - working with professional curators and museum staff, collaborating closely with my peers, and puzzling through the different aspects of putting together an exhibit (research, outlining, press, design, writing, and presentation) allowed me to put crucial skills to use in a way that felt valuable. I'm so grateful to have gotten a taste of curatorial work in a professional setting, and I'm really enjoying receiving feedback from those who visit our exhibition on what they learned and found thought-provoking. Professor Palermo guided us through this process, while also leaving plenty of space for us to take the lead and make each decision.

– Alice Baughman

I really enjoyed this opportunity as a way to put our research and ideas into a real exhibition through handling and grouping artworks. Collaborated closely with my classmates, I feel that everyone has a unique perspective to view Baskin's work and form a narrative about his creative products. This student driven process allows us a lot of freedom to develop our own ideas, while at the same time we have the chance to work with professionals in the museum. It's only in real practice that I realize the external concerns (like press, design, writing, formatting, spacing, etc.) than the mere expression of ideas as I usually did in writing a paper, which made this experience so unique and fulfilling.

– Yijun Huang

I thought that this class was a really great opportunity to get a look into what the curation process is like, and be able to have more of a hands-on experience with art history. Baskin was a very interesting topic to study, and I really enjoyed the freedom that we had in this class to be able to make decisions and decide as a unit how we wanted to organize the exhibition.

– Gabrielle Buffaloe

This class was excellent exposure to the full curatorial experience from idea conception to research to museum coordination to functional exhibit execution. The collaboration with the Muscarelle was a really unique opportunity to have full access to the inner workings of an art museum and get a better understanding of what goes into creating an exhibition. We, as students, were given a lot of creative freedom to make the exhibit something we all wanted and to focus specifically on individual interests while still being a part of a cohesive group.

– Carter Helmandollar