

International Networking – the Name of the Game

Gill Crabbe // FNG Research

The Ateneum Art Museum's art historians have been forging unique links with academics at Coventry University through shared research interests. Gill Crabbe asked Professor **Juliet Simpson** about her collaboration with arts professionals internationally, when she was in Helsinki to give a lecture on Gothic Modernisms

The words renewal and reinvention have long been associated with the city of Coventry. Its great twin cathedrals – Gothic and modern – bear witness to linked legacies of past and present that have made Coventry central to a new international spirit of post-1945 British culture. In recent years Coventry University's role in this has been pivotal as an engine of new thinking and creativity; it is therefore no surprise that the University emblem is the rising phoenix, archetypal symbol of rebirth. Juliet Simpson's new appointment in 2015 to the Professorship in Art History and Chair of Visual Arts, a long-standing University strength, marks part of a new academic influx, destined to open the next chapter of the University's development. As Chair of Visual Arts, Simpson begins a journey, challenging and dynamic, to put visual arts at Coventry firmly on the international map. Since her appointment, her professional dynamism has acted as a magnet, attracting a wide range of professionals to join her in realising her vision as part of a new Faculty of Arts and Humanities.

In a little over 18 months Prof. Simpson has energised growth, beginning the multi-faceted task of transforming Coventry's former Department of Design and Visual Arts within the School of Art and Design (now forming part of the University's Faculty of Arts and Humanities), into a multi-themed operation with an expanded interdisciplinary, international research and cultural sector reach. 'The idea was to re-energise the historical, the philosophical and theoretical side of the area and boost the connections that can be built between art historians, artists and designers with international museums and gallery collaborations,' she says. This is no mean feat, given the historic demarcation lines that have existed throughout the professions between university-based art historians and museum-based curators; between fine art and applied art. However, Prof. Simpson's vision not only crosses these disciplinary boundaries, but extends beyond Britain to establish international collaborations as pivotal to creating an interconnected and transnational visual arts research field, linking historians, curators and innovative creative practices through collaboration with academics and professionals internationally.

This is where Finland's arts professionals, and in particular the research partnership with the Finnish National Gallery, come into the picture. Simpson was in Helsinki in October, having been invited to deliver a lecture to museum professionals, art historians and students on 'Gothic Modernity and Nordic Art: Identity, Community and Belonging at the *Fin de Siècle*', linking Finnish art and works from the FNG's collections to this art-historical theme. It also provided her with an opportunity to meet Finnish arts professionals with related research interests. Simpson is always on the lookout for new talent and making multidisciplinary connections.



Prof. Juliet Simpson at the Ateneum Art Museum, photographed with Väinö Blomstedt's painting *Francesca*, 1897, on display in the 'Stories of Finnish Art' exhibition of works from the Museum's collection

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen

Simpson, who holds an MA Hons in Art History from the University of St Andrews and an Oxford DPhil in 19th-century History of Art, was appointed to the Coventry post for her strong track record of research publications in the modern art field. But, she adds, 'this was also for my collaborative work with national and international museums. I had just initiated the first stage of a series of international conference projects, resulting in publications and bigger networks exploring identities of Northern European Renaissance and modern European art in the 19th and early 20th centuries,' she says. These began in 2014 with the first in a series of conferences on 'Primitive Renaissances' which she led at London's National Gallery, in collaboration with Dr Susan Foister (The National Gallery) and Dr Jeanne Nuechterlein (University of York). It was an opportunity to plug her research interests into the heart of the development of an expanded vision of visual arts research at Coventry University within the newly formed Faculty of Arts and Humanities.

As part of a broader strategy she has created three core niche specialisms in visual arts research. A key strand is 'Art, Transnationalism and Cultural Identity', which focuses on the period of the long 19th century to mid-20th century. 'We have now developed a strong research focus on transnationalism and the idea of cultural identity. This embraces core interests in Northern artistic identities, revivalisms and cultural modernisms; art and national identity; women artists in transnational contexts and artists in the age of the networker', says Simpson. 'Part and parcel of this strategy has been to create an international collaborative framework, with related Professorships and Fellowships and nourishing new-generation research, looking outwards to engage with collections, museums and new arenas of cultural heritage.'

There was an opportunity to appoint visiting professors to boost connections in the transnational strand, as well as link related research interests. The Ateneum Art Museum's Senior Curator, Dr Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff was an inspiring choice. Simpson had attended the 'Between Light and Darkness' Symposium at the Ateneum in 2010 and the two had also

become close associates through their shared research involvement with recent projects on *'fin-de-siècle'* art (notably, the Leverhulme Trust, 'Redefining European Symbolism' network, 2010–12, and the European Revivals research project which started in 2009). 'Last year, when we were at the "Music and the Nordic Breakthrough" conference in Oxford, we talked about our shared vision for research', says Simpson. 'There is a really exciting match between Anna-Maria's expertise and the Nordic themes that we can build on in the art history and visual arts research field at Coventry. A further relationship is the context of Coventry's post-Second World War architectural and modernist artistic rebuilding by such leading international figures as Sir Basil Spence, Graham Sutherland and John Piper, who were reinventing the idea of a national language of art, architecture and modern culture at this critical period in the city's disrupted history. That context involved new, expanded international perspectives, notably inspired by Nordic art and design, to recreate a modern visual language reshaping an idea of national identity and monuments to express it, epitomised by Coventry Cathedral. And there seemed a strong resonance with such themes and our related research interests that we could draw on.'

The result was that von Bonsdorff was elected one of three new visiting professors in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at Coventry. She is joined by Professor Steven Parissien, Director of Compton Verney Art Museum, venue for the recent 'Visions of the North' conference exploring new 19th-century British and Belgian perspectives on early Germanic art – and Professor Judith Mottram, Dean of the School of Materials at London's Royal College of Art. For her inaugural lecture given to the Faculty in Coventry in May 2016, von Bonsdorff focused on the topic of curating the transnational art exhibition. She explored three main themes: an introduction to the FNG and the Ateneum's research-focused projects, such as European Revivals; asking why research projects are necessary in curating art exhibitions; and Japanomania in the Nordic countries, reframing East-West exchange.

Simpson's drive to develop international collaborative networks, however, does not stop there. In order to attract new colleagues with international links, support early-career scholars and collaborate with other partner institutions, there have been two further visiting academics appointed. Dr Tessel Bauduin, VENI Scholar from the University of Amsterdam and, from Madrid, Professor Pilar de Montero Vilar (Professor of Fine Art) have enhanced key strengths in Northern identities and international drawing practices research, led by Jill Journeaux, Professor of Fine Art Education. The PhD cohort has expanded with five new studentships, including the first joint doctoral award in partnership with Compton Verney Art Museum investigating the Museum's outstanding Enid Marx-Lambert design collections. Most recent is the collaboration initiated with the University of Warwick, Department of History of Art. It has stimulated the first Coventry-Warwick joint research seminar on Northern artistic legacies and Venice, given by Simpson, recently hosted in Venice by the University of Warwick, and an inaugural Coventry-Warwick post-graduate research colloquium, in the pipeline for May 2017.

'Key interests for doctoral and post-doctoral research include mapping the aesthetics of a Nordic identity through the FNG Collections and British women designers and Nordic modernisms of the 1920s–1950s,' says Simpson. 'One proposal is to use the FNG as a key case-study to explore how far the presence of women artists challenges or reshapes the canon and how patterns of identity are constructed within national modern and contemporary collections. With the FNG Collections, the idea would be to track if specific patterns emerge relating to ideas of Nordic art identities, and to build on this work in partnership with Finnish art curators and art historians for a scholarly publication.'

When preparing for her visit to Helsinki, Simpson sent out a call to her Faculty for specific projects concerned with new understanding of national art collections relating to her department's visual research themes. 'I've now identified our collaborations as the Coventry Helsinki Exchange,' she says with a glint in her eye. Several colleagues have expressed an interest in contributing to research for the follow-up to the groundbreaking Ateneum 'Japanomania' exhibition. 'They would be keen to explore a second stage of this field of modernist activity, to shed new light on potential relations between Britain, the Nordic countries and South-East Asia. It would be an outstanding opportunity to open up research in the post-Second World War field, to look further at relations with the East in 1950s and '60s' art and design.'

‘We have colleagues with research interests in colour, pattern, and graphic languages. There is strong potential to develop further affinities between these themes and fresh areas of enquiry relating to Asian sources of inspiration, new spiritualities, alternative spaces of creation, and identities of making and practices.

Simpson also sees this as an opportunity to create a new model of research exchange in shared themed workshops. ‘We would put out a call for a specific project and invite a group of colleagues from our Faculty to Helsinki for a knowledge-sharing workshop and then invite Nordic professionals to Coventry.’

‘Knowledge-sharing workshops’, she continues, ‘provide a focused and intimate way of working – alongside research seminars and conferences. I think if we want to develop close collaboration, in this way we can bring people into a specific space to explore ideas without having to prepare an academic paper.’

The final conference in the ‘Primitive Renaissances’ series takes place at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 29–30 June, 2017, with von Bonsdorff as one of the five-strong steering committee, and Simpson was in Helsinki to promote its theme – ‘Gothic Modernisms’ – with her lecture. Pivotal to this lecture is the meaning and significance of ‘Gothic Modernism’; what was its wider significance for European art at the *fin de siècle*; and how does the Nordic art connection fit in with that? And at the heart of her inquiry she raised the issue of ‘engaging with an idea of Gothic modernity which challenges core canons and genealogies of modernism – notably going beyond binaries of naturalism and symbolism – to open a new perspective of Gothic modernity which foregrounds debates about identity, religion, belonging, and about modern routes to national identity that more familiar constructions of the period have not addressed, but are very salient questions to explore now.’

The first stage of research inspiring the Amsterdam conference, will shortly appear as a scholarly book based on the London National Gallery ‘Primitive Renaissances’ conferences published by Ashgate. There is a further one pending related to ‘Visions of the North’. In addition, there are plans underway to develop a substantial published outcome for the Amsterdam ‘Gothic Modernisms’ conference, building on research pioneered by the earlier two. Next year too will mark a transition for Coventry’s visual arts research area into a Research Centre, giving it an official designated research status that the university recognises is a core area of its research agenda. This will bring to a peak a remarkable couple of years in the history of visual arts and research at Coventry, and herald deeper connections with its Nordic research counterparts.