

Caroline Houser, Professor Emerita of Art

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Caroline Houser joined the Art Department in 1979, after earning a PhD in History of Art and Architecture from Harvard University and teaching for three years at the University of Texas, Austin. Caroline was a Fellow of the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, where, early in her career, she was a member of the elite cohort excavating Corinth. Caroline returned to the School, as it's called by those who know and love it, nearly every year throughout her academic career to conduct research in the library and in the field, and to exchange ideas and discuss the latest, not yet published, archeological finds with colleagues. A tight-knit community of professional and personal friends who met and kept in close touch year after year, The School was a vital and essential part of Caroline's life.

Among her books, the two most important are on Monumental Bronze Sculptures. Her articles deal with a wide range of art-historical topics. Caroline was always active in her field, enthusiastic about sharing her knowledge, her joy and delight. A list of selected invited lectures takes up two dense pages, and the range of topics--from antiquity to the present, on several continents--shines some light on her intellectual curiosity and the pleasure it gave her to show others--like me--how to look. I learned a lot from visiting museums with her, both alone and at times joining her class at the Metropolitan Museum or the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, where students gave presentations on the pieces they had researched, in front, in back, below the works they were presenting. I remember Caroline stretched out on the floor of an MFA exhibit, setting an example for her students to follow, to view--as much as possible--a statue from the perspective of viewers approaching it in antiquity, in its original surroundings.

Soon after she came to Smith, Caroline and I became friends. For many years, she was a close and true friend, to me and to my family. For colleagues who knew me, and who did not know Caroline all that well, our friendship was surprising. Caroline gave the impression of being prim and proper. She was always elegantly put together, and a lady. No rude word passed her lips, let alone profanity. She made all her homes beautiful. She was a perfectionist, and a lot of work went into creating "elegant simplicity," to borrow a phrase from the Roman poet Horace. I will never forget going with her to choose bathroom tiles for her new house. She was considering what she saw as two very distinct shades of peach; of course, I could really see no difference at all. She was also a gourmet cook, and some may remember the elegant dinner parties she hosted, and how she made everything look effortless.

But Caroline was also a ranch girl. As a nine-year-old she would drive the tractor into town because she was too young to drive a car off the ranch. She was a crack shot. Until the last few years of her life she would return to the family ranch in Yakima County at harvest time to cook for the hired hands. She might quote her mother--but with a twinkle in her eye--no doubt in response to some uncouth utterance of mine: "Horses sweat, gentlemen perspire, ladies glow." But in the field she was hands on, down and dirty. I remember her scrambling down a very steep and treacherous hillside on Crete to get a close look at a newly discovered ancient foundry.

Caroline's most impressive legacy is as a teacher and mentor. Her students loved and admired her, and I received a large number of testimonials and memories from former students, quite a few of whom went on to academic careers in art history and architecture, as museum curators, as archeologists: I would like to quote from just a few of them:

1) I remember Caroline as a brilliant professor, and a gentle, generous, kind, and supportive advisor, mentor, and friend. I don't think I ever heard her raise her voice, but her soft-spoken lectures held our attention more effectively than any theatrics. She always had an open ear, and a deep understanding for the challenges her students faced, both academic and personal. She also had a cutting sense of humor. I remember once helping her sort slides for a talk on monstrous women in Greek mythology. I asked why she thought the Greeks were so scared of strong women, and she fixed me with a look that said more than words ever could. Her dedication to her students extended well beyond the classroom. Not only did she guide me expertly through my college years, helping me believe in my dreams through her faith in me, her door was also always open in the years beyond, and I know I am not the only one of her former students who continued to turn to her for support and advice, or simply an open ear and an open heart, well after graduation. While sorting through various papers and student projects in her office one day, she came across a small key chain in the shape of a globe. She handed it to me, with the words "There are many things I would like to give you, but most of all, I would like to give you the world." I still have that keychain, as a reminder of all the ways that Caroline gave me, and many others, the world. Thank you, Caroline.

2) When tasked with coming up with a seminar paper, I rather rebelliously proposed that I consider how male sculptures from Greek antiquity informed photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's ongoing exploration of the male nude in the 1970s and 1980s. I can remember still that, completely opposite to the reaction I'd expected, Professor Houser gave me that wonderful smile of hers and with a twinkle in her eye said it sounded wonderful. I can appreciate now that she brought as much curiosity to the project as I did and just how rare it is to find such deep support from a someone who readily admits they are not an expert on the given topic. We pored over Mapplethorpe's nudes together and she would suggest different artists, different eras of Greek sculpture for me to research. It was a beautiful give-and-take, a genuine conversation. It was also an exceptional lesson in learning from the past in order to better understand the contemporary moment and in being ever-attentive to the specifics of a work's context. Professor Houser made space for all of that and I am honored to claim her as a mentor and hope to embody her generosity, curiosity, and openness in my own teaching and scholarship.

3) When I think about Caroline I'm filled with an overwhelming feeling of gratitude for the great care she demonstrated, both in how she taught her classes and how she related to her students as individuals. She took us to the museum to learn to look closely and to value the object. She also took us to the first computer lab on campus (it was 1984) and from then on required us to word process our papers. She encouraged art history majors to take studio classes and experiment with historic media and processes. (An example: While taking Caroline's Copies, Fakes, and Originals seminar my senior year 86/87, and with her enthusiastic participation, we met for one class in the Sculpture studio, where we learned firsthand the process of creating a life mask. I later cast my mask in bronze, thus also learning firsthand the lost wax technique, used by ancient sculptors and modern forgers.)

Caroline made sure our minds and our bodies were nourished. There are so many examples of feeling seen and supported, including when Caroline made introductions, wrote recommendations to grad programs and potential employers, ensured I was included, fed me, and even housed me at her lovely later home on Strawberry Hill in Florence, MA. This was when I was expecting my first child and increasingly pregnant as I delivered the Art 100 lectures on medieval art in Fall 1998. While the specifics might differ from other accounts among these

remembrances, I'm sure I'm not alone in having enjoyed the progression from student to colleague to dear friend.

4) Professor Houser's decision to teach her seminar course in the Smith College Art Museum, using the museum galleries as part of our classroom, really solidified my desire to become a museum educator! Build our presentations using the museum collections, and presenting our work in the galleries, was such a fantastic formative experience. Her class led me to pursue a graduate degree in museum education, and a wonderful career of over 20 years as a museum educator in various NYC history museums.³³

5) I signed up for a seminar specifically because Dr. Houser was teaching it—the class could have been on any topic! Her teaching style was unparalleled. During each class period, she'd sneak in a "behind-the-scenes" story about at least one sculpture or piece of antiquity that helped us understand either its importance or how it was discovered. I felt like I was getting the inside scoop about ancient Greek art. She had a knack for making her topics exciting and relevant to modern times.[Berit Oskey]

6) I arrived at Smith in the Fall of 1993 very much unsure of what I wanted to study, or even what I was passionate about. I signed up for Art 100 in my sophomore year, thinking it would fulfill a requirement if I did choose studio art as a major. I enjoyed the first few lectures—but then Miss Houser began the lectures on Greek art, sculpture, and architecture, and I realized studying art history was how I wanted to spend the next three years.

I signed up for more of Miss Houser's classes as soon as I could. I loved what I studied, and even took a job the next year as the Art 100 assistant, placing visual references in the study room, so I could experience it all again. I took advanced-level classes and made my focus the way that early American sculptors and architects drew inspiration from classical sculpture to create the visual iconography of a new country—a subject that still fascinates me today.

Throughout it all, Miss Houser motivated me to think more deeply and creatively, to follow the ideas and subjects that interested me the most, and to foster true intellectual curiosity. She was also so kind to me personally—helping me through tough times academically and personally—and I especially remember a tea she hosted in her office for my whole family. She also created a community of students who loved studying art and talking about it, and I feel so lucky to still be connected to many of them. [Jill Schwartzman, Class of 1997]

7) When I arrived on the Smith campus in the autumn of 1994, I knew almost nothing about Greece and certainly never would have foreseen that Caroline Houser's Greek art and architecture lectures in ART100 were the beginning of my own academic career. Caroline opened the door to Greece for many Smith students, both before and after me. Some of us were fortunate to be a part of her famous seminar, 'The Human Figure in the Classical Tradition,' a class that still reverberates through the careers of many former students. Lest anyone infer that Greek art was fusty or staid, Caroline's seminar revealed how the subject not only remained relevant in late twentieth-century contexts but could also be subversive. Caroline knew intrinsically how to cultivate community in our seminar room, how to empower us but also instill fair judgement and respect.

Other students received Caroline's generous support and backing to study abroad in Greece, including stays at the American School of Classical Studies at Athens. 'The School', as it is known to its members, was a second home for Caroline, and her network there was especially formative to my own career. Nearly thirty years ago, Caroline arranged for me to spend a January term at the School in Athens. On the surface, this trip was purely pragmatic, a research excursion for a senior project, but in hindsight it was really Caroline's own distinct and

considered form of mentoring, a gift that very few people in the United States could offer. This introduction to Athens segued into my first job after Smith, thereby catalysing a lifelong association and community for me, and now even for my own daughter. While I undoubtedly appreciated such support at that time, it has taken decades for me to truly understand the extraordinary nature of Caroline's mentoring.

Some years after I graduated from Smith, Caroline was in Athens for the summer and arranged for me to accompany her to Samothrace, a place with especially deep-seated ties to Smith, and then afterward around northern Greece. One late afternoon, hungry after driving around Thrace, we stopped for lunch at the only place that was open: a canteen beside a gas station. Sitting together beneath a sun umbrella we happily consumed pizza and Coke. I looked across to her and asked, "did we get through the list of sites you needed to visit?" And she replied in her calm but deliberate voice, "No, you don't understand. We came on this trip for you."

Early in their careers, many academics hope to emulate their mentors, navigating their own ways through the field and down the tenure track. It is only later that we begin to measure and calibrate our pedagogical trajectory with those of our teachers. Some of us, like me, also find ourselves teaching our own versions or iterations of ART100. Occasionally – while I'm preparing lectures on Greece, or sometimes even *during* a lecture – a particular image or conversation about a monument will momentarily transport me back to Smith, and more specifically to Caroline's voice. These moments don't come as frequently as I'd like but they are, in a sense, what keeps me going.