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# Interview of Jacqueline Musacchio

**Jacqueline Musacchio** 00:00

Francesca is kind of amazed because suddenly she's incredibly popular. Bostonians always came to visit her, but now everybody's coming to visit her, and they want to see her draw, and they want to buy a drawing, and they want to flower from her garden. And she becomes this, as you were saying, a great tourist attraction, a celebrity. And at the same time, then and [John] Ruskin is quite pleased by all this because it serves as kind of promotional for the publication of Roadside Songs [of Tuscany] which he then publishes in 10 installments and then in a full book the following year.

**Megan Kate Nelson** 00:34

[Intro music fades in] Historians and Their Histories is a podcast by the Massachusetts Historical Society. It introduces listeners to our community of researchers. We learned about the path they took to become a student of the past and the projects they are working on at the MHS. I am Megan Kate Nelson, a historian and writer living in Boston. I am guest hosting special episodes of Historians and Their Histories that discuss books that have been completed by MHS research fellows. Today we are sitting down with Jacqueline Musacchio, a professor of art at Wellesley College and the author of the 2025 book, The Art and Life of Francesca Alexander. Jackie is a recipient of the Andrew Oliver Fellowship from the MHS. Welcome to podcast Jackie!

**Jacqueline Musacchio** 01:22

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

**Megan Kate Nelson** 01:24

Of course. So first off, tell us a little bit about how you became an art historian.

**Jacqueline Musacchio** 01:30

Well, I think it was largely by chance actually. I went to a public school. I hadn't had any art history classes as a high school student. I took the intro to art history class my first year of college, and I loved it. It was one of those very traditional kinds of classes, which many schools don't do anymore, where professors would jump up on the stage and do their specialty over the course of an entire year, and you would learn

way too much about everything, and you would try to retain it, which was impossible, but I loved it, and I found it fascinating, and I just continued to take classes in it. It was a field I didn't even really knew existed before I went to college, and I just sort of went from there.

**Megan Kate Nelson** 02:17
That's so great. I love to hear those stories about, you know, getting fired up in in classrooms because it really shows us how important education is on the secondary level and the and the college level. So, were there any particular artists or paintings or teachers or other individuals who kind of really sparked that joy in you and set you on this path to studying Renaissance painting and Italian art and women artists?

**Jacqueline Musacchio** 02:19
I think I was very fortunate. I was I teach at Wellesley [College] now, but I was a Wellesley undergraduate, and Wellesley was one of the first schools in the United States to teach art history in the 19th century, and with that kind of long tradition, we had amazing people teaching it through the decades. I worked, in particular with a woman named Lillian Armstrong, who died a few years ago. She was the Italian Renaissance specialist on campus. And although I look at what I do now and I look at what she did, she was a specialist in Italian Renaissance manuscript illumination, which is very different from the kind of art history I do, but I just found what she did fascinating, and I found the way she presented it so compelling, and it really grabbed me. And I always wanted to learn more. And I, you know, I'm very grateful to her for opening those kinds of doors to me, but the entire department at that time was amazing, and the people that taught art history were so engaged with it and so determined to engage their students, and I think we still are, but art history was a very popular major back then and our numbers have dropped a bit, as they have in you know, almost every school in the United States at this point for the humanities in general, but for art history too. And we used to fill an entire auditorium with the intro art history class. And a lot of our students graduated a lot of Wellesley students graduated having taken at least that one intro to art history course, if not other courses. So, it's something I hope we can sort of build up again as the years go on. But it's, it's a challenging time for the humanities in general now. So, I'm not quite sure if that can, if that's a feasible hope.

**Megan Kate Nelson** 04:36

What's so interesting about that, though, is that undergraduates these days, I mean, this generation of students is used to having visual images in their lives 24/7. I mean, they are often visual artists in their own right, without really knowing it when they are putting images on Instagram and....

**Jacqueline Musacchio** 04:54

Exactly and we want to teach them what those images are, right? We want them to understand the background for those images that they're seeing all the time. We want them to understand what the history of those images and what they mean. And I think many students are really in tune to that, and very excited when they learn that you know, an image they had captured and reused and modified and did whatever to they figure out what the history of it is. And that can be really exciting to them, but you have to sort of grab them first, and you have to get them interested in learning that. And I think that's where the challenge is.

**Megan Kate Nelson** 05:27

There as you noted, there are a lot of challenges right now in the humanities in general, but also in this particular field. Are there other kinds of challenges that you've been noting kind of along the way in the course of your career, because, because The Art and Life of Francesca Alexander is not your first book. So, you've been doing this a very long time. So, have you seen things you know, really change?

**Jacqueline Musacchio** 05:51

I think art history is really I think it's at a difficult point right now, and a lot of that has to do with funding, with money, trying to find grants in order to work on art historical topics is a challenge, and also trying to publish in art history can be a challenge. Publishers have, over the years, been kind of shifting the costs associated with art history books, which are huge, I have to admit, because of the cost of images, and they've been shifting this cost to authors in recent years. So, in order to publish anything in art history, you need to you need to secure an image. You need to often secure the permission to publish that image, and then the publisher has to find a way to produce a book that actually does justice to that image. And that's a really expensive thing, and it's difficult. There are a few funding sources. Many institutions have been increasingly releasing their objects, images of their objects, to scholarship for very low or no fees. But others have not, and I tend to work on all through my career, I've worked on objects that are usually in museum storerooms rather than out on the walls, so they're not things that maybe already have photographs, so you need to get them photographed. And we all think, oh, we can bring our phone in and take a photo, and in

some cases, you can, if the lighting in the storeroom is okay and you're allowed to do it and so on and so forth. But a publication quality photograph is a challenging thing to do under those circumstances. So, the costs associated with art history have really increased in recent years, and that makes it difficult for, I think, especially early career scholars. But even for those of us who've been around a while like me, in order to actually get something published, it can require an enormous amount of money, and that money has to come from somewhere. So that makes it difficult, I think, for advancing scholarship in my field.

**Megan Kate Nelson** 07:54

Yeah that, I mean, I read your book in PDF, and even in PDF, it was gorgeous, like just the image reproduction quality is so amazing. And you of course, have many, many, many, many images of different kinds of pieces of art. You have paintings and pencil and pen and ink sketches and bookmarks and objects and photographs of their salon, which was so interesting. And the book is out with Lund Humphries and I think they did a great job with the formatting of the book and how beautiful the images are and in this book, you are telling the life story of a really remarkable woman who was a celebrity in her own time, often described as a curiosity, whom visitors to Florence would like actually go and see, like a tourist attraction, like she was listed her at, you know, in guidebooks, so people could go and see her in her studio, which is kind of amazing, but she's largely forgotten today in art history, in women's history. I had never heard of her before I cracked open so how did you discover her, and how did you kind of decide that you are going to write an entire book about her life and her work?

**Jacqueline Musacchio** 09:24

Most people haven't heard of her. I mean, you're not alone. So, my training is in the Italian Renaissance. I did my dissertation on the Italian Renaissance. My early career was spent publishing, researching in the Italian Renaissance, always with an interest in the lives of women and the objects associated with women, and always with a great interest in archival work. So, a lot of the objects that I worked on as a renaissance scholar don't exist anymore, or they exist in little broken bits and things like that. So I kind of shifted from the Renaissance to the late 19th century, still in Italy, but now looking at Americans in Italy in maybe the early 2010s. I used to teach at Vassar College, and I was in the storeroom of the museum doing, I don't even really remember what some kind of research for my classes, and around a corner, and in the dark, there was a painting that I recognized as a copy of a relatively famous work by the Italian Baroque artist Guercino. And I was really drawn to it. And I thought, oh, how fun. We have a copy. And it was signed by this woman, Emma Conant Church. She was a New York artist in the 19th century, and she turned out, when I

investigated it, she was one of the first people that the founders of Vassar College reached out to when they wanted to start an art museum because she was in Rome, and she was known as a good artist who could make copies of famous works of art. And at that time, a museum like Vassar, or really, most museums that were slowly getting founded and starting up in the US, they couldn't afford originals, so they often had copies or plaster casts of famous works of art. And for a teaching museum associated with a college that was really important, you wanted to have sort of the best examples of things, right? And you couldn't afford an actual Guercino, or you couldn't even access one, but you could get a copy of one. And so, I got very interested in the idea of copies and casts, and the way that the Renaissance got sort of transmitted to the United States in the late 19th century. And I kind of worked on it on and off while doing other Renaissance kinds of things. But I realized as I was doing that research, that there were these communities of women who lived in Rome and in Florence in the late 19th century, who knew each other, who in part, transplanted their lives from the United States to Rome or to Florence to Italy. And you know, still had their tea parties, still had their social gatherings, still went out and looked at great things in museums, but were also making art, sometimes copies and sometimes originals, and they fascinated me, and I slowly started to kind of accumulate these names of these different women who were doing this, and these sort of intersecting circles that they made while they were abroad. And Emma Conant Church and her friends were a big part of it. But then, when I came to Wellesley to teach in 2007 I realized we had an amazing catch of information here in our archives as well about another woman artist named Anne Whitney. And so she became my big focus and kind of the framework of what I was envisioning as a bigger book that would look at these communities of women in late 19th century Italy and Francesca Alexander was always in that that group as someone that was mentioned occasionally in secondary sources, and I'd seen a few works by her published here and there, but she was kind of an oddity, not only because of the way you described her earlier, but because she was in Florence, not Rome, and because she lived there almost her entire life. She moved over when she was 16 and remained there and died there. And so, I wanted her to be a kind of chapter in this group of sort of case studies of women's experience I was working on, but she didn't always kind of fit, and I realized I was kind of pushing her in when she really didn't work with the others. Her case was very different. And then the pandemic hit, and none of us could do any research because our institutions were closed, and the kinds of research I do, which depends so much on primary sources that libraries and archives were closed. And so I tried to figure out what I had on my desk that I could actually work on Francesca was sort of it because we had information about her here at Wellesley, and because so many Boston institutions had information about her, and I naively thought, well, I've already written kind of a draft of a chapter when I thought she'd be part of the other book, so I can just expand it, and I'll be fine. I know what the extent of the resources

are, and I was very stupid about that because I didn't and it took much longer time than I thought it would to do it, but it kind of built from there and I was really lucky to be in the Boston area because when institutions started to open up, those were the institutions I needed, and I could literally take the commuter rail to them. Others were further afield, and I got to them eventually, but I was able to do the kind of research I wanted to do on Francesca here, and that wasn't the case for a lot of the other women I work on. So, I was very fortunate, and she just kind of developed into a book from there.

**Megan Kate Nelson** 15:00

I love that. I love that story because so much of the time, and I know a lot of our listeners will understand this. You know, our book projects change over time. You have one idea going in, and you might have one idea going into the MHS with a fellowship, and you're saying, I'm going to look at these sources, and that something happens, a curator or an archivist comes and shows you something else and suddenly you are on a different path, or something just becomes clearer for you. But also, the issue of access and the issue of what we can actually see, either in person or in digitized format that helps us with our research. I mean, that's a very realistic kind of element in all of our kind of research and writing stories. So, what was your favorite kind of event or scene to write about in the book about Francesca's life?

**Jacqueline Musacchio** 16:02

That's a really good question, too. I think, you know, I went into it as I said, thinking, I thinking I knew what she did and who she knew and what happened when she was abroad. But as I continued to do my research, not only for the Francesca book, but eventually also to try to reboot the other book too. I read a lot of things like diaries and letters of other travelers who went to Italy. And as you were saying, she was kind of a tourist attraction. So, I'd be reading along, not expecting to find anything about Francesca, but reading along. And, you know, oh, we went to the catacombs, and we went to the Coliseum at moonlight, and we went to this studio and went here, and we didn't want to eat the food because it was disgusting. And then they'll say, and then we went to tea at the Alexanders, and she showed us all her drawings, and she sang to us. And it's such an evocative kind of passage when you come across something like that, and I think it really opens up the past in such an interesting way because you're right there with them, right? They're going to this person's house, and they welcome them, and they give them tea, and they show their drawings, and they sing to you, and they take you, in Francesca's case, up to her rooftop where her studio was, and you see all the flowers that she grew from seeds that people like Annie Adams Fields sent her from the United States. And you realize these people have built a home for themselves abroad, and that that home became a

kind of stopping place for such a wide range of people. So those kinds of incidents, the things I didn't expect to find all the time, and that would surprise me as I'm reading along in a diary or somebody's letter, those are always such great things, right? That's such a way in to what happens in the past that you you can't always get, and then when you do get it, it's so exciting. Another case which I illustrate toward the end of the book is when the Bowditch family, who were the lawyers for Francesca Alexander and her mother, Lucia, prominent Boston family, they would go to Europe periodically. They'd bring their daughters and their daughter, Cora, I guess she didn't go on the earlier trips, but she went on a later one. And it's the first time she meets the legendary Francesca, right that she had heard so much about from her father and from her sisters. And she makes these fabulous little drawings of one of Francesca with her back turned to us, of course, and then one of Lucia and this, this monk that they knew in Venice, and she just sketches them, you know, as she saw them in her diary and the diary's at MHS. And I remember the day I was paging through it and came across that. And it was such a thrill, because here's this, you know, we have very few photographs of Francesca. She said at one point she didn't like to have her photo taken. But here's this impression by this young woman, I think she was in her teens at that point, if I remember correctly, of what she's seeing, and these people that she met that she was so fascinated by. And it's just this little line sketch, but she captures them so well from the way that I've read about them, and I understand them. You know, Lucia is this sort of imposing, stout woman on the arm of this little friar, and then Francesca, with her back turned to us and her hair in a kerchief, very modest, right? And it fits in with the way that people other travelers describe them. So those kinds of discoveries, I just found such, they were so thrilling to come across, the kind of things you leap up in your desk at MHS right, when you find them, and the other readers look at you like, why are you making noise? But it's such a thrill when it happens.

**Megan Kate Nelson** 19:50

You know, in the book, you are writing about these two cities, about Boston and mostly about Florence, although some about other places in Italy also. These are two of my favorite cities in the world, Boston and Florence. So, what do you think it was about Florence in particular that inspired Francesca's life as an artist and also as I mean, she was also a songwriter and a poet and an author of bilingual manuscripts. She put together these amazing books that included all of these different elements and sold them through interestingly, John Ruskin, who we will talk about again, I think, but what was it about Florence that was so inspiring to her?

**Jacqueline Musacchio** 20:37

I think for Francesca, she moves there with her mother and father. She's an only child. When she's 16, her parents had actually met there in the early 1830s when her father, who was an artist, was on a kind of Grand Tour, seeing art and sketching and picking up commissions. And they met in Florence, and when he met Lucia, when Francis met Lucia, there, she was traveling with at least her father, I haven't figured out who else. And her father hired Francis to make her portrait, which is a lost portrait, as far as I know. So, the parents met there, and then a few years later, when they both back in the States, they were married, and he had a Francis, had a very successful career as a portraitist, and they knew everyone in the sort of intellectual, cultural artistic circles in Boston in that time. They were friends with the Longfellow's. He painted Dickens when he came through Boston. They knew all of the prominent cultural figures in Boston at that period. And so, they were set up pretty well. You know, they had a really good life in Boston. But I think that they, I think her parents always wanted to go back to Italy, and particularly to Florence, where they met in a kind of romantic way, right? And it was also, it's also important to remember that Italy at this time, you could enjoy a higher quality of life for less money there than you could in a city like Boston. So a lot of people actually moved abroad for short and long periods of time, and all of the sort of contemporary guidebooks talk about how you can live there for much less so it was a probably intended for, I think, for a long term, not for their whole lives, but for long enough that they packed up most of their belongings and brought them to Florence with them. And it's no it was no easy thing to move abroad in that time period, either it could take, you know, in 1853 when the family moved the first time that that ship would probably take about three weeks or so to get across the ocean. And then you have to move, you know, from England or from France down into Italy. So, it was a major undertaking, I think, that they intended to spend several years there, but I think that Francesca just loved it immediately. And all of the documentation I can find talks about how she just immediately took to it and loved everything about it, and would go out and sketch and would meet people and would engage in charitable work, and apparently she was the reason that they decided to stay because later on, in 1868 '68, '69 they do go back to the United States for a little bit over a year, and they investigate buying a house in the Boston area. And they kind of waffled on which houses they wanted. They made a few offers. They didn't get what they wanted, and they thought, okay, we'll go back to Florence for a year, wrap things up, and then move back to Boston. But Francesca really wanted to stay, and so they ended up just staying for literally the rest of their lives. They never went back to the US, and all three of them died in Florence. And I think it just became, it became such an important place to her, where her friends were, where she could engage in charity, where she could enjoy the art and enjoy the life there that she had there. And they would spend the summers, when it was warmer, they'd go up into the Apennine, or

they'd go to Venice or Switzerland, and you know, we think of that now, and it was a pretty good life that they had there. And they always knew that friends from Boston would come through because Florence was a tourist destination. And they knew that they weren't isolated there, because they had their Italian friends, but they also knew they would always see people they knew from the Boston area too.

**Megan Kate Nelson** 24:53
Yeah, I mean, it seems like a pretty dreamy life, actually. Of course, they were, they were a family of means.

**Jacqueline Musacchio** 25:00
Yeah they definitely were.

**Megan Kate Nelson** 25:01
And so, they could afford to do that. Yeah, and she, you know, she was the child of an artist, and do you think that, I mean, there are probably multiple reasons why she was drawn to portraiture, but, you know, given that that was one of her father's modes as well, but she in particular, developed this real skill in producing these portraits of these young women who lived around her, who became her friends, and they sat for her. Why do you think she was so drawn to these young women and to portraiture as a specific kind of artistic practice?

**Jacqueline Musacchio** 25:40
Well, her father was a portraitist. That's what he was best known for. His work looks very different from hers, but certainly that would have been a huge influence on her, I think from the very beginning. I think that, in a way, my sense of what she did early on and what she continued to do throughout her time abroad, was that she just enjoyed drawing people. She enjoyed capturing portraits. She enjoyed the whole process of sort of putting someone on paper, right? We have these amazing they're amazing scrapbooks that survive, that tell kind of this story through ephemera of Francesca's life, both in the US and abroad. We've got one of them at Wellesley through a complicated series of connections from the early 20th century, and is full of these sketches, some of them named, of Italians, of visiting Americans, of British some drawings were on the market relatively recently of a Argentinian couple that she met, I think, on the boat when they went over in 1853. I think it was kind of a, almost a game for her to capture these portraits, right? Many of them are quite quick sketches. Others are much more detailed, especially as she got older and more experienced, more talented, she developed this amazing technique that resembled prints actually, resembles kind of

engravings or etchings, these incredibly fine lines with cross hatching and stippling. You look at them and you do, you do sort of pause to think that these are pen and ink, or in some cases, pencil, because they have such a fine network of lines on them, think it also is probably one of the reasons why she went blind later in her life. Her technique was so precise, working in dim, candlelit surroundings, and I think that the strain that that put on on her site was probably a huge problem for her as well, but I think that she just enjoyed capturing people and the many, many sketches that have survived or that we know about, I'm sure there are many more I don't know about, seem to indicate that it was just something she liked to do.

**Megan Kate Nelson** 27:56

The whole fact that her eyesight deteriorates later in her life is such a cruel it's such a cruel thing. I mean, we understand why, given you know that she is bent over these portraits and really kind of using her eyes in a very intense way through her life. But you know, I think it's every artist's nightmare that that would be something that would happen to you later. So, we talked before about these networks of women in Italy and in Boston, but she also, I mean, all the Alexanders, but Francesca in particular, really had a transatlantic network as well with Boston writers and poets. You mentioned Longfellow, also John Greenleaf Whittier. She connection to the to Isabella Stewart Gardner and their whole family of artists and collectors and sort of Boston Brahmins, who are doing a lot of travel. And then also, you know, some Europeans. Can you talk a little bit about her relationship with John Ruskin and how that came about, and how it affected her career?

**Jacqueline Musacchio** 29:07

If people know anything about Francesca Alexander, it's usually that they connect her to John Ruskin, and I think he'd be very pleased that that's the case now. But what I think I try to do in the book is kind of peel apart the Ruskin and Francesca connection a bit. Francis, her father dies in 1880 and Lucia and Francesca are clearly, you know, left wondering what to do, and they debated moving back to the US at that point too. But then in 1882 another artist, another American artist, who was in Florence at the time, Henry Roderick Newman, introduces them to John Ruskin, who is at that point on his last trip to Florence. He's already very well established, very well known on both sides of the Atlantic and Newman introduces Ruskin to the Alexanders, and Ruskin is immediately charmed. He's fascinated by the work that Francesca is producing, but he's also clearly fascinated by the Alexanders as well, and they're fascinated by him. They only meet a couple of times, I think maybe two or three times during this trip. I can't remember that exact number, but very briefly, he's in Florence and he's in Luca. He comes back to Florence and then he goes back to the UK. But that begins a correspondence that lasts until he's no longer able to correspond. The last decade of his

life. He dies in 1900. He's he's not really able to continue that correspondence, but she still writes to him. Both of them still write to him, and they write to his relatives who are taking care of him. So, they had a very, very close but strange relationship at a distance. They only see each other once more several years later, when he's in northern Italy, and that's only briefly for a couple of days, but Ruskin, who is so taken by Francesca and Lucia, also when he's there, buys one of Francesca's manuscripts from her. The manuscript that turns out to be what we now know as Roadside Songs of Tuscany because Ruskin essentially publishes it. And he also takes with him, he doesn't purchase, but he takes with him another manuscript that's about a young woman named Ida, who was a friend of Francesca's in Florence, who died quite tragically and quite young. And first he, when he gets back to the UK, he first, sort of edits, I think with a very heavy hand, the biography of Ida, and he publishes it to enormous acclaim. I think it's hard for us to understand the I think it's hard for us to understand the kind of popularity this book generated. Everyone was reading it. Became not only because Ruskin published it, and I should add, he publishes it under the name of Francesca, only her first name, and on the title page, it then says, edited by John Ruskin. So, he's kind of claiming part of it, right? And he later denies doing much to it, but he clearly did do quite a bit to it. But everyone is reading it, and they're fascinated by this story of a Catholic and a Protestant who get along and help each other and exhibit all of the qualities of perfect womanhood of this time period. And Francesca is kind of amazed because suddenly she's incredibly popular. Bostonians always came to visit her, but now everybody's coming to visit her, and they want to see her draw, and they want to buy a drawing, and they want a flower from her garden. And she becomes this, as you were saying, a great tourist attraction, a celebrity. And at the same time, then, and Ruskin is quite pleased by all this because it serves as kind of promotional for the publication of Roadside Songs, which he then publishes in 10 installments and then in a full book the following year. But in Roadside Songs, he makes even more dramatic interventions, I guess you would call it. Her manuscript was 200 pages of bilingual songs, Italian folk songs that she accumulated from the oral tradition, from her friends who are singing them. She translates them, she writes, puts them to music, and she illustrates them in 200 illustrated folios with song lyrics, with figural illustrations, with florals. He buys the whole thing, and when he publishes it, instead of the 200 actually 208 instead of that many, he only does 20 illustrations, and he inserts dozens of pages of text, mostly of his own writing, some of them cribbed from her letters that she sends him. So, he essentially becomes co-author, if not even more so, of Roadside Songs of Tuscany. And that sends her popularity, you know, soaring even further. And at that point, everyone is reading Francesca Alexander. And he then publishes another one of her books without illustrations, next, and eventually her mother, they never complained to Ruskin about what he did to her manuscripts, but her mother was very upset by the fact that it wasn't published in Francesca's original

format. So later in the 19th century, she arranged, arranges with a Boston publisher to publish the entire thing, which necessitated finding all the folios and getting them back from Ruskin's friends, and getting them photographed and so on and so forth. But Ruskin, I think of it as Ruskin amplifying what Francesca did. But he doesn't do anything to her. He doesn't change what she did. She was doing this all along. He sends her these letters that, frankly, super annoying to read, where he's saying you should do this and you should do that, and you should be more careful with your figures. And I want you to draw me a landscape, and I want you to want you to change your format and do this and do that. And she, I think she tries. She she'll send him drawings and he'll comment on them, but her work doesn't really change from before 1882 to after. It's just he had the megaphone that enabled this enormous leap in her popularity that went beyond the Boston Brahmin kind of set that she was already immensely popular with, and you know, to the point where Queen Victoria got a copy of Roadside Songs, right? It becomes this way to amplify what Francesca did, but I think that he had very little artistic influence on what she did. And I think that for Francesca, she never engaged with Ruskin's theories, with Ruskin's ideas. I doubt she ever read any of his texts. He was her friend, and he helped publish her books, and the books then she never got profits from Roadside Songs. He kept those profits, but she got profits from the other books, and she used them for her charity. So she was pretty pleased that money was coming in so she could enable her charitable work.

**Megan Kate Nelson** 36:19
So given all of this, this fame and I love this phrase. Someone kind of remarked a little bit derisively that she had been Ruskin into fame. And like, Ruskin is a verb. But why do you think she is now been forgotten?

**Jacqueline Musacchio** 36:38
Well, I think you know she's, she's publishing these books in the 1880s and then 1900 is her last book. The world changes a lot at that point, right? She dies. Her mother dies in 1916 at age 102 and then Francesca dies in 1917 at 79 and they even say, she even says, a few years before she dies, that they've outlived their world. You know, that world of, I always kind of think of it as sort of the the E. M. [Edward Morgan] Forster kind of world right the room with a view, kind of thing. That world of these lovely little ladies living in Florence and going about their business. Now in the early 20th century, you have Modernism, you have all kinds of things happening, and you have World War One coming up, right? This is not the world that Francesca and her mother were part of. A contemporary kind of mockingly said that they refused to even use they refused to ride in motor cars or use electrical light. I don't think he wasn't contemporary enough that he actually knew them. He was a child when they died, but he would have heard of this from his from

his family. You know, I think that it wasn't the world that they didn't keep up with the way the world was moving, and I think that's part of the reason why they kind of disappeared. She led despite that celebrity that she had for those few decades, they led a pretty sheltered life. People came to them, but they didn't go out into the world. She didn't really participate in the art market like we think of the art market in the late 19th and early 20th century. She sent a few works to exhibitions. She was rejected from one major exhibition, and it kind of crushed her in the 1860s and she vowed not to do that again. For her, it was important to sell her work in order to have money to do her charity. But it she didn't have her ego in it, right? She wasn't looking to make a mark on the art world. This was sort of a side thing for her. It was a way that helped her do what she wanted to do. But beyond that, I don't think she really minded that she wasn't as well known. And by the time that she and her mother died, even Florence had changed dramatically, right? Even sort of the Anglo-American experience in Florence had shifted. And the council at that time when, when they died in the in the report that they wrote up like, well, you know, they've been living here so long they were mostly Italian, so we don't really know them that well. That's very different from when they first moved there. And you would have tea with the American Council, and you would do, you know, social events, and everyone would come to these different houses. They were sort of fading into the background those last few years of their life, in part because Francesca not only was going blind, but she also had had a fall, and she couldn't really move about, except for in a little sort of wheelchair that they made for her in her house. Their apartment was up five flights, so for a few years, I don't think she ever even left the apartment to go down into the street the last few years of her life. She couldn't but she had a rooftop, and she would go there, and people would come to her.

**Megan Kate Nelson** 40:09
So, you already mentioned the Bowditch papers. Are there other sources that you used at MHS that became really important?

**Jacqueline Musacchio** 40:16
As I was saying before, some things were important. I didn't realize they would be until I was reading through them and came across, you know, this side mention in a diary that that afternoon, they went and saw what Francesca Alexander was drawing. So, there were those kind of serendipitous discoveries like that, and there were others too, that really pulled together some of the questions I had about Francesca and her life abroad and what she made. There's a lithograph at MHS that was listed originally as by her father. So, I called it up because I was curious. I didn't realize he had done any lithographs, and it turned out to be by

Francesca. So, it's been sort of re-cataloged now as a work by her. It's a I'm not sure who it is, but it's a portrait of one of her Italian friends. So that gave me a sense of how things and it had arrived in MHS in the late 19th century, how things got to MHS, and what the circle of people who were supporting MHS, right in the 19th and early 20th century, what kind of things that they had and that they donated as well. One thing we tried to find and doesn't exist anymore, or at least not at MHS, apparently, Lucia, her mother, had donated when she was kind of cleaning house. I guess she had donated to either embroideries or samplers. I can't remember what to MHS, but they're no longer in the collection. I think it's probably one of those, you know, strange things that came in the late 19th century, and gets shifted from collection to collection, right? So, things like that were always really fun to try to track down. There's one diary, what was it? Oh, Edith Roch. Edith Roch diary from 1877 where she talks about visiting the Alexanders, and I'm reading it, and she's saying something like, you know, and they had beautiful anemones, and then the Alexanders gave them a bouquet of anemones. And then I'm turning the pages in this and there's pressed anemones on the page, and it doesn't say these are the ones that the Alexanders gave her, but it's like the same week, right? So, I just felt like it was this, you know, here was here were the flowers that they had gotten from the Alexanders that had grown in her sky parlor, right? So little things like that were really exciting to come across, and because so many of the collections at MHS are people who traveled abroad, people who knew the Alexanders before they went abroad. There were endless numbers of little references that might not mean that much if you just had one. As I was able to build them up, they really helped to tell a story, not only about the Alexanders, but about the Bostonians who knew them too.

**Megan Kate Nelson** 43:00

That's amazing. I love that. What advice do you have for historians for planning a trip to a research library, using their time there, you know, as productively and efficiently as possible?

**Jacqueline Musacchio** 43:18

Well, I'm probably the wrong person to ask about efficiency because I can just sit in an archive for hours on end and come away from it with one footnote sorted out but enjoy every minute of it. So, I think time is so valuable and trying to find the time to do that kind of thing, or allowing yourself the time is such a challenge. You know, I think, in a way, because I was working on this in the sort of depths of the pandemic, you know, I was, I felt very lucky that I got this fellowship at a time when I couldn't take it, of course. But then as soon as MHS reopened, because I was local, they invited me to come that first few weeks, and it was so amazing to just be sitting in a library again, right? And to be sitting with manuscripts again, things that I

couldn't have accessed otherwise. So, allowing yourself the time to do it is so important. And at that point, I had nothing but time, right? I couldn't go anywhere else, and it gave me, it gave me the space to really sort out what I wanted to do with this project. And that's a, you know, that was amazing, but that's a hard thing to have because you're teaching or you're working or you're you have a limited sabbatical. The timing worked out really well for me, but I'm also the kind of person who loves to sit in an archive for hours on end, so I probably would have tried to find a way to do it anyway. It's just this book would have taken even longer to finish if that was the case. But I I've always, you know, my Renaissance work too involved the archival work. Like this is always something I love to do, and I think most people who do it feel the same way. You kind of have to, otherwise it would be just too frustrating.

**Megan Kate Nelson** 45:10
That's true and it is one of those experiences that drives us as as scholars and as writers. You want to be in those archives. You want to be sitting there and looking at the images in original or manuscripts. And, you know, just have that kind of in real life, the IRL experience in the archive because digitization is great and it democratizes access, but, but there really, kind of no, no, really, you know, a satisfying replacement.

**Jacqueline Musacchio** 45:46
And often what you need isn't digitized. So, you're left at the you don't know what you're missing, if you just count on digitized things because it's expensive to digitize, so institutions can't digitize everything.

**Megan Kate Nelson** 46:00
That's right. So, you may miss out on some of those serendipitous moments, and yeah, those moments when curators and archivists kind of come up with something new to show you, or have some good advice. Well, thank you so much for being with us today on Historians and Their Histories, Jackie.

**Jacqueline Musacchio** 46:18
Well, thank you. I really appreciate the chance.

**Megan Kate Nelson** 46:22
It's been wonderful and for everyone out there listening, can you tell them where they can get a hold of The Art and Life of Francesca Alexander?

**Jacqueline Musacchio** 46:30

It was published by Lund Humphries. I think the official publication date is about a month from now, but I know it's in Boston bookshops at the moment and available on various online retailers as well.

**Megan Kate Nelson** 46:43

[Intro music fades in] Wonderful. Thank you so much.

**Jacqueline Musacchio** 46:46

Thank you.

**Megan Kate Nelson** 46:46

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