Lauren Lessing is an art historian and educator with over twenty-five years of experience working in museums, including the Art Institute of Chicago and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City. In her current position as the Mirken Director of Academic and Public Programs at the Colby College Museum of Art, she manages her department’s $250,000 annual budget and oversees a staff of four professionals who direct community outreach and programming, and link the Museum’s collections and exhibitions to curriculum at the college. Working hand-in-hand with local organizations, faculty, the Museum’s curatorial department, and its Board of Governors, she and her staff have co-created public programs that serve diverse audiences from the college, the surrounding Maine communities, and beyond. After being hired as the Colby Museum’s first Curator of Education in 2007, Lessing built the Museum’s academic outreach, volunteer docent, and school visit programs from the ground up while also creating a slate of new public programs that include a summer arts integration camp for elementary school children, a series of musical performances in the galleries, a program of noontime art talks by Colby faculty, and a literacy program for preschoolers, to name just a few. With her staff, she has also established a host of pre-professional opportunities for Colby students, including a student docent program, a student advisory board, and an array of internships. Working hand-in-hand with Director Sharon Corwin, Lessing wrote the grants and secured the endowments that built her department under her.

In addition to her work in museum education, Lessing is a prolific scholar who has curated exhibitions, written and edited publications, and taught a broad array of both introductory and upper-level art history and museum studies courses. Her deep understanding of research, teaching, and the curatorial process has informed her work as a museum administrator, allowing her to foster meaningful collaboration between various museum departments and between the museum and faculty and students of the college. Although she completed her Ph.D. in Art History, Lessing began her professional career as an art reference librarian. This experience left her with an abiding love of books of all kinds (including artists’ books) and a deep belief in the life-altering power of printed words and images.

Like libraries, Museums have the capacity to educate, enrich, and empower people. At this pivotal moment, when audiences for cultural institutions across the nation are rapidly changing, it is crucial that art museums engage new visitors by expanding both their reach and their relevance. Unlike larger, urban museums, college and university art museums have the capacity
to be nimble and experimental. For this reason, they are well positioned to lead the field with new and innovative practices that attract younger and more diverse audiences.

Lessing has played a key role in shaping the Colby Museum’s ambitious mission to transform lives through art by enlarging and diversifying its audience. She co-wrote and helped to successfully implement a five-year strategic plan that led to the building of a new wing with dedicated spaces for teaching and art making, the expansion of the Museum staff, and a new focus on academic engagement across the liberal arts curriculum. In 2016, she led a working group on diverse, equitable and inclusive museum programming, expanding access for all of museum visitors while ensuring sustainable resources and infrastructure. Recently, Lessing has been a key player in shaping the vision and securing funding for the Colby Museum’s new Lunder Center for American Art, which is bringing visiting artists and scholars from around the world to collaborate with Colby faculty and students on creative, cross-curricular projects related to the Museum’s collections.

Lessing believes that the best managers inspire their staff by working with them to shape a shared vision, empower them to be creative collaborators, provide them with the support and resources they need to achieve their goals, and offer them iterative feedback to help them grow. Ideally, art museums cultivate creativity, open dialogue, critical thinking, and curiosity in their audiences. These qualities should also characterize the museum as a workplace.

Lessing was born in the Louisville, Kentucky and grew up in Southern Indiana. Her parents, a painter and a sculptor, were both students of the founding director of the University of Iowa Stanley Museum of Art, Ulfert Wilke. When she wasn’t drawing, daydreaming or rolling down hills in tractor tires, Lessing spent much of her childhood in museums and galleries. She has happily made Maine her home for the past eleven years and is proud to have been elected in a landslide to the Waterville City Council, but she remains a Midwesterner through and through.
PROFESSIONAL POSITIONS

Mirken Director of Academic and Public Programs, Colby College Museum of Art, January 2015- present

Mirken Curator of Education, Colby College Museum of Art, June 2007- December 2014


Lecturer, Department of Art History, University of Missouri, Kansas City, January-December 2006

Reference Librarian/ Senior Reference Librarian, Ryerson and Burnham Libraries of the Art Institute of Chicago, July 1997-August 2002

Visiting Assistant Professor of Art History, Earlham College, August 1996-June 1997

EDUCATION

Ph.D., History of Art, Indiana University, Bloomington, 2006


MA, History of Art, Indiana University, Bloomington, 1995

MLS, Library Science, Indiana University, Bloomington, 1994

BA, Fine Art, Earlham College, 1991 (with honors)

EXHIBITIONS


Weathervanes and Trade Signs from a Distinguished New England Collection, Colby College Museum of Art, July-December, 2016.

A Gift of Art: The Lunder Collection, Colby College Museum of Art, July 2013-June 2014 (with Sharon Corwin, Hannah Blunt, and Elizabeth Finch)


The Search for Beauty: Whistler and his Time, Colby College Museum of Art, May 2010-January 2011.
Art at Colby: Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Colby College Museum of Art, July 2009-January 2010
(with Sharon Corwin and Elizabeth Finch)

Beautiful Soup: Lewis Carroll in the Collections of the Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, Art Institute of Chicago, July-August 1999

SELECTED BOOKS


Art at Colby: Celebrating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Colby College Museum of Art (The Colby College Museum of Art, 2009). With Sharon Corwin and Elizabeth Finch.


SELECTED ESSAYS


SELECTED ARTICLES


“‘Not Unworthy of his Hand’: Crossing Borders in Benjamin West’s A Drayman Drinking,” Tran(s)udies 2 (Summer 2012). With Terri Sabatos.


JURIED PRESENTATIONS


“Flat-Breasted Maidens: Winslow Homer’s Depictions of Natural Girlhood in the 1870s,” Association of Historians of American Art Biennial Symposium, Philadelphia, October 2014


“Engaging Undergraduates with Art Conservation,” American Institute for Conservation, Albuquerque, New Mexico, May 2012 (with Nina Roth-Wells)


“Being and Seeing: Tableaux Vivants and Gendered Responses to Nineteenth-Century American Ideal Sculpture,” Conference of Women's and Gender Historians of the Midwest, Maryville University, St. Louis, MO, June 3, 2006

“Sentimental Christianity on a Southern Plantation: Adelicia Acklen’s Collection of Ideal Sculpture in Belmont Mansion,” Southeast College Arts Conference, University of North Florida, Jacksonville, FL, October 15, 2004

“Looking and Longing: Re-viewing Randolph Rogers’ Merope, the Lost Pleiad in a Domestic Context,” 11th Annual Art History Graduate Student Association Symposium, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, November 9, 2002


“A Spirit So American: Consumption and Rebellion in Eastman Johnson’s Painting The Reprimand,” Interdisciplinary Children’s History Conference, Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA, February 21, 2002
"We Tremble for their Future Health and Morals: Adolescence and the Culture of Display in Seymour Joseph Guy's Painting, Making a Train," Society for the History of Childhood and Youth Conference, Marquette University, July 2001

OTHER CONFERENCE ACTIVITY

Moderator, panel session, “Divining Objects,” in the symposium Somehow a Past: New England Regionalism, 1900 to 1960, Colby College, October 6, 2017

Chair, panel session, “Beyond Whistler’s Art Worlds,” in the symposium Palaces of Art: Whistler and the Art Worlds of Aestheticism, Freer Gallery of Art, October 28, 2011

Co-organizer, symposium, American School: American Art and Pedagogy (a symposium supported by the Henry Luce Foundation), Colby College Museum of Art, October 9-10, 2009 (with Sharon Corwin)

Co-chair, panel sessions, “Representations of Death in Nineteenth-Century Art” and “The Culture of Death and Mourning in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” WAPCC Organization, Constructions of Death, Mourning and Memory Conference, Woodcliff Lake, New Jersey, October 27-29, 2006 (With Terri Sabatos)


RECENT SERVICE

Executive Editor, Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art, June 2017-present

City Councilor, Waterville, Maine, January 2017-present


Curatorial Advisory Panel, Gund Gallery, Kenyon College, 2015-present

Arts Education Committee, Maine Arts Commission, February 2014-present