

COLIN B. BAILEY'S COURSE OF STUDY as a young undergraduate at Oxford University didn't seem designed for a future art curator and museum director.

"The university didn't offer an art history degree," he tells us in a recent interview. "I studied British and European history. But in my final year as an undergraduate, I was exposed to a very brilliant professor who gave one course on French art of the 19th century. I thought it was fascinating, and I decided I wanted to do a Ph.D. in that subject."

Now Bailey is marking 10 years as Director of the Morgan Library & Museum in New York City after positions that included a fellowship at the J. Paul Getty Museum, curator at the Frick Collection and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, deputy director of the National Gallery of Canada and director of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. He is also the author of several books and exhibition

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catalogs including *Patriotic Taste: Collecting Modern Art in Pre-Revolutionary Paris*, and co-author of a 2025 book on Renoir's drawings. His articles appear in *The New York Review of Books* and other outlets.

Founded to house the collection of famed industrialist John Pierpont Morgan, adjacent to his Madison Avenue home, the Morgan is famous for rare books, medieval and Renaissance illuminated manuscripts, and old master drawings. Today it is also known for its early printed books, literary, historical and musical manuscripts, modern and contemporary artworks on paper, and photography. A public institution since 1924, it has long been a cultural touchstone among researchers.

"When I first encountered the Morgan, I thought it was a rather forbidding institution—dignified, scholarly, but perhaps a little intimidating," Bailey says. That impression changed in 2006 with a major addition and redesign by architect Renzo Piano, more

Museum Director and author **COLIN B. BAILEY** talks to us about Renoir, New York City and strategy as he leads the historic Morgan Library & Museum into its second century.





than doubling its gallery space. Suddenly the Morgan was attracting a broad cross-section of the public.

In 2015, Bailey was recruited to be the Director.

"It was very different from what I had remembered," he recalls. "The collections were still impeccable and the curatorial ambition still very high. But the place was becoming more and more open. And that was a direction that the board was obviously keen to continue."

Bailey built international collaborations, a broader fundraising mandate and ambitious programs that balanced the appeal between academics and the general public.

As Director of the Morgan, Bailey is conscious of standing on the shoulders of previous directors—one in particular. Belle da Costa Greene first managed the collection for J. Pierpont Morgan in a private capacity until his death in 1913. A Black woman who spent her life passing as white and moving in the highest circles of academia and society, she then worked with Morgan's son, Jack Morgan, to open the library's doors to the public. She retired as Director in 1948 and her expertise and spirit are still felt throughout the collection. Her vision for the library "became the seed of the Morgan as a public-facing institution," Bailey says.

The Morgan marked its centennial in 2024 in grand style, with an exhibition about the life and career of Greene. Currently the museum is featuring an exhibition on Jane Austen's writing, *A Lively Mind: Jane Austen at 250*. And this fall will see the opening of a major Renoir exhibition in cooperation with Paris's Musée d'Orsay.

We spoke with Bailey in his office at the Morgan, surrounded by the books, artifacts, artwork and architecture that have made the institution an enduring part of New York culture.

"There's a lot of passion for the arts in this city," Bailey says. "When you have a Jane Austen evening, as we had a couple of nights ago, it was sold out—people making silhouettes, and doing country dancing. There's no fear of culture in these audiences."

What were your goals when you started at the Morgan?

Looking back now, I can see that initially, there was a certain reticence about committing to more things that you would then have to find funding for. I'd worked in both big and small institutions where there was no real sense that you couldn't do something you wanted to do—the funding would be there. I realized I could perhaps inject some of that confidence, because the economic climate was quite

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propitious to be ambitious. I also felt that we could advance the programming a bit, that we could do exciting exhibitions quite quickly, in some cases in two to three years.

We found ways to do that. The programming became more ambitious. Our partnerships were more international. And we could embark upon projects of older material that was perhaps slightly less in fashion.

The opening of the Piano addition broadened its appeal to the public. Did that change of identity strain the institution at all?

No. The public came to expect—and support—a slightly different menu. Certain types of programs were absolutely expected of the Morgan—literary, medieval, old masters. But perhaps modern material was less familiar, as was the idea that the Morgan might be a venue for an exhibition that's coming from London or Paris. So I would say that it was one effort to match funding with the ambitions among the curatorial team. Sometimes it meant even raising those ambitions.

How did you prepare for the 2024 centennial?

I'm very proud of all that we did to restore and enhance the exterior of the original Morgan library, which was designed by Charles McKim of the famed architecture firm McKim, Mead & White. That was before the centennial—before COVID, in fact. The restoration was completed in 2022. We replaced the roofing, restored the entire façade, including the bronze doors, and added a garden. While that was under way, we started planning our centennial, which would occur in 2024.

We were thinking in three areas. One was the opportunity to add to the collections in all departments, works that would either be given as outright gifts, made as purchases with funding available for the centenary, and, very powerful here, the category of a promised gift, where a donor identifies a work to be given to the museum upon their death. The collector continues to live with the work, but it is promised to the museum. And there is a taxable benefit to their estate.

That was a potent way for us to approach different supporters, board members, even foundations to say, "Could you celebrate with us?" In recognition of this effort, we mounted a show of about 80 works, from extraordinary medieval objects to works by Cy Twombly, Yayoi Kusama, and Helen Frankenthaler. This exhibition was on view in the Engelhard Gallery through August 17. The initiative helped us, in



The restoration of the exterior of the 100-year-old Morgan Library & Museum, in New York City's Midtown, was completed in 2022. Above, Director Colin B. Bailey and left, the institution's first Director, Belle da Costa Greene.

our centennial year, to highlight the collections as a chief priority.

For the second area, we established a campaign to raise \$50,000,000 to build the endowment to support core activities and to create a spendable fund that can be used for infrastructure, digitization, and building maintenance. This is ongoing. We haven't quite reached \$50,000,000 yet, but we're closing in. And I'm fully confident that we will succeed.

And third, from a marketing and communications standpoint, we used the centenary to introduce people or reintroduce them to the Morgan. We had a wonderful video program of interviews with writers, artists, and performers. We launched a community day and extended our evening hours. And then we planned the Belle da Costa Greene exhibition to be the culminating celebratory program.

So, altogether it was an ambitious and strategic campaign, emerging in the aftermath of COVID and giving us a year to celebrate.

And the Greene exhibition was very popular!

It was the most popular exhibition for which we have recorded attendance. It was installed in two galleries, and started in October of 2024 and ended in May of 2025—a much longer run than we would normally have for a single exhibition. I was thrilled. I wondered if it might tail off a bit after three months. But it didn't. It just grew.

There was a celebrated novel, *The Personal Librarian*, that was published during COVID, based on Belle da Costa Greene's life. That spread the story very wide. With the public's interest and curiosity already whetted, our exhibition was a significant research project with advisory teams, extensive programming, symposia and, above all, many critical loans.

For the exhibition *Belle da Costa Greene: A Librarian's Legacy*, we had brought together a committee of specialists, because the project was treading two paths: Greene's librarianship, museum work and medieval expertise on the one hand; but also, her story of racial identity, of passing and of her own family. However distinguished and accepted Greene was in her role, she lived always under the threat of discovery.

An important part was her letters. During COVID we wanted to keep our staff engaged as much as possible. We had no bookshop, no food service, no visitor services. But we did not want to let these people go. So we had everyone working on the transcriptions of Greene's letters that we had paid to digitize.

Greene was a very private person, for the reasons you can understand, and she burned all of her letters and private records. But she wrote hundreds of letters to Bernard Berenson, a great specialist of the Italian Renaissance, who was initially her lover and then a lifelong colleague and friend. Berenson was a scholar-connoisseur who also advised many of the great collectors in America between 1900 and 1930. Berenson kept everything, including Greene's letters, and they all ended up in Harvard's Villa I Tatti in Florence. But the letters she received from him, she burned. So we have only one side of that conversation, but these are extraordinarily candid and revealing letters.

So fast forward to this fall. You have a major Renoir exhibit coming up. I understand it's the first exhibition you're personally curating here?

As a Director, you can't normally devote three or four years of your time to the research, travel and persuasion that these international projects require. However, I'm also a specialist of French 18th-century art and of Impressionism. As a curator in my previous positions, I've done several exhibitions devoted to Renoir. And I realized that one exhibition that had never been done in America—or anywhere else since 1921—was an exhibition devoted to Renoir's drawings and works on paper.

Such a project was not really on my bucket list until 2017, when we were invited to request a gift from the estate of Drue Heinz, a long-standing Morgan trustee. Mrs. Heinz left many generous endowments to us when she died. Her estate also wanted us to choose one work of art for the Morgan's collection. I had been to her house once and noticed an amazingly large drawing of nudes by Renoir in her hallway, a study for one of his famous paintings, *The Great Bathers*. I'd never seen this drawing in any

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exhibition, and it had never been published. So I asked her attorneys, and they said yes. The Morgan had at that point a beautiful watercolor by Renoir and another drawing that we'd bought recently.

From there we began to amass a small corpus of Renoir works on paper. That enabled us to go to our colleagues in Paris, at the Musée d'Orsay, and say, “Would you consider a collaboration?” That was in 2018. So it's taken seven years.

With Orsay, and the Met, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, and the Art Institute of Chicago all supportive, we've been able to assemble a really wonderful survey of drawings, pastels, watercolors, some paintings and even a sculpture with related drawings. There are around 110 works by Renoir in the exhibition which will be installed in the same two galleries where the Greene exhibit was shown. And the exhibition will go on to the Musée d'Orsay in Paris for the second part of its run.

Renoir has really not been thought of as someone who works on paper very much—unlike Degas, unlike Cézanne. So this was a chance to exhibit some very fine objects that you might see illustrated in books, but not in person, and not hanging together on our walls. It's really thrilling. I've used any opportunity for business travel to advance this exhibition. At times I was a bit like a carpet salesman: I'd have my Renoir folder with me, with the potential loans, to lay out the story. And I had a lot of help, particularly with research and admin. The Morgan has supported this project 100%.

As a writer, do you feel a danger in speaking to a non-professional audience?

I fully believe that you can write interestingly for the general public. You don't have to avoid tackling certain topics. One of the things I admire at the Morgan—and people have commented upon this—is that when you read our labels for any exhibition, they're interesting. They're not condescending, but nor are they written for the 15 other people who will worry about the dating of a particular Renoir drawing, or how poorly it might have been treated in previous scholarly discussions.

In my writing—J. Pierpont Morgan's *Library: Building the Bookman's Paradise* (2022), for instance, which we published to commemorate the exterior restoration of the historic library—I don't see that there's much difference in the way I write than compared to an article I might do for the *New York Review of Books*, or a review in a scholarly journal. I'm writing in the same way—one that can be appreciated by a general readership.



What challenges are you faced with from the changing political climate?

Museum planning is always four or five years ahead. That lends a certain mitigation of risk to ongoing projects.

Similarly, our program for the next two or three years represents that diverse range of programs that we've been committed to for some time.

We've never been busier. We have Renoir coming up. Then we have an exhibit about Mozart. Then we have Caravaggio. Then we have a show on Tarot cards. We have a long run of really good projects coming up in the near future.

We are lucky to be in New York City, where there are a number of outstanding cultural institutions that share many of the same concerns. If there's economic turbulence or social turbulence, of course it affects us, but in general, it's a very resilient city.

This little known preliminary drawing for Renoir's painting *The Great Bathers* was a gift from the estate of New York City philanthropist and arts patron Drue Heinz.

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During COVID for instance, the museum directors met every week by Zoom, just to compare best practices for handling such an extraordinary crisis. And that opportunity is there again for issues that may affect the sector. As the water rises, we all rise.

Our role is to service the collections that we have, engage and increase the public that we have, and to sustain the broad mandate of the Morgan.

We are an art institution, a research library, an educational institution and a training institution. Our mission encourages us to introduce new—or underappreciated—aspects of creativity to a broad public, which might include presenting work by less familiar artists and writers, or focusing on a particular aspect of a renowned figure's work. But ours is also a mission that celebrates the greatest authors, composers, and artists in the Western tradition. And that's very important to us. ♦