

Featured Interview: Judith Dancoff, Prose Writer

by Barbara Krasner, the editor of [The Ekphrastic Review](#)

Writing the Past (WTP): What inspired you to write art-based short fiction?

Judith Dancoff (JD): Writing art-inspired fiction was a natural for me. From the time I was very young, I wanted to be an artist, and though I ended up a writer instead, the chance to write about art and artists gave me the chance to step into that persona and also write about the art and artists I studied from an early age. “Still Life with Cherries,” one of the stories in the collection, is an excerpt from my novel-in-progress, *The Remedy of Light*, so I don’t just write art-inspired short fiction, though certainly the form of short fiction is a chance to explore many people and times.

WTP: How did you choose the art?

JD: It was different for each story, though usually an intuitive process. The idea for my novella in the collection, “Women Bathing,” was initially set off by Jose Saramago’s novel *Baltasar and Blimunda* set in seventeenth-century Portugal. One usually reads historical fiction about well-known people, but his central characters are lesser-known imagined characters from that time and location, and it made me want to try the same. My mind immediately went to the character of a young woman artist set in late nineteenth-century Paris, a place and time period that have long interested me. Because she’s an ambitious young woman, she studies at an important atelier and lucks into the chance to model for the now successful artist Renoir. Out of that comes the central conflict.

WTP: What was your research process?

JD: Sometimes I had small, specific questions and because most of these stories were written before AI, I often went to great lengths to answer them. For example, for one scene in “Women Bathing,” I needed to know the type of fireplace or rudimentary oven the young woman would use to heat rabbit skin glue to prepare her canvasses. To answer that, I actually called an architectural historian living in France. While I think accuracy always gives the best texture to fiction, plausible answers to small questions like that can now come from AI. Still, I think going to the source will give the best answer. While ChatGPT can list the pigments an artist from the past might use, there’s nothing like going to an old library book and stumbling on information one would never think to ask Chat: the walnut oil painters used as a medium and how they made it; the ancient cinnabar mines of Turkey, prized for the red mercury color used in vermilion; strange scientific theories about vision and perspective. Whole worlds open up you never considered and sometimes they find their way into your writing.

WTP: Your writing process?

JD: For me story always begins with voice and character, whether I’m writing about art or not. And often too, it will be set-off by a single idea, which is the case for all of these stories. For “Roman Glass,” it was just something I randomly saw on a museum’s website—that one of the curators had invented the concept of the history of collecting, that makes the collector more important than the artist since he or she sponsors and protects the work and therefore makes sure it survives. And for some reason, the blurb on the website also said that this curator’s father, a professor of history, disagreed with the theory. That hooked me, and it turned into the conflict and through-line of a story about the things we value—both art and people. When I have the idea, I will alternate between writing scenes that occur to me and doing research, until

something else important rings a bell and the story further develops. As in any writing, it's a process of rewriting until the story discovers its final form.

WTP: What challenges did you face in writing and curating this collection? What were the satisfactions?

JD: The curation of this collection was the easiest for me. A writer friend familiar with the stories suggested I put them in a collection and since all of them touch on art and artists, they were fairly easy to organize. The theme raised by the first story, "The Birthday of the Infanta," about the Velasquez painting "[Las Meninas](#)," (published originally in *The Ekphrastic Review*) also provides a strong thread—that meaning requires the viewer's inclusion as well as the artist's. And several stories are written from a female point-of-view. Reviews have said that reading the collection is like visiting a museum, and that was my intent. On the other hand, some stories like "The Beautiful Gaze" about John Singer Sargent were extremely challenging. I had wanted to write about him for a long time, but it was difficult to locate the right story. Part of it had to be about the "Madame X" scandal, but what part and in what order? The breakthrough came when I decided to begin with the scene of Sargent making his copy of *Las Meninas* a few weeks before he left Paris because of the scandal and moved to London. In fact, he made his copy when he was a student, but using it there raises the core theme of the viewer's gaze and also introduces his distress over how badly his painting, *Portrait of Madame X*, had been received at the Paris Salon the year before; he couldn't stop obsessing over it and actually thought about giving up his career. So, as he prepares the move, memories of the scandal follow him in flashback, and that becomes the structure. Once in London, and this is true, he attended the artists' colony Broadway, and it was there that he made his extraordinary painting *Carnation Lily, Lily Rose*, that resurrected his career and ends the story. That was so satisfying—to find a biographical moment that could merge with the structure of the story and at the same time include this wonderful painting. And it was entirely serendipitous. I had always loved the painting, but it was only in doing the research that I discovered its importance in his life and career.

WTP: What advice would you offer to those writing art-inspired fiction?

JD: There are so many approaches one can take; I don't think there are a lot of rules. Imagine a story that tells a fantastical journey through Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*; a different story told from the point-of-view of a museum worker who passes the painting each morning and the effect it has on her life; or a story told from Bosch himself as he makes the painting. Only the last would require that the writer know a lot about Bosch's biography and technique. On the other hand, whatever the approach, I don't think the choice of art should be random. You may not be able to articulate the reason for choosing it, but since it will end up an important element, choose something that draws you strongly and don't feel excluded if you don't know the technique or history. There are endless approaches one can take, and there is always research.

WTP: What's next for you?

JD: Writing art-inspired stories will always be important. I've just completed a short story based on the Swedish modernist *Hilma af Klint*, and I am working hard to complete *The Remedy of Light*. It is almost done and I will soon be sending it out. At the same time, I am working on a hybrid memoir novel based on my father's work on the Manhattan Project and his death from radiation-induced cancer when I was a child. Like a lot of writers, I have many subjects inside of me.