

STAFF  
SPOTLIGHT

## Kathryn Reuter

**K**athryn Reuter remembers the bracing sensation that struck her whenever she walked into a museum or a library. Growing up in Southern California, part of the abrupt change was atmospheric: stepping from a hot sidewalk into the cold blast of air conditioners protecting the art and artifacts inside.

But as a child from a low-income, immigrant neighborhood in Orange County, Reuter didn't always feel welcome in the severe silence and cold ambiance of these kinds of cultural institutions. "They felt like such special places that sometimes I didn't feel were designed for me," she says.



Photo by Veronica Burns

That feeling is one that Reuter keeps at the forefront of her mind as the new academic outreach coordinator for the University of Iowa Libraries, Special Collections and Archives, and the Stanley Museum of Art—a position she started last fall. At both the Stanley and the UI Libraries, Reuter's mission is to create a warmer environment—figuratively if not literally (the art itself still prefers cooler temperatures and low humidity).

"It's so important to make art accessible, and to make students of all types know that the museum is for you," she said. "It's important to be enthusiastic, which is kind of my teaching pedagogy, to explicitly say to students, 'You are welcome here.'"

Reuter's job is to use the collections at the Stanley and the library—which include an extensive selection of "concrete poetry"—to inform and enhance a class at the university.

During her interview for the position, Reuter talked about a Kara Walker print in the Stanley collection called *Cotton* and its relationship to graphic art from the Iowa City Women's Liberation Front newspaper from 1970. Walker's print depicts a black figure suspended above a bed of cotton. The newspaper, which Reuter found in the library, shows a profile of Sojourner Truth over an outsized arm and fist. "The artists both used simple outlines and shading to represent Black women—in the Walker print this reduces the identity and agency of the figure, whereas the WLF art makes Sojourner Truth into an icon, and the emphasis on her fist expresses her power and autonomy," she wrote in an email.

She sees the objects as helpful for teaching students about how Black bodies have been portrayed in history, or the need for diversity in feminist movements, or simply as a visual aid to enrich the dramatic story of Sojourner Truth's life.

"There are plenty of thematic connections across the collections, and I'm excited to see what students respond to," she said.

The great thing about art, Reuter believes, is that it can help students, or anyone for that matter, escape their own self-centeredness and begin to see other perspectives about the world. "Your experience is not universal. People have different backgrounds, and it affects our opportunities in life today."

Reuter's relationship with art truly began outside of museums, with a "Meet the Masters" program that her mom, who ran the local PTA, helped to bring to the elementary school every year.

Its goal was to introduce young minds to famous artists, and then to task the students with trying to replicate what they had seen. She remembers being shown *Large Decoration with Masks*, a 1953 Matisse collage that looks like a quilt, except perhaps for the two sketched faces on either side. The vibrant colors, the simplicity and "down-to-earth" quality of the cut-outs appealed to Reuter.



Cotton  
1997  
Intaglio  
18 1/4 x 14 3/4 in. (46.36 x 37.47 cm)  
Edwin B. Green American Art Acquisition  
Endowment, 1997/42A  
Kara Elizabeth Walker  
American, 1969–  
© Kara Walker

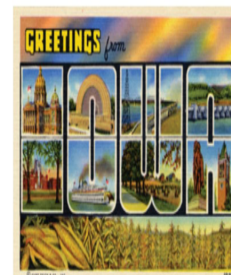


Image from Curt Teich Postcard Archives Digital Collection (Newberry Library)

She began school wanting to be a librarian, spending three years at Orange Coast Community College, paying her own way, before finishing her bachelor's in history at California State University–Long Beach.

She then traded warm, sunny days for midwestern cold at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, where she graduated last spring with a master's in library information science and history.

Reuter credits paid internships for her professional development and for becoming familiarized with the art world. She interned at the Getty Research Institute, which is associated with the Getty Museum in Los Angeles and focuses on promoting understanding of visual arts, and at the Thomas J. Watson Library, which is connected to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

These internships also connected her with a group of like-minded people who were, like Reuter, getting their start in the arts. Determined to expand access to the places where they now found themselves working—ending the exclusivity of art and museums has been a motivating force for Reuter to work in the field—this cohort helped one another navigate the privileged and exclusionary spaces of cultural institutions.

She stays in touch with her cohort using what some might consider rare these days: snail mail. As a child of southern Californian car culture, Reuter says she loves to take road trips, which sparked her fascination with postcards, particularly from the Curt Teich company. Making and sending postcards helped maintain her sense of community while she moved around for school and work. "It's a lowbrow, low stakes way to send your art to your friends," she said.

As outreach coordinator, Reuter wants to develop a professional network in Iowa City with campus groups that represent subsets of the broader Iowa City community, like the Pride Alliance Center or the Afro House. Reuter, who is biracial, is interested in learning what those cultural institutions have been doing on campus, and how they might see the Stanley as a space where they can continue their work. But part of the role is just being a friendly face when a student of any stripe walks into the Stanley or the special collections at the library. On Iowa's sweltering summer days, visitors will still enjoy the cool air. But Reuter wants everyone to also feel like the spaces are designed with them in mind—without having to brace themselves for a cold ambiance, they'll be able to walk into a more equitable and accessible museum.