

Portraits Podcast – *Pinocchio Noses and Plug-In Halos, with Ann Telnaes and Wendy Wick Reaves* (Season 4, Episode 11)

[Intro Music]

Ann Telnaes:

You know, caricature for editorial cartoonists is usually a vehicle for criticizing, you know, showing, you know what that person's soul is about. And this is why I don't do caricatures of friends, because I can't I tell them, look, I don't draw portraits. I do caricatures. You're not going to like it.

Kim Sajet:

Welcome to Portraits. I'm Kim Sajet, Director of the National Portrait Gallery. If you don't want Ann Telnaes to draw, you don't become a politician, especially don't become a hypocritical politician. Ann has been an editorial cartoonist at the Washington Post since 2008. She's drawn former President Donald Trump in a mega baseball hat with a crown on the top and she's drawn presidential candidate Hillary Clinton digging her own grave. But Ann says editorial cartoons represent something bigger than humorous sketches. She is a past president of the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists, and she advocates for her profession as a form of resistance, resistance against attacks on our First Amendment rights. She says political cartoons are like the canary in the coal mine. If there isn't enough oxygen for cartoonists to thrive, that signals a threat to press freedoms and to the health of our democracy.

Ann Telnaes:

I mean, we are quite lucky. We have a first amendment to protect us. And it has many times. I mean, I have colleagues overseas that have been everywhere from just harassed threatened to arrested to killed. We don't have to worry about our government imprisoning us, not yet.

Kim Sajet:

We included several works by political cartoonist in our recent Watergate exhibition, and the reaction kind of surprised me. Some visitors hadn't thought of political cartoons as a form of portraiture, Nixon in a Pinocchio knows well, it's not exactly a presidential look. We'll speak with a curator who collected those Pinocchio noses for us a little later in the show. But first, I want to ask Ann how she got her start as an editorial cartoonist, especially since her early career was not in politics at all but as an animator for Disney. I guess there's really not such a big jump between cartooning for Disney and cartooning for The Washington Post.

Ann Telnaes:

Except the subject matter, right?

Kim Sajet:

Yeah, you have to be somewhat kind to Bambi whereas you can it's a free for all on the presidents correct?

Ann Telnaes:

That's correct, right, but a couple of political events happened that made me change course. One was in 1989, when I was watching television, while I wasn't watching television, I kept the television on while I was drawing, which was a usual thing and the Tiananmen Square Massacre just sort of happened right in front of my eyes. And I wasn't very political to that point.

Even though I admired political cartoons for their art, I wasn't really interested in politics. But I think that event, it must have had an effect on me because I was close to the age of the demonstrators. So, from that point on, I decided that I needed to become more involved and read more and, you know, take an interest in politics and social issues. So, I was dabbling in editorial cartooning, I wasn't trying to publish it. But in 1992, I watched the hearings for Clarence Thomas. And as you recall, Anita Hill, accused him of sexual harassment when they work together previously. And that was, that was quite an eye opener for me because I was a young woman. And, you know, I had dealt with sexual harassment myself in the workplace, and to sit there and listen to senators, both, of both parties, you know, really not believe her, I felt compelled to put together my own group of editorial cartoons, and try to get published. So that's what I did. I have to admit, I knew nothing. Ignorance is bliss when it comes to trying something new. I didn't realize there weren't, there weren't a lot of women in the business. But I was lucky. I got published in 1992 for the first time, and that's how I got into it.

Kim Sajet:

You've also become somewhat of a historian around cartooning, I believe, and that you've really looked into the history of it. And I have up on the screen right now a picture actually called, *Polly Got a Cracker* that was done by the cartoonist Charles Nealon for the Philadelphia North American on May the 16th 1903. And I'm wondering if you could describe this cartoon, it goes to the heart of freedom of the press first amendment rights and you know the role of cartooning in a healthy democracy.

Ann Telnaes:

Yes, I was preparing a speech about editorial cartoonists, and freedom of speech. And this was a story that I came across. And there was a cartoonist, as you mentioned, Charles Nealon, who was, you know, in his work, he was criticizing the actions of the governor, Pennsylvania Governor Samuel Pennypacker. And in order to do that, he was using a visual metaphor, which we do quite often in our work, which was to depict the Governor as a parrot. And he's got quite a parrot nose, and he's got feathers, and he's being blown up into the air by a firecracker, which says public opinion. So, he did this continuously. This wasn't the only cartoon he did, he did many of them. And the, the governor got tired of it. And apparently, he wasn't well versed in the free press in a democracy and he decided to try to get the legislature to pass an anti-cartooning bill. And it's very lengthy the description of it, but it's basically saying you cannot depict any political figure in a condescending manner, you know, as a bird and animal a bla bla bla. So of course, as soon as he does that, the other cartoonists working, they're going to take that on.

Kim Sajet:

The bill proposed a ban on any cartoon or caricature that portray that person, quote, "in the form or likeness of beast, bird, fish, insect or other unhuman animal, thereby tending to expose such person to public hatred, contempt or ridicule". But the attempted censorship backfired when other cartoonists began depicting Pennypacker, as a turnip, a beer stein, just about anything that wasn't on the list.

Ann Telnaes:

And I thought it was such a great example of editor, a cartoonist, you know, we get around stuff, you know, if we're told we can't do something, we will try a different way.

Separate Audio Clip of Pat Buchanan:

Friends, this election is about more than who gets what it is about who we are.

Kim Sajet:

And its first published cartoon was an attendee at the 1992 GOP National Convention in Houston. The convention nominated President George Herbert Walker Bush for reelection. And it's sometimes remembered for a fiery speech by Pat Buchanan wanting that a culture war was at hand, there is a religious war going on in this country.

Separate Audio Clip of Pat Buchanan:

It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself. But this war is for the soul of America.

Ann Telnaes:

And so I decided to go ahead and show what the party was all about, and what they were advocating. And if you can see, at the time, the religious right was gaining power. So, I had him with a little halo, but it's just a plug in Halo.

Kim Sajet:

So he's got this little glowing Halo, but it is you can see it plugged in to the wall.

Ann Telnaes:

And the man that's standing there, he's he's got buttons all over him, and one says you can and 96, and another one says intolerance, and another button says anti-choice, and another button says homophobic. And he's holding a sign saying I have family values. You don't? Which of course, that's, that's another, that's another thing that editorial cartoonists always look out for, you know, is is hypocrisy.

Kim Sajet:

So, it's your role to, to sort of be even handed I guess, on the political divide, right? I mean, when whatever president and whatever party is in power, your job, as you said, is to point out hypocrisy often to do it in a fun way.

Ann Telnaes:

Well, I mean, going back to what you said about equal opportunity, I don't think I would really describe it that way. Because we all have our point of view. And that that, by the way, is what an editorial cartoon has to have is has to have a point of view. So, we all come from different, you know, ideals, and I'm obviously a liberal cartoonist. But that doesn't stop me from criticizing the Democrats, you know, of course, and that's what we do. So, I wouldn't say that we're equal opportunity. I think some people get that wrong because they think that I think they confuse reporting with, you know, commentary and we are you know, we're just like a columnist that uses words except we use images. But I wouldn't say that we, we are for a particular political party. I mean, I am not even though I obviously share more or points of view with the Democrats.

Kim Sajet:

When she talks about cartoons as columnists she's reminding us that newspapers are the historical home of her craft. But a lot of newspapers have folded. And misinformation and polarization have taken a really, really heavy toll. And as we know, journalists are often subjected to vicious attacks on social media that are meant to drown out their message. I asked, Ann if she feels she has the freedom to say what she wants to say, or if that's becoming more difficult.

Ann Telnaes:

Well, yes, editor or cartoonists are or were very used to being criticized. I mean, it kind of comes with the job description. It has changed throughout the years, you know, I started in the 90's. And print was primarily the vehicle and in order to, you know, for someone to express displeasure with a cartoon, they'd have to write a letter to the editor. That's a timeframe, right, it takes time to get the letter to the editor, and so on. And then we went into email, and then it got faster. And then social media really, I think, changed the equation for us because even though social media is very valuable for getting your work seen, and I use it, I use Twitter quite a bit, and the post encourages me to, it also presents a problem in the sense that there's things like Twitter storm is where people will take a cartoon and they'll even change the narrative of the cartoon, you know, describing it in a way that you didn't intend. And then people will pile on and there are organized groups that will also, you know, jump in. So, it's, it's a difficult thing to deal with.

Kim Sajet:

So, tell us from your perspective, how is political cartooning editorial cartooning, like the canary in the coal mine in terms of freedom of speech?

Ann Telnaes:

Well, okay, so editor cartoonists are journalists. I mean, I know a lot of people don't think that because we have the label cartoonists, which immediately makes you think it's something funny. But, but we are journalists, and we deal in images, unlike a writer. And because we deal in images, our work can be seen by the entire world. And it's powerful, because images, obviously transcend political lines, you know, actual country lines. And frankly, I think even more importantly, but people don't tend to think about this is class. You know, it really doesn't matter what position you are in life, you know, you can be rich, you can be poor, you can be well educated, you can be illiterate, you still can understand and be impacted by an editorial cartoon. So, when I say that they are the canary in the coal mine, I mean that if there's a place that you don't see editorial cartoons working, there's a problem there, because that means that they're being silenced in one way or another. And if that's true, then you better watch out what comes after that. Because that means that writers soon will be able to write what they want to write. It means you won't be able to read the books you want to read. It just leads up to a lot of things. So that's why I say that editorial cartoonist or just cartoonists, in general, if you don't see them around, you should watch out.

Kim Sajet:

For on the other side of the break, we'll hear how caricature and editorial cartoons qualify as portraiture, and why we started collecting them.

Wendy Wick Reaves:

It scratches an itch it expresses your own outrage or your own emotions.

Kim Sajet:

Stay with us.

[INTRO MUSIC]

Kim Sajet:

Today on portraits we've been talking to Ann Telnaes, the Pulitzer Prize winning editorial cartoonist. She says political cartoons are a form of resistance against attacks on our democracy, especially when it comes to press freedoms. Our recent Watergate exhibitions looked at the role of the media in restricting presidential power, and it included several political

cartoons. But as I mentioned earlier, some visitors hadn't thought of these satirical sketches as portraits. So, we went right to the woman who collected them for us.

Wendy Wick Reaves:

So, I'm Wendy Wick Reaves and I'm Curator Emeritus of Prints and Drawings at the National Portrait Gallery.

Kim Sajet:

Wendy single handedly collected almost all of the political cartoons in our collection. And I asked her, how are cartoons a form of portraiture?

Wendy Wick Reaves:

Well, many cartoons have caricature within them. And if we think of a caricature as an image that distorts or exaggerates the human figure for comic purposes, then when that figure is a specific individual, it is a portrait. And also, it's interesting to think about the differences between a cartoon that is a portrait and other types of portraiture. The, the cartoon is weighted with so much more emotion, and it uses humor and anger to make its point. So, it is very different from, from a regular portrait. But that negative portrayal that you often get in the satiric cartoon is in a sense of balance to the other kinds of very positive, even idealized portrayals, we get in other kinds of portraits. So, in a way, it sort of balances out other types of portraits.

Kim Sajet:

Yeah, I mean, I think a lot of people still have this perception of portraiture as being sort of really fuddy duddy and old fashioned and somewhat, you know, staid, but if you think about it in terms of caricature and political cartoons, it's it's the complete opposite. So, Wendy, as you know the Smithsonian is nonpartisan and yet these political cartoons are often very partisan, they definitely have a political side that's been chosen. How did you navigate that when you were at the Portrait Gallery, as you were choosing these cartoons?

Wendy Wick Reaves:

Well, we have a lot of of checks that are built into the system, which I think is a good thing, although they might have annoyed me at the time. We've we have a curatorial committee, we have historians and curators that get together and we all talk about things. We have you as a director, we have a board of trustees that review things. So, you know, you have to really justify what you're bringing into the collection on all of those different levels. So that really keeps you from going too crazy in one direction or another. And interestingly, sometimes the board would be very upset with the cartoons they would think they are, they were too critical. And so that was an interesting experience for me to witness because it just shows the emotional impact that a cartoon has, that even after the fact sometime after the fact, it can still pack enough emotion and convey enough anger that it made our trustees a little bit uncomfortable. It's always been the case for cartoonists, sometimes they go too far for some people's comfort.

Kim Sajet:

Just so you know, board meetings haven't changed much since you've been here. Lots of conversation.

Wendy Wick Reaves:

Right.

Kim Sajet:

It was our curator Kate Clark LeMay, who put together the Watergate exhibition and you could see how it's one of those political sagas tailor made for cartoonists because it's so far out there. The police caught burglars wiretapping the Democratic National Committee. And then the President himself was implicated in a cover up. 18 minutes of Oval Office tapes went missing. And Martha Mitchell, the loose lipped wife of the Attorney General was kidnapped. You almost couldn't invent something like this story that actually broke out in American politics. And people had a field day with it in terms of the commentary. So, there's this terrific cartoon that was done by Patrick Oliphant called *The Watergate Bug*. Can you describe it for us and tell us what you saw in this because you brought it into the collection?

Wendy Wick Reaves:

Right? Well, I love Oliphant's very layered approach to cartooning. And in this case, it's just a big pun. He's taking the idea of the wiretap the bug and turning it into an actual insect, a bug, and the bug is has eaten up some of the principals of the whole Watergate mess. So, here's this overstuffed bug with bones around him. And peering out from the side are two caricature portraits of Nixon and of his chief of staff, Bob Haldeman. So, you have these wonderful portraits. And Oliphant was brilliant at doing Nixon. And you've got the sagging jowls, and this elongated nose and these little beady evil eyes. His portraits of Nixon just get better and better. And they're sort of implanted in your mind after you've seen a whole lot of them. And then he keeps adding little things like he has this caption at the bottom, "Do you think it's still hungry?" And this is the two principals Nixon and Haldeman talking to each other. And it really reinforces their paranoia, as they're peering around the corner at this stuffed bug. And then all the font also has a little incidental character that he named Punk, the penguin. And in this case, Punk is talking to a little insect off on the side. And the insect is saying, "So much for the hors d'oeuvre." So that that the idea is that the main meal for this bug that's consuming and destroying all these people is going to be Nixon and Haldeman.

Kim Sajat:

Yeah, I love the bug is almost like a cockroach or something and he's on his back and he's looking very self-satisfied. He's even got an urp like a sort of burp coming out of his mouth.

Wendy Wick Reaves:

Yes.

Kim Sajat:

I asked Wendy about another cartoon from the exhibition called *The Credibility Gulfstream* by Draper Hill. And the reason that I love it was because as an art historian, you immediately recognize it's actually a riff off a very famous painting by Winslow Homer called *The Gulfstream* where you actually have a survivor of a shipwreck on a boat, who is being surrounded by sharks, the sharks are circling. But in this case, you actually see that instead of the, you know, the poor, sailor, you have Nixon. You are also an art historian so did that appeal to you in the same way that it appeals to me?

Wendy Wick Reaves:

Well, I think actually, it's wonderful to have that additional meaning of the very famous painting. And actually, this cartoon was published in in 1973, which was the year the Whitney Museum did an exhibition on Winslow Homer. So, I'm sure people were talking about and knew about that picture. There are actually interesting differences, of course, what was originally sugarcane on the deck of the ship, has now become tapes, many tape recordings, and he's holding the results of polls. So, these are the two things that really signal his destruction. And the other interesting difference is that Winslow Homer had included a ship on the horizon, which you

could read as a possible rescue for the poor man in the in the broken ship. But here, there is no ship on the horizon. There is no rescue for, for Nixon, there is a wind funnel in the background, and more storms coming and the sharks looking hungrier than ever. I think they're anticipating dinner.

Kim Sajet:

It's really terrific. When I asked antagonists to look at the Draper Hill cartoon, she told me that these kinds of references to earlier artwork can get a little tricky.

Ann Telnaes:

Yes, editor cartoonists do that, but there is a danger and you have to understand what your audience is capable of recognizing, too. You know, I've been in this for a long time. I've been in it for 30 years. And you know, sometimes using visual metaphors I have, I have very young editors, and they're wonderful, but sometimes I have to explain.

Kim Sajet:

I know it hurts your soul, right? I have two sons, and they they've never heard of The Sound of Music and a little piece of me died when I had no idea who Julie Andrews was, I was like, excuse me?

Ann Telnaes:

Yes, I know. I know. But that you know, that we have to deal with that. I mean, you have new readership, you know, and they, they respond to things. That's why it's so important to get young editorial cartoonists working, because you have to continue this.

Kim Sajet:

You know, we know also as historians that the biases as we all have, particularly comes forward in visual literacy, I think. I mean, some of the early cartoonists were pretty overt, now, when we look back on sexism, racism, all sorts of other things outside of just the political biases that they have. Do you think about that in your own work or when you look back in time, do you think that doesn't happen as much today or am I wrong.

Ann Telnaes:

Well, it's still happens today. But you know, I recently taught an editorial cartooning class at CalArts, where I went to art school. So, this is college age students and I, I have stressed to them several times when showing historical cartoons, you have to take things in context, you know, what was going on at the time, what people accepted, which wouldn't be accepted today. I don't think you should not show these. I think you should offer context, you know, and why and what was going on. I mean, even when I started editorial cartooning, and even today, I see depictions of women that I think are sexist, but I don't want to shut that cartoonist up. I want to challenge it. You know, I think that's important. I don't think censorship is the answer. I think it's it's dangerous to just immediately say, that shouldn't be drawn.

Kim Sajet:

So is outrage, a pre requisite for your job?

Ann Telnaes:

Yeah, you have to be outraged about stuff. I mean, my best work, I think, is about issues that I've thought about for a long time, that maybe I've had a personal connection with in one way or another just by who I am. And, you know, I feel I want to express an opinion on him. And that was the reason for the whole. You know, Clarence Thomas, Anita Hill hearings, why I decided

to enter the profession because I want to say something. So yes, I guess you do have to be outraged.

Wendy Wick Reaves:

What fascinates me about the the daily editorial cartoonists is just their ability to continue being outraged day after day after day, they'll find something that drives the wild, but they they do have to keep that edge. And I think that that's a certain kinds of emotional resiliency and I think that's an amazing, amazing gift to all of us.

Kim Sajet:

You can find Ann's editorial cartoons at the Washington Post or on Twitter. She's also published three books including *Trump's ABC* in 2018. And you can find the images we discussed in the show notes of this episode, or on our website at npg.si.edu. Ruth Morris produced this episode. Our podcast team also includes Justin O'Neill, Ann Conanan, Deborah Sisum and Rebecca Kasemeyer. Our music is by Jo Kye and Brake Master Cylinder and our engineer is Tarek Fouda. Until next time, I'm your host, Kim Sajet.