

**Holger A. Klein is an associate professor and director of graduate studies in the Department of Art History and Archaeology. His research focuses on Late Antique, Early Medieval and Byzantine art and architecture. He earned a Ph.D. from Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Bonn, Germany, in 2000. From 2004–07, he was the Robert P. Bergman Curator of Medieval Art at the Cleveland Museum of Art, where he oversaw the reinstatement of the museum's renowned collection of medieval and Byzantine art.**

**Where did you grow up?**

In Limburg an der Lahn, a small medieval town in Germany between Frankfurt and Cologne.

**What did you want to be growing up?**

I cannot remember for sure, but I didn't want to become a fireman... [Wanting to become] an art historian came later in high school because art history was something that combined my interests in history, literature, arts, architecture and archeology. If I had to make a guess about why I became interested in art history, I would say it was because I sang in a cathedral choir for much of my teenage years. Spending time in Limburg's 13th-century cathedral and being involved in the liturgy sparked my interest in medieval art and architecture. In Limburg there also is a famous Byzantine reliquary of the True Cross, which eventually found its way into my Ph.D. dissertation.

**How did you end up at Columbia?**

I came to the United States in 1998 for pre-doctoral fellowships at Dumbarton Oaks in

Washington, D.C., and the Metropolitan Museum of Art here in New York. A year later, I went on for another fellowship at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore. When I saw a job posted at Columbia for an assistant professor in western medieval and Byzantine art, I thought I should apply. Luckily, I was offered the job.

**How did you become a curator at the Cleveland Museum of Art?**

I was working at Columbia for four years when I received an email from the director of the Cleveland Museum, who asked me whether I would be interested in coming out to see the collection, which is very strong in Byzantine art. The museum offered me a job that I couldn't refuse — a chance to get a named curatorship and become the head of its medieval department. I had always wanted to work in a museum. When I told my chair at Columbia, she asked if I wanted to be put on leave. Two years later, when that leave was over, Columbia asked if I was ready to come back in a tenured position, and I accepted.

**What are you working on now?**

I am finishing up as the guest curator of a major international loan exhibition, "Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe," organized by the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Walters Art Museum and the British Museum. It runs until early October.

**Can you talk about winning the Mark Van Doren Award for teaching?**

It's a wonderful award.

What is particularly meaningful to me is that it is an award granted by Columbia College students, and I have to say that one of the things that I love about Columbia and brought me back is the great undergraduate students that we have in the College. Being able to teach Art Humanities is one of the things that I really enjoy. It is a very broad selection of artists and monuments I teach in Art Humanities, but

it is always very insightful to look at great paintings, sculptures and architecture with students who have completely fresh eyes.

**How do you recharge?**

By traveling, singing in a choir, and — too infrequently — by playing the cello. I also run and try to brush up on my Turkish in my spare time.

**Are you married? Do you have kids?**

Yes. My wife, whom I met during my time in Cleveland, is a fine arts conservator who specializes in stone objects. Our first child, Eleonora Sophia, was born in January.

**What is your favorite food?**

A good wiener schnitzel.

**What's something your students would never guess about you?**

I sing bass in a choir. Last year, while on sabbatical, I sang in the Münchner Motettenchor, and we had some wonderful performances of Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*, Berlioz's *Te Deum* and Beethoven's *9th Symphony*.

**If you could be anywhere in the world, where would you be?**

One of my favorite cities is Istanbul. That's one of the great things about being an art historian: The world becomes your home.

**What is your favorite spot in New York City?**

Aside from the Metropolitan Museum? Central Park.

**What's the last good book you read for pleasure?**

I am partial to Ian McEwan and W.G. Sebald. I recently reread Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* and still find it a very inspiring and wonderful read.

**What on your resume are you most proud of?**

The Mark Van Doren Award certainly is what I'm most proud of. It's wonderful to have been recognized by the students in this way.

*Interview and photo:*

*Ethan Rouen '04J, '11 Business*

*To see a website built by Klein and Columbia students for the "Treasures of Heaven" exhibit, go to [college.columbia.edu/cct](http://college.columbia.edu/cct).*

Five Minutes with ... **Holger A. Klein**

