NARRATOR: Welcome to Intersections: The RIT Podcast. The important role that scores of female artists played in the origins of animated imagery at Disney has long been overlooked – until now. In today’s episode, Mindy Johnson, author and award-winning playwright, talks with RIT assistant professor, animator and cartoonist Peter Murphy about what up-and-coming artists can learn from the invisible history of these trailblazing women.

PETER: What is it that got you focused on this theme of your book, women in the animation field? What brought you to that topic?

MINDY: I had written another book on an early subject of animation, and my editor asked what’s next. And we gravitated toward this idea – I had noticed that in my previous work I had written about one aspect of the production of a particular character on the inking and painting process. And I thought there really isn't much that explores this. Maybe this could be interesting. And we both thought maybe there is something there. But we both also labored under this preconceived idea that it was pretty girls who traced and colored. And we thought it would be a charming book about painting and the social aspects of life at Disney Studios during the 1930s and 1940s. In my typical fashion I began digging in and really getting into answering so many questions. I’m a very curious person. And in trying to find answers to those questions, it was challenging. It was very difficult. Every book out there had the same four or maybe five women in their index. You’d have to go straight to the index to try to find anything. And there was nothing. So I had to do some really determined digging into this. And about eight months in to my research, it was an avalanche of just how epic, and how far-reaching, and how masterful the artistry of what, not only what the women were doing in the world of ink and paint, but also where women were progressing and where women were within animation in the various roles. And women were everywhere, and the level of masterful artistry is beyond what anyone has ever looked at or talked about. And I also had the great good fortune to get to a few of our people who are still with us and get their first-hand accounts and get them talking about their experiences.

PETER: And you mentioned one of the artists that you worked with is now 108 years old. Can you tell us a little bit more about her?

MINDY: Yeah. [laughter] That's Ruthie Thompson. Ruthie, yeah, she’s 108 years young. She's incredible. Ruthie was about 12 years old, living in Los Angeles, and would walk past a little storefront studio for the Disney Bros. Studio every day on her way to school. And one day, Walt or Roy was out front having a cigarette or something and she asked, “What are you doing?” “We’re making cartoons in there. Go on in.” So she became the little studio’s mascot and would sit next to Roy while he was putting the cells for the earliest Alice Comedies on the stand and taking photographs of them. Fast forward to the ‘30s, the 1930s, and she was working at a riding stable, working with the horses. And Walt and Roy were very much into polo at that point, and very successful. “Well, Ruthie Thompson, what are you doing working here? You need to come work for us.” “I don’t know anything about animation!” “We’ll train you. You’ve sat and watched
me. We’ll train you.” “Okay.” So she went to work for the Disney brothers in about 1934. And she’s one of two surviving women who worked on ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.’ So a real trailblazer. And one of the key women that I wanted to get to while we still had her as living history.

PETER: After you dug into this research, and the continuing process of doing the research, did it shift your own personal view about how women now working in the field both should feel about the history leading up to it, but also how they would now engage working in the field? This is certainly a concern of a lot of our students now who are going into the animation field. And they don’t know what that world looks like. They know it’s still male-dominated. They hear good and bad stories depending on who they talk to in the field. But what do you think this research brings to both you because you were a filmmaker and an animator – both your past experience – and also for students who are now entering that world? How does this research impact them?

MINDY: There’s that great classic line of “If you can see it, you can be it.” And for me, growing up, there were no women other than the voice actresses. That’s all I heard about in terms of animation. In terms of filmmaking, there were no women at all. Costuming, hair and make-up and those areas, that would be about it. For me it was, again, enlightening to learn that, sadly, I had fallen into these false narratives. One or two women and that’s it? No! Women were there from the very beginning. So, it’s really sort of transformed me in terms of enlightenment and coming to understand my own limited thought processes and how society had shaped those based on what limited views society shows us. But for my students, this is transforming them. I have 70 percent women and 30 percent men in my classes. And everybody’s sort of trying to figure this out. Why is this? There are reasons why. Because we have generations now who are growing up having seen the Ariels and the Mulans and the Belles of Disney’s second golden era. But it’s about time we catch up with this. And it’s about time we get this ‘herstory’ out there so that both young men and women can see that they’ve only had half the story. We’ve all missed out on this. We’ve only known half of what it took to get these great films out there. And that women had key and powerhouse roles in terms of what they contributed artistically, narratively, design-wise. We’ve only been given a slice of that because we’ve all been lazy about it. We’ve only assumed that it was all men. We’ve only focused on the men. There’s been an imbalance all this time. It’s a fairly recent area of study, this idea of women’s studies. But it really should be about balancing our own collective studies. We’re all missing out. And so it’s been important to get this story out there, these stories out there to do just exactly that – balance our collective past.

PETER: How have you found the response from men, both in the professional field and students, to your work? Do you find them intimidated? Do you find it a mixed set of reactions? Do you find some men are engaged and opened up by this? What kind of measurement do you have from that response?

MINDY: It’s been great. When I was writing the book is when I had the biggest pushback, really. This whole idea of when I would be explaining to colleagues that
women were everywhere. Do you know about this woman and that woman? And do you know what they did? And they were like, “No. That’s not right. That can’t be.” And I actually had men getting irate and pushing back. “You can’t put these women in the same category as… You can’t just do this. That’s the great Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas and Marc Davis. And you can’t put these women in the same category.” And I was like, “Well, yeah, you can.” When you look at what they did and the level of artistry, and what they brought to this. Because it is their work you’re seeing on the screen. The men, certainly, designed the movement. But that’s a blueprint to what the women came in and finished. And it’s masterful when you see these examples. And since then, those who did have some hair-raising experiences with this have since come back and said, “I apologize. You were right. There are so many incredible women that we’ve overlooked.”

PETER: I remember, I saw your presentation at the Ottawa International Animation Festival. I started with the attitude of embracing what you were doing just as a concept.

MINDY: Thank you. [laughter]

PETER: But when I saw your presentation, and saw the actual details and the personal stories and the work that people did, that really had a different impact. I think animation, traditionally, has belittled or put on a lower tier the ink and paint work.

MINDY: Yeah. Yeah.

PETER: Because it’s all about the animators and the directors. But when you walk people through the steps and the research, both artistically and technically that the women in the ink and paint department did. And then bring that to fulfillment of seeing, for instance, the shot from ‘Fantasia.’ That impact is so much stronger. And you find a much deeper appreciation for what you’re talking about – that this is on an equal scale to the work that the men were doing. It’s a different area. But the impact and the skill that it took is of equal merit. And, I think, the only way you fully embrace that is by seeing those details that you provide.

MINDY: Exactly. It’s one thing to read the book and to hear their stories. But I knew that this had to be – to move beyond that, you have to visually see the work and see what we’re talking about in the book. Because when you see it – again, it’s about, I get emotional – you can be it. And the impact it’s having. Again, there’s a lot of catch up to do with where we’ve been with our animated past thus far with the men. And we’re still making new discoveries there as animators. The other thing, too, with the book is don’t let the title fool you. It’s where women were even beyond ink and paint. That’s kind of the through line, the trunk of the tree, if you will. But where women branched to, which is a really remarkable story. And going back to our earliest independent, artisanal women animators as early as 1916 with Helena Smith Dayton and a few others. And even earlier than that as far as the impact on the industry. And in many ways, too, we can trace back where we are today with animation, we owe to Margaret Winkler and her work, in terms of as the first woman producer and distributor of these animated novelties in the early 1920s. She transformed this and turned it into an industry by
making animation novelties a standard part of the movie-going experience. And turning the Fleischer Koko the Clown and Sullivan’s Felix the Cat into household names. She was only at it for a short period of time, but she’s the one who gave Walt Disney his start. He had trained under Margaret Winkler. People forget, but if you look at the early correspondence she’s telling him, “I know what my audiences want. You need to tighten this up and work on this character.” And he’s listening. I am convinced that he wouldn’t have succeeded. His company out of Kansas City failed. He went through multiple failures before he got what hit. But he listened to her work and her advice. And then after she left, he actually maintained a very lovely friendship with her later into the ‘40s when he had built the Burbank studios. We have evidence that she came back. He helped her brother find work. He held no animosity or any of that. It was really lovely circumstance. And he admired her and admired her work. So, there’s still a lot to fill in with this herstory of animation. [laughter]

NARRATOR: Thanks for listening to Intersections: The RIT Podcast, a production of RIT Marketing and Communications. To learn more about our university, go to www.rit.edu and to hear more podcasts, find us on iTunes and TuneIn or visit us at www.soundcloud.com/rittigers