TEACHING IN THE ART MUSEUM

Interpretation as Experience

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF TEACHING IN THE ART MUSEUM

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At the turn of the twentieth century, art museums were still new and bewildering to the ordinary visitor, and it could be fairly observed that people would "wander aimlessly through the rooms, looking at collections without knowing how to study them."[1] In 1892, the architect J. Randolph Coolidge Jr. had proposed in a letter to a friend that museums provide some system of guidance in the galleries.[2] Coolidge got the opportunity to try out his ideas when he was appointed temporary director of the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston in 1906. An article in the MFA Bulletin of June that year entitled "The Educational Work of the Museum: Retrospect and Prospect" included one of the earliest uses of the term *docent*:

> It has been proposed to the Trustees to consider the permanent appointment of one or more persons of intelligence and education who could act as intermediaries between Curators and the many who would be glad to avail themselves of trained instruction in our galleries. Through these *docents*, as it has been proposed to call them, the heads

> of departments could instruct many more persons than it would be possible for them to accompany through the galleries. . . .

In the next year, Garrick M. Borden, assistant to the secretary of the MFA and a former university lecturer in art history, was appointed the first docent, charged with the duty of "giving visitors in the galleries information about any or all of the collections." Louis Earle Rowe, assistant in the Egyptian Department, was made the second MFA docent. Both held paid positions, but two professors of the English Department at MIT acted as volunteer docents on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. Judging from the numbers of people who took advantage of the new service, as the museum began to regularly report, gallery teaching quickly became a success, and would eventually become part of almost every American art museum's public offerings.

In Boston the goals and methods of the new docent office provoked much discussion, reflecting then current political and philosophical issues within the museum. The 1907 docent position was in fact not the first experiment with live instruction. In 1896, the MFA had conducted a brief trial, using volunteers to give information about the museum's vast collection of plaster casts. The experiment did not last, however—not because the volunteer docents were unpopular, but because the museum administration was occupied with plans for a new building. A furious battle arose over the fate of the casts in the new location, which reflected opposing ideas about the educative role of the museum, and subsequently the role of the docent. Edward Robinson, the MFA's director and curator of classical antiquities, proposed enlarging the collection of casts. He emphasized the educative role of the museum and, in support of his proposal, cited the increasing use of the casts and replicas by adult as well as school classes. But Matthew S. Prichard, his assistant director, countered that the museum should emphasize the "real thing," and relegate the casts to a "downstairs" study collection. In making his argument, Prichard maintained that the museum "is dedicated chiefly to those who come, not to be educated, but to make its treasures their friends for life and their standards of beauty."[3] Prichard's view won the day, and the collection of casts soon lost its former prominence when the MFA relocated to its new building in 1910.[4]

Prichard's arguments reflected the rise of the so-called cult of the original. In the period between 1870 and 1910, wealthy American industrialists entered the European art market with a seemingly limitless appetite for old master paintings, Renaissance sculpture, and Greek and Roman antiquities. As these works found their way into museums, the idea of the museum as a temple of exquisitely beautiful originals took its place alongside the idea of the museum as the "crown of the educational system." Prichard echoed the sentiments of the Aesthetic Movement, epitomized by the writings of Walter Pater, who in the concluding chapter of *The Renaissance* famously wrote that art "comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake."[5] The founding of the 1907 position of docent thus came at a moment when the twin goals of education

and aesthetic pleasure were sharing an uneasy coexistence. The dialectic between the two ideas would play out in subsequent debates over approaches to museum teaching.

Benjamin Ives Gilman, secretary of the MFA, wrote extensively on the museum, and on the new position of docent. He insisted over and over again on the primacy of the museum's aesthetic mission. In his mind the artistic and the didactic were "mutually exclusive in scope, as they are distinct in value."[6] For Gilman, education developed knowledge and skills to be used throughout a person's life. In contrast, an artwork's worth was immediate: "Art is an end, education a means to an end."[7] Nonetheless, Gilman conceded that it was a "duty" for museums to perform "a special kind of educational work," aimed at assisting people to appreciate an artwork.[8] He was ambivalent about the docent's role. In some instances he suggested that artworks in the museum speak for themselves, and that the docent's job was merely to lead people to them. As Gilman remarked, "The whole function of spoken interpretation in the museum is accomplished when it ushers the visitor into a royal presence."[9] But elsewhere Gilman suggested that the docent might with his enthusiasm and knowledge "lead his disciples on to enjoyment."[10] "Anyone who has ever looked at a picture or a statue in the company of an appreciative friend," he wrote, "knows how much the comprehension of it can be aided by the communication of another's interest and information."[11] The exchanges between visitors and docents, he added, should not be like those between teacher and student, but more like those between friends, undertaken "in the spirit of free intercourse, not in that of compulsion, in the spirit of play and not of work."[12] As Gilman described it, docent service was not guidance, but *companionship*.[13]

MFA docents were therefore asked to instruct in an unimposing way. Gilman suggested that docents start not from their own interests, but from mutual interest. In effect, this meant inquiring after the visitors' interests. Louis Earle Rowe (as noted above, one of the first two docents appointed in Boston) reported that "no settled plan is followed out, for the fact is always recognized that each group or individual has different interests and requires varying treatment." His remarks suggest an early sensitivity to the audience and its needs. He went on to advise his fellow docents that it was a "dangerous and hidden pitfall" to emphasize one's own "personal criticism." Rowe recommended that the docent should keep himself as far as possible in the background, striving to arouse the visitor's own sense of appreciation and criticism.[14] A natural corollary of this approach was to invite visitors themselves to select the objects to be viewed, and indeed in 1916, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston arranged Sunday afternoon tours for small groups, limited to six, during which "the objects to be studied are determined by the wish of the majority." Two or three such groups met each afternoon.[15] Soon after the appointment in 1907 of Henry W. Kent as its first supervisor of museum instruction, The Metropolitan Museum of Art appointed its own paid "museum instructor," which, as Robert W. de Forest, second vice president of the museum, put it, was the New York way of spelling "what in Boston they write 'Docent.'"[16] "Expert guidance" was the term used to describe the instructor's activity in New York, but the differences in terminology masked a common goal, to instill in

the public "a love of art, of beauty, that will be a perennial fount of refreshment and true pleasure."[17] The docents at the two museums may have worked in subtly different ways. If at the Museum of Fine Arts the docent was to keep himself in the background, at the Metropolitan "no attempt is made to veil the agency of the guide." "So easy and unconscious is she that you stroll about with her as with a familiar friend, scarcely realizing that the burden of comment rests with her. You see (the moment it is shown you) all that she wants to bring out, yet so gracefully is her work done that you are scarcely aware that she is not echoing your own ideas."[18] The office was still too new, however, for anyone to know exactly how to fulfill it in Boston or New York.

Officials from other institutions soon joined the discussion. In 1915, the Metropolitan invited museum instructors from the eastern part of the United States to a conference on their common aims and problems. Thirty-eight people attended, from museums in Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, and Worcester, as well as New York, Brooklyn, Long Island, Elmira, and Newark, together with colleagues from colleges and other educational institutions.[19] A committee was appointed to consider forming an association for the purpose, through future conferences, of "improving methods of teaching, raising aims of the work, marking out lines of progression, and emphasizing the general importance of the profession."[20] Although the association was never formed, the American Association of Museums (AAM) recognized the need, and promised the instructors a session at each of its conventions to discuss professional concerns. At the AAM convention held on May 20, 1918, instructors at a special session discussed whether they should have training in pedagogy and psychology, theatrical training in posture and voice, or training in the practice of art.[21] Training was a central issue, as no institutional training as yet existed, and most instructors were learning on the job. Rowe remarked, "Most of us have had to secure our training as best we could, largely through active docent work."[22] The Art Institute of Chicago used artists as educators, drawing many of them from its associated School of the Art Institute of Chicago.[23]

The question of the proper central goal of gallery teaching recurs over and over throughout the history of the practice. In aiming to instill a love of art and beauty—"a perennial fount of refreshment and true pleasure"—the first museum instructors were making a certain kind of *aesthetic experience* the central goal of museum teaching. Aesthetic experience is an elusive idea—probed and contested by philosophers from the eighteenth century to the present day. The theory that aesthetic experience constitutes a form of contemplation was perhaps the most widely held opinion, given a classic formulation by Arthur Schopenhauer in the early nineteenth century.[24] For Schopenhauer, aesthetic experience is a state in which

> we no longer consider the where, the when, the why and the *whither* in things, but simply and solely the *what*.... We lose ourselves entirely in this object... we forget our individuality, our will, and continue to exist as pure subject, as pure mirror of the object... the entire consciousness is filled and occupied by a single image of perception.[25]

As objects of contemplation, artworks were seen to stand apart from the turmoil of the everyday world, and experiences of art became a means of transcendence and spirituality. As Gilman insisted, art existed for the sake of its own experience.

The relationship of contextual information to the aesthetic experience of artworks provoked controversy from the very start. Elizabeth Whitmore, former docent at the Worcester Museum of Art, put it simply: "Should the docent aim to impart information about the object or develop appreciation of its qualities?"[26] She answered that both information and appreciation were justified, but her instructions called for sensitivity in the use of information. The instructor should think of herself as a host, presenting to her visitors familiar friends among the collections, "unobtrusively giving the guest such information as will place him *en rapport* with his new acquaintances."[27]A docent must clearly exercise some delicacy in her role, careful not to give too much information about those "new acquaintances."

The problem of how much information docents ought to provide occasioned a great deal of discussion. At the 1918 AAM session, an instructor from Indianapolis remarked, "Appreciation is frequently, if not always, increased by a reasonable knowledge of the facts." Agnes Vaughn, an instructor from the Metropolitan, drew a distinction between "informative" and "interpretative" teaching. Classes coming to study at the museum in connection with history, literature, or art history requested the former. But others came "desiring to find the beauty of the objects," and for them the instructor's brief was "interpretative" teaching, aimed at finding "the contacts between that person and the principles of beauty in the things that they are going to look at." In teaching appreciation, the teacher focused viewers exclusively on the object. Indeed, "Isolating the mind from related facts is the first essential in teaching appreciation."[28]

This issue was soon subsumed by a wider debate about the place of art history in museums. At the turn of the twentieth century art history was a young discipline in the United States, the first university department of art history, at Princeton, having been founded only in 1883. The eminent art historian Erwin Panofsky observed that in its early years the new discipline had to fight its way out of an entanglement with practical art instruction, art appreciation, and general education, "winning the battle by the early 1920s."[29] For Gilman, for whom art appreciation was a matter of aesthetic experience rather than art-historical study, the separation was welcome. Gilman quoted approvingly the Rembrandt scholar Carl Neuman: "How often is one asked—'What art history is recommended in order to awaken an understanding of art?' But one answer can be given. 'No art history at all. The way to art lies through the individual artist.'"[30] Similarly, museum authorities at the Metropolitan were not anxious that the docent should teach the history of art. That, they remarked somewhat dismissively, "may as well be done in a photograph collection."[31] In their minds the concerns of art history detracted from the museum's mission. True appreciation of the beauty "that appeals at once to eye and mind, to sense and soul, must be based upon something more than historical and critical knowledge, even of the widest and wisest kind."[32]

The recoil from art history and the attendant dedication to a cult of beauty and pleasure provided an unsure foundation for museum education, however. In the "temple of art," docents would act as "companions" to visitors, but should they also be asked to "teach" aesthetic experience, and if so, how? Clearly, more was required than merely ushering visitors into the royal presences of artworks.

Formalism, which originated in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century circles of the Aesthetic Movement in England, provided one answer. Formalist critics proposed that aesthetic experience was prompted by the formal characteristics of an artwork. The critic Clive Bell, for example, wrote that people who feel pure aesthetic emotions "are concerned only with lines and colors, their relations and quantities and qualities; but from these they win an emotion more profound and far more sublime than any that can be given by the description of facts and ideas."[33] Profound experience of objects resulting from strict analysis also had real interpretive value, yielding not only insight into an artist's intentions but also understanding of his times.[34] In America the critic Denman Ross and the artist and art educator Arthur Wesley Dow, who was director of fine arts at Columbia University Teacher's College from 1904 to 1922, translated the somewhat elevated aesthetic theories of Bell and his colleague Roger Fry into a more common idiom. Dow's book *Composition*, published in 1899, and republished into the 1940s, was hugely influential in American art education.[35] In 1917, for example, the Metropolitan announced the introduction of informal "seminars" with the purpose of showing people "how to recognize good color, good line, and the other qualities that give value to art." The announcement noted that a new method of instruction adapted to museum teaching would be used, developed by Professor Dow, emphasizing primarily the principles of design and color, illustrated in the collections and in current merchandise.[36] Albert Barnes, at his newly created foundation for teaching about art, would develop his own version of formalism to be taught in the classes he devised.[37] (For an in-depth discussion of the Barnes method, see chapter 9 of this book.) What these formalist methods all had in common was the belief that observers should focus almost exclusively on the objects themselves. Formalist approaches to art would have a long life, lasting well into the twentieth century, and would continue to be influential in both museum education and art education, as exemplified by the popularity in the 1950s and '60s of books by Joshua Taylor (*Learning to Look: A Handbook for the Visual Arts*, 1957) and Bates Lowry (*The Visual Experience*, 1967).[38]

The potential tension between an approach based on the power of art to speak directly to viewers through their perceptions of the object itself and a historical approach based on the object's context was relieved by a commonly shared idea that the artist's intentions were discoverable in the work of art itself. The differences between the ways in which formalist and historically minded theorists described the task of determining an artist's intentions reflect the complexities inherent in the task itself. Benjamin Ives Gilman compared interpreting works of art to reading books, suggesting that the art museum aimed "to help us divine what their authors meant to say."[39] According to the 1918 "Educational Credo" of the Metropolitan, the museum

endeavored to "translate the message of the artist into terms intelligible to the visitor."[40] The Barnes approach to interpretation was based on the idea that "art must present to the observer an aspect of life that the artist himself has experienced and it must be presented in such a form that it communicates the feelings of that experience to the observer."[41]

The first decade of American gallery teaching ended with many unanswered questions about its goals and methods. Was there a kind of teaching that could produce such things as a love of art and beauty? What did such teaching look like? Did it take the form of contemplation? Was appreciation solely a matter of feeling, or did it require information about the artworks and their creators as well? How would the educational goals and methods of a museum be shaped by the demands of its public, or forces outside its walls?

The 1920s and '30s: Progressivism and the Expansion of Programs

In the 1920s and '30s, private foundations as well as the federal government began to provide support for museums, including museum education programs. Beginning in the late 1920s, the Carnegie Foundation financed educational experiments in museums, and distributed art appreciation kits (slides, reproductions, and books) to help college students appreciate museums.[42] The federal government's WPA Museum Projects (1934–42) paid the salaries of unemployed artists, photographers, cabinetmakers, scientists, teachers, and stenographers hired to supplement regular museum personnel. In some cases, the money went to support docent service.[43]

The number of people engaged in museum teaching grew as the practice spread to more museums. In his 1939 work *The Museum in America*, Laurence Vail Coleman counted about three hundred museum instructors, as well as many others who taught part-time. Few museums, he noted, had more than one or two people giving their whole or chief attention to instruction. The MFA in Boston had sixteen instructors, and the Metropolitan in New York, nine.[44]

Educational work in museums grew unevenly and often without design. The work of museum education was new and unprecedented, the result not of conscious, long-term planning or theory, but of ad hoc, step-by-step responses to public demand. Museum education programs in a given institution tended to begin by offering certain typical services, starting with gallery guidance, which led to gallery talks on particular exhibits, then to talks organized in series and often offered on a subscription basis, and finally to systematic courses on some particular art or historical period. Education programs also soon began to provide support to schoolteachers who brought their students to the museum to show them the kinds of artworks they were studying in the classroom.[45]

Lectures and gallery talks became the most common educational offerings for adult visitors: "At certain points it is necessary for the Division of Education to guess what its public might like to ask, and to prepare answers in advance, in the shape of lectures and courses of study."[46] The Philadelphia Museum of Art, for example, during the

week of November 28, 1938, offered at least one talk a day, including "Gainsborough—Portrait Painter," "The Meaning of Modern Art: from Courbet to Cézanne," and "The Artist's Point of View."[47] The Metropolitan Museum of Art developed an extensive program of such gallery talks. In the autumn of 1937, for example, at two o'clock and three-fifteen on Sundays, identical series of forty-five–minute gallery talks gave surveys of the sculpture, painting, and decorative arts of various countries and periods as represented in the Metropolitan's collections. At two-thirty one might choose either a gallery talk in the series The Artist and Society or a motion picture. At three o'clock the museum offered a course in color design, one of five lectures taking the American Small House as their subject, and at four o'clock, special Sunday lectures on a wide range of subjects correlated with museum collections. The talks were varied to show many different collections during the month so that the repeat visitor might enjoy a comprehensive survey of the museum during the year. The Boston MFA followed a similar plan.[48]

As the listings above demonstrate, the informational lecture dominated most offerings. Some museums, however, had begun to be affected by currents of the progressive movement in adult education. Influenced by the writings of John Dewey, the educator Eduard C. Lindeman launched a wave of new thinking with the publication of *The Meaning of Adult Education* in 1926. His conception of adult education was "a cooperative venture in nonauthoritarian, informal learning."[49] Already in her 1938 volume on educational work in museums of the United States, Grace Fisher Ramsey noted "a marked trend away from lectures more or less related to the museum collections, with a passive listening on the part of the audience and involving greater activity and participation on the part of adult visitors." As an example, she pointed to the Brooklyn Museum, which had initiated informal discussion groups, "indicating an attempt to keep pace with the latest developments in the field of adult education."[50]

Programs for children and young adults developed largely in parallel with offerings for adults. What was to become a considerable commitment to schools began tentatively at the beginning of the century. As early as 1901 a few museums began inviting schoolchildren with their teachers to hear talks about exhibitions.[51] There was some disagreement at first about whether the new office of docent/instructor should serve younger children. A 1934 survey of museums in the Northeast found that some directors, "particularly in some conservative New England institutions and in other museums officered by men who have had their training in that section, look on the presence of children in the museum as a necessary evil."[52] This indeed became the view of a marked minority.

As early as 1903, the Toledo Museum of Art proudly claimed to be the first in the world to become child centered, an innovation that was "revolutionary to accepted museum policies of the day, in that it recognized children as the personalities most important to contact."[53] At the Metropolitan in New York, work with schoolchildren became a priority from the beginning of Henry W. Kent's tenure as supervisor of museum instruction in 1907.[54] Under Kent the Metropolitan began an extensive

cooperation with teachers and directors of art at elementary, junior high, and high schools. In 1911 more than four thousand people used the service of "expert guidance," and already thirty-seven hundred of these were teachers and classes.[55] Echoing the beliefs of the progressive education movement in the United States, which viewed education as the fundamental means of social progress, the Metropolitan proclaimed that "the most distinctly modern educational activity of museums is to be found in cooperation with the public schools."[56] "Expert guidance" was open to everyone, including young children, "in each of whom is the capacity for aesthetic emotion waiting to be fed and developed."[57]

By the late 1930s, the work of the education departments in major museums increasingly centered around children.[58] Already in 1934 a survey of museums in the northeastern and north central United States found that all but two of the institutions visited employed some member or members of the museum staff to assist visiting school classes. The survey counted eight docents at the Metropolitan who, during the school year, were dedicated almost exclusively to school groups. At the Newark Museum every member of the staff took a turn as docent.[59] The survey found that the most common procedure was to give a preliminary slide lecture in the museum auditorium, followed by a trip through the galleries.[60]

Schoolteachers and administrators had their own particular expectations about how museums could be used for educational purposes. Aesthetic and educational goals took divergent paths, and museum teachers would be asked to take the more utilitarian direction, in the service of illustrating and supplementing what students were learning in their classrooms. As Henry W. Kent commented, the work with the New York schools promised to have its difficulties, "teachers and pupils being busy with their own curricula and our kind of art not being thought of real importance."[61] Rossiter Howard, head of education at the Cleveland Museum of Art, believed it the duty of his staff to connect the museum collections to school studies, but he also maintained the importance of aesthetic goals. Even in school programs, he said, "giving information is of small importance in comparison with getting children to see clearly and richly."[62]

In school programs as well as in adult programs, museums began to reflect progressive ideas. For the Progressive Education and Child Study movements of the period, the arts offered fertile grounds for "creative development." The title of Van Dearing Perrine's book *Let the Child Draw* (1936)[63] epitomizes a period when creativity became the chief goal of art instruction, along with the preservation of youthful spontaneity, attention to developmental tendencies, and protection of children from adult standards of what art should be. Many teachers contended that looking at the works of great artists inhibited students from being creative, as they would copy what they saw rather than experiment and create on their own. With teachers arguing that creative self-expression in children was inhibited by instruction in art appreciation, the latter virtually disappeared from most schools.[64] A lively debate about museum pedagogy ensued. The Philadelphia Museum of Art instituted high school art classes soon after opening in 1928. Although talks illustrated by slides were given occasionally, the

primary method of study was through drawing, "used extensively in the analytical study of the objects in the museum collections."[65] Thomas Munro recommended a new approach to replace the "old way," which consisted of a quick general tour of the whole building, "in which a docile class was rapidly paraded through a tiring and bewildering series of galleries," supplemented with the informational lecture, "replete with names and dates, with abstract principles and dogmatic evaluations." Munro feared such visits ran the risk of destroying the child's delight in art, and he suggested instead that docents sharply limit the number of objects children were asked to examine during their visits. He also advocated "active doing," such as making notes or drawing.[66]

In one much-discussed experiment, instructors at the Toledo Museum of Art also encouraged active participation by allowing students to pose the questions to be answered and to choose the paintings they wanted to know about. "Children taking their teacher-guide on walk-talk through the galleries unchain their own initiative. Experiment is needed to avoid the old set method of a teacher speaking to a silent group or asking her own questions to guide the class."[67] The staff at the Saint Louis Art Museum also stressed experimentation and flexibility. Many of their docents reported more interest when students conducted the lesson—that is, did the talking—"with the clever guidance of the adult."[68]

The 1930s had opened with optimism about the future of museum education. "We feel confident that museum practices will grow more effective as precise knowledge takes the place of personal impressions."[69] By the late 1930s, there was almost universal recognition that the public museum had the duty of educating the public, young and old, about its collections, although the technique and philosophy of such education were still in question.[70] The progressive movements in both children's and adult education provided many new ideas to a still unformed profession. Looking back at the 1930s from 1946, Winifred Howe remarked that "the methods and techniques were necessarily, nay happily, experimental. Every opportunity was embraced, every reasonable request granted, every method tried if it proved at all possible, all in the spirit of adventure and helpfulness."[71] Others, however, described the state of the field as "chaotic."[72]

The 1940s and '50s: Volunteerism and Experiments in Programming

The problems of training people to work as museum educators continued to be the subject of lively debate in the late 1940s. "As I see it," wrote Andrew C. Ritchie, director of the Albright Gallery, "the requirements for a good museum docent are every bit as rigorous as those for a research worker or a college teacher."[73] In a 1940 study commissioned by the American Association of Museums, Theodore Low remarked, "The fact is that to my knowledge there is no course on museum work in the country which offers a person satisfactory training in the peculiarities of museum teaching."[74] Charles Slatkin, coordinator of the New York City School Museums Program, commented in 1947 that if Harvard could train museum curators and administrators, some colleges

ought to train professionals in art appreciation. At present, he said, "museum guides and lecturers are scattered and out of touch, lost in their search for appropriate readings among the school magazines of the practise arts, the adult education journals, the periodicals on aesthetics, the scholarly bulletins and quarterlies on art history and connoisseurship."[75]

Conversely, the discipline of art history was flourishing. Panofsky described the decade from 1923 to 1933 as a golden age of art history in America.[76] He himself was one of several German art historians who immigrated to the United States in the 1930s and constituted a cohort that would eventually make U.S. universities, for the first time, international leaders in art-historical studies.[77] A 1943 survey of fifty liberal arts colleges showed that the number of art history courses offered had grown from a total of 140 in 1900 to 795 in 1940.[78] As art history developed, its influence on museum education grew. Writing in 1942, Theodore Low found that most museum instructors were trained in art history, and that the museums he studied were teaching a watered-down version of university art history, scaled to fit the "average" group of visitors.[79] But as Thomas Munro warned, the museum instructor would soon find out that it was not desirable to recite in the galleries notes taken during college art history lectures.[80] The contrast between classroom and gallery teaching was captured by Katherine B. Neilson, sometime acting director of education at the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design, when she remarked that interns in the education department needed "to swallow nine-tenths of their scholarly information and reorganize the remaining one tenth to fit the comprehension of the sixth grade—or (which is often a tougher assignment) of the ladies of the local Mother's Club or Women's Auxiliary."[81]

Although museums recognized the difficulties of teaching the wide range of audiences who visited, they often delegated public instruction to the youngest and least experienced members of the staff.[82] Some museums also began to turn to volunteers. In 1934, the year the Nelson Gallery at the Atkins Museum opened in Kansas City, Missouri, the director, Paul Gardner, happened to be seated next to Jane Hemingway Gordon, chair of the Arts and Interests Committee of the Kansas City Junior League. Learning of Gardner's interest in youth education, she suggested that Junior League members would be interested in giving tours of the museum. Gardner convinced the trustees to hire a director of junior education to coordinate a volunteer program. Working with the head of the arts committee of the Junior League, the supervisor of art education for Kansas City schools, and the schools' chairman of curriculum, the director developed training courses and tours for Kansas City students. In the first year, docents took two hundred students through the gallery. By 1953, the number had reached an astonishing forty-six thousand.[83] The program began to serve as an example for other museums. Otto Wittmann, who had worked for three years (from 1934 to 1937) in Kansas City, became associate director of the Toledo Museum of Art in 1946 and, shortly after his arrival, recommended that the museum use volunteers to expand its educational programs. He approached the president of the local Junior League to organize a program similar to the one he had seen flourish in Kansas City, and himself prepared the first

training syllabus and guidelines for gallery talks.[84] The spread of the Junior League model resulted in a prescription for the "best volunteer":

> She is a married woman, thirty to forty-five years old, with one or two children in school, and a husband in an executive position. She has attended exhibitions quite regularly for several years and has for some time brought her children to your classes and special events. She has some years of college education but is not always a graduate. She seldom has formal training related to her volunteer job but may have developed useful skills in other activities. She works well with her hands, likes people (especially children), and is at ease and talks easily with them. Most important—she has curiosity, imagination, and enthusiasm, and she believes in the importance of your organization to the community.[85]

Museum attendance increased rapidly in the 1950s.[86] The use of volunteers to teach children in museums spread. In 1950, Mrs. Albert Reeves, who had been in charge of the docent program at the Nelson, along with assistants who had conducted similar programs in Denver and Toledo, established a volunteer program at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.. However, Raymond Stites, curator in charge of education at the museum, was clearly at pains to put some distance between his institution and its volunteers, when he stressed that "these tours [for students] are not offered *by* the National Gallery of Art, but by the Junior League in cooperation with the public school system."[87] In contrast, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston proudly noted that Junior League docents led tours for more than 16,500 young visitors in 1955.[88] At the Akron Art Institute volunteers did almost all the docent work with schoolchildren, making it possible to handle "thousands of children otherwise beyond [the museum's] powers."[89]

The use of volunteers, however, met some resistance. In a 1953 issue of the *Circular on Museum Education* dedicated to "Volunteer and Part-Time Workers," only three of the thirteen education departments contributing opinions advocated using volunteers to instruct students. Most were adamantly against the practice. Theodore Low of the Walters Gallery said, "In a museum like the Walters, where so much emphasis in teaching rests on an understanding of the historical background of objects, to use volunteers would inevitably result in a lowering of standards.... Also, we hold strongly the belief that teaching the youngest child requires as much knowledge and experience as teaching adults. Few museums would be willing to let volunteers take classes of adults through the galleries. We can see no reason why the child should not likewise receive the best that we can offer."[90] As if in reply, Leroy Flint, director of the Akron Art Institute, stated that in practice, "if the smaller museum is to have a lively educational program at all much of it must be carried out by volunteers."[91] In a statistical survey of museums conducted in 1963 by the AAM, of 222 responding art museums, 131 reported using volunteers as "tour guides," and 92 reported using them to give gallery talks.[92] Almost all art museums in the United States, large and small, would eventually come to use volunteer docents to instruct visitors, some for school groups, and others for the general visitor.

Forty years after the appointment of the first paid docent in 1907, with thousands of programs behind them, museum educators were still puzzling over the goals and methods of their profession. In 1947 Charles Slatkin could still ask, "How much should one lecture; how much discuss; query? Should one educate or inform; elicit information or submerge the listener in a flow of words? Shall one aim for a moment's escape, a vision of man's unfettered genius, a sermon on mortality, the mysteries of the creative process, the enduringness of art, the elements of connoisseurship?"[93]

In school programs, museum educators continued to espouse the goals of active engagement and freedom through the 1940s and '50s. Experimentation continued everywhere. The word *game* began to appear in describing activities designed for teaching children in the galleries in this period. At the MFA in Boston, docents led "groups of six or eight at a time" on a trip "in the form of a 'museum game'" (using mimeographed sheets describing specific paintings and sculpture with words to correct or fill in) of a "treasure hunt."[94] At the Walters Art Gallery, a long-running program for fourth-graders consisted essentially of a game to break the ice, followed by a period of discussion. Lecturing was "kept to a minimum," and the children were "encouraged to talk and ask questions and theorize aloud" about what they saw.[95] Although the Metropolitan teachers were called "staff lecturers," the emphasis was on "informality," with "freedom to question or comment provided at all times. The Socratic Method, leading children to figure out their own answers by looking and reasoning, [was] a favorite technique." The word *discovery* also began to appear in the literature. In a typical formulation of the period, "Emphasis is upon enjoyment and discovery, rather than upon specific information to be remembered."[96] Likewise, the curator of education at the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design remarked that the skilled museum teacher "should strive to allow the pupil to draw his own conclusions and to find his own delight."[97]

For adult visitors, some still championed the aesthetic ideal as the goal of museum teaching. William M. Ivins Jr., curator of prints and drawings at the Metropolitan, stated unequivocally that "while there are other purposes that an art museum can have, the aesthetic one is of primary importance."[98] For Ivins the purpose of the museum was to enable people to gain firsthand acquaintance with works of art. Sounding very much like Benjamin Ives Gilman thirty years earlier, Ivins suggested that "it is much like making the acquaintance of another man or woman.... No one, not even the most learned or the most sympathetic person in the world can do more than... introduce them to one another."[99] Ivins protested against the idea that museum instructors should explain artworks to audiences unfamiliar with them. He cited Bernard Berenson's opinion that if you would understand a work of art, you should read and hear little or nothing about it until after you have become thoroughly acquainted with it—and once that has happened, any other man's statements about it are statements about himself and not about it.[100] Ivins had probably seen too much of what the artist and art historian Walter Pach had observed: visitors asking for "a sort of information capsule which will relieve them of the need to study the works before them." They can

then go through gallery after gallery without seeing a picture, their whole attention being given to the docent, "who tells his little stories, and otherwise dispenses 'education through the ear.'"[101]

Like Gilman in the early 1900s, Ivins in the 1940s proposed that museum educators might do a little more to help people make the acquaintance of artworks by helping them to learn to see for themselves. A "sympathetic speaker," he wrote, can help visitors see "through their own eyes" and later "through the spectacles of others," to counteract their lack of familiarity with artworks and above all their prejudices about how things in them are "supposed" to look.

World War II put the aesthetic ideal to a sharp test. The war provoked a flood of reflection on the nature and direction of human civilization, including many discussions of the patriotic obligation of museums to make clear the values on which Western civilization is based. In such circumstances, aesthetic appreciation would have to defer to the understanding of artworks as embodiments of historical and cultural values. Theodore Low criticized the museum talks he witnessed as "based on the idea that art is art and nothing else and that to think of it in any other fashion is sacrilege." He reminded his readers that despite its artistic merit and its importance in the history of art, "every work is a social document."[102] Roberta Fansler, an instructor at the Metropolitan, echoed Low when she wrote that "it should always be the purpose of the art educator to ask questions of the past, the answers to which throw light on the present." Lest there be any doubt about her point, she continued that the museum gallery talk afforded a perfect opportunity "for the examination of those values in our civilization for which we are fighting and out of which we must make peace."[103] Francis Henry Taylor, director of the Metropolitan, emphasized the museum's responsibility to the public of interpreting a work of art in its broadest meaning. Works of art "explain the social and political progress of mankind," he said. He criticized the narrowness of scholars in archaeology and art history who did not recognize that they were part of what he termed the broader disciplines of the humanities.[104]

Taylor's vision of the museum as illustrating the progress of mankind toward our democratic peak did not go without criticism.[105] But the idea that artworks should be discussed within the context of contemporary concerns resulted in some interesting suggestions about how this could be done.[106] In his 1948 survey of museum education, Theodore Low praised the Metropolitan for experimenting with a broad range of approaches to museum teaching. Among the programs it had begun to offer in the 1940s was an innovative series called Gallery Conversations. In December 1941, Roberta Fansler had proposed this program to Francis Henry Taylor, as one that could respond to the needs of people feeling the tensions of war rise in the city. "A museum gallery discussion is an almost made to order opportunity for the examination of values in historical perspective and in contemporary application. A very definite educational technique is needed, one of group discussion with the work of art as a starting point." Such gallery conversations would meet two distinct goals: the facilitation of discussions of

values, but also the provision of psychological solace for people suffering from anxieties generated during wartime.

Taylor approved Roberta Fansler's proposal, and for several years the Metropolitan's educational program emphasized discussion and less formal lecturing.[107] In the Metropolitan's annual report of 1944, Fansler described the program of conversations as one in which "members of the group exchange impressions, share their experiences of works of art under discussion, and do some independent thinking under the stimulus of the group itself and the guidance of the Staff Lecturer."[108] Elsewhere Fansler commented that the museum was putting increasing emphasis on informal gallery talks in which the lecturer welcomed interruptions by the group or asked questions of them.[109] The experiments did not always work. Sometimes the gallery conversation degenerated into uncontrolled monologues from the floor or reverted to lecturing by the teacher. The gallery conversation was, however, a technique "which, though requiring constant effort and skill, is highly rewarding."[110]

Gallery conversations could rely on a long-standing pedagogical rationale deriving from progressive philosophies of both elementary and adult education: "Handed down opinions are of no help to the student who must learn to use his own eyes."[111] But Theodore Low had more radical ideas. In concluding his book with recommendations for the future, Low maintained that museum teaching "must involve participation, and participation on a basis of equality. The student-teacher relationship must be kept to a minimum, with emphasis placed on the relationship of equals helping each other to find new ways of looking at old things and new ways of approaching new things." Discussion, he passionately proposed, should form the core of future museum teaching.[112] Robert Tyler Davis, director of the Portland Museum of Art in Portland, Oregon, put it another way:

> The museum educator, this time in the role of instructor, would find himself a discussion leader, concerned with relating the essences of human experience as expressed in the visual arts to the commoner experiences of daily life. We all know too well the kind of study group whose members have never felt the basic emotional impulse to study art but are eager to gather information and hear facts and stories about aesthetic experience without ever feeling it themselves. By concentrating efforts on promoting a basic emotional response to works of art the art museum can undermine the pretensions of what usually passes for art appreciation.[113]

In the 1950s, museum educators at many museums experimented with various forms of discussion in gallery teaching. The MFA in Boston tried a variation of the gallery talk, called a Gallery Discussion, led by two instructors, in which a back-and-forth discussion of a subject chosen for its "controversial" nature would take place. "Although the aim of eliciting a discussion among the audience was never fully realized, we felt from the attendance that the visitors enjoyed this type of gallery talk."[114] George D. Culler, director of museum education at the Art Institute of Chicago, perhaps

in response to the excitement generated by Katherine Kuh's experiments in the Art Institute's Gallery of Art Interpretation, initiated a number of gallery talks and study and discussion groups aimed at including the public in the interpretation of art. In late 1955, he himself led a series of "gallery explorations," called the Starting Point, which was "designed to answer some of the layman's most pressing questions." The program was short-lived, ending in 1958 when Culler became director of the San Francisco Art Museum.[115] The experiments with gallery discussion programs for adults in the 1940s and '50s thus appear always to have relied on particular educators who were committed to the format for various social, ideological, and pedagogical reasons. Despite the new theories of progressive education, educators did not develop a consensus about the rationale for their experiments in gallery discussions, and the programs did not develop enough momentum to survive long.

Judging from the calendars of almost every museum, lectures and courses were still by far the predominant museum offering to adult visitors. Museums claimed that they were simply responding to demand for a tried-and-true form of education. "Almost inevitably... one finds a situation wherein a specialist is confronted with a lay group" that has "come to hear the speaker and not themselves or other members of the group." Even Low, who recommended the discussion format so passionately, admitted that the "passive" audience at a lecture was not necessarily an inactive one. "Simply because a person's mouth and hands are still does not mean that his learning capacities are dormant. In short, the lecture is still a highly effective form of teaching and, while efforts should be made to improve technique, a form of instruction which has been in force for centuries should not be lightly thrust aside."[116] Roberta Fansler became director of education at the Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design in 1945 and brought with her the conviction that gallery discussion was "by all odds the most useful technique"—"especially," she added, "if it can be planned in relation to material presented in lectures." In the Rhode Island museum she scheduled discussions in the galleries for students who had attended art history lectures, concluding that discussion and lecture worked in tandem. "I should... be the last person to abandon the lecture and less formal gallery talk entirely," she said. "I have had too much good luck in the lectures I have heard."[117]

The 1960s and '70s: The Ivory Tower and the Discotheque

In the 1960s, new museums were springing up everywhere, and the AAM reported booming public attendance: 200 million visitors in 1960, 300 million in 1965, and 700 million in 1970.[118] A committee of art museum educators meeting at a 1972 conference in Cleveland, Ohio, drafted a "Credo for Museum Education," stating that museums were obliged to serve "the broadest portion of society within its capabilities."[119] Such promises resulted in increased educational programming in most museums.

One of the ways that American museums coped with the increasing demands posed by their growing audiences was to rely more and more on volunteers in their education programs, and indeed throughout the museum. Although the common opinion

in the 1960s in larger museums was that the volunteer was a "pest and nuisance and the fewer the volunteers the better the museum," smaller museums believed they could not survive without them, and larger museums were finding the same to be true.[120] A survey by the National Endowmen for the Arts (NEA) published in 1974 calculated that in fiscal year 1971 nearly 75 percent of art museums used volunteers. More than two-thirds of the 35,600 staff members of art museums were volunteers, and the largest single percentage of that group worked in education.[121]

It would not be long before observers would begin to ask why museums used unpaid nonprofessionals to do the bulk of their gallery teaching.[122] This development had serious repercussions for the status of education in the museum. The sociologist Vera Zolberg cited the example of curators, who had gradually excluded volunteers from their ranks, as "a sign of their strong professional standing" in the museum. In contrast, the continuing presence of volunteers in museum education showed "what a long way educators must go before they approach that level of prestige."[123] The sheer numbers of volunteer docents also impinged upon the ability of education departments to cultivate and monitor their teachers.

Museums were changing not only under the pressure of increased attendance but also under the pressures exerted by a changing culture. Inspired—or perhaps intimidated—by the activism of the period, museums became concerned with their social relevance. Protestors broke up several sessions at the 1969 AAM convention, protesting racism, sexism, and the Vietnam War. At the convention the next year, director Kyran McGrath commented, "I think we've developed a new appreciation of relevance versus tradition."[124] The 1972 "Credo for Museum Education" promised that the museum would "involve itself with the community and take positive steps to combat social injustices within the scope of its programs, exhibitions, and hiring policies, while maintaining high standards."[125]

An example of the new concern for social relevance was the exhibition Harlem on My Mind (1969), which used photographs, photomurals, slide and film projections, videotapes, and sound recordings to document Harlem's history from 1900 through the 1960s. The purpose, according to Thomas Hoving, director of the Metropolitan, was to attract "a new urban audience to an established museum."[126] The exhibition became highly controversial and drew a storm of criticism for displaying material that was not art, for politicizing the museum, and for failing to be truly representative of the Harlem community. The show became the focus of a debate between two visions of the art museum, "the ivory tower versus the discotheque," as the critic Grace Glueck put it.[127] One Metropolitan Museum trustee protested that "the Museum shouldn't be given over to "the wanton processing of hordes of people. We should worry more about the quality of what happens in it than the quantity."[128] But the tide of demographic pressure and social reform was running toward opening doors rather than closing them, and museum education responded with new programs and teaching methods to reach visitors and students.

In 1978, supported by a grant from the NEA, the Council on Museums and Education in the Visual Arts published a telephone book–size compendium entitled

The Art Museum as Educator, the first comprehensive attempt to document museum education programs in the United States. The book devoted about 250 pages to "The Art Museum and the Young, Their Teachers, and Their Schools." The survey indicated that the traditional tour, "in which docents herd children through the museum, lecturing all the way," remained the status quo. But many museum educators were now opposed to the use of lecture techniques and made the argument that art history was not the best—or the only—way to reach their students. The study cited encouraging signs of change, toward an "emphasis on direct involvement, on personal discovery, on creative activity" in such activities as music, dance, and drama as they related to art, mirroring changes that had been occurring in arts education in schools.[129]

Support for the arts and education swelled in the U.S. during the 1960s, driven by increased funding from the federal government, toward "the pursuit of American greatness," as President Lyndon Johnson put it in a statement issued on the proposed National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities in 1965.[130] With the support of initiatives by a new federal arts bureaucracy, the so-called "arts-in-education movement" began in schools in the late 1960s.[131] The movement called for education in *all* the arts, including dance, theater, and creative writing, as well as music and art, and aimed at giving students the "experience" of art—through making it, but also through watching art being made by others, including actors, musicians, painters, and so on. Similarly, visual artists, community theater and dance troupes, and musical groups were enlisted to give performances in museum galleries.

Art classes had long been a traditional offering in museums, but now they became increasingly important, as creative activity came to rival art history as the favored approach to art appreciation. The Toledo Museum of Art, which had offered children art and music lessons since 1903, made it a focus of their educational activities. For Victor D'Amico, head of the Museum of Modern Art's education department from 1937 to 1970, and perhaps "the single most influential museum educator of his generation," studio classes were the heart of museum education. "When people know how to create," he said, "they respect others' creativity."[132] Adult classes aimed "not to produce artists but to develop more aesthetically-sensitive individuals who will derive greater pleasure and understanding from the work of artists of the past and present."[133] In 1970, the Whitney Museum of American Art began its famed, and exclusive, Independent Study Program, offering each year a semester of advanced study in studio art or in art history and museum studies to two groups of artists, one made up mainly of black and Puerto Rican teenagers, the other of promising college students from throughout the country. Barbara Rose, writing in *New York* magazine, suggested that the studio project "has saved the lives of talented ghetto youngsters, many of whom, considered hopelessly delinquent by their public schools, have been given the possibility of becoming constructive artists and channeling their energies into creative rather than destructive, antisocial forms of expression." Rose also found hope in the newly developed willingness of public schools to release "problem" children to museum education departments to attend classes.[134]

More traditional museums such as the Metropolitan maintained long-standing "methods and materials" courses for adults, instructing participants on the various media and artistic techniques represented in their collections. In 1968 the Metropolitan offered a new pilot class entitled Old Masters: New Apprentices, which was designed to explore whether the museum's collections "could play a significant role in a studio course for underprivileged teen-agers." The program introduced the students to the museum's galleries and encouraged them to spend time observing, sketching, and engaging in group discussion. "Often we would suggest a different painting to each student to be looked at carefully." The instructors soon discovered that "our most effective teaching method was a flexible personal approach to the course." What proved most successful was "letting the kids wander at random through the collection, 'digging' artists they like." "By choosing their soul mates through history the kids also strengthened their own identities as artists"; identifying with great artists of the past also gave "to many students the security of belonging to a tradition."[135]

Many education departments replaced the traditional lecture tour with activities devised to encourage participation, discovery, and the stimulation of children's natural curiosity.[136] The National Collection of Fine Arts introduced elementary schoolchildren to works of art with the techniques of improvisational theater.[137] The Cleveland Museum of Art offered Dancer in the Galleries, encouraging children to "use their bodies and to enter into the movement of the works of art they are looking at."[138] With visiting groups of teenagers at the Metropolitan, educators experimented with "modified forms of sensitivity training as a kind of tuning up for experiencing works of art."[139] The most often stated goal of these programs was teaching visual awareness or perception: how to see.[140] Instructors at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, who described the process as "learning to look," asked young students to apply to works of art their everyday perceptual skills, engaging them in focused looking and active searching.[141] "Learning to see" or "learning to look" often meant learning to recognize the formal elements of art. The High Museum in Atlanta, for example, offered a program to children that consisted of six sessions on the themes of line, movement, rhythm, and mood.[142] In Cleveland, "sixth-grade boys squatting and rising and moving in an effort to reproduce the movement of line in a Chinese handscroll or younger children dancing in front of a Morris Louis burst of color" were "not uncommon sights in the galleries."[143] What museum educators did seem to agree upon was that teaching students to see did not mean looking at art historically. In her 1970 study, which included recommendations on the educational programs at the Metropolitan, Barbara Newsom remarked that facts might get in the way of observation for those who were new to art."[144] The very next year, Harry J. Parker III, vice director for education at the Metropolitan, reported that the emphasis in high school programs had shifted from providing art-historical information to developing visual perception.[145] Patterson Williams, explaining the development of so-called perception games used at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, remarked that "the basic thing about using methods of perception is to forget the necessity of giving historical information."[146]

Probably the best-known museum program instituted in the 1970s was Arts Awareness, started at the Metropolitan in 1972 by the head of high school programs, Philip Yenawine, and funded by the NEA and New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA). According to Yenawine, Arts Awareness was an attempt to "break down the barriers between high school students and art objects and the institutions which house these objects." Its creators "wanted to see if by using various means of creative expression such as dance and photography, we could get young people to respond on their own terms to things they see." Yenawine advocated "non-verbal and non-information-based" approaches to this task. These approaches were based on the idea that art could be accessed through a universal language. As Yenawine remarked, "certain aesthetic qualities are common to all the arts, such things as texture, line, space, structure, color and mood... translatable from one art form to another."[147] With the guidance of dancers and musicians, students "performed" a painting's line, texture, spatial relationships, color, or mood. "With Arts Awareness," said Yenawine, "we could do a *true* movement thing, and they loved it."[148] Although Arts Awareness ended officially at the Metropolitan in 1974, its approach was continued by Artists Teaching, Inc., a nonprofit group funded for two years by the NYSCA, whose members demonstrated this approach to docents and staff at museums throughout the state.[149]

All of these approaches were varieties of aesthetic formalism based on direct experience of objects rather than historical understanding of them. Implied in these approaches was the idea that observers relate through a physiological response to the basic forms of a work of art, that artworks are accessible through a kind of empathy.[150] John T. Murphey, museum educator and fine arts professor, explained, "The only correct use of a museum education department is as a catalyst to experience . . . the amplification of a visitor's feeling rather than his knowledge."[151] Harry J. Parker III, trying to understand what it meant to be current, pledged that museums would "ride the wave of feeling over thought which seems to be mounting today."[152] Information and art history were lost in the moment. George Heard Hamilton, director of the Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, maintained that a museum's duty was to provide "the most fundamental aesthetic experiences within its power, rather than exercises in historical retrospection."[153]

Criticism of the "sensitivity" movement in museum education was not slow to come. In 1980 Robert W. Ott rhapsodized about museum educators' diversified educational programs and their "sensory-based approaches to encountering art," but already only two years earlier, Susan Mayer, lecturer of art education and coordinator of museum education at the University of Texas at Austin, had remarked, "We could see that children were enjoying dancing in the gallery—but were they learning anything?"[154] A few years later Laura Chapman sardonically admonished educators to "consider when and where and why you might ask children to lie down on a cold slab floor and try to become purple triangles." Improvisation and discovery do have a place, she said, "but contemplation and disciplined search should also be encouraged. It is easy to underestimate how much young children can learn and enjoy the very process of learning."[155]

The 1970s ended with a sense of exhaustion on the part of many museum educators. Marcella Brenner, founder and director of the master's program in museum education at George Washington University, criticized museums for attempting to do "everything for everybody." Looking ahead, Tom Freudenberger, director of the Museum Program at the NEA, remarked, "We are past the stage of new ideas; there are no brilliant things ahead."[156]

The 1980s: An Uncertain Profession

In 1980, when Barbara Newsom, coeditor of *The Art Museum as Educator*, looked ahead, she saw a "decade of uncertainty" for museum educators.[157] Indeed, the 1980s would be characterized by a feeling on the part of many museum educators that the field was in dire need of firmer intellectual grounding. As Inez Wolins, assistant coordinator of education at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, remarked, the profession was long overdue for a "solid theoretical framework."[158] "In our daily lives, museum teachers, docents and museum education administrators desperately need to articulate the theoretical superstructure within which they operate," wrote Patterson Williams, director of education at the Denver Art Museum. [159] Williams herself contributed a "theory of instruction" based on more than a decade of experience at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The 1970s had ended with a challenge, framed in terms of the question of the right relation between the twin goals of intense, personal experiences of objects and learning about them, and Williams addressed that question with her theory of "object-oriented learning in museums."[160] She made her position clear from the very beginning, remarking that in thinking about the learning that goes on in museums, "the primary aim . . . must be to bring together people and objects not people and information about objects." The best goal for museum education programs, she wrote, "is to help visitors have *personally significant experiences with art objects*." There is a "strong and viable" role for peripheral information, about an artist's life or painting techniques, for example, but "as an introduction directed toward enhancing the visitor's experience of the object and making it more intense and meaningful."

Williams recommended that museum educators should encourage visitors to actively engage with art objects in four main ways: by slowing down and focusing on their various aspects; by valuing personal reactions and associations with them; by making judgments about them; and by thinking about them in cultural context. She was aware that the fourth approach fit somewhat uneasily with the others, being dependent on information not discoverable through the visitor's own observations, but she acknowledged that providing it to visitors was a "viable" method of teaching. For Williams, though, learning in the museum was primarily a matter of the visitor's direct experience of the object. To the extent that one could speak about the meaning of works of art, she suggested that "a work of art means to us whatever effects (not necessarily emotions) it evokes in us."

Williams's active and visitor-centered approach derived from the stream of progressive education that had influenced museum education since the 1930s,

from fact, and taught looking skills.[166] These prescriptions exemplified a growing consensus among museum educators in support of learner-centered approaches that emphasized students' active participation through discussion, with a corresponding de-emphasis for teachers on lecturing and other methods of imparting information.

In their discussions of master teaching in the museum, the participants in the Denver Meeting raised the issue of the *subject matter* of museum teaching. Issues about subject matter arose in the course of discussions about the relation of museum educators to contemporary trends in art education. Art education traditionally focused on art making, but the mid-1960s saw the beginning of a growing movement to add art history and art criticism to the curriculum.[167] The resulting initiatives, including aesthetic education, discipline-based art education (DBAE; see below), and visual literacy, raised many issues about the content of arts education.

In the 1960s the term *aesthetic education* began to appear with regularity in the field of art education.[168] The term referred generally to the tendency to add appreciative, critical, and historical activities to traditional art-making activities. When in 1986, Ralph A. Smith, the movement's foremost proponent, was commissioned by the National Art Education Association to write the essay "Excellence in Art Education," the result was a powerful piece of advocacy for aesthetic education.[169] The participants in the Denver Meeting were clearly aware of the recently published essay, putting "definition of aesthetic education for museums" high on their list of discussion points. Smith made aesthetic experience the central goal of aesthetic education. Although his definition of aesthetic experience was complex, drawn as it was from the writings of several contemporary philosophers, his discussion of the concept challenged museum educators to broaden the sources of their ideas as they struggled to define it for the museum.[170] Participants in the Denver Meeting were aware of the challenge, including on their list of important issues "developing a model of excellence for interactive learning and aesthetic experiencing."[171]

Smith recommended teaching students both art history and the skills of *aesthetic criticism,*[172] reflecting a mid-1960s belief that reform of the art curriculum should be based on organized bodies of knowledge and specific methods of inquiry defined as *disciplines*. When in 1982 the J. Paul Getty Trust established a center for education in the arts, it gave substantial support to discipline-based art education (DBAE), comprising the disciplines of art history, art criticism, aesthetics, and art practice. With the support of the Getty Trust, DBAE quickly became the most prominent approach in the field of art education, expanding to museums as well as classrooms.[173]

As an example, in 1986, the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded a grant to the Denver Art Museum for Piecing Together the Past: A Humanities Approach to Learning from Art Objects, a project aimed at teaching students ages ten to fifteen "how to explore art works and the social contexts in which they were created." With DBAE in mind, the model project proposed teaching students to "piece together the past" using the methods of art history and criticism. Museum staff and volunteers collaborated with almost two dozen humanities scholars to develop a model and teach it

to students in two-week summer workshops. The model included extensive "methodology charts" of the knowledge and skills characterizing the disciplines of art history and art criticism, as well as lesson plans and resources for three units of instruction. Evaluations were generally positive, but pitfalls encountered in the course of the project reflected those of DBAE in general, including the complex problem of how to define DBAE's component disciplines adequately. The project also raised the issue of whether the time spent learning about history and critical methods might detract attention from the objects themselves—whether, as a number of commentators wondered, the units were "object-oriented enough."[174]

As Danielle Rice observed, although museums might teach skills parallel to those taught through DBAE, the difference was that in the museum "the emphasis was on deriving meaning, not on learning the particular language or vocabulary of a given discipline." DBAE also proved to be too rigid an approach for museum teachers. In the museum, Rice noted, in contrast to the classroom, deriving meaning from artworks is a holistic process rather than one easily divisible into specific discipline areas. Museum educators are constantly shifting gears, she said, "switching hats, being now an art historian, now a critic or a philosopher or an artist. They do this in order to respond actively to the perceptions, questions, and issues raised by their visitors."[175]

The participants at the Denver Meeting also considered the new concept of visual literacy in museum education, which was commonly taken to entail "reading" the elements of art, more or less as a reader interprets the words of a sentence. But as Rice went on to note, the formal elements of art are part of a larger, culturally bound system for understanding and exhibiting art, accessible through "a very specific set of analytical and critical skills derived from esthetics, art criticism, studio practice, and art history."[176] Rice referred to DBAE as an approach designed precisely to provide such skills. But as she stated, visual literacy remained an elusive goal for museum educators, since the necessary knowledge and skills required "more than a brief, occasional encounter with a skilled museum teacher and a beautiful work of art."[177] Museums can partner with schools, but cannot expect to teach visual literacy by themselves.

The participants at the Denver Meeting raised again the question of the place of art history in museum teaching. A 1981 survey of museum educators at forty major art museums had shown that 41 percent had majored in art history as undergraduates, and 44 percent had graduate degrees in art history. Although 84 percent of those responding were involved with museum teaching, only 13 percent had graduate training in education. "As indicated by their formal training, the professional literature they read, and the conferences they attend, they [museum educators] see themselves primarily as art historians."[178] Elliot Eisner and Stephen Dobbs came to the same conclusion. "Museum educators regard art history as the intellectual core of their field and have given it the highest priority in their own professional preparation."[179] At a 1985 two-day follow-up meeting of some of the participants in the Eisner-Dobbs study, there was a consensus that "art history is the essential discipline, and that museum education is a form of

practice of art history." One participant guessed that about 60 percent of teaching in museums depended on art history, about 30 percent on education.[180]

Not everyone agreed that art history should be at the core of the practice. Danielle Rice remarked that museum educators "must give viewers a hint of how informed vision works," and agreed that knowledge of art history can inform and enrich the museum experience. But she also pointed out the importance of giving visitors the opportunity to look and draw their own conclusions. Teaching art history should not be the goal of museum teaching: "history is not learned for its own sake."[181] The philosopher Harold Osborne cautioned that with "the natural addiction of museums and their directors to the recent science of art history," there was a danger of substituting the acquisition of information for the art of appreciation. It is an occupational hazard of art historians, said Osborne, that they may know all there is to know about a work of art, all that anyone else has ever said about it, and yet be unable to contemplate it aesthetically as a work of art."[182]

In the 1980s there was almost no published research into audience response to artworks,[183] and participants in the Denver Meeting asked if they should be doing audience studies. When Patterson Williams defined the goal of museum education as "helping visitors to have personally significant experiences with art objects," she defined such experiences on the basis of her own experience, and that of "curatorial staff, art historians, critics, and artists."[184] In 1985 the Getty Center for Education in the Arts and the J. Paul Getty Museum commissioned the social scientist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and researcher Rick Robinson to do a study on aesthetic experience, and they based their study on the experiences of museum professionals. When in 1987 the Getty Center for Education in the Arts and the J. Paul Getty Museum sponsored a two-year focus-group research project on visitor perceptions and attitudes about art museums,[185] it represented a groundbreaking attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of art museum visitors themselves. Art museums had done scores of audience studies, primarily for marketing purposes, but the focus-group project was an attempt to probe the thoughts, emotions, and attitudes rather than the behavior of visitors. At a colloquium held to conclude the study in 1989, Neil Harris referred to the veil being lifted from the museum's most mysterious and yet most typical function, the encounter with the work of art.[186] The role of gallery teaching in facilitating such encounters was not a topic of the discussions, however. Indeed, one of the participants in the project's general discussion, longtime museum educator Nancy Berry, voiced wonder at why there had not been more discussion of teaching methods and the recent research that had been done in that area.[187] The whole question of the relation of audience studies to museum teaching remained open.

The 1980s thus turned out indeed to be a decade of uncertainty for museum education. Commentators from both inside and outside the field raised a storm of questions about the goals, subject, and methods of museum teaching, and educators would continue to struggle to answer them, and to formulate a theoretical framework to contain them.

The 1990s and 2000s: Postmodernism and Constructivism

In the 1990s, the museum experience as defined by experts would be contrasted and opposed to "visitor experience," as museums began to study their audiences and to emphasize "visitor-centered" learning. For Danielle Rice, the real issue for museum educators was the need to address the gap between the culture of experts and the culture of the average museum visitor:

> Museum visitors have traditionally been regarded as needing to learn the cultural value system of the art world, and not the other way around... thus one might say that within this context the role of the art educator was that of a missionary: passing on the culture of the dominant group to those natives supposedly devoid of real culture of their own. Many museum educators have become increasingly uncomfortable with playing this role exclusively. In recent years they have made great strides in learning more about their visitors, and this newfound knowledge... has resulted in a new attitude of respect for and interest in the perspectives of art-world outsiders.[188]

In 1995, Lois Silverman, professor and director of the Center on History Making in America at Indiana University, observed that the last ten years had "witnessed a new age in human science: a paradigm shift to a broad academic and political perspective referred to in various circles as post-modernism, constructivism, contemporary literary theory, or—perhaps most colloquially—*meaning making*." The shift highlighted the role and authority of the individual, or "reader," in shaping the meaning of a "text," or experience. In the museum, it highlighted a visitor's "active role in creating meaning of a museum experience through the context he/she brings."[189]

Silverman was referring to historical changes in the way critics and philosophers viewed the concept of *interpretation*.[190] Interpretation had been part of the museum enterprise from its beginnings, manifested in the arrangement and display of works in their galleries. It was not a widely debated concept, however. When people thought about it, the goal of interpretation was simply, as Benjamin Ives Gilman put it, "to help us divine what their [the artworks'] authors meant to say." In art history, the monographic narrative of the man and his work exemplified this view. By midcentury, however, literary critics and philosophers attacked this view, turning away from what they called the "intentional fallacies" of such interpretation; their criticisms culminated in Roland Barthes's declaration of the "death of the author" in 1968. In art, formalist interpretations that focused on the internal content and structure of the works themselves held sway at midcentury, supported by trends in contemporary art. We have seen how many museum education programs reflected formalist viewpoints. Toward the end of the century, as the limitations of such an approach became apparent, theorists developed philosophies of interpretation emphasizing the reader/viewer's role in the making of meaning. Silverman was referring to the many currents of thought moving in this direction.

In museums, the interpretive turn was manifested by the embrace of constructivist theories of learning. *Constructivism* is a theory about knowledge and learning. The

theory describes knowledge as comprising not truths about an independent reality to be discovered and transmitted but explanations constructed by humans engaged in meaning making in cultural and social communities of discourse. Learning takes place as individuals struggle to make meaning, assimilating and adapting conceptual schemes and structures to new experiences.[191] Some museum educators fully embraced this viewpoint. An instructor of museum education at Bank Street College in New York remarked, "My orientation is to acknowledge that museum visitors are active inquirers who construct meaning, and therefore knowledge, about museum objects in relationship to themselves and their views of the world."[192] In this view, the museum should be seen not so much as a place where knowledge is transmitted, but rather as a place where knowledge is produced.[193] It was time to create ways to share authority for the making of meaning in museums, to "hand the interpretive process itself over to visitors so that they may discover for themselves the meanings that speak to them."[194]

As one educator put it, "Museums may be the perfect environments in which to use constructivist theory," since they are full of objects that "invite meaningful experiences."[195] In a constructivist approach, the meaning of the objects is treated not as being inherent in them but as created when observers interact with them, generating and assigning meanings to them.[196] A teacher will try to stimulate curiosity and imagination, provoke thought, and connect the viewers' prior experience with the objects. She will "invite and motivate visitors to form their own interpretations, ask and pursue their own questions, and find personal relevance in the museum's exhibits and programs."[197]

Constructivism proposed that visitors should be empowered to accept their role in interpreting objects, and many educators came to see their task as one of teaching skills. According to *The Docent Educator*, "What we hope to impart has changed from pre-determined facts about our collections to skills—ways of thinking within a discipline, methods of gleaning information from primary sources, and ways of placing what is learned into a larger, more meaningful context."[198] Philip Yenawine, who as we have seen had been instrumental in developing experimental approaches in the late 1960s, reengaged with a different set of ideas, explaining, "I am interested in using museum time to help people learn what I call 'viewing skills.' By which I mean increase in observational skills, ability to probe, ability to find a variety of meanings, openness to the unfamiliar, and so forth."[199] Most educators agreed that they aimed at a sense of empowerment on the part of visitors. The "sense of enhancement/advancement—if consciously recognized by the student or visitor—empowers him or her for the next encounter with learning/experience."[200]

Facilitating visitors' interpretations required museum educators to emphasize particular skills of their own. They were expected to be skilled in "listening, supporting, prodding, and negotiating."[201] Yenawine put it succinctly, "I become a facilitator. I don't tell. I ask."[202] Indeed, asking questions continued to be the most commonly recommended method of gallery teaching through the 1990s. As the *Handbook of the 1991 National Docent Symposium* advised, "Giving tours is an art. It doesn't rely on

telling visitors what you know, but on asking questions that lead them to personal discoveries."[203] Throughout its run from 1991 to 2003, *The Docent Educator* exhorted docents to use the "inquiry method," which by definition consisted primarily of asking open-ended questions.[204] The goals of questioning strategies were to "encourage active thinking and participatory learning."[205] Properly formulated questions helped visitors learn the skills of observing, comparing, classifying, and hypothesizing.[206]

In the early 1990s, Yenawine and Abigail Housen collaborated on the creation of a sequential curriculum for classroom teachers to introduce discussion of works of art to their students. Their curriculum developed into an approach called Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), which became steadily more and more widely adopted, in museums as well as classrooms. The development of VTS reflected perfectly the educational currents of its time. The founders of VTS invoked Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky and suggested a way to translate the complexities of constructivism into a practical curriculum. VTS prescribed three simple questions designed to help teachers facilitate discussions that empowered students themselves, encouraging them to develop their own interpretations of artworks.[207]

The literature of VTS advised educators never to be the source of information or opinion.[208] Yenawine explained that the process he taught omitted what he called the "information surround," including information about an artist's life, how the object was made, stylistic implications, and even specific symbolism. He protested that he wasn't against information, but emphasized that connecting with art "begins with looking at it," and if in teaching we explain a work of art, "we teach passive reception, not active looking."[209] (For a more thorough consideration of the VTS method, see chapter 6 of this book.)

Many older, more experienced docents resisted the new approaches to gallery teaching. They were accustomed to traditional notions of education and had experienced prior museum education regimes, under which they had been instructed to transmit to the public the authoritative wisdom of curators. They had indeed often volunteered precisely in order to gain privileged access to the curators' expert knowledge; becoming, at least to some degree, experts themselves had been their main motivation in working as docents in the first place. Furthermore, museum educators themselves were not unanimous in endorsing the reforms and improvements necessary in gallery education, and many longtime docents were tossed back and forth by changing docent coordinators with different ideas.

The visitors were not all ready to do away with the facts either. The focus group study of visitor attitudes and expectations sponsored by the Getty Center for Education in the Arts and the J. Paul Getty Museum published in 1991 found generally that "information increases appreciation of the art. The more visitors know about a particular object and its background, the greater their connection with it."[210] As the authors of the *Handbook of the 1991 National Docent Symposium* remarked, personal experiences and information are not mutually exclusive: "They go hand in hand to create meaning for visitors."[211] Danielle Rice agreed that learning involves analysis and construction

of narratives on the part of visitors, but advocated "an information layering approach" that combined viewers' initial responses with "carefully selected information drawn from that vast universe of facts." The best use of information, she found, "is to reinforce and underline viewers' natural responses to a work of art."[212]

Does handing over the interpretive process to visitors necessarily mean that the views of art historians, critics, curators, and museum educators themselves should be pushed aside? In 1998, in clear reference to VTS, Danielle Rice commented that one of the challenges to museum education in recent years was "a rampant relativism that results from maintaining that no one meaning is privileged over another." She cautioned against an approach that might stimulate thoughtful engagement with art, but could also be misused by museum educators to "abdicate the responsibility of actually teaching visitors about the broader, consensual understandings that constitute an informed perspective."[213] Rice's cautions about relativism were echoed by Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, who pointed out that interpretive acts themselves are not the act of isolated individuals but the products of both individuals and communities: "Personal interpretations are forged through social and cultural frameworks."[214] More recently, Cheryl Meszaros called the idea that individual interpretation should dominate the "whatever interpretation."[215] She protested against the tendency for museums to prioritize individual experiential knowledge by devaluing culturally shared or received knowledge. Of course we each make meaning through our interactions with the world, she said, but "we do not do this in isolation from received ideas and language."[216]

2010: Challenges for the Future

For the museum teacher, the crucial question is what these changing conceptions of interpretation mean in pedagogical terms. The question is not so much how to craft pedagogy that reflects what is current as how to craft pedagogy that makes apparent and available to the public a broad range of interpretive approaches. One of the things teachers can gain from their history is not only a repertory of teaching strategies but also an understanding of the concepts of interpretation underlying those strategies. A good museum instructor brings to her task many resources, including her own experience with the objects, the experience of previous visitors, and knowledge of art history and criticism. She also has at her disposal an inventory of interpretive viewpoints, and an understanding of the historical and logical relations among them. Taken together, all of these resources allow her to engage with visitors in new, dynamic and wide-ranging acts of interpretation. She must develop pedagogy that genuinely respects everyone's voices: the visitors', her own, curators' and art historians', and the voices of tradition.

The central task of the museum gallery teacher seems simple—to bring people and art together. But how that interaction is understood, and how a teacher is to bring it about turns out to be anything but simple. The first century of gallery teaching reveals the remarkable variety of ways educators have struggled with the philosophical puzzles and negotiated the everyday problems of museum teaching, responding in turn to changing ideas about museums and education, to changing beliefs about

interpretation, to social change and political events, and to the demands of an ever-changing public. As they enter the twenty-first century, educators continue to search for a principled and consistently thoughtful approach to their work in the face of ever-new challenges.

Notes

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