

The American Museum Volunteer Docent: A Personal Reflection

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In a poem by the early twentieth century Bohemian/Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke, “Archaischer Torso Apollos” (Torse Archaique D’Apollon), the speaker is so affected by the ancient sculpture of the Olympian God in a museum that the statue speaks to him directly at the poem’s end and tells him that he must change his life, presumably his priorities: “Du mußt dein Leben ändern.” The poem is relevant to my subject, museum volunteer docents, in so far as these docents experience something that could be called life changing through art and through what they do in art museums, and much of this “change” comes from where they are in their own lives. Most docents are older adults who have had long careers outside of art and museums, but they have found a special place and “calling” within both.

I am going first to focus on what older adults like myself who become docents do as intermediaries in the reception and appreciation of art objects for adult visitors and for classes of school children. The English word “docent” entered the language in the nineteenth century through German, originating in the Latin verb “docere,” meaning to teach. It soon signified someone who leads guided tours, particularly in museums. In French the closest translation is simply “guide.” In the US museum guides, or docents as they are called, give tours designed to help visitors appreciate and contextualize the museum’s art objects, whether the visitors are a general audience visiting the museum as tourists for the first time, or well-read and sophisticated people returning after many visits, or children in a school group, or class. And for each group docents are both teachers and guides.

In New York City where I live and work, most of the major museums, including the two that I am a docent at--The Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Morgan Library and Museum-- use docents as part of their educational mission for groups ranging from just a few visitors to 30 or more. What makes this phenomenon of the museum guide, or docent, special is that the vast majority are volunteers who do what they do for the pleasure of doing it with no salary or personal compensation. Volunteerism is a long-standing practice in the US and is accepted if perhaps somewhat problematic in our museum world. Suffice it to say that the docents are rarely people who need income, despite the fact that from a purely economic perspective they represent free labor. So what do these docents do; who are they; how are they trained; why do they do it; and what is the impact of what they do, including on themselves? My comments are based on my experience as a docent in New York City, whose cultural relationship to the rest of

the US is similar to that of Paris to the rest of France. So what I say must be understood from a personal as well as a New York cultural perspective, and even though there may be close similarities between my experiences and those of docents elsewhere in the US, there are, undoubtedly, differences.

Typically the job of the docent is to lead a group around a museum and present to them between 3 and 10 objects, all usually connected to a theme: work, leisure, families, visions of war. Sometimes these works are chosen as highlights of the entire collection as they are at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art; sometimes they are from a specific or specialized area of the same museum—Medieval Europe, Contemporary African Sculpture, American Photography. At each work the docent gives a presentation and attempts to lead a brief discussion: for adult groups the docent does most of the talking and gets the visitors to look closely at the work, emphasizing the visual and cultural issues that art historians focus upon (subject, perspective, color, texture, technique, historical resonance, etc.). But the docent is not a professional art historian and does not try to mimic what one of them might say. Beginning with what the visitors see for themselves in the work, the docent attempts to build a presentation around their observations and understanding of the work in an inductive and incremental fashion that makes the tour dynamic and interactive. Based on these observations she, or he, asks questions that try to enrich and expand what the visitors have seen for themselves. The goal is for the visitors to both appreciate and understand the significance of the work and its place in the museum's collection.

For school groups the docent does many of the same things, but the emphasis is more on process, engagement, and inquiry than on information or any kind of knowledge base. The docent wants the children to relate to, engage with, and experience the art as directly and personally as possible by asking them open-ended questions designed to make them react to and think about what they are seeing (often to each other). Unlike the adult tours, there is almost always a creative activity connected to tours for children — sketching, writing brief impressions, vignettes, or poems, or physically dramatizing what they see in the art works in a kind of tableau vivante. Both of these kinds of tours and activities require the docent to be trained and educated, to possess a certain amount of inspiration and understanding in addition to knowledge, to have communication and pedagogy skills, and mostly to have enthusiasm and life-affirming energy. For adults the docent is an essential source of background, information, context, and insight, while for children the docent alternately plays the role of teacher, enabler, and perhaps surrogate grandparent. For both groups the docent tries to make sure that the art is not merely looked at and discussed, but experienced.¹

Each museum has a different emphasis or philosophy of the mission, or goal, of the docent. In New York's Metropolitan Museum (our Louvre) which has the largest audience of any cultural institution in the city (more than 7,000,000 visitors last year) and more than 400 docents, the goal for adult tours is to provide a general introductory understanding and level of interest that emphasizes the visual and the work's artistry, or what visitors--most of whom are tourists--can see and understand themselves and connect to the broader history of civilization that this encyclopedic institution tries to present. By necessity the guides select well-known works by well-known artists as centerpieces of their tours, but integrating them within a framework that holds the tour together is more important than identifying masterpieces. At The Morgan Library and Museum, which specializes in the history of writing, manuscripts, books, photograph, drawing, and prints, and has some 40 docents, the goal of tours is more intellectually ambitious and there are fewer of such well-known works, unless we count objects such as its three Gutenberg Bibles. Founded by the financier/collector Pierpont Morgan as his personal library collection at the turn of the twentieth century, the Morgan which attracts a different group of visitors than the Metropolitan asks its docents to impart a deeper, more scholarly understanding of the works and to show where they fit into the history of writing. The emphasis is on the connection between the visual and the verbal, and between writing and art especially in the case of books, or manuscripts, that are themselves works of art.

In different ways New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, The Guggenheim Museum, and The Frick Collection all share this more "intellectual" and specialized approach in relation to the emphasis of their own particular collections. I believe this is also true of many other museums in New York City and elsewhere. (There are museums, however, such as New York's Museum of Modern Art, that do not use docents but instead employ professional educators to give tours.) For school groups the goals are similar from one institution to the next, even though there are differences among museums. The docent's mission is in this case to enhance the personal and educational experience of the children, many of whom have entered a museum, or are looking at artwork, for the first time. Often the objects on the tour and the docent's presentation and agenda are directly connected to the curriculum the children are studying at school, but often the children have no notion of what is meant by terms such as the Greco-Roman World, The Middle Ages, etc. In my experience many have no idea of what Europe is, and are unable to identify a country there. This becomes a challenge for the docent who must be skilled in finding a kind of cultural common ground with the children that can become meaningful to them. Some of this can be achieved through a co-

curricular art activity, such as sketching an object, and hopefully through a follow-up assignment at school where the children will connect with what they have seen and learned. But unfortunately this often is not the case.

Who are the docents? Where do they come from? What were their previous lives? How are they trained? What is their impact? Why do they volunteer to do what they do? And how are they chosen? All museums that have docents go through an extensive and rigorous screening and a competitive process of selection. Many more apply than are accepted, and having a background in a field that seems like a good match for the museum will not necessarily lead to being chosen. Generally docents are older adults. I would say the age range is from the mid 50s to the mid 80s, but I have encountered docents younger and older than that. By and large, women outnumber men at least 3 to 1. Most are retired. Many like myself, are former professors, or teachers; some are businesspeople, civil servants, or doctors, or people who worked in the media or finance, but perhaps the largest group is retired lawyers. Interestingly, very few are art historians, although all share a love of art and ideas, and are looking for a meaningful way to learn, work and connect to others at this stage of life. For many the chance to study, talk about art, and teach is a compensation for working careers that often provided limited personal or intellectual fulfillment and connection to others (particularly in the cases of lawyers and those in finance).³ The docents' motivation is to have a meaningful post-career occupation and the opportunity to impact the lives of others by sharing their knowledge and enthusiasm for art at this period of their lives. Their reward is a new and fulfilling form of study, learning, and teaching and the chance to work among so much that is beautiful and inspiring: it is at its best a kind of rebirth experience such as Rilke's poem conveys.³

The basic study, or training, can take anywhere from 4 months to a year and more (as it does at The Metropolitan Museum), and many museums require library research of their docents and ongoing additional training to learn new collections, or to prepare for new exhibits that they will give tours of. The Metropolitan Museum, where training takes a year, requires written papers about art objects of their trainees that conform to guidelines for academic research, including sources and bibliography; The Morgan Library requires docents to know the permanent collection well, and expects those who are training for special exhibits to read the latest scholarship on the exhibition's subject. The general training in all institutions involves mandatory classes which focus on the particular areas of the museum's collections, usually led by curators, and ongoing pedagogical and educational discussion sessions led by professional museum educators

especially for docents who work with school groups. At their best, training sessions give docents a sound knowledge of the collection and a shared sense of purpose, or community, in addition to the pleasure of learning new knowledge and skills. At many museums, such as The Metropolitan, the docents have well developed, autonomous, and self-administered volunteer organizations that work closely with the museum staff in setting guidelines and standards. These organizations play a key role in training new recruits and in keeping up with innovation at the museum and in the larger field of museum education.

At The Cloisters—the medieval site museum in northern Manhattan that is part of The Metropolitan Museum and our version of Cluny—where I give tours to school children, the docents study objects from the collection every year to add to the thematic tours they give on a range of topics, such as the Medieval Journey, Stories and Legends, Medieval Architecture, or The Medieval Court. The Court Tour, in particular, focuses on the world of castles, courts, and medieval nobles, and the art objects created for or about them. A typical docent presentation might involve helping children understand the various levels of meaning provided by the Cloisters’ famous Flemish Unicorn tapestries of the late 15th century with their images of a mysterious and allegorical hunt. This is especially important in giving children of the inner city in particular a sense of entitlement and connection to, and intellectual ownership of, these aristocratic works and their cultural resonance as many of them have never been in a museum before, have no sense of aristocracy, or social class, except for the sense that they are at the bottom of it. This has become especially pronounced in the current American political climate where lower class and minority children, many of them immigrants or children of immigrants, have found themselves marginalized by the tone of national politics in a way that has not existed for a hundred years. Ironically, these children are often the ones who become most engaged by these works and relate to them most personally. At The Morgan Library there is a special book project that all school children who visit participate in where they produce their own manuscript page, and in some cases entire manuscripts, using original materials such as authentic period pigments that existed in the Middle Ages, as well as gold leaf, fish glue, etc.

The Morgan Library possesses one of the most impressive collections of illuminated manuscripts and some of the most beautiful rooms of any museum. In addition to tours of the writing collection and of the museum’s highlights and architecture, The Morgan usually has 6 to 10 new exhibits a year that docents research and study. Docents present these in tours to both adult and school groups. Some exhibits are quite challenging, such as “Henry James and American Painting,” which displayed

excerpts of the turn of the twentieth-century patrician American James's novels, journals, and letters in the context of contemporary paintings by figures such as Sargent and Whistler, who he had friendships with and who influenced the subject matter and texture of James' writing. Another Morgan exhibit, "Churchill: The Power of Words," explored how Churchill's writing and speeches used the English language for both political and cultural purposes and as a vehicle to rally a nation in a time of war. In both exhibits docents attempted to get the visitors to make the important connections between word and image, and between word and history. Other tours focused on the American photographer Peter Hujar, the dramatist Tennessee Williams, and the idea of time in the Middle Ages.

While they are not trained art historians or literary critics, docents at both of these and other institutions spend a fair amount of time situating the works they discuss historically and placing them in a cultural context. They try to determine from their sense of particular tour groups an appropriate level for their discussions, and the contemporary application or resonance of the objects they discuss is one of the most important things for them to communicate. Academic language and jargon are strongly discouraged, and the goal is to make the complex accessible. In New York's museums there is also an emphasis on a multicultural and open-ended approach which tries to forefront underrepresented, or marginalized, cultures and people whenever possible. Docents take to these challenges quite readily as most have a progressive and humanistic outlook.

The point of all of this is that the age and life experience of the docents have connected them to museums as volunteers, to art and culture, to ideas, to this new kind of study, to a new community of other docents and museum professionals, and to their fellow citizens. The fact that they are volunteering to do what they do signals a high level of selflessness and commitment. They have found in the museum the opportunity to engage with art, and specifically with the collection, as well as with the museum staff, their fellow docents and, most importantly, the visitors. In maturity docents have discovered a new calling: to study, to learn, and to share their new knowledge. For many, if not most, they are experiencing one of the most fulfilling and engaging times of their lives. Like the speaker in the Rilke poem, they have changed their lives and, at the same time, are having an impact on the lives of others.

¹ Rika Burnham and Elliott Kai-Kee, *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011, 79-93.

² Deborah Edwards, "It's Mostly about Me: Reasons Why Volunteers Contribute their Time to Museums and Art Museums." *Tourism Review International*, Vol.9, No.1, 2005, pp. 21-31.

³ Leonie Lockstone-Binney, Kirsten Holmes, Tom Baum, "Volunteers and Volunteering in Leisure: Social Science Perspectives." *Leisure Studies*, Vol. 29, 2010. Issue 4, pp.435-455.