

Syncretism

Fern Miller

The Taoist Gallery

How did a creative force without form or face become a religion with sculpture, painting, and elaborate silk robes? The answer is syncretism. The word is derived from the Greek word *sun* meaning union, plus *Kret* referring to Crete. According to Plutarch, "It means to combine against a common enemy after the manner of the cities of Crete." It is the act or system of blending, combining or reconciling inharmonious elements. (Encyclopedia Britannica)

The Three Purities

The Celestial Worthy of Primordial Beginning put a human face on the amorphous concepts of *ch'i*, the breath of life, and *yin* and *yang*, the creative dualities. The coming of Buddhism into China in the first century played a big part in this transformation. It brought with it a human representation of the Buddha. *The Celestial Worthy* was seen as the source of all Taoist teachings. In both the painting



on the table, he uses the Buddhist gesture of discourse and argumentation. From this gallery you can look into the Sculpture Court and see the large Sung dynasty *Bodhisattva* using the same mudra.



In the circle of light at the base of the scroll Mt. Peng Lai rises out of the water. This is the island of immortality where souls go after death. Many of the ancient beliefs of the common people became part of official doctrine. This *Celestial Worthy* initially appeared in the early fifth century and became the most important of all Taoist gods.

One way this Taoist god differs from the Buddha is in his clothing. The Buddha wears a simple monk's robe. Since this set of paintings was an imperial commission all three gods wear imperial robes embellished with gold. At the beginning of the Ming dynasty emperors became patrons of Taoism, believing that it would help them rule the country.

In the middle painting is *The Celestial Worthy of Numinous Treasure*. Numinous means mysterious, incapable of being described. In the circle of light at the base of the painting is a ling-chih, the mushroom of immortality. It stands in a bronze tripod, the kind of vessel used in Shang dynasty ancestor rituals. At the top of the mandorla behind the god sits Lao-tzu surrounded by Taoist Immortals.

The painting on the right is of Lao-tzu, *The Celestial Worthy of the Way and Its Power*. Lao-tzu lived in the sixth century BCE and was deified in the second century when a spiritual leader in Szchuan had a vision of the deified Lao-Tzu.

Two other examples of syncretism in this gallery are the *Stele of the Five Deities* and the Taoist robes.

Compare the eighth century Taoist stele with the sixth century *Maitreya Buddha Stele* in the Sculpture Court. Both are made of black limestone. In the center of the Taoist stele a Supreme Elder sits on a lotus pedestal meditating. Lao-tzu was also shown like this after he was deified. On either side of the Elder, two smaller gods stand on lotus pedestals. They are either Celestial Worthies holding Taoist tablets, or zodiac gods. There is a dedicatory inscription below the figures.

At the top of the *Taoist Robe* are cosmic symbols: sun, moon, constellations, and a pagoda surrounded by a sunray pattern. On the moon stands a rabbit mixing the elixir of immortality. This symbol became popular in the T'ang dynasty. At the base of the robe are four of the eight Buddhist emblems: the canopy, eternal knot, umbrella, and wheel. The other four symbols are on the front of the robe. Taoist and Buddhist symbols are on the same robe.

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Water and Land Ritual Paintings

These three sixteenth century scrolls were used in Buddhist rites for the dead. The purpose was to earn merit for the living, and release for the souls of the dead from the tortures of hell. The goal was to gain re-entry into the wheel of reincarnation, or, better yet, release into the celestial realm. The rituals were intended for Buddhists, Taoists, Confucians, and those who worshipped nature spirits, local gods or the ancestors. This is the ultimate in syncretism.

Numinous Treasure Emissaries

Do you see anything from a religion other than Buddhism? The emissaries and their attendants are riding on a tiger and a dragon. In Taoism the two animals represent *yin* and *yang*, earth and heaven. In our Japanese Zen screen they represent the souls: one earth-bound, the other freed from earthly ties.



In a 1988 tomb excavation in Henan, archaeologists found a Neolithic period sculpture of a tiger and dragon flanking a corpse. Symbols are often drawn from an era that predates the founding of the religion.

The blue books, which the attendants are carrying down to earth, are Taoist Scripture, the numinous treasure of the title.

Da-Li Ming Wang

Look at the Buddha in the center of the painting. He wears a green robe and is surrounded by a halo of fire. What seemed to be his shoulders becomes the top of a warrior's head. Step back a few paces so that details don't distract you. Gradually, four small heads emerge, then eight hands, each holding a weapon.

And we thought Surrealism developed in twentieth-century Europe.

This is *Da-Li Ming Wang*, one of the ten heavenly kings and a fierce protector of Buddhist thought. He wears chest armor and rides a white bull. He is a wrathful manifestation of the Buddha of Infinite Light. He transforms as we stare at the painting. Change is an important characteristic of Taoism. In Hinduism a god has the ability to change into many different forms. Hinduism was a strong influence on Tibetan Buddhist beliefs. During the Ming dynasty Chinese emperors became patrons of Tibetan Buddhism as well as Taoism. This painting is a unique example of syncretism in religion and art.



Ritual Vessels

In front of the three scrolls are five ritual vessels that appear together on Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian altars. The censer in the middle is a reproduction of a *ting* used in the Shang dynasty 3,000 years earlier. Food and wine sacrifices were made to heaven when kings and priests prayed for rain to make the crops grow, or for victory in battle. Vessels were also buried with ancestors. By using these same shapes in temple worship, the Chinese carried on their link with the past, a very important value in China.

Shinto

When Buddhism came to Japan in the sixth century, it changed the indigenous religion, Shinto, just as it had transformed Taoism in China.

Shinto, like Taoism, explained the relationship between humans and nature. And, like original Taoism, it had no anthropomorphic images. Shinto, "the way of the gods," had supernatural beings called *kami*. They lived in nature: in rocks, trees, waterfalls, and mountains. Worship focused on both the *kami* and their dwelling places, which were marked either by straw ropes tied around them, or by fenced enclosures.

Divine Rain-Making Boy

By the end of the eighth century Shinto gods began to be sculpted in human form, a direct result of the influence of Buddhist anthropomorphic images. This *Rain-Making Boy* holds a wish-granting jewel in his left hand and a walking stick in his right hand. Behind him and to the left you can see the *Bodhisattva Jizo* holding similar attributes. While Japanese Buddhist images wore Chinese monks' robes, Shinto gods wore robes like those of Japanese aristocrats. The sculptures were made of wood believed to be from old trees revered as the dwelling places of the supernatural deities.

The *Rain-Making Boy* was considered a youthful manifestation of Amaterasu, the sun goddess who dwells in the sacred shrine at Ise. In 743 the Emperor Shomu proposed building a major temple to house an immense bronze Buddha that would rival anything in China. To make sure that he was not offending Amaterasu, he sent an emissary to describe the project to her. She was not offended. In fact, she responded, "This Buddha and I are aspects of the same reality." This is syncretism at the highest level.

Two rich sources of information on Chinese and Japanese religion and art are: *History of Japanese Art* by Penelope Mason, and *Taoism*, the catalogue of the Art Institute of Chicago exhibit of the same name in 2000.



Never A Wrong Answer

Pam Friedland

I recently invited my new junior docent to follow me on my third grade Safari tour. I realized I would have to of course polish up all transitions (or better yet, use transitions), show the third graders superb and well planned out works of art (or simply find what is not in storage) and most importantly show my junior docent the best way to handle a group of young students.

The tour was progressing well with an animated group of curious visitors. They were quite chatty, energetic, and intelligent. Shortly after reaching the mummy (of course, even though I had not planned to visit *Lady Teshat*, it was discovered during the tour the mummy was a much-anticipated object), I launched into a discussion of where the pigments used to decorate the mummy came from. I told the kids that the pigments probably did not come from either Target or Michael's Arts and Crafts, yet asked where did the Egyptians obtain the pigments? Actually now that I think of it, I am realizing that this is not exactly an open-ended question – oops.

Immediately one of the girls raised her hand. I was not surprised it was her hand as it had been up in the air the entire tour without anything pertinent to add at any time. No one else was volunteering information, perhaps because I violated the rule of never asking the dreaded close-ended question and they were fearful of being wrong (after I, of course, had told them there was not a wrong answer during an art tour). So after being forced to once again call upon this child, she volunteered with an absolutely innocent and straight face that the pigments came from Home Depot.

I realized I needed to be cautious how I responded to this child, of course not wishing to tell her she was indeed WRONG! Before I had a chance to completely gather my thoughts and remembering that my junior docent was observing my reaction, a very small boy in the group who had already established he was well acquainted with many encyclopedias and other publications, came forward and very intelligently informed the girl that Home Depot was not in business yet in Egypt. At this point, the girl realized her miscalculations of the start of “big box” businesses and became quite embarrassed. The damage was done so being the flexible docent we all strive to be, I then jumped in trying to repair her feelings yet continue our Safari expedition.

So, next time you take your junior docent on a tour; always know there is no lack of discussion after a tour. Remember, those of us old enough to do so, that Art Linkletter used to say that, “Kids say the darndest things.”

Notes from New York

Bob Marshall

On November 30, Sotheby's tried to auction off the Gilbert Stuart portrait of *George Washington*, known as the *Munro-Lenox Portrait*, that belonged to the New York Public Library. As you may have read, with a \$6 million minimum estimate, it failed to find a buyer. Of more interest to us, this is probably the portrait that Thomas Sully copied to paint the version now in the MIA, and seeing it at Sotheby's exhibition space

gave me the chance to make a detailed comparison of the two works. (Unlike the *Landsdowne Portrait* that visited Minneapolis a few years back, George Washington's right hand is not extended in the air, but rests on a piece of paper that is often described, contrary to all visible evidence, as the Constitution.)

One detail that struck me was the back right leg of the chair behind the president. In the “original,” the leg is so loosely painted that it is transparent, and I wondered how a copyist would handle this. Back in Minneapolis, I discovered that Sully simply omitted the leg altogether! He also omitted the fold of drapery visible to the right of GW's left leg and the colored US flag motif on the crest of the chair.

Another discovery awaited me at the Fra Angelico retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum. I expected to find our small saint, *St. Romuald*, and there he was, in a line with five other saints, now located in Venice, Chicago and Altenburg, Germany, painted for the pilasters of the high altarpiece of San Marco, in Florence. I was pleased to note that the MIA's work was in the best condition of the six, the only one standing on a pedestal of bright blue clouds, the others having faded.

But I was not expecting to find a second work, *The Nativity*, also from the collection of the MIA. The label called it an “experimental work” and noted that the panel had been cut across the top, but cited it as evidence of Fra Angelico's development: it combined his naturalistic detail with the linear perspective he had seen in Masaccio's work.

According to Patrick Noon, this work has languished in storage for many years, because it didn't seem quite right, and its attribution had been challenged in the past. (It can be found on artsmia.org, however.) The current Met exhibition was the first chance in many years for scholars to review the corpus of Fra Angelico's work, and the verdict was unanimous that the MIA's *Nativity* is, as they say in the trade, autograph. Purchased in Germany in 1924 by Herschel Jones (and bequeathed to the MIA in 1968 by his daughter, Tessie Jones), the work was off-view to European scholars for most of the century, which also contributed to its lack of recognition.

When the Met show ends, Fra Angelico's *Nativity*, from 1425, will take its place in Gallery 343. I hope you will agree with Patrick that “it's a lovely little object” – and certainly a valuable addition to our stable of Renaissance works.



Tom's Tour Time

Tom Byfield

By this time the fall touring season is in full cry and we are scurrying about like frantic cockroaches in the kitchen when the light is turned on. The game of musical chairs our pieces of art played last year has not abated. What was up during

your pre-tour run through, checking your route, adjusting your underwear and making sure everything was where it should be is no guarantee that while you are gathering your group in the lobby, the trolls of demonry won't gleefully pluck one or two of your selections from the wall and secrete them away, never again to be found in your lifetime. Some of us meet these unexpected changes with the amused tolerance Savonarola viewed a pregnant nun. Others with a *savoir-faire* acquired over the years are more unflappable and handle it with aplomb, a few grapes and a slice of Camembert.

On a recent tour I had just given a brilliant transition for *The Carpet Merchant*, which left the group pawing the ground and panting for more. I'm taking literary license here; actually they just seemed politely interested. When we got there it was gone, replaced with a little card saying "OUT ON LOAN," or "OUT FOR RUG REPAIR," I don't remember which. I was left with the same frustration one must feel when you find the Viagra isn't working. I decided to do something I had never done before. I followed the lead of docents at the Hermitage during the siege of Stalingrad. All the art there had been hidden away where it would be safe. The docents however continued to give tours of the now bare walls, describing each picture where it used to hang. They might have claimed those bare walls contained the world's finest collection of minimalist art. They didn't of course, being humorless Soviets. I've always thought the Russians were rather gloomy lot; see Dostoyevsky and Chekhov and their propensity for despair and suicide.

In retrospect, my decision was a mistake, but if we don't learn from our mistakes there is no point in making them. I am not accustomed to erring. Oh sure, I did once, accidentally brushing my teeth with Brylcreem. At least they lay nice and straight for the rest of the day. I began describing the scene in the courtyard, the beautifully clad figures of ethnic diversity, Byzantine, Arab, Ottoman and French cultures, painted without any visible brushstrokes. Painted so sharply they almost appeared to stand out in 3-D. I described Gerome as an impeccable colorist, a poet of perfection who painted with a realism that was an attitude rather than a style. I blathered on and on. I believed I was holding them enthralled with eloquence of my word pictures, with my enthusiasm and all around *bonhomie*, a judgment of which I was profoundly mistaken. They looked as confused as goats on Astroturf and began shuffling about with impatience. They looked as if they thought I had been sniffing White-Out and wondering why this old man was waving his arms in front of a blank wall like a demented Osmo Vanska. I realized that unlike the Avian flu, my fervor was not infectious. I was losing them. I tried to recoup but it was as useless as fiddling with the curtains on the Titanic.

The rest of the tour mercifully passed by quickly and I retreated to the lounge to assess the irritating texture of my folly. After some introspective reflection I decided I would emulate those Russians docents again only when Moses does another bush.

Book Review:

Tulip Fever by Deborah Moggach

Victoria Veach

In Amsterdam in 1636 a wealthy merchant, Cornelis Sandvoort, employs a young artist, Jan van Loos to paint a portrait of his wife Sophia and him. Cornelis is very proud of his lovely young wife; his self-satisfaction and happiness would be complete if she would give him a child to replace the two sons he lost from his first marriage. Sophia agreed to marry Cornelis to obtain his support for her widowed mother and sisters. She enjoys her lovely home with its many paintings but is lonely. Her only companion is her servant Maria.



As work on the painting proceeds, Sophia and Jan fall in love and began a relationship that results in betrayal, deception, mistaken identity, and greed. An elaborate plot to free Sophia for a life with Jan requires Maria's complicity. She agrees to help Sophia betray Cornelis in order to save her position in the household after her own indiscretion and abandonment by her lover, the fish monger Willem. In order to make the money necessary for their escape, Jan and Sophia decide to participate in the frenzied trade in tulip bulbs. The price of one bulb can equal the price of a horse or a year's rent. Their final gamble is all or nothing; all their profit is tied up in one bulb.

In her description of her characters, Moggach contrasts the life of the wealthy merchant class with the lower classes of Amsterdam. She describes Cornelis's civic pride, his strict religious faith, and his tolerance for Sophia's Catholicism. Moggach depicts Jan's attitude toward his art as different from that of his friend and of his assistant. She discusses the variety of subject matter in the paintings produced during this period in the Netherlands. Short chapters narrated by the characters move the story along quickly to a tension-filled ending. The reader absorbs the atmosphere of Amsterdam in the mid-1660s and gains an understanding of the inhabitants of the city as she follows the characters along their disastrous path. The paintings in the MIA's Dutch galleries now have a new familiarity for me. I can imagine Sophia, Maria, Jan or Cornelius in the next room, aboard the ship, or behind the easel.

Celebrating Sally Lehmann

and 40 years as an MIA Docent

Interview by Terry Edam and Fran Megarry

Q: Who inspired you to become a docent 40 years ago?

A: Sometime in 1965 Friends of the Institute Chair of Volunteers, Liza Creer, was at our home for a WAMSO "Listening Evening." As we were having refreshments Liza noticed the large number of books about art on my shelves and concluded I must have an interest in art. I told her of my major in Art History and she said, "I have just the volunteer job for you!" The rest, so to speak, is history.

Q: How do you think docent training has changed over the years?

A: One thing that hasn't changed is docents in training have very busy lives in which to embrace this substantive volunteer activity. My two youngest of four children had just entered nursery school at that time and that meant little socializing with the fellow docent trainees after class. However, our class time was full of interaction.

To respond to your question about changes, Marge Russell was the Director of the Tour Department. She had selected a small number of docents for training. This small number worked well with such a small class room, almost a "workshop" space. Marge's training style employed "game playing" and individual involvement. Lacking the extensive colored slides and services we have now, Marge would tape up reproductions or post cards and have everyone go around and identify artists or place objects in a time period and then we would discuss our responses. Most of the training on the Institute's collection was done sitting on stools in front of the objects with lots of shared inquiry and insight based on talks by staff senior lecturers Barbara Dow, Helen Krinke and Barbara Kaerwer.

Q: What is your favorite memory of a tour? (I think many of us remember our first tours for one reason or another.)

A: It seems to me we started touring after one year. To pass, Marge followed our first tour (at a discreet distance). I was bursting to spew out everything I knew about European Masterpieces for a high school class. In her consultation with me after the tour, Marge said, "Well, you didn't need to include *everything* you have learned about the whole history of art!" I have been trying ever since to say less and ask more.

Q: What do you think has changed the most during your 40 years of leading tours?

A: One thing that comes to mind is the great informality of the program in those early years. Tour requests were pinned up on a bulletin board in the cramped office and docents grabbed what they wanted. You had to be aggressive if you wanted to get tours. Most requests were for "Masterpieces" or "Meet Your America."

Q: What is the most unusual experience you have had at the MIA?

A: During the construction of the Kenzo Tange addition the museum closed to tours. The question was, "What to do with docent energy and talent?" A program of classroom visits with reproductions and slides was instituted and also special training for a program of neighborhood architectural walking tours which was conducted by Marion Cross.

Marion, a long time member of the Friends of the Institute and a docent, was a free-lance writer and historian. She had written a history of this area, *Pioneer Harvest*, published by the Farmers and Mechanics Bank for its 75th Anniversary in 1949. Also, as a member of an old Twin Cities family she had an intimate knowledge of local history. Her lectures to prepare us for leading walking tours of the Whittier, Lowry Hill, Lake of the Isles and Downtown neighborhoods were full of lively personal anecdotes. Judy Sobel, the tour director at that time gave solid background on architectural styles on our "walk through" walking training. As a resident of the

Lowry Hill neighborhood, the preparation and conducting of tours along Mount Curve and Groveland Terrace and Lake of the Isles, was one of my most enriching experiences as a docent. It put local and architectural history into a new context and it paved the way for my deep love of the Purcell-Cutts House and its place in the Lake of the Isles neighborhood.

Q: What is your favorite special exhibit over the 40 years and why?

A: My favorite exhibits are the one just done and the next one coming.

Q: As recent docent graduates (2001) we have collected tons of worksheets and lecture notes. In your experience what has been your most successful way of organizing your research?

A: Well, over 1500 tours and about 70 special exhibitions later I have accumulated a wall of books and catalogues, and two full file drawers of notes.

Q: Any final interview comments?

A: Art holds the key to expanding learning and understanding of just about everything!

Thank you Sally for sharing a bit of 40 years with docents.

Keeping in Touch



Letter from the Docent Chair

With the relatively low demand for tours this fall, I've taken the opportunity to search out and to think about works of art that have a special meaning for me. One that stands out is Robert Koehler's *Rainy Day on Hennepin Avenue*.

I grew up in Idaho, but my grandmother was born and raised in Minneapolis. When I was very young, I would stay over at her house and she would tell me stories about her Minneapolis days. Her father owned a butcher shop on Hennepin Avenue. The setting of the picture is Ninth Street and Hennepin; the residential district began on Tenth Street. I would like to think that her father's shop was in the vicinity of the street that is displayed in the painting. She would also describe with great relish how she and her father on a Sunday afternoon would take a buggy to Minnehaha Falls. Perhaps the buggy they rode in was the same as the one depicted in this painting. I have no photographs showing my grandmother's life as a young child and *A Rainy Day on Hennepin Avenue* has given a visual context to the stories I remember her telling.

I hadn't given much attention to the photographs in our galleries until last week when I was assigned to do a picture person training. The picture on the list for *How People Lived* was Walker Evans' *A Miner's home, West Virginia*. Looking at that photograph, I recalled my earliest memories of the Great Depression. In the '30s, there were air shows, performances by stunt pilots in double-winged planes who did loop de loops and other dangerous tricks. One summer, a show was scheduled for the airport in my hometown. My parents, being farmers in the midst of the Depression, could not afford the tickets necessary to go on the runway to watch the show, but we all got in the family Studebaker and parked on the edge of the runway, within sight of the show but outside of the range of the ticket taker. The edge of the runway was bordered by the

city dump, and in the dump, during the Depression, had sprung up “Duttonville.” Mr. Dutton was the mayor of my hometown during the Depression and Duttonville was the name the locals gave the developments known elsewhere in the country as Hoovervilles, shantytowns constructed by homeless people out of scavenged material.

I remember little of the air show. But I do remember a lady who was working on her house near where we parked. She was dressed in a red suit and wore a matching hat. She exhibited all the dignity of the woman in Dorothy Lange’s *Migrant Mother*, and she was tacking cardboard on the outside of her shack, much in the way the minor in Walker Evans’ photograph had finished the inside of his home.

I was in the museum today and saw that the holiday trimmings and images of holiday feasts were being set up in the period rooms. My youngest memory of a holiday treat was a breakfast at two o’clock in the morning following a midnight Christmas Eve Mass. We ate pink grapefruit – a rare treat for Idaho farm folk in the waning years of the Depression.

I might feel an obligation to apologize for these maudlin thoughts, but the appearance of the holiday trimmings in the various rooms suggests it is the time to be nostalgic. So on behalf of the members of the docent executive committee, I would like to wish that this holiday season provides you with many moments you will remember warmly and nostalgically.

Patrick George

From the Museum Guide Programs Staff

Notes from Sheila

Thank you to all of you who participated in our recent 3-part series, “Connecting with Kids: Understanding and Working with Diverse Student Populations.” These programs and the related materials we distributed to everyone were funded by the Ruth Mackoff Shapiro Docent Education Fund, an endowment fund established in 2000 by Dr. Sidney Shapiro as a memorial and lasting tribute to his late wife and long-time docent, Ruth Mackoff Shapiro.

I encourage all of you to borrow the tape of Director Bill Griswold’s November 28th presentation to the docents and guides on “Re-positioning the MIA.” Dr. Griswold described how virtually all areas of the museum will be impacted by this re-positioning. Following his presentation I described some new ideas we will be piloting in the months ahead and encouraged all docents and guides to give us feedback. Once you have viewed the presentation, please share your ideas in the “Feedback Box” on the counter under your mailboxes or via e-mail. Thank you in advance!

Keep your eyes and ears open for more news about our upcoming “Visitor Experience Workshops” on Monday, January 23, Thursday evening, February 16th, and Saturday, February 18th. The museum is working with David McNair and The McNair Group who is custom-designing these workshops for staff and volunteers to help us create the best possible experiences for our visitors. I am so enthused about working with David McNair because he truly understands the value of volunteers and the generosity of spirit which leads volunteers to choose to spend their time at a given organization. As a for-

mer hospital administrator, he oversaw a group of 450 hospital volunteers. I am also encouraged by McNair’s approach to these workshops, which promise to be different from others you and we have attended.

Also keep your eyes open for news about a very special event being planned to recognize and celebrate the contributions all of you make to this museum all year long as we approach the grand opening of our new building.

Happy Holidays to all of you from all of us!

Sheila McGuire

Brewing Innovation:

The 2005 National Docent Symposium

Docents in Boston cleverly organized The 2005 National Docent Symposium around the theme “Boston Tea Party: Brewing Innovation.” These docents did a remarkable job organizing and providing meaningful learning experiences for some 500 docents and tour program staff from around the country for four days. As always, I was so proud to represent such a great program. I shouldn’t be—but I am always surprised by how many people know about our program and the terrific work we are doing!

I had the privilege of presenting at the symposium with Kati Johanson, docent (and last year’s docent chair), Sandra Wethers, Collection in Focus guide and junior docent, and Mary Kay Zagaria, Art Adventure guide. Thank you to the Friends of the Institute for making it possible for the three volunteers to participate in this symposium. We presented the Museum Guide Programs’ Cultural Complementarity discussion series from its conception to our proposed next steps. Our two sessions were packed with docents and staff eager to learn about and from our accomplishments, and share their experiences. We began each session by having our audience break into small groups to discuss the question “What do you value most about the place where you were born or grew up?” Each session concluded with questions from our audience.

Within the context of the overall theme, “Brewing Innovation,” two major themes dominated the Symposium: “Embracing Change” and “Diversity.” Clearly, our presentation addressed both themes!

Although I am tempted to report on every session I attended and every museum I visited, I am opting instead to share just a few ideas that I am still thinking about two months later.

Many presentations at the symposium stressed the value of interactive learning as the key to a meaningful visit for many museum visitors— young and old alike. Rika Burnham, Associate Museum Educator at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, where she has worked for over twenty years, presented an intriguing talk called “The Art of Teaching” in which she acknowledged that teaching in museums is a “complicated art.” She stressed that there are at least two important goals that museum educators (paid staff and volunteers) have—to help people gain greater knowledge and understanding of art works, and to help them connect with the works personally and directly. She emphasized how unpredictable but potentially wonderful each encounter with a work of art in the gallery will be when we leave it up to people to bring their hearts and minds to each experience.

She described the good museum teacher (that's you!) as someone who uses her or his art historical expertise to suggest possibilities, not to establish conclusive interpretations to impose on the museum visitors. The successful museum teacher integrates art historical information to deepen and enrich the visitors' experience of art works as called for.

She confirmed for me what we have said for years—that this kind of teaching doesn't require less preparation on the part of the teacher—it actually requires more. To be most fully prepared to share information in response to what people are seeing on their own the good museum teacher must spend a lot of time with each work of art, looking at it and researching it. S/he understands when art history will increase someone's ability to understand a work of art and when a work is speaking directly enough that art historical information isn't needed.

Ms. Burnham also acknowledged that each teacher brings unique gifts to teaching through art works. She, personally, prefers encouraging discussions with adults by simply asking for thoughts, observations, and ideas over asking a series of questions. Participants in the session had a lively discussion about their various approaches to leading successful discussions and encouraging visitors to look closely and share their ideas.

I urge all of you to read the article (in your mail boxes) that Ms. Burnham recently published with her colleague Elliott Kai-Lee. I believe many of you will gain a greater understanding of our own goals for museum teaching from this article. The authors do a great job of describing different ways gallery teachers can create good museum learning experiences by encouraging focused attention on and discussion of art works.

A presentation by Judith Murray, Director of Visitor Learning at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, called "Making Objects Come Alive: Teaching for Discovery," included a review of research regarding learning, which helps all of us understand why engaging visitors in the learning process is so essential. She shared statistics based on the "Learning Pyramid" from the National Training Laboratories in Bethel, Maine, which report that the average learner's retention rate from the content of a lecture is 5% and that the average learner's retention rate from participating in a discussion is 70%.

Murray also reiterated the results of a study published in Museum News in 1995, which concluded that visitors are motivated to learn in museums when they are provided with:

1. opportunities for active involvement and for making personal discoveries
2. an open process that is accommodating of various points of view
3. an experience where challenges are tailored to the learner's level of ability and experience
4. an atmosphere that is positive and reinforcing and that promotes interaction among members of the group.

I am proud to say that we have such a strong program because of your willingness to keep learning and to adapt your approaches to touring to create the best visitor experiences possible.

Sheila McGuire

New in the Library

The following book has been added to the Docent/Tour Guide Library:

The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down by Anne Fadiman.

It is in the S.E. Asia section.

Art, A Brief History, Marilyn Stokstad, Reference copies.

Art Beyond the West, Michael Kampen O'Riley, Harry N.

Abrams Art History.

Body of Clay, Soul of Fire: Richard Bresnahan and the Saint John's Pottery, Matthew Welch Decorative Arts.

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Social Chairs: Cynthia O'Halloran, Ann Davis

Docent Muse Editor: Fran Megarry

Communication/Sunshine: Eleanor Nickles

Honorary Docent Chair: Nancy Pennington

Book Club



The Book Club will meet on Monday, December 19, at 11:00 am in the West Board Room. The book for discussion is *The Art Spirit* by Robert Henri.

Dale Swenson

The 2005 Junior Docent Class

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts 2005 docent class started this fall. About 325 interested people attended one of the five information sessions at the MIA last winter. We were told that 70 to 80 people would be interviewed and about 40 people would be selected. The actual numbers were slightly higher than that, with 92 interviews scheduled and a class of 48 members selected.

Those who weren't scared off by promises of hard work, lots of reading, research projects, and a three-year commitment to the program after two years of training, filled out applications, wrote essays and lined up references in preparation for a disciplined interview process. Two teams, each consisting of one staff member and one docent conducted the Interviews. MIA staff read, sorted and discussed what we sent, then talked to all who applied and finally selected about half that number.

We will be the first docent class to have gallery training in the new wing at the MIA; we were the first to use the new mobile computer training lab; we are the largest class ever; we have the most men of any class; we are the first class without a class room (and will be the first to use the new one), and we love to talk (which is not a first, I am told).

In listening to us talk, I have developed a sense of who we are. We are teachers, business people, homemakers, lawyers, caterers, waitresses, ministers, writers, historians, entrepreneurs, doctors and golf tournament organizers. In short we are a cross section of life with backgrounds as varied as the visitors we will serve. Amanda Thompson Rundahl, coordinator of the Collection in Focus program, put it well

when she said to us, “Docents are people with all sorts of depth and breadth of experience.”

We are from all areas of the country and even have two people who were born in Latvia. A glance around the classroom shows many more women (40) than men (8), but that aside, we are still a cross section of life. We are tall and short, left- and right- handed, light and dark.

We are from other tour guide programs at the MIA and even from other museums. Two of our class members are docents at the Walker Art Center. Both will continue to volunteer at the Walker as they broaden their knowledge beyond the twentieth century through our program. One member of our class was involved with the Tate Museum in London. European museums do not use volunteers and her friends in London wonder why she does this without pay. The answer, of course, is that it is fun and rewarding.

Most of us commute our way into class from the usual pockets of the metro area: Kenwood, Linden Hills, Wayzata, Dellwood, North Oaks, Minnetonka and Edina. Two of us are close enough to bicycle in, while two have to really work at it. One commutes from River Falls, WI while another follows the Minnesota River up from Henderson. Many have long commutes from the far corners like Victoria, Andover, Corcoran and Chaska, but we all show up and we seem to enjoy it.

One of the reasons we show up is that we had morning treats organized through the end of the year by the end of our first day, but more important, we are made to feel welcome. Ann Isaacson, Coordinator of the Art Adventure Program, commented light-heartedly that docents and the director are the only ones in the whole organization to have windows in their office. In passing our group in a hallway, Amanda Birnstengel, director of Visitor Services, commented, “Docents are awesome.” Sheila McGuire, director of Museum Guide Programs, makes it a point to thank us every time she talks to the class. Debbi Hegstrom, coordinator of the Docent Program, mentioned that most afternoons would be in the galleries where we should have a little fun.

Consequently, we will continue to show up and we will be taught about tour techniques, and the museum and the collection and art history and we will become docents in two years. Not only because of the process we went through and are going through but also because we are the kinds of people we are, we will be very good docents at one of the best museums in the country.

Bill Bertram

Honorary Docent News

On October 26, the Honorary Docents met for lunch at Betsey’s Back Porch. A guided tour of The Museum of Russian Art show, “Modern Russian Painters” followed.

The Honorary Docents book club met at the home of Arlene Baker on Nov. 16. The book discussed was *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse.

Edna Sanfilippo will host the January 18th book club meeting. *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen will be the January selection to read and discuss.

There will not be a tour in November or December because of the holidays.

Honorary Docents will meet at 10:30 Wednesday, Jan. 25th at the MIA. Sue Canterbury will lead a tour of the “Villa America” show.

Nancy Pennington

From the Editor...

Thank you to all *Muse* contributors and especially to Merritt Nequette for all his work formatting and preparing this document for publication. Articles for the Spring issue of the *Muse* are due on February 16, 2006. Articles may be e-mailed to megar003@tc.umn.edu.

Happy
New
Year