

The Docent Muse

December 2008

Celebration of the Mind

Darlene Carroll

Terry Edam, Nan Lightner and I recently prepared and led a personalized tour entitled “Celebration of the Mind,” an anti-stigma event hosted by Hamm Clinic in honor of Mental Illness Awareness Week. Following the Sunday afternoon tour, the three groups joined together in an MCAD classroom for a reception and lively discussion. The program was sponsored by St. Paul’s Hamm Clinic, whose mission is to provide leadership in our community for effective mental health care.

Artworks were selected based on their ability to stimulate discussion. Background information was given on each piece, so the viewers were better able to understand and appreciate the creator of each piece of art.

With an audience involved in the mental health professions, it was helpful to have an idea of Van Gogh’s state of mind at the time he painted *Olive Garden*. In a letter to his brother Theo in October 1889, he described his thoughts about these very olive trees. Months later on July 29, 1890, Van Gogh committed suicide.

Also a popular discussion topic, Ensor’s painting truly *Intrigue’d* our savvy group. This was a much-examined piece at the follow-up discussion.



To lighten the load, we also used Picasso’s *Baboon and Young*, which led to an inevitable discussion about Picasso and his many women.

Sargent’s *Birthday Party* was intended to be a happy event, as the quote by Sargent’s friend, and father of the birthday boy, confirms. But during the discussion period, our viewers looked well beyond the icing on the cake.

Such a simple painting as *Picking Cotton* might muster the comment “a child could do that.” And, perhaps a child could, but not with the soul and spirit put forth by Clementine Hunter, who grew up working the plantations as a daughter of a slave.



Lucretia, of course, was another “hot topic” as depression and suicide are two of the main issues that Hamm Clinic therapists deal with on a regular basis.

But Goya’s painting with his doctor summed up the day: the importance of a health professional, Dr. Arietta in this case, truly caring for the patient; and conversely, the patient, Goya, truly appreciating the care.

MCAD’s classroom served well for the group discussion, moderated by a Hamm Clinic therapist. Each image was projected onto a very large screen, making each object all the more engaging. The animated discussion focused on the impact of each piece on the viewer. Responses were surprisingly wide and varied – truly a “Celebration of the Mind.”

Reflections on Rwanda

Martha Bordwell

Usually when I travel I am obsessive about visiting museums, especially art museums. But when I went to Rwanda last summer, I didn’t set foot in an art museum. Nonetheless, I encountered connections with the arts of Africa, and with my role as a docent, wherever I went. Since we have learned that African art is thoroughly integrated into the daily lives of the people, that seemed fitting.

I went to Rwanda to join my husband, who was volunteering as a physician for the American Refugee Committee. The refugee camps where he was working house refugees from the Congo, who have been displaced by a war which has been going on for over

ten years and is a direct consequence of the genocide that occurred in Rwanda in 1994. As I write this, the Congo is in the news as the war continues and more people are forced from their homes.

Needless to say, a refugee camp is a pretty bleak place. Residents, some of whom have been there for over ten years, live in huts with mud walls and plastic sheeting for roofs, receive barely adequate food, and have little to do. John took me on a tour of the camps where, despite the hardships, some bright spots prevail. As a case in point, he wanted me to meet a wood carver he had encountered among the refugees.

We entered his home and were immediately surrounded by several wood carvings, most very large. We didn't have an official interpreter so I regret to say I didn't learn as much about this gentleman as I would have liked. He was fairly old and walked with a pronounced limp. And I could only assume that he was a professional wood carver in the Congo, given the quality of his work.

After admiring all of the works, I decided to purchase a sculpture of what initially appeared to me



to be a fertility figure. It is a sculpture about eighteen inches high of a person who appears to be on its knees. The head is oversized and ovoid in shape, with a triangular nose and large cavities for the eyes. The neck is long. I assumed at first that it was a female figure, because of the protruding belly,

except that it doesn't have breasts. On the torso various patterns are carved. And a cylindrical object, probably made of rope, is tied around the chest.

Recently, I showed the figure to Dr. Grootaers, our new curator of African art, and to our recent lecturer Dr. Barbara Blackmun, who were both wonderfully accessible. They agreed that it was likely an ancestral or guardian figure, that it represented an elderly male, and that the cylinder around the chest represented a protective amulet. Its maker is likely from the Luba culture. The sculpture now graces a table in my home. And it is a reminder that despite this man's tragic circumstances, he has been able to

continue his tradition of wood carving as he waits to return home.

We at the museum are most familiar with Rwandan art through the baskets and room dividers we have in our collection. Rwandan baskets are now everywhere in the country, obviously sold as souvenirs. But they have taken on a greater significance as the country tries to recover from the genocide. Traditionally, these baskets were made by prosperous Tutsi women, the ethnic group that was targeted during the genocide, as containers for presents and other precious objects.

Since the genocide, through connections to the private sector, basket-making cooperatives comprised of vulnerable women such as the disabled, the HIV-



positive, or women widowed during the genocide are selling their baskets and other woven handicrafts on the international market. For

some of these women, who previously survived on subsistence farming, this has provided a major boon to their income. Tutsi and Hutu women, the other ethnic group that played a role in the genocide, are working side by side in these cooperatives, thus forming a major vehicle for reconciliation.

One of the major supporters of the basket-making project is Macy's, which promotes a line of baskets and has sent representatives to Rwanda to help establish quality control and offer design ideas likely to make the baskets more marketable in the United States. The baskets today are made of natural fibers,

such as banana bark and papyrus, and use both commercial and natural dyes. They tend to be made in bright pri-



mary colors as opposed to the neutral tones of our baskets. The shape is similar to the baskets in our collection but the baskets are sturdier.

At the end of our stay in Rwanda, John and I travelled throughout the country, which is about the size of Maryland. It is breathtakingly beautiful, very clean, and very safe. I found the fields of tea the most

beautiful of all, due to their particularly rich shade of green. We visited a nature preserve, Nyungwe Park, where we hiked to a waterfall and to see Colubus monkeys. And it was on this hike that I got to thinking about what might connect the Rwandan guides who accompanied us and me as a guide at the MIA.

I read somewhere that the natural beauty of our world inspired human beings to create art. It makes sense. The awe I felt seeing an unfamiliar but gorgeous landscape is akin to the awe I feel when confronted with wonderful art. And the pride and zeal with which our guides presented the vistas of the park where they are employed and live their lives reminded me of the pride I take in our art collection. They enthusiastically pointed out details among the plants and wildlife that I would have missed if on my own (although I think had they employed the inquiry



method, a distractible person such as myself might have learned even more). They talked about the lives of the people and the agricultural

processes, particularly the tea cultivation. They encouraged us to tell our friends about the beauty of Rwanda and this particular park as Rwanda tries to improve its economy through tourism.

These two male guides did something else which I really appreciated. In Rwanda, the average life span is 47. I was 59 when I visited, so needless to say, they viewed me as quite the old lady. The hike we took together lasted about five hours. Although I am in good shape for my age, the fact that the pace they adopted was fairly leisurely made it much easier for me to keep up and enjoy myself. (I was the only woman on the hike.) They asked me many questions about myself, showing a genuine interest and respect. And when we got near the origin of the waterfall, and could see it, they informed me and the rest of the group that the remainder of the walk would be pretty steep and difficult.

Not wanting to hold the group back and satisfied with the view I could already see, I said I would

stop and wait. They conferred in their native language and then said that they wanted me to see the rest and that, "We will help you." As I set off for the final leg, with two strapping men on either side, I was thinking that I could definitely get used to this. Although I think I made it the rest of the way on my own strength, I so valued the message that they wanted me to fully experience this hike. I hope that I am similarly sensitive, when I lead tours, to the individual differences and needs of my group. (Reminder to self: learn to use the devices to project my voice for the hearing-impaired).

I recently heard Bill Clinton expressing frustration with the media for treating Africa as a monolith and presenting the entire continent as embodying one disaster after another. He said there were positive stories in Africa and cited the progress in Rwanda as a case in point. Today, Rwanda is one of the safest, cleanest, most beautiful, and most progressive countries in Africa (for example, over half of its legislators are women). If you are looking for a place to visit, I highly recommend Rwanda. Whether we as docents can travel that far or not, it behooves us all to enhance our understanding of individual cultures and countries on this huge continent and to discover the positive stories about Africa which go beyond the often tragic headlines.

The India Show: Is This Really Photography?

Sharon Hayenga: A Personal Essay

I love this exhibition, full of artists, ideas, color and India. But I've also found it very thought provoking. It has brought forward in my mind unanswered questions about much of contemporary visual art. One of the most important goes back to 1964.

Is the Medium the Message?

Marshall McLuhan received a great deal of attention when he posed this question in a book titled *The Medium is the Message* those many years ago. I summarize, from Wikipedia [contemporary conceptual information?]: The medium is the message means that the form of a medium embeds itself in the message, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived.

This show is conceptual contemporary photography. The conceptual implies that the ideas and intentions of the artist create the criteria by which a work is judged, that what they intended to do is syn-

onymous with what has been done. But I think there remains an external criteria, that the artist is not also best able to evaluate how well the work has been done.

For instance, Shilpa Gupta's *Untitled* is a video game. He wants it to be something more, but in a world which has defined this format as a game, it is a format that is an obstacle to the communication of the artist's meaning, his serious intentions.

Subodh Gupta's *Pure* is burdened with conflict between the medium and idea as well. In the video we look at the image of a man backing into and then coming out of the shower, backing in again and then coming out again. He's larger than Charlie Chaplin, but the video takes us back to the humor of so many silent movies. How are we to know the man is covered in cow dung, smelly, dirty manure that isn't really dirty because it comes from a holy animal? Yet the man keeps trying to wash it off?

In contrast, Navjot Altaf's three-screen panel hosts computer-managed video waves that lap from calm azure blue to an alarming blood red. Fragmented and blurred images of tragedy emerge from the waves in an orderly pattern of chaotic events.



Looking down, our eyes see reflected motion and color coming from the 72 mirrors on the floor. The video is lovely in a painful way. Though arcane, the title is poetic and consistent with the message: *The Lacuna* [absence] of *Testimony*.

Is Technology Destroying Photography?

A week or so ago I watched a gorgeous Metropolitan Opera production of *The Damnation of Faust*, the first since 1906. The staging issues are overwhelming. But for this production, the Met invested between two and three million dollars on the production. The fundamental element of the set is nothing but a large scaffold for people to walk on and to hold onto as it rises up four stories.

But it becomes fantastic with eight horses and riders running in place (four on each of two levels), the flames of hell, 24 desks with chairs in a four-

storey library, manor houses, and underwater balletic scenes.

At intermission, the soloists reveal that their work is difficult because they cannot see anything that goes on in front of them or behind them; all they have to work with is the scaffolding. The rest is an amalgamation of photography and video projection, video projection that is so sophisticated that the tones of the music and the motions of the lead singers direct the sensors that manage the images. The people are not sitting on chairs at the desks; they are bent down onto nothing – their desks and chairs are only visual. People are not dancing in the sea; it's a visual ocean.

Not surprisingly, Robert LePage, the producer, has done a couple of shows for *La Cirque de Soleil*. Of the opera, *The New York Times* quoted a manager, "...this is beyond virtual reality, it is alchemy" (Nov. 18). In the review (NYT, Nov.22), a critic worried that the magical set would overwhelm the music: the set would become the opera.

Is Photoshop the New Paintbrush?

Jitish Kallat's *Artist Making Local Call* is image manufactured. He took tape from a security type camera (360-degree) which rotates indiscriminately, photographing everything in its range of motion. Photoshop will crop the image down to its



choice segments, cut it, color it using RGB colors, and reassemble it into a panorama. This street corner does not really exist. Not in all of India could one find a street so empty of people, nor so many tuk-tuks parked where no one wants to pay for a ride.

Surekha's video *Tree Woman* also is damaged by special treatments. An old woman speaks, she tells the story of the forest that she and her husband have created over the past 50 years. The text crawl along the bottom of the screen repeats the voice. It's a great story, poignant and sweet, strong in a way. Unfortunately, most of the video is layer upon layer of inscrutable gauze-like images. Occasionally something wonderful appears, but not many people stay to watch. The images rob the woman of the dignity of her story.

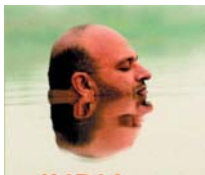
What about the Old Camera and Lens?

Very good contemporary photographers, like earlier photographers, have captured a truth found in tangible, touchable reality. With their creative eyes looking into the lens and their darkroom skills creating softness and tone, art and documentary photographers have been able to continue to hold onto the documentable truth, yet print an image that enriches and often transcends its original. *The Migrant Woman* is a perfect example.

There are wonderful photographs that meet this standard in the show. Righth Ray opened visual space so Indira Gandhi could float toward the outer edge of the frame; he pulled space away from the very intense confined darkness of her funeral pyre.

Manish Startup recorded the claustrophobic terror of the Godhara train, creating an essential truth that is both visual and emotional. The wrestlers' worry can be found in the disquieting diagonal line that is the stairs on which they sit, and again with a fill-the-frame close-up that insists on intimacy. The artist reveals that these men are the General Motors of India, which adds detail and poignancy, but is not necessary for understanding the image.

There are many more: the Friedlander-like mirror cart, the open car-door frame. My favorite piece is Atoll Ballard's series, *I Was Not Waving But Drowning II*. It is a set of glorious stills that try to become a short movie. My favorite is the artist's head and reflection forming a perfectly round, charming circle with tiny ears and eyebrows.



Think What I Say, Not What You See

It worries me that these "essays" are illustrated messages rather than imagery containing a message. The Kerala grouping is charming. But the charm, the cleverness is in the label, not the photographs. The photos are a row of mediocre 8x10 portraits with each person having a Marxist name. The placard punch line: Gorbachev and Mao are not among the images because Gorbachev had gone to work early and Mao was still pouting from an earlier fight and wouldn't appear. I'm not sure that cleverness on the wall should be enough to get inadequate photos into a contemporary photography exhibition.

Pleasingly there is an instance in the show in which photography strongly trumps the idea. By far the most startling images in the show are the series

with the hirsute naked man serving tea to his frail, older father. The artist seems determined to have us think these images reflect the burdens of colonialism and that the teapot represents the queen herself. Perhaps the artist is naïve, or just in denial. But nudity trumps the teapot, which itself looks phallic. These are good photos. And no matter what the artist intended, we look for something that relates to the nudity and the father-son relationship, because that is what the photos have offered. (Several articles about this set of photos and Freud and Oedipus appear in art magazines). These photos qualify for admission to the exhibition; the queen and colonialism don't make it.

Cleopatra with the Viagra-enhanced servant is a golden circus-like image. I know that the artist will insist on telling me that it is about something serious, probably a social problem. But already a couple of hours into the show, I have become emboldened enough to decide that I will see for myself. I can. And I do.

Art Is a Better Criteria Than Time

This show opened with a Sunday afternoon lecture titled "Meditations on Photography: Birth, Death and Meaning of a Medium." Why is it that I so often think contemporary art is making an important contribution, when so often it is not? Of course I like this show. I think it's important to explore new ideas, new ways of presenting things, and new information about cultures other than the United States. Blind acceptance is asking too much. Nonetheless there is a lot to like and even more to find interesting.

We Have a Lot to Talk About!

Sheila McGuire

Happy Holidays!

I am so glad to have this opportunity to share all kinds of information with you. I know this is long, but I hope each and every one of you reads through to the end. Those of you who attended the Annual Meeting on November 3 know that I did not get to any of my agenda items, so I will do my best to summarize them here, understanding that all of these were intended to be discussions, not reports. So, I will post two of the topics in the forum on the new website in the hopes that you will share your thoughts about them there.

If you haven't already done so, it is easy to log on. You have received a few e-mails about this and

Debbi is recapping it here in the *Muse* for those of you who haven't logged in yet.

Dress Code

This was probably the hottest of the "hot topics" I was scheduled to address. At the request of some of you, the Museum Guide Programs staff and the Docent Executive Committee have had several conversations about whether or not docents and other guides should have a dress code. In the end, we decided for now that we will not institute a dress code for a number of reasons, but I really wanted to hear how you all feel about this topic and to share some of our thoughts.

I do agree with the concerned docents that we all need to consider that we represent not only ourselves, but also the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, when we lead tours. We all have different, very subjective, ideas about what constitutes appropriate dress. Because dress is so subjective, I am not a proponent of dress codes. Further, the museum does not have a dress code, so I think it would be unfair to insist upon one for our volunteers.

This said, I agree we all have to consider who we will be presenting to on any tour. I have heard several observations that some docents are not dressing up enough for corporate and museum patron events. The Docent Executive Committee and staff agree that it is essential that docents leading these tours dress up appropriately for these types of events. I don't have the magic description of "appropriate," but do ask that all of you assigned to such events consider your audience and dress to the event.



Thoughts to share? Please go to the forum post (posted November 25) in the tour ideas folder of the docent section.

Museum Guide Programs Library

I know the library is a bit out of control these days. We have intentions to go in there and weed out old books that are no longer used and replace some with other more useful titles.

In the meantime, please do your part to help ensure that everyone is using the library respectfully. A few reminders:

- books circulate for one week at a time

- always file the library card in the card box under the author's last name
- put the card back in its pocket when you return the book
- CLEAN UP AFTER YOURSELF!

Book Tours

A good number of you have expressed interest in developing public tours around books. In fact, you already give book group tours to your friends. I have broached the topic on several occasions over the past years, but have not received the go-ahead to make these a reality because there is interest in the public programs department in developing some sort of art-based book group as a program that people would sign up for in advance and attend at established times – just like a class. At this point, we will not move forward on offering these as tours. Please do continue to develop them, share your ideas with others, lead them for your friends, families, and fellow docents.

I think we could put together a docent book group that met as often as you would like for which the book discussion is always a tour of related art works. Please go to the web and start talking to each other if you would like to form such a group. If I am available, I would love to be a part of this exciting group.

Please continue this discussion on the MGP volunteer website forum. I posted it on November 25 in the tour ideas folder of the docent section.

Public Tours

Thank you to all of you who shared your ideas with me regarding how to get the word out about the great public tours that you give every day at the MIA. Because I fear this article is getting too long, let me say simply that we are making progress getting the word out in more external vehicles and working on getting clearer, more immediate communication about these tours in the building.

Other Topics

I suspect some research study says that people stop reading printed newsletter items after too many paragraphs, words, headings, columns, or whatever. So, I will give only super brief reports on the other topics.

1) The success of our Twin Cities Art Museum Guide symposium: it was great! Thank you to everyone involved.

2) The progress of our pilot program for people with memory loss, Alzheimer's disease and dementia: it is going amazingly well – thank you to everyone who is participating.

3) 2nd-grade Minneapolis Public School VTS Tour Project: Training was a lot of fun and the tours have already begun! Thank you to the Friends and all of you who are making this happen.

4) Artifax “upgrade:” The so-called upgrade has proven to be less than so. As we communicated earlier, the system is not operating at full capacity, and we will not be in a position to add new functionality (e.g., e-mail-able confirmations) at any time in the near future. Sorry. Thank you to Paula, Jennifer, Bryan, and all of you for your patience and understanding.

5) St. Paul VTS Partnership: Our partnership with Maxfield Elementary School will begin shortly after teachers receive training here on January 23. Thank you to all of you who will be helping make this dream a reality!

Whew! I hope you made your way through this important information and that you will now go to the website to participate in discussions about these and other topics.

THANK YOU!!!

And Now a Word From...

Debbi Hegstrom

Protecting the Art

I admit it; I was a sensitive child. If an adult (or even my big sister) told me the bad guys were going to get me, I believed them, and spent many nights underneath my bed covers, which were somehow a magical shield from all things scary. So, when I hear docents say, “if you touch the art, the guards will get you,” I shudder at the thought of a diabolical, gray-blazered apparition just waiting until it gets dark . . .

I realize it may take a lot more to scare children these days; however, I want to offer an alternative way to introduce our friends, the guards.

“We are going to look at works of art today that we would like to have around forever! Part of my job is to protect the art, and I ask you to help me do that by staying one foot away from the objects and the cases. We will also have help from Mark (or Sam, or John, or Mona, or Melika; you get it – learn their names and introduce them!), who is here to watch over the art and all the people in the museum.

So, if you need any help while you're here, you can feel free to ask any guard – you will know them by their gray jacket and colorful MIA tie.”

It is true that sometimes you will be interrupted by a guard during a tour, because you or someone else is too close to the art. Please thank the guard for the reminder and let your group know that s/he is doing his/her job well!

MGP Volunteers Website – Something NEW

The new website is a service that Museum Guide Programs (MGP) is providing at your request. It provides “one-stop shopping” for calendars (continuing education, month-at-a-glance tours, weekly museum-wide schedule, Registration department weekly schedule, *etc.*), the *Docent Muse*, rosters, announcements, and more! It is also a forum to communicate with your peers (including when you're seeking a substitute for a tour).

If you haven't tried it yet, it is so easy! Here's how to use it:

Website address:

www.mgpvolunteers.org

Username: first initial and last name

examples: Robert Smith = rsmith

Sally Jones-Olson = sjones-olson

Lisa Phelps Johnson = lphelpsjohnson

Password: mia4all

Set a goal to login and complete the following “homework assignment:”

- View your profile and add, update, or delete information about yourself
- Upload a photo to represent you
- Find the MGP Continuing Education calendar under ‘Calendars’ on the Main Menu.

If you are having trouble logging in, contact Ann, Amanda, or Debbi for assistance. We will also provide a session on “Using the MGP Website” at a future date. See your Spring Continuing Education calendar – to be posted on the website in December!

Lunch, Anyone?

Antra Pakalns: One docent's perspective on the Symposium – October 21, 2008

A memorable event; an inspiration! Every event added new knowledge and even left time to touch base with old friends, as well as make new ones from other museums.

A session that really inspired me was one presented by Linda Phillips, docent from the MIA. She

gave the first presentation in the “Art, Culture, Spirit” session in the afternoon. She proposed that we of the Twin Cities Art Museum Guide Collaborative (TCAMGC) create a directory of names of docents and guides who have areas of expertise which would be available to us all.

This could be a source of back-up research or more information which we want or need for a better tour or a special project in the galleries for our tours. All we have to do is call the individual for help in making our tours richer and better.

Linda’s professional observation was that we have a pool of docents/guides at the MIA who have expertise in their various fields – be it cultural, spiritual or aesthetic.

The social aspect of this could include a cup of coffee or lunch after our tours. Another way to get to know each other better and share our expertise.

Lunch, anyone?

Blooming all Year

Pam Friedland, class of ’95 and Mary Merrick, class of ’98 are co-chairing *Art in Bloom* this year and have a very large contingent of docents/guides on their committee. They couldn’t think of a better way to make sure that our wonderful collection is part of all of the event planning.

In 2008 *Art in Bloom* attracted over 26,000 people to this annual rite of spring and close to 2000 enjoyed a docent tour. The theme this year is “An American Classic.” The signature image selected is a photograph, and not only is it by a living artist, the internationally renown Cy de Cosse, but he is from Minnesota and he very generously donated the work to the museum specifically for *Art in Bloom*.

A new event this year, *Winter in Bloom*, on **Thursday, February 26** features Soni Forsman – noted queen of water gardening, who grew the lotus in the *Art in Bloom* image by Mr. de Cosse. Soni will share her insight in water gardening from container gardens to luxurious ponds. The evening will be an opportunity to enjoy a behind the scenes look at how *Art in Bloom* comes together with previous *Art in Bloom* People’s Choice Award winners and special docent led tours of the art to be interpreted for *Art in Bloom* by the floral arrangers (organized by Georgia Engbretson and Barbara Edin).

Art in Bloom is presented by the Friends of the Institute – the parent organization of the docents,

and is one of two major fund raisers the Friends produce. Again this year a portion of the proceeds will be directed to the Friends’ Children’s Fund. Since the Fund’s inception two years ago the Friends have developed a tool for exploring the collection in a fun engaging way – a family art scavenger hunt brochure, free to visitors. Recently announced is the commitment to fund a three-year teach, transport, and tour program (VTS!) targeted at every second grader in forty Minneapolis public schools, beginning this year. As part of the MIA’s educational outreach to younger children, the fund has provided materials to support and expand Artful Stories, a preschool program involving books, artworks, and hands-on art activities at the MIA. Note how much that happens not only involves but capitalizes on the talent and dedication of the docent corps!

Mark your calendars for April 30-May 3 and if you haven’t already signed up to tour this wonderful event, or want to know more, check with Martha Bordwell or Madeline Cushman, this year’s Docent Tour Committee Co-chairs. In the meantime, stop in and enjoy the hospitality of the Friends’ office.

Holiday Tradition Costume rejected by Debbi



Pat George