

The Docent Muse



March 2011

The Docent Executive Committee: A Brief History

Marge Buss, DEC Chair, 2010/2011

Volunteer guides at our museum date back to the year 1948, when the Junior League of Minneapolis pioneered guiding visitors through the MIA. In 1962, due to the success of the Junior League program, the Friends of the Institute augmented the Junior League's efforts by providing tour guides who were part of the Friends group. By 1968, the joint program was a tremendous success in the realm of community outreach. It brought 18,000 visitors through the doors for tours that year, and the Friends tour guides became pivotal in providing many of the guided tours of the MIA's collection. The word "docent" was used interchangeably with the word "guide" at that time.

In 1969, The Friends of the Institute structured a formal Statement of Standards for Volunteer Docents. The name of the program officially became The Volunteer Docent Program under the auspices of The Friends of the Institute. Mrs. John Pillsbury Jr., a Friends member, was seated as chairperson and began formulating plans to structure the official docent program. Because the docent group had grown so large and had many logistic and governing issues to deal with, Mrs. Pillsbury felt the need to form a committee of designated leaders to represent the group. Consequently, an executive committee was formed to address aspects of the program such as selection and training of docents, and adopt policies and procedures to serve as guidelines for the docent corps through the Friends of the Institute. Hence, the Docent Executive Committee was chartered on October 6, 1969.

Trivia: In June 1967, the docents voted to turn down a directive to wear uniforms. That's when The Minneapolis Institute of Arts badges were approved for us to identify our role in the museum. Docents received their official badges in February 1968. That tradition lives on today.

In those early years, the Friends President appointed the DEC Chair and in turn the DEC Chair appointed the other members of the board. Self government by the docents through their Docent Executive Committee established the group's official name as "Friends Volunteer Docents" and set up the categories of Senior Docents, Junior Docents and Candidates for Docent. Training and touring requirements were established. Standards were set by the DEC with the full backing of the Friends of the Institute. This official recognition status for Docents affirmed their ability to participate and construct the model for the program. All training and touring was done by Friends volunteers and this formed the basis of our affiliation with the Friends today.

In May 1971, the allocated budget for expenses associated with the docent program was \$50. In July 1971, the Friends Board approved \$6,000 to hire a full time salaried person to schedule docent-related activities, thus introducing, in part, the docent program model we have today.

Trivia: \$6,000 in 1971 would equate to about \$34,000 in 2011.

The present day Docent Executive Committee is seated more democratically, with all voting members selected by the docent corps at large. This representative committee is truly yours. Your involvement in the process counts. Our board meets once a month to address the needs and concerns of docents. We plan social events, produce *The Docent Muse*, extend sympathy in times of need and make accountings of your funds. We work hand in hand with staff and management to communicate concerns, express thoughts, and find solutions together. We represent you as the best of what docents can be, with the underlying principle of providing a bridge that carries ideas to and from all strata of volunteers and staff associated with this outstanding museum.

On behalf of the Docent Executive Committee, thank you for giving us that opportunity. Always know you have a voice. (You can reach me at mbuss2@comcast.net.) And most of all, thank you for all you do. Your work is simply unsurpassed.

Smiling Like a Cheshire Cat – With Gratitude

Sheila McGuire

It is 11:30 am on Thursday, March 3, 2011. I am here at my desk beaming with gratitude and pride, thinking about all of the fabulous (Absolutely Fabulous!) learning opportunities that you are giving to MIA visitors just today alone.

This morning I grinned from ear to ear (“like a Cheshire cat,” my mother would say) at the throngs of joyful students shouting and moving around in anticipation of their VTS and Art Adventure tours. Shortly thereafter I saw docents and guides leading Picture People into the galleries for training on their Art Adventure sets. In an hour, a group will gather around the docent leading an object-in-focus discussion about the Japanese Teahouse and will join her for a tour of the Arts of Japan at 1:00 pm. Another crowd will gather for the Titian public tours, while other private tours, including one for a home-schooled group, will fill the galleries to learn about the museum’s diverse treasures.

Also at 1:00 pm, I will eavesdrop on tours custom-designed by eight docents for Washburn High School freshmen as part of our partnership related to the Ali Momeni and Jenny Schmid project that will culminate in a projection on the museum’s 24th Street façade in June. These students also will probably interact with two volunteers facilitating the very popular Mourners Art Cart.

At 2:00 pm, instead of Continuing Education in the auditorium, three volunteers will take us on tours they developed for participants in the “Islam and the West” conference last Saturday. We will pass by a number of private tours in the galleries as we go.

Tonight, visitors eager to discuss *Seven Days in the Art World* and *Eat, Pray, Love* will join our brand new book tours. Before or after those tours, they just might participate in a China or Mourners Art Cart, or a tour of China, Titian, or the Marino Bronzes. They most certainly will cross paths with throngs of excited Picture People learning about Art Adventure.

What an exciting ten hours in our own art world! I am so fortunate to be a part of such an amazing, talented, creative and dedicated group of women and men. You inspire wonder through the power of art, AND you inspire me. Thank you!!!

Questioning Techniques and Active Participation on Tours

JeanMarie Burtness

During our tours at the MIA, we are encouraged to ask tour group members questions because people who participate tend to notice and connect with what they are viewing. Even though only one person can answer a question at a time, we’d still like to have all tour members thinking and noticing even when they aren’t talking. Sometimes the way a question is phrased or its timing can encourage more participation. Here are five easy-to-use questioning techniques that have worked well for me in the past to encourage active participation among my tour group members, particularly students.

Technique #1: Question, then ask for raised hands. After taking a moment to look at *Frank* by Chuck Close, I ask students to look at the glasses and eye area. “When you notice an interesting detail, raise your hand.” This gives all visitors, particularly the more reticent students, time to look and formulate a possible answer. Since I’ve mentioned in the introduction that I’d like to hear everyone’s voice sometime during the tour, I can select a couple of students to comment who have not yet spoken. Some students might say that the glasses are old-fashioned, others might say they are dark or contain a reflection of a skyline. This technique sets up students to be successful and to have confidence that their answers are acknowledged and valued.

Technique #2: Question, then use the nametags. Frequently, students wear nametags. Making an effort to use the visitors’ names during tours is important. During an extended discussion, including the name at the end of the question encourages all members of the tour group to reflect, consider multiple possibilities, and then comment. “In what ways is this sculpture of *Saint Benedict of Palermo* like the *Amida Buddha* that we looked at earlier in our tour?” Pause a moment and then choose a visitor while making eye contact, “Matthew?” Continue with “And what else? Debbi?”

Technique #3: Phrase your transition in the form of a question.

As part of a transition between objects, pose a question to your group and ask each of them to prepare a response while you walk to the next artwork. Include the comment that you hope there will be a lot of unique answers. “If you were going to create a painting to show calm and silence, what colors might you choose?” Before entering the gallery with the *Yamantaka Mandala*, ask your visitors to share which colors and details they would use. Even if people don’t volunteer to speak, some will be thinking about colors and their emotional impact. This can serve as a type of mental preparation to discuss an artwork that is symbolic and not completely realistic.

Technique #4: Pose a transition question that relates to both the previous and the next object.

After looking at the *Samurai Armor* with a group of advanced history students, I asked them to do this. “As we walk through the galleries on the way to our next object, I’d like each of you to think of one or two lasting effects that may occur with people who have served in a combat area or in the military during war. Try to think of examples both from history and more contemporary times.” As we approached *Peace Concluded*, I asked students to tell me what they came up with. Some shared stories from family members in the service who were changed or injured. Some shared what they had read in the news about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. After examining the painting, there was a great deal of lively speculation about what the father might not ever be able to share with his family.

Technique #5: Ask for a show of hands.

A quick way to get all students to evaluate some aspect of an artwork is to ask for a thumbs up for “Yes or Positive,” a thumbs down for “No or Negative,” or an open, waffling hand for “Not Sure or Mixed Opinion.” I used this technique one time to conclude a tour of the *Charleston Parlor*. “If you could live in this house, would you like spending a lot of time here?” The visitors responded with all types of hand gestures. Everyone seemed to have an opinion about whether or not they’d actually like to live in and have this parlor be their family gathering spot. This technique provided a way for visitors who do not talk very much to participate during the tour.

My Tour of the Month Club

Marilyn Smith

I have been giving private tours to a group of adults on the third Friday of every month for the last three years and I would like to share my thoughts on how this arrangement has enriched my practice as a docent and strengthened the group’s connection to the MIA and its collection.

When I first became a docent, I didn’t seek out or even consider the possibility of giving monthly tours to the same group of participants. This opportunity literally came to me. I had invited a friend to attend two of my checkout tours at the end of my docent training. Before the second tour, she asked if she could bring a couple of friends to the tour and I agreed. Afterwards, she asked if I would give a private tour to her book club. I agreed to that as well and, a few tours later, they asked if I would be willing to give them tours on a regular basis once a month. I said I would and we’ve been touring together ever since.

After about the first four months, however, I found that I had used all of the objects that I considered “ready to present” from my docent training. This is when the fun/work for me really began. As a result, my learning curve on the MIA’s collection went straight up and I have never regretted saying yes to this opportunity.

The first tour I gave outside my “comfort zone” was called *The Madonnas of Minneapolis*. In preparation for it, I suggested that the group read *The Madonnas of Leningrad*, by Debra Dean. On the tour, I showed them a variety of Madonnas, ranging from the ancient French sculpture, *Madonna Enthroned in Majesty* (G343) to later works like the 19th century painting, *Madonna and Child*, by Franz Ittenbach (G322). After the success of this first tour, I decided to base my tours on the MIA’s monthly tour topics. This allowed me to prepare at the same time for these tours and for any monthly public tours for which I might be scheduled. I also gave the group tours to all the special exhibits to which I was assigned. Even so, after two years and 24 tours, I needed to find new tour topics that would be of interest to the group and would include objects they had not already seen. So, I developed tours on topics new to me, such as *Glass at the MIA*, *Neolithic Pottery at the MIA*, *Art and World War II*, *Bronze*

Sculpture: 1850 to the Present, and *German Art: 1850 to the Present*.

These tours have benefitted me in several ways. First, they have reinforced for me how full and rich the MIA's permanent collection is. Without these tours, I probably would not have realized that I could give a whole tour on Chinese jade or ancient glass. Also, in searching the galleries to find new objects, I have truly appreciated how thoughtfully and beautifully the museum's objects are displayed.

These tours also have required me to keep learning new things. Because I know that my audience will appreciate all my preparation, I am driven to put in as much effort as it takes to make each tour special. This has helped me fulfill my goal of being a lifelong learner.

Third, the tours have encouraged me to step outside of my comfort zone and try out new objects, new approaches to presenting objects, and new galleries well off the beaten track. I was even able to schedule part of a tour in the Print Room. My group was delighted to have the opportunity to see off-view prints there and to learn about printmaking processes from Kristin Lenaburg.

Finally, as time has passed, this group has grown in number and increased the depth of its discussions about the art. On a recent tour based on *The Mourners*, for example, the group stood in front of *The Choir in the Capuchin Church on the Piazza Barberini, Rome*, by Francois-Marius Granet (G306)



for about ten minutes, discussing reasons why Granet had made so many paintings of this place, analyzing the differences between several versions of the painting and speculating on which might be the latest version. It was a truly fascinating conversation and one I had not anticipated at all. Furthermore, I have noticed that, as we walk through the galleries, group members often make comments

while passing objects discussed on other tours as though they are revisiting old friends.

I didn't seek out this regular tour arrangement, but I am truly grateful that I accepted the challenge of giving the same group a different tour every month. It has been a win-win situation from the beginning for everyone involved.

How the MIA Photography and Prints/Drawings Departments Helped Me Design and Conduct a Tour

Dale Swenson

Recently, I received a tour assignment from a U of M instructor requesting a tour covering "the worker and work in America" from the late 19th century to the present. After searching the galleries in vain for some works to fit within this topic, I realized that I needed some help! Because I knew there would probably be some off-view photographic and print images that would fit well within this theme, I contacted Christian Peterson in the Photography Department and Kristin Lenaburg in the Prints and Drawings Department to ask for their assistance. They were wonderfully cooperative and took on the task with enthusiasm, pulling a number of pieces from their collections and meeting with me to review and choose the selections.

After reviewing the pieces (about 30) that Christian and Kristin had suggested, I divided the works into four groups and the MIA staff set them up for display during the tour, which took place entirely within the two departments. At the tour's outset, both Kristin and Christian provided some commentary on printmaking processes and on the role of photography in documenting the historical period in question. Then, I commented on the artistic approaches used by the artists in each of the four categories. After these introductory remarks, the students immersed themselves in the images for the rest of the hour.

I have never had such a fine response to a tour from a university-level class! By giving them such special access to these off-view works and to the expertise of the MIA's staff, we opened up the MIA to the students in a new way. I left feeling very grateful and proud of the service that Christian and Kristin had provided for the students and for me.

Ask the Decent Docent Advice Column

Question: On my last tour, while we were discussing Van Gogh's *Olive Trees*, a grade-school student asked me who painted the *Mona Lisa*. I completely blanked out! What should I have done? What advice do you have for handling those inevitable questions that come out of left field?

Answer: What an excellent question! This question goes right to the heart of what it means to be a good docent and we all know that "A good docent is a flexible docent." So, what you're really asking is, "How can I be flexible when my brain turns into Cream of Wheat?"

This brings me to my first (but, admittedly, not best) option: divert the discussion to another work of art that you do remember something about, such as the Philip Goodwin, *A 'Bear' Chance*, which is located in a totally different gallery. The advantage of this option is that you will likely be talking about Cream of Wheat, which has the same consistency as your brain matter at that particular moment.

BUT being a good docent, you will reject this option the moment it slogs into your slurred skull. Instead you will slide seamlessly to Option 2: Ask if anyone in the group knows the answer (while frantically scanning the gallery for another docent or museum guard or total stranger who might be able to lend a hand). While this may ultimately prove to be your salvation, this is more likely to be a tour when all the chaperones are quiet and well-behaved.

Which brings us to Option 3 (my favorite): THE TRUTH. Just tell them that for no apparent reason, this particular fact is not on the tip of your tongue and that it might be a fabulous research question for when the little darling who had the...impulse...to ask it gets back to school. And please, when s/he finds the answer, you would absolutely love a note with that information. S/he can send it straight to the docent office and from there it will make its way into your box. Then you all can know what Titian ate for breakfast on his 51st birthday or whatever the original question was. And remember, there is no such thing as an annoying question, only rigid docents. Come to think of it, there are NO rigid docents! We are quite the flexible, happy lot. Oooooommmmm...

Question: What is the most effective and/or polite way to respond to a museum visitor in your tour group who feels compelled to contradict information you have given your group? Does your answer change, depending on whether the visitor's information is demonstrably wrong? Or if the visitor is a child versus an adult?

Answer: Another excellent question! But before we address the finer points of this inquiry, we need to clarify – do you want to know the most effective way to respond or do you actually want to be polite? These are, as they say, horses of different colors. And on that note, maybe you could start out by talking about creatively-colored horses, such as *The Large Blue Horses*, by Franz Marc, once loaned by the Walker Art Center to our very own MIA. However, I intuit that there are those among you who perhaps feel that this is avoiding the question. Therefore I will, for the sake of expediency and simplicity,

assume that you would like to be both effective and polite. We are, after all, docents! We can do it all!

The next level of inquiry might be this: are you a native Minnesotan? If so, you already know that you must simply smile and say nothing (though you might have an almost overwhelming impulse to trip the ill-informed visitor and then regret it for about a decade).

However, let's be fair to those among us who have not had the distinct advantage of calling the Loon state their lifelong home. For those poor souls, there is the "Oh, that's interesting" approach. This involves memorizing a short speech that might go something like this:

"I have never heard that [incredibly farfetched fact] before but it is certainly an interesting observation. The last thing I recall learning on that issue is that [fill in the correct information]. However, I will certainly have to look up this fascinating [fact/interpretation/fantasy] that you have shared with us. Thank you and watch your step."

This approach appeals on a variety of levels. First, it allows one to offer the arguably correct information to the group for consideration. Secondly, the visitor really may have read some recently-discovered or re-evaluated evidence that has not wormed its way into our admittedly already overloaded crania. Thirdly, it reminds one that it really is NOT NICE to trip the visitors, even when they have the...impulse...to disagree with us. After all, we are docents! We are always polite! And flexible!

Finally, there is the "keep-your-eye-on-the-prize" option. We docents absolutely thrive on encouraging our visitors to look at and experience the art. We are not automatons! We are not simply spitters of information! We live to help visitors discover for themselves the limitless allure of art of all kinds! If our dear, misinformed visitor is engaged with the art I, for one, do not want to do anything that might interfere with or tarnish that person's enjoyment of the experience and the MIA. After all, we are talking about ART, people! Are there really any wrong answers?

And on that philosophical note, I will close for the time being. Tour well, brave docents! Adieu!

Until next time.

How Do You Say, "What's Going On in This Painting," in Ixchel?

Nancy Kelly

I recently returned from a week of in-service training on Visual Thinking Strategies for teachers at a small school in Santa Avelina, Guatemala. Santa Avelina is a remote village in the Ixchel Triangle of the Guatemalan highlands. The people of Santa Avelina are indigenous Mayan, speaking one of about 23 Mayan dialects. They are beautiful, gracious and happy people. They have a strong sense of family and community, but they have many problems as well. The Ixchel Triangle was the hardest hit area during the civil war in Guatemala that lasted from 1960 to 1996. Its residents live in extreme poverty. There is no health care in the town. And as in most of the remote regions of Guatemala, education is limited.



I came to Santa Avelina through HELPS International (www.helpsintl.org), an organization that my family has been involved with for the past eight years – mostly

on medical mission trips to remote regions of Guatemala. HELPS also sponsors the school in Santa Avelina. The school teaches children in grades 1 - 6, and few children in this region will go to school past the 6th grade.

When I first visited the school in October of 2009, I started thinking about the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) program that we use at the MIA and how it could benefit both the students and teachers. Because Ixchel is the native language in Santa Avelina, the students and teachers are continually working to learn Spanish as a second language. As with any second language, it is difficult to develop language skills to express abstract concepts. And it is especially important for these children to develop critical thinking skills to compete in the world outside of their village. I realized that VTS would be an ideal teaching tool for this population. I discussed my idea with the director and founder of the school, Lois O'Neal, who suggested adding a writing component

and invited me to return the next year to facilitate an in-service training for the teachers.

I spent the next year planning my training and gathering materials. My goal was to keep the teaching method as simple as possible and work on the basics. I would plan on coming back another time to continue to advance the curriculum. I wanted to make it easy and fun for both the students and teachers. I received wonderful input from Amanda Thompson Rundahl and Maria Eggemeyer. The MIA education department gave me several posters and old Art Adventure reproductions to bring with me. Sheila McGuire suggested that I bring images that the students could identify with, so I created posters from photographs I had taken at the school the year before, which proved to be a great way to initially engage the students.

I returned to Santa Avelina in January with my teaching team, which consisted of a former humanities teacher and my Guatemalan Spanish teacher. We initially worked with five teachers in third through sixth grade. I demonstrated the VTS technique in several exercises with them, and then had them practice VTS with each other. I had prepared cards for each of the teachers with three relevant VTS questions and some tips for conducting the exercise, such as pointing, paraphrasing, connecting the ideas and remaining neutral. After two days of training with the teachers, we brought in some of the students (who were on break at the time) to practice. We had them conduct all of the exercises in Spanish first, and then we had them do an exercise in Ixchel to see the difference. The discussion in their native language was much more animated.

For me, the most exciting part of VTS is watching children bring their own experiences and worldview to the artwork. For example, both the teacher group and student group loved Gérôme's *The Carpet Merchant*. Interestingly, the children thought that the carpets on the floor were *cortes* (the colorful skirts the local women wear) rather than rugs. In viewing Bonnard's *Dining Room in the Country*, the students thought the setting was similar to the Guatemalan highlands. They discussed Signac's *Blessing of the Tuna Fleet at Groix* in their native language, and it was a very lively and animated discussion. None of the children had seen a harbor before or boats like these. They created delightful stories about what was going on in the painting.

By the third day the teachers were fairly adept at using VTS and the three questions. At this point I planned to talk to the teachers about the benefits and concepts behind VTS and a little about the research. One of my colleagues suggested we ask their ideas of the benefits before we told them. One teacher talked of how VTS would help the students who do go on to junior high and high school compete with students in larger cities, and would give them the analytical skills to go on to university one day. They understood the need for the students to have an appreciation for their differing ways of thinking and seeing the world. They saw how the students responded with respect for one another's opinions and how it expanded their way of thinking. The teachers discussed how VTS could be helpful to the children in learning Spanish and encouraging discussion, particularly with no right or wrong answers. We discussed with the teachers how to use VTS in their curriculum, and how they would apply it to natural sciences, language class, art class, etc.

The teachers also appreciated the VTS writing exercise, which turned out to be a wonderful component to the program. It solidified the concepts and ideas of VTS in the minds of the teachers. It also helped them improve their own Spanish writing and communication skills.

I discussed the importance of keeping a journal after each VTS session to note how it went, any changes they could make, how to apply the lesson in other areas of study, how the students responded, and what changes they noticed in the students' abilities. My hope is that they will create an ongoing log in order to see progress and maturation. Through email and Skype, I will continue be a resource for the teachers, helping to choose artwork and lend other advice.

I have had the honor to come to know many indigenous Mayan people. It was a privilege to bring a slice of the educational model for Visual Thinking Strategies to a very different cultural setting. I plan to continue with this project for the foreseeable future, and I would appreciate any thoughts, suggestions, ideas and comments on it from fellow docents and educators.

Tom Rassieur in the Hot House

Kay Miller

The *Hot House: Flowers for After the Frost* exhibit in Galleries 315 and 316 is nothing like what Tom Rassieur intended it to be. It's bigger, quirkier and longer-lasting than the life span of most hot house flowers. Partly that's because Rassieur, John E. Andrus III Curator of Prints and Drawings, was open to the chance encounters that loans and the MIA's varied collection afforded. But it was also because of the camaraderie and cooperation of his curatorial colleagues and MIA designers.

"My original intention was to have it run from the solstice to the equinox – late fall/early winter," Rassieur said. But the show – botanical, historic and artistic – proved so popular with visitors that he agreed to extend it through *Art in Bloom*, refreshing it in March with four or five substitutions, like a florist adding fresh blooms to an existing arrangement.

Hot House includes works from a man who was arguably the finest flower painter of all times, a publisher whose attempts to publish *The Temple of Flora* bankrupted him and a pop artist who swiped an image from a photographer and got sued for it. It also features objects from nearly every curatorial department. During a gallery talk in November and recent interviews, Rassieur offered insights into a curator's thinking about the juxtaposition of objects and altered states of mind for the viewer.

"This show has been great. Everybody has been so cooperative," Rassieur said. Paintings Department Chair Patrick Noon let him take the paintings he wanted, including Henri Fantin-Latour's poetic *Roses*. Christian Peterson, Associate Curator of Photography and New Media, offered Adolphe Braun's 1854 albumen print photograph, used to create printing blocks for wallpaper and fabric designs, as well as stunningly beautiful contemporary work. Eike Schmidt, Curator of Decorative Arts and Sculpture, let Rassieur fill the decorative art cases in G315 with floral-patterned English Delftware and German beer steins, acquired in 1937 but never before



displayed. And Bruce Dayton offered art from his home, saying “If you want to borrow it, it’s yours!”



The project started after last year’s *Until Now* exhibition of post-1960s art.

Contemporary Art Curator Liz Armstrong had works from the

show for which she was “seeking a home” - Jennifer Steinkamp’s hugely popular *Hurdy Gurdy Man* (*Chrysanthemums*) video installation and Andy Warhol’s *Black Flowers*, loaned by Gordon Locksley. “We thought it would be great if they could remain on view in some way after the exhibition,” Rassieur said. He was also looking for an excuse to mine his department’s Minnick Collection, which alone has 8,000 works, many of them botanicals.

“I decided to do a crazy botanical show,” Rassieur said. “So, those very nontraditional botanicals were actually the start of the whole thing.”

With some coaxing from his colleague Matthew Welch, Curator of Japanese and Korean Art, Rassieur placed *Hurdy Gurdy Man* front and center, where the constantly shifting projection entices visitors into G315. *Chrysanthemums* measuring 48 inches high sway with the breeze, blossoming infinitely in four randomly repeating loops of color and light. Hanging on the wall nearby is Warhol’s iconic *Black Flower*, for which he had appropriated a color photograph of hibiscus flowers from the June 1964 issue of *Modern Photography* magazine, using it to create his own silk-screened image. When photographer Patricia Caulfield saw her photo in one of Warhol’s posters, she sued. The pair settled out of court for an undisclosed amount of cash. This event reminded Rassieur that the recent fracas involving Shepard Fairey’s appropriation of an Associated Press photo for his ubiquitous Barack Obama *Hope* poster was “nothing new.”

Like a hot house, the resulting exhibit is warm and inviting with its well-used cast-iron garden furniture and nearby coloring books of poetry. They beckon you to sit and soak it all in. Only then, do you notice the painted stems, ferns and flowers poking out of the wall title, leaves falling into piles at the floor boards. “We called Jessica Zubrzycki, the

graphic designer, and said, ‘I want this to be crazy. I want plants coming out of the title.’ And she went whole hog with it. The whole design team came up to put up the titles. They had plants sprouting out the doors. It was like decorating a Christmas tree. Everyone was having so much fun. It was a moment of special camaraderie.”

When did the rage for floral paintings and drawing begin? “There was a flowering of botanical drawing in the 18th century,” Rassieur punned. But already by the early 17th century, such major botanical artists as Basil Besler, represented in the show by a “fantastic” sunflower and carnations, were publishing. The botanical book, printed compendia of useful plants and herbs, flourished as early in the 15th century. In the 16th century, many artists were copying from books plants they had never seen in real life. By the 17th century, floral images became larger and more precise as artists made studies of actual plants. By the 18th century color became more prevalent. Prints become ever more elaborate in the 19th century, as artists used lithography and introduced printed color instead of hand coloring.

“Priscilla Bury is one of the treasures of our collection,” Rassieur said. She was a self-taught artist who began drawing flowers as a child, a typical lady’s diversion during the 19th century, and later became widely recognized as one of the greatest botanical illustrators of all time. Bury was a liberated woman who, during the craze for exotic botanicals, left her railroad engineer husband and traveled to the South Pacific to study its flora and fauna. Among her works in the show is the stunning scarlet, *E.F. Seedling Amaryllus 1819*.



Another head-turning work in the show is Robert Dunkarton’s *Night-Blowing Cereus*. The cereus, one of the great exotics of the 18th century, blooms just once a year. And when it blooms, it blooms at night. Dunkarton’s cereus comes from Dr. Robert John Thornton’s *Temple of Flora*, a publication of folio-size colored plates that is one of the most appealing botanical cycles of the 18th century, but which bankrupted Thornton, leaving him desti-

tute at death. “That particular print taps into the idea of ‘sublime,’ the concept of nature or art being so overwhelming that you feel it emotionally, rather than intellectually. It bypasses the mind and goes straight to the gut,” Rassieur explained. “You have this wildly exotic flower beautifully depicted in a fictive landscape that includes a clock and the clock is set to midnight. It has a very moody surrounding that helps convey the mystery of this plant.”



Along the far wall in G316, Rassieur displays the chronological history of floral still life from the 17th to the 19th century. In the center is Georgius Jacobus van Os’s lush *An Arrangement with Flowers*, which *Art in Bloom* organizers selected as their 2011 poster image and which will soon be moved to a more central viewing location. “Van Os places his talents in the service of *memento mori*,” reminding us with its withering blossoms and broken stems that life is fleeting, Rassieur said.

Jan van Huysum’s *Bouquet of Flowers in a Terracotta Vase*, a new acquisition making its MIA debut, is perhaps Rassieur’s favorite piece in the show: “He’s arguably the greatest flower painter of all time.” Van Huysum had a profound knowledge of flowers. In winter, he spent evenings drawing floral arrangements from memory, pulling together flowers that bloomed at different times of the year and never would have been available simultaneously for a fresh bouquet.

“All this was coming out of his well-crafted imagination,” Rassieur said. “I find this highly animated drawing – his treatment of black chalk, gray wash and graphite – extraordinary. If you look carefully, you’ll see that it’s squared. The grid over it was probably meant to help transfer the image to a canvas that could then be painted. But when he painted, he painted directly from actual flowers. So the paintings look different from the drawings. The painting believed to be most associated with this drawing is in the National Gallery in Washington, D.C.”

Mondrian’s *Chrysanthemum*, in watercolor and charcoal, is paired on the adjoining wall with Matisse’s *Bowl of Begonias I*, which Rassieur calls “one of the more beautiful evocations of plants done in black and white.” Matisse was interested in relief



cutting on linoleum because there was nowhere to hide. If he made a mistake, he started over. He liked the challenge of making things that were very spare and elegant.

Nearby in a center vitrine, contemporary Japanese artist Koike Shoko’s floral ceramic *White Form*, reaches out with its large, ragged white petals. Matthew Welch suggested using the work, which was part of a recent, large loan of contemporary Japanese ceramics from Massachusetts collectors Carol and Jeffrey Horvitz. “If you lift the lid, you see broken glass to represent water,” Rassieur said. In another vitrine is a Cy Decosse’s *Dandelion*, a wee palladium print photo balanced on a wire. Says Rassieur: “Every garden needs a weird Cy Decosse.”

By early March, Rassieur was finalizing which works he’d use to refresh the show. Among them: *Composition No. 8*, a stunning abstract collage by Michel Seuphor (an anagram of Orpheus; real name, Fernand Berkalaers) that Bruce Dayton gave the museum last year. It reminds Rassieur of an abstract tree. The collage is in a neo-plastic style, using extreme abstraction, geometric form, and a strict primary color palette with black and white. Displaying it near the Matisse provides a way of exploring the concept of the flatness of abstraction, a principal element in the work of Matisse and Seuphor.

He also hopes to include a watercolor of calla lilies by German Expressionist Emil Nolde. The artist imbues his painting with a dream-like vision of the flower. “He’s made – as is his wont – great use of the free flow of water color, in a sense, nature’s element of chance within the image. He gives it a soft-focused, dream-like effect, in contrast to the sharp focus of most botanical studies.”

Bruce Dayton is also lending a small oil painting by Odilon Redon, a late-19th/early 20th century

French painter. This still life of anemones glows with gorgeous oranges, blues, whites, reds and yellows. “It’s one of the most beautiful paintings I’ve ever seen, an other-worldly jewel,” Rassiour says. “Redon painted it so that the vase of flowers seems to float in mystical space.” Redon, who is most often called a Symbolist, used his paintings to explore his own psyche and feelings, once explaining: “My drawings inspire and are not to be defined. They place us, as does music, in the ambiguous realm of the undetermined.”

A *Still Life with Roses*, by Cornelis de Heem, a mid-17th century Dutch painter, also will be brought into the show. “I like its simplicity relative to most of the period. It provides contrast to the complexity of Jan van Hollsum’s still life images,” notes Rassiour.

Associate Curator Joe Horse Capture is providing the fifth and final substitution that Rassiour hopes to make: a group of Native American silhouettes of plants cut from bark in a tall, narrow frame. Rassiour wants the *Silhouettes* to be seen in close proximity to the linocut by Matisse, for which they have a kindred artistic vision.

“This is the thought process that is happening right now,” Rassiour said, inviting docents to add the show to their tours in March and April. “Come and see how it all turns out. It’s like a hot house: It’s always changing!”

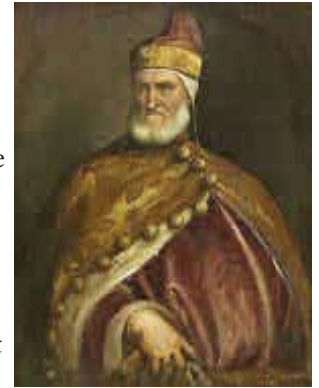
Venetian Music in the Renaissance: Choosing Selections for the Titian Exhibition

Merritt Nequette

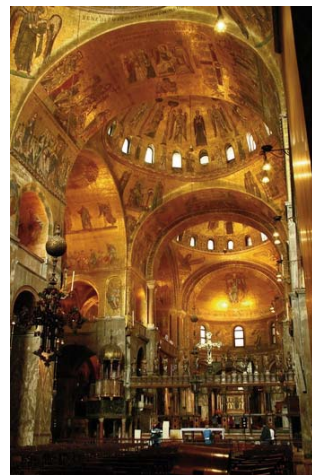
The people of *La Serenissima*, the Most Serene Republic of Venice, were concerned over the centuries to preserve the authenticity of being a Venetian. Those touring the current Titian exhibition may notice that most or all of the painters represented are from the city or the area governed by the republic.

Being appointed the *maestro di cappella* at the Basilica of St. Mark required that the candidate be one of the native sons. There was one notable exception, who proved to be significant for the type of music that is associated with Venice in the Renaissance. Adrian Willaert was a Flemish composer, possibly born in Bruges, who was only one generation removed from the Burgundian School composers responsible for the music accompanying the

MIA’s *The Mourners* exhibit. The group is usually categorized as the Franco-Flemish School of Renaissance music. After spending some time in Rome, Ferrara, and Milan, Willaert was appointed to the position in Venice by the Doge Andrea Gritti in 1527, remaining there until his death in 1562. By the way, Andrea Gritti had his portrait painted by Titian (or at least by Titian’s workshop).



Although he was a “foreigner,” Willaert did found what is called the Venetian School of musical composition. Part of his legacy was probably due to the unusual construction of the cathedral in which he worked. San Marco has five domes, which create



unusual acoustics for music. The choir area is actually split in two on either side above the main altar. Each of the balconies had its own organ, and a rather shallow space for singers and instrumentalists.

The Franco-Flemish school had developed polyphony to the point that we usually think of it in the Renaissance – not quite as strange to our ears as the earlier century of the Burgundians. Willaert developed a type of polychoral music – a choir on either side singing antiphonally or together, creating a sort of 16th century surround-sound. Since the balconies are shallow, it was difficult for a conductor to stand in front of the performers and be seen by them. The solution was to use two conductors – the one in the right balcony conducted the group across the altar area, and the other conductor did the same. This not only allowed the choirs to see “their” conductor, it also allowed the conductors to see each other and keep the music together. A “choir” in this sense can be either vocal or instrumental, or a combination of the two. In the Renaissance, it was assumed that vocal choirs were often doubled by instruments.

Venetians loved pomp and circumstance in their basilica – as evidenced by the gold they expended on



ecclesiastical decoration, particularly the *pala d'oro* (the retable of the high altar) – and brass choirs in polychoral style were therefore a natural addition to the musical landscape. The most famous of these were Andrea Gabrieli and his nephew Giovanni Gabrieli, whose work is still standard repertoire for brass ensembles. All of these composers wrote music for the church and for secular events as well. And there was not that much difference, other than text, that made it one or the other. Even Mozart at a much later date could simply change the Italian opera text to a sacred Latin text and use the same music without changing a note.

It was probably sometime in October 2010, when Treden Wagoner approached me about helping to choose music for the audio stops in the Titian exhibition. With all the unusual Renaissance music that was possible, this sounded like a great opportunity to bring music into the MIA again. I gathered a number of CDs and found music that seemed appropriate for the “stops” that I was given. When I brought them in, Treden told me they would have to find out if they could get permissions to use the various tracks. The music itself, of course, is in public domain, but the recordings of the music are not.

In January, Treden sent me a series of music files which the MIA had permission to use. None of the first group chosen was included. Now my second try at the music was to be chosen from among the 51 tracks he sent me. After I had made my “second” choices, he told me that some of the “final” choices might not be the same as mine, and I shouldn’t be surprised if that happened. If this were to be done

again, of course it would be easier first to find out what music is permissible, and then only have to do the choosing once.

I have listened to the audio guide since, and found that most of the selections are the ones I originally chose (the second time). However, I also discovered that some of the audio stops are at different objects from the ones I was working with.

One musical selection is at the stop for *Christ Carried to the Tomb*, by Tintoretto. I had originally chosen a plainchant. In the second round, I found another piece that was more-or-less appropriate. The selection that was ultimately chosen is absolutely wonderful. I have no idea what it is, but it is very appropriate. So kudos to whoever found it.

Since the name of the MIA includes “Arts” in the plural, I am pleased to see that music is being included in more exhibitions. I have worked on music for the Art Carts over the years, and with Coral Moore’s help this fall, that project is now complete for all ten carts. There was music in the gallery for *The Saint John’s Bible* exhibition in 2005, and there is music by the Rose Ensemble for the current *The Mourners* exhibit.

Election of the Doge

(The Republic of Venice’s version of ranked order voting?)

Genoa and Venice had rulers called a doge. Although the doge of Venice was elected for life, after his election he was confined to the doge’s palace and the area of the Basilica of St. Mark, next door to the palace, which I assume means he could not stray very far from the Piazza San Marco, the cathedral, and the doge’s palace next door for the remainder of his life.

The Venetians were very concerned about a dynasty being established as a ruling family, and thus after 1172 the election of the doge was entrusted to a committee of forty, who were chosen by four men selected from the Great Council of Venice, which was itself nominated annually by twelve persons. After a deadlocked tie at the election of 1229, the number of electors was increased from forty to forty-one.

New regulations for the elections of the doge introduced in 1268 remained in force until the end of the republic in 1797. Their object was to minimize as far as possible the influence of individual great families, and this was effected by a complex elective machinery. Thirty members of the Great Council, chosen by lot, were reduced by lot to nine; the nine chose forty and the forty were reduced by lot to twelve, who chose twenty-five. The twenty-five were reduced by lot to nine and the nine elected forty-five. Then the forty-five were once more reduced by lot to eleven, and the eleven finally chose the forty-one who actually elected the doge.



The Splendid Mystery of our Ife Shrine Head

Jane Grunklee

Figuring prominently in Yoruba oral history, the royal and holy city of Ile-Ife in southwest Nigeria is considered the cradle of all human existence. According to one of the more enduring origin myths, the founding deities Oduduwa and Obatala began the creation of the world as directed by Olodumare, the creator of existence. Obatala modeled the first humans out of clay and Oduduwa became the first divine king or Ooni of the Yoruba. A sacred kingship was established at Ile-Ife with elaborate palace compounds, a network of shrines, streets, courtyards and communal altars. Ile-Ife began to develop as a major artistic center between 700 and 900 CE. Artifacts, often depicting the human body (particularly the head) in stone, copper, brass, and terra-cotta, have been found throughout the city. It is believed that the MIA's rare and exceptional *Shrine Head* was displayed and honored on a royal shrine in the palace compound.

There is an abiding humanism in art from ancient Ile-Ife. As one studies our *Shrine Head*, it appears that the artist breathed life into the clay as this immortalized portrait took shape and form. We

notice the heightened realism of the eyes, nose, lips, modeled facial structure and flesh and strong neck with bold horizontal creases. However, some viewers may struggle to make sense of the dense incised striations that cover the face. These parallel lines have typically been explained as scarification marks, emblems of status, beauty and identity. The truth of the matter is we really don't know with certainty what the striations represent.

Why is the traditional explanation in question? The exhibit catalog, *Dynasty and Divinity: Ife Art in Ancient Nigeria*, by Henry John Drewal and Enid Schildkrout (2010), presents a couple of alternative interpretations to share with our museum guests. Facial and body scarification, and, in certain ritual contexts, face painting were common in many areas of Nigeria until the early 20th century. However, there is



no evidence pertaining to what kinds of body marks were prevalent between the 12th and 14th centuries, the peak of artistic expression in Ile-Ife, when our *Shrine Head* was created. Some writers have suggested that the striations may depict veils on the beaded crowns Yoruba kings wore to conceal their faces from the common people. This theory presents a wonderful opportunity to introduce viewers to the MIA's magnificent, but more recent beaded *Yoruba Crown* only a few feet away. A second explanation may be that the vertical lines provide visual and textural contrast, thus enhancing the appeal of the portrait. Surely these fascinating hypotheses will engage our guests.

So, who is this woman we find so fascinating? Is she a queen, maybe the mother or sister of the Ooni? Perhaps she is Luwo Gbagida, the 21st and only female Ooni of Ife. One thing is certain, she keeps us, with her steady gaze, in a state of wonder.

Spotlight on Our Cultural Community: The Hillstrom Museum of Art

Emily Shapiro

Are there any “Gusties” among the docent corps? Or, perhaps, parents of “Gusties”? If you do have some connection with or knowledge about Gustavus Adolphus College, located approximately 60 miles south of the MIA, you may know that it contains a gem of an art museum on the lower level of its student union building, the C. Charles Jackson Campus Center. This museum, the Hillstrom Museum of Art, sponsors two special exhibits of art during the fall and spring of each academic year. It also devotes a gallery each semester to a focused and scholarly examination of art works from its own permanent collection. And in May of each year, the museum exhibits works of art by graduating studio arts majors from among the Gustavus Adolphus student body.

So, how did this museum come to be?

According to the museum’s website (<https://gustavus.edu/finearts/hillstrom>), one of the College’s 1938 graduates, Reverend Richard L. Hillstrom, “began collecting art in the 1940s, when his ministerial career was just beginning. It was to become a lifelong passion, one that continued after his retirement, when he took a position in 1982 at Lutheran Brotherhood in Minneapolis and began building their renowned collection of religious art.” (NOTE: Readers who are familiar with the MIA’s current *Venice on Paper* special exhibit, will feel their hearts skip a beat at this wonderful connection between the works in that exhibit and our protagonist, Reverend Hillstrom.)

Reverend Hillstrom initially concentrated on collecting works by Swedish-American artists but soon began to focus on more mainstream artists, especially those of the American figural tradition. He acquired pieces by The Eight (a group of American artists dedicated to making art connect directly with life), including paintings by Robert Henri, William Glackens, Maurice Prendergast and, in particular, George Bellows. In addition to The Eight, Hillstrom collected works by such American Regionalist artists as Grant Wood and Edward Hopper. Some 19th century artists who also caught Hillstrom’s attention include John Singer Sargent, Winslow Homer, and Homer Dodge Martin.

As mentioned earlier, each semester the museum’s curators show selected works from the perma-

nent collection in a changing exhibit called *Focus In/On*, in which an artist’s works are accompanied by lengthy scholarly labels that explore, in depth, the artist’s life, artistic style, and art historical context. Currently, however, the museum is taking the opposite approach and, instead, is showing nine works from its permanent collection accompanied only by labels that say “Look!” In so doing, the curators seek to confront, head on, a debate circulating among MIA curators as well; that is, whether and to what extent a museum’s wall labels should explain an artwork in order to help the visitor better understand its meaning and significance. The opposite perspective is that art museums should limit their use of wall labels and allow visitors to obtain their own aesthetic experience from the artworks, without distraction or interference from the curators. In its current exhibit, the Hillstrom Museum invites its visitors to “Look!” first at the art and, if curiosity requires, to send the museum an email seeking further information on the painting and the artist who created it.

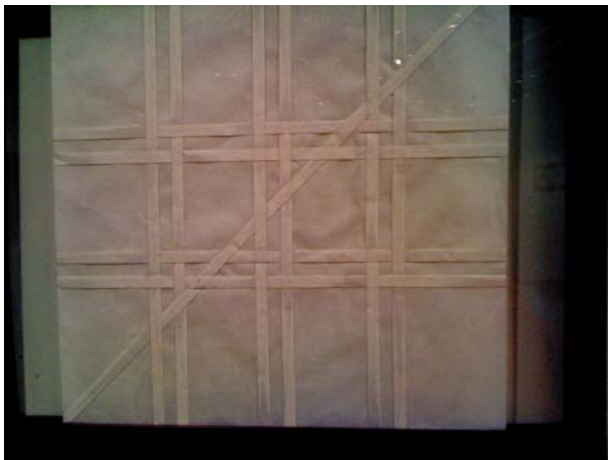


“Take a “Look!” at this painting from the current exhibit and see what you think. Any guesses as to its artist and/or genre?”

The other exhibit currently on view at the Hillstrom is an extraordinary collection of origami works by the California artist Robert J. Lang, called *Many-Fold Manifolds: Engineered Origami*. Lang began his career as a physicist and engineer at Cal Tech but, in 2001, left that career to become a full-time artist. In keeping with his scientific background, Lang’s origami works stress the close connection between origami and mathematics. In the artist’s own words, as quoted in the exhibition brochure, “(O)rigami, the art of folding uncut paper, sinks deep roots into both the natural laws, patterns, and structure of

mathematics, and the aesthetic, conceptual, and emotional goals of art... (b)y manipulating a surface – the paper... through the means of many folds...”

As conceptual as this statement may sound, the works in the exhibit are incredibly precise and naturalistic, and include many amazingly realistic re-creations of animals, birds and insects, as well as some textile-like abstract pieces that look woven and defy the idea that they are composed of single pieces of uncut paper.



Have I piqued your curiosity enough to cause you to head down Highway 169 to visit this incredible museum? I hope so! The current exhibits will be on view until April 21st. Directions and museum hours are provided on the museum’s website. Readers who want more information about the “Look!” painting described earlier in this article should feel free to email me.

A Farewell to Arms

Tom Byfield

History’s roadside is littered with feats of deriding-do, successful or not. There was Napoleon who punched his drinking buddy, General Nye, in the arm and said, “Hey, I’m off to Waterloo, c’mon along, it’ll be fun!” And there was Gary Hart who set out with a bimbo for Bimini on a yacht prophetically called, *Monkey Business*. The yacht didn’t sink but his presidential hopes did. Then there are those who actually pull off deeds that defy reason, such as Charles Lindbergh who used rouge and Magellan who first circumnavigated the globe – thus proving to the Pancake Flat Earth Society (the precursor to today’s Tea Party) that the earth is round.

In that latter category we can salute one of our own, right here at the MIA. Bob Marshall recently gave a tour entitled, *The Ten Worst Paintings at the MIA*. He invited along fifteen of his Class of 1995 classmates. This was no fly-by-night venture, given that the MIA is only open late on Thursday evenings, Bob’s only night for writing commercials for men’s hair darkeners. No, this was a well-thought-out tour with strong, seamless transitions and high humor, during which he methodically tore into some of the sacred cows hanging on our walls. The impudence of his offering and the delighted excitement it brought to the group made this one of the most unforgettable tours in recent memory. It was great fun. Rather than describe his chosen pieces, I direct you to Bob’s blog, “riffsbybob,” and to its “arts 2010 October” section. Read it; you won’t be disappointed.

I have always had an honest and wholesome regard for whatever is atrocious in art. Following Bob’s lead, I granted myself permission to view some of our paintings with a more critical, if not jaundiced, eye. One painting, at first glance, seemed a little odd to me and, after spending more time with it, it became genuinely irritating. Like James Bond, I was shaken, not stirred, by it. It is *A Portrait of a Noblewoman*, (attributed to the school of Hans Holbein, c. 1550). She sits next to *Princess Charlotte* in gallery 342. There is no escaping the fact that her extremely long arms make her look like the comic book heroine, *Elastic Woman*. It was painted, I suspect, by an apprentice in Old Hans’s workshop, named Orvis Doult, a trainee who had a pretty good grasp of heads and hands but was out drinking beer at Oktoberfest the day they studied appendages.

Let's get some anatomical perspective here. Our old friend, Polykleitos, and his sidekick, Pythagoras, whose theorem is one of my favorites and maybe yours, too, set down criteria for ideal body proportions, much like that great student of anatomy, Hugh Hefner, has done for our generation. They said, for instance, that the head should measure one-seventh of the body's height. Using a complex extrapolation of mathematical formulae employing exact measurements, sines, tangents, Newton's Second Law, and a chain saw, I determined that our *Noblewoman* had to be 5 feet, 3 inches tall.

The Greeks also postulated (they did a lot of postulating back then, having no TV) that the distance from fingertip to fingertip, with extended arms, should equal the body height. Now, measuring our *Noblewoman*, we find that her wing span almost equals that of a B-24 bomber. To reconcile the two, she would have to be seven feet tall! The Holbein workshop instructor must have gone ballistic when he saw our tyro's work! I bet he told him to paint those big puffy sleeves (the ones that look like kiddie arm floats) on her tentacles, hoping to disguise their length. It doesn't work.

If our noble lady were alive today, she could be the best shot blocker in the NBA. Are you listening, Woofies?

