

The Docent Muse

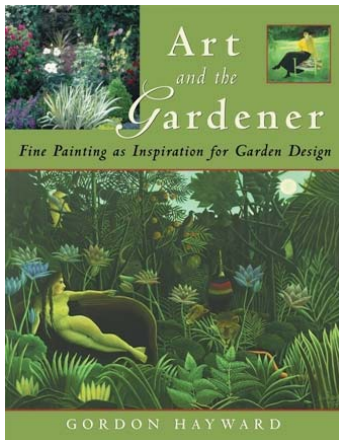


March 2012

Painting as Inspiration for Garden Design

JeanMarie Burtness, Chair of the Docent Executive Committee

In *Art and the Gardener*, author and gardener Gordon Hayward wants to inspire the home gardener in new ways by showing how paintings in art museums can inspire a new way of seeing. Taking the time



to notice color, line, texture, scale and balance in paintings can help a garden designer. Painters and gardeners use a similar common language, and both are expressing their personalities and passions. This book does not have lists of plants or detailed garden plans. Instead, it suggests that planning a garden is similar to creating a painting.

In the section “Choose Your Style,” paintings are paired with photographs of gardens to help readers decide what gardening style they prefer and would like for their homes and surrounding land.

For an example of Romantic gardens, Hayward uses a Thomas Cole painting with a disintegrating viaduct that has vines growing up over the rubble. The old bricks have patches of white, and there’s a sense of a simpler past. The lush plants and trees do not look as if they have been maintained. A path wanders off into the distant green hills. The companion photo of a garden shows an un-pruned climbing hydrangea rambling up a brick wall with parts sloughing off. A rusty decorative gate begins a path into the garden with a shade tree, some grass and shrubs. Short flowering plants cluster randomly near the gate. There is a feeling that if you were to enter the garden, you would be in a tranquil place, somewhat secluded from the everyday world.

In comparing an Impressionist painting of Childe Hassam with part of his own garden in spring, Hayward talks about the play of light as sunlight diffuses through wild plum trees onto the emerging spring ferns and daylilies. He points out how the artist used hollyhocks to draw our eye up toward the sky and how gardeners use the angular trunks and branches to provide a vertical structure to link the ground with the sky. In the Hassam painting, splotches of red flowers peep through tall grasses. In Hayward’s own garden, red tulips provide punches of color on a green hillside.

The section “The Relationship between House and Garden” uses paintings that illustrate garden design lessons. In one lesson, Hayward uses a Bonnard painting as a way to think about views from windows out into the garden. The windows become frames for individual paintings within the larger canvas. Hayward advises that you stand at each window in your house to see what views your own windows frame. The gardener’s goal is to make what you see through those windows beautiful.

There are more pairings of paintings and gardens with topics such as curving paths, dappled shade, man-made structures contrasting with plants, the roles trees play in the garden, and so on. The pairings and the text comparing the two make for delightful looking and reading. A final chapter on Claude Monet’s life, garden, and art adds insight about Monet’s use of light, color, and the atmosphere he created in his gardens and paintings at Giverny. The book also has several extensive appendixes. I found the appendix on Symbolism and Associations in Art and Gardens particularly useful.

As he compares paintings with gardens, Hayward uses terms and elaborates on the examples he finds in such things as the destination for the eye, play of light, limited plan/color palette, movement, color contrasts, and many more. The examples of these artistic principles were clear and to the point. In addition to *Art and the Gardner* being a beautiful

and delightful book to read, I found myself thinking more about some of the landscapes in our art collection at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

Gordon Hayward will be one of the featured speakers during the 2012 *Art in Bloom* lecture series.

Kongo Ivory is Purchased in Honor of Sheila McGuire

Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers,
MIA African Art Curator

“It is my pleasure to inform you that last week the Accession Committee approved the acquisition of the 18th/early 19th century Kongo ivory figure of *Saint Anthony*. We will rotate this important object into the current African installation by the end of the month.”

To honor the twenty-three years Ms. McGuire had given to the MIA’s Museum Guide Program, approximately 124 active, sustaining and honorary docents contributed over \$36,000 to purchase a late 18th-to-early-19th century ivory Kongo statuette representing St. Anthony of Padua holding an infant Jesus, both clearly of African origin. Mr. Grootaers had seen the statuette offered for sale by a Brussels dealer at the Paris



African Art Fair last year. It had previously been owned by the family of a Belgian collector who obtained it around 1900, giving it valid provenance.



African Art Fair last year. It had previously been owned by the family of a Belgian collector who obtained it around 1900, giving it valid provenance.

Grootaers sought and received confirmation from fellow curator Eike Schmidt, an expert in ivory figures. Prior to designating the donated funds for this particular object, Jan-Lodewijk showed pictures of the ivory to Sheila and explained St. Anthony’s importance to the Kongo people. She concurred in the selection. And now we can all look forward to seeing this beautiful new addition to the African galleries this spring.

A Reflection on Ethics in the Museum

Marge Buss

Museums are a place of public trust. They hold the stories of mankind in their care. The public views the museum as a place of learning, yearning, and discerning human talents that express the history and values of the world in which we live. They do this through the objects in their collections, either real or virtual. As presenters of such, we have an ethical obligation to bring our “A” game to the floor, or within the multimedia we use, honoring the integrity of the institution we serve and its contents.

Contrast this within the context of the marketplace in which museums operate and compete. American museums are competing for the public’s attention. Competition for audience is sought after by every social event and shopping mecca located within the radius or realm that surrounds us, creating an enormous job for museum marketing departments to compete within. How do we get the public to open our physical doors or access our virtual domains as we vie for attention with other competitive venues? These competitors might be online entertainment, professional sporting events, mega movie theatre complexes, and the Mall of America. We compete with the marketing departments of sophisticated businesses such as these in attracting visitors.



Consider the public’s ever-shrinking time. How will they choose to use it? Consider the ever-shrinking budgets of schools. How will they choose to allocate these funds? Museums offer a unique product within this array of leisure time and educational choices. What can we do at the level of the Museum Guide Program to promote the uniqueness of our product? How can we sync up with the Marketing & Communication Department to round out or enhance the product they are promoting? A good place to begin answering these questions resides within the arena of ethics, an arena where docents and guides hold a unique position from which to weave a visible or virtual layer of values into the mix of the unique product we offer or produce.

Our ethical standards are transmitted through the ways we interact with each other and with the public. These consist of behaviors that can be qualified and quantified. We are the face of the museum. In that capacity, our duty is high. Look at the words below

in bold type, adopted from Rudder Finn’s creative edge marketing group ethics officer, Emmanuel Tchividjians, as a baseline format with which we can carve out a niche of ethical uniqueness in the marketplace.

*Honesty. Transparency. Respect. Privacy.
Relevance. Responsibility.*

These are significant words to wrap our actions around. Consider the following interpretation of how we could use these words in directing our work in the museum and electronically.

Honesty: We utilize facts and data communicated via various departmental experts at the museum and through diligent personal research to form the parameters of the information we relate to our audiences.

Transparency: We are honest about who we are with the awareness that we are representing the MIA during every type of presentation we make for the museum.

Respect: We exhibit respect for the museum, the objects, the audience, and each other.

Privacy: We respect what others tell us and hold personal information as private information.

Relevance: We ensure the content of our tour or virtual work is appropriate for the audiences we serve.

Responsibility: We hold ourselves accountable in accuracy when we build our tours and present ourselves to the public. The public good is our highest responsibility.

Museums can earn the public trust in ways other venues can’t. The face-to-face interaction with the public and virtual interaction using educational information makes us a unique venue of choice for the public’s prized time. Offering a product of human enrichment wrapped in an ethical mantel, combined with the museum’s current publicity effort would have great potential in creating a uniquely marketable product. These are not merely ways to offer our tours as product, but are ways to lay a path to higher ground, and possibly provide a virtue the public has an unquenched thirst for, the desirable quality of ethics in the public realm.

Did you know?

Minutes for the Docent Executive Committee are posted monthly on MGPV under Docent minutes. DEC minutes can also be found on the bulletin board and in the 3-ring binder on the book shelf in the Museum Guide Resource Center.

Putting It Together: Rembrandt in America

Terry Nadler

The excitement is building! Rembrandt is coming to the MIA on Sunday, June 24th. Well, at least his artwork is, in the exhibition Rembrandt in America. We’ll have a great opportunity to see some of his work from American museums and private collectors up-close. The MIA’s *Lucretia* is included; she’s coming home! You might be wondering how this exhibition came about.

I sat down with Tom Rassieur, Department Head of the Prints and Drawings Department, and John E. Andrus III Curator of Prints and Drawings, to find out. I asked questions about what makes a “real” Rembrandt and got Tom’s suggestions on tour themes and background reading.

Before Tom came to the MIA in 2008, Kaywin Feldman had learned of the impending exhibition from her friend Larry Wheeler who is the Director at the North Carolina Museum in Raleigh. She definitely wanted to have it here at the MIA. In the end, North Carolina, Cleveland and Minneapolis became the only cities hosting the exhibition.

Tom has spent a large portion of his professional life studying Rembrandt. He started out as a collector of Rembrandt etchings, “do-able” he says in those early days, “even on a modest budget, believe me.” Then he began his graduate work, studying with Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann, one of the great Rembrandt scholars of his generation. Haverkamp-Begemann (now in his late 80s) was a professor at New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts. Tom spent five years “doing nothing but studying Rembrandt.” Using Vienna as his European base, he spent “weeks and sometimes months at a time – going through the Rembrandt print collections and analyzing them.”

When Tom became Department Head of MIA’s Print and Drawings in 2008, MIA Director Kaywin Feldman asked him to be the MIA’s member of the curatorial team preparing the Rembrandt exhibition.



The inspiration for Rembrandt in America came from Dennis Weller and George Keyes, curators at the time of the North Carolina Museum at Raleigh, and the Detroit Museum, respectively. Tom speculates that because of the number of Rembrandt exhibitions in 2006, celebrating the 400th anniversary of his birth, these two curators wanted to create a Rembrandt exhibition of their own and to examine the role of Wilhelm Valentiner at the same time. Valentiner had been a director at both their museums and a prominent Rembrandt connoisseur, advising American museums and private collectors on buying Rembrandts of their own. Once the MIA and Cleveland got involved, the emphasis shifted away from Valentiner and toward Rembrandt and his art.

One of the first challenges of putting this exhibition together was financial. Detroit had to pull out early on, due to severe financial difficulties the museum was having. Tom mentions, “The unfortunate problem...is that Detroit owns one of the finest Rembrandts in America – from (Rembrandt’s) middle period – which is an unusual thing in American collections.” However, Cleveland stepped in and replaced Detroit as an exhibition venue even though it has no verifiable Rembrandts.

Tom continues, “You’re dealing with a number of extremely valuable works of art, so the cost of shipping and insurance is considerable. Detroit felt that it wasn’t able to bear that burden.”

Then there is the complex issue of deciding which Rembrandts you want. “Because these paintings are dispersed all over the country, there’s a lot of travel involved – going to see the pictures and trying to know what you’re really dealing with. Whether you have an authentic Rembrandt or something that is from his orbit, or something that is intended to look like it’s from his orbit. And then when you do ask museums or collectors to lend their Rembrandts, you’re often asking them to lend their prize object, essentially lending it for a year (to this exhibition). So it’s a ‘big ask’.”

Individual collectors understand the value of their contribution and willingly lend their Rembrandts. Tom added that loaning from American museums, however, might involve some ‘horse-trading.’ The MIA made some offers to lend one of its works, now or in the future, to some museums willing to lend their Rembrandts now.

The show will have about 50 paintings, all of which at some time were attributed to Rembrandt. But with the research that has gone on in the second half of the 20th century, especially the renowned Rembrandt Research Project, Tom said only about 30 are classified today as “real” Rembrandts.

Tom paused for a moment, then said, “This is amazing. This is the largest group of authentic Rembrandts ever drawn together in America! He’s such a fascinating artist. If you truly engage with him, you begin to realize how rich the experience is.”

So it took five years to put this amazing exhibition together, from the time Weller and Keyes conceived of the idea in 2007, to finally opening the first installation at the North Carolina Art Museum in Raleigh at the end of October 2011.

So what makes a painting a “real” Rembrandt? Is it the intensity, the eyes, the superior quality, the brush strokes, or the tactile feel of the paint? Let Tom explain.

“It’s a very, very challenging question. People have bet millions of dollars on either side of the question. It’s something that has challenged connoisseurs since Rembrandt’s day. In a nutshell, it’s hard.” Tom discussed some of the technical analysis that experts have been doing over the years, analyzing questionable Rembrandts, comparing them to those which are documented as authentic, comparing the age of the wood and the pattern of the threads. The analysis has even extended to determining if the same plank of wood or bolt of canvas has been used compared to an authentic Rembrandt! Even then, things can get murky. It’s known that Rembrandt painted right alongside his students, maybe even off the same



Self-Portrait 1659

palette. And in his day, it was acceptable to sign his name to his students’ work. Even some of his “self-portraits” have been found to be done by his students instead, not by him! And when Rembrandt thought there was an overstock of his self-portraits, these would be over-painted with moustaches or hats and sold

as character studies, just so that patrons could have a Rembrandt hanging on their walls. So establishing a painting as an authentic Rembrandt is pains-taking work!”

In the galleries, looking at the paintings, Tom says, “To me, with Rembrandt there is a depth of character beyond which his acolytes (his students or others painting in his style) can produce. It’s that feeling that you get. But there are other telltale signs.

One of my favorites is to look at the eyes. Rembrandt has the uncanny ability to depict the musculature around the eyes. And when you look at other artists, the eye is an olive-shaped opening in a mask-like face. Things are a little too smooth and a little too idealized. Rembrandt was not given to too much idealization. In fact his sitters complained that the paintings didn’t look much like them. And maybe the paintings look too much like them! Like when Gertrude Stein complained to Picasso ‘This painting doesn’t look like me.’ And Picasso said ‘But it will.’ Because that’s the way she’s going to be remembered. Through [Picasso’s] eyes. And that’s the way it is with Rembrandt. Through his eyes and his imagination.”

Tom mentioned Rembrandt’s application of paint. “One way that Rembrandt distinguishes himself from many others active in Holland is that he doesn’t want a fine smooth finish. He doesn’t want them to look enameled. Certain pictures he wants a great deal of tactility. Whether he’s drawing, painting, or making prints, he’s interested in surface texture. So in certain pictures he may slab the paint on with a palette knife or he may paint with brushes that cause the paint to end up in peeks, almost like whipped cream. This can give his paintings a physicality that exceeds that of other artists. It can also give them a subtlety that’s unparalleled, in that there is a play of light off all these different surfaces. That becomes extremely important when you are distinguishing a gold chain from the burnish of a plate of armor. In fact, looking at the early Rembrandt paintings, they are very, very fine in the face and then he’ll get rough in the hair and he may be smooth again in the armor and then cursory in the clothing and it looks like three people were painting the picture, but it’s all him.”

After years of contemplating Rembrandt’s genius, Tom muses, “You encounter a single image. You can realize the depth of communication that’s going on

across time. And the fantastic quality of his work with the brush. The deeper you get into it, the more confounding it is. He changed so much over the course of his life. He was capable of painting in multiple styles at once. Sometimes it’s hard to believe that two authentic Rembrandts are really by the same hand, but yet they are. There’s a lot of “Rembrandt” in his art. They’re not simply stylistic exercises or command performances from above. They are often strong personal artistic statements.”

For those docents touring the exhibition, what themes does Tom suggest? He advises emphasizing two concepts:

-The evolving phases of Rembrandt’s career – “the brash young artist, the confident master, and the timeless observer.”

-The stylistic changes seen in this show’s paintings, revealing Rembrandt’s continual experimentation, “ searching for his own voice.”

Tom wants us to be aware that Rembrandt kept evolving as a person throughout his artistic life and that this is reflected in the intelligence of his art. “There’s an arc. He starts out as a brash young artist who’s out to prove something. And he becomes the most sought-after artist in the thriving metropolis of Amsterdam. And then he becomes the confident master. He wants to be seen as a gentleman artist, as a prince, as a man to be reckoned with. And in a sense, he’s willing to deny you. You have to come to him and make your case to get pictures from him. And then in his old age, when he’s had his comedown, he’s really taken some blows. He’s had personal losses, the deaths of his children and his beloved wife. He re-starts his family. But then he winds up going bankrupt. He loses his home. He loses his patronage. He is no longer the most stylish artist in Amsterdam. Yet many people still respect him enormously and want to have his work. He becomes resolute. He becomes the timeless observer of humanity. There’s an increasing depth and feeling in his work.”

Tom continues, “That’s why we are so fortunate to have *Lucretia* at the MIA. Painted in 1666, it’s one of his very late pictures. And he’s painted it right at the period when he’s losing Hendrickje, the woman that he loves for the second half of his life. He’s portrayed her in a horrible situation. I see that as a deeply autobiographical work.”

Hold on! More on Tom’s interpretation of the MIA’s *Lucretia* in the next issue of the *Muse*!

Reading recommendations:

Rembrandt in America catalog. Tom recommends it, of course! The six chapters cover a Rembrandt biography (written by Tom) and the American history of Rembrandt collecting and connoisseurship. Each of the three curators wrote two chapters a piece.

Schwartz, Gary, *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings*, Penguin Press, 1995

Schwartz, Gary and Harry N. Abrams, *The Rembrandt Book*, 2006

Schwartz, Gary, *Meet Rembrandt: Life and Work of the Master Painter*, 2011

Van de Wetering, Ernest, *The Painter at Work*, University of California Press, 2006 (paperback)

Crenshaw, Paul, *Rembrandt's Bankruptcy: The Artist, His Patrons, and the Art World in Seventeenth-Century Netherlands*, Cambridge University Press, 2006

Rembrandt, Not Rembrandt: Aspects of Connoisseurship (2-volume set), Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995

Rassieur, Tom, *Rembrandt's Journey*, Boston Museum of Fine Arts catalog, 2003

For a very helpful overview of the exhibition, Rembrandt as a person and artist, his patrons and community, view the excellent 30-minute production by University of North Carolina Public TV and the three museums hosting this exhibition. Tom is featured in it. <http://video.uncv.org/video/2166529890>

The online OOM: So much more than a beautiful sound

Kay Miller

Two years ago then-junior docent Anna Bethune presented an idea to the class of 2009: "I was thinking that we should share our research. It just doesn't make sense for each of us to keep reinventing the wheel." We had been in training for less than a year. And most of us held our precious research efforts to our breasts like new mothers with their first-born. Anna's suggestion fell flat.

But Anna is not a woman to be deterred. A year later, she revived the idea. She brought it up cheerfully, as if it were a bright, shiny-new notion. This time there was a little discussion. Then, the idea fell flat. That, despite the fact that we were being trained to collaborate.

"One of the first things we tell a new docent class is to share research, resources, and ideas with one another," said Debbi Hegstrom, senior educator in charge of the docent program. "We have been adding more and more group projects to the curriculum, such as group-generated tours, to foster a spirit of collegiality and get docents working together as early as possible in their training."

Three months before our graduation, Debbi had assigned major group tours. The six groups were to send Debbi written versions of their tours, complete with members' meticulously researched objects. Then, she published them on the MGP Volunteers website.

Anna pounced: "See how useful those completed write-ups were? Perhaps we could start a club – completely voluntary – and share our research. Each of us would pick a favorite object per month, then email the finished product to club members. Instead of one finished piece, we'd have dozens." Now that we were facing tons of tours on random topics (and feeling a bit panicky), Anna's idea gained traction. Suddenly, her idea seemed positively fresh and shiny-new.

Thus was born the Object Of the Month – OOM. Naturally, Debbi was on our email list. Looking the OOMs over, she posed the natural question: How would group members feel about sharing their OOMs with the wider MIA guide corps?

"Historically, docents have contributed the fruits of their research and tour ideas to the object files," Debbi said. "We have all benefited from this work. Recent classes have set up email groups among themselves to share their discoveries. Before the launch of mgpvunteers.org, there was not a central electronic gathering spot to collect contributions. However, we now have the opportunity to share information on a much larger scale."

OOMs could be posted on MGPVolunteers, where guides have gotten used to finding class assignments and articles, she said. After considerable discussion, the group decided to go ahead, with the proviso that individual members could opt out if, for any reason, they chose to do so.

The results have been amazing: For her *Butterfly Maiden Kachina* OOM, Helen Leslie painted a picture of the Hopi ceremony so vivid that we can see the Sovalkatsina walking into the village "like a weary old man," singing sacred songs and signaling the Hopis' ritual emergence into the "fourth world."

Wendy Chen analyzed Chinese paintings with great graphics, an offshoot of her work with college students. Ziya Tarapore reported on innovations she saw at the Denver Art Museum. Dick Ploetz tackled an overview of Chinese ritual bronzes. For her OOM on *Veiled Lady*, Gail Gresser-Pitsch introduced us to the Victorian language of flower symbolism. Lin Stein painted an evocative picture of the human capacity to transform oneself from the inside out in her OOM on Bill Viola's *Three Women*.

When Linda Krueger researched *Women Hunting the Fox*, she realized to understand it she needed to know about tapestries. So, as a bonus she contributed a hefty "European tapestries: Primer." (Linda is famous for adding "fun facts" to her OOMs.) Susan Rouse's OOMs are models of the concise, the concrete and the comparative. And when Jim Allen struggled to understand Cy Twombly's black board painting, *Untitled*, he found website sources to educate himself – and us – on contemporary works.



Joan, as she was displayed in the Donna and Cargill MacMillan bathroom in 1991. The setting creates a vastly different visual experience. In G369 visitors say she looks "creepy, despondent, unhappy..." Comments about the mood in the photo have been "pensive, lost in thought... relaxed...reflective (no pun intended).

Lynn Brofman

Photo was taken by Lynn Brofman's husband, architect Chuck Levin, who helped design the MacMillan's condominium.

OOMers have interviewed artists. They have discovered that art historians, book authors and archeologists are only too happy to share the results of their research, especially when they learn it will be shared with hundreds of guides. Great props and tour ideas have cropped up. Lynn Brofman recently contributed the picture of *Joan*, our hyper-realistic polyethylene nude, in her original 1991 setting: the bathroom of donors Donna and Cargill MacMillan's then-new condominium. In the multiple

mirrors, *Joan* is reflected into infinity.

For my OOM on Alice Neel's *Richard Gibbs*, I had been trying for weeks to learn who Gibbs was. After numerous false starts, I called the Los Angeles

gallery that sold the painting to Eric Dayton, who has loaned it to the MIA. The guy at the other end of the line went to check the files. "Well," he said, upon returning, "The foundation said only that Gibbs was a friend." "Foundation? There's an Alice Neel Foundation?"

Online again, I found info@aliceneel.com. I sent a message into cyberspace and was answered by Ginny Neel, Alice's daughter-in-law. She wrote that she knew Richard Gibbs and would be happy to chat with me. That evolved into a 1-1/2-hour phone interview in which Ginny cast a very different light on Neel's life, temperament, skill, exhibition history and way of working. She verbally walked me through the painting and, as she did, I saw things in Richard Gibbs that I had never seen before: I saw Neel's New York apartment to the right and the New Jersey gardens that Gibbs had tended floating in from the window to the left.

Ginny's insights have made my own use of this painting much richer. That interview is at the end of my ridiculously long OOM. If you like the painting and read nothing else of the *Richard Gibbs* OOM, do catch the last third of the interview. We found that other OOMers' interests filled in gaps in our own. Best of all, we could put together a tour quickly. At the very least, an OOM would provide the base for further research.

"The OOMs are a great way to keep us up-to-date with new research and discoveries relevant to our collection," Debbi said. "They also are a perfect place to share stories about works of art based on your travels, books you have read, and people you have contacted and interviewed." Eventually, we decided to key OOMs to the following Tour-of-the-Month topic. January was Mostly Modern. February was sculptures. March was Asia.

At last count, 261 OOMs have been completed. Now, we're adding tour ideas and great articles we find. The list continues to grow. We're delighted to share our work with the museum guide corps. And we're hopeful that other docents, CIF and Art Adventure guides will join us, contributing their vast knowledge, research and tantalizing tidbits through OOMs of their own.

"You are all working toward the same end – to create the best visitor experience possible. There is so much you have to gain in being generous with one another. This isn't a new practice, but rather one that

we want to build upon. The creation of the Object of the Month files (OOMs) supports this tradition,” Debbi said. “The OOMs are a wonderful complement to our object files. If you haven’t heard, we are going all-digital with them as well! The great scanning project has begun and is moving us toward greater ease of access to information for all docents and guides.”

Generally, OOMs include:

Title, artist, date, accession number

An image – if available

Three key questions

Three key ideas

Artist biography

Historic period

Possible tours on which the object might be used

Resource list

To add an OOM to the collection, send a Word or pdf version to our online guru, Stacey Thompson:

sthompson@artsmia.org

To access OOMs:

Log on to www.mgpvolunteers.org

Click on “Object Files” under the Main Menu on the left side of the page.

or

Search by a specific object by typing the artist name, the title or the accession number in the search box in the upper right corner of any page on the website.

Did you know?

The extensive text and photos for the wall panels for *Saint Paul the Hermit* are available on the Museum Guide Program website <http://www.mgpvolunteers.org>. Log in, and go to Downloads, to categories, to Special Exhibitions at the bottom of the page, to *Saint Paul the Hermit*.

That happened when? ... MIA pre-history

Merritt Nequette

On the top shelf of the docent library shelves is a series of bound volumes entitled the *MIA Bulletin*. They range from 1905 to 1975. The remaining issues may be found in the MIA library.

This may be the beginning of an intermittent series on the history of the MIA. Most of the guides are probably aware of the opening date of the MIA – January 1915. So 1905? How about 1883? The official legal entity that runs the MIA is known as the Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts, and it was incorporated in January 1883. William W. Folwell, president

of the University of Minnesota, was the first president. He and twenty-four “other citizens of Minneapolis” constituted the inaugural board of directors. The Society established the Minneapolis School of Fine Arts in 1884. A department of design was opened around 1900.

In April 1905, it was decided to publish a monthly Bulletin distributed to its members. By this year, membership had grown to 600 members. Enrollment in the school had reached 185 in 1904, with 70 students attending (not sure what that meant). The school was located on the upper floor of the Public Library Building. Robert Koehler was the director.

Besides sponsoring the school, the Society presented art exhibitions. Called “loan exhibitions,” the works involved were drawn from the private collections of the various “citizens” in the city. The First Loan Exhibition was held in November 1883. Most of the exhibitions apparently ran for about four-five weeks, and were held in four or five venues simultaneously.

The second exhibition occurred in 1897, with over 150 paintings loaned by the private collectors. It was noted that these collectors were not too favorably disposed toward the “new” Impressionists, but were much taken with the French academic style and the Barbizon School. Attendance was disappointing, however. Not noted was that this may have been due to the fact that it was held in mid-December through the beginning of January.

As part of building its own collection, the Society acquired *The Ray of Sunlight* by John W. Alexander in 1905, at a cost of \$2000. Twenty-four “ladies of Minneapolis” formed a Picture Fund Committee and raised most of the cost by subscription. A later issue of the Bulletin listed the 129 names of the subscription. The majority of these were “ladies” and only four names were listed as “Mr.& Mrs.”

One of two donations listed in April 1906 was Douglas Volk’s *Portrait of John S. Bradstreet*. Set in Bradstreet’s former room at the Judd House (which was across the street from the Minneapolis City Hall), it is probably best known today for the room as much as the portrait. Volk had been the first director of the Minneapolis Art School, and Bradstreet was one of the original board members in 1883. It is on view in gallery 319.

In volume ii:6 of the *Bulletin* dated Midsummer 1907, a lengthy report of the directors’ meeting on

June 10 indicates a desire to consolidate the efforts of the Art School, the School of Design, and to develop a plan to obtain a site from the park system of Minneapolis for a permanent museum.

Whatever transpired during the following seven years is not reported monthly. Volume iii of the *Bulletin of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts*, published by the Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts, appeared in January 1914. The ellipsis in publication is acknowledged in the announcement of the new name and a picture of a nearly-completed shell of the building taken December 10, 1913. It was expected to be completed in June 1914.



The ground floor is to be devoted to the use of the art school. The main floor will be principally occupied by a collection of casts of famous works of sculpture, ranging from the early periods to the present time (some of which are already owned by the Society, while the acquisition of others is pending), by collections of furniture and other examples of the applied arts, to be arranged in separate rooms according to the different periods, while the remainder of the space will be required for the administration offices and for school use. The third (skylight) floor will contain the principal exhibition galleries for the permanent collection of pictures, for loan collections, for periodical exhibitions and, temporarily at least, for school purposes, should this prove necessary, as now seems likely. The pictures now owned by the Society will fill more than one gallery; a separate room will be occupied by the Martin C. Koon Memorial Collection.

At the time of the opening of the museum, the Society actually owned only eight or nine works (more than one gallery, it seems). Three from the Koon Collection are still in the accession listing: *The White Bridge* by John Twachtman (G351), *Marriage* by Gari Melchers (G302), and *Night's Overture* by Arthur B. Davies (not on view). Various loans and

donations would occupy the remainder of the galleries.

Other acquisitions prior to the inaugural opening included *The Miraculous Field of Wheat* by Joachim Patinir and Quentin Massys, now called the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (*The Miraculous Field of Wheat*) from the workshop of Joachim Patinir (G342), *Fire in Ingram Street* and *Tuscan Landscape* by Sir Muirhead Bone (neither on view), and a sculpture which has undergone some changes in its time at the MIA.

It was thought to be a statue of a Holy Woman, Mary Cleophas or Mary Salome. The original commentary states:

This remarkable example of German sculpture at the close of the fifteenth century was purchased last summer from the income of the Dunwoody Fund. The figure is carved from close-grained, soft wood, probably linden, is 91 cm high, and preserves largely intact the original gilding and polychromy which adds so much to the decorative effect of the piece. The face and hands have been painted in flesh colors; the garments are crimson, gold and white.



Time has darkened the colors and softened the gleam of the gold into rich harmony.

According to a penciled notation in the *Bulletin*, the gild and polychrome was removed in 1964 and a clear wax cover applied. It was then thought to be St. Catherine or Mary of the Annunciation. Later it was identified as a Kneeling

Woman or a Praying Woman. During the past year, Eike Schmidt, curator of Decorative Arts and Sculpture, has determined that it is *Mary Magdalene* (14.8), attributed to Nikolaus Gerhaerts van Leyden, c1460. It is now further protected by a vitrine (G342).

The "loan program of exhibitions" had probably been causing some problems for the incipient museum-to-be, and resulted in a notice of the By-laws of the Society, that an Acquisitions Committee had been established to pass judgment on works that would be accepted by the new institution as part of its own collection. In the same February issue, "an appeal to

owners of objects of art” indicated the hope that a “census” of artworks in the area could be taken. There was also a price list for various objects that the museum wished to acquire and would accept donations for same. These ranged from a “carved walnut Sieneese *cassone*” at \$850.00 to “two 17th Century Portuguese leather chairs” at \$20.00 each.

By May 1914, it was determined that the museum would need additional space in the “near future,” and that the art school was about to outgrow its ground-floor space. A separate building for the Art School seemed prudent to consider.

The official opening of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts was held on Thursday, January 7, 1915, at 3:00 p.m. The inaugural exhibition included loans from the Barbizon collection of J.J. Hill of St. Paul, a group of paintings from the Freer Collection of the National Gallery of Art, a collection of Winslow Homer watercolors from the Metropolitan Museum of New York, and Impressionist paintings from the Art Institute of Chicago. Other museums loaned objects and a number of private collectors contributed to the wide range of objects, from Ming vases to Gothic tapestries.

Listening to Chuck Close

Marilyn Smith

This February as a friend and I were driving through Wisconsin on our way home from Chicago, we happened to catch part of an interview of Chuck Close on Wisconsin Public Radio. As I listened, I became extremely fascinated by some of Chuck’s remarks about himself, his art and the making of art in general.

Here are five things Chuck told in that interview that really hooked me and made me want to hear more from him about his life, his work and his philosophy.

Chuck described himself as having a disability, which causes him to be incapable of recognizing faces. At the time, I thought how strange that was for someone who has spent his whole mature career painting faces. (I later learned that this condition is called prosopagnosia and is documented by neurologist Oliver Sacks, who has the condition himself, in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*). After Chuck had been painting his very large portraits for 20 years he said he finally realized the connection they had with this disability.

Chuck also described himself as learning-disabled due to dyslexia. This, too, got my attention, as I am also dyslexic and could appreciate his description of some of the feelings he had while growing up.

In addition, Chuck said that because he was physically disabled and unable to run and play like other children he turned to doing magic tricks to “fit in and be liked.” He learned to do many tricks and would perform them for small neighborhood audiences. He said that at the end of each trick, he would always show the audiences how he did it and that they liked the tricks just as much even after they knew how they had been done. So today, he said he always makes it a point to leave evidence in his paintings as to how he made them.

Chuck said he owed his whole career to “Open Enrollment.” With his disabilities, he was completely unable to take entrance exams for college, but due to “Open Enrollment,” the two-year community college in Everett, Washington, had to take him. And that was the beginning of his college career.



Finally, I was impressed by how many presumably insurmountable obstacles Chuck was able to conquer in his life, albeit in most cases with extreme effort, to gain the recognition he now enjoys.

As an aside, Chuck is the subject of a new biography by his friend Christopher Finch who also took part in this interview, *Chuck Close: Life*.

After I got home from my weekend trip to Chicago, I left for New York City to attend the National Art Educators Association Conference at which Chuck Close was scheduled to be a featured speaker. Prior to hearing the radio interview I was lukewarm to attending this session, but hearing the interview changed my mind and I was not disappointed.

The audience was standing room only for this session in the grand ballroom of the New York Midtown Hilton Hotel. Chuck was carried onto the stage, which had no ramp for his wheelchair, and from the time he began to speak until he ended his



talk the audience was held in rapt attention to his every word. As one blogger from the conference said, “Amazing, amazing. This session made the whole conference worthwhile. Mr. Close was sharp and witty, and regaled the appreciative audience with funny stories particularly about his time as a young man in the Yale School of Art. He spoke about his peers at that time, all names that we’ve learned about in art school.” I would have to agree! I came away with many ideas to ponder.

Here are a few of Chuck’s statements that I recorded in my notes:

“Inspiration is overrated. Inspiration is for amateurs, the rest of us just show up and get to work. New ideas will come from the work itself. Don’t sit around and wait for inspiration; just sit down and get started.”

“I had very supportive parents. No one gets anywhere without support.”

“At the age of eight I was drawing from nude models. I was the envy of all the other boys. This was going to be a really good career.”

Speaking of his time at Yale in graduate school: “We didn’t think we were artists, we were students. We worked through the styles of many artists and learned from them.”

“I was hell bent on purging my work of any other artist.

What could I do that no other artist had done?”

“Everything comes out of the process itself.”

“Ease is the enemy of the artist.”



“If you know what art should look like, it’s not hard to make some of it.”

“We don’t always know what we want to do, but we always know what we DON’T want to do. Start there.”

“Self-imposed limitations are always good to move you to a new place.”

“Have an idea. Work within a supportive community.”

“I don’t care about money. When I sold my first paintings they were cheap. I just wanted people to see them... to be seen.”

“I sold my first painting to the Walker in Minneapolis.”

“I don’t take commissions. I just paint people I choose.”

After hearing these two presentations, I will definitely have more information to share when I use the MIA’s Frank by Chuck Close on a tour.

There is an interesting NPR interview of Chuck Close at: www.npr.org/2011/04/20/135568726/chuck-close-contemporary-artist

Did you know?

There’s a nifty, updated one-page list of Art Adventure sets and their objects complete with gallery numbers. Look under AAG Resources on MGPV under Documents at the bottom of the page. There’s also a laminated paper copy in the file drawer with the Art Adventure guide booklets.

Book Tours at the MIA--

Carolyn Dahl

Book tours have been increasingly popular at the MIA and Carolyn Dahl, President of the MIA Friends, was asked to share her thoughts about them. Here is what she said:

“I am so happy that you have asked for my impressions of the book club tours because I think that they are ingenious. I just love the combination of books and art, and not just any art, but pieces of the MIA permanent collection. I am a member of three book clubs – one of which is the Friends Book Club. I am presently trying to interest the other two groups in reading a future “book tour” book.

As I read *The Picture of Dorian Gray* I was wondering what docent Emily Shapiro would show us on the tour. The tour was excellent. The tours really seem to make people think more deeply or at least differently about the book. The Friends Book Club goes on the tour first and then we meet and have a

discussion. The tour inspires everyone to examine the book in a whole new light. And we all get the opportunity to learn new things about the art in the museum. I gave a sales pitch for the tours to the Friends Executive Committee and to the Friends Board of Directors. I am a big fan!”

Public book tours are held every Tuesday at 11:30 a.m., and every Thursday at 6:30 p.m.

Upcoming book tours will be:

April – *Tulip Fever* by Deborah Moggach

May – *The Greater Journey* by David McCullough

June – *Dreams of Joy* by Lisa See

July – *Vermeer’s Hat* by Timothy Brook

August – *Luncheon of the Boating Party* by Susan Vreeland

Musings from MGP

Debbi Hegstrom

Happy Spring! So far, so good. Let’s hope it’s safe to put away the winter coats and boots. We’ve got some upcoming CE sessions that will provide us with opportunities for springtime reflection and renewal.

Docent Forum

Plan to attend this session designed especially for docents on April 5, 1:00-3:00 p.m., in the Friends Community Room. This is a great opportunity to discuss numerous activities taking place within the docent and larger museum community. I also welcome your suggestions for agenda items – send them my way!

I’ll give updates on a number of groups who are actively pursuing a variety of museum initiatives:

- *Participatory Activities* – after two lively, successful workshops, this group will refine and follow up on the many ideas generated. Thank you to everyone who attended – your creativity was contagious!
- *Object Files Scanning Project* – several docents have begun the lengthy task of scanning in the object files. We’ve established guidelines and are tracking issues that come up. It’s not too late to join in on the fun!
- *OOMs* – read Kay Miller’s article in this issue to learn about what an OOM is, and how to access this growing electronic information resource by and for museum guides.
- *Accessibility Outreach* – a small, dedicated group is working on increasing awareness of our touch

and ASL-interpreted tours. Faribault School (for students with various disabilities) is planning a large group visit in July. We will be holding a special training to get a large group of docents prepared for this visit. Information will be sent out in the next month or so.

- *Book Tours* – the books have been selected through the end of 2012 and we have produced a colorful new bookmark to be distributed on current tours and during Art in Bloom. The group continues to meet periodically as we share ideas and anticipate new titles and new audiences. This fall, we will be collaborating with the University of Minnesota around their First Year Experience book, *The Other Wes Moore*.

Everyday Improvisation Workshops

Save the dates for our upcoming “Everyday Improvisation” workshops on May 3 and 17; no acting experience necessary! We’re in the midst of planning with a local improvisational group, and it’s going to be fun.

You may ask yourself: “What can improvisation do for me?”

Think of it as a “techniques” master class, or a chance to try out new ideas and forms in a safe setting. Musicians do it, dancers do it, playwrights do it, anyone who wants to refine and stretch their skill set does it!

Here are some areas we will explore together:

- Improv exercises – thinking on your feet and adapting a tour to the often unpredictable comments and interests of your audience
- Innovation and creativity – adopting new ways of looking at art and encouraging multiple voices on a tour
- Participatory activities – using games and play to engage your audience

Here’s to spring and to flexing some new muscles.

From the editor

Mary Bowman

Boy, has this year gone by fast! (Don’t they all?)

I want to thank all the wonderful people who have contributed articles to our *Muse* this year. They’ve been informative, funny, touching, and a valuable source of material docents can use as we introduce both new visitors to the MIA and welcome repeat visitors to new things in the galleries.

I had the opportunity to follow two book-inspired tours in the past month, *The Teahouse Fire* led by Karen Nerison and *Strapless* led by Joy Yoshikawa. Both groups had read the books and were enthusiastic participants during the tours. Their comments echoed what Carolyn Dahl expressed here in an earlier article.

As I read *Tulip Fever* in preparation for my own April tours, my response to the lively, at times erotic, and fast-moving story is quite different than it might have been. I am constantly noting details which relate to the MIA's collection. Not until I finish the novel will I read the list of suggested related objects which might be used on a tour. I expect to recognize many but also to be surprised. Will I ever again read a book in the "old" way?

Preparations for *Art in Bloom* are underway! Soon after those four days of innovative and gorgeous floral interpretations gracing our galleries, thoughts will be turning to the exciting *Rembrandt in America* exhibit. We are incredibly fortunate to be one of the very few museums in this country to be hosting this amazing show.

Lots to look forward to! More in May...

Docent Executive Committee



JeanMarie Burtness, chair



Fran Megarry, chair-elect



Terry Edam, secretary



Toni DuFour, treasurer



Nan Lightner, communication



Elizabeth Short, social committee



Sue Marty, social committee



Merritt Nequette, *Muse* publisher



Debbi Hegstrom, senior educator docent program



Mary Bowman, newsletter



Helen Bowlin, honorary docent representative

For Better or For Worse by Lynn Johnston

January 17, 2012

