

# The Docent Muse



September 2012

## Musings from MGP

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*Debbi Hegstrom*

Welcome to fall and a new year of touring. We ended the summer Rembrandt exhibition with record numbers. Thank you for all the tours! Here are some visitor statistics hot off the presses:

Ask Me in the gallery – 4208

Private tours – 4170

Public tours – 8700

Which means you interacted with over 17,000 visitors!

It was a joy to reminisce and celebrate 50 years of the docent program together at the fall luncheon on September 20. JeanMarie Burtness has agreed to do some “docent historian” work, to help us fill in gaps and continue to document the story of the program. The last segment written ends at 1986. Another of our projects will be to collect back issues of the *Docent Muse* and keep them in a centralized location (I think that means my office). Does anyone know the date of inception? If you have some really old issues (pre-1979-?), get in touch with JeanMarie. We are also trying to collect names of those who served on the Docent Executive Committee in the 1960s and 70s.

Now we are looking ahead to the *Terracotta Warriors* exhibition. Ticket sales are already in full swing and tour requests are coming in. Will we exceed our Rembrandt numbers?

I’m busy planning some in-gallery training for the new exhibition in the Target Wing: *Art in the Age of Globalization*, on view September 2012 - September 2013. Spanning the centuries and taken from every corner of the globe, the works in the exhibition explore significant aspects of the world’s evolving cultures. Each area has been designed around a specific narrative or theme. Globalization has resulted from the growth of modernization; the emergence of the Third World from colonization; advancements in communications, new technologies, and multinational trade; and many other factors. It is one of the most

significant and pervasive contemporary trends affecting our world today. These galleries will stimulate some great conversations.

## Touring Rembrandt

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*JeanMarie Burtness*

Last week a docent who was going to say goodbye to her favorite Rembrandt paintings before they travelled back to their museums and private collections said, “I don’t think that any of the docents will ever be around so many Rembrandt paintings that we know so well. Some paintings we may never be able to see again.”

During the last week of the Rembrandt exhibit, it was reported that over 100,000 visitors had attended, and the show still had four more days. Docents touring the show were not surprised because the galleries have been jam-packed. Many days felt like we were in the middle of the Minnesota State Fair. Even though only 100 people were admitted to the exhibit on the hour and half hour, we noticed that people were staying for two to three hours circling back to look at the paintings and prints and rereading labels and wall panels. Some went back to get headphones.

On August 1, after a brief introduction about Rembrandt by Linnea Asp, the 100 people waiting to enter at 11:30 efficiently divided themselves into two groups of 50 each for the public tours led by Linnea and myself. Large groups of 35 or more became the norm for the public tours. Private tour groups, whether assigned by the tour office or those from outside groups, were limited to 15 participants, but many of those private tours frequently doubled in size because the visitors joined any group being led by a docent.

We had very curious visitors who wanted to know details about the personalities in the Rembrandt portraits. Why aren’t they smiling? Did they have bad teeth? Why were so many dressed up like Pilgrims? Who made all that lace? Did they have

to wear those big collars everyday? Why do some of the men have such big bellies? And others shared their own connections.

Susan Burnett said that a man on one of her tours told her they once had a dog named Tarquin.

Antra Pakalns shared this story: I was finishing an hour of educating and question-answering with a group of 50 lovely people. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a mother encouraging her adolescent son. The son asked, “COULD YOU EXPLAIN TO ME HOW REMBRANDT DEVELOPED HIS PAINTING STYLE THROUGHOUT HIS CAREER? HOW DID IT CHANGE?” (Ya gotta be kidding!!! I thought to myself).

However, without missing a beat, I said, “Of course, and this exhibit shows it brilliantly. Look at his early paintings in gallery one. Then, see his mid-life paintings in gallery four. Now, compare those with the MIA’s *Lucretia* in gallery five. He went from lots of color, to a limited palette, from tight varnished layers and color to very loose, almost abstract and thick/thin applied painting in late life.” It was less than five minutes! The kid got it! He was so proud that he had dared ask an intelligent question. What an exhibit! What a question!! I know he will be a future Rhodes scholar!!!

James Allen had an interesting experience with a private tour: “It was an elderly group from Rochester, and I had to practically yell to be heard by this hearing-challenged group. The rooms were packed. There was some jostling between my group and the public who each claimed offense at being pushed around by the other. As usual there were hangers-on who listened in on our gallery conversation. In particular there was a man with a heavy European accent who had a lot of comments and insights. He was beginning to annoy the members of my private group. At the end of the tour he came to me and said, ‘Say *Hendrik!*’ I complied. Then, ‘Say *kja!*’ Again I complied. ‘That,...is how *Hendrickje* is pronounced.’ I learned that he was from Amsterdam and is a docent at the Rijksmuseum. It was fun to chat with him after the tour. I hope to visit him at the Rijksmuseum in a year or two.”

Mary S. Bowman shared a funny incident from an Ask Me session: “I was at Orchestra Hall the next night for an SPCO concert. During intermission, a couple walked up to me and the man said, ‘You’ll probably read about this in the paper tomorrow, but

just thought I’d tell you that one of the Rembrandts was stolen last night.’ I looked startled and was thinking that he looked familiar. Then his friend started grinning and he continued ‘...and it was stolen by ME!’ It was the painting of a young man done the same year as *Lucretia*, and during Ask Me he’d said he really liked that painting and could happily take it home. He said during intermission they’d looked around the lobby to see if they knew anyone, and his wife said “Well, there’s the docent.” It was a fun encounter.”

## **Walking the Paths and Pavilions of Jade Mountain**

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*Lynn Dunlap*

Our visit to the historic Orchid Pavilion at the base of Orchid Mountain has changed the way eighteen of us guides and docents will tour *Jade Mountain*. Thanks to Wendi Chen, who planned and organized the trip, we were immersed in Chinese art and culture for nearly three weeks last May.

No longer must we imagine the brook winding through a leafy landscape; we sat beside that stream and experienced it for ourselves. As Wang Xizhi captured it so eloquently, “the sky was bright, the air pure and the gentle wind a thing of tranquility.... All that the mind and eye conceived was best appreciated through the senses. It was a delightful experience!”

Carol Joyce now “identifies with the people depicted on *Jade Mountain*, sitting near paths and near the stream.” On her tours Mary Samuels shares her photo of herself and Suzanne Zander to emphasize the ephemerality of nature: “Suzanne and I were just in China and today someone else is in the same location, reflecting on the constant shifting of human life and the shifting of Nature.”

We not only drank in the sensations described by Wang Xizhi, who sat beside that lazy stream in the 4th century, but we also saw his calligraphy.

For Patti Bartlett, the Orchid Pavilion was an “oh, wow” art historical moment. She explains that the Orchid Pavilion is a mecca for generations of calligraphers and the literati. It is the site represented in our *Jade Mountain* where Wang Xizhi, a “calligraphy saint” in China’s history of calligraphy, gathered 41 friends to spend the Spring Purification Festival in the year 353 CE. They enjoyed a drinking game where a wine cup is floated down the stream and the first person sitting in front of the cup when it stops must

drink and recite a poem, allowing for a pleasant exchange of cordial conversations. Here Wang Xizhi penned his “Prelude to the Orchid Pavilion,” considered a masterpiece of literary grace and calligraphic writing.

“When you visit the Orchid Pavilion there is another story told,” she adds, “which for me explains the history and the importance of calligraphic writing in China.” It goes like this:

Wang Xianzhi was the seventh son of Wang Xizhi. He wanted to be a calligrapher as renowned as his father. His father told him that practice was the only path and so he filled eighteen large pots with water and said, “Son, when you have used all the water in all of these pots, then you will have practiced enough.”

So Wang Xianzhi began to practice the art of calligraphy. Now mind you, it takes only a few drops of water combined with ink to write quite a lot. After he had used up three pots, he felt he had practiced enough. He went to his father and presented the character “big” to show him how far he had come. His father looked at the character and agreed, he had practiced much. He added a dot in the center of the character which changes the meaning to “too much” and told Wang Xianzhi to take it and show it to his mother.



When he presented the calligraphy to her, she said, “Wang Xianzhi, you have worked very hard, and are making great progress, but the only part of this character that is as accomplished as your father’s is the dot in the center. You must continue to practice!”

Today there are eighteen large pots of water next to stone surfaces with a brush provided so that visitors may practice their calligraphy. Patti hopes to tell

the story often in tours to emphasize the importance of the art of calligraphy.

“We then visited the only university in China, near the Orchid Pavilion, where students specialize in the art of calligraphy in its many forms,” Patti added. “These students will go on to keep that alive for future generations.”

For us, touring *Jade Mountain* will mean sharing one glorious day, and for our visitors, a richer way of looking at art that embodies the essence of one of China’s most treasured sites.



Docent Carol Joyce learns how to hold the brush at one of the 18 stations for calligraphy practice at the Orchid Pavilion.



Our group gathers at the stream where poets drank from floating cups of wine.



## Hooks that work

David Fortney

Think back to some of the best experiences you had as a child. Some of those were probably listening to great family stories told in the evening. What made those stories so memorable? They had a hook; some aspect that grabbed your attention and made you want to hear more; to know what happened next. That sense of wonder and anticipation can be an integral part to a successful tour.

So before I dive into this topic hook, line and sinker (sorry), let me take note of the differences in how docents approach their tours. Some want to increase the visitors' appreciation of what the museum has to offer. Others want to educate. Some want to entertain. These are not mutually exclusive. It's a question of what feels right for you. Regardless of approach, having that hook can make the difference in holding the attention of the audience. And yes, I think it helps if you think of the tour group as your audience and you are on stage. The hook helps your performance.

What do I mean by a hook? A couple examples come to mind. Does the average visitor really care



what year *Death of Germanicus* was painted? Probably not. When they walk away, will they remember it was created in 1627? Or was that 1727?

Does it matter to them? Unlikely. But they will remember the family intrigue portrayed. They will remember that the little boy grows up to be Caligula. Perhaps they recall the suspicion cast on Tiberius' mother Livia, who isn't even pictured. The family drama is the hook. So hook their interest with the drama and while you're at it, you can talk about the role of drama in Baroque painting.

More recently many of you toured *Rembrandt in America*. I think this is an example of a show that has a built-in hook that links much of the exhibit, not just a single painting. To me, the story of Saskia's Last Will and Testament provides the story telling hook. It ties together Saskia as Minerva, Hendrickje as Lucretia, Titus, and the Rembrandt Self-Portraits. It provides human interest. I recall one public tour

where I mentioned the restriction on Saskia's estate and the problems it would create for Rembrandt. As I did, I overheard one woman say to her friend: "she was just trying to take care of her son." I thought to myself, "gotcha!" She was hooked with the storyline.

So as you plan your next tour, take a chance on using story telling with one object, perhaps a painting with a strong narrative. Watch your audience take your hook!

## Transferable Information and Slashing

Fran Megarry

I often approach a new exhibit looking for transferable information. In other words, what kernel of information can I gather through Continuing Education, catalogues and tours (whether or not we tour the exhibit) that could be used long after the exhibit is closed? For example, docents touring this summer's *Rembrandt in America* exhibit emphasized

his use of light in portraits. It doesn't take a long walk in the galleries to see how important light was for *Cottage on Fire* by



Joseph Wright of Derby in Gallery 306 or of course *Elements of Water* in Gallery 341. We are reminded to ask, "Where is the light and why has the artist chosen to light that area?"

Although, I did not tour *Edo Pop* I did attend lectures and went on Matthew Welch's tour of this exhibition. Through the discussion of textiles, facial expression, asymmetrical positions, and saturation of color I discovered information that could be used while touring Gallery 239, that gem of a Japanese print room that is always different and thematically interesting.

In a recent television program aimed at improving small businesses, a researcher looking at a new entrepreneur's ineffective advertising plan observed, "Too much information is akin to no information at all." That started my head to spin. This advice is very similar to what I call "slashing" when I am preparing a tour. (In other contexts "slashing" is a scary word

to use in regard to art!) In the process of writing each tour I might come up with sixteen or seventeen connecting pieces of art that support my theme but to be more effective, I need to walk through the galleries looking at those pieces and begin to “slash.” The voice in my head is saying, “Less is more” or (now) “Too much information is akin to no information at all.” I don’t want to overwhelm my tour guests with information causing them to tune out.

I have suggested not only the transfer of information we learn about one work of art to another, but also the transfer of information about art to our guests. When the nearly 30-plus docents planned for the *Touch Tours* this summer we soon discovered that the transfer of information had to come in a variety of ways. For docents who love to talk (and that would be most of us!) these tours are perfect because verbal description is a critical component. Verbal description allows the transfer of information for every object in the museum including special exhibitions for guests with low or no vision.

The new Essence Boards create another method for the transfer of information especially for guests of low vision. The essence of a painting is depicted in a raised form on one side of the board with a full color print of the painting on the other side of the board. Thus guests can put the painting nearer their eyes. Our own docents came up with these Essence Boards over the summer. Check them out for your regular tours as well. They are on the top shelf in the Resource Room. We still have supplies if anyone is interested in adding to this resource.

Finally, thanks to Eike Schmidt, we have a wonderful list of approved touch objects to include on *Touch Tours*. Any touch-touring docent will say objects touched reveal transferable information. It isn’t until an object is touched that docents and our low and no-vision guests really internalize the artists work. It is an amazing experience for all.



For example, it was the experiences on a *Touch Tour* of touching *Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier* in Gallery 354 and hearing the verbal description of *Portrait of George Washington* in Gallery 333 that greatly illuminated the art for docent and guest alike. And that feeling of

touch can also help docents look more carefully at other art to select for a regular tour. It is transferable information.

In summary, I encourage you to attend all of the lectures and training that are possible for you this year, looking for transferable information. When planning a tour remember the advertising aphorism, “Too much information is akin to no information at all.” Try slashing. Be open to new avenues for writing and presenting tours for all guests. Have a wonderful touring year.

## Decent Docent #5

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*Dear Decent Docent,*

I’m a new docent and am directionally challenged, and that includes using gallery maps! What do I say to my tour group while I’m wandering through galleries trying to find my next object?

Signed,

Lost and Not Loving It

*My dear, dear Lost,*

*moi, misplace* our bearings now and then! I counsel being gentle with yourself. Speak to yourself with love and acceptance! For instance, you disparagingly characterize yourself as floundering about! You are exploring the wonders of our dear sweet MIA!

Now, I understand as well that when one is followed by a gaggle of visitors through our august institution, one may want to *appear* as though one knows where one is going. However, at times, for *whatever* reason, we may need a little, shall we say, *breathing space*, before forging purposefully on to our next planned object (wherever that may be).

This may be just the time to spot *another* artistic gem that one has had absolutely NO experience with and try a little tenderness ... WAIT ... I mean ... VTS. Yes! That is just the thing! A bit of tenderness with VTS! Let our esteemed guests join you in gazing admiringly at some lovely bit of sculpture, let us say, and *caress* it with their eyes! What do they see? Ah, what lovely insights they have! What else? Oh, my! I never noticed *that*! What a *marvelous* way to experience the museum again, just as though you had never set foot in it before (which, indeed, is the way you feel right now!)

*Et voila!* Now, you either have regained your sense of direction . . . or not! It matters NOT! You are a docent! You are flexible! AND you know VTS! What more, I ask you, dear Lost, does one need?

Have a delicious summer! *Abbbhh!* Long, lazy days and Rembrandt! Indeed, what more could one ask for? *Au revoir!*

## Getting to Know Your Docent Executive Committee - Somewhat Up Close and Personal

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*Marilyn Smith*

As editor of the *Muse* for the touring year 2012-2013, it is my great pleasure to include an article in this first issue that will begin to introduce each of the new Docent Executive Committee members to the larger docent membership. Each committee member wrote a short autobiography and I found that each bio was fun to read and contained interesting information that I had previously not known. I also realized as I was reading that this is an extraordinary group of individuals and I wanted to find out even more about all of these interesting people. Perhaps you will too!



**President - Fran Megarry, Class of 2001**

What people may not know about me: I worked my way through college by teaching swimming. I spent my early career as a chemist. I retired from the Anoka Hennepin School District as a Community School Administrator. In between years were spent living on a military base in 29 Palms, California. My daughters are a great joy in my world. To get me going in the morning I need strong black coffee and conversation with my golden retriever, Splash. I love being a docent and, as frequently as possible, take trips to NYC.

**President Elect - Linnea Asp, Class of 1998**

I have been fortunate to be a stay-at-home mom for my son and daughter. They are now 23 and 21 years old, so the nest is getting emptier. In addition to my work as a docent, I serve on the Board of Frank Theatre here in Minneapolis. My husband Jon and I

are in the process of moving downtown after eighteen years in Plymouth. I look forward to serving as Chair-Elect this year!

**Secretary - Lynn Brofman, Class of 2009**

After a 30-year career in nursing and health care I came back to my love of creating sculptural forms and jewelry. I attended the Minneapolis Community and Technical College Jewelry Manufacturing and Repair Program, apprenticed with a small jewelry manufacturer and then opened my own design studio in 2002.

As a docent I have the delight of exploring the extraordinary collection and the opportunity to share and appreciate it with visitors of all ages and places. It's an experience that inspires and encourages my creative endeavors.

**Treasurer - Bill Bomash, Class of 2005**

I was born and raised in Denver, Colorado but have lived most of my adult life here in Minnesota. I am married and have two grown daughters and one grandchild, a boy named Willie. I came to the Twin Cities in the late 1960s to pursue a graduate degree in history and have been here ever since.

Something you might not know about me is that I lived in Denmark for a number of years and put myself through graduate school by teaching Danish at the University of Minnesota. I had a number of jobs after graduating including Microfilm Archivist at the Minnesota Historical Society, Instructional Designer for McGraw Hill, and most recently, Information Technology Leader for the Minnesota Extension Service.

Becoming a docent has been a dream of mine for many years. I recall stealing a few hours now and then from the drudgery of writing my dissertation to come over to the MIA and soothe my tired brain by immersing myself in this cool, relaxing yet stimulating environment.

**Newsletter Editor - Marilyn Smith, Class of 2005**

I am the mother of five daughters and grandmother to fourteen children, (ten of whom are boys) newborn to freshmen in high school. I am an avid gardener and work part-time at the American Swedish Institute in their Youth and Family Programs. But "Art" was my first love.

I grew up in Frank Lloyd Wright land, Oak Park, Illinois and delighted in a yearly school field trip to the Art Institute of Chicago. I am an art teacher at heart who, due to extenuating circumstances, became



an elementary school teacher and I spent thirty years teaching in various Minneapolis Public School classrooms. The art teaching remained a dream until I became a docent at the MIA where I have the great good fortune to teach about art on every tour!

**Communications - Maurine Venters, Class of 1995**

I am now enjoying my retirement by spending time with several grandchildren, singing in my church choir, and exploring the world through travel and giving tours at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Before retirement, as an epidemiologist and lawyer, I focused on research, teaching, administration, and community involvement at the School of Public Health and Medical School at the University of Minnesota, and in other community related work settings.

**Social - Anna Bethune, Class of 2009**

I am noticeable for my British accent which doesn't seem to go away. Culturally however, I am French, and in addition to that, a newly-minted U.S. citizen as of 2011. I am thoroughly enjoying touring and getting involved in as much as I can at the MIA.

I am a former "Partner in Art" and am the mother of three.

**Social - Jean London, Class of 2009**

I am a clinical social worker who worked for 20 years in the newborn intensive care units at Minneapolis and St. Paul Children's Hospitals with a team of medical staff to support families through the birth of critically-ill children. My love of art has always been something to bring such joy and peace to my life, a passion that I am happy to have transferred to my two daughters.

My work as a docent at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts has afforded me the opportunity to bring these interests together. As co-chair of the social committee, I hope to expand the opportunities docents have to engage with one another and I look forward to a very active year.

**Honorary - Helen Bowlin, Class of 1992**

I was a member of the class of 1992. I have been part of the honorary group of docents for three years and enjoy the continuing contact with the MIA. In addition to serving as the honorary representative to the DEC, I volunteer at the Information desk. I am also part of the program planning committee for the honorary docents. It is a joy to stay connected!

**MIA Representative - Debbi Hegstrom**

My title is Senior Educator at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. As all of you might know this means I oversee docent training and continuing education programs, which include teaching about the museum's encyclopedic permanent collection as well as evaluating and coaching docent gallery tours and conversations. I am currently actively involved in exploring new avenues of audience engagement, including the use of improvisational techniques and participatory activities on tours.

I have an M.A and Ph.D. in art history from the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, specializing in the relationships between American and European art and architecture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some of you might know my dissertation, "Gustav Stickley and American 'Home-making' in *The Craftsman*: Gender and Design Issues, 1890-1915," examines the significant role Arts and Crafts proponent Gustav Stickley played in developing a comprehensive domestic program for the American home and family, which he introduced in his *Craftsman* magazine and catalogs. I also have an interest in Islamic art and architecture and its influence on European and American decorative arts.

On a more personal level, I live in the Ramsey Hill historic district of St. Paul with my partner, Scott, daughter, Caitlyn, and faithful dog, Logan.



Continuity - Honorary Docent Helen Bowlin, President Elect - Linea Asp, Past President - JeanMarie Burtness, Current President - Fran Megarry.

JeanMarie Looking Fetching  
"To be the DEC chairwoman  
you need a flexible hat,  
one that will serve you  
in all circumstances."  
JeanMarie revealed her  
secret hat at a luncheon  
in June where the  
out-going DEC board  
welcomed the new DEC board.



## **Sunshine Fund Needs Your Help!**

*Linnea Asp*

The Sunshine Fund is a dedicated fund within the docent budget that is used to send cards or flowers to our colleagues who experience challenges, either through serious medical situations or through the death of close family members. If you have been the recipient of a card or bouquet, you know how much it is appreciated.

Currently, less than \$60 remains in the fund, which is maintained through the generous donations of docents. Please consider giving a donation today. Checks made out to "Docents of the MIA" may be sent to Bill Bomash - Treasurer, 4152 Beard Ave. S., Mpls, MN 55410; or you may give an envelope with the check to Paula or Jennifer who will make sure Bill receives it. Thank you!

## **Announcing the Docents' Film Club**

*Jean London*

As social co-chair, I am thrilled to introduce a new addition to our regular opportunities to socialize. We will employ the MPG Forum to communicate about a monthly film choice and you, a docent, can reply if you plan to come.

Docents can also go onto the Forum and find other docents who plan to attend the film to arrange carpools or make plans to meet before or after the film if they wish. We are hoping that this new and innovative way to make new friends among our larger group will broaden relationships, create new relationships and give us another way to simply enjoy one another.

We plan to meet on Mondays preferably around the 4:00 p.m. matinee times the third week of the month. With holiday weekends, we will plan well in advance to notify you with an alternate Monday.

Please watch for announcements. We are planning to keep you informed of "reel deals" offered at area restaurants for movie tickets and dining! For more information, please check the MPG Volunteer Forum. Stay tuned!! With questions or suggestions, please email me through MPG Volunteers!