

The Docent Muse



January 2015

Reflections from the Chair

Mary Bowman, DEC Chair

Details.

That was the subject of a recent article in *The StarTribune*. As we age, the article said, we notice more details (or notice details more). Great, I thought! A plus for those accumulating years. But wait. Maybe not. Maybe getting bogged down in all those details could mean the bigger picture gets foggier. We miss things more important. Details can distract us, too.

Leaving my workplace a few evenings ago, I was startled by how light it still was at 5:00 p.m. When did that happen? That was a detail I had missed... probably distracted by all the other details swimming in my head. Surely the presence of light at 5:00 p.m. hadn't occurred overnight.

Hurrying through the museum to make sure objects included in my upcoming tour were still where I'd assumed they were (or even still on view) I began to notice objects I'd not seen before and other things, paintings and large sculptures, in new locations. I've decided I need to slow down and look more, look harder. I've decided noticing details is a good thing.

Now I'm noticing (and sometimes sadly missing) other details. The single lovely, creative floral arrangement on the upper lobby information desk (which is also missing). Those flowers always remind-

ed me of the several enormous, magnificent arrangements in the Metropolitan Museum lobby in New York City. They towered over the masses of people swarming in and out and silently proclaimed "You're here! Welcome!" to everyone entering. The bouquets at our museum were also evidence of the human touch, as were the smiling, helpful faces at our now missing information desk which those flowers once graced. The message to visitors: "We're happy to be here and we're happy you're here, too. How can we help you?" I'm just one person, but I know I'm expressing the thoughts of many others: volunteers, museum visitors, longtime patrons, and supporters.

The details are important.

"Docent's Eye View" of *The Habsburgs: Rarely Seen Masterpieces from Europe's Greatest Dynasty*

Emily Shapiro

You know that sinking feeling we all get a few weeks before the opening of a major special exhibition that we have been assigned to tour? The one that wakes us out of a sound sleep in the middle of the night? Panicked, we realize, "Oh no! I know nothing! There is no way I can learn enough before I lead my first tour! Help!"

Well, help is here. I, your fellow panicked colleague, had the recent opportunity to meet with Karleen Gardner, MIA Director of Learning

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Innovation, for a preview of the Habsburg exhibition. I took advantage of this meeting to ask her the types of questions I thought would be foremost in the minds of my fellow docents, such as: What are the exhibition's major themes? How is it organized, from one gallery to the next? Which eight objects would she choose if she were leading a tour?

By way of background, Karleen is one of the “go to” MIA staff persons for this exhibition, having worked closely with Kaywin Feldman and the other museum directors and curators on making this exhibition become a reality. In fact, she had the opportunity to make two trips to the *Kunsthistorisches* and Imperial Carriage



Museums in Vienna to develop interpretation for the exhibition. “Our museums were ambitious about what we asked for,” she told me, “and, to our delight, we got most of it!”

The exhibition itself was initially the brainchild of Kaywin Feldman and Michael Shapiro, Director of Atlanta’s High Museum of Art, where the exhibition will travel in September after its run at the MIA and at Houston’s Museum of Fine Arts. Having learned that the Vienna museum officials were interested in giving greater world visibility to their art collection, Feldman and Shapiro approached them and proposed this special exhibit. The rest is history!

Enough background. Onto the questions posed above.

What are the exhibition’s major themes and how is it organized?

Karleen shared with me the exhibition’s “big idea,” which supports its learning outcomes: “This wide-ranging survey ... evokes a rich and tangible sense of the *personalities, spectacle, and history* of Europe’s greatest dynasty.” In keeping with this objective, the “geography” of the exhibition is organized chronologically. Each of its eight galleries focuses on one or more of the dynasty’s major rulers and showcases the art works collected or favored by those rulers and the “spectacles” surrounding their lifestyles (*e.g.* armor, carriages, costumes, *etc.*). At the

beginning of the exhibition, visitors will see both a timeline of the dynasty and a map of its European dominion, and they can choose to watch a ten-minute introductory video about the Hapsburgs in the Pillsbury Auditorium. As usual, an audio-tour will accompany the exhibition, featuring the voices of our own museum staff as well as voices from Vienna.

Which eight objects would be on Karleen’s Highlights tour?

Karleen was hard-pressed to limit her choices to eight art pieces out of the ninety-plus works in the exhibition (Welcome to our world!). But these *eleven* made it to the top of her list:

Assembled Armor of Emperor Maximilian I
(cat. No.6)

Bust of Charles V (cat. No. 9)

Arcimboldo’s *Fire* (cat. No. 35)

Goblet of Rhinoceros Horn (cat. No. 33)

Correggio’s *Jupiter and Io* (cat. No. 37)

Caravaggio’s *Christ Crowned With Thorns*
(cat. No. 41)

Alchemical Medallion of Emperor Leopold I
(cat. No. 59)

Gala Carriage of the Vienna Court –
The Princes’ Carriage (cat. No. 73)

Vienna Court Carousel Sleigh (cat. No. 75)

Black Velvet Dress Belonging to Empress Elisabeth
 (“Sissy”) (cat. No. 82)

Hungarian Campaign Uniform of an Imperial
and Royal Field Marshal in Hungarian Attire
(Franz Joseph’s military uniform) (cat. No. 81).

Happy touring and viewing!



Concise Summary of Docent Forum on December 4, 2014

Rose Stanley Gilbert

Find the complete forum discussion on the MGP
Website:

Downloads> Docents> Documents>
Docent Forum Dec 2014 Museum Topics or
Docent Forum Dec 2014 CE Topics

The Docent Forum had three topics

- Karleen Gardner (Learning Innovation)
“Continuing Role of Docents at the MIA”
- Kristin Prestegaard (Engagement)
Marketing/Public Relations
“The Birthday Year”
- Lengthy discussion led by Mary Bowman and
Jane Mackenzie concerning topics
for future Continuing Education sessions.

Future CE Topics: Suggestions and Problem-solving

- Difficult-to-handle artwork
- When curators lecture, what information
would be helpful to hear?
- What are the stories behind the objects?
(Things not easily found with research)
- Hearing about new acquisitions
and “over-looked treasures”
- Why was this particular piece purchased?
- Lectures on new exhibits (like the photo exhibit
to be installed March 2015)
- School Tours Starting in the Target Wing:
pros and cons, positive strategies
- Logistics: Old elevator – What is its future?
- Greater availability of folding chairs?
- DYS (*Discover Your Story* tours)
problem-solving
- Behavior Issues:
cellphones,
chaperone behavior,
the lead’s responsibility,
how docents can set ground rules
and expectations for students.
- Variability of days/times for Continuing Education
- MIA Lobby: Information Desk/Bar Changes
- Why aren’t our emails on the “tour confirmations”
we receive?
- Compare, Contrast & Coffee: docents meet in the
galleries and share our strategies

Hiding in Plain Sight: George Segal's *The Girl Friends*

Joanne M. Platt

Strolling through the galleries of the MIA has never been more exciting. In the past few months, myriad new artworks have appeared, delighting visitors’ eyes and stirring their imaginations. The long-term loan from the estate of benefactor Myron Kunin, unveiled on New Year’s Day, has filled three galleries with colorful American modernist artworks, and many others from Kunin’s collection are sprinkled throughout the museum in surprising places.

Prior to her departure from the MIA, former curator Elizabeth Armstrong breathed new life into the contemporary art galleries with the addition of several new acquisitions. One sculpture in particular caught my eye – George Segal’s ghostly white plaster cast of two women, *The Girl Friends*.



George Segal (1924-2000) was an American sculptor who created life-sized plaster figures in poses taken from everyday experiences and daily life. His cast figures would be placed in what Segal referred to as “assembled environments,” or tableaux, in which their poses seemed utterly natural and lifelike. Some of you may be familiar with his pieces at the Walker Art Center, including *The Diner*, in which a man silently sits at a counter, watching as the waitress pours a cup of coffee. These white, plaster shells of people are no more than three feet apart, yet both appear isolated. Segal created his art out of life’s seemingly uneventful moments –



waiting for a bus, drinking coffee in a diner, listening to the radio – but his sculptures are more than just frozen moments. They remind us what it is to be human, to be a participant in the world around us.

Influenced by the Abstract Expressionists, Segal started his career as a painter, but began experimenting with sculptural figures in the late 1950s. Segal's first experiments with sculpture involved burlap, plaster and chicken wire, all materials readily available on his farm in New Jersey, where he lived with his wife, Helen, and their two children. His studio was located in a 300-foot-long former chicken coop on the premises. In order to support his family during the 50s, before he made his mark in the art world, he taught art and English at the local high school and at Rutgers University.

The material that changed Segal's sculptural style forever was rather serendipitously introduced in 1961 by one of his students in an adult education art class he was teaching in New Brunswick, NJ. This student, the wife of a chemist at Johnson and Johnson laboratories, brought to class some plaster-impregnated bandages which were newly developed to aid in the setting of broken bones. The dry plaster bandages, when dipped in water, created an amazing new material for Segal to work with. Segal immediately saw the potential for their use in sculpture.

He could cover a living body in the plaster bandages, allow it to harden and set, cut it off, and have a perfect record of a human being. Segal began his direct casting technique, using first himself, and then his friends and family as models. The models would have to hold Segal's desired pose for approximately 20 minutes until the plaster set; he would then cut the form and allow the model to ease out. When re-assembled, the casts of the human figures were combined with found objects to create a tableau of familiar scenes.

In a PBS documentary interview, Segal recalled, "I covered myself in the material when I got home, and it was July, it was very hot, and I had no idea that plaster sticks to hair like crazy, and I'm covered with – I'm very hairy, all over – and pulling it off was like ripping off a gigantic Band-Aid. But I was entranced, entranced with the look of the chunks I pulled off, because it revealed my structure. And I was amazed at the ability of this new material. And would you believe I've been at it for about 50 years. And I'm still amazed, and delighted, at the ability of

the material to capture not only the physical reality, but mental attitudes."

Segal refined his process over the years. He used Saran Wrap to protect the head and hairstyles, and Vaseline to ensure that no body hair was pulled off. Plaster-soaked cloths were applied to the model, and removed in sections. The most time-consuming task was assembling the pieces, adding detail or blurring it as he saw fit. The mark of Segal's process was evident on his figures; no attempt was made to hide the textured bandages used to create his plaster casts. Segal seldom used professional models, because he preferred everyday people, in relaxed poses. Segal explained: "You have to know the gesture you want, and then there's always the question of whether the human being can hold that gesture for the 20 minutes it takes for the plaster to dry. People have attitudes locked up in their bodies, and you have to catch them." A dramatic effect was created when the figures were placed in real environments. That contrast of real and unreal was what made his work so stunning and mysterious.

Segal also noted that it was a bit unnerving to be covered in plaster. "It doesn't seem to bother anybody when the stuff is on the body. It's the head that gives people the biggest difficulty. I see to it that I never cover the nostrils; through the entire process the model is able to breathe easily... And the biggest thing is keep your eyes closed – for heaven's sake don't try to open your eyes when they're covered."

In *The Girl Friends* (1969), Segal cast two life-sized nude women sitting on a twin mattress facing each other. Reduced to their most anonymous forms, the figures are heavily wrapped in thickly-textured bandages; the plaster drips viscerally from their hair down their backs like a Jackson Pollock paint-splash. Segal's concern with the formal elements of positive and negative space is evident in the models' positions and gestures. Segal's models were a real-life couple, one of whom was Jill Johnston, the dance and art critic for *The Village Voice* newspaper in New York City during the 1960s. Johnston gained notoriety as the first mainstream journalist to come out as a lesbian in the late 1960s, as well as for her vehemently outspoken support of gay rights and feminism. Based on pictures I have seen of Johnston, I believe she is the figure on the right with the longer hair. Johnston sits with her legs apart on the rumpled mattress; her feet and legs extend beyond the edge of the sheet-

draped mattress. One of her hands supports her body by grasping the edge of the mattress behind her. Her partner kneels between Jill's legs, and both their heads subtly lean in towards each other as if they are listening intently to what the other says. Each woman's hands rest casually, yet proprietarily, on the other's thighs, in a gesture of connectedness. My reaction to this sculpture is mixed. I feel as if I am intruding on a private conversation; their nudity only adds to this discomfort. But the scene is also familiar and comfortable. I, too, have experienced this intimacy of shared conversation on a bed with my husband. It is a private and intimate moment between two lovers frozen in time, but the artwork invites the viewer to identify and connect with these human figures, and to perhaps recognize themselves in the depiction.

Although classified as a Pop artist, Segal's distinctive works possessed an emotional resonance lacking in Pop Art. Above all, Segal was fascinated with human relationships, both those displayed in his art as well as the ways in which we, the viewers, responded to and connected with his artworks. And we can certainly identify with Segal's figures. They represent everyday people, doing what we do, in places with which we are familiar. His was an art of the ordinary person, performing ordinary tasks, in the ordinary world, and as such, his art is relatable to us all. Segal directed us to focus on these banal activities and commonplace settings, and in turn, gave new meaning to what we do. He created a fresh understanding of our human emotions and relationships.

Distinguished Visitor on 11/18/14

James Allen

On a *Water is Life* tour today Susan Rouse and I had a distinguished visitor from the Loring Elementary School. His name is Henry and the manner in which his special heritage became apparent was in itself interesting.

During Susan's discussion around art objects demonstrating the importance and multiple uses of water, one of her second grade students piped up that his "grandfather's uncle" had art in our museum. But unfortunately he was unable to recall either the artist's name or the nature of his art. Susan felt it a shame not to be able to unite the student and his

ancestor. It looked to be just a lost connection with no resolution.

But as my section was returning to the Target Wing the classroom teacher, Ms. Heidi Begin, exclaimed on passing by the *Collage IX*, that this was the work by an ancestor of a student in her second group. She was quite excited to have happened upon the piece by pure luck.

It had looked to be a lost cause. Susan had a kid with no art object and I had an art object with no kid. But Ms. Begin was excited to see it and I love it as well so we stopped to admire the work. While doing so, who should show up, but Susan and Henry himself. The connection was made and the mystery resolved.

It was quite a coincidence and quite a reunion. Henry was delighted to see the huge piece to which he is connected and the rest of the class was excited as well. We were rewarded with a neat picture of a kid standing before all his friends and in front of the wide collage ...with a grin nearly as wide.

*Susan
had a kid
with no
art object
and
I had an
art object
with no kid*



Between us, Susan and I had a fun time explaining the fun story of George Morrison and his great collage. I'm pretty sure that Henry was the hero for the whole bus ride home! ...and all had the memory of a fitting tribute to a "grandfather's uncle."

photo credit: Susan Rouse

Bridging to Honorary – A Docent's Transition

Tom Byfield

It seems like years ago when I was but a lad wearing knickers that Jane Stull, the editor of *The Docent Muse*, asked me to write an article about my departure from the docent ranks and about the adjustment of becoming an honorary one. I blithely said yes and promptly forgot about it, chucking it into the nether regions of the black hole that is my brain's memory cubicle. Yesterday she reminded me that said article was due. Yikes! I have to shed my carefully-cultivated reputation of picturesque lethargy and get to work. Procrastination, thy name is Satan.

“Going Honorary” isn't as one friend said, “Crossing over to the dark side,” but entering a new phase of life. I was a docent for 17 years and loved every minute. Circumstances, however, demanded I spend more time at home. Unlike the 17-year cicada that emerges from the earth into a frenzy of mating and quickly dies, my transition into the work of honorary “docentdom” was different since I don't do frenzy anymore, and I hope my life span is longer than the shelf life of milk.

Honorary Docents are the same friends you had as an active docent. They have the same zest for art in all its forms and show that zeal by organizing tours, field trips, and intriguing outings. As an example, thanks to Toni Rosen, we met at the home of Sam Kaplan, who was a former ambassador to Morocco, and his wife Sylvia. Sylvia entertained us with stories of their adventures there while at the same time making a huge pan of cornbread from scratch which we later had with soup and dessert. Sylvia apparently didn't think too highly of Moroccan cuisine. Their large house was made for entertaining and was peppered with artifacts from their travels, all displayed with the élan of an artist's eye.

I have been asked if I miss the easy flow of conversation and laughter in the docent lounge. Of course. Do I miss the challenge cobbling together an exciting and meaningful tour which often gave me the illusion of competence? You bet. Will I miss the gentle handling of our charming travel agents, Paula and Jennifer? Absolutely. I will miss asking a docent, “How were your tours?” (Oops, now to be PC according to the latest epistle, we should inquire, “How were your experiences?” Which, when I think

about it, may be probing into depths best left unexplored.) Will I miss the wretched instant coffee in the lounge? Not too much.

All in all you will find a warm welcome by the honorary docents when the time comes for you to make that decision to close the books on all your touring notes and cross over to the light side.



Editor's Note: “Happy Crossing, Tom.”
Thanks for all your contributions.

Book Tours: FAQ

Rose Stanley Gilbert

How do you let the tour office know you want to do book tours?

You can sign up for book tours on the annual Docent Questionnaire. On a follow-up email you choose the books that interest you. You can also email Paula or Jennifer several months ahead that you would like to tour a certain book.

How much time will I have to read the book and prepare before the tour month?

The docents selected to tour a book will have one month to read and prepare a tour.

If I read and prepare for the tour, will I get more than one tour during the month?

Currently tours are twice a week – Tuesday mornings at 11:30 a.m. and Thursday evenings at 6:30 p.m. There may be more dates offered in the future. Two or more docents are scheduled for each tour. The number of docents chosen is based on the number of tours each month. It is planned that docents will have many opportunities to do tours on the scheduled days.

Why do docents enjoy book tours?

First of all, book tour docents love reading and sharing what they have read. For our visitors, books tours make meaningful connections to the visual arts in a very different way than regular tours do. Book tour visitors love going on these tours and docents receive a one-hour credit for each tour that they lead.

Books scheduled so far for 2015

February

Still Life with Breadcrumbs by Anna Quindlen

March

A Tale for the Time Being by Ruth Ozeki

April

Flight Behavior by Barbara Kingsolver

May

The Thing Around Your Neck by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

June

Rebecca by Daphne du Maurier



SAVE THE DATE

**Gertrude
Stein
&
Companion**

MARCH 4, 2015

JUNGLE THEATER

SOCIAL EVENING FOR DOCENTS
WATCH FOR DETAILS ON
E-MAIL COMING NEXT WEEK