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Museums and Schools as Universal Partners in Art Education

Robert W. Ott

Hurrah and hallelujah, museum education is going to sock-it-to-ya! This could very well be a banner motto because throughout the world, museum education is on an upward spiral of exciting, stimulating, and thought-provoking discovery-based art education. Although museum education is usually as diversified as the varieties of art collections in museums throughout the world, American, Canadian, and particularly European art museums are actively at work promoting art education to a place that is high on their lists of priorities. It is equally gratifying to discover, as I have done in traveling, researching, and teaching in museums, that the educational role of museums in most countries is often placed well above the traditional roles of collecting, exhibiting, and preserving.

Gone, or at least going, are the tomb-like environments, the temples of art, the dusty cabinets of curiosities that were amassed in the past for only the enlightened few. Going, going, and almost gone are the efforts of an over-worked education staff merely to provide "walk and gawk" school tours for endless lines of mesmerized children. Gone are the art galleries used only as lecture halls to preach about art. Museum educators are proud of their present-day diversified educational programs and their sensory-based approaches to encountering art. They are also very determined to reach individuals with personal processes towards the appreciation of art works in their collections.

Changing Times

Communications, the need to reach audiences, funding, as well as public demands for education in world museums, are but a few of the reasons for the change that has taken place in the educational programs of museums. Whatever the cause,

museum education has truly undergone some recent changes. It would, however, be misleading to suggest that these changes occurred overnight. The gradual change that has taken place, however, has been caused by the demand of the public for knowledge which has been stirred by the imagination and spirit of the public.

Museum educators themselves have changed. The traditional professional in charge of education in the art museum usually had training in art history. This continues to be the case, but training in art education has also begun to permeate this domain. This can be seen in museum education graduate programs at Bank State College, Pennsylvania State University, George Washington University, North Texas State University, and The University of Pittsburgh, to name a few.

The change in the training formats of museum educators does not mean that their methods have changed radically. Museum educators have not abandoned the lecture hall, nor have they put their slides to rest. Lecturing about art to the public is not a thing of the past. In fact, museum educators in most countries continue to establish a lecture series in their museums, if one is not in existence. Nor can it be said that the art studios in museum education programs are gone. Art schools affiliated with museums are still prospering, and new ones continue to develop. The proliferation of educational exhibits evolving around art concepts, trends, and periods of time in art, art processes, and art techniques are also not a thing of the past.

Participatory Learning

Influenced by the educational programs in science museums and the trend towards manipulation and self-operative concept-oriented exhibi-

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tions, "participatory learning" in art museums through learning-center exhibitions is very much with us today. So are the "museums without walls" concepts that continue to develop and are even taking on a futuristic look through the advent of holography. Outreach programs which extend services to remote areas by vans, buses, trains, art carts, and by establishing neighborhood museums are still essential to most museum education programs. Thematic workshops, holiday programs, related and integrated arts programs, game catalogs, discovery rooms, hands-on rooms, continuing education programs, docent and volunteer guide programs as well as teacher education programs are all very standard diet for museum education in most countries today. These are as expected and as accepted in the museum world as are the duties and responsibilities of the other professionals on a museum staff. Curators, unlike educators in a museum, work to extend, preserve, and exhibit the collections, but even this distinction isn't one-hundred percent defined, for in small museums today the curator and the educator might be the same person.

Trends

What then is making museum education on an international scale so unique these days? First and foremost it is the creativity with which all of the



components of museum education are being implemented. Second, it is the international exchange of ideas and the communication that presently exist among museum educators. This is evident in the Museum Education Affiliate meetings of the National Art Education Association, in the Committee on Educational and Cultural Action of the International Council of Museums, in INSEA meetings held throughout the world, in regional and national conferences of The American Association of Museums, and in the substantial progress to scholarship and research contributed by The Center for Museum Education in Washington, D.C. Third, it is the underlying and accepted premise that museum education must strive to reach the heart of the art museum education experience in order to serve its true function in society. The manipulation of dials and knobs, tubes and inks, words and facts, is only meant to contribute to the individual's understanding of art. The basis of what is to be learned through museum education is the fulfillment by the individual of his/her appreciation of art.

Basis for Partnership

A strong base for reaching individuals and their appreciation exists in museum education and contributes greatly to the growth of this profession. Attitudes are, however, being altered by the art educator in teaching in the classroom and in cooperative teaching with the education department of the museum. Today the art educator is asked to consider the museum as an art classroom and not just a local art resource. This also means that the education department

of the museum must work closely with art teachers in the schools in order to originate, innovate, and develop museum education that is oriented to museum collections as well as to students' needs. It also means museum educators need to embrace the art education acceptance of the uniqueness of the individual and the need to work with students, whatever their age might be, in arriving at a personal and individual understanding and appreciation of art. Such partnership that is in existence today in museum education is perpetuating a life-long commitment by individuals to art. Such a commitment is very well motivated and established by particular museum education programs, exhibitions, and aesthetic events within the museum. The measure of successful museum education is often the possibility of a continuing life-long educational experience in art for the general public and for the young people in our schools.

Contextual Museum Programs

Partnerships of this nature in the appreciation of art that are happening throughout the world in museums happen in educational programs aimed at the viewer/learner through the art works in their collections. Although some art education continues to be based on critical modalities, that which meets with great success is that which is more contextual in nature and addresses issues of expression, feeling, and personal interpretation of art. Emphasizing the teacher as a catalyst between the art work and the perceptions and understandings of the individual, museum education of this nature offers the promise of hope and



encouragement to all visitors. It also attempts to expand the horizons of the individuals who participate through interdisciplinary means that cut across many humanistic and scientific concerns.

Summary

Museums are making great strides towards individual art appreciation and learning experience. Many are rethinking Irving Kaufman's theory of the Communal and Lonesome Looker approaches to museum education. There is also a resurgence of interest in such museum education giants as Thomas Munro, and there is also a new body of literature as witnessed in the recent publication by The Council of Museums and Education in the Visual Arts. Regardless of whether museums call it "Creative Appreciation" as in the Tate Gallery in London, or a "Pedagogical Laboratory" as in the new Pompidou Museum in Paris, or the "Yellow-Space Place" in Little Rock, the "Discovery Room" in Toronto, or the "Imaginarium" in Pittsburgh, museum education universally embraces the development of the individual's perceptions and interpretations of art through a total art learning experience. Feldman's stages for critical analysis, Sollin's movement experiences, as well as Mayer's museum catalogs and Hurwitz' gallery methods all contribute and indicate that museum education serves a basic art education need that is common to all cultures and forms a natural partnership between schools and museums in our societies.

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