The Art of Teaching in the Museum

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A class is studying a small painting by Rembrandt in the galleries of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. The museum educator has been inviting the assembled visitors to look ever more closely, guiding the class toward an understanding both of the painting itself and of our reasons for studying it. The class has been anything but passive—indeed, it has been lively. The painting is *The Abduction of Europa* (1632), a picture that depicts in delicate detail a story from Greek mythology, the kidnapping of the Phoenician princess Europa by Zeus in the guise of a white bull. The visitors have shared their observations, speculations, ideas. As the class concludes, the museum educator asks the participants to speculate on the painting's larger meaning, to say what they think this work is, finally, about, as revealed by their long discussion. The group's experience has clearly moved beyond the telling of a single story. One participant suggests that Rembrandt's work is about the fearlessness of traveling into the unknown. Another says that it concerns the story of the soul's leaving the earthly for the heavenly realm. When the class comes to an end, people move closer to the painting and continue their discussions.

In the same museum, another museum educator is also conducting a group of students through the galleries. He begins with a Roman statue of Venus, followed by an eighteenth-century French terra-cotta bust of Madame Récamier by Joseph Chinard. For each sculpture, he asks the students to focus on only one detail, the hands. The students are encouraged to observe and take note of the sculpted figures' gestures, much as if they were studying a person. Time seems to slow as perception sharpens. The educator listens patiently as the students begin to "read" the sculptures as a whole through the expressiveness of the hands. The group moves on to a mysterious portrait by Millet in which the students discuss the nature of love, and

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The teaching we have come to believe in strives to make possible a certain kind of experience with art objects. Good museum teaching comprises many skills that enable instructors to engage visitors, inspiring them to look closely and understand the works of art they are viewing. It is vital that we know our audiences and the collections from which we teach. We must always be able to provide accurate and pertinent art-historical and other contextual information. We must be well versed in interactive learning techniques. But we must think of such knowledge and such techniques not as ends in themselves, but as tools to be used for the larger purpose of enabling each visitor to have a deep and distinctive experience of specific artworks. None of us can attain the goal of facilitating such a transformative experience for every visitor in every lesson. Nonetheless, the idea of keeping such experiences always in mind as our goal will give our practice consistency and direction. It can become the heart of everything we do.

In *Art as Experience* John Dewey discusses how experiences with art may be marked off from ordinary experience by a sense of wholeness and unity, and characterized at their close by feelings of enjoyment and fulfillment.[1] Such experiences are examples of what Dewey calls "*an* experience," distinct from the flow of ordinary experience. Indeed, Dewey says, it is our experiences with art that exemplify best what it means to have "*an* experience." Such Deweyian experiences have an internal integration — a *focus* — that holds them together. They include "a movement of anticipation and culmination, one that finally comes to completion."

Dewey's theory describes well the kind of experiences we want to make possible for visitors to our museums. We hope that they will feel the time they have spent with us in our galleries has yielded special experiences different and separate from whatever else they have known. We hope that they will leave having understood one work of art or many in a deep and satisfying way. In the classes described above, visitors felt engaged and focused by "*an* experience" of an artwork that took them out of their ordinary lives.

Dewey also observes that experiences of works of art unfold over time. The element of time, important in all aesthetic encounters, is clearly highlighted in the museum context. Seeing is more then mere looking; looking is more than a casual glance. "*An* experience" of intense, focused seeing doesn't just "end," but builds up toward a satisfying conclusion. What Dewey calls "culmination" leaves us in a state of ardent appreciation.

Similarly, we hope the visitors we invite into our galleries will make discoveries, think freely and inventively, and work toward meaning through prolonged visual study of the artworks they focus upon. We hope that they will leave with the afterglow of an investigation that has brought observations, thoughts, and feelings together into a whole (even if only a temporary, provisional whole), with a sense of having reached a point of knowledge and understanding, with a feeling of accomplishment.

Museum educators create programs that invite people to gather around works of art for the purpose of sustained and careful seeing. Engaging the visitor's attention is our first task. Even though works of art are mounted on pedestals, or hung in elaborate frames, or bracketed by text — all of which are designed to direct attention to them — most casual visitors spend little more than a few seconds with each. Museum environments are almost always beautiful, but they are often noisy and distracting, too. People's reasons for coming to the museum are varied. Why should they stop and attend to the objects?

As museum educators, we are obliged to create a structure of engagement, a means of inviting people to appreciate and understand great works. We implicitly promise visitors that our knowledge will guide their looking, and that, at the same time, we will respect the knowledge and life experience that they bring with them. We are also always looking to learn more ourselves. We must communicate our own commitment to the shared enterprise of seeing, our belief that looking together and talking about art is a valuable and significant experience for us, too. Our manner must assure visitors that we are knowledgeable about the artworks in our collections and skillful in bringing people and artworks together in meaningful ways. Side by side, the instructor and students will investigate the works of art. Everyone must trust from the outset that his or her understanding will increase as a result of the experience.

We ask visitors to gather around an object, creating a kind of closed space where the experience begins. We ask them to commit an hour to the study of a limited number of objects, or perhaps only one. The physical separation from the larger flow of the museum allows the group to focus and concentrate. There is a place for silence as well as for speech. We invite them to take a minute to look. Fundamental to the experience are moments of contemplation, of silent meditation upon the works of art. We ask visitors to turn away from their immersion in everyday concerns and to slip into the world of the object. Our focus may be narrow, or broad. In these first moments viewers may, but are not asked to, relate their intellectual or emotional responses to anything outside the work of art. We ask only that they take some time to look at, and think about, and study the work of art before them. We begin in silence as an undirected way of taking note of the work in its entirety. Each participant has a chance to form his or her own first impressions and ideas. It is from individual experiences that the collective experience will flow.

> The class studying the painting by Rembrandt is asked to begin by simply looking at the painting in silence. An observer walking into the gallery would see twenty people, looking so intently that one might think they were watching a play. Their eyes shift from the gallery to the entire wall, next to the picture frame and its label, then into

the picture itself. Suddenly, the painting snaps vividly into focus, as though it were the only object in room. After this moment of silence, the instructor asks for thoughts, observations.

The second class begins with a specific focus, a detail, the hands of the Roman statue of Venus. Does the detail suggest modesty, or perhaps simply surprise upon encountering an unexpected view? The instructor encourages everyone to read the sculpted figure as if she were a person across the room. In this moment, he suggests that by virtue of living in the world, by virtue of our observations and interactions with the people we know, we have within us the essential knowledge to read this sculpture, and then the next work of art we encounter, and so on.

In both cases, what might look like a conversation is in fact a series of observations, an investigation of sorts. It begins with an open-ended invitation for thoughts and observations. Participants articulate what they are seeing and how they are making sense of what they see. Such a facilitated discussion differs from a lecture, which constructs experience for the listener. It differs too from pure inquiry methods, in which the teacher's basic mode of discourse is questioning. In the investigation we encourage, the teacher sometimes gives answers. The conversation is a give and take; everyone, teacher and students, contributes. The museum instructor reiterates and restates the visitors' observations, building on everyone's desire to talk about the effects the artworks have, and what is interesting in them. Everyone is invited to share ideas; some will see things others do not. Almost everyone has an opinion. Many voices are better than one. Everyone should feel welcome in this conversation, but it is not necessarily the instructor's goal that everyone should actively contribute. The instructor may ask questions, invite comments, make a statement, or provide information. The participants may ask questions, or ruminate silently. A shared vocabulary develops among the group. People begin to respond to each other's ideas, and comment on them. Conversation expands everyone's experience of the objects, propelled by a sense of discovery.

The museum instructor carefully sustains the group's experience by encouraging and summarizing new insights and observations. It is important to note that observations come up in what appear to be random order. There is no script, no preformulated series of questions. No two people see in exactly the same way, and no groups of people unfold works of art in the same way. The instructor expresses appreciation for an insight, or presses the participants further in their thinking. Sometimes one observation leads to another, or opens up a new area of looking. Sometimes the instructor asks the participants to hold a thought, or a question, in order to follow the implications of a suggestion, an observation, or an idea. The many thoughts

are like balls in the air, juggled by the instructor, who moves quickly and decisively to keep them up and active as long as possible. The objective is to follow observations, put descriptive phrases into play, create chains of thought, and respond to questions and comments throughout, advancing some ideas and saving others to be brought back later. The museum instructor keeps track of the complex and various parts of a growing conversation. Sometimes observations are taken and supplemented with similar ideas other people have had, or those of the instructor, in order to build a larger argument about the work of art, or about art itself. A real conversation emerges as a result of the sensitivity and perceptivity of the museum instructor. This requires practice, skill, and preparatory work that allows the teacher to understand the ideas that emerge, and to move the conversation forward. With every work of art, the meaning changes; with every class, the dialogue is different. Order as well as shape emerges: this is the making of meaning.

What does the instructor do to prepare? Part of the instructor's preparation is always to spend time with the artwork, looking closely for extended periods of time. The instructor who teaches the Rembrandt painting spends many hours in the gallery, looking at the painting from all angles, from close, from far. She sees it first as she has always seen this painting, a small work that hung for many years in the galleries of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. At the Getty, it looks different, newly cleaned and sparkling. The instructor then asks herself to see it as if for the first time, as a participant in a class might see it. She finds she is puzzled about the action, wondering what brings this assemblage of detailed characters together. The expressiveness of the faces and the gestures of the hands all suggest a story. She also notices Rembrandt's configuration of primary colors, the ghostly gray background, the way the action is pulled out of the darkness by the light. She does a sketch, to think through the compositional structure. The image of the painting becomes implanted in her mind: the story and the elements of the work that tell the story.

> The participants understand from the outset that Rembrandt is telling a story, as they see what Rembrandt is guiding them to see through the orchestration of tiny details, the glowing lights and shadowy darks, the gentle distribution of primary colors across the mysterious landscape. The instructor does not tell the students the title of the painting or the story of Europa's abduction. Instead she urges the students to make sense of the story by entering Rembrandt's visual world, trusting what they can see and understand through observation alone. She assures them that she will in the end tell them the specifics of the narrative, and the relevant art-historical information, but asks, will they not trust Rembrandt, and their own eyes, for the moment?

The instructor's preparatory work continues with research. She reads the museum's curatorial files; she consults articles, catalogues, and reference works; she speaks with colleagues. Deep knowledge of the artworks is a part of good gallery teaching. Information, together with seeing, is the source of ideas. The museum educator honors both objects and audience by bringing them together in an experience guided by scholarship.

How does the instructor use the knowledge she has gained from art-historical research? She uses it to enable her to suggest possibilities, not to establish conclusive interpretations that she will impose upon her students. She suggests relationships between a work and the circumstances of its creation and reception, thereby supplying visitors with information that indicates how and why a work came to be, how it was made, and how it was viewed in its original social and artistic context, and what the artwork has meant to its audiences over time.

> The class considering the statue of Venus has taken little time to propose several explanations for the way she stands with her hands half covering and half revealing her body. In response to one suggestion that her gesture may be one of modesty, the instructor asks, Why should Venus, as goddess of love and beauty, be modest? The question is clearly intriguing to the students, and the discussion of possible explanations becomes animated and more complex. At this point, the instructor informs the students that this statue is a version of an original Greek statue made by Praxiteles in the fourth century B.C., famous in its time as the first large-scale sculpture of Aphrodite portrayed without clothing. Might not Praxiteles be making a startling statement about female modesty? Might he be asserting that this familiar human emotion is so powerful, it extends even to goddesses, and even to the goddess of love herself? The instructor suggests another possibility: perhaps Praxiteles is referring to the Greek belief that it was dangerous for mortals to see their gods naked. Then again, he says, the statue might simply be illustrating the myth that on a voyage from Cyprus to Greece, Aphrodite stopped on the island of Knidos — where the original statue was erected — to wash the foam off her body. What does the group do with this information? The group is drawn in by the excitement of new discovery, and the ensuing discussion is lively. The students will decide for themselves what meaning to embrace. The instructor ends the consideration with his own question: could the sculptor have had in mind all of these stories and ideas as he decided to place the goddess's hands strategically to cover a body both beautiful and dangerous to behold?

The instructor uses art-historical information to deepen and enrich the visitors' experience of the work. He does not provide all the information at

his command at the outset, because he does not want the group to see the sculpture first as an artifact of history; he wants the viewers to attend to the artwork's here-and-now physical presence before them. He intends his provision of art-historical information to increase the range of interpretive possibilities, and indeed, it causes the discussion to widen. He invites his students to look at the sculpture carefully for themselves, and then, as they point out details, ask questions, or stumble over the roots of ambiguity, he moves their experience further with his own observations, or information that makes them see more, and see differently. The goal is to extend the conversation, to make the understanding of the work deeper, in part by making the students feel that they are getting closer to the work by grasping it in its historical context. But the historical information is not meant to decide among contending interpretations — to end the conversation — as it might have if the instructor were to adduce only a single historical circumstance, or, in response to a question concerning meaning, were to rely on the authority of his knowledge to say, "This is what Praxiteles meant." Instead, the skillful use of the information makes the students aware of ambiguities, and it is ultimately that awareness, and acceptance of its attendant complexities, that enriches their experience.

Art history sometimes increases our ability to understand works of art, and make meaning, as described above. But sometimes a work seems to speak directly to us. What does Rembrandt do to bring us so close to the experience of being abducted? What does Rembrandt draw upon in us when he gives form to the story of the abduction of Europa? Our knowledge may yield a hypothesis about the meaning of the work itself, but a sense of the painting's inherent urgency may also suggest a poetic idea about Rembrandt's seeking out the edges of the soul's experience and its passions.

> Eventually, someone asks a pivotal question. Why in the world is this woman riding on the back of a bull? The instructor says a question like this is a gift that can open our understanding, and at that moment, she decides to tell the story from the Roman poet Ovid of how Zeus fell in love with the beautiful Europa, how he seduced her by turning himself into a beautiful bull prancing along the shore, and enticed her to climb up on his back so that he could steal her away to ravish her. The group refocuses their discussion, and begins to see more details that both explicate the story and reveal the painting's narration of it to be very complex. The class examines Europa's face and finds it strange that she appears unafraid, looking back to shore as if signaling that she understands the significance of what is occurring. A student observes that the moment is portentous. The class realizes that the painting embodies a complex of ideas that goes far beyond simple storytelling. It is important to know the story, but knowing it

does not exhaust the painting's meaning, nor is the story by any means all that the painting is about.

In museum teaching, the importance of the instructor's research is that it yields potential interpretations. The instructor begins to formulate ideas about the work — what is important, what is unusual, what the work is about. From her own research and experience, she develops a sense of the work's possible meaning or meanings. She devises from these possibilities a kind of plan, a structure of ideas that will support an exploration of the artwork. The structure may be more or less elaborate, depending on what and how many works of art the class will be looking at. The structure may include an initial direction of inquiry, and a sequence of questions or ideas that might push the conversation in particular directions. The educator's ideas are put forth with an openness to change. The instructor should be encouraged to think of such a plan as experimental, open, and flexible.

The instructor's sense of the range of a work's possible interpretations is an essential component of gallery teaching, for it will inevitably, if subtly, affect the direction of the visitors' exploration. As their exploration deepens and widens in scope, the group continually tests the hypotheses that emerge against further observations. This is the most delicate part of the endeavor. Museum instructors must always have a sense of direction, a sense of the possible outcome of any group's encounter with a given artwork, yet must, equally, cultivate a willingness to listen and to yield to what unfolds in conversation. The instructor's questions and remarks should be open-ended. With truly open questions, we encourage and honor participation in the unfolding discussion, and unexpected comments expand the group's awareness of what is possible. Leading questions, however — questions with predetermined answers — do not, in the end, lead anywhere. As instructors, we should think of ourselves as being *part* of the group, learning alongside everyone else. We use our own hypotheses about a work's meaning to help guide the group's experience. Intense looking and deep concentration enable every viewer to construct his or her own meaning, within boundaries charted by the artwork itself.

From her own study of the picture, the instructor had come to believe that the theme of *The Abduction of Europa* is human lives caught up in the gods' larger designs, the interweaving of divine and mortal destinies. But when someone asks, "Why is this woman riding on the back of a bull?" the discussion turns unexpectedly. The students focus anew on the painting, and now see Europa as a heroine facing her uncertain fate with courage and fortitude. If we were in her place, they say, we would be afraid. But she is not. And so the conversation shifts from Zeus and his actions to the universal meaning of such a strange journey: Is Europa on a mysterious journey from life to death? Is

> Rembrandt investigating a journey to unknown places, to the realm of the divine? Does Europa represent all people in this way? The instructor's own hypothesis disappears and yields to the suggestions and interpretation of the group.

Looking at a work of art involves a series of actions — taking it in as a whole, focusing on details, thinking and reflecting on them, pausing to look again, and so on. Interpretation and understanding alternate with moments of emotion. In the end, everything should come together, with the experience of the artwork unified in an expanded whole. Dewey writes of how emotions hold the elements of experience together: "Emotion is the moving and cementing force."[2] It is through emotion above all that we engage our audiences; we harness the impetus of emotion that marks encounters with works of art — interest, like, dislike, puzzlement, curiosity, passion — and strive to maintain the momentum emotion provides as we further explore the works. The artworks we look at may be powerful, enchanting, frightening, sad, beautiful. Characters and places within the depicted scenes come alive, and the viewer may live a little in them, moved and transported.

> As they discuss Millet's comparatively stark and simple portrait of Louise-Antoinette Feuardent, the students pause to look at the way Millet painted her hands, puzzling at the ring on her middle finger, the way she rests her arms on her dress, and the expression on her face. Someone says, "She is so beautiful." For a moment, it seems as though there is nothing more to say.

The museum educator's task is a delicate one. On the one hand our goal is for people to gain a greater knowledge and understanding of a work, and on the other for them to connect with it personally, directly. Emotional involvement is a necessary precondition for awakening to a work's poetic possibilities. We know that the encounter of artworks is as much a matter of the heart as of the mind, that learning about artworks is motivated and held together by emotion as much as by intellect.

Each encounter with a work of art ends differently, unpredictably. As Dewey writes, "we have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment."[3] "*An* experience" of an artwork in some way never ends, but in the hour or so that museum educators have with a group, we aim to provide an experience that reaches a moment of culmination, a point at which the observations and thoughts of the group come together. We must sense when this has happened. The experience may end gradually, with a slowly developing appreciation of all the resources an artist has used to a particular effect. It may end suddenly, in a moment of discovery, as if the curtain has been pulled aside to reveal a work's final layer of meaning. It may end in a sentence. Or it may end in silence and wonder.

Like the artist's own process of creation, experiencing a work of art is not a regular and predictable process. In both of the classes described here, each group has concentrated on the artwork, and turned it about in their imaginations. We have allowed our minds to wander and speculate; we have reached a resting place, then begun again, as the work revealed itself gradually in time. We have experimented, looking from one viewpoint and another, followed the trails leading from our first impressions, fellow participants' comments, or a scholar's thesis. We have moved from the life of the object to our own inner lives, and back, fitting pieces of one into the other. We have come back to a work again and again, because each time we look, a different understanding is possible. We have worked together in this creative process. We have been held together by our belief that we will leave with an understanding of the artwork that we did not have when we began. We have contributed our perceptions and knowledge to a collective experience that has allowed each of us to understand and appreciate the work more fully.

A museum instructor who teaches for any length of time knows that often our viewers expect, or hope to arrive at "what an artwork means," a single interpretation, with some sense of solidity and finality. The instructor reinforces and relies on the viewers' trust that meaning is possible, yet at the same time, teaches that ultimately the interpretation of works of art inevitably encounters complexity and ambiguity. We move through our conversation, supplement observations with knowledge, and develop a sense about possible meanings. We arrive at a synthesis, and a possible understanding of the particular work of art we are studying. But we also arrive at the larger idea that works live and remain important because their meanings change. They accumulate past views, and are affected by the resources each new viewer brings. We always begin with the object, but the process of studying art in the museum is a creative process that transforms objects into something new. Dewey went so far as to say that, in a sense, the work of art does not exist until it becomes alive in the viewer's experience.[4] As we have said, we would add that it is only our ongoing engagement with works that *keeps* them alive.

Teaching is the heart of our practice. But many of us find we do not have the time to think about and prepare for it properly. As we look around our museums and museums everywhere, we see teaching that seems to have lost its way, become mechanical, unsure of its purpose. We have proposed a practice that aims high, at experiences that transform our visitors.

Museums are places of possibility. But possibilities are only made real when educators skillfully use the broad knowledge and understanding they have of objects throughout their museums to inspire and encourage people to dream a little with them, and to make them their own. What we teach is

not just "how" to look, or what to look for, but in the end, the possibilities of what art may be.

Teaching in museums is a complicated art. It requires tremendous preparation, knowledge, and planning. It is motivated by a love and knowledge of artworks, but also from an appreciation of the infinite possibilities of meaning that accumulate around them. It requires flexibility, balancing between a desire to share hard-won understanding, and openness to interpretations that come from completely new places. It is a delicate art, requiring the ability to engage, cajole, and listen, to move from viewpoint to viewpoint, all the while guiding, collecting, and building. It is an art ultimately committed to expanding and enriching the visitor's experience.

NOTES

1. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; reprint, New York: Perigee Books, 1980) chap. 3, "Having an Experience" and Philip W. Jackson, *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), chap. 1, "Experience and the Arts."
2. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 42.
3. Ibid., 35.
4. Ibid., 108.