

then to a painting of a Russian princess by Winterhalter, in which the artifice of all the details is suddenly theatrical, dazzling, and delightful. At the end, no one wants to leave.

As museum educators we teach in many kinds of programs, and teach in many ways. Every museum educator brings unique gifts to the art of teaching through works of art. The two classes described above might seem at first glance quite different. The first museum educator stays with a single work of art for the entire session, constructs her class around the observations and ideas of the students, and trusts that through their collective experience, a larger meaning will emerge. The second educator inspires his students with a feeling of confidence by guiding their observations of a single feature common to several works, and then allows a main idea to emerge. The two classes, however, are also alike in certain essential ways. In both cases, the students and the instructor are animated, concentrated, focused, and active. Their investigation is tightly focused on the works under discussion, and the group together reaches for a sense of the artworks as a whole. At the end, when the participants cluster around the works of art, still wanting to continue the experience of discovery, the instructors know that their students have understood that engagement with a work of art is a beginning, not an end.

The opportunities museum educators have to teach and learn are granted to us by the collections of objects in the care of the institutions in which we work, and by the students and visitors we invite to consider these objects. These artworks also impose upon us a great obligation, to bring them alive for those we lead through the galleries. For ultimately, it is our devoted attention that keeps artworks alive generation after generation.

This essay is the result of our work as museum educators. It began with a casual discussion about what constitutes good teaching, and what we can do to guide ourselves and our docent colleagues toward consistent and principled teaching in our museums. We know that it is possible to bring visitors to a greater understanding of works of art, and that these experiences can be transformative. Our teaching practice is grounded both in the everyday realities of our work and in the sense of limitless possibility and the idealism we share.

For many years, in our museums, we have taught students of all ages, and we have taught others how to teach in museums. We share the conviction that teaching is most effective when guided by clear goals and principles. We hope to define here the source from which good teaching emanates, and to describe an approach to teaching broad enough to encompass all kinds of museum education practice, which may prove useful for a range of education programs and audiences. We hope equally to encourage reflection in other practitioners upon our own art form. For we believe that museum teaching is indeed an art, a creative practice.