MAKING CONNECTIONS

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For an introduction to this issue of *Educational Perspectives* devoted to education in museums, I am expanding on the title, "Making Connections."

Making connections basically *is* what education is all about. We react to images and information by sense and nerve and *connect* these impulses and ideas with our stored experiences. The role of education in a museum setting is very complex as it may include in its teaching content not only one object or several objects to view separately or comparatively, but relationships with ideas on history, analyses of forms, and other aesthetic ideas in other media, e.g., music, literature, and visual arts. Only a few studies have been undertaken to research this process

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and suggest guidelines for teaching. Historically, the quality of the teaching depended on the breadth and depth of the teacher — ranging from world experts on a specific area of art history or science to an untraveled, inexperienced, recent college graduate who had enrolled in a few courses in art history or science taught by professors whose talents may be superlative, or inspired, or mediocre. The new teachers, particularly, could benefit by some training in using guidelines developing an awareness of the kinds of "connections" to be made. Teaching children is one level, growing in complexity with college students and adults as the need to relate the art or science experience to earlier concepts and information appears. This becomes more involved in intercultural or interracial situations where ways of seeing, hearing, and interpreting are influenced by family or group or cultural patterning. This sensitivity in the teacher to the individual or group adds one more layer of complexity to the teaching process which deals generally only with the "object," disregarding the viewer or viewers as a person or persons with whom we must "connect."

Direction of Thinking

The direction of thinking in academe and museums has most often been about "facts" about objects of art or science. For example, a painting would have many details recorded as to size, materials in the colors, analysis of manner of execution, locale of setting, name of site or person(s) if applicable, name of artist, his or her origin, dates and biographical details and provenance of work, and who owned it successively. All these facts are important, but what other information would help the viewer?

What if the first information given set the painting in a historical and cultural setting in a generalized way, described vividly to alert the imagination? Moving from there to explore the emotional and spiritual "pathways" to "connecting" with the painting. Can one empathize with the portrait or landscape or situation or abstract design? What questions would a viewer ask that will help to "bond" both mind and feelings to the work? Can a teacher, docent, or professor anticipate these ideas or "lead them out" by discussion or probing expectations? It is after this introduction of the person-to-object level that the facts of the case can follow with more relevance. The viewer, supposedly, has been aroused on several levels of attention and is now able to make "connections."

This assumes an experienced, flexible guide with a competent store of knowledge, one that is aware of the individual or group and will deal with the facts relating to the object. For example, after looking at a David painting of a ceremony depicting Napoleon and Josephine, the viewer should have a clear idea of that period of aristocratic rule, of opulent dress and decor, of echoes of Imperial Roman splendor inspiring this later era, of status, of courtly behavior, in addition to noting David's use of rich colors, strong and varied brush technique, plus knowing by whom the work was commissioned and where it hung originally, and subsequently.

In addition to having options in the "direction of thinking" regarding details of a work of art being examined, other disciplines can be drawn on to enhance the information further. For example, other fields — music, literature, science, and political, cultural or social history — can be involved in further elucidating the significance of a work. Some of the other articles in this issue will discuss this interdisciplinary approach.

Making Connections With The Past

Leaving the process of teaching, which is undergoing many changes, it is interesting to think of the past of museums and museum education in the United States.

The "museum movement" in the United States has a long history that began with the desire and vision of far-sighted philanthropists to establish institutions for the enlightenment, cultural development, and *education* of the people. Unlike European museums, which were originally royal collections, often dating back many centuries, housed in palaces, and with the coming of democratic regimes becoming public museums; American museums often began with sparse collections — often of the *wunderkammerer* type: what they had to display they used to educate children and adults; after that began the important collecting in the prosperous late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Never was there a day when there was not a museum somewhere in the United States. In 1773, three years *before* the Declaration of Independence, the Library Society of Charleston, South Carolina, established the Natural History Museum of South Carolina, the first *public* museum.

Earlier, in 1750, Harvard College displayed a collection of curiosities, followed shortly by Charles Willson Peale's museum in Philadelphia. The late 18th century brought many museums into being, often founded "for the people" by societies, such as: 1791, Massachusetts Historical Society; 1797, East Indian Museum Society at Salem; 1904, New York Historical Society; 1905, Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts. The museum movement followed the development of educational institutions along the east coast of the United States. Not until the mid-19th century did it spread to Chicago, Milwaukee, Grand Rapids, and San Francisco. Large art and science museums were started in the larger metropolitan cities as historic house museums, campus museums, and small, private collections turned "public." Private collecting followed the flourishing economy.

One of the early collectors, James J. Jarvis, put together an important and historic ensemble of 13th to 17th century Italian paintings, most of which are currently in the Yale University and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts collections. Competition between individuals and museums caused a sharp rise in prices for works of art. As time went on, the private collections were bequeathed to museums enriching their holdings.

The 1870s saw the beginning of the teaching of art classes in museums: 1870 at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City; 1903 in Toledo, Ohio, and 1905 at the Cleveland Museum of Art — even before it had a building! This carried out the charter of the founders which stated that their aim was "to serve the public." They added, "the public is entitled to enjoy the advantages of free citizens in a democratic society, including access to the greatest works of art. Such access is not solely the indulgence of the senses but for the inculcation of political and social virtue."

Another quotation comes from the dedication ceremonies of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1880: ". . . that the diffusion of knowledge of art in its highest forms of beauty would tend directly to humanize, to educate and refine a practical and laborious people."

Further awareness of the popular taste referred to the influence of the arts on industry, as in an earlier Boston program: ". . . in character there was a necessary connection between art and industry for moral uplift and popular taste; to elevate as a library does as a seat of learning; a source of self-improvement."

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By the 1930s and 1940s there was a shift to social reforms and educational experimentation, from emphasizing the custodial function to expanding the educational opportunities. World War II introduced a broadening interest in the arts of the world, from the Orient, Europe, primitive peoples and minorities to the American population.

A veritable explosion of interest in the arts occurred in the 1960s, an expansion that produced over 5,000 museums and an awareness of the *lacks* in American education which stressed knowledge obtained by the read and spoken word while producing a visual illiteracy in learning by images and symbols. The importance of reorganizing two areas in education were now recognized: (1) the need to relate to history as a continuum of past to present, especially vital to a knowledge of culture and art, and (2) the need to see the failure of the American educational system to "transmit" information by visual means as a stimulant to imagination, invention and innovation; *flexibility* within knowledge. In Anglo-American heritage, emphasis has

been on literature, theatre, music — with the visual arts, last. Much of this attitude is due to the Protestant ethic denigrating the sensual, or the "useless." In contrast, Japanese society is penetrated by the visual in home decor, costume, decorative and fine arts, revealing sensitivity to light, color, line, shade and appropriateness relating to inherited ideals. Our cultural approach to art is more pragmatic, often merely verbal or ancillary information barring our access to the works of art themselves.

Many questions need to be asked about the methods of presenting art, science, or cross-disciplinary subjects in museums. We need an evaluation of what is now being done for different age levels — child to senior adult — with a search for possible improvements. We need to examine how different cultures are being interpreted, especially as American society is becoming more intercultural with the growth of Latin-American and Asian origin populations.

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Some Problems in "Making Connections" — Preparation As An Integral Part of Educational Method

One of the weakest points in museum education is in the *preparation* of a viewer for experiencing either objects in the permanent collections or those in loan exhibitions, both in art and science museums.

Inherent in other types of education, preparation is a basic, integral ingredient. Elementary school children "prepare" in all subjects, generally aiming for passing school tests and for advancing into higher grades. The same basic procedure applies both in high school and college courses. A student *prepares* to learn certain facts, methods and processes either through in-class instruction or homework, depending on the subject; again being examined on competence in knowing the material as the end objective.

Except for rare instances of school children being *prepared* by teachers for what they will experience in a museum visit, the usual museum visitor arrives *cold*, often with neither clue nor information on the exhibition. It is the rare sophisticated, well-educated and well-traveled individual that might *read up* on an exhibition by buying an advance catalog, book or magazine. An adult group touring an art show is an enormous challenge to a museum educator. First is the state of *unpreparedness*; second is the group's range of educational levels, which may go from third-grade to post-graduate. Establishing a rapport with such a diverse group takes great skill, sensitivity, empathy and eloquence to hold its interest; facts about the works of art is not enough. Establishing the exhibition's objects in a cultural framework, and, by imaginatively relating the objects to the viewers by calling attention to significant details, is the essence of education in a museum.

Some museums have made a start in *preparing* adults by offering courses and lectures scheduled several weeks before the opening of an exhibition. The Cleveland Museum of Art, for example, before the "Art of the Maya" showing in the Fall, 1986, sent advance releases to the nucleus of "opinion makers" of the museum's family — members of the Board of Trustees, Advisory Council, Women's Council — to inform them of the show and future events.

We must, again, refer to schools which have closely supervised programs with museums; programs which prepare pupils for attending the museum and viewing its displays. This area of museum education needs further study and development.

Some Problems in "Making Connections": Professional Status of Museum Educators

Professor Elliott Eisner and Dr. Stephen Dobbs have indicated the plight of museum educators, in the hierarchy of museum professionals, in their 1985 study of education in a selected group of 20 museums. Until recently, the status of museum educator was considered inferior to the elevated and superior position of museum director and curator. The study's title, "The Uncertain Profession," is vividly descriptive.

Unlike those in museums a few decades ago, today's museum educators have at least one, and possibly two, graduate degrees. Many are well-traveled and have received travel grants for visits pertinent to their research and study. Today's museum educators also make up an impressive group and are working hard to upgrade their status within the museum structure so their input will be included in the framework of museum operations. Being accepted as "first-class museum citizens" would make it much easier for museum educators to assist in solving many problems in education by (1) having a unified approach to exhibitions and (2) maintaining a common

aim, philosophy and mutual understanding of *direction.* Occasionally the miracle occurs when director, curators, exhibition designers and museum educators agree on a common goal and a long-sought dream becomes reality. Thus, it is only common sense to bring museum educators into the mainstream of policy and planning *provided* they have had adequate preparation and have the required competence.

Some Problems in "Making Connections": Marketing Museum Programs

More and more museums are turning to the techniques used by business and industry to "market" their products — and their institutions. S. Dillon Ripley, writing in *The Sacred Grove,* advocated ways to make museums more effective to their communities. Effectiveness is very complex, being measured in many ways. Is it determined by the number of people entering museum doors? Do museums *know* who comes to its exhibits and participates in its programs? Has a study been made of the specific area's demographic characteristics, its traffic flow, its recreational choices and patterns? For a museum to reach a public, it needs to know many points about that public: its numbers, educational levels, transportation needs, expectations, and a method of receiving feedback from museumgoers which will help staff keep up, change and improve programs. In areas of publicity, public relations, membership, and financial support, successful business methods can assist museums — with selected and judicious application.

One of the obvious weaknesses in both academic and museum education — which would not be tolerated in commercial and business life — is the lack of training given to museum educators in speaking about and delivering their ideas to audiences. Hundreds of audiences, in the past, have accepted the fact that even a world-renowned professor could put audiences to sleep with a poor delivery of brilliant ideas. Today, the general public is conditioned to expect an engaging physical appearance, clear and agreeable vocal tones that enunciate words distinctly — much as they see and hear on television and in films. Drab and dull are not acceptable, and lead to the conclusion that many scholars should restrict their communications with the public to writing books or articles. It is a serious flaw in our educational system, then, that instruction in speaking before an audience is not an integral part of early training, then refined and improved on both the high school and college levels. Some speakers, because of individual personalities, will present their ideas better than others; but an effort in the area of public speaking instruction will certainly make speakers aware of what can be done to put their ideas before the public for acceptance with enthusiasm, comprehension, and enjoyment.

Holding in mind the Founding Fathers' emphasis on education as a primary function of a museum, the future effectiveness of museums as educational institutions is becoming increasingly important. In the glamour, excitement, and importance of the acquiring, preserving, and displaying functions of museums, education has often come in a poor "fourth." Present trends seem to indicate education rising to some degree of equality with the three other functions. It is to this present-day point of view that the following articles are addressed.

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