
THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO Its Museum Education Department

John Kent Lydecker

The Art Institute of Chicago is one of America's largest and oldest institutions dedicated to the visual arts. Structurally, the Art Institute consists of two elements: the School of the Art Institute, committed to the professional preparation of artists; and the Museum, dedicated to the collection, preservation, and study of great works of art. Thus, the Art Institute's educational mission is twofold for it both trains artists and helps the public — old and young, novice and expert — gain an understanding or appreciation for art. While the faculty of the School is charged with the first task, the Department of Museum Education is responsible for the second.

Within the Art Institute, the Department of Museum Education has many specific duties: we offer programs for younger visitors who come as organized school groups, as individuals, and with their families. For general audiences, we write texts and organize and present hundreds of tours, lectures, and courses. We are using the media as an educational tool; our staff creates audiovisual programs for many of our exhibitions, and we are gradually moving into the video age by preparing short videos on exhibitions or parts of the collection. A project on last summer's exhibition of Japanese Buddhist art has just been completed, marking the beginning of a video library of Art Institute exhibitions and collections.

The Museum Education Department also works with outside organizations concerned with the visual arts in our society. And as the department vested with responsibility for teaching, it is a key point of contact with the School of the Art Institute. With the School, we are consolidating the Art Institute's programs for teachers — one of our most important audiences. We have established a coordinating council which will become a forum for developing further points of exchange between museum and school. Indeed, one of the great tasks facing us as an educational institution is the more subtle weaving together of the life of the School with the life of our collections. All of these specific departmental duties are part of a larger, more exciting, picture. We contribute to — and I hope spur on — thought about the Art Institute's identity as an educational institution. In a curious way, our educational reach exceeds — and properly should exceed — our departmental grasp.

It is our responsibility to assure our members and visitors access to our collections. That access can be thought of as both physical and intellectual. Physically, we provide for movement, comfort, security; our several building projects are clearly the focus of this concern just now. But a great institution must also provide intellectual access to our holdings. This means accurate information, a tasteful and intelligent presentation of the collections, and a variety of routes to information.

For all that is said about it, education does not seem to be a commodity coming in one-size-fits-all. In fact, it

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is doubtful whether it is really a thing at all — like a painting or statue; rather, it is a change in outlook that occurs when we work out our curiosity about the world around us. Because ideas about the arts change, and ideas about education in the arts change, it is probably best to be pragmatic in our educational programs.

Physical and intellectual access to our collection is relatively easy when museum professionals deal with people like themselves. But, if we are to consider our purpose to be more profoundly educational, we must go out of our way to open the Art Institute to people who are not just like us. This isn't a matter of finding the lowest common denominator, it's a matter of finding common ground. We are doing that in interesting ways. For example, during the "Great Eastern Temple" exhibition, Buddhist monks performed a daily dedication ritual that opened the eyes of thousands of visitors. By acknowledging the living religious tradition represented by this art, we opened lines of communication with our audience that may not have been possible if we had kept matters strictly on aesthetic grounds.

In short, our task is to define, through our actions, the broader educational mission of the Art Institute. As

museum professionals, we strive to complement good collecting and cataloguing with good teaching. It is a point made over and over in recent literature on museums, but cultural institutions teach best when everyone in them — museum directors, trustees, curators, guards, conservators — recognizes the importance of the task.

This concern with the educational function of museums is an issue increasingly important throughout America. The American Association of Museums and prestigious foundations, such as the J. Paul Getty Center for Education in the Arts, have come forward with reports on this subject. In Illinois, Maryland, and a growing number of other states, a development of profound importance is occurring as they mandate instruction in the arts for all high school graduates. These states' legislators have discovered something that art professionals have always known: that art is an essential part of the human experience. The arts have moved to center stage, and an increasingly better-educated public is turning to our museums for instruction and delight.

It is tempting to see these developments as steps toward the goal suggested in John Adams famous dictum: "I must study politics and war that my sons may

have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain." Taken out of its context, this is a somewhat frightening quote, for if we are not to study the arts until we have a firm grasp on the natural sciences, and if we must defer study of the natural sciences until politics and war are laid to rest, then the painters, poets, musicians, sculptors, weavers and potters had best take early retirement. John Adams' priorities are occasionally paralleled within the museum community when the educational function is subordinated, or even omitted entirely.

The founders of the Art Institute of Chicago, and similar institutions, had a different vision, based on the idea that art is profoundly civilizing, and curiosity that leads to learning is still basic to our philosophy.

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