

# The Docent Muse

September 2008

## Vintage, Victorian Clothing Poses Provocative, Private Photography

A Review by Marge Buss

Timothy Piotrowski is a long time security staff employee of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. He most often is on duty at the security desk as we check in for Monday morning continuing education.

Situated on the edge of downtown Minneapolis, one-half block from the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, is a charming museum filled with nostalgic treasures of eras gone by. Visiting the Hennepin History Museum at 2302 Third Avenue South in Minneapolis is a stroll worth taking.

A featured exhibit through September 28, 2008 is photographer Timothy Piotrowski's *Studies from Life*. It showcases the Hennepin History Museum's collection of vintage clothing from the Victorian Age as seen through the discerning lens of this gifted photography artist. Using vintage techniques, Piotrowski evokes the photographic process of the era. With present day models, he recreates the social and private lives of people who would have been subjects of the cameras used in the late 1800s.

The complexities of authentically replicating the look of vintage photographs in modern times are finely attended to in this stunning show. One would not know s/he wasn't looking at the original photos of people from the Victorian Age until, upon closer inspection, a discovery is made. The woman, *Seated Miss Katherine with Broad Hat and Long Cape – 1890*, dressed in a full sleeved, buttoned to the chin jacket, with hat covering her head and gloves covering her hands, is entirely bare bottomed.

In addition to being a show about the Hennepin History Museum's wonderful textile collection, it is a show of contrasts. Starkness of objects contrast with lightness of air, as seen in *Victorian Nicole with Chair – 1880*. Nicole is bathed in light against a stark, dark, Victorian chair, while she evocatively lifts her



dress to reveal the scandalous bare ankle of 1880. The bareness of her ankle is echoed in the bareness of the floor, the wall, and the chair, lending powerful stability to the composition while the seductive tease is on.

The Victorian Age did not give freedom to women. This show does. Nowhere does it suggest the freedom women yearned for more than in the *tour de force* of *Young Victorian Woman Anonymously Displays her Undergarments – 1875*. Here we see a woman lifting her dress to expose the wire hoop undergarment worn to create the Victorian flounce in her skirt. Her body language gives us more than a pictorial on fashion design. She exhibits a pose that contrasts her closed knees with open feet, her toe pointing to center, inviting the provocative suggestion of lust denied. Too afraid to show her face, she wears

a mask. Is this the mask of shame or the mask of seduction?

Piotrowski rides that fine line with finesse, allowing the viewer to imagine the intent. The provocative juxtaposition of external exhibitionism and internal shame makes the poser most evocative. While revealing the entrapment of women's Victorian garments and undergarments, the soul longs for revelation and sexual freedom but cannot quite break out of the cocoon society puts her in. Looking more closely we see one shoe is laced, one is partially unlaced, eliciting more suggestion of moral conflict. The composition is arousing while solidly grounded in the reminder of Victorian mores. What is she thinking?

Contrasts continue in *Alexandra and Hoopskirt with Staff and Hurricane Lantern* – 1870. A secure, determined woman with strong positioning bares her hoop skirt and feet with a staff firmly held in her hand and affixed to the floor. A gas lantern evokes a sense of heat while providing a better “glimpse” through the window panes of the hoop skirt to what's beneath. The top half of the woman portrays a sense of strength, while the bottom half provokes an invitation to look. Both are counterintuitive to Victorian culture.

A variety of other genre-based photographs round out this nostalgic exhibit. Vintage automobiles, bicycles, toys and scenic vistas allow the viewer to enter into the serenity of everyday life. Efforts by the artist to capture authenticity are realized.

A final contrast worth mentioning: in a history museum, filled with the precious stuff of years gone by, it is delightful to view a body of work done in the present time using a process of the past. The technical accomplishment is strong.

This show delivers on various levels – historically, technically, artistically and culturally, while pushing the viewer to think about what is going on in the pictures. To think beneath the visual, enter the psyche and ask questions about basic human emotions as they exist inside societal constraints. And for the viewer that wants to study Victorian textile and dress design, this show will not disappoint.

## The Boys of Summer

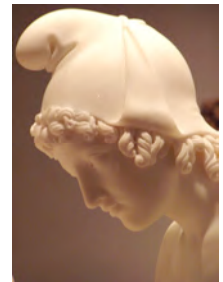
### *Merritt Nequette*

Last year, the *Docent Muse* featured the usual grouping of Muses, who all happen to be women. Those familiar with the family refer to them by their nicknames: Thali, Calli and Eri; Ura, Melpy and Terpi; Poly, Euterp, and Clio.

So this year, since I'm back at being editor (seems like only a year ago that I was doing this), it seems only fair to introduce the boys of the family. They sometimes are referred to as the Macho Muses. You probably have seen a lot of them around the MIA, but just didn't recognize them. So here they are.

Gany is the muse of cyclists. He always wears his helmet.

Actually that's all he *does* wear. I understand it's partly because he's allergic to Spandex. Most of the guys in the family don't wear a lot of clothes because it's hot in the Mediterranean area. And besides, most of the girls in the family have had their share of wardrobe malfunctions.



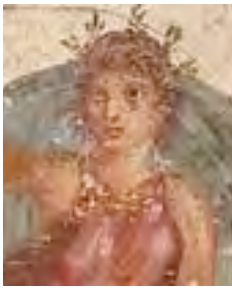
This is a quiet easy-going fellow and is the muse of quelling disturbances, some of which he causes. He carries a club to make him look heroic, but he never gets upset. His hair stays in place. He doesn't get mad. He does clobber people on occasion, which won him a part as an extra on a few episodes of *The Sopranos*. And don't think of kidnapping the bride if he's a guest at the wedding.



Cali was a real imp as a kid. Always joking around, forgetting to put his pants on and stuff like that. He did grow up to be a holy terror. And he was very fond of his horse and thus is the muse of equine aficionados.

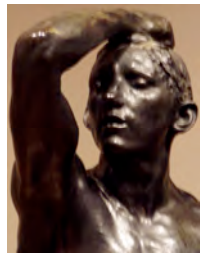


Dion likes to have a good time, and is the muse of partying. The fact that he is usually a bit off kilter and has bunches of grapes on his head just adds to his fascination.



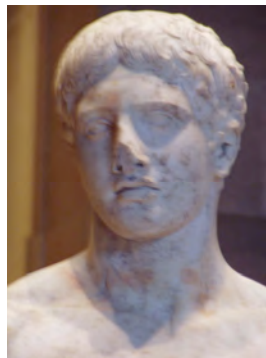
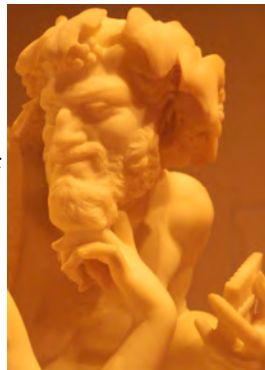
Lars is familiar to the Scandinavian crowd that comes to the Institute. He's the muse of a different kind of dancer than his sister Terpi. Why is he considered macho? Think of 150 push-ups as a warm-up to his routines. And then there's that bit of catching a 110-pound ballerina flying through the air and making it look graceful.

Ferro is the iron man of the family and the muse of regular exercise. Just look at those muscles. Most people do. If he looks familiar, it may be that you are thinking of his much older identical twin brother Bronzi.



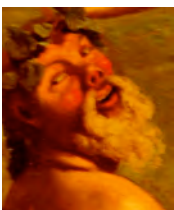
Colo is the muse of sea-farers and thus the source of chanteys, hornpipes, and fish tales. He just stands in the harbor and watches ships come and go all day.

Pan, the satyr and muse of music (had to get one of those in somewhere) writes the soundtracks for his sister Eri's music videos.

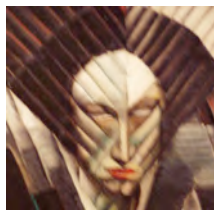


Dory, the spear carrier, is the all-around athlete. He has a look of concentration and determination on his face, probably trying to remember where he left his spear back in Italy. Of course, the face is about the last thing people look at when they see him.

So now you've met the whole family, all except Mom and Dad. Dad is a really quiet and laid-back



person, seldom complaining about anything. But Mom really calls the shots in the family.



## These Are A Few of My Favorite Frames

### Bob Marshall

*Note: For those not familiar with this author's work, please note that all opinions are his alone. The same may be true for his facts, so please check for yourself before using any of his information on one of your tours.*

Next to paintings, what I like best are frames, and the MIA collection has some great ones. In case you've never picked out your own favorites, here are mine. First, you will note that my list ends around 1900, because that seems to be when framing, as a decorative art, started its decline to the point where modern art dispenses with frames entirely. Second, I have arbitrarily excluded, as insufficiently idiosyncratic choices, four frames whose uniqueness would place them on most everyone's list:

A. The tabernacle frame that announces *Charlotte of France's* royalty;

B. The Rococo sensuous *richesse* of *Mme Aubry*;

C. The Baroque/Neoclassical flourish in gold that dwarfs *Countess Pignatelli*;

D. The talking frame that continues the savage lampoon of *Mlle Lange*.

What follows is my personal Top Ten, in chronological order, subject to revision the next time I visit the galleries.

#### 1. *Saint Romuald*

This seemingly simple frame seems to match the purity of Fra Angelico's paint, but on closer inspection there's a lot going on. A band of blue cloverleaves, separated by two blank circles, picks up the aquamarine of the Saint's cloud and book. The inner frame is stamped with diamond shapes that once were red. The craquelure in the gold at his feet adds years to Romuald's countenance.

#### 2. *Still Life*

The Dutch 17<sup>th</sup> century is full of black frames, but none as effective as the Claesz. The absence of color matches the painting's restrained feel, yet the black sets off the dashes of blue, yellow and red. The wave trim gathers light and bounces it off the pewter and glass. The ripples come in two styles and three sizes, setting up their own intricate harmony. (See, also, *Two Studies of the Head of an Old Man*.)

#### 3. *View in the Roman Forum*

Codazzi's Corinthian columns soar upward to a shell-and-scroll crown grander than the undistinguished painting it surmounts. Just as intriguing are



the vaguely architectural shoulders with their floral insets. Who says a frame need be rectangular?

#### 4. *Mirror, Italy*

Black and gold are a stunning combination, especially when each is softened by age. The acanthus leaves swirl like waves in a storm; fading sunflowers grab the raised inner frame, while other flowers peek out below. Persephone peers into space under a crown of narcissus, rose and marigold, a bewitching precursor to the *Veiled Lady*.

#### 5. *Attributes of the Arts*

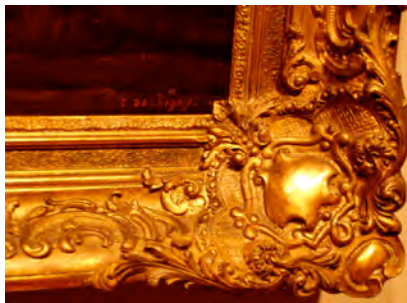
The MIA is blessed with classic masterpiece French frames to go with its Rubens, Van Dyck, Poussin, Boucher (to name some highlights), but my favorite is the Chardin. All feature flowers, shells, interlacing vines; an inner band, sanded band, main decorative band, outer band of entwined florets or encased circles; and elaborate cartouches or accents at the four midpoints. The Chardin has diapered panels with cross-hatched background – elegant, masculine, definitive.

#### 6. *Portrait of A Young Man*

Bright gold can look tacky, or it can illuminate, as it does here, casting a veritable spotlight on the youth's cheeks and white collar. Gericault may be Romantic, but this frame is pure Neoclassic, with low-relief designs borrowed from Pompeii – lyre, bay branch, grape cluster, vase. Compressed tulips form the inner band, while a pattern of floret and two horseshoes repeats 30 times down the outside.

#### 7. *Crossroads of the Eagle's Nest*

As Daubigny is underrated, this frame is under-



noticed. At first it seems generic, with its sanded band and inner ring of rosettes. But study, for a minute, the corner pieces, from whose unusual abstract design fully formed flowers sprout.

Restraint, interest and elegance – so different from the neighboring examples of busy but boring acanthus and oak leaves.

#### 8. *Portrait of Harriet Brown*

This broad, brown frame is as simple, and severe, as the sitter. The grain of the wood adds interest and sets off the unmodulated background; and the inward slope slides the viewer's eye into the picture, where Mrs. Brown's eyes push right back.

#### 9. *Sala dell'Illiade in the Pitti Palace*

In a Decorative Arts gallery where all the frames have a part to play, this is the star: an open framework of oak leaves that literally fly off the wall yet curve in to bring the eye back to the painting – eventually. This is a junior partner to the mirror frame, above.

#### 10. *The Bronze Horses of San Marco, Venice*

After two rows of gold banding set off the image, a row of beading leads to a marvelous pattern of alternating flowers and oakish leaves, encased in an Art Nouveau trumpet-vine swirl against a stamped-gold background. Outside the frame is another tiny band of feathered S-curves. In all, four stately patterned bands match the four horses of San Marco.

## **The Chair Cheers for the MIA**

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### *Martha Bordwell*

What is the role of the Docent Executive Committee?

I would guess this is not a burning question on the minds of most docents. If you are thinking about the museum at all these days, I suspect your mind is focused on your tours (for the class of 2005, the African check-out tour looms large) or perhaps our luncheon on September 8. But as the Chair of the Committee for this year, it is a question I have been pondering a little. The official role of the committee, according to the *Docent Handbook*, states: The DEC functions as a liaison between the Director and docent membership and will offer whatever assistance it can to ensure the smooth operation of the docent program.

My unofficial observation: The Committee primarily serves a communication role. This communication occurs on several levels: the committee meetings themselves, when Sheila and Debbi report to the group the latest relevant activities at the museum (i.e., progress toward developing a tour for persons with Alzheimer's disease); the communications chair who expresses our concern to those who have suffered deaths of close family members or serious illnesses by sending a card or flowers; the newsletter editor – the *Docent Muse*, which spreads the news in written form and allows the creative writers among us to try out their skills; and the social committee, which plans events where we can all get together and communicate face to face.

We are kept current on the activities of docents who are no longer touring by the honorary docent representative. The treasurer makes sure we have the

money to do all of the above and the secretary reminds us what we decided to do. (By the way, a copy of the secretary's report is filed in the lounge so all of you can keep tabs on what we are up to).

A question you are even less likely to be considering: What is the role of the Chair of the Committee? Because of the expectation that I write this column, that question has been on my mind. Obviously, the main role is to chair the meetings, keep things moving, and make sure everyone gets along and gets a chance to participate. And the Chair gets to attend the monthly Friend's board meetings. Beyond that, we usually don't have a lot to do, unless a major scandal erupts in our midst (and frankly, I haven't the foggiest idea what I would do in such an event, so let's control ourselves and save the scandals for my successor). Most of us I think have sort of defined our role ourselves. And although this will come as a surprise to anyone who knew me in high school, I have decided to define my role as cheerleader – not your typical extroverted cheerleader but the introverted type whose enthusiasm is best conveyed in writing.

What do I intend to cheer about?

Let's start with us, the docents. I'm glad I didn't know anything about the competition when I applied to become a docent. I still remember how awed I was on the first day of class at the accomplishments modestly described by my fellow classmates. Although this high achievement level could have made for an unpleasant couple of years as we all vied to outdo one another, it wasn't like that at all. I would guess that other classes experienced the same. We competed each to do her/his best and yet remained thoughtful and supportive toward one another. Much better than high school. And today we are the face of the museum, showing off our collection to visitors far and wide. As our new director's strategic plan progresses, we will be key to its success, whether the goal be enhancing the museum's reputation, broadening the museum's audience, or enhancing the visitor experience. And we are up to the task.

Secondly, I offer a cheer for our training program. I am one of those people who didn't know when to quit when it came to going to school. (I'm like John McCain and horses: don't ask me how many degrees I have). All of this schooling did qualify me for at least one thing: how to recognize a good educational program when I see one. Although Sheila

and Debbi did have good material to work with (see above), I still venture the guess that most of us hadn't the slightest idea how to lead a tour when we began our training. And, as in my case, most of us had little formal training in art history. In the first few classes, I alternated between chagrin at how I could have lived so long and learned so little and excitement about all that I was learning now. Better late than never.

But I still had doubts about my touring skill. That confidence grew gradually, as I wrote my first tour, presented one piece to the group (which I labored over obsessively – hard to believe now) and gradually developed and presented a full tour. And when I finished the program, I had been transformed into a confident docent with the ability to engage almost any group. I watched this process take place with my classmates as well. I truly credit Debbi and Sheila with this transformation, which they did by somehow balancing high standards with warmth and positive reinforcement. I know from conversations that those of you who were trained before Sheila and/or Debbi's time are equally proud of your education.

Finally, I have to cheer for the museum itself. The official blurb for press releases which the MIA uses begins, "The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, home to one of the finest encyclopedic art collections in the country, houses more than 80,000 works of art representing more than 5000 years of world history." That sounds pretty impressive to me. And it is free, a fact that I don't think gets nearly the credit it should. When I see all the school children walking through the museum with their eyes wide open or wander through the museum by myself (eyes equally wide open), preparing for a tour, I am so grateful to be a part of this museum.

There are so many pieces in the permanent collection I love that I could never name my favorites. Since the new wing opened there seems constantly to be new pieces on view that I have never seen before, adding to the excitement. And the steady influx of special exhibits keeps our touring opportunities fresh and challenging. Finally, we have a new director, Kaywin Feldman, who seems determined to make the museum even more central to our community and to the art world in general. And because she is a woman, I am not afraid to admit that I am cheering for her success with a little extra vigor.

So, give me an M. Give me an I. Give me an A. What does it spell? MIA. I'll be leading the cheering section on these pages of the Docent Muse this year and trying to connect with all of you as we traipse about the museum, sharing our enthusiasm with our visitors and turning them into cheerleaders too. See you in September. I think it is going to be a great year.

## **Welcome Back!**

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It is Friday afternoon, September 5, 2008. For most school children, school began this week, or earlier. For us, it begins on Monday the 8<sup>th</sup>. At least one of us is already worrying about what she will wear on Monday. We anticipate seeing all of you again, and feel the excitement that "going back to school" still generates. This excitement is just one of the many small and great joys our jobs provide us. Thanks to all of you for being such an important part of the museum's and our lives. Welcome back, and best wishes for a terrific year!

*Sheila and Debbi*

## **"Artful Stories..."**

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*Sheila McGuire*

Giving tours for young and old alike has taken on new meaning at the MIA. As the museum continues to open its doors to new audiences, Museum Guide Programs has been at the forefront of that effort. In the last year, we have developed programs at both ends of the age spectrum – for pre-schoolers and for people living with Alzheimer's disease.

If someone had asked me a year ago if it was realistic to think we could, in the year ahead, pilot a pre-school tour program and get a tour program for people with Alzheimer's disease started, I likely would have said no. Both have been dreams for some time now.

Christine McKigney, Coordinator of School Outreach Programs, and I envisioned a very modest start for a preschool program – a tour with a book and a low-cost interactive activity. We had no idea that our plans aligned with the Friends' interest in funding a new program through the awesome Children's Fund. Long, happy story, short, the Friends Children's Fund made it possible for us to develop and pilot an exciting program that reached 409 preschoolers in four short months. We worked with Kelly Wussow, Hennepin County Library's liter-

acy specialist, to design training for the docents and staff. Groups from day care centers and schools participated in our pilot and gave us valuable feedback that Christine will share with all of you soon.

The tours, called "Artful Stories: a Preschool Tour Experience at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts" are just that – experiences. Each thematic tour – so far we have tours that focus on shape, color, and gardens – is organized around a storybook or two. Every tour begins with the students introducing themselves by putting their face in a fancy picture frame and singing along with "looking through my picture frame, who do I see?" For each unit the docent integrates the storybook, looking-based discussions about related art works, hands-on activities, and interactive songs.

Thank you to the Friends Children's Fund for supporting us again in the year ahead. With this support we will develop a large-size postcard to spread the word to at least 2,000 daycare providers and schools across the state. We will also be able to complete additional tours around the themes of animals, opposites, color and emotions, and more. We hope you will help us spread the word to anyone you know who might want to get their preschoolers involved. I encourage all of you who are able to attend our training session on September 15 to learn more. Who knows, you might want to sign up to lead some "Artful Stories" tours.

On September 22 we are offering training that will provide information on Alzheimer's disease, current research, and basic communication tools we can all use to facilitate tours for people with Alzheimer's disease. Whether you plan to lead these tours or not, we highly recommend that you attend the morning session, which will be led by Marsha Berry and Michelle Barclay from the Alzheimer's Association of Minnesota-North Dakota. We hope also to have other presenters at this session to talk about their own experiences living with Alzheimer's.

Your docent colleague, Sharon Johnson, has been facilitating art conversations with day residents at Lyngblomsten's "The Gathering" for over two years with museum posters and objects from her own collection. Debbi and her intern Eleanor accompanied Sharon on a few visits last summer while we were researching the varieties of programs for people with Alzheimer's disease that have been developed by other museums. Although we wanted to move for-

ward last fall, we decided that it was not going to be feasible to pilot both the preschool and Alzheimer's programs in the same year. We simply did not have the staff to do this. That is, until your docent colleague, Jane Tygesson volunteered to help get this up and running.

Since March when Jane attended a two-day symposium at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (which has been a leader in the development of museum programs for people with Alzheimer's), she has been generously donating her time to make our pilot program a reality. We have partnered with the Alzheimer's Association of Minnesota-North Dakota who have welcomed us into their early-stages work group and introduced us to fabulous people in the cities with whom we are collaborating to make this pilot a reality. Jane has already facilitated tours for a group of gentlemen we met through the workgroup and a group of visitors from the Wilder Adult Day Health Services. We'll share more details about the tours themselves as we progress with this exciting pilot.

Programs like these would not be even remotely possible without your amazing talent, dedication, and enthusiasm. I am eager to see where we all are with both of these new tour programs in a year. Thank you!

## **How I Spent My Summer "Vacation"**

*By Jane and Ruth's Mom (Amanda T.R.)*

I followed the trend and opted for a "stay-cation" this summer. But unlike many Minnesotans' close-to-home holidays, mine was 9 weeks long and not especially restful!

Ruth Louise Rundahl (aka Rootin' Tootin' Ruthie) finally surrendered (but not without the assistance of labor-inducing hormones administered by my doctor) and entered the world two-weeks overdue on May 16, 2008. By my tally, I was asked, "Are you still here?" by MGP volunteers and my colleagues exactly 1.5 million times between my due date and Ruth's birth. It was a relief not to have to come up with yet another original response to that question!



Upon meeting her new sibling for the first time, big sister Jane (age 5 ?) proclaimed Ruth "just perfect!" Jane's approval was a huge relief since we'd heard horror stories of older siblings demanding their little brother or sister be returned or sold at the next garage sale!

As many of you know from your own parenting experiences, life with a newborn consists of 96-hour-long days, 95 hours of which are spend diapering or feeding (or diapering while feeding!). We did change things up a bit when our aged clothes dryer finally died on Ruth's first day home from the hospital, so when not feeding or diapering, we found ourselves outside hanging "onesies" and the tiniest socks you've ever seen on the line. (Thank goodness it was May, not January!)

In the ensuing four months, we've all gotten better acquainted, become accustomed to being sleep deprived, and settled into a feed-diaper-repeat routine. Babies are even more captivating than the Olympics coverage on NBC; Ruth's current tricks include smiling, cooing and rolling over. And while I didn't get much rest or relaxation this summer, it sure was memorable. John and I are blessed to have two beautiful, joyful, healthy daughters!

Thank you to everyone who sent well wishes after Ruth's birth. We were humbled and honored by the showering of cards and gifts. They were much appreciated and enjoyed!

## Sunshine Fund

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*Susan Burnett*

Throughout the year docents who are ill, hospitalized or who have lost a loved one are remembered with a floral arrangement or card. The Sunshine Fund provides the money to carry out this activity. As we begin the 2008-09 year we are asking docents to contribute a small amount (\$5.00) to this important part of our docent experience. An envelope marked *Sunshine Fund* is on the bulletin board in the Docent Lounge.

## The "Real" Muses

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For those who do crossword puzzles or would just like to know who the "real nine Muses of mythology" are:

- Calliope – epic poetry
- Clio – history
- Erato – love poetry
- Euterpe – lyric poetry
- Melpomene – tragedy
- Polymnia – sacred poetry
- Terpsichore – choral dance
- Thalia comedy
- Urania – astronomy

Their parents were Jupiter and Mnemosyne (Memory). Apollo was their guardian and was thus known as Musagetes.

## You too can be famous

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Writing an article for the *Docent Muse* can be fun, and not too painful at all. Have you been to a fascinating museum, come up with a tremendous idea for a tour that swept your guests off their feet, or just have something to share with fellow docents? E-mail your ideas to me, submit a Word document as an attachment to an e-mail, or drop a note in my mailbox in the office. The next issue of the *Muse* is scheduled for December 1, but you don't have to wait until Thanksgiving to submit something. If I hear of something, I may bug you too.

Merritt Nequette, editor  
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Have  
a  
great  
year!