

The Docent Muse



May 2009

Heritage of Docents

Tom Byfield

The editor of *The Docent Muse* has suggested it might be of interest to write an article on family members who may have been docents in the past. After impetuously accepting this assignment, I drew a blank. There was no one in my clan past or present that had any inclination to be a docent. Art appreciation apparently was not high on the whoopee list of my progenitors. In checking our family tree – a stunted sickly bush – I found we have avoided almost all research of our genealogy, afraid no doubt of what we would find. One would be hard-pressed to make wine out of the vinegar of a lineage speckled with rabble-rousing rascals, roués, reprobates and Republicans. Oh, we did trace my great-great-grandfather back to Marie Antoinette. Actually it was my great-great grandmother who traced him. They used to call him “Poppy” which we thought was a charming endearment for the old patriarch until we learned it was because of his opium addiction. But that’s apocryphal in its authenticity and we shall speak no more of it. In desperation, I will tell of my mother’s foray into docenting to explain a singular piece of art to my father.

I was four years old, alone in the living room with a box of crayons. One wall was quite bare. I thought it would be a sterling idea to use that blank canvas for this *enfant terrible’s* entry into the annals of art history. (Cue the ominous background music.) I drew stick figures of our family, Patches my dog (a little dust mop with feet), and our house. I completed the panorama with trees, a brilliant sun and clouds. I did not sign it as I thought my technique, being unique, would speak for itself. Besides, I couldn’t write yet. I was pleased.

The enthusiasm for my first major work was not universal. When my father came home, mother led him on a tour to the living room and my masterpiece. He was not enthralled. Little wisps of smoke

came from his ears. His lips were pressed in disapproval tight enough to make diamonds. He finally voiced his displeasure succinctly and with words I had not heard before. His reaction acquainted me for the first time with the bane of all struggling artists – an unsympathetic, know-nothing critic.

We all have come from the same primordial soup. Some of our distant relatives left the Olduvai Gorge in Africa – mostly because they were behind in the rent and moved up to Europe. I can well imagine one of my prehistoric forebears leading a group of Paleolithic art admirers into the cave at Lascaux in France. He would carry a torch in one hand and point dramatically with the other saying, “Look what Og do!” They would be spellbound by the huge figures of bison, bulls, stags, and a rhinoceros. My distant relative would no doubt use the inquiry method and ask, “What do you see?” Then, “What else do



you see?” He would validate all responses, then remark on the limited palate of black and red that Og used and his economy of brush strokes. I don’t know the number of tours my prehistoric docent was required to lead each year, but no doubt the Director of Cave Volunteer Services would have established the minimum for qualification. I wonder if they had a Friends organization that would host an *Art in Bloom* with a gift shop at the cave entrance.

A Year to Cheer

Martha Bordwell

When I began my term as chair of the Docent Executive Committee, I wrote in the *Muse* that I saw my role as a sort of cheerleader. As I prepare to retire my pompoms and to turn over my responsibilities to the very able Jane Tygesson, I would like to report on where and when I have found the opportunity to cheer for us as docents.

I was handed a fabulous opportunity for praising the docent program when I became part of the interviewing committee for the new docent class. At the five informational sessions held prior to the deadline for applications, Kathy Rothenberger, Marilyn Smith, and I praised the training program, our classmates and the pleasures of being a docent. Since about a hundred people had applied for fewer than 40 openings, I am not sure any praise was needed. Perhaps we should have found fault with the program instead.

Lately I have found myself sitting across from applicant after applicant, with lengthier and more impressive résumés than many I have seen in my lifetime. Tell them they have to limit their travelling for two years, and most reply, "Not a problem." Describe the extra trips to the museum to follow tours and the answer is some version of, "Sounds like fun." List the lengthy papers and reading assignments and we hear, "I love to study." Joke that we accept bribes to get into the program and they gamely respond, "Chocolate or wine?" (If we didn't have such high ethical standards at the museum, auctioning docent seats would be a great fundraising tool).

Seriously, it is quite humbling to realize what a coveted position being a docent at the MIA is. I have a lot of empathy for the qualified people who won't make it into the program. It has been an honor to be a part of the process and I have loved getting to know Sheila, Debbi, Kathy, Marilyn, and Ann Isaacson better. When I see the faces of the new class members in the museum next year, I am going to take a little extra interest in their progress.

One of the responsibilities of the DEC chair involves attending the Friends monthly board meetings. I have to confess that I had paid relatively little attention to this group of women (I have yet to see a man at any meetings). But I have come to learn how

dedicated they are to this museum and how much they contribute to our docent program.

They are responsible for the transportation funding to bring all Minneapolis second-graders to the museum, for the charming bookmarks we are giving as a memento, and for the new costume for the holiday traditions tours, not to mention the museum's major fundraisers, Art in Bloom and Art Perchance.

At first, I was at a loss as to what to say at the meetings, given the amount of responsibility assumed by the other committee members. But then I remembered my cheerleading function. I started encouraging the board members to take more tours and to invite their friends to go along, all the time emphasizing how absolutely fabulous the docents are. And I think it has paid off, as recently board members have stopped me in the hall to say what an excellent job a docent had done on a tour.

I have heard praise particularly about the monthly tours for new Friends members. I have also been informed that when our new docent class graduates, the Friends plan to host an event honoring them, thus insuring that new docents won't be such a stranger to the Friends office, like I was.

Finally, I have tried to be a little inspiring in my writing for the *Muse*. And I have so appreciated the positive feedback I have received. It has gone to my head at times, as when I started mentioning my name in the same sentence as Maureen Dowd (only I'm not as mean) or modestly envisioning my byline in *The New Yorker*.

I am glad to report that I am so over that and have just accepted that it has been great fun to write for the *Muse*. I am lucky to have had such a forum, with a tolerant editor in the person of Merritt Nequette. I would encourage all of you to consider writing for the *Muse*, especially about tours you have given. Now that we no longer meet on Mondays, I think we are all feeling a little estranged from one another. Writing is one way to stay connected.

I would like to thank my committee, who did all the hard work: Colleen and Anastasia, Patrick, Merritt, Larry, Susan and Mary Ritten. And Jane will be a worthy successor, if her effort on behalf of the new Alzheimer's Program is any indication.



The museum is weathering a particularly painful time financially and I know that we docents are more crucial to the museum's functioning than ever. Are we up to the challenge? We better be, because expectations have been raised and we will have a very, very distinguished group of new docents, not to mention the Museum's many visitors, following us around next year.



tations have been raised and we will have a very, very distinguished group of new docents, not to mention the Museum's many visitors, following us around next year.

Thanks so much for the opportunity to serve as the Chair of the Docent Executive Committee.

Honorary Docents Stay "Active"

Mary Ritten

Once a docent, always a docent, seems to be the motto of all MIA tour guides. Should you begin to consider relinquishing your "active" status as a docent, please keep in mind that you can still stay connected with the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and your docent friends by becoming an active member of the association of honorary docents.

MIA honorary docents plan monthly visits to artists' studios, private art collections and places of interest throughout the Twin Cities, gathering for lunch afterward at a local restaurant. The honoraries relish the lively give and take of their monthly book club as well as the opportunity for guided tours of special exhibitions at the MIA, Walker and other museums. They also meet for occasional meals with friends at the Arts Café after or before a stroll through the galleries.

Once you have submitted a written intention to give up your status as an "active" docent, you automatically assume the status of "honorary" docent. You will then receive an honorary docent roster and a schedule of yearly outings and book club information along with the docent training schedule and *The Docent Muse*, either electronically or by post. You may also expect a personal phone call welcoming you to this new stage of docent life.

Two more events for honoraries have been planned for this season. If you are considering a change of status, you are invited to join the honoraries on these occasions:

Wednesday, May 27: A Tour of the National Weather Service at 10:30 a.m.

Friday, June 16: A Backstage Tour of the Guthrie Theater at 10:00 a.m.

For more information concerning these events or about the honorary docent program in general, please contact Georgia George at 952-922-4992 or GSGeorge@bitstream.net or Mary Ritten at 612-333-7004 or ritz123@comcast.net.

Notes from Museum Guide Programs

Debbi Hegstrom and Sheila McGuire

This year the National Art Education Association (NAEA) annual conference was held in Minneapolis. The theme of the conference was "Visual Arts Education: A Landscape for 21st Century Learning."

The Museum Education Division Pre-conference, titled "Responding," was held at the MIA. Museum Guide Programs staff members highlighted the good work you do through our presentations and conversations with NAEA conference attendees from around the world (as far away as Australia). I thought you might be interested in the topics we covered, in some cases in collaboration with colleagues from the Walker Art Center:

Doors Wide Open: Building a Diverse Community of Volunteers

How's Your Internet Connection? Museum Educators Using the Web to Connect with Audiences Pre-K Museum Play

Discovering Stories Together: Programs for Visitors with Memory Loss

Museum Accessibility and Universal Design

As we continue to reach out to new and diverse audiences, introducing new programs and ideas, you have been with us every step of the way, helping open our doors to everyone in the community.

At the heart of the larger conference were discussions, debate, grappling with issues, ways of working our way toward the 21st-century museum.

We were looking ahead, but in one session we were also encouraged to look back. "Our History and Our Practice" highlighted the past work and words of various museum educators. One of them, Benjamin Ives Gilman, Secretary of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (1893-1925), wrote *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method* in 1918, in which he stated the duty of the museum was to develop "beholders of art." He created the first museum "docent service" in 1907, charging docents to act as "companions," whose job it was to help visitors foster "real connections" and "friendships" with works of art. He encouraged showing only a few objects,

chosen to find “mutual interest,” even while the docent “keeps as far as possible in the background.” This approach, says Gilman, leads to enjoyment and a type of “holiday mood,” even encourages “free intercourse” and “play.” It was fascinating to me how these words from the past are so vital to our museum practice today!

At the end of another year of touring, we can’t thank you enough for all that you do, including the many “friendships” between people and art that you have cultivated with such dedication and enthusiasm! We’ve seen that “holiday mood” in action!

Docent Executive Committee

New Board (elected 14 May 2009)

- Jane Tygesson, chair
- Marge Buss, chair-elect
- Mary Grau, secretary
- Jean Burke, treasurer
- Maurine Venters, communication chair
- Sharon Richardson/Sally Rice, social chairs
- Bill Bomash/Grace Goggin, newsletter co-editors
- Honorary Docent representative, tba

Thanks to this year’s board

- Martha Bordwell, chair
- Jane Tygesson, chair-elect
- Patrick George, secretary
- Larry Simon, treasurer
- Susan Burnett, communication chair
- Anastasia Pydych/Colleen Watson, social chairs
- Merritt Nequette, newsletter editor
- Mary Ritten, honorary docent representative

Passing of torches and grand gala will be held at some point in June at an undisclosed location.

In Memoriam

May 2008 to May 2009

The Docent Muse begins a new tradition with this issue in remembering active docents who have left us during the past year.

Fern Miller

Yupik

- Sewing kit or tobacco box
- Could be either
- Could be both
- Face on either side
- One male with moustache
- Smiling
- One female
- Unsmiling
- Across the way
- A mask unidentified
- By gender
- But thought to be female
- Unsmiling
- Why does the Inuit woman frown?

