

The Docent Muse



January 2010

Docent Journeys

Deep 20-below-zero Winter in Minnesota is the perfect time to take a journey to a warmer place. The Winter issue of *The Docent Muse* is inspired by the many journeys we docents take in life. We are delighted that our own Sheila McGuire is beginning a new journey here at the MIA as Interim Head of Education. And we are hoping to see Kate Johnson, recently retired Head of Education, coming back to the MIA to share tales of her travels with us.

This issue includes reports from docents who journeyed to China, Italy, Montreal, Philadelphia and even a report from far-away Milwaukee. There's an account of Patty McCullough's wonderful journey into the world of art collecting and Kay Miller's engaging series on those of us who are just beginning a wonderful new journey here at the MIA, the docent class of 2009. So get settled in your chair by the fire or in the glow of your computer screen and come share in these journeys with your *Muse*. *Bon Voyage!*

Remembering Marjorie Russell

Sheila McGuire

I recently received a card at the office; the envelope caught my attention. The address was written in an unfamiliar yet friendly hand. The sender's name – Pam Russell – was unknown to me, but familiar at the same time. I opened the beautiful card to read a note that began, "Dear Ms. McGuire, It is with sadness I write to let you know of my mother's death this past June 9 in New Hampshire." Pam continued, "I don't know how many are still around at the Institute that knew her or remember her, but for many years her work with docents was the most important part of her life!" These sentences brought to my mind images of an industrious woman I knew only from files and stories. Marjorie Russell ran the docent program from 1966 to 1972. The poignant color picture of Mrs. Russell that accompanied the photocopy of her obituary enclosed with Pam's note showed a strong, spirited, aging woman gazing directly at the camera. A leader.

From what I can gather Marjorie Russell was hired by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts' education department in 1963. Her first-year responsibilities included supervision of junior league guides. In August of 1965 she became the museum coordinator for the Friends. Her biggest challenge in the years ahead would be to develop an increasingly rigorous docent training program for the Friends volunteers who gave tours at the museum. In 1965, thirty-five

volunteers, drawn from a pool of experienced guides, new guides, and speakers bureau volunteers, completed an ambitious crash course in twelve weeks, designed by Mrs. Russell to stress "historical and curatorial knowledge of the collection." (Quoted in Marion Cross, "Origin and Early Years of the Docent Program at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts," 1981-85, page 15) Under Mrs. Russell, the docent program grew and more and more visitors took advantage of volunteer-led tours.

Pam Russell, in her note, wrote: "I was a teenager when she was working at the MIA and was both inspired by her career and impressed by warm support and admiration of 'her' docents. I have followed closely in her footsteps and work in museum education myself!" Her mom must have been so proud.

I was so moved by Pam's card and the opportunity her words, the photo of Marjorie, and the neatly folded obituary gave me to think about the amazing women in the Junior League, Friends, and the MIA itself who had the vision to get a volunteer program started at the MIA, and who continued always to innovate and take risks to make the program the best it could be. It is exhilarating to consider the enormous contributions that so many women and men have made to make our tour guide programs at the MIA so successful for so many decades.

I want to thank all of you and encourage each of you to think about the profound impact your work has on those you come into contact with, everyone from the strangers who participate in your tours to your families and closest friends. You truly inspire wonder through the power of art.

These are remarkable times, and you are remarkable volunteers.

Collecting American History

Patty McCullough

The journalist, Joseph Alsop, offered a simple definition of collecting in a lecture at the National Gallery of Art in Washington in 1978. He stated that “to collect is to gather objects belonging to a particular category the collector happens to fancy.” This is a simple definition, but it is one that describes fairly accurately what my husband, Sam, and I have done for over four decades.

It started very innocently in 1964 when we bought our first home in Edina and needed furniture. Unable to afford the new furniture we wanted, we began looking in the newspaper under “Antiques and Art Goods,” and the seeds of a collection were sown. Of the furniture and objects we purchased over the next ten to fifteen years, few remain. However, buying these old pieces was addictive and taught us to identify, over time, exactly what it was we wanted to collect for our home.

Sam is the true collector. I love the objects, but he has the passion and the drive. He pours over auction catalogues, reads a number of art and antiques monthly and weekly magazines and newspapers; and he is usually thinking about his next purchase.

The earliest and largest part of our collection is furniture. We have concentrated on 18th and early 19th century American furniture, particularly from Connecticut and Massachusetts. However, for a docent article, I will only talk about paintings, as it was the exhibit last February of *Noble Dreams and Simple Pleasures* that prompted this article.

There is such a great variety of art, and it is always interesting to know why people collect certain artists or periods. Often it is financial; we collect what we can afford. Most of us could not collect French Impressionists, Old Masters or a Jackson Pollock. A friend of ours took a museum trip some years ago to the Hudson River Valley and was inspired to collect paintings from that period.

Another took a Fine Arts course at the University and decided to collect Dutch paintings, joining the Paintings Council at the museum where the curator at that time, George Keyes, was an authority on Dutch art.

In our case it was a trip to New York in 1974 where we attended an exhibit on American Folk Art at the Whitney Museum and immediately loved the portraits in the show. We had seen folk art before and were drawn to it; but seeing the “best of the best” in one exhibit, made us want to own some. We were drawn to the simplicity and abstract quality of this art. In 1976 we joined the newly formed Decorative Arts Council, which at that time consisted mostly of collectors of Americana. We started to attend the Americana auctions and shows in the East, and gradually added portraits to our collection.

All of the portraits we own come from the Eastern United States. They date, with one exception, between 1800 and 1854. There has been a great deal of research since the 1930s; and today many of the limners of that period have been identified, as portraits were seldom signed.



Ammi Phillips, whose portrait of Catharina van Keuren appeared in the exhibit, *Noble Dreams and Simple Pleasures*, painted many portraits during his long career, and most are easily identifiable because of his particular style. His iconic *Girl in Red with Cat and Dog* at the American Folk Art museum in New York is Phillips at his best. Joshua Johnson, who painted the full-length portrait of *Richard John Cock*, was the first-known black portrait painter in America. Born to a black slave and purchased from his owner by his white father, he became a blacksmith and earned his freedom. Johnson worked with the Peale family of artists in Baltimore, perhaps as a valet, and many of his paintings are in the Baltimore Historical Society. His portraits seldom come up for sale.

Another artist we admire is John Brewster, Jr. Born into a well-to-do family, a deaf-mute from birth, he showed artistic talent early in his life and



was able to earn a living doing portraiture. Perhaps because his sight was his most important connection to the world, his sitters, especially children, have a sense of solemnity and poignancy not seen in children's portraiture of this period.

I don't think I have ever counted our paintings, but for this article I decided to do just that. There are twenty-four of them, not a large number for a collector. However, wherever you look in our home, there is usually a face or two staring back at you. Front and center in the bedroom is a portrait of *Reverend William Mason of Castine, Maine*. Painted on board in his clerical collar with his open Bible, he was a Harvard graduate and the first pastor of the First Parish church in Castine. However, during the War of 1812, he performed his most famous act; in 1814, the British seized Castine for the second time, and Reverend Mason was selected to carry the white flag of truce to the enemy warships. According to the family tradition, it was his wife's best linen tablecloth. It is the wonderful stories behind many of these pictures that make them a window into the history of America.



It has been a great adventure. We have met many fine dealers and museum curators, attended seminars at Winterthur and Colonial Williamsburg; and in 1995 we joined the American Folk Art Society. This organization meets twice a year for a long weekend trip, visiting museums, historic houses and, of course, homes with folk art collections!

We plan to live with our collection as long as possible. However, our children don't have the same affinity for these objects as we have had. Eventually most of them will go to auction where other collectors will expectantly page through the catalogues just as we have done for many years.

I Love to Go A-Wandering

Most of us will recall the song "A Happy Wanderer" from our youth. In the past several months, a number of our docents have traveled far and wide to other museums. Here are some of their accounts of their recent wanderings.

Old Friends

Jane Mackenzie

Last September a golf event took me to the City of Brotherly Love but a rainstorm took me to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. With a compound that includes the Auguste Rodin Museum, the Perelman Building, the Fairmount Park Houses and more than 200 galleries, the PMA is among the largest museums in the US – and it is fabulous!

What I really wanted to see was their enormous collection of hometown hero, Thomas Eakins' work. When I typed "Thomas Eakins" in their Art Finder computer, I got 3315 results! A couple of summers ago a few of us spent a memorable evening in fellow docent Carreen Heegaard's garden talking with one of Eakins biographers, Amy Werbel. This, of course, made me feel like Tom and I were old pals – must have been the wine we shared that night.

Besides the Eakins collection, the elegant period rooms at the PMA made the rainy afternoon even more memorable. How could you not want to visit a place with the address of Benjamin Franklin Parkway?

The Enchanted Garden

Carreen Heegaard

As docents, if we cast the right spell, priestess and spectators alike will be transformed by the experience.

Consulting the Oracle, 1884, is on display at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and was my inspira-



tion for the above comment. A sumptuous exhibit of J.W. Waterhouse, (1849-1917), aptly called *The Enchanted Garden*, is on view until February 7th. I was exhilarated by this exhibit for many reasons.

First of all, in October, William Holman Hunt was still fresh in my memory and I enjoyed the rare thrill of connoisseurship that sometimes comes as a result of being a docent. Also, in the northern climes we seek refuge and sanctuary in our museums when it gets cold outside. Our gardens die back, but our spirits do not, they live on in that internal world of contemplation and reflection and imagination. I may curl up by the fire with books, but also need and crave the communal, so I venture out and hope that the external world will rekindle that inner fragile spark. Waterhouse's exquisitely painted large canvases of ancient narratives did just that, they were breathtaking and were marvelously set off by full length black velvet curtains and large cushioned benches.

The theme of *Garden Enchantment* was enhanced with the use of lighting which created the illusion of a magical stream running through the exhibit. My guess is Waterhouse would have approved of these enhancements and theatrics; he was fascinated by the new developments of his day in archeology, anthropology and comparative mythology. He had a progressive interest in the lives of ordinary people with an emphasis on sensuous delight. Finally I loved this exhibit because it features one individual. It is such a treat to see an artist's development and preoccupations. Waterhouse's sketchbooks are full of insights, especially when we see his early stages of an idea and then the later developed and often very different final versions. It was particularly fun to see Waterhouse's sequence of paintings on *The Lady of Shalott*. I hope you will transport yourself to Montreal before this exhibit leaves on February 7th, you won't regret it.

An Art Mecca

Gep Durenberger

I recently toured a terrific group from the Haggerty Museum of Art on the Marquette campus in Milwaukee; yet another reason to visit that city, with its museum designed by E. Saarinen, and more recently, by Calatrava – all right on the lake! The new wing freed up space for a knock-out installation featuring the Chipstone Collection of Decorative Arts (see Sept issue of *Maine Antiques Digest*).

Milwaukee also boasts of the Flagg collection of medieval art, and the Layton Art collection, both at the Milwaukee Art Museum. Perhaps all the above could tempt our traveling fellow docents to arrange a trip? With our new Curator of Decorative Arts now

on board, the Chipstone installation might well provide inspiration for our own needy Period Rooms.

Saints, Bestias, and the Docents In Between

Michele Yates

As docents, we've probably all had moments when we felt the responsibility of protecting "our" collection, and I was shown, recently, just how strongly those of us who value precious art can feel about it!

My husband, Isaac, and I recently had the good fortune to spend some time exploring the Liguria region of Italy and came upon the *Santuario Nostra Signora Della Costa* (Church of the Madonna of the Coast). It's a beautiful 17th-century Baroque church which served as a physical, as well as a spiritual, beacon for sailors approaching the northern Italian coastline, perched as it is atop *La Pigna*, the medieval, pinecone-shaped hilltop section of Sanremo.

As we approached and entered the *Santuario*, we noticed a diminutive but spry elderly woman with a cane keeping an eye on the few visitors that were there that day, while going about her devotions in front of the various religious stations. Attached to her waist was a set of large keys. I had noticed a sculpture of Judith by the Italian sculptor, Domenico Carli, and was asking her about it. She seemed pleased that I recognized the subject, so she took me by the hand and led me around the entire church, proudly explaining each sculpture and painting. There were a few wooden sculptures by Maragliano and Carli, and a painting by Domenico Fiasella.

We had established that the best way for us to communicate was in French (this part of Italy had once been French territory, so many of Sanremo's residents speak French). She would always begin in French, but after about thirty seconds, she'd invariably slip back into Italian and so I was able to understand her only sporadically. However, at one point, she made herself perfectly and clearly understood! She'd noticed a young woman taking pictures with a flash and had asked her twice "please no flash." When the young woman continued to disregard her pleas, she left my side, went running down the central aisle, arms in the air, and chased the woman right out of there, shouting, "*Bestia! Bestia!*" She came back to our little tour, her hand over her heart, and was clearly heartbroken about the young woman's lack of respect. I told her I was a docent and understood her desire to protect these sacred

objects, and by the time we left, she had introduced herself as Alvalina, insisted I kiss her on both cheeks, and had Isaac take our picture!



enjoy precious art from long ago.

From where we were staying, we had a wonderful view of the *Santuario*, poised on the hill overlooking Sanremo, and every night I'd imagine Alvalina with her big old keys, locking up her precious charge at the end of a hard day of keeping the *bestias* at bay!

Overheard in the Galleries

Ahhhh pre-school...

One from a four-year old. We were walking through the galleries on our way to the next art object, when we happened to face an entire wall with no paintings, just hooks. So, I asked the child walking with me: "Where are all the paintings?" She answered, without missing a beat: "They're being painted." So, if you are ever perplexed, ask a four-year old!

-- Antra Pakalns

In Search Of the Three Jade Mountains

Tom Byfield

As we begin weaving the last few inches of the tapestry of our lives, we find that long-term goals have become irrelevant. A now-or-never mentality begins to take over. I have long wanted to go to China and see in situ the other three jade mountains, companions to our own here at the MIA. Time and particularly money were the trivial reasons it never happened. Now through the miracle of pizza coupons and proper tire inflation I amassed the mammon to make it happen.

So this fall with my son Bret as my keeper, we journeyed to mysterious Cathay. After a flight that lasted no longer than the time it took Magellan to reach Guam, we landed in Shanghai. We went through the purgatory of visa and passport documen-

tation, interrogation, forehead temperature registration, inspection for Dutch Elm Disease and baggage damage while reeling like grainy-eyed zombies with jet lag,

Shanghai could be called China's Skyscraper National Park and the construction crane its national bird. In the last few years China has gone on a building binge. Some of the architects may have been on LSD as their designs can only be called wildly flamboyant and bizarre. Our hotel was the tallest in China. Its lobby was on the 54th floor and our room was on the 75th. Room service was a long distance call and had to be delivered by UPS.

One day we visited the Shanghai Museum which is huge, built in the shape of a ding, a round Zhou dynasty bronze food vessel. Its exhibits, some 120,000 pieces, range from the Neolithic to the Qing dynasty. Their collection far exceeds ours in quantity but not in quality. The MIA jades are more stunning and our Ming Reception Hall and Chien Scholars Study are more elegant, better furnished and the real thing. Kudos to Bob Jacobson who brought them to us.

After a five-day boat trip up the Yangtze where we saw countless new cities built for the displaced Chinese whose villages now lie underwater due to the Three Gorges Dam, we flew to Xian on a local airline. My son wondered if it gave me pause that the pilots probably believed in reincarnation. We found the Terracotta Warriors were still there as they have been for 2200 years. Each warrior's face is distinctive. I think I recognized one, a classmate from high schoolmate whom I didn't like very much. We met the only surviving farmer who uncovered the first terracotta head in 1974. He sat at a desk and eyed us with the benign twinkle of a water moccasin and was gracious enough to sell us his expensive book which couldn't be touched for less than a dollar on the Nicollet Mall.

Then it was gung ho for the Great Wall where we plodded along with hordes of Chinese. If it had been built in North America it would stretch from Miami to the North Pole, which would have made it more convenient for all of us.

Then before you could say "boo to a goose" we were in Beijing. There are one billion three hundred million Chinese all of whom were on holiday in Tiananmen Square. Our tour guide, a well-spoken and candid man, said he had two heroes –

Chairman Mao and Warren Buffet. This in microcosm illustrates the dichotomy existing in China today. There in Tiananmen Square they were celebrating 60 years under communism while at the same time reveling in their burgeoning capitalism.

Viewing death as a dreary affair we ignored Mao's mausoleum and entered the Forbidden City and our quest for the three jade mountains. The complex is huge, roughly the size of Fargo. We split from our tour group and began a frantic search for the particular hall that houses them. We only had a few minutes before we were to meet the bus at the old North Gate or be stranded. We were looking for the Palace of Tranquil Longevity (aren't we all) and after many false starts stumbled upon it. The mountains are large and encased in plastic boxes. I hurriedly took pictures which turned out to be excellent shots of flash reflections off glass. The mountains seemed a darker shade of brownish green than ours, but similarly carved to tell a story. Seeing them, however briefly, was one of the high points of a trip filled with mountains of them.

Overheard in the Galleries

We were in front of *Peace Concluded* and one of the questions often asked is: "Why is the father sad?" Often, the answers are: "He's been hurt in the war." "His friend was hurt in the war." Which, of course, are all correct. One child, who had really been thinking and thinking, finally said: "He's sad because he's out of the war and he's not getting a pay-check anymore." We then discussed what no pay-check might mean for the family: less food, family worries, etc. This from a 9 year-old! We had a great discussion on this painting. Children have a great sense of humor most of the time, but also insight.

-- Antra Pakalns

A Great Beginning

Kay Miller

A New Docent Class

Wrapping up her Dec. 16 lecture on the Greek Hellenistic period, Debbi Hegstrom recognized one last raised hand. "Things are just coming together for me," Dick Ploetz said, musing aloud. "My sense is that Classical Greek sculpture captures a moment of *being*. But Hellenistic sculpture captures a moment of *becoming*."

It was an elegant observation and the entire class gasped in appreciation, then broke into applause. As much as anything, that moment characterizes the Docent Class of 2009. Individually we are

Qianlong's Four Jade Mountains

These four jade mountain sculptures, commissioned by Emperor Qianlong in the late 18th century form an iconographic group depicting revered Chinese legends. One is here at the MIA, the other three are in Beijing, China.

Great Yu taming the Flood is the largest one, weighing in at about 6 tons, 2.4 meters high and 1 meter wide. The stand is copper inlaid with gold. Great Yu is the legendary founder of the Xia dynasty who is said to have labored for thirteen years to control the flooding of the Yellow River. Hills, springs, waterfalls, caves, and forests are carved into the jade mountain along with many workers cutting stone, digging, and dredging in the huge effort to control the flooding along the great river. A poem by Qianlong and his seal are carved onto the mountain.



The Nine Elders of Huiching is 56" tall and 40" wide. It depicts a well known gathering of elders including the T'ang dynasty poet Bai Juyi. The elders, respected and revered in Confucian society, are enjoying

wine and music in harmony with nature in a mountain retreat. The stand is bronze. A poem by Qianlong carved in the stone points out that "the scene in jade will outlast the ink painting."



The MIA's *Gathering of Poets at the Orchid Pavilion* is the smallest of the four jade mountains. At over 600 lbs., it is the largest historic carved jade piece outside of China. The famous 4th century poet and calligrapher Wang Hsi-chi is shown writing and drinking wine with the other scholars and poets who joined him at the pavilion.

Wang's famous poem, written at this gathering, is carved into the jade. On the other side is a poem by Qianlong and his seal.

The fourth jade mountain of the set remains a mystery to the *Muse*. Dr. Jacobsen, docents, museum staff, other readers of the *Muse* - if you can help us out with this - we'd love to know more! (contact gjanggoggin@yahoo.com)

beginning to grasp the themes that run through art history and the subtle, beautiful threads that bind the MIA's collection to it. But the group response to Ploetz's comment is also typical of a class in which docents instinctively support, trust and delight in each other.

I'm surprised by the degree of comfort – almost across the board – in this group of getting up and doing presentations," said Sheila McGuire, now acting chair of the MIA Education Division, who as director of Museum Guide Programs helped select the 43 junior docents from 100 applicants. "There's a huge amount of talent in this group. There's a comfort level in taking risks and doing what we're asking

you to do, in taking it one step at a time. People come in and do their best and that's enough. There isn't a great deal of angst."

The goal in selecting the class of 2009 was to have a variety of backgrounds, said Hegstrom, who heads the docent program. This class is more diverse, skews a bit younger and has more people still in the workforce than previous classes. Roughly half of the new docents have some formal art history or studio art training, but that wasn't a prerequisite. Far more essential: a love of art, a love of people and a desire to share one with the other, Hegstrom said. "If you have those three things, how can you fail?"

We've had careers as doctors, clergy, college professors, lawyers, artists, nurses, social workers, a scientist, teachers, a realtor with an ecological certification, business executives, a commercial banker, a Stillwater town board supervisor, an accountant, a systems analyst, a dentist, a Naturopathic doctor and a *Star Tribune* reporter. Six junior docents bring years of experiences as MIA Art Adventure or Collection in Focus guides. Others have been guides at the Walker, Weisman and Russian art museums. But the skills that make a good docent can come from many disciplines, Hegstrom said. From her years as manager of clinical research at Medtronic, for example, scientist Deborah Shatin brings curiosity and investigation skills that are directly applicable to artistic inquiry.

Over the last 40 years, the docent training program has steadily evolved as MIA educators get a clearer picture of what gives visitors a sense of belonging and a desire to return. Starting with the 2005 docent class, there was a marked shift away from formal academic research papers and toward more gallery exercises and collaborative group projects, Hegstrom said. "We didn't know how it would work. These are very strong people who do their own work – self-starters," Hegstrom said. "They relish their independence. So when we ask them to go into a group, it's not always easy."

But instructors discovered that docents are much more inclined to share information and help each other succeed when classes are collaborative from the start. The emphasis has been on giving new docents a solid grounding in art history then connecting the MIA collection to it. Long before doing any structured gallery talks, junior docents were trained in Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) and open-ended

questions. By October, McGuire had enticed 35 of us to lead VTS tours for Minneapolis 2nd and 3rd graders in February and March and had arranged dozens of VTS practice sessions.

"We want you to go into the gallery and look at objects," Hegstrom said. "The emphasis is on looking and enjoying and hearing what people have to say."

Getting to know more New Docents

The six men in our group proved themselves to be championship fibbers when they told some really convincing whoppers in an opening day icebreaker called "two truths and a lie" – winning in five of the eight groups. Terry Nadler, for example, convinced us that he had delivered his sister's baby in an emergency. Nadler's not a doctor. But for fifteen years he ran Medtronic's program to train cardiac fellows about medical devices and the heart. Just in case real medical emergencies arise, we have several doctors in the house: Heidi Iwanski is a part-time out-patient psychiatrist. Beth Karon is a retired physician who travels 170 miles round-trip from Rochester. Jim Allen is an ophthalmologist. And Rebecca Alderson is a Naturopathic doctor.

Other docents have had life-changing experiences only hinted at in our online biographies. As a young mother, Ziya Tarapore survived stage IV breast cancer and now drives to Mayo Clinic every Tuesday to counsel other breast cancer patients undergoing treatment. Tamara Meyer has worked tirelessly on behalf of children with autism, occasionally lobbying the state Legislature on their behalf. Jim Allen and Paula Sanan volunteer for international medical missions. Carol Joyce, a retired UCC clergy person, has enough interest in foreign affairs to proofread the *Middle East Policy Journal*. Junior docents serve on a variety of boards – Liz Short at the Jungle Theater, retired trial attorney Boyd Ratchye on the Yellowstone Association and Clyde Steckel at the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research.

Pamela Pevon is helping with Keys 4/4 Kids, a St. Paul nonprofit started by a teen to recycle donated pianos, funding arts programs for kids who otherwise couldn't afford them. Liz Short just finished her 7th (and final) year of running Lyndale Elementary School's fall carnival, where the only reasonable way to track the number of attendees is by hotdogs consumed (240) and cotton candy cones sold (160).

Several junior docents play instrumental music and sing. Roma Calatayud-Stocks is a pianist and composer who cut her own CD, *Carnival of Life*, on which she sang original compositions inspired by her Mexican-Latin heritage. Suzanne Zander sings with MacPhail's Sonomento choir and was chosen to sing in *La Bohème* with the Duluth Festival Opera this August. Many of us love wine. A few are gourmet cooks. Cori Ander wisely quotes the sage who proclaims that without ice cream, there would be darkness and chaos.

A number of us practice yoga, Tai Chi, Chi Gong, and Pilates. Burned out from social work in her 20s, Rebecca Dipiti Alderson spent 1-1/2 years in India, visiting relatives (including an auntie who was an old movie star), learning about homeopathic medicine from another aunt, studying yoga in the Himalayas and practicing silent meditation with a group of Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka.

We're readers, poets, writers, public radio junkies and lifelong learners. Gail Gresser-Pitsch even writes haiku. Kay Miller, the author of this article, is the *Star Tribune* reporter in the group. A number of junior docents are fluent in French, Spanish, Portuguese and other languages – or are learning them – often to facilitate travel to favorite places. Debbie Done, who has a masters in Social Work, worked in Germany with the Department of Defense for thirteen years. Nancy Anderson has a degree in French literature and lived in two foreign countries. Anna Bethune grew up in Europe.

Bethune is one of a number of artists in the group. She spends hours at the Minnetonka Center for the Arts "playing in mud." Her most recent bowls echo designs in MIA Greek vases. Lin Stein has painted water colors for years with a circle of close women friends. Although Susan Rouse uses her expertise as an accountant in lots of volunteer activities, oil painting is a passion. Beth Karon models her contemporary sculptures (pediatrician, rabbi, ballet teacher, musicians and more) on Southwestern Native American storyteller figures. Lynn Brofman crafts elegant silver jewelry. Ziya Tarapore uses batik techniques to combine wood, dyes and wax, creating bowls with vibrant, layered colors. Both Brofman and Tarapore exhibit their work at the Grand Hand Gallery in St. Paul.

Until October, Sue Marty owned and ran The Blue Nest Gift Gallery in Waconia. Every five years

she reinvents herself and it had been seven. So she got certified in Reiki healing, joined the docents and closed her store. Several years before moving here Susan Friedman worked in client services for Christie's auction house in New York. Lora Weinstein helps manage the financial end of her husband, Martin's Weinstein Fine Arts Gallery, which deals in museum-quality photography, paintings and sculpture

Many of us garden. Jean London raises orchids. A number of junior docents play golf or tennis. Others sail, canoe, climb mountains, snorkel, ski, run long distances, watch birds, pamper cats and walk their dogs. Sheila-Marie Untiedt owns and rides Arabian Western show horses.

Some docents remain in the workforce in quite challenging jobs. As an attorney at Wells Fargo, Helen Leslie has spent much of the last year helping provide legal support in the culture-melding merger of Wacovia's and Wells Fargo's insurance groups. Determined not to miss the opportunity to become a docent, Leslie has used most of her vacation time for Wednesday classes.

A number of junior docents quit paying work to care for aging parents or children. Others have devoted their careers to protecting children from abusive situations. Jean London did that in the St. Paul Public Schools.

During her 30 years of teaching in the Wayzata Schools, Lynn Dunlap supplemented literature and writing units with field trips to the museum. She's so familiar with Greek myths that she effortlessly integrates them into her gallery observations. Sue Hambrege also found that art was a wonderful channel to opening junior and senior high school students to social studies. Although Gail Gresser-Pitsch spent much of her professional life as a commercial banker, 10 years ago she started tutoring young English Language Learners, employing art as a tool for learning and expression. Susan Housh left teaching 4th and 5th graders to concentrate on parenting, but she turned those skills into volunteering at her four children's schools.

There are three veterans of the Art Adventure Guide program – Nancy Kelly, Jane Grunklee, and Karen Kletter. Tamara Meyer and Pamela Pevon are Art Adventure Picture People. Linda Krueger was an MIA Collection in Focus guide with expertise touring Africa, Pacific Islands and China. All six of them

have generously shared their knowledge of resources and experiences with us, as Gunklee did stressing the need for pithy transitions when touring squirmy kids.

*Chatter and Cheese lead to Insights and
Belonging for the Class of 2009*

Wednesday mornings begin with chatter over coffee and an increasingly elaborate array of baked goods, fruit, cheeses, smoked fish, yogurt and chocolate before class begins. Most of us are extroverts with enough introverts to keep conversations to a dull roar. Pity the person who has to call us to order.

Classes start with four, one-minute reviews. Hegstrom times each with a small gong. Through our colleagues' quickie, often quirky reviews of books, CDs, restaurants, destinations and ideas, we have glimpsed the passions that drive each other. Liz Short's mouth-watering description of \$3.50 *banh mi* sandwiches from the nearby Jasmine Deli has sparked regular pilgrimages there for lunch. Bob Brusic, a Lutheran pastor who moved here in 1989 to become Seminary Pastor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, gave a lyrical talk about "McSorley's Back Room," a nostalgic painting that captures a moment of mortality in brown and shadow, inspiring Brusic's love of art. Clyde Steckel brought chuckles with his fast-paced romp reviewing the opera *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*. When Steckel retired from United Theological Seminary in New Brighton, where he was a professor and dean, they named the Steckel Learning Center in his honor.

Hegstrom, McGuire, Ann Isaacson, head of the Art Adventure Guide Program, and Amanda Thompson Rundahl, head of the Collection in Focus Guide Program, alternate giving slide lectures in their areas of expertise. (They have begun to post those presentations on the docent website for all of us.) Together they are taking a chronological approach to art, contrasting parallel developments, for example, in Mesopotamia, China, Egypt and Mesoamerica during the same time periods. That means staggering our readings – up to 70 pages a week – in four principal texts: Stokstad, O' Riley, Sullivan and Mason. Weekly worksheets and assignments take us into the galleries to figure out how MIA objects fit into the larger story of art. We're encouraged to study together and compare notes.

At 12:30 or so, we break for lunch. People stay in little clumps in the training room, eating bag lunches and chatting or disperse to neighborhood

restaurants, D' Amicos or the College of Art & Design's cafeteria. Most afternoons are spent on group activities – in the classroom, but more often in the galleries. In October, Thompson Rundahl introduced us to the ArtsConnectEd website and has revisited it, as questions arise. It's become invaluable as we look for objects in the galleries and start the rudimentary first steps in building tours.

A number of new docents grew up abroad. Their insights add to our understanding of other cultures and their art. When we studied the *Winged Genius*, for example, Ziya Tarapore told us that in her Zoroastrian faith the purse-like vessels these guardian figures holds carries the soul. Carolina Zarate, who is from Bogota Colombia, helped us pronounce the name of the Aztec fertility goddess Chalchiuhtlicue. Wendi Chen, who grew up in China and, as a full-time faculty member at Minneapolis Community and Technical College where she teaches "Chinese Art and Culture," made "taotie," the monster mask design on Chinese bronzes, sound quite musical. Then, she spent a quiet lunch hour with Alderson exploring the Chinese galleries together, with Chen offering correct pronunciations.

The life experiences of other docents answer questions we never thought to ask: In studying the Cycladic woman, Mary Samuels speculated that it represented a person who had died. She's a retired Unitarian Universalist minister, but before that she was a nurse – starting as a Vietnam War-era Navy Nurse – and has seen the feet of the dead droop forward, as does the Cycladic figure.

Jean London, who worked in the newborn intensive care units of Yale University, Minneapolis and St. Paul Children's hospitals told us "I'm used to talking into a room full of people whose babies have died." She drew on that experience in her first gallery talk about the Southeast Asian Bell. From working with grieving Cambodian families she knew that they do not say the deceased's name, lest that keep the soaring soul from finding peace. Instead, they would ring a bell like that one.

Some days we leave the museum feeling that our heads are about to explode with all the information we've crammed inside. Our hair hurts. But we've grown close as a class. So on Dec. 16, as we packed to leave for the holiday break we realized it would be two weeks before we saw each other again.

Dozens of docents lingered in the classroom, hugging and wishing each other safe journeys and wonderful holidays. Anna Bethune talked about the Southeast Asian Bell and her feeling that it now belonged to her. No, interjected Jean London and Beth Karon, the bell was theirs. In four months of training, we have gained the very sense that we hope to impart to MIA visitors.

“This has been the best experience,” Anna Bethune said. “Going into the galleries as often as we do, I feel so at home. I feel as if this *whole* museum belongs to me.”

Muse Mailbox

To the MIA's incomparable Docents,

Thank you so much for the gorgeous bouquet of dozens and dozens of red roses, and for a wonderful send-off yesterday (Dec. 3). I've had the best job in the world, including hearing rave reviews of your Louvre tours. Sally French, a retired Mpls. teacher, just wrote: “I was thrilled by the responses of what appeared to be 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders. I've seldom witnessed such detailed and thoughtful discussions!” We all know that we are doing a great job, but it's wonderful to know others notice too! I can't think you enough for the hours of studying, driving, and touring that you have devoted to every exhibition, not to mention our superb permanent collection. Just know that you have my deepest respect and gratitude.

See you in the galleries!

Kate (Johnson)

Overheard in the Galleries

After a preschool Artful Stories tour, I was sitting with friends having coffee as their children played in the MIA's family center. The six children and their moms had played I Spy green with their color necklaces riding the Otis elevator, talked about riding along to get gas in front of the Mike Smith photograph, had 'read' together the City Colors book, talked about *Your Dog* and put the colored dots on the activity boards, had peered under the silver *Tatra*, and had talked about the hot yellow sun in *The Olive Trees*. A very engaged four-year-old named Tayler said, “I like coming to the SEE-um. Can we come back to the SEE-um?” What a positive way for a child to tell about his experience at our museum!

--JeanMarie Burtness

Dear MGP Volunteers,

How can I even begin to express how much I appreciate all of the love and support you have given me?

Thank you for the beautiful flowers and treats. My home smells wonderful, and the goodies help relieve sadness!!! And thank you for all of the uniquely beautiful, thoughtful, heartfelt cards and messages – no two alike, and each filled with love, wisdom, compassion, and so much more. I look forward each day to getting home to open and “be” with my cards. They remind me how fortunate I am to work for all of you and to have you as my friends. Your messages confirm that people all over and with very different stories nonetheless share so many feelings and experiences. There are universal events that unite us. I love looking at the envelopes as I open your cards – each one of you has a distinct hand, many of which I have come to recognize over the years. I even like to think about the little bit of DNA that becomes part of each envelope when you seal it. From the bottom of my heart,

Thank you.

Love, Sheila

