Teaching with Themes

“Oh, sure, he remembers everything. But show me one significant insight he’s been able to draw from all that data.”

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If you’ve listened to a conversation without understanding what was being said, or seen a movie and not been able to figure out the plot, then you know how it feels to take a tour that lacks a theme. It’s confusing!

A theme is the glue that holds a tour together. It establishes the tour’s raison d’être, or purpose. A theme defines what is being explored and gives both observation and conversation a context and meaning.

It’s not cleverness that distinguishes the better theme, but an ability to effectively summarize the topic or concept being examined on a tour. A theme should offer tour participants a clear point-of-departure for contemplating and establish a realm for understanding. It should provide a reference marker that tells visitors why they are seeing what they are seeing, and why they are discussing what they are discussing.

The theme defines a tour’s intent and content. Without a theme, a tour can become pointless, dissolving into a “show-and-tell” performance … a loose presentation about assorted things that have no relationship to one another.

Themes are useful tools, beneficial to both docents and visitors. They serve no less than four important functions for touring and teaching.

1) A theme establishes the focus of a tour and, therefore, provides docents with a gauge for making choices about a tour’s structure and content. If you know what you are teaching, decisions about your tour planning and strategies are more straightforward. Your theme becomes the criterion for decision-making — it enables you to make intelligent choices and to develop relevant questions, as your choice of objects and the questions you ask about them should relate to the topic being examined.

2) A theme provides visitors with a context for organizing information and constructing meaning. People learn better if they know what is being taught, and they learn best if they also know why they are learning it. A theme tells visitors what is being taught. And, when a tour is appropriately reflective of its theme, answers to the why emerge.

3) A theme offers both the docent and visitor a way to stay on track and to evaluate the relevance of what is taking place. A docent can use the theme as a way to stay cohesive. Following a tangential discussion, a theme offers the docent a route back to the topic-at-hand. If confused or sidetracked, the docent or visitor can ask herself, “What does this have to do with the topic being explored?” When that question cannot be adequately answered, clarification can be sought or a “bridge” can be requested that helps make the relationship more relevant.

4) A theme serves as the “big idea” through which memories are recalled and impressions are organized. On a long term basis, most people will retain little more than an impression of their institutional visit. The theme of their tour becomes the sieve through which their impressions are sifted and retrieved. Recalling the theme may even jog memories of facts and experiences that might otherwise be discarded.

To be truly effective, a theme must be broad enough to allow docents some latitude in their choice of objects and approaches, but narrow enough to provide visitors with clear and useful parameters for learning. To accomplish this, a theme should describe what is being taught, not...
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what is being shown. Declaring "the permanent collection" as the theme of a tour doesn’t work unless the tour is focused on how the institution gathers and displays its collection. Otherwise, such a topic is too amorphous, and does not describe what is being taught.

A theme is different from a goal. While hoping that visitors “gain an appreciation” for art, or history, or nature is a noble and appropriate goal when teaching, it is not an effective theme because it, too, does not establish what should be learned. However, such themes as “identifying emotional content in art,” or “insights into the pioneering life,” or “how ecosystems function,” do.

Themes can be borrowed or built. Among the best and most available resources for borrowing themes are the units (or curricular components) schools create for every subject area. They serve the same function for schools as they can for museums, historic homes, zoological parks, and botanical gardens … to organize the construction of lessons and the presentation of information consistent with the age and sophistication of the audience. For instance, a typical second grade social studies topic, such as “food, clothing, and shelter” or “transportation and communication,” could be developed into a tour theme for use with almost any institutional collection.

Sometimes, a theme is presented by an exhibition’s title. “The Tropical Rain Forest” not only describes an exhibition, but offers a cohesive tour theme for examining such things as physical characteristics and inhabitants, geographic locations, importance, and threats. Similarly, “19th Century Landscapes of the American West” can function as a tour’s theme, as well as an exhibition’s title. As a theme, one might explore the confluence of styles, artistic and political concerns, and societal influences of works that share both a time period and subject in common.

Perhaps the simplest way to build a theme from scratch is to create an “attributes list.” Making an attributes list uses inductive reasoning by going from specifics to generalities. The process is fun and can produce many useful themes. Let’s develop one using some of the plants cultivated in a botanical garden … for instance — oak trees, bamboo, roses, fens, lavender, hostas, tulips, and daffodils.

To make an attributes list using these plants, we begin by asking ourselves what are some of the general attributes (activities, characteristics, functions, uses, needs, and so forth) that these specific plants share. Our list might include: propagation and reproduction, growth and life span, proper soil and atmospheric conditions, limited geographic ranges, dormancy during winter, susceptibility to diseases and pests, functional and decorative uses, varieties and hybrids, photosynthesis, flowers and leaves, and aesthetic considerations such as shapes and colors. Each of these attributes could be used as a theme and developed into a tour.

If, to continue our example, a docent chose the theme of “propagation and reproduction,” he or she would plan a lesson that allows visitors to survey, identify, examine, and compare the different methods used to propagate these plants. Such a tour would expose visitors to the seeds, rhizomes, spores, bulbs, and cuttings that nature and gardeners use to produce more of these plants.

Thematic teaching isn’t comfortably embraced by everyone. Educators who teach in a “stream-of-consciousness” style find it too disciplined and confining. Consistently effective teaching, however, requires both an aim and a plan.

There are other educators who believe that focusing on one aspect or facet of an institution’s collection is too limiting. They feel an obligation to show and discuss as many things and subjects as possible during the limited time visitors have at their facility. Their concern is misplaced, however. The pre-eminent concern should be for the quality of a visitor’s educational experience, rather than for the quantity of superficial exposure.

It just isn’t possible to have people see and consider the significance of everything an institution collects in one visit. Visitors should be encouraged to make return trips or to explore further following a docent’s lesson. If, for some reason, they cannot return or spend more time, then at least the tour theme ensured that they had an in-depth, memorable, and coherent visit during the limited time available.

Teaching with a theme is not style, it’s substance. It functions much like a book’s title. It announces the agenda and establishes the content. A theme is not frill, nor is it something to use when one has an opportunity. A theme is an essential part of cohesive teaching and facilitated learning.

Alan Gartenhaus
Publishing Editor
Art museums are natural laboratories where the ability to see with our eyes, our minds, and our hearts can be cultivated. Works of art issue invitations to each of us to step into the skin of others and see the world through their eyes. Art asks us to reflect upon our lives and the lives of others; to understand, accept, and even delight in the vagaries and frailties of the human condition.

It is both the challenge and privilege of those working close to art to introduce others to it in such a manner that they can recognize, contemplate, and respond to art’s invitations.

Typically, when designing a tour’s theme, we look to the objects on exhibit — their styles, subjects, makers, country of origin, or time period. In this article, we would like to suggest a different approach to theme selection — looking to the audience.

**Art Appreciation: Seeing Through the Eyes of Others**

Caring for and about others requires more than sympathy, concern, and compassion. It requires that we possess “inside knowledge” of others — the kind of knowledge about others received by allowing their realities to temporarily become our own. Philosopher-educator Nel Noddings terms this phenomenon that is so central to caring relationships as “feeling with” another.

Feeling with another facilitates caring in two ways. First it enables a person to care from a knowledgeable perspective. Understanding another’s perspective can provide invaluable guidance to anyone seeking to respond appropriately and helpfully to expressions of need, fear, or hope. Secondly, feeling with others motivates, indeed compels, us to reach out in caring ways to others. Noddings notes, “When we see the other’s reality as a possibility for us, we must act to eliminate the intolerable, to reduce the pain, to feel the need, to actualize the dream.”

Though a few rare individuals are naturally receptive to others and seem to apprehend their perspectives, most of us must develop our “feeling with” capacities to do this. The discipline involved in consciously attending to different views, suspending ourselves long enough to allow another’s reality to become our own, can certainly be developed within museums. Indeed, art, by its very nature, begs us to enter another’s world and to see through another’s eyes. Those privileged to guide visitors through museums introducing them to both art and artists, can, through their words and attitudes, encourage the development of an open and receptive spirit.

**Related Gallery Activities**

If visitors and docents are to “feel with” each other and with the makers of art, discussions about works must reach the underlying perspective that was a part of a work’s production. The following are some empathy-building gallery activities that reinforce this “audience-based” tour theme.

Choose a work of art that is likely to evoke divergent responses among visitors. After gathering a variety, ask participants to defend responses or opinions about the work different from their own. This can be accomplished as an oral or written activity, individually or in groups. This strategy, which many of us remember from debate class, asks visitors to “feel with” those holding an opposing viewpoint.

Another activity, one that works well in a diverse exhibition, uses artists’ quotations or biographical information. Prior to touring, prepare cards with an artist’s name on one side and that artist’s profile (one or two paragraphs about the artist’s life or experiences) on the other. Pass out the cards to individuals or groups and ask participants to match their artist profile with the work of art they believe that artist created. Urge the participants to make their choice based on “feeling with” the artist. It is not so important that participants make correct matches as they develop good reasons for their selections and demonstrate an understanding of the emotional content of a work.

**Art Appreciation: Looking Within**

Not only does art have the potential to enhance our understanding of others. It also can, and should, encourage greater knowledge and acceptance of ourselves. This, too, is vital if we are to participate in caring, supportive relationships, for the respect we offer others is, in a very real sense, inextricably linked to our own self respect. In his book, *Loving*, Erich Fromm makes this point nicely, noting “My own self must be as much an object of my love as another person. The affirmation of one’s own life, happiness, growth, freedom is rooted in one’s capacity to love.”

Exposure to art may not, in and of itself, encourage love of self. It can, however, prompt a deeper degree of self-knowledge, a certain foundation for a genuine, grounded sense of self-worth. Both responding to and engaging in creative acts demand that we look within. Art invariably elicits a response — pleasure, sympathy, wonder, delight, fear, anxiety, loathing, boredom, and sadness to name but a few. These responses can be passing sensations, felt and then forgotten, or they can provoke reflection leading to a greater degree of self-knowledge. Skillful docents can do much to ensure that the latter occurs. They can also, in structured and unstructured ways, encourage efforts at artistic expression on the part of those whom they instruct. Such efforts contribute to a strong sense of self in at least two ways. Every artistic effort is a form of self-expression and thus requires that the artist tap into his or her unique emotions, memories, beliefs, and such.

Encounters with the inner world can serve to increase one’s self-knowledge. Furthermore, the act of translating these encounters into some kind of product has the potential to develop self-acceptance,
for one must, at least at some level, come to grips with the forces inspiring or driving his or her emotions.

**Related Gallery Activities**

This activity encourages visitors to take a moment to reflect upon their own values and, as such, increase their self-knowledge. Ask visitors to find a work of art that expresses a value or point-of-view that they share, e.g. a love of the land expressed in a landscape painting. Ask them to write the title of the work of art on one side of a card and, on the reverse, a few short statements about themselves that might account for their choice. For instance, "I live in a farming community. I was taught to respect the land by my parents. I love to sit on our porch and look out across the fields."

This activity prompts visitors to respond to art using more than just their emotions and memories. It encourages them to reflect upon their values. To expand this activity to include a "feeling with" component, collect the cards and shuffle them. Hand them out randomly and ask participants to match the statements they were given to a work of art (without looking on the other side of the card to see which work was actually selected). Again, discuss as many as time and interest allow, stressing empathetic reasoning over making correct matches.

Many docents do not have opportunities to lead visitors through the art-making process. However, we can structure oral or written activities that encourage visitors to tap into their personal histories in ways that approximate some of the decision-making artists engage in. Questions pertaining to how and why visitors would change a given work of art to make it reflect something about themselves addresses this goal. Being "permitted" to make different choices than an artist made can be very empowering, especially when one's ideas are met with acceptance and treated with respect by the docent and other members of the group.

**Art Appreciation: Accepting the Human Condition**

In our culture, certain things are valued — economic prosperity, beauty, intelligence, health, athletic prowess, and the power and status they afford. In the view of many people, attaining these attributes depends upon not differing significantly from society's norms. In other words, being a "success" requires that we deny much of what it means to be human. We become intolerant of our differences and shortcomings. Personal and cultural differences that do not serve us, threaten us. The failures of others, unless they directly contribute to our victories, frighten us because they remind us of our own vulnerabilities. Not infrequently, in order to avoid despair, we engage in a kind of wholesale denial of our humanity.

Encounters with art can provide a powerful antidote to our culture's love affair with perfection. Indeed, art can celebrate imperfection, diversity, and frailty. Often artists see beauty in improbable subjects. Ignoring the less than perfect parts of life is, for them, not an option. They may respond to these with rage or wonder or laughter, but they do respond. In doing so, they affirm that it is alright to be less than perfect and that it is more interesting to live in a world with other less than perfect persons.

**Related Gallery Activities**

Docents might want to begin a tour on this theme with a discussion of some of the ideas expressed in the paragraphs above. They might address the issue of why many people believe so-called "plastic" arts should have content that is beautiful, lofty, and transcendent, when the same is not expected of literature, film/video, and theater. As an activity, docents might ask participants to find works of art that they "don't like" due to some unpleasantness or its disturbing subject matter. Then, challenge them to think of works they do like in literature, film/video, and drama that deal with similar emotions or subjects.

Alternatively, docents might pre-select objects on exhibit and corresponding works from other genres for comparison and discussion. For those who have not grappled with this dichotomy, being encouraged to do so can open doors to new, and sometimes startling, insights.

**Conclusion**

Art education, including art appreciation and criticism as practiced in museums, will not in and of itself transform schools, renew our cities, or create a commitment to a more peaceful global community. It can, however, play an important part in this process. By cultivating the ability to entertain other perspectives, by encouraging self-awareness and self-acceptance, and by reminding us that the reality and wonder of life lies in its complexities, paradoxes, puzzles, and problems, museum docents can help to develop ways of thinking that can contribute to better ways of living and relating.

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Using Quotations as a Theme
Breathing Life into Tours

There is no doubt about it — Shadows-on-the-Teche is a remarkable place because of its setting, because of its history, and because of the resources available for making tours memorable. In telling the story of the Shadows, the museum staff is at a tremendous advantage over the staffs of many historic houses because of the Weeks Family Papers. These papers contain the personal letters, inventories, bills of sale, receipts, and so forth of the families who lived and worked at this stately house in bayou country.

The Shadows is one of the best documented houses in the country, with over 17,000 papers archived within Hill Memorial Library at Louisiana State University. The Shadows’ staff uses these papers as documentary grounding for its tours, which means that everything a tour guide says on tour should have a basis in the Weeks Family Papers.

Though a tour, based on research, was developed in the early 1960’s, active research was not resumed until 1983 when a trained historian came on staff. During the intervening years, tour guides began to rely upon second-hand stories and “old Southern” myths, such as the Spanish room tax to explain the lack of closets in the house, petticoat mirrors for pier tables, whistle walks to explain landscaping, etc.

For historic houses striving for accuracy, myths are long dying. Even with the refreshing breeze of new historical research, it was a struggle to keep old stories out while putting new, documented material in. One way the Shadows continues to provide new material to make tours more accurate and more interesting is through the use of thematic, or special focus, tours. The most recent of these tours emphasizes quotations, or statements made by the people who lived on this property during its period of interpretation — 1834-63.

Other thematic tours offered at the Shadows include: “Rediscovering Past Pleasures: Leisure as Revealed by the Weeks Family Papers,” “Experts at My Needle: Domestic Arts at the Shadows,” and “From the ‘Fiery Orb’ to ‘Freezing Fingers’: Coping with Climate in the 19th Century.” The purpose of these special tours is to provide new insights and to breathe life into what was becoming the same old thing — dull tours that revolved around basic facts about the property that offered visitors little of the vibrancy of the people who once lived in and around the Weeks homeplace.

All of our thematic tours began with research. Volunteer researchers gathered references for a chosen topic from the Weeks Family Papers. (Sites that do not have our great wealth of documentation might try using newspapers from their period of interpretation, popular literature of the day, papers from people of the same special circumstances as the tour’s focus, oral histories, etc.) Supplemental sources were also used to shed light on areas not covered in the Weeks Family Papers. For instance, because there were no papers written by slaves who lived on the property (though we have ample evidence about the slaves at the Shadows), the writings of Soloman Northup, a former slave who wrote about his experiences, provided an important glimpse into life in bondage on a plantation in Louisiana.

Another example of the use of readily accessible, supplemental documents is in support of our “Coping with Climate” tour. A researcher looked through pre-Civil War newspapers for advertisements listing seasonal clothing and for references to the weather. (Example: The weather has been delightful of late. Spring has come — beautiful Spring — glittering with garlands, and attended by light-pintoed zeephyrs and sweet singing birds. Spring has come. Reviving earth is clothed in her loveliest dress — the tall trees, covered with green glories, tell their joy to the orderous [sic] breeze — the busy bees hush out their happiness, as they sip the garden’s sweets, and the quiet sky looks lovingly down and smiles. Franklin Planters’ Banner. April 15, 1847.)
Gathering research is crucial to the process of tour development. It is best to know your theme, or special focus, from the start, instead of taking an encyclopedic approach to information gathering. Topical research provides the impetus for a cohesive product.

After the research is gathered, it must be assembled into a logical, useful structure. For instance, the quotations used for the Shadows’ tour focusing on leisure activities were divided into categories: food and dining; hunting, fishing, and pets; travel; needlework; balls, parties, and dancing; and visiting and reading.

Once the assemblage is arranged, the researcher presents the guides with the material and lets them formulate the best way to use the information. Along with a few suggestions, guides are told to be creative in arranging quotations and deciding where they are to be used. A theme affects everything about a tour, from its route to the objects used to illustrate the message. Giving guides the time and the situation to develop their own thematic tours empowers them by giving them a sense of ownership.

The guided tour experience is what sets historic house museums apart from other exhibition techniques. Guides are the labels and the interactive media on a house tour. With a few, well-chosen words, guides can provoke the visitors’ imagination and heighten the tour experience. After all, what could be more descriptive than, “I have read everything in the house. I wish there was a library in this place, in dark bad weather when I cannot go in the garden, time hangs heavy on my hands.” (Mary C. Moore in a letter to her husband John Moore, 1853.) It not only tells you about the place, but of a frame of mind and of leisure activities.

Quoting animates subject matter. Simply stating that John Moore grieved about his wife’s death carries far less emotional weight than reciting his words — “her loss to me is irreparable. [sic].” Saying that daughter Frances did not care very much for her music lesson is less evocative than using her own words — “I hate the days to come when I have to take my music lesson.”

Even using the words of people who were not connected to the Shadows, but who lived during the same time period as we interpret, can be illustrative. For instance, when explaining fashion and why the once red brick plantation house was white-washed, guides will quote Charles Dickens who on a trip to America remarked, “... every house is the whitest of white; every Venetian blind the greenest of green [the Shadows has green shutters]; every fine day’s sky the bluest of blue.”

Of course, the idea of using quotations is not new, but for some reason it is less a part of the historic house experience than one might think. Usually, interpreters and guides talk about what a person said or did instead of using their own words. What could be more appropriate, however, than using a person’s actual words as part of a tour?

It was not until 1991 that the Shadows staff became sold on this technique. The “sale” took place during a visit to Edith Wharton’s home, “The Mount,” in Massachusetts’s Berkshire Mountains. The guide, with note cards in hand, quoted Mrs. Wharton throughout her tour. Mrs. Wharton’s own words told of her feelings about living in this home, and of her ideas about art and decoration. The device was most effective. Since that time the desirability of using quotations became clear — even if guides needed to carry note cards to prompt them when repeating specific quotations.

Quotations from the period of interpretation lend an air of authenticity that complements the presentation of historic house museums. What’s more, they can help visitors in other types of museums. Quoting artists can assist us to understand the expressive process; quoting pioneering scientists can give us insights into the research process. Quotations offer visitors the immediacy and truthfulness found only in primary documentation.

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Because there is little else that one can do with the objects displayed in art museums besides look at them, such museums imply that all objects in their care, regardless of their initial uses, are valuable primarily because of their visual interest. This visual bias, which is at the core of art museums, is distinctly Western or Eurocentric in origin, despite its claim to universality. Docents in art museums usually teach people how to look at art, thus inadvertently mirroring the biases of the institutions in which they work. Often they sense that there is a mismatch between the content of their teaching and the interest of their audience, but they don’t know what to do about it.

Understanding how our looking and teaching is informed by our “hidden Western bias” may help resolve this tension.

People reflect the cultural values and habits of the environment in which they were born and raised. Museums, created by many individuals working together over time, manifest the cultural assumptions and resources of their creators regardless of the culture or cultures that they attempt to represent. Art museums exhibit certain types of objects that are generally acknowledged to be art. Although the objects in art museums come from many different cultures and times, they are all exhibited in very similar fashion — in cases, on pedestals, on walls, with dramatic lighting and scant written information. Art museums highlight the similarities between these objects, that is that they are all beautiful or compelling visually. Other types of museums, ethnographic museums for example, strive to represent cultural specificity and therefore emphasize the differences between objects, not their similarities.

Philosopher Richard Anderson (Calliope’s Sisters: A Comparative Study of Philosophies of Art. Prentice Hall, 1990) identifies four different theories that make up Western aesthetics: the mimetic, the pragmatic, the expressive, and the formalist. Mimetic theories discuss how art objects imitate the real world whereas pragmatic theories emphasize the functional aspects of art, requiring that art make some sort of contribution to society. Emotionalist theories focus neither on the material nor the social world but rather on the psychological realm of inner experience and the feelings of the individual creator and audience. Finally, formalist theories emphasize the existence of “significant form,” asserting that art is valuable because of its “formal qualities” such as, for example in painting, the painter’s use of color and composition. Anderson characterizes the four theories as a vocal quartet with one part carrying the lead while the others sing in harmony. In the twentieth century, formalist theories have “carried the melody,” playing an essential role in the institutions of art: art history, art criticism, and art museums.

Formalist aesthetics informs much of the way art history was taught from 1950 to about 1975 when many people who are now docents learned it. The emphasis was on seeing how significant form varied over time to create stylistic development. Art history was often taught as a linear progression of styles and practices that culminated in the leading styles of the present. Major artists, as well as major monuments of art, were emphasized, while little emphasis was given to artists whose styles did not fit into what was considered to be the mainstream. Museum collections are ordered along art historical lines in that objects are arranged in roughly chronological order based on particular periods or schools.

Docents who teach in art museums are generally trained in the language of art history. Even though they quickly discover that art history cannot be taught in a brief tour or lesson, they nevertheless follow the order that the museum imposes, which is an art historical one. Especially when teaching adults, docents talk about artists’ lives, their techniques, and their importance to the development of particular styles that are deemed important in the history of art. When teaching about non-Western art, where the individuality of the artist is not emphasized, the main content is still derived from art history books that divide the art into significant periods and styles.

Another approach to teaching about art that reflects the formalist bias of twentieth-century Euro-centric aesthetics emphasizes the formal elements of art objects. This approach emphasizes the importance of reading a work of art as a conglomeration of colors, shapes, lines, and textures. While the art historical tour, with its emphasis on periods, styles, and artists works especially well with adults, the formalist tour with its stress on the basic elements is ideal for children. The formalist way to teach about art, when it was first introduced, was actually a great boon to museum education because it allowed museum educators to argue that anyone could be taught to look at art. This optimistic philosophy was applied with great creativity in museum teaching and is still much in use today.

Getting Beyond Colors, Shapes, Lines, and Textures

So what, if anything, is wrong with teaching about art along art historical lines or stressing the formal elements of art? Nothing really, except for the fact that these two approaches are mired in the hidden theme of Western formalist aesthetics. If we recognize that art is not a universal language, easily understood by anyone who can see, but rather a complex
phenomenon deeply rooted in a particular cultural system, we can actually improve our ability to communicate the essence of art.

Beginning in the 1970s, art history began to feel the impact of the Civil Rights and the Women’s Rights movements as artists of color and women began to notice and complain about the absence of their own kind from the history books. The “great masters” approach to the history of art came under attack as did the formalist aesthetic that justified only a very few types of works as significant masterpieces. The Euro-centric vision of the evolution of art from Egypt, to Greece and Rome, and culminating in European art, began to seem rather stilted in light of the highly evolved, ancient cultures of China, India, and Africa. A more pragmatic aesthetic began to compete with the formalist one, stressing the function of art in society and its role as symbol and communicator.

Museums, too, came under attack. Artists began making works of art that could not be contained by museums or galleries. Earthworks, performance art, conceptual art were all very popular art movements of the 1970s and all intended to critique the institutions of art. The notion that the museum was a neutral space for the contemplation of art was exposed as a myth by some artists while other artists began to question the formalist tradition that art was detached from politics. Community groups began calling for more representation, demanding exhibitions and installations that more accurately reflected the diversity of the community.

In this atmosphere of change, formalist approaches to art are not just old-fashioned, they are seen as belonging to the more exclusionary, Euro-centric museum of the past. But how can one get beyond the restrictions of the environment in which one teaches, which, as I pointed out at the beginning, is infused with the visual, art historical, formalist biases? Getting beyond color, shape, line, and texture may not be very easy, but it is possible.

One method is to reorient one’s thinking about what is important in the interaction between the docent and the visitor. Teaching is only as good as the learning that it inspires. An effective docent is not judged by the information she is able to master, but rather by her ability to inspire her audience to understand what she is communicating. If instead of thinking of the docent as a conveyer of information, we think of her as a facilitator, we shift the authority from the docent to the visitor. Color, line, shape, and texture are not important in and of themselves, but rather as tools to help visitors make sense of works of art. The process of making sense involves being able to relate works to our own experience. A docent can encourage this process by helping visitors begin to question the why’s and wherefore’s of an artist’s practice. Instead of asking directed questions that lead visitors to see what the docents want them to see, docents should consider asking more, open-ended, philosophical questions that can lead people to ponder the effects and meaning of a work of art.

In addition to teaching about stylistic development in the traditional, art historical way, docents need to examine works of art as artifacts that had a particular cultural significance different from the one they currently hold in the museum. Because the museum was not the original context in which many of the works of art which are currently housed there were displayed, docents need to inform themselves about the original settings and uses of art objects. Escaping the hidden Western bias is as simple as making it evident: acknowledging that museums are just one context, out of many, for art.

Traditional tours may need to be examined and revised so that a more inclusive, more multi-cultural focus can be introduced. Instead of just following periods and styles as laid out by the museums, docents might experiment with organizing their lessons along broadly thematic lines that can appeal to diverse audiences. For example, a tour about the human figure in art can include African, Chinese, as well as European art, whereas a discussion of the uses of art throughout time can combine a large variety of objects into one lesson. At the Philadelphia Museum of Art, we have begun offering art history courses with a multi-cultural perspective, focusing on a particular period in time but looking at art from around the world. All of these methods can work in tandem with traditional tours and courses, enriching the museum's offerings.

Docents should also be aware of, and sensitive to, the need to include a large variety of objects on their tours, including objects that may fall out of traditional art historical categories. Reminding visitors that artists may also be female, African-American, Jewish, and so forth is a way of acknowledging the contributions of people who are traditionally less visible in the museum setting. Finally, docents should play a more aggressive role in being visitor advocates within museums, which are still slow to change their focus from being repositories of great masterpieces, to being community-based, cultural and educational centers.

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Architecture as Artifact

Is an empty house truly empty? Imagine visiting a house museum where all you see is the house — no furniture, no fabrics, no art collection, no memorabilia — no kidding! What is there to see? What could we possibly learn?

"We may live without her [architecture] and worship without her, but we can not remember without her."
John Ruskin

At Drayton Hall in Charleston, South Carolina, visitors experience architecture as a powerful artifact of history, technology, and culture. From foundation to roof, the elements of design, construction, and patterns of use provide unusual evidence of over 250 years of continuity and change within a family and community. Interpreters must use bricks, mortar, and spaces as touchstones to the people who built and used them.

Interpreting architecture as artifact is a matter of "reading" a building and its environment. In order to best comprehend the language of buildings, consider shapes and materials as "vocabulary," with "grammar" reflected in craftsmanship and style. How a building reads depends on how all of these elements are composed.

"I call architecture frozen music."
Goethe

The size, scale, and basic geometric form of a building can make us feel comfortable or uncomfortable, depending on our personal experiences. Drayton Hall was spacious for its time and still is for most of us. Interestingly, a few members of the English aristocracy have said Drayton Hall "is nothing but a little farm house ..." They are reading Drayton Hall in the context of their experiences.

"All architecture is shelter; all great architecture is the design of space that contains, cuddles, exalts, or stimulates persons in the space."
Philip Johnson
A building’s design usually reflects a set of choices based on a combination of needs, use, cultural values, location, materials, technology, economics, and civic regulations. Think of it as the compromise between, “What do I want?” and “What can I have?” The builder of Drayton Hall was fortunate to have been wealthy enough to have the house of his dreams. His choice of location, floor plans, materials, moldings, paint schemes, and overall design style allow us to see what was necessary, popular, and possible in his time.

Like shards in an excavation, architecture must be seen in the context of its location. Geography, climate, natural resources, travel, and trade routes affect what is built, as well as how it is built. Unfortunately, few buildings are surrounded by their original landscape. Population shifts, urban growth, natural disaster, or changing economics may rob a building of its intended context. These changes, however, provide an equally important historical record.

Located between the oldest road in the state and a deep water river nine miles inland from the port city of Charles Towne, Drayton Hall was situated to take advantage of two major trade and transportation routes in the early 18th century. The semi-tropical climate supported an agricultural industry of indigo, rice, and cotton cultivation that generated extensive networks of trade, and which required mass enslaved labor. Viewing Drayton Hall in relationship to its location, visitors soon understand why the building has two entrances, a land front and a river front. We can also understand why Drayton Hall has a one story above ground “basement” supporting large, airy rooms on the next two floors. Why would a separate kitchen building be desirable? What other support buildings would you expect on the site? What conclusion might we draw from crumbled foundations, silted-in ponds, secondary growth trees, and Victorian-era garden mound?

**The Basic Elements**

Architecture can be overwhelming. It may be a new, challenging experience to look at a building from ground line to roof. What are your first impressions? What elements stand out? Architecture is an artifact composed of many elements, each an artifact that can be interpreted on its own. To help focus, consider the overall shape of the building. What other shapes do you see? Are these shapes symmetrical or asymmetrical? How are they used? How do they make up the basic parts of the building? How do they work? What are they called?

Drayton Hall is a rectangle composed of geometric shapes placed in accordance with the principles of symmetry. It is such an important part of the design that interior walls have false, or sham, doors to balance real ones. The house’s two story portico (porch) with a triangular pediment is its most prominent feature. It takes up over one-third of the land front facade, and was meant to be noticed. It is supported by columns and composed of rectangular spaces that open into the house.

**Materials and Construction**

Materials and construction provide evidence of natural resources, trade, craftsmanship, technology, as well as change. Drayton Hall’s portico is constructed of brick, stone, and iron to withstand the elements, with wood and glass for the windows and doors. The bricks are local, indicating a brick making industry, and they are laid in the Flemish bond pattern with lighter colored bricks around the windows and doors. The complexity of this design requires considerable attention to detail and highly skilled masons. Stone had to be imported from as far away as England. It was quarried, cut to order, and shipped in sections to be reassembled on-site. How many people might be involved with this process? How long would it take to request and receive an order by letter and ship?

The iron railings were also imported, though iron arrived in long bars and had...
to hand wrought by smiths, either at a workshop in town, or right on the property. The frames for the windows and doors were constructed without nails, using local wood. From forest to finished product, the wood went through several different stages and hands before it was joined to fit in the openings of the brick wall. The glass panes are wavy, but new to the house. Placed in a six over six pattern, they have slender mullions that seem to barely hold them in place. These “new” sashes are from the early 19th century, when technology and fashion allowed larger panes of glass for a less obstructed view. An 18th century visitor would have seen smaller, thick panes with thick mullions in a twelve over twelve pattern. This was the best you could expect with costly handmade glass.

**Design**

A master builder would have been responsible for coordinating craftsmen and materials. Construction would proceed under his orders, but the design was the choice of the owner: how did they settle on the final plans? Why would this house have a portico? Is this building any particular style?

Size, scale, patterns, colors, textures, materials, construction, placement of the elements, and use of space in design creates style. Learning to recognize the evolution of style over time helps us date buildings as artifacts and to document change.

**Use**

Drayton Hall’s portico functioned as a major entrance, a covered outdoor living space, and a place to look out over the property. Who might it have served, and how well did it work? We can think about the variety of people who would have used the portico over 250 years — mothers playing with their children, house slaves sweeping, soldiers delivering orders, guests watching the sun set. What furniture may have been placed on its stone floors? Was it ever lit up at night? What stories have been told on this portico? We may never know all who used it or how, but we can imagine how we may have used such a space.

**Value**

As an artifact, Drayton Hall’s portico is thought to be the first of its kind in North America. Its value is not only in its rarity, but also in how well it functions as part of the building, the use of the materials, the quality of construction, the influence of style, and its evidence of the interdependence within a community and as a document of change.

As a teaching tool, architectural details are a connection to the craftsman who carved them, the designer who created them, the builder who chose them, and the people who have cared for them. As an artifact, architecture is a physical manifestation of the intersection of time, ideas, community, economics, aesthetics, and society.

“We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us.”

Winston Churchill

Meggett Lavin is Curator of Education and Research for Drayton Hall, a property of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

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The Docent Educator welcomes your articles, questions, techniques, comments, and announcements for possible publication. Interested? Please consider addressing the themes of our upcoming issues.

**Program Mechanics:** Recruitment, Training, and Evaluation
Spring 1994
Submission deadline - Dec. 1, 1993

**Blockbusters:** Changing Exhibitions or Large Crowds
Summer 1994
Submission deadline - March 1, 1994

**Back-to-School:** Serving School-aged Audiences and Teachers
Autumn 1994
Submission deadline - June 1, 1994

**Multiculturalism:** Diversity in our Audiences and Collections
Winter 1994
Submission deadline - Sept. 1, 1994

Have an article, technique, or activity in mind that does not conform to the themes above? You are still invited to submit it for consideration. Feature articles average 1,500 to 2,000 words in length. For further information, send SASE for writer’s guidelines to The Docent Educator 2011 Eleventh Avenue East, Seattle, WA 98102.
Cultural Education

When Congress established the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities as sister agencies over twenty years ago, the legislation raised questions whose answers remain confusing to this day. Most people are pretty sure they could define "arts," but they feel less certain about the "humanities." And if they don't know the humanities, do they need them or want to support them with public dollars?

The recent Ken Burns documentary on the Civil War is probably the best known, recent project sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. History, by clear consensus, is a basic humanities discipline. However, the boundaries between the humanities and the arts become less distinct when we consider history as more than dates for the Magna Carta or the Norman Conquest, and think in terms of the history of art or the history of ideas.

The humanities focus on the analysis and the interpretation of ideas and art — a rich blend that forms the basis for cultural education. Teaching about the history of art and ideas requires more than finding out objective facts or speculating about an artist's intention. Though assembling dates or reading letters and diaries about an artist's intention can be interesting to scholars, such views are always conjectural and ultimately not very interesting to many museum visitors.

My initial reaction to works of art is speechlessness, because for a time my heart and mind are out of synch. Art forces a recognition of some new organizing principle that takes time to comprehend. Like a computer reorganizing data, I need an opportunity to recalculate my own experience in view of the new artistic vision. Then, I try to comprehend the experience rationally: for me, this links the arts and the humanities.

Often issues bound to art are political — not in the sense of attitudes toward a single ephemeral event, but in the sense of the macro-nature of our world. Shakespeare, for example, presents as many dysfunctional families as one would ever want to meet. Think of Lear, the aging parent who wants reassurances that his daughters love him and discovers the folly of counting on those who praise him. Romeo and Juliet, written about 400 years ago, examines gang violence, family feuds, and teenage sex and suicide in the context of an urban government that fails to protect its citizens. These are problems that continue to trouble us.

J.M.W. Turner's painting, The European Vision of America, is more than an aesthetic re-creation of a dramatic storm and the action of a ship's captain and crew, who throw African slaves overboard to lighten the load and save their own lives. Turner makes us feel the terror of the storm at sea and the horror of the crew's actions. In the presence of the storm, the captain and crew treat the Africans as cargo, rather than as people, and reveal themselves as less than human, even as they deny the humanity of the slaves.

The humanities exclude the creation or performance of art or the sponsorship of art exhibitions. The ability to express creatively through art is exclusively the purview of the arts. Through the humanities, however, we analyze and interpret how art comments upon and affects our lives. Sometimes that means that organizations like the National Endowment for the Humanities or the state humanities councils sponsor exhibitions, like Seeds of Change. This sesquicentennial project, developed in cooperation with the Smithsonian Institution, was about the cultural encounter between Columbus and the indigenous people he and his crew encountered.

The conversations resulting from the debate in 1992 over the benefits and losses from this meeting vary greatly from the celebration in 1892 at Chicago's Colombian Exposition. Last year's debate showed how Europe benefited from the New World's gifts of foods, like potatoes, corn, and tomatoes. The debate also forced people to consider the negative results, such as the introduction of new diseases to native people without immunities. The discussions about responsibility, even for unintended actions, matter in how we define ethical action. This type of philosophical question reflects the essence of the humanities.

While museums (art, natural history, gardens) do not always find common ground with the humanities, we share a common mandate for public cultural education. We want people to know more about the world. Finding ways to talk — to analyze and to interpret experience — elevates the level of public discourse and helps us build communities.

Every state has a state humanities council. For the telephone number and address of an individual council, the best resource is the Federation of State Humanities Councils at (703) 908-9700. Each state council has its own guidelines, deadlines, and initiatives.

Though NEH or state councils may not be able to fund the entirety of a project for a museum or other cultural organization, they may fund lectures by art historians or educational publications with essays on aesthetic principles or the theoretical development of art, natural history, or science. Such funds free other money to support an art exhibition or workshop on creating art, designing gardens, or the physics of soap bubbles. Given the current budget problems of local, regional, and national organizations, increased cooperation lies in all of our best interests. What we may not be able to do separately, we may be able to do together.

Kathryn Mettelka currently serves as the Associate Director of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. She did her undergraduate work at Duke University. She earned her M.A. and Ph.D. in English from the University of Michigan. Later, she returned to school to study administration and became a C.P.A.
Museums and Multicultural Societies

In the April 14, 1993, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Ivan Karp, Curator of Anthropology and African studies at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History, and Steven Lavine president of the California Institute of the Arts, discussed some of their opinions concerning the need for museums to adapt to the pressures of multicultural awareness. Their comments, while primarily directed at trustee and curatorial decision-making, have implications to those who teach within these settings.

"As repositories of knowledge and forums for the expression of central values, museums have claimed to play a critical role in the transmission of culture. In this country [U.S.], museums have often asserted that they can compensate for the failures of formal education at all levels. Increasingly, however, museums are hoisted on the petard of their own boasts. Because they profess to be central cultural institutions, what they keep and what they display is increasingly subject to dispute ..."

Further changes in museums are inevitable ... the stance of benign neutrality held by museums of the past has lost credibility. Exhibitions are being subjected to profound scrutiny about their political, cultural, and social agendas. As the demographics of the U.S. population shift and as we move toward being a society in which the majority of the population will belong to minority groups, we can expect these external pressures to grow."

Mr. Karp and Mr. Lavine are the co-editors of two books on this topic: *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Displays* and *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*. Both texts are published by the Smithsonian Institution Press.

New and Improved Quarters

The New Orleans Museum of Art recently completed a major expansion of its gallery and office space, allowing it to exhibit far more of its Asian, African, and European permanent collections.

The History Museum for Springfield-Greene County, in Springfield, MO., has moved to a new, larger location. In addition to exhibiting its permanent collection, the new site allows the museum to develop galleries for changing history exhibitions and a special, hands-on children's area.

And, congratulations to The Art Museum of Santa Cruz County, which chronicled its logistical travails in the Winter 1992 issue of *The Docent Educator*. After 11 years of borrowed space and earthquake problems, they finally have a home in the handsome new McPherson Center for Art and History, which is shared with the Santa Cruz County Historical Trust.
Typical Science and Technology Topics

In its series "Sharing Science with Children: A Survival Guide for Scientists and Engineers," the North Carolina Museum of Life and Science offers the following as potential themes for teaching elementary aged students:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>First &amp; Second</th>
<th>Third &amp; Fourth</th>
<th>Fifth &amp; Sixth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Animals</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many kinds</td>
<td>Are alike and different</td>
<td>Adaptations to the environment</td>
<td>Animal classification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have different coverings</td>
<td>Move and grow</td>
<td>Defense mechanisms</td>
<td>Selective breeding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eat different kinds of food</td>
<td>Different homes</td>
<td>Helpful and harmful animals</td>
<td>Interaction with the environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plants</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many kinds</td>
<td>Characteristics of plants</td>
<td>Classification of plants</td>
<td>Parts and functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grow in different places</td>
<td>Collecting parts of plants</td>
<td>Effects of soil, water, air, and light on growth</td>
<td>Life processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetables and fruits</td>
<td>Seeds become plants</td>
<td>Conservation</td>
<td>Plant processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prehistoric plants</td>
<td>Uses of plants</td>
<td></td>
<td>Adaptation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weather</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Days can be sunny, cloudy, rainy, and snowy</td>
<td>Air occupies space, has weight</td>
<td>Effect of sun on earth</td>
<td>Evaporation and condensation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four seasons</td>
<td>Atmosphere</td>
<td>Temperature and thermometers</td>
<td>Precipitation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Air has pressure</td>
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<td>Air masses</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wind is moving air</td>
<td></td>
<td>Forecasting and instruments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical &amp; Chemical Properties</strong></td>
<td>States of matter</td>
<td>Expansion and contraction</td>
<td>Factors affecting climate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Things have colors, sizes, shapes</td>
<td>Different types of matter</td>
<td>Heat</td>
<td>Atoms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classifying objects</td>
<td>Dissolving</td>
<td>Fuels</td>
<td>Chemicals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hot and cold</td>
<td>Movement of things in air, water</td>
<td>Producing sound</td>
<td>Mixtures and compounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serial ordering</td>
<td>Sinking and floating</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Matter and energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Electricity Magnetism</strong></td>
<td>Sources of electricity</td>
<td>Magnets</td>
<td>Sources of energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses of electricity</td>
<td>Simple compass</td>
<td>Use of magnets</td>
<td>Reflection/refraction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lenses</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Earth &amp; Space Science</strong></td>
<td>Sun, moon, earth</td>
<td>Heat and Light</td>
<td>Nature of electricity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moon</td>
<td>Stars</td>
<td>Seasons</td>
<td>Simple circuit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Day and night</td>
<td></td>
<td>Day, night, year</td>
<td>Batteries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tides and eclipses</td>
<td>Series and parallel circuits</td>
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<tr>
<td>Soil</td>
<td></td>
<td>Solar system</td>
<td>Safety</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gravity, inertia and orbit</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Comets, meteors and meteorites</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Space exploration</td>
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</tbody>
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A Tie that Binds
The Thematic Tour

There are times when a docent has a certain degree of latitude in teaching about the objects or artifacts on a guided tour. In other situations, however, a docent’s choices can be more limited. This may occur for many reasons, including the audience’s level of awareness, the docent’s own comfort level with the subject matter, or a lack of adequate accompanying documentation about the objects in question. These are appropriate times for thematic tours.

Focusing on an aspect of an exhibition rather than on its entirety can provide an enriching tour, give visitors something to think about, and present information within a solid structure that can be appreciated by the museum staff, docent, and visitor alike.

Consider, for example, an ethnographic collection — that which displays a large number and variety of articles, such as furniture, clothing, toys, tools, machines, folk art, and so forth. First, the docent selects some aspect shared in common that will tie these different objects together. Among them could be: their shape, the materials they are made of, their function, or the meanings that can be inferred from them. Then, once the docent makes a choice, these objects must be reviewed from that perspective.

To continue our example, let’s examine an object using the theme of “materials.” The object is a small wooden casket dating from the last century. How can the material it’s made of tell us something of the society and resources of the people who produced it? The material of the casket, in this case wood, was drawn from a natural source and underwent relatively little transformation. By noting that the craftsmen of the last century drew upon local resources, and only slightly transformed their natural materials when fashioning the casket, we might reasonably infer that their way of life was, relatively speaking, less complex and closer to nature than our own. By comparison, had it been made of plastic, it would have had to go through a complete chemical transformation from crude petroleum into another material — plastic. The process that changes petroleum into plastic requires the presence of several different industries, is far more complex, and results in a product that is far more
different and commercial; the metal cross from a church steeple would indicate the presence of a place of Christian worship and settlement patterns; and eating utensils might bespeak economic class, craftsmanship, and social mores. All of these objects, whether symbolic or utilitarian, reveal a lot about the owner and the society of the people who produced and used them.

One of the best aspects of touring with a theme is that whether items are displayed together or not is of little importance. The docent draws connections using the theme to create a well-structured tour and a unifying factor.

Many exhibitions nowadays use posters, audiovisual equipment, computers, design (layout, lighting, etc.) and other such museographical elements. Just like the objects exhibited, these too can be incorporated by the docent to illustrate a tour’s theme. Because docents sometimes find themselves working with minimal supervision, they must develop methods that they can accomplish for themselves. Thematic tours permit them to do this.

Before any visitors arrive, docents can identify the most productive or “high-yield” aspects of the exhibition in order to convey the principal idea of the exhibition and to meet the visitors’ desire to discover something new.

The thematic approach also allows docents to tackle topics that, at first glance, seem more difficult — such as the role or mission of their museum. The capacity of the thematic approach for provoking thought and for creating awareness can be used by the docent to help visitors better understand why the museum collects as it does.

Even the idea of having a collection can make a successful theme. Museums have collections, but so do people.
Children may collect dolls or model cars; adults may collect antiques or coins. Though a museum’s collection can often diversify into a vast assortment of objects, a theme helps to knit them together. The different items are then set into a context, enriching the learning, knowledge that can be derived, and insight of the curators, while giving rise to new questions that can pave the way for new research. (This is an idea advanced by Cécile Dubuc in an internal memorandum circulated within the Musée de la Civilisation in Québec City.) In addition, by discussing the objectives of the museum’s collection policy, docents can lead visitors to a better understanding of the museum’s raison d’être, as well as its role in the community.

A docent constructs a thematic visit, first by choosing at least one theme that will best correspond to the topics most likely to interest the visitor. Then, he must choose the appropriate components of his presentation, wherever they are found within the exhibition. The relevance of a well-chosen theme in creating a unifying thread can even allow the docent to guide visitors through more than one wing, gallery, or exhibition area.

To sum up, then, to create and use a thematic tour, put these principles into practice:
- Choose themes, objects, and questions carefully.
- Select themes that best correspond to the interest of your visitors.
- Formulate an introduction and conclusion.
- Give a short summary of your theme at the beginning of the tour.

If you do these things you will have built a cohesive and interesting presentation. In addition, you will project a solid image of yourself as an educator even in an exhibition that may be a bit short on documentation, or with which you feel somewhat less than at ease.

Daniel Arcand has been a docent at the Musée de la Civilisation in Québec City, Québec, Canada, for over four years. Prior to this, he was a docent for eight years at the Place-Royale interpretation site, where Québec City was founded in 1608 and which was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1985. Mr. Arcand holds B.A. degrees in both history and translation.

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School Curriculum + Museum Reality = Powerful Programs

In one of my favorite "Peanuts" cartoons, Charlie Brown explains his reaction to a class field trip. "You've seen one field, you've seen them all." Teachers often encounter museum tours that leave us with the same reaction!

On the brighter side, however, are an increasing number of museums, zoos, historic houses, and nature centers that use their state's curriculum guides to help plan relevant school programs. Teachers with limited funds, time, and administrative approval for class outings look to these institutions first when they plan field trips. Our already over-loaded planning time is used more effectively when thematic programs slip easily into state-mandated goals and objectives.

Each state requires that students within its public schools be taught certain skills and specific concepts. These requirements are set down in curriculum "guides" that come in various forms and reflect varying amounts of jargon. In whatever form they appear, they are, nonetheless, the impetus of a teacher's lesson plans, and they are an excellent starting point for museums that want to help teachers teach. Copies of curriculum guides for every subject and grade are generally available from local Boards of Education or from the Department of Education in your state.

The Science Curriculum Framework for Tennessee, for example, is employed by many science museums, nature centers, botanical gardens, and zoos in the state to link classroom instruction to thematic programming in their institution. Tennessee requires kindergarten through sixth grade instruction in Physical Science, Life Science, Earth and Space Science, and Environmental Science. These broad areas are further divided into Machines and Work; Electricity and Magnetism; Sound, Heat, and Light; Matter and Energy; Animals; Plants; Human Body; Growth and Development; Microscopic Life; Astronomy; Meteorology; Geology; Oceanography; Energy and the Environment; Man's Effect on Earth; and Ecosystems. Different aspects of these topics are emphasized at different grade levels in a spiral curriculum.

Additionally, students are expected to develop process skills such as observing, collecting data, and formulating models; reading and study skills such as following directions, distinguishing between fact and opinion, and judging the relevance of information; and interpersonal relations and attitudes such as cooperating, appreciating the beauty of nature, and understanding the limits of science and technology. Again, the curriculum is designed to develop these skills over the course of the elementary years, with specific skills emphasized at different grade levels.

Effective museum programs, like effective classroom lessons, go beyond these broad categories. It is at this point that more and more museums are creating programs that make teachers — and students — sit up and take notice.

What do teachers want? The fine print (Tennessee calls them "terminal objectives") in the curriculum guides tell us what to teach in each of the separate disciplines that comprise our academic day. We need your help to make the concepts come alive; to "show" what we only would be able to "tell" to motivate and inspire at the beginning of a unit of study, or to summarize at its conclusion.

The reality of live animals, historic artifacts, and great art is best found in your institutions. Tell us, through thematic programming, where you fit into our lesson plans.

One of those required "terminal objectives" from the Science Curriculum Framework simply states that sixth graders in Tennessee "...understand the parts and functioning of the nervous system." Instructional objectives further refine the requirements: "The learner will explain the purpose of the nervous system; name the three main parts of the nervous system; describe the function of each part of the nervous system; and describe and relate how the nervous system allows one to notice and respond to everything in our environment."

Through experiments, examination of a sheep's brain, group projects, and individual research, my sixth graders develop a good idea of the functions of the central and peripheral nervous systems. But, it is the "Brain Power" exhibition and program at the Cumberland Science Museum in Nashville that puts it all together for them.

A brief docent-led introduction to the exhibition precedes a structured experience in the gallery where the docent serves as a facilitator and teacher, not as a tour guide. As my students explore various aspects of the nervous system through interactive displays and computer programs, the docent directs learning, answers questions, and prods the reluctant.
A follow-up back in the “education center” clears up any misconceptions, allows students to share what interested them most, and provides time for praise (and stickers) for a job well done.

I could take my class to experience this exhibition without scheduling a docent-led program. I would save money, and, in some museums without good docent programs, this is what I do. In this program, as with any good thematic program, however, the docent is the “glue” that holds it all together. In addition to having another voice from whom to hear the concepts (not a small consideration), students need a docent to guide their learning in even the best museum exhibitions. The thematic program is more than the exhibitions it examines; it is a way of helping students interact with artifacts, animals, or environments. When I encounter what sounds like a good program, I’m always skeptical until I see it in action. Until a docent brings a thematic program to life, it is just museum marketing!

Because the Cumberland Science Museum offers docent-led, curriculum-related thematic programs, it is possible for classes from my school to come each year to experience a different topic. Fifth graders, for example, enjoy a program and exhibition entitled, “Animals of the Earth’s Biomes.” This program, which employs live animals as well as static displays, meets science curriculum goals in both the “Animals” and “Ecosystems” areas. Sixth graders chaperone one field trip each year with their kindergarten “buddies.” We often choose the Cumberland Science Museum because they can accommodate both disparate groups on the same day with age-appropriate experiences.

Science is not the only area where curriculum-related programs are making an impact and offering teachers more than merely a “day out of school.” In an attractive brochure entitled “What’s Happening,” Constitutional Village in Huntsville, AL, states the kind of broad goal that teachers can adapt to their field trip request: “Exhibits, programs, and tours are designed to foster interest in the history of Alabama, encourage creativity, and heighten students’ awareness of themselves in relation to the past.” Further examination of the brochure reveals a program called “Masters of All We Survey.” The description promises that students in grades 5-8 will “…step back into the shoes of a surveyor in early Alabama as they study old journals, read maps, learn surveying terms, and master the use of surveyors’ instruments to measure a plot of land.” Map reading, map making, and primary source research are requirements of most upper elementary and middle school curricula; geometric concepts and measurement skill requirements could be reinforced by this program.

Language arts curriculum requirements could be met by the Storycrafting Workshop available at The National Scouting Museum in Murray, KY. The museum uses a special group of docents, a storytelling troupe called Spinners!, to help children create original stories and learn to enliven well-known tales.

In a “Special Note to Kentucky Teachers,” the guide states: “The museum’s school programs are directly applicable to many of the skills included on the List of Valued Outcomes for Kentucky’s Six Learning Goals, including basic communication and math skills, science, social studies, arts and humanities, self-sufficiency, thinking and problem solving and integration of knowledge.” Teachers are also invited to “… schedule an appointment with the education staff at the museum to design a lesson that meets the needs of your classroom and your curriculum.”

Too many hours of my students’ days are filled with the “non-reality” of videos, electronic games, and television. As I plan lessons for the year, I search for ways to make my teaching relevant and for ways to compete with the passive entertainment that fills the leisure time of today’s children. I look for museum programs that extend the hands-on learning that begins in my classroom. Museums that understand the importance of providing curriculum-based programs, and that train their docent staff adequately, get my business!

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Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor

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