Blockbusters

Special Exhibitions

Large Crowds

“Special” Exhibits
Questions? Questions!
Mastering Blockbusters
Videos Boost Blockbusters
Elusive University Audiences
Taming the Maddening Crowds
Blockbusters and School Teachers
"Special" Exhibitions
The Same, but Different

An incomprehensible number of images and sounds compete for our attention everyday. From traffic signs to product labels, from freeway noises to elevator music, from television commercials to store window displays, the happenings of contemporary life constantly bombard us with stimuli.

The cumulative effect of all this dissonance teaches us to see and listen less acutely in order to eliminate the distractions. As a result, our attention is increasingly more difficult to capture and hold.

The advertising, movie, music, and television industries understand this phenomenon well. They employ ever greater levels of excitement, explicitness, and sensationalism to garner the public’s notice and interest. From video games to music lyrics, from movies like Fatal Attraction to computer-generated experiences such as “virtual reality,” we have become people best baited by high stimulus and the lure of an adrenaline rush.

With this in mind, consider the implications for museums, gardens, and historic sites. Could there be environments more antithetical to today’s fast-paced, action-packed, over-stimulating world than that of static exhibit halls or the vestibules of old houses?

Most exhibitions are inanimate — silent and still; they demand that visitors initiate and sustain engagement. For many people, such institutions and their collections simply do not “speak loudly enough” to be heard over the din of all that competes for their attention and interest. (Even in zoos, visitors quickly abandon exhibits where animals are sleeping or are well camouflaged.)

This may explain the proliferation of “Blockbusters” and other “special” exhibitions that began to appear with increasing regularity since the early 1970’s. Their catchy titles are often provocative, their transitory nature — appearing only for a limited time — creates a sense of urgency, and the accompanying media hoopla offers hosting institutions a higher profile than usual.

From model dinosaurs that move and growl to the treasures found in threatened environments; from the wonders of ancient civilizations to the horrors of human slavery; from a retrospective of an artist’s lifetime of work to an array of cold-war era toys, special exhibitions lend a sense of excitement to a realm that is otherwise thought by many to be anything but exciting.

The tactic has worked. Special exhibitions have drawn tens of thousands of additional visitors to museums, zoos, and historic sites. They have been useful tools for audience-building and for increased institutional visibility. In fact, they have been so successful that some newer “museums” only feature changing exhibitions and do not even possess permanent collections of their own.

For all their usefulness, success, and validity, changing exhibitions can tax education and docent programming. The demands of acquiring and presenting new information can fatigue and intimidate, as often as it can excite. And, the sense of obligation to visitors who have made special efforts (and sometimes paid additional fees) to attend, may result in anxiety or confusion about responsibilities and appropriate methodology.

What should the role of docents and interpreters be when touring special exhibitions? Since it is often the subject matter of such exhibitions that attracts visitors, is there a greater responsibility to provide information than on regular, inquiry-oriented tours of the permanent collection?

It is the prerogative and responsibility of each institution to establish its own goals for touring special exhibitions. The decision, which should be made by the institutional director and senior education department staff, must then be communicated to all who work with the public. Both staff and volunteer educators should know and understand the philosophy guiding their activities.

When establishing the philosophic goal for touring special exhibitions, it is imperative to employ realism and honesty. For instance, since the majority of visitors taking tours are dependent learners, less able to acquire information or make determinations about what they see and hear than those with greater levels of exposure and experience, it must be honestly acknowledged that telling does not equal teaching. If hearing ensured learning, then merely attending a lecture on nuclear physics would guarantee comprehension.

It’s also not realistic to assume that simple access to an exhibit, or to recited information, satisfies an institution’s educational responsibility. Nevertheless, institutions must stake out and defend a philosophy of public service. If crowd control and logistical assistance are paramount, then so be it. If the distribution of information (regardless of its absorption) is pre-eminent, then guides need only recite from prepared scripts. If, on the other hand, educational programming is responsible for ensuring that learning occurs, then teaching should be the prescribed route. Whatever the decision, it should be known and understood by both the staff and volunteers who execute it.
When education is truly the goal, then teaching should be the primary conduit. Teaching is the most time consuming and least comprehensive method of guiding visitors through exhibitions. Such characteristics are worth noting as visitors who expect to be shown everything in a special exhibition may be disappointed when a method that relies upon in-depth examinations, rather than a survey or overview, is employed.

What about the public's expectations? Usually, visitors believe that they want to see "everything," though their capacity to absorb what they see and hear diminishes rapidly after the first few minutes. Also, most would simply rather be told about an exhibition, and shown what to notice, than to engage in conversation and the retrieval of information.

If the institutional goal is to satisfy these desires, then that scripted presentation might suffice. If the institution strives to go beyond the public's desires (addressing their needs) then, again, teaching is called for. If both are essential considerations, then perhaps there should be a blend — teaching activities followed by a bit of "show and tell."

Whenever education is an institution's goal, in whole or in part, those who teach should find some comfort in the knowledge that they are striving to impart the same looking and analyzing skills using the special exhibitions as they do when using the permanent collection. While this does not remove the docent's responsibility to learn about the special exhibition, it does lessen the burden of becoming "experts." (It is the "borrowed insights" of scripted presentations that establish guides as authorities in the minds of visitors.)

It is axiomatic that established teaching concepts and techniques have constancy even when the objects used in a lesson have changed. Among the more successful teaching structures was one developed by Benjamin Bloom, called "The Taxonomy of Cognitive Learning." It is well synthesized and made relevant to museum teaching in this issue of The Docent Educator by Laura Wendling in her article Questions? Questions! A Report from the Field.

Another teaching method that can be successful employed was developed by Dr. Louis Raths, and is explained in depth in his text Teaching for Thinking (Columbia Teachers College Press, 1986). Dr. Raths approaches teaching using those thinking and organizing principles that he believes people rely upon naturally, on their own, to acquire and analyze information. They are:

- observation - looking closely with reason or purpose
- comparison - finding similarities and/or differences in two or more things
- classification - sorting using established or created criteria
- summarization - condensing form or substance without omitting essentials
- interpretation - pulling meaning out of, or investing meaning on to, something
- hypothesis - making predictions based on evidence or what is known
- imagination - extending into the unknown using fantasy
- decision-making - making determinations using established criteria.

Either enabling structure can be employed equally well with new exhibitions or "old friends," because both address the process of learning, and both serve to impart skills for independent and continued learning on the part of visitors as a priority over remembering isolated pieces of factual information. They offer methods for teaching, when telling just isn't enough.
Mastering Blockbusters

Blockbusters — mention the very word and a universal groan can be heard throughout “docent land.” Hearts beat fast and palms grow clammy, as thoughts of learning about hundreds of unfamiliar objects in three hours race through the minds of volunteers.

Well, fear no longer, for there are ways to combat these anxiety attacks. The first is to focus on positive attributes of preparing for a Blockbuster; the second is to visualize the exhibition as a large puzzle just waiting for you to figure out how all the pieces fit together.

Since Blockbusters can cause even the most confident docent to break into a cold sweat, let’s begin by investigating some positive aspects of large-scale exhibitions. It is important to recognize the fabulous opportunities that touring a Blockbuster provides. Blockbusters generate a lot of pre- and post-opening excitement, and this energy can have an invigorating effect on your tours. In addition, the introduction of new information can be extremely energizing.

Think about the rewards of learning interesting material perhaps not found in your museum’s permanent collection. You may find yourself brushing up on information studied years ago, or learning about new material that, though interesting, may never have crossed your path otherwise. And, remember that you can apply what you’ve learned from the Blockbuster later in other situations. Looking at a new culture or different historical period will cause you to think about your museum’s collection in new and different ways.

Now that we have considered some of the positive aspects of blockbusters, let’s look at some practical ways of dealing with these large-scale exhibitions. The most effective method for “mastering” a Blockbuster is to visualize the exhibition as a large puzzle that must be broken down into smaller, more manageable parts. Methods to gain mastery of the information include:

- Reading the exhibition catalogue, recording the docent-training session, studying the exhibition by its themes, and, most importantly, brainstorming ideas with other docents. Using one or all of these methods will help you approach your tours of the Blockbuster with confidence.

Reading is one of the easiest ways to begin mastering large areas of unfamiliar information. The catalogue is a logical place to introduce yourself to the exhibition’s objects. The images contained within the catalogue, accompanied by the text, should give you a solid working foundation. You may also want to immerse yourself in the exhibition’s culture, language, philosophy, music, literature, history, art, and/or religion by pursuing background information provided in the catalogue’s bibliography, or by conducting research at your public or museum library. Along with gaining background information, the organization of the catalogue should offer ideas about themes for touring.

More theme ideas and mastery of material can be gained by taping (either video or audio) the curator or educator who discusses the exhibition. Knowing that every word is being recorded will allow you to actually look at and think about the objects instead of the lines on your note pad. The tape serves as a great reference tool to review about a week after the exhibition opens; listen to the tape to gather information you may have

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missed, to answer any questions that may have come up, and to give you new ideas for sharpening your tours.

Tour themes can be generated by mastering themes presented within the Blockbuster itself. Since many Blockbuster shows are divided thematically, learning these overriding ideas will help guide you through the exhibition puzzle. Begin to gain confidence by knowing one object from each section very well. Once the first tour is under your belt, go back to learn other pieces from each section. Continue this process until you feel a sense of mastery. You will never grow bored because you will have so many objects from which to choose. Additionally, knowing the objects by theme will help you in a crunch when there are logistical problems in the exhibition or crowds prevent your group from seeing the object you planned to discuss. Understanding an exhibition by themes allows your tour to flow, gives it cohesiveness, and will transform your Blockbuster puzzle into a more complete work of art.

As your awareness of this Blockbuster grows, sit down with other docents (as many as possible) to brainstorm and evaluate. This method is very effective when mastering the complex art of the Blockbuster exhibition, and at the same time is the easiest and least time consuming. It can also be fun!

Questions to consider when brainstorming include: How can you adapt your tours for special interest and multi-cultural groups that the Blockbuster attracts? Which themes work well, and which do not? How can you move tours easily through the exhibition when there are large crowds?

How can you get through everything you set out to do? Which pieces will be most popular and why? Are there any controversial pieces, and when should they be avoided? Has anything humorous come up that enhances your tour? Play with these ideas to gain greater insight on the Blockbuster.

Docent Jeanette Solomon tours visitors through a Blockbuster exhibition of art from the William S. Paley collection recently displayed at the New Orleans Museum of Art.

When the exhibition closes, say “good-bye” to your new-found friends, and congratulate yourself on learning a lot of new information in such a brief period of time. When the next Blockbuster opens, remember to read, tape, gain insight into the exhibition’s theme, and to brainstorm ideas with other docents. But before you begin the process again, remember to think positively to generate energy and excitement personally, and among the rest of your docent corps.
Questions? Questions!

Recently, as part of a larger project, I had the opportunity to observe 27 docents at two large West Coast art museums while they conducted tours with third through sixth grade children. As an educational researcher, it was my aim to find out the kinds of questions docents typically ask during their tours. Since developing the ability to think critically is widely viewed as an important educational goal, I decided to look specifically at questions that promote children’s (and adult’s) thinking (cognitive), rather than emotional (affective), abilities.

The use of questions as a means of promoting children’s higher level thinking has long been considered an effective pedagogical tool and a basic way of stimulating participation, thinking, and learning. In fact, it has been estimated that classroom teachers ask an average of 300 to 400 questions in a single day! While asking questions is important, it is just as important to be aware of the types of questions you are asking.

Starting With a Structure

It’s easy to get confused when you start to think about all the different kinds of questions you might ask. Therefore, it is helpful to have a structure to give you guidance and assist you in your planning. One such structure is the hierarchy of thinking skills developed by Benjamin Bloom. Although developed in 1956, it is still commonly cited in teacher education textbooks today. The hierarchy ranges from behaviors which necessitate lower-level skills (i.e., Knowledge) to the behaviors which demand the highest level of thinking skills (i.e., Synthesis). Following are brief definitions of each of the six thinking levels (including subcategories) as well as examples of questions used by the docents in this study.

I. KNOWLEDGE (remembering)

This level involves the remembering of learned information (ideas, materials, or phenomena), either by recognition or recall. Emphasis here is on remembering learned information. There are two primary types:

1) Recall of information, including definitions, actions or events, names, dates, and places. What do we call this? What did your teacher tell you about this artist?

2) Identification of persons, objects, materials, and events. Can you find the boy with the blue shirt? What colors do you see here?

II. COMPREHENSION (understanding)

This level focuses on those objectives, behaviors, and responses which indicate that the child has a grasp of the literal meaning and the intent of a communication. There are three types:

1) Translation deals with the ability to transpose a communication into another language, into other terms, or into a different form. What does an olive branch stand for? What’s another word for “wonderful”?

2) Interpretation refers to a global understanding of the relationships between the various elements of the communication. What’s going on in this painting? How do you suppose this person feels?

3) Extrapolation involves understanding the likely continuation of trends or tendencies, predicting consequences of courses or action, and understanding implications. Where is the light in this picture coming from? What do you think would happen next if this painting came alive?

III. APPLICATION (solving)

Bloom makes the distinction between Comprehension, wherein a person demonstrates that s/he can apply the abstraction, and Application wherein s/he does apply the abstraction independently and in the appropriate situation. There are three types:

1) Quantification in which the children are not told what mathematical process to apply. How many miles do you think it is back to those mountains? How big is this horse?

2) Physical demonstrations of a concept. In the air, make a brush stroke with your arm that would fit the style of this painting.

3) Problem-solving suppositions wherein children are asked to put themselves in an “if you were in
A Structure for Teaching

by Laura Wendling

this or that situation, what would you do?”. What if you were a shepherdess and had a flock of sheep and one got away, what would you do? If you were a court painter, how do you suppose you’d make the queen look when you were painting her?

IV. ANALYSIS (analyzing)

The aim in this level is on the separation of an item into its various elements and on recognition of the relationships of the parts to the way the whole is organized. Whereas Comprehension involves content of the material, Analysis deals with both content and form, including techniques and devices used to convey meaning. There are two main types:

1) **Compare and contrast** questions in which children examine or think about a variety of separate issues, putting together the parts into an organized whole to make some kind of comparative judgment, and explicit discourse on the methods. *What is different about these two styles of painting? How is life in this painting the same as our life today?*

2) **Ways the artist conveys meaning** which engage children in going beyond simple understanding towards an expression of their insights into how the (artistic) meaning was achieved. *How does the artist tell us that there is conflict going on? What did the artist do to make you feel happy?*

V. SYNTHESIS (creating)

A person operates at this level when s/he is able to combine all of the elements and parts of a communication that are known, and then restructure them to form a pattern that did not previously exist. Bloom provides the example of “creating a piece of artwork” to typify this level. If creating such a work is not possible, aim at asking questions that elicit original, creative responses from the children. *What title would you give this work? If you were going to design a coin for this city, what kinds of things would be important to put on it?*

VI. EVALUATION (judging)

This highest level involves making evaluations or judgments about the value of ideas, works, solutions, methods, materials, etc. Such a determination may be based on either internal criteria or external standards. If no formal criteria are available or appropriate, try asking the children to apply and explain their own criteria. *Do you think that the use of white was a good idea? Which of these two pots has the best design?*

**When a Question Isn’t a Question**

In addition to Affective types of questions, two other types of questions were used frequently by the docents. The first type was Procedural questions that were used to keep the children focused and on task. This type fell into three categories: Managerial (Does anybody have any questions?), Focusing (Do you see the bird here?), and Probing (What else?).

The second type of question is what I refer to as a Rhetorical or Answer question and is the trickiest of all because this question sounds like a question but really isn’t one. Instead it is a declarative statement of fact that is phrased as a question through the use of add-ons such as, “isn’t it?”, “don’t they?”, “okay?”. Rhetorical questions can almost always be answered with a “yes”, and oral responses typically are not expected. (Looks like an almond shape, doesn’t it?)

**Strive for Quality not Quantity**

When I began my research, I did not know whether the docents in this study would ask a lot of questions or only a few during their tours. As it turned out, overall they asked many—up to a high of 187 questions in a 50 minute period. That averages out to a question every 28 seconds! But remember, it takes time to respond. This is especially true when answering more difficult higher-level thinking questions. Silence may feel uncomfortable at first; however, allowing some moments of quiet after asking a question will increase learning and show children that you believe their responses are worth the wait.

Integrating higher-level thinking questions effectively into your tour demands practice and a conscious effort on your part to use your own higher-level thinking abilities. It won’t happen by chance. So ask yourself this, “What are my three primary objectives for a tour?” If one of your objectives aims at getting children to think at higher levels, then you are heading down the right path. Next, try recording one of your tours, and then write down the questions you asked. Group your questions according to a framework like the one described in this article. In this way, you will better ensure that your tours are not only recreational but highly educational experiences for children.

The author wishes to express her gratitude to the docents who voluntarily agreed to participate in this project. Without their gracious cooperation, this research would not have been possible. Because the docents were assured anonymity, names of the participating institutions have been omitted.

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Taming the Maddening Crowds

They’re here they are — what seems like hundreds upon hundreds of people, totally bereft of any fashion sense whatever, impatient, hot (or cold; it’s always one or the other), gazing skeptically down on you as you prepare to transport them to new heights of consciousness. Sound intimidating? It doesn’t have to be. Although most of us find interpreting to small, intimate groups more rewarding and pleasurable than speaking before a large throng, there are techniques that you can employ to engage the visitor even if s/he is but one in a large mass of people with differing agendas, ages, and, ah, shall we say, acumen.

Ultimately you want to challenge your visitors to think, to react — either verbally, physically, or mentally — and to try to relate to the information you are proffering them. The easy way out is to spoon feed the rabble your information in a one-way oration that only tends to distance you, and your message, from them.

“But, golly, Mr. Howell,” you may be thinking, “it sounds as if you’re suggesting we try to interact with, like, 30+ people!” Well, you’re right. I am. Adult (and child) education is most effective when the learners are involved in the process.

“Well, Mister Hot-Shot Know-It-All, did it not occur to you that those same college flunkies who came up with that obvious little pearl also concluded that most adolescents and adults get extremely intimidated by large crowds and don’t like being involved, for fear of embarrassing themselves in front of a bunch of strangers?” Yes, but only when they are singled out and made separate from the group. (By the way, don’t you just love third - fifth graders? They’d jump off a cliff naming all the geologic periods they passed if you asked them to.) And remember, “involvement” can mean many things. But I’m getting ahead of myself. The following are some ideas to keep in mind when interpreting to crowds. They won’t work with all groups all the time but I think you’ll find that they will help you improve your ability to personalize your interpretation and, as a result, make your message more immediate.

▲ The Agassi Angle Remember a shoe commercial on TV not too long ago featuring Andre Agassi saying “image is everything?” It’s always annoyed me that someone with his gifts could say such a thing, particularly when he was partially right. The way you are perceived is extremely important. In fact, most people will form an opinion of you within three seconds of coming into contact with you. That first impression will set the tone for the entire experience. The more professional, upbeat, personable, and enthusiastic you are at the beginning, the less energy you will expend trying to justify your credibility later. Whether we like it or not, perception is reality in our visitor’s mind.

▲ Periscope Up Watch the group. Observe their actions and react accordingly. Don’t ever assume the tour will go the way you expect it to. Be flexible: if people seem to get antsy, use your judgment and decide if it’s in the tour’s best interest to edit your remarks. It’s their tour, not yours. Are they confused-looking, frustrated, totally lost? Or, for that matter, are they smiling and nodding at you? (Most visitors feel they have to be polite, no matter what they’re
really thinking.) At least once ask for feedback: "Does this make sense?" "Am I going too fast?" Once you go on automatic you are not longer an interpreter. You are nothing more than a live tape recorder and are in great need of reviewing past issues of The Docent Educator!

**The Pawn Opening** People tend not to like being set apart from other people. They like to feel safe and secure in new surroundings and situations. If you can devise a situation at the beginning where everyone participates together rather than picking on a select few you will create an atmosphere of openness and camaraderie. This can be done either physically or mentally.

Start off with a rhetorical question or direct questions to the whole group that are easily answered. I have seen an interpreter hold up two pieces of reddish and white wood, mention that one is white pine and the other red oak, and ask which is which. "Too elementary," you may say, but it accomplishes three things: it shows you are not going to embarrass them, it helps their self esteem because even if they don’t verbalize the answer they are thinking, "hey, I know that!," and it establishes from the outset that this interactive approach is going to be your style. (A question like "You there, in the orange shirt ... there was

only one period in history when the entire world was at peace. When was it?" is not a good opening gambit.)

Physically, if you can involve the entire group, or a sizable portion, in illustrating an idea they will begin to feel a bond with one another; you lessen the feeling that they are a group of strangers at the mercy of some tour guide gone wacko. For example, use the size of the crowd to relate to points dealing with quantities: "Together, we are about the size of typical Continental Line company."

Once you establish the fact that you are going to use them passively, then you can start narrowing down the numbers yet still expect a reasonable chance of someone volunteering. For instance, use them as points along a time line to illustrate historical distance ("You here represent today; the lady two feet away from you represents when man first appeared on Earth. That guy way over yonder represents when dinosaurs walked the Earth.")

If you do have a situation that calls for only one or a few volunteers then you have a few decisions to make. Sometimes it’s good to let the experience be a surprise; keeping the visitor’s experience unpredictable will help maintain interest but, on the other hand, explaining what you are asking of volunteers might encourage them to participate. At any rate, never forget to thank them both before and after you have used them.

If you are asking someone to role play or read a quote then make sure you provide them with easily read material and time to review it. Stuff like this is best done by someone sixteen or over and, above all, make sure it has a point.

You can also use the visitor to represent what you are trying to explain. I saw a wonderful interpretation once where the guide asked a tall man to represent a mature redwood, then surrounded him with a ring of children representing how the species reproduces itself by expanding outward from a central point. No one had to say anything or do anything or trust to prior experience; they were just pawns in the game of interpretation. This example leads me to my next point.

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*by Mark Howell*
**Suffer the Little Children**

Kids will be kids so why try to change them, shushing them all the time or, worse, ignoring them. Asking kids to come to the front of the group, explaining an idea to them first then expanding on that idea for the adults or having them do activities (scavenger hunts, object identification, etc.) that illustrate ideas from your tour does several things: first of all, the kids get something out of it all, and the parents think you’re the next best thing since the automatic garage door opener. That, in turn, makes them respect you all the more and, besides, adults get as much out of interpretations geared to children as the kids do. They won’t admit but, trust me, they do.

**The Emperor’s Clothes** I’ve never understood the old public speaking advice of imagining your audience naked. I can’t think of anything that would put me off this profession more quickly. But do remember that you are more familiar with your subject than the vast majority of your audience. If you are intimidated by large groups just keep in mind that you are perceived as the expert until you do something to change that opinion. To keep that from happening maintain good eye contact with the group (it will unconsciously register with them if you keep looking over their heads), be honest if you don’t know the answer to a question, keep fidgeting to a minimum, and finish your sentences with a sense of finality. Some folks end declarative sentences as if they’re asking questions, with the voice trailing up, suggesting a lack of confidence in what they are saying.

Of course, following this course of interaction always leaves you vulnerable to the bane of all interpreters — the Know-It-All (shudder). If you get some Know-It-All on your case, allow them their opportunity to speak (you should have encouraged questions and observations at the beginning of the tour and, besides, they would have interrupted you anyway) but *always* have the last word, beginning with “Our research indicates …” and then leave the point. **Who do you think the crowd will believe?** If Mr. Know-It-All (they do tend to be men, don’t they?) becomes a heckler, then no one will think the less of you if you tactfully suggest you will gladly talk with him/her after the tour concludes. Believe me, the other visitors will thank you for it. The chance of that happening is by far negated by the positive interactions you will encounter.

**Silence is Golden** Feel like you have to fill up every little portion of your tour with verbiage? Do you find yourself answering your own questions because no one spoke in the nanosecond you gave them to think of an answer? Remember that language is an artificial tool that humans developed for communication, and it has to be processed. Give people time to respond to a question, at least four seconds before you bull in with the answer or a follow-up clue. Doesn’t sound like a long time? Time it out; you’d be surprised how long a time it can be.

The same goes for dramatic pauses. The silence that follows a salient point or that occurs during an activity or an observation of something is as useful as the commentary you provide but only if you utilize it right from the beginning of your interpretation and prepare people for the fact. **If you are consistent, silence is less an uncomfortable pregnant pause and more a moment for reflection.**

**Speak and Be Heard** On the other hand, when you are speaking make sure you can be heard. Periodically, ask the group if they can hear you. This does two things: first of all you’re not assuming anything and it shows your respect for them and your message. If we discover we are not being heard we tend to compensate by increasing our volume. This only sends the voice into a higher register and pitch where it dissipates faster and is just downright irritating to listen to. Female interpreters need to be particularly sensitive to vocal strength since their voices tend to be

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*Having first asked these three men to contribute only their height to make her point about the space Africans had on board slave ships, the interpreter eventually had the entire group lying down side-by-side to dramatize the close quarters they would have had to endure. (photo courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg)*
high to begin with, but us tenors need to be aware of the impact our voices have as well. This topic deserves a full article (or issue, Mr. Editor?) but, generally, try to keep your voice at a normal level and put more air behind it by taking deeper breaths and pushing that air with the diaphragm. Yelling originates in the throat and sounds thin and will tire your voice out. Projection begins in the chest and will be more resonant. In short, don’t yell, breathe.

**Traffic Control** Try to position yourself slightly above the group if at all possible but not in an obviously dominant manner. If you’re outside, a small rise in the ground is dandy but standing on a chair or something similar will unconsciously distance you from the group, even though you would be better seen. Better to spread the group out to 2-3 deep in a crescent shape, if possible. If they don’t do it naturally, direct them to.

**Piloting a Battleship** Face it, large crowds move more slowly than small crowds. If you are interpreting in more than one location then accept the fact that you will not get across as much information as you will with a small group, so plan accordingly. Also, try to avoid talking while on the move. Before you step off, offer a transition or some food for thought from your current location to the next one and give them a break from your wise insights (Voltaire once said that “the way to be a bore is to say everything.”). Once moving, take it easy. Those of you who have stepped off and then turned around only to find yourself light years ahead of a huffing and puffing queue know how difficult it is to match your workman-like pace to their I’m-on-vacation-dammit pace. When you arrive at your next location give the back of the group time to join you while you fill the time asking for questions or just getting to know some of your group (you never know what might come in handy). Once all are collected reiterate your transition and begin. The reiterated transition lets latecomers know that you have not been yapping about critical information they may have missed that might cause them to resent you.

**What if they just don’t want to play?** Despite your best efforts, you’ll get groups that will not gel or just won’t interact. Well, you’ll never know if you don’t try. Avoid the all-too-easy practice of prejudging a group. Approach each group with a fresh perspective and the benefit of a doubt. I know this sounds a bit prissy but, remember, your attitude will be perceived by tour members. Either consciously or unconsciously, they are sizing you up while you are sizing them up.

Confidence, visitor perspective, flexibility, establishing expectations: these are ideas to keep in mind when approaching a group. Ultimately, your best guide is experience (sound familiar?). It’s easy for me to sit here and type out suggestions and recommend a few techniques. Sure, there is risk involved in these ideas but, as with all things, the higher the risk, the higher the return. Plus, you control and lessen your risk if you establish your expectations for the experience right from the beginning. You cannot expect effective interaction if you introduce it halfway through the tour.

Large groups of people with divergent backgrounds can have a meaningful tour but only if you approach them with the intent of involving them in the experience. Ask yourself: what can you do to exceed their expectations. You will find the answer requires work and diligence but the rewards are worth it — for both of you.

* P.S. - As far as I know, the world has never been completely at peace. It was a trick question!

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Mark Howell is a trainer in cultural history and presentation skills, program planner, and occasional interpreter for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. He also edits a quarterly publication on topics pertaining to the colonial Chesapeake region and interpretive technique called the Colonial Williamsburg Interpreter. He has foolishly offered to the editor that anyone interested in receiving this publication, free of charge, can be placed on its mailing list. Write Mr. Howell at Colonial Williamsburg, Box 1776, Williamsburg, VA 23187 and request to be added to an august list that includes Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, The Docent Educator, and the Annie Oakley Foundation.
For Your Consideration

A New Resource
for Volunteer Program Administration

The American Council for the Arts in association with the American Association for Museum Volunteers has produced a comprehensive text on administering volunteer programs that should of assistance to anyone organizing or supervising volunteers. Volunteer Program Administration: A Handbook for Museums and Other Cultural Institutions, by Joan Kuyper, offers sample job descriptions, evaluation forms, and program guidelines easily adaptable for use in every possible volunteer setting including docent programming.

The text examines such topics as: long-range planning; legal and ethical requirements; leadership and advocacy; the role of the volunteer administrator; program supervision; sources for recruitment; interviewing, placing, training, and evaluating volunteers; and even dismissing a volunteer.

Volunteer Program Administration is available through the American Council for the Arts and the American Association of Museums. The charge is $15.25 for members and $16.95 for non-members. Both organizations charge a shipping and handling fee, however the ACA charges only $4, which is $3 less than the AAM charges for UPS delivery. To order through the ACA call, toll free 800/321-4510 (credit card orders only) or write to: American Council for the Arts, Dept. 33, One East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022. To order through the AAM call 202/289-6578 or write to: AAM Bookstore, P.O. Box 40, Washington, DC 20042.

Enfranchised Docents Respond!

Any museum seriously hoping to enfranchise and professionalize its docent corps should create routes for their inclusion. The following are suggestions that can make docents feel and perform better, and improve the rapport between docents and the paid staff:

♦ invite a docent representative to be present at regularly scheduled staff meetings (except those that are closed for specific reasons) so that he or she can report what is happening in all areas of the museum to the other docents;
♦ invite a docent to be present during the initial planning process for upcoming exhibitions so that those who must teach with the objects can express their ideas and concerns to those who instill and label them;
♦ invite representatives of the curatorial and security staff to speak with docents to discuss their ideas and concerns about tours, visitor conduct, and the docents’ role in making their responsibilities more successful;
♦ provide docents with regular, periodic performance evaluations so that they might know what is expected of them, how they are doing, and where and how they might improve; and
♦ request that the museum’s director address the docents as a group on a regularly scheduled basis in order to present an overview of the goals and challenges facing the museum in the months ahead.

On Being a Professional

If one of the goals of your institution or docent organization is to raise the performance and status of docents to that of a profession, consider those variables that define a “professional.” They are: performance standards; accountability; and compensation.

Performance standards convey the purpose and responsibilities of the position. For paid staff they are established through written job descriptions that define precisely what that staff member is expected to do; who that staff member is supervised by; and the “yardstick” by which their activities are measured.

Accountability refers to being responsible for one’s actions and activities. A professional is accountable for such factors as his or her: attendance; reliability; deportment; acquisition of necessary skills and abilities; and ability to fulfill the responsibilities assigned. Professionals learn what is expected of them and how their performance meets these expectations through performance evaluations or reviews.

Compensation is the reward for work. Compensation need not be monetary, but it should, however, be tangible (in addition to those intangible rewards such as camaraderie, or the satisfaction of doing a good deed). Compensating volunteers should not only take the form of parties or luncheons, but should include items that enhance professional development. For instance, provide volunteers with individual copies of texts and periodicals (such as The Docent Educator); offer them opportunities to learn from guest speakers; sponsor field trips; and give docents institutional privileges accorded to other staff members.
It Works for Me...
Sharing successful techniques and ideas.

Docents may not think of themselves as storytellers, but we tell stories every time we tour. What greater dramas are there than the conflict between native and intruder, whether insect, plant, human, or other animal; between the forces and tensions in the earth; or between how things were and what lies ahead? As any teacher understands, piquing curiosity, stimulating creativity, and encouraging analytical thinking requires adding spice to the learning stew. Getting youngsters to appreciate a museum as more than a repository of miscellaneous collections is a daily — hourly! — challenge. The Coordinator of Volunteers and several experienced docents at the Los Angeles County Natural History Museum brainstormed and innovated two approaches to class tours.

Docents were treated to a workshop/performance by Jan Manning on Historical Interpretation. His technique has the docents appear in character, in authentic costume, and talking to the class as though stepping out of a set.

It is a very effective way to give immediacy to a lesson and to enhance the reality of an exhibition, whether it is of a gold mine, a whaling ship, a covered wagon, or a landscape painting. It also necessitates research and careful scripting to be credible. While some docents have been understandably hesitant about this level of make-believe, a few intrepid ones have taken the risk. Their success will, no doubt, lead others to gather their courage and costume before long.

The theater of the mind, the province of storytellers, is less threatening. Learning to tell stories is like learning to play a musical instrument. Though virtuosity demands years of study and practice and talent, one can learn to play a decent tune early on.

One of the first tasks of a storytelling workshop is to ease docents out of performance shyness/jitters by demonstrating that we are already storytellers. After all, docents are accustomed to addressing groups of various sizes and remembering quantities of information on a wide variety of subjects. Another task is to explain that docents need not, indeed should not, memorize and recite *Moby Dick* in the Marine Biology Hall! A simple, interjection of a brief story about deception can lead into a discussion of animal or insect camouflage. Even those receiving the tour can be involved in storytelling. What could be more appealing than mummies or statues coming to life and telling us about themselves, or having predator and prey give their opinions about their mutual habitat?

Storytelling is like a game of Chinese Checkers, you can move in any direction. It is, moreover, an effective teaching device, whether used to illustrate a point or merely to trip the light fantastic. Both storytelling and historical interpretation enrich the touring experience. And besides, they’re fun!

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*Sylvia Khan, docent
Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History*

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**Museum Education Conference**

On November 14, 1994, the Museum of Arts and Sciences in Daytona Beach, Florida will host its 4th annual museum education conference. The all-day conference is open to both docents and staff members and includes a workshop on interactive teaching techniques, as well as an information exchange. The registration fee is $45.00 and includes a box lunch. For further information, write or call:

Trish Thompson, Education Dept.
Museum of Arts and Sciences
1040 Museum Boulevard
Daytona Beach, FL 32114
phone (904) 255-0285.

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**Frank Stella on "Blockbusters"**

When asked about special exhibitions that assist museums to get the “maximum number of people into its halls” in the September/October 1993 issue of *Museum News*, artist Frank Stella expressed concerns.

“The Matisse show in New York raises that kind of question … Is it right to bring all that Matisse together for a few connoisseurs who really want to see what it looks like together? They say they are doing it for everybody else. But I don’t think it is right to bring all those things together so people can now pass through and forget about Matisse. Now Matisse is completely done. We don’t need another Matisse show for another 75 or 100 years. Is that really fair to Matisse or the people who look at Matisse?”

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**Tracking Down Historic Sites**

If you enjoy working with historic sites or visiting them when you travel, a useful publication to help you discover new ones is *A Guide to National Monuments and Historic Sites* by Jill MacNeice. Prentice Hall, $14.95. The text lists natural and historic sites that have been preserved by the Federal Government. They’re listed state by state, and range from the well-known (the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.) to the more remote (Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument in New Mexico).
Elusive University Audiences

The Henry Gallery at the University of Washington enjoys a location that many museums, on campus or otherwise, would be delighted to have. Over 2,000 students, faculty, and staff pass by the front door of the Henry everyday. Located on the western edge of the campus, it is, so far, the only building right on the main thoroughfare running the length of the campus's west side.

Yet, despite this high profile, and free admission for UW students, many, many students continue to pass the museum by, going in only once or twice during their four years at the university, or worse, never going in at all. And, of the students who visit the museum while studying here, many never return after graduation.

It is encouraging that the Henry's visitor surveys show that 60% of our audience comes from the community and 40% are students, a great improvement over the last decade. Immediate future plans for expanding our general audience include developing even closer ties with our university students and faculty, placing this relationship as one of the most important the museum must foster.

Currently, the Henry Gallery has several programs in place to involve university students. For the last five years, the museum has drawn exhibition guides from the graduate program at the School of Art. Most are art history students, but some are not, coming from the studio art program or the ranks of recent graduates. These guides tour exhibitions much as docents do, going through similar training and preparation for working with different audiences. Our exhibitions change regularly requiring them to develop a new tour every three or four months. To compensate, we pay our guides a nominal amount that is more of a “thank you” than a real honorarium. The experience is the true reward, giving participants an inside perspective on the museum and an improved ability to verbalize intelligently about art.

The Henry also has an academic year internship for art history graduate students that includes curatorial research, development of education programs, and working on wall texts and gallery guides. The curator of collections also employs a few students each year to assist in various cataloging projects and the occasional small exhibition. In some cases, a graduate student has taken on a large research project that greatly enhances the museum’s information about a particular segment of its collection. All of these internship opportunities give an excellent introduction to museum careers.

During the school year, many classes from different departments visit the museum. Architecture students study the building (some are currently involved in designing imaginary additions to the building), art history

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students come to our prints and photographs study room to view
originals, and English students come to
observe and write about various works in
the exhibitions. There is an organization
on campus called “Freshmen Interest
Groups” which are small groups of
freshmen from a single department who
regularly go on activities lead by older
students to familiarize them with
campus. The number of visits from these
groups seems related to the types of
exhibitions the museum offers.

Another activity that has been
successful is the Henry’s “student
openings.” These are openings held
during the day around the lunch hour
where we serve refreshments and give
out our posters for door prizes. These
openings always attract students inside,
especially those elusive ones passing by.

In the last two years, the Henry has
offered University of Washington
students free admission to the majority of
its lectures and special events. It became
clear before the institution of this policy
that many students would not come to a
lecture or event even if the admission fee
was only three or four dollars. Since
then, we have had a large increase in
student attendance to education
programs, and many faculty assign our
lectures as part of course requirements.

Also in the past, we have allowed
the main gallery to be used for music and
drama performances by students. These
short programs are always supervised by
a faculty member and usually do not
have a general audience.

In the future, the Henry Gallery
would ideally like to have a staff member
whose work is devoted to strengthening
the relationship between UW students
and the museum. Many more
curriculum-based discussions need to be
held with faculty to help them
incorporate the museum in their course
syllabi. Much more could be done to
make the museum useful to faculty and

by Tamara Moats

students, both through the development
of specific exhibitions and educational
programming. When our museum
building expands (scheduled for 1996)
much more of our permanent collection
will be on view for extended time
periods, thus allowing it to be used
predictably and regularly. Also, we
hope to expand the internship program
so that it will have a stipend attached to
it and major tasks assigned.

We have talked with faculty at the
College of Education about involving
their student teachers in the museum and
attempting to give their students skills
for using museums in connection with
their future classroom responsibilities.

An important aspect of expanding
the museum profile in any community is
the museum’s ability to expose a wide
variety of potentially interested
individuals to the possibility of a career
in museum work. This helps build long-
term change into the museum’s
structure and broadens the curatorial
base. The Henry is very interested in
making the museum as accessible as
possible through audience
diversification.

Unlike any other type of museum, a
university museum, with its ability to
reach an open, relatively young
audience, can become an ideal forum for
discussion of not only the language of
art and its magic, but also how art
reflects diverse aspects of our
complicated society.

Tamara Moats has been Curator of
Education at the Henry Art Gallery at the
University of Washington for the past five
years. Formerly, she worked at the Los
Angeles County Museum of Art.

Submit an Article!

Publish Your Teaching Ideas and Techniques

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

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

Object Literacy: Reading, Interpreting, and Discovering Meaning
Spring 1995
Submission deadline - Dec. 1, 1994

Adult Visitors: Touring and Teaching Adult Audiences and Families
Summer 1995
Submission deadline - March 1, 1995

Connections: Tour Introductions, Transitions, and Conclusions
Autumn 1995
Submission deadline - June 1, 1995

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.

Send your ideas and manuscripts to:

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If you wish to receive writer’s guidelines,
please send us a self-addressed,
stamped envelope.
Videos Boost Blockbusters

Your museum is hosting a Blockbuster exhibition. Attendance numbers are more crucial than ever. There is a need to foster public awareness, and a strong desire to prepare visitors and school groups for what they will see. The most viable and successful route may be an alliance with your local commercial television station.

Whether the station produces public service announcements or an extended program about the exhibition, the greatest number of people will be reached via local television. Cooperation and collaboration between non-profit organizations, businesses, and commercial television are increasingly common occurrences.

In Dallas, Texas, for instance, 31 such programs have been produced by the Dallas/Fort Worth NBC affiliate, KXAS-TV, in partnership with area cultural, scientific, and educational organizations. The station has embraced the idea of providing significant support to museums and other local organizations by supplying technical support in the form of photographers, editors, graphic artists, equipment, on-camera talent, and programming airtime.

In 1989, when "Ramses the Great" was exhibited at the Dallas Museum of Natural History, a 30-minute documentary about the Blockbuster was shot on location in Egypt. The program, which was produced by Mayah Production for KXAS, included images of objects in the exhibition in their historic, social, and geographic context. It was shown on two occasions, one at prime-time and the other on the weekend. Funding, supplied by corporate sponsors, offered supporting businesses valuable exposure as underwriters and presenters of this televised "special."

The impact of the broadcast upon museum visitation was enormous. The museum had 1.2 million attendees during the run of "Ramses the Great" — the largest attendance ever in the city. The exhibition's success was directly related to the impact of the television program. As an added bonus, the NBC affiliate was awarded the coveted Business Committee for the Arts' Obelisk Award as the "business in the metropole contributing the most to cultural exposure and education in Dallas."

Among the most important considerations for content of the "Ramses the Great" video was that this video could go where the museum visitor could not . . . to Egypt. Viewers could see that Ramses made his presence known all over Egypt during his reign and that this presence can be seen there even today. A powerful educational tool, the video provided real-life settings for the objects in the exhibition.

With this in mind, "Ramses the Great" video was used as an introduction to the exhibition, giving visitors the opportunity to view it and learn prior to entering the exhibition. Copies were also circulated to schools and community centers planning visits to the exhibition. Reviews quoted visitors as saying, "The program made our experience very exciting because we could imagine the objects as they are in Egypt." Currently, the video is in national educational distribution through the efforts of Guides to Understanding, a distribution and media development group in Dallas.

Sponsorship of Blockbuster exhibitions usually comes from large corporations. Often, they will respond enthusiastically to the idea of creating and distributing documentary videos to elementary and secondary schools, libraries, and universities as an extension of educational outreach. The majority of classroom teachers have access to video tape players and seek out materials that better prepare students for their museum experience.

Properly planned and produced, a video or documentary should have a viable presence, and should stand on its own, educationally. Documentary videos give a longer life to Blockbuster exhibitions, far beyond their actual presence in the local community. Such videos can be useful to museum education programming and can be used in support of the curriculum in schools. In addition to their tremendous educational and public relations potential, videos can permit us to experience outstanding collections of art, objects, or natural specimens that are brought together only once in a lifetime.

by Barbara Nichols and Katina Simmons

Barbara Nichols, educator, trainer, and fund-raiser is a principal in Creative Learning Associates. Katina Simmons, television producer for KXAS-TV and Mayah Productions, has produced 31 documentaries on science, multi-cultural, and arts-related topics. Both are located in Dallas, Texas. Together they operate Guides to Understanding, which develops educational materials to accompany media products, and arranges for educational distribution of documentaries.
The Olympic Spirit

How do you interest a diverse audience, community, and volunteer corps in an exhibition entitled Classical Taste in America, 1800-1840? The Mint Museum of Art in Charlotte, N.C., successfully drew upon the theme and spirit of the Olympic Games.

Following the archaeological excavation of the ancient Olympic stadium in 1878, Frenchman Baron Pierre de Coubertin renewed the Olympic Games of the Greeks. Earlier in the nineteenth century, a similar classical obsession transformed tastes and styles in Europe and America. As the Olympic flame is the classical symbol of peace and friendship among all nations, classical tastes became an international symbol of beauty and, for America, a national expression of patriotism.

Early on, leaders in the United States of America recognized a need for new symbols to unite the many disparate parts of the country under its new republican government. Led by George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, this new nation embraced the models of ancient Greece and Rome in laying the foundations of a new society and culture. The major exhibition, Classical Taste in America, 1800-1840, presents furniture, sculpture, silver, ceramics, and costumes — the arts and designs that came to symbolize our new nation.

The Mint Museum of Art faced a formidable challenge. How to interest the greater Charlotte community in an historic exhibition of decorative arts, including gilded furniture, ornate silver, and aristocratic portraits created to display the refinement, culture, and affluence of an elite society?

In spite of the fact that, in 1791, George Washington had called Charlotte “a trifling place,” and by 1800 the city had a population of only 300 people, Charlotte was an appropriate host for this exhibition. The Mint Museum of Art was originally constructed as the Charlotte Mint, designed in 1837 by William Strickland in the classical style. After surveying objects created for people of privilege and affluence, the historic exhibition turned to the popular dissemination of classical taste throughout the South, and in particular North Carolina, as well as to the minting of coinage in Charlotte.

Beyond curators, historians, collectors, and specialists, what interest did Classical Taste in America, 1800-1840 hold for the general public? Lots! And the exhibition proved to be an unmitigated Blockbuster for school groups. All Charlotte-Mecklenburg eighth graders came to view the exhibition. As a mandatory field trip for Social Studies, the eighth-grade tours represented the most democratic and diverse group of Mint visitors.

The exhibition opened with a timeline of American and European history from 1800 to 1840 and presented students with a grand tour, from Europe to the building in which they were standing — Charlotte’s Mint. The Education Department decided to tour focusing on the historic hits in the exhibition, such as Thomas Jefferson’s portrait, Napoleon’s chair, and the Speaker’s Chair at the North Carolina State Congress.

Preschool groups and young elementary students also caught the classical spirit, but were toured quite differently. The children’s tour, nicknamed “The Paw and Claw” by the docents, focused on classical motifs, such as paw feet, dolphins, swans, and griffins. The docents captivated children with stories from classical mythology, and they provided a basket of touchables — from marble to tassles — allowing children a multi-sensory experience. In the classroom, children designed their own Grecian vase, decorated a nineteenth-century interior and built a city with domes, columns, and pediments. This “hands-on” approach inspired creativity to compete with antiquity.

The exhibition was also extremely popular with Senior citizen groups. A tea set would evoke memories of long past visits to Granny’s house. Like enjoying an old quilt, Senior citizens appreciated this American sampler of the decorative arts.

To accommodate the crowds anticipated for this Blockbuster exhibition, the museum needed to double its docent corps from 100 to 200 volunteers (plus an additional 300 volunteers for greeters, coat check, and membership). A successful effort was made to recruit new docents that reflected the diversity of the Charlotte community.

Once recruited, however, the new docents needed a training program to bring them up to speed. New docents joined the existing docent corps for four weeks of training on the special exhibition.

(Continued on page 20, "Spirit")

by Susan S. Perry
"To See or Not to See – That is the Question!"

Blockbusters Present Special Problems for Teachers

When I was a very little girl, the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus came to my town. I went with my family to the railroad station at the break of dawn to watch the circus train disgorge its menagerie of exotic animals. We stood with throngs of awestruck citizens as elephants and bespangled girls led the circus parade along our main street to the vacant lot transformed with tents full of wonder. And, then, we went home to await the big event — not the circus itself, although that was certainly an exciting activity to anticipate. No, we were waiting to see GARGANTUA! The gigantic gorilla was pictured on posters all over town — teeth bared, eyes burning with hatred for his captors.

How I remember that night! Perched on my father's shoulders, I rode high above the crowds into the sideshow tents. We worked our way slowly toward the cage that protected us from the terrifying gorilla. I hung on tightly as Daddy waded through the sea of people. At last, we gazed through the bars of the mighty cage. And we saw ... a large bundle of black hair curled quietly in a corner. Gargantua was fast asleep.

Now, almost 50 years later, I still remember my first "Blockbuster" event. The memory affects the way I approach the highly touted, once-in-a-lifetime exhibits many museums work so hard to present. My baby self learned a lot from the encounter with Gargantua — don't believe everything you're told. When I consider taking a class to visit a "Blockbuster," the Gargantua experience always reappears.

Blockbusters present teachers with a major dilemma. On one hand, there's a lot to be learned from these "significant" cultural events. The opportunity to see, "up close and personal." King Tut's golden mask or Napoleon's military tent will happen only once in a lifetime. Conversely, because they do attract large numbers of people, these exhibitions often become mere "walk-throughs" where no teaching takes place and the lessons learned are incidental. More and more, the job of informing the viewer is passed to a very sophisticated, and sometimes expensive, audio tour that children are usually unable to master. In addition, such exhibitions are logistical nightmares for teachers, and they violate the First Law of Teaching — "Avoid Surprises ... Unless You Know About Them Ahead of Time."

Successful field trips require a teacher to pre-plan, preview, and prepare. Because Blockbusters and other such special exhibits are not part of a museum's permanent collection, a teacher cannot do the preliminary work necessary for a good field trip unless the museum and the docent staff consider her needs when the exhibit is planned. If those needs are included in the overall plan for the exhibition, Blockbusters become a meaningful and important outing for school children. If not, children may learn, as I did with Gargantua, "don't believe everything you're told."

Pre-planning for field trips is done months in advance. Lesson goals to be met by the field trip must be approved, lessons written, and permissions obtained. Just as museums spend months or years in preparation for a special exhibition, teachers, too, need lots of lead time. A summer gathering for teachers to alert them to upcoming events, to familiarize them with the physical facility, and to introduce them to the museum's education staff and docents would be very helpful. In the case of proposed Blockbusters, teachers...
could be shown mock-ups of the exhibition space and traffic plans. (It is even possible that teachers could point out potential trouble spots in the proposal. After all, they do crowd control for a living!)

Even if a meeting of this nature is not possible, a printed calendar of events (with opening and closing dates clearly delineated) should be distributed to all teachers, or, at least to every school within the museum's audience range.

Such a calendar should, of course, include instructions for booking school visits for both permanent and special exhibits. Many large, well-funded institutions produce slick, professional calendars as a matter of course, but even small museums hosting a traveling exhibition can put together a suitable calendar with a good typewriter or computer and a copying machine!

**Preventing** a traveling exhibit is difficult, and, in some cases, impossible. In order to do a good job of previewing, a teacher must visit the exhibition first and then book her class tour. In reality, class tours for major events that are expected to draw large crowds must be made months in advance. Even so, if possible, a teacher should visit the exhibition before taking a class to see it. Some museums offer free preview tickets or preview evenings for teachers who have booked tours, and these are very helpful. At the very least, preview materials such as brochures or catalogues should be made available to teachers.

**Preparation** a class to visit the exhibit is, of course, the most important part of preparation, and it is in this area that museum docents can play the most important role. By their very nature, Blockbusters often preclude real teaching. Teaching takes too much time, and Blockbuster audiences are encouraged to "move along." Interaction with an audience is discouraged in favor of scripted tours that provide the maximum information with minimum "fuss." When this is the case, rather than give up teaching in favor of merely telling, docents need to move their teaching from the exhibit area. Some museums offer a pre-tour school visit by a docent armed with artifacts or reproductions, posters, and photographs, and an inquiry-based lesson that will prepare and excite the students who will soon see the "real thing."

Teachers find most pre-visit materials extremely helpful in preparing their classes to visit any kind of museum exhibition, but such materials are essential in the case of traveling exhibitions. Background information about the context and content makes the teacher more comfortable in dealing with students' questions. Vocabulary unique to the exhibit, sample questions, suggested pre-visit activities, and suggestions concerning expected audience behavior are just a few of the types of material useful to teachers. In addition, suggested follow-up activities are helpful in setting goals.

Children come to Blockbuster exhibitions with different expectations than do adult visitors. While adults will be satisfied to merely experience the exhibit, *children are brought there to learn*. They will be expected to do something with their new knowledge — make a report, build a diorama, do research, draw a picture, and so forth.

When museums design their Blockbuster exhibitions and the accompanying education programs with children in mind, the school visit can be a "gargantuan" experience — one the children will remember with pleasure for many years.

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Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor

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Next issue: “Back to Schools” – Programs for Students and Teachers!

If your institution would like every docent to receive an individual copy of The Docent Educator, contact us about group rates.

Classical Taste, as the training program was called, focused on four questions: “What is classicism in the decorative arts?” “How did classical taste influence American lifestyles in the early nineteenth century?” “What is the story of our nation, the state of North Carolina, and the city of Charlotte from 1800 to 1840?” and “How will this exhibition educate and interest school children?”

Consistent with the Olympic spirit, every volunteer took pride in the story of our nation and state, and gained an enhanced appreciation for its symbols of beauty and patriotism.

Susan S. Perry is the Docent & Tour Coordinator at The Mint Museum of Art in Charlotte, North Carolina. Ms. Perry received a M.F.A. degree in Drawing and Painting from California State University, Long Beach, and a M.A. in English from UNC Charlotte. Over the past ten years, she has taught courses in art history, drawing, and painting at various colleges. As a professional artist, she exhibits her handmade paper sculptures.

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- Museum Education Roundtable
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