Visual Literacy
Reading, Interpreting, and Constructing Meaning

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You Think “Tomato” and I Think “Potato”

Subjectivity and Interpretation

“A word means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.”

Humpty Dumpty to Alice

As an educator working in art museums, I often introduced young people to art. Of the many tours I conducted, I recall one most clearly. It involved a group of third graders and a larger-than-life-sized portrait.

The portrait was of a handsome, middle-aged woman. The painting hung in the museum’s entrance hall, a cavernous space, about three feet off the floor. The image of this woman stood over six feet tall, making her a most imposing figure, who looked down, imperiously, upon all who approached.

The subject of this painting had lived during the 19th century, a person of obvious wealth and status. Her posture was erect; her bearing regal. She wore an elaborate, white dress and an abundance of jewelry.

Among the possessions adorning her, one may have been cherished above others — a large cameo brooch. It appeared to be the focal point of the painting. Everything called attention to it. Her arms were as lines, leading your eyes to it. Her pearl necklaces encircled it. Even the light seemed to shine most brilliantly upon it.

To demonstrate to the students how artists direct our attention to certain areas of their paintings using lines, shapes, lighting and other devices, I decided to employ a game. I had the youngsters approach the painting with their backs turned toward it. The children enjoyed the silliness of walking backwards and some laughed out loud. As they quieted down, I told them I would count to three, have them turn quickly, look at the painting, and name the first thing they saw.

“One, two, three, what do you see?” I said as I, too, spun around to look at this commanding woman and her magnificent brooch. A split second later I heard their chorus of voices. “Her feet, her feet!” My immediate reaction was one of confusion. Then I dropped down to their eye level. Indeed, it was true; the first thing they saw was her feet.

I learned an important lesson that day — one should not presume uniformity of thought. We all approach things from our own vantage point. We are all different, and our dissimilarities can run the gamut — from our physical relationship to what we’re viewing to differences in personal or cultural patterns of thinking. The cumulative effect of our many differences can be great and can have profound effects upon how we view, interpret, and construct meaning from what we see.

To further illustrate this point, imagine four people examining an old chair. Each would see the chair from a different physical perspective by virtue of where they stood in relation to it. In addition, each might consider the chair from a different mental vantage point, reflecting personal interests and concerns. Person #1 might wonder about the chair’s comfort; person #2 could compare this chair’s design to others; person #3 might think about the chair’s origin and history; and person #4 might contemplate the chair’s materials and construction.

Everything is experienced and interpreted subjectively, regardless of how objective, precise, exact, or quantifiable it may seem. “Time,” which is about as objective, precise, exact, and quantifiable as you can get, is a prime example. One hour is always and precisely 60 minutes, or 3,600 seconds. Yet, while every one hour segment of time is exactly like the other, an hour spent in a dentist’s chair is experienced very differently from an hour spent watching an engrossing movie.

Another common interpretive experience is language. In his text Communications: The Transfer of Meaning, author Don Fabun illustrates language’s subjective qualities by asking us to consider such words as “patriotism,” “virtue,” and “morality” and their many and varied interpretations. He points out that meanings change with speakers, regions, contexts, cultures, and times. Mr. Fabun continues by stating that “many of our problems in communication arise because we forget to remember that individual experiences are never identical.”

Just as with words, symbols and images are interpreted differently. One might see a simple “+” shape as the intersection of two lines, or perhaps streets. It might also be thought of as an addition sign in mathematics, or the crosshairs in a gun’s sight. People from China might see it as a symbol representing the number ten. Some Native American people might know this shape to mark the center of the universe. Still others may find it evocative of a cruciform shape, the Christian religion’s symbol of worldly suffering and promise of salvation.

The interpretative nature of experience does not end there. It is
"Everything is experienced and interpreted subjectively, regardless of how objective, precise, exact, or quantifiable it may seem."

followed by subjective response and reaction. If, for example, you perceived the "+" shape as the crosshairs of a gun’s sight, your response to that image will be interpreted through your association with guns. Your response might range from "power" to "persecution," depending on whether you identify with the hunter or the hunted. Guns may instinctively intrigue or frighten you. They may serve as symbols of protection and individual freedom or as metaphors for violence and mayhem.

With so many perceptual and emotional responses applicable to just one shape, imagine the accommodations one must allow for when looking at something as visually and emotionally complex as a work of art, a cultural artifact, a scientific specimen, or an object of historic significance. (Animals, too, can evoke a wide range of responses. Just say the words “spotted owl” in my part of the country and watch the range of responses you will get.)

In the realm of art, for instance, subjectivity explains why “experts” will express widely differing views about the same works, and why one artist’s work can be alternatively praised and scorned by successive generations. After all, a work’s ability to survive such reinterpretation, and to thrive beyond its original context or culture, is an essential factor in achieving its status as “Art.”

Even when intention is well documented or known, it need not fix meaning or limit interpretations. Most African sculptures, for instance, were created with specific cultural or religious purposes. Yet, this fact has not constrained our ability to appreciate them in ways totally unrelated, or even opposed, to their creators’ intentions. For that matter, the mere act of placing any work of art or artifact in a museum gallery changes its intention and, arguably, its meaning and significance.

The phenomenon of subjective interpretation explains how historians can have differing views of historical figures, events, and time periods, and how scientists can support alternate or conflicting theories. And, it explains why the visitors you tour may construct differing interpretations. As educators, our responsibility is not to pre-determine interpretations, but to help visitors learn how to construct their own “reasoned” interpretations through exposure to authentic objects, a heightened level of awareness, access to information, and the application of logic and sensitivity.

As you consider the topic of visual literacy as examined within this issue, and as you attempt to find and extract specific meaning from objects in your collection, be sure to make allowances for subjectivity. Just because you have heard an answer, or have developed your own answer, does not mean you know all the answers possible. This can be a lesson hard learned … but once learned (as I discovered while touring those third graders), it is not easily forgotten.

Alan Gartenhaus
Publishing Editor
As interpreters, we may wish to convey an image of the past. But how can we know what the past was like when we weren’t there?

You’re more likely to have a sense of the past when you’re surrounded by objects of the past. These were the things that surrounded people in their everyday lives. They show what the past looked like — and sometimes even what it smelled, sounded, felt, and tasted like. Though objects do not tell us everything, they are powerful because they can shape our ideas and images of earlier times.

Our images of past kitchens, for instance, are shaped by the kettles and doughboxes that women once used there. Woodstoves, nutmeg graters, and rendering kettles suggest to us some of the smells these cooks knew. The creaking of the iron crane in the fireplace or the scraping of the shovel in the coals were everyday sounds.

The equipment in women’s kitchens also suggest their activities. Did they stoop over a stewpot on the hearth, or reach across the burners of a cast iron stove? Did they pump water at the sink or carry buckets from a well?

Still we can’t fully understand the experience of cooks in the past centuries by looking at their equipment or even by cooking with it. A cookstove may tell of women’s daily routine, but it doesn’t tell of its value. What did the stove mean to the women who used it? Did its first user welcome it as a back-saving advance from hearth cooking or was she apprehensive about unfamiliar technology? Years later, did a different user feel comfortable cooking on that familiar old stove, or did she wish for something newer and more convenient?

What does a stove tell us about changes in the society where cooks and coal miners and stove sellers lived? Paying attention to what objects have to say often raises as many questions as it answers. But even when an object doesn’t give us all the answers, the questions can open up aspects of the past we might otherwise overlook.

If objects are this important, visitors need to know it. How can you use the objects at your site to open up new perspectives for visitors? How can you help visitors envision the material world that surrounded people of the past, understand how people interacted with that world, and consider what that world might have meant to them? Visitors need to begin with the object’s power to evoke earlier times.

Objects and Environments

From the moment your visitors enter the room, objects begin to create an image. Working in partnership with those objects, you can help visitors imagine tastes, sights, smells, sounds, and textures of another time. Even if your blacksmith shop seems quiet and lifeless to visitors when there’s no blacksmith at work, if you’re familiar with the process of smithing, you can use language to animate the tools and evoke images and noise.

You might set the scene like this:

“The shop seems peaceful now, but as you look around at the forge, the anvil, the hammers, and the other tools, imagine how noisy and busy this shop once was. The blacksmith heated iron in this coal-fired forge and then shaped it by hammering it here on the anvil. Imagine the swoosh of air as an apprentice pumped the bellows to make the fire even hotter. See the red glow of the hot iron, which the blacksmith places on the anvil. Think of sparks flying and springing
from the hot iron as the hammer hits it. Hear the iron hiss as the smith quenches it in water. If you consider the continual jarring clang of the hammer on the anvil, and the harsh, bitter smell of coal smoke, the blacksmith shop may not seem as romantic a place to work as we sometimes imagine it to be!"

A blacksmith shop may seem an obvious place to create a vivid image of a world people experience through their senses, but you can evoke equally powerful images with the objects of a home. You can ask your visitors to image how colorful the wallpaper or painted furniture looked when it was new and bright. You can describe the evening dimness of a room illuminated by a small point of candlelight or the flickering, unsteady light of a gas fixture. In homes of the past, bedsprings creaked, knitting needles clicked, and wood thumped into the woodbox. Chair upholstery might have been rough horsehair or smooth satin. Meats might have been preserved with salt; cakes spiced heavily with ginger. There was the smell of warm bread, leather-bound books, tallow soap, and chamber pots. Challenging people to visit the past through their senses can help them immerse themselves in that world.

Objects and Activities

The better your visitors understand that sensory world, the better they can visualize how people acted in it. Objects are involved in so much of what people do — from sleeping to traveling to celebrating. People and objects are constantly interacting.

To create an image of travelers sleeping fitfully in a crowded tavern, you might begin by pointing out the beds they shared: “If a customer stayed the night, he didn’t have his own room or even his own bed. He simply had a space in a bed. The tavern keeper might assign him to the right side of this double bed, with a stranger already sleeping on the left side.” Use the bed to help visitors envision the proximity of a bed mate who snores or tosses through the night.

Saddles and stirrups, wagons, ships, or automobiles can help visitors understand how far and how frequently past people traveled. You can use communion cups, prayer shawls, baptismal fonts, or tambourines to convey an image of how people worshipped. Objects can even help visitors understand the posture and movements of past people. In the eighteenth century, for example, many women wore quilted stays stiffened with whalebone to mold their upper bodies into a tapered cone shape. Have visitors imagine the discomfort and difficulties such undergarments would have caused to breathing or bending over from the waist.

Objects and Insights

Wear marks on a chair rung suggest something personal about the chair. Someone may have hooked his heels over the rungs while leaning back, enjoying long evening conversations; or, perhaps a child kicked at the chair rungs, impatiently, while sitting at the dinner table. But nothing about the chair can tell us what it meant to the people who used it. Was it a favorite of one particular family member? Was it a special chair given to company?

Objects have meaning within the context of the lives of those who used them and they also have meaning in the context of the society they lived in. Consider a shelf clock sitting on a parlor mantel in a farmhouse. It’s easy to

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present the clock simply as an object of beauty, or as a proud possession and a symbol of the owner’s economic status. But, it can say far more.

People’s ideas about time and time-keeping were changing in the first half of the 1800’s. The 1820 clock you see on the mantel (pictured right) was a relatively new style then. The wooden works were mass-produced, so for the first time a clock was affordable to someone like the farmer who owned this house. We can guess that this family took pride in their clock because the farmer’s wife mentions in a letter “the fine new shelf clock that now ornaments our parlor.” Because only a minority of farm families in this community owned clocks in the 1820’s, the clock certainly tells us something about the family’s social and economic standing.

Perhaps buying a clock also signaled a change in the way this farm family organized their daily lives? What might it have been like to own a clock after decades of living only by the rhythms of daylight and darkness, planting and harvest? How readily did they begin to measure their daily activities in precise intervals of hours and minutes?

Visitors can be encouraged to see remarkable social significance reflected in objects that, at first glance, just seem decorative. Objects can be touchstones to the past and can throw aspsects of earlier times into sharp focus.

A simple Shaker-made sewing desk, whose drawers pull out from two sides, might simply be thought of as an appealing piece of furniture with clean lines and clever construction. Or, it could be understood for its deeper meanings. The drawers were placed to equally accommodate two women, each working on her own side of the desk; and several desks were placed in a communal sewing room. Even in the mundane task of sewing, these Shakers expressed their belief that people should live together as brothers and sisters, sharing everything equally and working communally.

Since objects are thoroughly intertwined in the everyday environment and the daily activities of people, it’s no wonder they carry so much meaning. They are tangible elements of past people’s worlds; elements that somehow survived the trip through time. As past environments changed, past activities ceased, and past people became silent, these objects remained to form a fragile connection between their worlds and ours.

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[All articles are edited for publication.]

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An Object Lesson

by Susan Miner

Before visitors, especially students, can be expected to "read" museum objects on a tour, they should be given an example for practice. Whether during a pre-touring visit to a classroom, or as an introduction before entering the galleries, docents can conduct a simple "object lesson" as preparation.

Using a jar of apple pie filling as an object to be "read," let's consider and answer the following six questions:

1- What is the object?
2- For what purpose was it intended?
3- Who might have made, owned, used, or kept it?
4- What activities are associated with this object?
5- How does this object represent change?
6- How do you feel about those changes; and why do you feel that way?

The answers to these questions can quickly expand the meaning of this fairly mundane object.

1- The object is a glass jar with a paper label and painted metal lid, containing 32 ounces of prepared apple pie filling.

2- The contents are intended to be baked into a pie and eaten. The container is meant to be thrown away or recycled. The filling was prepared in advance as a convenience to make a time-consuming/labor-intensive activity, fast and easy to accomplish. It also allows people to enjoy apples in their pie regardless of the season.

3- Those who produced, marketed, used, and disposed of this jar may include: farmers and orchard managers; seasonal labor for harvesting; factory workers and supervisors for preparing and packaging; corporate buyers; growers of sugar cane; sugar processors; spice importers; label designers; advertisers; printers; iron ore miners; steel plant workers; workers in glass factories and bottling plants; truckers and shippers; grocery store buyers, shelf stockers, and checkers; consumers; cooks; diners; garbage haulers; landfill operators; and recyclers.

4- Activities associated with this object could be as diverse as: hiring; working; firing; cooperating; competing; selling; buying; planning or failing to plan; cooking; cleaning; dining; conversing; and keeping or breaking resolutions about eating sweets. Some symbolic activities associated with this object are: patriotism ("as American as apple pie"); wholesomeness; and traditionalism.

5- The way we get and use apples for pie has changed significantly over the years. During earlier times, apples were grown and sold locally, while in season, for use by neighboring customers who made their pies "from scratch." Today, large scale growers, mass production, rapid transport, technology, and marketing make fresh fruit available year-round, and provide time-saving, prepared pie filling for consumption. The make-up and pattern of consumption has also changed. More people live on their own as singles; and many family cooks have responsibilities outside the home, have little time to prepare meals, and may not be mothers or wives with support or assistance from partners.

6- A wide variety of feelings may be associated with these changes. Everyone should be encouraged to express opinions and to offer reasons for their point-of-view.

All of these questions, and their responses, offer docents an avenue for further discussion about the object, the culture, the time period, and so forth. The purpose of this activity is to acquaint visitors with the process of reading, interpreting, and constructing meaning from objects, and to demonstrate that even the simplest objects can offer insights into the people and time associated with it. (This exercise was adapted from "Interpreting History through Objects" by Barbara G. Carson, The Journal of Museum Education: Roundtable Reports, Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 2-5.)

Most historical objects can also be considered using this approach. Try applying the same questions asked about the apple pie filling to the buttonhook pictured above.

These questions should lead to discussions about use and obsolescence. They might even have you imagining a dialogue between a parent buttoning a child's shoes while the child hurries out to play. Perhaps you might wonder about the status and cost of buttonhooks; which type might have been given away with a new pair of shoes, and which might have been purchased as a more decorative item?

No matter what objects or phenomena a tour presents, pre-tour practice in object reading and interpretation prepares visitors for the content of the tour, equips them with important skills for participation, and helps them make personal sense out of museum collections.

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The “A, B, C’s” of Reading Objects

“Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogrovks,
And the mome raths outgrabe.”

If this selection from Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky” seems gibberish to you, imagine how confusing it must be to someone who doesn’t read English. For, as nonsensical as the words first appear, most of us who speak English derive some meaning from them. We have a general sense of their meaning even if we have no definitions for the words.

We can read “brillig” as either a predicate noun or adjective because it follows the linking verb “was.” We can understand the “toves” (a noun introduced by “the”) are “slithy” (an adjective ending in “y”) and that they “gyre and gimble” (verbs preceded by the auxiliary verb “did”). We “read” the words of the sentence as part of the grammatical context of English. Some of these same techniques that taught us to “read” the words of our language and to derive meaning from them can be used by docents to teach museum visitors to “read” objects.

Visual Discrimination

A beginning reader first learns to discriminate visual difference in words — to see that dog and bog, for example, are different words. Beginning observers, like beginning readers, first learn to make visual discriminations — to see the color of an object, its texture, size, shape, and to see it as different from other objects that may have similar traits or characteristics.

Object readers might begin by finding all the red objects in an exhibit, by noticing how a portrait artist made the sitter’s dress seem smooth, by telling which animals in the zoo are as small as a pet cat, by guessing what material a dough bowl is made of. As their “reading fluency” increases, object readers can learn to distinguish foreground, middle ground, and background in paintings; hypothesize about the composition of different minerals by examining their colors; or find camouflaged animals in zoo exhibits. And, when they reach the level of comprehension, object readers can be taught to interpret symbols used in religious painting; to discover what a copper ornament in a stone-age Mississippian culture exhibit implies about trade routes; and to infer a bird’s diet from the shape of its bill.

Treasure Hunt for Shapes in the Art Museum

Sample Activities Promoting Skills of Visual Discrimination

➢ For beginning observers: Show your group paper cutouts of various geometric shapes and help them name these shapes. Then, give each smaller group of two or three children one of the cutouts to “match” to similar shapes within paintings in a particular gallery. After the children in each group have located their shapes, they should share their “treasure” with the other groups.

➢ For intermediate observers: Use three-dimensional models of shapes, such as cones, cubes, and spheres. Discuss with students how an artist creates the illusion of three-dimensional objects appearing within two-dimensional paintings. Allow each smaller group of students to find examples of the shapes given to them, and to explain to their peers which devices (perspective, shading, color, etc.) the artist used to give the shapes their three-dimensional form or appearance.
For “fluent” observers: Using paper cutouts of a heart, diamond, circle, etc., discuss with students some of the symbolic meanings ascribed to certain shapes. Assign each group of two or three students to a particular gallery and ask them to find shapes that have symbolic meaning. Let each group identify and explain the symbolism they find to other groups.

**Sequencing**

Beginning readers must also learn sequencing before they can read words and sentences. They learn that English is written from left to right and top to bottom. Beginning observers, too, should learn how museums, zoos, gardens, and other such facilities are sequenced or organized. As you move through the exhibits, explain why you have chosen a particular path. Don’t assume your audience will understand the logic of your choices without discussion. Making them aware of the choices you made strengthens their appreciation for the concept of sequencing.

Since very young children have little understanding of historic time, chronological sequence is difficult for them to comprehend. In a history museum, for instance, it is easier for them to understand objects that are grouped by use. They may understand that carriages, wagons, bicycles, trains, ships, and automobiles are used for getting from place to place, without appreciating the time or place in history held by each method of transportation.

In a zoo or aquarium, visitors should be encouraged to discover why certain animals are grouped together. Are they similar species, or do they share a similar environment? In a garden, are the plants grouped by variety, type, climate, soil conditions, or aesthetics?

**Letter-to-Sound/Object-to-Use**

Finally, a beginning reader learns to connect letters and sounds. Likewise, a beginning observer should learn to connect objects with their use. Playing “historical detective” is a great activity to help accomplish this skill. Give groups of 4-5 children an object whose real use they are not likely to know (e.g. a fluting iron, a darning egg, an apple corer, etc.). Ask them to make a list of as many uses for this object as they can think of. Having children find uses for an object (not THE use, but their own use) lets them explore many possibilities without having to find a right answer. Just as beginning readers know that they will be able to “unlock” millions of words with just the sounds of 26 letters, beginning observers will recognize that they will be able to give meaning to unknown objects by finding uses for them. They will also have greater curiosity about, and gain appreciation for, the actual use of objects.

**Comprehension**

It is not enough, however, to merely read words. Competent readers must also derive meaning from those words, and from the words in the context of sentences, paragraphs, and stories. When the mechanics of reading are mastered, educators are able to teach to reading’s purpose — comprehension.

When teaching visitors who are already capable of object knowledge, additional levels of comprehension can be added. A beginner may look at an object and know what attributes separate it from other, similar objects. A more experienced observer can understand how the object was/is used. And, the fluent observer can infer what the object says about larger concepts, such as the time period of its manufacture or the culture that made it.

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“In the same way that readers learn to analyze a piece of literature for its deepest meanings, viewers are taught the relevance of an object by placing it in context.”

Making Hypotheses in the Science Museum or Zoo.
Sample Activities Promoting Skills of Comprehension

➤ For beginning observers: Tell children to pretend that we have found a new animal, but we don’t know what to feed it. Have them guess what foods it would eat by examining its teeth, and comparing its teeth to those of other animals whose diets are known.

➤ For intermediate observers: Have students examine three different specimens that share something in common with one another, such as three: minerals, shells, feathers, bones, pelts, or living creatures. Ask the students to determine which two seem most closely related to one another, and to explain how they made their determinations.

➤ For fluent observers: Provide students with information about the size of a densely inhabited exhibit space, zoo enclosure, or aquarium. Ask them to develop a method for counting the organisms sharing that environment.

Developing Vocabulary

When learning new vocabulary, readers are taught to define words in context by using synonyms, antonyms, and examples. The same can be done with objects.

Just as a reader looks for words with the same meaning in order to understand new vocabulary, object readers can be taught to look for objects used today that have the same use as an object in a historical museum. Similarly, visitors can look for similarities between animal species with which they have great familiarity (such as domesticated animals) and those in zoos. They can learn to see plants in nature centers and botanical gardens as similar to the roots, seeds, and leaves they eat everyday. By doing this, they learn that museum objects have “synonyms” to those found in the more familiar world in which they go about their daily routines.

Antonyms, also, are a useful way of giving meaning to words and objects. Teaching children to think of everyday objects that have replaced historical objects, and to find reasons for these replacements, is an important way to help them see the objects in context. The whole idea of a zoo as an “antonym” — an opposite to the animal’s natural world — can help children understand the importance of zoos in the preservation of species and the reason why zoos attempt to recreate an environment as close to the animal’s natural environment as possible.

A child learns the meaning of the word “vegetable” by learning that carrots, peas, and potatoes are vegetables. The more often he encounters examples of vegetables, the greater is his understanding of the word. The more examples of a particular type of object the child experiences, the better is his understanding of that object. When your museum only contains one example, use pictures from other institutions to help your visitors see the characteristics that are common to all of a particular type.

Reading a Culture

Vocabulary is defined for a reader both alone and in context. Museum objects, also, can be seen as individual pieces of art, or craft, or as a way of “reading” a culture. To see an object clearly as a piece of art, viewers discern the elements from which it is made. They look at the relationship of part to whole and whole to part, just as readers look at individual letters, phonemes, and syllables. They notice the materials from which the object is made and learn to recognize the difference between crude and skilled craftsmanship. They learn to value an object for itself as beginning readers learn the value of individual letters and words to language.

To see an object as part of a culture, however, viewers must know more than simply the elements from which the object is made, just as readers must know more than letter sounds in order to understand an essay or poem. In the same way that readers learn to analyze a piece of literature for its deepest meanings, viewers are taught the relevance of an object by placing it in context. Who made it? Why is it made? What was it made of? Why was it made? Who used it? What does it say about the people who made it?

Docents who do a good job in this area of their audience’s education open the entire world of museum objects in the same way a good reading teacher gives students access to all written knowledge. And, since most of our knowledge of the world’s history comes from objects of past cultures, who’s to say which is the greater skill?

Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor
Beware the Jabberwocky!

Did you happen to read the article appearing on the front page of The Week in Review section, in the Sunday, October 23, 1994, edition of the New York Times? The article, which was entitled "The Jabberwocky of Art Criticism," serves as a warning to art educators everywhere — beware of falling into the trap of art-babble when discussing art criticism.

The article bemoaned the loss of intelligent and intelligible art criticism appearing in professional journals. It could just as well have been describing the approach taken by some curators and educators who surround art in a defensive layer of verbiage and mysticism.

"Has art criticism sunk into paralysis?" the article asks. Consider these snippets quoted from leading art publications:

"Younger artists like David Row and Shirley Kaneda have also begun to study the possibilities of painting in a post-Kantian context, without giving up their works' traditional epistemological character in favor of a verbal model of production." (International Flash Art, Summer 1994.)

"Perhaps we've seen too many sculptures dealing with the human body in the last few years, or perhaps the impressive artistic (by expert tailors) overwhelmed the metaphorical possibilities of the work, or perhaps the metaphor itself (weight and context) was simply too obvious." (Art in America, Sept. 1994.)

"Federle's grouping of works also suggests a kind of epigenesis of abstraction: as each stage offers a greater, more exacting epiphany of the idea of abstraction as such and the essential consciousness — a consciousness that can recognize and deal with essences (in a Husserlian sense) — than the preceding one." (Artforum, September 1994.)

The Docent
(A Cautionary Tale)
by Clare Wiser

A decent docent doesn't doze But stays alertly on his toes Praising art in all its splendor Public service thus to render.

In dissent docents dare not deal While others tell them how they feel They play a proper patient part When hearing "Is this really art?"

Many things a docent doesn't Some he could but most she mustn't Might such art-official* virtue Bring success but also hurt you?

*artificial?

Clare Wiser is a professor of mathematics at Washington State U. in Pullman, WA. He also is a docent at the University's Museum of Art. The first two lines of his poem were borrowed from the poet David McCord.

A Good Idea is Worth Conveying

One of our more recent subscribers, The Natural History Museum in London, England, has an excellent physical arrangement for accommodating student tours. The museum devotes a special entrance and room entirely for school groups. The Len Moore room is where teachers and their students are checked in. Students are provided with spaces to deposit their coats, lunches, and other belongings, and where they can be divided into smaller, touring groups before entering the museum's galleries.

The room even has benches and tables, where children on an extended field trip can eat, and where rules of museum behavior can be explained or reinforced.

The Len Moore room allows youngsters to unwind from the excitement of their bus trip without distracting other museum visitors. The room is cheerily decorated with the letters of children who wrote to the museum following their visit, as well as with docent teaching resources such as specimens, photographs, and diagrams.

Mysticism Defined

Mysticism — "over-explaining what could otherwise be understood."

The Theory of Relativity

When asked to explain his theory of relativity, Albert Einstein reportedly said, "When you talk with a pretty girl for two hours it feels like two seconds; when you sit on a hot stove for two seconds it feels like two hours. That's relativity!"
Intended versus Discerned Meaning

by Betsy Gough-DiJulio

As docents, we have the privilege and responsibility of teaching viewers how to "read" works of art, and then urging them to construct their own meanings. But, how often have you heard the complaint, "How do we know if our interpretation is really what the artist intended? Aren't we reading an awful lot into it?"

Such protests are related to issues of "visual literacy" — the process of reading, interpreting, and constructing meaning from works of art. In fact, they go to the very crux of the matter — do viewers have a valid role in establishing the meaning of a work of art?

Personally, I can only reply with a resounding "Yes!" A classroom teacher in a recent recertification workshop may have expressed it best when she good-naturedly said, "Just try and stop us!" Works of art are, inevitably, the repositories for our individual interpretations.

But, what about the artist's intentions? While knowing an artist's intention can offer insights, it is neither essential, nor is it necessarily reliable. Consider the phenomenon known as "intentional fallacy." Artists will intend what they do not achieve, and will not intend what they do achieve. A work of art, therefore, never fully duplicates an artist's intention; it always varies — falling short in some respects and surpassing it in others.

What is significant for this discussion of intent and interpretation is that meaning is a variable, and that an artist's intention is but one way to consider an art work; while personal interpretation is another. Let's apply this concept to a more familiar example — that of a house. A house can be considered an architect's creative expression, but it can also be thought of as shelter, a social hub, an investment, a status symbol, and so on.

In his essay entitled, "On the Manner of Addressing Clouds," in History of Form in Art, Thomas MacEvilley grapples with the form/content problem in aesthetics and criticism. MacEvilley developed thirteen overlapping categories of content or meaning expressed in art, which he sees as analogous to the poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," by Wallace Stevens (see the shaded box). In this poem, the blackbird itself does not change from verse to verse, though the meaning of the blackbird does. Like MacEvilley's categories, the poem illustrates that meaning is based on personal interpretation, and is discerned in context and shaped by experience.

A list of MacEvilley's categories, with very abbreviated explanations follows. (I encourage you to read his essay in order to gain a full understanding of his thoughts.) Docents, as well as viewers, may be surprised to discover that meaning sometimes resides where we least expect it.

1) Representation. The parts of a work of art that refer to the "real" world through resemblance.

2) Verbal Supplements from the Artist. Titles of works, published statements, or interviews with the artist.

3) Genre or Medium. Implicit in an artist's choice of genre or media is a wide range of social, political, and cultural attitudes, e.g. the use of some media have been considered reactionary or gender-specific during certain times in history.

4) Material. Similarly, an artist's choice of materials links him or her with sociopolitical attitudes, e.g. steel and plastic have very different associations than does marble.

5) Size and Scale. An object intended for private devotion would have a different size, scale, and meaning than one intended for a more public arena, such as a city plaza.

6) Temporal Duration. Objects made to endure virtually unchanged for many centuries mean something very different than the earthworks of the 1970's in which the alterations caused by nature over time were important parts of the works' meaning.

7) Context. Under what conditions a work is displayed (home, museum, city park, etc.) has a dramatic impact upon its meaning.

8) Relationship to Art History. How the work acknowledges or reacts to previous styles and movements.

9) The Object's Own History. This includes such things as the commercial use or manipulation of images, such as the Mona Lisa or Grant Wood's American Gothic. These things become part of the meaning of the work.

10) Iconography. The symbolic aspects of the work.

11) Formal Properties. Use of design elements and principles.

12) Attitudinal Gestures. Wit, irony, parody, etc. which relate to the artist's intentions.

13) Physiological Responses Provoked in the Viewer. The kinds of physical responses caused by viewing the work.
How can we use these categories to help viewers have more meaningful encounters with works of art? In our art center, we often use a worksheet made up of questions related to each category. If you prefer a more conversational, less activity-oriented approach, try raising questions related the categories.

For example, you might employ a string of questions, such as: What people, places, and things do you observe in this painting that resemble those found in the "real" world? Does the title give you any clues as to what concepts the artist is working with? Let me read you a brief statement by the artist to see if it helps us understand what s/he is trying to communicate. How would your reaction to this piece change if it were a sculpture rather than a painting? If this piece was created using metallic markers rather than egg tempera, what different associations would you make? How would the meaning of this work change for you if it were tiny enough to fit in the palm of your hand? Look at the other works in this gallery. Why do you think they were chosen to hang together? What do they say about each other?

Should your museum allow you to carry discreet notes while you tour, simply make a list of the categories for quick reference. Fortunately, committing the thirteen categories to memory is also fairly easy to accomplish. Once you have worked with them a few times, this kind of content inventory will become second nature. You will begin to feel as though you have not adequately explored a work of art until you have investigated all thirteen categories and the relationships among them! Why not challenge yourself, or your visitors, to expand this list of categories.

"When the blackbird flew out of sight, It marked the edge Of one of many circles."

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**Betsy Gough-DiJulio is Director of Education for the Virginia Beach Center for the Arts, in Virginia Beach, VA, and is a frequent contributor to The Docent Educator.**

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**Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird**

_by Wallace Stevens_

I
Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II
I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

III
The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV
A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

V
I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

VI
Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.

VII
O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you?

VIII
I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

IX
When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

X
At the sight of blackbirds
Flying in a green light,
Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.

XI
He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a tear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds.

XII
The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying.

XIII
It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
The blackbird sat
In the cedar-limbs.
Giving Objects Their Voice

by Sandra Mackenzie Lloyd

We've all taken them. Those historic house museum tours led by a pointing finger identifying one thing after another in a room. "And, over here is a beautiful Duncan Phyfe table." (You are thinking, "What is a dunkinlife?") "Next," the tour leader continues, "please notice the exquisite acanthus-carved legs." (You are wondering, "What is a canthis?")

Imagine the voice, the intonation, the repetitive incantation identifying one thing after another ending with "that about does it for here, let's move into the next room." Visitors stand there obediently, listening, watching, and then moving as directed until gradually they are numbed into mental and physical passivity. Once the last room is seen and its objects identified, the visitors move outside where they turn to their companions and comment, "Wasn't that a lovely house?" probably without remembering much of what they heard.

As tour guides, we want to tell others what we find interesting about our museum's collection. We also want to demonstrate our knowledge of artifacts. After all, we had to learn about each object, memorizing the artists, dates of fabrication, and materials. No doubt we were even tested on this knowledge before we could work with the public. Naturally, we want to share our enthusiasm for, and our mastery of, these objects with visitors. Most often, however, that leads to the "thing identification" tour described above.

It doesn't have to be that way, though. Museum objects can sing a richer song than mere identification. They can become the visual cues that trigger interesting stories. They can stimulate interaction between the guide and the visitor. They can contribute to what people remember about a museum.

This is especially true at historic house museums where visitors are afforded the opportunity to examine objects in context, as both art and as material culture (that is, as products of particular people at a particular time). Such objects can be "read" as historical documents, much like one reads a diary or a letter.

Looking at objects as material culture requires knowledge of what the objects are, but more is asked. What did these objects mean to the people who used them or made them? What, if anything, would they mean to people who didn't own them? How do these objects tell us something about the past? How do these objects connect with experiences we have today?

To illustrate further, let's consider several artifacts that are part of the collection at Cliveden, an eighteenth century house located in Philadelphia and owned by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Cliveden was the primary site of the Revolutionary War Battle of Germantown and it retains many of the decorative arts objects accumulated by several generations of the Chew family who lived there.

attributed to John Wollaston
Portrait of Margaret Oswald, c. 1755
Cliveden of the National Trust
The entrance hall at Cliveden contains several significant paintings. One is a mid-18th century portrait attributed to John Wollaston and another depicts the Battle of Germantown. We use both of these paintings to introduce the people and the events that shaped Cliveden. In so doing, we read them as material culture "documents."

When visitors enter Cliveden they hear a brief discourse about its architectural history and the history of the Chew family. We then invite them to look at the portrait of Margaret Oswald, (left) sister of Elizabeth Oswald Chew — the first mistress of Cliveden. We illuminate the entire portrait — frame, background, and sitter.

After giving visitors a moment to see the work, we pin-light the lustrous fabric the sitter wears. "Imagine holding this fabric between your fingers. How does it feel?" Invariably visitors respond with words like soft, smooth, and cool.

Then we ask, "What type of fabric do you think this is?" Because they have felt it before, most visitors of about age seven and up will respond either silk or satin.

"Look at the lady’s cuffs. How are they trimmed?" With the light directing their eyes, visitors focus on the delicate lace bordering the silk sleeves. Usually, a child pipes up with the right answer. "Does anybody know how people made lace a long time ago?" Sometimes, there are visitors who know. Many times there aren’t. But through a series of questions, such as "Do you think it was made by machine or by hand?", visitors uniformly draw the conclusion that lace was handmade and took a long time to produce. "Would you imagine, then, that lace was an expensive or cheap addition to her clothing?" Kids are the ones who generally respond most enthusiastically, "REALLY expensive."

A flurry of questions follow. "Look at this lady again. Consider her dress. Do you think it was her best one? How would you dress if you were having your portrait painted? Do you think everyone dressed like this? What do her clothes tell you about her status and economic class?"

Next we look at the background. With the assistance of light, visitors can see trees. "Where was this lady painted?" The answer is obvious, outdoors. "What does the basket of flowers the sitter holds tell about her?" Together, they and the background lead visitors to deduce that the lady may have enjoyed gardening.

"So, what does this portrait tell you about Margaret Oswald?" The answers come tumbling out — she was rich, she had beautiful clothes, she enjoyed gardening.

"What does Margaret’s portrait tell us about the people who lived at Cliveden?" The visitors conclude that they were wealthy; leisureed; that they enjoyed demonstrating their social status to visitors with large portraits set in elaborately carved and gilded frames; that subsequent generations of the family took pride in their colonial roots.

Then, the final series of questions come. "Do you think that most people lived like this? Would we have lived like this?" It is a rare time when somebody answers yes.

Such questions shift the portrait of Margaret Oswald from a painting to a document of social history. Rather than simply hearing "Here is an important portrait attributed to John Wollaston ..." visitors feel personally introduced and acquainted with Cliveden’s people. They also have gained the skills that should help them read other portraits as products of material culture.

Edward Lamson Henry’s painting of the Battle of Germantown (above) was commissioned by the Chew family about 100 years after the actual event took place. Henry dramatically evokes the American attack on the British-occupied house, illustrating key events that occurred during the course of the battle.

Again, light is used to focus attention. The painting serves as illustration for the story of the battle.

(Continued)
Toward this goal, Cliveden has just completed a Historic Structures Report, a detailed site history, and an institutional self-study funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The self-study has reshaped our thinking, and Cliveden has begun a reinstallation of the house to better illustrate the people and events that shaped it.

The overall interpretation of Cliveden focuses on how, and why, the Chew family preserved the house’s colonial history in the 19th century. Themes to be explored are: the creation of national symbols and myths, late 19th century entertaining, the relationship of owners and their servants, and the role of women in historic preservation. Within particular rooms, we will cluster objects so that they can help tell particular stories.

For example, one bedroom will feature memorabilia illustrating Mary Chew’s membership in the Colonial Dames, her preservation efforts at Independence Hall, and her personal correspondence with owners of such historic houses as Stratford and Stenton. Rather than describe the room’s magnificent 18th century furniture, the new tour will use the setting as a whole to illustrate how and why the Chews elected to preserve, and live surrounded by, their colonial roots at a time when most Americans focused on the future.

We plan to rely on objects and their related stories to carry much of the weight of communicating ideas. Like illustrations in a book, Mary’s Colonial Dames membership certificate, her photo wearing a pseudo-eighteenth century mob cap, and bedroom filled with spectacular Philadelphia Chippendale furniture will visually tell a story we wish to share with the public.

Similar strategies will be employed throughout the house. While we will still be able to address the interests of connoisseurs and historians, the house, its collection, and its history will present the general public with a three-dimensional view of history, where objects are critical, but they will not BE the tour. They will be the illustrators and vehicles through which American social history will be interpreted.

Sandra Mackenzie Lloyd is Curator of Education at Cliveden, a historic house museum that is a co-stewardship property of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. She received an M.A. from the Winterthur Program in Early American Studies and has worked variously as a museum curator, architectural historian, and teacher.

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Object Literacy

Although "reading, interpreting, and discovering meaning" is an acknowledged goal in all teaching, object literacy (a.k.a. visual literacy) may not be as readily understood or embraced. Even experienced educators are sometimes uncertain about the importance of object literacy. What does it mean? Is it essential? Will it advance my curriculum? How do I teach it?

Object literacy is a special skill gained through the process of discovery and discussion about original objects. It is a skill which, like others, must be learned. Museums have original objects, artifacts, or works of art. Therefore, museums are logical places in which to teach people to become object literate.

Museum objects are great resources. They are rich in meaning, both alone as primary sources and in context with others of their time and place. Recognizing the need to show teachers how museums can be used to complement classroom instruction, we designed a workshop that is relevant to all who teach within a museum setting, including docents.

We created four categories of workshop, each one with a specific discipline in mind. To meet the needs of teachers of social studies, writing, science/math, and art, we used the same basic outline but choose different types of objects and focused on different aspects of the objects selected.

✓ Social Studies. The aim was to demonstrate how to learn about culture from objects. A seventeenth century American chest, for example, speaks eloquently about life in Colonial Boston. The materials from which it was made, the way it was put together and decorated, how and where it was used and by whom, all are clues that lead to a better understanding of its time and place.

✓ Writing. Portraits are used as an aide in the process of understanding and writing about people. Comparing two similar types of portraits from two different periods, such as Vincent Van Gogh's Postman of 1888 and John Singleton Copley's Paul Revere of 1768, reveals how each sitter's expression, pose, and dress tell much about them, as well as about their relationship to the artists and the time in which they lived.

✓ Science/Math. The materials, compositions, and patterns of objects are the focus and source of discussion for this unit. Bronze vessels made in ancient China provide a rich resource for investigation. How and why they were conceived and executed, the evolution of the technology of bronze casting, their scale and shapes, and the surfaces covered with intricate designs and intriguing symbols are all matters for scientific and mathematical (as well as artistic) analysis.

✓ Art. Emphasis is on the product and how it was created. Looking at a view of Boston Harbor in 1850 as painted by the American artist Fitz Hugh Lane and at another seascape of ten years earlier by the English artist J.M.W. Turner raises questions and provides answers about artistic techniques and traditions, stylistic differences, and personal communication and messages.

Viewers encounter an object with a task to perform, responding to a discovery worksheet. In this way, the object itself presents problems for viewers to solve. The social studies worksheet, for example, might ask:

• What is it? (describe the object using the information found on its label)
• What do you see? (note the materials, decoration, size, appearance, etc.)
• What can you infer? (based on what you see, consider how this object might have been used, who might of owned it, etc.)
• What more would you like to know?

As viewers learn to look for meaning in, and collect data from, an original object, they begin to understand how an object communicates its many messages. Directed looking at, or "reading," an ancient Greek vase, for example, rewards the viewer with insights about the techniques used by the potter and the painter who created it; the patron for whom it was made; and can also generate thought and lively discussion about cultural practices, use and purposes, and other aspects of the time and place of its manufacture.

When viewers encounter an object with a task to perform they find, much to their delight, that they can extract information with ease. And, as they learn to become object literate — reading, interpreting, and discovering meaning — we fulfill our mission and our purpose.

Sally Leahy is the Coordinator of the Gallery Instructor Program in the Department of Education at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. She is responsible for recruiting, organizing, training, and supervising approximately eighty volunteer Gallery Instructors who teach children of all ages about the collections of the Museum. She is also extremely interested in helping teachers take better advantage of the Museum's resources.
Not You Again!

Finding a New Vantage Point

by Ann M. Meehan

At the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA), many docents have been members of the Education Division for over twenty-five years!!! Keeping their teaching fresh and enthusiastic is a top priority. This goal presents several obvious challenges, not the least of which is how to stimulate new insights and approaches to some very familiar objects and images.

The best way I have found to sustain or regenerate excitement is to challenge docents to add a creative dimension to their own interpretations when “re-reading” familiar objects. Working from ideas found in Roger von Oech’s A Whack on the Side of the Head: How You Can Be More Creative, I have discovered four ways that help. They are:

- using metaphors,
- breaking the rules,
- asking the question — “what if,” and
- cross-fertilizing.

Though we use these methods to renew master docents, they can be employed by all docents, regardless of their level of experience, and with a wide variety of institutional collections.

I have chosen to illustrate these techniques using a painting from NOMA’s permanent collection entitledComposition (1948), by Jackson Pollock. I’ve selected this work because it has been a stalwart of our museum for many years, it is often puzzling to our visitors, and it can present more difficult teaching challenges than other, more traditional paintings.

The first method for regenerating enthusiasm through creative thinking is the use of metaphors. The method involves connecting two ideas that, seemingly, have little or nothing to do with one another.

Devise a metaphor randomly by selecting a word from the dictionary, a magazine, a newspaper, or conversation. Then, apply it to an object or work.

In our example, let’s apply the word “life” to the artwork, Composition. How is this painting like “life?” Life’s a mess; it’s filled with drips. Life is confusing; you never know where you’re going next. Life’s a big mystery; it can lead in many directions. Was Jackson Pollock trying to tell us something about life in this painting?

The second technique is to break rules. Some of history’s most creative people are those who challenged the rules. They stood up and asked the question, “Why not do it differently?”

Here are a few rule-breaking questions you might ask yourself when touring:

- Why move chronologically through your Museum’s collection? Why not begin a tour with the 20th century and end with the Renaissance?
- What would happen if you toured only works you disliked? Would you find a greater appreciation for them?
- Why not choose a black and white drawing to illustrate color? Can’t black, white, and gray function as colors, just as red, yellow, and blue do?
- Now, ask yourself, does Jackson Pollock’s painting break the rules?

Creative people also ask the question — “what if?” What if the Earth had no gravity; how would we eat soup? What if oranges were blue; what would we call them? What if dogs could fly; how would it change life for birds?

Apply “what if” questions to Composition. What if there were only one drip in the painting? What if the background were black? What if the painting were turned on its side? What if the painting were auditory, rather than visual? What if there was a cow in the middle of it?

Another idea for energizing tours is cross-fertilization. Think outside the discipline — consider music, computers, medicine, accounting, gardening or cleaning. What ideas do these fields generate for your tours? Ask yourself the question, “How might people in disciplines other than art tour Jackson Pollock’s painting?” How would a six-year-old tour Pollock’s work? What about a house painter? A pasta maker? What about Michelangelo?

Play with these ideas and allow yourself to be foolish. Ask others to help you. Write your ideas down. Explore possibilities. Don’t be afraid to examine a tangent, or to consider a fleeting thought. And, of course, don’t forget that humor can be a major and positive route toward regenerating your point-of-view and tours, as there often is a close connection between “haha” and “ahah.”

Often, the first spontaneous responses you hear from guests at an aquarium or zoo are “Cool! Can I touch it?” or “Ouuu, what does that animal feel like?” The desire to touch a Hawksbill sea turtle to know how hard its shell is, or to pet a Sea otter to feel how thick its fur is, is strong for both children and adults.

Is it important for our guests to have such a tactile experience? The answer lies within the goals of each institution as to whether guests’ experiences should be confined to visual stimulation only. However, touching is one way that humans “read” objects and their characteristics. Allowing guests to encounter an object or animal through touch usually improves the quality of their experience, and may result in greater understanding and appreciation.

Health and safety concerns can make touching live animals problematic, and doing so is usually discouraged by the animal care staff. Though some aquariums and zoos provide touch pools or petting areas, most interpreters and educators have to be creative if they want the public to have a “hands-on,” tactile experience.

One route toward helping guests discover through touch is to provide them with substitute specimens. Use a variety of interesting objects having different textures, shapes, and sizes. Objects such as pelts, dry specimens, plastic replicas, and toys can describe what is seen and heighten your guests’ tactile experience.

Be certain you know the reason that you are planning a “hands-on” experience. What is the objective of the experience? What additional information will direct contact with an object provide? How will touching help the public appreciate, and be concerned about, animal life?

The interpreter creating a touching experience must have the skills to achieve the objectives of such an experience. The educator must guide the visitor’s discovery through touch toward relevant meaning through the effective use of questioning, analogies, and dramatic demonstrations, rather than simply by a recitation of facts.

Touching can reveal specific kinds of information about an animal. A touch may suggest where an animal lives, how it has adapted to its environment, or how it protects itself. For example, touching a sea lion pelt can lead guests to hypothesize about the temperature of the water a sea lion lives in.

When using touch specimens, interpreters must be prepared to answer difficult questions. For instance, a guest may ask, “I thought Bowhead whales were protected from hunting, how did you get that piece of baleen?” Interpreters should be provided with answers to such questions by their institutions, or should refer the questioner to a staff member if the interaction is confrontational.

By their very nature, aquariums and zoos already provide dazzling visual experiences. We can enhance their wonderful exhibits and displays by also offering tactile experiences. In this way, aquariums and zoos become active places of learning, where opportunities to touch evoke verbal responses, occasional yelps, and most importantly, questions.
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