Engaging the Senses

- Coming to Our Senses
- Imagery Awakens the Senses
- Art, Questions, and the Five Senses
- Sensing the Desert
- Making Sensory Tours Safe
- A Process-Oriented Approach to Engaging the Senses
Our five senses are the portals through which we gather impressions and information. We experience the physical world around us by seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling it. The more sensorial routes through which we experience things, the more intellectual and emotional routes by which we can know, understand, and recall them.

In addition to the five senses through which we explore the physical world, our “sixth sense” — that of intuition or emotion — provides another way to know or understand, independent of physical evidence. Along with our five senses, our sixth sense allows us to collect, manage, and interpret experience. As educators, we will maximize our visitors’ encounters with collections by intentionally composing learning experiences to have strong sensorial components. Such lessons magnify awareness, assist comprehension, and offer multiple routes for the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of information and ideas.

Use Sensory Experiences

If you saw the theme of this issue and thought, “we can’t provide sensory perceptions beyond that of looking and listening,” or “we can not allow visitors to handle our collection,” this edition of The Docent Educator is dedicated to you. All collections can be examined by constructing multiple-sensory learning experiences. Whether these lessons are accomplished using teaching collections and reproductions, re-created or simulated experiences, or by invoking our visitors’ imaginations, such teaching is always more compelling than is simple listening and looking.

Any extra effort it may take to construct sensory learning experiences will be well rewarded by greater levels of visitor involvement and by the knowledge that you are teaching in a way that appeals to several types of learning styles (sensory, intuitive, kinesthetic, etc.) simultaneously. So, do give it a try!

Teaching Collections and Reproductions

Many institutions devote part of their collection to “hands-on,” activities. Opportunities to inspect and handle add a tactile dimension to investigations. The items used for these activities may be authentic or they may be reproductions. They might consist of samples, casts and molds, skeletal mounts, fabrics, utensils, tools, materials, models, or other examples. Stimuli that appeal to senses other than touch might be such auditory ones as animal sounds, birdcalls, and music, or olfactory ones like aromas and fragrances.

Many science-oriented facilities provide visitors with opportunities to handle bones, pelts, rocks, and other items that are not essential to their exhibition collection’s integrity. Visitors are allowed to touch, inspect using magnifying glasses and microscopes, and to otherwise closely examine and compare plant matter, minerals, crystals, shells, feathers, teeth, butterfly wings, and other such specimens.

There are zoos, nature centers, and natural history museums that have herpetology labs and insect zoos where visitors can feel the skin of a snake or hold a praying mantis. Botanical gardens may allow visitors to touch tree bark, crush and smell herbs, handle succulents, or compare the feel of various soils.

Historic sites and museums of history may allow visitors to try on reproductions of apparel of the time, or to play period games, or to participate in such activities as making candles or soaps.

Art institutions may offer visitors a chance to manipulate clay, make collages or drawings, hold brushes or other art-making tools, feel incised plates and carvings, or crush minerals to make pigments.

Re-creations and Re-enactments

Museums, historic sites, and other facilities may re-create activities or events that engage visitors’ senses. Visitors may enter galleries where recordings of such things as animal calls, tribal instruments, or period music are played. On certain occasions, battle scenes may be re-enacted at which muskets and other weaponry are fired. And, many institutions dress docents or performers in costume and have them converse and conduct activities in a manner consistent with the interpreted period.

At the Kona Historical Society’s Uchida Coffee Farm, visitors tour a small coffee-producing property and home typical of Japanese immigrants who settled in this area of Hawaii. The visitors’ five senses are brought into play throughout the tour.
Tour participants listen to donkeys braying and to chickens clucking.

They handle rice bags used to make clothing. And, upon entering the Uchida family's house, they are greeted with small samples of foods symbolic of those that would typically be given to greet visitors, such as white rice wrapped in seaweed, or cups of miso soup.

V Imaginations

Sensory perceptions are so powerful and so much a part of our mental and emotional repertoire that they need not be "actual" to become discernable. How fortunate for those of us who teach! Even when teaching collections or simulations seem impractical or irrelevant, educators can construct multi-sensory lessons by asking visitors to use their imaginations.

Imagine the sounds made by firecrackers. Then, think of what time or place it reminds you of. What smells do you associate with this sound, the time, and/or the place? You don't actually have to hear the sound of firecrackers exploding to respond to these questions. These questions ask you to rely upon previous sensory experiences; they only take a working imagination and memory to respond to them.

Before walking into a tropical rainforest environment in a zoo or arboretum, ask visitors to imagine what they might expect to feel, hear, and smell. Then, once they've entered, ask them to confirm which of the sensory experiences they listed are actually present. Do they perceive any sensations that were not accounted for prior to entering?

Many science-oriented facilities provide visitors with opportunities to handle items that are not essential to their exhibition collection's integrity. Visitors are allowed to touch and to otherwise closely examine and compare items, as these two visitors are doing at The British Museum, in London, England.

Continued on the next page.
What have they learned about this environment from their sensory observations?

Imagine that the year is 1880. You inhabit this historic house, which was built in the middle of town. What sounds might you hear from your living room windows — horses, carriages, street vendors? What sounds that are familiar to us today would you not hear? What smells would you notice on a hot summer’s day? Why?

Look carefully at a landscape painting. What sounds might you hear if you were there? Listen closely. Can you hear birds, animals, the sound of water, the wind in the trees, the cracking of branches under the weight of heavy snow, or the swishing of feet walking through tall grass? And, come to think of it, what do abstract paintings sound like? Are they all the same, or does each have its own, distinctive rhythms and sounds? Try listening to paintings hung throughout your galleries!

Sit among tribal masks, baskets, tools, or sculptures. Tell visitors a story that relates to the people, things, or images surrounding them in the gallery. Storytelling is a terrific way to engage the imagination and participation of visitors.

When told in an elaborate and compelling fashion, stories will bring the listener’s senses along for the ride. From time-to-time, interrupt the story to ask visitors to describe what they might hear, smell, taste, or feel in the various situations the story portrays.

Make Up Your Own Activities

Docents and other educators have wonderful opportunities to be inventive when developing games and activities that engage the senses of their visitors. Activities that request comparisons work particularly well for this purpose. For instance,
here's an activity I've developed called "What's Your Taste?" After participating in this activity, visitors will have inspected carefully, isolated relevant details or events, described their responses to those details or events, and used their personal creativity to make and define associations.

This activity is set up by explaining to visitors that the taste buds on our tongues can only distinguish four flavors — sweet, sour, bitter, and salty. It is by various combinations of those four flavors that we perceive different tastes. For instance, chocolate is a particular combination of sweet, bitter, and salty whereas citrus is a combination of sour, sweet, and bitter. Next, have your visitors examine a work of art or reflect upon an event of history that you have just discussed. Have them posit what that artwork or time period would "taste" like if they could translate it into flavors and explain why they perceive it in that particular way.

Whether you use teaching collections and reproductions, offer re-creations or re-enactments, or call upon your visitors' imaginations, creating activities that engage multi-sensory perceptions is exciting, rewarding, and fun. Try creating a game or activity that calls upon your visitors' senses, and then allow them to find their own personal relationships to your collection. Challenge yourself to think of many sensory possibilities, rather than to be boxed in by restrictions. Though we tend to assume that the world within museums, zoos, and gardens is primarily visual — as the song goes, "It ain't necessarily so."

Alan Gartenhaus
Publishing Editor
Imagery Awakens the Senses

The giant saguaro cactus, tall and powerful, depicted as the John Wayne of the desert. The majestic lion, loud and troublesome, seen as a neighborhood bully. The Grand Canyon, diverse and full of life, perceived as a large, metropolitan city. An ancient piece of pottery thought of as a lost soul, lonely and forgotten. How can these images be used by docents? Each fires the minds of listeners, invokes the senses, and brings an individual a step closer to significant and in-depth understanding.

Effective interpretation has never been stronger at today’s interpretive sites. Many docents are becoming better at encouraging visitors to become active thinkers, rather than to simply listen, passively, to information.

The use of metaphors and similes to create imagery has been used by generations of dynamic speakers and storytellers. It is a most effective communication tool and allows listeners to understand and respond on a personal level. Using words to touch the senses, including emotion, helps each individual make profound images.

As Roger von Oech points out in his book, A Whack on the Side of the Head, “Metaphors help us to understand one idea by means of another; we understand the unfamiliar by means of the similarities it has with what is familiar.” He goes on to point out that “facts stand alone and focus on differences, like a spotlight. Metaphors try to find similarities and connections, like a floodlight.” (Notice the use of metaphor here to help understand the meaning of “metaphor.”)

Recently, I saw a booklet promoting the area of Durango, Colorado. After reading it, I realized that some of their comments were among the better examples of effective interpretation I had seen in print. The front page stated,

This is God’s country.
But He left the gate open.

Next to a picture of Mesa Verde, they have,

Smack your head on the same doorway the Anasazi did. (ouch!)

Describing their town alongside a beautiful photo they stated —

Small town hospitality combined with western vistas.
Kind of like Aunt Bea in chaps.

From those few small statements, the reader can bring forth a flood of thoughts. Perhaps they smell good country cooking, hear the porch swing creek, and begin to whistle the theme song from the Andy Griffith show.

One of the best ways to spice up your interpretive programming is to think and speak with images. Ask yourself, just what image is it you want to bring to the listener’s mind and then reach into your own memories to find ways to evoke it. One should keep in mind that every person sees things in a somewhat different light. Such variables as age, background, and life experiences make the act of interpreting personal; it will vary from one individual to the next.

Connecting the tangible with the intangible in a significant way should be a goal for any successful docent. Inviting visitors to understand on their own level, at their own speed, will stimulate interest and motivate involvement. I experienced a prime example of this when I observed a docent at a location honoring the history of World War II pass around a military hat and ask each person to describe what he or she held. Most of the comments were very visual in nature, referring to its size, color, and texture. Then, the docent held the hat and told a story about it. He told how it had been worn by his uncle’s fighting buddy after his uncle had been shot and killed, how the hat had actually been held close to the heart of this soldier as a tribute to a brave companion. Suddenly, the hat took on additional meaning and the group perceived it as if it were an exquisite crystal piece. When the group was asked to describe it once again, the words they used were altogether different than previously.

An exercise I share and use successfully can involve any object familiar to everyone in the group. First, I stimulate the participant’s senses by asking them to imagine … the smell of gasoline; the taste of a banana; the feel of a cactus; the site of a small puppy; the sound of a fire engine; etc. — different phrases that ignite the imagination and bring forth an image. Then, we go around from person to person and have each individual give a one or two word description of the familiar object using each of their senses. This helps the group examine this object in a different way and not just view it as the summation of known facts.

Creating strong images that evoke the senses helps listeners make and more fully experience collections.

by Bev Twillmann
National Park Service staff and docents at the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial site in St. Louis, MO, use all of their senses to describe a buffalo skin during an “Interpretive Voices” workshop exercise.

Photo: courtesy of Bev Twillmann

and locations. The technique of visualization can bring the inanimate or remote to life. Images are powerful, as are words. By successfully combining imagery with language, docents can ignite experience for audiences, awaken memories, engage passions, and bring to life all the senses.

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Bev Twillmann is a storyteller/educator/keynote speaker/trainer who provides workshops, performances, and interpretive training sessions. Her work in the interpretive field, under the name of Interpretive Voices, has been nationally recognized. Ms. Twillmann has contributed two articles previously to The Docent Educator (Winter 1998-99 and Summer 2000). She can be contacted by e-mail at: bevstory@aol.com.

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New Designs on Audiences

Across the United States, and in other countries as well, museums have gone on a building spree. In the U.S., more than 25 major art institutions, and many smaller ones, are constructing new facilities. When most of the current projects are completed, more than $3 billion in capital funds will have been raised, mostly from private donors.

Avant-garde architecture and an international cast of architects are playing a prominent role in marketing these projects, both to potential donors and to the public. Among the many projects underway or recently completed are:

Guggenheim Museum, New York City
   architect, Frank Gehry

Museum of American Folk Art, New York City
   architects, Williams and Tsien

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City
   architect, Rem Koolhaas

Museum of Modern Art, New York City
   architect, Yoshio Taniguchi

Museum of Modern Art annex, Queens, NY
   architect, Michael Maltzan

Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY
   architect, James Polshek

Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA
   architect, not selected

Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, CT
   architect, Van Berkel & Bos

Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach, FL
   architect, Arata Isozaki

Akron Art Museum, Akron, OH
   architect, not selected

Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
   architect, Frank Gehry

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
   architect, Herzog & de Meuron

Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
   architect, Renzo Piano

Amon Carter Museum, Ft. Worth, TX
   architect, Philip Johnson

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Houston, TX
   architect, Rafael Moneo

Austin Art Museum, Austin, TX
   architect, Richard Gluckman

Pulitzer Art Collection, St. Louis, MO
   architect, Tadao Ando

Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO
   architect, Daniel Libeskind

Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO
   architect, Steven Holl

Jewish Museum of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA
   architect, Daniel Libeskind

Bellevue Art Museum, Bellevue, WA
   architect, Steven Holl

A Newsweek article published on March 26, 2001, reads, “Many American cities have been making a comeback, as the 2000 Census figures confirm, and museums are now seen as urban jump-starters, capable of attracting hordes of visitors, good press and even new business.” Newsweek continues, “Art museums began to change in the ’60s. The power of the curators waned as museum education departments grew — and government money began to flow in. Today public money is drying up and marketing is more important than ever. Museums are pushing to appeal to broader audiences, not just with blockbuster shows of impressionist paintings but with a whole new category of populist fare:

The Art of the Motorcycle
   (Guggenheim Museum, New York),

Wallace and Gromit
   (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston),

The Art of Star Wars
   (Museum of Fine Arts, Houston).”

[For a few more thoughts on this topic, permit us to refer you to a previous issue of The Docent Educator — Summer 2001 (Vol. 10, No.4), focusing on the topic of Entertainment and Education.]

In a revealing comment that took us aback, Newsweek continues by declaring to its readers that, “The new architecture is designed to “de-odorize the whiff of elitism that emanates from all those grandiose beaux-arts museums built at the turn of the century.”
Visiting Museums in the Big Apple

If you are heading to New York City for a visit to its museums, you are probably going to go to the Museum of Modern Art, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. However, the list of intriguing museums in New York does not end there. Why not consider going to one of these other, very intriguing museums, in addition?

- Cooper-Hewitt Museum — the national museum of design, which explores how design affects our daily lives.
- El Museo Del Barrio — presents and preserves the art and culture of Puerto Ricans and all Latin Americans in the United States.
- The Merchant's House Museum — the only NYC home preserved intact, both inside and out, from the 19th century.
- The Museum for African Art — dedicated to increasing public understanding and appreciation of African art and culture.
- Museum of the Chinese in the Americas — preserves over 150 years of Chinese-American history in the heart of Chinatown.
- American Museum of the Moving Image — takes visitors through the process of producing, marketing, and showing movies and television programs.
- Scandinavia House — offers a wide range of exhibitions and programs that reflect the Nordic culture in the United States.
- Corning Museum — displays the world's premier glass collection and presents live, hot glassblowing all day, every day.
- The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology — textiles, clothing, shoes, and other apparel dating from the mid-18th century.
- Museum of the City of New York — a presentation of the social, economic, intellectual, and political history of this great city.

Some Favorite Genes

The Museum of Natural History, in New York City, has opened a new, hands-on area devoted to gene research and the mapping of the human genome. This burgeoning area of scientific investigation has a myriad of profound impacts and consequences to life in the future — from curing cancer and other diseases to cloning. It is sure to be a big draw for school groups and the general public.

In the hands-on laboratory, visitors can retrieve a sample of their own DNA and have it analyzed and, within 90 minutes or so, mapped. They can compare their DNAs' similarities and differences to other humans, and to other animals. Visitors can see, for instance, that human DNA is 98% similar to that of chimpanzees and 90% to that of mice.

When featured on NBC's Today Show, the museum's provost stressed that this hands-on facility would have school children as its primary audience and that education was the laboratory's primary purpose and intention.
Using the Five Senses to Enliven Tours

Sensing the Desert

Have you ever watched a house cat sitting outdoors? A cat is super-tuned to its environment. Ears, eyes, nose are all alert and taking in information. Its survival may very well depend upon its ability to perceive what is lurking in its environment. A cat will never just exit from the house without first checking past the door to see if it is safe. In contrast, I go in and out, here and there, barely noticing where I step or what is around, as if I were in total control of my environment and nothing would ever surprise me. As civilized adult human beings, a heightened sensory awareness to our local environments is not so critical for our survival.

As babies, however, we begin our learning entirely with sensory input. The unfocused eyes and brain struggle to make sense of our surroundings. Over time they learn to recognize shapes. The cacophony of sounds becomes ordered, we learn to understand words and eventually to talk. The smells of our caretakers, siblings and local foods become familiar, and we remember them. We reach out to touch and grasp everything we see, and each thing must be tasted and evaluated with lips and tongue. As children grow this sense of touching, handling and sensing objects continues. Children are very active sensory learners.

As the environment becomes familiar, our senses go into a kind of automatic mode. We see, but we don't notice. We hear, but we don't listen. However, when we enter an unfamiliar environment for the first time, whether it is a new museum, or a foreign country, our senses are heightened. In this "new world" our senses do not know what to focus on, how to prioritize information, and we are in sensory overload. There are so many new and exciting things to see, hear, smell, and sometimes to do.

Docents in a museum can help visitors of all ages learn where and how to focus this heightened sensory awareness onto specific objects or exhibits, and bring fascinating stories to life. We will explore a few ways docents do this at the Desert Botanical Garden, in Phoenix, AZ.

1 Touching

Explaining why there are deserts in the world and where these deserts occur on the earth can be pretty "dry" information, especially when visitors are on sensory overload. However, showing a raised relief map of where the deserts and the mountains are located, and allowing visitors to touch, helps enhance an image. As they hear about how the mountains block the rain, the visitors sense the elevated mountains beneath their fingers. That makes a memorable impression.

Another example of touching helps visitors understand how cacti store water. We explain that a cactus is not a vessel filled with water, and it is not possible to cut one open and get a drink. But, allowing visitors to feel the texture of the tissues of a succulent cactus and to discover how these tissues store water, helps them understand. Do not underestimate the value of physical touching to make your point, reinforce your message, or keep excited little hands busy while they listen to your story.

3 Smelling

There are many fascinating stories of how plants in the desert survive. Using the sense of smell is another useful method to bring these stories to life. For example, the creosote bush is a rather unimposing looking desert shrub. The story of this very abundant desert plant is unforgettable when docents have visitors smell the aromatic resins on the plant's leaves. These resins protect the bush from losing water—conserving water is essential for desert plants to survive. This resin dissolves into the air when it rains creating a very distinctive fresh smell. "Fake" rain, created with a little spray bottle, allows visitors to smell and remember about the creosote bush's special desert adaptation. Smell is a very powerful sense, and aromas are remembered forever. Make your story memorable with a related smell.

3 Tasting

Docents tell the story of the desert "Tree of Life" (the mesquite tree) at a station set up in the shade of a magnificent mesquite tree. At this station docents show examples of all the components of this amazing tree that have been used in the desert for centuries: pitch made into paint for pottery, wood used for making tools and building homes, leaves used as a topical medicine, and bean pods used for food. While tasting tea or flour made from the sweet bean pods, visitors are fascinated to learn how the beans are collected, stored for year round use, and then ground into the flour that can be used to flavor cookies, muffins, pancakes,
breads, and many other foods. Visitors can also grind some of the beans themselves — the old fashioned way in a stone mortar with a large wooden pestle. They go away with the taste of mesquite, and a better understanding of the value of this important desert tree. Tasting is almost always a winner, especially with children visitors.

3 Hearing
Recorded sounds of local birds are available on a sign in the Garden. The distinctive call and chatter of a desert Gamble’s Quail can be heard while looking at its picture and reading information about this interesting bird. Visitors can write in our log book those birds they have seen or heard on the day of their visit. It is amazing how people begin to identify the local animals by sight and/or sounds, as evidenced by those recorded in the log.

In this instance, it is an exhibit sign that engages the sense of hearing to focus visitor attention. Docents build on the sounds of the sign by encouraging visitors to listen and look for birds and nests, while also showing up close some of the birds nests and the nest materials. The birds and their calls, explained by the hands-on items, help visitors understand that birds and animals depend on local desert plants for survival. Using hearing is an effective “hook” for getting visitors interested in the message.

3 Seeing
As primarily sighted beings we look at things all the time. But do we really see things? One of the exercises we share with docents, teachers, and visitors is to ask what colors they think of when they hear the term “desert.” We often have preconceived visions in our minds that we do not “see” beyond.
To break free of this we give each person 3 - 5 assorted color chips cut from a paint sample brochure. They then go out into the Garden and find their colors in the plants, the soil, or wherever, as long as it is

At the “Tree of Life” station docents show examples of all the components of the amazing mesquite tree that have been used in the desert for centuries: pitch made into paint for pottery, wood used for making tools and building homes, leaves used as a topical medicine, and bean pods used for food. Visitors can grind beans themselves — the old fashioned way in a stone mortar with a large wooden pestle. They go away with the taste of mesquite, and a better understanding of the value of this important desert tree. Photo: courtesy of the Desert Botanical Garden.
Docents encourage visitors to listen and look for birds and nests, while also showing up close some of the birds nests and the nest materials. The birds and their calls, explained by hands-on items, help visitors understand that birds and animals depend on local desert plants for survival. Hearing is an effective “hook” for getting visitors interested.

Photo: courtesy of the Desert Botanical Garden

in the natural things in the Garden. In direct contrast to their bland “visions” of a desert, people are amazed by how many colors are readily visible in the leaves, branches, and bark when their attention is focused. One of the docents uses this activity regularly with visitors on his tour. When each person finds his color he shares it with the rest of the group, then everyone benefits. It is surprising how easily and eagerly visitors of all ages get involved in this simple technique of discovery.

On the other hand, as attuned as we are to using our sight to gather information, try going for a nighttime tour. You quickly discover that smelling and hearing become more advantageous in the dark. We then learn that night-blooming flowers are usually aromatic to attract the nighttime animals that pollinate them. And nocturnal animals like crickets and frogs make noise at night in order to attract a mate. This perspective can also help us understand how visitors with disabilities might benefit from museums/docents that “engage the senses.” Using a variety of sensory activities to tell the museum’s stories enables visitors to easily and naturally connect using one sense or another.

In the harsh world of spiny, prickly, “don’t touch” plants at the Desert Botanical Garden, we search for ways to connect with our visitors and enhance their understanding. Having hands-on, sensory items on tours and at docent stations along the trail enables docents to make that connection and the desert becomes a more “friendly” place.

Museums are often thought of as sterile places where you look at special things and don’t touch. In reality museums offer special opportunities to use the objects and artifacts to engage the senses in ways that are not available in the formal education world of books and photos.

Stories about the objects — whether it is how a rock was formed and moved to the surface of the earth, or how a plant survives in the desert, or how an artist makes his paints or his paintings — are made real by visitors using their senses to have very personal experiences with the objects. Helping visitors focus their attention by using their senses is an easy and rewarding way to make a visit to your museum memorable.

Nancy Cutler has been interpretive coordinator at the Desert Botanical Garden, in Phoenix, Arizona, training docents and refining interpretive techniques for the past nine years. She is a frequent contributor to The Docent Educator. Her most recent article, “Capitalizing on Curiosity,” appeared in the Autumn 2001 issue (Vol. 11, No. 1).
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue Title</th>
<th>Volume/Number</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Docent as Teacher</em></td>
<td>1/1</td>
<td>Autumn 1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Docent Programming</em></td>
<td>3/3</td>
<td>Spring 1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Outreach</em></td>
<td>6/1</td>
<td>Autumn 1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Creative Programming</em></td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>Autumn 1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>More Tough Topics</em></td>
<td>6/3</td>
<td>Spring 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Evaluation</em></td>
<td>6/4</td>
<td>Summer 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Games and Activities that Teach</em></td>
<td>7/1</td>
<td>Autumn 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Honing Your Teaching Skills</em></td>
<td>7/2</td>
<td>Winter 1997-98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Interpretation: The Search for Meaning</em></td>
<td>7/3</td>
<td>Spring 1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Preventing Burn-Out: Incentives and Benefits</em></td>
<td>8/4</td>
<td>Summer 1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Highlights: Programs in Various Settings</em></td>
<td>8/1</td>
<td>Autumn 1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hands-On!</em></td>
<td>8/2</td>
<td>Winter 1998-99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Continued on page 20.*
Art, Questions,

by V. Gwen Weisner

Normally, when we think about appreciating art, we think of using our eyes. Questions such as, “What do you see?” or “What might the artist be portraying?” come to mind. But, there are other ways to perceive art—ways that involve other senses and other questions.

Recently, an exhibit at the Palo Alto Art Center included works by two artists chosen to participate in the annual juried exhibition called “Radius.” One of the chosen artists produced works that were computer-generated, or produced by conventional means and then scanned into the computer. His process involved crumpling and folding the first printed versions before scanning them into the computer a second time, creating a cracked background effect. They were then printed on large sheets of tissue paper with additional photographic elements or painting or drawing effects added for a rich textural surface. Because of this artist’s emphasis on texture, the idea of touch became very important to teaching about this art.

Docents prepared tours focused on the idea of texture and touch, talking about how artists produce textures and what effect textures have on those who look at the work. They found specific objects in the exhibit with different textures and discussed how the artists produced the textural effects and what responses these effects elicited.

Among the questions docents posed were:

x If you were the artist, would you have used this textured effect?

x If you could touch it, what word would you use to describe the texture?

x Why do you think the artist added the texture?

Soon, more creative and expansive questions emerged from these fairly conventional ones. Choosing a specific textured area, we began asking such questions as:

x What sort of noise might you hear if you could rub the surface?

x Would the noise be different if you rubbed from right to left? From left to right? From top to bottom? Or, from bottom to top?

x If you chose a type of music to describe this area, what music would you select? Jazz, rap, bebop, rock, etc.

When asking such expansive questions it is important to share and validate the responses you receive. They will reflect individual differences in perception and point-of-view. For example, I led a group of children to a ceramic sculpture with bushy, spiky “hair.” I asked the children what it might feel like if we could touch it (and reiterated that this must be an imaginary touch). Answers ranged from “rough, pointy, and jagged” to “oily, like horse-hair, and slimy.”

Sometimes, however, questioning receives a unanimous response. When this same group of students looked at a larger ceramic sculpture with long flat ribbon shapes, the group looked at it for only a short while and then agreed that the artist had used a pasta/noodle machine to make the clay pieces. We had a small piece of the ribbon for the children to touch, and they again were unanimous in deciding that the strips had been put on the sculpture before the piece was fired and that the color was added as a last step in finishing the work.

It is not uncommon to receive some surprising and clever comments to open-ended questions. In a recent show of work by three women artists, one artist used sheets of mulberry paper, pierced and covered with melted beeswax. The first question from the group was, “How does she make the holes?” I distributed samples of the paper and asked them if they could figure out what she had done. The children agreed that she had poked something through the paper, because there was a ridge around the small hole on one side of the paper.

One child commented, “It’s like for a blind person.” They also noticed that there were variations of color over the large surface of the sheets, and the group consensus was that she had painted the surface with hot wax and as it cooled, the thickness varied and made for changes in color. The group decided that the wax was applied first and then the holes were made, since painting on the wax did not flatten the one-sided ridges. Then one boy sniffed his sample and remarked that it smelled sweet; a girl tried a sniff and said it was like flowers, and a third boy corrected her statement by summing up, “It smells like really good candles.”
and the Five Senses

The students all could think of places where you could get dirt to mix with melted wax to get different colors, as the artist had done. They decided that one of the best places to go would be the Grand Canyon, since the canyon walls contained so many colors. But, they said, this artist didn't go there; she used ordinary kinds of dirt.

I've enjoyed having a chance to talk about the "sounds" evoked by art works. I remember one exhibit where there were two charcoal drawings of sea stacks. We looked at them and talked about what a sea stack was and where you could go to see them. Then, I told the students to close their eyes and imagine standing on the beach looking at the stack. I asked them to tell me what sounds they heard.

At first, all they could imagine was the sound of the sea. But, gradually, by asking a few additional questions, more complex answers emerged. "What kind of weather is it?" They responded, "Oh, there's a wind, you can hear the wind in the trees, maybe the wind will break off a branch and you could hear it fall." I asked, "What animals might you hear?" and they heard shorebirds, seagulls, and imagined a growling animal in a nearby forest. Then, they added a boat behind the sea stack, hearing the sails flap and the boat's bell. They heard the sound of pebbles dragging back and forth with the movement of the waves on shore, the sound of bubbles breaking on the sand, and of a fish jumping close to the beach.

At the conclusion of our tour, I asked the children if there were art works they would remember after they left our facility. A number of them chose the sea stacks and said that they would remember all they had imagined, unseen, by thinking about the sounds.

A similarly positive response occurred when our institution exhibited some large jar sculptures within which were hidden trays supporting blocks of ice. We asked the students to sit quietly and tell us what they heard. At first, no one really heard anything, so we listened to ourselves breathe. Then, suddenly, one child said quietly, "I hear dripping." We listened carefully until everyone could hear the dripping. Then, I asked, "Which jar is the dripping sound coming from?" This required extra listening before they informed me, triumphantly, "They're all dripping and some drip faster than others!"

Asking questions about art works that engage the imagination and senses is easy and it slows visitors down, makes them look, and takes them past such thoughts as "I like this" or "I don't like this."

V. Gwen Weisner became a docent at the Palo Alto Art Center, in Palo Alto, CA, in 1989, when she retired from the Palo Alto Unified School District. Today she continues to provide tours for both children and adults, and to learn about art. In addition to serving as a docent, Ms. Weisner is a gallery attendant, welcoming visitors to the exhibits and offering to answer their questions, and is a member of the Palo Alto Center Foundation.
A Process-Oriented Approach to

At the Dallas Museum of Art, education staff and docents often work collaboratively to develop and refine a variety of strategies for teaching in the galleries. Many of the DMA's 140 actively touring docents are practicing artists who bring their own perspectives to teaching about art in the collections. The following are examples of the object-based experiences developed through this collaboration.

DMA docent Emily Parham developed a plan to lead a session on ceramics with first-year touring docents Sarah Nabors and Jo Ann Reno. The three women, who share a common interest in making ceramics, each selected works in the permanent collections that they planned on presenting, including the DMA's prized three-glaze Chinese guardian figures, ancient Chinese ceramics, and Japanese Jomon pot. Before spending time in the galleries, Emily, Sarah, and Jo Ann chose to lead a session in the art studios that allowed docents to experience handling clay. Docents attending the afternoon training were each provided a workstation and distributed a large slab of clay that they were told to mold or reshape in some way. Emily brought a variety of simple implements and objects including toothpicks, buttons, rolling pins, and textured surfaces like a hazelnut, used for sculpting, shaping, and re-texturing the clay. After the studio exercise, docents adjourned to the galleries where Emily, Sarah, and Jo Ann gave presentations on the art objects, connecting how they were made to the previous activity in the studios.

While explaining the patterns that were pressed on to the Jomon pot using a coiled rope, Emily made comparison and reference to the various found objects and tools the docents worked with in the studios. A technical explanation of firing and glazing techniques also took place. This allowed the conversation to delve more deeply into an understanding of the technical skills required to finely craft and execute the pieces in the DMA's collections. The session was well-received by the docents in attendance, who were excited to hear their peers and to gather information specific to objects that they could incorporate into their tours.

This past May, the DMA opened the exhibition Wolfgang Laib: A Retrospective. The show provides a distinctive challenge to docents as Laib's work is intended to be experienced in a solitary fashion. Laib's sculptural installations of hand-harvested pollen fields, wax rooms, and rice mountains have synesthetic qualities that engage the senses in unusual ways — the fragrance of beeswax, the texture of pollen, the role of silence in viewing this complex work. In assigning tours of this exhibition, the education department primarily asked docents to serve as conversation starters and to answer questions about the work, while encouraging visitor exploration.

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Engaging the Senses

DMA head docent, Corinne Simpler, who has toured at the museum for over 3 years, developed a wonderful approach to simulate the process of the artist. Corinne brought from home materials similar to those used in The Rice Meals, 1983, a small jar of white rice and a brass plate. In the actual work, Laib constructs 26 rice mountains of almost identical height and depth spread over brass offering plates. Finding an isolated area outside of the galleries, Corinne asked a volunteer from her group of school children to experiment with building a mountain of rice like the artist. First, the student tried taking grains out of the jar using his fingers. When there appeared to be more rice stuck to the child’s hands than on the brass plate, he shifted to the tactic of pouring the rice directly on the plate. Focusing his attention on the concentrated act of pouring rice into a shallow container, the child became more aware of the challenges facing the artist in making each mountain the same height and depth. Corinne’s idea was later adapted by the education staff for use in an interactive gallery talk geared toward adult visitors.

The DMA’s P.M. docent corps is a group of working professionals who tour in the evenings. Lane Banks is a practicing artist, who serves as an active museum educator and member of this group. Lane was recently awarded a grant from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation for his work as a minimalist painter and often takes a process-oriented approach in his work with adult visitors. In discussing the museum’s Sol LeWitt’s drawing, which is made directly on to a wall of the main building, Lane researched the artist’s plans for similar wall pieces. He invited visitors to experiment with making their own drawings using a general set of instructions Lane prepared, similar to the type of guidelines developed by LeWitt:

- Draw a square.
- Fill it with 10 lines drawn horizontally from one side of the square to the other, spaced as close together as possible.
- Draw a square.
- Fill it with 10 lines drawn from the upper right corner to lower left corner, spaced as close together as possible.

The resulting sketches from this activity yielded many different interpretations of the instructions and provided visitors with the sense of freedom that LeWitt, as artist, allows museum staff in interpreting and executing such unique works.

Process-oriented strategies, such as these, pull visitors more deeply into an artist’s creative process and allow visitors to use both creative and critical thinking skills. Such routes for involving the senses make more engaging and rewarding experiences for both the educators and their visitors.

Shin Yu Pui is a poet and writer living in Boston, MA. She is the former docent coordinator for the Dallas Museum of Art in Dallas, TX.
Making Sensory Tours Safe

A number of years ago, I happened to be on the grounds of Fort Knox, Kentucky, at the Patton Museum of Cavalry and Armor, on the Fourth of July. Visitors that day had been promised a "parade" of some of the armored vehicles in the museum's collection. I wasn't expecting much. But then, a low, ominous creaking began. As the sound came inexorably nearer, I suddenly experienced an unexplainable fear. This was no sound I'd ever heard, and it filled me with dread. When the tank that was producing the fearful sound came into view, it brought with it an aura of power that the museum's static displays could only hint at.

The Patton Museum at Ft. Knox still allows summer visitors the sensory experience of one tank in motion on the third Saturday of each month, April through October, and a mass parade of rumbling armored vehicles on the Fourth of July. They are able to do so because they spend many hours in preparation to ensure the safety of their visitors. Impressing on people that tanks are "loud, hot, and dusty," their large volunteer force also provides the supervision that is one aspect of safely including sensory experiences in museum tours.

Safety guidelines regarding sound are generally vague, although Nancy Nadler, director of the Noise Center for the League of the Hard of Hearing, has been quoted as saying, "If it sounds too loud, it probably is." Continued exposure to noise above 85 decibels can cause serious hearing damage (ordinary conversation is about 60 decibels.) Museums, historic sites, and other such institutions that include loud sounds as part of their experience must consider both distance from the sound source and the acoustic environment (indoors or outdoors, and with or without ambient noise) when planning for their visitors' and volunteers' safety. Ear protection devices such as muffs or disposable plugs should be offered if loud sound is a continuous part of the tour. For those tours where a loud sound, such as a cannon or rifle volley, is (pardon the pun) a "one-shot" occasion, audience members should be warned to cover their ears, and those creating the sounds should wear earplugs.

When incorporating smells as part of a museum experience, common sense and those old rules from the chem lab are applicable. Smells from caustic or overpowering substances should not be used in museum settings, no matter how tempting it is to let visitors to a turn-of-the-century pharmacy get a good whiff of asafetida! Paints and glues with strong odors should always be used in a well-ventilated area. If visitors are asked to smell something, they should be instructed to carefully wave the vapor from the substance toward their nose with their hand, rather than sniffing it directly. Visitors should also be advised when they will enter an area of the museum where the irritants and odors from perfumes and colognes (or incense) or tobacco might cause allergic reactions in some people.

Allergies and sensitivities to certain foods should also be a consideration when museums and other educational facilities plan to introduce taste to their educational programming. A few specific foods seem to cause the majority of food allergies, with 90% of all allergic reactions coming from cow's milk, eggs, peanuts, wheat, soy products, fish and shellfish, and tree nuts. With up to 2 million children affected, food allergies are not to be taken lightly. In addition to avoiding the use of certain foods, museums should advise parents of children participating in food programs (and the children, themselves) of the types of foods to be used.

Peanuts, in particular, have become the number one food allergy, and the food allergy most likely to be fatal. Reactions to food allergies, in comparison to food sensitivities, are usually immediate and may include itchy mouth, "fullness" in the throat, shortness of breath, difficulty in breathing, vomiting, and/or a red, itchy rash over the entire body. In addition to avoiding the use of such highly allergic foods, docents and education staff should have training in dealing with allergic reactions and access to emergency help should a visitor have a severe reaction.

Food preparation is one area that is carefully regulated by county and state health departments, and personnel at those facilities can be of incredible help in setting up an educational program that includes food. Health department requirements vary depending on whether or not the food in question is being sold or given to the public, and on whether or not the food is a "sampling" vs. a serving size. If food is to be sold, or if it is considered serving size, most health departments require that the food be prepared in an inspected kitchen facility by trained food service.
personnel and supervised by a certified food protection manager. Rather than use their own facilities and personnel, many museums that serve food on a regular basis use an inspected and approved catering service.

In most cases, however, food offered during tours or demonstrations is a small sample. In these instances, health department guidelines are available to help in developing a protocol to avoid illness and liability issues. While most people take great care with food sanitation and refrigeration, a health department official shared with me that the greatest danger in food contamination actually comes from Hepatitis A, a viral disease transmitted when food service personnel are not scrupulous about hand washing.

Adding sensory experiences to a museum tour or demonstration takes careful planning and consideration of a variety of safety issues.

It is never enough to depend on rules and the goodwill of the touring public. When appropriate tastes, smells, and sounds are added to a museum’s programming, however, enhanced visitor enjoyment and education make the extra planning worth the effort.

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Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor

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