

TEACHING IN THE ART MUSEUM

Interpretation
as Experience

Rika Burnham
and Elliott Kai-Kee

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Teaching in museums is a complex art that requires tremendous preparation, knowledge, and planning; museum educators must balance a desire to share their hard-won understanding with openness to visitors' interpretations. What do we teach in our museums today, how, and why?

2 A BRIEF HISTORY OF TEACHING IN THE ART MUSEUM 19

Elliott Kai-Kee

The quest for good gallery teaching began around 1900, when museums first assigned docents and gallery instructors to work with the public. Museum educators have had to contend with a constant flux of ideas, experiments, controversies, and methodologies ever since. Today, the discipline of gallery teaching cannot progress without an understanding of its own history.

3 GALLERY TEACHING AS GUIDED INTERPRETATION 59

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Rewarding gallery experiences depend upon visitors' active participation in a process of discovery. Reframing gallery teaching as a project of shared interpretation allows us to view museum pedagogy as part of a broader hermeneutic practice that unites many disciplines, a practice with its own extensive literature and history.

4 INTENSE LOOKS:

Solitude, Scholarship, and a Teacher's Transformative Experience 67

Rika Burnham

Intense encounters with difficult artworks and the resulting struggles for interpretation can be uniquely frustrating and uniquely valuable for educator and students alike. In auspicious circumstances, a museum teacher's solitary looking, research, dialogues with colleagues, and gallery teaching may converge to create an experience that transforms her approach to even the most challenging artworks.

5 CONVERSATION, DISCUSSION, AND DIALOGUE 79

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Together with looking at artworks, talking about them occupies most of the time we spend in museum galleries. How should we conceive of talk in gallery teaching? Conversation, discussion, and dialogue are three modes of talk we can distinguish, each with its own goals and methods.

6 QUESTIONING THE USE OF QUESTIONS 94

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The use of questions to engage visitors with artworks is ubiquitous in museum gallery teaching. An examination of the history of questions in gallery teaching, exploring their uses and misuses, leads to a critical questioning of the very use of questions as currently practiced.

7 INFORMATION IN GALLERY TEACHING:

Charles Le Brun's *Water Tapestry* 112

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The methods of arthistory provide an essential means for understanding artworks. But does informational always enrich and advance visitors' experiences? When and how should we as gallery teachers introduce art-historical information into the dialogues we lead?

8 GALLERY TEACHING AS INTERPRETIVE PLAY 126

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Interpretive play is a critical part of the pedagogical practice of museum teaching. The concept of play helps us to explain what we mean by *openness* and *freedom* in gallery teaching, sustains creativity in our work, and helps us to elicit unexpected insights from our students.

9 THE BARNES FOUNDATION AS A PLACE FOR TEACHING 134

Rika Burnham

Albert Barnes collected and assembled works of art to be continually rearranged according to the imperatives of his unique teaching system. While this method might seem restrictive, the Barnes Foundation may be understood as the physical realization of a philosophical dream, a place where the theory that art can be appreciated and understood by all is tested.

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Teaching Toward Peak Experiences 143

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While it is gratifying when our students report enjoying rare, memorable experiences such as "learning how to look" during our gallery sessions, the temptation to make such experiences our goals and to teach toward them may lead us astray.

11 THE FUTURE OF TEACHING IN ART MUSEUMS 150

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In art museums of the future, gallery teachers are the most accomplished members of the education department, those best qualified to shape and animate its programs. They define its philosophy and mission, overturning the historically prevalent definition of teaching as a peripheral, volunteer, or entry-level activity.

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