

TEACHING  
IN THE  
ART MUSEUM

Interpretation  
as Experience

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Los Angeles

# PREFACE

In the fall of 2002 Rika Burnham was appointed a Getty Museum Scholar at the Getty Research Institute and the J. Paul Getty Museum, where I have worked as an education specialist since 1996. During her tenure at the Getty, Burnham led gallery dialogues for groups of adults and young adults on Friday evenings in a series she initiated, called *The Observant Eye*.<sup>1</sup> I attended many of these sessions, and came away with a profoundly transformed idea of what gallery teaching could be. I had been working as a museum teacher for many years, but nothing prepared me for the intense experiences Burnham seemed to pull out of the evening air in our galleries. I had so many questions for her. How did she guide participants to play such a large part in the dialogue? She seemed to work from no obvious method or system, and her own contributions to each dialogue were often so unobtrusive that the group's interpretations of the artworks often seemed to coalesce as if by magic. Did Burnham have her own interpretations of the artworks? Was she testing her interpretations against those of the participants? Was her goal the conclusions the group reached, or the process of exploration itself?

In my capacity as supervisor of gallery teaching at the Getty Museum, I asked the museum's gallery teachers to participate in the sessions Burnham led, and to comment on their experiences. Many described the salient features of Burnham's teaching: her extensive preparatory study of each artwork; the way she opened each dialogue with a moment of silence for intense looking and contemplation; the way she requested participants' thoughts and observations, paraphrased their comments back to them, and returned to their ideas again and again. Some of the Getty Museum gallery teachers' most thoughtful comments took the form of questions about their own practice: How do I use and balance information with audience participation? How much do I observe and listen, and how do I fold in and validate participants' responses? How can gallery teaching yield a meaningful experience?

It turned out that Burnham had come to the Getty in order to afford herself a few months to examine precisely the same questions. The expressed purpose of her stay at the Getty was to practice, reflect upon, and write about what she had learned in more than twenty years of teaching in art museums, principally at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and also as a guest teacher at museums throughout the United States and abroad. As Burnham herself confessed to me, her understanding of much of her practice remained intuitive, and she hoped at least to begin to articulate the principles that she felt must lie at the foundation of a good teaching practice. While neither of us could claim a comprehensive knowledge of the history of art museum teaching methodologies—we quickly discovered that no such history had ever been attempted, which convinced us that it was high time someone wrote one—we were of course aware of the various proposals for a unitary approach or universal method of gallery teaching that had come and gone during our careers. Yet her own experience suggested to Burnham

immense and diverse achievements of the artists and objects represented in our museums. If no one model could serve the cause of art museum teaching, then just what sort of philosophy could it be that we were both searching for?

Burnham and I began a series of freewheeling conversations not just about her approach but about art gallery teaching in general. We agreed that consistently good art museum teaching badly needed the support of a philosophy that would define its goals and methods. But where could we look for guidelines and standards appropriate to this unique kind of teaching? Our impressionistic survey of the various kinds of tours and talks and lessons offered in the galleries of American museums yielded a broad array of approaches and an equally varied array of visitor responses, but little sense of any coherent body of beliefs and values shared by our teachers and docents.

Our conversations at first generated one question after another that we agreed would need to be addressed in order to build the theoretical foundation we thought art museum teaching needed if we were to understand our practice properly: What should be the content of our teaching? What kind of knowledge should we aim to produce? What constitutes truth in the experience of art? To what extent should art history and art criticism provide the models for our work? What are the differences between the curator's and the educator's approaches to interpretation? What is the place of emotion, will, and imagination in looking at art? Of irrationality and surprise? How can we disentangle *how* we teach from *what* we teach, since the two so often seem indivisible? What is the function of authority in museum teaching? Of information? Or should we conceive of gallery teaching as an essentially democratic, participatory process? What is the purpose of the various formats that gallery teaching has taken over the years, such as lecture and discussion, and how do they differ one from another? How should we use questions in our work? How do our groups experience time as we look at artworks, and how and by whom should the pace of discovery be controlled? When we teach, should we seek to *make* something happen, or *allow* it to happen? What constitutes a coherent experience of an artwork? Is there such a thing as a collective experience of art for a group, and if so, how does it differ from the individual's experience? What is the purpose of leading *groups* to look at artworks anyway? Should we as instructors invest in certain outcomes, or should the goals of our teaching be open-ended? How can we create a structure or atmosphere that fosters a sense of exploration and discovery? How should we express our fundamental respect for our audiences? And, finally, why do we teach in art museums at all?

With so many questions, our discourse continued long after the end of Burnham's visit to Los Angeles. We corresponded, and began to write together. The result was "The Art of Teaching in the Museum," our first attempt to compose a coherent statement of our philosophy of gallery teaching, which, in a revised version, is included as chapter 1 in this book. As I reread this article today, it appears to me as an agenda comprising the issues that have continued to preoccupy us ever since. We explored many of these issues further in presentations we gave together at the annual National Art Education

Association conferences. Also decisive in our development of the ideas examined in this book were the seminars that we led, separately and together, for art teachers and museum educators at the Teacher Institute in Contemporary Art (TICA) and Teaching Institute in Museum Education (TIME), both run by the Art Institute of Chicago and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.<sup>2</sup> The welcome reception of our ideas among our colleagues in museum education, and their eagerness to join in the broad dialogue we sought to provoke, has encouraged us to continue working together ever since.

The book you hold now in your hands is the result—provisional, in progress—of our explorations to date. As the reader will quickly discover, the essays included here do not in the end constitute a system or method of museum teaching; such a scheme would in fact be remote from the spirit of our work. Rather, we propose a variety of perspectives—historical, theoretical, practical—from which we invite both professional museum educators and volunteer docents to reflect upon the art of gallery teaching, in order to deepen, broaden, and question their practice. Museum teaching is self-evidently a profession, and for some, we propose, a vocation too; yet we do indeed believe that it is also an art, and as such, we acknowledge that there will always be aspects of this art that remain perhaps in some sense beyond analysis. Nonetheless, we believe that we can and must teach better, and that we can only do so if we are able to arrive at collective understandings, however temporary, of what we do and seek to do. Just as we believe that the results of any given gallery dialogue should always remain unforeseen and open-ended, likewise we contend that our philosophical reflection upon our work should itself remain a shared collective dialogue open to experience. Nothing would gratify us more than to encounter, in coming years, colleagues who have explored, extended, countered, and contended with the ideas we propose here.

—E.K.K.  
Los Angeles  
March 2010

#### Notes

1. Rika Burnham's series of gallery dialogues at the Getty later inspired her to create a series of gallery dialogues, also called *The Observant Eye*, at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, where she was then an associate museum educator. The series is generously funded by Patsy and Jeff Tarr.
2. For their generous support of these programs, Rika Burnham and I wish to acknowledge with gratitude Phil Baranowski at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; Tina Olsen, formerly with the Getty Trust; and Max Marmor, of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation.

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## THE ART OF TEACHING IN THE MUSEUM

*Rika Burnham and Elliott Kai-Kee*

A class is studying a small painting by Rembrandt in the galleries of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. The museum educator has been inviting the assembled visitors to look ever more closely, guiding the class toward an understanding both of the painting itself and of our reasons for studying it. The class has been anything but passive—indeed, it has been lively. The painting is *The Abduction of Europa* (1632), a picture that depicts in delicate detail a story from Greek mythology, the kidnapping of the Phoenician princess Europa by Zeus in the guise of a white bull. The visitors have shared their observations, speculations, ideas. As the class concludes, the museum educator invites the participants to speculate on the painting's larger meaning, to say what they think this work is, finally, about, as revealed by their lengthy investigation. The group's experience has clearly moved beyond the telling of a single story. One participant suggests that Rembrandt's work is about the fearlessness of traveling into the unknown. Another says that it concerns the story of the soul's leaving the earthly for the heavenly realm. When the class comes to an end, people move closer to the painting and continue their conversations.

In the same museum, another museum educator is also leading a group of students through the galleries. He begins with a Roman statue of Venus, followed by an eighteenth-century French terracotta bust of Madame Récamier by Joseph Chinard. For each

sculpture, he asks the students to focus on only one detail, the hands. The students are encouraged to observe and take note of the sculpted figures' gestures, much as if they were studying a person. Time seems to slow as perception sharpens. The educator listens patiently as the students begin to "read" the sculptures as a whole through the expressiveness of the hands. The group moves on to a mysterious portrait by Millet about which the students discuss the nature of love, and then to a painting of a Russian princess by Winterhalter, in which the artifice of all the details is suddenly theatrical, dazzling, and delightful. At the end, no one wants to leave.

As museum educators we teach in many kinds of programs, and teach in many ways. Every museum educator brings unique gifts to the art of teaching through works of art. The two classes described above might seem at first glance quite different. The first museum educator stays with a single work of art for the entire session, constructs her class around the observations and ideas of the students, and trusts that through their collective experience, a larger meaning will emerge. The second educator inspires his students with a feeling of confidence by guiding their observations of a single feature common to several works, and then allows a main idea to emerge. The two classes, however, are also alike in certain essential ways. In both cases, the students and the instructor are animated, concentrated, focused, active. Each investigation is tightly focused on the work, and each group collectively reaches for a sense of the artworks as a whole. At the end, when the participants cluster around the works, still wanting to continue the experience of discovery, the instructors know that their students have understood that engagement with a work of art is always a beginning, not an end.

The opportunities museum educators have to teach and learn are granted to us by the collections of objects in the care of the institutions in which we work, and by the students and visitors we invite to consider these objects. These artworks also impose upon us a great obligation, to bring them alive for those we lead through the galleries. For ultimately it is our devoted attention that keeps artworks alive generation after generation.

This essay is the result of our work as museum educators. It originated in a casual conversation about what constitutes good teaching and what we can do to guide ourselves and our professional and volunteer docent colleagues toward consistent and principled teaching in our museums. Teaching is at the heart of our work as museum educators, but many of us find we do not have the time to think about and prepare for it properly. As we look around our home museums and museums everywhere, we see teaching that seems to have lost its way, to have become mechanical, rigid, or unsure of its purpose. We know, however, that it is always possible to bring visitors to a greater understanding of works of art, and that such experiences may be transformative. Our teaching practice is grounded both in the everyday realities of our work and in the sense of limitless possibility and the idealism we share.

For many years, in our museums, we have taught students of all ages, and we have taught others how to teach in museums. We share the conviction that teaching is most effective when guided by clear goals and principles. We hope to define here the

source from which good teaching emanates, and to describe an approach to teaching broad enough to encompass all kinds of museum education practice, which may prove useful for a range of education programs and audiences. We hope equally to encourage reflection in other practitioners of our own art form. For we believe that museum teaching is indeed an art, a creative practice.

The teaching we have come to believe in strives to make possible a certain kind of experience with art objects. Good museum teaching comprises many skills that enable instructors to engage visitors, inspiring them to look closely and understand the works of art they are viewing. It is vital that we know our audiences and the collections from which we teach. We must always be able to provide accurate and pertinent art-historical and other contextual information. But we must think of such knowledge not as an end in itself but as a tool to be used for the larger purpose of enabling each visitor to have deep and distinctive experiences of specific artworks. None of us can attain the ideal of facilitating transformative experiences for every visitor in every gallery talk. Nonetheless, keeping the possibility of such experiences always in mind will give our practice consistency and direction. It can become the heart of everything we do. (However, for a consideration of the potential pitfalls of deliberately teaching toward peak experiences, see chapter 10 of this book.)

In *Art as Experience* John Dewey discusses how experiences with art may be marked off from ordinary experience by a sense of wholeness and unity, and characterized at their close by feelings of enjoyment and fulfillment.<sup>1</sup> Such experiences are examples of what Dewey calls “an experience,” distinct from the flow of ordinary experience. Indeed, Dewey says, it is our experiences with art that exemplify best what it means to have “an experience.” Such Deweyan experiences have an internal integration—a *focus*—that holds them together. They include “a movement of anticipation and culmination, one that finally comes to completion.”<sup>2</sup>

Dewey’s theory describes well the kind of experiences we want to make possible for visitors to our museums. We hope they will feel that the time they have spent with us in our galleries has yielded special experiences different and separate from whatever else they have known. We hope that they will leave having understood one work of art or many in a deep and satisfying way. In the classes described above, visitors felt engaged and focused by “an experience” of an artwork that took them out of their ordinary lives.

Dewey also observes that experiences of works of art unfold over time. The element of time, important in all aesthetic encounters, is clearly highlighted in the museum context. Seeing is more than merely looking; looking is more than a casual glance. We strive to encourage observant eyes. “An experience” of intense, focused seeing doesn’t merely “end,” but builds up toward a satisfying conclusion. What Dewey calls “culmination” leaves us in a state of ardent appreciation.

Likewise, we hope the visitors we invite into our galleries will make discoveries, think freely and inventively, and work toward meaning through prolonged visual study of the artworks they focus upon. We hope that they will leave with the afterglow of an

investigation that has brought observations, thoughts, and feelings together whole (even if only a temporary, provisional whole), with a sense of having reached a point of knowledge and understanding, with a feeling of accomplishment. We hope that they will have gained a sense of *how* works of art may be understood.

Museum educators create programs that invite people to gather around works of art for the purpose of sustained and careful seeing. Engaging the visitor's attention is our first task.<sup>3</sup> Even though works of art are mounted on pedestals, or hung in elegant frames, or bracketed by panels of text—all of which are designed to direct attention to them—most casual visitors spend little more than a few seconds with each. Museum environments are almost always beautiful, but they are often noisy and distracting too. People's reasons for coming to the museum are varied. Why should they stop to attend to the objects?<sup>4</sup>

As museum educators, we are obliged to create a structure of engagement that means of inviting people to appreciate and understand great works. We implicitly promise visitors that our knowledge will guide their looking, and that, at the same time, we will respect the knowledge and life experience that they bring with them. We are also always looking to learn more about ourselves. We must communicate our commitment to the shared enterprise of seeing, our belief that looking together and talking about art is a valuable and significant experience for us too. Our manner must assure visitors that we are knowledgeable about the artworks in our collection; we must be skillful in bringing people and artworks together in meaningful ways. Side by side, like an instructor and students will investigate the works of art. All must trust from the beginning that their understanding will increase as a result of the experience.

We ask visitors to gather around an object, creating a kind of closed space where the experience begins. We ask them to commit an hour to the study of a single object or perhaps a few at most. The physical separation from the broader flowing current of visitors through the museum allows the group to focus and concentrate. There is a place for silence as well as for speech. We first invite visitors to take a minute to themselves. We ask them to turn away from their immersion in everyday concerns and to slip into the world of the object. We begin in silence as an undirected way of taking on the work in its entirety. Each participant has a chance to form his or her own impressions and ideas. It is from individual experiences that the collective experience will flow. Moments of silent meditation for contemplation of the artworks will be fundamental to the collective experience as we proceed. Once we break the silence and invite preliminary observations from visitors, they may, though they are not asked to, relate their intellectual or emotional responses to something that occurs to them from their experience outside the work of art itself. The group's focus may evolve to be narrow or broad. We ask only that visitors take some time to look at, and think about, and study the work of art before them.

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The class studying the painting by Rembrandt is asked to begin by simply looking at the painting in silence. An observer walking into the gallery would see twenty people looking



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so intently that one might think they were watching a play. Their eyes shift, concentrating their focus in stages from the whole gallery to one wall, next to the frame around the work we are to discuss and its label, then at last into the picture itself. Suddenly, the painting snaps vividly into focus, as though it were the only object in the room. After a few moments of silence, the instructor invites thoughts, observations.

The second class begins with a specific focus, a detail, the hands of the Roman statue of Venus. Does the figure's pose suggest modesty, or perhaps simply surprise upon encountering an unexpected observer? The instructor encourages everyone to read the sculpted figure as if she were a person across the room. In this moment, he suggests that by virtue of living in the world, by virtue of our observations and interactions with the people we know, we have within us the essential knowledge we need to read this sculpture, and then the next work of art we encounter, and so on.

In both cases, what might look like a casual conversation in fact structures itself essentially as a linked series of observations, an investigation of sorts. It begins with an open-ended invitation for thoughts and observations. Participants articulate what they are seeing and how they are making sense of what they see. The dialogue involves give and take; everyone, teacher and students, contributes. The museum instructor reiterates and restates the visitors' observations, building on everyone's desire to talk about the effects the artworks have on them, and what is most interesting in the works. Everyone is invited to share ideas; some will see things others do not. Almost everyone has an opinion. Many voices are better than one. Everyone should feel welcome in this exchange, but it is not necessarily the instructor's goal that everyone should actively contribute. The instructor and the participants may ask questions, invite comments, make statements, or provide information. The participants may also ruminate silently. A shared vocabulary develops among the group. People begin to respond to one another's ideas, to comment on them. Dialogue expands everyone's experience of the objects, propelled by a sense of discovery. (For a fuller treatment of the roles of talking and silence in gallery teaching, see chapter 5 of this book.)

The museum instructor carefully sustains the group's experience by encouraging and summarizing new insights and observations. It is important to note that observations come up in what appear to be random order. There is no script, no preformulated series of questions. No two people see in exactly the same way, and no two groups of people unfold works of art in the same way. The instructor expresses appreciation for an insight, or presses the participants to pursue fruitful paths that open up in their thinking. Sometimes one observation leads to another, or opens up a new area of looking. Sometimes the instructor asks participants to hold a thought or a question while the group follows the implications of another suggestion or observation. The many ideas are like balls in the air, juggled by the instructor, who moves quickly and decisively to keep them up and active as long as possible. The objective is to follow observations, put descriptive phrases into play, create chains of thought, and respond to questions and comments throughout, advancing some ideas and saving others to be

brought back later. The instructor keeps track of the complex and various parts of an expanding dialogue. Sometimes the instructor takes observations and supplements them with similar ideas other people have expressed (scholars, curators, prior visitors), including the instructor's own, in order to build a larger argument about the work of art, or about art itself. A genuine dialogue emerges as a result of the sensitivity and perceptivity of the instructor. This requires practice, skill, and preparatory work that allows the teacher to understand the ideas that emerge, and to move the dialogue forward. With every work of art, the meaning changes; with every class, the dialogue is different. Order as well as shape emerges: this is the making of meaning.

What does the instructor do to prepare? Part of the instructor's preparation is always to spend time with the artwork, looking closely for extended periods of time. The instructor who teaches the Rembrandt painting spends many hours in the gallery, looking at the painting from all angles, from close, from far. She sees it first as she has always seen this painting, a small work that hung for many years in the galleries of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. At the Getty Museum, it looks different, newly cleaned and sparkling. The instructor then asks herself to see it as if for the first time, as a participant in a class might see it. She finds she is puzzled about the action, wondering what brings this assemblage of characters, depicted in such detail, together. The expressiveness of the faces and the gestures of the hands all suggest a story. She also notices Rembrandt's configuration of primary colors, the ghostly gray background, the way the action is pulled forward out of the darkness by the light. She does a sketch, to think through the painting's compositional structure. The image becomes implanted in her mind, both the story and the elements of the work that tell the story.

The participants understand from the outset that Rembrandt is telling a story, as they see what Rembrandt is guiding them to see through the orchestration of tiny details, the glowing lights and shadowy darks, the gentle distribution of primary colors across the mysterious landscape. The instructor does not initially tell the students the title of the painting or the story of Europa's abduction. Instead, she urges the students to make sense of the story by entering Rembrandt's pictorial world, trusting what they can see and understand through observation alone. She assures them that she will in the end explain any specifics of the narrative that have eluded their investigation, and the relevant art-historical information, but she asks, Will they not trust Rembrandt, and their own eyes, for the moment?

The instructor's preparatory work continues with research. She reads the museum's curatorial files; she consults articles, catalogues, and reference works; she speaks with colleagues. Deep knowledge of the artworks is essential to good gallery teaching. Information, together with seeing, is the source of ideas. The museum educator honors both objects and audience by bringing them together in an experience guided by scholarship.

How does the instructor use the knowledge she has gained from art-historical research? She uses it to enable her to suggest possibilities, not to establish conclusive

interpretations that she will impose upon her students. She suggests relationships between a work and the circumstances of its creation and reception, thereby supplying visitors with information that indicates how and why a work came to be, how it was made, and how it was viewed in its original social and artistic context, and what the artwork has meant to its audiences over time.

The class considering the statue of Venus has taken little time to propose several explanations for the way she stands with her hands half covering and half revealing her body. In response to one suggestion that her gesture may be motivated by and expressive of modesty, the instructor wonders aloud, "Why should Venus, as goddess of love and beauty, be modest?" The question is clearly intriguing to the students, and the examination of possible explanations becomes animated and ever more complex. At this point, the instructor informs the students that this statue is a Roman copy of a Greek original sculpted by Praxiteles in the fourth century B.C., famous in its time as the first large-scale sculpture of Aphrodite to have been portrayed without clothing. Might not Praxiteles be making a startling statement about female modesty? Might he be asserting that this familiar human emotion is so powerful, it extends even to goddesses, and even to the goddess of love herself? The instructor suggests another possibility: perhaps Praxiteles is referring to the Greek belief that it was dangerous for mortals to see their gods naked. Then again, he says, the statue might simply be illustrating the myth that on a voyage from Cyprus to Greece, Aphrodite stopped on the island of Knidos—where Praxiteles' original statue was erected—to wash the foam off her body. The group grapples with these ideas, and the ensuing exchange is lively. The students will decide for themselves what meanings to embrace. The instructor ends the consideration with his own question: Could the sculptor have had in mind *all* of these stories and ideas as he decided to place the goddess's hands strategically to cover a body both beautiful and dangerous to behold?

The instructor uses art-historical information to deepen and enrich the visitors' experience of the work. He does not provide all the information at his command at the outset because he does not want the group to see the sculpture first as an artifact of history; he wants the viewers to attend to the artwork's here-and-now physical presence. He intends his provision of art-historical information to increase the range of interpretive possibilities, and indeed, it causes the dialogue to widen. He invites his students to look at the sculpture carefully for themselves, and then, as they point out details, ask questions, or stumble over the roots of ambiguity, he moves their experience further with his own observations, or information that makes them see more, and see differently. The goal is to *extend* the dialogue, to make the understanding of the work deeper, in part by making the students feel that they are getting closer to the work by grasping it in its historical context. But the historical information is not meant to decide among contending interpretations—to end the dialogue—as it might have if the instructor were to adduce only a single historical circumstance, or, in response

to a question concerning meaning, were to rely on the authority of his knowledge to say, "This is what Praxiteles meant. . . ." Instead, his skillful deployment of information makes the students aware of ambiguities, and it is ultimately that awareness, and acceptance of its attendant complexities, that enriches their experience.

Art history sometimes increases our ability to understand works of art, and to discover meaning, as described above. But sometimes a work seems to speak directly to us. What does Rembrandt do to bring us so close to the experience of being abducted? What does Rembrandt draw upon in us when he gives form to the story of the abduction of Europa? Our knowledge may yield a hypothesis about the meaning of the work itself, but a sense of the painting's inherent urgency may also suggest a poetic idea about Rembrandt's seeking out the edges of the soul's experience and its passions.

Eventually, someone asks a pivotal question: "Why in the world is this woman riding on the back of a bull?" The instructor says a question like this is a gift that can open our understanding, and at that moment, she decides to tell the story from the Roman poet Ovid of how Zeus fell in love with the beautiful Europa, how he seduced her by turning himself into a beautiful bull prancing along the shore, and enticed her to climb up on his back so that he could steal her away to ravish her. The group refocuses their inquiry and begins to see more details that both explicate the story and reveal the painting's narration of it to be very complex. The class examines Europa's face and finds it strange that she appears unafraid, looking back to shore as if signaling that she understands the significance of what is occurring. A student observes that the moment is portentous. The class realizes that the painting embodies a complex of ideas that goes far beyond simple storytelling. It is important to know the story, but knowing it does not exhaust the painting's meaning, nor is the story by any means all that the painting is about.

In museum teaching, the value of the instructor's research is its potential to provoke a variety of interpretations.<sup>5</sup> The instructor begins to formulate ideas about the work—what is important, what is unusual, what the work is about. From her own research and experience, she develops a sense of the work's possible meaning or meanings. She devises from these possibilities a kind of plan, a structure of ideas that will support an exploration of the artwork. The structure may be more or less elaborate, depending on what and how many works of art the class will be looking at. The structure may include an initial direction of inquiry, and ideas that might push the dialogue in particular directions. The instructor proposes her ideas in a spirit of openness to change, conceiving of such a plan as experimental and flexible.

The instructor's sense of the range of a work's possible interpretations is an essential component of gallery teaching, for it will inevitably, if subtly, affect the direction of the visitors' exploration. As their exploration deepens and widens in scope, the group continually tests the hypotheses that emerge against further observations. This is the most delicate part of the endeavor. Museum instructors must always have a sense of direction, a sense of the possible outcome of any group's encounter with a

given artwork, yet must, equally, cultivate a willingness to listen and to yield to what unfolds in dialogue. As instructors, we should think of ourselves as being *part* of the group, learning alongside everyone else. We use our own hypotheses about a work's meaning to help guide the group's experience. Intense looking and deep concentration enable every viewer to construct their own meaning, within boundaries charted by the artwork itself.

From her own study of the picture, the instructor had come to believe that the ultimate theme of *The Abduction of Europa* is human lives caught up in the gods' larger designs, the interweaving of divine will and whim with mortal destiny. But when someone asks, "Why is this woman riding on the back of a bull?" the dialogue turns unexpectedly. The students focus anew on the painting, and now see Europa as a heroine facing her uncertain fate with courage and fortitude. If we were in her place, they say, we would be afraid. But she is not. And so the focus of the dialogue shifts from Zeus and his actions to the universal meaning of such a strange journey: Is Europa on a mysterious passage from life to death? Is Rembrandt investigating a journey to unknown places, to the realm of the divine? Does Europa represent all people in this way? The instructor's own hypothesis, which she never expresses directly, dissolves within this matrix of speculation, yielding to the suggestions and the emerging interpretation of the group.

The museum educator's task is a delicate one. On the one hand, our goal is for people to gain a greater knowledge and understanding of a given work, and on the other, for them to connect with it personally, directly. We know that the encounter with artworks is as much a matter of the heart as of the mind, that learning about artworks is motivated and held together by emotion as much as by intellect. Emotional involvement is a necessary precondition for awakening to a work's poetic possibilities. During our gallery dialogues, moments of interpretation and understanding tend to alternate with moments of emotional expression. Dewey discusses the way in which emotions hold the elements of experience together, concluding that "Emotion is the moving and cementing force."<sup>6</sup> It is moreover in part through emotion that we engage our audiences; we harness the impetus of emotion that marks encounters with works of art—interest, like, dislike, puzzlement, curiosity, passion—and strive to maintain the momentum emotion provides as we further explore the works. The artworks we look at may be powerful, enchanting, thrilling, frightening, alienating, sad, beautiful. Under the gaze of each group's observant eyes, the characters and places within the depicted scenes come alive, and the viewer may live a little in them, moved—and even transported.

As they discuss Millet's comparatively stark and simple portrait of Louise-Antoinette Feuudent, the students pause to look at the way Millet painted her left hand (the young woman stands with her arms folded in such a way that her right hand is hidden); they puzzle at the ring on her middle finger, the way she seems to rest her arms on the hem of

her bodice where the folds of her skirt swell beneath it, and the elusive expression— confrontational? evasive? frank? melancholy?—on her face. Someone says, “She is so beautiful.” For a moment, it seems as though there is nothing more to say.

Looking at a work of art involves a series of actions—scanning its surface, grasping it as a whole, focusing on details, thinking and reflecting on them, pausing to look again, reconsidering the whole in relation to its parts, and so on. In the end, everything should come together, with the experience of the artwork unified in an expanded whole. Each encounter with a work of art ends differently, unpredictably. As Dewey writes, “we have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment.”<sup>77</sup> “*An* experience” of an artwork in some way never ends, but in the hour or so that museum educators have with a group, we aim to provide an experience that reaches a moment of culmination, a point at which the observations and thoughts of the group come together. We must sense when this has happened. The experience may end gradually, with a slowly developing appreciation of all the resources an artist has used to a particular effect. It may end suddenly, in a moment of discovery, as if the curtain has been pulled aside to reveal a work’s final layer of meaning. It may end in a sentence spoken aloud. Or it may end in silence and wonder.

Like the artist’s own process of creation, experiencing a work of art is not a regular and predictable process. In both of the classes described here, every participant has concentrated on the artworks and turned the works about in their imaginations. They have allowed their minds to wander and speculate; they have reached a resting place, then begun again, as the work revealed itself gradually in time. They have experimented, looking from one viewpoint and then another, followed the trails leading from their first impressions, fellow students’ comments, or a scholar’s thesis. They have moved from the life of the object to their own inner lives and back, fitting pieces of the one into the other. They have worked together in this creative dialogical process. They have been held together by the implicit promise and conviction that they would leave with an understanding of the artwork that they did not have when they began. Each member of both groups has contributed perceptions and knowledge to a collective experience that has allowed everyone to understand and appreciate the work more fully.

Every museum instructor who teaches for any length of time knows that our viewers often arrive at the museum expecting or hoping to discover “what an artwork means,” a single interpretation, with some sense of solidity and finality. We hope that the dialogical process we examine here may persuade visitors instead that experiencing a plethora of interpretive possibilities may be equally or even more satisfying. We come back to each work that we teach again and again, knowing that every time we look, a different understanding is possible. We reinforce and rely on the viewers’ trust that meaning is possible, yet at the same time, we teach that ultimately the interpretation of works of art inevitably encounters complexity and ambiguity. As we move together through our gallery dialogues, we supplement observations with knowledge

and develop a sense of possible meanings. We arrive at a synthesis and a possible understanding of the particular work of art we are studying. But we also arrive at the larger idea that artworks live and remain important because their meanings change. The artworks accumulate past interpretations, and our speculations are affected by the insights that each new viewer brings. We always begin with the object, but the study of art in the museum is a creative process that transforms objects into something new. Dewey went so far as to say that, in a sense, the work of art does not exist until it becomes alive in the viewer's experience.<sup>8</sup> We would add, as we have written at the beginning of this essay, that it is only our ongoing engagement with artworks that *keeps* them alive.

We are sometimes asked if our style of gallery teaching works only with certain audiences. We believe that a dialogical approach to focused looking is appropriate for almost everyone: adults and students, visitors with extensive experience in looking at art and those with none; and for groups of all ages, from very young children through high school and college students, young professionals, adults, docents, and educators. With students in third grade and below, some adjustments may be necessary, since teaching groups of very young children is a special calling. But even our youngest visitors can be encouraged to look, to see, and to share aloud their thoughts about what they see. We are always surprised by the insights and discoveries that seem to lie outside the developmental-learning categories that would predetermine visitors' capacities by age group. Great artworks have the power to erase such distinctions. Many of us have heard third-graders make philosophical comments and raise significant questions similar to adults' or even experts' concerns. Conversely, we all hear adults make fresh, innocently perceptive remarks similar to children's. The artworks themselves open up the unexpected.

We are likewise often asked if our approach works only for certain *teachers*. The real question lying behind this concern is, Can only professional educators teach like this? Can volunteer docents be taught to approach their work in the same way? In this regard, we like to quote a former educator at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, Troy Smythe, who always says that any museum that wants to get the very best out of its docents must first shift its value system from lecturing to the experience of artworks. If docents are convinced that what they do is respected as a profound and meaningful enterprise, and if educators model for their docents the kind of teaching they believe in, then the docents themselves will make positive changes in their practice as a matter of course. Conversely, it may even be a museum's docents who embrace an open pedagogy and model it in their galleries, and in so doing shift the institution's values away from standards and scripts, learning outcomes and the acquisition of skills.<sup>9</sup>

Museums are places of possibility. But possibilities are only made real when educators skillfully use the broad knowledge and understanding they have of objects throughout their museums to inspire and encourage people to dream a little with them, and to make the artworks their own. What we teach is not "how to look," or "what to look for" but, ultimately, the possibilities of what the experience of art may be.

Teaching in museums is a delicate and complicated art. It requires tremendous preparation, knowledge, and planning. It is motivated by a love and knowledge of art works, but also by an appreciation of the infinite possibilities of meaning that accumulate around them. The best gallery teaching requires flexibility and the ability to balance the desire to share our own hard-won understandings against an openness to interpretations that come from completely new places. Gallery teaching demands the ability to engage, cajole, and listen, to move from viewpoint to viewpoint, all the while guiding, collecting, building. It is an art ultimately committed to expanding and enriching the visitor's experience.

#### Notes

1. See chapter 3 ("Having an Experience") in John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Milton, Balch, 1934; repr. New York: Perigree, 1980, 2005), and chapter 1 ("Experience and the Arts") in Philip W. Jackson, *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).
2. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 39.
3. See Maxine Greene, "Being Fully Present to Works of Art," in *Variations on a Blue Guitar* (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 2001), 57-66.
4. See Rika Burnham, "If You Don't Stop, You Don't See Anything," *Teachers College Record* 95, no. 4 (Summer 1994): 520-25. This early essay addresses many of the issues examined in this book, considering them from a viewpoint remarkably consistent with our current thinking. Perceptive readers will, however, note in certain aspects a shift in emphasis, and, in a few instances, a considerable evolution in our approach.
5. For a discussion of changing practices of interpretation in museums, see Lisa C. Roberts, *From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 60-79.
6. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 44 (see note 1).
7. *Ibid.*, 36.
8. *Ibid.*, 113.
9. This is indeed what took place at the Phoenix Art Museum in 2009.