

# *A Conversation on Object-Centered Learning in Art Museums*

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**ABSTRACT** Danielle Rice and Philip Yenawine are veteran art museum educators who have wrestled for decades with the thorny issues involved in teaching about and learning from art objects in the museum setting. While there is general agreement within art museums today that the object should be the focus of educational practice, debate continues as to the most effective processes for facilitating learning. Gallery teaching is one of the most contested arenas, with much of the disagreement centering on the place of information in teaching beginning viewers. In art museums, the issue of what and how to teach is complicated by the fact that many people, including artists, museum professionals, psychologists and educators consider art primarily as something to be enjoyed, and they posit this enjoyment in direct opposition to learning about art. Partly because of this, the function of art museum education and gallery-based instruction is still evolving.

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## INTRODUCTION

The ensuing discussion flows from an on-going debate regarding gallery instruction methods that was initiated at the National Docent Symposium in 1999. At that time, Yenawine and Rice prepared a demonstration video showing their respective teaching methods and then debated the relative merits of these methods with the assembled audience. This article takes the form of a conversation in order to present more fully their divergent opinions and the on-going nature of that debate.

PY: Let me start by saying that I am very interested in nurturing enjoyment of art, but feel that most people are not able to relax and enjoy, at least not with a very wide range of objects. I have especially found that to be true since most of my work has been in museums of modern and contemporary art. I am therefore interested in using museum time to help people learn what I call "viewing skills." By which I mean increase in observational skills, ability to probe, ability to find a variety of possible meanings, openness to the unfamiliar, and so forth.

I think it must be said that people do learn from art. Historically, one of the prime purposes of art has been to teach. Even if "teaching" is not the goal of much art displayed in museums, we still learn plenty from looking at it, in addition to the pleasure it provides. One of the difficult things here is that too many of us see education as dreary and looking at art as pleasure, and we don't encourage the twain to meet.

DR: I think it is also useful to recognize that in fact, art museums are broadly diverse institutions and that people come to museums for many different reasons. We cannot forget that museums fulfill a social and recreational function. People come to be with friends and family, to enjoy a "classy" setting, or to have a quiet and contemplative escape. However, in my experience, most novice visitors to art museums, subscribe to what may be characterized as an aestheticist position on art. They are still heavily invested in the Romantic theory that the arts relate more to the emotions than to the intellect and therefore visitors assume that the arts constitute a universal language equally accessible to all. I think your comment that people often find it hard to relax and enjoy some form of art relates to the disconnect that occurs when visitors' assumptions that art is a universal language comes up against art that they don't understand.

PY: Marilyn Hood, in the very early 80s, studying audiences in Toledo, found that one thing that differentiated people who went to museums from those who didn't (given identical demographic profiles) was that museum goers thought that learning was a pleasurable experience, and they did go to museums to learn. The ones who chose sporting events and zoos over museums thought of learning as laborious, and not a way to spend leisure. We also found at MOMA that most people listed learning as an important goal when visiting. But that doesn't mean that the notion of learning is not pretty vague. I think the paradox here is that even if they say they want to learn, it is in the rather broad sense of being uplifted and inspired. It is not as if they come to museums to work hard at something.

DR: I think one of the things that has shifted the debate about visitor experience in art museums in recent years is the fact that for museum professionals trained in art history, post-modern scholarship rejects the notion of the "masterpiece" that can transform through its electrifying presence. The individual art object, instead of being seen as a pleasing combination of formal elements is treated as "as an element of discourse" within a variety of social, cultural and political contexts. In contemporary critical thinking, the museum can no longer claim to be a neutral backdrop for the display of art, because it is understood instead to be a highly complex institution that participates in the social construction of culture and in the legitimization of power. When I started out in museum education I subscribed to this idea and I thought of myself as a subversive. I felt that the role of the museum educator was to deconstruct the museum, to give people a sense that art was part of a social and political context and that museums participated in this contextualization as well. But I've also heard a number of artists and art educators complain that in putting too much emphasis on context you ruin for people the very source of pleasure; the aestheticist position depends very much on the theatricality of the institution being transparent, invisible.

PY: That being said, I have indeed heard pretty serious grouching from visitors when they come upon art that they do not understand. If they lack the option of going into galleries full of older art, both modern and contemporary art can produce a great deal of angst, if not negativity. It's not surprising: much of the art since the last half of the 19th Century has in fact been made for people with a serious commitment to art. Artists have assumed certain kinds of experience, expectations, and openness. Great numbers of people who come to museums today have no such accumulated knowledge. And it is small wonder that they are confused and often hostile when confronted with, for example, an all black canvas. But the question remains: what to do for these visitors?

There was a time when I thought my responsibility as a museum educator was to carefully consider the art on view (whatever special exhibition or permanent collection) and decide what key elements needed to be made clear for visitors to be able to "enter" the work. What could I tell them that, if understood, would make art distant in time or culture (or difficult in concept) seem negotiable? Since I have spent most of my career in museums of modern and contemporary art, it was the latter – art that seemed inscrutable because of its abstraction or highly conceptual nature – that has most often been the challenge. What ideas and information could I convey that might make Jackson Pollock or Andres Serrano approachable?

But during the late 1980s, I underwent a conversion, if you will. I now think it more appropriate to reverse the equation. Now I often seek to grasp what people already know that I can help them use to begin to decode unfamiliar work. I switch the focus from what objects say to what viewers think. Needless to say, my practice has changed.

DR: Well, museums have also changed quite a bit. In fact, one of our biggest battles as art museum educators in the 1970s and 1980s was simply to get curators to put up labels giving people basic information about an object's subject or content. Now a lot of art museums present even their permanent collections in heavily interpreted, thematic displays. Interactive kiosks, video monitors, study galleries, maps, timelines and other contextual information have become standard

practice. And many institutions include a diversity of voices including the perspectives of guards and visitors in their interpretive repertoire.

Perhaps because there is so much more information about art now available in the galleries, museum educators are rethinking their own traditional roles as teachers. Let's talk a little bit more about this shift you mentioned, from what objects say to what viewers think. In fact this shift in your thinking is consistent with what has been happening in art history, literary criticism, and educational theory as well. We are generally much more aware that instead of buried truths that must be discovered – either through the educational process or through research – making meaning is about the stories we tell ourselves, it is an internal process. In that sense, the individual viewers or learners are the ones who are best equipped to make their own meanings. Your teaching methods are quite effective in helping people to develop their meaning making skills.

PY: The teaching methods I now espouse (called Visual Thinking Strategies, or VTS) are based on my work with cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen, which has focused on helping to produce growth in viewing skills among beginning viewers. And by beginning viewers, I refer to those in the first two stages of aesthetic development she uncovered during her research. Housen calls the first of these the Accountive Stage, though it is more commonly referred to as the storytelling stage. During this early developmental phase, viewers make relatively few observations and draw simple conclusions from them, usually in the form of mini stories. They make sense of what they observe by relating it to their own lives and they explain their understandings in short narratives. In the second, or Constructive Stage, viewers begin to see art through other frameworks, such as the conventions and norms that work for them in the course of their lives. (I must say that this is gross oversimplification of Housen's rich and complex work, but I hope these comments set at least a bit of context for my current thoughts on museum education.) In any case, Housen has found that the majority of young people are in Stage I and most adult museum visitors are in Stage II.

From Housen, then, as well as other developmentalists such as Piaget and Vygotsky, I have learned to make sure that the beginning viewer is made the active participant in learning. I become a facilitator. I don't tell. I ask. I select art that is going to be understandable to the viewer based on what they already know. I admit that all black canvases are the visual equivalent of James Joyce: not intended for beginners. I therefore most often choose narrative work for them to examine. I try to make it easier for them to operate in the way that Housen's research shows is normative. If they are going to make sense by looking for stories, then I select work for them in which stories are intended, preferably ones that the viewer can decode based on what they know from life experience. And the questions I use are ones that underlie behaviors discerned from Housen's stages.

I start off the process by asking, "What is going on in this image?" This question is open ended enough to allow for any kind of comment, but it also encourages the natural behavior of storytelling. When I hear an interpretive comment in response, I ask, "What do you see that makes you say that?" This question asks the viewer to ground opinions in evidence in the image, so while the logic is their own, the grounding is in the picture. The behavior sought here is one that leads toward a Stage II framework that appears in Housen's research: that of looking for what the artist might be trying to make us think. I frequently ask "What more can you find?" in order to encourage more finding of detail and more probing. And so it goes.

DR: What role does information about objects play in all this?

PY: It depends on what you mean by "information." Viewers dig deeply into the information contained in the image, which is very important to me. Understanding art, not to mention having aesthetic experience, starts with engaging deeply in what is presented to us by artists. What the process I teach omits is what I call the "information surround": facts and opinions about the picture that are not apparent in the image, such as information about the artist's life. Or how the object was made, which is often only visible if you are acquainted with artistic practices. Or meanings

ascribed by those who know art history, such as stylistic implications or even art-specific symbolism.

But remember, for beginning viewers, I recommend selecting images from which viewers' own observations are likely to be what the artist had in mind for us to observe. Even with this intention, there is a lot of choice – from some Egyptian figures to many Japanese prints to some tapestries, or paintings by Breugel, Goya, Cassatt, or Kahlo and legions of photographers, to suggest just a few. Beginning viewers can discuss such images without any intervention from me and interpret them richly without need for additional information.

What I want is for beginners to make a serious connection with art, gain a sense of confidence about drawing meaning from anything unfamiliar, and have a way to go about digging into objects that doesn't require my presence. I am looking for those I teach to become self-sufficient – as quickly as possible.

DR: Do you correct misunderstandings?

PY: No, or at least very rarely. If groups consistently misinterpret a work, I change the work. For example, if they draw inappropriate conclusions from looking at an African ancestor figure, I will substitute it with a mother and child – something that they have tools for "getting right" without additional information. Open ended, facilitated discussion of art by beginning viewers works only when you select the art as sensitively as you choose books or movies for young people. You look for things that they can comprehend and enjoy without explication.

I am not against information, by the way. I know how wonderful it is to find out certain things about intention or original context. But I think that connecting with art begins with looking at it, and my concern with beginning viewers is that when we explain it to them, we teach passive reception, not active looking. I also think for beginners to get the impression that they need to know a lot of stuff before they can connect with art actually stops them from looking and thinking on their own.

But perhaps the point in this discussion should not focus exclusively on the way I teach. What might be taken from what I think is that any interpretive program in museums should take into account the viewer, and what is most helpful to her or him. I don't believe in asking beginners what they want or need, because they don't know what the options are, for one thing. And we have trained people to expect certain things – such as lots of information. This is why I turned to Abigail Housen. She has taken the time to study what goes on in the heads of people of all stages when looking at art, and I think we can all use her data to design programs, even exhibitions. I have focused on beginning viewers mostly because, again using her research as well as the impressions of most of us, people who want help in museums want it because they are beginners. Those in Housen's Stages III and beyond have what they need in the art itself, in basic labels, in catalogues and books. Those who feel they lack their own resources turn to educational devices.

DR: When you say, "we've trained people to expect ... lots of information," you make it sound like museums and museum professionals have done that. I don't think the situation is quite that simple. We live in an information-rich culture. Everywhere we turn we are surrounded by information from the news media, from the Internet, from the myriad of billboards and ads that confront us. Much of the information is raw, unprocessed, and often irrelevant, but it has a kind of addictive pull. The more information we get, the more we want. I think this is because what we're really searching for is meaning, an opportunity to make sense of the complex world that we inhabit. And, unfortunately, information gathering does not necessarily lead to meaning making. That is why I think your process-oriented teaching is so important. But I am concerned at the complete lack of information transfer in this process. To me, learning has to involve analysis and construction of personal narratives, such as you describe. But teachers also have a responsibility to inspire people to move from one position to another. They have to develop the learner's "cognitive dissonance," the awareness that one way of perceiving may not be enough for understanding a particular object or situation.

It also seems a little disingenuous to have a museum professional abdicate all responsibility for correcting misunderstandings or conveying any of the ideas and interpretations that they may have collected and processed over time. By acting just as a gatherer of the viewer's ideas, you don't really engage in an active dialogue with them, or give them an opportunity to agree or disagree with you. While I understand your desire to "empower" the novice viewer, the situation seems rather one-sided.

PY: I agree that meaning making is the real issue. Art means nothing if the beholder lacks capacities to connect to it on all sorts of levels. Such connections eventually involve information and informed opinion as you suggest, but they begin with something more sensory or perceptual, and visceral. And it is that level of the original connection that I try to teach – that matter of using one's eyes, mind and heart in concert to dig out what you call the "personal narrative." To begin viewing in a way that is assisted and made more probing by the educator, without mediation of the discoveries. Visual Thinking Strategies, as an example of this, asks people to look, and look again. To draw conclusions based in evidence, and so forth. The rigor comes from the questions and from repeated meaningful encounters with art, not from dialogue with someone who knows much more, and who directs the viewer's thinking however benignly.

But back to information, I actually do think that art museums rely on information as the main content of educational efforts, exacerbating the problem you cite in the culture generally. We very often explain art to people using biography, or history, or art history. Most of us try very hard to do this without resorting to jargon. We explain vocabulary and define by pointing out stylistic information etc. But, still, the basis of our effort is most often information. Even when we are using so-called Socratic methods, we use directed questions to help audiences find specifics that will then, it is thought, provide them with the insights that lead to understanding. And of course that understanding is essentially "ours" too; the viewer hasn't constructed his or her own views; they must try to assimilate ours. The older the viewer, the more they appreciate this kind of help – and I said earlier, I think we have taught them to expect it. But regardless of the generosity of our motives, I don't think such efforts lead to learning – little of what we say sticks. What we tell viewers about one work seldom applies to others. The questions we ask are not ones they have knowledge enough to ask themselves. From such questions, viewers do not learn strategies for making meaning on their own – by which I mean ways of approaching the unfamiliar and comfortably beginning a process of constructing meaning. We have only to listen to some of the docents we extensively train to hear what happens to understandings they try to adopt from us. I am talking short hand here, I suppose, but as I said before I am trying to teach people to become self sufficient viewers, and they can only do that on their own, just as they learn to talk and read with help and practice, but on their own. No one can do it for them. Our job as educators in any of these cases is to structure their activity in such ways that they grow.

DR: Well, it is precisely because museum educators have so little time with individual viewers – as opposed to classroom teachers who have a whole year to develop a relationship with their students – that I think it is so important to make the most of that moment. When it comes to teaching about art, I guess I subscribe to what I've called in the past the "seduction theory" of museum education. The best thing a museum teacher can do for visitors is to help them interact with the object in such a way that they get seduced into wanting to look more closely and to know more. Information plays an important role in my thinking.

Each work of art is like the nucleus of a vast universe of information that relates to it. The list of information strands includes, but is not limited to, the object's history of manufacture and ownership, the artist's biography and the position of the object within his or her artistic development, the information related to the technique used in its making, the social context in which it was originally made and viewed, and the history, over time, of the way it was interpreted and used. This huge range of options is often very confusing to novice teachers who think that

there are, at best, two or three relevant facts to say about an object and they are often drawn to memorable anecdotes that do little to enhance viewer understanding.

When teaching directly from art objects, I like to use an information layering approach that combines viewers' initial responses to a work of art, their natural way of interpreting it, with carefully selected information drawn from that vast universe of facts. I think that what some museum educators fail to realize is that the act of linking information to art is fundamentally interpretive. What I mean by this is that in selecting what to say and what to leave out, we are privileging some information as the "truth" about that object. Therefore we have to be very thoughtful about what kinds of information we bring to bear when helping novice viewers make sense of art. Too often we flood our viewers with the wrong kind of data and basically turn their analytical process off.

PY: How do you avoid this turn off? And how do you decide, given the vastness of possible information, what will keep viewers engaged and active, rather than having them go passive on you?

DR: In teaching from art objects, the viewers' responses are always my first jumping off point. I am always delighted and inspired by the variety of fresh perspectives viewers bring to art. The pull to make sense of what they are seeing is very strong right from the beginning and often leads viewers to make conjectures about meaning. As an experienced analyzer of art, I sometimes add myself into the mix by including information about the first impressions that other viewers have had with the object in question. But I am not a novice viewer, and I have spent years thinking about, looking at, and carefully studying art objects and their diverse histories. So I feel strongly that my role should be to share some of my experience, my informed perspective on art, with visitors. The challenge is to do that while also encouraging visitors to think for themselves.

I have found that the best use of information is to reinforce and underline viewers' natural responses to a work of art. For example, if viewers suspect that a painting of a mother and child may have had some kind of religious significance, I can tell them that indeed the work represents the Virgin Mary holding the Infant Jesus. In this way I use the information to validate the viewers' response and encourage them to analyze further.

PY: Isn't there an inherent contradiction between asking people what they think and then helping them to see beyond the limits of their knowledge? Your method seems fine if viewers' insights are running along the "right track" but what if they are not? Isn't there the potential for them feeling that their insights are wrong, and that you have corrected them, and that they might just better keep quiet in the future?

DR: In working with a group, I generally gather a number of responses and invite people to consider why that object has inspired a particular set of responses. I can usually select from the responses I've gathered, some that are closer to the standard, professional interpretation of an object. I then present that interpretation and invite viewers to consider what they think about it. Obviously, I never say: "Oops, you really blew it that time!" But I will say quite firmly: "Here is how this object has generally been interpreted by scholars and art historians. What do you think?" I invite viewers to consider both the visual information that comes from the object itself, and the information I have given them. In some situations, viewers have disagreed with the interpretations that I've presented and this leads to some pretty stimulating discussions. People are so accustomed to giving their opinions that they don't consider how information should work to either challenge or amplify gut reactions. Besides, I don't think people's egos are so fragile that they can't handle knowing that they've misread something if this is done in the context of a frank and democratic discussion in which a variety of perspectives is presented.

Furthermore, information can be a very powerful tool in transforming and in fact strengthening a person's relationship to an object. An exercise that I use when I train museum docents illustrates this point. I ask the docents to imagine that the museum exhibits two identical Colonial American

beds. One bears a label indicating that it was made c. 1765, in Philadelphia, by Craftsman X. The other bears a label indicating that it was made c. 1770 in Philadelphia by Craftsman Y, and that General George Washington had slept in this very bed upon his visit to the city in 1776. I ask the docents to consider which of the two beds would be more compelling to visitors and they inevitably respond that the second of the two beds would be the one. Then, I ask them to imagine that the night watchman accidentally switches the labels on the two objects. In this way, the information on the label has the power to transfer the aura of history or authenticity to another object. This exercise is intended to make docents realize that the things that they say about an object can either magnify or reduce an object's aura. My goal is to use information to enhance visitor experience and encourage deeper engagement.

PY: I guess I have a problem with seduction tactics because, of course, the fact that our founding father slept in either bed has nothing to do with the object itself. And if people only get interested because of some charming but arcane bit of the object's history, does the bed itself sink into their understanding of beds, or of craft? Or of Colonial America or Philadelphia, for that matter? I don't think so. Sure the information is seductive but I am interested in people looking at and thinking about the bed itself, and in using that examination as a stepping-stone to others, and to greater visual acuity – another way of saying a growth in viewing skills. I will even go so far as to say that when we have to succumb to seduction to get viewers to look, we have chosen the wrong object for our audience. With a museum full of wonderful, engaging alternatives, why would we ever choose to spend a beginning viewer's time with something we have to seduce them to look at? I know you are just illustrating a point here, but I want to get at a bigger matter: that of thinking about what we use as objects if our intention is to help people develop viewing skills. We often choose to show them a bed without thinking about their interest level; it is something they SHOULD know about – and we could substitute many other objects here for the bed. We then have to resort to human-interest information to get people to care. We don't do this outside the museum: we never give children books to read that will bore them, or are beyond them if we want them to read. We would never simply give an adult a manual if we felt it important for them to use a computer. We occasionally have little choice as to objects, and in that case we have to make the best of it. Trying to find tidbits that pique interest is perhaps the only option, but I think we should generally be more thoughtful as we select subjects and approaches if our goal is to develop viewers' rapport with art.

But perhaps it is better to get back to your bigger point: that we waste people's time if we do not create an opportunity both for their looking and thinking AND for the sharing of our own hard won insights. Once you have enhanced their experience – and I have seen you do this brilliantly – what behaviors might you expect from them when they are on their own?

DR: I guess I'm not particularly interested in changing behavior. I'm more interested in changing minds and affecting desire. By inspiring people to think about things they would not have thought about on their own, I stimulate them to value deep looking and deep thinking. Most people who do come to art museums come to muse. I don't think an interaction with a skilled interpreter interferes with that impulse, although it may very well strengthen it. But I think the kind of looking that we do in a facilitated group discussion is a kind of social activity that is fundamentally different from the looking that we do individually. I certainly want viewers to feel that they can make their own personal connections with objects and that they can engage in more than superficial looking. I want them to like the objects more and to feel more comfortable in the museum so that they will want to come back. But most importantly, I want them to feel invigorated and stimulated and may be even stretched from having been exposed to a variety of ideas and interpretations. I feel that I've succeeded if they then go to a library and look something up, spend time watching a video in the galleries, or reading the in-depth information cards we've been developing, or using the Internet to do additional research. And perhaps the growth of art museum attendance, the proliferation of information about art on museum walls and on the Internet, are all a tribute to our, I mean all museum educators', efforts over the past twenty years.

PY: I think you have discovered the difference between us: I would describe success as my students going off to look at more art – to walk into any gallery, no matter what is on the walls, and feel excited about and empowered to find meaning in it. I think in both cases we are looking for behavior to be affected, but we are talking about two different parts of the audience that turns to us for educational assistance. I am picturing those who need a foundation in looking before information and concepts make sense or stick. You envision people who have moved a bit beyond, who are on the verge of Housen's Stage 111. At this point, they are beginning to examine art through a framework of artists' intentions, of an interest in motivations, context, and technique. They are ready to build on what they already know about art and/or can figure out from looking, and they want additional insights and information. I too love it when people arrive at this juncture. I also delight in learning more in that sense. I just want this desire to come from motivation that builds from within.

VTS uses groups of peers to build to this point. In VTS, beginning viewers share many observations and pose many possible, grounded interpretations. These interpretations are developed over the course of serious extended discussions that are purposely left open-ended to indicate that no discussion of art is ever finished. The insights come entirely from the group, and not the teacher. Kids are as adept at the task as adults are, and though different in content, the discussions are just as searching. Learning this practice of careful examination in a group, individuals are quickly capable of looking on their own and thinking in complex terms based on many observations. Housen has data to support this. What you want to happen happens naturally, without the need for the sharing on the part of the teacher – and the process is given a substantial start with a single encounter. I maintain that there are traps when the teacher contributes to the discussion for viewers at this stage. One is that the teacher has to be pretty knowledgeable and thoughtful to select the most pertinent insights to share, and lots of museum teaching is assigned to people without sufficient experience. And another is that, along with the possibility of inspiring, you can very easily intimidate.

DR: It seems to me that some of what we've been arguing about is whether to give more weight to teaching through art instead of teaching about art. I guess I believe that both methods work well in different contexts and with different learners. I also fear that our discussion may perhaps be faulted for comparing apples to oranges. You've done most of your work with young people and I've worked almost exclusively with adults over the past twenty years. Your approach is rooted in cognitive psychology whereas mine is based in art history, anthropology and sociology. Finally, your learner-focused approach is ideal for the controlled environment of the classroom setting, where I know that most of your current practice takes place. In your model, the educator becomes a kind of coach or personal trainer, carefully selecting the level at which his or her viewer can succeed and encouraging them to keep building their looking muscles. The viewer is then able to use that muscle to understand like objects and to engage in like conversations with family and friends while gradually building sophistication. This is what I would characterize as teaching through art and I am in favor of museum educators doing as much of that as they can when the circumstances permit.

PY: You describe this well, although the method is as effectively applied in museum galleries as in schools. Even a single visit can begin a process of empowerment if the strategy applied is integral to the learner's mode of operating. And I think it is very much teaching about art. It simply focuses on what can be gained from looking at it. The real issue is that I say we should let discussion remain at the level of the beginning viewers' insights, not include ours. What we as experts understand, even the ways we think are foreign territory to the inexperienced. We can phrase our insights in terms that they grasp, but don't retain. Our thinking represents understandings and processes that are beyond their natural ability in the way that skipping is beyond the capacity of a toddler. I think you suggest putting a lovely, luscious carrot in front of the horse as motivation for forward motion – growth. But remember that the horse never gets the carrot. Given VTS

experience, viewers move forward motivated by their own engagement. VTS helps them be the best they can be at their current stage and encourages growth at a natural pace, adding questions, not information, when they are ready. I think that when experts share their insights what they are hoping for is fast tracking a process that took us many, many years. Let's not pretend we can eclipse the time factor that real growth requires.

DR: I think a lot of your work has been very effective and I especially appreciate the way you've taken it into the schools. But one of the questions I continue to have is: what is the point of putting novices into learning situations with experts in the museum setting if they cannot benefit from the experts' informed perspectives? The experts, and here I mean professional museum educators in particular, should know how to communicate effectively with novices, this is part of their area of expertise. I feel strongly that museum educators have a responsibility to teach both through art, and about art, especially when working with culturally and historically diverse collections. While looking skills and viewer empowerment are important, communicating culture is also essential and that is what thoughtful, interactive teaching about art can be: the kind of educational practices that both of us have devoted our lives to encourage. We want people to think for themselves, to look closely and to probe deeply, in other words, to live with the discomfort of ambiguity without seeking simple, ready-made answers. I think there may be many different ways to succeed in this quest!

PY: While I might argue that the art itself teaches beginners in ways that educators can only facilitate, I want to echo your sentiments about the breadth of our purpose. If by helping people dig into art, we help people learn to appreciate ambiguity and value multiple, plausible viewpoints, we also build capacities that transcend art. The openness carries over, and we desperately need more open attitudes to solve the crises that surround us. It is great to think that what we do in art museums might influence the way our complicated, sometimes frightening world turns.

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