Like It Was with *Like It Is*

**ELIZABETH F. FRERE AND ROBIN JONES**

It's been described as “groovy,” “cool,” “a fifteen-minute commercial for the Met,” and “an hors d’oeuvre to whet the visual appetite.”

If any of that is true, then we succeeded in at least one objective: breaking the tradition of the standard classroom documentary to present The Metropolitan Museum of Art in a way that would be exciting and relevant to young students.

What is now a fifteen-minute color film, called *The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Like It Is*, began with a lot of enthusiasm and a bare minimum of experience. Between the first discussions and the last session with the movieola, all of us learned a lot.

And what we learned is the subject of this report, assembled for the guidance of anyone considering a venture such as ours. Speaking of *Like It Is*, Allon Schoener, Visual Arts Director of the New York State Council on the Arts, which underwrote the project, said, “Apart from the imagination brought to bear here, the equipment required is available to anyone. Any museum could do the same sort of thing.”

**Overture**

Perhaps the best preface for such a report is to present the credentials that would qualify us for creating a presentation this important for an institution as important as The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Frankly, just about zero.

Both of us, basically, are professional writers. While we are rather ardent—or perhaps active—photographers, the relevant word had to be amateur. Our involvement began when Harry Parker, Chairman of the Metropolitan’s Education Department, saw several slide presentations we had created out of our travels. (We had become interested in the possibilities of combining slides with a sound track made up of music, commentary, and on-location sound effects.) Parker had been struggling with a problem whose solution seemed to be audio-visual: finding a way to make a visit to the Metropolitan more meaningful to the thousands of students who were streaming into the Museum every week during the school year. His question, after he’d seen these shows of ours, was could we give him some sort of presentation, an orientation really, that students could see as soon as they entered? Or even better, before they arrived?

**Sketching Out the Goals**

The ground rules were settled early and easily. Hopefully, such a presentation would survey...
the contents of the Museum and teach the viewer the basics of how to look at a work of art. The least tangible aim was perhaps the most important of all: to show the Museum as a happy place that gives pleasure and joy to people through beautiful objects. We would have succeeded if the students, when the film was over, felt they couldn’t wait to get out of auditorium and look at what they’d just seen on the screen, to experience all of it personally.

The tone of the show was to be fresh, lively, and upbeat (even startlingly so, from an “official” point of view, if necessary), for we wanted to take the cold chill of institutionalism off the Museum. Since so many students would be seeing the Museum for the first time, it was important that it meet them in a way that was neither condescending nor remote.

And that, in turn, led us to a preliminary decision that was to become the most decisive in terms of actual technique: to eliminate a spoken narrative.

All three of us found repellent the thought of that predictable baritone narrator, crooning his way through the classic classroom documentary. So we decided to see if we could do without him. Let the sequence of pictures, plus the right kind of music, tell the story. This is supposed to be a visual statement about visual experiences and how to use your eyes: let’s start with the film itself. And besides, we thought, this is the first generation of youngsters raised on television. Visually, they’re so much more alert. And this way we’ll draw them into the film quickly and hold them. Also, without narrator, the visual content will be free to adjust itself to each viewer’s educational background and level.

Oddly enough, we were right.

Or at least, the ground rules held up and helped guide us through some murky moments later on. The very lack of narration, we were to discover, forced us to assess every photograph not only for its own value, but how it contributed to the movement of the purely visual plot. While creating maddening problems of editing, we found that this technique can produce a strong, involving statement.

There was one other decision worth noting. It was Harry Parker’s specific request that we photograph everything ourselves. He had two reasons. While a wealth of lecture slides already existed, one of the show’s major themes was to be people, so it was essential to photograph people actually in the Museum, actually looking at art. The second reason for our doing our own shooting was more subtle. On the basis of other things we had done, it was Parker’s feeling that, between us, we had a certain point of view in our photography, and that such a point of view would bring an added—and desirable—unity to the presentation.

Making It Happen: The Technicalities

So much for theory. Now we had to go and make it happen.

Like It Is was originally conceived as a slide presentation. We felt that pacing, variety, and even surprise were essential if we were going
to be entertaining. So we decided to alternate between the usual, straight projection of slides and the special effects achieved by using a dissolve unit. Thus the original show called for three Kodak Carousel units, two of them linked through the dissolve unit and the third operated separately. By the time the show was finally in its approved form, we were faced with a formidable problem. Although everyone was pleased with the edited presentation, our show was going to call for major investment in special equipment—complicated lenses and programing units—for projecting it in an auditorium. (Originally we changed each slide manually, taking cues from the sound track for pressing the advance button.) Conversion to film, however, would cost less than that new equipment, while giving us the enormous added advantage of being able to send prints of the film to schools for viewing before a tour of the Museum.

Low cost was possible through the newly developed “computafilm” technique invented by The Presentation Center Inc. (18 East 48 Street, New York, N. Y. 10017). They converted our assortment of slides into a 16mm sound movie. Key to their process is a specially designed optical system that has been under development for some three years; with a patent pending, its characteristics are virtually classified. However, the point is that The Presentation Center can turn 35mm transparencies into 16mm motion-picture film of acceptable quality, and do it at a fraction of the cost heretofore associated with animation stand filming.

The Presentation Center handled all the details of the process of conversion. Other than handing over the slides themselves, numbered in sequence, plus a “script” that correlated our music selections to the slides, we had very little to do, manually or technically. We viewed the work in progress at various stages and judged things like proper synchronization, correct dissolve sequence, and color quality.

We have only one regret about converting slides to film and that is that we hadn’t known in the beginning that we’d end up on 16mm film. The proportions of the image projected by 16mm film differ from those of 35mm film; vertical photographs on 35mm cannot be adapted to 16mm without first being enlarged, so the 35mm image expands to reach the left- and right-hand margins of the 16mm frame, and then cropped, since the now-enlarged slide has grown in height as well as width. In most cases we were able to salvage our 35mm Verticals—or return to the Museum and rephotograph the object horizontally. What all this means, really, is a warning: if you’re thinking about converting to film, photograph everything horizontally.

Initially, we were worried about photographing with available light. Yet that seemed the only way to take pictures of people in the Museum. The keynote was to be people enjoying and responding. Catching them off guard would be impossible if we used flashbulbs, whereas fast film and a telephoto lens (and a little fast footwork) seemed the obvious solution. Which it was, thanks to the sensitivity of high-speed Ektachrome (ASA 160). Our first step was to test various films in a variety of light situations. We recommend this film testing to anyone else, since light situations can differ greatly within any museum. An afternoon of such testing not only tests the film but teaches the photographers quite a lot.

Going to Work in the Museum

One misconception that was promptly dispelled was that we’d have trouble photographing people being themselves. Even though we were trying to be as unobtrusive as possible,
we assumed that someone would notice us at work. Hardly. We leave it to the sociologists to comment on a basic truth we discovered: weekend crowds were such that individuals seemed to close their minds to their fellow visitors, ignore the crush, and concentrate totally on the art objects. Thus we were peering through the rangefinders at people not only wholly absorbed in art, but totally oblivious to photographers. Nothing could have been easier for us.

We were equally unprepared for another discovery and, paradoxically, it related to the very theme of the show itself: visual perception. For many years both of us had prowled around, felt at home in, and thought we knew every corner of the Museum. We were even a bit smug about being Museum People, having gallery-pounded from Budapest to Santa Fe. Yet we had never carried cameras through the front doors of the Metropolitan and had never looked at a work of art there in terms of photographing it. And any alert photographer looks at any potential object with an enormously heightened sense of that object’s meaning, design, and – for lack of a better word – presence. Thus came the pleasant shock of discovering unexpected content in pieces we had thought we knew well.

Wonderfully enough, it never occurred to Harry Parker to tell us what to photograph, and certainly we assumed that we’d simply go in, photograph what seemed worth photographing, and start shaping a show out of that. Later, we would realize we hadn’t represented a certain period or area, and we soon realized that the easiest aspect of the enterprise was the actual photographing. After all, no great skill is required to produce an acceptable color photograph of an art object that is reasonably well lit and nailed down. Unlike shooting the Houses of Parliament on your vacation, you’re not apt to run out of film, it won’t rain, no large bus will materialize between you and it, and you’re not due somewhere else in fifteen minutes.

Editing: Here Be Dragons

It became clear that the real work in this project would be finding and presenting a story line without benefit of narration: creating sequences, or a series of sequences, that would hang together and communicate some sense of organic logic. We were looking for a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Two things helped us. First, we did have a “plot.” Very early on, we had settled with Harry Parker that the show would re-create what we thought was the new visitor’s impression of the Museum. First would come an awareness of other people; then an awareness of people with objects; and finally an awareness of objects alone. That was the profile, the graph line, of the show.

Also helping us was the knowledge that music could be used to move the narrative along by aurally completing what was being “said” visually on the screen; music could give the audience a point of view and comment editorially on the visual material, thus helping clarify it further; or comment against the visuals, creating tension or irony. (Of that, more later.)

Altogether we took approximately one thousand photographs, and we began editing as soon as the first roll of film was developed. And we never stopped throwing out, rearranging, taking out some more. Then we
started editing all over again and mostly kept throwing away.

One of the last Museum officials to view the show as it reached the final stages was George Trescher, in charge of the 100th Anniversary Committee. Because we knew him to be a professional’s pro and an acute, sensitive critic, we waited until we felt we had honed our content to the barest, most shining simplicity. After seeing the run-through, George gently uttered the words we’ll pass on to anyone else attempting this sort of thing. He said: “If I had my way, all life would be a one-act play. Everything in this world can be cut.” We went through the show once more, and dropped sixty slides; after our egos recovered, we wondered why we thought the excised slides had ever contributed anything. The moral here is for the photographer to cut, cut, cut. Sleep on it, cut some more, and then call in someone who’s never seen it before. And then really start editing.

Two hundred and twenty-six slides survived the many stages of editing. (That means, roughly, using one slide out of every four, which in professional terms is a very respectable batting average. Many “waste” shots were of acceptable quality but were eliminated for various reasons of content. These may be used elsewhere by the Museum, which owns them all.) A few examples might help to illustrate some of the kinds of pitfalls we ran into—and perhaps how to sidestep them.

As we suggested earlier, we felt that if we took enough good pictures, something, somehow, would emerge. We did and it did. We noticed that if we sorted by subject matter, we had a collection of “women,” and another of “men,” and another of “animals,” and another of “plants.” What happened with three of those “plants” slides dramatizes the problem presented by the lack of narration: any slide or group of slides can really be put almost anywhere in the show. The problem is figuring out just where.

As we were sorting and editing, we were confronted with three transparencies, all depicting an aspect of a staircase by Grinling Gibbons. The first was a shot that established the staircase from a distance, with a visitor
studying it. Then we went in for a medium close-up of the staircase itself; and finally, a very tight close-up of a detail: an ear of corn. Those three seemed a logical way to begin a series of slides about "plants." And somehow we thought the "plants" sequence would follow naturally after a five-slide statement on doors, archways, and ceilings.

But when it was all put together on screen, the doors and arches looked excruciatingly lifeless. Out they went. And the only Gibbons slide that seemed right was the close-up shot. But that was carved wood and seemed wrong too, since all our other plants and flowers were in two dimensions and the corn was in three. So much, it seemed, for Mr. Gibbons.

In the meantime, the opening sequence for the whole show was beginning to solidify. We would enter the building, notice all sorts of people, and then look at people absorbed in works of art. It occurred to us that we could use the Gibbons sequence not in terms of "plants" but in terms of a visitor, eying the staircase and then the corn. It would become a comment on the act of viewing an object, not on the object itself. So we reinstated the sequence of three slides, moved it up to the beginning, and there it now resides.

Overstatement and misstatement caused trouble on what we thought would be a strong, logical sequence. The obvious closing seemed to be, simply, to leave the Museum, showing what everybody sees in leaving; and, if possible, suggest nonverbally that the visitor has been given a heightened sense of perception because of the visit. So we relentlessly photographed people milling about in the Great Hall, struggling into coats, studying jewelry at the gift counter, surveying volumes in the book store, trooping out into the light, going down the stairs. Once this section was put in context with all the other sequences, we realized that we had labored too long to say a simple thing. With no narration to distract the viewer's attention, he would instinctively concentrate much more on every picture, so fewer were needed to make the point.

So we put aside perhaps ninety per cent of that series. But something was still wrong. The show was now about to end and we were hoping we would have given our viewers a tremendous desire to go and experience the Museum for themselves. And yet here we were, "walking" them out the front door and down the steps, ending the visit.

If we eliminated the shots that showed people leaving the building and kept only the final slides that showed details of the exterior façade, we completely changed the effect. Now it was not the visitor but the camera - our narrator - that was going outside, to look back at the building itself, thus symbolically summing up everything inside. We rephotographed these exterior details with a wide-angle lens: the results were consciously dramatic and slightly distorted. They succeed, we think, in creating the feeling that the viewer has been given new eyes with which to take that last look at the Museum.

While it was easy enough for us to get very
good shots of people moving through galleries, ascending stairs, coping with children, or whatever, we soon realized we were on our way to establishing a major collection of the backs of people looking at works of art. For variety's sake, if nothing else, we needed to see faces and the work of art at the same time. To get what we wanted, we would have to put the photographer on the other side of the object; thus the visitor would be looking at it—and into the camera.

And total strangers obviously wouldn’t and couldn’t react naturally in a situation as awkward as that. The only solution was to violate our rule of faking nothing, and to use willing friends as models. To our surprise, they were far more willing than we thought they would have been. We also learned to use as many different faces as possible—rather than the same few faces looking at many different things. Otherwise, we would have inadvertently established a dominant character that the audience would become interested in, rather than the art. (We picked our models in terms of faces and gave them a definite part to dress for: the miniskirt, the tweeds and turtleneck, and so on.)

Since our friends could be posed as needed, we were able to create a sequence of close-ups of objects under the gaze of viewers. Because this section gave us a visual transition from emphasizing people to focusing on objects, it was one of the most essential sequences of the show.

To return to the example of an editing problem. Among the photographs our shooting sessions produced was an extraordinarily effective photograph of one of our models gazing at the Rospigliosi Cup. It was a very tight close-up, with this glorious, glowing object filling the screen, almost edge to edge. Very much out of focus, but nonetheless recognizable, was an enraptured face. And the photograph worked quite well in the sequence that now rounds out the introductory section of the film. But you won’t see this photograph. Here’s why.

The editing was proceeding very nicely elsewhere and we knew that we had an exciting situation in a later sequence: using the dissolve unit as we projected successively tighter close-ups of a Waterford chandelier until, in fact, we seemed to pass through the crystal pendants, by purposely going out of focus. And this in turn would dissolve into a close-up of Lippold’s Variation within a Sphere, #10io: The Sun, a dazzlement of gold wires. So far so good, but moving on gracefully from that shot was proving difficult. The effect of the Lippold itself was so stunning and total that anything else seemed anticlimactic: other contemporary sculpture didn’t seem to fit with it. Shots of other glittery objects were all silver or crystal, not golden, and therefore colder in tone. And then we remembered the Rospigliosi Cup. It was perfect. But there was that human being in it, and the narrative had now moved into the part of the show that was absolutely objects-only. While it was painful to toss out the original shot, it was simple to
go back to the Museum and photograph the cup itself, without human interest.

One last example can suggest what’s surely the deepest pitfall of all: photographs that are successful as photographs but don’t contribute to—or even work against—the narrative.

By now you’ve gathered that the opening minutes of Like It Is show all sorts of people in the Museum in different situations and settings, and that this section closes after it has depicted those visitors becoming increasingly engaged with and involved in the objects. And, indeed, objects are made to dominate so much that the viewers start to fade, literally, from focus.

We noticed that we had a number of shots of people resting in the Museum, being exhausted, even sleeping. What a perfect way, we thought, to round out the introductory sequence. In recognizing the lot of the footsore visitor, this would humanize the institution by letting the Museum say “It is tiring, isn’t it?” And to top it off, we would show a bronze of a sleeping cupid. Even the works of art must rest.

Here we really outsmarted ourselves, for four minutes after the show began, we brought the opening sequence to such a close that it was hard to get the narrative started again. Our little gesture of completion was inherently too strong. We realized this when we sensed that something wasn’t quite right with the end of the introduction: it wasn’t flowing on into the following sequences. Nor could we put this section at the very end of the show, because by then it would be too late to reintroduce “people,” thereby interrupting the movement of thought that was to carry the viewer outside to look at the façade.

By now, as we’d studied the light trays and the battalions of slides in front of us, we’d learned to think in terms of “It’s not that we need more slides. We just have six too many of something. Which are they?” We suddenly knew that amusing as our “sleepy people” section was, it was working against the narrative. It had to go, and in the process we realized that there’s a point at which you must stop savoring the aesthetic value of a photograph and begin wondering about how it helps move the story along.

Music: The Wordless Narrator

Perhaps it’s because music is such an integral part of Like It Is that it’s also the hardest to verbalize. All we can say is, follow your instincts and don’t be afraid to be intuitive. It also helps to know all kinds of music and to have access to a large library of LPs.

A nonverbal presentation automatically places a premium on the relation between the visual and the aural. For example’s sake, picture in your mind’s eye the Winged Victory of Samothrace, and imagine you’re hearing the opening bars of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. It’s a powerful combination. In fact, Beethoven acts as a filter, both intellectual and emotional, highlighting certain very definite qualities of the sculpture. Then “hear” your favorite Chopin étude. Suddenly you’re seeing quite a different work of art; your attention is being focused on new emotional relationships.

The opening section of Like It Is runs four minutes. Succeeding it is a section of three and a half minutes in which we look at art objects in considerable detail. The first two objects are, in fact, rooms: the Hall of Armor and the Blumenthal Patio. We close this part of the film with an examination of the Badminton Sarcophagus, and we’ll close this discussion of music with the musical “treatment” of these three subjects.

The first twenty seconds of the show were critical if we were going to let our young viewers know that this was not the show they probably thought they’d have to sit through. So it was an obvious solution to settle on some contemporary, swinging music. We hoped, in fact, it would come as a pleasant shock that the Museum even knew such music existed, let alone that the Museum would use it on behalf of their student guests.

Something bright, vital, and upbeat would also communicate one of the introduction’s main themes: this Museum is a place where a lot of people have a lot of fun. A number of recordings were reviewed and perhaps it’s not coincidental that we settled on something by The 18th Century Concepts, a group that specialized in applying a baroque instrumentation to pop songs. This gave us exactly what
we wanted: a combination, musically, of the old and the new. The music is an updated version of an English music-hall ditty from World War I. Judicious splicing extended it to cover the time needed for all the slides of that section. (We didn’t want to introduce a second piece of music that would break the mood.) Bumptious and perky as it was, four minutes is a lot of time to spend on a simple melody, so a change of pace was definitely in order for the next piece of music, which would introduce the Hall of Armor. And we wanted the whole section to be a strong contrast to the opening.

In the knights’ section, we settled down for a relatively extended look at a series of objects, all related to medieval warfare. The choice of music here was an unusual work by J.-B. Lully, composed solely for the kettle drum. It is a military march. Nothing but a stately tattoo, it instantly sets a mood of menace and suspense. Adding its dark quality to the photographs created, we think, a fairly frightening combination. It’s consciously melodramatic and if it conjures up scenes of jousts and Agincourt, so much the better.

To relieve this impression of violence, we next go to another room, one of great tranquility and serenity: the Blumenthal Patio. A natural choice of music would be something Spanish, and that in turn suggested a guitar. However, the room’s openness and simplicity seemed to call for something less agitated than a Spanish guitar; something more measured and calm. The answer was a solo lute performing an Elizabethan song. Historically the choice was not inaccurate, and emotionally it fit the personality of the room very well.

The final chapter in this series was the Badminton Sarcophagus. The choice of music was narrowed down by several considerations. First: the two previous sections had set a pattern we didn’t want to break, i.e., the use of a solo instrument. Second: the sarcophagus was Roman and thus did not immediately suggest an instrument that would be historically accurate (or pleasant to the ear). Third: therefore, the determining factors should be our own feelings toward the object and what we wanted to emphasize about it.

Having decided that, the rest was fairly simple. Enormously convoluted, the high-relief surface of the sarcophagus is largely sylvan in subject matter. Whereas medium close-ups would have conveyed an unfortunate feeling of busyness, we chose to show the intricacies of the carvings in a series of close-ups that only heightened the sense of flowing line. And these close-ups were being projected on the dissolve unit, which meant we were melting from one detail to another in a way that seemed most agreeable.

So, by the process of elimination, we worked out a definition of what the music would have to be. We were looking for a solo instrument, and the sylvan subject matter suggested a shepherd’s flute; and while we wanted a melody that was simple, open, and transparent, it should be a long, flowing melody. Fortunately we were able to find something that qualified. It’s an old English folk song called “I Know My Love,” performed on the recorder. In this case, there is absolutely no historical connection between the music and what it is underscoring, and the ultrasensitive viewer may be thrown off in the first few seconds trying to relate a folk song on a recorder to a Roman sarcophagus. But all we can say is that it does work.

This last example of music also exemplifies something alluded to earlier, and that is consciously establishing tension (or lack of obvious relationship) between the object and the music. While not advised as a steady diet, such tension does make the viewer assume that there is in fact a relationship and will prompt him to find it. Such tension, or irony, literally underscores not so much a particular historical fact but the editor’s (or photographer’s) personal point of view toward it.

The Toughest Critics in Town

Eventually, all was finished. The slides were converted into a movie . . . we faced our first audiences. And now, torn between the desire to appear modest and devotion to journalistic truth, we have to admit that Like It Is is a hit. Or at least that’s what the Museum tells us. Three of the most gratifying comments from our young critics are these:
Many museums seem cold, but this brief picture actually gave an air of warmth about the Museum as it should be.

and

I liked the part with the people, because that’s what a museum is, people. Without people, it is not a museum and does not fulfill its purpose.

Finally:

I thought that this short introduction was excellent, especially on a school trip when time is limited, necessitating a cursory examination of the Museum. I think the lack of narrative helped to create an atmosphere in which the observer is credited with enough intelligence to understand it without a lengthy explanation.

But not all students like all parts of the movie. Nor, perhaps, should they, if you believe that teen-agers are works-in-progress and respond unpredictably to what you thought was really quite predictable. Our favorite comment tends to be this one, quoted exactly as received; the student was passing judgment on a concerto by C. P. E. Bach used during one section of the film. Said he: “The harpsichord has got to go,” and then added: “The rest of the film was pretty good.”

The Advantages of Not Being The Metropolitan Museum of Art

At this point the thought does occur that someone else might think the Metropolitan Museum would be a better resource for such a show than any other, smaller institution.

While it’s true that the Metropolitan does offer riches beyond the photographer’s dreams of avarice, it also has some disadvantages to visual narrators such as we are. Or to put it this way, smaller collections offer their own advantages.

For instance.

Simply by being smaller, smaller museums don’t require that the photographer record such a staggering range of cultures, media, and objects as the Metropolitan does. For us, it would be a relief to try surveying a museum one-third the size of the Metropolitan. Within a smaller perimeter, such a survey would become less of a paraphrase, and more of an inventory.

By the same token, fifteen minutes on the screen would give you the chance to look more closely at the individual works of art.

In our case, we had only fifteen minutes in which to meet two goals that are almost mutually exclusive: to suggest the contents of the Museum and to study a few objects in detail. To do one, obviously, leaves less time for the other. To apply those two goals to a smaller collection, then, would be much easier.

In the long run, the size of a museum is less important than its quality. Assuming that your camera is in focus, the beauty of the object will shine through. If you can communicate your own feeling toward the object, that beauty will shine more brightly for your audience. The best advice about how to project your own feeling is simply to have fun and like what you’re doing. As advice goes, ours is neither very technical nor very aesthetic. But if Like It Is succeeds the way we wanted it to, it succeeds—we now realize—because we did love what we were doing.

NOTE

The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Like It Is, as well as The Museum Hero (see pages 225 to 229), are available for rental through the Education Department of the Museum. The fee for each is $7.