In Search of Human Contact

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If the only enduring purposes of a museum were to buy, store, and protect, surely the Metropolitan Museum could best function in a bank vault sealed off from human contact. One certainly would not allow a lot of school children to come in and browse around the objects. Assets comparable to those of General Motors would not be set out where any madman could take a razor to several million dollars’ worth of canvas. But they are. What could be a single-minded concentration on things is constantly tempered with other interests. Call them utilitarian – the employment of art for the inspiration, pleasure, and education of people.

The idea of using art scares many people today, but the founders of the Metropolitan Museum saw this purpose clearly and stated it in the Charter: “The Metropolitan Museum of Art is to be located in the city of New York, for the purpose of establishing and maintaining in said city a museum and library of art, of encouraging and developing the study of the fine arts, and the application of arts to manufacture and practical life, of advancing the general knowledge of kindred subjects, and, to that end, of furnishing popular instruction and recreation.” The notion of using art to accomplish broad social aims is, then, not a new one. The Museum was conceived as relevant to the needs of New York’s citizens, improving their taste and their surroundings, and refreshing their spirits.

Today the Victorian sense of public responsibility is undergoing a healthy revival, and new uses of the Museum for the benefit of society at large are being explored. This decision forces a complete re-examination of standard museum practices. It means that a museum can no longer sit passively to count its blessings and receive its visitors. It means, instead, attempting to manage the museum experience so that the visitor takes away certain attitudes, insights, and information. It means, in addition, not restricting the use of the museum to the audience inside the physical building, but promoting its ideas and principles to as large an audience as possible. It means going where...
the people whose taste and knowledge you want to affect congregate. One such place is the American high school, and it is to this forum in which values are formed and ideals are communicated that the Museum's Department of Education has been addressing a large part of its effort this year.

The articles in this issue of the Bulletin present various aspects of our effort to reach the high school student. We attack American students in mass by feeding curriculum materials into the classroom and creating museum orientation films. And we concentrate on affecting the few who care enough to devote a summer to art history seminars or studio sessions. We work in that area where viewer meets object, and human contact becomes the basic purpose of the object's preservation.
In its reluctance to place any importance on art education in the general curriculum, the secondary education establishment in America has been derelict. Only one out of ten students studies art at any point in his high school education. He is seldom the best student, as art is a low-priority item on the college admissions officer's list. The art teacher is unfairly ranked near the bottom of the faculty totem pole. Art appreciation is a minor adjunct to the studio course. Art history is hardly taught at all: there are probably not more than a dozen high schools in the country today offering such courses. The interest in art that has been nurtured through elementary school comes to an abrupt halt in secondary schools, and relatively few students sustain their interest across this desert on the way to college and a lifelong appreciation of art.

We felt the Museum had a stake in continuing art education through the high school years and plotted our demand for equal time in the secondary school curriculum.

We learned that some schools have begun to recognize the deficiency, and experimentation in so-called humanities courses is widespread. Curriculum designers have had their problems, and team teaching (where music, art, and English teachers join forces) has complicated the issue on occasion, but the movement toward beefing up the humanities program is most desirable. Equally promising, it seemed, was the growing breadth of the social studies curriculum. Every high school student takes American history, civilization, government, whatever the title employed; and, increasingly, history teachers are turning to original sources and documents where the feeling of closeness to the past is far greater than it is in the abstract theories of the textbook. Helping students and teachers to utilize the visual document as an original source would require real effort, but to indulge in a little McLuhanism, all of us are becoming more and more sensitive to communication through visual means - the average high school graduate today has spent more hours watching television than attending school.

The basic idea of the project was to relate art and history, to show how the past can be studied through the most vivid documents that civilization leaves behind. At the same time the students would learn the history of culture, to complement their knowledge of

*music for the filmstrip’s soundtrack, shipping it to the schools, and testing it in the classroom*

Right-hand photograph by Lew Merrim
the history of economics, politics, or diplomacy. Art is used here to make man aware of his past.

There was risk capital involved in this venture, and we were fortunate to secure the enthusiasm and support of three agencies—one public, the New York State Council on the Arts; one corporate, the Geigy Chemical Corporation; and one private, Arthur K. Watson. This troika, unusual in the history of funding, helped us to frame a project whereby the Museum would produce materials to be evaluated in pilot schools of varying types throughout the country. Thirteen secondary schools scattered through five states in the eastern half of the United States were selected to become our partners in experimentation. Urban, suburban, rural, public, and private schools from Mobile, Alabama, to Lakeville, Connecticut, were included to assure diverse opinions.

Most school libraries lack even the standard art texts, and we had to make sure these were available. So we began by sending to each classroom a small library of books and magazines on American art in which the teacher could assign reading and the individual student pursue his own enthusiasms. We then prepared sound filmstrips, a kind of poor man's movie, by which an illustrated presentation with narration could be economically produced in quantity.

The filmstrip content paralleled the standard divisions of the American history one-year course. For the time of the Revolution, we examined the works of John Singleton Copley as the testament of a man whose personal indecision as to political loyalty was typical of a large class of colonists unsure whether to stay with the Tories or join the revolt. His portrait commissions of the 1760s—from Samuel Adams to Thomas Flucker, the last English governor of Massachusetts—indicate acceptance by both political factions. Copley's withdrawal to England and rejection of the style of his American paintings say something about the effect of the rebellion on one man's life. Later in the year, we surveyed the country's romanticizing of the frontier as it was reinforced by the paintings of nineteenth-century artists, and in the third filmstrip compar the discovery of the city by artists at the beginning of the twentieth century to the effects of mass immigration and urbanization. Additional information on each of these subjects was offered in a teacher's manual, which supplemented the script of the filmstrip with considerable detail on each object and a bibliography to facilitate further research.

The pace of the narration was fast—geared to the student's capacity for absorption of visual material. We tried to keep the message or point of view as direct as possible, and always preserved the teacher's option to embroider and enrich the experience with more details about the pictures than could ever be fitted into a script.

Educational materials are successful only when they work under classroom conditions, so in order to find out how well ours passed the test, we asked for teacher and student evaluations. The teachers wanted us to include more questions, to be suggestive rather than didactic, to lead from the facts at hand to historical themes of more general application. The students asked for fewer portraits, more preparatory sketches, more humor, and a still faster tempo. Their response was the basis for our reworking the presentation.

Filmstrips are familiar to teachers and easily adaptable to existing classroom facilities. None would be so dramatic, however, as the arrival in a high school of an entire exhibition sent out by The Metropolitan Museum of Art—PTA meetings could be called and local newspapers alerted to the event. Our special contribution would be exhibitions, the form of communication most familiar to museums, but little known as an educational medium in the schools.

Learning from exhibitions is different from learning by lecture, by book, or by film. An exhibition just stands there passively; it is the student who examines it closely or not so closely. It may take him a minute or an hour, but the effect is cumulative as he discovers new things in it over a period of time. Some museums have tried to send traveling exhibitions out to the schools—usually a set of framed reproductions. The most handsome picture often finds its way to the principal's
George Segal in his studio, working on his silkscreen for the high school exhibition
office; the rest get separated from their labels and hung unevenly down the darkest corridor. We wanted to control the look of the exhibition and still arrive at a format that was easy to assemble, light in weight for shipment, and relatively impervious to the between-class rush down the halls. A new firm in New York, Museum Planning, Inc., designed folding screens made up of hinged aluminum panels with retractable legs. In only ten minutes, sixty running feet of exhibition space can be assembled in almost any school location. Photographs or reproductions can be mounted on the panels; labels and written information can be silkscreened directly onto the surface. Of course, if you can silkscreen labels you can silkscreen art: the technique we used is a multiple original process—like a lithograph, an etching, or an engraving—so it is possible to create a limited edition of identical exhibitions. We can, therefore, lend original art, in a format that fits the requirements of school use.

With Rosa Esman of Tanglewood Press we were able to convince Richard Anuszkiewicz, Helen Frankenthaler, Adolph Gottlieb, Nicholas Krushenick, Roy Lichtenstein, and George Segal—six of the most important artists working in New York today—to create original art for our aluminum format. The artists were challenged by the unusual process of printing on aluminum as well as by the concept of reaching out to a teen-age audience in high schools all over the country. In addition, they submitted to taped interviews, which were combined with photographs of the artists in their studios to produce a filmstrip that could be circulated with the exhibition.

Students from the classes that had participated in our pilot program were brought to New York City in the spring to confront the objects that they had been studying in reproduction. Would this final experience, possible only in the Museum itself, be stronger and more vivid for the months of preparation in the classroom? Would it help to have been trained to view the object of art as intimately related to all aspects of history? We think it did. We are convinced that the power of a work of art to affect a human being is directly related to the preparation and education of the person for such an experience. Museums do have the ability to affect the quality of human contact with art.

The educational effort still to be made is enormous. The people to be reached range in age from preschoolers to senior citizens and in previous art awareness from the ghetto fifth grader to the graduate student in the history of art. If we must make sure that the preschooler is initially intrigued, we must make equally sure that the scholar gains access to long-buried factual information. The college student must come to know art in the original, with all the subtleties of color, condition, and detail that can never be reproduced in the second-hand slide. The general visitor must learn the questions to ask himself about a work of art if we are not to have another generation of uncomfortable, dazed beholders wondering what is supposed to happen when one looks at Rembrandt. Helping people get the most out of works of art is a challenge for which education is the answer. This long-neglected aspect of the Museum's role requires the commitment not only of the Museum's resources, but those of society at large. For society loses, each day that art's power to affect men's minds and awareness of themselves is wasted.