Leaping the Century Gap

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CENTURY II is a Centennial experiment launched to help eight- to fifteen-year-olds discover early in life that education in some settings is inextricably bound up with joy. Its members enjoy a variety of privileges appropriate to their ages, the frequency of their Museum visits (half of them live far from Manhattan and must depend heavily on family sanctions), and the price of their membership ($35.00 for eighteen months—142 are scholarship recipients). Newsletters keep the Museum in touch with those who cannot drop in easily. Their discount, which is one cent on a five-cent postcard, sometimes drives our bookstore to distraction but gives the economically minded member a sense of belonging where it counts. While the Museum has no unusual gifts of prophecy, we hope that a generation from now CENTURY II members may be among the employees, the members, and the benefactors of this Museum. They will surely be part of a public that struggles for the survival of the museum heritage and helps to rethink constantly and everywhere the relevance of treasure houses in the third millennium. CENTURY II members will be better qualified for thought and action than many of their contemporaries.

Special events carefully related to the Museum’s Centennial exhibitions are the highlights of the program. In connection with New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970, CENTURY II members interviewed Helen Frankenthaler and Ellsworth Kelly. The young people asked dozens of penetrating and philosophical questions, which were most thoughtfully answered. During the 19th-Century America exhibition CENTURY II will focus on the treasures in grandmother’s closet.

In celebration of The Year 1200, young Museum members became medieval pilgrims on a Sunday morning this spring. Wearing hats to protect them from the sun or rain and led by pages or nuns, they traveled through the Museum in bands, watching, listening, and singing like medieval wayfarers, while participating adults, professional and volunteer, played the parts of king, troubadour, and humble nun. CENTURY II membership buttons entitle the young people to retrace their steps to The Year 1200 as often as they wish. Many of them have already been back to share with their families and friends what they only had time to glimpse on their pilgrimage. “It’s lots nicer coming here now I’m a member. The guards seem to think so, too.” The photographs here attest to the involvement of our members, who leapt with such agility into the Middle Ages.
After a page washed 500 hands ceremonially with water from a lion-shaped aquamanile, the participants ate hearty hunks of bread washed down with tasty medieval soup (any improbable indigestion was cured by herbs grown at The Cloisters). The Corpus Christi choir sang medieval Latin under the direction of its choirmaster, the exquisite shrines of the exhibition captured pilgrim attention, and a lute player sang tunes attributed to William, Duke of Aquitaine and grandfather of Eleanor.