The Centennial Tours

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Question: What do a banker from Miami and a housewife from Akron have in common?

Answer: They are both new and enthusiastic friends of the Metropolitan Museum. And they aren’t the only ones. There is a rapidly growing number of men and women all over the United States and Canada who are becoming acquainted with the Museum under very special circumstances. This is the result of a program developed and carried out by people who felt that over the past hundred years the Metropolitan has managed to gain two quite different reputations: one as the leading art museum in the country and the other as an awesome institution that tends to overwhelm the out-of-town visitor. In fact, many American art lovers are more familiar with the Louvre and the Prado than they are with the Metropolitan; when in New York, for business or pleasure, they too often prefer the small, less time-consuming Frick or Guggenheim to the impersonal and exhausting Metropolitan.

From the beginning, George Trescher, Secretary of the 100th Anniversary Committee, felt that one of his main goals was for the Metropolitan to emerge from the anniversary year as a national resource. “In this age of ecumenicism, we should be ecumenical too. We wanted to share the celebration with others who are involved in museum work around the country.”

According to Trescher, he first got the idea of bringing other museums to the Metropolitan as far back as 1966, when it was suggested to him by Mrs. Vincent Astor, a trustee of the Museum. “I felt that as the mother museum this would be a good chance to improve our relations with curators and trustees in other cities,” explains Mrs. Astor. “I’ve had to travel around the country a good deal and I’ve always been received warmly, but we haven’t done this in New York. I thought this was the time to build up good will for the future.”

In the fall of 1968, just one year before the first Centennial exhibition, Dorothy S. Bauman appeared on the scene, and together with Trescher worked out the plan for tours that would enable other museums to send groups of interested people to see the Metropolitan during its coming year of activities.

“We decided that special invitations and arrangements were important,” says Trescher, “and by keeping to small groups from different museums we thought we could create a cross-fertilization.”

A scheme was developed for a series of three-day tours during the Centennial year. There would be one tour a month consisting of eighty adults – preferably twenty people
from each of four museums. As Trescher points out, "A small museum may have little in common with the Metropolitan but may share many problems with another small museum."

The cost to each individual would be $150 in addition to travel and hotel expenses. Of this, fifty dollars would go to cover the costs of the tour in New York and a hundred-dollar contribution would be split between the sponsoring museum and the Metropolitan. In this way a museum would receive $1,000 for sending a group of twenty on the tour.

The next step was to get in touch with the museums and hope that they could be encouraged to come to New York. To make the invitations as appealing as possible, they were hand delivered by Mrs. Bauman. Making great loops through the South and New England and then zigzagging across the country to the West Coast, she personally visited sixty museums, talking to their trustees, directors, staff, and members. She told the history of the Metropolitan and showed slides of the five big Centennial exhibitions, explaining that a group should plan to come when the exhibition that interested them most was in progress, and collecting suggestions of what people might like to have included on the tours.

"We had no idea what the response would be," admits Trescher, "but we were very lucky to have Dorothy Bauman. She has done so many different things over the years that she has friends in every city." The response was tremendous. Mrs. Bauman feels this was in part due to the small museums’ pleasure and surprise in the realization that an institution as vast as the Metropolitan would care enough to send someone out asking them to participate in its Centennial. A great many museums that could not be visited were informed of the tours at a breakfast in San Francisco hosted by Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Hoving during the American Association of Museums Conference last June.
To date there have been five tours, and Trescher says with obvious pride that he is “enormously pleased with how they have gone. They have been one of the most satisfying aspects of the Centennial.” Their success has been so great, in fact, that the remaining eleven tours that will run through January 1971 are completely filled. When two additional tours were scheduled they also were immediately sold out. In several cases, groups returning home from an early tour have convinced their museum to go on a later one as well.

For the most part, the people who make up the tours are thirty-five to fifty-year-old men and women of the successful business and professional groups, all of whom are members and supporters of their local museum. In many cases the director has been able to come and occasionally the group has paid the way of a staff member.

A typical tour begins in the Museum at a lunch on a Thursday with Hoving welcoming everyone to New York and to the Metropolitan. “He told us the Met was ours while we were here and apparently he meant it,” said a Louisiana visitor. Members of the Museum staff and volunteers are present to answer questions and exchange ideas with the staff of the visiting museums. Lunch is followed by “behind-the-scenes” tours of a variety of Museum departments: the Armorers’ Shop, Far Eastern Art, Exhibition Design, and, before they were opened to the public, the Wrightsman Rooms. For a woman from Minneapolis this was the best part of the tour: “If you don’t actually work in a museum you never get to see this sort of thing.”

There is also a session with Harry Parker, Vice-Director for Education, and members of his staff, who outline their projects and describe the growing importance of that department in the Museum today. “Education is one of the few things a small or newly established museum can do as well as we can,” Parker notes.

That evening there are cocktails at the home of a Metropolitan trustee or member of the 100th Anniversary Committee. Mrs. Ronald Tree, the Arthur Houghtons, Mrs.
Harold Bache, Mrs. Vincent Astor, and the Roy Neubergers have already entertained
the visitors, many of whom had never before been inside a private home in New York.
Dinner at a restaurant near Lincoln Center followed by the theater or opera completes
the first day’s activities.

Friday morning the tour is admitted to the special Centennial exhibition well in
advance of the usual ten-o’clock opening. This is followed by other tours and lectures
of the visitors’ choice in different areas of the Museum. That afternoon is devoted to
viewing some of the outstanding private collections around the city – no small feat of
arrangement on the part of the Centennial office. By Friday evening, when everyone
gathers for dinner at a private New York club, a real camaraderie has been established
within the group. One member from each visiting museum is asked to speak about his
museum’s plans. “They are extremely well informed about their own institutions,”
Trescher has found. “Among their biggest concerns are finances, loan exhibitions, and
attracting good staff.”

Saturday morning is spent touring The Cloisters and the afternoon is left open for
visiting other New York museums or galleries. With this the tour officially ends and
the participants, the Museum hopes, now have a special feeling for the Metropolitan
and for New York. “My only criticism would be to make the tour longer,” one woman
reported. “I really could have used another day or so. Otherwise I wouldn’t change a
single thing.”

The details that Mrs. Bauman and her assistant Jill Rodgers have to cope with are
endless – always complicated by last-minute cancellations and additions. “A well-run
tour requires the cooperation of everyone,” says Mrs. Bauman, “and I’ve had coopera-
tion all the way down the line. Even the guards have gotten into the spirit.” The
efforts of the staff and the generosity of the trustees have been important, but her
highest praise goes to the four volunteers who are assigned to each tour from early
Thursday until late Saturday afternoon. These volunteers have all spent a year or more
at the desk of the Visitors’ Center answering questions about the Museum and are well
equipped to handle any problems encountered on the tour. “Considering the number
of people involved there are very few snags,” one volunteer noted. “You have to re-
alize that they are a very savvy group who know their art, and in many cases they are
collectors themselves.”

By the end of the Centennial there will be more than a thousand people from thirty
museums throughout the United States who have gone on the tours. It is difficult to
estimate what the impact will be when twenty well-informed, art-minded individuals
return to their community with new enthusiasm to give enlightened help to their own
art centers.

Over and over the people who have been on the tours have urged the Metropolitan
to reciprocate by sending some of its staff and members to see their museums. Trescher
and others are eager to accept these invitations, as they believe there is a great deal to
be learned from these places. “If we are to be a truly national museum,” Trescher
points out, “we must act in a national way.”