What is The Metropolitan Museum of Art? What is it for? What should it do? Should it be an awesome treasure house or should it have “happenings”? Should it be a temple of silence or should it be a sort of community center? Should it remain aloof or should it be a crusading force of novel ideas, conquering by means of its masterpieces the grayishness of today’s urban environment?

All these questions have been launched at me since I became Director of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

To answer, one must plunge one’s hands into the fertile soil of ideas that existed in 1870 when the mission of the Metropolitan Museum was laid out by its founders. That charter stated the Museum is “for the purpose of establishing and maintaining 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 sole change in this wording from the founding moment to the present occurred in 1908, when the word “recreation” was dropped—an unfortunate excision.

The language of the charter was deliberately couched in the broadest manner for the broadest effect. It is almost as if the founders knew that lurking somewhere in the future there would be questions about “happenings,” treasure houses, community centers, and crusading forces. Thus according to the stated purpose all things that encourage the
mind and eye to the deepest appreciation of fine art are possible at The Metropolitan Museum of Art—within bounds of common sense, reason, taste, and “gentlemanly and courteous behaviour on the part of the Director,” as the Trustees of 1900 put it in their gentlemanly, forcible manner.

The foundation block of the institution and its collections will always be the conditioned eyes, the penetrating knowledge, and the experience of the staff. Scholarship is the stone upon which all else can safely and responsibly be erected—whether temple of silence or crusading force. All tasks of the museum community—collecting, preserving, exhibiting, educating—are equally critical. But today, in an age of price escalation (or, to some, price madness) of works of art, I think the stress must be more on education and “popular instruction” than on anything else. In short, the Metropolitan is in the business not only of gathering but of giving forth. Its mission lies not only in how effectively its treasures can themselves communicate but also how well it can communicate about its treasures.

When a curator comes upon a brilliant work of

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art he experiences an immediate, kinetic feeling of vibrancy. At once that painting, sculpture, porcelain, or piece of furniture communicates an aura of strength, of sureness, of perfection, of inevitability. When you find a truly great work of art you feel like the comic-strip character with the light bulb blinking over his head, signifying SMASHING IDEA – but instead of one bulb there is an explosion.

The discovery reaction is intense but short-lived. What follows is the painstaking, highly rewarding process of scholarly investigation to find out everything about that work of art, its creator, its period, and even about those human beings who have marveled at or been moved by it.

I want as many people as possible to share this spontaneous enthusiasm, this “explosion of light” when they confront a great piece. What the Museum must endeavor to do is to communicate the deep excitement that marks the masterpiece: the excitement that impelled its creator to fashion it; the excitement of the time in which it was made; most of all, the excitement of the work itself as something of surpassing quality. A sort of unforgivable silence can surround a painting pinned on a frame or a sculpture plunked on a pedestal or a beautiful small bronze isolated in a glass case. The task of the Metropolitan Museum is to break through that silence and communicate – simply and conveniently – the full life of a work of art. The most rewarding experience in the museum field is to be able to give an ignored, misunderstood, or silent object the resounding eloquence it possesses.

The ingredients in this heady formula for popular instruction are complex. And those ingredients must be totally modern, probing, skeptical in the scholarly sense of the word, and brilliantly illuminative.

In getting the word across everything is of importance. From a new type of thematic exhibition such as In the Presence of Kings, which tries to give new insights into familiar pieces and to strike sparks by linking diverse material by a common thread, to the act of writing a label that indicates why a painting really is “good.”

All media must come to the fore, from television to libraries of special recordings – not only by scholars, but also by artists themselves – for guided tours that will impart more information than the chronic “introductory course,” to experiments with new computers that can answer questions of any complexity from inquiring visitors. We must have orientation galleries to prepare visitors for what the Museum is, has, and wants to express, equipped with every modern communications device. As a first step in creating this buffer between the expanses of the building and the limits of human endurance, this summer we’re trying out a “visitors’ center,” manned by multilingual college students who have volunteered their vacation for the project. Here they plot out individual routes for visitors, everything from a first-time excursion into the whole of our collections to a detailed look at a single aspect – the history of glass, for instance, from the time of Hatshepsut...
to Louis C. Tiffany. Above all, we must have a general guidebook to the Museum, comprehensive catalogues of every collection, and a great scholarly periodical for specialists and those growing numbers of visitors who do like to read (mirabile dictu!) and like to probe ever deeper into works of art that move them.

The one question probably asked more often than any other is, “Why can’t you stay open at night?” Why not, indeed. So in June we stayed open from ten in the morning straight through to ten at night on four consecutive Tuesdays. To make the evening pleasurable and convenient we kept the restaurant open, and civilized Museum dining by making wine, beer, and sangría available. From five to ten P.M., close to six thousand people visited the Museum, as many as come on a rainy weekday. The experiment was an unprecedented, stunning success. It would be facetious to say that we’re still studying the results. Obviously, we have to make every effort to keep the Museum open evenings on a permanent basis.

We must try out public hearings, public symposia on difficult subjects, such as “Frauds, Forgeries, and Deceit.” New acquisitions of great beauty, rarity, and importance should be presented with flair and outcry (of a gentlemanly courtesy, of course), and then be explained – or defended – by the curator or Director to the public, which would then be invited to ask questions about the quality and desirability of the piece.

We must experiment with different ways of bringing people and works of art into imaginative rapport. One such took place in the galleries of modern painting and sculpture in June: this was the American première of Eugene Ionesco’s eleven-minute playlet “Maid to Marry,” performed for Museum visitors by the Four Winds Theater in front of paintings by Pollock and de Kooning, with telling results. Anybody who saw the show will never forget the juxtaposition of the large abstract painting and the wonderfully affected man before it, musing “What would Joan of Arc have said, I wonder? . . .”

These are not gimmicks, but possibilities of higher communication, and probabilities for making works of art of all civilizations and human states of mind more naturally assimilated into the bloodstream of our consciousness.

We must advance beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the passivity of showing works of art and expecting only the aesthetic response. Art is humanism, is relevant. Art leads and changes individuals. If it is not brought fully into the “practical life” of which the Museum’s founders wrote, how then will the next generation know enough to insist upon an automobile that isn’t vulgar, or architecture that is more than pegboard, or even pots and pans that are not shoddy or rinky-dink? Herbert Read said, “The best civilizations of the past may be judged by their pots and pans.” In that sense The Metropolitan Museum of Art is in the business of those pots and pans that must withstand the judgment of posterity. And we must teach posterity to judge.