

Chapter 5

Docents and Museum Education: The Past, Present, and Future

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ABSTRACT

Many art museums rely upon volunteers, often titled docents, to implement a range of educational offerings, including guided gallery experiences. As such, docents regularly engage visitors more than most museum staff members. A review of literature spanning over a century provides support for an examination of four reoccurring themes within museum education and docent history: uncertain definitions, professionalization, theoretical foundation, and embedded traditions. Subsequently, consideration of the past offers context for examining contemporary museum education programs that develop the capacity of docents as change agents, including offerings during the COVID-19 pandemic and developing inclusive practice through docent education. The chapter concludes with an envisioning of the future for docents within museum education.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers a look back on the last century of museum education to provide a foundation for examining the present and envisioning the future of docent programs. The impetus for crafting this exploration was born in a personal quest to understand how the history of museum education, and its traditions, have impacted current docent education. The chapter begins with a historical analysis inspired largely by my dissertation review of literature, drawn from conference papers, articles, research, and photographs of docents (Figures 1-6). Rising from this exploration are four recurring themes that I identified within the review of literature: uncertain definitions, professionalization, theoretical foundations, and embedded traditions. An emphasis is placed on this history, as it underpins the analysis of current undertakings in museum and docent education.

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Docents and Museum Education

Next, through the lens of civic engagement (defined as individuals, operating either independently or in collaborative groups, working towards positive societal change), an exploration of present-day blogs, social media posts, discussion boards, and e-journals offers insight into recent efforts to prepare art museum docents for addressing issues of inclusivity and virtual learning. As such, it is possible to see how the above themes shaped current efforts. Finally, the chapter concludes with recommendations and poses questions to the reader to consider the future of docent programs.

Of note, discussions within this chapter consider museums in relation to aspects of identity. Therefore, it is critical to state that I identify as a cisgender, White woman, and I acknowledge my experiences working in art museums have made me both knowledgeable of the field, as well as a contributor to oppressive systems. It is necessary to understand how systemic oppression developed and transformed (or not) within museums in order to dismantle them. Through a deep dive into the past, the reader-and the author-are better positioned to recognize how these factors impact present efforts within docent programs, ultimately aiding in visualizing future reforms and innovations.

Background

A considerable number of museums around the world utilize volunteers in a multitude of positions, interacting with both staff and visitors. Nearly 51,663 volunteers contribute over 3 million hours to art museums in North America (Association of Art Museum Directors, 2018). Traditionally, volunteers who facilitate guided-looking experiences in museums were titled *docents*. The term docent comes the Latin verb *docere*, meaning to teach (Bleick, 1980; Gilman, 1918; Giltinan, 2008). These volunteers serve as the “public face” of the institution, often the sole interface visitors have with museum staff (DePrizio, 2016, p. 5). Consider that between July 2016 and July 2017, 55.4 million people in the United States of America (U.S.) saw at least one art exhibit (National Endowment for the Arts, 2019). Therefore, a reasonable hypothesis is numerous visitors encountered volunteers within the art museum, as on a guided tour.

Many museums use the word *tour* or *guided tour* as an encapsulating term for the curated¹ experience of visitors guided through galleries and stopping to explore specific artworks or objects, typically around a chosen theme (e.g., a particular artist, a historical period, a topic, or highlights from a collection). Some institutions utilize *guided-gallery experience*, *guided-looking*, and *gallery walk* instead of the word *tour*. Additionally, the term docent indicates a person leading these guided discussions, with some museums replacing the term docent with *interpreter*, *museum guide*, and *gallery teacher*. These changes mark significant transformations in museum education and highlight the need to familiarize oneself with not only terminology but the act of scrutinizing jargon, later explored.

Before we examine contemporary issues and trends, it is pertinent to investigate the history of museum education, and thereby docents. In this way, we can tease out significant themes, reoccurrences of ideas, and support our understanding of transformations within the field. As Curran (1995) shared, “Without a historical perspective, common assumptions are absorbed into the discipline of museum education with little scrutiny” (p. 5).

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