

Chapter 14

TEACHING AESTHETICS: THE VERY YOUNG MUSEUM VISITOR

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It has been said that visual artistic talent (and logically, appreciation) is a function of mature intelligence. Mozart may have been creating masterpieces at the age of eight; Raphael was not. Is it then a waste of limited and expensive staff time to make the rather heroic effort required to cultivate the very young child as a museum visitor?

The rationale for directing so much of our focus toward student tours takes either the altruistic or the cynical path: we are either contributing to the development of future artists or future benefactors. In the case of the very young child, neither of these assumptions has much validity.

In plain fact, many museum personnel, both staff and volunteers, share very little enthusiasm for the presence of a tiny herd of "rug rats" wriggling among the Greek vases. What can they be learning? After all, even the difference between a portrait and a landscape has little significance to a child who is not yet totally certain what an elbow is. And docents untrained in specific early childhood education techniques—as most are—are among the most vocal opponents. It is uncomfortable to be forced to abandon the tried and true, the little signs with artists' names, the old stories behind favorite paintings, dazzling words like "Impressionism" and "Jacobean," all to reduce one's mind to the level of LocBlocs and PlaDoh.

In many museums, it is just this level which provides an answer to the problem: hands-on "art" making, a fairly recent phenomenon in which the expectation is that somehow the sticking of cotton balls to construction paper becomes a much more artistically valid experience by virtue of being performed inside a marble building.

When the little ones come, says this viewpoint, give 'em crayons and let 'em color. We've taught them red from blue, we've spun the color

wheel and shown them Anuszkiewicz, now let them "create" while we get back to the proper contemplation of Art.

Why bother? If this is the sum total of the experience, perhaps the detractors SHOULD have their way and bar the doors to anyone under six (ten? eighteen? forty-three?). Is it possible to construct a valid program for the young child and a valid reason for developing one in the first place?

As always, the source of the answer is in the question itself. Why are we here? What are we trying to do? What are a museum's responsibilities to education, anyway?

Better, perhaps, to ask, what do original art works offer that is unique, unavailable in any other place? And what kind of experience results from the study of them—by any age group?

Let us begin by considering what a museum is NOT. We are not a school. The museum is not obligated to create, as Frank Oppenheimer (1978) has said, "a parallel education system" that moves into areas where the public schools already function very well. We are not an "attraction," an amusement center offering teen dances and video games as a way of showing what art can do for the modern kid. We are also not a mausoleum, as so many people unfortunately perceive a museum to be, a place where any kind of physical or vocal expression of pleasure is unwelcome. Possibly this latter misconception was at the root of the current tendency toward overcompensation in the direction of frenetic activity, somewhat loosely art-related, to say the least.

What, then, is a fine arts museum to the child visitor? It is, or should be, a combination of certain qualities which work together to provide an environment in which learning becomes a natural and comfortable result of simply being there. The space itself is important; it is special in some way, whether by size or design or decor, or it would not BE a museum. The attitude of the museum's personnel is extremely important, for people—especially young people—who are seen as eager to learn as those who actually do learn. And, of course, the content of whatever information is offered is important, because it is the nature of that information which will sustain the interest created by the physical and psychological factors.

Assuming, then, that those factors have been met, an attractive and pleasant environment has been provided, along with supportive and interested staff or docents, what is to be taught, or shown, to the children? How can experiences beyond the capacity of these youngsters be translated into a valid educational experience?

The Getty Report (1985) classified art teaching goals into four categories: creation, history, criticism, and aesthetics. The first is demonstrably not our mandate; the second next to impossible with the very young audience; the third, criticism, involves explaining and judging and requires a higher level of discrimination than young children have

mastered—they love it all—but the fourth, aesthetics, gives us some ground for hope.

Remember that in aesthetic evaluation, we are encouraging responses entirely different from both the intellectual and the emotional. We are confronting an understanding of the philosophical qualities of art. Now, if this seems an even more difficult task than the others, let us look more closely and see that it is not.

I feel at ease with reducing my goals in teaching aesthetics to three: looking, distinguishing, loving. First we must teach how to look, as simple as that sounds. How many of us actually look at things? Probably not as many of us as of these small eager children. Everything is new and exciting when you are four years old, and that is indeed part of the charm of working with this audience.

We look at tables. We look at rugs, and clocks, and plastic G.I. Joe cups. We look at all of these things in parallel with their counterparts in the fine arts. Decorative objects are a very good introduction to the idea of "art." One comparison between the rug on the classroom floor and a Persian masterpiece goes much further than any words. A cheap drinking glass in one hand and a piece of Steuben crystal in the other teaches a lesson that is missed by no one. I have gone even further and asked pre-schoolers to compare dishes of pressed glass and of leaded cut crystal. No problem.

All this is done by way of introduction to the idea that art is all around us, that it involves much more than just sterile objects hung on walls away from the public's dirty hands. Ideally, some sort of introductory lesson such as this should be given in the children's own classroom, where they are more relaxed, more confident of themselves and secure. When I do make such a visit, I bring to them several replicas of items in our Museum's collection—excellent photographic reproductions of paintings and hands-on objects as similar as possible to our three-dimensional pieces—ceramics, sculpture, metal and woodwork. A typical introductory lesson would include a very light overview of the many kinds of fine arts in our museum, beginning perhaps with the most easily understood—the rugs, glasses, and so forth—and moving on to the paintings themselves. The choice of a painting or paintings to be shown must be a careful one. Concepts of style—Impressionism, for example—are going to be lost entirely on this age group. One excellent image to work with is our Georgia O'Keeffe *Poppy*, for the idea of making a simple, familiar thing like a flower enormous to give it importance is easy to teach and easy to comprehend. The lesson itself is short: I begin by asking them to imagine a flower and tell me its color, which they are all most eager to do. I then show them a small red silk flower and tell how artists have drawn and painted flowers over the years, as they themselves may have done. But, I say, what if you wanted your flower picture to be different from anything else anyone has ever done, to stand out and attract the

attention of everyone who sees it? Well, here is what one artist did. And I produce the large (24" x 36") reproduction of the Poppy, and of course they get very excited.

At the end of the introductory lesson, the children have learned the following: that art can be many things which were perhaps ordinary to begin with, but which have been changed somehow by people of great imagination called artists; that, if we look carefully, we will see the difference; and that the creative ideas of these people can make our own lives better because of the ways they enhance our thinking.

In the ideal progression of events, the children then come to the Museum itself, and preferably within a very short period of time, not more than two or three days, when these thoughts are still fresh in their minds. This is where the final and most important part of the lesson is taught: the confrontation with original artworks. Verbalizing is not necessary at this age, or—to be perfectly frank—at any other. Art, after all, is essentially a subtle, sensitive set of symbols which create in us feelings that words cannot convey and should not be able to convey. If an artwork could be totally verbalized, it would be an essay. Art is a language in itself—the universal language, in fact, which submerges linguistic differences through its own breadth and richness.

With young children, and especially with disadvantaged young children, our greatest goal must be to enable them to develop their minds and intellectual capabilities through all forms of learning. Creative intelligence is among the foremost of these and experiencing fine art opens every mind to unexplored areas of thought and appreciation.

The technicalities of developing fine school programs are many. You must have a supportive institution. Serving all segments of the community is often a mandate of the public museum, and in the case of a private museum, such as ours, the original intent of the donors is often the guiding light. Our charter states that the Museum's greatest aim will be "to increase and diffuse knowledge and appreciation of art," and, since its inception, all staff have recognized the fact that this is not done entirely through erudite Sunday afternoon lectures.

You also must have a system or other organization, such as Headstart, that deeply wants to participate. Most do, of course, public school art being so limited in time and staff. You must have help, docents or volunteers with some training, to further these goals, if you intend the program to cover not only a specific and select audience, but a wide range of children. In my own experience, for example, after I planned the pilot programs, we increased our participation to include if not a classroom visit, at least a Museum field trip, by every four-year-old Headstart child (some 800) in our county. This was done with the assistance of two or three dedicated docents and a number of one- or two-time helpers from our regular corps of 50 docents.

Money, of course, never hurts, but it need not be a major factor. Photographic reproductions, such as that of the O'Keeffe Poppy, are expensive (in the range of \$200), but not a great many are needed to launch this type of teaching. Actually, one of the most successful lessons I ever did with this age group was accomplished with the use of almost nothing in materials. It was in connection with an exhibit of African art, and I thought I would conclude and reinforce my little discussion by allowing each child to come to me and add a colored wooden bead to a wire "necklace," while recalling something he or she had seen in the show. As our small piece of African beadwork grew, the children began—spontaneously—making observations about it:

"There are more red beads than blue;"

"There are six green beads;"

"The beads are all round, but some are larger than the others."

They had actually devised their own lesson, incorporating their own newly-learned skills, colors and numbers, with the somewhat subliminal (I thought) message of my visit. For moments such as that, one remembers why teaching is the most rewarding of all professions.

Our total school outreach program is of course not restricted to the very young child. We see thousands of children every year, both in the classroom and in the Museum, but the older students, in elementary through high schools, can be taught many things in many ways. The one specific segment of that audience which this paper has addressed, the very young child, requires special thought and preparation. It requires, I think, that we look very deeply at not only what they are but at what we are.

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Chapter 15

DEVELOPING A DEVICE TO ASSESS ATTITUDES TOWARD SNAKES

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Introduction

Educational efforts in zoos and museums to increase the public's commitment toward conservation of animal species is complicated by negative attitudes toward some of these species. While there is little resistance among the general public to the idea of conserving primate species that share many characteristics with humans, other animals have not generated as much concern. Reptiles, in particular, stimulate negative affective and cognitive reactions in many people. A large number of individuals fear snakes, believe that snakes are dangerous, and are not aware of the important role of snakes in the ecosystem. Formal and informal educational programs sponsored by schools, museums, and zoos have attempted to change both the emotional and the cognitive (learning) reactions to this animal. However, there apparently has been little evaluation of these educational efforts to determine how they influence the public.

Two recent attempts have been made to evaluate the impact of live and non-live animals (other than snakes) on cognitive and affective responses (Sherwood, 1986; Wakeman, 1986). Sherwood studied the impact of live demonstrations with horseshoe crabs and sea stars on 4th graders under three conditions: (1) a videotaped demonstration plus contact with live specimens; (2) a videotaped demonstration and contact with "dried" specimens; or (3) a videotaped demonstration but no contact with live or "dried" specimens. Both cognitive (learning) and affective (feeling) changes were obtained in the two contact groups (live and "dried"), but not in the videotape-only group. Wakeman, in another study of the effects of live animals, evaluated the cognitive impact of demonstrations on 4-6th graders and found no cognitive learning differences among live, dried, or video animal experimental conditions.

Apparently, for the species studied there was little difference between live and dried specimen. However, one might expect a very different reaction to snakes since emotional responses tend to be more extreme to this species.

The current study had three purposes: (1) to validate a survey device we developed that may prove useful in the evaluation of educational programs geared toward snakes and similar species; (2) to determine how young adults perceive snakes in terms of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies; and (3) to assess the impact of a live snake demonstration on the beliefs, feelings and behavioral tendencies of young adults.

A useful assessment device for measuring attitudes toward animals should have several characteristics:

- It should be sensitive to techniques that change the attitudes of respondents.
- It should be easy to use.
- It should be cost effective.
- It should have generality across respondents, situations, and animals.

Method

Subjects

A total of 134 undergraduate introductory psychology students, 70 males and 64 females from Jacksonville State University, Alabama, served as subjects. For the control group, 48 males and 49 females were used; in the experimental, or live demonstration group, 24 females and 16 males were included.

Assessment Device

An attitude survey was used that included the following items:

- two items pertaining to beliefs ("Most snakes are dangerous" and "Snakes are useful to man");
- three items pertaining to emotions ("Snakes scare me", "I am afraid of snakes if they are not in cages", and "I feel uncomfortable when close to snakes");
- four items that described behavioral tendencies ("I like to look at snakes when at the zoo", "I would like to touch a snake", "I would like to hold a snake", and "I would like a pet snake"); and
- one item on interest or curiosity ("I would like to know more about snakes").

Procedure

For the live snake demonstration, a classroom in the psychology building was used for the presentation. A boa constrictor six years old and six feet long, obtained from the Anniston Museum of Natural History, was used as the live snake in the demonstration. The live snake demonstration was videotaped with a Panasonic VHS recording system. The subjects were exposed to a 15-minute lecture/live snake demonstration, the content of which was designed to address some of the common misconceptions about snakes.

When the participants arrived at the demonstration room, one of the experimenters instructed them to sign an extra-credit sheet and to take a seat anywhere in the room. Subjects were not aware that a live snake would be part of the program. Two data collectors were positioned in the rear of the room before the participants arrived. Their function was to record events and behaviors during the demonstration. At the designated starting time, the door was closed and the subjects were thanked for their participation and informed that a survey would be administered at the end of the demonstration. At this time the demonstrator entered the room with the boa constrictor in a white cloth bag. Not until the demonstrator was positioned by the podium was the snake removed from the bag. For the 15-minute demonstration, the snake was in full view of the audience. The lecture part of the demonstration contained and expanded on the main affective and cognitive components of the attitude survey. The main points were as follows: (1) explicit information about the boa constrictor actually used in the demonstration; (2) the origin of various misconceptions concerning the dangers of snakes; (3) statistical information on poisonous versus nonpoisonous snakes (e.g., number of deaths each year by snake bite and geographical distribution of different types of snakes); and (4) the usefulness of snakes to the environment and to humans.

After the lecture, subjects were given time to ask questions. Subjects were then given an opportunity to touch the snake. Subsequently, they were given the opportunity to hold the snake. The number of students touching and holding were recorded. The same attitude survey administered to the control group was administered upon completion of the demonstration. Surveys were collected by an experimenter as the participants exited the demonstration room.

In the control condition, the survey was administered to four introductory psychology classes. At the end of a regular classroom lecture, the instructor passed out the surveys, asked the students to complete them for extra credit, and turn them in before leaving class. Statistical analysis was completed on a Macintosh computer using the STATVIEW statistical program.

Results and Discussion

Male vs. female reactions. Figure 1 summarizes the results of the attitude survey device for male and female respondents. Females communicated more negative beliefs than males about snakes. Males were more likely than females to disagree with the statement, "Most snakes are dangerous" ($p < .0001$). In addition, males were more likely to agree with the statement, "Snakes are useful to man" ($p < .005$).

Females also exhibited more negative affective reactions to snakes. Females were more likely to agree that "Snakes scare me" ($p < .0005$), "I am afraid of snakes if they are not in cages" ($p < .0001$), and "I feel uncomfortable when close to snakes" ($p < .01$).

Reported behavioral tendencies were not as consistent. There was no difference between males and females to the item, "I like to look at snakes when at the zoo." However, there were significant differences between genders for the remaining three behavioral tendency items, "I would like to touch a snake" ($p < .0001$), "I would like to hold a snake" ($p < .0001$), and "I would like a pet snake" ($p < .001$).

Finally, females were more likely to disagree with the statement, "I would like to know more about snakes" ($p < .001$).

These results show that males and females of young-adult age respond very differently to snakes, at least in terms of self-report. It is interesting to note that the difference between male and female included beliefs as well as emotional responses, suggesting a connection between these two response systems.

Experimental versus control conditions. Figure 2 contains a summary of the survey results comparing the experimental and control conditions. The two items that referred to beliefs were significantly different between experimental and control subjects. After the lecture/demonstration, subjects were more likely to disagree with the statement, "Most snakes are dangerous" ($p < .001$) and to agree with the statement, "Snakes are useful to man" ($p < .0001$).

Changes in affective reactions (survey items #3-5) were not universal for cognitive responses. Despite the lecture/demonstration, the experimental group subjects were as likely as the control group to report that "Snakes scare me." However, there was a significant difference between groups to the item, "I am afraid of snakes if they are not in cages" ($p < .05$). The greatest difference in affective response between experimental and controls was in response to the item, "I feel uncomfortable when close to snakes" ($p < .005$). Those who had participated in the live demonstration were more likely to disagree with this statement. This suggests that this latter item is the most sensitive of the three in measuring affective changes.

There were no statistically significant changes in the behavioral tendency items. The subjects' tendency to want to look at, touch, hold, or own a snake remained unchanged. This suggests that behavioral tendencies are more resistant to change than cognitive or affective responses. It is interesting to note that, while both experimental and control subjects were neutral with respect to looking at snakes at the zoo, the majority were definitely not interested in touching, holding, or owning a snake.

The interest-curiosity item ("I would like to know more about snakes") was also unaffected by the lecture/demonstration. Improving attitudes toward snakes does not necessarily increase interest or curiosity about them.

Observations during the demonstration lecture. When the snake was first taken out of its bag at the beginning of the lecture, three subjects rose from their chairs and walked rapidly to the back of the room to get as far away from the snake as possible. Others appeared to be anxious about the snake since there were a number of spontaneous comments that indicated sympathetic nervous system arousal. Following the 15-minute lecture, subjects were given the opportunity to touch and hold the snake. Most of the students did not care to get close to the snakes; however, two females and four males went to the front of the room and touched the snake. Subsequently, when given the opportunity to hold the snake, the same two females held the snake, while three of the four males who had touched the snake also held it.

General Discussion

It is not surprising that many of the respondents had misconceptions about the dangerousness and usefulness of snakes. The negative emotional reactions to snakes was also expected. It was gratifying, however, that both cognitions and emotions could be influenced by a brief lecture-demonstration experience. It is not clear if the same impact would have occurred with a videotaped presentation or with a nonliving snake demonstration.

The study also demonstrated that the survey device was sensitive to an educational program geared toward attitude change. Students who participated in the live snake demonstration were more knowledgeable about the danger and usefulness of snakes. To a lesser extent, the emotional responses of the respondents appeared to be affected by the experience of a demonstration. Behavioral tendencies and interest level, however, were resistant to change.

The gender difference in nine of the ten rating scale questions suggest that males and females respond dramatically different to snakes, at least in terms of self-report. Similar gender differences were observed by Mitchell and Bitgood (1982) with respect to the perceived severity of life stressors (e.g., loss of a loved one, divorce). It is difficult to assess whether some

of this gender difference is a difference in self-reporting or a difference that reflects impact on the individual. For example, it may be that males are less likely to admit fear of snakes. It is also possible that males have more exposure to snakes earlier in life due to gender-linked socialization.

References

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Footnote

Rick Bevins is now a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts.

Figure 1

Item		Strongly Agree			Neutral			Strongly Disagree		
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
Most snakes are dangerous. $p < .0001$	Male							3.28		
	Female							2.28		
Snakes are useful to man. $p < .005$	Male							2.41		
	Female							2.89		
Snakes scare me. $p < .0005$	Male							2.45		
	Female							1.62		
I am afraid of snakes if they are not in cages. $p < .0001$	Male							2.63		
	Female							1.70		
I feel uncomfortable when close to snakes. $p < .01$	Male							2.60		
	Female							1.93		
I like to look at snakes when at the zoo.	Male							2.08		
	Female							2.36		
I would like to touch a snake. $p < .0001$	Male							2.94		
	Female							3.89		
I would like to hold a snake. $p < .0001$	Male							3.03		
	Female							4.21		
I would like a pet snake. $p < .001$	Male							3.31		
	Female							4.24		
I would like to know more about snakes. $p < .001$	Male							2.39		
	Female							3.19		

Figure 2

Item		Strongly Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree
Most snakes are dangerous. $p < .001$	Control			2.56
	Treatment			3.27
Snakes are useful to man. $p < .0001$	Control			2.90
	Treatment			2.03
Snakes scare me.	Control			1.96
	Treatment			2.19
I am afraid of snakes if they are not in cages. $p < .05$	Control			2.03
	Treatment			2.43
I feel uncomfortable when close to snakes. $p < .005$	Control			2.05
	Treatment			2.75
I like to look at snakes when at the zoo.	Control			2.29
	Treatment			2.05
I would like to touch a snake.	Control			3.51
	Treatment			3.24
I would like to hold a snake.	Control			3.73
	Treatment			3.43
I would like a pet snake.	Control			3.89
	Treatment			3.57
I would like to know more about snakes.	Control			2.89
	Treatment			2.62