

Meet the Provisional Class 2024-2025

Patty Santiago, Instructor



Nina Sandvik Bashforth

Born and raised in Norway, I moved to California where I earned my B.A. in Business and Marketing at California Lutheran University. Returning to Norway, it was 2008 before I made my way back to California. The business side of me has always been matched by my love of the arts across media, which gave me a fulfilling career in children's book publishing. Now, as a proud parent of three adult children and happily retired, I am excited to be in the docent training program. That same drive to nurture and inspire young minds that fueled my business and marketing career can now be channeled into working directly with children, exploring the world around them through art.

I am also a lifelong enthusiast of health, fitness, and longevity, engaging in pursuits that enrich both body and mind. Whether hiking, skiing, or cooking with fresh local ingredients from the farmer's market, I find balance and energy in nature and its bounty. Fluent in several languages, I have a deep appreciation for travel and discovery, so art education as a training docent is a perfect fit to balance my life.



Gretchen Hewlett

Raised in Fresno, California, I moved to Santa Barbara in 1970 to attend UCSB. Like many others, I fell in love with the community and have been fortunate to spend my entire adult life here, working in a variety of professions—publishing, law, trust services, and most recently, fundraising at the Museum of Natural History and Santa Barbara City College (from which I retired in 2021). Coming from a home of public school educators, I've had a lifelong appreciation for education's power and attraction for continual learning and growth.



Ann Kaplan

My husband and I fell in love with Santa Barbara on our many trips across the continent. Bi-coastal living gave way to full time in 2019 when I cut back to half-time as a Distinguished Professor at Stony Brook University and he retired from NYU. We decided to retire here while maintaining contact with NYC. After my husband died, it made sense to make my home here. In my career, though I mainly taught literature, film and contemporary media arts, I always loved classical art. I applied for this docent position as an avenue to enjoy a more formal and rigorous exposure to additional art genres and learn more about their contexts through art history, a way of continuing my career as an educator but in the role of volunteer. While I did a lot of research over the years in feminism and film, trauma and climate change (areas I continue to study), it was teaching that I loved most. As a docent I hope to revive the teaching self that I have most missed these last few years.



Michelle Madril

I made two decisions that changed my life. The first was after graduating from Cal State Fresno when my employer asked if I would move temporarily to a place called Montecito. I knew nothing of Santa Barbara County, except that it was on the ocean. I immediately fell in love with the place, quit my job, and stayed. That was in 1999. I had found where I would spend the rest of my life. The second key decision was trading a career in finance with Morgan Stanley for one in real estate. Being able to help clients buy and sell homes in the city that I love is my passion.

When I'm not working, you can find me walking my dogs (mini poodles, Kizzy and Bun Bun) at Elings Park, my favorite place in SB. I also love playing tennis, attending ceramic class at the Schott center, going to the farmer's market, and partaking of all the amazing eateries here with friends and family. Volunteering is my way of giving back. I have been involved with Pacific Pride Foundation, the Santa Barbara Food Bank, and the Democratic Women of Santa Barbara County. As a docent, I will give my best sharing the Museum's art with our community.



Natalie NG

I went to school in NYC, got my first real job there, and believed I would be there forever. It wasn't an easy place to live, but after a few years it felt like home. Then unexpectedly, I was recruited to SB for a job. It was an absolutely unreal transition. When my plane landed in front of what looked like someone's Spanish-style estate, I was stunned. How can this place be where I live and work? After the initial shock, I settled comfortably into this dream-like landscape, the easy, relaxed lifestyle, and all these happy, friendly people around me. It felt and still feels like a vacation. I became a Santa Barbaran—got married in the Courthouse and gave birth to my child at Cottage Hospital. Twenty years later, it's hard to imagine living anywhere else, a city that inspired me to pull up my Big City roots and replant them in an irresistibly charming town that feels like home.

Giving back to the community as a docent feels like the best way to honor that journey.

Tish O'Connor (No image)

I grew up in Boston, earning my degree at Dartmouth in 1976. That was bookended by three years of study at the Sorbonne in Paris and the École du Louvre. After working in publishing in NYC for five years, I moved to L.A. to manage LACMA's publications, specifically the exhibition catalogue that featured impressionist works from the French national collection, their contribution to the Olympics Arts Festival in 1984. I also documented the cultural life of sprawling Southern California in two guidebooks commissioned and published by the L.A. Times (1990) and the Getty (1997).

For three decades I worked with my husband, photographer and book designer Dana Levy, as Perpetual Press, our studio producing illustrated books for museums and university presses all over the U.S. In 2001 we relocated to SB where I became a docent at Lotusland for fourteen years until my husband's illness intensified, as well as the SB Courthouse until my ongoing work as a scholarly editor demanded more time. Since 2017, I have been a Compeer at the Music Academy. I am excited to be in the docent training program to continue my lifelong learning and resume volunteering in a culture-rich environment.



Susie Thum Way back when, as a newly married graduate student with a budget to fit, my introduction to art was a Rauschenberg collage in a Leo Castelli Gallery. As missed opportunities in life go, I sometimes think about the \$250.00 price tag and wince. But I came away with a budding appetite to learn more. Since then, I have had four children, earned a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology at UC Berkeley, and run a non-profit education and psychology clinic. Along the way, I was an educational psychologist in the public school system and worked in educational research at a San Francisco non-profit.

My volunteer experience is varied, most recently as a docent at LACMA from 2004-2019, holding many positions over the years. As a lifelong student, I relish the opportunity to learn something new every day, be it a child's reaction to an artwork, or delving into the research needed for a new exhibition. My being a provisional docent will help satisfy my need for personal growth while serving the Museum.



Michelle Klong I moved to Santa Barbara from Brentwood, CA, about 13 years ago. A dear friend was moving out of a rental house near the SB Mission and asked if I was interested in moving here and renting it given landlord approval. I jumped at the chance. I've always loved the arts, whether music or history or books—making, learning about, and viewing art has always been a part of my life. In college and graduate school I studied studio art. Before moving here, I worked briefly at two art museums in Los Angeles and enjoyed learning about the collections. I've always wanted to teach art, and being in the training program seems like the perfect opportunity to guide visitors as a docent.



Sohelya Valleie

I left Texas and my engineering career behind in 2022 to move here, my new home. Santa Barbara, with its nurturing of artistic expression, is the perfect place to grow, share and contribute. Retirement has given me the opportunity to build on my knowledge of art history as well as the environment in which to advance my artistic abilities. Primarily self-taught, I have supplemented that knowledge with various classes and art programs here in SB. I see the docent program as a natural progression for my interests, a more focused, in-depth education program to prepare me to share the Museum's riches with

visitors. For me this level of learning is a privilege. I am excited to one day share my new knowledge and skills with students and the public.



Cyndi Withrow-Aliabadi

My husband and I finally returned to SB after meeting at and graduating from UCSB thirty years ago. We lived in several cities in California, plus a decade in Europe, and another decade in Chicago and Seattle before moving back. We absolutely love to travel and experience new and different cultures, during which I have nurtured my love for art, antiques and design, collecting unique treasures and selling them online. I am particularly drawn to antique textiles, which visually and tactilely connect me to the culture which produced it. In addition to my M.A. in Philosophy, I continually take courses to enhance my education, especially in art history and interior design. Education feeds me, and I continually pursue other likeminded people to share and learn from. My home away from home is always a museum, no matter where I am in the world. So I am thrilled to be in the docent training program, making SBMA my new 'home' of choice.