

ROLE OF THE DOCENT

The members of the Docent Council are engaged in a satisfying and nurturing commitment to perform their often challenging duties on an entirely voluntary basis.

The word *docent* comes from the Latin verb *docere*, meaning "to lead or teach". Docents are an integral part of the Museum's educational program, and they have a special dedication to learning, teaching, and aesthetics. After a provisional year of training in the Museum collection, touring techniques, art research, and art history, docents conduct gallery talks for adults and school groups. Building a tour is a challenging assignment, for differences among visitors and changing exhibitions made each experience a new one. A docent's reward is the feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment when working with a responsive group of visitors.

Docents focus on helping visitors establish meaningful connections with the art and objects they see in the Museum. The docent works in the domain of active observation, questions, and ideas. A docent is familiar with the Museum's exhibitions and has an understanding of the learning process. This means the docent is able to communicate with audiences of all ages, promote discussion, ask thought questions, prove responses, spark ideas, and encourage curiosity.

School tours are often a student's only exposure to museums. We believe the Museum's greatest value to the student is to encourage critical thinking, stimulate imagination, arouse curiosity, and allow opportunities to wonder and marvel, regardless of the Museum's content.

Though the Santa Barbara Museum of Art has maintained an intense commitment to the community since its opening in 1941, it was not until its 20th anniversary that the docent program was created. Prior to that time the gallery talks were a project of the Junior League of Santa Barbara.

The first museum docent in the world was appointed in 1908 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, to provide free public instruction in the galleries. The docent was to be "not an instructor of subjects, but an interpreter of objects."

The importance of the docent is seen with increasing clarity when viewed through the shifting focus of art education. The arts today no longer are the province of the privileged few but belong to everyone. The tools of educational psychology have chipped away at old beliefs and have revealed a potential for genuine creativity in uniquely personal forms for every child. The first forays of split-brain research indicate that learning is much more powerful when experiences in the arts and academics are integrated.

The art museum holds the possibility of that dual experience through the activities of its docents. When the art museum is seen as a storehouse of our cultural history and the docent as holding the key to a vital experience of our inheritance, wonderful possibilities are inevitable. The impact of that heritage can be made deeply meaningful to the museum visitor—child or adult—adding to his or her reach of history and aesthetics and expanding the sense of self.

"Men learn as they teach."—Seneca