

Compiled by Nathaniel Prottas

Twelve years ago the *Journal of Museum Education* (JME) published an essay by museum consultant Mary Ellen Munley and long-time museum educator Randy Roberts that posed the question: “Are Museum Educators Still Necessary?” In their article, the two educators trace a shift from the object-centered to visitor-centered museum starting in the 1970s. They argue that museum educators were poised to lead their institutions into a new museum era and define public value as the key mediator between the collection and communities. But they also identify challenges that come with this paradigm shift: how, they ask, do educators define and differentiate their roles in a museum where *all* work is understood as visitor-centered? The challenges and possibilities identified by Munley and Roberts continue to be as relevant today than they were a decade ago. As museums increasingly conceive of themselves as spaces of social and political action and centers of dialogue—in addition (or contrast) to their traditional role as collectors, researchers, and custodians of objects—museum education continues to (re)define its increasingly central role in the institution. The article serves as an important reminder that that in order to understand where we are, we must look back at where we came from.

This Virtual Special Issue of JME looks at our history and seeks to uncover debates around the value and role of museum education as documented in the journal between 1972 and today. The articles collected here investigate a specific issue in our history, namely how educators argued for power and responsibility in the museum, with a special focus on knowledge of the public vs. knowledge about objects. The articles highlight how museum educators used JME to argue for their relevance and importance in the changing museum landscape. While the format of the writing changed dramatically—from a more informal style to the more academic format now preferred by the journal—the debates invariably coalesce around a constellation of issues related to museum education’s role as advocate for the visitor. These include museum education’s status in relation to curators, the increased role of visitors, the emergence of evaluation as a central task, and criteria for the selection of objects for public interactions and exhibitions. In order to make clear when these debates emerged and how they shifted over the decades, the articles are presented in chronological order, rather than grouped thematically.

Certainly, this selection cannot trace all the varied histories of museum education. JME has regularly dedicated itself to the task of exploring the field’s history; educators including Emily Curran, George Hein, Elliot Kai-Kee, Lisa Roberts, Briley Rasmussen, and Scott Winterrowd among others, have explored the emergence of museum education and teaching in journal articles. This edited volume does not seek to replace their exemplary work.

The JME published its first edition in 1973, and the journal’s first decade demonstrates that museum educators had an increasing interest in reconsidering power structures in the museum, as reflected in reports on panels addressing this topic at conferences. Early on arguments centered on the museum hierarchies, in particular the role of curators vs. educator. As early as 1973 short articles appear that highlight the need for cooperation between these two groups in the museum.¹ From 1973-86 the journal published several short articles that directly address the issue of cooperation among curator and other members of the museum,

¹ N. A. “Exhibition: A Question of Cooperation,” *Journal of Museum Education*. Issue 1. 1973. N.P.

including educators. Reports from 1973 indicate that educators and curators were already beginning to discuss how to work productively together.² In 1980 the issue appeared again in a brief article entitled “The Second Decade,” authored by Jane Farmer, and by 1986 a short notice in the journal noted a productive panel at the American Association of Museums (AAM) conference dedicated to curators and educators working together.³ Due to their brevity, the articles are not linked below; instead the references are given in the footnotes.

Of course the 1980s were not without controversy, as evidenced by Gretchen Jennings’s response to an article written by museum director Thomas Levitt in *History News* the previous year.⁴ In his article, entitled “In my Opinion: Can Research Find a Home in a Museum?”, Levitt argued that education departments should be abolished and curators made responsible for the supervising the educational staff. Jennings agrees that the separation of research and education is deeply problematic for the museum, but suggests that a collaborative approach offers a better solution to integrating academic and public education into exhibition-making. This concept of collaborative exhibition development—with educators and curators each bringing their respective specialists to a team—would reappear again and again over the decades to come.

But discussions of how educators should define their role in the museum began in earnest in the last years of the 1980s, and it is here that articles selected here start. At this point we begin to witness clear articulations of museum educators as responsible for the newly important public, even as they continue to argue for recognition of their knowledge about objects. Of course none of what appeared in the JME occurred in a bubble; the articles must be read in the wider context of debates in the museum world over the last 45 years. Certain milestones in museums serve as the backdrop to these articles: the 1984 publication of AAM’s *Museums for a New Century* and in 1986, *The Uncertain Profession: Observations on the State of Museum Education in Twenty American Art Museums*, commissioned by the Getty Center for Education in the Arts, both loom large.⁵ The latter’s influence can be witnessed directly in three articles from 1987 by Carol B. Stapp, Judith White Marcellini, and Danielle Rice, all of whom focused on the unequal status between curators and educators. Rice’s response is perhaps the most prescient and salient, noting that the inequality in the museum was due not to a higher qualification held by curators, but rather to structural issues in museums that effect what kind of knowledge we value. This line of thinking would continue to evolve, as constructivism took hold and is evidenced in several of the articles selected here, including Lisa Robert’s 1989 “Museums and Knowledge. The Responsibility of Open Minds” and Lisa Falk’s “‘Not about stuff, but about Somebody’ Michelle Spock on the Client-Centered Museum.”

As museums shifted in the late 1980s and 1990s from “being about something, to being for somebody,” to quote Stephen E. Weil, we witness a proliferation of articles dedicated to

² N. A. “A Spring Meeting: Eskimos, Exhibitions and Education,” *Journal of Museum Education*. Issues 1. 1973. N.P.

³ Jane Farmer, “The Second Decade,” *Journal of Museum Education*. Vol. 5, No. 4. 1980. p. 9.; Patterson B. William, “NewsfromEd.Com. Mostly Good News from San Francisco.” Vol. 12, No. 2, 1986. p. 20.

⁴ Leavitt, Thomas W, "IN MY OPINION: Can Research Find a Home in Museums?," *History News* 39, no. 9 (1984): 28-29.

⁵ American Alliance of Museums, *Museums for a New Century; A Report of the Commission on Museums for a New Century*. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1984; Elliot W. Eisner, *The Uncertain Profession: Observations on the State of Museum Education in Twenty American Art Museums*. Los Angeles, Getty Center for Education in the Arts. 1986.

exhibition-making focused on visitor needs. Jeanette M. Toohey and Inez S. Wolins's "Beyond the Turf Battles: Creating Effective Curator-Educator Partnerships" and Lisa Roberts' "Educators on Exhibit Teams: A New Role, A New Era," both reflect the central role of visitor.⁶ The authors argue for exhibition-making as an interdisciplinary process including educators and curators, inherently proposing that the visitor's needs are of equal value to the presentation of research by curators. It can also be no coincidence that, as visitors' needs became central, we witness the rise in evaluation studies, including three special thematic editions of the journal in 1987, 1996, and later in 2015.⁷ Only one visitor evaluation article is listed here ("Listening Outside and Within")—chosen for the connections it makes between evaluation and the museum's shifting focus in the 1990s—but the others are equally worth studying.

By the early- and mid-2010s, the importance of the visitor and the educator's role as advocate for the public seems less controversial, and the articles reflect this newfound certainty. Debates around which objects can and should be displayed also appear in the late 2010s, as educators moved even more clearly into a place where they could help shape and influence content, in contrast to an older model of transmitting information received from curators.⁸ Articles such as Elisabeth Summers' "Introduction: Protecting the Objects and Serving the Public, an Ongoing Dialogue," and Maxine Friedman's "Shall we go for a Ride?" reveal the shifting relationship between visitor needs and conservation and curatorial requirements. While Summers notes the still-present tensions among various interests in the museum, the dialogue among departments are no longer theoretical suggestions as they seem to have been in the 1970s; curators, educators, and conservators all discuss solutions as active partners. The educator's work has become central to the museum's operations, with articles such as Barbara Henry's "The Educator at the Crossroads of Institutional Change," evidencing the shift in power.

In many ways, the articles here are deeply prescient, not only responding to the major shifts in the museum world, but also forging new paths. Lisa Robert, for example, published several articles in JME in advance of her important book, *From Information to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum*. And if in the 1980s educators were still pondering whether PhD's in the field were necessary, today many educators hold advanced degrees in education as well

⁶ Stephen E. Weil, "From Being about Something to Being for Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum," *Daedalus*, Vol 128, No 3. Summer, 1999.

⁷ "Evaluation," 1987, Vol. 12, No 1 "Understanding the Visitor Experience: Theory and Practice Part 1 & 2," 1997, Vol. 22, No. 2/3; "Empowering Museum Educators to Evaluate," 2015, Vol. 40, No 1.

⁸ Of course education has always been central to museums, from their founding in Europe through the opening up of private, princely collections to the first American museums, which very early on had educational offerings. But, although the word "education" can be found consistently in the history of museums, its definition, goals, and methods have of course changed. The most recent turns in education are related in part to constructivism and the belief in the relative, produced nature of knowledge on the one hand, and on the other the "educational turn" in curating, where all curatorial work has been redefined as educational in nature. The history of these changes cannot be traced here, but on the latter see compellingly: Irit Rogoff, "Turning," *e-flux*. Journal # 00, November 2008 and Nora Sternfeld, "Im post-repräsentativen Museum." In *Ausstellen und Vermitteln im Museum der Gegenwart*. Ed. Carmen Mörsch, Angeli Saches, and Thomas Seiber. Beidefeld: Transcript, 2016. On the various ways in which education can critique institutional knowledge and create new knowledge, see the important essay: Carmen Mörsche, "Am Kreuzungspunkt von vier Diskursen: Die documenta 12 Vermittlung zwischen Affirmation, Reproduktion, Dekonstruktion und Transformation." In *documenta 12 education 2: Between Cultural Praxis and Public Service Results of a Research Project*. Ed. Carmen Mörsch and the research team of the documenta 12 education. Berlin: Diaphanes 2009.

as the humanities and sciences. Although I am loath to trace a straight trajectory through the articles selected here, they reveal a shift from a field on the sidelines of the museum to one integral to its goals. I hope that these articles will offer our readers inspiration for thinking about our history and how education can continue to define and articulate its role in the museum. This selection of articles is by its nature idiosyncratic and in some ways reflects my own interest. For example, in large part they focus on art and history museums. As my colleague on the board, Lynn Baum, pointed out to me, science museums and centers have a slightly different history; many of these institutions are not necessarily collection based and thus authority can rest more in the exhibit department rather than with curators. In addition, the evolution of the role of education happened earlier in science centers; they led the way on the visitor-centered approaches with interactive and hands-on practices. Undoubtedly other such questions and themes could be raised and reexamined, revealing alternative histories of the field.

I hope that this selection of essays and the stories it tells will inspire our readers to do just that.

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