

Productive Information: Contextual Knowledge in Art Museum Education

BY OLGA M. HUBARD

What is the place of contextual information in students' responses to artworks?

Does it limit the possibility for a perceptual, personal relationship with a work?

Or can it enrich the encounter?

Aiming for experiences that are both culturally responsible and personally meaningful, in this article I offer guidelines to help museum educators and art teachers negotiate contextual information within group investigations of works of art. To make my suggestions more tangible, I have illustrated many of them with instances from my teaching practice.

Contextual Information: Hindrance or Blessing?

Group dialogue holds a prominent place in today's art museum education. Through guided discussions, educators can engage students in meaningful investigations of artworks. Effective discussions have a back-and-forth character: Viewers pay close attention to the works in front of them, drawing from their lived experiences to make sense of what they see.

There is much that educators can do to encourage group inquiry. For example, they can pose thoughtful, open-ended questions that encourage people to look more closely at works of art. They can acknowledge all responses, and weave them together into a larger web of meanings. They can invite students to ground their comments in what they see, and ask them to probe deeper into their thoughts and feelings.¹

Museum educator Rika Burnham (1994) wrote that the purpose of group dialogue is not the "time-efficient transfer of information" (1994, p. 523) about an object. The aim, rather, is to empower audiences to collectively discover layers of meaning in works of art (Barrett, 2000; Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2005; Greene, 2001; Rice, 1995; Rice & Yenawine, 2002). Group discussions are, therefore, closely aligned with art criticism, as interpretation is the central activity (Barrett, 1994).²

What, then, becomes of all the information that traditional lectures used to deliver? Should educators attend to artists' biographies, art historical categories, and critics' interpretations? Or should they focus exclusively on the personal relationships that can be forged between a viewer and an object?

Burnham (1994) explained that programs based on the delivery of information can "severely limit the possibility for a perceptual and personal relationship with a work of art.... Students realize their participation is irrelevant, that other people have already defined what is important and significant, ... [and they] tune out" (p. 521).³ Likewise, philosopher John Armstrong (2000) said that a preoccupation with information "can be a way of avoiding a more personal relationship with the object. External considerations can be so absorbing that they draw our attention away from the very thing that they are supposed to serve: We end up **knowing about** [emphasis added] the picture ... but not **knowing it** [emphasis added]" (p. 14).

Nevertheless, Armstrong (2000) and Burnham and Kai-Kee (2005) explained that contextual knowledge does not necessarily lead to impoverished engagement. Information can foster more detailed perception and open up viewers' appreciation. It can change, guide, and develop the way people see, deepening and enriching their experience. In short, contextual knowledge is not in itself a hindrance or a blessing. It is what a spectator does with the information that matters. What art history student has not felt the satisfaction of walking around a museum, fitting objects into all the right categories? This one is Cubist, this one from Crete, that one by Carracci. "Getting it right" can bring about a feeling of satisfaction and even impress others. Yet, merely attaching to a painting the label "Cubist," keeps a viewer within the realm of impersonal generalizations. It is only when one explores with fresh eyes how Cubist precepts play out in a particular picture that information about Cubism helps deepen understanding.⁴

The Role of Teachers

How can teachers help students use information productively within dialogues about art? How can they ensure that facts will act as catalysts for significant meaning making?

These questions are frequent in the classes I teach to future art museum educators and school-based art teachers. I often cite Burnham (1994), and tell students that the viewers' experience comes first; that "information should be added only when it is not injurious to the free flow of ideas and when it can validate understanding" (p. 524); that facts should be offered "gently and sensitively and at the right moment" (p. 524).

But my students' relentless curiosity (when is the right moment? how do I know if I'm being sensitive?) has pushed me to look closer at my teaching practice. I've realized that I have collected a series of tips that guide my decisions regarding the delivery of information, and that sharing these guidelines with my students can be helpful. You will find them in the next section.

These tips are not to be regarded as set rules but as **fluid guidelines**. Depending on a particular situation: on the artwork, the audience, and the gist of the conversation, a given tip may be more or less applicable. In other words, this article is not intended as an authoritative manual. Rather, it is meant to inspire reflection about how teachers can allow information to illuminate art viewers about other ways of being, while also enabling them to gain insights into themselves.

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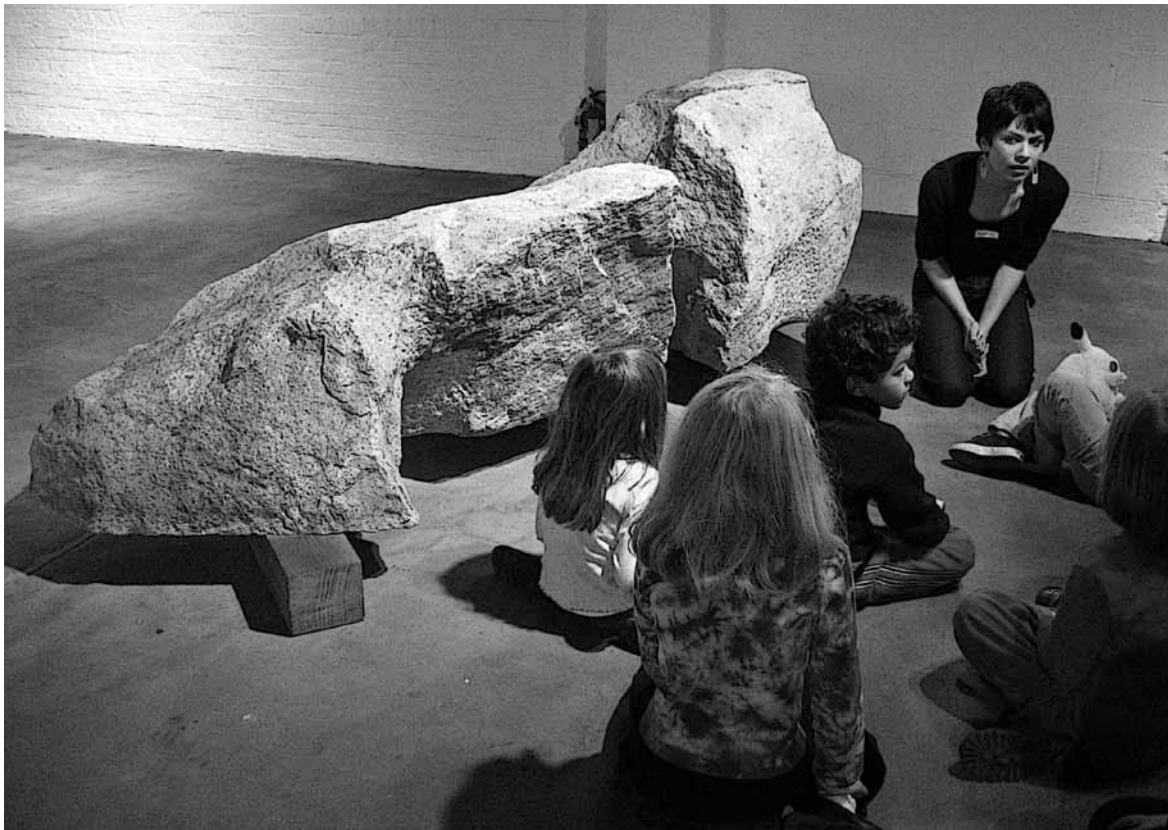
Tips for Productive Viewing

Before You Start. Become comfortable teaching by discussion, and be clear about why you want to use this approach. These guidelines will only work if you can help students look, respond, and share, and if you embrace a genuine spirit of investigation.

What to Say (or Not to Say). (1) Be as informed as you can about a work (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2005), and be prepared to call on whatever information you may need. Think of the information you hold as a well-stocked pantry. Though you may have innumerable ingredients, you use only those that make a specific dish tastier. (2) Consider how important a particular piece of knowledge is to the understanding of a work. For example, to understand Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937, Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid) it is more relevant to know that the town of Guernica was bombarded during the Spanish Civil War than to learn that Picasso had many wives.⁵ (3) If you are using a theme to thread together a series of works, identify information that is relevant to this theme. For instance, if your theme is "Identity," telling viewers that a painting by Rembrandt van Rijn is a self-portrait (*Self-Portrait*, 1660, Metropolitan Museum of Art) will be particularly helpful. (4) When sharing biographical information, be mindful of the impulse to psychoanalyze the artist. Psychoanalytic examination

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demands a rigorously trained interpreter and thorough research. Attempts to psychoanalyze within a museum education program often leads to limiting explications, such as "Jackson Pollock dripped paint because he was an enraged drunk." (5) Be mindful of "gossipy" information: Vincent Van Gogh cut his ear off; Artemisia Gentileschi was raped; Thomas Eakins slept with his students. Such information can easily take viewers away from the art. This said, some artworks deal specifically with content from the artists' life. For instance, Frida Kahlo's *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940, Museum of Modern Art) relates to her troubled relationship with her husband, artist Diego Rivera. If seemingly gossipy information is relevant to an artwork, integrate it responsibly. But remember: Artists' lives are one of several windows into their work. (6) Consider the relevance of the information to different audiences. What an adult finds helpful might not be so useful to an 8-year-old.⁶



If you share a preexisting interpretation of a work, explain that this is not its “ultimate meaning,” but someone’s vision. Ask the group to respond. Does the interpretation support or change their experience of the work? Does it limit their investigation or open new perspectives?

Looking for Information. (1) Many texts include descriptions of artworks. Rather than sharing descriptions, invite people to look: they will arrive at descriptions on their own. For example, viewers can easily notice that Piet Mondrian used only blue, red, yellow, black, white and straight lines in *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43, Museum of Modern Art). (2) Many art historical categories and interpretations originated through someone’s observation process (Armstrong, 2000). One example is the categories that Heinrich Wölfflin (1915/1998) developed to distinguish Classic and Baroque painting (linear/painterly, plan/recession, closed form/open form, multiplicity/unity, and absolute clarity/relative clarity). If you would like to share information of this sort, consider whether viewers might be able to arrive at it by looking. For instance, you might invite people to compare Raphael’s *Madonna di Foligno* (1512, Vatican Museum) to Peter Paul Rubens’ *Assumption of the Virgin* (mid 1620s, National Gallery of Art, Washington). Viewers are likely to notice that a clear edge defines the figures in the Raphael (linear), whereas the forms appear to merge with one another in the Rubens (painterly). By the same token, beware of making the identification of preexisting ideas a goal: Throughout their investigation, spectators might discover new and insightful categories that add to, challenge, or complicate existing ones. (3) Viewers’ questions can sometimes be answered, even if partially, through observation. For instance, close scrutiny of a carved, wooden sculpture might help answer the question, how was this artwork made? (If a question can’t be answered by looking, provide the answer. A feeling that the teacher is withholding information can take away from an invaluable climate of trust. If you do not know the answer to a question, be honest. If you have a good reason to hold the answer to a question for later in a conversation, say so.)

Using Knowledge: The Importance of Timing. (1) If you offer information too early, it can shut out viewers’ ideas. If you give it all at the end, it can have a “here’s the real story” tone, which either invalidates participants’ insights or lets them know they “got it right.” Either way, you (and the information you hold) become *the* authority, taking away from the spirit of collective meaning making. More important, if viewers receive all the information at the end, they will not use the new knowledge to deepen and enrich their investigation. Thus, weaving information at key

moments throughout the conversation is most productive (Schmidt, 2004). (2) If the dialogue comes close to a particular piece of information, you know your audience is getting ready for what you have to say. Share the information when that line of investigation cannot go further without the new knowledge. At that point, the information will support viewers’ responses without cutting important discoveries short. For example, a group looking at Mondrian’s *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43, Museum of Modern Art) might note that the painting is reminiscent of an aerial city view, and that the small, colorful squares look like moving cars. This would be a good moment to offer the work’s title, and to explain that Mondrian was inspired by the energy and music of 1940s Manhattan. After you introduce a piece of information, let the group use it to deepen their investigation (Armstrong, 2000; Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2005; Schmidt, 2004). Having shared the title of *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, discuss: How is the picture reminiscent of a busy city street? How is it different? (3) It is common for audiences to debate an ambiguous element in a work. For example, viewers looking at *Winter Play* (circa 1130s-60s) by So Han-chèn, discuss the gender of the two children portrayed. Some believe they are two boys; others argue that one is a boy and the other a girl. Through research, you know that one of the figures indeed represents a girl. Let the debate unfold before you share this information; important insights might surface along the way. After you share your knowledge, invite the group to continue the investigation, integrating the new learning.

Facts and Interpretations. (1) Distinguish factual information from interpretive information. Facts are what people know to be true: This sculpture is made out of marble; Frank Gehry designed this building. By contrast, interpretations express the meaning or relevance that individuals find in a work: This work embodies hope in the face of destruction; that one celebrates the everyday. Interpretations are born when people make connections between what they see and what they know about art and life. If you share a preexisting interpretation of a work, explain that this is not its “ultimate meaning,” but someone’s vision. Ask the group to respond. Does the interpretation support or change their experience of the work? Does it limit their investigation or open new perspectives? Bear in mind that multiple interpretations, even contradictory ones, work together to illuminate a work (Barrett, 2000;



Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2005; Eco, 1989; Gadamer, 2000; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994). This, however, is not the case with factual information. Whereas it is acceptable to say, "To some of us, this work embodies hope in the face of destruction; to others it celebrates the everyday," it would be ludicrous to say, "To some this sculpture is made out of marble; for others it is made out of wood." Celebrate multiple interpretations of an object, and communicate relevant facts as such, allowing them to become stepping-stones towards new interpretive possibilities. (2) Artists' commentaries about their work can be factual: "I painted this landscape when I was living in France." More often, however, they are interpretive: "My work is about gaps in communication."

In this respect, scholars have reminded us that the meaning of a work always goes beyond the intent of the artist (Eco, 1989; Gadamer, 2000). For example, in 1893 Edvard Munch made a painting of a woman embracing a man, which he titled *Love and Pain* (Metropolitan Museum of Art). In 1894, Polish poet Stanislaw Przybyzowski wrote a poem about this picture. To his eyes, the painting portrayed a female vampire biting a man's neck.⁷ Is the painting about love and pain, as Munch originally saw it? Or is it a vampire scene, as the poet later suggested? Could it be both? Might it be about yet something else? The point is that, although the artists' words inform people about the creator's process, they are not the "ultimate truth," a statement to

end the speculations of others. When you share the artists' intent, do not use it to close the discussion but to open new avenues of inquiry. (3) The title of a work of art can be factual (*Aztec Calendar*)⁸ or interpretive (*Love and Pain*). Treat titles according to their nature.

Cultural Meanings. (1) There are objects whose original cultural meaning can be lost to contemporary audiences. If a group's response to one such object is far from the work's cultural meaning, invite viewers to look closer: The features of many objects speak eloquently if we give them our time and attention (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994). This, however, isn't always true. For example, a group of Western students observe an Indian miniature painting, *The Death of the Demoness Putana* (circa 1610, Metropolitan Museum of Art). The picture shows Krishna, an important Hindu deity, as an infant killing a wicked demoness. In spite of close observation, the students refer to Krishna as "an evil little elf getting into trouble." Accepting this interpretation without sharing relevant contextual information would be equivalent to offering misinformation. Despite the importance of personal meaning, audiences deserve to participate in the larger tradition of human ideas. In addition, a neglect of Krishna's cultural and religious significance can be offensive to adherents of Hinduism. (2) When spectators' readings differ from traditional ones, this does not mean that the viewers are totally wrong, or that they have been insensitive in their investigation. Quite simply, their referents are different from those of people in other times and places. Students who see Krishna as "an evil little elf getting into trouble" recognize the supernatural character of the blue being, and discern that he appears to be in some kind of conflict. However, they are not familiar with Hindu mythology and are therefore one step short of identifying the deity. One way to address such conflicts is to highlight the overlap between the spectators' observations and the traditional view, hence validating the audience's insights. Additionally, you can share the missing referent and invite the group to integrate it into their meaning-making process. Moreover, you might invite students to reflect about the different readings and image can yield, and about what each reading reveals about the artwork and its audiences. (3) Despite the importance of the cultural significance of an object, be cautious of presenting cultural meanings as truth to the exclusion of personal responses. Viewers' fresh insights can inform existing, shared understanding. This was the case when a group of adults engaged with the *Seated Buddha* from the Tang dynasty (circa 650, Metropolitan Museum of Art). Except for one Taiwanese viewer, the spectators had little knowledge of Buddhism. Still, they made sense of what they saw based on their experiences. The Taiwanese viewer, whose understanding of

the religion was remarkable, listened attentively. After the discussion, she said that her peers' observations had helped her see the unexpected in a familiar object, and that their insights had caused her to think of her culture and religion in new and interesting ways.

What Viewers Bring. (1) Viewers bring abundant knowledge with them. The information they hold might be descriptive, factual, interpretive, or even gossipy. Draw helpful information from your audience, but embrace a spirit of collective meaning making, not one of testing and rewarding previous knowledge. Treat the information viewers contribute as you would information from any other source: Integrate what is helpful; manage what is not so helpful; and invite the group to question what can be challenged. (2) Some visitors assimilate relevant information from the museum itself. If they go to a museum of contemporary art, they assume the works on display will be relatively recent; if they walk into the Japanese galleries, they realize the objects around them come from Japan. This, however, is not true for every person. Ask questions that will help you assess what visitors have absorbed from the setting. If they haven't done so already, help them take advantage of the information that the environment provides. (3) Do not make assumptions about what people know. Present information in a clear, accessible manner. If you use terms spectators may not be familiar with, explain what they mean. (4) Be attuned to your audience, know your artworks and try out different approaches. Be flexible. Bend the guidelines when doing so will give way to a richer exploration.

Final Word

In people's encounters with art, dialogue exists on several levels. There is dialogue between a viewer and a work. There is dialogue between two or more spectators who share responses. This article deals with yet another form of dialogue: the back-and-forth that can exist between meanings that are individual, and meanings that are embedded in larger sociocultural traditions. By allowing these meanings to inform and enrich each other, teachers can help students build deeper and more significant relationships with art.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹For more on facilitating group discussions see Barrett, 2003, 1995; Brookfield & Preskill, 1999; Burbules, 1993; Burnham, 1994; Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2005; Dunne, 2004; Elder & Paul, 1998; Housen, 2000-2001; Housen & Yenawine, 2000; Huang, 2005; "Inquiry with art," n.d.; Rice & Yenawine, 2002.
- ²Conversations about artworks can occur during a museum visit or at school. They can focus on an original work or on digital or printed reproductions (for more on working with originals versus reproductions see Hubbard, 2007). When conducted at school, group dialogues can be connected with a given lesson or serve as preparation for a museum visit.
- ³See also Rice & Yenawine, 2002.
- ⁴For more on superficial recognition versus deep perception, see Dewey, 1934/1980.
- ⁵For more on relevant information, see Armstrong, 2000.
- ⁶See Grinder & McCoy, 1985 for descriptions of different age groups.
- ⁷Munch made several paintings of the same motif. The one at the Metropolitan Museum bears the title of the Przybyzowski poem, *Vampire*, and is dated 1934. In smaller print, the painting's label includes the poem, and mentions Munch's original title, *Love and Pain*.
- ⁸The *Aztec Calendar* or *Sun Stone* was created in 1479. It is housed in the National Museum of Anthropology and History, Mexico City.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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