Interview with a Curator

Rebecca D. Meyers is the curator for the Signature Works: 25th Anniversary Gifts to the Permanent Collection exhibit. A curator is the person responsible for choosing the objects in an exhibition. Here she answers a few questions about what she does and how this affects what you see in the exhibition.

- **What does a curator do at a museum?** Put very simply, there are three main responsibilities that a curator has: to take care of the objects in the Permanent Collection, to expand the Permanent Collection, almost exclusively by donations to the museum, and to research and share information about the Permanent Collection through exhibitions, both here as well as through loans to other museums, with researchers, through printed publications and electronic media.

- **How did you select the artwork in the Signature Works: 25th Anniversary Gifts to the Permanent Collection exhibition?**
  
  The exhibition features 71 works of art created by 63 named artists, which is less than one-fifth of the total amount of powerfully aesthetic donations received in celebration of the museum's 25th anniversary. Despite the wide range of technique, age, experience and geographic location of the artists represented here, some general themes emerged in the chosen artwork: portraiture and the human figure; pre-Cuauhtémoc subjects; landscape; border issues and labor; politics and war; and works with a conceptual or feminist perspective.

- **How did you become a curator?**
  
  I have been attracted to art, either making it or experiencing it since childhood. While in undergraduate studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, I majored in Fine Art (Painting and Sculpture). After college, I worked behind-the-scenes at the Art Institute of Chicago where I installed artwork during the day, and learned a lot about how to display and take care of an art collection. While traveling on a weeklong trip, I fell in love with the art, culture and people of Mexico and was determined to study art history, at night, at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, choosing any classes that focused on Mexico. There were very few. My graduate degree is in Art History.

- **What is your favorite part of being a curator?**
  
  To be surrounded by thoughtful, creative people and great art is a privilege in a work environment. It is an honor to preserve items created by people of Mexico, and of Mexican descent. which is such a vital, relevant and integral culture in the US.

  Without doubt, uncrating a work of art that is joining the Permanent Collection is my favorite part. Acquiring an artwork can be a lengthy process and to finally have the piece delivered, in good condition, to the Museum is not only a relief, but an absolute joy! One has to relish working with art collectors and artists as well. My training as an artist nourishes a deep respect for another artist's intentions in their work.

- **How does this affect what you see in the exhibition?**

  Think about the following: Do you have a collection at home? What do you collect? Why do you collect these items? Do you like to share your collection with others?

  Discuss: Why do museums create collections of objects? Why is it important for them to share their collections with the public?

During your Visit

Bring or request some notecards and a pencil (Remember: no pens in the gallery!) at the front desk. Write down some notes or sketch 1-2 details about any work of art that stands out for you.

- **Look at the work of art again, is there anything new that you’ve noticed?**

  Discuss the following questions about the artwork.

  - Why were you attracted to this work of art? What did you like about it?

  - What story does the work of art tell?

  - If you were the curator and included this work of art in your exhibition, what other works of art might you include? How would you title your exhibition?

  - Look at the work of art again, is there anything new that you’ve noticed?

Activity: Exhibition Remix

Materials: Digital camera (phone camera is fine), computer, printer, tape

1. During your visit: Take pictures of your favorite works of art from the exhibition using a digital camera. Try to at least gather 8-10 images.

(Remember: no flash in the galleries! Artwork is sensitive to bright light.)

2. At home or school: Upload your photographs to a computer. Print them.

3. Pretend you are the curator and these images are the works of art that you will feature in an exhibition. Arrange the photographs on a wall.

4. Think of a title for your exhibition and add it to your display.

5. Invite someone to visit your exhibition and look at the works of art in your "collection."

6. Be prepared to answer the following questions about your exhibition.
   a. Why did you choose these works of art?
   b. What do these works of art have in common with each other?
   c. Do these works of art have any special meaning for you?
   d. What do you want people to learn about this collection?

Activity: Your Turn to be Curator (After your Visit)

1. Find 10 objects that will form a collection. Items can already be a part of a collection you own. The items should have something in common with each other or should have some kind of relationship to each other. Example: objects from a specific place such as a garden, different examples of one kind of an object such as spoons, toys, earrings, objects from the past, etc. There are many ways to create a collection. Can you think of other ways to group objects?

2. Find a place at home or in your classroom to display your collection. The place should highlight your items. Make sure it is free of any objects that might distract viewers from looking at your collection. Make sure your collection is well lit.

3. Think about how you’d want to display your chosen objects. Do they need to sit or stand on something to hold them up? Rearrange and move your objects around until they look good to you.

4. Invite others to come look at your collection. Think about organizing an “opening” for your guests, a small party celebrating the start of your exhibition.

5. Be prepared to answer the following questions about your collection.
   a. Why did you choose these objects?
   b. What do these objects have in common with each other?
   c. Do these objects have any special meaning to you?
   d. What do you want people to learn about this collection?
   e. What is the title of your collection?
   f. What story does your collection tell?

6. Write down your response/s to some of the previous questions. This can be the text for an introduction or visitor’s guide about your exhibition.

Look at all these masks. How would you organize them to be part of an art exhibit?

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