

Dude, Where's My Museum? Inviting Teens to Transform Museums

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Museums are dull. They are stodgy. They are elitist places. They are for the old, not the young. Too many lectures, academic answers, and canned responses.

Is this what teenagers really think of museums? Or are these just assumptions that adults make about what teenagers think? Twenty years ago, the teen audience was perceived by most museum programmers to be difficult and unruly, treated suspiciously by museum security staff,¹ and in the main, written off by museum educators.

But the past decade has seen a surge in museum programming for the teen audience. Have museums become increasingly concerned about their aging audiences? Or perhaps after years of engagement with younger children we have reached an obvious progression in our work: to continue to work with these children as they grow into the later phases of their pre-adult lives.

Teens, if we allow them, have the potential to provide our museums with the fresh perspective and energy required by each new generation as it reinvents and finds the significance of its own cultural patrimony. Museum directors, educators, and marketing experts now recognize increasingly that this audience represents the pulse of contemporary culture. Their thinking will be at the forefront of society within the decade. Teens represent the next generation of political leaders, artists, workers, and inventors. Why not engage them now, learn from them, and as some of our colleagues have boldly demonstrated, invite these youthful audiences to actively participate in the transformation of our institutions?

On the first day of the High School Museum Studies program at the Museum of Modern Art, 16 high school students spent two hours in the galleries looking at art and discussing what they saw. Afterwards they were asked to write down any questions they might have about modern art, artists, and the museum in general. Their questions were astonishing: Why do artists get to bend the rules? Why do people collect art? How does art spread new ideas? What makes art "museum quality?" What is the definition of modern art? Why is some art worth millions while other art is not?

What an extraordinary set of difficult questions loaded with ambiguity and nuance, not easily answered, and heavily debated by the most sophisticated adults. These are not the questions of diffident or indifferent adolescents. These are the questions of 14- to 18-year olds from public high schools across New York City, from varied walks of life. What they have in common is the motivation to get involved with the museum. Perhaps they heard about the High School Museum Studies program by word of mouth, from previous participants or teachers. Some are drawn to the idea of earning a bit of money, meeting new friends, and helping the museum with a project like creating a website. They bring with them a highly developed curiosity and a willingness to experience new ideas in an environment quite distinct from home or school.

The Museum Studies Program is one of many after-school options the museum offers teens. It is a semester-long program in which high school students are paid a stipend to curate an exhibition of artwork made by their peers across the city. In taking on the task, they meet with curators, exhibition designers, editors, educators, and art handlers who provide insight and guidance as the students begin to understand the multiplicity of skills required to bring a museum exhibition to fruition.

MoMA's commitment to programming for high school students has grown over the past four years and, as head of the education department, I have dedicated a portion of my intellectual energy to learning about the work of colleagues across the country, many of whom have also developed innovative programs for adolescents. This article surveys but a small portion of this impressive programming and reflects briefly on the characteristics that attract adolescents to museums.

According to recent demographic research, the current teen population in the United States is 32 million, the largest and most diverse generation in our history. By 2006, it is estimated that there will be 34 million people between the ages of 12 and 19 in the country.

In her excellent article in the fall 2000 *Journal of Museum Education*, Deanna Banks Beane captures some of the essential characteristics of teens: "In cognitive terms, during adolescence the ability to engage in abstract thought and moral reasoning is developed. As adolescents mature intellectually, their repertory of problem-solving skills becomes more sophisticated. They can examine situations, develop hypotheses, and mentally manipulate possible solutions. . . ."

Beane also notes that on a social level, teens operate in a distinctive mode: "Friends and peers serve not only as a support system, but also as partners in teaching and learning about the good and bad of life, for they too, are on their own search for personal identity. As a group they set norms and develop rituals. Teenagers' desire for independence and their efforts to emulate adult behavior belie the fact that they also seek out relationships with caring adults."²

Traditional museum education programming has reached children primarily through the schools. But for most museums, high schools remain the singularly most challenging aspect of school programs for a myriad of practical reasons. High school students and their teachers are under enormous pressure to follow a pre-set curriculum, prepare for the taking of standardized tests, and get accepted into college, thus they rarely leave their school buildings. There are, of course, shining examples of high schools that are the exception to this rule.³ These schools deserve careful examination and have much to teach us about the potential of museum-school partnerships for high school students. Indeed, the methodologies for teaching and learning in the new generation of small schools have become model sites for museums, allowing us to realize our full potential in the larger community of teaching and learning institutions. In this article, however, we will look primarily at the programs that have remained outside the formal school setting, that is after-school programs, summer programs, apprenticeships and job opportunities.

Several museums have become something of a laboratory for teens. The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, have created some of the most innovative and immersive relationships with their teen audiences. The Warhol's programs focus on fostering "leadership and creative skills" in small groups of young people. Warhol's work actually provides the basis and inspiration for the museum's Youth Invasion programs, which include several components: teens curate exhibits, throw parties, create fashion shows, and publish a magazine. Jessica Gogan, assistant director for education and interpretation at the Warhol, underscores that teens are a catalyst for change at the museum. Significantly, staff and youth participants hold themselves to a high set of expectations about the quality of everything they create as part of the program.

For more than 10 years the Walker Art Center has nurtured programs that have taken its teen audience from almost non-existent to 11 percent of its total audience (approximately 70,000 annually). The signature component of the Walker's various programs for teens is called WACTAC (Walker Art Center Teen Arts Council), "a diverse group of 12 young artists and art enthusiasts that makes sure programs for teens are part of everything the Walker does." WACTAC is at the hub of a wide set of offerings for teens, including teen-curated exhibitions, artist talks, performances, and art workshops. According to Christi Atkinson, the museum's associate director of education, 90 percent of the interest in her programs spreads by word-of-mouth, with another 10 percent spreading by e-mail (a technological version of word-of-mouth). Some of the most important lessons that Atkinson and the Walker staff have learned in the past 15 years — to listen carefully, share authority, understand that teens have expertise, and accept the fact that their social behavior is quite distinct from adults. All agree that the support of Walker Director Kathy Halbreich has been an essential ingredient in building and sustaining these programs. Her conviction about the power of the museum as well as the engagement with artists was essential to her own development as an adolescent, an opportunity that she believes should be made available to others.

The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, maintains a series known as Youth Insights, a host of programs that ranges from conversations with artists to teen-run dance parties in the museum. All of these are created by and for teens. "We've made a real commitment to mentoring young people and giving them skills to be successful communicators, critical thinkers, team players, and interpreters of American art and culture," notes Raina Lampkins-Fielder, associate director for education. "These extraordinary young people work hard and learn a great deal, but their real contribution is to remind us that multiple perspectives especially from different generations enrich the experience with art."⁴

Richard Evans, principal researcher at Emc.Arts, and project director for the Surdna Foundation's excellent study, *Powerful Voices, Developing High-Impact Arts Programs for Teens*, notes that it is the "responsibility of our leading cultural institutions to play a front-line role in the development of a culturally literate citizenry, for whom art is a core dimension of their life-long learning." Evans is quick to point out that museums "have some self-interest in this process." At the same time, the research done by Evans, as well as by numerous social scientists, reveals that these programs have a powerful personal impact on the students who participate. The profundity of these programs seems so significant that some students indicate that the opportunities afforded by their museum

experiences are sometimes a turning point in their lives, and others say they found confidence or passion, skills and mentors, friends and perhaps future colleagues.

Though my own investigation has focused largely on programming in art museums, much is to be learned from the work in history, science, and children's museums, where colleagues have been equally engaged in important initiatives for teens. For 18 years the Brooklyn Children's Museum has been refining its highly successful community-based Museum Team after-school program. In this highly successful program, 9th and 10th graders engage in various volunteer positions in the museum, and at the 11th- and 12th-grade level, the students are eligible to apply for paid work opportunities. According to Niobe Ngoze, director of education at the BCM, the program's most important goal is to provide adolescents with support in making the transition to higher education and the work force. Interestingly, it is the 9th graders who have proven to be the most challenging. These youth "are at the age of greatest uncertainty," Ngoze explains. "They are asking the questions: Who am I? Am I invisible? Who sees me? Am I worthy? Where do I fit in?" Over time the museum staff has learned that these 13- and 14-year-olds are most successful when they are asked to mentor younger visitors.

For science museums, too, training teens to be mentors, guides, and explainers has consistently proven successful. Programs at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum and the Shedd Aquarium, both in Chicago, provide excellent models. The New York Hall of Science has taken the concept of teaching teens to teach and created its highly successful "Science Career Ladder" program. Young people develop their skills and engagement with the museum, beginning as volunteers, continuing on in high school internships, and into college apprenticeships, and ultimately gain access to jobs as science teachers in the public schools. This capacity for museums to partner with other organizations (in this case, the City University of New York and the New York City Department of Education) actually has a practical and life-transforming impact on its young participants.

As is so often the case, the stories of the students themselves best demonstrate the larger lessons of our work. For some teens, getting involved with the museum speaks to their personal and intellectual aspirations. Take Jonathan, who speaks frankly about his experience at MoMA:

Having equal interest in Renaissance art and early 20th century art history, Jonathan is off this fall to Grinnell College where he may study art history. Jonathan's friends have internships at the Whitney Museum and the Brooklyn Museum, and they all agree that they have had opportunities to learn things that they could not replicate in any other setting. For some teens, the museum is a place to hone skills and gain practical job experience. Maqsood knew he wanted to study business and he sought a unique experience to take with him to college.

When Maqsood takes breaks from his work in MoMA's accounting office, he is known to frequent the contemporary art galleries. He has been particularly taken by Josiah McElheny's assemblage of mirrors, glass, and aluminum titled *Modernity, Mirrored and Reflected Infinitely*. Maqsood will enter Baruch College as a business major this fall.

And for others, museum programs are the source of social opportunities and new friends. Julisa, age 16, a social science major who will be a senior at Brooklyn Technological High School, says that when she went to museums in elementary and middle school, she found the trips boring, that she was frustrated, and wanted to get behind the scenes. Julisa always thought she wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer, but after taking part in MoMA's Museum Studies program she is considering becoming a conservator.

What role will technology play in drawing teens to museums? Despite the fact that 73 percent of American youth ages 12 to 17 reportedly use the Internet,⁵ museums conduct surprisingly few media-based programs for youth. There are a few exceptions: the Bronx Museum's Media Lab, and MoMA's Red Studio, both focus on adolescents' relationship to technology. The Media Lab emphasizes media production, and enables students to develop the skills to create their own CDs, videos, and websites. Red Studio invites students to engage with artists through youth conducted interviews, polls, and interactive design competitions. More characteristically, museum programs for youth continue to take advantage of the opportunities for real-time-and-place dialogue as well as live interactions with experts, and artifacts. To some extent, the perceived value of these programs is the intensely social component, which may actually have a stronger draw than the complex social communication that takes place in our newly developed ether-world. Still, it should be anticipated that youth programs that exploit new technologies will hold an increasingly important position in our museums. Given the overwhelming use of the Internet by young people, that Instant Messaging is overwhelmingly the communication tool of choice, and that young people are both consumers and producers of new media, it will be important to watch the evolution of programs for youth. With the input of this media-saturated generation, we soon will see how much of their museum experience will be shaped by the Internet and the new frontier of podcasting (see "The Pods Have Landed," page 15).

Happily, the list of inventive, well-designed and successful programming continues to expand. Taking a brief step back from the specifics, let us consider a set of developing guidelines that inform the museum community as it works to best serve its youth audience:

- Museums hold the promise of learning, but in an informal and flexible way, that is less reminiscent of school and more connected to real life. This flexibility is enormously powerful to adolescents who want answers to their own questions (not the questions as formulated by others).

- Museum staff who participate in programs must convey an authentic interest in teens. Development of these programs will succeed only if the adult participants are willing to listen carefully and treat their adolescent audience with appreciation and respect.
- The artifacts in our collections are a prime catalyst for adolescent curiosity and learning. In addition, our buildings, designed environments, administrative infrastructures, and connections to artists, scientists, and historians are equally exciting to young adults.
- Teens like to be with their peers, and they are often more open to experiences that are based upon their own ideas.
- Museums have long been recognized as places where people can enjoy informal social experiences, and teens like to be in highly social situations.
- No well-designed museum program can take place without structure and standards. While teens like some authority over what happens to them, they also respond to structured programming in which expectations and standards are high and well defined.
- Museum programs for teens often are built on a "behind-the-scenes" approach: how do museums actually make an exhibit happen or, alternatively, how does an artist make a work of art? These seem to be meaningful to teens who are interested, in every aspect of their lives, in the process of creation, and not just the end product.

Teens need to be able to follow their interest in museums over an extended period of time, to have someplace to go next, and to pursue their newly found interests or passions. For every program offered, museum staff must begin to think about the next step or level of engagement that will sustain their youthful audiences as they journey through their teen years.⁶

As our museums open up to teenagers, all over the country we see instances of a truly engaged constituency, which in turn has an impact on the ways in which we conduct business and make choices about the museum's value and purpose in serving the generations to come.

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Footnotes

1. In a focus group conducted at the Brooklyn Museum in 1993 in preparation for the soon-to-open New York City Museum School, high school students commented about how difficult it was to be in a museum because "the guards were always following you around, as if you were a criminal." Later the staff realized that this phenomenon might have also been the lack of understanding on the part of the teens, and that, in fact, all visitors are followed around in museums. Ultimately two attitudinal shifts had to occur: Security staff had to be sensitized to the impact that they were having on teens. At the same time, educating teen visitors about the basic structure of a museum helped dispel their brooding sense that they were not trusted.

2. "Museums and Healthy Adolescent Development: What We Are Learning from Research and Practice," Deanna Banks Beane, in *Adolescence: Growing Up in Museums*. *Journal of Museum Education* 25, no. 3, fall 2000, Museum Education Roundtable, Washington D.C. p. 4.

3. The New York City Museum School and the Henry Ford Academy in Detroit, to name two. The success of these schools affirms that a viable relationship can be forged and nurtured between youth and their local museums and, further, that there are methods of teaching and learning that may be unique to museum-based curricula.

4. Bonnie Pitman and Ellen Hirzy, *New Forums: Art Museums & Communities*, AAM, Washington, D.C., 2004, p. 132.

5. Amanda Lenhardt, "Teenage Life Online: The Rise of the instant-message generation and the Internet's impact on friendships and family relationships," 2001. www.pewinternet.org.

6. Many thanks to numerous colleagues for their insights in informal conversations, as well as to those who contributed to this year's AAM annual meeting panels, "Adolescent Identity and Museums." Particular thanks to Richard Evans, for his thoughtful recommendations to the field, as outlined in *Powerful Voices* (see bibliography.)

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