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Museum Memories

Rose Reissman

Note to teachers:

In order to align the museum within the school project to the teaching of memoirs and the writing of personal narrative accounts, it is suggested that the teacher begin the project by sharing a memory story of a single visit or visits to a museum during his or her childhood. In the case of the developer of this project, these visits were the personal catalyst for integrating the museum within the school concept into the literacy classroom. Attached is the project developers own memory story which can be used as an introduction or the teacher might simply encourage the students to share and respond to one another's recollections of visits to favorite museums.

Memories of a Former PS 139 Community School District 22 Student and her Mother, a Community School District 22 Elementary School Teacher.

As a little girl Sundays were a special day in my week's calendar. On this day of the week, assuming I had finished my homework and projects, mother and I would get on the subway train to journey to the 86th and Lexington stop. This stop held magic for me. It was the literal staircase to the museums...The Metropolitan Museum Of Art, The Jewish Museum, The Cooper-Hewitt Museum Of Art And Design, The Guggenheim and The International Center For Photography.

To an eight year old these venerable, imposing mansions were fairy tale palaces of art and

knowledge that my mother and I could visit for a few precious hours.

My mother's personal library was filled with profusely illustrated art books. These art books were not only on the shelves for ceremonial display, they were literally perused over by mother and me. We would talk about the artists' lives and how they were reflected in the artists' work. We often would just focus on a particular artist's masterworks and share stories we'd create to go with it.

One of our art books was the critical view of Chagall's work. Mother had picked it up from a discount table without noting that she had mistakenly taken the French translation of this Chagall tome, not the English one. By the time we discovered the error at home, mother pulled out her French-English dictionary and we slowly perused the book on a two to three page basis each evening!! (Mother had only a rudimentary grasp of French and I was only eight).

While the French language Chagall book proved a formidable challenge to my mother's and mine English language compressive capacities, this art book and mother's ever expanding art library collection were primers for museum going.

I remember distinctly how excited I was as an eight year to "really see" Van Gogh's Sunflowers at the Museum of Modern Art. They meant so much to me since I had previously read about it in mother's art books. I felt immeasurable pride and privilege to be in a gallery within feet of the actual painting I had read about in print. My mother's art

books had prepped and primed me to savor the precious experience of actually viewing the art itself. My sense of arts power was richer for my in print preview.

Furthermore, the museum's old world settings with their high ceilings, imposing staircases, embellished arches, gardens, reflective alcoves, and intricately arranged galleries transported us from our day to day Brooklyn apartment existence to a Renaissance rich, remote, painting filled, statuary embellished paradise.

One of our most memorable museum world odysseys involved the very artist mother had mistakenly acquired in French—Marc Chagall. Mother told me that Chagall had created special windows, which we could see at the Jewish Museum before they could be shipped to Israel. It was so exciting to think that a subway ride would take us to a place where we could view Chagall's work. As we rode the subway train to the museum mother and I read and reread our French Marc Chagall book (or rather we at least glanced at the print reproductions). We got off the train at 96th street and I literally raced ahead of mother to get to the Jewish Museum, but I stopped short as we approached the building, there was a line extending from the museum entrance around the block.

"Mommy what is this" I asked. My mother's answer was " We are not only the Chagall fans in the world, he's a great artist, we will have to stand on line patiently and wait our turn to get into the museum to see the exhibit." So we waited two hours to see the windows. I remember a feeling of sheer reverence and bliss by the time we approached the stained glass windows.

Mother and I stood in close proximity, connected to Marc Chagall, whose work we had only glimpsed at in book print, but here we could almost touch his own depictions of the Twelve Tribes.

The staircases of the Jewish Museum, an old mansion donated by a wealthy family, always prompted me to fantasize about the family who lived in the museum building before its transformation. Other impressive mansion museums inspired the fictional author in me; they included: the Museum

of the City of New York, whose toy gallery I mistakenly believed had previously been that of the museum owner's children and the Cooper-Hewitt Museum of Art and Design, which I had naively imagined contained all the decorative objects that its owners had collected. Of all the stately museums that dotted what was to later be called the Museum Mile, the most magnificent was the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Just ascending the steps to this Parthenon of art treasures was an experience in of itself. In fact one afternoon mother and I had a great time interviewing international visitors outside the museum and feeding pigeons as we waited for my Aunt Sophie, our frequent museum companion, to join us!

Indeed, I always gravitated to the flowers and then set out with mother to catch a current exhibit or visit one of my favorite paintings. When I grew older a sign of my increasing maturity was my mother's permission to visit the galleries on my own. She would tell me where we would meet and set off alone to visit her own galleries. I remember how proud I felt about being allowed to roam the Met on my own. I was never late for my appointed reconnaissance with mother. Indeed I always arrived with lots of eavesdrop gossip, notes, stories and recommendations for her. She usually had her own ideas to share with me. As we debriefed our museum viewing together over a lunch in the Metropolitan Museum Garden Restaurant, our shared art experience was the sweetest and most substantial item on the menu. To this day, years later we still relish going to the Met together.

One year I became intensely involved with a PS 139K school contest focused on the Metropolitan Museum. The winners were to go on a special trip with the tour to be given by the head of the education department an exhibit of the prizewinner's scrapbook in the museum school gallery, and an award luncheon with the curatorial staff. I wanted desperately to win. My mother kept on saying: " But we go regularly to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This prize is something you do on your own anyway." I explained to her

how doing this project would celebrate my love of the Met. It would be wonderful appreciation of all the art richness and joy I had absorbed through our visits each week. In the few weeks prior to the contest deadline I worked feverishly to research my favorite artist's lives—Rembrandt, Degas, Sargent, Velasquez and Renoir. I used my own post-cards and reproductions to illustrate my research. I wrote poems and interior monologues inspired by the art. Finally, mother helped me create a gold tinned foil framed background for each page. On the deadline I turned in my entry.

The winners were announced at the close of an awards ceremony at the school auditorium. My heart beat wildly to the announcements. The announcements were in alphabetical order; this gave me (with an "R") plenty of time to worry about whether my entry had won. But sure enough, my name was finally announced. I had won the right to be an honored visitor at the Met as a result of my tribute project. My scrapbook was exhibited in the education showcase.

The memory of the joyous day at the Museum, in the company of its curatorial staff and my peer classmate winners who also loved art, has never left me. It is with me as I enter a museum alone, with a friend, with a family member or with a class of students.

This year I have decided to attempt to "gift" large numbers of school children in various schools across the city and in model cities and in model school districts nationally with an ongoing spiritually invigorating and literacy nurturing gift of art appreciation. I seek to do it through developing "Museum within Schools" as inspired by Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence theory.

Beyond implementing and infusing Gardner's research on learning into schools' ongoing quest for high standards, multiple literacy achievement, I want to help each student involved in the project acquire cultural art backgrounds, visual arts appreciation experiences, familiarity with a network of local cultural institutions and museum insider status. Once students are literally given "entry" to the transformative magic of

museums, they will possess the power of unlocking the door to their private world of endless art, activated learning, empowerment, and enchantment!!! Then they too will accumulate burgeoning museum memories that they can share with their children.

About the author

Dr. Rose Reissman is presently President of the New York City Association of teachers of English, consultant to the New York City Board of Education-Office of Technology, teacher-trainer at community school district 10 and 20, and educational consultant to the Museum of the city of New York.