
Teaching in the Art Museum meticulously explores art museum education from the perspectives of two of the foremost names in the field, Rika Burnham of the Frick Collection and Elliott Kai-Kee of the J. Paul Getty Museum. Seeking to articulate the educator’s central role in the twenty-first century art museum, the authors combine scholarly analyses and professional anecdotes to form their investigation.

Read as a continuous narrative, the eleven brief essays that comprise this volume offer a broad discussion of the field of art museum education. Beginning with an exploration of the history of teaching in the art museum, Burnham and Kai-Kee go on to analyze the place and validity of various questions and communication styles in the gallery setting. Drawing heavily on the experiential theory of John Dewey, the authors advocate a teaching method that facilitates transcendental understandings of works of art reached through an open group dialogue guided by the teacher’s expertise. To illustrate their proposed method, the authors rely extensively on the use of quotations and paraphrased dialog from their own teaching sessions.

Other essays in this book offer case studies, including an examination of the unique teaching system of the Barnes Foundation and a personal account of Blackburn’s transformative interpretive experience with Giovanni Bellini’s San Giobbe Altarpiece. Both essay types coalesce effectively to advocate a teaching method centered on careful reflection and open dialogue. Each chapter was also consciously written to stand as an individual work of scholarship; therefore each essay begins with a concise yet beneficial summary of the previous chapters’ hypotheses.

Together, Burnham and Kai-Kee have produced a thought-provoking and academically sound explication of the critical issues facing today’s art museum educators. Although the essays speak primarily to museum educators, the tone is quite academic and has considerable research value. Throughout each essay, the authors summarize the hermeneutic or experiential theories from which they draw their educational method. The academic fortitude of their arguments is evidenced through each essay’s dense endnotes of theoretical insights and research.

While different versions of four of this book’s essays have been published elsewhere, Teaching in the Art Museum combines theory and utility to create a foundational model for gallery teaching and opens a dialogue for future innovation. This volume is a novel contribution to the field of art museum education and is recommended as an addition to both museum and academic libraries that support programs in art education, museum studies, or art history. This adhesive bound, softcover book contains nine high-quality illustrations and a detailed index of its contents.

Alison Verplaetse, MLS, MA, verplaetsea@gmail.com