

The Art of Interfaith Tours
A Community, Museum and Docent Collaboration
The Saint Louis Art Museum:
Bill Sitzer and Ann Burroughs, Presenters
National Docent Symposium, Washington, DC
October 26, 2019

Introduction by NDS Representative: Bill Sitzer is an active docent and the immediate past chair of the docent board of the Saint Louis Art Museum. From its inception, and in collaboration with the Museum's learning and engagement staff and community partners, he has been involved in the development and realization of the Museum's interfaith pilot initiative and tour program, using the language and symbols of art to explore universal ideas of faith and religion across cultures and history. He has given numerous interfaith tours to groups from many diverse faith-based communities as well as to the general public.

Ann Burroughs is a member of the learning and engagement staff of the Saint Louis Art Museum and is the head of the Museum's department of engagement and interpretation. She oversees the docent program, which consists of more than one hundred volunteers and numerous support staff. She provides initial and ongoing docent training, and she supervises the organization of all docent-led Museum tours, programs and gallery experiences. From its earliest discussions, she has been deeply involved in the development of the Museum's interfaith docent tour initiative.

Section I. BILL:

[Ann and Bill images] Good morning, everyone, and thank you for that nice introduction. Ann and I are both honoured to be invited to present this workshop and excited for this opportunity to share with you the development of our new new interfaith tour initiative and program at the Saint Louis Art Museum. While the Museum has provided interfaith tours in the past, this initiative has uniquely drawn upon the resources of Museum staff and outside community partners, as well as a diverse group of docents, in a way that has created something very special, and resulting in the Museum being able to provide opportunities to present expanded and meaningful interfaith tours to groups from many diverse faith-based communities as well as to the general public. This workshop will explore the collaborative efforts that were involved in the development and realization of that initiative and program.

Recognizing the power of art to bring together diverse audiences, we departed from the traditional model of touring with a single docent, and instead brought docents from different faith traditions together, working in pairs and modelling respectful dialogue, while exploring common religious themes across time and cultures and utilizing the

language and symbols of art in a safe museum setting. This workshop explores how we went about creating this program initiative and explores how staff and docents collaborated with community partners, including academics, faith communities and interfaith groups, who each brought their own experiences, resources and perspectives to such tours, resulting in a true community, museum and docent collaboration

We understand that you who are here with us today come from a variety of museums and other institutions, and therefore applying these principles to what you might do in creating a similar program will vary depending on your own institutional and community resources.

ANN: If you will, please, some of you, give us an idea of what institutions you represent and what drew you to register for this particular workshop.

BILL: I think you will find that by utilizing the strengths of your own institutions and by working with willing and capable partners in your own communities you will find opportunities to create programs celebrating diversity, interfaith dialogue and understanding.

In addition to learning from our own curators, staff and outside experts, one of the keys to our initiative involved recognizing and utilizing the diversity of our own docent community. As a docent with a background from a particular faith tradition, I was able to team up with and learn from another docent from a different faith tradition, and together we explored yet other faith traditions, utilizing what we discovered to bring people together and to nurture notions of understanding, empathy and dialogue.

[Toni Morrison image and quote] The importance of celebrating our differences by identifying what different faith traditions have in common cannot be understated in today's world, and the arts provide fertile grounds for such exploration. As the late Toni Morrison, recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, has stated:

"I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore its pain, it is also critical to refuse to succumb to its malevolence. Like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge – even wisdom. Like art."

Section II. ANN:

[Conversations between staff and outside collaborators, development of initial teens pilot tour]

Section III. BILL: Themes, stories and art selection, development of tours

[Image of Shawnessey and Bill] Early in 2017, another of our Museum's docents, Shawnessey C, pictured here, and I, with religious backgrounds quite different from each other, began to share ideas and learn from one another in our galleries. I had sought her out as a person with training in Christian theology to help me compensate for gaps in my own background and understanding of the Christian faith and the art in our collection portraying the stories and principles of Christianity. She was willing and open to sharing her knowledge with me, and in turn asked me to share my ideas from my lifetime of study of the Jewish faith. We shared and provided each other with reference materials. Our work together led to a deeper understanding on both of our parts of the connectedness of belief systems and the confluence of art and religions. Our process helped us to deepen our understanding of the overlap, the shared values, the common yearnings of all peoples that were apparent regardless of the belief system involved and the works of art we were viewing in the galleries.

We began the development of our tour with identifying a theme, and, because we were comparing ideas of different faiths, we wanted to be sure we understood what is meant by faith. It made sense to us to think of faith as a series of beliefs formulated by human exploration from a place of yearning for meaning, without the certainty of scientific proof, based on reason, trust, and a belief that some truths lie beyond human understanding. We discovered that historically faith seems to be motivated by a desire to discover who we are, why we exist, how death influences how we live, and why there is both birth and death, destruction as well as creation. The exploration of the cycles of creation and destruction in virtually all belief systems became the central theme of our original tour.

[Wheel] We found it helpful to begin our tours with consideration of the image of a wheel as a metaphor, in order to explore what various belief systems have in common. We asked our tour participants to picture a wheel with many spokes and to imagine that each spoke on the wheel represents a different belief system, faith tradition, or religion. At the wheel's hub, where all the spokes come together, is what we have most in common: for example, love, compassion, justice, peace, the golden rule. Furthest from the hub are the most profound differences of humanity's belief systems. At its best, religion inspires us to connect with our highest and best selves, to discover what is hidden and what is revealed, permitting the improbable to become possible. Whatever our religion, the closer we are to that center of the wheel, the more we connect to others in powerful ways. Utilizing the language and symbols of art permits an exploration of these ideas, a window to greater understanding, in a safe museum setting.

Our exploration led us to conclude that one important way belief systems evolve is through stories, or parables. Works of art are often used to tell these stories. In the context of faith traditions, stories permit us to discover what we believe to be true. What is on our own spoke of the wheel may be seen by us as a truth and what is on someone

else's spoke may be perceived as myth. At the hub of the wheel are the truths contained everyone's stories.

[Kiefer] So, this is Anselm Kiefer's *Breaking of the Vessels*, which among other things presents opportunities for the telling of stories and interpretation of Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism. In one such story, it is told that in every generation there are times when hope and faith threatens to leave the world. At the time of the Baal Shem Tov, perhaps the greatest Jewish mystic, it was told that he would go with his people to a secret place in the forest, light a special fire, say a special prayer, and tell the stories of his people to their children, and that as the result of these rituals, the danger was averted and hope and faith stayed alive. In succeeding generations when faith again threatened to leave the world, the people first forgot their way to the special place in the forest, then forgot how to light the special fire, and even forgot the special prayer, but they continued to tell their stories to their children, praying this alone would be enough. And it was.

It seems that the telling of stories that communicate our beliefs to succeeding generations is a central practice of virtually all belief systems. So long as the stories are told, the continuity of faith seems to stay alive in the world. If you look carefully at works of art, you will find the stories and parables in religions and faith traditions that address the fundamental questions and ideals at the hub of our metaphoric wheel.

[Osiris] So, now we want to provide you with a sampling of some of the artworks we identified for our first tours to carry out these important ideas and what the world's great religions have in common. I want to emphasize that this is not a sample tour, since that would need to be done in the galleries with a format that encourages and involves conversation and visitor engagement. Rather, this is a summary designed to present these ideas in a workshop setting.

We chose to begin our tours with our Museum's bronze sculpture with lapis lazuli inlay from the sixth century BCE of the ancient Egyptian god Osiris. We wanted to begin with the story of Osiris because it clearly shows that searching for understanding of the meaning of life have been part of the human condition for thousands of years, and that these questions are not the creations of modernity. In addition, our Museum's wonderful Egyptian gallery contains several mummies dating from the time of Moses to the time of Alexander the Great and numerous funerary objects typically found in Egyptian tombs, and therefore this gallery lends itself particularly well to a conversation of the meaning of life, death and afterlife. Although a gallery in an art museum, this gallery felt to us more like a particularly holy space, immersing us into the fundamental questions posed by virtually all religions and belief systems, what happens when we die.

The Osiris story tells a powerful tale of faith. According to the ancient *Book of the Dead*, Osiris was king of Egypt from the dawn of time. Osiris' younger brother, Seth, wanted to be king, and in order to achieve his goal he killed and dismembered his brother, scattering his remains throughout Egypt. Osiris' sister-wife, Isis, who as a result of the murder became the mourner of all mourners, traveled throughout Egypt, gathering the

parts of her deceased husband. She then assembled and wrapped them in linen, creating Egypt's first mummy. The jackal-headed god Anubis performed burial rites that rejuvenated Osiris to serve as king of the underworld. Osiris and Isis then conceived an heir, a son Horace, who would grow to overthrow his uncle and father's murderer and become Egypt's first pharaoh. The Egyptians understood the resurrection of Osiris to mean that the dead could live again in the next world, and as judge in the afterworld, Osiris could ensure the well-being of all deceased. It is a fascinating early example, long before monotheism or the scientific revolution, of resurrection and rebirth, creation and destruction, and the permeable nature of the distinction between life and death in the world.

[Syrian Tile and the Façade of the Jewish Synagogue in Sarajevo] The religion of Islam began in the year 622 when the Prophet Muhammad fled with a band of followers from Mecca to Medina. The term "Islamic" means "to submit" to the will of God. The Islamic world today is vast and complex, consisting of more than one and a half billion people. Most "Islamic" art is based in form on geometry, calligraphy and botanical imagery.

One of the early illuminating moments identifying works of art for these tours for us began with the exploration of "geometric motifs" in various belief systems. We had seen what appeared to be a star of David in a blue 15th Century Syrian wall tile in our Islamic gallery. Why was a star of David, an important symbol of the Jewish faith, being prominently displayed in this tile? We discovered that although made in Damascus, Syria, tiles such as the one in our collection have been associated with a group of itinerant potters from the city of Tabriz in northwestern Iran, which was once considered a thriving Jewish center.

In our exploration of architecture in the Muslim world, we were drawn to the question why are there multiple hexagons on the façade of the early twentieth century Jewish synagogue in Islamic Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina? Our Syrian tile provided the opportunity to explore and engage in respectful dialogue how the logic and reason of geometry and related symmetry have been used in many cultures throughout history in the development of understanding and faith in many cultures and belief systems.

We discovered that in the Islamic tradition, geometric forms have been used for many centuries to explore the meaning of life and to further the relationship of the physical and spiritual worlds. We discovered that in the Islamic faith the hexagon is a symbol for heaven and the sweetness of a bee's honey comb, which is made up of multiple hexagons, that the triangle represents human consciousness, and that the circle, without beginning or end, represents God.

In the Jewish tradition, the hexagon is viewed as a container representing the six days of creation. The Sabbath, the day of rest, is represented by the negative space, or center, of the form. The hexagon consists of two triangles, which make up the star of David, the upward pointed triangle representing the spiritual world, the downward pointed triangle the physical world (and the resulting hexagon the merging of those two worlds). The three sides of the triangle represent God, Torah and Israel.

[Siva Nataraja, King of Dancers] In the Hindu faith the merged triangles of the hexagon represent the male (Shiva) and female (Shakti) attributes of the creator, with creation being the act of conception, gestation and birth. The negative space of the circle of fire in the Siva in our Museum's Hindu gallery represents the womb of all creation.

[Crucifixion] In Christianity the triangle represents the trinity. The cross, with its horizontal and vertical lines, the tree of life. The halo is a circle, representing Godliness.

Seeking to portray and understand the meaning of life and the spiritual realm through the "order" of the universe as expressed in geometric forms provides wonderful opportunities for artistic expression through the visual arts.

[Seated Bodhisattva, Guanyin] One of the most revered of Chinese Buddhist deities, this seated bodhisattva (known as Guanyin) from the 11th century, represents an enlightened being who has achieved *nirvana*, a transcendent state in which there no longer suffering, desire, nor sense of self, resulting in the subject being released from the effects of karma and the cycle of death and rebirth. Although Guanyin has attained *nirvana*, this deity as a matter of personal choice remains in the material world to aid in the salvation of all mortals. Here he is portrayed as a princely figure wearing a tiered crown bedecked with jewels. In addition, he is richly clothed in light silks. As such he seems to personify both the physical and spiritual worlds. The relaxed pose, known as "royal ease" is derived from pre-Buddhist Indian royalty. The bodhisattva leans on one arm, his knee raised to rest his long, extended arm with sensitively rendered hand and fingers. The figure, known as the compassionate and merciful one, is still and composed, but there is a sense of flowing movement amid swirls of silk and soft scarves that appear to ruffle and sway. He is often referred to as one who hears the cries of suffering in the world.

Buddhism began in India, migrated across the Himalayas into all the corners of Asia, including China, Southeast Asia, Korea and Japan. It is a tradition that focuses on personal spiritual development and the attainment of a deep insight into the true nature of life. Buddhists seek to reach a state of *nirvana*, following the path of the Buddha. Buddhists believe that nothing is fixed or permanent and that change is always possible, that the path to enlightenment is through the practice and development of morality, meditation and wisdom, and that life is both endless and subject to impermanence, suffering and uncertainty. Buddhism suggests that existence is endless because individuals are repeated reincarnated, experiencing suffering throughout many lives, that the chief cause of suffering is the belief that any feeling can last indefinitely, and that no state, good or bad, lasts forever.

The bodhisattvas come in many forms or manifestations, and they appear throughout Asia with attributes of a spectrum of genders. The bodhisattvas throughout history have found comparable persons, prophets, angels and gods in other belief systems, including the messiah of Christianity, the prophet Mohammed in Islam, and the 36 Lamed Vav Tzadikim of the Jewish faith, the anonymous individuals living in any given generation and without whom according to Jewish midrash the world would cease to exist.

Conclusion

[Images Africa, Native American, Meso American and Oceanic] We have found that these tours are most successful at ninety minutes in length. My current docent partner for these tours is Gin Wachter, who I am pleased to introduce to you as she is here with us today. Pairs of docents typically present no more than six or seven works representing different faiths, cultures and times in history and based on what is available in our collection and the theme identified by the docents giving each tour. The works utilized in our Museum are selected from the belief systems of the ancient world, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hindu, Buddhism, Africa, Native America, Meso America and Oceanic cultures from across history.

The works you might select for comparable tours would be determined entirely on what is institutionally available to you that would fit into your own identified themes. The nature of the collaboration remains the same, to focus on dialogue rather than debate and the celebration of diversity.

As Mohatma Gandhi has said, religions at their best should not separate us from one another, they should bind us to one another.

Section IV. ANN

[Expansion of the program, specific initiatives with community partners, tours for local faith communities, expansion of the number of docents and training, testimonials, statistics and takeaways]

Section V. ANN and BILL Question and Answer Session

DCMSTL presentation – outline

Slide 1 – Title – Bill and Ann

Slide 2 – Lakota (Sioux) Pipebag; Kota Reliquary Guardian Figure; French 13th century stained glass; Japanese Amitâbha Buddha 13th century; Kula prayer carpet early 19th century

Slide 3 – All Collaborators

Slide 4 – Shawnessey and Bill

Slide 5 – Toni Morrison

Slide 6 – Visitors in the galleries

- As Bill mentioned this collaboration and resulting tour program have offered the opportunity for us to build our cultural fluency and invite our visitors to do the same.
- Museums are great places to bring people from diverse perspectives together
- And museums can be a safe setting for discussion of different ideas / points of view
- Museums are a location where we can expand our understanding of beliefs, customs, stories that our different from what we already know – places where people can develop – awareness, understanding, respect

Slide 7 - In December 2018, the Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London described museums as “trusted arenas of public space” and called out museums as uniquely capable of telling complicated stories of hybridity and cosmopolitanism, vital to maintaining a respectful society. (*The Art Newspaper*)

V and A Director Tristram Hunt goes on to say:

- Museums are recognized institutions for explaining complicated and challenging sociocultural issues
- And Museums need to confront the big issues
- Need to provide a space for respectful discussion and debate
- Through exhibitions, tours, and public programs we can generate discussion with a respectful and inclusive approach so often absent from contemporary discourse today

Art has the unique power to inspire thoughtful dialogue among diverse audiences

Interfaith tours are an example of how we have allowed the Saint Louis Art Museum to become a safe place for discussions by people of different faiths

Slide 8 – St. Peter’s Episcopal youth on tour

For years the Saint Louis Art Museum has offered tours on world religions; however in recent years we felt we could do more to develop this offering. Especially in the post-9/11 world, it seemed that a better understanding of all world faiths, their differences and similarities, could enhance global understanding and respect.

However, as I’m sure many of you can relate, it’s tough to find the time to initiate a new program in the midst of multiple ongoing projects, and it can be tough not only to find the capacity to start something new, but also to identify how to begin.

We suggest a starting point for a new program or initiative could be shared with a community partner who may also be looking to expand the scope of their program offerings. Rather than draw exclusively on resources within your museum, which may be maxed out, you may be able to find a local organization within your community with whom you can collaborate.

Slide 9 – Batya and Amanda

During the summer of 2017, Amanda Thompson Rundahl, Director of Learning and Engagement at SLAM and Batya Abramson-Goldstein, Chair, Community Programs at Arts and Faith St. Louis had the good fortune to connect.

- Arts & Faith St. Louis is an organization whose mission is to bring people of different faiths together to learn about our differences and our similarities, and to share common experiences. In 2011 Arts and Faith organized an concert showcasing the music of many different faith traditions to mark the 10th anniversary of 9/11. Now an annual event, this concert features performers of all ages from diverse faith groups, providing attendees with a unique opportunity for reflection, unity, and peace.
- Quickly staff and docents at the Saint Louis Art Museum realized that a collaboration with Arts & Faith would allow us to draw on the expertise of other community members committed to interfaith initiatives, who share similar missions and goals, and potentially reach their audiences. Both their knowledge, experience, and contacts with local congregations of diverse faiths could help us launch a more formal Interfaith Tour program.

- And quickly Arts and Faith realized that they could expand their program offerings beyond music to include the visual arts in a collaboration with the Saint Louis Art Museum.
- We began by having our docents, Bill and Shawnessey, put together a 90-minute tour for St. Louis area high school youth from multiple faith traditions – and we will share more about this first tour later. For now, we will share an audio clip of Amanda speaking about collaboration:

Slide 10 – audio clips from radio interview

Slide 11 - So how do successful collaborations begin? What are the keys to successful collaborations?

Get to know local organizations and potential partners

Look for organizations whose mission aligns with yours

Ask the question: Can we work together?

Large and small organizations can work together

Meet face-to-face – get to know each other and understand the possibilities and limitations of each partner

Be open to where this relationship and ideas may go

Sometimes the next step is not immediately obvious – keep talking if the relationship has potential

Collaboration may start with an idea in mind; others projects take time to germinate and develop

Sometimes an initial idea evolves into something very different than originally intended

Develop a comfort level with ambiguity

Be honest and realistic about resources

Address assumptions and be explicit about limitations

Both organizations must see the relationship and project as important

Be patient and persist if larger goals are shared

Invest careful thinking and intentionality in all your efforts

Put yourself out there – take considered risks - benefits can be great

Don't be afraid to step back and re-evaluate

Build the relationship over time with mutual respect as foundation

Respect and thoughtfulness are key

Keep main goals in mind

Introduce relevant staff and volunteers from the beginning; all key players need to have ownership and a seat at the discussion table

Our two docents, Shawnessey and Bill, joined our planning team from the beginning

Slide 12 – Once we decided to collaborate with Arts and Faith, our docents began to construct their tour.....

Slide 13- wheel

Slide 14 – Kiefer

Slide 15 – Osiris

Slide 16 – Syrian Tile, Siva, facade

Slide 17 – Crucifixion)

Slide 18 – Guanyin

Slide 19 – Moccasins, Maya Vessel, New Ireland Malagan

Slide 20 - So the first interfaith tour that Bill and Shawnessey gave was for local St. Louis high school youth from a range of faith backgrounds. They were all part of a local organization for youth interested in learning about different faiths called Interfaith Quest. Here is what they had to say about it:

Slide 21 - Interfaith Quest video

Slide 22 – And here is Batya sharing her perspective – audio clip

Slide 23 – Following the initial tour for youth, we offered several drop-in Interfaith tours, and the visitor response was overwhelming. We quickly realized we needed

to get more docents involved to keep the tour groups small – 15-18 participants max.

So we partnered with another community organization we learned about through Arts and Faith: Interfaith Partnership of Greater St. Louis

- collaborative organization open to people of all religions in the St. Louis metropolitan area.
- Strives to deepen understanding, respect and appreciation among all persons across lines of religious difference
- Staff and Board Members at Interfaith Partnership attended our first pilot tour for adults
- They shared their expertise in facilitating respectful conversations and also worked tirelessly to organize tour groups, comprised of different faith traditions for scheduled tours
- In December, 2018 Dr. David Oughton delivered a docent training for our entire docent group on World Religions. His presentation was most helpful not only for docent participating in Interfaith tours, but for all of our docents.

Slide 24 – tour group images

Slide 25 – stats pilot years

Slide 26- testimonials

Slide 27 – As we moved forward, Shawnessey was offered an amazing opportunity to relocate to continue her education in Switzerland...so Bill welcomed longtime SLAM docent Gin Wachter as his new Interfaith Tour partner.

Slide 28-Expanded working group

Due to tour demand in the pilot years, early in 2019 we invited other docents interested in this program to join us so we could offer more tours and engage a larger part of our community. Beginning in 2019, 18 additional docents have been working to select tour themes, find a docent partner of a different faith, and together develop an Interfaith Tour.

Tour themes from this new group include: Compassion (2 pairs), the Dignity of Difference, Religious Rituals, the Golden Rule, Religious Women, Living a Good

Life, Reaching out to God, and ancient and contemporary religious practices across the globe.

Slide 29 – The expanded group of docents has met monthly to discuss and refine their tour ideas.

Dr. Dave Oughton has returned to work with this smaller group of docents in the galleries, clarifying fine points of different religious beliefs and customs, and supporting docents who are working on these tours. We intend to launch an expanded program in 2020.

Slide 30 – takeaways

Slide 31 – Art Still Has Truth....in our current troubled and challenging times

Invite respectful dialogue and discussion of diverse religions and topics related to faith in your museum.

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