

## Piecing the puzzle of an artwork together

### The Frick Collection

March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015



The Frick collection is housed in the New York City mansion built by Henry Clay Frick (1849-1919), one of America's most successful industrialists. Displayed in a serene and intimate setting are masterpieces of Western painting, sculpture, and decorative art.

Sixteen permanent galleries offer a unique presentation of artworks arranged in the way Mr. Frick enjoyed them before bequeathing them to the public.

The museum was first opened to the public in 1935. The collection has grown over the years, while maintaining the special ambience of the art connoisseur's private mansion. Today The Frick is internationally renowned as one of New York's most beloved cultural treasures.

Mission statement public programs:

Education at the Frick provides a vital, diverse, and probing dialogue between The Frick Collection and the public through a commitment to excellence in gallery teaching and an array of programs of the highest quality.

#### People we met

- Rika Burnham, head of education, our host for this study visit to New York  
*"That you are all here is a dream come true"*
- Adam Eaker, Co-Curator *Van Dyck: Anatomy of a Portraitist*
- Ian Wardropper, Director
- Isabel Bird, Education assistant
- Adrienne Lei, Manager of Education & Public Programs
- Ryder O'Dell, Programs Assistant in the Education Department

### Gallery talk 'One hour, one work of art'

*"Take a few minutes to take in 'the most important European painting in America'"*

Rika Burnham took us into the galleries, towards 'The most important work of art in America': a painting of 'Saint Francis' by Johannes Bellini. From a distance of four meters she asked us to take a look towards the painting and observe. What do we feel and think?

Five minutes later she asked for our first impressions. She let us talk freely. Sometimes she repeated, rephrasing us. After a while she asked to change positions and to look from this point of view. Suddenly all of us saw different things. As we continued our analysis, Rika asked to exchange ideas with our neighbour. Everyone was really involved, discussing, looking and pointing. After five minutes the discussion was brought back to the whole group. Bit by bit Rika added to our observations, referring to our comments, gestures and body language. While we were observing the painting, she had been observing us.

After a while she asked us to come closer and have another look. We started discussing the overhead picture light, when suddenly she switched it off. This made us see the painting again in yet a completely different way. The more we looked at the painting, the more our wondering grew. Because Rika never asked us any direct questions, we were able to shed our art history backgrounds and we kept asking questions towards the painting. We started to get lost in the painting. The less answers we found, the more fascinating it became to us. We continued looking and talking and one hour passed by...

### Sharing suggestions for an exhibition

In preparation of the exhibition about *Van Dyck: Anatomy of a portraitist*, Adam Eaker engaged us in a discussion about the process of painting a portrait. Preparatory drawings, oil sketches, sittings, posing, representation, fashion... interest him, but also the social context: what was the one occasion to have your portrait painted? Now pictures are made at every possible occasion, we're living in a period of the democratization of portraits. Our team was able to suggest various strategies to the public in a topic like this:

- use selfies as an entrance
- contemporary portraits next to portrait painting
- shift from first idea to final result
- digital storytelling
- working with children's stories
- augmented reality
- self representations
- A copy of a educational project of the KMSKA about portraits for OKAN classes will be sent to the museum.

### Meeting to exchange ideas about education

After the workshop we met Rika and her education staff in the Directors dining room to exchange ideas about education. First we reflected on Rika's practice and then we talked about our own educational programs. They were pleased to hear some of our suggestions.

- In the MSK in Ghent the method of Rika is already in practice: one work, one hour. The Ghent educators observed that it is very important to communicate what ‘art dialogue’ is, so the public knows what to expect. Another important condition is that the public feels safe to talk. It is the public that asks the questions, not the guide. The public’s perception of the art work is more important than obtaining knowledge about it. This way of guiding requires excellent skills and is not for everyone.
- “Include yourself in the we”: make the museum more personal, make it yourself. The Frick is an historic house where the collector lived, some of the works are in their original place. You can make your public feel at home and proud of the museum and collection. You can compare The Frick Collection with a castle. A Disney movie like Frozen or a series like Downtown Abbey can be a point of entree.
- Children under age of 10 are not allowed in the museum, because of the fragility of the space and the works of art. In Flanders we do allow toddlers and young children in historic houses. Here museum rules and a good understanding with both the teachers and the children suffice to ensure a trouble-free visit.
- The question came up of how to deal with the character of Henry Clay Frick himself? Our advice to the people at the Frick was not to keep silent about it. He is part of the history of the house and the collection. Despite its origins, the people of New York may be proud of this collection in their city.
- The Museum Plantin-Moretus briefly introduced two outreach programs to the Frick educational staff. The first: *Listening Eyes* is an innovative tool for discovering the museum and its collections that is aimed at learners with specific needs: visitors with intellectual and learning disabilities as well as Dutch as a second language students. The overall purpose is to develop verbal expression and literacy skills in conjunction with social skills and cultural awareness. The second: *Culture Friends* brings adolescents together in the museum: pairing students with special needs (autism, Down syndrome, etc) with college students. During one school year these duos meet about 8 times. They join in creative activities in the museum or at school. Both methods were developed with teachers from underprivileged schools.
- Our colleagues from Faro talked about the online method *Expert in the classroom* which is essentially a webinar that establishes a dialogue between children in the classroom and experts in various heritage institutions. This method is useful for extra fragile collections but also for children who cannot travel because of a physical impairment.
- In the Rockox House in Antwerp visitors meet the original art collector Nicolaas Rockox who is brought to life through an animation on a screen before entering into the collection. This is a good place to start with school groups.
- The Museums of Art and History in Brussels links music to the works of art. Children from all around the world recognize the sound and objects of home. They often start singing their own songs, in their mother tongue, which helps to start a dialogue.
- In Bozar in Brussels writers and poets connect to works of art through text. During events they read from their work, standing next to the object.

### Five marked elements

1. One hour, one work of art can work in Flanders
2. Dialogued based education is a great way to achieve a lot of interaction with your public. They are able to give many suggestions and input and there is no right or wrong. The works of art do the talking.
3. Children under ten are not admitted to the Collection
4. The enormous hospitality of The Frick
5. The professionalism of the team of educators and their imbedded position within the whole museum team

### Takeaways for Flanders

Piecing the puzzle of an artwork together – one hour, one work of art

Private tours

The Frick Collection offers a limited number of private tours for small groups of up to five people.

Sketching in the Galleries: see: <http://www.frick.org/visit/museum/sketching>

The professionalism of the team of educators and their imbedded position within the whole museum team.

### Takeaways for Museum Mayer van den Bergh

The method of 'Piecing the puzzle of an artwork together'. It makes visitors look at the art. The knowledge is not important but the experience of being in a museum and exploring art. We practice this method now with three or five works of arts for groups of Dutch learning students.

Sketching in the Galleries

Museum Mayer van den Bergh is also an historic house full of art. People feel comfortable sketching in the galleries. And if they want we can exhibit the sketches in our hall and post it on our Facebook page.

### Take aways for Museum Plantin-Moretus

The method of 'Piecing the puzzle of an artwork together'. By analysing closely and thoroughly the way Rika works with a public, we can transfer it to our daily practice. We already had a try out for a group of teachers the week after our visit to New York. They really enjoyed it and gave us tips of how to communicate this to our public.

We believe that the atmosphere of a historic house plays an important role in all our public programs, and this was confirmed by our visit to the Frick.

The professionalism of the team of educators enhanced our wish to enlarge our own professionalism.

The possibility to contribute to public programs around the Van Dyck exhibition in the Frick.