

**Visit the Met... see the world!**

**The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 03.03.2015**

**Meeting with:**

Rebecca McGinnis, *Senior Museum Educator, Access & Community Programs*

Sandra Jackson-Dumont, *Chairman of education*

Helena Guzik, *Assistant Educator of Online Publications*

## **Introduction**

The Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met) is the largest art museum in the United States and one of the ten largest in the world. Its permanent collection contains more than two million works, divided among seventeen curatorial departments. The main building is by area one of the world's largest art galleries. There is also a much smaller second location at The Cloisters in Upper Manhattan that features medieval art.

Represented in the permanent collection are works of art from classical antiquity and Ancient Egypt, paintings and sculptures from nearly all the European masters, and an extensive collection of American and modern art. The Met also maintains extensive holdings of African, Asian, Oceanic, Byzantine, and Islamic art. The museum also houses encyclopaedic collections of musical instruments, costumes and accessories, and antique weapons and armor from around the world. Several notable interiors, ranging from first-century Rome through modern American design, are permanently installed in the Met's galleries.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art was founded in 1870. The founders were businessmen and financiers as well as leading artists and thinkers of the day, who all wanted to bring art and art education to the American people. The museum opened on February 20, 1872, and was originally located at 681 Fifth Avenue.

As of 2012, the Met occupies about 2,000,000 square feet (190,000 m<sup>2</sup>). Admission is pay what you wish with a recommendation of \$25.

## **Education, the heartbeat of the Met**

### **WIDE RANGE EDUCATION**

The Met is a gigantic museum. It employs 2,000 staff including 110 educational staff. This team consists of educators for Academic Programs, Concerts & Lectures, Administration, Gallery and Studio Programs, Public Exhibition Programs, School and Teacher Programs. Much attention is given to the visually impaired, the hearing impaired, children with learning disabilities and autism and people with dementia. There is an offer both for individuals and groups and the focus is on the social aspect (the experience with family and friends), multi-sensory perception and an inclusive way of working. All groups can visit the museum every month for a thematic tour or workshop.

### **PERSONAL CONNECTION WITH VISITORS**

Although the museum is huge, the educators still try to create a personal connection with their audience, especially with specific audiences. The goal is that the participants of custom developed tours can gradually transfer to the regular programs. This seems to work well: two thirds of the participants have become regular visitors.

This personal connection is initiated by sending out e-mails to specific mailing lists, but especially by building strong relationships with communities and with organizations that work for people with disabilities.

#### PREPARING FOR MUSEUM VISIT

The offer for people with a disability starts well before the moment of entering the museum and includes various tools for preparing the visit. People with disabilities need specific practical information. The Met website was created as a welcoming environment informing visitors of what to expect when entering the building through information and pictures.

(<http://www.metmuseum.org/events/programs/programs-for-visitors-with-disabilities/visitors-with-developmental-and-learning-disabilities/for-visitors-with-autism-spectrum-disorders> )

The museum also prepares itself by asking some information about the individual participants when they are registered. For example when a caretaker registers a person with dementia the intake form has some will be asked specific questions: What is his/her age? Is the person averse to crowds? Does he/she have certain interests?

#### VOLUNTEERS

The staff members of the Met are assisted by a group of 1,400 volunteers. They are responsible for the information desks, guide school groups, ...

#### ONLINE PUBLICATIONS

The museum uses various online tools to bring the collection closer to the audience. One of the most popular tools is the *Timeline of Art History* (<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/> ) with 2 million hits each month! On this website, visitors can find texts by curators, detailed high quality images and video clips. In all, a useful tool for teachers, students and researchers.

*82nd and Fifth* (<http://82nd-and-fifth.metmuseum.org/>) shows curators with a background in art history talking about a work in the collection that is really significant to them.

*Connections* (<http://www.metmuseum.org/connections/>) shows different members of the museum staff giving their own fresh look on the collection. The personal story is more important here than the art historical expertise.

Along similar lines the Met will soon come out with a new series of video clips: *The Artist Project*, in which artists give their views on the collection from a creators' perspective.

#### Takeaways

- Not only in the Met, but also in other museums we saw that volunteers had different functions. The museums in Flanders could expand their volunteer work and recruit more volunteers.
- Working for specific groups starts before the people enter the museum.
- Different *Online Publications* make the collection accessible at home. To reach more members of the audience, the collection in the Met is approached in different ways. There is not only the art historical information. There are personal stories of museum staff, the vision of different artists is recorded and available for the public, visitors can trace the journey of collection items on loan,...

- The Met puts all of their multimedia content on their website and mainly focuses on labels, gallery texts and audioguide in the galleries. This approach was also visible in other museums we visited, even in the Whitney which will be moving to a new state-of-the-art building at the beginning of May.

The website enables visitors to thoroughly prepare their visit and to revisit the collection afterwards, in the comfort of their own homes. People who like to access information during their visit, can use the wifi network that is available throughout the museum. This democratic approach ties into the mission of the founding committee in 1870 and is also reflected in the 'pay what you wish' policy.

## Pictures



Lies Ledure, Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent

Tine Van Poucke, Groeningemuseum, Bruges