Collaborating with Museum Educators to Promote Conservation

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Introduction

Conservation-focused high-school classes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art were developed to increase students' understanding of and familiarity with the works on view in the galleries, as well as to introduce the importance of the conservation and preservation of art to tomorrow's cultural leaders. The materials science content of the classes was emphasized in the course announcement, with the intent of expanding the typical target demographic to include more science-minded students. The classes are offered free to local high-school students through the Education Department and generally consist of 2-4 sessions in length. Each session is 2 hours long and is usually attended by 5-10 students.

The first part of the class consists of a PowerPoint presentation that introduces general conservation concepts and ethics followed by a material-specific lecture, supplemented by hands-on exercises. The lectures follow the thought process of a conservator, introducing the chemical and physical properties of a particular material category such as metal or glass, through the processes used by artists to manufacture art objects, such as casting or stained glass production, and on to the understanding of the deterioration processes at work in the material under study. The hands-on exercises have ranged from small-scale science experiments, such as an acid-digestion of a carbonate stone or stimulation of copper corrosion with salt and ammonia, to conservation-focused exercises such as inpainting small areas of loss or mixing and tinting wax resin fills. Through these activities the students can further explore the topics discussed during the lecture by physically engaging with the materials.

The second, generally shorter section consists of a gallery discussion that focuses on installed objects whose materials and/or methods of manufacture or conservation were previously examined. We aim to encourage the students to ask similar questions to those posed during the class about materials and techniques, and to make connections between what was presented in lecture to the physical objects as they view them in the galleries. Throughout the classes, whether in the galleries or during the lecture, we engage the students by asking them to share their ideas or understanding about the current topics.

History

The classes were conceived of by the authors, who realized that conservation served as an effective lens through which applied science—including chemistry, biology and physics— could be taught. In addition, we felt that high school students would be excited to learn about another area of museum work which would have otherwise remained hidden. We approached the Education Department and pitched the idea; the reception was overwhelmingly positive and supportive. The success of the initial four-session class in March 2005 ensured that the classes would be renewed the following year.

In addition to the classes at the Metropolitan Museum, we have developed and led classes at the Brooklyn School for the Arts (BHSA; http://www.njit.edu/v2/Directory/Centers/CABSR/preservation_hs/), a public high school in Brooklyn that has several arts tracks, including one focused on historic preservation. Topics addressed at BHSA include Cemetery Conservation and Bio-deterioration of Outdoor Stone, which includes a basic introduction to several biology concepts, as well as The Science and Conservation of Metals. These programs follow the same general organization as the museum classes; first the basic concepts are introduced with a PowerPoint presentation, which is followed by a lab or studio-based activity that reinforces the lecture content.

Future Directions

The ultimate goal is to build on the outreach experiences to create original high school curricula supplementary activities. Using both environmental science and forensics as models, both topics successfully adapted for use in the classroom, the conservation curriculum offers an applied approach to science-focused lecture content and laboratory experiments. To this end, we will begin to expand our efforts to teacher outreach programs this fall, 2008, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, again through the Education Department.

Art conservation education at the high school level is not aimed at just creating more conservators for an already overloaded field, but rather in raising the profile of the conservation field as a whole and increasing support for art and historic preservation activities, all the while accomplishing the defined goals of a high school education. This type of educational format works well to promote concepts of scientific inquiry, logical reasoning, and problem solving, which are major components of a high school curriculum. By educating students about the physical processes and historical developments that went into creating the art they see around them, we feel we can increase their understanding of and degree of regard for the art and cultural heritage for which they will be responsible. By educating them about the investigative, scientific, ethical and cultural nature of the conservation profession, they also come away with a greater understanding of the rigorous nature of conservation work and (we hope!) a greater respect for those working behind the scenes in the museum.

To Learn More

For more on this project please see the associated poster presented at the AIC 2008 Annual Meeting "Collaborations in Education: Focus on High School Students" by Beth Edelstein, Assistant Conservator, Metropolitan Museum of Art; Sarah Barack, Conservator in Private Practice; Heather Maxson, Whitney Museum of American Art; and Rika Burnham, Museum Educator, The Frick Collection.