Whose Rodin is it, really?

A proposal for a learning experience at the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University

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5 March 2002
I. Introduction

We at Stanford pass many sculptures on our way to classes and work. These sculptures tell stories that we don’t even hear because we pass by. Because we believe it is important not only to hear these stories but to participate in creating them, we have created an activity to foster an appreciation of arts in an outdoor setting.

This paper is a proposal for a learning experience based at the Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University (commonly called the Cantor Museum), focusing on the Rodin sculpture collection. To create the activities, we began by observing the setting of the proposed program and thought about the current educational programs available at Cantor Museum.

II. Observations

Our initial insights

At a graduate school reception held at the Cantor Museum’s outdoor sculpture garden, Yunn Chyi and Nina noticed how the sculptures blended into the environment. So much so, that people were leaning on the sculptures and putting their plates on the bases. The art docent mentioned that she once saw a Swatch watch on the Thinker’s hand. Elsewhere on the Stanford campus, we saw a classroom teacher instruct her 2nd grade students to touch an outdoor sculpture. This same teacher, surely, wouldn’t do that in an indoor museum. Clearly the interaction between the visitor and the art is different depending on the setting, whether indoor or outdoor. These incidents introduce us to the uniqueness of outdoor exhibits, and the role of the museum in providing a physical context and interpretive context that becomes part of the story of sculpture.

Observation plan

Prior to our visit to the B. Gerald Cantor Rodin Sculpture Garden on February 22, 2002, we prepared a list of questions to guide our observations. These questions were prompted by our experiences with outdoor sculpture exhibits.

- Are people talking around the sculptures? If so, about what?
• Are they touching the sculptures?
• Do they notice the sculptures or do they just walk by?
• Do people visit the sculptures alone or in groups?

Findings
On a sunny, beautiful Wednesday afternoon, we expected to see people at the garden but certainly not the variety that we did see. The garden is accessible from the main road. It is possible to enter the indoor Cantor museum without going through the garden. There are two entrances to the indoor museum: one through the garden and the other about 50 feet from the garden. So, it is possible to enter and exit the museum without going through the outdoor garden. Likewise, it is possible to go through the garden without entering the indoor museum. We observed people entering and exiting the indoor museum through both access doors. We also observed people visiting the outdoor museum without visiting the indoor museum. We were unable to determine whether people from the indoor museum were likely to step into the outdoor sculpture garden.

In one hour, we saw:
• A jogger with a Walkman
• People walking through as a shortcut to another destination
• People engaged in conversation, not noticing the sculptures.
• People engaged in conversation about the sculptures.
• A guide with 3 people explaining each sculpture
• A man taking pictures of the sculptures
• 2 women walking to the outdoor café overlooking the garden, passing through the sculpture garden but not stopping by the sculptures
• A family taking pictures of their baby by the Gates of Hell
• A man on his cell phone, and touching the Gates of Hell
• A woman sunbathing next to a sculpture
• People taking their time at the various sculptures
• People touching the sculptures
• People not touching the sculptures
• A group of 10 teenagers with a group leader
• That the Gates of Hell was the most visited sculpture
• That few people read the two information platforms describing the garden

Summary
First, our observations lead us to believe that people have many purposes for going to the museum. Some may come to enjoy the environment, like the sunbather or the family taking pictures or the group of friends discussing their lives on a bench beneath a tree, all in the vicinity of the Rodin sculptures. Others come to hear the stories behind the sculptures. Second, the behaviors of people differed. Some people went solo through the garden although they arrived with other people. Others looked at each sculpture together. Some looked at one sculpture while others looked at all or none. A docent told us during our visit, that visitors should not touch the sculptures inside the museum, but the outside ones are fine to touch. She even touched them herself. However there were no signs that said, “Please touch.”

Some questions that arise from our observation:
• When is it okay to touch art, and when is it not?
• Why is that?
• What does that tell us about art?
• What does it tell us about museums?
III. Learning at Cantor: Mary, a docent at the Cantor Museum

When Nina and Yunn-Chyi were at the garden, we saw a lady with an official badge was explaining things in front of the “Meditation” sculpture to a group of three people? a white male (looked like early twenties), two Asian women (looked like mid twenties). Yunn-Chyi decided to join the group to observe how learning was taking place and also to get a chance to interview an “authority” from the museum.

I saw the name on her badge, “Mary,” and her status as “Volunteer”. The moment I positioned myself near the group, Mary immediately engaged me with her eye contact and made me feel that I was part of the group. While explaining, she kept constant eye contact with her listeners and looked for responses from them.

“Why does this sculpture have no hands?” She touched the sculpture, traced the contour of it from the broken arms and asked.

“It allows us to concentrate on the torso!” one of us answered.

I found that the way she engaged her audience invited me to want to find out more about the sculptures, which was not my intent at the beginning.

We moved from sculpture to sculpture in the garden, from Meditation, Martyr, the Walking Man, his Torso, to the Gates of Hell. I was totally engaged in the learning process. I noticed that she enabled me to appreciate the beauty of the creation from a professional perspective.

“Look at how we can concentrate at the torso without the hands”, “feel (by touching) the smoothness and the roughness of the sculptures”, “how the back leg is created longer in length in order to show the walking posture (refer to the Walking Man)”, “the muscles and the unconventional unique expression of the back of the walking man torso, it’s very powerful”, etc.
She combined a little story with her explanation, which definitely raised my interest and helped me to remember, “this Gates of Hell is the only piece without Rodin’s signature on it, but he left an angel at the bottom, which is a representation of his signature. Look at the rope cast at the back of the gate. Rodin was furious when they actually cast the rope, which was not part of his creation, in making this piece; the rope was used for pulling the gates up! It’s also interesting that the Cantor Museum is a popular place that people come to be married in front of the Gates of Hell!”

I observed that the group raised more and more questions as the tour proceeded. The two Asian women looked a bit shy and quiet when the tour began at the Meditation, but when we reached the Gates of Hell, they had raised more than 2 questions and shared their experiences with Rodin’s sculptures they had visited in other countries.

The tour continued to the indoor gallery. Once again, interesting explanations were given of the important pieces, from the Monument to Balzac and the Burghers of Calais.

Mary ended the tour in front of the sculpture “Torso of a Man”. The sculpture is appropriately positioned facing the hall of Ancient Greek sculptures, from which Rodin drew great inspiration.
“Thanks for being an wonderful group! Before we end this tour, I would like you to reflect on what you’ve learnt by telling me how you see this sculpture. Go around it and tell me.” Mary surprised me in putting a closure of the tour in this way. “Placing it in front of the Greek sculptures indicates how Rodin’s work is influenced by the Greek”, “it is smooth in front and rough at the back”, “you can see the trace of his thumb mark and remind you that it was all made in clay”, “the torso has no arms, so we can concentrate on the torso”, the group responded.

I left the museum with the appreciation of “A well made torso contains all of life”, “The beauty is like god, a fragment of beauty is beauty complete.” -- By Auguste Rodin.

An interview with our docent

Background
Mary volunteered to be a docent at Cantor because she loves art. She finds it more fun to sharing the appreciation with people rather than admiring them alone. “I learnt a lot from the people, from their comments? every group is different? I like to lead the Rodin groups, the groups are more focused.” “People who come to see Rodin’s, normally they have experience and seen his sculpture elsewhere... It’s fun to watch people discover for themselves something new.”

Mary told me that the docent training teaches her to be interactive, applying questioning techniques to pull out from people to make them understand. She hoped her group would then be able to carry with them the knowledge to another Rodin’s exhibits.

There are more than 300 volunteers and about 60 docents at Cantors Arts Center.

Analysis of Mary’s teaching technique

- **Engaged her audience** She engaged her group really well. She explained using eye contact with me and ask questions and seek for replies
- **Explain with enthusiasm** She is keen to tell more about the sculptures and share her knowledge. “The Gates of Hell illuminated under the moonlight, oh, it was so beautiful” “human torso is the most beautiful in nature” “Remember that all the sculptures were made in clay, you can see his thumb marks on top of it? feel the combination of smoothness and roughness?”
- **Pause and questions** She paused in between her explanations. Asked for questions or posed questions or asked the group to touch the sculptures. When we came to the next piece of work, she kept asking what she had explained.
- **Encourage the groups to ask questions** She gave the group the chance to ask questions and ensure she didn’t leave out any member (when one of the members stepped away to talk on the phone, she checked with him to see if he missed the key points of the Torso)
• **Content of explanation** She combines her explanation with story telling, historical background, the Rodin’s process, and details to look at.

• **Recap and culmination** She ended the tour by the center piece and asked the group to reflect what they’d learnt by what they see from the sculpture.

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**Educational program at Cantor Arts Center**

The Cantor Arts Center offers docent-guided tours free to schools and not-for-profit groups. Groups may visit without a guided tour during open hours.

Guided school tours are available for grades three and up. They require a 1:10 ratio of adults to children and expect teachers or coordinators to stay with their group. The Center can provide tours for only up to 60 people from one group or school each day.

General Tours: This is an introductory tour that features objects from a variety of cultures and historic periods. Wednesdays at 12 p.m., Saturdays and Sundays at 1 p.m. Meet in the Main Lobby

Family Tours: This tour provides an introduction to and exploration of art in the Center for children up to the age of 8 and their accompanying adults.

Group Tours: Pre-arranged Group Tours will be available to groups

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A good quote about outdoor display

“I want the birds to poop on them. I want them to integrate into environment” — Rodin (as explained by Mary)

Question to ponder from this learning experience:

• What learning did visitors get out from the museum?

• In what ways will the learning experience be affected by
  o the authenticity of the sculptures?
  o the interaction between the museum and the visitor?
  o the quality of the educational program?

• How does the visitor’s prior knowledge and experience affect the visit?
IV. A Proposal for learning about museums at Cantor

This section describes a proposal for the design of a learning experience for high school students, situated at the Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University. The program, *Whose Rodin is it, really?*, will have two main content focus points: 1) the appreciation of the sculpture of Rodin, and 2) the role of the museum in presenting and interpreting Art to the public. We arrived at these topics after our class discussions of Lisa Roberts’ ideas about narrative and meaning construction in museums (Roberts, 1997), our team’s reflections on our own experiences with sculpture at museums, subsequent observations at the Cantor Museum, and our reflections on docent-led learning experience there.

The learning experience will take the form of a special program of docent-led walking tours of the museum’s Rodin collection, supplemented with group discussions and a few interactive kiosks where visitors can add their experiences and share their opinions with later visitors, adding to the narrative within the museum. These events will be aimed at high-school students, and will be advertised through schools, after-school groups and other organizations that work with teens. In addition we propose advertising in other media (like local commercial slots on MTV) that teens are exposed to.

During the tour, groups will move from sculpture to sculpture, progressing from the garden into the museum. Discussions will take place at each sculpture, with three main parts. First, the docent will explain the sculpture, where it comes from, how and why it was made, what Rodin’s vision of art and sculpture was, and so on? basically, the type of information that Yunn-Chyi found in her tour of the Cantor. Second, the docent will allow time for questions on those sorts of topics from the group. Last, the leader will ask the group to discuss some controversial questions related to the piece, like: What if you saw one at a gas station? Would you think it was important? Rather than presenting information in this portion, the docent will become a facilitator of what we’d hope was a lively discussion.
At key junctures in the tour, students will be asked to record their responses privately at kiosks located in the garden and inside the museum. These responses to fixed prompts will then become part of the public narrative of the exhibits themselves, complementing the explicit and implicit messages put forth in the museum’s literature, plaques, architecture, curation and, in fact, existence.

By the end of the tour, students will be able to answer practically and critically questions like the following. Why are some of Rodin’s pieces outside, while others are inside? And why are some behind glass? Why are they in a museum at all?

To guide the proposal, we’ve decided to use a framework for voluntary learning experiences developed by John Falk and Lynn Dierking (Falk and Dierking, 2000).

The conceptual framework

Falk and Dierking identified three important contexts that are important to consider in the construction of voluntary (including museum) learning experiences: the personal, the sociocultural, and the physical. These factors include:

The Personal Context
- Motivation and expectations (marketing)
- Prior knowledge, interests and beliefs
- Choice and control

The Sociocultural Context
- Within-group sociocultural mediation
- Facilitated mediation by others

The Physical Context
- Advance organizers and orientation
- Design
- Reinforcing events and experiences outside the museum

Motivation and expectations

450 Rodin sculptures represent the core of the Cantor Foundation’s assets, of which several are on permanent and prominent display at the Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University. The Cantor Museum is known for its Rodin sculptures. Our proposal takes advantage of its reknown. People expect to hear about Rodin when they visit the Cantor, and they might even expect to learn about the sculptures in a tour.

People don’t expect museums, especially museums that don’t focus on contemporary art, to question their own roles. [In fact, there’s some question as to whether the Cantor Foundation would want to pose such questions about its centerpiece museum and permanent collection. We’ve decided to ignore that problem for now.] To overcome this, we propose an aggressive marketing campaign for the program, aimed at teens using cool
billboards, strategically placed TV ads (local MTV commercial slots), using controversial slogans like “Why museums?” or “Take back your art.”

**Prior knowledge, interests and beliefs**

We expect (without any specific research to cite) that our program will fit in well with the kinds of questions high-school aged students are naturally concerned with, sometimes explicitly and sometimes not: the questioning of authority and power structures in which they operate. In that regard, we believe we’re addressing the prior knowledge and interests of our learners. In planning this program, we’ve come across the interesting problem of whether an institution can authentically provide a forum for challenging its own authority. If the museum endorses the exploration of such questions, it seems to undermine or co-opt the questioning that’s taking place there. This in itself can then become an important topic of conversation within the program.

To get a better handle on the specific interests and prior knowledge of the visitors, we also propose using a 3 or 4 question pre-test to gauge their background. This will help each docent fit their presentations and facilitation styles to each group the work with. Is the docent preaching to the converted? Did the group study Rodin or sculpture in an art class?

**Choice and control**

Tours provide learners with natural affordances for choice. People can come and go with the tour as they please, unless they’re part of a formal group (like a school visit). Also, in this format, people can ask questions at any time in the tour, of course, which changes the topics discussed, giving users an order of control. With the addition of the kiosks, learners get an additional bulwark to their own voice and opinions. Regardless of the viewpoint of the docent or the designers of the program, learners can form any opinion on the topic they like, and can have it added to the ‘official’ presentation of the sculptures.

**Within-group sociocultural mediation**

Discussion is an important and designed part of the tour, which allows for peer groups to negotiate (mediate) meaning around the objects and ideas they discuss.

Interactive kiosks give visitors a lasting voice with which they enter into conversations with future and past visitors. In fact, to make these relationships even more explicit, it would be interesting to provide a threaded or networked navigational structure for viewing people’s contributions.

**Facilitated mediation by others**

Docent acts as an expert guide, providing information needed to fuel productive conversation, even during the interactive portion of the tour, where their role is less presentational.

**Advance organizers and orientation**

Advertising helps to shape people’s expectation about the learning experience. These are reinforced by the name of the tour, and the fact that the tour is marked as special in
relation to other tours in the museum. The pre-test also poses questions that will provide many of the discussion themes during the learning experience. Placards put out for the tour can also provide visitors with extra information, and pose challenging questions to visitors who don’t take part in the tour itself.

**Design**

The tour moves takes advantage of the design of the museum, moving from the garden into the museum (from touchable to markedly important), and thereby makes the design of the museum itself a topic of discussion.

The tour and discussions facilitate co-construction of knowledge. During tours, it becomes explicitly okay to yell and laugh and carry on inside the building.

**Reinforcing events and experiences outside the museum**

Taking advantage of what we noticed helped make the learning more memorable, we propose to end the tours with a capstone ’oral exam’ to emphasize main points and questions raised in the experience. This exam, rather than being graded, will consist of a group discussion of Rodin’s torso, which provides a point of contrast among many topics discussed in the tour (Rodin’s view of art, inspiration of the Greeks, his interpretation of their view, the modern view of art, a critical view of art as special culture).

Visitors will also receive a wallet card with points to remember when viewing art: questions that guide a critical exploration of the art, artist and venue.

We also propose an extension of the experience on the web where people can share their experiences with each other and continue the debates that began in the museum or in the kiosks.

We would hope to assess the success of visitors’ learning experiences by randomly interviewing students at two points: immediately after their visit and again a few months after the visit, to hear their own account of what they believe they had learned, how they had changed, or their views had changed. Additionally, we could interview teachers and other program coordinators sponsoring student visits to find what changes they might have observed in their students actions and approach to their work.

**V. Conclusion**

This proposal aims to provide a holistic museum learning program for the high-school students. The learning program includes:

- an advertising and publicity strategy to attract the target audience
- a learner-centered docent-led tour that emphasize on dialogue and authentic activities
- a set of followed up assessments to assess and motivate learning
- peripheral activities such as interactive kiosk and placard to reinforce learning and sense of involvement.
In sum, we hope that the proposed program will make the learning experience explicit and meaningful to the students. The data collected from the future pilot runs will contribute to research on learning at museums.