Education in Motion: The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Artmobile, 1953 – 1994

*Maureen O'Connor**

Abstract

This essay explores five exhibitions created for the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Artmobile, the first mobile art museum in the United States. The mission of the Artmobile was to bring works of art directly to citizens throughout the state of Virginia from 1953 to 1994. In analyzing educational and exhibition materials, such as exhibition booklets, audio guide recordings, press releases, and speeches, this research examines the educational philosophies of each exhibition in relation to contemporaneous museum education literature. Applying Tony Bennett's analysis of the impact of culture on the social to the creation of educational philosophies, this essay argues that while the mission of the Artmobile remained constant, there was a shift in the educational objective from the development of cultured citizens through art appreciation and the improvement of public taste to fostering individual visual literacy and encouraging visitors to make art historical and personal connections.

Key words: museum education, artmobile, Virginia, exhibition history

Introduction

In 1958, John Walker, then-director at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, provided the following remarks in his opening address for the Artmobile exhibition *Painters of the Renaissance*: 'Now, why is the Artmobile so important? The reason is, of course, beyond any other method yet devised, it disseminates the influence of original works of art. This…is a worthy objective. Nearly everyone is in favor of art' (Walker 1958: 2). The Artmobile, the first mobile art museum in the United States, was designed by Leslie Cheek Jr, the second director at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, and its mission was to bring original works of art to residents in cities and towns throughout the state. It was this mobile instrument of education that, for Walker, represented the most significant development in museum education in the mid-twentieth century. Walker praised the museum for its state-wide initiative, but also noted that the Artmobile served a particularly useful function in enabling 'more people to enrich their lives through the development of a discerning eye', which was critical in a time when the eye was 'easily corrupted' and 'its power of discrimination' diminished (Walker 1958: 2). One week later, Cheek sent Walker a letter, thanking him for attending the exhibition opening. He concluded by stating, 'It is very true that people in the provinces never think they have anything of value until outside "experts" come to tell them so directly' (Cheek 1958).

The remarks made by both Walker and Cheek during the *Painters of the Renaissance* exhibition may seem outdated to contemporary museum educators, but their comments remind us that the relationship between the museum and its audience has evolved since the mid-twentieth century, as has the perceived educational function of the museum. As Marjorie Schwarzer, professor and administrative director of Museum Studies at the University of San Francisco, observed, the American museum is a 'prism of American society' and its exhibitions 'tell us stories, adding to the ever-changing, sometimes contentious meanings…Americans give to history' (Schwarzer 2006: 1). While the stories of twentieth-century exhibitions have been examined by art historians, scholars in the museum education field (Rawlins 1978;

Zeller 1989; Schwarzer 2006; Kai-Kee 2011) have argued that a comprehensive history of the philosophical evolutions of art museum educational practice in the United States is lacking. While *The Art Museum as Educator* (Newsom and Silver 1978) recorded nationwide museum education programs, including mobile art exhibitions, virtually no analysis was conducted regarding the educational impact of these programs. Jessica Norberto Rocha and Martha Marandino conducted a more recent examination of the history of mobile science museums in Europe, North America, and South America (2017); however, analyses of the history and impact mobile art museums are still absent. Therefore, in this essay I seek to contribute to the scholarship in examining the history and meanings of five Artmobile exhibitions, focusing in particular on the concurrent theoretical philosophies that developed in the field of museum education from 1953 to 1994.

Within this timeframe, the Artmobile presented a total of sixty exhibitions to its Virginia audience. To analyze all sixty exhibitions is beyond the parameters of this article; additionally, archival evidence varies for each exhibition, as there was no explicit initiative to create comprehensive files of all educational materials for each exhibition. Therefore, an examination of five exhibitions and their educational materials is subsequently presented in chronological order. This article first presents a brief history of the Artmobile, including a discussion of other mobile museums in the United States that inspired the Artmobile's creation. Although the examination of five exhibitions in relation to parallel philosophies contributes to an understanding of the development of the field of museum education, it is not enough to simply analyze the exhibitions in a vacuum. Indeed, an analysis of the socio-temporal environment during each exhibition must also be examined in order to understand the greater cultural motivations that influenced educational approaches. Applying Tony Bennett's examinations of culture in relation to the social to educational approaches, I will demonstrate how in the course of the mid to

Figure 1. "Artmobile I," 1954. VMFA Photo Archives. © Richmond Times-Dispatch.

late-twentieth century, the educational philosophies of the Artmobile evolved from developing cultured American citizens through art appreciation and the improvement of public taste to developing individual visitors' visual literacy and providing opportunities to make art historical and personal connections.

The Artmobile: A History

When the VMFA opened its doors to the public on 16 January 1936 it became one of the American South's first state-supported art museums. As mandated by the Virginia General Assembly, the mission of the museum was 'to promote education in the realm of art throughout the Commonwealth.'[1] Therefore, from its inception the VMFA had an educationally-driven mission not just for its local Richmond community, but for the entire state. In the first fifteen years of operation, the VMFA served the state through travelling exhibitions and audio-visual materials which were sent to schools, community centers, and other museums (Christison 1954: 295). However, one of the major challenges of serving a state-wide audience was reaching visitors in rural and low-income areas (Rouser 1985: 110). Cheek believed that the museum could do more for its Virginia audience and advocated for the expansion of programs and educational services in 1949 (Rouser 1985: 111). Additionally, he identified three key problems the museum faced: finding suitable places to exhibit art objects; transporting and installing those objects; and interpreting the objects to the viewing public (Rouser 1985: 111).

Cheek's solution to these challenges was the Artmobile, for which he drew his original designs in June 1950. Correspondence between Cheek and potential funders for the Artmobile during this time reveal that he was also inspired by bookmobiles, or mobile libraries, which travelled to underserved communities and expanded access to reading materials (Rocha and Marandino 2017: 3). The number of bookmobiles increased in the early twentieth century and,

Figure 2. Twelve Portraits: Delacroix to Gaugin *exhibition. 1962. VMFA Photo Archives. © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.*

inspired by their popularity, individual museums designed similar outreach vehicles. For example, the Saint Louis School Museum developed a horse-and-wagon portable museum in 1905 to deliver scientific instruments as well as natural and industrial products from its collection to schools (Rocha and Marandino: 3). In 1913, the Field Museum in Chicago, Illinois, developed its mobile museum which delivered exhibits and models to public schools (Rees 2016: 53). By 1947, the Cleveland Museum of Natural History initiated its Traveling Trailside Museum, which exhibited objects from their museum collection (Alexander 1979: 189).

In the early 1950s, the VMFA received financial support from the Richmond department store Miller & Rhoads and the Virginia Federation of Women's Clubs to bring Cheek's Artmobile designs to life (Rouser 1985: 114). Artmobile I was a specially-outfitted tractor-trailer, measuring 34 feet in length [Fig. 1]. At each location, the Artmobile was connected to a 220-volt outlet, which allowed for lighting, sound, a security alarm, and air conditioning system (Rouser 1985: 115). The length of stay in each community was determined by its population or by the number of schools and community organizations interested in attending the exhibition (Virginia Federation of Women's Clubs 1953: 2). The VMFA provided advance notice of the works on view and major themes showcased in the exhibition to local school, college, and adult groups. Additionally, the museum sent advertising materials to press, radio, and television outlets at each location to promote the arrival of the exhibitions.

Figure 3. Four Active Artmobiles Parked in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Parking Lot, 1967. VMFA Photo Archives. © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

As visitors waited to enter the Artmobile, they were encouraged by the driver-curator to read the large text panels on the exterior of the truck, which presented detailed histories of donors, techniques, or regions relevant to the exhibition [Fig. 2]. The term 'driver-curator' was adopted at the start of the program, and the men and women in this role provided tours, managed the operation and maintenance of the vehicle, and served as the point of contact between host venues and the VMFA. About fifteen visitors were able to circulate through the gallery at a time and, after exiting the Artmobile, visitors could speak with the driver-curator who would answer questions and sell postcards and catalogs (Virginia Federation of Women's Clubs 1953: 3).

In 1962, The Old Dominion Board of Trustees granted the museum funds to construct Artmobile II (Rouser 1985: 117). This tractor-trailer was larger than Artmobile I; at a length of 54 feet, the new addition required a special permit and police escort to travel on Virginia roads (Rouser 1985: 119). By the late 1970s, four Artmobiles circulated throughout Virginia simultaneously [Fig. 3]. Artmobile III was designed to bring materials to the twenty-one museum affiliates in the state, while Artmobile IV specifically served college campuses (Rees 2016: 21). Although the addition of two more Artmobiles was a positive step in the continuation of the program, museum staff became increasingly concerned about the conservation and safety of artworks on board. By the late 1980s, the VMFA significantly decreased the number of original works on the artmobiles, with the exception of works on paper. With growing conservation and financial concerns throughout the decade, the VMFA made the decision to officially terminate the program in 1994 (*Richmond Times-Dispatch* 1994).

Education by Experts: Developing Cultured Citizens

In the first half of the twentieth century, art museums struggled to define 'the values of public education, citizenship, and American identity' (Schwarzer 2006: 3). Additionally, many museums felt a particular obligation to teach working men and women what it meant to be 'cultured, civic-minded Americans' (Schwarzer 2006: 18). While many institutions espoused a mission of educating the public, there was debate within the museum community on defining the terms of museum education. For example, Benjamin Ives Gilman, Secretary of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, wrote in 1918 that a 'museum of art is primarily an institution of culture and only secondarily a seat of learning' (Zeller 1989: 29). Gilman insisted that the art museum was 'not didactic, but aesthetic in primary purpose' and that docents - which Gilman introduced to the museum in 1907 - should 'teach toward' the work of art, not 'from it' or 'about it' (Gilman 1911: 165). In other words, Gilman rejected the notion of using art to impart historical instruction or teach art criticism in favor of guiding the viewer towards the discovery of the lessons found within works of art. Thus the aim of the docent service was to 'first inspire worship before the works of art…then minister to edification from them' (Gilman 1911: 166).

In the aftermath of World War II, many museums felt particularly motivated to educate citizens on the democratic values on which post-war Western society was based (Kai-Kee 2011: 32). As scholar Theodore Lewis Low wrote, 'The argument was brought forward that art provided one of the readiest means…to promote world understanding' (1948: 93). Low argued that during the war, museums reached a turning point in the development of their societal function. Museums were no longer institutions which simply collected and preserved objects, but institutions with 'a vast gathering of visual facts which document and interpret' the development of societies 'through the ages' (Low 1948: 2-3). In displaying this development, art museums contributed to the moral imperative of improving the taste and developing the cultural understanding of the masses. In his 1948 text, *The Art Museum in America,* art historian and critic Walter Pach observed:

> Great works of art museums, like the masterpieces of literature and music, are things we think of when pondering what are call 'permanent values.' Some of these objects have lasted for centuries…and the ideas they offer us have a faculty of renewal that makes them as true today as at the time when they were created (Pach 1948: 1).

Therefore, in examining artworks of the past, museums could help visitors gain an understanding of what Francis Henry Taylor, director of the Metropolitan Museum, called 'the social and political

progress of mankind' (Kai-Kee 2011: 32). The Artmobile's capacity to develop what Walker defined as a 'discerning eye' was thus achieved by teaching visitors the formal elements of art and exposing visitors to the ways in which art reflected a 'humanistic understanding of the world and its problems' (Low 1948: 67).

As Low advocated, museums were an ideal place to teach citizens a broad understanding of a society and its values through studying works of art (1948: 57). This idea was not novel to the mid-twentieth century, however. As cultural sociologist Tony Bennett observed, the idea that the art museum served as a 'moral reformatory' was particularly present in the nineteenth century (2000: 1420). Within the walls of the museum, expert curators assembled a 'range of cultural resources' in such a way as to enable them 'to function as the props and occasions for various forms of civic or moral self-management' (Bennett 2000: 1420). This objective was primarily aimed toward the working classes; by transporting the working man to 'a higher plane of existence' through art, an inner transformation would occur through the changing of 'the working man into a self-regulating moral agent' (Bennett 2000:1414). Echoes of this objective can be heard in John Walkers' call for citizens to 'enrich their lives' through the 'development of the discerning eye'. It was not simply an exposure to art that was important, but the inner transformation of citizens through the improvement of public taste.

Figure 4. George Skadding, Driver-Curator William Gaines at Little Dutch Masters, *"Artmobile – Wise, Virginia" series,* Life Magazine*, 1954.*

The first Artmobile exhibition, *Little Dutch Masters,* exemplified this objective by examining the artists, materials, and techniques of the artworks in relation to the political and economic advancements that took place during the 'golden age' of Dutch painting (Pittman 1994: 1). The exhibition was displayed from October 1953 to October 1955 and featured sixteen paintings by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish artists [Fig. 4]. At the opening ceremony for the exhibition, Virginia Governor John Stewart Battle declared that the Artmobile would 'make this grand old Commonwealth of ours a better place in which to live and raise our children' (Virginia Federation of Women's Clubs 1953: 1). Following Battle's speech, Thomas Beggs, then-director at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, commented on the benefits of the Artmobile. Beggs began by comparing the arrival of the Artmobile with the 'pleasure enjoyed by members of a household that have recently acquired a new pleasure car' (1953b: 1).

The juxtaposition of the comments made by Battle and Beggs is particularly striking. On the one hand, Battle's comment reflected the idea that museums offered ideal places for even the youngest American citizens to learn about societies and their values. On the other hand, the comparison of the Artmobile with a 'pleasure car' posed a paternalistic scenario in which the museum gifted the community with an emblem of cultural prosperity. Like Battle, Beggs noted the influence of works of art on younger generations, stating that through the study of the 'sensitive hand of a master', an opportunity was created to induce 'in the observer the emotions of the original act of creation' (1953b: 2). At the same time, Artmobile exhibitions would provide visitors with a 'diversity of…experiences' that would 'enrich the understanding' of American and global histories (Beggs 1953b: 2). Beggs concluded his remarks by thanking the administrators of the Commonwealth 'under whose supervision this project cannot help but develop a greater awareness of art' (1953b: 4).

In order to develop this greater awareness of art, visitors were given information about the artists, materials, and techniques on display. As described in the exhibition booklet, 'The Little Masters', this exhibition demonstrated how 'few painters have more directly responded to the life of their time than did the artists of the northern and southern Netherlands during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries' (1953a: 1). An emphasis was placed on Dutch landscapes and seascapes as well as characteristics of Dutch life. In examining these particular works, visitors would discover the connection between the artwork of these centuries and the prosperous Dutch nation.

Figure 5. The Williams Collection *exhibition. 1965. VMFA Photo Archives. © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.*

Object labels in the exhibition booklet provided concise biographical information about each artist. For example, Ludolf Bakhuyzen was a 'bookkeeper by trade' who began his artistic career 'making ink sketches on ships' (1953a: 3). After achieving recognition for his large oil compositions, he abandoned bookkeeping to pursue his artistic career. The entry for this painting also acknowledged Bakhuyzen's trips to the banks of the Zuiderzee ports to 'study the rough water dashing against the rocks' (1953a: 3). Visitors were then told to notice this in the reproduced image, 'both in the details of the ships and in the forces of the storm' (1953a: 3). Beyond this description, little visual analysis was provided. Instead, the entry concluded

with the observation that the Netherlands was a major sea power in the seventeenth century and, as a result, nautical images were in high demand. In examining the formal qualities of the works on view and learning about the artists who painted them, visitors gained the art historical information necessary for their development as cultured citizens.

The philosophical idea that museums developed cultured citizens through art appreciation was similarly reflected in *The Williams Collection* exhibition, which was displayed from January 1965 to December 1966 [Fig. 5]. The exhibition featured twenty art objects from a larger donation made by the Williams family and marked the first occasion in which the collection travelled outside of the museum (Pittman 1994: 12). Similar to *Little Dutch Masters,* this exhibition emphasized artist biography, materials and techniques, and taxonomies of style. The works on view showcased a range of objects, including paintings by Delacroix, Monet, and Rembrandt as well as ancient Greek vases, Egyptian gold cups, and American silver pieces.

As previously noted, before the Artmobile's arrival in a particular city, the VMFA would send marketing and promotional materials to advertise the exhibition. One newspaper editorial provided by the VMFA for *The Williams Collection* began by stating that, 'art is often a personal, private matter, and collectors may acquire works for a variety of reasons…Even a small collection of the world's great art can be a timely investment in timeless beauty' (1965b). Throughout the exhibition, visitors were not only presented with examples of artistic masterpieces, but also invited to examine the ways in which art reflected the history of humankind. When visitors entered the exhibition, they had an opportunity to view the artworks on display before the audio commentary began.[2] After describing the Williams donation, the narration asserted:

> Throughout history man [sic] has created works of art to fulfill his various needs:
>
> paintings of historical subjects to record the significant events of history; religious works to render the abstract spirit of man's Gods [sic] into concrete form; genre paintings to show the day to day activities of man; and, in our own time, paintings which reflect the expressions of the artist himself.[3]

Following this observation, the narration subsequently guided the visitors to ten paintings in the exhibition. The first painting visitors were encouraged to examine was Claude Monet's *View of Montmartre.* The narration identified Monet as a 'prominent member of a group who worked and exhibited in France in the late nineteenth century.'[4] The narration then described Monet as rebelling against the art of the *Salon* through his exploration of ways to capture 'a fleeting moment of time on canvas.'[5] Monet achieved this in *View of Montmartre* by 'employing short slashes of almost monochromatic color' to 'capture the feeling of snow'.[6] Through this artistic rebellion, Monet and his fellow Impressionists freed the artist from the studio and the stagnant style of the *Salon* and 'started the movement toward the variety of expressions found in the art of our time'.[7] What visitors were ultimately asked to notice and examine were the formal qualities of the artwork. Through this examination, visitors would develop an appreciation for the effects that resulted from Monet's application of color. As Francis Henry Taylor wrote, art museums had the ability to 'preserve the fragments of the past' and, in doing so, taught 'the truth of the ages which produced them' (1945: 78). For Taylor, it was this dual understanding that developed 'in the individual a capacity for improvement' (1945: 78).

The interpretative text in *The Williams Collection* demonstrated an educational relationship in which the art historical expert directed the eye of the visitor to certain compositional elements. For example, in the description for Teniers the Younger's *The Village Holiday,* the narration identified this type of painting as 'genre', or the depiction of scenes of everyday life. The narration subsequently observed that the artist had 'carefully composed the scene with a series of horizontal movements all tied together with the receding serpentine line of the dancers'.[8] The visitors were then instructed to 'notice the individuality of the faces of all the participants in the dance' and 'notice how this attention to individuality captures the joviality and spirit of the happy event'.[9] Ultimately it was the compositional elements of each painting which were brought to the visitors' attention and led to the development of their taste and appreciation for the arts.

Two art educators, Elliot Eisner and David Ecker, described art education during the 1950s and 1960s in the following terms: 'If society saw education as a means of creating an individual culture, art was seen as a tool for developing cultured tastes and cultural accomplishments' (Newsom and Silver 1978: 17). This objective was present in *Little Dutch Masters* and *The*

Williams Collection, during which the VMFA demonstrated its commitment to developing cultured citizens through the study of works of art and improvement of public taste. In line with many exhibitions of the decade, both exhibitions primarily presented paintings created by white European men. Similarly, photographs from the exhibitions suggest that the exhibitions were primarily attended by a white audience. Since driver-curators were not responsible for recording audience demographics, it is impossible to determine who attended each exhibition. Moreover, while the aforementioned exhibitions were Eurocentric in focus, the Artmobile did present exhibitions on Egyptian, pre-Columbian, and Chinese art in the 1950s and early 1960s.

What ultimately united the early Artmobile exhibitions was the educational objective of improving public taste through direct exposure to artworks. The presentation of information in both exhibitions was authoritative in that visitors were told what to notice and given the information that was deemed pertinent to develop an appreciation of the artworks on display. Similarly, the tone of exhibition materials and comments about the exhibition reinforced an educational relationship in which the art experts provided the necessary context and information for visitors to develop an appreciation for the fine arts and transform visitors into a cultured, civic-minded citizenry.

Making Connections: The Development of Visual Literacy

As cultural historian Morris Dickstein observed, the 'American culture of the 1960s was characterized by a "demystification of authority", which was a reaction against the repressive, hierarchical, and authoritarian culture of the 1950s' (Rawlins 1978: 10). Bennett similarly noted that within the social context of the 1960s, new social movements led by civil rights activists and libertarians led to 'new forms of identity politics and empowerment' (2000: 1421). These shifts were present in the emergence of new theories and styles in museum education during the 1960s and 1970s (Kai-Kee 2011: 37). New philosophies included the direct involvement of the visitor through music, dance, and drama as well as replacing traditional lecture tours with activities that encouraged participation and discovery (Newsom and Silver 1978: 17). Educators also began to prioritize teaching visual awareness, or 'learning to look', at the compositional elements in a work of art. As museum educator Adele Silver noted, museums in the 1970s had 'as perhaps their most popular, or most often stated, goal…of teaching visual awareness or perception: how to see' (1978: 269). The objective of this sensory education was to teach visitors to see and respond, 'to draw pleasure and instruction from the work of art itself independent of its maker or its place in' art history (Silver 1978: 269-70).

Yet, these educational shifts were not always clean-cut; rather, educational philosophies such as the aesthetic ideal or the significance of the visitor experience were debated by educators well into the twentieth century. For example, in the early 1970s, museum educator and fine arts professor John T. Murphey promoted museum experiences that prioritized the feelings of the visitor over information about the art object (1970: 16). For Murphey, the concern of museums was not providing information about objects, but discovering the ways in which objects could be used as 'catalysts for experience' (Zeller 1989: 46). In the same decade, George Heard Hamilton, director of the Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, argued that the responsibility of museums was to provide 'the most fundamental aesthetic experiences…rather than exercises in historical retrospection' (1975: 117).

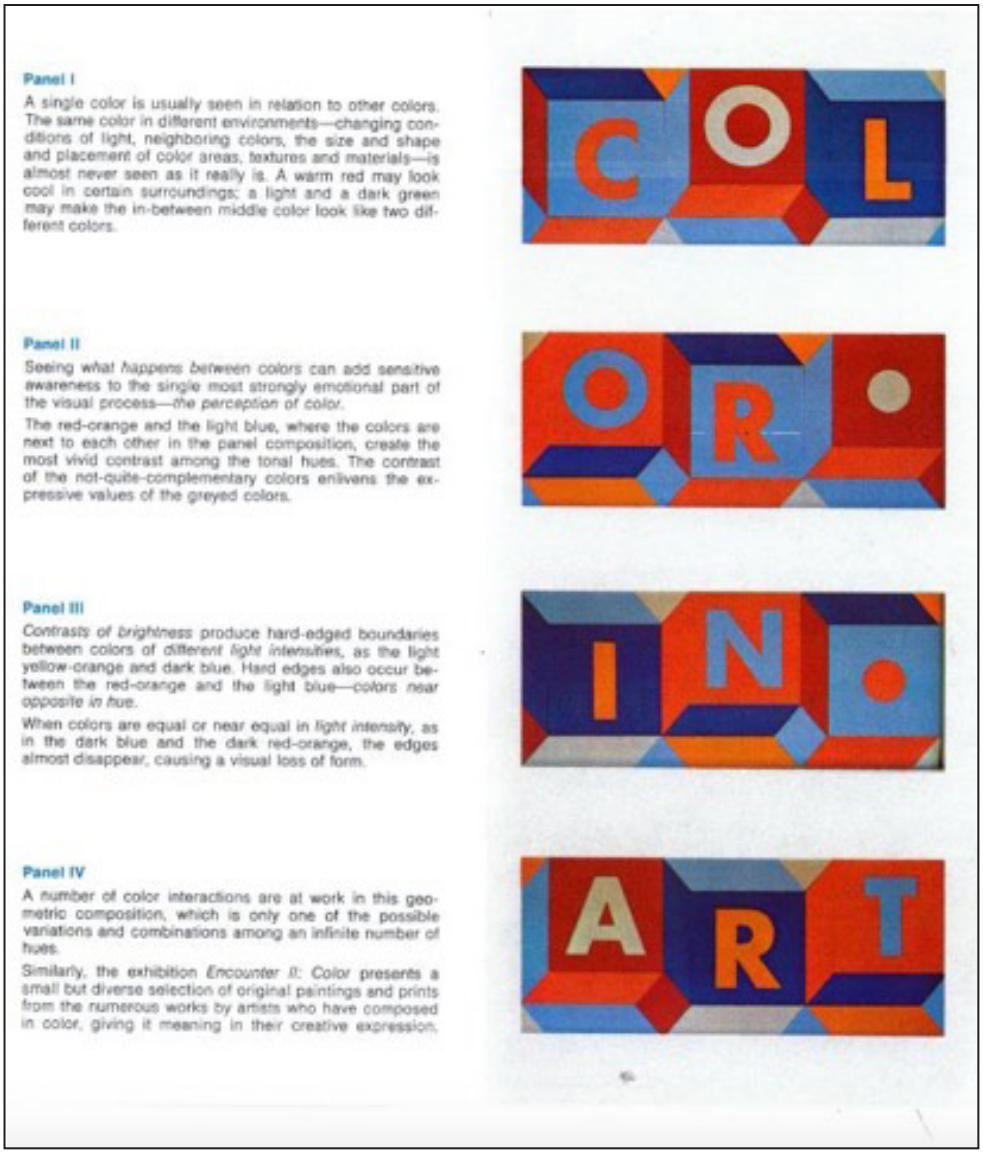
The *Encounter* exhibitions, *Space* and *Color,* exemplified the task among museum educators to teach visitors how to recognize and read the formal elements of art and understand their own process of looking. Unlike the *Little Dutch Masters* exhibition, which emphasized collective improvement of public taste, the *Encounter* exhibitions sought to transform the individual viewer's awareness of their own visual processes. In order to accomplish this, visitors were provided with a toolkit of art historical terms and concepts related to each artistic concept. The *Encounter I: Space* exhibition, displayed from September 1971 to May 1972, was the first of two Artmobile exhibitions to explore conceptual themes related to artistic practice [Fig. 6]. The exhibition featured twenty-two artworks, including paintings, lithographs, prints, silk screens, and reliefs, that examined ways in which artists depicted space. Object labels for this exhibition emphasized materials and techniques and the ways in which each artist constructed space and perspective in each work. For example, the object label for Georges

Braques' *Nature Morte* explained the spatial arrangement of the composition: 'The objects in this simplified arrangement are seen from different angles: the goblet is drawn in profile, the dish holding fruit is drawn in plain view while the table top is tilted forward' (1971b). Another example of compositional description is found in the object label for the Peruvian textile, *Woven Shirt with Bird Pattern*, which described 'the rhythmic progression of the anthropomorphic designs and the horizontal patterning of bird forms' which served as a repetitive measure of space (1971b). In emphasizing the compositional elements and explaining how artists defined space in each work, visitors were provided with a collection of terms and concepts they could apply in their examination of artworks from other periods.

Figure 6. Encounter I: *Space exhibition. 1971. Exterior Panels. VMFA Photo Archives. © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.*

The idea that space was a universal characteristic which visitors could learn and apply to different types of art was reinforced in comments made by Artmobile coordinator Phyllis Houser. One press release for the exhibition contained an interview excerpt in which Houser explained, 'Space is environmental' and artists respond to their environments in both their 'actions and… art' (1971a). She continued by stating that, through the examination of the artworks in *Space*, visitors would learn to read 'the visual language of the past' and 'recognize the continuity between the arts of the past and those of the present day' (Houser 1971a). Houser also described how the educator accompanying the Artmobile during this time contributed to the development of visitors' visual literacy through slideshow lectures. The educator provided information on artwork ranging from Paleolithic cave drawings to twentieth-century painting, concluding that 'a work of art is a sort of mediator between the inner world', which artists try 'to order, and the outerworld – our complicated environment with its many differences in experience' (1971c: 6).

The partner exhibition, *Encounter II: Color,* which was displayed from September 1972 to February 1974, featured eighteen paintings in conjunction with explanations of the processes of vision and color perception. As visitors entered the exhibition, they were given a pamphlet which encouraged them to consider what happens in various color relationships and how this understanding could add a 'sensitive awareness' to the relationship between their visual process and a work of art [Fig. 7]. In the introduction, color was described as an 'element used to construct symbolic meaning, or as a secondary element used to capture naturalistic



Panel I

A single color is usually seen in relation to other colors. The same color in different environments—changing conditions of light, neighboring colors, the size and shape and placement of color areas, textures and materials—is almost never seen as it really is. A warm red may look cool in certain surroundings; a light and a dark green may make the in-between middle color look like two different colors.

Panel II

Seeing what *happens between* colors can add sensitive awareness to the single most strongly emotional part of the visual process—*the perception of color.*

The red-orange and the light blue, where the colors are next to each other in the panel composition, create the most vivid contrast among the tonal hues. The contrast of the not-quite-complementary colors enlivens the expressive values of the greyed colors.

Panel III

Contrasts of brightness produce hard-edged boundaries between colors of *different light intensities*, as the light yellow-orange and dark blue. Hard edges also occur between the red-orange and the light blue—*colors near opposite in hue.*

When colors are equal or near equal in *light intensity*, as in the dark blue and the dark red-orange, the edges almost disappear, causing a visual loss of form.

Panel IV

A number of color interactions are at work in this geometric composition, which is only one of the possible variations and combinations among an infinite number of hues.

Similarly, the exhibition *Encounter II: Color* presents a small but diverse selection of original paintings and prints from the numerous works by artists who have composed in color, giving it meaning in their creative expression.

Figure 7. A page from the Encounter II: *Color exhibition pamphlet, in which color theories were explained through comparison and contrast. 1972. VMFA Photo Archives. ©Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.*

effects, to a major role of creative importance' (1972: 3). The relationship between colors was identified as 'a major concern for the artist'; thus, learning to read various color relationships was a necessary component in the development of the visitor's visual literacy (1972: 3).

The third page of the exhibition pamphlet provided four examples of color relationships: contrast of extension; light and dark; complementary contrast; and simultaneous contrast. Each section contained explanations of the theory behind various color relationships in two to three sentences. The tone of the explanations was straightforward and direct, allowing for a general audience to easily absorb the information and apply it to works inside the exhibition. For example, in 'Simultaneous Contrast', the accompanying explanation asked the visitor to look at

a grey square on a blue-green background, noting that when one looked at the background of the interior square for an extended period of time, the shape became tinged with a red-orange hue. The text explained, 'The sensation that occurs is not physically present…but is perceived by the eye and the brain. This contrast simultaneously supplies the complementary color that the eye requires' (1972: 2).

The *Encounter* exhibitions invited visitors to consider their visual process as it related to color. In doing so, visitors could develop an appreciation of the artwork on display through the understanding of art historical concepts and the ways in which artists have historically explored the characteristics of space and color. Additionally, visitors would be able to use their art historical toolkit of terms and concepts to engage in future conversations about different types of artwork. In the aforementioned press release for *Encounter I*, the purpose of the exhibition was defined as providing a 'viewer with greater insight into the creation of a work of art. By increasing perception, enjoyment is increased correspondingly' (1971a). While noticing an artist's use of color or techniques for creating space enhanced the visitor's knowledge of artistic practice, it also contributed to the visitor's ability to read a work of art and understand their own process of looking.

Education through Experience: Making Personal Connections

Toward the end of the twentieth century, many museum education programs shifted further away from teaching through formalism to emphasizing the visitor's role in making connections (Kai-Kee 2011: 39). In 1984, museum educator Patterson Williams argued that teaching visual literacy should extend beyond teaching the elements of art, to instructing visitors on 'how to have personally significant experiences with objects' (1984: 10). The interest in personally significant experiences developed into larger philosophical shifts: that museums served people of diverse learning levels and that the visitor experience was as significant as the art object (Muhlberger 1985: 98). In 1988, Danielle Rice, curator of education at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, argued that teaching visual literacy was no longer about providing visitors with a set of critical and analytical skills to look at art, but 'making sense of art and being able to apply to daily life the learning and experiences derived from original objects' (1988: 13). The following year, Susan Sternberg contended that artworks have little meaning unless 'ideas and objects are related to the visitor's experiences, feelings, and imaginative skills' (1989: 155).

In the 1990s, some museum educators embraced the viewpoint that museums were not simply places in which knowledge was transmitted, but also a place in which knowledge was produced (Rice 1995: 17). Lois Silverman, director of the Center on History-Making in America, discussed this changed relationship, asking 'What is the nature of interpretation?' and 'Who makes meaning?' in the museum setting (1993: 7). Silverman's questions demonstrated the larger debates of defining the object-visitor relationship; in particular, defining 'meaning-making' and the ways in which museum educators could provide opportunities for visitors to make personal connections. While there was no uniform definition of what constituted meaning-making, there was a clear interest among educators to create more inclusive ways of interacting in the museum and that visitors 'share authority' with museum professionals in constructing meaning (Silverman 1993: 7).

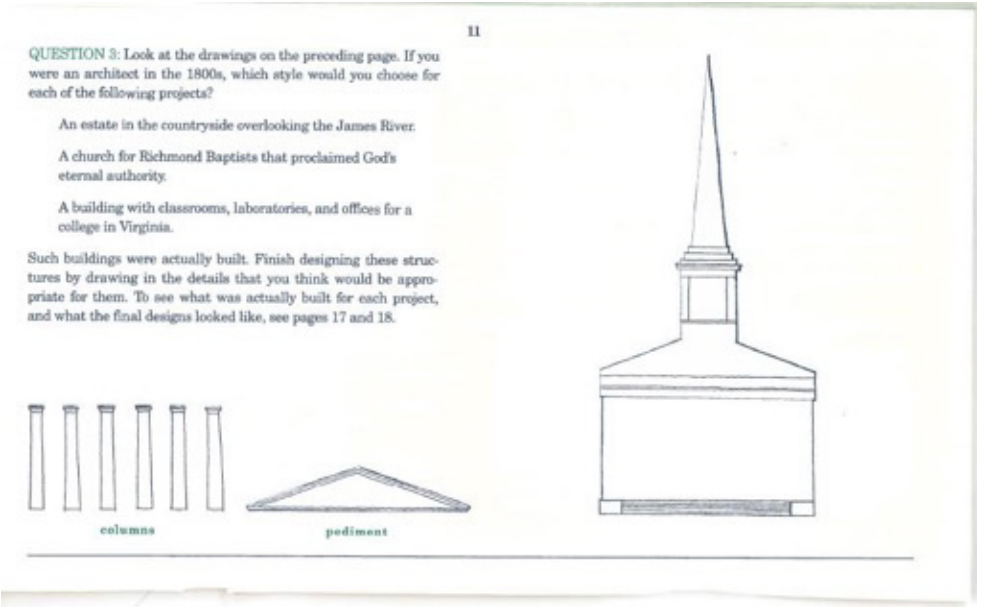
During this decade, theoretical and philosophical developments within museum education were also articulated by national organizations. In 1992, the American Alliance of Museums reaffirmed its commitment to education in the report titled *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums.* As Hein observed, this report not only emphasized the educational role of museums, but also their commitment to community service (1998: 9). Moreover, the report stated that museums shared the responsibility of other educational institutions to 'nurture an enlightened, humane citizenry that appreciates the value of knowing about its past, is…engaged in the present, and is determined to shape a future in which many experiences and points of view are given a voice' (Hein 1998: 9-10). The creation of an 'enlightened, humane citizenry' evokes the cultural development and art appreciation intentions discussed in the context of the 1950s; however, the recognition of a multiplicity of voices and experiences demonstrated the changed relationship between museum and audience at the

end of the twentieth century. Indeed, as Bennett noted, one of the major turning points from the mid- to late twentieth century was that that 'it is no longer the classed individual that is targeted as the primary surface to which the actions of art and culture are to be applied' (2000: 1420). Instead, an emphasis was placed on empowering communities through the use of artistic resources.

Figure 8. Introducing Virginia Architecture. *1992. VMFA Photo Archives. ©Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.*

The final Artmobile exhibition, *Introducing Virginia Architecture,* displayed from September 1992 to May 1994, exemplified some of these philosophical developments in the exploration of architectural terms and concepts. The exhibition included thirty-three photographs, models, diagrams, and drawings which examined the forms and qualities of Virginia architecture from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries [Fig. 8]. Similar to the *Encounter* exhibitions, *Introducing Virginia Architecture* presented architectural terms and characteristics, while also engaging with visitors by asking them questions, facilitating activities, and providing opportunities to make personal connections.

In addition to examining various types of architectural forms in the exhibition, visitors could also look through an accompanying exhibition packet. The packet was divided into


11

QUESTION 3: Look at the drawings on the preceding page. If you were an architect in the 1800s, which style would you choose for each of the following projects?

An estate in the countryside overlooking the James River.

A church for Richmond Baptists that proclaimed God's eternal authority.

A building with classrooms, laboratories, and offices for a college in Virginia.

Such buildings were actually built. Finish designing these structures by drawing in the details that you think would be appropriate for them. To see what was actually built for each project, and what the final designs looked like, see pages 17 and 18.

columns

pediment

Figure 9. A page from the Introducing Virginia Architecture *booklet. 1992. VMFA Photo Archives. ©Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.*

three sections: architectural drawings and forms; architectural expression; and architectural structures. The first section discussed Thomas Jefferson's Monticello in relation to architectural plans. The introduction stated, 'When Jefferson began designing Monticello, there were few professional architects anywhere, especially in the colonies. Using books and his own careful observation, Jefferson taught himself the art of architecture' (1992: 2). Accompanying the explanation was a reproduction of Jefferson's 'sophisticated' architectural plan for Monticello and a description of how architects used drawings to help them visualize their idea: 'Architects use different types of drawings to help them 'see' their ideas…The plan is an outline or map of one floor of a building, as though you were looking down on a building that had the roof lifted off' (1992: 4).[10] When new terms or concepts were introduced, the text was often highlighted so that the visitor would recognize it as an important term in the architectural field. At the end of each section, a series of questions and activities were presented. For example, following the discussion of architectural plans, visitors had the option of cutting out and assembling the plan for the west façade of Monticello. Visitors were also presented with a matching activity in which they identified various architectural forms on a photograph of the west façade.

In the section on architectural structures, visitors were invited to explore the late twentieth-century architecture of Dulles International Airport, which the packet identified as the 'first airport created specifically for travel by jet aircraft' (1992: 14). After examining architect Eero Saarinen's plans for the roof of the airport, the booklet posed two questions. The first question asked, 'What architectural forms might best express the concept of the jet age?' (1992: 14). As visitors considered the reasons for this architectural choice, they were encouraged to pretend their hand was a jet plane taking off and to make that shape with their hand. The second question asked the visitor to describe what kind of path their hand made (1992: 14). Although encouraging movement in the exhibition space had roots in the 1970s, the inclusion of different visual and kinesthetic activities demonstrated the continued interest in the 1990s of addressing different learning styles through interactive activities.

At the end of the exhibition booklet, visitors were encouraged to use the information they acquired throughout the exhibition and imagine themselves as an architect in the 1800s. The visitor was subsequently presented with different architectural features and asked to choose the appropriate styles for a countryside estate, a church, and a college [Fig. 9]. In

doing so, this activity engaged the reader to reflect on what they read and make choices based on the histories of architectural style. The final question that visitors were presented with in the exhibition packet was, 'What is your favorite building you live in? Did the architect use forms like any of the ones you have seen in this exhibition?' (1992: 15). While the underlying purpose of *Introducing Virginia Architecture* was providing visitors with a toolkit of terms and concepts that they could use to engage in conversations about architecture, visitors were now asked to answer questions and make personal connections between the architectural examples in the exhibition and architecture in their own towns. Ultimately, the visitor was no longer expected to passively look at artworks and absorb information dictated by educators or audio recordings, but rather participate and develop their own understanding of architectural practice in their own communities.

Conclusion

Studying the history of American museums and exhibitions offers us an opportunity to examine instances in which institutions have answered the central questions museums face: 'What must we be, and for whom, and to what purpose?' (Schwarzer 2006: 4). Cheek's answers to these questions was the Artmobile, which reflected the VMFA's commitment to its statewide mission by bringing sixty exhibitions to cities and towns throughout Virginia. The five exhibitions explored in this article were not necessarily ahead of their time in terms of the artwork and artists represented; however, the idea of physically transporting original artworks outside of the museum walls represented a turning point in the ways that art museums engaged with their surrounding communities. Ultimately, analyzing the materials related to these five exhibitions in relation to contemporaneous museum scholarship reveals a philosophical evolution from developing cultured citizens through art appreciation and the improvement of public taste to providing individual visitors with information and opportunities to make art historical and personal connections. What educators gain from tracing this history is not only the story of educational strategies used within these Artmobile exhibitions, but also an understanding of the complex evolution of the mid- to late-twentieth century educational concepts underlying those strategies.

Changes in educational philosophies were not simply determined by discourse within the field of museum education; rather, the evolution of these changes must also be situated in relation to changes within American society during the second half of the twentieth century. As Bennett observed:

Museums have served as important sites for the historical production of a range of new entities…which, through contrived and carefully monitored 'civic experiments' directed at target populations (the workingman, children, migrants) within the museum space, have been brought to act on the social in varied ways (2005: 525).

As the relationship between the museum and visitor changed, the objective of these so-called 'civic experiments' also evolved. While the lack of archival evidence regarding audience demographics makes it difficult to analyze this evolution in relation to different groups within American society, there is a notable change in the relationship between museum and viewer from experts creating a cultured citizenry to a more democratic process of learning to look and allowing the viewer to make personal connections.

On 30 October 2018, the VMFA relaunched the Artmobile program for a contemporary audience. The 53-foot trailer, now called 'VMFA on the Road', once again provides art experiences to residents throughout the state, in addition to interactive learning experiences and virtual reality tours of the VMFA (Clark 2017). Like its predecessor, the mission of 'VMFA on the Road' is to bring the museum experience to all corners of Virginia, in particular remote and rural areas where residents cannot easily access the museum at its Richmond location (Clark 2017). Ultimately, while the resurgence of this program is a powerful testament to the impact of the Artmobile in the twentieth century, it will be up to future educators to interpret the legacy of educational strategies related to the twenty-first century mobile art museum.

Received: 17 May 2018
Finally Accepted: 1 February 2019

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Margaret Lindauer for her insight and guidance during the course of my research. I am also grateful to Jeffrey Allison, Courtney Tkacz, and the library staff at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts for supporting my archival research.

Notes

1 Virginia General Assembly. (1936) 'Code of Virginia §23.1-3216,' Retrieved from https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title23.1/

2 I transcribed the narration recording for *The Williams Collection* exhibition at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Archives on 15 October 2017.

3 *The Williams Collection,* 1965 digital recording, (8:18-8:30), 15 October 2017, RG260970, Audiovisual Media Collection (RG-26), VMFA Archives, Richmond, Virginia.

4 *The Williams Collection*, (10:01-10:05).

5 *The Williams Collection,* (10:05-10:09).

6 *The Williams Collection,* (10:36-10:40).

7 *The Williams Collection,* (10:40-10:45).

8 *The Williams Collection,* (13:35-13:40).

9 *The Williams Collection,* (13:41-13:44).

10 Bolded text from original *Introducing Virginia Architecture* exhibition packet.

References

Alexander, E.P. (1979) *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*, Nashville: American Association for State and Local History.

Bennett, T. (2000) 'Acting on the Social: Art, Culture, and Government', *American Behavioral Scientist,* 43 (9) 1412-1428.

Bennett, T. (2005) 'Civic Laboratories: Museums, Cultural Objecthood and the Governance of the Social', *Cultural Studies,* 19 (5) 521-547.

Cheek, L. (1958) 'Letter from Leslie Cheek Jr. to John Walker', 20 October, Box 5, Folder 32, Artmobile Documents: Opening – Roanoke, 1958, State Government Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

Christison, M.B. (1954) 'The Artmobile: A New Experiment in Education', *College Art Journal,* 13 (4) 295-301.

Gilman, B.I. (1911) 'Docent Service: Teaching of and by Works of Art; Its Weakness and Its Strength', *Art and Progress,* 2 (6) 165-167.

Hamilton, G.H. (1975) 'Education and Scholarship in the American Museum', in Sherman E. Lee (ed) *On Understanding Art Museums,* 117, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Hein, G. (1998) *Learning in the Museum,* New York: Routledge Press.

Kai-Kee, E. (2011) 'A Brief History of Teaching in the Art Museum', in Rika Burnham and

Elliott Kai-Kee (eds) *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience,* 19-58, Los Angeles: Getty Publications.

Low, T. (1948) *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Art Museums in the United States*, New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Muhlberger, R. (1985) 'After Art History, What? A Personal View of the Shaping of Art Museum Education', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 19 (2) 93-103.

Murphey, J.T. (1970) 'What You Can Do with Your Education Department', *Museum News,* 49 (2) 16-20.

Newsom, B.Y. and Silver, A.Z. (eds) (1978) *The Art Museum as Educator,* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Pach, W. (1948) *The Art Museum in America,* New York: Pantheon Books.

Pittman, D. (1994) *VMFA Artmobile Exhibition History (1953-1994),* Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Archives, Richmond, Virginia.

Rawlins, K. (1978) 'Educational Metamorphosis of the American Museum', *Studies in Art Education* 20 (1) 4-17.

Rees, J. (2016) 'A Brief History of the Mobile Museum: What it is, what it was, and what it can be', Master's Thesis, Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas.

Rice, D. (1988) 'Vision and Culture: The Role of Museums in Visual Literacy', *The Journal of Museum Education,* 13 (3) 13-17.

Richmond Times-Dispatch. (1994) 'After 41 years, it's curtains for Artmobile', *Richmond Times-Dispatch,* 29 April, VMFA Archives.

Rocha, J.N. and Marandino, M. (2017) 'Mobile Science Museums and Centres and their History in the Public Communication of Science', *Journal of Science Communication,* 16 (3) 1-24.

Rouser, P. (1985). *Living by Design: Leslie Cheek and the Arts, a Photobiography,*

Williamsburg, Virginia: College of William and Mary Press.

Schwarzer, M. (2006) *Riches, Rivals, and Radicals: 100 Years of Museums in America*, Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums.

Silver, A.Z. (1978) 'Programs for Schoolchildren in Museums', in Barbara Newsom and Adele Silver (eds) *The Art Museum as Educator,* 266-272, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Silverman, L. (1993) 'Making Meaning Together: Lessons from the Field of American History', *The Journal of Museum Education,* 18 (3) 7-11.

Sternberg, S. (1989) 'The Art of Participation', in *Museum Education: History, Theory and Practice,* 154-172, Reston, Virginia: The National Art Education Association.

Taylor, F.H. (1945) *Babel's Tower: The Dilemma of the Modern Museum,* New York: Columbia University Press.

Virginia Federation of Women's Clubs. (1953) 'The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Members' Bulletin' 14(3), Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Archives, Richmond, Virginia.

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. (1953a) 'The Little Masters', Audiovisual Media Collection (RG-26), Box 18 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Archives, Richmond, Virginia.

(1953b) 'Remarks at the Opening of the Artmobile by Thomas M. Beggs, Director

National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.' Audiovisual Media Collection (RG-26), Box 18 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Archives, Richmond, Virginia.

(1965a) 'The Williams Collection Audio Narration Transcript', Audiovisual Media Collection (RG-26), Box 18 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Archives, Richmond, Virginia.

(1965b) 'Suggested Background Editorial or Column for Newspaper or Radio', Audiovisual Media Collection (RG-26), Box 18 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Archives, Richmond, Virginia.

(1971a) 'Artmobile Exhibition Explained by Organizer', Audiovisual Media Collection (RG-26), Box 21 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Archives, Richmond, Virginia.

(1971b) 'Encounter I: Space Object Labels', Audiovisual Media Collection (RG-26), Box 21 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Archives, Richmond, Virginia.

(1971c) 'Encounter I: Space Slide Script No. II', Audiovisual Media Collection (RG-26), Box 21 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Archives, Richmond, Virginia.

(1972) 'Encounter II: Exhibition Pamphlet', Audiovisual Media Collection (RG-26), Box 21 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Archives, Richmond, Virginia.

(1992) 'Introducing Virginia Architecture', Records of the Education and Outreach Department (RG-07) VMFA Archives, Richmond, Virginia.

Walker, J. 'Speech for Roanoke Artmobile Opening Exhibition, Oct. 13, 1958', Box 5, Folder 32, Artmobile Documents: Opening – Roanoke, 1958, State Government Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

Williams, P.B. (1984) 'Object Contemplation: Theory into Practice', *Roundtable Reports* 9 (1) 12-15.

Zeller, T. (1989) 'The Historical and Philosophical Foundation of Art Museum Education in America', in *Museum Education: History, Theory, and Practice,* 10-89, Reston, Virginia: The National Art Education Association.

Maureen O'Connor* Virginia Commonwealth University
Maureen received her Master's degree in art history and museum studies from Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. Her research interests include the history of museum education theory and practice as well as the influence of this history on contemporary art museums visitors. She has interned in education departments at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia. She currently works as a visitor guide at the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C.

oconnorm2@vcu.edu