

**2015 National Docent Symposium  
Bridge to the Past: Path to the Future**

**The Path to the Future: Key Themes**

The opening plenary session of the 2015 National Docent Symposium in Cincinnati set the stage for the meeting which focused on the Path to the Future: Preparing the Museum for 2025. Speakers for this panel reflected a diversity of institutions: the Cincinnati Art Museum, the Mt. Holyoke College Museum, the Taft Museum of Art, a national historic landmark, and the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati. Institutions represented by speakers in other plenary sessions included the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the School for Creative and Performing Arts in Cincinnati, The Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden, Google Apps for Education, and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art.

Three overarching themes in the opening session and other plenary sessions were:

- The increasing trend toward broader forms of engagement
- The importance of reaching out beyond the museum to multiple audiences
- The opportunities afforded by new technologies

In the first theme, speakers throughout the Symposium emphasized that, “Museums need to be not just a temple on the hill where you see beautiful objects but a place to turn on, be engaged, and participate.” If visitors have a good time, they WILL come back.

Docents today, and in the future, need to be nimble and flexible. As we have experienced, visitors, both adults and students, can and want to engage with the art, not just look at art. Docents are a key vehicle in shaping their experiences with art by encouraging conversations, storytelling, and hands-on activities that engage visitors with art in ways that reflect their own life experiences and interests. It is easier to hold on to information if it is imbedded in a story and a visual picture.

Docents no longer teach ABOUT art but teach with art. Art needs to be a tool for education, involvement, and entertainment.

Arts-based learning is not only fun but can improve performance in business, organizations, professions, and schools because it is easier to hold on to information if it is imbedded in a story and a visual picture.

Museums can and should do things that schools are not doing. School tours with docents not only help students (and other visitors) experience connections between art and other subjects and can help build multiple critical learning skills including critical thinking, communication, interpretation, and empathy. I think all of us were energized and encouraged that our Honolulu Museum is in the forefront with

**our student tours and new venues for public engagement with art.**

**Second, speakers stressed that museums need to proactively reach outside the museum to many audiences through multiple venues, e.g., blogs, twitter, instagrams, selfies, newspapers, talks, lectures, and entertainment. One speaker said that the more that art is on the internet, the more people come in to see the actual art. So we do not need to be afraid putting our art on the internet and social media will decrease museum attendance. The reverse is true.**

**Third, speakers in the plenary sessions encouraged museums to welcome and use the opportunities afforded by new technologies such as social media, i-pads, cell phones, and Google art sites. We should not be afraid of new technologies – they are one bridge to the future of taking people on a life long journey with art. The only cautionary note is that we need to use technologies in ways that eliminate barriers, not introduce them.**

**New technologies also enable museums to engage and collaborate easily with each other about lessons learned and best practices, opportunities, and art discoveries. We cannot all do leading research or have huge collections but we can learn and borrow from other museums.**

**At this point, I'd like to ask my fellow adventurers at the 2015 NDS Symposium for any additional (brief) comments.**

**(COMMENTS)**

**Thank you. We'll now turn to four activities from the breakout sessions.**

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