

# *From Collecting to Sharing: New Possibility of Museum Culture and Public Education in Korea through Volunteer Docent*

Jooyeon Han, Educator  
Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art (Seoul, Korea)

## *A Story about Volunteer Docent of Korean Art Museum*

In 1997, volunteering began at the Ho-am Gallery, of Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art. Though the National Museum of Korea had its volunteer program from 1970's, the program was limited to the attendees who finished an academic program from the Museum Committee. In 1996, the National Museum of Modern Art attempted to start its volunteer program but was having difficulties due to geographical disadvantage and such. Meanwhile, Ho-am Gallery, with its more advantageous location and distinctive exhibitions, began its docent program. The program commenced with twelve unpaid volunteers as docents; soon their passionate activities created a vibrant community in the art world. Despite its small number, the group had a large influence over the beginnings of art museum volunteer programs.



그림 1, 2 Ho-am Gallery docents at Wooden furniture in Joseon dynasty and Ufan Lee retrospective

Ho-am Gallery closed its doors in 2004 and opened new museum, Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art. At this museum, the volunteer programs' responsibilities were expanded to include visitor services as well. Also, the integration of the museum collection was based on two

kinds of collections, modern art and Korean traditional art works. These contrasting permanent and special exhibitions were a new challenge to the docents, who were faced with an increased range of art history to cover. The new architectural element of the museum was another interesting aspect to the visitors, of which the docents acquired artistic knowledge in a short range of time in order to greet the museum audience. Even during this unusual time period, the docents shared their difficulties and strengthened their relationships within their community. The older docents were required supported the new docents. As if putting the pieces together of a jigsaw puzzle, the docents came to create a guideline of high standards. It was through those who were already aware of the basis of art history knowledge and volunteer programs that we were able to go through hard times such as these. Rather than describing my decade's work experience as managing and evaluating them, I was able to research the audience's needs and reactions with the docents' help. Also, encountering the docents' educational perspective between the curators and the visitors encouraged my responsibility as an educator. It was during these last years with the docents that I executed several surveys to discover educational meanings and characteristics in their learning process.

### *Characteristics of Art Museum Education Discovered through Docents*

#### *1. Learning Knowledge of Art History*

“I have forgotten about this aspect of myself during years of marriage and raising children after my graduation from university. One day, I saw a middle aged woman guiding as a docent in an art exhibition and felt I wanted to participate as well. My daughter at home also works on similar field so we have several books related to art museums, thought it will be better than to read them by myself... So I decided to apply.”  
(64 year-old docent)



그림 3,4 Docent group study and peer docent in the gallery at Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art

The fact that the docents are able to study art through volunteer training is a significant educational and satisfying factor. They learn various communication skills and through volunteer training sessions they can encounter the experts such as curators or artists themselves. Sometimes they have a self-aspired art learning and life-long learning opportunity through a respectable institution. Most Smithsonian Art Museums spend from nine months to a year training their docents; continuous motivational evaluations and active support is provided. This led me to the idea that the scope of their learning should include both professional knowledge of art history and communication skills for visitors.

## *2. Learning through Human Relationships*

“The range of people you can meet as a teacher is quite small. Same old talk. If you say that students, colleagues and parents were all you met in the past, these days you hardly meet the parents, even. People you meet here [museum] are diverse, from college students to elderly; the relationships are unreciprocating and interesting. Doing things together that we like makes it so exciting. Meeting the people, that is.” (60 year-old docent, elementary school teacher)

Through detailed personal interviews of docents, I was also able to discover that the docents' learning happens not only by reading and attending lectures but also by making connections with others. For example, in numerous occasions one finds that a new docent asks for guidance from

more experienced docents beyond official outlooks and information about art, such as relating with the audience, attitude, and more. We also realize that not all information can be gathered from book or via online. Also, the docents said that during the course of their docent program they encounter diverse audiences: those with or without professional knowledge in art, children, family, school trips from all levels of education, youth, elderly, disabled, etc. They also mentioned opportunities to learn about people by experiencing “how people have diverse learning methods” during these encounters.



그림 5,6 docent members in Ho-am Gallery and Leeum at Volunteer's day

### *3. Experiencing the Change of Perspective on Life*

“The first thing I thought was that I should change my speech attitude. Also felt that my vocabulary is insufficient. In front of the audience, I become humble since I am required to explain without any knowledge of the visitors' age, their educational background, or experience. I know my limitations, so also a little nervous. Teaching in a classroom gives me greater control, leading me to act a little bit like a tyrant; these were some of the points that I liked about museum docent programs.” (37 year-old docent, elementary school teacher)



그림 7,8 Family tour 'Leeum Discovery' and special education school tour using sign language

As a learning community group, the docent program's ultimate goal is to distinguish one's transformation before and after participating in the volunteer program. Not only does the person become a knowledgeable guide of art history and a skilled docent, he or she also goes through a phase of self-examination in which one confirms one's identity through self-confidence from volunteering. For example, a housewife experiences an affirmation of one's identity through an expanded range of acquaintances; a school teacher began the program out of an educational goal to explain the artworks to the students in the museum, yet soon learns a new opportunity to escape from the relatively banal school life; young docents are able to interact with the older docents and gain diverse perspectives which in effect, allow the students to rediscover their mature selves.

These changes are educational experiences that take a long time and cannot be quantified. Thus, criteria such as how many language services do the docents provide, how many school trips are attended, or how fluent the docents are in their explanations is different thing. What is significant is that the docent program is in itself a valuable educational program even without accounting that the docents' contribute to other programs. I would like to underscore the importance of paying attention not to the artworks and the numbers but to the people and these transformations.

### *New Discovery through art museums in Smithsonian*

#### *1. Management through Educational Training and Evaluations*

The first impression I got from participating in the docent tour around Smithsonian art museums was that individual docents have a very high level of competence. They are equipped with incredible knowledge; the attitude in which they conduct the tour is very experienced. One can see that this is the result of a good deal of experience and education beyond techniques. As evidenced by the docent manager, the person in charge of docent training maintains appropriate number of docents while simultaneously communicating and exchanging feedbacks. Of all aspects, recognizing the docents' potential is the most important. The educators of the American History Museum, the National Portrait Gallery, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and the National Museum of African Art all expressed strong relationships with and confidence in the docent program. Also, they shared their views on the significance of the docent activities as well as each museum's educational programs and administrations. Evaluation, management and training are topics that have been long debated in the museum studies field. However, since my interest lies in other aspects of museums I will not go any further into this matter.

## *2. Roundtable Reports, the Roots of Museum Education History*

In discussing the origins of the Smithsonian's education approaches, one must look at Roundtable Report activities that have taken place around Washington, DC. In 1969 museum educators began the organization in order to share information with teachers and to expand the professional scope of museum education. They began releasing the Roundtable Report to the public in 1973.



Though its first printing consisted of only 300 copies, the Roundtable Report expanded to museum educators, teachers and students, and others began to collaborate, to exchange information, and to relay the museum information to the teachers in nearby schools. (it is the former form of the Journal of Museum Education) One can find such a collaboration influencing museum studies as well as Smithsonian's museum research greatly in Roundtable Reports Archives.

그림 9 Roundtablereport, Spring 1977

The history of museum education inspires the unpaid volunteer activities of the docents in the area and powers the incredibly relatable and educational tours led by these docents.

### *3. Volunteering is museum spirit practice itself*

One must reconsider the fact that the docents work as volunteers. The docents who have emigrated from other countries were able to provide objective perspectives on volunteering.

“I came from Europe and we don’t have these traditions there. This is only possible in America. It is part of your everyday life.”

“Occasionally people come from some Korean museums to benchmark museum volunteering programs. But this is something that cannot be resolved with the director’s leadership or good management. One cannot apply the volunteering programs from America to Korea without understanding the long history of volunteer work and culture.”

Scholar such as Samui Rudvich pointed out that American volunteer culture is ‘Coalition of the Willing’ in order to solve the many ethnical, religious, classified, personal and official problems and to gain social identity. He also commented that to understand the volunteer culture that resides deeply in any American community is to understand America. He classified volunteer work as religious, civil, military, and governmental volunteer works and continues to say that such prevailing presence of the volunteer culture is like American foreign policy where they export democracy. From this perspective, current trends in museum studies research is very ‘American’. Cultural research on volunteerism is a question that still needs to be discussed; however, this tradition is a respectable social value and one should acknowledge that this is the basis on which museum volunteer work stands on.

### *4. Connecting Museum and School*

Smithsonian art museum docents meet countless numbers of visitors. Not only do they spend time with adults and families in a given time but also participate in the school tours. If the school applies for a museum tour in advance, they can have a docent guide them or occasionally accommodate interactive lectures so that the students can discuss art without physically being inside a museum. The American History Museum's Video Conference Tour is an example of this case where through technological advancement one can convey distance learning with instantaneous responses instead of putting efforts on making slide materials. In New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art also equipped this distance learning standards in their recent renovation of the education facilities. The docents are fundamental factors in the distance learning activities; their experiences and efforts are essential to accomplish connections with schools.



그림 10, 11 American Art History Museum's Video Conference Tour with school for distance learning

Another interesting method adapted by the high school student docents titled 'Portraits Alive' at the National Portrait Gallery, a play by nearby high school in Washington, DC. Participating Students, training by performing expert, spend the summer researching and practicing to play the person in a portrait at a gallery. They introduce the character to the visitors of the gallery by playing the role; this approach earned a good response from the audience, especially family groups with children. Though it was a temporary project, it is also a school program that is executed through narratives. Reading the art works' narratives may be difficult for visitors, but the docents, or gallery guide, are those who attempt to solve these issues together with the

audience. This implies much about the gap between schools and Korean museums that have poorly connected each other in spite of their aims at the same direction based on learning.



그림 12, 13 Special tour <Portrait Alive!> of National Portrait Gallery by high school student

### *5. Acceptance of Diverse Values*

The initial questions I had were about the difference between museums and art museums, the reason for art museums having less interest in visitor research, and the lack of enough educational acceptance. For example, in the case of the Hirshhorn Museum, I felt that the museum did not have a set time for the docent programs while having questions about its docent management outside the education department. However, meeting with the three of the Hirshhorn museum docents have brought me to realize that I was wrong. Most of them have moved to the Hirshhorn from other art museums and felt liberated by the Hirshhorn's educational approaches, diverse docents, flexible tours, and especially the method in which the docent responds when the visitor needs them. In some cases, people even stated that such tours are more democratic. While finding this argument convincing, I realize that Smithsonian's real presence lies here. Before comparing and evaluating each museum, the visitors are able to have appropriate each of Smithsonian's diverse values. Each museum has its unique identity. Sharing the strong points of each museum is the overall strength of the Smithsonian. The power of sharing comes from power to accept diverse values in its audience, narratives and interpretations, collections and exhibitions.

“Role of docent is different from curators’. One must relate the artworks to the lives of the visitors to create proximity. This is not something you can learn through practice. Nor can it be substituted by machines.”

### ***New Museum and Education Model in Korean Art Museum***

Korea has a high percentage of private museums and art museums compared to national museums. The reason for this phenomenon is that the individuals founded museums and showed their collections to the public before many substantial national museums were developed. The method in which there are a number of private built museums or galleries is called grass roots museum culture. The terminology was adapted from descriptions about Korean democracy. Greater public access of Korean museums and democratic possibilities can be made possible through ‘education’. Also, volunteer activities and the docent programs can be educational models for showing a big picture.

Volunteer activities at art museums are social, community service activities. The volunteers participate in these social roles as artistic experiences and memories. Volunteers are enabled to understand the multiple elements comprising of audience, colleagues, arts, works, and museums simultaneously as they acquire new perspectives that will lead to greatest joy and pride. Despite the short history of museums, Korean museums have potentials in expanding the individual efforts displayed at the initial founding of the museums into larger society.



그림 14, 15 Ho-am Gallery docent ‘s on-line community since 2002 and digital PDA guide at Leeum

On the other hand, the internet culture is a significant part of the catalysts that make this possible. Koreans are rapidly exchanging and sharing information and apply the similar principles to museum culture such as exhibitions, education and marketing. Recently we have a digital project titled 'Digital Docent' and have a long established online docent community. The docents share education and exhibition materials and learn various tools while downloading images. Because of the diverse age group, younger volunteers support older docents through which the borders between each generation are removed for active communications. Through my work at the Smithsonian, I was able to discover a possible link between American volunteer culture and Korean museum culture. I believe we can overcome the different perspectives, age groups, interpretations, museums, and nations; above these differences lie the potential to learn 'together' that makes museum a common phenomenon.

### *Unforgettable Thanks*

I have realized during 13 years of working at an art museum that striving for achievements in both academic aspects and museum practice is not easy; yet, it is so important to give a voice to museum educators and to have it heard to the others. Thus I challenged myself to apply for the Smithsonian Fellowships in Museum Practice out of the desperate need to learn, despite my shortcomings. I am so grateful to the Smithsonian Center for Education and Museum Studies for having me here.

First of all, I am indebted to Dr. Jungsil Lee, University of Maryland who gave a courage to me to take on such a challenge, and Dr. Carole Neves, the Director of Office of Policy and Analysis in Smithsonian Institution who found potential in me and gave me new perspective and advises. Also, I would like to mention former Chairman of Korean Association of Museum and President of Korean National University of Cultural Heritage, Ki Dong Bae, who gave me a wonderful recommendation and Prof. Hyungsook Kim of Seoul National University who was my advisor for Doctorate Degree has provided me with infinite support. Rayoung Hong, General Deputy Director of Leeum was happier than anyone I know upon knowing my awarding of this fellowship and has had deep consideration of volunteering by docent all the time. Without insight into the future and consideration from Executive manager Gunyung Song, my current

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This research is now at its starting point. I am returning to Korea with the research draft having two stories of Korean and American docents, and I will make more finished research results come to the book and hope to have an opportunity to share the results with Smithsonian Center for Education and Museum Studies once again, including museum educator and docents in Smithsonian. I have found more educational perspectives in docent activity and their life. Though there may be some difference in Museum Culture of docents in two countries, both are pursued with the same prospects; thus, the same in whole. Now, I will have the research field more carefully with broaden eyes and minds that I've gained from this fellowship. I am thankful for the last two months finding not art history and education, but museum minds and diverse value integrated, and promise to go back to Korea to share what I have learned and felt to Korean

museum people. Finally, I deeply appreciate always the docents who have a life of learning and sharing with me more than 10 years in Korea.