

1973 Rehabilitation Act (Public Law 93-112) sums up the spirit of the law: "No otherwise qualified handicapped individual shall, solely by reason of his handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance." In other words, any federally supported program must in every way provide equal opportunities for all disabled citizens in the country. The museum community was one of the first public-service sectors to work actively toward this goal. And it was in this spirit that the Albright-Knox Art Gallery's Education Department and volunteer organization called the Junior Group embarked on *Matter at Hand*.

The program began in 1973 with an exhibition of touchable sculpture accompanied by workshops in clay designed for individuals who are blind or visually impaired. Visitors to the exhibition were encouraged to touch nineteen works of art from the Gallery's Permanent Collection and to experiment with clay sculpture in a hands-on workshop offered in conjunction with the exhibition. The program ran for four weeks (May 16 through June 3), and was made possible in large part by the efforts of fifty-five Junior Group volunteers and Gallery docents who served as guides and classroom assistants. The Junior Group also funded two trained instructors, the necessary art supplies, and exhibition materials.

Matter at Hand II (presented May 20 through June 30, 1975) followed the same format—an exhibition of touchable sculpture combined with hands-on workshops—but offered a wider variety of media. Once again, the Junior Group funded the primarily volunteer program. *Matter at Hand* was extended further into the community with the participation of the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society and the Buffalo Museum of Science, who offered programs in the contexts of their collections. The Historical Society explored costumes and tools, and the Museum of Science made its nature trail accessible through specially guided tours.

In the fall of 1976, a series of creative workshops was offered, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery's Members' Council, another volunteer group. In six two-hour sessions, groups toured the museum and participated in studio workshops featuring a variety of media. This became the format for *Matter at Hand III* (presented May 18 through June 10, 1977), made possible with funding and volunteers from the Junior League of Buffalo and the additional support of the Crippled Children's Guild, which provided transportation costs; and the Buffalo Real Estate Board, which funded the presentation of the videotape documentary *I Am Not Blind*, produced by Les Levine for the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. Continuing with *Matter at Hand IV* in May 1979, the program relied heavily on

funding from outside sources and on volunteer assistance, including thirty of the Gallery's docents who conducted tours for participants.

In the spring of 1980, *Matter at Hand V* explored a new direction. Offered from April 15 through May 22, the program was the result of a collaboration between the Gallery and the Theater of Youth (T.O.Y.), a local acting troupe. *Michael through the Painting*, a play by Henry Kautz, was commissioned and presented to children in conjunction with a series of one-hour creative drama classes. Stressing creative drama as a teaching tool to enhance museum learning, the program provided an introduction to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, the concept of a museum, and the basic art elements of color and line.

For its first eight years of existence, the *Matter at Hand* program was largely volunteer-staffed and available for only a few weeks each year. In the fall of 1981, an endowment for the program set up by the James H. Cummings Foundation made possible the hiring of a professional coordinator/instructor and the development of an overall program budget. This transformed *Matter at Hand* into one of the regular, ongoing programs of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery's Education Department. The budget was supplemented by additional funding from the Aetna Life and Casualty Foundation; Fisher-Price Toys, Inc.; and the Mobil Foundation, Inc. With this increased and sustained support, *Matter at Hand* expanded beyond the blind and visually impaired community to

incorporate a wide variety of special needs, including individuals with speech and hearing impairments, developmental delay, and physical and emotional disabilities, as well as psychiatric and geriatric populations. The program coordinator, in a series of related sessions, visited the groups' home sites and provided Gallery tours and workshops. The Gallery also presented exhibitions of the artwork produced by program participants, accompanied by opening receptions, three times each year in the Education Department. In 1993, the *Matter at Hand* program and its coordinator Lisa Garvey received a Certificate of Merit from the State of New York, "in recognition of dedicated service to children with disabilities and their families."

Matter at Hand continues to serve the special needs populations of Western New York, with the James H. Cummings Foundation endowment continuing to be a major source for the program's operating support. The Eileen and Rupert Warren Charitable Fund of the Community Foundation of Greater Buffalo has also been a long, loyal, and generous supporter of *Matter at Hand*. Funding each year is supplemented with grants from a variety of local businesses, individuals, and corporations, which over the years have included Clement and Karen Arrison; Conax Corporation; General Mills, Inc.; HSBC - North America; the Institute of Museum and Library Services; the LTN Foundation/Sierra Research Division; Rite Aid Pharmacies; and Starks Associates, Inc.

The Philosophy of Matter at Hand

The *Matter at Hand* program uses the museum to provide educational and therapeutic experiences for individuals with special needs by combining tours of the Gallery's collection and special exhibitions with hands-on studio art projects to help individuals learn to express themselves through an understanding of the language of art, the creation of works of art, and group discussion and interaction. Through these sessions, planned by a program coordinator trained in art education and/or art therapy, *Matter at Hand* encourages creativity and self-discovery in specially designed art experiences offered within a community setting.

Looking at works of art in the Gallery's collection provides groups with the opportunity to see and hear how creators of a variety of original works of art have used the basic fundamentals of line, shape, color, and texture to express their ideas and feelings in visual form. Participants are invited to offer their own observations about expression in painting and sculpture through a process of visual discovery led by the program coordinator.



Figure 3: Matter at Hand participants work on projects in the classroom. Photograph by Tom Loonan.

Following the tour, groups participate in studio workshops that emphasize the application of personal ideas in creating art. Individuals use concepts they were introduced to during the Gallery tour as raw materials for expressing themselves in the studio. This hands-on component involves working with diverse art materials in an environment that is meant to inspire freedom of expression and experimentation. After projects are completed, participants are encouraged to share their work with the group. These discussions, which focus on meaning and intensity of expressive elements, serve as a vehicle for self-discovery.

As individuals engage in peer group relations through participation in and discussion about artwork, they often begin to discover the similarities that exist between themselves and others. Group projects also promote mutual trust and respect as those involved engage in collective problem-solving while working in collaboration toward a defined goal. Working together, participants improve interpersonal skills such as listening to others, responding appropriately, self-analysis, empathizing with others, and exercising emotional control. Ultimately, program participants can graduate to a level of self-confidence that fosters independence and the ability to better function within a community.

Art Therapy and Matter at Hand

The position of *Matter at Hand* Coordinator has historically been filled by an art therapist. The field of art therapy combines the disciplines of visual arts, psychology, and counseling to assist individuals dealing with a wide variety of developmental, emotional, and physical difficulties. The American Art Therapy Association was founded in 1969, but the roots of utilizing art for healing purposes reach far back into history. Shamans in traditional cultures sometimes used art for healing, and as early as the eighteenth century, art was used to treat individuals living in European “insane asylums.” Influenced by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, a growing number of therapists began to view art creations as potential diagnostic tools and eventually as a modality for treatment. By the 1940s, the term “art therapy” was being used to describe this combination of “talk therapy” with art interventions as a form of treatment. In the United States, the pioneers of the art therapy field are Margaret Naumburg, Edith Kramer, Hanna Kwiatkowska, and Elinor Ulman. Each of these women, through their own background and experience, made a unique contribution to theory, practice, and research in the field of art therapy. As a result, art therapy has developed into a comprehensive and specialized field within the mental health and medical communities.

Issues addressed by art therapists include mental health concerns such as post-traumatic stress disorder, grief and loss, anxiety, depression, addictions, and eating disorders. It also has been used to help individuals and families dealing with a variety of medical issues, including Alzheimer’s disease, cancer, HIV/AIDS, and end-of-life care. In addition, art therapists frequently work with individuals coping with developmental disabilities, including autism, learning disorders, and mental retardation. Art therapists work in a variety of settings—including inpatient and outpatient mental health clinics, group homes, hospitals, nursing homes, schools, and private practice. The art therapy position at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery was one of the first of its kind in the United States and remains fairly unique even today.

Matter at Hand is designed to be less clinical than most other art therapy placements. Due to the fact that participants visit the Gallery only once or a few times, the art therapist does not assess, diagnose, or clinically treat those who attend the program. Instead, emphasis is placed on using the opportunity to view and discuss artists and their work as a way to create connections, resonance, and shared experiences; this then leads naturally to participants responding to the tour through creating their own works of art. The art therapist’s role is to help to make the visit a positive, inspiring, and enjoyable experience.

The practice of Matter at Hand

Preparation

Tailoring sessions to participants' needs is an important part of the philosophy of *Matter at Hand*. Through a questionnaire sent to group leaders, organizations and/or schools can specify particular goals they would like to see addressed in the Gallery setting. Every attempt is made to accommodate those requests. Groups have the opportunity to choose from suggested goals such as sensory integration, feeling identification, language skill development, and recreation. They may also choose to specify their own goals. For example, a special education teacher may be covering a certain historical period, or an inpatient psychiatric center may want to address women's issues. Having an understanding of the various disabilities and issues presented by participants enables the coordinator to address the goals stated by the school or organization, and quickly pick up on and reinforce any behavior management techniques used by attending staff. A second form requests information about the group's experience in art: materials they have had prior experience with and are interested in; types of projects they would enjoy; skill at recognizing elements of art such as line, shape, color, and texture; themes in art they would like to explore in the Gallery, such as portraiture or landscape; and practical information about the group's ability to use certain materials and anything that should be avoided.

Lesson Plans

Organizations and schools can schedule either a single visit or up to four visits in a six-month period. Single-visit groups are limited in the types of materials that can be used for the classroom activity, while those coming for a series of visits can work on multi-part art projects.

Lesson plans are designed to incorporate group interaction. A positive environment can create a domino effect of self-discovery, in which individuals react enthusiastically to the results of their efforts and create a momentum of like reactions within the group that can accelerate the achievement of goals for that particular lesson. Conversely, if an individual is distracted or cannot complete a task, the instructor should have alternative materials or activities prepared to prevent the entire group from being affected. By anticipating each participant's needs before the lesson, the instructor can better ensure that group expectations will be realistic.

Following are two examples of tours and art activities: one for groups with a more basic understanding of art, and the other for a more advanced group. Connections are made whenever possible between the tour and the art activity.

Single-Visit Basic Lesson Plan: Colors and Shapes

This lesson is generally used with participants who are functioning at a kindergarten to first grade (ages 4 to 6) developmental level. Students from special education classes at schools, adults with developmental disabilities, and those with certain types of traumatic brain injury are candidates for this type of museum experience. However, when working with adults in this type of session, it is important to make the activity fun and respectful, and to interact with them at the level of their chronological age.



Figure 4: A Matter at Hand group on a tour with Coordinator Julie Cox. Photograph by Tom Loonan.

The tour begins with works of art that incorporate shapes and colors that can easily be identified by the group—for example, a blue square or a yellow triangle. The *Matter at Hand* coordinator carries cardboard shapes and color cards to assist those with little or no verbal ability, allowing them to point to the correct shape and color. Next, the group considers representational works of art in which shapes are implied—the rectangle formed by a building, for example, or a pyramidal composition of figures. If necessary, the art therapist can assist by displaying one of

the cardboard shapes and asking participants to try to find it in the painting or sculpture. For groups that are a little more advanced, other activities can be used, such as a discussion of the seasons, the weather, and what sounds they might hear if they were in the scene. Again, it is important to remember that when working with adults with a developmental disability or brain injury, it is important to make this a fun and respectful activity, interacting with them at their chronological level of age.

Following the tour, the hands-on experience in the classroom involves oil pastels and watercolors. To begin, the tour is reviewed through a discussion of favorite shapes, colors, or specific works viewed in the museum. Then, because many of these types of groups require simple one- or two-step instructions, tracing the cardboard shapes with the oil pastels is demonstrated. The group is then encouraged to trace shapes on their own paper, overlapping if they choose. The use of watercolor and the way oil pastel resists the paint is then demonstrated before allowing the group to paint in the background for their shapes. If there is time remaining at the end of the session, the group is encouraged to share their creations.

Multi-Visit Advanced Four-Part Lesson Plan: The Ideal Landscape

This lesson is appropriate for groups at a developmental level of at least third grade (8 to 9 years) and requires the use of liquid paint, which can sometimes be over-stimulating for individuals with



Figure 5: A Matter at Hand group poses in front of a landscape they created together. Photograph by Tom Loonan.

impulsive or behavioral difficulties. It also works well as a group project, with participants working together to create a larger landscape.

The first session focuses on the horizon line, using paintings in the Gallery's collection of landscapes and cityscapes as illustrations. In addition to being introduced to the concept of a horizon line, participants are asked to picture themselves in the scenes and think about the various sights, sounds, and smells that might be present, along with the time of day, weather, and season represented. In the classroom, project participants begin by deciding where they want their horizon line to be, and drawing it with pencil and ruler on paper. Next, time of day is chosen and the sky is painted an appropriate color. The background of the area below the horizon line is then also colored.

At the beginning of the second session, concepts covered the previous week are reviewed. Four different land and cityscapes in the Gallery's collection are then discussed, again with thought to the various sights, sounds, and smells the participants imagine.

Using descriptive feeling cards, the concept of mood is introduced, along with discussions about how each artist expressed his or her feelings. In the classroom, individuals are asked to think about the weather, season, and mood of their own ideal landscape and add to the sky accordingly. The group may also have time to start penciling in details of the lower portion, using pre-cut templates if needed.

The third session uses additional paintings in the Gallery's collection to look at how artists create the illusion of foreground, middle ground, and background. Interactives for this tour include objects found in the landscapes and a variety of artists' tools. In the classroom, participants incorporate concepts of foreground, middle ground, and background into their works of art, again using pre-cut templates if necessary.

In the fourth and final session, some of the paintings shown on earlier tours are reviewed, paying close attention to details not previously noticed about content, titles, matting, and framing. Paintings are then completed, matted, framed, and titled.

Keys to Success

An individual engaged in a creative art experience, working at his or her own pace, on a project that can be successfully and creatively accomplished, will reap rich rewards, including the opportunity for communication. While keeping in mind that some participants will not be comfortable talking to the group about their artwork, it can often be very valuable for those

willing to do so. Group discussion of the lesson and the resulting artwork provides each participant with an opportunity to share ideas and insights.

Some of the most moving testimonials to the success of the program come from the participants themselves, in thank-you notes and accompanying artwork. Group leaders often write as well. For example, in December 2005, the Recreation Therapist at a residential program for children with emotional and/or behavior disorders wrote to Robert Warren, an important and consistent supporter of *Matter at Hand*: “The children, who had attended a five-week session, had really demonstrated improvements from the first up to the final session. There was a remarkable difference in ability to maintain attention to a task. The children were able to demonstrate improvements in making eye contact with Julie during group discussions and tours of the museum. They were also able to accept and listen to her directions with less assistance by the end of five weeks. One of the most exciting things for me to observe was the change in the children’s abilities to express themselves. Julie did a great job of identifying feelings that were displayed in the numerous pieces of art in the museum. This really seemed to impact how the children were able to talk of their own projects . . . with pride and confidence. Self esteem and feelings of self worth have been very difficult issues for the children to deal with.” She goes



Figure 6: Matter at Hand artists enjoy work in the 2009 exhibition. Photograph by Tom Loonan.

on to thank Mr. Warren for his continued and generous support.

Annual Exhibition and Reception

One of the highlights of the *Matter at Hand* program is the exhibition of artwork produced by program participants, which takes place in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery’s Education Department. The coordinator selects the theme before fall sessions begin—general enough to allow for flexibility, but focused enough to provide a coherent theme. Past exhibition titles have included *Nature Works* (2008), *Mirror Image: Images Mirror* (2005); *Creative Expression for All* (2004); *expressive GESTURES* (2002); and *Matter at Hand in Action*



Figure 7: Albright-Knox Art Gallery Director Louis Grachos and Curator of Education Mariann Smith serve pizza at the 2009 Matter at Hand reception. Photograph by Tom Loonan.

(2001). A community reception is held in conjunction with the exhibition for the participants and their families and friends. The exhibited works are a source of pride for the artists, and this time of sharing them with others is one of the most beneficial and satisfying parts of the program.

Docent Tours

Matter at Hand is offered only three days a week, and often more school groups wish to come than can be accommodated by the coordinator. These overflow groups are encouraged to participate in our school tour program, conducted by Gallery docents, the majority of whom have little or no experience with special needs populations. To remedy this, the *Matter at Hand* coordinator conducts training sessions that focus on both general and specific tour techniques. General guidelines include the following: the use of appropriate language that puts people first; the importance of not making assumptions about a person's abilities, instead allowing them to make known what they need; the practice of always asking before assisting; having the patience to wait for answers, because many people with cognitive disabilities often take longer to respond; letting the staff handle any issues that might arise; and assessing the group's developmental level and adjusting the tour accordingly. More focused guidelines are also provided about touring techniques for specific groups: for example, individuals with cognitive disabilities, autism,

brain injury and other diseases of the brain, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, mobility issues, visual impairments, and hearing impairments. Docents find this type of information invaluable for the creation of tours that provide positive experiences for themselves and their visitors.

Art Sense-Ations Tours

The first of the Gallery's free verbal description tours was offered in October 2005. In August 2006 a regular bimonthly schedule was implemented, and in April 2008 the tour was branded *Art Sense-Ations* to differentiate it from the *Matter at Hand* program. Although it took nearly two years for *Art Sense-Ations* to develop into a regularly attended tour, it has now become so popular that two docents have been recruited to assist. Attendance is currently limited to nine, with close to half the slots filled by companions; the goal is to expand that number by training additional docents and offering the program on a monthly rather than bimonthly basis.

A wide variety of individuals regularly attend the *Art Sense-Ations* tours: a few have experienced extensive vision loss but can still see some colors and objects at close range; several others are in less advanced stages of vision loss and are able to navigate for the most part on their own; and a few have been blind all their lives and use either a cane or a service animal. Some may wonder how a person who has never had sight could possibly enjoy or be interested in attending a museum tour. However,



Figure 8: Participants touch a sculpture by Fletcher Benton during an Art Sense-Ations tour. Photograph by Tom Loonan.

these individuals are insightful and inquisitive in discussions, and one shared that the associations he makes with colors are texturally based.

Art Sense-Ations tours are a combination of verbally describing works of art and touching select sculptures from the Gallery's Permanent Collection. The tours are planned well in advance and pieces selected based on special exhibitions and the interests expressed by participants in the previous month's tour. While describing the artwork, an attempt is made to incorporate other senses such as hearing, smell, touch, and taste, along with body positioning. For example, when viewing George Inness's *The Coming Storm*, a recording of the sounds of wind and distant thunder was played. On a different tour, participants posed like the two characters in Jehan Georges Vibert's *The Marvelous Sauce*. Props are oftentimes used to enhance understanding: for example, raised line drawings of the composition; fabrics or objects similar to those in the artwork; and materials and tools used by the artist. As a result of these in-depth



Figure 9: Participants in an Art Sense-Ations tour share their creations in the classroom. Photograph by Tom Loonan.

experiences, only three or four works of art can be visited in each sixty-minute tour.

The second half of *Art Sense-Ations* takes place in the classroom. As with the *Matter at Hand* program, every attempt is made to connect the art activity with the tour. Everyone is encouraged to participate in the art activities, including the companions, and a wide variety of art materials, processes, and themes have been introduced. For example, after a tour of non-objective, expressive paintings from the 1950s by Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko, participants were invited to paint to music, paying special attention to their body movements and how they felt emotionally. On another occasion, portraiture was discussed in a special exhibition that featured many of Nikolas Muray's photographs of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, along with several reproductions of her paintings and the Gallery's original self-portrait by Kahlo. In the classroom, each participant was given a bowl filled with various textured paper, fabrics, and objects and asked to choose an item that reminded them

of someone important in their life. They were then asked to share what they chose and why. One person selected a fabric that reminded her of her grandmother who loved to sew, and another picked a seashell because their spouse was fond of the beach. Everyone was then given a clay tile and invited to create a real or symbolic portrait of either themselves or someone else in their life. The results were creative and varied: a few individuals made line drawings of themselves; one used the symbol of an apple with a worm to describe someone in their life; and another combined her own handprint with the paw print of her service dog. In most cases projects can be completed that day, but because many participants frequently attend the program, projects have also been done that can be continued at the next session.

Certain adaptations are implemented in the classroom to make it easier for individuals to create art. For example, trays are used to hold materials so they are easily located and do not roll away. When painting, the paper is taped to the table to provide a tangible and motionless boundary for those with a visual impairment. Some individuals appreciate a tour of the classroom beforehand, while others find it unnecessary.

Art in Darkness Documentary

In October 2007, Toronto-based Studio Five Films arrived at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery to make a short documentary film about



Figure 10: A film still from *Art in Darkness*. Photograph by Tom Loonan.

giving museum tours to individuals who are blind or visually impaired. Art therapist Julie Cox, the current coordinator of *Matter at Hand*, was featured prominently. Four individuals from the community were invited to participate in the tour and also to talk about their life and experience of being partially sighted or blind. Ms. Cox conducted the tour using detailed descriptions and multi-sensory experiences to enhance the understanding of each masterwork. The result was a short documentary film called *Art in Darkness*.

Geordie Sabbagh, the film's producer, said he was inspired to make the film after witnessing a similar tour about ten years ago in a different museum. He remembered, "As each painting was described, I was captivated by the expressions of the group. I have always wondered, what did they 'see' and was it as compelling as what a person with sight felt when they looked at the same painting." Directed by Naomi Wise, *Art in Darkness* was submitted to film festivals around the world. It was accepted into the 2008 Rhode Island International Film Festival and won second place in the Best Short Documentary Film category. The producers of the film hope



Figure 11: James Jacques Joseph Tissot, *L'Ambitieuse* (Political Woman)

that the documentary will raise the public's awareness of the necessity of this type of programming for individuals who are blind or visually impaired. Laura Herman, one of the tour participants, after recalling many people's misconception that blind and visually impaired individuals cannot appreciate pictures, said "today, you showed us the picture - we were part of it. And that's the way it should be." Iwona Plonka, another participant, said her hope for the film is that "maybe the stigma about blindness will vanish."

Two of the works included on the tour are public favorites in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery's Permanent Collection, *also known as The Reception*, 1883–85; Oil on canvas; 56 x 40 inches (142.2 x 101.6 cm); Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Gift of William M. Chase, 1909.] In addition to describing



Figure 12: Jehan Georges Vibert, *The Marvelous Sauce*, circa 1890; Oil on wood; 25 x 32 inches (63.5 x 81.3 cm) Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Bequest of Elisabeth H. Gates, 1899.

James Tissot's *The Political Woman* in detail, Ms. Cox used props to help the group to better understand certain aspects of the painting, including a recording of a large party to help illustrate the mood of the event portrayed, various fabrics for them to feel, a feather to create the impression of the woman's fan, and a large braided tassel like that depicted on the curtain in the background. When telling them about Jehan Georges Vibert's painting *The Marvelous Sauce*, she used role-playing with props to help participants get a sense of the figures' attitudes and positions, and offered herbs for them to smell.

Visual Description Audio Tours

Because not everyone can participate in *Art Sense-Ations* tours, visual descriptions are also available as part of the Gallery's OnCell audio tour. This offering for blind and visually impaired individuals was first introduced in the spring of 2003 with the special exhibition *Masterworks from the Phillips Collection*, on view at the Gallery May 27

through September 1. On July 16, a breakfast event was held to launch audio description tours both of the special exhibition and the Permanent Collection, with fifty-two blind and visually impaired individuals and members of organizations serving that population in attendance. Feedback from this breakfast led to the following: Braille number labels were added to audio wands with the help of a rehabilitation counselor from the Olmsted Center for Visual Impairments; a script for the *Masterworks* audio description tour was translated into Braille; and a Braille edition of the Permanent Collection audio description tour was made available at the Admissions Desk.

Through the years, more audio description entries have been prepared, and can currently be accessed through visitors' cell phones. By dialing a main number and then entering the access code for a particular work of art, visitors can hear a more detailed description than those provided in the general adult or youth entries. For example, the following is the audio tour script describing Paul Gauguin's famous work *The Yellow Christ*:

"French artist Paul Gauguin, who lived from 1848 to 1903, painted this image called *The Yellow Christ*, in 1889. It is vertically oriented, and measures just over three feet high by almost two-and-a-half feet wide. The tones that dominate the painting are yellows, oranges, and browns—the colors of autumn.

In the foreground is an image of Jesus Christ on a wooden cross, with three women kneeling in

prayer at its base. The horizontal bar of the cross is about four inches wide and extends across almost the entire top edge of the painting. The vertical bar above is cut off by the frame. The lower vertical extension of the cross is slightly off center to the left, and extends almost to the bottom of the canvas. The last few inches are blocked by a large gray shape, most likely a rock. About a quarter of the way up the cross is a small, wedge-shaped platform on which Jesus' feet rest. The right foot is on top of the left, and one nail attaches them both to the ledge through their centers. There is no blood. His thin long legs move up to the small loincloth, rendered in a V-shape with a piece of material hanging down to the left. As with his legs, details of his abdomen and torso are vaguely defined. His thin arms extend straight out on an upward diagonal from his shoulders, and his hands are nailed to each end of the cross bar. No fingers are delineated, and again no blood is shown. His skin is yellow, with greenish-gray tints in various locations. His head leans peacefully to the left, and his eyes and mouth, represented by thin brown lines, are closed. A brown arc over his right eye forms an eyebrow; his left eyebrow continues into the shape of the long nose. His deep brown hair is shaped like an upside-down U over his head, and his mustache and short beard are brownish-gray.

Gauguin painted *The Yellow Christ* in the northwestern French province of Brittany, which was one of his favorite locations. The three women who kneel quietly at

the base of the cross are dressed in traditional Breton peasant costume and perform one of the daily prayers that were part of the Breton cycle of life. Two are placed to the left of the cross, and fill up the lower left third of the picture. In the lower left corner, with part of her body cut off by the edge of the canvas, is a woman whose body faces us at a three-quarter angle. Her head is in profile, with simply delineated facial features. Her dress is dark, with white collar and cuffs. Her apron is blue-gray with shades of purple and pale yellow. A white headdress covers her hair. Her hands are folded quietly in her lap as she contemplates the image of Jesus before her. The second woman sits farther back in space, facing us from behind and to the left of the cross. She, too, kneels with her hands folded in her lap. Her dress is deep blue, her apron orange with mottling of brown. The same orange color forms a stripe up her bodice and appears in stripes at the ends of her sleeves. She too wears the traditional white headdress, under which her facial features are extremely indistinct. The third woman is in the extreme foreground with her back to us, cut off at her shoulders by the bottom edge of the canvas. Her head is turned slightly in profile, but no facial features can be discerned. Her headdress caps her head then extends down her back—it is white, but filled with tones of pink, purple, and gray. Since Gauguin's paintings often included various levels of meaning, the three women can be interpreted as peasants

pausing to pray at a roadside altar, as women experiencing a vision, or symbolically as the three women named Mary whom the New Testament states were present during the crucifixion of Jesus. The rest of the foreground around the cross is grass, colored in shades of yellow, orange, brown, and green.

The background of the painting is divided into three horizontal planes. The foreground area, around the cross, is divided from the middle ground by a low stone wall. The left end of the wall is blocked from view by the two women on the left—it appears for several inches, then disappears again behind the cross. It then continues to the right—several inches before the right edge of the canvas it turns back towards the distance and is hidden by a small tree with orange leaves. The leaves of this tree, and all trees in the painting, are represented as one organic shape with no branches visible.



Figure 13: Paul Gauguin, *The Yellow Christ*, 1889; Oil on canvas; 36 1/4 x 28 7/8 inches (92.1 x 73.3 cm); Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, General Purchase Funds, 1946.

About a third of the way from the right edge of the canvas a man climbs over the wall, with one leg on each side. He wears black pants, a blue shirt with white collar, and a black hat. Two women stand near him on the other side of the fence, wearing traditional headdresses like the women in the foreground. No one knows who these figures are or what they might represent.

On the other side of the fence is a yellow field, punctuated by three orange-leaved trees. A curvy path begins in front of a house about a third of the way from the left side of the canvas. It comes toward the stone wall, disappears behind the cross and a tree, then reemerges behind the man and two women. It then disappears again behind the tree in the foreground. Beyond the yellow field is a series of hills. Between the field and the hills is a small village. On the left is the thatched-roof house from which the path emerges; just to the right of the cross can be seen a white house with dark roof. Separated from this house by a stand of tall and rounded orange trees are three white houses with dark roofs, extending diagonally towards the left distance. To their right is a green hill. The low hills behind the village seen to the left of the cross are covered with orange trees. To the right of the cross the yellow hills are open fields that meet the sky. In the extreme left distance, purple trees divide the tree-covered hills from the sky. The top quarter of the canvas is sky, mostly hidden by the cross and Jesus. Most of the sky is made up of shades of gray,

blue, green, orange, and lavender; the sky closest to the horizon is more white.

The fall setting is appropriate for the Breton peasant way of life, in which religion was woven into the agrarian cycle. The cycle of the seasons was seen as parallel to Christ's life—the autumn was equivalent to his crucifixion and death; and spring, when the crops grew again, to his resurrection.”

Towards a Universal Environment

Federal law requires places of public accommodation, including non-profit organizations, to comply with section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. New York State also has building codes that apply to accessibility, and any alterations made on the part of the facility must comply with the most stringent of these various laws and codes.

In 2006, the Gallery formed the Universal Environment Committee (UEC) with the goal of moving the Gallery's facilities and programming into compliance with all federal, state, and local accessibility laws. Furthermore, the Gallery's aim is to go beyond mere compliance with the law and strive to create an environment that is universally accessible.

With these goals in mind, the UEC engaged outside organizations to conduct physical accessibility assessments of our facilities to determine the current status of the Gallery. In March 2006, the Self-Advocacy Association of Western

New York conducted a wheelchair assessment, and in October 2006, the State University College at Buffalo's Center for Inclusive Design & Environmental Access (CIDEA) completed a Universal Design feasibility study.

The results of these assessments were compiled, and a chart was created in 2007 to assist the Gallery in outlining and categorizing the alterations necessary to increase the Gallery's accessibility. The committee was then reformed to include representative individuals from a number of Gallery departments, including Education, Guest Services, Curatorial, Buildings and Grounds, Security, and Development. The *Matter at Hand* Coordinator was named ADA Coordinator, and the newly formed committee worked throughout 2008 to create a mission statement and policies and procedures to guide the Gallery's move toward greater accessibility. Simultaneously, the Gallery began making low-cost, low-effort improvements to the physical environment. At the end of 2008, a presentation was

made to the Strategic Leadership Group (Director, Deputy Director, Director of Advancement, Chief Financial Officer, and Chief Curator), who unanimously adopted the policies and procedures.

In February 2009, the Buffalo-based architectural firm Hamilton Houston Lownie finalized the Architectural Accessibility Study with suggestions and cost estimates for the physical improvements needed to increase accessibility in the Gallery.

The term "universal design" has been coined to promote the idea of striving to go beyond simple compliance with the law to creating an environment that is accessible to the "broadest public to the greatest extent possible" (*Design for Accessibility*, 55). There are seven principles of universal design to guide organizations toward a mindset of inclusiveness: creating environments that are equitable; flexible; simple and intuitive; providing perceptible information; tolerance for error; low physical effort; and size and space for approach. Rather than



Figure 14: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, USA. Photograph by Tom Loonan.

viewing these principles as an end result, universal design encourages a constant vigilance and striving toward ever-greater accessibility.

Conclusion: Looking to the Future

The Albright-Knox Art Gallery's hope for the future lies in the policies and mission statement of the Universal Environment Committee. The policy is threefold. First, the Gallery will strive to employ the concept of universal design to promote inclusion and eliminate segregation wherever possible. Second is a commitment to compliance with the Americans

with Disabilities Act and New York State access laws. And finally, that both the letter and the spirit of the law will guide the design of facilities, programs, activities, and events. In conclusion, according to the Gallery's Deputy Director, Karen Spaulding, "the Albright-Knox Art Gallery is committed to creating a Universal Environment for all its visitors, to making every visit, every encounter with a work of art, every experience with music, or dance, or film a meaningful and rich moment in their lives. It is our hope that our guests will feel enriched whenever they visit and will want to come back again and again."