



# Roundtable with MoMA Educators

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**Wendy Woon:** Why do you think Meet Me at MoMA is an effective program?

**Carrie McGee:** At a basic level, engaging with art is fitting for people with memory loss because it does not require the use of short-term memory. Works of art — for the most part — are stationary objects. They don't move or change over time. Beyond that, engagement with art triggers both intellectual and emotional stimulation, and individuals with dementia are perfectly capable of responding to both types.

**Francesca Rosenberg:** Art also engages because it enables people to tap into the imagination. Even though memory may be affected by the progression of Alzheimer's disease, the imagination is still alive and rich. Art can serve as a tool for allowing the mind to roam. Whatever the medium — painting, sculpture, photography, and so on — and whatever the genre,

representational, abstract, expressionistic, etc., the works can serve to stir the imagination.

**Amir Parsa:** People talk about art as if it is clearly definable, as if it's all the same thing. It's in fact sometimes difficult to point out what these objects we refer to as "art objects" have in common. But I think the fact that we cannot clearly define art, that there is a wide range of possible definitions, makes this — and really a lot of our educational programs — successful. It allows for a certain type of engagement where opinions can truly be validated, where inquiries and digressions and insights lead to a wide range of legitimate interpretations, which in turn really allows people to understand and appreciate that they are contributors, part of a community of interpreters. The process becomes very exploratory and thus social and interactive and stimulating.

**Laurel Humble:** I think that, on top of that, we try to encourage people to determine their own narrative. We're not trying to convince them that one particular interpretation is the only correct one. We're not there to make people follow what has been established as the storyline of art history and theory. We definitely provide some of that information but the program is really about using that information as well as the interpretations of other participants to determine your own story for the work and reach your own conclusions.

**Amir Parsa:** That's why you have to emphasize the importance of the educators: they should not just lecture, but facilitate this type of exploration and discussion while giving information in relevant ways that allow participants to make connections.

**Carrie McGee:** It's important to point out that this program is not simply about looking at art; it's interactive. We use works of art to provoke dialogue. For individuals with Alzheimer's disease, this is especially

important. The way the disease can affect your ability to communicate as well as the stigma attached to it can make many individuals feel isolated. In this program we bring people together and encourage conversation and interpersonal connections.

**Wendy Woon:** Do most participants have prior experience with art?

**Carrie McGee:** Yes and no. We see participants who were never interested in art before coming to Meet Me at MoMA become incredibly engaged. They return to the Museum again and again, contributing valuable insights to the group discussion. I think it is because we are highlighting their strengths. We're asking them to think critically and to engage with art — and they rise to the occasion. Works of art are challenging to decipher and interpret for all audiences, so the program offers participants a chance to strengthen their sense of self and be empowered intellectually. An entire new world of interest can open up in this later chapter in life.

**Laurel Humble:** And it is precisely at the time when you're hearing that you won't be able to learn anything new. I think that along with highlighting people's strengths we are also simply expanding their worlds. I don't mean by just exposing them to the Museum and its collection, though I think that is very important for some, but more importantly we afford participants an opportunity to think beyond their current state. That brings us back to what Francesca was saying about the imagination, but the program moves beyond imagining to actually learning about developments in the practice of particular artists and art history, in general. Furthermore, you can connect the works to current and historical events.





**Wendy Woon:** How is this program different from other educational programs offered at museums?

**Carrie McGee:** People ask that a lot. I think one answer is that it's not that different; we're utilizing and experimenting with various strategies from the fields of museum and art education. We're just adapting them for this audience based on what we've learned about Alzheimer's disease and its effects on cognitive function. Another answer is that we emphasize the social component of this program much more than we do with other programs. Socialization is a fundamental part of the program.

**Amir Parsa:** I agree. It's not that different from a regular museum visit. In reality, the educator is engaged in the design of a certain type of interaction. I teach and conduct programs with that same frame of mind for all audiences. Educational programs are ways of creating connections to the world and to yourself. It's a way of knowing the world, relating to and understanding the world. That is still very true with this audience. In fact, the life experiences of participants, along with the changes relating to their cognitive abilities lead to great interactions, insights, and ways of seeing the world. In that vein, storytelling and socializing become central to the program.

**Wendy Woon:** What's interesting to think about is how this program can inform other educational programs.

**Amir Parsa:** On an even grander scale, I would add that the process of creating innovative programs for different audiences can provide opportunities for art museums to revisit and reframe the forms and functions of education, museums, and art.

**Carrie McGee:** It makes you wonder why museum programs for adults don't encourage socialization and

personal connection more often. I guess it's thought that providing space for the personal, emotional side of interpretation somehow detracts from the intellectual exploration. We've learned from this program that it doesn't, it enhances it.

**Francesca Rosenberg:** A good educator can weave it all together and make the experience that much richer. By encouraging participants to share their perspectives, we are asking them to connect the works to their own lives, to make them relevant. That in turn may tap into an emotional memory that, as we've learned, can have a stronger or longer-lasting impact than other types of memory. Also, at Meet Me at MoMA there is equal participation between participants with dementia and caregivers. It's because of this narrative aspect. Everyone has a story to share.

**Wendy Woon:** Francesca, going back to what you were saying earlier about educators — what should educators be mindful of when working with this audience?

**Francesca Rosenberg:** It is essential for the educator to be attuned to all signs of engagement. In order to effectively communicate and connect, the educator must not only listen to participants' words but also read their facial expressions and body language. One becomes highly aware of the level of engagement by concentrating on these various factors. This is true for all good teaching. I think it is important to emphasize nonverbal communication and that nonverbal signs can be just as meaningful as the words that come out of someone's mouth.

**Amir Parsa:** Through teaching the program you gain insight into the nature of engagement and how we determine and measure it. We've really come to the conclusion that it doesn't just take one shape or form. There are various forms of engagement and they don't manifest themselves in one particular way.



**Wendy Woon:** I would say the same thing about learning in general and forms of communication, including life-long learning and digital learning.

**Laurel Humble:** In addition to how we communicate with participants when discussing art, we've also learned how important it is to communicate the overall goals of the program to everyone from the outset, to make sure they understand that it will be an interactive experience and that we want everyone's opinions. You have to take steps to break down any barriers that might hinder communication and be explicit when describing what is expected during the program and when encouraging group participation.

**Wendy Woon:** Why do you enjoy working with this audience in particular?

**Francesca Rosenberg:** In this program there truly is a reciprocal relationship between participants and staff. As museum educators we learn a great deal from the participants during each and every program. Older adults have lived! Using works of art as a starting point, they, and they alone, can teach us about what it was like to live through World War II, to experience Coney Island in its heyday, and to participate in the Civil Rights movement. The participants open my eyes to elements of the paintings and interpretations that I had not considered. We are the students and they are the teachers.

**Carrie McGee:** Yes, many of the participants were alive when many of the works of art in our collection were made. They provide perspectives that no other generation can provide. They share such a wealth of information, which adds a new layer of interpretation. Once this generation is gone that can never happen again.

**Amir Parsa:** If you value how people see the world differently, and how cognitive changes allow for that change in perspective, then you can also be transformed. That's what happens. You learn and you are transformed by your interactions and the interpretations and the stories and the experiences of others.

**Wendy Woon:** How has the program changed or evolved since its inception?

**Carrie McGee:** It looks very different than when it first began three years ago. In addition to participating in training led by staff from the New York City Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association and Mount Sinai School of Medicine, we've gone to conferences across the country to be sure we're staying current as the field develops. We've taken what we've learned and applied it directly to our practice.

**Amir Parsa:** We've rethought the components of the program, devised new strategies for engaging participants, reexamined the types of artwork that can be used, and really transformed the essence of the program.

**Francesca Rosenberg:** The key to maintaining a successful and effective program is constant reassessment and evaluation. We hear directly from the participants as well as our staff about what is working and what is not working. We try to improve our teaching by observing other educators and critiquing our own practice. The staff need to be reflective and self-aware. If you establish a program just to check off a box, you won't provide a meaningful experience for anyone.

**Laurel Humble:** Also, over the course of the last year and a half, as we've traveled the country and been in contact with museum and other professionals establishing similar programs, we've heard of numerous adaptations that are all wonderful ideas. There isn't any



one answer. It's great to connect the specific logistics and structure of the program to the particularities of your collection, gallery or facility spaces, and audience.

**Amir Parsa:** We're leading training, as well, and by presenting and modeling our program we have the opportunity to analyze in depth every aspect of what we do. That allows us to fine-tune the details of our practice while learning from families affected by the disease, museum professionals, and staff from care organizations.

**Wendy Woon:** Why is a museum the right venue for a program for people with dementia?

**Amir Parsa:** A museum is a clean space, a contemplative space. It's a safe and stimulating space. More importantly though, it is where meaningful experiences can take place. Meaningful, leading to personal growth, but also leading to interactions and conversations that have multiple psychosocial benefits.

**Laurel Humble:** With this program there is a sense of ownership in your experience. Yes, we decide ahead of time which works to discuss and then lead the groups through the galleries, but you are there when the Museum is closed, and you have the galleries all to yourself. You have a personal educator who will not only share art-historical information and answer your questions but also listen closely to your insights and then connect them to the interpretations of others. So while your experience is highly individualized, at the same time it is linked to the experiences of others, which I think is very reaffirming. It is validating and situates you within a greater group.

**Amir Parsa:** That's right. It allows you to connect to the efforts, ideas, struggles, and visions of others, including the artists. It also allows you to reconnect to yourself, in addition to feeling that you are still

an important part of the social fabric, a valued human being engaging with the world.

**Carrie McGee:** It's also important to note that, as valued cultural institutions, museums are in a position to help deconstruct the stigma surrounding this disease. Time and time again individuals with Alzheimer's say that one of the greatest challenges they face is the overwhelming stigma surrounding the disease and its effect on the way they are treated in society. Museums can set an example by showing that people with dementia are, as Amir said, valued members of the community.

**Francesca Rosenberg:** Part of our goal is to act as a catalyst for change. We would like to help people affected by the disease think differently about the possibilities for a life with Alzheimer's disease or other dementia. There are ample opportunities to remain active members in the community through engaging in meaningful activities. For those who are less familiar with the disease, the program can serve as a learning experience to make them aware and demystify it. It's not a role that we necessarily think of for the Museum but it is in a way our responsibility.

**Laurel Humble:** It is definitely our responsibility. We should remember that museums serve as model institutions. They have the potential to set an example for the public through engagement with the community.

**Francesca Rosenberg:** In fact MoMA was founded as an educational institution with this idea in mind. People affected by dementia form a significant portion of the community, and with the changing demographics this segment of the population will only continue to grow.

**Wendy Woon:** What have each of you taken away from your experience with the Meet Me at MoMA program?





**Francesca Rosenberg:** The art acts as the spark for rich discussions and insights that we all hold dear. There's a buzz, a generosity of spirit, a connection that has been forged between the attendees and the staff. We're all thinking about the here and now. By the end of each program, everyone is uplifted.

