Being an Art Museum Tour Guide

Insights and practical advice from the vault

Dahn Hiuni, MFA, PhD

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Preface

Art museum tour guides come from a wide variety of academic and professional backgrounds. Some may have studied art history, curating, or archeology, while others hail from studio art, architecture or even filmmaking. Each educator brings his or her own unique perspectives and appreciations, which is what makes each tour so special. The one thing I think we all share is a passion and purpose to spark meaningful and memorable dialogue with visitors in front of authentic works of art.

After working for many years as a museum educator at various museums around the world, I decided to write this book in hopes that it may help future tour guides, and those just starting out. While museum education comprises many different types of activities, including research and writing, designing self-guided material, or providing professional development for local art teachers, I have focused this book on one aspect close to my heart: Touring. While many museums today increasingly try to engage visitors through digital displays, virtual tours and immersive experiences, the face-to-face dialogue in front of a real work of art remains irreplaceable. For those who love hosting visitors in the museum and sharing their love for art, I hope some of what I share here rings true.

As you begin reading, you may find that you are familiar with some of the educational theories or questioning techniques related to museum education, in which case I hope it may serve as a helpful review. If the material is new to you, I hopes this proves to be a good starting companion on your journey to becoming a museum tour guide. As is often the case, the best learning happens on the job. As you begin touring and sharing experiences and anecdotes with your supportive colleagues, you will gain greater confidence and improve your practice.

There are many wonderful people who helped *me* in my journey and I wish to acknowledge them here, with much love and admiration. At the Art Gallery of Ontario, I thank Julie Stone, Pat Sullivan, Carla Roth, David Wistow, Doug Wortz, Peter Gale, Diana Lunde, Susan Hind, Brian McDowell, and Sheila Greenspan. At the Winnipeg Art Gallery, thanks to Nancy Newman, Catherine Stenger-Mass and Richard Brown. At the Museum of Modern Art, thanks to Glenn Lowery, Patterson Sims and Cynthia Nachmani. At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, big thanks to Mike Norris and Nancy Thompson. At the Getty Art Center, thank you to Merritt Price. And at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, thanks to Orit Sabag. Of course, at all of these museums, I wish to thank the teams of amazing tour guides who taught me so much and with whom I had so much fun.

Very special thanks to my brother Guy Vidal, who has always supported my career in the arts, and to Ivan Eyre, my first drawing professor who suggested I consider becoming an art teacher.

Dahn Hiuni, MFA, PhD
2026

Featured in the cover photo: Rosa Bonheur, *The Horse Fair*, 1852–55. Gift of Cornelius Vanderbilt, 1887. The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Open Access)

Being A Museum Tour Guide

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Preparing to be a Tour Guide

What is a Museum Tour Guide?

As understood above, a tour guide in a museum is an informal educator, functioning outside the confines of traditional classrooms and lecture halls. As the term 'guide' suggests, we might better understand the figure leading the experience as a facilitator—one who enables and supports a special encounter between the viewer and the artwork. Indeed, tour guides play a crucial role by facilitating close access, encouraging engagement and inviting reflection and interpretation. While we may be armed with art historical knowledge, fascinating stories, and behind-the-scenes anecdotes that breathe life into the art, what makes tour guides truly indispensable is our talent for conversation and dialogue. Basically, we love to ask questions. The quality and depth of the dialogue relies on the guide's questioning strategies and techniques, which orient the viewer toward the artwork and spotlights his or her observations. These special skills help audiences to interpret creativity and human expression, breaking down barriers, and making art more relatable and engaging for visitors with varying levels of familiarity.

Through our unique interactions with visitors, tour guides spark curiosity, inspire interest, encourage further exploration, and ignite a passion for art, potentially fostering a lifelong relationship between the individual and the museum. On occasion, a tour guide may have an even greater impact on a visitor, leading them in a particular career path.

If you are attracted to museum education, there's a good chance you've made a conscious decision to conduct your educational offerings *outside* the traditional classroom. Furthermore, if you prize interactive, participatory, individual and collaborative meaning-making, it is likely that Constructivist learning theories resonate with you. What else attracts you to museum education? What is truly unique to it that can hardly ever be done in a classroom? There are several uniquenesses as we've already seen, but perhaps the greatest is *the presence of the art object.* The artwork is at the heart of museum education, as the primary text is the center of attention in academia and research. Rarely do others accesses authentic artworks with visitors in the way that museum tour guides do—a special honor indeed.

Unlike a traditional classroom, we are in a very special space. There is no denying that there exists a kind of 'magic' when standing before a great work of art. As museum tour guides, we mine that magic and use it to our advantage. But rather than focusing on our own expertise, we are trained to quickly and consistently turn

everyone's attention back to the fascinating, original object before us as the source of learning. Most visitors instinctively respond as they themselves have experienced inspiration and the effort of creation—of one kind or another. Most recognize that they are in the presence of something special on this special occasion, away from school, work and everyday life.

Thus, together with and in front of authentic works of art, through a well-paced and thoughtful line of inquiry, the function of the tour guide is to elicit an open dialogue that embraces the organic and unexpected nature of responding to creativity. Through the excitement of close proximity to the artwork, and through a generous and inclusive process of soliciting responses, tour guides enjoy an uncommon relationship with their audiences marked by the genuine excitement of collaborative curiosity.

If we put this all together, a model starts to emerge. The unique relational dynamic of a *museum* pedagogy is indeed a three-way one: between the viewer/s, the artwork and the tour guide.

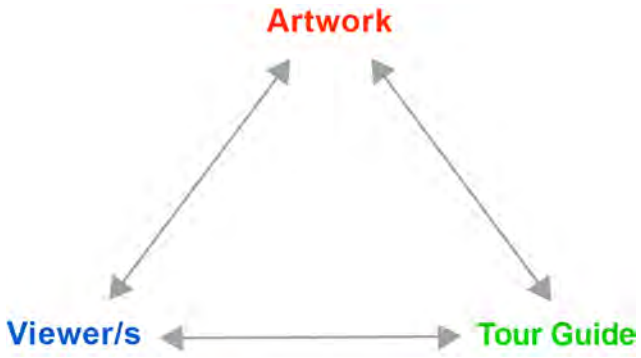

Figure 2: The Viewer/s-Artwork-Tour Guide model; a triangulated dynamic. ©Dahn Hiuni 2025

As this simple diagram suggests, there is a multi-directional and multi-relational exchange that takes place during a museum tour. That exchange exists between the viewer/s and the artwork, the tour guide and the artwork, and between the tour guide and the viewer/s (and sometimes among the viewers themselves.) Each of these interactions comes to the fore at various points on a given tour, but they are all active circuits. Think of it as a new interaction between you and two friends, one whom you know well and the other less so. You are doing your best to introduce them to each other, acting as the consequential mediator. How can you bring them closer together so that they too may develop a meaningful relationship? Though at times you might focus on one more than the other, your flexible attention is needed for both simultaneously—a question of intuition and balance. It is important to start

thinking about this triangulation as a touring ethic. We will continue to address this dynamic in-depth as we analyze the event of the tour.

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Aesthetics

Aesthetics is the branch of philosophy that asks the big questions on the nature of beauty and art. At the time of the first recorded debates in Ancient Greece, philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle thought of beauty and art as synonymous. Today we know that art doesn't have to be beautiful, as its purpose has evolved over the centuries.

Whenever we talk about art, there is an underlying preoccupation with Aesthetics. We either embrace and celebrate the object we are discussing, or we critique, challenge, and sometimes reject its status as art. Some may concede that an object may be art but not very good art. Some may assign art a purely aesthetic function while others argue that it can and should be a means to an end. Throughout history, various artists and movements have expressed strong opinions about the nature and purpose of art, often through impassioned manifestos. Because there are no definitive answers in philosophy, many ruminations have added to the fascinating, age-old question: *What is art.*

Aesthetics can be done with intention within the museum. Debates on Aesthetics can sometimes be the most interesting discussions, again, even at the expense of the time scheduled for an artwork.

To best explain the power of Aesthetic debate, I would like to share a personal account of a time I engaged in Aesthetics in the museum. It was during my interview as a prospective tour guide at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. I took a risk by deviating from what was asked of me, but since I knew the interviewing staff had been doing dozens of these 'auditions,' I wanted to do something different. I was asked to prepare a few artworks for discussion. I did, and we eventually got to them, but I decided to start my tour at a fire alarm.

I began discussing the fire alarm as a work of art, much to the initial incredulity of the educators who came to evaluate me. After a wink and a smile, they caught on and began to play along.

I went up close to the fire alarm and stood beside it as I would any other artwork, "I want to talk about this piece," I said. "Are you familiar with it?" One 'student' exclaimed, "That's not art." Surprised, I retorted, "What do you mean? It's in the museum." "Yes, but still, it's clearly not art," he protested. I shot back with, "Not only is it in the museum, it's on the wall!" A moment of silence. I continued, "*and* it has the customary label right underneath it." I had a pretty strong case. After sharing some smiles, another 'student' finally clarified: "that's a fire alarm. I've seen many like it before." "Oh," I said, "you mean it's not an original, it's been mass-produced—much like this nearby urinal…" Things started to get interesting. Despite the label being closer to the fire alarm than to the urinal, I eventually conceded that, yes, it is in fact related to the object on the pedestal and not to the one on the wall.

Figure 17: Duchamp's *Fountain*, 1917 with nearby label and fire alarm (AI composite) ©Dahn Hiuni, 2025

OK, it's a fire alarm. And while someone designed it, with its shiny red color, symmetric simplicity and sans serif capitals, those decision were made based on its utilitarian function: to be clearly seen and pulled in the event of a fire. And yes, they are all over the place. I posed one last tricky question: could the fire alarm ever *become* art? After some reflection, they affirmed that it *could* potentially become art if an artist presented it as such; decontextualized it from its original function and displayed it for the sole purpose of contemplation. We came to agree on a few

things: it wasn't the material used, the skilled artistry displayed, nor the originality that mattered. Anything could potentially become art. What matter's is intention, the artist's idea and gesture—provocative and subversive as it may be, as in the case of Duchamp's familiar *Fountain*.

That day, all of us engaged in Aesthetics, rather than the usual art history, and it was fun and thought-provoking. We realized all sorts of conversations could be had within the museum that are worthwhile and eye-opening. I did get the job that day, and I continued using my fire alarm trick with numerous groups over the years, mostly with defiant high school students, to talk about the nature of art.

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Conclusion: Our Role as Tour Guides

Given all that we've reviewed together in the preceding pages, it's time to come to a few conclusions regarding our work as museum tour guides. The big question this book has been asking is, in effect, "What is our role as tour guides in the museum?" From my long perspective, I'd like to propose some possibilities.

Yes, we must know our art history and be able to elicit good iconographic, formal, and historical analysis. Yes, we need to encourage our visitors to provide vivid descriptions and thoughtful, defensible interpretations. And yes, it is certainly important to be a good storyteller and a gracious host. However, it strikes me that our greatest role as informal educators is to foster a growing, independent, and meaningful relationship between the viewer and the artwork through a kind of dialogue that is uniquely ours.

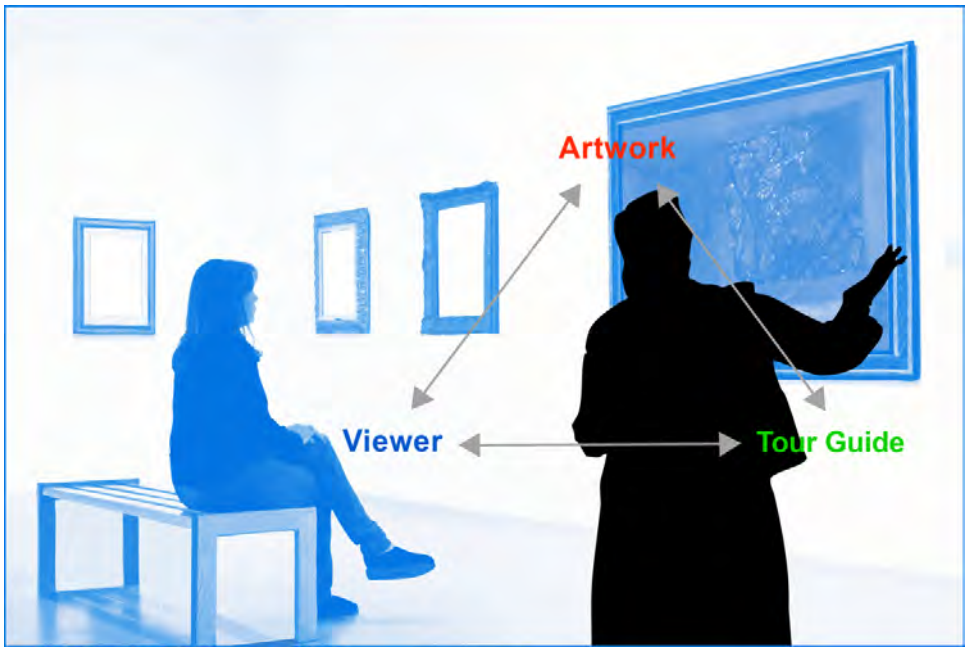

Figure 18: The triangulated dynamic of museum pedagogy. ©Dahn Hiuni, 2025

Perhaps a good way to define our unique role is to compare it to a similar practitioner in the realm of *formal* education. Take a university art history professor, for example. The professor holds a doctorate in art history and likely has a specialization in a particular artist or era—about which he or she can speak with great authority and expertise. But while that professor stands at the podium, projecting reproductions of artworks in the dark, he or she is at a certain deficit. First, the professor is removed

from the primary source, likely working with images of questionable faithfulness to the original. Second, the professor is likely physically removed from the students, in his or her own professorial space, which affords less personal dialogue. And third, due to the nature of the profession which is mostly focused on research and publishing, he or she is less likely to be practiced in the dialogic discourse of inquiry-based learning. While we ourselves might enjoy the occasional hour-long lecture about our favorite artist, we cannot subject our visitors to this kind of experience, which is more often than not pre-packaged and delivered in monologue form. It would place our guests in a very passive position, and place undue burden on us.

We, on the other hand, stand in front of the *actual* work of art, at very close proximity to it, and to each other. We share the same non-hierarchical space and operate as an informal group marked by a spirit of collaborative curiosity. There is a sense of discovering *together*, discovery which is open and unscripted. In this manner, I have truly had many visitors illuminate an artwork for me in a new way, offering a new perspective from which I was greatly enriched. This special kind of collaborative dialogue we facilitate is one that can never be repeated; it is completely unique to that particular group. Even though we might only have them for an hour, our interpersonal skills and our driving focus allows us to direct everyone back to the object in the most supportive way, encouraging visitors to generate personal meaning. If anything, we teach visitors how to look, and how to share.

Too many visitors arrive with pre-conceived notion about art, and excess reverence for the institution of the museum. In their humility, many visitors expect the experts to explain what it is they should see and know. If the subtext of the visit—inadvertently promulgated by teachers, parents, or the culture at large—is that viewers are to behold 'the great masterpiece' before them, they will assume that the artwork already *contains* its meaning—an ultimate, 'official' meaning. If visitors subscribe to this kind of thinking, they will believe that *their* task is to unlock it, to 'crack its code,' or worse, to simply lean back and wait for its genius to wash over them. Furthermore, they often believe that the tour guide *knows* this definitive meaning and is simply holding out for the sake of compulsory discussion.

The proverbial thought bubble over their head might read something like, "Hey, I'm just a commoner in this temple of culture. What do *I* know…?" This is the 'one-way' model of interacting with art and is precisely the scenario we wish to avoid.

Figure 19: The one-way model of interacting with art. ©Dahn Hiuni, 2025

Museum tour guides ought to be alert to these preconceptions, and diffuse them at the earliest possible moment. Instead, we must do everything we can to empower visitors to more actively and independently engage with artworks, bringing a multitude of their own ideas and experiences to the act of viewing—a kind of interpretive agency. We ought to encourage viewers to make their own creative and insightful connections, and in so doing, own and defend their thoughts and interpretations. Is that not what we do in most areas of life—encourage the individual to think independently and critically—respecting his and her opinion? Why is it that the visual arts elicit this hands-off approach in many viewers, while the other arts do not? People are much more willing to share their personal interpretations of movies and music. Somehow, the visual arts are seen as intrinsically vexing.

The only way to reverse these preconceptions is through our work. It is through our questioning, our patience, our generosity of spirit, and our restraint that we can turn the one-way dynamic into the two-way street it ought to be!

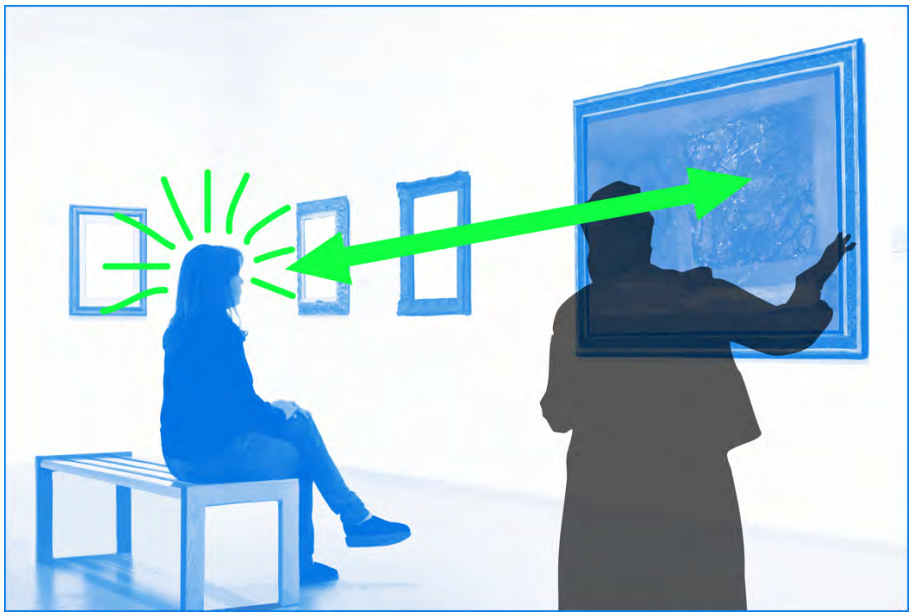

Figure 20: The relationship between the viewer and the artwork as a two-way street. ©Dahn Hiuni, 2025

About the Author

Photo Credit: Galit Carmeli

Dahn Hiuni is a multi-disciplinary artist and academic. He is a visual artist and graphic designer, as well as a performance artist and playwright. He has been widely exhibited and presented at such venues as P.S. 122, Franklin Furnace, Artists Space and Thread Waxing Space in New York, the Cleveland Performance Art Festival, the Delaware Center for Contemporary Art, and the Lancaster Museum of Art. Additionally, his writings, photography and graphic design have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Huffington Post*, *Playbill*, and *The Dramatist*. Mr. Hiuni's work is part of the permanent collection of the Walker Art Center and the Leslie-Lohman Museum.

As a longtime professor, Mr. Hiuni has taught a variety of studio art, graphic design, art history and art education courses at Pratt Institute, School of Visual Arts, Fashion Institute of Technology, Hofstra University, Bucknell University, State University of New York at Old Westbury, Kutztown University, Shepherd University, Woodbury University, the National Theatre School of Canada, and at the UCLA and UC Berkeley Extension Programs. For many years, he also worked as a museum educator at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, Provincetown Art Association & Museum, Art Gallery of Ontario, Winnipeg Art Gallery and the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Mr. Hiuni holds an MFA in studio art and a PhD in Art Education, both from Penn State.