ABSTRACT
How can museum educators create dialogical experiences with European decorative arts? This question frames my essay and stems from the challenges I have faced introducing objects whose original functions seem to overshadow their aesthetic and interpretive value. Repeated efforts to spark rich dialogue and collective interpretation around pieces of decorative art at The Frick Collection, specifically, has shown that, whereas painting and sculpture inspire responses that are not just formal in nature but also subjective and even phenomenological, clocks, commodes, porcelain and other such objects are seemingly less accessible, met with apparent discomfort, and confronted with the following questions: What was this used for? How was it made? How much did it cost? What is its provenance? Painting and sculpture, especially canonical examples of each, seem immune to this line of questioning and thus riper for dialogical engagement as defined by museum educators Rika Burnham and Elliott Kai-Kee. Without devaluing the importance of technical art history, functionality, materiality, and the history of collecting, I will explore how museum education – and the visitor experience broadly defined – is affected by the canon of art history’s hierarchical categorization of the fine and decorative arts.

The encounter
It was a Friday evening at The Frick Collection. Devoted participants of the Art Dialogues program gathered in the Entrance Hall of the museum, the echo of their eager voices a striking contrast to the peaceful solitude of the mansion after hours.\(^1\) I greeted them with a smile, thanked them for attending, and told them how lucky we were to share this time together. Henry Clay Frick’s home was ours, so it seemed. For a mere 90 minutes, the collection belonged to us by virtue of bestowing our thoughts and ideas upon it.

First developed by museum educator Rika Burnham at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it was known as the Observant Eye, the program was renamed Art Dialogues when Burnham took over as Head of Education at The Frick Collection. As discussed further in part three of this essay, dialogical teaching is not a method, but rather a theory developed and written about by Burnham in conjunction with fellow museum educator and historian Elliot Kai-Kee, which seeks to shift museum teaching from the two common poles of art education – information-based tours and programs that prioritize engagement over information (e.g. Visual Thinking Strategies). Building upon philosopher John Dewey’s notion of what it means to have “an experience” with a work of art,
Burnham and Kai-Kee’s influential *Teaching in the Art Museum* advocates for the dialogue as the mode best suited to bringing viewers into a shared orbit around a work of art whose depth of meaning is never fully exhausted, but rather always open to the diverse observations of those whose eyes and minds encircle it. In these “interpretive communities,” as Burnham describes them, the museum educator has equal respect for both art and audience, and by bringing them into communion, ignites a hermeneutic experience that is entirely open-ended and unique with each encounter. Throughout the dialogue, which is marked by moments of silence, exchange, opposition, questioning, information and more, the teacher follows and supports the interpretive pathway mutually carved by object and audience, never forcing a particular outcome, although her preparatory research on the object is deep. As Burnham and Kai-Kee emphasize repeatedly, the teacher does not view any one piece of the interpretive puzzle as authoritative – not scholarship, not the visitor, not even the object. “The gallery teacher is the advocate for the endeavor as a whole.” In dialogical teaching, the work of art is not a problem to be solved. It is a playground for the imagination – a labyrinth with infinite entrances and exists. It is an experience, moreover, driven by emotion and the stirring of the soul.

In this particular Art Dialogue, as in all Art Dialogues at the Frick, the subject of the evening remained a mystery until participants arrived at the chosen gallery and sat in museum stools before the work of art in question. Withholding the topic of the dialogue not only creates anticipation but also hinders preparation and the stirring of preconceived notions. There is also something theatrical about approaching the work of art unknowingly. Arriving via a choreographed path is akin to a curtain rising to reveal a stage set of marvelous proportions. Upon arriving at the object, I asked the group to quietly and singularly contemplate the work of art for a minute, without any introduction to influence the direction of their thoughts. Then I simply stated, “I invite your thoughts.” In this way, I allowed the group to decide the path of inquiry that will start our time together.

Each arrival elicits a different reaction, from traditional “oohs” and “ahs” to wide eyes and satisfied smiles. Of course, no matter how much the group is held in suspense, a work of art is never truly a *tabula rasa*. This was never more apparent than on the night in question. On this particular evening, the group did not travel deep into the galleries and the element of surprise was not augmented by a circuitous route. A quick right turn at the end of the East Vestibule brought us to our location at the base of the grand staircase. I directed everyone to sit in a tight formation of stools cascading down the steps. But before I could introduce the object I had so proudly chosen, a dedicated participant put the heel of his hand to his forehead and exclaimed, “A clock? Oh no!” I had never heard such a negative, guttural reaction to a work of art, especially from a longtime participant. His tone was one of disappointment and worry, and I sensed that his voice spoke for the majority of the group, whose expressions showed similar levels of concern and doubt.

I did not anticipate this reaction, although, to my knowledge, the *Longcase Regulator Clock* by Balthazar Lieutaud, Philippe Caffiéri, and Ferdinand Berthoud had never been used for an Art Dialogue at the Frick (*Figure 1*). Moreover, the clock’s location is inaccessible to the general public, leading me to assume excitement – not discomfort – on the part of my group. What caused such dismay? What did they have to fear from a clock? Why did the sculpture I used two weeks earlier and the painting I would teach...
with two weeks later elicit the exact opposite reaction? This article offers a starting point for trying to answer these questions.

The Frick’s esteemed 1767 *Longcase Regulator Clock* rises tall from a sturdy square base (Figure 2). It is a commanding piece, almost architectural in its construction, with an insistent geometry that is hard to ignore: elongated rectangles and trapezoids, delicate ovals,
and squares inscribed by circles – all crafted from precious woods and gilt bronze. The geometry of the clock is accentuated further by the presence of elaborate sculpture elements placed at key intervals along the vertical axis. Representing popular moments from mythology, these gilt bronze sculptures – in conjunction with the architectural interest of the clock case itself – throw Neoclassical light on an object created during Rococo’s sunset. This early foray into the Neoclassical turns a lens, by extension, on the three men who collaborated to bring the clock into being. Indeed, Balthazar Lieutaud, Philippe

Figure 2. Longcase Regulator Clock, 1767. Copyright The Frick Collection.
Caffiéri, and Ferdinand Berthoud were pathfinders in cabinetmaking, gilding, and clockwork, respectively. The *Longcase Regulator Clock* is also a kind of meta-object that encourages contemplation of the passage of time at different moments in domestic history. Working backwards, it calls attention to the Frick’s status as a house museum, sheds light on Gilded Age New York, and ultimately transports visitors to the eighteenth century, when regulator clocks ruled the measurement of time in an affluent household. At the same time, and like most objects with a solid provenance, it transcends its environs by opening up onto the history and meaning of time itself. In other words, the clock regulates – and interrogates – the very passage of time. Like many works of decorative art, it is a deeply reflexive object in which form, function, and meaning are bound to one another. In curator Martina Droth’s astute words,

> … the objects become on one level purely aesthetic; but the conceit of function, far from being rendered obsolete or irrelevant, activates another level of meaning, infusing the fantasy of the image with the “real world” of the table or hearth … Moreover, it is on this very conjunction – between everyday reality and the precious object – that the object’s capacity to radiate significance beyond the “decorative,” “crafted” or “aesthetic” turns.  

From the passing of the seasons represented on the base to the crowning image of Apollo driving his chariot across sky, viewers are faced with the representation of time as the clock anxiously ticks its minutes away. At the nexus of art, science, and technology, the Frick’s *Longcase Regulator Clock* lights infinite pathways for conversation. And yet the dialogue I envisioned never came to fruition. We were at an impasse from the get-go.

Interestingly, neither the clock’s important place in the collection nor its status in the history of art helped matters. For a specialist in eighteenth-century decorative arts, the Frick’s *Longcase Regular Clock* is hardly peripheral to the canon; quite the contrary, it is a masterpiece that demonstrates the transition from Rococo to Neoclassical, the intricacies of the French guild system, and the development of precise time-keeping instruments.

For my visitors that evening, however, the art historical status of this object did not matter. To them, the clock was anything but canonical; it was foreign, unapproachable and interrogated with questions rarely unleashed on paintings and sculpture: How was it made? How was it used? What did it cost? Instead of brave interpretive offerings, this avalanche of technical questions led to a veritable question and answer session, not a vigorous dialogue founded upon the exchange of observations and ideas. The point is not to disparage questions that are perfectly applicable to material culture, but rather to try and understand why the decorative arts seem to resist a dialogical format predicated upon emotional response and insist upon a lecture defined by factual information.

Repeated efforts to spark rich dialogue and collective interpretation around pieces of decorative art has shown me that, whereas painting and sculpture inspire responses that are not just formal in nature but also subjective and even phenomenological, clocks, commodes, porcelain, and other such objects are seemingly less accessible, met with apparent discomfort, and confronted with pragmatic and informational questions. The challenges I have faced introducing visitors to objects whose original functions seem overshadow their aesthetic and interpretive worth lead me to ask: how, if at all,
can museum educators create effective dialogical experiences with European decorative arts?

Without devaluing the importance of technical art history, functionality, materiality, and the history of collecting, I will explore how museum education – and the visitor experience broadly defined – is challenged by the canon of art history’s hierarchical categorization of the fine and decorative arts, a hierarchy that is often communicated and thus reinforced by art museums. It is my conjecture that museum goers have unwittingly inherited this traditional hierarchy, calling into question the effectiveness of the dialogical model across genres.

**Nomenclature’s challenge to teaching**

History tells us that decorative art is not fine art. Centuries ago, artistic production was categorized and ranked by opposing aesthetics and utility, brains, and brawn. Art historian Mary Sheriff describes this succinctly:

> In this theoretical system, the arts that we designate as “decorative” were traditionally placed with the artisanal or mechanical, thought to require more hand than head. In contrast, the “beaux-arts” were classed among the liberal – those that called for more head than hand.¹¹

At stake in pitting concept against labor is the role of the imagination. As Enlightenment thinker Jean le Rond d’Alembert tells us in his preliminary discourse to Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*, the beaux-arts are governed by imagination and pleasure is their principle aim. By contrast, the mechanical arts – later known as the decorative arts – are inherently utilitarian, and their decoration defers, therefore, to their function.¹² Taking this eighteenth-century mentality a step further, no matter the beauty and invention of the decorative elements used to embellish a functional object like the *Longcase Regulator Clock* and raise it to the status of art, the underlying practical function of the clock remains its defining characteristic and its makers should be praised for their artisanal knowledge.¹³

Whether or not we agree with the age-old dichotomy between the fine and decorative arts, and no matter how much art history and curatorial practice have done to overcome it in recent decades, we should pay heed to the impact it has on museum visitors and our teaching practice. Of course, most of our program participants have not studied the splintering of the canon into the fine and decorative arts, a bifurcation that reached its apogee in eighteenth-century France, when the Académie Royale deemed painting autonomous and free from questions of market and labor. Nevertheless, the distinction has been institutionalized by museums, galleries, and auction houses and reinforced by higher education, which favors curricula grounded heavily in the fine arts, from survey courses to seminars.¹⁴ Moreover, at the level of language itself, the very prefixing of the adjectives “fine” and “decorative” – connoting superiority on the one hand and inferiority on the other hand – is, in my opinion, enough to influence the collective psyche of museum goers. We must recognize that nomenclature matters for museum education, whether you work in a strictly western collection divided into painting, sculpture, and decorative art, or in an encyclopedic collection that imposes a system of classification that spans space and time.

Returning to the particular instance of the *Longcase Regulator Clock*, what I find most interesting about my teaching experience is how much my participants’ struggle with the
clock related to their lack of familiarity with the meticulous craft of making such a luxury object. What I had anticipated was a philosophical discussion of time mediated by the form of the clock, but what I got was a preoccupation with workshop practice and the broader socio-economic factors of luxury goods that became a kind of testament to the old hierarchy of the fine and decorative arts. Ferdinand Berthoud, Philippe Caffieri, and Balthazar Lieutaud were treated as craftsmen, and the distinct roles they played as cabinet maker, gilder, and clockmaker, respectively, drove the discussion away from the clock’s overall form and potential meaning and toward the intricacies of their particular expertise. I jumped in at several points to offer my own observations in order to slow the bleed of questions and steer the conversation towards a holistic contemplation of the clock’s sculptural totality, but the group was happily consumed by issues of manufacture and use. In the moment, I was frustrated and confused, locked in a downward spiral of queries that were antithetical to the spirit of dialogical teaching. In retrospect, however, the tug of war we had between art and manufacture was a fascinating replay of the historical debate over the decorative arts’ complex position at the boundary of art and non-art, beauty, and function.

In Old Collections New Audiences, to my knowledge the only book that examines the decorative arts through the lens of the visitor experience, Professor of Museum Studies Nancy Bryk arrives at a similar, historically informed conclusion.

It seems to me that the “decorative arts” have always been betwixt and between in the museum world. They are not really considered “fine art” – art created for art’s sake out of the heart and soul of the artist to inspire and move. Nor are they steam engines or other workhorses produced only to be useful. The decorative arts are as useful as they are beautiful … listening to our visitors and watching their reactions to these furnishings is fascinating. Yes, they do marvel at the beauty of such pieces. But many are naturally curious about the “people issues” connected to these wonderful furnishings. Questions they might ask include: Did someone famous use this? Why does it look this way? Were the owners rich? What’s it like to sit on this? What type of old-fashioned house did it sit within?15

Questions of craft and function can certainly be asked of paintings and sculptures as well. Take a Netherlandish oil painting or an Italian small bronze, for example. The patient layering of translucent pigments to transform canvas into a luminescent surface or the laborious steps taken from the initial wax model to the final chasing of the bronze are critical to the understanding and appreciation of oil painting and bronze sculpture, respectively. And yet, in teaching I find that program participants rarely question or worry about the complex mechanical substructure of the fine arts. Function proves less interesting in my experience, even in the case of altarpieces, where the use-value of the object is quite high.

As mentioned earlier, we may be the unconscious beneficiaries of the eighteenth-century’s freeing of the fine arts from the shackles of function and facture. But there may be something additional at work here. Most museum goers do not own, let alone “use,” paintings, whereas the majority of decorative arts enjoy modern-day equivalents that exist in homes. Bryk muses on a related phenomenon in Old Collections New Audiences. She wonders why visitors do not linger very long in period rooms: “The objects were lovely. And they were furnishings – could not everyone relate to them?” That’s exactly the point. It is perhaps the decorative arts’ very relatedness, their mundane existence in our everyday lives, that stifles engagement.
John Dewey identifies this issue in *Art as Experience*, a book that has become central to the field of museum education. He addresses “the distinction between fine art and useful or technological art,” concluding that the association of art with the “normal processes of living” is what removes functional objects from the aesthetic realm. While Dewey disagrees with this “antagonistic relationship between the process of normal living and creation,” going so far as to deem it “pathetic” and “tragic,” he calls attention to the “story of severance and final sharp opposition of the useful and the fine.” Henceforth, Dewey primarily cites painters – Van Gogh, Gaugin, Chardin, and especially Cézanne – as exemplary of his theory.

None of this is to suggest that my program participants were wrong to approach the clock in this manner. Nor do I mean to use their insistence on manufacture and function to confirm the antiquated belief in the superiority of the fine arts. Rather, I want to underline how the decorative arts seem to inspire a quest for information, not meaning, that calls into question the ability of dialogical teaching to serve the decorative arts.

**Dialogue and the canon**

In *Teaching in the Art Museum*, Burnham and Kai-Kee argue that through close, prolonged attention to looking, guided by a knowledgeable educator, groups can gain an emotional, intellectual and deeply meaningful experiences with art. Central to their theory is the conviction that information should support and expand audience observations, but that the educator should not have a pre-set goal or set of talking points for the program. Rather, the group should be allowed to explore and engage with the work, always with the educator there to correct information, offer additional thoughts, and connect the various comments and ideas offered by the group.

The argument Burnham and Kai-Kee make for dialogical teaching gains its potency through a careful balance of theory and practice. In addition to an unprecedented adoption of philosophy and social science to articulate the field of museum education, they weave a rich tapestry of case studies that demonstrate the infinite horizon of meaning when participants and artwork interact under the gentle guidance of a deeply informed yet totally open-minded teacher.

Interestingly, for the purposes of this essay, paintings created by a singular genius dominate the case studies in *Teaching in the Art Museum*. Furthermore, all the highlighted works except one – Jackson Pollock’s *Autumn Rhythm* – are figural and narrative. In light of my experience with the *Longcase Regulator Clock* at the Frick, I have since wondered why Burnham and Kai-Kee exclude the decorative arts from their study. While the book addresses all museum educators, including volunteer docents, the case studies imply certain restrictions. By “art,” do the authors really mean fine art?

Whether intentionally excluded or not from *Teaching in the Art Museum*, I believe the decorative arts resist dialogue because they resist subjectivity, an essential ingredient to which one of Burnham’s high school students testifies: “What I had seen was just as important as what was being revealed, because it was rooted in my experiences, and it was my truth.” Interpretive freedom and personalization are key here, as Burnham and Kai-Kee conclude in chapter eight. To achieve a heightened experience, the dialogue must be a vehicle for total absorption by the work of art. In this special atmosphere, “The artworks sweep us up; the rules and the theory seem to disappear.” Or, as philosopher...
Maxine Greene puts it in her eloquent foreword to *Teaching in the Art Museum*, “... the experience of works of art begins in wonder.”

The perfect case in point is offered midway through Chapter 1, “The Art of Teaching in the Museum.” Burnham recounts a dialogue focused on a small painting by Rembrandt, the *Abduction of Europa*, making the point that certain works of art speak directly to us, unmediated by art history. In the case of this painting, “a poetic idea” emerges and the experience of the painting seems predicated less on art historical information and more on the painter’s ability to strike deeply into the souls of his viewers. This example illustrates a leitmotif of Burnham’s publications and the linchpin of her dialogical theory:

We know that the encounter with artworks is as much a matter of the heart as of the mind, that learning about artworks is motivated and held together by emotion as much as by intellect. Emotional involvement is a necessary precondition for awakening to a work’s poetic possibilities.

In my teaching practice, this simply has not happened with the decorative arts; in fact, the exact opposite of wonderment has been the case. The artwork stands at a distance because rules and theory cling to the surface; objectivity and the search for facts dominate our minds. It is important to recognize that the dialogic method urges gallery teachers to honor the intentions of both object and viewer and make room for the giving of information and the answering of questions when they arise. But when there is nothing but questions and information and the dialogue is forced by both object and viewer to become a kind of lecture, we must begin to wonder how applicable the dialogic method is to the full scope of artistic production. Why, one must ask, do some objects seem to elicit practical questions while others more emotional, intellectual, and spiritual reflections?

Art historians have taken steps to shift the mindset towards the decorative arts. In *Sense of Order*, art historian Ernst Gombrich argues for the decorative arts’ capacity to “transcend the boundaries of setting, function, medium and scale that conventionally distinguish them.” And he asserts that “autonomy, creative freedom, and aesthetic intent can be linked with decorative art, which is usually assigned craftsmanship, contingency and function.” More recently, *Taking Shape* at The J. Paul Getty Museum and *Matières des Rêves* at The Portland Art Museum, have made strong cases for the aesthetic dimension of the decorative arts.

But shifting the academic mindset is different than changing the approach of museum goers. Gallery teachers can make strong, prefatory statements to dislodge certain notions and encourage participants to see the decorative arts in other ways, but such a preconditioning of the audience is really antithetical to dialogic teaching. So too does it rub against the grain of inquiry-based methods, such as Visual Thinking Strategies, which museum educator Lisa Podos has entertained as a possible solution to what she calls “the decorative arts question.”

Certainly, one might argue that during the Art Dialogue I could have changed tactics, moved to a more lecture-based format. But given the goals of dialogical teaching, namely creating meaningful experiences, not conveying knowledge, such a switch would have also required an entirely new set of expectations to be defined. One might in the moment decide that such a change is merited, but the more important question is why the program ran into problems, not if it could be saved during that single session.

Returning to the theme of this guest-edited section of JME, I implore my fellow gallery teachers to think not only about how they choose objects for teaching but also how they teach with the objects they choose. Bringing the decorative arts to the center of our teaching
practice is not the pressing issue here. Rather, we must acknowledge and accept that the canon has infiltrated the way our public engages with art, shaping their reactions even before the first word is spoken. The disappointment of the participants as we stopped in front of the clock that day serves as a reminder that our programs and pedagogies do not develop in a bubble – our public’s expectations and assumptions will always play a role. This is of course central to dialogical teaching, the personal response to works, but when those responses are shaped by larger hierarchies that exclude certain types of works from the emotional and spiritual experiences that we aim to achieve in a dialogue, we as educators must take note. The art historical canon can and should be questioned by educators, curators, and the public. But in order do so, we as a field must confront the extent to which the hierarchical organization of the canon has unwittingly influenced our most respected pedagogies.

Notes

1. The Art Dialogues program was created by Rika Burnham, Head of Education at The Frick Collection. During my time as the Samuel H. Kress Interpretive Fellow, and then Associate Museum Educator for Academic Programs, I had the great privilege of teaching this program, which became the bedrock experience of my fellowship and teaching practice. It continues to inform my work, both in the museum and in the classroom. I am forever grateful to Rika, the Frick, and the Kress Foundation.


4. Ibid., 59ff.

5. Ibid., 92.

6. See Part 3 of this essay as well as page 15 of *Teaching in the Art Museum*.

7. Art Dialogues is a longstanding program that happens on a regular basis and is attended by a stable core of participants. Further, the permanent collection is small, making it difficult to avoid repetition for educators and curators alike. During my tenure, I reviewed the log of works used for Art Dialogues in the past and noted that the decorative arts had never been chosen, and sculpture only rarely. This is not to imply that the decorative arts are never taught with at the Frick. There have been numerous lectures, seminars, and gallery talks, many of which are inspired by the magnificent exhibitions curated by Charlotte Vignon. In this article, I refer only to a specific program, Art Dialogues. Several Interpretive Fellows, education and curatorial staff members have gone on to teach extensively with decorative arts and sculpture, expanding the reach of programming into new and exciting territories. Most recently, Caitlin Henningson and Vincent Tolentino, both members of the Education Department, have done great work introducing various audiences to decorative art and sculpture at the Frick. So too have Associate Curator Charlotte Vignon’s exhibitions, especially *Pierre Gouthière: Master Gilder at the French Court*, reimagined the way visitors experience the decorative arts.


One of the key distinctions consistently drawn between sculpture and decorative art is the latter’s association with function. In contrast to the self-determining agency of sculpture, the conditional nature of decorative art and furniture – in particular, the notion that decoration must defer to function – is seen as limiting its creative volition and expressivity.

For an overview of the history of the devaluation of the decorative arts within art history, with particular attention paid to the institutionalization of the hierarchy of the fine and decorative arts, see Martin, “Relics of Another Age, accessed February 17, 2017. The bibliography contained therein is also very useful.

There is a chapter that highlights a Japanese screen and an entire chapter devoted to tapestries, but these are still pictorial works dominated by the inventive genius of a single creator and the collaborative circumstances of their making do not figure greatly into the account of the dialogues, although Burnham does detail separately the importance of the expert weavers at the Manufacture Royale des Gobelins.

The book also excludes sculpture.

Chapters 6 and 7 of Teaching in the Art Museum are devoted to the topics of questions and information in gallery teaching.

Droth, Taking Shape and Hunter-Stiebel, Matières des Rêves.

Podos, “Exploring the Decorative Arts Question at the Bard Graduate Center”, 27–33.

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