

## Program Report

### Cultural Dimensions: Museums, Educators, and Social Action

*A talk by Peter Sellars*

Tuesday, November 3, 2009

10:00 a.m.

J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Center

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### Note from the Editor

This issue of *EdLine* reflects a change in the newsletter's emphasis. While the publication is shorter, it will continue to appear quarterly and will have a tighter, more in-depth focus on MESC programs. This change represents the continued merging of the former print edition of *EdLine* with the expanding MESC Web site ([www.mesconline.org](http://www.mesconline.org)). Enjoy the new *EdLine*!

—Gregory A. Dobie, Editor  
([gdobie@sbcglobal.net](mailto:gdobie@sbcglobal.net))

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On November 3, 2009, MESC, in collaboration with the J. Paul Getty Museum, launched its programming year with a fall inspirational lecture. Asuka Hisa, MESC president for the 2009–11 term, introduced Michael Brand, director of the Getty Museum, and Peter Sellars, the program's speaker. Sellars, an acclaimed opera and theater director, is perhaps best known for his innovative staging of classic works. He also teaches Art as Moral Action in the UCLA Department of World Arts and Cultures. He extemporaneously addressed the topic of museum education and discussed the role of museums, the objects they hold, and the experiences they offer visitors.

Sellars opened with the assertion that museum education departments are the most important (yet least appreciated) entities in our institutions, because they interact with the segment of the public whose museum experience is still open. Education departments work with individuals—especially children—who are figuring out who they really are instead of who people think they are and are exploring museums as a tool in that search. Relating an anecdote about a Japanese ikebana instructor who moved to Cairo after finding her “Egyptian self” when she had an interaction with an artwork, Sellars deftly brought the audience along with him as he explained how crucial it is to find one's hidden self and how contact with objects activates that knowledge and creates a connection to one's ancestors and to previous lives.

The power of the museum lies in its ability to invite the visitor into a non-predetermined space. Unlike television, movies, or advertising, which lead a

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viewer inexorably to one conclusion, the museum is a place for undetermined discovery. And, although many grants now ask for quantifiable results, the beauty of the museum space is that there is no way to quantify the real inner experience of a visitor.

Beauty is watching someone discover his or her own insight. A museum allows someone to see something that no one else can see, because it is there for only that one person. Museums need to acknowledge multiple, simultaneous, composite viewpoints—in the twenty-first century there is no single viewpoint. The voice on the audio guide is not the only way to interpret a work. The wealth of response is infinite.

Sellers drew on personal experience at the Carnegie Museums in his hometown of Pittsburgh to illustrate the ability of a person to develop personal relationships with objects. An art museum, archaeology museum, concert hall, library, and natural history museum, the Carnegie offered free admission for a working-class audience, making multiple visits possible. Such repeat visits allowed friendships to be established with objects. Once those friendships exist, the tombstone labels recede and the objects become part of who a person is.

Both Brand and Sellers mentioned that museums are places of solace and contemplation. Sellers said that they offer an environment where one can bring melancholy, a type of feeling that is increasingly hard to experience in “the nonstop culture of success” of the United States. In today’s depressing economic environment, museums can be places of regeneration.

Sellers was not afraid to be critical of museums. Calling art museums “hospitals for artworks,” he said that museums are often not hospitable to artworks or visitors. The works are decontextualized and robbed of their ability to be dark and wild. He mentioned the difference in viewing Indian sculptures in museums, where they sit as bronze objects on pedestals, versus experiencing them in India as living beings surrounded by incense and other offerings. The presentation of objects as masterpieces doesn’t allow the viewer to contribute anything. He wondered how museums can provide a more contextualized yet more open space, where objects are not the end points of display or interpretation but the entry point into a larger awareness.

The talk concluded with a question/answer session. One query and the resulting discussion provided a perfect symbiosis of Sellers’s theater and opera background with general museum practice. A member of the audience wanted to know how to keep from saying the same thing over and over again about objects on a museum tour. Sellers responded by describing his work backstage at each performance of a production, where he challenges the actors to continue to discover something new about the role, not simply simulating the part. In a museum tour, like on the stage, the goal is to raise the curtain, to unveil, to reveal, not only for the visitor but also for the docent or educator.

What had been scheduled as a ninety-minute talk went on for almost two hours. The audience was enraptured with Sellers and his message of inspiration, which accomplished MESC’s goal of offering progressive ideas to take back to our institutions.

—Mary Beth Carosello, Web Content Chair ([mcarosello@getty.edu](mailto:mcarosello@getty.edu))

### **Excerpt from final paper assignment for Art as Moral Action**

Please make a list and describe and map in detail three irreplaceable treasures in your life that you must safeguard during the drastic years to come. As you think through your life, recognize what is expendable and what in fact is essential. Identify three elements (objects, qualities, relationships) that you cannot part with, that will be subjected to severe strain, and that will need to be actively rescued. The act of writing about them is already a moment of recognition, of love, of treasuring, of protection. Please write in such a way that this paper will become itself invaluable to you and people close to you ten years from now, twenty years from now, and fifty years from now. Think of this paper as a safe deposit box for your most inviolable self.