

Talking about art to visitors at the VBMA is quite an art in itself.

DO'S AND DON'TS FOR DOCENTS

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Docent Pat Gabaldon, left, often leads tours for Alzheimer patients and their caregivers. With her is Martha Phelps, the docents' vice-chairman.

I am walking through the Vero Beach Museum of Art's Schumann Gallery with docent and advisor Pat Gabaldon, who frequently leads tours for mid- to late-Alzheimer patients and their caregivers – one of many community outreach programs offered by the museum. We are viewing the watercolor show "Ecstasy: The Mystical Landscapes of Walter Anderson," a Southern artist who died in 1965. Anderson not only did watercolors, pencils

and pen-and-ink drawings, but also was a master potter, sculptor and writer.

I confide to Pat that Anderson's rendition of pink and blue trees reminds me of Fauvism, a style of painting popular in France in the early 1900s that used brilliant colors often incongruous with the subject matter. Pat, ex-chairman of the docents, remarks that Anderson's symmetrical patterns remind her of the Dutch graphic



Chris Loughlin teaches art at the museum and is one of two male docents. With him is docent chairman Toni Hamner.

artist, M.C. Escher (1898-1972), a lithographer, woodcutter and engraver. Pat has just proved one of her salient points from our initial meeting: "There is no right or wrong approach, no script for the docents to follow for the exhibits."

The docents bring their own perspectives to their work. "If a docent is an artist, she might be more concerned with color and composition, whereas an art history major might emphasize the period in which the work was done," says docent Suzanne Albani, whose job as statistician is to record all the hours logged into the museum's "Green Bible" and put them on spread sheets contained in the docents' office in the library.

There are currently 36 volunteer docents – a few are currently inactive due to health, family problems, etc. – at the museum. Two are men. One, Chris Loughlin, teaches studio art, both off- and on-site for the myriad of outreach programs that the other docents tour at the museum. He is, in effect, a liaison between the docents and the art department.

Docents come from a variety of backgrounds. Some like Martha Phelps, now the docents' vice-chairman, were teachers. A few were former curators of museums such as the Cincinnati Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Others never had an art history course prior to becoming a docent. "We have former lawyers, who are used to researching and presenting material," says Toni Hamner, the current docent chairman who has been affiliated with the museum since it opened its doors in 1986 under its original name, Center for the Arts.

Toni is the liaison between the



As well as conducting tours, Suzanne Albani is also the docents' statistician.

Education Department headed by Marshall Adams and the docents. "What the docents all share is an interest in art, an enthusiasm for the subject, and an outgoing personality," says Pat Gabaldon. "We look for docents who make a connection both with the art and with the audience."

Because of the time commitment involved in being a docent, most of them are retirees. The average age is 60, and about 60 percent of them live in Vero Beach year-round. The others are considered seasonal docents, and their training and volunteering requirements are condensed into the six months they normally spend in Florida.

To become a docent, one has to be a member of the VBMA and fill out a questionnaire provided by Marshall Adams. This application pinpoints the potential docent's related experience and interests. After receiving the form, Marshall sends a schedule of requirements to the applicant. Next, a face-to-face meeting is set up to further ascertain the newcomer's interests and abilities.

Each docent-in-training (DIT) is assigned a mentor who will help her with presentations, both in the gallery and in the classroom. DITs are required to



"The docents are the museum's ambassadors," says VBMA Executive Director Lucinda Gedeon. "They integrate the exhibitions and interpret them for the public."



As VBMA Curator, Jennifer Bailey Forbes plays a major role in co-ordinating new and permanent collections with the tours conducted by the docents.

attend meetings, which include tour techniques, twice a month on Tuesdays. Wednesdays are spent in what is known as Art History 102, which contains material applicable to the current shows. Other hours, many of them flexible, are spent leading tours, doing research and making presentations to fellow docents.

After shadowing an experienced docent in a gallery, a DIT will lead a tour for other docents for 20 minutes, eventually culminating in a full 60-minute tour. After researching a given subject related to the current exhibition, a DIT is then required to give a power-point presentation, with assistance if needed, to other docents. "For example, says Toni Hamner, "in 2005, we had an exhibit in the Holmes Gallery titled 'Mongolian Art: A Living Landscape.' One of our docents did a presentation on Buddhism and another did a visual project on the culture of Mongolia, all of which was tied into the show."

Docents are available to guide visitors on an informal "walk-in" basis during museum hours. Daily walk-in tours are available between Labor Day and Memorial Day; during the summer months, they are available on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Formal hour-long guided tours are offered on the same days as the walk-in tours. (Groups of six or more can arrange for docent-led exhibit tours by calling 231-0707, ext. 117, at least two to four weeks prior to the visit date.)

The docent program has been in existence since 1986, the same year the then-Center for the Arts opened its doors. (The name change to



Of the 36 volunteer docents who work at VBMA, 27 are pictured here at a recent meeting. From left: Barbara Tilney, Joan Edwards, Phyllis Meyer, Vanna Halsington, LeeAnn Saltzman, Maryanne Bohlinger, Pat Garbaldon, Suzanne Albani, Mary Caverly, Phoebe Larson, Alicia Quinn, Roz Chadwick, Nancy Shaver, Joan Bowers, Sue Sharpe, Jane Padwee, Mary Berrigan, Renee Lincoln, Martha Phelps, Toni Dering, Carole Barton, Sue Phau, Wesley Davidson, Deborah Flynn, Margaret Hambleton, Betsey Marshall and Shirley Holmes.

VBMA took place in 2002.) The museum's permanent collection of 800 pieces, plus its many programs – traveling exhibits, gallery tours, studio and classroom art, humanities education for young people and adults, film studies, community events, lectures, seminars and concerts – provide an ample range of volunteer opportunities.

Dressed in "business casual," docents give approximately 18 tours in the galleries that are worth 36 credits per year. Within that framework, docents decide when they are going to give tours, and to whom. If they are seasonal residents, they often will cram their hours into the winter months. "There are always docents available who will pinch-hit while others are away," says Toni Hamner, who minored in art history at Finch College in the heart of Manhattan's "Museum Mile."

Before every exhibit – usually the day before – docents will join Museum Director Lucinda Gedeon, Ph.D., who has been with the VBMA since 2004 and was previously with the Neuberger Museum in Purchase, N.Y., or Curator Jennifer Bailey Forbes, who earned an M.F.A. at the University of Chicago, or the exhibiting artist for a "walk-through."

This touring of the exhibit highlights its main features, "and is always exciting," says Toni. "You never know who will

be there. For instance, sculptor George Rickey's son recently showed up for the walk-through of his father's exhibit."

As well as knowing about the exhibits, docents must have an intimate knowledge of the museum itself, a 55,412-square-foot, neoclassical structure in Riverside Park that is the largest cultural arts facility of its kind on the Treasure Coast. In 2007, the museum received re-accreditation from the American Association of Museums, the highest national recognition for a museum that only 47 other museums in Florida share. (Out of 17,500 museums in the U.S., 775 are accredited.)

In a typical year, docents volunteer more than 13,000 hours to prepare and lead tours for more than 25,000 museum-goers. "They work very hard," confirms Dr. Gedeon, who has worked in the museum field as both a director and curator for 25 years. "They are the museum's ambassadors. They integrate the exhibitions and interpret them for the public. Their job is crucial in terms of the value they offer to the museum and its visitors."

This attitude is also reflected in the museum's follow-up letter to those interested in being docents: "While the VBMA docent corps requires significant commitment," it reads, "it is an incredibly fulfilling position, both professionally and personally." ❁