



## Returning To Our Beginnings

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In the 1980s the support staff at the Cincinnati Art Museum, like others before them and after them, was engaged with the collection, with the Museum, and with the idea of visual art itself, all of which enlivened their days. Last month some of those 1980s staffers gathered (from Chicago, from Cleveland, from Washington, D.C. as well as points closer to Eden Park) to spend a day at the Museum and see what has happened since we were there helping to make things happen. It was an intensive day.

We met in the entrance hall, like any other tour group, feeling odd to be the ones there doing that. Terrie Benjamin, another '80's veteran and still on the staff two days a week as Donor Development Officer, was there to take us through some of the changes. Terrie – we're on first name basis here – for thirty-two years was full time on the Museum staff as Assistant Secretary to Director Millard Rogers, then Assistant to the Director for several succeeding directors, before moving into her current position, created for her.

Terrie led us through the gallery immediately off the entrance hall, now mercifully relieved of its black draperies but still showing what could be characterized as the Collection's Greatest Hits, out of context but holding their own, and on to the Great Hall, which had been pretty wholly concealed during the '80's. From that triumphantly 19<sup>th</sup> century space we turned left, through a gallery then just being installed with Warhol baseball memorabilia, and on to what we remembered as the Director's Office, in the process of becoming the Millard Rogers Gallery. Our informal response: highly appropriate. The library of our memory, nearby, has become a place to encourage children to relate to art. Not to panic: the library is elsewhere.

And throughout the day we found that elsewhere was the case for other familiar functions and endeavors – storage, for instance, is an organized, mechanized marvel – but the galleries, some changed and some close to what we had known, were full of old friends on display. We re-acquainted ourselves here and there and went to lunch in space some of us remembered as the Musical Instruments Gallery, others as Native American Arts, and some as something else entirely. The art moved around, then as now.

After lunch, Costume Curator Cynthia Amneus gave us a tour of her current exhibition, *The Total Look*, exploring creative collaborations by designer Rudi Gernreich, his model Peggy Moffitt and her husband, William Claxton. Moffitt and Claxton made important contributions to the development of Gernreich's innovative style, she explained. These clothes, so narrowly conceived in terms of who might wear them (perhaps two people in our group could actually appear in any of them) still managed to put fashion on another plane altogether. Cynthia told us how and why.

Terrie took us on again, to the new space filling the stone walls that once held the Art Academy. Top floor is the library, complete with outdoor terrace and an extraordinarily pleasant view. Another floor is office, singular not plural, everyone in a large but well ordered space complete with "white noise" to damp down the clutter of voices. Glassed-in conference areas are at center, along with private phones for conversations less open to the casual ear. The director, some curators, various departments are here; other necessary functions for the Museum as well as some curatorial offices are on floors below.

In this efficient environment everyone is within easy reach and the business of running the Museum proceeds with neatness and dispatch to an extent we didn't know, in our offices tucked into nooks and crannies wherever space could be found. The new set-up is quite like an old fashioned newspaper city room, where everyone works in sight (and sound) of everyone else. The more things change, the more they stay the same?

But there was a further difference from the Museum we knew. People working at the Art Museum today can come to their desks in the morning and leave in the afternoon without seeing a single work of art. The art itself is elsewhere.

Perhaps our group is not wholly in the modern mode, although most have continuing careers that grew out of their work at the Museum. We understand the advantages of the new office plan, but we think we'd miss the art. The pleasure of being in its presence during the working day is something we all recognized and that shared pleasure certainly added to the sense of reunited camaraderie that lit up our time together.

Who was there?

Gretchen Mehring Bertolet, whose CAM career took her from clerk-typist in 1973 to Assistant Director (Director of Marketing) at the time she left in 1993. She became Director of the Art Museum of Greater Lafayette in Indiana but left that post to marry a professor of philosophy at Purdue University, where she also held positions in marketing until January, 2014, when she retired "to happily enjoy living in West Lafayette."

Beth DeWall, who says "I was there for quite a few years and had several titles, ending as Manager, Merchandising and Photographic Services." She now lives in Chicago and is Senior Global Sourcing Specialist for The Bradford Exchange. "I believe it is rather rare to be friends with former colleagues so many years after the fact," she said of our gathering, voicing a sentiment we all shared.

Mary Ellen Goeke had two stints at the CAM, 1984-88 and 1992-97, as Assistant Registrar and then Registrar and also as Head of Exhibitions,. She has also held other museum positions in New York and abroad and is now executive director of FotoFocus, the month-long biennial celebration of photography and lens-based art in Cincinnati.

Carol Thoman, Education Coordinator/Head of the Education Department during this period, later moved to Dallas where she developed a model Artist-in-Residence program, then returned to Cincinnati and worked at Miller Gallery before co-founding her current enterprise, Simply Rearranged, a home redesign studio.

Maureen France "worked in the Education Department with Carol Thoman," she says, where she was involved with the docents, with programming, with the Discovery Room. She also did a stint with Painting Curator Denny Young when Young's assistant was on maternity leave, but meanwhile her own photography career was developing. She has exhibited her work nationally and internationally – and locally: "Positively Alive," a mid-career retrospective in 2002, appeared at the Cincinnati Art Museum. She has taught photography full time in the University of Cincinnati's School of Design since 1993.

Francie Morrison was Curatorial Assistant in the Painting Department from 1976 to 1986 and now publishes a directory of Cincinnati area foundations, used by Cincinnati non-profit organizations.

Kristi Horner, who was Director of Volunteer Services from 1987 to 1992, now lives in Cleveland and says she "has had a myriad of roles" that include working in the schools and with the church, leading to her current position as Independent Representative for Silpada Designs.

Janet Zack worked with Beth DeWall from 1982 to 1986 as Assistant Coordinator of Publications and went on to become an independent graphic designer. She founded ZackDesign in 2000 and has exhibited her mixed media assemblages in Cincinnati and across the country.

It's apparent that more than one of us makes things, which is what artists do, and two people, responding to my email requesting information, more or less identified themselves as "artists." Diane Szczepaniak, Membership Coordinator at the Museum from 1985 to 1988, also has taught art and worked at a museum in Illinois but has lived in Maryland, outside Washington D.C., since 1996. She says "I made art before my time at the CAM and after."

Cece Marshall, who was Membership Coordinator at the Museum when we all were there, says "My current occupation is artist. I live in Blue Ash."



I have never made art, myself, but have always written about it. I was the Cincinnati Post art columnist in the early 1970's but started at the Museum in 1974, moving gradually from part-time to full time as Press Officer. From 1974 to 1991 I was the interface with the press for the Museum, and also wrote whatever odds and ends needed writing. Since retiring I've been pleased to return to journalism and contribute to various publications. Like everyone else, I learned a lot at the Museum.

-Jane Durrell