Writing in the Museum: Myths, Images, and Language at the Palm Springs Desert Museum

By Martha Plender

Four years ago, the Inland Area Writing Project at UC Riverside began a partnership with the Palm Springs Desert Museum and the RIMS California Arts Project. The partnership came about through fortuitous circumstances. I had been a docent at the museum for eight years and had long wanted to find a way to bring the museum and the writing project together. The director of the museum, Dr. Janice Lyle, is deeply committed to the mission of the museum as an educational institution. The museum’s director of education, Sidney Williams, shares my desire to combine writing and the museum experience. Together, we conceived of a special project in which local teachers would use the museum collection for student writing and art, the best of which would be exhibited in the museum. We entitled our project: Mitos, Imagenes, E Idioma/Myths, Images, and Language, or Mitos.

That first year, we decided to focus on the museum’s Mesoamerican collection. We invited local K–12 teachers to participate in a year-long project, which began with a workshop in the museum to introduce the teachers to Mesoamerican art and to give them suggestions for writing and art projects they might conduct in their own classrooms. An artist from the museum, Xavier Cortez, visited the classrooms to work with the students and their projects.

Finally, the teachers submitted ten student projects (art or writing) from each class for consideration in the exhibition. This is an agonizing part of the process, for the teachers want every piece to be shown while the museum insists on maintaining exhibition standards. It was therefore with much trepidation that we awaited the selections for the first Mitos exhibition to open in May 1997.

We had a special opening for all who had participated. It was a memorable occasion. The museum had mounted, framed, and hung the student work with the same expertise that a Picasso exhibit would receive. Students, teachers, parents, and staff from the museum, writing project, and arts project all looked with awe at the images and language that covered the walls. We beamed with pride: the Mitos project was launched.

Since that time, there have been two other Mitos exhibitions: Mitos 98 focused on Western Art, Mitos 99 on a special exhibition of recycled art. The coming exhibition, Mitos 2000, will focus on contemporary art. Each year we have strengthened the process; each year the exhibition is a surprise and delight. The museum now plans for Mitos as an annual exhibition.

Yet each year one persistent disappointment has remained: few students have the opportunity to actually visit the museum and participate in the Mitos experience. This year, because the museum is such a rich resource for the community, we made what turned out to be a significant innovation. The museum committed to pay for bussing Mitos classes and students to the museum to see the works in person rather than to view them simply in reproduction. This seemed especially critical since we were focusing on contemporary art and changes the twentieth century had made to literature and art. Reproductions simply couldn’t convey the effect of a Dale Chihuly, a Robert Motherwell, a Frank Stella, or a Duane Hansen. So we created a special Mitos tour in which students came to the museum for a two-
hour visit to view selected paintings and sculpture and write observations and reflections. The students wrote at each of five stations that traced the progression of art from the nineteenth century, beginning with traditional Western landscapes, to the late twentieth century. Mitos teachers then took the students’ prewriting back to the classroom for them to complete for their Mitos project.

The new program, called Writing in the Museum, grew from this model. When the Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP) contacted the museum about special tours for middle- and high-school students in the Coachella Valley, the education department of the museum suggested a variant of the Mitos tour. So we created a new program called Writing in the Museum. The first tour began in the natural science wing with the first desert peoples exhibition and continued with desert animals, Mesoamerican art, a special sculpture exhibition of Ben Tre’s work, and the contemporary art wing. The tour ended in one of the two sculpture gardens with a chance for students to write a longer piece of analysis and response to a sculpture of their choice. At the end, the writing was given to the teacher with a request that it be completed in the classroom and sent to the museum to be displayed in binders.

Although the Writing in the Museum program is quite new, it has been received with great enthusiasm. EAOP in Coachella Valley has committed to bussing a number of classes, primarily from middle school and high school, to the museum, some from up to two hours away. The museum has applied for a special grant from a local group to help fund the project next year. The docents who have given the tours are excited about the student writing that emerges. The teachers are delighted to find a way to bring art into their curriculum and to bring art and writing together.

And the students are exuberant. Each tour group bursts into the museum, happy to be released from the confinement of the bus. The students receive a clipboard and pen, then gradually, magically, they become quiet. Suddenly, they laugh at the Duane Hansen couple sitting sedately on a bench as they realize “it’s not real.” They look up at Dale Chihuly’s stunning glass chandelier in amazement. They always love Paul Jenkins’ “Phenomena Wind Off Big Sur,” seeing in it an exploding rainbow, a flower, or a butterfly. They say “it makes me happy to look at it.” They stare a bit mystified at abstract expressionist paintings, and then one will say, “I don’t know, but ... I like it.” When they are given the chance to write, their heads settle down, and then—when they share—it’s extraordinary. Afterwards, docents tell me, “you should HEAR what that boy wrote.” Teachers say, “I am so proud. I could never have put it that way.”

We end the tours by taking students outside to one of the sculpture gardens to choose a piece to write about. Their quiet absorption is moving. I am always curious about and often surprised by what they choose, which leaves me eager to see what they write. This program demonstrates that the museum and writing are, and will continue to be, natural partners.

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