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Museums



Portrait of a Mughal Prince
(possibly Sultan Shuja), c.1605
Unknown Artist
Northern India

Shimmering silk, translucent cotton, sparkling enamel, luminous gold-leaf—looking like India's Mughal rulers without this heavy-to-wear fabric, often using knifes made with a single squirrel hair. Who was worthy of such materials used in pieces, possibly the son of an emperor or Shah Jahan, who built India's Taj Mahal. See the miniature portrait of this stately prince.
—at your DIA.

INSIDE OUT brings reproductions of great treasures from the Detroit Institute of Arts into your community. Choose from all around town. Visit detroitarts.org/insideout for maps of other communities and information on programs.

 Knight Foundation 



Public

Around the country, museums are collaborating with public artists and shedding their highbrow image

BY JON SPAYDE

OVER THE YEARS, in these pages we've chronicled the evolution of public art from "plop art"—the big sculptural object by the renowned artist dropped into the public place—into a dynamic ecosystem of artistic practices, from mural-making to event-making, that are more and more focused on the histories, needs, and wishes of communities, and more and more collaborative with community members.

At the same time, the art museum, sometimes seen as the "indoor," more rarefied end of the art continuum, has been undergoing a curiously similar evolution, from a warehouse of rare objects and a generator of aesthetic experiences into a force for education, community involvement, and even social change. It should come as no surprise, then, that many art museums are learning from, and aligning themselves with, some of the same public-practice and social-practice initiatives that have been making public art more audience-focused in the past decade or so.

As the late Stephen E. Weil, a scholar of museum studies at the Smithsonian Institution, wrote in an influential 1999 *Daedalus* article, "In place of an establishment-like institution focused primarily inward on the growth, care, and study of its collection, what is emerging instead is a more entrepreneurial [museum] that...will have shifted its principal focus outward" toward the public.

The change is being driven by several forces, Weil said, including socially conscious younger curators and a need to quantify the impact a museum is having so as to inform and impress corporate and nonprofit funders. And the change is progressing beyond educational outreach (Weil's main focus) into co-creation with the community the museum serves.

Two children gaze at a reproduction of the Detroit Institute of Arts' *Portrait of a Mughal Prince* (1680s) by an unknown artist. Part of the museum's Inside|Out project, this was one of several reproductions installed temporarily in 2014 in Detroit neighborhoods.

Photo courtesy Detroit Institute of Arts.

A Curator of Public Practice

The Oakland Museum of California (OMCA), for example, has long called itself “the people’s museum,” but it, too, has made steps to become more co-creative with its community. After a major physical renovation in 2010 came a reorganization under executive director Lori Fogarty that reoriented the OMCA toward a more active involvement with the four Oakland neighborhoods that surround it.

“We actually see our collections as the beginning of bridge-building between ourselves and the community,” says Kelly McKinley, director of the OMCA Lab, a unit focused on balancing curatorial expertise and public engagement. “We think less and less about creating exhibitions *for* people and more and more about how to create exhibitions *with* people. And that means that traditional curatorship has to line up alongside other ways of knowing, other ideas of relevance, and other voices.”

To help make that happen, the OMCA established a new position, Curator of Public Practice, and took Evelyn Orantes from the museum’s education department to fill it.

Orantes had been organizing an annual Day of the Dead exhibition that highlighted how Oakland’s Chicano communities celebrate the occasion, and via that show and her other activities

she had developed relationships with schools, museum visitors, and area artists who work with the public. Outside of the Day of the Dead show, however, these alliances mostly involved educational programming; rarely did community images and voices show up in exhibitions.

Now, however, as curator of public practice, it’s Orantes’s job to see that they do. She connects with community members and local artists to bring their ideas and their work into the OMCA. She’s organized exhibitions like *Who Is Oakland?*, in which ten Oakland-based artists reflect on current community issues in a range of media, including video, digital photomurals, and multimedia. She’s also overseen the creation of two murals on the outside of the museum, intended as “calling cards” to invite visitors in.

As her title suggests, she’s engaged on a daily basis with “public practice” ideas and practitioners, although, she adds, not always by that name.

“The artists I work with don’t necessarily identify as public artists or public-practice artists,” she says. “It’s just about using the right tools and the right strategies to execute projects. I want to know who are the exciting, innovative, playful people who are developing the means for community voices to be part of the final artwork or exhibition.”

RIGHT and BELOW: The *We Dream in Art* mural features artwork and portraits created at participatory art events in 2013 by community members answering the question *What is your dream for your community?* The mural was installed at the Oakland Museum of California February 28, 2014, through March 2, 2015.







Along with a friend, Esteban Cuaya-Munoz (right) stands in front of his portrait, part of the z project by artist Brett Cook at the Oakland Museum.

Reaching Out

Two Scandinavian museums devoted to public art are finding ways to reinvent their relationship with the public

The push outward toward the public that's on the agendas of so many museums today is even influencing two museums that are among the very few in the world specifically devoted to public art.

In 1934, Ragnar Josephson, a professor of art history at the University of Lund in Sweden, came up with a visionary idea: collect an archive of the sketches, models, and other preliminary products of the creative process involved in the making of public sculpture and murals.

The Skissernas (Sketches) Museum now houses some 30,000 objects documenting work by Swedish and other Nordic public-art practitioners as well as French artists (including Arp, Matisse, Vasarely, and Delaunay) and the preeminent Mexican muralists.

In 2011, the museum brought on its third director, a curator trained at Lund and NYU named Patrick Amsellem. He has

been working, as he puts it, to “reframe” the collection in a way that reflects a new educational/outreach focus, moving from the Skissernas’s traditional focus on the art-making process toward making apparent the ideological and other currents that flow around public art projects.

“What I want to do,” he says, “is raise questions that are quite important and even obvious in the art world of today: you can’t discuss the birth of an artwork in public space without discussing the political, social, financial, and cultural context.”

This reframing, along with maintenance and expansion plans, has closed the Skissernas until September 2016. When it reopens, wall descriptions, audio guides, docent tours, and public programming will, Amsellem hopes, give visitors that sense of context, and a sense of the multiple real-world issues that all public artists negotiate.

The KØS Museum of Art in Public Spaces in KØge, a small coastal town within the Copenhagen metropolitan area, also collects drawings, maquettes, and preliminary paintings for public artworks, including both the extremely iconic (a model of Edvard Eriksen’s 1913 Little Mermaid, Copenhagen harbor’s tourist magnet) and the up-to-the-moment.



The Oakland Rover, the Oakland Museum of California's mobile museum, brings public art activities to communities in neighborhoods surrounding the museum.



TOP: Photo by Maria Montati. BOTTOM: Photo by Emma Krantz, courtesy Skissernas Museum.

The Swedish collection at Lund's Skissernas Museum, which houses 30,000 objects by artists who have created public sculptures and murals.

“Community Ownership” of Masterpieces

Since 2010 the Detroit Institute of Arts has been doing a light-hearted project that combines the old paradigm—museum as treasure-house of masterpieces—with the new spirit of community connection; a project originally inspired by social- and public-practice innovator Thomas Hirschhorn.

In May 2004 Hirschhorn created a “precarious museum” by borrowing paintings by major modern masters (including Duchamp, Mondrian, Dalí, Beuys, and Warhol) from public collections and setting them up in a cobbled-together “museum,” the Musée Précaire Albinet, in the gritty Paris suburb where he lives. Daily events took place in the museum, from art workshops for kids to art history lectures and rap face-offs.

That venture inspired a program at London’s National Gallery, The Grand Tour. Full-size, high-quality reproductions, not originals, were displayed in the ungritty streets of Soho, Piccadilly, and Covent Garden. The Detroit Institute of Arts’ director, Graham W. J. Beal, brought the idea home, and Inside/Out was born.

“We took forty reproductions of works from our collection and just stuck them up on walls throughout our community,” says Kathryn Dimond, the DIA’s director of community relations. “And one day someone called us and said, ‘Hey, are you

missing one of your paintings? My husband is guarding it while I’m making this call.’ That made us realize that people were appreciating and taking ownership of the project.”

Since that time, community ownership has expanded, says Dimond. The number of artworks has increased, and they’ve been sited all over the metro area after conversations with community members about what works would be appropriate where.

Today, Inside/Out artworks serve as a means of highlighting the flavor of neighborhoods and the work of neighborhood groups as well as helping people who might be intimidated by the museum get a taste of major art. In the summer of 2015, for example, the DIA teamed up with Southwest Detroit Environmental Vision to install artworks in community gardens and develop programming around them.

The idea has spread. Since 2012 the DIA’s program has been supported by the Knight Foundation, and with Knight support, museums in Akron, Philadelphia, and Miami have initiated Inside/Outs of their own.

The Placemaking Museum

Public artists have been involved with the enlivening of public areas for centuries, long before the current vogue for placemaking and the involvement of artists in schemes to revitalize

By the terms of its funding arrangements with the Danish state, the KØS can only admit the work of Danish artists to its permanent collection. On the other hand, it commissions temporary public art projects by international artists, displaying them within Køge and elsewhere in the country.

The goal isn’t simply to produce public art. According to Christine Buhl Andersen, who directs the museum, commissioning is part of the museum’s teaching mission as well. “We produce very ambitious projects in public space,” she says, “in order to engage the audience in the processes, difficulties, and conflicts involved in putting art into the public realm.”

A current show, for example, is a career retrospective of the Danish artist duo Randi and Katrine, who create colorful, playful, self-consciously kitschy architectural structures. Sketches, models, film footage, and other forms of documentation of their work are displayed indoors, while outdoors, visitors can take in a series of newly commissioned works by the pair, installed along a two-kilometer “art walk” down to Køge harbor.

And because the KØS’s commissioning activities fall outside the Danish-only rule, the museum can invite the likes of Gerhard Richter and Tracey Emin, who took part in an iconic (and iconoclastic) study and exhibition in 2012–13 focused on art in the Danish Lutheran Church. —Jon Spyde



neighborhoods. Now, via a museum-practice thought leader, a California museum is getting into the act as well.

Nina Simon directs the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History (MAH) and blogs at *Museum 2.0*, where she discusses TED-worthy ideas for furthering the evolution of museums in a changing cultural and economic landscape. She's a major theorist of the move from museum-as-treasure-house to museum-as-community-center. She's also a former member of the City of Santa Cruz Arts Commission. "That experience," she says, "at a time when we were discussing an expansion of the role of public art in our museum, helped me think broadly about how art informs civic life."

The MAH is becoming a placemaker by leading in the redesign of Abbott Square, the plaza next to the museum, with public art and performance playing key roles.

"There's a paradox in Santa Cruz," Simon says. "We call ourselves an artistic community and we do support art in many ways, but when it comes to civic support for public art, we're severely under-resourced." As a result, she says, nonprofits like the museum fill the gap.

At the same time, the number of visitors to the MAH has grown rapidly in the past few years. "So we ask ourselves where we need to grow next," says Simon. "And the answer is, we

need to grow into public space. That's why we've taken on the project of turning Abbott Square into a creative town square for Santa Cruz, anchored with art."

The first phase of the project, an installation of Tim Phillips's huge sculpture *Beacon*, is complete, according to Simon. When the whole project is done (summer of 2016, she estimates), the main part of the plaza will have a public marketplace with food purveyors, two stages for performance events, and public art that invites passersby into the square.

Making a Public Park with the Public

Between 2010 and 2014, Minneapolis's Walker Art Center ran an initiative that quite deliberately brought social-practice- and public-practice-oriented art and artists not *into* the Walker, but onto a big green field right next to the building.

Open Field, the brainchild of the Walker's former education department head Sarah Schultz, was in part a way to make use of the open land where the Guthrie Theater used to stand (it relocated to downtown Minneapolis in 2006).

The question Schultz asked was, as she puts it, "What would it be like to make a public park *with* the public? How could this be a place for the public and also for artists engaged in public practice—and how could we bring all these approaches together

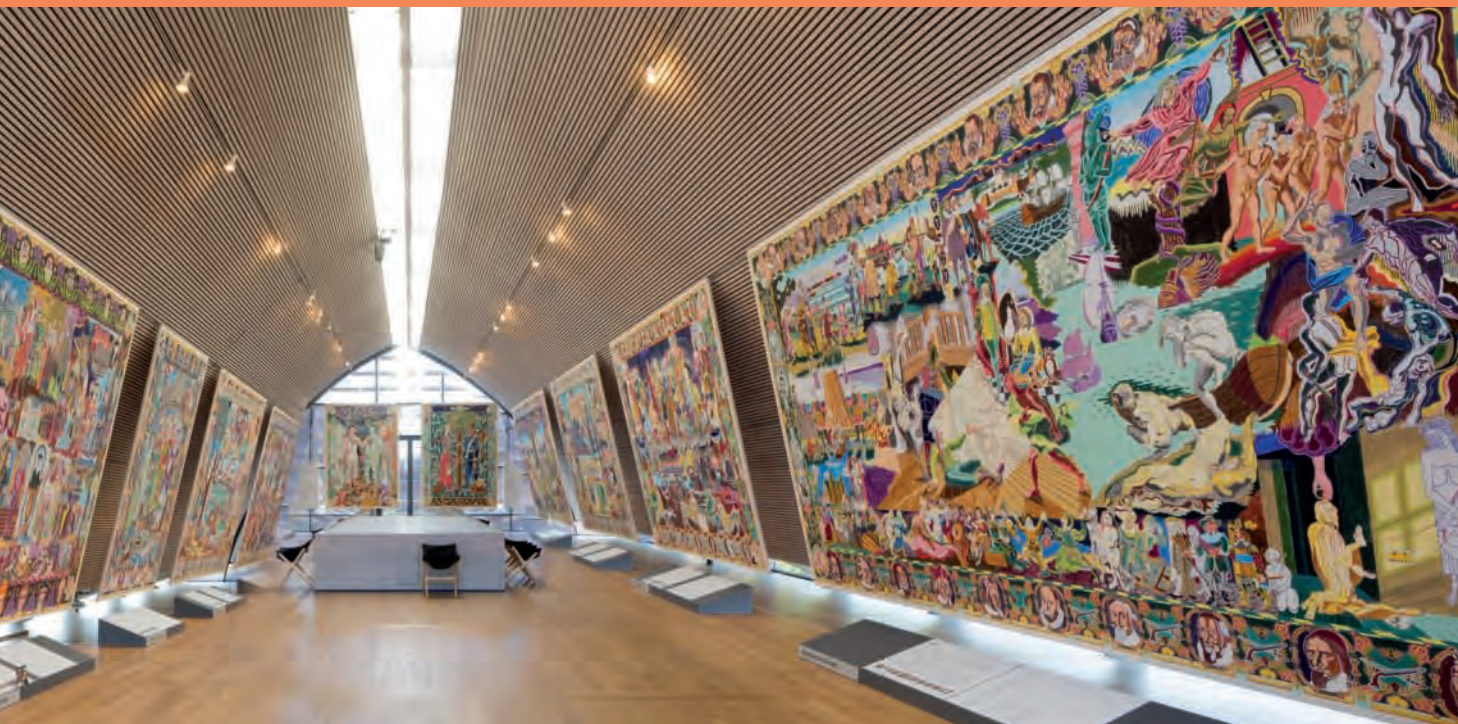


Photo by Hans Ole Madsen.

Bjørn Nørgaard's *Sketches for the Queen's Tapestries* at the KØS Museum of Art in Public Spaces, which collects preliminary work toward public pieces.

in one space to see what might percolate and how they might pollinate one another?”

For Schultz, the Walker’s role as a major contemporary art center also obligates it to pay attention to what she calls “this surge of interest among artists in working in the public sphere in a variety of different ways.”

Open Field hosted a wide range of mostly informal projects initiated by artists and community members. Projects included drawing and knitting clubs, a synchronized-lawn-mowing event, play readings, an invitation from a local publisher to pitch book ideas, and projects from out-of-town artists, the best known of whom were probably Fluxus icons Alison Knowles and Benjamin Patterson. And the Walker’s wildly popular and ongoing Internet Cat Video Festival was launched at Open Field too, by Schultz’s colleague Scott Stulen, who is now curator of audience experience and performance at another notably community-minded museum, the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

Like Orantes in Oakland, Schultz is hesitant to use the term

public artist for the Open Field participants. “All artists are public artists,” she insists. “It’s just a question of how you want to engage what you think of as the public.”

Erasing a Distinction

One of the instigators invited to Open Field for a residency was Maria Mortati, a San Francisco–based exhibit designer, who worked with local artists to develop FluxField, a galaxy of projects based on Fluxus precedents. Mortati is also the creator of the San Francisco Mobile Museum, which was one of the most prominent of a whole series of mobile, pop-up, and otherwise improvisatory mini-museums that have been showing up in public space in the past few years, more or less totally effacing the distinction between “museum art” and “public art.”

As Elizabeth Merritt, director of the American Alliance of Museums’ Center for the Future of Museums, wrote in 2009, the year that Mortati created the Mobile Museum, “All sorts of purveyors are finding new ways to meet their patrons—or



A music event for teens—including a mixed tape exchange—drew large crowds as part of Open Field, a 2010–2014 program of the Walker Art Center.

encounter new ones—outside the confines of their traditional physical locations” in a trend that “builds on a long tradition of performance art and other cultural mash-ups in public places.”

“I was working on large museum projects for a studio, researching a lot of different museum practices,” Mortati says. “Pop-up and mobile museums were still kind of few and far between, and I wanted to test out ideas of bringing the museum to the people.”

The Mobile Museum was partly inspired by the work of Jaime Kopke, who had founded the Denver Community Museum as a series of storefront exhibits. Since storefront appropriation wasn’t an option in San Francisco, Mortati created an eight-sided steel-framed and wood-paneled structure that could display objects, could be configured in various ways, and could fit into her car so she could drive it around the city to parks and other public places.

In fact, the first Mobile Museum show, *Looking for Loci*, was a collaboration with Kopke. That project asked citizens in Denver

and San Francisco to create “visual tributes,” including photos, drawings, and written accounts, to special places that meant a lot to them. Mortati provided each participant with a standard-size box into which everything had to fit, and the citizen-artists ended up creating small dioramas that were shown both in Denver and in the Mobile Museum in California. Other projects followed before she folded up the mini-museum in 2012.

Originally a worker in brick-and-mortar museums, Mortati voices a sort of charter for why museums are reaching out into realms familiar to public artists. “There’s a lot of interesting stuff going on in museums,” she says, “and some of it is intellectually provocative, but it’s possible to get pretty far away from people’s experience. So I’m enthusiastic about the idea that I can take some of those ideas and explore them in the public space, and as a result really ask what we’re doing with our public institutions, and particularly what we’re doing with our museums.”

JON SPAYDE is a frequent contributor to Public Art Review.



Photo by Maria Mortati.

Maria Mortati created the pop-up San Francisco Mobile Museum, here showing the FREE Shrines Exhibit (2010) at San Francisco’s Exploratorium.