

WHAT IS A DOCENT?

BY MRS. LORING DAM

THE idea of a Museum as a place for frequent and leisurely hours of æsthetic entertainment seems to be strange to the mind of the average American.

Frequently when I have asked my friends whether they would like me to show them our collections, they have said, "Oh, but I've *been* there!" Most of us go once the rounds of public exhibitions in a cursory way, methodically checking them off as "done" after one visit, or the Museum is regarded either as one of the sights of the city for the instruction and admiration of out-of-town visitors, or as a place of use only to art students, historians and archaeologists.

I happened to be standing just inside the entrance to the Louvre one day last July, and had an opportunity of studying a crowd of tourists whose guide was informing them that they had twenty minutes in which to see the collections in that great Museum. Their complacency was not affected by an announcement and a situation that struck me as exceedingly ludicrous.

The incident startled me into speculation and, being everywhere Museum bent, I began studying the visitors here and there as well as the collections. It was an interesting business.

The British seem to take that same thorough and solemn possession of their public collections that they do of their parks and squares. I followed groups with a lecturer about the British Museum, wondering how Englishmen of every apparent walk of life came to be so interested in the designs on Cretan vases. I talked to one group and slyly dropped the question into the midst of our conversation. "Oh, we're (note the pronoun) excavating in Crete, you know, and one likes to be up on what's been discovered." I stood in the Lower Egyptian Galleries where were strolling about half a dozen men with their sons, great pals, some nearer six, some perhaps sixteen, and overheard a boy, certainly not over ten years of age, say, "now look here, Dad, is this a reproduction or an original?" They were not sightseeing, they were studying, with the same spontaneous enthusiasm they might take to a cricket match.

The average Englishman takes it for granted that he should be familiar with the art of all the world, and its history, too, for does not his empire stretch around the globe? It has a definite and practical significance for him.

The French seem less earnest, less proprietary about their Museums, one does not see so many of them in the galleries in France, but I talked to none who did not know the art of his city surprisingly well. They must acquire their knowledge intuitively, like their taste, with an insouciance that belies its thoroughness.

But the Italians go to their galleries as they go to church, with a childlike and unaffected reverence. The galleries are often crowded, but never disturbed, never noisy. They go with pride and comprehension to contemplate the wealth of Italy's contribution to art. I think the Italian is the Museum visitor par excellence; he combines the proprietary pride of the Englishman with the æsthetic sensitiveness of the Frenchman—and every picture, every marble one looks upon seems a living part of the mental content of the Italians we meet in the galleries, by whose courtesy, one feels, we are graciously permitted to enter the house of Italy, as we express in so doing an appreciation of her taste.

My conclusion was that the European does not merely visit his museums; he *uses* them as a part of his inheritance, they satisfy his tastes, and his emotional life. On a Sunday morning the modest Italian calls, with a friend or two, upon Raffael or Botticelli, with the same respectful cordiality he would show in entering the Salon to which he has not the entrée, and he goes away with as much enrichment of mind and spirit as those who converse with living celebrities. He is in sympathy with the greatest artists, and fortunate indeed is the foreign visitor whom he meets by chance in the gallery, and introduces into his world.

We, on the other hand, though we know the works of art from all the world in our Museums are beautiful and wonderful, that we have wealth and can buy them, that we can fill our buildings with the best each country and nation has to offer—do we really possess them?

Material possession is very different from spiritual, and dry as a mummy in comparison. In our free Museums the visitor may go where he pleases and look where he pleases, but to meet these select Chinese ladies from the court of T'ai-tsung or Kublai Khan, and these quiet Greek goddesses and stern Sumerian kings who graciously

have taken up their residence here, one must be properly presented. One must have the advantages of travel, and an acquaintance with their kindred in other cities of the world, or one must have an introduction from the court.

And this is where the docents serve. By living day by day with these royal visitors from the past we learn to know a little of their individualities, their culture and their tastes; and being, as it were, servants in the house, it has become our privilege and our pleasure to be permitted to present to them the visitors who want to become personally acquainted.

"What is a docent?" is asked us a dozen times a week. A docent is not a lecturer, not a guide, not a teacher, but one who shows. We are here to show the visitor not what is in the cases, but all the many things that are in the Museum, not visible, around, above, behind the cases, the things not obvious, not selfevident, that one discovers only by living daily with the treasures of the Museum, and which make these relics of the past vital, living, entertaining components of the life of today.

Many visitors who ask for Docent service come with a definite objective. They are teachers, and want to enrich their minds, or they are collectors and come to study our collections the better to understand their own. Others have travelled and have learned abroad to appreciate the importance of Museums. Occasionally we have the pleasure to receive one of those wise persons who prepare for travel by study of the foreign art so near at hand that it is usually overlooked through its proximity. Frequently people ask me what books to read before starting on a trip to the Old World, and my answer is always from my own experience, an hour spent in a Museum in intelligent study is a better preparation for the art of the Old World than all the books in the libraries.

And the visitors we like best are those who come, often with no definite objective, who drop in upon us for an hour's leisure in the spirit of adventure, with curiosity and with a challenge to our resourcefulness. That is what makes our own days in the Museum a constant adventure.