Museum Education behind Bars: National Palace Museum Reaches Out to Young Offenders

Huei-hsien Lin

This case study discusses the National Palace Museum’s (henceforth NPM) project to bring museum education, in the forms of exhibitions of replicas and educational programs, into juvenile reform schools and correctional institutions in Taiwan. The following discussion of the program’s impact is based on the author’s participatory observation and discussions with young offenders during and after the program, as well as on analysis of young offenders’ written records and written reviews of the program.

Since 2012, the Museum’s replica exhibitions have toured 5 major juvenile reform schools and correctional institutions in Taiwan which detain young offenders between the ages of 12 to 19. Each exhibition displayed an average of 30 to 50 replicas of original works of art from the Museum’s collection, together with interactive devices, learning resources, and the artistic creations by young offenders inspired by the Museum’s collection. Over 1,600 young offenders visited these exhibitions and around 100 of them were trained by the NPM to serve as student docents who gave tours to the visitors. Also, 80 of young offenders’ art works were displayed together with the replicas. These art works were created in skill training workshops or art classes in reform schools where NPM educators and reform school teachers collaborated in teaching. Therefore, these exhibitions served more than a display of replicas. Combined with educational programs, the Museum hopes to provide a platform where personal stories can be woven with stories of objects from the Museum’s collection and then shared with fellow offenders, parents, and visitors and let the feedbacks from all those participated in the exhibitions reinforce and encourage the young offenders to rediscovers and recognize their potentials.

Reform Schools and Profiles of Young Offender in Taiwan

There are five major juvenile correctional institutions in Taiwan. While each differs in the offences of young offenders’ and the age groups, they are similar in integrating the teaching of middle and high school national curriculum into the institutions’ daily routine, which is a government requirement (Chang, 2007). Therefore, teachers of different disciplines are among the institutions’ regular staff
while additional skill-training teachers may work part-time at skill workshops. Collaborations with these teachers create both a platform where museum educational programs may blend into the schools’ schedule and curriculum as well as a pool of suggestions and creative ideas. Eventually, NPM educators, teachers, staff at the reform schools, and even some parents worked as a collaborative network of support for the young offenders. Written reviews by young offenders indicate the importance of teachers’ and parents’ encouragement and input, as will be discussed later.

NPM began the project by conducting a front-end evaluation in 2012, the result of which indicates that the young offenders had little museum experience (Chen, 2012, 2015). NPM also studied the profile of young offenders in Taiwan by analyzing the annual surveys conducted from 2008 to 2012 and published collectively by Taiwan’s Ministry of Justice in 2013. According to these statistics, young offenders in Taiwan concentrate in the age group of 15 to 18, and 85% to 86% of them are male. Only about 60% were registered middle or high school students prior to entering reform schools (Ministry of Justice, 2013). They are also estimated to be averagely 2 years behind regular school curriculum (Chang, 2007), which together with the low registration rate, may suggest that many of them have encountered difficulties in adapting in schools or have been disinterested in school curriculum, a speculation confirmed by the young offenders’ written reviews which often indicate their lack of interest in schools or negative memories of teachers. Therefore, exhibitions were designed with accessibility in mind, with themes that relate to young offenders’ interests and life experiences, attempting to reduce possible gap in understanding the Museum’s collection.

Statistics of these surveys also indicate that their major offences are burglary and drug-related offences and some of them are “pre-delinquents”, which include young offenders with drug addiction tendencies. The major causes of their offences, as they themselves selected in surveys, are psychological (45.94%), social (16.81%) and family factors (12.40%). Among psychological factors selected by interviewed young offenders, “lack of self-control” ranks the highest (92.08%); among social factors, “negative influences from friends” ranks the highest (94.96%); among family factors, “lack of proper parental guidance” ranks highest (67.63%). Some young offenders also selected “ignorance of the law” (6.96%) apart from the above-mentioned factors (Ministry of Justice, 2013). NPM educators were aware that it is not possible to tackle all of these issues at once but by bringing museum education behind bars, the Museum may stimulate a new interest in art or an impetus in learning, may help them build a new partnership and develop healthy, constructive relationships with their fellow classmates, and may even help foster or rebuild relationship with their parents. In short, NPM educators may have a chance to address some of the personal, social, and family issues that led the young offenders to the reform schools and even inspire aspirations for a better future and consequently, not only impact individual lives but also fulfill the social role of creating a better society (Sandell, 2002).

Exhibitions and Educational Programs

Displaying replicas is a necessity as well as requirement since venues at the reform schools do not meet NPM’s conservation and security standards for the display of original works of art. However, using replicas has its advantage as young
offenders can touch, handle, and closely observe these objects, an experience that surpasses an actual visit to NPM as most of the objects on display cannot be touched. Artworks created by young offenders, inspired by the exhibitions, as well as samples of their writings reflecting on the exhibitions and the educational programs, are displayed together with the replicas. NPM hopes that the exhibition is a platform where dialogue between objects and young offenders, between educators, young offenders and their audiences may occur.

For example, “I See Qianlong” includes replicas representing courtly life and the emperor’s cultural and creative endeavor, themes which were integrated into discussions and creations of art works in educational programs where young offenders were encouraged to relate their life experiences to the objects’ stories and to explore creative ideas inspired by Emperor Qianlong’s (r. 1736-1795) collection. The exhibition was partially inspired by NPM’s multimedia exhibition “Qianlong Chao (Qianlong Trend)” in 2013, an exhibition of contemporary new-media works based on the emperor’s collection. One of the exhibition themes in “Qianlong Chao” is “everyone can be Qianlong”, a message to the young audiences that everyone has the potentials to be as creative or as artistic as the emperor and that his collection is still a very “trendy” source of inspiration for young designers and artists today. Incidentally, Qianlong Emperor has also become a popular culture theme in novels and TV series in recent years. NPM educators believed that “everyone can be Qianlong” is a positive message and with Qianlong’s increasing popularity, this theme may appeal to young offenders who may have had little interest in history. We placed more emphasis on psychomotor and affective education, encouraging young offenders to develop skills and creativity in art and skill training workshops and also to reflect on how the emperor’s life and collection may still affect and inspire modern audiences, including themselves.

**Art and Skill Training Workshop**

For example, in coordination with the “I See Qianlong” exhibition, reform school teachers and NPM educators found inspiration in imperial writings on palace memorials. Palace memorials are reports submitted by government officials in imperial China reporting administrative affairs to the emperors and the emperors would sometimes write in the three-character comment “thou art understood,” a simple statement meaning that the report has been read. The seemingly ordinary characters inspired a Taiwanese design company to produce paper tapes printed with these three characters which became extremely popular in the NPM gift shop. The popularity of the three characters inspired NPM educators and reform school teachers to design a pastry-making session of making traditional Chinese sweet cakes stamped with the characters (figure 1). Pastry is an important skill training workshop as it may lead to possible job opportunities and many offenders expressed their interest in pursuing a career in food industries in their discussions with NPM educators. In the process of making sweet cakes, the young offenders learned the meaning and historical background of the three characters. They also learned the potentials of a museum object where a seemingly insignificant idea can be transformed creatively. They explored and cultivated skills that may relate to future job opportunities in pastry-making. Moreover, the young offenders learned to challenge their limitations since their first attempts were often not very successful and the perfect final products actually grew from a time-consuming process of repeated trial and error. But once they overcame the seemingly tedious and at times frustrating process, eventually a
satisfying result might be accomplished. Museum education, skill training, creativity, and the discovery and recognition of their potentials are therefore linked together at this workshop.

Figure 1

Moreover, when these sweet cakes were displayed in the exhibition and served to the visitors during the opening ceremony, the dialogue between museum objects and the young offenders’ production, between an ancient historical document and modern creativity is shared with all visitors who participated: teachers, staff, fellow young offenders at the reform school, parents and visitors from outside of the school. Their positive feedback concerning the creative idea of the sweet cake fueled the young offenders’ self-esteem and confidence in pursuing related professions in the future.

**Student Docent Training**

One other highlight of educational programs is the student docent training program designed to train young offenders as student docents at the exhibitions. Docent trainees either volunteered themselves or were selected and recommended by reform schools. The training sessions mix cognitive, psychomotor and affective domains as young offenders learned in-depth knowledge about displayed objects and practiced tour-giving and public-speaking skills. Student docents were also specifically encouraged to include their personal interpretations of displayed objects in the tours by relating the objects to their life experiences or memories. Consequently some offenders began to ponder on pursuing future professional training in public speaking while some reflected on their past weaknesses and strived for a better future.

NPM educators conducted most of the training sessions and provided learning resources, but teachers at reform schools would also help students locate further information on the web, as young offenders are prohibited from freely browsing the web. Some offenders even wrote to their parents for help to locate references. Offenders also collaborated with fellow docents by sharing notes and by practicing with each other. Therefore, NPM educators, parents, fellow young offenders, and teachers became a network of support in the process as student docents gradually learned to work as a team with classmates and began to rebuild their relationships with parents. During the exhibitions, student docents gave tours to parents, fellow offenders (figure 2), teachers, and even to visitors from outside of the reform schools such as regular schools and residents in the communities and to officials from NPM and the Ministry of Justice (figure 3). All those who came to hear their tours were
deeply impressed with their performances. Parents in particular often were very pleased with their transformations and some began to look at their children in a different light and some even burst into tears in the emotional moments when they first heard the student docents’ tours. The project became a journey of personal development as well as a reconstruction of relationships with peers and parents and the impact of the experience is shared by the young offenders in their written reviews and discussions.

![Figure 2](image1.png) ![Figure 3](image2.png)

**Young Offenders’ Reflections and Aspiration**

Following are some student docents’ written records of their tours where they interwove stories of objects with personal stories and experiences. One young offender, for example, was inspired by Emperor Qianlong’s efforts in innovating ceramic production techniques. He interpreted it as a message of encouragement that one should always stand up to new challenges. Qianlong did not want to follow others’ footsteps in ceramic productions and therefore introduced European painting techniques to be used on Chinese ceramics. He also created the “revolving vase” and “vase within vase” techniques. I see a Qianlong that challenged himself and was not afraid of proving himself. I used to shy away from challenges. But even an emperor who already had it all took on challenges to stay creative. Shouldn’t we try much harder to prove ourselves?

Another found inspiration and encouragement in a court painting entitled *The One Hundred Stallion*. He related himself and classmates to the symbol of skinny horses in the painting.

*The One Hundred Stallion was beautifully painted. Skinny horses in the painting symbolize undiscovered talents, just like us in reform schools. If we are willing to try and don’t give up easily, we may be a stallion someday.*

Student docents’ written reviews of their experiences also reveal that initially many of them were indifferent to or were daunted by the seeming difficulty of the task. But repeated encouragement from reform schools, teachers, and NPM educators eventually motivated most docent trainees to strive for their best performance. Following are examples in their written reviews commenting on NPM educators’ and

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1 Young offenders’ names and images in photographs are obscured for protection.
reform school teacher’s encouragement.

I used to hate history classes and all my history teachers were really mean. Educators from NPM were nice and patient, they encouraged and guided us. I’ve begun to like history.

My teacher told us that we shouldn’t underestimate our potentials. If we don’t even bother to try, nothing will come out of it.

Some young offenders commented on parents’ and classmates’ support and, at the same time, parents and classmates who visited the exhibition also left positive written comments concerning the young docents’ performances. Both types of comments indicate the building or rebuilding of constructive relationships with parents and peers.

I wrote to my mother for her help to search for more reference materials. Mom said that this is almost like before when she helped me study.

I practiced my tour in class. To my surprise, my classmates gave me a really big hand. My teacher and classmates were all amazed by my tour. Their support and encouragement gave me the strength I need.

Every student docent did a good job. My son explained one of the paintings to everyone. He was very organized and eloquent, quite different from what I remembered of him. His transformation is obvious.

My friend’s tour helped me understand the emperor’s portrait, even though it’s just a replica. I can see how hard all my friends have tried for this project.

The feedbacks and reflections from the young offenders, either expressed in writing or in their discussions with NPM educators, indicate that their experience was positive. Some began to ponder on the possibility of returning to schools and even pursuing related professions. Some reflected on their life experiences and determined to rectify their previous weaknesses. Stories of the objects were woven with young offenders’ stories, and as NPM educators, teachers, peers, and parents assisted in the process, the young offenders’ experiences also reached out and stimulated their peers, parents, and outside visitors, who were surprised by their potentials and now looked at the young offenders in a different light. The feedback from all participants again reinvigorated the young offenders to strive for a better future.

Future Challenges

NPM educators realize that these are only some initial steps and there is still a lot left to be done. First of all, the Museum faces challenges of limited resources as each exhibition has to come to an end and NPM needs to pool more resources and seek more collaborative partners in order to extend and expand the impact of these projects. Educators also need to cultivate more efficient collaborative relationship with reform school staff as non-teaching staff tends to place more emphasis on discipline than on education and therefore has a different expectation for these projects. But we hope that we have at least opened up new possibility or planted a
seed of hope in some of the young offenders and that such experiences will serve as a starting point to discover and recognize their potentials which eventually lead to actual positive affective transformation, inspiring aspirations for a better future for the young offenders.

Bibliography