

# Local Museums Offer Teachers Art Refresher

DALLAS (AP) —

By JAMIE STENGLE Associated Press Writer

Gathered under the summer sun in a museum garden, a group of teachers gaze at a bronze sculpture of six people who appear to be trudging along a city street.

The educators note that while the figures are walking close to one another, they are not interacting. High school English teacher Erin Rankin points out that one of the sculpted women tightly clutches her purse, almost fearfully.

"I love this piece because it's the disconnect. We don't know our neighbors," Rankin said of George Segal's 1983 work "Rush Hour" at the Nasher Sculpture Center.

Middle school art teacher Lisa Hunsaker said, "I'm sure he planned it that they're really close but not touching."

Rankin and Hunsaker were among about 20 mostly secondary teachers who participated in a recent weeklong forum on contemporary and modern art offered by five Dallas-Fort Worth area museums.

Organizers say the program helps keep teachers up-to-date on works produced from the early 1900s through today and reminds them that museums are an educational resource.

"It was the best staff development I've ever had," said Austin Haynes, who teaches painting and drawing at McKinney North High School. "It really fed into the art programs in the schools and how to grow them. It was wonderful."

Throughout the week, participants spent one day at each of the five museums -- the Nasher, Dallas Museum of Art, Kimbell Art Museum, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth and The Rachofsky House. The teachers toured current exhibits, got behind-the-scenes peeks at museum operations and discussed works of art and even did their own art projects.

The forum is among a variety of programs museum educators across the nation offer year-round to teachers, said Ford Bell, president of American Association of Museums.

"It's a great example of how museums address societal needs," he said.

The collaboration of five museums for the program allows teachers to see five different approaches to how to think and talk about the art, said Thomas Feulmer, director of education programming at The Rachofsky House, a private art collection that can be seen by appointment in Dallas.

"The primary objective for this program is to come away with a better sense of modern and contemporary art," said Connie Hatchette, education coordinator at the Kimbell.

"You can see the light bulbs and the sparks going off as they're getting new ideas each day," she said.

Feulmer said the inspiration for their program came from a similar forum put on by four New York City museum giants -- The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

In its fifth year, the New York program helps 40 teachers from around the world to integrate modern and contemporary art into the classroom. It's open to those who teach grades 3 through 12.

Dana DeYoung, who teaches fine and visual arts to high school students at The Albany Academies in Albany, N.Y., said that one of the things she enjoyed about the New York program was hearing the perspectives of teachers from other disciplines.

"Plus, I'm really excited that teachers in other disciplines want to use art to teach," said DeYoung, also fine arts chair at the school.

Experts say that such programs fill a need in recent years as schools cut arts funding focus increasingly on reading and math skills tests mandated by the federal No Child Left Behind law.

"In general, I think it's a challenging time for the arts in the schools in America," said Robert Lynch, president and chief executive officer of Americans for the Arts.

It's also clear, experts say, that students benefit from exposure to the arts.

"We know that from lots of different research that the arts are a great benefit to the advancement of children in schools and in life," Lynch said.

Bell added, "It's very clear that appreciating art and learning about art is a step in critical thinking."

Teachers attending the Dallas-area program, which is in its second year, said it was a good way to get acquainted with the museums' collections.

"It exposed me to art that I had not spent a lot of time with before and of course I loved going to all five museums," said Brenda Fee, who teaches art to elementary students in McKinney, just north of Dallas.

Teachers said that keeping up on current artists is important, especially since students are particularly interested in living artists.

"The first question they ask me is, 'Is this person alive?'" Fee said.

Rankin, who teaches English and creative writing to high school students in Frisco north of Dallas, said incorporating art helps put lessons in perspective. "English in a vacuum, it doesn't work," she said.

Hunsaker said teaching modern and contemporary art is easier once you learn more about the artists and their ideas.

"The more I learn about it myself, the easier it is to teach obviously," said Hunsaker, who will teach at a middle school in the Dallas suburb of Plano this fall.

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