

**Justice in the World and the Mission of Lasallian Education Today:
Enacting the Common Good
LACU Livestream Symposium
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Reflections on Social Justice

By Klare Scarborough, Ph.D.

As the director and chief curator at La Salle University Art Museum, I have wholeheartedly embraced the Lasallian commitment to educating the poor and advancing social justice. The Art Museum was founded by Brother Daniel Burke, FSC, a past University provost and president, who believed that the experience of original artworks, “little hints of God that expand the soul,” could be educational as well as inspirational, prompting responses that were potentially spiritual and transformative. While the educational programs have naturally focused on La Salle students, the Art Museum has always welcomed its neighbors, especially underserved schoolchildren from the surrounding low-income area. The Art Museum’s mission has been “to further Lasallian educational objectives by helping students, other members of the University community and the general public to experience significant, original works of art in an intimate setting and to place them in meaningful contexts.” I have understood this concern for social justice to be particularly Lasallian, and an ideal worth striving for, as highlighted in the recent virtual symposium I attended on “Justice in the world.”

During my early years at La Salle, with a strategic plan to grow both internal and external audiences, we expanded faculty and student opportunities to work with the collection, and we developed community partnerships that made our educational resources more widely available. We began participating in the History Hunters Youth Reporter program run by Stenton, which brought over 2,500 public elementary schoolchildren onto the University’s campus each year, instilling the idea that college life could be part of their futures. We also developed collaborations with community organizations serving adults with special needs, such as the SpArc Services, the Ladder Family Center, ARTZ and others. Following the Art Museum’s mission, we have actively served low income and marginalized individuals in our neighborhood who would not otherwise have access to the arts.

As with all museums, the collection itself has provided the foundation for our educational work. Within only a few decades, Brother Daniel managed to create well-rounded encyclopedic collection, featuring works by prominent African American artists such as Henry Ossawa Tanner, Walter Williams and others. Building on these interests, I have expanded the collection with works by a diverse range of modern and contemporary artists, including many engaged in community-based activist and mural-making practices in the U.S. and abroad. Some acquisitions were made in response to faculty interests, and in connection with our special exhibitions, which included solo shows about socially-conscious artists such as Charles Searles, Hung Liu, Elizabeth Catlett, and Paul Valadez, along with thematic displays about WPA-era prints and contemporary immigration. The collection has grown to encompass artworks which highlight many important

topics in our world today, providing relevant source material for our popular educational programs.

Based on the strength of the collection, many of our recent programs have focused on the subject of art and social justice, and art for social change. Examples include Explorer Cafes, public lectures by artists engaged in community activism, customized lessons for La Salle classes in a range of disciplines, and a virtual after-school program for middle school students in partnership with Writers Matter. Thanks to a major grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the entire collection has been digitized and made accessible through an online searchable database—providing a valuable resource for La Salle students as well as public audiences around the world.

As part of the mission, we have mentored numerous La Salle student interns and part-time student employees, providing practical work experience, professional advice, and recommendations for jobs and graduate schools. Many of them have expressed delight at the periodic influx of schoolchildren through our doors, dressed in colonial costumes in connection with the History Hunters program. Some of our students have worked on collections-based projects, which others have gained practical experience presenting age-appropriate lessons for school groups.

Alongside my role at the Art Museum, I have also taught undergraduate exhibition seminars for the University. These kinds of classes provide students with meaningful opportunities for problem solving and hands-on learning, with process-based activities centered on collaboration and teamwork, leading to the outcome of a public exhibition. In one seminar, for example, students learned about the history of African art and the problematic exhibition of non-Western artifacts in Western museums. They selected objects, wrote interpretive labels, and contributed to the layout plans, with the resulting display framed within a meta-exhibition that highlighted critical issues in the display and interpretation of traditional African art.

In recent years, with the financial pressures associated with declining college enrollments, and now with the Covid-19 pandemic, I am concerned that Lasallian institutions of higher education will turn increasingly inwards, with less interest in the well-being of the surrounding communities, and fewer opportunities for students to be involved in public service. Lasallian educators can teach students about social justice, provide them with critical tools for lifelong learning, and encourage them to work for social change. However, it makes a world of difference for students to experience this work first-hand, to learn by actively doing, and to know that their alma mater cares.