St. Louis Educational Museum: A Centennial Commemoration

By James A. Allen

The St. Louis Educational Museum will celebrate its 100th anniversary in 2005. This is a significant milestone for the St. Louis Public Schools as well as in the history and development of visual literacy and of educational technology as we know it today. It is important that we look back at our beginnings and pay homage to the pioneers in our field.

Educational Museum Pioneers

It all began in 1904, with the arrival of the St. Louis World’s Fair held on 1,240 acres in Forest Park, then at the edge of the city. The theme of the World’s Fair (also known as the Louisiana Purchase Exposition) was technology and education. During the eight months the Fair was open, 70,000 school children hopped the trolley with their teachers to experience the fun, excitement and educational exhibits at the Fair. It was fortunate for St. Louis that a few great teachers and administrators saw a great potential in the fair for their schools.

As the Fair was drawing to a close they joined forces to convince city leaders to create an educational museum within the St. Louis Public Schools and to allot monies to purchase key exhibits from the Fair. Teachers and administrators were also successful in convincing Fair exhibitors to donate many educational exhibits.

F. Louis Soldan, Superintendent; Carl Rothmann, Assistant Superintendent; and Amelia Meissner, elementary teacher, spearheaded the planning and development of the Educational Museum. The approval to move forward with the Museum came in September, before the close of the World’s Fair. Meissner, an avid photographer, designed the public school exhibit in the Palace of Education. To enhance the overall design and to inform the public, she had taken approximately 2000 photographs, which depicted classroom activities in the St. Louis Public Schools. In an innovative move she created a living school exhibit, with real students in classrooms doing their regular lessons. Move over “reality TV!” When class was over the students in the exhibit were free to roam throughout the fair. The Educational Museum planners found a space for the museum in one of the existing school buildings (Wyman Elementary) and created a learning center there for both teachers and students. Wyman Elementary was ideal because of its central location in St. Louis. There was ample space to house the exhibits and the many fine visuals and technological tools. Students were shuttled to the Museum for a hands-on learning experience. Soldan and Rathmann and the school board agreed that Amelia Meissner would be the one to head up the newly created Educational Museum. It was apparent to them that she had the necessary skills, skills that she had demonstrated in...
visual literacy and what we now call educational technology, while designing the public school exhibit at the Fair’s Palace of Education.

Meissner was not hesitant to add audio-visual materials into the school’s curriculum as they became available. Realia, still photos, drawings, charts and stereographs eventually gave way to projected images, motion pictures and recordings. Because of her experience and her role in planning and directing the Educational Museum, she was in demand to consult with and speak to school districts starting their own audio-visual education units throughout the country. She would go on to direct the Educational Museum until 1943, at which time her Assistant Director, Elizabeth Goltermann, took over. Goltermann initiated a new era in educational technology in St. Louis when she took over. That same year she changed the name of the department from Educational Museum to Audio-Visual Services to reflect the implementation of new educational technologies in the department and throughout the country.

Reality and visual education

The Educational Museum pioneers were not alone in their concept of visual literacy and educational technology. When the St. Louis Public School administration opened the Educational Museum, it did so in parallel with the visual instructional movement. It was a time when visual education was considered as an antidote for “verbalism” and “book learning.” The realist philosophies of Locke, Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel were also put into practice when they were incorporated into St. Louis Public Schools practical method of visual education (McClusky, 1955). The Education Museum’s focus was practicality, and therefore it incorporated real objects and images into the classroom curriculum. The Museum’s collection contained items, almost all of them from the Fair, which reflected global knowledge, technology and culture and demonstrated products from industry around the world in all stages of growth and development.

The underlying philosophy

Soldan, Rathmann, and Meissner have been credited with spearheading the development of the Educational Museum, but a previous superintendent may have laid the groundwork for the modern view of visual literacy and educational technology as one in which multiple modes of instruction make important contributions to learning. William Torrey Harris was a school superintendent in the later part of the 19th century. He was a great thinker and student of philosophy, who achieved highest honor as an educator when he was appointed Commissioner of Education for the United States. Harris was an avid student of Kant, Aristotle, Plato and especially Hegel, who he said “unites ancient and modern thinking.” He used his insight into philosophy on the job in his own district, and in a practical sense. As pointed out by Ames, Harris felt “the only way to cultivate the emotion was by the development of the intellect and the will. Thus he relegated sense-perception to its proper and very subordinate place in education” (Ames, 1909).

William Torrey Harris gave a prophetic speech to the St. Louis School Board 28 years before the creation of the Educational Museum in which he stated:

“Thus it is in our own time that we see the so-called object lesson system arise in opposition to the ‘discipline’ system in vogue. Let us know what is. Let us learn from the object itself, and manipulate words. The learner should see, hear, and feel for himself — say these new lights in the educational world. How plausible all this is,