

# Progressive Education and Museum Education

Anna Billings Gallup and Louise Connolly



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**Abstract** Museum education and progressive education both arose at the same historical period, approximately a century ago, and share not only a common history but also common features. Both emphasize pedagogy based on experience, interaction with objects, and inquiry. They also share a social vision of serving the entire society, including underserved audiences. The work of Anna Billings Gallup at The Brooklyn Children's Museum and Louise Connolly at the Newark Museum, exemplary museum educators during the early decades of the 20th century, illustrate the pedagogic and social aims of museum education in the progressive tradition. Their accomplishments can inspire us today.

## INTRODUCTION

Museum education, the deliberate interpretation of museum objects for pedagogic purposes, is as old as museums.<sup>1</sup> Museums as public institutions have always intended to teach, inspire, impress, or persuade audiences. Museum education as a profession has a shorter history, going back approximately a century. Anna Billings Gallup, a teacher who joined the Brooklyn Children's Museum in 1903, four years after its founding, and Louise Connolly, a former school superintendent hired by John Cotton Dana in Newark in 1912, are illustrative examples of significant museum educators from the early period of museum education that paralleled the historically dramatic expansion of public education.<sup>2</sup> Progressive education and museum education emerged at the same time and shared then, as they do now, common ideals and practices.

## PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

Progressive education emerged in the United States in the late 19th century. It was, and is, the educational component of a larger, worldwide progressive social and political impetus in response to powerful social changes. Historically, it derives from populist and republican thought of the enlightenment when new, nationalist governments in Western societies began to take responsibility for their populations' health, welfare, and education. The previously dominant institutions—church, monarchy, guilds and landed gentry—were gradually replaced by civil government agencies. Simultaneously, governments themselves became increasingly representative, even if still powerfully influenced by unelected interests.

Most of the larger social issues facing the United States after the Civil War to which progressives responded are still familiar today:

- Massive immigration and resulting social reorganization while enriching our society with new energy simultaneously spawned anti-immigrant sentiment and tension over jobs, housing, wages, and cultural differences.
- A wave of industrialization and job displacement and urbanization in a previously predominantly agrarian country resulted in rising and dramatic gaps between rich and poor.
- The newly rich were not shy about displaying their wealth along with their power. Some of the mansions that now are the crown jewels of house museums—Biltmore, Winterthur, and the Newport summer “cottages,” for example—were highly visible symbols of the differences between the lives of the rich and the struggles of urban dwellers.<sup>3</sup>
- State responsibility to all citizens for education, social services, health care, and other activities coupled with a rational taxation system (both inventions of the nationalistic movements that followed the enlightenment) were greatly expanded and applied more widely while costs of such efforts were hotly debated.
- A wave of criticism of public schools as they struggled to accommodate the influx of immigrant children, urban growth from internal migration and a more diverse society.

In education, progressivism led to a “transformation” of the public school, as Lawrence Cremin titles his definitive history of the movement.<sup>4</sup> Specifically progressive education included:

- 1) Broadening the curriculum of the school beyond traditional subjects that had consisted primarily of preparation for the classics in the early grades and academic subjects in secondary school. This movement eventually resulted in almost complete disappearance of some subjects (classical languages) and radical transformation of others (history).
- 2) Broadening school responsibility to include concern for children's health and well being, as well as their intellectual and moral needs. Schools promoted health and hygiene, not only through subject matter, but also through practices. We see the consequences in today's school lunch programs (with free lunch for the poorest), school nurses, and other health initiatives. There was a time in the early 20th century when many urban schools had toilet and bathroom facilities (including showers), crude as they seem today, far in advance of what was available in many childrens' homes.
- 3) Introduction of pedagogic principles from the emerging social sciences. Developmental theory and the recognition of childhood as a distinct phase of life began to influence schooling. Even relatively conservative public schools are far different from the typical classroom of 1850. Dewey's version of progressive education particularly stressed practical experience—painting, cooking, building, shop work, gardening, field trips, museum visits, etc.—as the basis for intellectual analysis. Most educators today acknowledge the value of experiential education even if it is seldom practiced to the extent that he advocated.
- 4) Finally, as Cremin argues, "Progressivism implied the radical faith that culture could be democratized without being vulgarized, the faith that everyone could share not only the benefits of the new sciences but in pursuit of the arts as well. This democratization of the arts and sciences and access to them for the whole population matches particularly well the parallel emergence of museum education."<sup>5</sup> Progressive education, like progressivism generally, had the goal of extending the benefits of modern culture to all the population.

Museum education naturally emphasized some of the progressive agenda, such as learning from objects. But other progressive ideals, including social goals were also integral to museum education in its early days, as illustrated by the work of both Gallup and Connolly.



Figure 1. Anna Billings Gallup (front center) with staff, 1913. *Brooklyn Children's Museum*.

## ANNA BILLINGS GALLUP

Anna Billings Gallup (1872–1956) came to the Brooklyn Children's Museum as curatorial assistant in 1902, became curator and then curator in chief shortly thereafter (Figure 1). She was a founding member of the American Association of Museums.<sup>6</sup>

Later in life, she described the beginning of the museum in language that resonates with the progressive education spirit:

The Brooklyn Children's Museum was not too impressive. It occupied two rooms of a Victorian mansion in a small city park. Its collections were limited to a few shells, a few minerals and insects and an assortment of enlarged models. But this museum was always open free, while the great museums placarded their entrances with "Children under twelve years of age not . . . etc." Brooklyn children flocked into their own museum to observe, to handle and to discuss their new found treasures. Fetterless and free, too, were the staff



Figure 2. Anna Billings Gallup, 1937. *Brooklyn Children's Museum*.

members, blazing a new trail in a new sphere. We obeyed the insistent challenge, "Stand ever at attention and develop a technique in service that will implement the child's own power." Every day, I repeated, "Follow the child around" to discover his major interest. If he had none, we sought to create it.<sup>7</sup>

Gallup was one of a generation of bright, well-educated, and industrious women born after the Civil War, who entered the professional world, seldom married, developed strong careers, and reached positions of prominence in their fields. It's important to remember that she came of age 30 years before woman's suffrage and ten years before women's right to own property was legal in all states. Born in Ledyard, Connecticut into a family that could trace its roots back to colonial times, she attended Norwich Free Academy and Connecticut State Normal School in New Britain. After graduating in 1889, she spent four years teaching biology at Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, one of several schools founded after the Civil War to educate African Americans and Native American children. From there, she entered MIT and received a Sc. B. degree in 1901 and shortly afterwards came to the Brooklyn Children's Museum where she remained until her retirement in 1937 (Figure 2).

The original idea for the first children's museum already echoed the typical themes of progressivism and progressive education that she consciously continued:

To build up gradually for the children of Brooklyn and Queens a Museum that will delight and instruct the children who visit it; to bring together collections in every branch of local Natural History that is calculated to interest children and to stimulate their powers of observation and reflection . . . The Museum through its collections, library, curator and assistants will attempt to bring the child, whether attending school or not, into direct relation with the most important subject that appeal to the interest of children in their daily life, in their school work, in their reading, in their games, in their rambles in the fields, and in the industries that are being carried on about them or in which they themselves later may become engaged.<sup>8</sup>

The report goes further to describe the plans for the museum that will contain collections "that include the great round of human endeavor and of human interest so far as they appeal to the child or so far as they may be made to subserve the child or so far as they may be made to subserve the cause of the education of youth. . . . Its collections are selective and have a real, definite relation to the home and school life of the child."<sup>9</sup>

But despite the noble rhetoric, the new museum soon began to revert to open storage space for excess collections from the grand Brooklyn Museum. By 1907, Gallup had clearly taken charge and rearranged the place. Her descriptions parallel the words of contemporary progressive educators.

Whether [the visiting child] copies a label, reads an appropriate quotation, talks about the group of muskrats with his playfellows, spends an hour in the library or listens to the explanation of the museum 'teacher,' who gladly answers his questions and tells him stories, matters but little so long as the effect of his visit is to enhance his love for the best things in life.<sup>10</sup>

Children could borrow objects if they were regular users and met certain criteria (for example, a bird specimen could be taken home for a week by children who could recognize 25 species on sight). There were minerals to sort, polish and examine, and constant lectures on a wide range of topics in

natural and social sciences. After a staff member noticed a small boy leading his blind brother through the museum, she immediately started a program that allowed the child to feel and thus experience natural objects he had only been told about.

During the 1905–06 school year, in response to requests from a group of boys, they added practical physics and electricity to the topics and some months later the enthusiastic students built a radio receiving and sending set, mounted an antenna on the roof and began to broadcast and receive messages.<sup>11</sup> Foremost for Gallup was always the idea that children needed to be active.

[W]e must remember that the keynote of childhood and youth is action. Any museum ignoring this principle of activity in children must fail to attract them. The Children's Museum does not attempt to make electricians of its boys, nor is its purpose to do the work of any school. The object is rather to understand the tastes and interest of is [sic] little people and to offer such help and opportunities as the schools and homes can not give.<sup>12</sup>

### LOUISE CONNOLLY

Louise Connolly (1862–1927), a decade older than Gallup, was born in Washington, DC and also was highly educated, despite significant hardship. The youngest of four daughters, she prepared for college but had to train to be a teacher after her father died. She continued her higher education at night while teaching in Washington and living at home with her mother. She described this difficult time:

I arose at six, and studied an hour before breakfast, and all the way to my school. I taught from eight-thirty to three, and prepared the next day's work, and corrected papers until four, and studied all the way back home. I dined at five, and studied on the way to college, and attended classes for four hours, and studied all the way back home—in the streetcars, of course. My mother read aloud to me as I undressed, a story to take my mind off my work. On Saturday I did up the mathematics for the week, and on Sunday I wrote all the required papers. In the summer I made up the weaknesses of the previous winter and forestalled some of the work of the winter

succeeding. And I took two degrees. B.S. 1888; M.S. 1899 [at George Washington University]. The thesis of my master's degree was *The Minerals of the District of Columbia*.<sup>13</sup>

She also wrote textbooks, learned telegraphy when there was no one else to teach it, and produced a steady stream of stories both for children and adults. She kept up this pace all her life, only adding public lectures as she became better known (Figure 3). She earned a position as a general supervisor of grades 2–8 for the Newark, New Jersey Public Schools in 1902. The offices for the curriculum supervisors were abysmal, but Connolly sent out formal, written invitations, inviting the superintendent and other supervisors to a “reception” at the offices. The superintendent got the point and asked John Cotton Dana, the recently appointed director of the Newark Public Library, if he might have space for them. Dana was glad to oblige and invited Connolly to work out of his building. At one point, Dana suggested to her that she might use local subjects for annual essay contests, and she put topics such as “Newark’s hospitals” and “Newark’s stray animals” as assignments for citywide essays. Connolly left Newark in 1908 to become Superintendent of Schools in Summit, New Jersey. Unfortunately for her (but not for the museum profession!), after four years the Summit school board decided they wanted a man in that position, so she returned to Newark as Educational Advisor at the Newark Library and the new museum Dana had established on the library’s fourth floor. Dana almost immediately sent her on a trip around the United States, as far west as Chicago, (she visited over 60 museums) to find out what was happening in other museums and in schools. On her return, she wrote a wonderful pamphlet, with an introduction by John Cotton Dana, which could serve as a curriculum guide for any progressive teacher at a museum or a school.

Then came the modern movement in pedagogy. It took off the shackles of dead forms that had trammled the feet of teachers, and bade them walk.<sup>14</sup> Some do not know to this day that their feet are free; but many are treading with firm step the uphill path that leads to high achievement just because they know enough to study the child as well as the subject . . .

So we take out children to see the real thing, whatever that may be, and then to the museum where hand specimens of it may be found to remind us of it, and then we reduce our knowledge of it to



Figure 3. Louise Connolly, ca 1925.  
*Archives of the Newark Museum.*

language, and, finally, we look into books to be reminded by language of our experience-gained knowledge.

The whole city administration in any progressive city is a museum. A class reciting upon the function of courts has seen a court in session. The city itself is a still larger and fuller museum. A class desiring to sketch trees sits in the park or on its school-house doorstep for the lesson. A class in United States history gathers about the statue of Washington. Rivers are studied on a river's brink.

So through their own observation of the response given to their efforts and through the diffusion of ideas as to how the people should be taught, museums have been slowly led to the revolution which is now going on in their conduct.<sup>15</sup>

Connolly became a frequent and popular lecturer traveling around the country to support her educational ideas, also arguing for the value of the new motion pictures thought by many to be inherently sinful. As a member of the "Better Films Movement," she argued that producers should not be censored but encouraged to make more uplifting and educational films.<sup>16</sup> In a short essay, she describes her experiences on a lecture tour to Georgia and North Carolina on which she took a stuffed squirrel as a model to use in her



Figure 4. Louise Connolly (far right) docenting a class on the story of pottery from the exhibition “New Jersey Clay Products,” 1915. *Archives of the Newark Museum*.

presentations. She reports intense reactions of various people she met—maids in the hotel, children she meets on the train, and, of course, school classes and assemblies where she lectured—to her delightful prop. She combines her thoughts about education and motion pictures as follows:

What I want to know is this: Since Average Citizen is so sure that the wicked Motion Picture People, in order to make money out of the parents are luring the children of our nation to moral destruction by the attractiveness of their picture wares, why doesn't he spend a tiny bit of the taxes, which surely could justifiably be used for so laudable a purpose in setting up as counter-attraction a live museum covering such extremely simple objects as my lesson [using Mr. Frisky, the squirrel] involves?<sup>17</sup>

## PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION TODAY

Although the Progressive Education Association ended in 1955 and its journal, *Progressive Education*, stopped publishing in 1957, the kinds of schools Dewey and his followers advocated continue and still attract advocates and

critics. Michael Spock has described his own experiences attending a leading progressive school in the 1940s and how that has influenced his work.<sup>18</sup> The 1960s saw a rich flowering of progressive schools of all kinds—including not only materials-rich, inquiry-oriented schools that were envisioned decades earlier, but also the poorly managed, unstructured, “child centered” schools that so enraged critics then and now. The 1960s was also the time when many museums, especially children’s museums, pioneered by Spock’s work in Boston, and the new science centers exemplified by the Exploratorium, developed exhibits and programs closely modeled on progressive practices.<sup>19</sup>

Museum educators continue to exemplify progressive educational practices. Perhaps most significant is the reemergence of education as a central focus for most museums. In *Riches, Rivals, and Radicals*, a history of the last 100 years of American museums, Marjorie Schwarzer emphasizes that education was a major component of museum practice early in the 20th century and its modern prominence represents a return to earlier enthusiasm for museums’ educational role.<sup>20</sup> Even more to the point, the renewed focus on visitors is increasingly associated with social action as illustrated by recent publications and programs.<sup>21</sup>

The almost universal recognition that visitors need active engagement for understanding has led to inclusion of interactive components in exhibits, not only in the science centers and children’s museums, but also in history and art museums. Activity centers, resource rooms, and direct links to virtual extensions for exhibits have become standard fare.

Another powerful lesson from the progressive education tradition is recognition of the value of opportunism; being open to developing programs and exhibits that reflect the needs and enthusiasms of the (potential) audience. A focus on visitors, rather than on the canon of knowledge to be displayed, immediately provides a rationale for reaching out to underrepresented audiences. The wireless radio station at the Brooklyn Children’s Museum in response to a few boys’ interest fit with the museum’s desire to serve more of the borough’s children. Current educational programs that address social issues such as aging, popular culture, or environmental concerns, provide contemporary parallels.

A third legacy of the progressive approach to education is exemplified by increasing efforts in museums to embrace and exhibit the every-day experience of ordinary people. The Newark Museum developed exhibitions around the cultures of Newark’s immigrant population as well as displaying ordinary, inexpensive items that demonstrated good taste. The educational

efforts in museums today to address recent history, local controversies, and our increasingly diverse society follow this progressive tradition.

The twin pillars of progressive education—learning through hands-on activities that also engage the mind (currently most commonly called “inquiry” or “constructivism”), and social goals of providing access for all potential museum visitors, especially underserved populations—are as relevant and appropriate today as they were for the pioneers in museum education. We can serve our profession well if we strive to emulate their social goals and accomplishments.<sup>22</sup>

## NOTES

1. Alma S. Wittlin, *The Museum, Its History and Its Tasks in Education* (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1949); George E. Hein, “Museum Education,” in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon MacDonald (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).
2. Edward P. Alexander, *The Museum in America: Innovators and Pioneers* (Walnut Creek, Calif. AltaMira Press, 1997). Alexander devotes a chapter to Anna Billings Gallup in his book on “Innovators and Pioneers” in American museums, but only mentions Louise Connolly in passing. For Newark, he focuses on Katherine Coffey, who directed the museum training program for decades after Connolly guided the first two classes in 1925 and 1926.
3. The Tenement Museum in New York, in contrast, illustrates living conditions for millions of immigrants from the same period.
4. Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1867–1957* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1961).
5. *Ibid.*, p. ix.
6. Anna Billings Gallup is included in AAM’s recent Centennial Honor Roll of “100 of America’s Museum Champions.”
7. Anna Billings Gallup, “Memories and Satisfactions,” *Children’s Museum News* (December/January 1939–40): 27–28.
8. Brooklyn Institute for Arts and Sciences, *The Twenty-fifth Yearbook of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, 1899–1900* (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Institute, 1900), pp. 417–418.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 419.
10. Anna Billings Gallup, “The Children’s Museum as an Educator,” *Popular Science Monthly* (April 1908): 371–379.
11. The U.S. Navy asked them to shut down the system during them First World War because of concern that enemy submarines might take advantage of the signals.
12. Gallup, “The Children’s Museum as an Educator,” pp. 376–377.
13. Frances D. Twombly, “Louise Connolly: A True Teacher,” in *Louise Connolly* (Newark, NJ: The Library and The Museum, 1928), pp. 11–12.
14. Both Gallup and Connolly use the image of freeing teachers from constraints. A trammel was originally a kind of shackle used to limit a horse’s gait.
15. Louise Connolly, *The Educational Value of Museums* (Newark, N.J.: The Library and The Museum, 1914), pp. 6–8.
16. Connolly was also a strong supporter of women’s right to vote.
17. Louise Connolly, “Mr. Frisky and What he Proves,” *Library Journal* (February 15, 1922).
18. Michael Spock, presentation at AAM Annual Meeting, April 27, 2006.
19. Frank Oppenheimer, the Exploratorium’s founding director attended the progressive Ethical Culture School, two decades before Spock.
20. Marjorie Schwarzer, *Riches, Rivals & Radicals: 100 Years of Museums in America* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 2006).

21. For example, Robert R. Janes and Gerald T. Conaty, eds., *Looking Reality in the Eye: Museums and Social Responsibility* (Calgary, Alberta: University of Alberta Press, 2005) provides case studies of museums that have developed socially conscious educational programs; Leicester University began an on-line journal, *Museums and Society*, in 2003 and Left Coast Press has launched a journal, *Museums and Social Issues*, in 2006. The British Sociological Association began a subgroup on Museums and Society in 2001, while Johns Hopkins University has started a new graduate specialization on Museums and Society in 2006.
22. A version of this material was presented at two panels at the 2006 AAM Annual Meeting, Boston, Massachusetts, April 27–May 1. I am grateful to Beth Alberty at the Brooklyn Children’s Museum and William A. Peniston and Jeffrey V. Moy at The Newark Museum for their generous assistance in searching their respective archives. My thanks to Emily Romney for her editorial advice.

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