



Composer Jim Cockey had the congregation singing in Vermont at The First Congregational Church of Woodstock while recording hymns that were significant to the Billings family. Life By Comparison: The Stories of Frederick and Parmly Billings unites the musical traditions and communities of Woodstock, VT—where the Billings family originated, with Billings, MT—established by the Northern Pacific Railroad in Billings' honor. Recordings from both places will be featured as aural components of the exhibition and will inspire Cockey in creating an original piece of music evoking a historical picture of late 19th century Montana and Vermont.

Hallmarks of Successful Collaborations

While those who participated in the Museum Loan Network’s “think tanks” concurred with the opinion that “collaboration can be the trial of the soul,” as the musician and scholar Bernice Johnson Reagon once said, investing time, effort, and treasure in collaborations can nevertheless pay high dividends. The question is: What distinguishes those who do make the effort worthwhile?

True collaboration, said those who participated in the first convening, is distinctive in bearing recognizable hallmarks. It is not self-serving, but builds—and builds on—the strengths of those involved (perhaps helping to overcome limitations, as when teachers work together, for example). It deepens and broadens the reach and range of partners—in their missions, to their audiences. It unveils new meanings, while respecting what is known, and new proficiencies in the partner collaborators. It has high value, real value, in its compounding effect, one that amplifies knowledge, often redefining what and who is powerful or essential. And in the meaning it gives rise to or releases, collaboration has a transforming power that alters the status quo. (It creates that transforming energy, they proposed, by challenging the sanctity of expectation—“violating the setting,” “animating objects,” startling participants and audience; objects serve as catalysts by stimulating a viewer’s responses and energy.) True collaboration, they concluded, never diminishes anything. Ideally, it is inclusive, increasing the magnitude of its impact, and profound in that impact, making a difference in the way content is redefined.

Those who participated in the last of the MLN’s three “think tanks” experienced some aspects of this power when **Celeste Miller**, a dancer, and **Debra Wise**, an actress, engaged them in an exercise that made the collaborative process transparent, a firsthand experience. Thinking about the presentation they were going to make, the two artists confessed, they had found themselves wondering about the room at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in which it would take place. Learning it was

hung with portraits of past MIT presidents' wives, they recalled how many rooms they had been in where such art is utterly ignored. How do you get people to look—and, more important, see? That gave them the idea: they would create a collaborative process to make it happen. First, they would ask participants what they saw. Taking cues from their ideas (and a mode of operating from the dramatist Anna Deavere Smith, who calls herself a “curator of people’s voices”), Wise would then strike the pose of each woman as she sat for her portrait, revealing her “innermost thoughts,” while Miller would create a vocabulary of gestures to communicate her “feelings.”

Most of those present thought the choice of a single artist made the presidents' wives seem generic—“flattened by a studied dowdiness”—as one said. Still, they saw individuality: rigidity and sadness in one woman's eyes and posture, rebellion in another's striped blouse (a challenge to the painter). Working with these impressions, Wise crafted monologues for each—“Why didn't you paint this earlier, when I was still beautiful?” as one might have asked; “It's no picnic being in the public eye without any power,” for another. Miller took details people had noticed, like the dark space of a gap between blouse buttons, and made gestures of their shapes, building a dance expressive of something barely perceptible, but emotionally huge. Moving as an ensemble, the group then did the “dance.”

When they looked back, participants agreed the exercise had allowed them to “hang out in the problem space,” as Wise had characterized the



William Banfield

For composer **William Banfield** an art museum is “the most favorite place in the world” because the objects they display represent “focused and meaning-full artistic energy, energy that's meant to connect in recording human experience.” Entering a museum, he says, “I find myself speechless, excited like a child, in awe. It's as if I am walking with kindred souls, hundreds of them.”

When he was invited to participate in *Museums, Composers and Communities*, a collaboration launched by the American Composers Forum and the Museum Loan Network, he was thus overjoyed. He would be part of an effort “to pair composers with museum curators wanting to explore interdisciplinary dialogue.”

Connections between composers and the visual arts are not such a stretch, he notes: Gershwin, Stravinsky, and Miles Davis all painted, while Kandinsky, Picasso, Schoenberg, and Augusta Savage felt connections to the music and figures of the Harlem Renaissance. What promised to be different with this collaboration was the involvement he would have in selecting pieces of art and sculpture for display in celebrating a new museum building, as well as composing a piece for the celebration. “Now, *that*,” he says, “would be new for the arts.”

The collaborative process began for Banfield and the Mobile (Alabama) Museum of Art when he traveled to Mobile (via a *Museums, Composer and Communities* travel

grant) to see the Museum's new site and meet with Museum staff, plus members of the Mobile Symphony, the Opera, and the public radio station. They traded thoughts on the piece he would write to celebrate the new building, who would be involved in performing it, and where.

Then Banfield took part in the last of the Museum Loan Network's three “think tanks,” which pushed him “to think beyond traditional museum and musical alliances and concepts,” he reports. Not long after, he accompanied the Mobile curators on their MLN travel grant—a four-day whirlwind journey from Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, to Brandeis University's Rose Art Museum, to the New York Historical Society's Henry Luce III

period common to collaborations when ideas and possibilities are entertained and uncertainty reigns. And there had been a wide range of ideas, thanks to the attendees' breadth of experience—understandings peculiar to having lived through the '60s, and of having to balance beauty and intelligence in post-feminist times, among them. The collaborative effect of layering multiple contributions was manifest, they concluded, as the experience unfolded. So, too, was the craft necessary to make good use of those contributions.

After they characterized the nature of true collaboration, participants in the first MLN convening sought to describe the ingredients necessary for success. Drawing on what they admitted were both good and bad experiences, they had a number of observations. True and successful collaborations, they said, are based on an initial candor that fully articulates expectations and concerns, and crucially vets acceptable levels of risk, such as controversy or loss of control. They are steeped in a mutual respect that acknowledges and tolerates partners' limitations, including legal strictures, fiduciary responsibilities, and funding realities, and, too, elements that complicate "multilingual" endeavors, such as the differing languages and protocols of professional specialties. Successful collaborations always offer incentives—something of worth and value for everyone concerned, benefits that make the risks tolerable.

Successful collaborations also build gradually, they said. After first identifying common ground, they move on to discover deeper mutual overlap. They are based on shared goals for the task at hand and agree-

Center for the Study of American Culture, and finally, to the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC to identify potential works for the 2002 celebratory exhibit.

Getting acquainted, he says, could be termed a "journey" as well. They moved from conversations about collaboration as a *process* of "continually re-mixing and re-blending ideas, translating them from one 'language' to another to get the right chemistry and balance," to thinking about collaboration as a *product*. Their discussions about potential themes for that product (the exhibition and the piece he will compose) ranged equally widely. Ultimately they decided to focus on "the American experience" and thought about "how to bridge a

series of divides"—between generations and economic classes, between appreciation for "high art" or vernacular art and disdain for popular cultural impulses.

Not surprisingly, they had to grapple with questions about exactly *whose* experience might be characterized as "American," whose art would be exhibited and whose values and perspectives would be reflected in Banfield's piece. European artists who came to America with their European values, aesthetic, and politics in place, like the Irish person who has assimilated? Black Americans who feel disdain for the hypocrisy of many of the country's policies? Banfield recalls that they even asked themselves "does a piece of pottery equal a piece of



Debra Wise and the portraits

pottery framed in canvas and oil?" In the end his collaborator, curator Paul Richelson, framed a list of "equivalencies"—*evolution of theme, compositional structure, spiritual values and beauty, emotional power, movement, myth, and rhythmic disclosure* among them—as a guide to "finding the right note within the frame."

"For me this entire experience, still in its early stages, has been extraordinary," says Banfield. "Collaboration, historical framing, cultural impulses—they're all a part of the life of museums and their intersection with our culture." They're also "a map" for his own journey as a composer.

ment on the roles and responsibilities of all involved. They are clearly structured and tightly focused to make effective use of scarce time and energy. And finally, they stay close to the creative spark, providing “creative payoff” as they build—expectations morphing into revelations—which fuels further cooperation and growth.

Yet again, participants saw some of the tenets of collaboration illustrated in microcosm when two artists, the visual and performance artist **Joyce Scott** and the composer **William Banfield**, made a presentation and then discussed their process in preparing it. They had gotten to know each other over the phone, Banfield explained; he had played an excerpt from his radio show, *Essays of Note*, for her, which set off a discussion of aesthetics, what they “believe in.” He sees art as “a cross-roads, a swing back and forth between the new and the old,” a vehicle for “learning to grow.” And in being “advocates for art through their work,” he regards artists as being “involved in a kind of priesthood.” Scott believes art “embraces and facilitates all things, and offers room to breathe, space to see, a chance to dream.” For her, the “improvisational impulse is the life force creating physical embodiment.”



William Banfield and Joyce Scott

What they decided to do was re-create the unfolding discovery of one another’s thinking, using one of her sculptures to catalyze an interplay of song and spontaneous riff. He would “noodle” with the piano, she with voice and gesture. Ultimately, Banfield offered “windows of sound”—opening chords that morphed into jazz—“in which Scott could move.” She did just that, suggesting the flow and cleansing of the creative spirit as she “opera-tized scat,” imitating the likes of Woody Wood-

The more “multi-lingual” a collaboration is, the bigger the “jumps” it will produce, believes **Alan Brody**. As Associate Provost for the Arts at MIT (the official responsible for overseeing the arts throughout the Institute, including the Museum Loan Network), he has seen a few such jumps.

One must acknowledge some distinctions in the fields from which people are coming, however. When artists collaborate with each other, he points out, the process and outcome can both fairly be described as creative—i.e., *artistic*, whereas when organizations and institutions collaborate, the term *creative* is more likely to mean *productive*. It’s when

institutions facilitate collaborations with artists that you get a rich mix. “Artists tend to dive in, to try to fertilize the ground without a lot of planning, working from the subconscious level,” Brody explains. “But curators know how institutions work.”

Everyone then benefits: successful collaborations between museums and artists “open everyone’s eyes to the needs of others.” For museums, collaborations “let air in;” for artists, they “create new canvases.” And neither can survive without collaborating with the other, he believes. “Given the response to post-modernism and its territory, it’s necessary for artists, and crucial to the survival of muse-

ums—the root institution.”

As it becomes more difficult to define what any art is, not to mention the reality we live in, collaboration also helps discourse in the arts, says Brody. “For example, it opens us to what we really mean by the term *diversity*. Challenging the way institutions define themselves, especially museums, is tough,” he acknowledges. “When human beings do it, they have nervous breakdowns. But it’s the nature and great benefit of collaboration that as trust develops, conflict will come, and you can manage it because it’s not personal.”

pecker and Ella Fitzgerald to suggest that art is wide enough for all, and “a synthesis of people’s experience, sculpted.”

Describing what they had gone through, Banfield admitted that the first steps had seemed artificial, but going back and forth had created a flow; and as the process opened out, they both gained ideas and momentum. Scott always had answers for “How do we do this?” he said, and she was “so fast and wide in her embrace of ideas” that it fueled his willingness to accept, to “give up ego.” For her part, Scott was delighted to be engaged. “Submitting to the muse is always pleasurable,” she explained, “because it helps answer ‘How do I get out of me what I want to give?’” Collaboration is “about chemistry,” Banfield concluded, “and there needs to be balance in the formula.”

One of the participants observed that Scott and Banfield had moved to “clean” as well as build things up. “Imagination is the skill to create great beauty and meaning,” Banfield mused. “All human beings are creative, but the artist knows what experiences mean and so constructs a format.” Scott wasn’t so sure. “Art isn’t always about meaning,” she cautioned. “It’s simply a willingness to be in the fray. Sometimes, craft isn’t considered fully enough so the beautiful and the monumental may not be what’s in the moment. But that’s fine; something new and clear always comes out.”

Having seen the early results of research the Urban Libraries Council (ULC) now has underway, **Eleanor J. Rodger** believes that collaboration can offer strong institutions real opportunities for learning how to broaden their audiences and benefit their communities. How? By studying what can be gleaned from the other’s very different strengths, says the ULC’s president and CEO.

Take libraries and museums. The “culture” of libraries couldn’t be more different than that of museums, Rodger suggests: “One says ‘don’t touch,’ the other, ‘please touch.’ One cautions ‘leave it here,’ the other urges ‘take it away.’” At libraries, “users’ needs drive everything,” she concludes, “while at museums it’s very different: they have information or an agenda they wish to share.”

Yet in these differences lie oppor-

tunities to her way of thinking. “The gift,” Rodger explains, “is in recognizing them as strengths from which you can learn.” Museums, for example, are “deeply responsible for authenticating the provenance of objects. Libraries aren’t—but perhaps they should be. Say you have a complete run of *Harpers* magazines languishing in the basement,” she proposes. “As a former Librarian of Congress would put it ‘how can we get that champagne out of the bottle?’ Museums have a way of dealing with the inherent value of their collections,” she reasons, “and libraries could learn from it.” On the other hand, “museums could learn something from the way libraries have been in conversation with their communities.”

While such differences should be “regarded as opportunities, not ob-

stacles,” Rodger admits that “opening champagne bottles” can be dicey. “There’s a getting-to-know-you stage you need to go through,” she emphasizes, where the learning comes in. Recently she had an “aha moment” meeting with a public broadcast representative, for example. He pointed out that in being licensed to use the airwaves his station has legal responsibility for what it broadcasts, whereas libraries don’t. Libraries intentionally seek to include everything: “we carry books questioning whether the Holocaust happened,” she notes, suggesting a public broadcaster would be loath to do so. “So how do we work this?” she asks rhetorically. “These are not insurmountable barriers; they’re simply issues that need to be addressed”—which is exactly where the opportunity lies.



PEOPLE & SALMON OF THE MCCLOUD RIVER

Wintu Tribe members, anthropologists, archeologists, marine biologists, and museum staff members met monthly to discuss the multilayered exhibition *People & Salmon of the McCloud River*. Comparing today's Wintu people with those who arrived over the past two centuries, Turtle Bay's exhibition examines how all groups—and the generations they represent—related to the region's ecology, the salmon culture, and to one another.

Throughout the planning process, the museum worked very closely with the Wintu Tribe to include the voice of today's Wintu people, to ensure that the exhibit is relevant and meaningful for tribal members. As Alice Hoveman, Turtle Bay's curator of history notes, "Turtle Bay is committed to working with the Wintu people to create an exhibit with public programming that includes the wisdom, knowledge, and aesthetics of the Wintu Tribe." The museum encouraged public participation in the planning phase to determine which specific themes and storylines most interested people. For Hoveman, "what happened to the salmon, and why, is a story that will resonate with people today and apply to contemporary issues, concerns, and dialogues."

Through MLN travel and implementation grants, the exhibition will feature 57 Wintu artifacts from the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. The objects—that have been at the Smithsonian since 1876—were collected by Livingston Stone, a fish culturist who established in 1872 the first salmon breeding station on the McCloud River. Stone had developed a unique relationship with the Wintu people, especially with the leader, Colchoolooloo. As part of the project, Colchoolooloo's great-great granddaughter, an active member of the exhibition design team, traveled to the Smithsonian with Turtle Bay staff members to research the objects to be borrowed. "Turtle Bay," Hoveman notes, "will be working closely with the Wintu Tribe to welcome back these artifacts to the region where they were made and used."

Turtle Bay website: <http://www.turtlebay.org>



BUDDHIST ART AND RITUAL FROM TIBET AND NEPAL

Through a community-based process, the Ackland Art Museum's *Five Faiths Project* unites scholarly knowledge with the perspectives of contemporary American practitioners of each faith. The museum's innovative project introduces the beliefs and practices of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism by using original works of art displayed in their galleries and on their website. The project's goals, according to Barbara Matilsky, Ackland's curator of exhibitions, include "supporting interfaith dialogue and understanding in our rapidly changing community, serving teachers and school audiences with information and curricular resources, and developing a model that other art museums might find useful."

To support the *Five Faiths Project* and enhance the museum's ability to teach about Buddhism, Ackland collaborated with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the Namgyal Monastery, and three other museums on an exhibition titled *Buddhist Art and Ritual from Tibet and Nepal*. Through an MLN implementation grant, the museum borrowed 20 Tibetan and Nepalese objects from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Newark Museum, and the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University for a two-year period. The installation illustrates the integration of art and ritual that is, according to Matilsky, "fundamental to understanding the true meanings of these objects as part of living cultural traditions." To implement this integrated approach, the Ackland Art Museum consulted with Tenzin Gephel, a resident lama, at the Namgyal Monastery near Ithaca, New York, who came to the museum to place the objects in their appropriate settings.

Lamas from Namgyal Monastery created a Medicine Buddha sand *mandala* over the course of a month, providing the community with a closer connection to the cultural and ceremonial aspects of Vajrayana Buddhism. An *Art of Tibet* course was developed at the University of North Carolina, and students chose works from the installation to conduct research and develop websites as their final project. The museum will host a series of lectures on a range of topics, including Tibetan medicine, religious thought, the relationship between art and the environment, and the influence of Buddhism on Western culture. With university-wide, interdisciplinary programming, the installation of *Buddhist Art from Tibet and Nepal* is providing a more comprehensive overview of Buddhist spiritual beliefs.

Five Faiths Project website: <http://www.ackland.org/fivefaiths>
Buddhist Art... website: <http://www.ackland.org/art/exhibitions/buddhistart>