In 1975 an intrepid group of volunteers approached UMMA Director Brett Waller and proposed that the Museum create a docent program. Waller had had experience forming a docent program elsewhere and his formative ideas included “...a thorough screening and recruitment program, rigorous continuing training both in art history and in the methods of informal education, and ongoing evaluation and quality control.” He found that he and the volunteers shared similar ideas and that “...their enthusiasm was contagious and their clear-headed realism reassuring.”

Waller and these early volunteers laid the groundwork for the structure of the successful, dynamic program in place today. UMMA docents recruit highly motivated and multi-talented volunteers who are intensively trained by UMMA Education and other staff in the Museum’s collection areas and gallery teaching and additionally schooled by U-M faculty in art history, world religions and culture. Docents have regular continuing education on temporary exhibitions and on tested and emerging theories of museum teaching preparing them for the full variety of museum audiences.

The traditional focus of docent attention has been school children and the adult public and these groups are well-served at UMMA. Two successful programs developed in the last five years demonstrate that docents are also dedicated to new audiences, research, leadership, and personal growth. continued >>
Students participating in Elementary Mathematics Laboratory, Teaching Works, U-M School of Education, examine a model of Chinese watchtower with Docent Heidi Goodhart.

“Our students have discovered, observed, created, and analyzed art, all with the tremendous support of the museum’s thoughtful docents.”

SIMONA GOLDIN
RESEARCH SPECIALIST
TEACHINGWORKS PROJECT, U-M SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Jeannie Mack Powers, Docent since 1996, with a participant in the Meet Me at UMMA program.

Docent Wes Rae engages students in a discussion of Barbara Hepworth’s Sphere with Colour (Grey and White).
In September, Ruth Slavin, Deputy Director for Education, and a cadre of docents involved in the Meet Me at UMMA program that offers tours for visitors living with memory loss, presented their approach and their five years of experience at the National Docent Symposium in Cincinnati. As the title of their talk, “The Senses are Alive and Well,” suggests these docents are using a sensory-based approach that reflects the latest research on working with people with memory loss to improve quality of life and create social connections. As you can see in the photos included here, UMMA docents include humor, respect, and patience working with these patrons but also, as Slavin notes, “docents incorporate insights from their own practice, leading researchers, and people with memory loss to provide high quality museum experiences for this audience, their families and caregivers.” In addition to the regard docents have for participants of this program, it is reported that working with this population brings deeper meaning to the people who implement these programs which they then carry over to their other Museum efforts. In effect, this high quality program helps propagate other quality programs.

UMMA also partners with U-M institutions to address needs in teaching and learning. Three years ago, UMMA was approached by a School of Education staff member who wanted to incorporate arts experiences for their Elementary Mathematics Laboratory (EML) students who work on campus for two weeks solidifying their understanding of fractions and math concepts needed to advance in middle school. Docents worked with Pam Reister, Curator for Museum Teaching and Learning, to create a series of tours and hands-on activities that moved children through simple contour drawings to sketches with perspective, from watercolor to multi-media creations. This year docents planned and implemented all lessons for this program. Simona Goldin, Research Specialist, in the TeachingWorks project at the School of Education which designed and administers EML, shared that she has been “consistently moved and impressed by the meaningful and high-quality programs that UMMA constructs in partnership with the EML. The program has provided rising fifth graders with hands-on experiences of impressive depth. Our students have discovered, observed, created, and analyzed art, all with the tremendous support of the museum’s thoughtful docents.”

The Museum is lucky to have access to docent artists when creating other public programs such as Family Art Studio. Lisa Borgsdorf, Manager of Public Programs, has relied on docents to create hands-on activities that are directly tied to art on display. Lois Baru, Docent Emerita, wrote that the workshop she attended with her granddaughter “was the perfect combination of gallery time and hands-on time—all beautifully coordinated. Docent Susan Clinthorne did a fine job both engaging the children and sharing her knowledge. I will look forward to attending more of these ‘little gems’.”

Forty years after the first docent class UMMA Director Joseph Rosa stresses how important the docents are to achieving the teaching goals of the Museum. “Docents are integral to the teaching and learning mission of UMMA, make possible the school tour program, and actively expand and enrich our university offerings. We are honored to celebrate their anniversary and look forward to posting highlights of their story this year.”