

Gallery Epiphanies

Interning at New York's Oldest Museum

by Liana Chow

The museums of New York City were as much my childhood learning grounds as were the classrooms at school. I grew up fascinated by art and history, and going to educational workshops in galleries was my favorite way to learn about them.

In tenth grade, my history teacher, Ms. Suri, sent my class to the “Chinese American: Exclusion/Inclusion” exhibit at the New-York Historical Society (N-YHS). I was inspired both by the history of progress chronicled in the exhibit and the story of the N-YHS itself. Founded in 1804, it is the oldest museum in New York. The renovation of the stately building on Central Park West had been completed just three years earlier, and I walked into a sunlit, welcoming space with interactive screens featuring guides to breathtaking American classic paintings.

During the spring of that year, I applied to the Student Historian Internship Program at the N-YHS. In my application, I discussed my love of museums, art, and history. In May, I was called in for a group interview, which turned out to be enjoyable. I liked hearing everyone’s answers to the question, “What historical figure do you aspire to be like?” I discussed my admiration for Melba Patillo Beals, one of the first students to integrate Little Rock High School in the 1950s. We then went into the galleries and designed group presentations of Audubon bird paintings. Two weeks later, the manager of Teen Programs sent me an email saying I had been accepted as a Student Historian.



Liana (left) speaks to visitors in the New York Historical Society's Smith Gallery.



Student Historians, including Liana (far right), talk with visiting high school students.

N-YHS

Before participating in the Student Historian program, I had never been around so many enthusiastic students. Three days a week for five weeks during the summer of 2015, 29 New York City-area teens gathered to receive training and work on projects. Our main project was to research, design, and lead tours for fellow New York City students. My tour stop was a Communist presidential campaign poster from 1932 that read “Equal Rights for Negroes Everywhere!” and featured an African-American vice-presidential candidate, which I found surprising for its time. The overarching theme of the tour was activism. It focused on the exhibition “Art as Activism,” whose title combined two of my passions.

Learning by Doing

The visitors on my first tour were quieter than I had anticipated, so I quickly adjusted my questions to be more open-ended. I had always been shy, but now I realized that I had acquired knowledge I could

share and that other students would listen with interest. For the first time, I felt confident speaking in front of groups.

Learning by doing was an essential part of my tour-guide education. In addition, the N-YHS provided us with a strong foundation of training. We learned strategies for object inquiry and group control. We practiced analyzing paintings with the manager of Visual Arts Programs in a Picasso exhibit, watched a conservator submerge a yellowed letter to clean it, and learned the history of the museum from its Vice President and Chief Historian, Valerie Paley. We had access to the library and its historical documents from hundreds of years ago. We were also encouraged to explore the galleries. I was amazed that I could take in the serenity of the dazzling Hudson River School paintings without leaving my workplace.

We trekked across the city anyway. We took tours from student guides at the American Museum of Natural History and reflected on

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a different curatorial approach to the topic of art as activism at the Museum of the City of New York. We tried to keep up with an ebullient history teacher, Mr. Roper, as he led us through the historical sites of Lower Manhattan. It gave me new appreciation for my own neighborhood.

I learned just as much simply from picnicking in Central Park with my co-interns, who entertained me with tales of their own hobbies and studies, from zoology to sonnet-writing. By the end of the summer, I was convinced that there were few better classrooms than a museum gallery. I felt fortunate to have been introduced to museums as a child, and I became interested in museum education. I wanted to show kids how amazing museums are and what it's like to learn with the real objects instead of just words and pictures in textbooks.

History Takes Flight

That was my first of three summers at the N-YHS. Each subsequent summer, I developed a new skill set and new interests. The following year, 2016, I didn't hesitate to apply to the more advanced Teen Leaders Program. We ran the N-YHS's free exhibit "Audubon: Birdman for a Fledgling Nation" in a former military barracks on Governors Island. Our responsibilities ranged from sweeping the floor and counting visitors to leading arts and crafts activities, and I grew to appreciate that each aspect was important.

Using tips that the Family Programs coordinator taught us, my co-intern Sacha and I designed and ran a successful drawing activity in which visitors of all ages observed and drew bird models on a grid, Audubon style. I took the advice of the director of Visitor Services and proactively approached visitors to give them tours. I was so happy to see a five-year-old attentively copying the lines of a flamingo at our drawing station, and to hear a visitor remark as she left the exhibit, "I'm not a bird person, but that was pretty cool." Afterward, I blogged about the experience.

When I returned to Governors Island as a Teen Leader the summer of 2017, I surprised myself by adding acting to my island activities. The student-curated exhibit this year was "The Battle for the Ballot: The Centennial of Women's Suffrage in New York." A co-intern and I wrote and performed debates

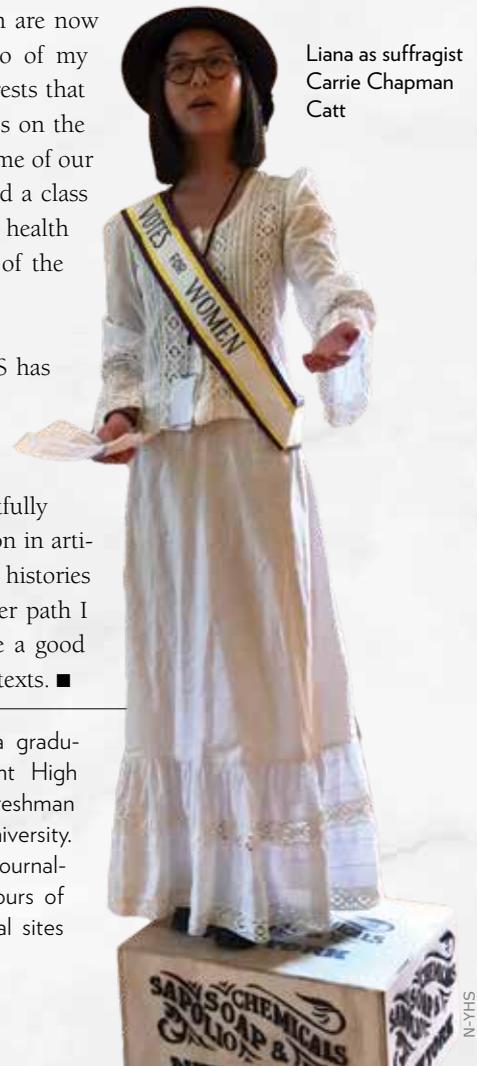
to represent suffragist and anti-suffragist viewpoints of real historical leaders. We even wore period dress. "Battle for the Ballot" excited me not only because it was about a protest movement, but because it incorporated a modern one—the Women's March of 2017. That brought my interest in protest movements to life.

I know I will always feel at home when I walk into the N-YHS, and I hope that I made other people feel welcome, too. I encourage my friends to attend the talks and programs at the museum. The 2015 Student Historians who attend college in Boston are now planning a reunion. I chose two of my freshman classes because of interests that the N-YHS instilled in me: a class on the life of Charles Darwin reminded me of our in-depth studies of Audubon, and a class on the arts as an agent for global health sends a message similar to that of the exhibit "Art as Activism."

Three summers at the N-YHS made me more open, in both my interactions with people and my academic thinking. I've learned how to interact respectfully with strangers, discern information in artifacts, and contemplate the chaotic histories of activism. No matter what career path I take, these skills will help me be a good citizen and collaborator in all contexts. ■



Liana Chow is a graduate of Stuyvesant High School and a freshman at Harvard University. She enjoys arts journalism and giving tours of Hamilton historical sites in Manhattan.



Liana as suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt

See page 32 for more on this and other internship programs.