

# Can **A**RT Help Unlock Memory?

Alzheimer's patients benefit from the Museum of Modern Art's special programs.

Photo: Timothy Hursley



We have all been moved by the power of a piece of art, whether it is the careful rhythm of a poem, the crescendo of a sonata or the bold brushstrokes in a painting. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City wanted to build on that power by creating an art program for people with Alzheimer's. Now, museums across the country are creating similar programs.

Launched in 2006, *Meet Me at MoMA* was the result of several years of research to find art and create a program that would give the most benefits to Alzheimer's patients and their caregivers. The free program is offered monthly on Tuesdays, when the museum is closed to the general public. This allows the small groups of Alzheimer's patients and their caregivers to feel like VIPs, as well as assuring a more quiet, individualized approach.

### Designed with Alzheimer's Patients in Mind

Francesca Rosenberg, director of the community and access program in MoMA's Education Department explains that the tours are based on a theme, providing a thread to connect all the works of art. "We try to make it different each month, because we find we have many return visitors and we want to keep it fresh for them," she explains. "We really thought about this population," Rosenberg says. "And what works of art we could use with them, what communication techniques, and how best to serve them." Trained educators lead the tour, engaging participants, creating discussions, and sharing bits of information. Works by such modern masters as Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock, and Andy Warhol have all been a part of the program.

*Meet Me at MoMA* allows Alzheimer's patients to maintain their thoughts and creativity, with very empowering outcomes. "If you came in and saw the program in action, you would have no idea it was a group with Alzheimer's," she says. "They appear just like any other audience or group together looking at works of art." To date, more than 1,500 individuals living with Alzheimer's or other dementia have participated in the program.

The program is ideal for Alzheimer's patients, says Rosenberg. "They are right in front of them, the art is not moving or changing, and they are given time to focus on

them." She adds that the program's educators have noticed the change that comes over the Alzheimer's patients after sitting in the galleries for a period of time. "They have been outside in Midtown Manhattan and they may feel all kinds of symptoms that go along with Alzheimer's such as agitation," she explains. "But a transformation takes place and they come alive in front of these works. That is the beauty of it."

Rosenberg's observations have been backed up by research as well. A 1999 study from Brighton, England, looked at a 10-week art therapy program for Alzheimer's patients. The researchers found that half of the participants showed a decrease in depression.

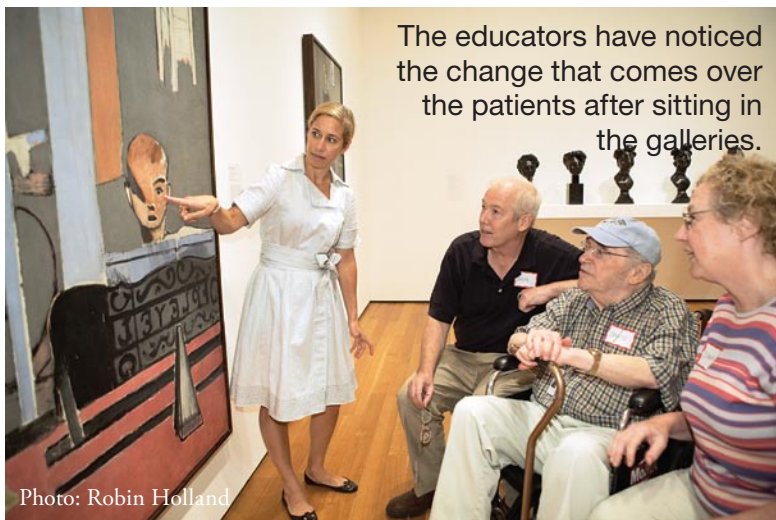


Photo: Robin Holland

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### A Gracious Gift

Building on the success of the *Meet Me at MoMA* program, the museum recently received a \$450,000 grant from the MetLife Foundation to expand the project nationally. The new program, *The MoMA Alzheimer's Project: Making Art Accessible to People with Dementia*, will broaden MoMA's existing

efforts across the country over the next two years.

Rosenberg stresses how important the visual arts and programs like MoMA's are to people with dementia, saying both provide an entry for communication and the opportunity for engagement, "not only with art, but with their caregivers, loved ones, and society at large." She continues, "This generous grant will enable us to share what we've learned and help others across the country to develop similar programming to enhance the lives of those in their community."

### Check with Museums in Your Area

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville, and the Brooks Museum in Memphis are creating tours inspired by the MoMA program for Alzheimer's patients and their caregivers. Many other museums across the country have also expressed interest in adopting this approach. In addition, similar Alzheimer's-focused events have been cropping up at museums and galleries nationwide. Contact museums in your area to find out if they offer (or plan to offer) a program for visitors with dementia.

“Programs such as *Meet Me at MoMA* are important, because they offer people with Alzheimer’s and their caregivers opportunities for mental and social stimulation through art,” says Sibyl Jacobson, president, MetLife Foundation. “We are pleased to support MoMA’s innovative program and help to expand it nationally.”

The first part of the expansion will include speaking engagements at a variety of upcoming conferences, including the American Association of Museums and the Society for Arts and Healthcare, to share details about the program. “We will be conducting seminars and providing resources for the participants so they can go back to their community and create a program of their own with their resources,” explains Rosenberg.

In addition, a printed manual and webinars will be created to help other museums or galleries who are interested in creating their own program for Alzheimer’s patients. MoMA has already worked with the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts to help the VMFA establish its program. “We led a group of their docents through their own galleries and talked about techniques for making their collection accessible,” says Rosenberg. She hopes that as additional museums create their own programs, they will act as liaisons for other museums in their area.

Rosenberg is particularly excited about the website, [www.moma.org/alzheimersproject](http://www.moma.org/alzheimersproject). “What is nice is this is something that can also be used by individuals.” She cites examples of a daughter using artworks on the computer to engage her mother, or staff at an assisted living facility using reproductions to work with small groups. “We are trying to make the print manual and the online resources so any of these people would find them valuable and useful,” she says.

### Painting a Different Picture of Alzheimer’s

Rosenberg worked with Dr. John Zeisel and Sean Caulfield, founders of Artists for Alzheimer’s to develop the initial *Meet Me at MoMA* project. Artists for Alzheimer’s is a project sponsored by the Hearst Foundation Alzheimer’s Family

Foundation, a Massachusetts-based organization that supports the care and treatment of Alzheimer’s patients and their caregivers through non-pharmacologic methods.

Dr. Zeisel says, “When people living with Alzheimer’s disease discuss the works of art on this tour, their responses are amazing. Their insights are profound and to the point, their behavior shows much less agitation and anxiety, and they are transformed by the experience. The impact lasts for days, if not weeks, and participants even remember the experience long after.”

While Rosenberg, and all those connected with the Alzheimer’s programs, are working hard to assist other museums and local Alzheimer’s groups create their own programs that best suit their own needs and collections, she

says the larger goal is to change public perception of this disease.

MoMA provides many education programs for specialized audiences. Programs such as touch tours for the blind and partially sighted, sign-language interpretation, and captioned programs recognize the diversity of the general public’s abilities and needs.

Rosenberg says, “The Museum has long been committed to serving audiences with disabilities and special needs. We had a war veterans art center that dated back to 1945, so even then we were thinking of audiences with special needs.”

*Meet Me at MoMA* may have just celebrated its second anniversary, but according to Rosenberg the research continues. “As we do the program, we try new works of art,” she says. “Works that are narrative, such as Andrew Wyeth’s *Christina’s World*, are tried and true. But others, like a Mondrian, can spark conversation even though it is just colors.” She adds that the focus of the program continues to be concentrating on the Alzheimer’s patients’ abilities.

“We know that a diagnosis doesn’t mean a patient’s life needs to stop being fulfilling,” Rosenberg says. “Looking at a work of art can create great moments for them and their caregivers.” ■



Photo: Robin Holland