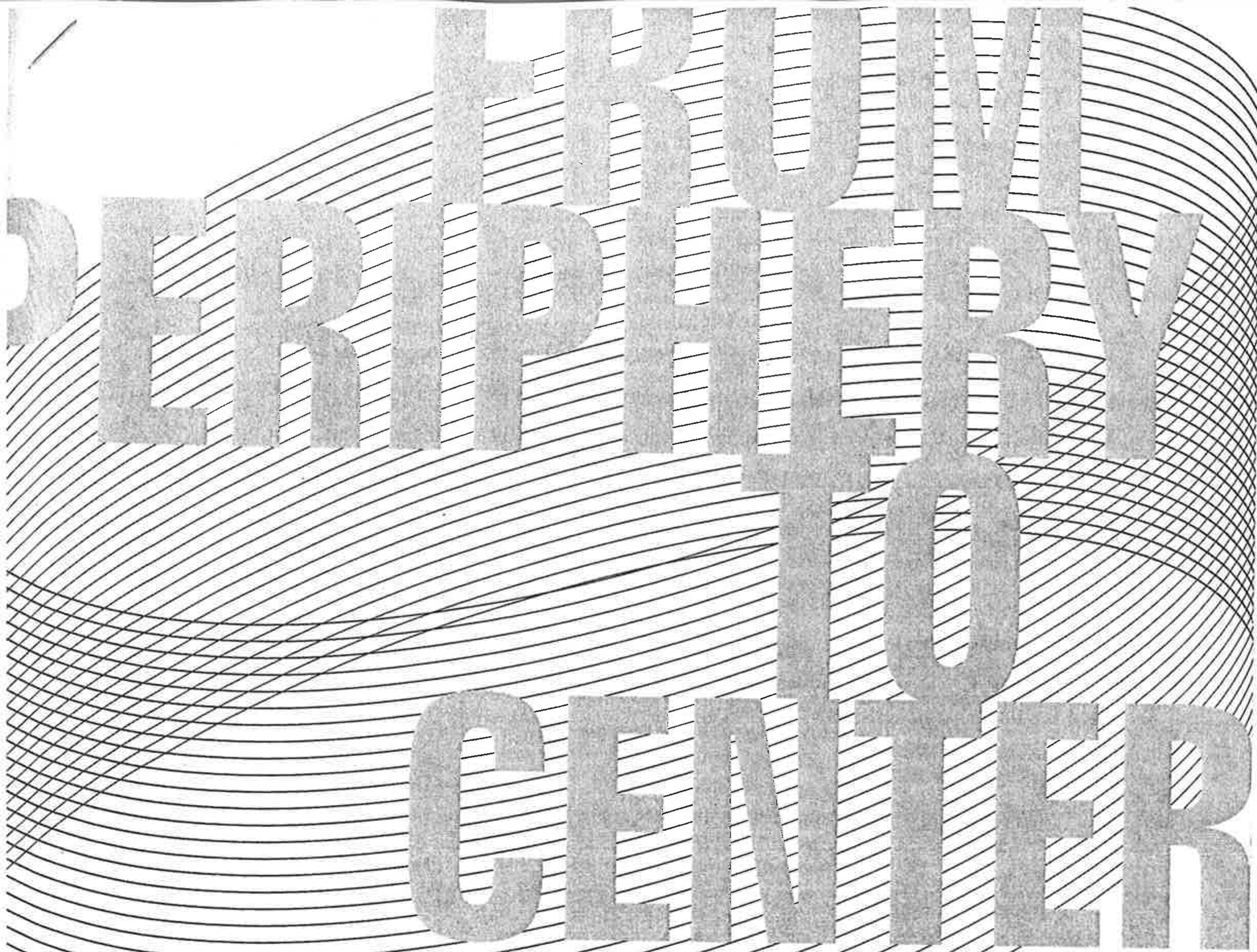

Art Museum Education In The 21st Century

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Understanding the Museum Experience

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Art museums are an important aspect of contemporary culture. With their tasks of collecting, preserving, exhibiting, and interpreting works of art, they provide access to the history, beliefs, and values of cultures throughout time. They are, in effect, much like libraries holding vast quantities of information, information that is accessible visually in ways that can be quite powerful. Falk and Dierking (2000) referred to museums as "public institutions for personal learning" (p. xii). As such, museums offer rich opportunities for teaching from actual objects. Museums have long planned educational programming for schoolchildren, but now many are reaching out to adult audiences. Of course, there are many people who have discovered the potential for learning that museums provide, but there are also those who believe that museums are for someone else, not for them (*Insights*, 1992; Hood, 1983). This chapter considers the museum experience from the perspective of the museum visitor, with the explicit goal of helping make the museum visit a more rewarding experience for both children and adults.

What is it about art museums that make some people uncomfortable? The answer to this question has much to do with the philosophy that influenced the development of museums. Originally, many museums in this country focused on an aesthetic mission. One of the most well-known advocates of this position was Benjamin Ives Gilman of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. He wrote an influential text, *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method*, in 1918, in which he distinguished between science museums and art museums in a way that today reeks of elitism. He explained, "A museum of science is in essence a school, a museum of art in essence a temple" (Zeller, 1989, p. 30). Museum directors influenced by Gilman sought to create environments where those who entered could commune quietly with works of art. Little was needed in terms of education other than displaying the work. Even today, we can still find vestiges of this philosophy reflected in museum practice.

Others worked to infuse an educational mission into museum practice. One of Gilman's contemporaries was John Cotton Dana, founder and director of the Newark Museum, who advocated in practice, and in print, that museums had an educational responsibility to the broader community. To that end, Dana sought a more egalitarian approach, one that would reach out to the community through loans of works of art to schools and factories and the establishment of storefront museums in business areas. According to Dana, "A museum is good only in so far as its use" (Zeller, 1989, p. 35).

This educational mission became a reality with the passage of the Tax Reform Act of 1969 (Caston, 1989). This legislation provided tax exemptions to institutions in which education was a principal function. Where the debate in the museum field had been merely philosophical in the past, now there was a clear rationale for museums to assume stronger educational roles. For the most part, these educational efforts consisted primarily of programming for school groups through gallery tours, teacher resources, and outreach programs. Elementary schools became the primary target of programming because class changes in middle and high schools made scheduling museum visits difficult.

Over the last 30 years, much has changed in the ways art museums embody their educational mission. While there are still holdovers of the philosophy that a museum should be a quiet sanctuary for a few, today more and more museums are reaching out to an increasingly diverse public. Exhibitions are booked that have the potential to interest broad sections of the population, and blockbuster exhibitions designed to attract large crowds are commonplace. Increases in visitor attendance indicate that a growing number of people are changing their "perceptions of the role museums can play in their lives" (Falk & Dierking, 2000, p. 2). Museum educators in these museums work with curators to develop labels and wall text that are accessible to visitors with various levels of artistic experience. For example, at the High Museum in Atlanta, the principle goal is to help the visitor have a meaningful encounter with the work of art, and interpretation becomes something that the visitor discovers rather than something the curators predetermine (Remaking the High Museum, 2005).

The Personal Nature of the Experience

For most adults, deciding to visit an art museum is a conscious decision. It is a decision based on personal knowledge and past experience. People make this decision for a variety of reasons including the desire to have an experience that is meaningful. Many museum visitors are repeat visitors; they know that there is a payoff to their visit in terms of personal pleasure, knowledge acquired, and insightful reflection. Others feel uncomfortable and ill prepared to understand works of art and never, or only rarely, visit museums.

The idea that the museum should be a quiet sanctuary for the enjoyment of those who already know a great deal about works of art is being replaced by the museum that actively seeks out a wider audience. The *Treasures of Tutankhamen* exhibition in the mid-1970s demonstrated that museums that could go beyond simply displaying works of art to creating environments designed to maximize the viewer's potential for comprehension could attract large segments of the population (High Aims, 2002).

Textual connections among the social, cultural, and political context in which works of art were created are essential aspects of exhibitions in many museums. Audio tours often include music and poetry designed to help create a sense of time, place, and emotion. No longer are these tours necessarily static and sequential: the viewer can choose which works to see in whatever order desired and can choose to play or not play the accompanying audio. In other words, viewers can structure their own experiences.

Although most museums did not openly acknowledge this fact, to some degree, this has always been true. Visitors enter museums, choose the galleries to which they go, choose the works in the gallery they want to look at and the labels they want to read. They also choose when they want to leave the gallery and the museum itself. A museum visit is a very personal experience.

The Personal, Social, and Physical Contexts

There is growing interest in the nature of the museum experience among researchers in art and museum education.[1] The museum experience was broadly defined by Falk and Dierking (1992) as all that transpires between the "person's first thought of visiting a museum, through the actual visit, and then beyond, when the museum experience remains only in memory" (p. xv). Additionally, they proposed that this experience varies from individual to individual and, in fact, is dependent upon the interaction among the personal context (the visitor's life experiences, interests, and expectations), the social context (whether the individual visits the museum alone, with friends or family, or as part of a large group), and the physical context (the architecture, atmosphere, and objects on display within the museum). Most recently, they have added the dimension of time as an aspect of learning in museums and expanded the social context to include the sociocultural to explain how learning in museums is mediated socially and culturally (Falk & Dierking, 2000). Dierking (2002) conceptualizes such learning as "a series of overlapping and reinforcing experiences over time and place" (p. 16). In their earlier work, Falk and Dierking (1992) explained that every experience is different because each visitor comes to the museum with a different set of personal experiences operating within differing sociocultural contexts. Each is affected differently by the physical context of the museum and the choices individually made within that context.

It is not difficult to see how important the personal context is. We are all the sum products of our own personal experiences. We have backgrounds rooted in various cultures and differing levels of educational experience and economic levels. For some, visiting art museums is a habit formed in childhood; for others, it is a new experience. Expectations of a museum visit can be very different for repeat visitors than for those who are visiting for the first time. Repeat visitors base their expectations upon actual experience while first-time visitors' expectations may be based upon what they have read, seen in a movie, or heard from a friend. Understanding these differences can help facilitate experiences that are more positive for everyone.

People come to museums alone, with friends or family, and as part of organized groups. Each of these different social contexts can directly affect the quality of the experience as can interactions with museum staff and other visitors. Some people prefer to visit alone; they can take as much or as little time as they like with particular works of art without worrying about anyone else. Others prefer to come with someone to share their experiences, sometimes separating and reuniting to discuss what each experienced. Some visitors bring their families and view the museum as an environment in which they can learn new things together. People who choose to come as part of an organized group often enjoy learning about art in a group setting but have less control over which works they view during their visit.

The physical context of the art museum also affects the museum experience. The architecture can be imposing and even intimidating to a first-time visitor. Much like Gothic cathedrals, older museums were designed to inspire a sense of awe. Today's more contemporary buildings, although far less formal, can also be imposing. Vast, open spaces can be disconcerting to some viewers (Maxwell & Evans, 2002). Within these spaces, the layout of the galleries, the type of lighting, and the arrangement of the works of art all are intended to work together to create a space where it is possible to view the exhibition in the most positive way. Today's museums give considerable thought to these details, even changing the color of paint on the walls to better showcase the art. In theory, the museum staff creates the setting in which it is most likely the visitor can have a meaningful experience with the work of art, an environment free of distractions in which the work of art is the central focus.

Since the political and cultural changes of the 1960s, museums have increasingly sought to increase their relevance to contemporary life through broadening their range of exhibitions and increasing the diversity and number of their visitors. The more recent immigration of the last several decades to the United States has made this even more relevant. Today's budgetary realities also necessitate that museums take steps to assure that new visitors revisit the museum. Museum educators agree that a primary way to encourage repeat visits is to help visitors of all ages have positive experiences, those that Walsh-Piper (1994) described as "both meaningful and memorable" (p. 105). As a result, a number of studies (see Falk & Dierking, 1992) have sought to better understand the museum visitor. In general, these studies have shown that people visit museums for a variety of reasons that fall under the categories of: "(1) social-recreational reasons; (2) educational reasons; and (3) reverential reasons" (p. 14) and that museum visitors value opportunities to learn, the challenge of new experiences, and doing something worthwhile (Hood, 1983) that the museum visit provides. Museum educators and others are now beginning to question the nature of that learning (Dierking, 2002).

Some museums are learning about the museum visitor's experience through market research designed to help improve their public image and to better inform decisions regarding hours of operation, content of wall labels, admission charges, and, as an article in the *New York Times* suggested, "perhaps one day, even what kind of art to show" (Vogel, 1992, p. 1). Other museums have studied non-museum visitors to discover ways to make the galleries more meaningful to a broader range of people. In particular, The J. Paul Getty Museum used focus-group interaction to compare the expectations of adults who generally did not visit museums to their reactions to an actual museum experience at museums across the United States (*Insights*, 1992).

The Getty study found that people don't visit museums for a number of reasons. In general, they often feel intimidated by museums—they believe that everyone who visits museums is more knowledgeable about art than they are and that they lack the knowledge necessary to be able to understand the works

of art on display. They choose to do other things in their free time and often expect that they would be bored visiting an art museum. After their visits, first-time visitors found the experience "emotional" and "invigorating" and wanted to return. They were surprised that the art was "more interesting" and "less intimidating than expected" and reported that they "spent more time in the museum than [they had] planned" (*Insights*, 1992, pp. 10-15).

Another study conducted by Eisner and Dobbs (1988) looked at what museums do to help the visitor better experience the museum. They looked at "the way the works are displayed, the themes that relate one work to others, the content of the signage (wall panels and labels) that is provided, comprehensibility of the text, and the overall effectiveness of the installation" (p. 7) in 31 museums throughout the country. Their conclusions indicated that museums could greatly increase viewer involvement by having orientation galleries that provide some guidelines for viewing, displaying works in ways that invite comparison, providing contextual references for the works on display, and using language that is clear and invites emotional and cognitive connection. Museums throughout the country are making these kinds of changes.

In the late 1980s, the Denver Art Museum conducted a series of studies to gain information "from visitors that described not just who they were, but their reactions to art and the efforts of an art museum to communicate with them" (Loomis, 1990, p. 133). The results of these studies were examined by museum staff, and many ideas were generated and put into practice. A visit to the Denver Art Museum today reveals a museum that is truly visitor friendly. Galleries include area rugs and comfortable sofas in front of works of art because visitors indicated they needed to places to relax as they viewed the art. Gallery guides are written in everyday language and tucked into convenient locations. Each exhibition floor has a library area that invites further research through books and computer terminals. These libraries are decorated in a style that reflects the content of the galleries on that floor with comfortable seating, casual lighting, and works of art. Areas are set aside for children complete with "dress-up" costumes and mirrors. The galleries are full of visitors of all ages and various ethnicities. Teenagers, families with young children, young adults, and senior citizens all seem to find the museum an inviting and welcoming place. In short, the museum has succeeded in attracting and maintaining a new audience because it paid attention to what museum-goers said they needed in order to have a more engaging experience.

The Denver Art Museum Interpretive Project (Grinstead & Ritchie, 1990) provided a strong theoretical and practical base for important changes in how museums now approach their visitors. It also had relevance for what McDermott-Lewis (1990) described as the "novice" viewer, the viewer with "moderate to high interest in art and low to moderate knowledge" (p. 7). She used the term "advanced amateur" to describe those viewers who are "knowledgeable" about art and "pursue art as an avocation" (p. 7). Advanced amateurs are visitors who have continued to try to learn about art and regularly seek out and take advantage of opportunities to view works of art. What distinguishes the novice from the advanced amateur? How do they differ in terms of expectations of museum experiences and the ways in which they perceive art? Understanding visitor expectations can help museum staff create exhibitions in which visitors have more meaningful museum experiences.

Understanding Visitor Expectations

Novice viewers, those viewers who described themselves as having interest in art but as lacking knowledge of art, want their museum visits to be pleasant learning experiences. They prefer to come to the museum with others and to walk through the galleries until something grabs their attention. They also are quick to make judgments and tend to prefer art that is realistic or highly skilled and, above all, understandable. An emotional connection is important as well and is often the main motivation for viewing art. Although they know there is much more that they could learn about works of art that might enhance their viewing experiences, they are skeptical of over-intellectualization and experts who try to tell them what is good or bad in terms of art (McDermott-Lewis, 1990).

More advanced viewers plan the museum experience, either beforehand or upon entering the museum. They also want an enjoyable experience and have learned through experience that it is better to focus on certain works rather than trying to see everything in the museum. They expect the art to be displayed in such a way that they are not distracted by glare or other art or even other people. They expect to learn new knowledge but do not want that knowledge to be forced upon them. Although they are more likely than novices to visit museums alone, they also see benefits in visiting with someone and sharing reactions. A human connection is important; they are interested in historical information, the sources of the artist's ideas, and how certain effects are created. Comparison to adjacent artworks or art they have seen before is a meaningful part of their experience. Time is important as more advanced viewers are aware of how to look in depth at a work of art and need sufficient time to become engaged with the work and make discoveries on their own. The idea that the intellectual is valued does not negate the importance of an emotional response. It seems the more advanced viewer wants a balance between the two (McDermott-Lewis, 1990).

Making the Experience Meaningful

What does it mean to have a meaningful experience with a work of art? Those of us who are familiar with museums use this type of terminology frequently, sometimes without fully understanding what we ourselves mean by it. For many museum-goers, it is an experience of insight or emotion that is at the heart of our experiences, what is frequently referred to as an aesthetic experience. For others, this phrase—"the aesthetic experience"—can be troublesome and perplexing in itself. Because it is central to many viewers' idea of a positive museum visit, and, in fact, a goal of many visitors, it is important to recognize that frequent museum visitors value the insight and emotion that such an experience provides.

The aesthetic emotion is a particular type of emotional response. Traditionally, philosophers have connected the aesthetic to a sense of beauty (Eaton, 1988). In the early-20th century, the aesthetic emotion was linked to the way the formal elements of a work of art were arranged to create what aesthetician Clive Bell called "significant form" (Dickie, Scalfani, & Roblin, 1989). According to this viewpoint, content was considered less important than the formal components of a work of art. During the 20th century, artists challenged ideas about the nature of art resulting in a wide range of artistic expression. In today's cultural climate, where works of art challenge our understandings and explore important social issues, the idea that one should react primarily only to the formal elements in a work of art in order to experience it "aesthetically" is counter to current thinking.

Walsh-Piper (1994) defined the aesthetic experience as "one of heightened attention to perception, which is what makes it both meaningful and memorable" and that has those "qualities that foster subsequent worthwhile reflection" (p. 105). She discussed how museums are designed as architectural spaces to set works of art apart from other distractions and to invite contemplation. She explained that visitors should have enough information to "stimulate curiosity and imagination, while allowing for the sheer pleasure and delight in looking" (p. 109). It is in this sense that the aesthetic experience is addressed in this chapter.

Csikszentmihalyi, a researcher known for his work investigating the flow experience in athletics and chess, and Robinson, an interdisciplinary social scientist, were commissioned by the J. Paul Getty Museum to study the aesthetic experience. Working under the assumption that the aesthetic experience is the ultimate museum experience, they conducted extensive interviews with museum professionals. They hypothesized that museum professionals possessed highly developed skills that allowed them to enjoy thinking deeply about works of art on a daily basis, that this ability to find pleasure in

viewing art is an acquired skill, and that a logical way to understand the viewing experience was "to study the practices of those who may be assumed to possess" that skill (Czikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990, p. vii). They explained that historical information, information about the social and cultural context, connections to basic human emotions, and the engagement of the imagination all are factors that can stimulate such a response. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson stated that viewers need to understand that "viewing art is its own reward" and becomes an opportunity to "challenge their senses, their emotions and their knowledge" (p. 174). Out of such moments can come increased understanding, greater insight, and a sense of time well spent, all important aspects of a lifelong approach to learning.

Research in educational theory (Damasio, 1994) has shown that learning is connected to emotion and cannot be separated into exclusively rational domains. The arts have the power to engage us emotionally and intellectually. The potential for new knowledge and insight is one of the primary reasons people visit museums on a repeat basis (Dierking, 2002). Additionally, such experiences bring a sense of pleasure and give meaning to our lives. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) explained, "The value of a person's life—whether it was filled with interesting and meaningful events or whether it was a sequence of featureless and pointless ones—is determined more by the sum of experiences over time than by the sum of objective possessions or achievements. By this measure, aesthetic experiences are important indeed" (p. 152).

Artists in the last two decades have expanded the traditional forms of art, crossing boundaries between media and creating works that demand new modes of understanding. Much of contemporary art falls under the category of postmodernism. Postmodern art seeks to dissolve boundaries between art forms, merge aspects of various styles and cultures, and deconstruct what has come to be the artistic standard of the artworld. Most obvious in architecture in many cities, postmodern art may also take the form of an installation in a gallery or a performance piece with accompanying digital imagery and sound. Gude (2004) has identified specific postmodern principles that she contends can also inform understanding. Examples include appropriation, or taking preexisting images and using them in new ways; juxtaposition, intentionally using disparate images and objects in ways that confront the viewer; recontextualization, taking traditional symbols and refiguring them to give them new meaning; layering, using images on top of one another to create complexity; and hybridity, merging newer art forms with traditional ones. Museum educators can help their visitors recognize these characteristics and how they are used to better enable those visitors to find meaning in contemporary art and enjoy the unique, interpretive challenge it presents.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a basic overview of the educational role of art museums, the varying contexts in which they are experienced by the museum visitor, and the nature and continuing relevance of the aesthetic experience in the 21st century. In the '70s, '80s, and '90s, art museums were criticized by academics as being irrelevant to social issues and other concerns (Oberhardt, 2001). Today, they are in the process of evolving from institutions whose previously accepted role was to serve as "arbiters of taste and the ultimate authority" (Adams, Falk, & Dierking, 2003, p. 15) to collaborators with museum visitors in the construction of meaning, providing unique opportunities for reflection and moments of insight. In doing so, they empower individual viewers to have the kinds of personal museum experiences that make them want to return.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] Portions of the following discussion of research investigating visitor response were first published in Henry (2000).