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The Art of Learning: How Selection and Interpretation Shape the Museum Visitor Experience

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**The Art of Learning:
How Selection and Interpretation Shape the
Museum Visitor Experience**

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Abstract

This paper addresses the historically-instilled division between the art museum and its visitors and their inability to connect to fulfill their mutually held educational goals. Through a careful examination of museum-industry texts, unpublished evaluation study findings, observations of existing museum exhibitions, and my own hypothetical examples, I argue for increased transparency of art museum selection practices through more centralized interpretive activities. Openness between the museum and its visitors will reveal the constructed nature of knowledge by allowing visitors to partake in the interpretative process, and thereby better achieve communication and understanding between the art museum and its visitors.

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Introduction

Museums collect the work, histories, and discoveries of humankind and display them to enhance public understanding. In providing a casual arena to learn about our world, museums strive to offer visitors an enjoyable experience that will further their insight and potential to contribute to the collective construction of knowledge. Visitors view museums as a place that provides them with an entertaining learning experience. Museum professionals are responsible for recognizing visitors' perspectives and creating the space for these informal interactions with their collections. This goal of education via enjoyable experience has emerged fairly recently and the methods left over from more traditional institutions are gradually being exchanged with more engaging approaches for the sake of the visitor.

Traditionally, the museum's main drive was to preserve and acquire objects with cultural or scientific importance. As museums have evolved, their focus has expanded from a model which places its highest importance on the objects in its collection to one which also acknowledges the motives of the visitor. Every museum discipline must take visitors into as much consideration as artifacts and presented information, but one discipline in particular has remained more reluctant to adopt its visitor base as an equal priority; art museums are still adhering to the most traditional model of exhibition, one which emphasizes the work over the visitor's experience of the work. Even though many are making efforts to engage their visitors, most have yet to fully embrace the visitor experience as the essential purpose of the museum. Art museums in particular must reconcile their goals with the goals of their visitors in order to create the most effective educational exhibitions possible.

Although art museums are increasingly attempting to depart from traditional didactic display methods, they continue to miss making a vital connection with their visitors by obscuring their influential role on the creation and maintenance of knowledge and thus neglect to serve their

ultimate purpose of public education. In this thesis, I will analyze the reasons behind this disconnect and will argue for the greater integration of interpretive devices to increase visitor capability to contribute to our communal knowledge base. By upholding traditional models and practices, I argue that art museums exclude their modern visitor and unwittingly fail to serve their very purpose.

To be sure, this type of assessment is not new; art museums would not have developed education departments if they were blithely unaware of their educational aims. However, my innovative contribution to the move toward a more accessible art museum lies in the critical analysis I present and the angle I suggest to help overcome this disconnect. My discussion relies on a synthesis of the findings and ideas presented in museum-industry articles, unpublished visitor evaluation studies, observations of existing exhibits¹ and my own hypothetical examples. In this paper, I will focus on the divide between the creators of museums and their visitors through an analysis of each party's respective goals and motivations. I will then assess the impact of current strategies and practices on visitor impressions and general perceptions of the art museum. My explanation of the role of selection and interpretive strategies will further depict the lack of connection between the museum and its visitors. As I describe the fundamental concerns with traditional display tactics, I will present possible methods to unite the museum and its visitors; these suggested changes in general practices and attitudes must occur to fulfill the art museum's role as a public educational institution.

The issue of inadvertent alienation of the visitor is not malicious, but rather the result of a discipline that has historically developed stringent restrictions in order to reinforce a distinguished

¹ This thesis will predominantly examine Denver museums as examples of existing exhibitions. Through both a year-long internship at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science in the Visitor Research and Program Evaluation department and a semester-long Education department internship at the Denver Art Museum, I benefited from close proximity and access to their exhibits. Furthermore, in having such a tight scope of examined museums, this paper will present a deeper focus on what is being done across the varied disciplines within one city. With a broader scope, I would be more likely to emphasize outstandingly successful or unsuccessful exhibitions rather than successful and unsuccessful practices in more every-day, common exhibitions.

upper class (McClellan 3). Those who fell into this distinction relied on the fact that art interpretation is not always intuitive for those unaccustomed to its methods. Display techniques reflected that the upper classes, who would be viewing the works, had preexisting training in the arts.

The modern day art museum has preserved these techniques out of respect for convention. However, the continuation of these practices no longer fits with a more welcoming visitor base. Patterson Williams, an educator at the Denver Art Museum, conducted a study which found that 70% of their visitors were considered novices, or those “who describe themselves as having moderate to high interest in art and low knowledge” (14). When a museum is speaking to its visitors as though they have the same background levels of knowledge, they rarely can form deep connections.

Without transparency concerning selection’s impact on presented information in the museum setting, visitors are not made aware of the constructed nature of knowledge, that analysis to achieve understanding is a human practice prevalent in all forms of research and observation, and that context heavily influences perceptions. This obscured relationship with the visitor further maintains a hermetic discipline that refuses input from external contributors; the art world limits itself to the perspectives of professionals trained to uphold the same standards they have always held.

Because art is an inherently visual experience, the visual is often the only component of a work that is acknowledged through conventional display techniques. Traditional interpretive methods, like labels that consist of the title of the work, the artist, and the year of production, rarely take visitors to the rich depths of nuance and understanding that an art history class would cover on a piece. For non-expert visitors, nuance is lost without explicit, clear guidance. Assuming the works speak for themselves segregates visitors into those who already know and those who do not.

Providing so little background for those who are not art historians makes the conceptual and contextual significance of the work difficult to access and leads visitors to assume that art is incomprehensible to the common man or is chosen to endure in our culture arbitrarily. Since visitors are not provided with the necessary tools of interpretation, their museum experience is restricted to seeing rather than understanding art.

In order to demonstrate the value of art as a visual means of communication, visitors must be familiarized with the methods by which art historians, museum staff, and scholars in the field read the work. They must be informed about the rationale behind which works are chosen as priceless pieces of the canon, and which are deemed amateur attempts to create something artistic. Museums act as the connection between the art world and the public; if that bridge of communication remains aloof by maintaining that the works are more important than the visitor's experience of them, they neglect to serve their purpose and public to their fullest potential. Only through understanding of the visitor perspective and the implementation of interpretive devices which lead visitors to more basic levels of art knowledge can this educational potential be achieved.

The Disconnect Between the Museum and its Visitors

The museum as an institution has experienced some gradual but major shifts in the role it serves the public over time. Visitor bases have grown steadily, expanding from only the highest social strata to the industry's current attempt to include all groups of people. Andrew McClellan's "Brief History of the Art Museum Public" describes the first outreach to increase visitor bases as a means to "seduce the newly moneyed classes into the pleasures and social advantages of collecting" and asserts that the *Salon* in Paris was created in response to requests for access to collections for those without their own (4). Exposure to this public, albeit broader than in the days of royal portrait galleries, was still committed to cultivating high taste and maintaining the sanctity of art as separate from something created for the masses. Museums were a place to showcase the artists and works that incorporated classical teachings and give these works an audience that could fully appreciate masterpiece works. At this time, museums treated each work with highest reverence and served as a sanctuary for these pieces to be admired by the public.

With increased openness, the museum's goals began to shift. Kate Wurtzel, educator at the Austin Museum of Art- Arthouse, argues that the beginnings of educational goals had begun to emerge through aspiration to teach the public which art qualified as proper taste and which did not. She synthesizes the ideas of Lisa Roberts and Terry Zeller when asserting: "Towards the end of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century, the educational role of the museum in the United States was to promote good taste and civic responsibility. 'Good taste' was not necessarily determined by the individual visitor, but instead determined by the elite, and reinforced as a homogenous opinion" (Wurtzel 3). This penchant for promotion of good taste began to add flexibility to the traditionally stringent requirements for acceptable museum objects. Carol Duncan, author of "Museums and Department Stores: Close Encounters," explains that in 1920s America, John Cotton Dana strove to create an even more accessible museum. He appeased the traditional

museum crowd with a few old master paintings and broke from the customary by displaying well-designed items used by the common man (141). This may be one of the first times that a focus on the learning of the visitor allowed museum creators to incorporate exhibit components which were not in accordance with the sanctuary role of the museum. Inclusion of non-canonical works emphasized the influence of art on their contemporaries, and hence Dana's museum adapted practices to be progressively more driven by public education.

Art museums, by becoming increasingly blind to social status, have adopted an educational message that is no longer focused on preaching connoisseurship. They hold three general roles for the public: conservation, research, and education. Through conservation, museums hold the responsibility to preserve works for the benefit of future generations. Their research efforts make art museums leaders in investigating the backgrounds of these pieces and establishing a more holistic understanding of humanity's past through cultural and aesthetic means. Only within the last fifty years has the view emerged that both of these services are dependent on the public which they serve; without presenting these works and discoveries to the public, their efforts have no real purpose and are reduced to an exercise of skills a museum staff possesses. The most fundamental function of the museum is to create an enjoyable, informal educational experience for their visitors; conservation efforts and research are in the service of this more broad purpose.

Although this overarching educational goal for visitors may be obvious when expressed at this level of simplicity, internally, art museums are still restrained by traditional display methods and the necessarily selective nature of art history. As discussed previously, art museum creators are usually formally educated in art history and rely on this training to make exhibitions which appeal to and inform the general populous. This background is helpful in understanding artworks and generating accurate content, but this extensive knowledge of artworks can cause exhibit creators to neglect the visitors' comprehension level of the works presented. Although museum educators

intend to provide visitors with an educational experience, they do not address the questions that come to mind from visitors unfamiliar with art interpretation. Failing to address these basic uncertainties keeps visitors removed from understanding that artworks are an informative medium which can pass along information throughout history and prompt critical thinking.

It is imperative that museums bring into consideration why their particular visitors are coming to their institution and then build off of that concept in order to create the most fulfilling visitor experience possible. Institutions unduly concerned with their outward appearance may make the mistake of trying to incorporate their visitors by appealing to two extremes. Imparting the most popular new method of interpretation or utilizing a tried-and-true structure simply because it is the way things have been done in the past reflects that the museum staffs have overlooked the mission of any civic-funded establishment: to serve their public. In order to be a public resource, cultural institutions must be observant of their dominant visitor base and embrace visitor goals.

Very few visitors question their own motivations behind coming to these institutions, but their presence demonstrates a belief that the visit is worth their time and support. Visitors would not come if they did not believe they would gain some sort of benefit from their time and entry fee, but too few museums assess this motivation. Increased use of self-critical evaluation practices helps museums inspect what actual benefits they provide. When an institution is aware of their visitors' goals and motivations, it can further embody the qualities its visitors will appreciate.

Visitor evaluation provides the insight needed to explore the motivations behind why visitors make the time in their day to take a trip to the museum. Visitor surveys are a common method to collect data on this subject matter.² Evaluation departments are relatively new to the

² The majority of the information provided here concerning museum evaluation is derived from my year-long internship at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science in their Visitor Research and Program Evaluation department. I learned many of the basic skills and tools of evaluation under the supervision of Kathleen Tinworth. Many of the statements here are synthesized from the informal conversations, emails, tasks, and projects I actively participated in while employed in this internship position. Likewise, it should be noted that my access to the numerous referenced

museum world,³ and are most commonly represented in science institutions due to their discipline's dedication to innovation through statistical and experimental research. However, several art museums are also aware of the importance of the voice of their visitors and have also begun to invest in this vein of research, both by integrating visitor evaluation into their standard practices and by hiring external evaluators. Evaluation is centered on discovery rather than looking for an expected response to fit into what is anticipated by museum staff and theorists. Although preconceived aims often drive these studies, professional evaluators are trained to be aware of leading questions and avoid using methods which would potentially influence results. They strive to hold the most objective perspective possible in order to gain accurate responses reflective of visitors' predominant opinions and impressions. Visitor studies are necessary to assess the impact of the institution; they illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of an institution from the visitor's perspective.

The Denver Museum of Nature and Science employs one of the pioneering evaluation departments throughout the museums in the United States mid-west and plains region. In their bi-yearly Visitor Baseline Study,⁴ they sent out teams of researchers to ask, "Why did you come to the Denver Museum of Nature and Science today?" Visitors were asked to choose as many as applied from the following responses:

unpublished evaluation reports was possible through the consent and assistance of the members of the Denver Museum of Nature and Science evaluation team (Kathleen Tinworth, Laureen Trainer, and Andréa Giron).

³ For example, the Denver Museum of Nature and Science established their evaluation department in 2007 and the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago began hiring to create an evaluation department in the winter of 2011. Further, according to a 2004 Smithsonian Institution study, only 13% of museums have a staff member spending time conducting evaluation activities.

⁴ This question appeared in Laureen Trainer's unpublished Visitor Baseline Study conducted in the spring of 2010, the fall of 2010, and the spring of 2011. Interestingly, each of the three data collection periods had consistent first, second, and third highest occurrence of responses. The results here are expressed as an average across all three survey periods. Calculations were done by Lauren Wilson.

-Fun/entertainment	-Have friends/family in from out of town	-Bad weather (indoor activity)
-Learning/ education	-New Exhibition	-Was recommended
-With tour/school group	-Special event/class/lecture	-Regular visitor
-Family outing	-With children (something for children to do)	-Other (please specify)

On average, Fun/entertainment was chosen most frequently with 73.9% of visitors selecting this box. Next was Learning/education, as picked by 55.5% of surveyed visitors. The third most significant option was Family outing, which appealed to 43.1% of museum visitors that participated in the survey. Through the Visitor Baseline study, the Denver Museum of Nature and Science can be self-aware and assess their role in their visitors' lives realistically. The data collected reflects the predominant visitor perspective that the Denver Museum of Nature and Science is valued primarily as a place for a fun, educational family activity. Essentially, visitors come because they first want something enjoyable to do, and secondly, they want to learn something while partaking in this activity. Their experience takes precedence over the particular subject matter presented, as many museums mistakenly maintain. The museum outing is a casual experience made possible for a public that wants to make discoveries.

There have also been studies that attempt to more explicitly describe motivations based on the gains visitors perceive resulting from their visit. John H. Falk is a Sea Grant professor of Free Choice Learning at Oregon State University and has contributed extensively to the research of the role visitor perspectives take in museum learning environments. His findings in *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* divides museum visitors into five categories based on their motivation for visiting a museum (Falk 64). These categories are divided as follows:

- **Explorers** are curiosity-driven, with a generic interest in the content of the museum. They expect to find something that will grab their attention, fuel their learning, and inspire them to investigate.
- **Facilitators'** visits are socially motivated, focused primarily on enabling the experiences and learning of others in their accompanying social or family group.
- **Professional/ Hobbyists** feel a close tie between museum content and their vocation or hobby. Their visits are typically motivated by a desire to satisfy a specific content-related objective.
- **Experience Seekers** perceive the museum as an important, "must see" destination. Their satisfaction primarily derives from having "been there and done that."
- **Rechargers** seek a contemplative, spiritual and/or restorative experience within their visit. They see the museum as a refuge.⁵

These categories can describe the motivations for visitors to all types of cultural institutions and provide insight that helps to accurately assess the museum's service to the public. The Denver-area Evaluation Network (DEN),⁶ a group of evaluators from nine⁷ Denver cultural institutions, decided to test these categories on visitors in the summer of 2010 to see how they pertain to varying disciplines of institutions. After interviewing 1,296 adult visitors at all nine institutions, their study showed visitors most frequently indicated they felt the Facilitators category best described them (44.6% of surveyed visitors). 19.2% identified with the Explorers, and 15.4% exhibited Professional/Hobbyist motivations. Smaller numbers related with the Experience Seekers and Rechargers, 9.6% and 8.7% respectively. This data reaffirms the findings that visitors primarily come to museums for an educational outing. The high number of Facilitators indicates the importance visitors place on the ability to interact with each other and learn together.

⁵ Falk's categories appear here in summary form as explained in an unpublished evaluation report by Kathleen Tinworth.

⁶ Unified, cross institutional evaluation studies are extremely innovative and new in the museum industry and Denver is heading this type of pan-institutional evaluation. They have created a collaborative Denver -area Evaluation Network (DEN), which is currently conducting pan-institutional evaluations throughout Denver area cultural institutions and working to create evaluation instruments which can be implemented at any institution throughout the United States.

⁷ The group has since expanded and as of April 2012, consists of 15 institutions.

Due to their expertise in their subject matter, museum professionals can easily lose sight of this simple fact. Curators are primarily concerned with their particular area of research and the objects and information on display to the visitor. Educators attempt to tie school curriculum to programs and activities at the museum, or are so focused on finding an effective means to convey information, they can accidentally fail to notice the basic reason their visitors came to see their exhibition in the first place: to have an enjoyable outing with educational benefits. With too much emphasis on subject matter or particular aspects of educational milestones, visitors can miss out on the underlying foundations of current museums: that self-motivated learning can be an enjoyable activity and can stem from an unlimited number of sources, even those which do not carry an explicitly or exclusively educational mission. Institutions which investigate visitor motivations are reaching to bridge the gap between museum professionals and their audience. When visitor priorities take precedence in the museum, the institution will hold a greater value for its public because the benefits of the museum's enjoyable, educational offerings will become more evident to visitors.

DEN's study on Falk's visitor motivations is especially illuminating when comparisons are made between the results of its participating institutions. Since data was collected using the same methods at different venues, their findings can depict variations between the visitors to each type of institution. Out of the nine institutions which participated in the survey, six of them found the majority of their visitors fell into the Facilitators category. The institutions which draw visitors because they wish to inspire the learning of their group were the Buffalo Bill Museum and Grave, the Butterfly Pavilion, the Children's Museum, the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, the Denver Zoo, and the Wildlife Experience. Facilitators come to the museum hoping to provide an enjoyable experience for someone else and enjoy their visit depending on how fellow group members perceive the outing. In order to most accurately satisfy the needs of Facilitators, these institutions should strive to create family-friendly exhibitions which promote group participation

and interaction. Too many activities that only engage one person at a time would negate these visitors' main purpose in coming: to instigate a group learning experience together. Successful exhibitions for institutions that are predominately visited by Facilitators create a visitor-centered space for participation with components which have easily absorbed educational messages.

Although the majority of museum-goers overall associated with the Facilitators' motivation, and this represented the most common type of visitor at the largest number of the participating institutions, three institutions indicated that the majority of their visitors fit into different categories.

The Denver Botanic Gardens saw highest visitor-ship in the Rechargers group. Rechargers place a priority on being able to feel at peace and experience a space that is different than their everyday surroundings. Highly participatory activities in the Botanic Gardens would derail the serenity of the institution and detract from their visitors' experience.⁸ These institutions would find subtle, individual interpretive materials more suitable because for Rechargers, it is more about the ambience the facility provides than creating an enjoyable memory or illuminating a particular piece of information. For the Denver Botanic Gardens, effective interpretive materials could include walls that promote privacy and paths to secluded spots among the specimens. Utilizing exhibition strategies that promote a sense of peace and individuality shows that the Denver Botanic Gardens is cognizant of and caters to the reasons behind why their Recharger majority is motivated to visit.

The Denver Art Museum and the Molly Brown House Museum both had more Explorers within their walls. Since Explorers are motivated by their curiosity, they benefit from interpretive materials that illuminate something previously unfamiliar. Explorers are not interested in learning about particular subject matter, which gives their institutions a wide array of possible angles to satisfy their visitors' needs. These two institutions would be wise to capitalize on the natural

⁸ The Denver Botanic Gardens does, however, allow for those visitors who do appreciate participatory activities by providing a separate interactive children's garden. This is appropriately located across the street from the main gardens to maintain a serene setting for the appreciation of the Recharger majority.

curiosity drive of their visitors by providing intriguing exhibitions and elaborating on the “lesser-known” sides of their works. Visitors driven by Explorer motivations have little previous knowledge of the objects they will encounter in the museum and will not achieve extensive learning without an effort from museum staffs to reach out to visitors’ existing levels of familiarity.

For Explorers, the idea of educational content is complicated. Since these visitors come to see what there is to see, they are likely to have very minimal preexisting knowledge of a presented object, if any at all. For the Molly Brown House Museum, this could imply that their visitors do not know who Molly Brown is, why her house is worth visiting or preserving, or why her life is relevant to the contemporary public. Explorers want to know what there is to find out about Molly Brown, but come in with little to no expectations of what that information could be. Visitors would presumably be well served with an overview of Molly Brown’s historical life story, what impacts of her life are still visible in contemporary Denver, and intriguing facts that are uniquely represented within the Molly Brown House Museum.

The Explorer majority at the Denver Art Museum may come to see a particular temporary exhibition, but they are more interested in what they will find there than learning about the subject matter extensively. The discipline of art education is not heavily emphasized in contemporary school curriculum, so the visitors’ understanding of what they can learn from artwork is considerably lower than that of more traditional school subject areas. In order to clarify this point with their visitors, the Denver Art Museum must make their educational aims more explicit; visitors must see that they are being involved in a potential learning experience when they see a new work. These learning experiences should be varied encounters and present visitors with unique perspectives, since Explorers are inquisitive and seeking an experience of something out of the ordinary. The Denver Art Museum’s educational activities would have the greatest impact if they held a focus more heavily concentrated on the concept that art is not simply an aesthetic exercise, but with appropriate

attention to context and formal qualities, provides information. An experience that communicates the capability for visitors to learn about works in a more general sense capitalizes on the investigative openness of visitors, and realizes the Explorer majority is not concerned with facts of minute detail.

Museum creators and visitors are both striving for the same result: an enjoyable educational experience. However, art museums are not achieving this aim to the fullest possible degree because they approach their works from the perspective of art historians. This perspective already has the value and potential of art as the crux of their beliefs, but this is not a perspective that is familiar to their visitors. Visitors must be provided the necessary tools needed to discover for themselves that art is an educational medium.

In addition to the visitor misunderstanding of the art perspective, museums, likewise, seem unaware of the goals their visitors predominantly hold in choosing to visit their institution.

Exhibitions are created based off of staff priorities and personal speculation rather than out of accurate assessment of visitor needs, like those depicted in John Falk's visitor motivation categories.

His essay, "Contextualizing Falk's Identity-Related Visitor Motivation Model" states:

[Research] clearly speaks to both the strength and endurance of museum memories, and thus to the legitimacy of trying to understand how these very special experiences impact the lives of visitors...It makes clear that what visitors find important in these venues is most frequently tied to visitor's needs and agendas, rather than to the institution's needs and agendas. Thus, memories and meanings only partially coincide with the "learning outcomes" espoused by most museums. (Falk 155)

If these learning outcomes better embodied the fulfillment of museum visitors' needs, the experience would be more memorable and gain the potential to more readily transmit the museum's educational message. Memory plays an important role in the visitor experience; the memories that visitors create while at a museum are closely tied to the benefits they believe the museum serves. For example, maintaining a sanctuary-like art institution would create lasting memories for Rechargers, but contributes little and actually detracts from the experience Explorers seek. Explorers are far

more likely to make learning gains when educational messages are communicated in methods that pique their curiosity, since they hold predominantly curiosity-driven goals. Anticipating and accentuating components and strategies which appeal to visitors' goals builds the institution's ability to provide an effective educational venue for their public.

Evaluation is essential in maintaining an accurate viewpoint of the role art museums serve their community. Visitor research clarifies the areas where gaps exist in communication and understanding between the creators and audience. This recent investment in evaluative practice is indicative of the shift that museums continue to undergo in centralizing the visitor experience over the preservation and research of the museum object. With this newfound investment in the visitor experience comes better communication between the institution and the visitor; information can be more easily passed from one group to another with greater openness and understanding of each group's respective driving motivations and perspectives.

However, due to the traditionally exclusive nature of art history and the reluctance to give visitors the skills needed to interpret works from their untrained perspectives, visitors remain estranged from the potential educational experience art museums aim to provide. Upholding traditional interpretive practices that disregard the needs of the contemporary public reinforces a system that, in the eyes of its visitors, is opaque in its processes and functions. Institution-wide lack of transparency shields visitors from fully grasping that art history is based on selection. This fundamental component within the discipline is a necessary part of understanding a work, and visitor unawareness of selection's influence on the information museums present maintains the gaps that have been historically instilled to separate the masses from the higher classes. Only when these gaps are filled, using methods that appeal to a novice visitor base, can contemporary visitors truly benefit from the information museums attempt to convey.

Issues in Current Exhibition Strategies and Processes of the Art Museum

To illustrate the problem of the art museum, imagine this scenario: take scientific subject matter and display it the way an art museum traditionally presents their collections. A dinosaur skeleton stands in a spotlight in a white-walled room with a label that reads, “Stegosaurus. Plaster and Bone. Discovered 1942 by Dr. Steve Davidson. Santiago, Chile.” The only museum-affiliated people in the gallery are security guards positioned strategically to enforce a no-touching and no-photography policy. Visitors are expected to grasp the magnitude of this discovery and time period through quiet contemplation. With very little supplementary material, visitors must actively make an effort to guide themselves to do more than visually take in the significance of these bones. A paleontologist or dinosaur enthusiast will certainly be able to pull from their own knowledge to supplement their experience, while someone who is only casually intrigued by dinosaurs would see the skeleton as limited; their experience of the stegosaurus halts at the visual of the reconstructed bones and a few indisputable facts.

Some would argue that this approach is all that is needed, especially within the intensely visual discipline of art. Although it promotes visually heavy experiences for visitors by eliminating potentially distracting supplementary activities, it also projects the message that if a visitor cannot understand the implications of the displayed object, they are not worthy of an explanation. Natural history museums would have typically displayed their specimens in a similar manner up through the 1950s, but in more recent eras, science museums have abandoned their old habits for something more engaging. Newer interactive approaches boast the potential to have a more powerful and memorable impact.

Most contemporary science institutions have made bounds in embracing the visitor by taking the initiative to not only show the visitor their artifacts and displays, but also to encourage the visitor to take an active role in learning more about the material. The Denver Museum of Nature and

Science temporary exhibit “T. Rex Encounter”⁹ houses a predictable reconstructed Tyrannosaurus Rex skeleton,¹⁰ but wall panels elaborate on the dinosaur by showing how its massive head and upper body is balanced out by its extensive tail, as reflected by the way the skeleton is positioned. Alongside this skeleton, visitors can place their arms in contraptions which restrict human movement to the same limits imposed for the arms of the T. Rex. Accompanying the directions for the activity is a sign which explains scientists are still uncertain of the function of such small appendages and discusses a few of the current theories. Another part of the exhibit features a robotic version of the dinosaur, complete with camera-eyes. The robot’s upper body is motion sensitive; it moves to follow visitors, and displays the Tyrannosaurus Rex’s prey-focused vision on a screen above the dinosaur’s head. Out of all of the above mentioned features of the exhibit, only one particular item qualifies as a museum object or artifact: the skeleton of the T. Rex. However, with extensive interpretive materials, the exhibition is not lacking. In fact, visitors can more easily appreciate the skeleton since the majority of the space is filled with items made by exhibit designers to elaborate on the information that can be gathered by researching the skeleton. Underlying the explicit message of dinosaur facts resides the more general statement that through careful observation and research, an object can provide clues to help people better understand their surroundings.

In the visitor-centered exhibitions of science museums, the object is emphasized as a tool to communicate educational aims and demonstrate to the public the methodology behind the research that uncovers the information presented. This openness explains to visitors that the object on display allows people to conduct research and to make discoveries. With exposing the constructed

⁹ “T. Rex Encounter” ran at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science from September 16, 2011 to January 8, 2012.

¹⁰ Although predictable, this particular Tyrannosaurus Rex skeleton (affectionately named “Sue”) is the largest and most complete skeleton unearthed to date; the exhibition makes this point very clear to visitors through repeated mention of this fact within their marketing and signage.

nature of the information on display, visitors become aware that findings emerge through scientists' study of the object. This transparency asserts the notion that accepted facts can change with new research, rather than are pre-set and repeated to accompany an artifact.

Art museums have been reluctant to embrace new tactics to reach the visitor because their objects, artworks, are generally created to be seen unaccompanied by interpretive devices and without further explanation. However, works displayed in a museum are already taken from their intended context. Few pieces are created with the intent of being shown in an exhibit hall, and those that are created with this purpose may have their own critical commentary on the art museum as an institution.¹¹

Providing a less formal educational environment asks the visitor to be a part of their own learning experience. Traditional art museum display tactics show a work and provide a brief no-questions-asked description of its significance or origin. Explaining a work through particular facts drives the visitor to feel that their interpretation of the work is wrong, and that there is only one true answer, or even, that there is an answer. Breaking down this authoritative façade opens the discipline to a wider base of visitors from differing backgrounds and allows them to develop connections to art where they may have been intimidated before. When the visitor no longer fears they will be judged for an incorrect assessment, they will be more willing to casually interact with works. Making the visitor an essential focus in the creation of exhibitions makes the less-educated more comfortable interacting with the information at hand. In turn, this interaction will lead to better art-literacy skills, which are necessary for better visitor understanding. Only when visitors can see for

¹¹ In particular, the Banksy stunt of creating oil paintings and affixing them to the walls in traditional art museums alongside iconic works. It can be inferred that Banksy is pointing out the elevated status works receive due to their presence in a museum. Likewise, Dadaism rejected the bourgeois notion of high art and many of its works challenged the authority of art critics and institutions.

themselves the purpose and importance of the works they are viewing will there be true public investment in art.

In order to achieve visitor understanding, institutions must be willing to allow visitors to get involved and contribute in the processes they historically have reserved for staff and experts. In her article, "The Changing Practices of Interpretation," Lisa C. Roberts supports the idea that "by omitting any mention about the decisions behind the determination of an object's meaning, museums exclude visitors not only from an awareness that knowledge is something that is produced but also from the possibility that they themselves may participate in its production" (226). Science museums have readily adopted a model which strives to convey the influence of the visitor's input; they urge visitors to participate in making discoveries, breaking down the barrier between the expert and the layman. In some cases visitors are even provided the opportunity to contribute to ongoing research in the field during their museum trip. Bridget Coughlin, curator of human health for the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, uses visitors as subjects in a long-term study she is conducting on genetics and the perception of taste in the Museum's permanent exhibit, Expedition Health. For those who accept the invitation, the research team explains the significance of the information they can derive through visitor participation while collecting data about each individual's heritage, body composition, and ability to taste chemicals on litmus paper. The visitor then allows the research team to dye a portion of their tongue blue and take a picture in order to provide an accurate count of their taste buds. The visitor walks out of the exhibit with their personal results from their body composition readings, information on how to view the study's latest findings online, and a small instant photo of themselves with a blue tongue as a memento of their contribution to the research. In this case, visitors are aware not only of the fact that scientific research is an ongoing process to which the museum contributes, but also that its fundamental concepts are accessible for non-scientists. Through exhibition components that encourage visitor

participation, science museums have enthusiastically opened dialogue with their visitors. Art museums would reach their visitors more directly by emulating this approach. To give their collections and research purpose, it is imperative to involve visitors in their process and maintain a more transparent interface.

Selection

In consideration of the statistic that 70% of art museum visitors know very little about art history, it is important to expose the methodology behind staff selection of which works to put on display (Williams 14). Visitors will gain an understanding of the purpose and potential of art once they can comprehend the process which elevates certain artists and art objects over others. For the majority of visitors, art museums lack clarity in this particular area. The staff keeps their influence hidden; they are the ones with ultimate say over which objects are put on display, which are stored, and which are worth their attention and preservation efforts. Selection is indicative of what is and is not important, and when the visitor is unaware that selection is occurring, they miss the foundations for understanding why those works were chosen.

Visitors do, however, begin to attach significance to a work after repeated exposure. They learn that a particular artist is important if they hear their name multiple times. They establish that a movement was fundamental when they see the city covered in advertisements for a blockbuster show. Museums hold an important role in this perpetuation of making certain works recognizable not only through advertizing specific artworks and artists, but also by providing the public with the opportunity to see what the most famous works look like in “real life”. Museums help craft this associated value by upholding significance through their exacting standards of selection; historically, their curators¹² were the most highly regarded position on staff due to their role as those who shape

¹² In an art museum, curators serve as experts on staff. They are principally in charge of selecting and researching the works in the museum’s collection and choosing which works are placed on display.

the parameters of the canon (McClellan 5-7). Museums act as the authority figure for the public; based on the pieces they show and emphasize, they show visitors which works of art they should consider important.¹³ Visitors accept the role the museum has in determining the works which are valuable, but museum staffs fall short of explaining why these particular pieces have garnered such importance over the years.

Contemporary art in traditional art museums typically receives the most criticism from perplexed visitors, and often selection is the issue with which they are unknowingly confronted. When they cannot understand the work of art, they are unable to grasp why it was chosen for display in a museum. Since contemporary works have relatively recent dates of creation, they have not acquired the same level of esteem and recognition from the general public as more historical works like those by Renaissance masters. Historically canonical pieces present less of a challenge because they are familiar. These works have more traditional form and style, and hence neglect to bring visitors to question their importance.

In fact, selection is so integral to art and art history that artists themselves participate in selection; in some cases, a ready-made object the artist has “chosen” becomes the artwork in itself. One artist notorious for this type of art-as-selection is Marcel Duchamp, whose *In Advance of a Broken Arm* is a commercially manufactured snow shovel. Duchamp’s act of selecting a particular shovel, giving it a title, and placing it in an exhibition qualified it as a piece of art. For visitors unaware of the importance of selection, though, encountering this piece would likely draw them to wonder, “Why isn’t my snow shovel in the garage at home art, and this one is?” They are being led

¹³ Certainly, art museums are not the only institutions that determine the public’s familiarity with some of the most canonical works and artists. They are working with popular culture and standardized public school history curriculum to perpetuate which works are valued. For example, in the 1986 film, *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, the main characters find themselves in the Art Institute of Chicago and one of the characters spends time intently staring at Seurat’s 1884 pointillist masterpiece, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*. Although the average American may not be well informed about pointillism, many would recognize the painting if they saw it because of the movie’s popularity.

to questions that Duchamp likely intended with his work,¹⁴ but for fear of appearing uncultured or unintelligent, they avoid admitting this skepticism to the museum, and possibly the other members of their social group. Visitors thus are trapped in the symbolic level of the work; they only see a shovel in an art museum, and do not see the context that makes that shovel worth placing in an art museum. Visitors who do not understand contemporary artworks often cannot reach beyond the representational aspects of a work and into the ideologies that the art conveys, like the prevalence of selection in Duchamp's ready-mades.

Duchamp is not the only case where the influence of an artist's selection is underemphasized and lost to the visitor. Recently, National Public Radio's Susan Stamberg spoke with National Gallery of Art curator Molly Donovan about the exhibition "Warhol: Headlines."¹⁵ The works on display in this exhibit were magnified recreations and manipulations of newspaper headlines. When Stamberg questioned how projecting and tracing an existing headline onto a canvas qualified as art, Donovan replied, "It's about the selectivity of the artist. He's choosing from among volumes of newspapers he read daily." The importance of selection as opposed to representation¹⁶ may be obvious to those who have studied Warhol and are aware that reproduction and copies are common themes in his works, but for those who lack this background knowledge, it may not be discernible why blown up headlines hold such high esteem in the art community. It is unlikely they will realize that "Warhol was trying to get us to see ourselves in these headlines. He loved the name of the New York Daily Mirror, felt it mirrored, reflected its readers in the news it published, the news we

¹⁴This thought comes from David Ferris' lectures concerning ready-mades. Lectures were for his class, The Postmodern in the fall of 2011.

¹⁵"Warhol: Headlines" ran at the National Gallery of Art from September 25, 2011 to January 2, 2012.

¹⁶In this case, representation would be how accurately he drew the headlines or their general aesthetic value.

consumed” (Stamberg 2011). Visitors may not catch on to Warhol’s intentions; however, they will see huge traced newspaper headlines on the wall.

This type of misunderstanding and lack of depth is what trivializes art in the eyes of its skeptics. Because visitors are uninformed as to the basic qualities and trends in art, how can they also be expected to grasp the nuances that artists are trying to communicate ideologically? Essentially, visitors are not provided with the “why” of art history. The uninformed visitor can tell that selection is taking place because they understand that their personal artwork is unlikely to end up on the museum wall. Nonetheless, they are ill-equipped to interpret this selection as intentional within an artist’s work, much less integral to art history as a discipline. Their confusion discourages them from further investigation. Since the advent of the camera, art has lost its role as the most accurate form of representation. Contemporary works aim to communicate ideas over pristine recreations of the natural world. However, visitors generally remain unaware of this connection, and relate with contemporary works on a directly aesthetic level. When that aesthetic communicates very indirectly, most visitors cannot fully appreciate the work. The current state of art museums seems to imply that one must evaluate art without background knowledge or learn how to evaluate art elsewhere. It is presumptuous to assume that visitors inherently should be able to distinguish what makes a Robert Motherwell painting, a few black masses on a white background, worthy of the same fate of display and preservation as the *Mona Lisa*.

Selection holds an important position more directly within the museum institution as well. Most visitors are surprised by the quantity of objects in museum collections, and have incredibly inaccurate perceptions of the amount of works that are kept in storage.¹⁷ They are therefore

¹⁷ In an unpublished study I conducted for the Denver Museum of Nature and Science in July 2011, findings showed that 61% of DMNS visitors would guess that 26-75% of the collection was being shown, and only 8% of surveyed visitors guessed that 5% or less of their collection was on the floor. In reality, the Museum houses 1.4 million objects; about 1% of that is displayed for visitors.

imperceptive of the influential role of the museum staff in choosing what is presented for the visitor. Visitors may be unaware that it takes more than simply hanging paintings on a wall to create an exhibition. “The Poetics and Politics of Hispanic Art: A New Perspective,” by Jane Livingston and John Beardsley, likens exhibition strategies to photography: the broader the gaze, the less focused the exhibition. Both exhibitions and photographs provide a representation of the external world from one particular angle and it is fundamentally impossible to create a perspective which represents the subject in question fully (Livingston and Beardsley 105). Museums provide the most accurate information they have access to and translate that information to the public, but it is impossible to do so without first passing that information through the creators’ cultural filters and personal judgments.

An exhibition reflects the collective assessments of those who made it. Kathleen McLean, the principal of a museum development consulting firm and widely published within the museum field, recognizes the dangers of not admitting to the museum’s influence on displayed information. She suggests that through the presentation of their exhibitions, museums may present certain truths at the expense of others in order to drive home a specific educational goal; when certain aspects are presented and others are left out, it leads to oversimplification of a subject (McLean 193-211). For example, an institution that supports the theory of evolution would host a very different exhibition on the way that animals have changed over time than The Creation Museum.¹⁸ Each group would select particular truths to highlight over others in order to maintain consistency and for the sake of simplicity. Although visitors are not required to align their personal beliefs with those of an

¹⁸ The Creation Museum’s website describes their exhibit, “Natural Selection Is Not Evolution” saying “Enjoy the wonders of God’s Creation as you uncover what natural selection can and cannot do. In this special exhibit, examine an aquarium that resembles a real cave. This cave aquarium features live blind cavefish, showing how natural selection allows organisms to possess characteristics most favorable for a given environment—but it is not an example of evolution in the molecules-to-man sense. You’ll also uncover the truth about antibiotic resistant bacteria.”

institution, it is less evident the amount of manipulation the museum holds over the visitor in less controversial or polarizing subject areas, like “Which Manet was more influential to Degas?”

Since the museum cannot display anything without doing so through their perspective, visitors are necessarily limited by the information they receive from the museum. Art museums are reluctant to admit their bias for fear that if visitors possessed this knowledge, it would undermine the validity of their discipline. In actuality, this openness may make the visitor more comfortable to see art as a flexible, human-created and maintained discipline.

To uphold their credibility, art museums frequently take on an authoritative, instructive position by simply informing the visitor through direct, inflexible interpretive methods. Since the hand of the art museum’s subjective perspective is hidden, existing descriptions and interpretations are presented as irrefutable fact. By nature, instructive teaching asserts that there is a correct and incorrect answer; those who know have the authority to instruct those who do not know. Art museums close their teachings to the potentially illuminating dialogue that could transpire between themselves and their visitors with varied backgrounds. Interpretation is demonstrated to the art museum visitor as an objective process, only conducted correctly by experts with PhDs.

By obscuring their influence, museums inadvertently detract from their credibility as an institution because they maintain the façade of objectivity. In reality, all disciplines rely on subjective assessments. Gianni Vattimo, a postmodern philosopher, embraces the subjectivity that art museums seem to view as their weakness. His text *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture* reconstructs the typical idea of history. He claims that an objective sequence of events, or a complete and accurate history, is unattainable due to our inability to step outside of our own perceptions of which events were important (Vattimo 1-15). We are limited to our current stance; since we cannot predict the future or see human history as a whole, our judgments of which events were important and which were not are dependent on the contemporary state of the world.

Many traditional art museums work to connect their visitors with their past through works of art. Instead of hiding their shaping of the public's views of history, museums could acknowledge that this circumstance is unavoidable. Ensuring transparency behind selection practices and exhibition goals would tap into the art museum's potential to bring visitors to a new awareness of visitors' own biases in their world view. Visitors would be presented with the idea that universal terms like "truth" and "history" are problematic.

As an institution devoted to informing the public, museums must embrace their instructional role as more focused on visitors' holistic education using the information and objects they have available to use as teaching tools. Expressing their methodology or allowing visitors to partake in activities that expose selection would help museums avoid training visitors to approach art history as a discipline constructed via rote memorization and the ability to parrot back historic facts. Kate Wurtzel explains, "by presenting the information as an absolute truth, there is the implication that the only route to understanding and appreciating a work of art is by receiving and memorizing its historical and formal properties" (6). Art museums must realize that informing visitors by guiding them to make their own conclusions is actually more beneficial than simply telling them an artist's life story or an acceptable interpretation of an artwork. A museum's acknowledgment of subjectivity in the selection process allows its visitors to realize that the museum's perspective is constructed from accepted beliefs of its staff, its historical context, and the tenets of its discipline.

Art museums further communicate selectivity through their classification of works. The divisions that exist as a means to organize galleries and categorize works are frequently too stagnant and leave little room for flexibility, which instills confusion in the visitor. The world outside of art history is classified in much more of a gradient; visitors can feel that the museum is even further removed from the functional world when they cannot relate to the reason behind why a museum

object is represented or grouped in a particular way. The most apparent manifestation of this issue is the division of art objects versus cultural objects. Kathleen McLean addresses this concern:

In the exhibition *ART/artifact*, organized by art historian Susan Vogel at the Center for African Art in New York City in 1988, four different display environments for African objects over the past century--a 1905 curiosity room, a natural history museum presentation complete with diorama, a reverential art museum presentation, and a contemporary art gallery installation--were elegantly inverted into a critique of exhibition practice. As Vogel described it, "The exhibition stressed that these different styles reflected differences in attitude and interpretation, and that the viewer was manipulated by all of them." (203)

To viewers, it became apparent that the designation "art" is up to the person presenting; context heavily influences our perception. For observant visitors, questions arise in more traditional exhibitions of these "cultural" objects. In their permanent Native Arts gallery, the Denver Art Museum attempts to acknowledge the fuzzy line of this division; a display of traditional Native American pottery is accompanied by contemporary ceramic works done by artists of Native American heritage. Why are these works kept within the Native Arts section? Are works by contemporary artists that happen to come from a Native American background automatically excluded from the Contemporary galleries and placed in the Native Arts section? Although their intentions were presumably to demonstrate the variance in style of present-day Native American artists and break down stereotypes, it can also imply that Native Artists do not create "true" contemporary works, and instead are an anomaly that does not fit in with the rest of the Contemporary art. In dividing Native Arts and Contemporary work, the visitor encounters a separation that is inconsistent with the complexities of the world it attempts to depict.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, if museums were to adopt a system where works were randomly intermixed, it would detract from visitors' ability to develop overall perceptions and understandings. The completely randomized museum would serve as a place where visitors drift from work to work, picking their favorites along the way and missing out on bigger driving themes. Hence, divisions in museums function as a necessary organizational tool to promote learning by

categorizing ideas and styles; however, with too little transparency about the decision-making that develops these distinctions and allowance for transitions or alternatives, museums trap and perpetuate traditional approaches to art.

Interestingly, an effective method to allow for this type of flexibility can be found on another floor in the Denver Art Museum's permanent collection, European and American Art. Although this section is already a geographical category, within the gallery works are organized by subject matter, medium, or specific donor.¹⁹ The portrait section jumps from Post Impressionism to Renaissance works to Mannerism. By placing all of these varied genres together, interesting juxtapositions and commonalities become more apparent to the viewer. The inability to easily and accurately classify artworks may have emerged due to the fact that art is increasingly less formulaic in structure. Newer models of classification are necessary in order to address the great variety present in today's art world.

Art museums that embrace nontraditional methods of display are more able to accommodate the evolving landscape and breadth art has begun to assume within the last century. With their exhibition, "West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965-1977,"²⁰ the Denver Museum of Contemporary Art effectively maintained coherency while broaching the typical concrete barriers that most art museums employ. As an institution, the Denver Museum of Contemporary Art has no permanent collections. With only temporary exhibitions, the museum floor can be reorganized to best suit each particular exhibition. "West of Center" devoted the museum's space to providing visitors with their own experience of the countercultural movement. Galleries were organized around particular identifiable artistic groups which were active

¹⁹ A few more examples of the sections in the European and American Art gallery are Landscape, Textile, and Still Life.

²⁰ "West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965-1977" ran at the Denver Museum of Contemporary Art from November 10, 2011 to February 19, 2012.

at the time. This type of strategy allowed the museum to address different types of art forms that generally cannot be represented in a museum, covering diverse forms like dance, installation art,²¹ posters, and media productions intended to accompany psychedelic rock concerts. Although none of these artists' aesthetic styles closely resembled each other, one unified concept stood out as visitors made their way from room to room: that artists in the late 1960s and 70s were largely concerned with breaking away from the mainstream lifestyle and their art served as a vehicle for change. The Denver Museum of Contemporary Art's tactic of breaking up their exhibition into particular artistic groups created distinct and obvious boundaries between differing approaches toward a common goal. Flexibility in exhibition categorization breaks down compartmentalization and enables the visitor to think critically and form connections that are not communicated in traditional exhibition environments.

Selection within an art museum is manifested in a broad array of practices, but sadly the visitor remains blind to its existence. Obscurity on the part of the museum accounts for much of the evident confusion that visitors face when confronted with individual artists who emphasize the concept of choice. More importantly, visitors are shielded from the awareness that an art museum's selection of presented and highlighted works helps to form the public's communal understanding of humanity's past. In exhibition strategies, often divisions meant to categorize works perpetuate traditional perspectives of art that are no longer viable or accurate. With openness to the visitor, the art museum acknowledges that it presents a lens through which to see the world. Transparency between the museum and visitor removes the authoritarian position museums have historically held and allows for better reception of the ideas and values represented within the institution.

²¹ For this particular exhibition, this included recreations of Drop City's iconic geodesic domes and an inflatable structure emulating Ant Farm Inflatables. Both installations invited visitors to come inside and experience the work.

Interpretation

The most direct means by which a museum communicates with their audience is through interpretive materials. These are the labels, activities, and non-artifact items that can be found in an exhibit hall. Although interactive games and large descriptive panels written by exhibits staff may be more obvious interpretive devices, they can be as subtle as a lighting technique or paint color on the wall. Even the arrangement of an exhibition space interprets objects and communicates significance to visitors; the works in the center of the gallery under a spotlight are perceived to be more important than those lining the periphery of the room.

Interpretive materials are typically put together or added to an exhibition after a curator chooses the objects²² to be placed on display. They provide a varied experience for visitors through tactics that elaborate on or appeal to senses that may not be engaged otherwise when presented with a museum object. Interpretive devices give an object or work a context expressly intended for the benefit of the visitor. Science museums have emphasized interpretive materials to the level that, in some cases, activities for visitors vastly outnumber physical objects from their collections. For example, in a health exhibit, the number of devices like a heart-rate monitor and a diagram about the impact of UV rays on the layers of human skin often exceeds the number of plastinated organs. The aim behind this interpretive focus is to ensure the visitor is actively involved in their own learning. Interpretive devices facilitate this process by providing environments which direct visitors' attention toward certain aspects of the objects presented. Essentially, they supplement and translate the information that can be derived from museum objects into a presentation which appeals to the general populous.

²² Selected objects can be pulled from the museum's collections or can be on loan from another museum or institution.

For traditional art museums, though, the predominant attitude toward interpretive materials is this: they often function as an unnecessary disruption to the gaze of the visitor. By limiting the quantity and scope of interpretive materials to a few simple notes on a card to the side of the work, art historians attempt to preserve the sanctuary-feel of the art museum, which holds the artwork in the highest reverence. This may be suitable for those who have extensive backgrounds in deciphering artwork, but for that 70% of visiting novices, it results in a platform for a passive reception of the work (Williams 14). The museum is transformed, for the majority of visitors, into a display of “curious” or “beautiful” or “important” objects which somehow are considered to be more expensive to purchase and maintain than a mid-range car. Without effective interpretive materials, visitors resort to guessing the reasons behind an object’s importance, focus heavily on the works made by blockbuster artists with household names, and are compelled by those works which appeal to their personal aesthetic tastes. Incorporating more extensive and engaging interpretive materials promotes visitor learning and a deeper experience of the work. Visitors look beyond the name of the artist when they can identify something of interest in an artwork. Interpretive materials can convert the museum into an accessible platform that promotes knowledge and investment rather than spreading conventional ideas of lofty inapproachability or obsolescence in the context of art.

Interpretive materials are not completely absent in the art museum world, but the sparse attempts at interpretation which do exist are far less central to the museum experience than those which appear in other disciplines’ exhibitions. As mentioned above, it is not uncommon in some science museum exhibits for interpretive materials to outnumber museum objects. In most art museums, the artwork takes precedence in a gallery and subtle devices work to enhance the visitor experience. It appears that art museums want the visitor experience to remain very directly related to the object rather than dilute that interaction by using activities and alternative methods to

communicate with the visitor. Although many museums are gaining confidence in removing them, traditional interpretive devices develop barriers between the visitor and the work; glass cases, do-not-touch signs, and showy frames give off the impression that an object is more important than the visitor (McLean 199).²³ Few would consider these items classic interpretive devices, but they qualify as interpretive because they affect visitors in the same sense. They carry their own subtle interpretation of the work just as much as intentionally interpretive components. With the elimination of traditional, albeit largely unintentional, interpretive practice, visitors can experience objects in the form which the artist intended without the added implications that accompany these added preservation and enhancement techniques.

The more apparent interpretive devices currently in place within art museums are generally considered supplementary or optional. The Denver Art Museum stands at the forefront in embracing progressive art display tactics, transforming their exhibitions into spaces where visitors can interact with collections in ways that go beyond reading and passive looking. For instance, they recently devoted a space to an interactive component called the Studio. During their temporary “Marvelous Mud”²⁴ exhibition, visitors were provided clay balls to create their own miniature sculptures, introduced to the process behind clay firing in a kiln, and given the opportunity to try using a wheel to throw a pot under the supervision and guidance of a professional pottery teacher. The Denver Art Museum is also recognized nationally for their Backpack programs, Hot Spots, and the Hub, all of which are visitor-focused interpretive activities used within and around the galleries to supplement the visitor experience of the works which they see in the museum. Unfortunately,

²³ Occasionally, an object must have a climate-controlled environment or is too fragile to reasonably be displayed without a case. It would not be outlandish to provide an explanation for why that particular item must remain behind glass.

²⁴ “Marvelous Mud” was an exhibition that incorporated multiple areas of the Denver Art Museum (Contemporary Art, Asian Art, and Photography) from June 11, 2011 to September 18, 2011. The Studio is only active during bigger temporary exhibitions, generally in the summer.

these interpretive materials are largely removed from their regular collections; most are only available during times of high-traffic such as the summer or on weekends. Likewise, these activities are only somewhat integrated into the galleries, if not located within its own separate segment of the museum. The Denver Art Museum has begun to make progress in accentuating the visitor experience, but their efforts still have yet to adopt and include its updated focus wholeheartedly.

Interpretive activities in art museums typically take on a temporary presence, and when they are a permanent fixture in the museum they are usually easy to overlook. Moreover, art museum interpretive activities often are physically stationed off to the sides of galleries or are aimed towards children; both tendencies send the message to adult visitors that interpretive materials are not necessary to understand the works or that only children need guidance. Adults may feel that they must go without the interpretive materials to appear more cognizant and cultured. Education should not be limited to children or those who have them, though. Multiplatform exhibit environments have the potential to appeal to children and adults alike.

Museums can include a broader range of their visitors with a more welcoming, inclusive exhibition strategy. Making interpretive devices prominent in exhibits encourages visitors to participate in their learning experience. Because the museum is a casual environment that advocates free-choice learning, visitors can choose the extent to which they would like to incorporate interpretive activities into their time at the museum. Not all people appreciate participation to the same extent, so interpretive devices should account for that differing level of investment and approval. Those who do not like to actively participate can still make educational gains from watching others interact or seeing interpretive devices available for use. Explorer types would be satisfied with interpretive activities because they capitalize on their intriguing experience and take

them to a deeper level of awareness than simply seeing something interesting.²⁵ Facilitators would appreciate extensive interpretive materials and activities because they more directly communicate educational goals. Centralized and varied ways for visitors to interact with artworks presented in the museum motivate differing bases and categories of people to experience the art on display to greater depth.

Current interpretive devices which hold an explicit educational purpose typically dissuade visitor interpretation. In a special exhibit, they may have an audio guide directly telling the visitor what information they should be absorbing from seeing a work. Individual ear pieces further enforce the “be quiet” atmosphere in galleries and discourage discussion. Docents, who break this silence, also employ a rigid explanation of the way museum objects should be understood by presenting to visitors in a lecture style. It is important to note that "The didactic labels and lecture-style tour also reinforce a particularly modernist way of knowing. True to modernist beliefs, knowledge is being provided instead of being constructed as a shared event between the visitor, educator, artist, and institution" (Wurtzel 6). Unlike labels, small group tours do allow for visitor questions. However, these tours are not a necessary component of most museum experiences²⁶ and visitors must have taken the initiative to ask for a docent tour. Further, simply stating answers to questions detracts from visitors' ability to discover the artwork on their own terms and by using methods most comfortable to them.

When visitors are made aware of their own potential to teach themselves, they can apply this mindset to their daily lives. Interpretive materials have the most direct connection with the visitor

²⁵ Explorers may actually be attracted by interpretive activities in and of themselves, as long as they are well done. Since Explorers are unconcerned with the particular materials that they encounter in their visit, interpretive devices could easily hold just as much of an attractive quality as a particular work.

²⁶ The Molly Brown House Museum does require a scheduled docent tour to view the museum. However, this type of visit is uncommon. Most museums advocate more self-directed experiences for visitors.

and inspire intrinsically motivated learning. However, traditional interpretive practices in place at art museums tell the visitor not only an inflexible analysis of works, but that their art education comes second to the works on display.

Part of interpretation involves opening the museum floor to discussion, whether among visitors or between visitors and representatives of the museum. The Denver Museum of Nature and Science hosts an impressive and knowledgeable volunteer team that populates the museum floor at all times. They conduct demonstrations, are readily available to answer questions for any visitor, and are even found with carts in the hallways encouraging visitors to handle objects from the collections. With such a large volunteer staff, a casual question or conversation is easy. After going through a screening process to assess their strengths, the most approachable volunteers are trained to be able to provide greater depth for their particular exhibition and stationed on the museum floor.²⁷ Volunteers play an important role in interacting with visitors; they are the face of the exhibits. Even on slow days, Denver Museum of Nature and Science volunteers stand ready to demonstrate concepts and interact with potentially curious visitors.²⁸ In contrast, slow days at art museums make the galleries look abandoned with the occasional exception of a passing security guard. Visitors are left to interpret artwork on their own, unless they came with or approach another visitor. Without anyone designated as knowledgeable within an exhibit, art museum galleries form an amassment of collected objects put up for display only.

²⁷ Volunteers who are not well suited for visitor interaction often make contributions behind the scenes in research assistance roles.

²⁸ While wandering the empty Denver Museum of Nature and Science floor looking for visitors to interview for evaluation studies, I have had numerous volunteers offer to let me participate in their activities. Some of my favorites were getting spun in a chair to demonstrate the equilibrium of the inner ear, touching a narwhal horn, and interpreting tree age and condition by looking at core samples. All of these activities were facilitated by the volunteer team, and each was eager to tell me what they had learned from other visitors' reactions as well.

Nina Simon has emerged as a mogul in the museum industry for her work in addressing the importance of participation for the visitor experience. Her book, *The Participatory Museum*, describes in detail the interpretive approaches which do and do not engage the visitor, and critically examines visitors' real museum experiences rather than the idealized version that museum staffs envision their visitors to have. In her blog, a post²⁹ entitled "How Different Types of Museums Approach Participation" effectively sums up many of the key issues art museums must address in the realm of participatory visitor experiences:

OPPORTUNITIES - Art museums are well-suited for creative visitor participation. They show the creative process, and many visitors may be inspired to create their own art in response to that on display (e.g. *In Your Face*). While art historians and curators may have their own sense of what interpretations of art are most accurate or valuable, it's generally accepted that everyone has his own experience of art, and that individuals' different interpretations or preferences are acceptable (which encourages some museums to invite visitors to write their own labels). Finally, many art museums do fabulous, highly participatory projects that are led by participatory artists who work specifically in the realm of dialogue or active social participation.

CHALLENGES - Art museums have more significant separations between education departments and curatorial departments than other types of museums. This means that an activity construed as educational (i.e. write your own label) often cannot be placed in the gallery if it is perceived by curators to distract from the aesthetic experience of connecting with the artworks. Ironically, art museums often present the most radical participatory experiences for visitors--but only when led by an artist, not by internal staff members. There is also a strong bias in some art museums against amateur content, which prevents some institutions from encouraging creative participation by visitors. (2010)

Simon sees art museums as institutions with plenty of potential for visitor participatory experiences as long as they embrace the visitor and deemphasize traditional tactics and attitudes. Interpretive devices offer the visitor this opportunity for participation, and when done well, can make the difference between seeing art and understanding art.

Effective interpretive devices have the potential of communicating that museum objects have educational uses and benefits. When visitors are provided an attractive method to guide their

²⁹ Within the quoted portion, this blog post contained links that have been disabled for the purpose of this paper. The segments that were originally linked were "*In Your Face*" "to invite visitors to write their own labels" "dialogue" and "active social participation."

own interpretations and learning, they are more likely to value their experience. Giving visitors the opportunity to participate in the construction of knowledge, or at the very least, directly making them aware of this process, promotes fuller understanding. The realization that art is a cultural product of humankind that can be understood in various ways and is shaped by our contemporary perspectives is a fundamental concept of art history, and one that generally is not openly discussed with the museum visitor. Welcome visitor involvement brings art to the level of the public, both on a physical and conceptual level. Increased comfort interacting with art promotes a positive outlook from visitors, which would likely foster greater public investment in the discipline and the museum as an institution. Art museums could eliminate their elitist persona and adopt more self-aware and tolerant qualities through approachable, interesting interpretive materials and activities that invite visitors to interact with the exhibition.

Guidelines to Connect the Museum with its Visitors

With increased self-awareness, museums will gain the capability to more effectively engage their visitors. Several changes in exhibition strategy would help the public to experience art through an involved perspective and more easily access the knowledge that can be communicated through museum objects. Exposing the process by which art historians develop their assessments of a work would teach visitors the art-literacy skills which allow the art-historically educated to assess works. When a logical selective and interpretive process is demonstrated for the benefit of visitor understanding, it creates a solid foundation for art appreciation. Museum education techniques should be sure to clearly establish that the museum is presenting a particular perspective influenced by several variables, and that unbiased objectivity is an amicable but fundamentally unattainable aim. Beyond teaching pure art-historical knowledge, museums have the opportunity to inspire positive visitor attitudes concerning education on a more basic level. Including the visitor in the interpretive process creates an investment in self-motivated learning by allowing the visitor to make discoveries and conclusions based on the guidance of experts.

Interpretive activities should simultaneously strive to guide visitors in a supportive manner and to provide visitors with opportunities to make their own assessments. Too much freedom may result in radical, unfounded personal speculation, but too much emphasis on nuances of research and rote fact becomes a passive learning exercise for the visitor. Interpretive activities should both demonstrate the constructed nature of art historical knowledge and allow visitors to partake in its construction. One possible manifestation of this type of activity would be a touch-sensitive screen in the center of a gallery. On this screen, visitors would find the same paintings depicted as those hanging in the exhibit. Each visitor would have the option to re-arrange the paintings in a virtual exhibition. The activity would first explain to the visitor the tactics, such as consideration of color to communicate mood, which the curators and exhibition designers used to create the existing exhibit.

It would then prompt visitors to create a unique arrangement of the works based on their own interpretations by placing emphasis on something different. Once completed, the screen would save each individual visitor's arrangement by asking them to define that arrangement's interpretive focus, whether on a formal quality, time era, subject matter, or any other type of grouping they decide is appropriate. Visitors would be able to see the interpretive work of their fellow visitors by scanning through the archived virtual galleries. An activity of this style advocates visitor interpretation and gives them confidence in their ability to derive meaning from art rather than just appreciate it aesthetically. Interpretive devices like this would, if proven to be attractive to visitors, aid in their comprehension that works convey meaning and that meaning can be manipulated by the way the works are presented.

It is essential for art museums to enforce the idea that knowledge is a constructed, subjective interpretation. By expressing this openly, the museum shrugs off its front as a pedantic authority figure. Encouraging interpretation from the public's stance enables visitors to teach themselves rather than rely passively on the irrefutable word of exhibit creators. Instead, in an institution that places the education of its visitors as its top priority, museum staffs would function as guides to the construction of knowledge as a communal effort. Ultimately, showing the nature of selection and interpretation within the art museum through more extensive interpretive methods creates the vital connection between the art museum and the public; this connection enables visitors to stop passively looking and understand art.

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