

Object-Oriented Learning in Art Museums

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Roundtable Reports, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1982), 12-15.

When one thinks about the kinds of learning that can go on in museums, two characteristics unique to such institutions must be kept in mind. First, the museum's primary teaching tool is, in the words of Ada Louise Huxtable, "a superior set of stimuli." The primary aim of museum education must be to bring together people and objects ("superior stimuli") not people and information about objects. Programs which deal essentially in information about an artist's life or painting techniques are peripheral to the essential experience of the visitor—that of seeing, reacting to, and thinking about an art object. There is a strong and viable role for such peripheral information as an introduction to experiences with objects, an introduction directed toward enhancing the visitor's experience of the object and making it more intense and meaningful.

The second unique characteristic of museums is that in contrast to schools (the other major learning environment in our culture) museums are non-directive educators, and the visitor (potential learner) is there by choice. If visitors are to be pleased and satisfied, it is essential that they retain their right to their own experience of objects and that museums offer a variety of ways of introducing audiences to their collections. Programs should vary in length, in type (performing arts, lectures, labels, audio-visuals, etc.), and in levels of sophistication. All programs should, however, respect the visitor's personal experience.

Keeping in mind the importance of objects, and of the individual's right to his or her own experience of objects, the best goal for museum education programs is to help visitors to have *personally significant experiences with art objects*. The key words in this phrase are *significant* and *with art objects*. The museum's existence depends on the community's belief in the significance of the paintings, sculpture, ceramics, costumes, and other objects which it collects. Helping people have significant personal encounters with art objects is the most direct means of building such community support.

When people compare going to the zoo or a push-button science museum with going to an art museum, they often complain, "But what's there to *do* at the art museum?" This kind of question reflects a doubt that there is anything personally involving, or significant, that can occur when encountering art objects. It also reflects contemporary association of physical activity (doing something) with involvement. The involvement possible in encounters with art objects is of a contemplative nature. The activity possible in such encounters is of an interior nature involving, not physical, but mental and emotional activity.

To contemplate is, according to Webster, "To look at or view with continued attention; to observe thoughtfully; to think studiously, meditate, consider deliberately." Contemplation is the behavior we must encourage in museums. Indeed, it is the skill we need to teach museum

audiences. Teaching visitors to think in such a way about art objects can be divided into four general areas each representing a nearly separate mental-emotional operation which visitors can perform on an art object.

Operation I: Looking

In searching for active experiences that fully involve visitors, museums have often found an answer in hands-on and role playing programs. Such activities have their place in museums, but the most direct and most active experiences called for in museums is that of looking at objects. Of all the senses, looking is, perhaps, thought of as the most passive, and the one that requires the least effort. One can look and be quiet, self-contained and appear to be passive; but if one is really looking and responding to what one sees the experience is anything but passive. To paraphrase James J. Gibson, the perceptual psychologist, perception requires an observer who is fully awake and alert and does not wait passively for his sense to be stimulated. He explores available light, sound, odor, and contact, selecting what is meaningful to him. An individual, after practice, can orient more exactly, listen more carefully, touch more acutely, smell and taste more precisely and look more perceptively than he could before practice.

Teaching visitors to look and that looking itself is an important task to perform in a museum is fundamental if we hope to encourage visitors to have significant experiences with art objects. Several approaches can be taken when teaching visitors about visual perception. Certainly knowing what to look for (*e.g.*, formal elements or painting techniques) can help but there are two more basic approaches. We must encourage visitors to alter their behavior patterns on a museum visit—to slow down and to concentrate on a small part of a collection rather than try to “see it all.” Works of art are objects of a complex visual character. A thorough visual experience of such objects requires perceiving materials, techniques, subject matter, size, color, texture, and the multitude of relationships within each of these categories. This takes time. Comfortable seating can help to alter visitor behavior in this regard, but the individual visitor should be taught to control his or her own behavior by understanding the nature of visual perception.

Thus, we must teach basic facts about this sense experience, such as:

1. It takes a long time to see an art object.
2. You can lengthen the amount of time you spend looking at an art object by changing *focus*.
3. *Focus* requires eliminating information for the sake of getting information.
4. You can focus on subject matter, color, shape, line, brush strokes, shading, as well as the arrangement and details of these elements.
5. Testing your *visual memory* can help you to evaluate your visual perception.

6. No two people see exactly the same thing. There is always a subjective element in visual perception.
7. The possible reasons for individual differences in visual perception lie in physical, emotional, and experiential differences in people.
8. With practice, a person can learn to perceive more accurately and thoroughly.

Operation II: Reacting

One of the most generally accepted ideas about art works, particularly museum art works, is that they have the power to move viewers, to affect them, to stimulate a response or a reaction. In some important ways a viewer can benefit greatly from merely reacting to art objects, without knowing much about them. Works of art can be valued as complex stimulants of complex human responses. Works are by their purpose man's form of self-stimulation.

Reactions and responses that occur naturally as visitors look at objects vary from individual to individual; but they also vary in kind. Some reactions are mainly affective ("What a gloomy subject."); others mainly cognitive ("That looks as if it took a long time to make."); some responses are conscious, some unconscious; some are essentially freely made associations stimulated by seeing an object ("I remember seeing that when I was a little girl."); and others are more structured thoughts involving judgments ("I don't get that one."). All reactions are expressions of the individual's personality and past experience and as such are an important and inevitable part of a viewer's experience of art. To ignore reactions, even to fail to stress their importance, is to deny the validity of a viewer's personal and direct experience of art objects.

It can be argued that the *meaning* of an art work is intimately associated with the reactions the art work stimulates in the viewer. Philosopher John Hospers in *Meaning and Truth in the Arts* discusses that relationship as follows:

"What is the meaning of a work of art?" When the question is asked, I am not sure what the inquirer is asking for. . . . A person may state what the structure of a given work of art is, what effects it has on him, what effects it has on others, and even what he thinks its effects on others should be; but if he has stated these things and is still asked, "What does the work mean?" then one may well wonder what the questioner is asking for, what he wants, what information he desires in answer to his question. Until this is known, there is not possibility of answering it.

Under these circumstances it may not seem advisable to all to use the word “meaning” in speaking of works of art. . . However, if one wants to retain the word in speaking of the arts, I suggest that it be defined somewhat as follows: a work of art means to us whatever effects (not necessarily emotions) it evokes in us; a work which has no effects on us means nothing to us, and whatever effects it does evoke constitute its meaning for us. As we become more acquainted with the work of art, the effects it evokes in us gradually change, but in that case its meaning for us (as I have defined it) gradually changes too. The work of art is one term in the relationship, the evoked reactions the other; and the gradual changing of the latter as we hear or see the work again constitutes a gradual change in its meaning for us. Its meaning may or may not be describable in words—in most cases it is not, since few if any states of mind (particularly affective states) are describable to the satisfaction of the person who experiences them.

Some concepts to be covered in teaching audiences to react to art are as follows:

1. The extreme importance of honesty in reacting to art, of not adopting another person’s reactions because he or she is thought to be more sophisticated, of having and retaining our own reactions.
2. The difference between “Knowing about” an art object and reacting to it including the roles of information about art objects and of direct experiences of art objects.
3. The difference between objective and subjective statements in labels, brochures, books, and guided tours. Some didactic material mixes objective factual information about art with subjective, interpretive views of the author or speaker *without* distinguishing between them. When this happens readers or listeners often accept the author’s/speaker’s subjective view as being correct and better than their own view or reaction.
4. The possible reasons or sources within the viewer which may account for his or her particular reaction (“What is it about me that makes me feel this way?”) and the possible sources (colors, formal elements, subject, etc.) within the work (“What was it about the painting that made me feel that way?”)
5. The role of empathy and of associations in determining the “meaning” of a work of art, per Hospers.

Operation III: Thinking About Art In Cultural Context

When art works are thought of as forms of communication between a viewer and an artist, or between the viewer and the culture within which the object was made, the object alone seldom suffices to complete the act of communication. Information, often in vast quantities, must be added to the viewer’s experience if he or she is to obtain an accurate

message from the work of art. An act of communication occurs when a message is sent via gestures or painted images, and *that same message* is received by the viewer. If the viewer misreads a painting and assumes an intention or message from the artist which never existed, then the artist and viewer “are not communicating” in common parlance.

Being able to think about an art work in its complete cultural context—knowing its maker, his techniques, personality, and social milieu; knowing its owner(s) or patrons, their times and social milieu—is a complicated business, one that has been the basis of school tours, lecture series, and film programs in American museums for decades. Far too often the viewer’s direct experience of the object has been lost in this flood of information.

Keeping in mind that there is another conceptual framework within which one can legitimately think about art works and viewers—that of the object as primarily a form of stimulation, rather than communication—museums must consider carefully the role of information about art, and the methods they use to convey such information. The choice of kinds of documentary information is wide and includes biographical information about the artist, and information about how, when, and where the object was made. Other kinds of information also abound—knowledge of the object in comparison to other objects of its same time, or similar function, for example. Knowing, discovering, and conveying this information is the business of art historians, cultural anthropologists, archeologists, and others. In art museums one must define the possible roles of art objects in this informing process.

Given a choice of several sorts of cultural or personal artifacts—human bones, tools, or other useful equipment, and art works—one might consider the sorts of information that could be yielded by these various physical remains. What could one learn about an individual or a culture from its tools? What could one learn from art that one couldn’t learn from the other artifacts? In general it would seem that art works yield to informed speculation suggestions about the intangible aspects of other lives and other cultures. The evidence of art—music, dance, the visual arts—is always suggestive, seldom definitive, about the values, thoughts, tastes, feelings, and beliefs of its makers.

There are two broadly different methods by which viewers might receive information about art—by investigation and by inculcation. Here we have the choice of teaching audiences how to discover information themselves, or of telling them the information through verbal, media and written forms. Both methods are viable alternatives. In each of these, art objects can be of central importance or they can be of peripheral importance. If the major reason for having a program is the conveying of information, then the art object is not very important. But we can reverse that situation and develop informative programs which center on objects and which actually prove the importance of art objects as cultural artifacts. In order to do this, we must stress the kinds of information uniquely related to art objects (information about the intangibles) and we must select the information we choose

to convey, or to have our audiences discover, with an eye to its direct and close relationship to specific objects in our collections.

In order to explore the complex issue of seeing art in cultural context, audiences should explore the concepts below:

1. The variety and complexity of “contexts” which are connected with each art object—makers, owners, etc.
2. The values of, and differences between, inquiry and expository teaching methods.
3. The special role of art works as cultural artifacts, as opposed to tools, etc.
4. How to relate information directly to objects.
5. The effects of different kinds of information on viewers.
6. The difference between the illustrative and the instructive roles of art objects as cultural artifacts.
7. The nature of speculation and hypothesizing as opposed to fact finding.

Operation IV: Making Judgments

Webster says that a judgment is “a formal utterance of an authoritative opinion.” In this sense museums and art experts are and have long been involved in the making of judgments, many of which revolve around the process of choosing and acquiring works of art. From the public’s point of view, the act of hanging an object on a museum wall often means that the experts have announced their estimate of the worthiness of the object. Webster also defines judgment as “the process of forming an opinion by discerning and comparing, after inquiry and deliberation.” This also is a process which occupies an important role in a museum, a process which requires considerable skill and effort and which often rewards those who perform it with a sense of completing their “understanding” of an art object.

The making of judgments—deliberating, discerning, comparing, and inquiring followed by the forming of an opinion—is a skilled act from which museum audiences can obtain personal pleasure, refinement of their perception of objects, and greater awareness of themselves and their own values. Seldom are museum audiences directly asked to make judgments about art. In fact, one could argue that some steps are taken to dissuade viewers from judging as though the judgments had already been made once and for all and were to be simply shared by all viewers. Audiences will, nonetheless, make judgments while walking through museum galleries. The most commonly made judgment is “I like” or “I don’t like.” But that judgment is often made on the basis of a glance, or a brief encounter, and does not involve much discerning, deliberating, comparing, or inquiring. Both museums and audiences might need to struggle considerably in order to incorporate a judgment-making role for viewers into the average visitor’s experience in museum galleries. The museum’s

benefit would be identical to the viewer's—a greater level of viewer involvement with art objects and a more intense personal experience of such objects.

Concepts and processes to be covered when teaching audiences to make judgments are listed below:

1. The ways in which interpreting (“To judge in a personal or particular way”) and appreciating (“To estimate the worth of”) involve the making of judgments.
2. The kinds of visual, mental, and emotional activities that should be involved in making judgments—comparing, deliberating, discerning, inquiring.
3. The distinction between subjective value judgments (not just a preference but a preference that is felt or considered to be justified morally, by reasoning or aesthetic judgment) and objective judgments (based on objective criteria).
4. The enormous range of different kinds of value judgments that can be made, for example, deciding what you like, what you respect, what you are strongly moved by or what you believe should be preserved for future generations.
5. The wide range of different kinds of objective judgments that can be made, for example, deciding which object is in good condition, which one reflects the interior world of the artist's mind, which is most colorful, or most controlled or most spontaneous, the most original or the most traditional.
6. That one work of art may be valued highly by one set of objective or subjective criteria, but devalued by a different set of criteria. A concomitant concept is that a work of art may be highly valued by a particular set of objective criteria, but valued lowly by one's subjective criteria.
7. That judgments take time and that final judgments, subjective or objective, should be postponed until full exploration of the object can be accomplished.
8. That a seemingly simple value judgment such as liking or not liking an object is actually a remarkably complex act, one which reflects a complex of values, reactions, perceptions, and thoughts that make up one's individual value system.

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Author's Note: The approach to learning from museum objects described here is the product of ten years of museum teaching and conversation with fellow museum teachers: Carol B. Stapp, now Research Instructor, George Washington University, Museum Education Program; Marla K. Shoemaker and Julie Valenti, School Programs, and Tara Robinson, now Head of Installations, Philadelphia Museum of Art.