

# VISUAL PEDAGOGY AND THE ART MUSEUM LIBRARY

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You've just heard from three accomplished academic librarians who have presented exciting new approaches to learning and teaching, using, it goes without saying, cutting edge technology. So, as the sole museum practitioner on the panel, let me first set the museum stage for you as a contrast to the academic stage, beginning with the digital divide between academic and museum libraries. Museum libraries are different.

Museums invest their techno-dollars in collections digitization projects (one rationale being to feed the academic demand for images), in building website departments, in exhibitions technology (such as wireless broadcasts dialled into from the visitor's cellphone, replacing the headphones and audio guides of old) and in the development of online educational resources. They are investing in partnerships such as the "Visualizing Cultures Project" at MIT (<http://visualizingcultures.mit.edu>), which "exploits virtual technology to open new avenues of public education and global historical and cultural understanding" and is "a nexus between the institutions that house image collections and the scholars who would like to use them for research purposes." As museums adopt new technology to disseminate their collections farther and wider than they ever thought possible, what of their libraries? In reality, few art museum libraries have wireless reading rooms, interactive reference desks or online distance learning programs, internet kiosks or podcasting – or any one of the features that are taken for granted in academic libraries and on which their pedagogical programs rely.

In museum libraries, life is different. Here, everything begins with the work of art or, in museum-speak, the object. For a museum librarian, the phrase "visual pedagogy" doesn't immediately ring any bells. 'Visual' is easy -- art museums are all about the visual, from destination buildings designed by star architects, to breath-takingly beautiful exhibitions in carefully-designed physical and even sound environments – but 'pedagogy' less so. As

librarians, our professional lives, like those of curators, revolve around the objects. By which I mean, and this is an important distinction, around the physical art object, not its digital image or some other surrogate.

In the museum environment, pedagogy – that is, the social production of meaning or, in more traditional terms, the study of the methods and activities of teaching – is most clearly identified with the educator (who works with schools and teachers) or the interpretive planner (who writes the text for the introductory wall panels and extended labels that support an exhibition's narrative arc), not with the librarian or perhaps even the curator. At the same time, *visual* pedagogy, in terms of the whole museum, is a coat of many colours. It might be instruction in the formal analysis of the work of art. Curators, of course, are trained analysts – but it's a stretch to imagine this being of interest to the average visitor, or the curator as instructor to the public. It can also teach methods to de-code the meaning and iconography of art objects (although, in terms of user instruction, museum librarians assume that the academic environment is carrying this particular ball). Or, it consists of teaching that incorporates images of art works as a stimulus to formal learning in any other subject field. Traditionally, museum educators have taken this approach to create teaching guides for, let's say, high school history teachers. Or, finally, it is a programme that introduces children to art in the context of play.

Education is, of course, a pillar of the mission statement or charter of every public art museum. This is not, though, education in the form of students, classrooms, teachers and librarians as instructors of visual pedagogy. It is more rooted in the founding museum conceit of Art as a tool for educational uplift, as defined by the elite for the non-elite, and the Art Museum as a civilizing influence on society at large. After a phase in mid-20<sup>th</sup> c. and later as a provider of popular entertainment, as in the ubiquitous blockbuster exhibition, the art museum has begun to come full circle. Today, it sees itself as a socially-relevant facilitator of the personal, transformative experience – which could be taken, I suppose, as a contemporary re-statement of the Victorian founding principle. There's a twist, though: museums also now

identify their offerings as, and overtly design them to be, a stimulus to education and life-long learning.

Art museum visitors no longer find themselves “standing on the conveyor belt of history” (to borrow a phrase from Nicholas Serota, Director of Tate Britain, to describe galleries installed according to the old chronological or national canons). Instead, in a traditional gallery of Old Masters, they might well encounter a photo-based intervention by Thomas Struth, using museum visiting and art viewing as subject matter so as to comment on the viewer’s motivations. Struth’s monumental museum photographs raise questions about the nature of the museum experience – is watching other people looking at art (as depicted in the photograph) more interesting than looking at art oneself? Or, why does one art object resonate more than the one beside it? Or even, what’s with this immense photograph on the wall, where’s the real thing -- the Rembrandts, the Rubens’, the Poussins? What is the real thing – photograph, painting, both?

Today, curators no longer install galleries solely for aesthetic or art history didactic goals. Instead, they cut across their museum’s holdings to create installations, including periods and media outside of their immediate expertise to stimulate new readings of the collection as a whole. In layman’s terms, curators mix things up so that the visitor is encouraged to take a fresh look at familiar objects. Museum educators, too, have a new role as creators of narrative: a gallery installation is no longer just a space containing art but a place where the visitor is encouraged to have a personal experience with art, where the installation is intended to stimulate responses such as recognition based on the visitor’s own life passages. Both gallery installations and exhibitions now routinely feature *strategic* display of the art object, combining its selection with deliberate placement in proximity to other objects, both aesthetic and utilitarian; these function not as props, but as agents that non-verbally explain and illuminate the meaning of the central art object.

This is visual pedagogy, the art museum way. It is one that endeavours to teach the visitor to look, and to learn by looking, through the creation of

stimulating visual environments. Art museum educators, often trained teachers rather than art historians, are now integral to the staffs of art museums around the world. By challenging the value and quality of learning that can take place when objects are de-contextualized, that is, exhibited with no reference to the environments for which they were originally made, educators are enabling curators to re-think their traditional approaches to installing their galleries. Indicative of the strength of this way of exhibiting, both visitor research and the theory of art education in the museum are rapidly growing subsets of museological literature.

As this sea change has slowly gained traction in art museums over the last 20 years, what of the library? It seems that the art museum library has continued to be defined by its documentary proximity to the art object. Service to museum professional staff and scholars, its core constituency, was and is its fundamental *raison d'être*, even though many offer public access. Library programs, including reader instruction and access policies, continue to be guided by the dual priorities of art object and scholar. Reader services directed to museum research staff – a group that includes collections and exhibitions curators, conservators and educators – are tailored to individual needs or to the larger requirements of an exhibition, for example, where a reference librarian or an archivist may be heavily involved for the duration. Instruction and library orientations are customized to an individual, or a group with the same needs, such as gallery guides. This individualized approach, unimaginable in an academic setting, is necessitated by several factors: the variable levels of education that institutional readers bring, from well-known scholars to volunteers learning how to use the library for the first time; the idiosyncratic personality of most museum library collections and the role of the librarian as indispensable guide to every relevant nook and cranny; the internal culture of the museum which values highly focussed art expertise and deep knowledge of museum collections – attributes earned through typically long careers in one museum and working relationships built up over years; and, not least, a sense of entitlement on the part of museum professional staff that harks back to earlier times and still flourishes. If visual pedagogy in the

library implies group instruction in a structured learning environment, it's an uncomfortable fit in museums.

Museum librarians do see the need for, and are enthusiastic about, new technologies that will support their core mission, new and improved methods of reader instruction or different approaches to orientation, and the participation of librarians and archivists in the institutional events that define visual pedagogy in museums. There are librarians who have taken on the role of tech missionary, demonstrating for curators the potential of Web 2.0 applications for collaborative research with colleagues elsewhere; it's a natural fit, given the international web of interests that grows from museum collections with similar object concentrations on the one hand, and the capacity of librarians to be up-to-date on information technology on the other. Other librarians have taken to the airwaves, appearing on local TV to talk about art research for the private collector and other topics. With educators having paved the way, librarians and archivists are able to act as curators for rare books and special collections, materials that have enormous exhibition potential as aids to understanding the works of art on display. In some art museums, the library may have dedicated public space where it can exhibit treasures from its collections, even borrowing from the art collections to create engaging displays as pedagogical in purpose as any classroom.

To come full circle, museum libraries are different – but not lacking.

I was mindful, when writing this paper, of the definition of a pedagogue as a teacher who gives too much attention to formal rules and is thus not interesting, and hope that my talk has been at least somewhat stimulating.

In closing, I'd like to acknowledge Linda Seckelson's lucid discussion of museum reference services in that number one bestseller, [Art museum libraries and librarianship](#) (see reading list). Also, the educators of the Art Gallery of Ontario who have, for more almost 20 years, been in the vanguard of their discipline; it hasn't always been a meeting of minds, but they have assuredly challenged me to look at library collections and information services

in new ways. And thank you to museum colleagues across the continent who took time to speak with me in a series of phone conversations -- you know who you are. Your stimulating ideas and occasional brave admission that you too were baffled by the term, visual pedagogy, helped to keep this paper's feet on the ground.