

The Isaac Sack Gallery

The Isaac Sack Gallery in the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College seems like any other American Art gallery at first. It houses paintings, sculptures, and artifacts from the colonial era all the way until the middle of the 20th Century. Visitors stroll up to the art, look at it for a few seconds (some even read the informational plaques), and then move on. Strangely, however, the viewers do not (as in some museums) quickly walk through the gallery, giving only a fleeting glance at the paintings. They ponder, pause, to think about the paintings. Something must be causing them to do this, but what? Although in an art museum, it would seem intuitive that the artwork itself is what engages the viewer, the design of the exhibit as a space has more of an effect on the interaction between the viewer and the art. By examining how the exhibition emphasizes the art it holds, we can better understand how viewers experience art and what that means for the designs of galleries.

Light

Although not immediately noticeable, the paintings on the walls are brightly lit by overhead spotlights, literally illuminating the main focus of the gallery. David Dernie describes lighting as “a vital part in the visitor’s experience...[it] affects the way in which an exhibition structure is perceived, the effectiveness with which it communicates, the rendering of form and colour and the legibility of graphics” (Dernie 136). How a space is lit, Dernie argues, corresponds directly with how a viewer may interact with a painting or sculpture. The spotlights in the Hood museum, mounted on the tall ceilings as to be out of the way of the viewer, cast their light directly onto the paintings and objects on display. This focuses the viewer’s attention, as it creates a surface that is both brightly lit and brightly colored. The intense light also allows encourages viewers to take in the details of an image instead of a general idea of the subject of the image, allowing viewers to analyze the painting more rather than just breezing by quickly.

This effect is most clearly noticeable in the bust at the center of the larger open space to the right of the entrance to the gallery. Lights shine from all around the bust, allowing all sides of the bust to be fully illuminated. This causes viewers to examine the entirety of the sculpture. They will find the wings on the back of the head of the bust strange, and will ask questions about why they are there. They will walk back around to the front and read the plaque, wondering if the answer to their question is there. Viewers, simply because of the extra light and focus on the sculpture, were made to interact with it, to think about it. Without the light, viewers might not have noticed the peculiarities of the bust, and would have moved on without fully “experiencing” it, so to speak.

Light is also used in the gallery to bring out certain aspects of the artifacts displayed. On the other side of the center structure of the gallery, there is a vase in a glass case. The light from the spotlights points down in the general direction of the vase just like the other artifacts and paintings in the gallery. However, the glass case focuses the light more carefully, drawing special attention to the flower near the top of the vase. The less important, less decorated parts of the vase are deemphasized by being cast in shadow. While the lighting of the bust encouraged viewers to interact with all sides of the sculpture, the lighting on the vase emphasizes a one-sided

interaction between the viewer and the art, an interaction that would still occur regardless of the artwork displayed in the case.

In a more general sense, downward-pointing spotlights create layers of light and dark that direct viewers where to look. Because all of the paintings are placed at a general eye level (as is convention in most art museums), there is a band of light that goes across all of the walls in the gallery, creating a smooth line for the viewer's eyes to follow. The informational plaques of the paintings are also on the same level, meaning that the viewer does not have to break his or her interaction with the line of paintings. Without this break of flow, viewers are encouraged to provide their own interpretations of paintings as they read through the interpretations provided by the museum. The viewer is further encouraged to focus on the artwork through the contrast of the lit paintings and the darkness of the ceiling area, which also deemphasizes the physical spotlights. While the lighting of the gallery emphasizes the actual art, it also very carefully crafts how viewers interact differently with different paintings and artifacts. It is not the subject matter or "beauty" of the paintings themselves that causes viewers to experience them differently, but rather how they are highlighted by the surrounding visual cues.

Contrast

The Isaac Sack Gallery uses different types of contrast to its full advantage to create a sense of movement throughout the room and emphasize certain features of its collection. The nature of the colors and the arrangement of the paintings provide multiple different types of contrast. David Dornie views coloristic contrast as being a key element of creating a viewing experience for a museum-goer (Dornie 160), a technique used extensively in this gallery. The two colors adorning the walls, dark blue and tan-yellow, contrast innately. In color theory, these two colors are complementary, meaning that when juxtaposed, they pop. Movement is created through this contrast because of the clear path that the dark blue coloring follows. The side of the central structure facing the entrance is blue, which leads to either of the walls flanking the entryway. The view is then toward the back wall of the room, which then leads back to the front. A similar route is created through the yellow, leading from one side wall around the back of the central structure to the other side wall. This mirrors the two-lap viewing route that is encouraged by the structure of the gallery.

The gallery also makes use of pictorial contrast to keep viewers interested in the art. The paintings on the yellow walls consist almost exclusively of wide-view landscapes, and the paintings on the blue walls, while more varied, are generally cozier portraits or genre paintings. Combined with the movement of the viewer through the room, the artwork provides a varied (but patterned) order that groups similar paintings together without boring the viewer with too many at once. The viewer is thus encouraged to spend more time with the paintings, thinking about how groups of paintings are similar or different. Because of how contrasting colors and subject matters are used, the viewing experience is shaped to create a natural movement for the viewer and allows for a more in-depth view of the art displays. If the contrast were not present, the viewers would have likely not engaged as deeply with the paintings, regardless of the artistic prowess of the painter.

Non-Visual

While visual techniques do play an important role in shaping the viewer experience, non-visual cues also contribute irrereplaceably to the interaction between the viewer and the gallery. The placement of the structure in the center of the gallery serves dual purposes, as a way to direct viewers down a path and as a space for extra displays. Immediately after entering the gallery, viewers are forced to choose between turning left or right and following a relatively narrow path around the gallery. This allows for visual aspects of the gallery to work as intended, shaping how the viewer follows the carefully-designed patterns and influencing the kind of experience a viewer will get from walking through the gallery.

The second function that the central structure serves is as a space for more art to be displayed. While this seems like an unimportant design feature, it still directs the viewing experience by encouraging visitors to walk around the gallery twice, once to observe the paintings on the outside walls and once to observe the artwork on the central structure. Taking two laps around the gallery also encourages viewers to slow down, knowing that a quick and easy look around the gallery is not possible. As techniques for affecting the interaction between viewers and the gallery, the main purpose of this structural feature is to set up the visual techniques as a sort of auxiliary form of experience-shaping.

In addition to these more obvious non-visual features of the gallery, there are also minor features that have a small contribution to a viewer's overall experience of the space. The room, due to its high ceilings and sharp corners, transmits echoes very well throughout the entire space. Whispers can be heard across the gallery, causing visitors to feel self-conscious when speaking too loudly. This creates a quiet, contemplative atmosphere in the room, which can lead to viewers spending more time looking closely at artwork. The size of the space also affects how viewers interact with the art. The room is relatively small and the center structure is very large, creating walkways that are relatively crowded (in contrast to large public museums that are very open and airy). This forces visitors to be closer to the paintings and artifacts, encouraging more intensive observation and interaction with the art, especially in corners where visual contrast is most prominently used to shape the viewing experience. Despite these being minor design choices (or consequences), together they have a very large influence on how a viewer perceives the gallery independent of the collection displayed in it.

Viewer Experience

The combination of visual elements (lighting and contrast) and non-visual elements (construction and atmosphere) creates a space in which the techniques of presenting the gallery have more of an impact on the viewing experience than the contents of the gallery. If one or more of the design elements of the gallery had been changed, the entire experience would have been radically altered. If one of the paintings had been changed, though, the experience would have mostly been the same. Through the acknowledgement of the importance of gallery design in creating an experience for a visitor, we can better characterize that experience.

It turns out that the interactions that a visitor experiences constitute not just a viewing experience, but a total sensory experience. The non-visual design elements of a space make up a

substantial part of the experience of the gallery, and even the barely noticeable parts of the space such as the smell of the air or the humidity level (and how it feels on the skin) influence how we perceive exhibits. To design exhibits, then, we must strive to appeal to all of the senses in a cohesive way that complements and ultimately draws attention to the artwork on the walls.