

**Culture of Museums, Archives and Libraries**  
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**Comparative Observational Studies:  
Two Upper East Side Museums**

This paper will present the results of user studies conducted in the permanent collections at two Manhattan cultural institutions – the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Jewish Museum. Both studies are based on a single visit to the institution lasting approximately 45 minutes to an hour. There were several important differences between the two studies which will necessarily impact the possibilities of comparing the results, though there are still some general comparisons and conclusions that can be reached regarding the organization and presentation of exhibits at these museums and the ways in which visitors interact with these exhibits.

The Metropolitan Museum was founded in 1870 and moved into its current building on the Upper East Side of Manhattan at 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 82<sup>nd</sup> St. in 1880. The Met collects works of art from all periods of time – from the ancient to the contemporary – and all locations. Its collection currently consists of around 2 million items. (Brief History) The visitor study was conducted on Tuesday, February 3 from approximately 3:30 until 4:20 in the afternoon. The location chosen for the study was gallery 14a in the European Paintings wing on the second floor of the museum, which houses several paintings by the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer along with other works of the Dutch Renaissance period. This location was chosen specifically for the presence of the Vermeers. Vermeer's work stands out today due to the limited number of extant pieces – 35 in the world, 13 in the United States – and due to the media attention given to it via Tracy Chevalier's novel *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* and the subsequent feature film adaptation.<sup>1</sup> (Essential Vermeer) A particular interest of this study was the extent to which visitors singled out the Vermeers for greater attention.

The second institution, the Jewish Museum, was founded in 1904 and has, since 1947, been located a short distance from the Met at 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 92<sup>nd</sup> St. Its collection of 26,000 items consists of both art and historical objects related to the Jewish experience throughout history. The visitor study was conducted on Sunday, February 8 from 3:25 to 4:20 in the afternoon in the museum's permanent historical exhibition, titled *Culture and Continuity: The Jewish Journey*. The exhibit is located on the third and fourth floors of the museum and encompasses about a dozen separate rooms.

At the Met, the observer spent most of the time positioned on a bench in gallery 14a, occasionally walking around the room or stepping into an adjacent gallery. The museum seemed to be fairly quiet during the time the study was taking place. Around 80 people stepped into the gallery during that period, with the number of visitors in the room at any one time ranging between zero and six or seven. While this does not necessarily seem like a small number of visitors, the galleries definitely are built to contain many more people, and the large halls of the museum certainly felt underpopulated. This could be attributed to a number of factors – the visit was conducted on a Tuesday, thus eliminating

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<sup>1</sup> And to a much lesser extent, Jon Jost's independent film *All the Vermeers in the New York*.

potential visitors who were at work, the visit was conducted fairly close to closing time (5:30), and the visit was conducted in the middle of a large snow storm.

Room 14a is located fairly deep into the European Paintings wing, meaning that the visitor has to walk through a number of other rooms to reach it. It has two doors which are positioned directly across from each other on the east and west walls. These walls have a number of smaller paintings on them while the north and south walls each have three larger paintings. At the time of the observation, three Vermeer paintings were hanging on the north wall with a fourth, smaller work, hanging on the west wall directly next to the other three.<sup>2</sup> A fifth Vermeer is hanging in the neighboring room 14. There was also a small sign on the wall next to one of the Vermeers ("Allegory of the Catholic Faith") on which was printed a photo of another Vermeer ("Study of a Young Woman") which had been moved to a recently-ended temporary exhibition celebrating the museum's acquisitions during the tenure of former Director Philippe de Montebello.

Due to the positioning of the room and the doors, about 30-35 of the people who entered the gallery simply walked straight through without stopping, essentially using the room as a hallway. Visitors who actually stopped would walk towards either the north or south wall; those who went south would generally move quickly between the paintings, glancing at the painting first, then the information card, spending approximately 5-10 seconds per painting. Only one visitor was observed to spend significantly more time with a non-Vermeer work, specifically a young woman who spent about five minutes in front of a large crucifixion painting on the south wall. Many, though not all, of the visitors who went to the north wall spent significantly longer with the paintings – the Vermeers. About 10-15 visitors were observed to spend at least thirty seconds with each painting, sometimes more. One incident in particular stands out: two men entered the room, one middle-aged, the other perhaps 20 years old, they appeared to be father and son. The father immediately drew his son's attention to the Vermeers, pointing out each one in turn. After about 5 minutes of examining the Vermeers, the father began to leave the gallery, telling his son who had stopped to look at other non-Vermeer paintings, "Let's move along."

At the Jewish Museum, the rooms in the permanent exhibition are laid out in a roughly chronological path, covering the span of Jewish history. The exhibit begins on the fourth floor, which goes from antiquity up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and continues on the third floor, which goes to the present day. The items on display are mostly historical artifacts, occasionally interspersed with artworks that depict the time period in question. The observer moved through the exhibition from beginning to end, taking note of other visitors along the way. Approximately 30 other visitors were observed in the exhibition during the time of the observation. From the lobby, the museum seemed to be much more crowded – it was a Sunday afternoon, a prime museum-going time – but most of the museum patrons appeared to have skipped the permanent exhibition in favor of a temporary exhibit: *Marc Chagall and the Artists of the Russian Jewish Theater*.

Visitors seemed to travel through the galleries in a slow and studious manner, especially in the early rooms. The most common practice seemed to be spending around 30 seconds with each item or group of items, looking back and forth between the item and the informational sign. There were some visitors, particularly those in larger groups with

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<sup>2</sup> The smaller piece is actually not owned by the Met, but is on loan from a mysterious private collector who recently purchased it from hotel magnate Steve Wynn. (Essential Vermeer)

children who moved through the exhibits much faster, often not even stopping to look at any items.

The Jewish Museum exhibition, unlike the Met, included a number of moving image and audio elements. Only one of these appeared on the fourth floor – a video installation entitled "The Interactive Talmud," in which visitors can use a touch-screen monitor to select their positions on various moral dilemmas. Upon choosing an option, a low-resolution video clip of a Jewish scholar will play on the monitor explaining that particular point of view. In the five minutes spent in that room, two visitors, a mother and her approximately 12-year-old child, sat down at the monitor and worked through several of the on-screen scenarios. On the third floor, there were a number of video screens hanging on the walls which presented short videos about Jewish traditions such as reading from the Torah. Audio was provided by wall-mounted speakers. As no seating was provided, visitors tended to glance at the video and move on. The exception was a video towards the end of the exhibit about the founding of Israel. Here, three short rows of bench seating were provided, and about 4-5 people were sitting and watching. In "New Directions Videos," another video installation, five screens, covering the entirety of one wall, showed various news and documentary clips.

In addition to these permanently installed video pieces, there was a temporary audio installation woven throughout the exhibit. Entitled "The Sound of Light," it was created by Julianne Swartz and consists of a number of radio transmitters placed around the two floors, the signals from which are picked up on glowing slug-shaped receivers that can be carried around by visitors. The signal does not directly relate to the exhibit, but rather is a more abstract mix of music, sounds, and voices. The receivers are passed out at the entrance to the exhibit and are completely optional. In fact, only 4 other visitors were observed with the receivers. Additionally, the museum staffer at the exhibit entrance takes great care to point out that the receiver is not a regular audio guide, no doubt responding to the confusions of earlier patrons. More traditional audio guides are offered, as at the Met, but they seemed to be used only sporadically in both museums; perhaps 10% of visitors were seen to be using them.

The two museums definitely appeared to have different visitor bases, at least during the times when observed. At the Met, the majority of the visitors were couples, generally in the 20-45 year-old age group. A large amount, perhaps as many as half, of the visitors observed were tourists, although this could only be verified when the observer heard the visitors speak. In contrast, the Jewish Museum visitors were more likely to be older adults – in the 60+ year-old age group – or family groups – frequently a couple and their young child or children. There were some tourists, but not in the proportions seen at the Met. At least some of this contrast is certainly due to the different times that the museums were visited, with weekends lending themselves more to locals and families and weekdays more to tourists.

One major difference between the user experiences at the two museums was the differing camera policies. At the Met, non-flash photography is allowed in the European Paintings wing, although it is not in certain other areas of the museum, generally special exhibitions. Visitors frequently stopped to take pictures of the Vermeers. One young couple took turns taking pictures of each other with the Vermeers. Some people seemed to be shooting video on small hand-held camcorders – this practice is forbidden according to the Met's website, but there was no signage related to this and guards did not stop these

visitors. At the Jewish Museum, no photography is permitted in any areas. Neither museum has posted cell phone policies in the observed areas, although the Met states on its website that cell phone use is not allowed in areas outside the main hall. No visitors were seen using cell phones at either museum.

The guards at the Met seemed to be quite knowledgeable about the art on display. There were a number of guards on duty in the European Paintings wing; when asked, they were all able to direct the observer to the Vermeers. When engaged in conversation, a guard stationed in room 14a commented on the Met's large collection of Vermeers in relation to the artist's overall body of work and said that visitors often ask him about these works. As this conversation was taking place, a visitor actually came up and asked how many Vermeers are at the Met; it was unclear if this question was unprompted or if the man had overheard the conversation and decided to ask. The guards at the Jewish Museum seemed helpful but less knowledgeable about the objects on display. When asked, they were able to give directions to specific areas of the exhibit.

Both museums have cafés and gift shops on the premises – several of each in the case of the Met, although in neither museum are they directly connected with the areas being observed. In the Met, the closest gift shop is the large museum store, an entrance to which is located outside the European Paintings wing, with the closest café being in that same area. In the Jewish Museum, the gift shop is on the ground level and the café is in the basement, both at some remove from the permanent exhibition, but much closer to the more popular Chagall exhibit.

In conclusion, despite some differing methodologies, these observations can offer some interesting points of comparison and contrast between the two museums. The areas visited at both museums are in the permanent collections, rather than being part of a special exhibition. As a result, they are perhaps less well attended than other areas of the museums – this effect was clearly seen by looking at the Chagall exhibit in the Jewish Museum. The Jewish Museum has also added audiovisual and interactive elements to its exhibit in a way that the Met has not. Speculation might suggest that the Jewish Museum feels the need to draw in visitors with flashy technology, while the Met can rely on its art to sell itself, particularly acknowledged masterpieces like the Vermeers. Finally, thinking again about the Vermeers, the visitors to the Met tended to distribute their time unevenly, spending much more time with the Vermeers than with other works, while at the Jewish Museum, the visitors tended to spend an equal amount of time with each item. The suggestion here is that the Met visitors, and perhaps the curators as well, view the galleries as a collection of individual artworks, some more notable than others, where the Jewish Museum exhibit is created and viewed as a holistic experience, where each item is merely a part of the overall story being told.

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