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Observations

An Observational Study:
Comparing the Metropolitan Museum and the Morgan Library & Museum

Museums, archives, and libraries attract different types of people for different reasons. However, there are a lot of factors that contribute to the types and amounts of patrons an institution might receive. The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Morgan Library & Museum are two different institutions in terms of size and collection. Observations were conducted at each place in both special exhibits and permanent collections with the duration of each visit being approximately two to three hours long. The observations made at each place helps establish who visits certain institutions and how displays dictate behavior.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art is one of the largest collections in the world. Founded in 1870, the mission of the museum, according to the Met's website, is "to collect, preserve, study, exhibit, and stimulate appreciation for and advance knowledge of works of art that collectively represent the broadest spectrum of human achievement at the highest level of quality, all in the service of the public and in accordance with the highest professional standards¹. The museum is known for its widespread art collection, particularly its medieval art collection and 19th century European art collection. The museum is comprised of more than two million works of art spanning over 5,000 years across the world². Among its permanent

¹ "About the Met." Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accessed Online February 17, 2010.

<<http://www.metmuseum.org/about/>>

² Ibid.

collections, there are paintings, sculptures, decorative arts, and period rooms, as well as other artifacts. They also have several special exhibits at any given time. The museum is normally closed on Mondays, however, on certain Monday holidays, such as Memorial Day and President's Day, the museum is open from 9:30 am to 5:30pm. One unique factor that may have played a role in what was observed is my visit took place during the afternoon on Monday, February 15—President's Day. My observations were conducted in two areas of the museum. The first part of my observations took place in a current exhibit entitled "Drawings of Bronzino," while the second part of the observation took place in the 19th and early 20th century European Paintings gallery.

The Bronzino exhibit is a popular attraction highlighting the work of Italian artist Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572) who was commissioned to do several works for the Duke Cosimo I de' Medici and his wife the Duchess Eleonora di Toledo. The exhibit features sixty of his drawings and earlier sketches of his famous works that have never been on public display. Located on the second floor of the museum, the exhibit was placed near the 19th and early 20th century European paintings. The exhibition space is set up in three open rooms, with two ways of entering, as the middle room has a rope in front of its entrance. However, though the room on the left is marked as "Enter" and the room on the right marked as "Exit," visitors would enter through both doorways. There was one guard who mainly stood outside looking into each room. Occasionally, he would remind patrons that no photography in the exhibit was allowed. Outside of the exhibit was a small gift shop stand that featured an accompanying guide to the exhibit as well as other merchandise sold throughout the museum.

The first two rooms displayed the drawings and sketches both on the wall as well as in glass stands in the middle of the room. The last room contained two benches in the middle of the

room, while the art was displayed on the wall. The exhibit was quite popular as there were never less than fifteen people in each of the rooms. The visitors were predominately older with the majority ranging from middle age to senior citizens. However, there was a fair amount of younger patrons, including a few children. There also seemed to be slightly more women, particularly of the senior citizens. Most people were there in groups of friends or families, as well as many couples. There were also a few individuals. In terms of demographics, the visitors appeared to be predominately middle-class and Caucasian. However, there were many difference ethnic groups and nationalities present. At least twenty-five percent of the visitors used audio guides, and of those they were usually older and on their own. In the last room, most of the visitors stood as they looked at the art; however, many also sat on the bench. There were also a few people, mainly children, sitting on the floor sketching. Some of the younger visitors were not there to really see the exhibit, and instead complained of it being too warm and played on their cell phones. Most patrons, who were in groups or couples, would look at a piece and then talk about it or point something out. One interesting conversation that was overheard during an observation from sitting on a bench was from two elderly women also sitting on the bench in the last room, discussing the technology that allows scientists to look under the paintings. Their discussion started with the work, but then it quickly went to discussing European cities and their trips to those cities, lastly to cruises, specifically the “Queen Mary,” and other trips. While they stayed in one spot for over twenty minutes, most people were walking through and spending only a few minutes on each piece, before moving on.

The observations made from the permanent collection contrast somewhat significantly with the observations from the special exhibit. Continuing on the second floor to the nearby permanent collection of the 19th and early 20th European Paintings and Sculpture. The major

differences that are seen right away is that area of the collection is larger and brighter. The Bronzino exhibit was dimly lit and more intimate. The permanent collection was more spread out and contained much more open space. Also, the noise level was significantly louder with more people talking, including a tour guide giving a lecture on a Renoir painting and Impressionism to a group of people. Also, there were several guards walking around, but they mostly looked bored. One guard was writing in a notebook, while another one was slouching against the wall. Another noticeable difference in this part of the museum was the use of photography. Many people were taking pictures and using video cameras. There was also a much younger demographic of visitors. Many of the children spent the time trying to guess the artists with their parents, while others who were bored, either sat down or were begging their parents to go to the café.

Visibly, the special exhibits are drastically different than the permanent collection. Also, in another part of the museum's collection, for example the American Wing's architecture, there are interactive screens that people can use to learn more about the objects that they are seeing. Audio guides are used throughout the Met, yet roughly only a third of patrons seemed to be using them. There was a wide age range from children to senior citizens throughout the museum, and families were particularly present. The museum also attracted many out of town and foreign visitors. Overall, the Metropolitan Museum of Art is an enormous museum that attracts a large number of visitors.

The Morgan Library and Museum is significantly different than the Met in size and appearance. Located on Madison Avenue and 36th street, the library was built in 1906 as the private library of J.P. Morgan. After the financier's death, it was later turned into a public institution in 1924. The museum was added on later to allow for several exhibitions. The

library, while the rooms are regarded in nature as a museum, the collection is still in use during the week as research materials. According to the Morgan's website, the mission of "the Morgan Library & Museum is to preserve, build, study, present, and interpret a collection of extraordinary quality, in order to stimulate enjoyment, excite the imagination, advance learning, and nurture creativity³." It regards itself as a global institution focused on the European and American traditions, and looks to celebrate "creativity and the imagination, with the conviction that meaningful engagement with literature, music, history, and art enriches lives, opens minds, and deepens understanding⁴." Among its collections are manuscripts, rare books, music, drawings, and ancient and other works of art, including three copies of the Gutenberg bible. The observations of this institution were conducted on a Saturday afternoon. The majority of my observation was conducted on the Morgan's current exhibit "A Woman's Wit: Jane Austen's Life and Legacy."

For a small museum, it had a high attendance, even for a Saturday. However, with the current resurgence of Jane Austen in popular culture, particularly with recent film and television adaptations and new books on Austen, as well as adaptations of her works, it is no wonder that this exhibit was popular. The exhibition gallery was a large room located on the second floor. Paintings, quotes, and text, as well as some encased letters were on the walls, while in the center of the room were display cases and glass stands containing books from Austen's time as well as her own collection, to various early editions of her books to letters written by Austen. There was one guard present who looked rather bored, and would occasionally approach people to tell them not to lean on the glass or to wear their coats. During the visit, a different guard switched with

³ "About the Morgan." The Morgan Library & Museum. Accessed on February 20, 2010. <<http://www.themorgan.org/about/mission.asp>>

⁴ Ibid.

previous guard. At times, some people were looking at their cell phones, and one woman was standing by the door while she was on her cell phone. There were people of all ages; however the majority were middle-aged women, possibly upper middle-class. Many people were there as families, couples, and groups of friends; however, there were a few people there by themselves. There were a few children, though some of them sat on the floor looking bored. Though there was a large amount of people in the exhibit, it was very quiet, with people only seldom whispering. Occasionally people would discuss what they were reading. For instance, a group of friends were debating the chronology of Austen's life, while a daughter commented to her father in regards to the Austen chronology, "wow, she really cranked out those novels." Another example of overheard comments was a couple's discussion of a letter written with backwards spelling by Austen. The husband commented on beautiful handwriting, while the wife pointed out different words and amount of time it must have taken to write it backwards. Most people seemed to comment on the letters and how they were written, while others discussed Austen and her life.

There was no specific order that people had to go in; however, many started by the main entrance where a chronology was posted and then went along the walls first, while others just walked about the room. One elderly woman would go to different cases and write down quotes and information. While the space was mostly open, in the back right corner there was a sectioned cornered off that was displaying a 16 minute film, "The Divine Jane: Reflections on Austen," created for the exhibit. The documentary depicts six people, (famous authors, scholars, and actors), examining the Morgan's collection of Austen's letters and manuscripts, and having them comment on the impact and legacy of Austen's work. The film also includes quotes about Austen from famous writers such as Virginia Wolf and Alfred Lord Tennyson, as well as quotes

from Austen. The interesting thing about the film is not only is played on loop in the exhibit, but it also available to view on the first floor of the museum as well as online. There were two benches in front of the screen in which people sat and watched the film, while others leaned against the wall to watch the films.

While the Austen exhibit was crowded, other parts of the building were not. Morgan's library and study were on view with a guard in each of the two rooms. Though patrons could walk into the library and the study, there were ropes and "do not touch" signs to deter visitors from harming the objects. There were also cameras visible in the library. This part of the museum, which is older, is more traditional and grandeur, while the main entrance and second floor gallery is much more modern and simplistic. On the main floor there are six computers for visitors to find more information, as well as sign up for the Morgan mailing list. There is also a reading and research room.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Morgan Library & Museum are different visually and collection-wise, but also have some similarities. The Met is well known and established. It's older and has a significantly larger collection, then the Morgan. Though the Morgan is smaller, it definitely feels prestigious. People read more information that was available than at the Met, where most people looked at the objects and art, while only glancing or occasionally reading the information provided. This result is due perhaps to the overwhelming amount of items and information available. People seemed to come to the Morgan specifically for the Austen exhibit, while the people seemed to go to the Met just to experience the museum, although some did seem to come for the special exhibit on Bronzo. Since it was a holiday, and children had off from school and some people had off of work, it seemed like they thought going to the Met would be a good way to spend the holiday learning. The Met seemed to be more

child-friendly with subject matter and interactive screens. The Morgan had one large gift shop next to the café and upscale dining room on the first floor, while the Met had gift shops and stands, as well as at least two cafés and a cafeteria, throughout the building. Both museums offered maps and pamphlets about the museum. Also, both feature lots of information, particularly on the special exhibits, on their websites, including collection catalogs. Both institutions required admission, though Met states their admission as suggested donations, while the Morgan has a fixed admission price. Both offer student discounts and on Fridays from 7-9pm, the Morgan is free.

The observations from these visits help illustrate the kind of draw a certain collection can bring in. The large collection of the Met offers a variety of interests and attracts many different types of people, whereas the more concentrated collection of the Morgan attracts a more similar group of patrons. Both institutions illustrate that people behave differently in different set-ups as shown by the observations in special exhibits versus permanent collections. The Met is an experience in itself and draws patrons based on reputation and content, whereas the Morgan is less known, but draws people for its content and research offerings. Overall, both had a fair amount of patrons for their respective size and each offer a wealth of knowledge for those who seek it and at least an ascetically pleasing experience.