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The Culture of Archives, Museums, and Libraries H72.1801

February 24, 2010

Natural History Museum vs. Classic Art Museum

An Observational Study on users of two different cultural institutions

Introduction

The public benefit and impact that a museum can provide will never be the same in any two institutions. The real guts and glory of every museum is in its particularity, not in what it does in common with others.¹

Museums vary. Users of different museums vary. Every single museum has its own way of having users interact with objects whereas libraries share pretty much the same way of having users utilize their service. This paper will state the differences between overall user activities originating from different institutions' different types. An observational study was conducted that compared and contrasted two different cultural institutions. The two institutions are museums—American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) and Metropolitan Museum of Arts (Met) AMNH represents a classic natural history museum while the Met represents the classic art museum.

The observation of each museum was performed by visiting and experiencing the exhibitions with ordinary users with the intention that the observation be as natural and participative as it can be. No artificial tools for measuring users or user activity such as a stopwatch or surveys were utilized. However, a brief and casual interview with a user was done when it seemed required or necessary for more exact understanding. Since this observation cannot be accomplished with a detailed and sophisticated factor control, terms to categorize the visitors by any socio-economic bracket, nationality, or age will be intentionally limited to avoid hasty generalization. At least two rooms were visited for each museum—one from the special exhibitions and the other from the permanent exhibitions.

American Museum of Natural History (AMNH)

¹ 'The Proper Business of the Museum: Ideas or Things?', *Rethinking the Museum and Other Meditations*, Weil, Stephen E., Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, p.48

Date and Time: February 6th 2010, Saturday, from 4:00 pm to 6:00 pm

Established in 1869, AMNH is one of the largest and the most renowned history museum in the U.S. and even in the world. Maintaining 25 interconnected buildings with 46 permanent exhibition halls and the collection of nearly 32 million specimens, it hosts four million annual visitors. Its main goal, focused on science and education, is “to discover, interpret and disseminate information about human cultures, the natural world and the universe through a wide-ranging program of scientific research, education and exhibition.”

Saturday afternoon in the winter season is one of the most perfect times you could decide to visit the museum. The lobby was full of visitors, mostly in groups of more than two people, and a long line for purchasing admission was found. Several special temporary exhibitions were found: *Journey to the Stars*, *Travelling the Silk Road*, *The Butterfly Conservatory*, and so on. Even though *Travelling the Silk Road* seemed a more focused exhibition with a bigger scale promotion than the other, the decision to observe *Journey to the Stars* was made. There was an expectation to experience an unusual way of exhibition: a screening in planetarium. This show has been running since early July 2009, being shown every 30 minutes daily from 10:30 am to 4:30 pm. Tickets, which include access to the permanent exhibitions, are \$18 for students.

The planetarium is located in the Rose Center for Earth and Space. Upon the last screening of the day the waiting room was filled with slightly less than a hundred people. Video clips were screened there, providing background knowledge on what people will be seeing in a moment. Everyone was accompanied with at least one other person. Approximately two thirds of the crowd was couples and rest was groups of family members. Interestingly, several couples made of father and son in approximately age seven or so were found whereas no couples of mother or father and daughter. Seemingly old people were hardly seen. As screening time approached, the announcement was made saying no photos and cell phones were allowed during the screening. The architectural structure of planetarium and its way of screening is almost same as that of the movie theater except the fact that the screen of planetarium is covering the ceiling providing the image of 360 degree vision. The attitude of people occupying approximately half of the seat seemed similar to usual audiences in usual movie theater. Only a boy behind the writer was telling his mother “we’re going down” with excitement when the camera zooming out from stars in sky rapidly.

Basically *Journey to the Stars* is made in a form of documentary. It explains the nature of the stars, universe and the relation between them and us. This 3-D documentary with three

years of production was developed by AMNH in the collaboration mainly with the California Academy of Sciences and several other science museums over the world as well as a partnership with NASA. The goal of this documentary is simple and obvious: being educational enough to be screened in the museum and spectacular enough to catch audience's attention to get financial success even though its venue is limited to a special theater: the planetarium. Its main figures, narrative and visual show this tough and tricky goal and the narration by Whoopi Goldberg, co-written by a former Sesame Street writer enables various audiences to understand the secret of universe. The 3-D visuals along with adventurous and dynamic camera movements attract the diverse audience regardless of age, sex, and nationality.

After the screening the audience who looked up the screen as if they were looking up the sky scattered. The similarity between this screening and that of the usual movie theatre may imply one of the main reasons why this kind of space show is only produced for—seemingly boring education needs an entertaining feature of cinematic experience. The other and more apparent reason might come from innate limitations of 'exhibiting the stars'. When museums need to exhibit something incapable of being presented in original form they often display surrogates such as copies, stuffed specimens, and waxes. Given that, it seems pretty obvious to present the stars using 3-D moving images.

Natural history museums are rather less obsessive about the original than the other type of museums—displaying surrogates is their usual choice. To examine more ordinary user activities permanent exhibition rooms also needed to be checked: the Dinosaur Wing and the African mammal room.

As the representative part of AMNH and the impressive background of the successful feature film, *Night at the Museum*, the Dinosaur Wing was the most crowded room in the museum. With a similar number of visitors in the room to that of the audience of *Journey to the Stars*, the notable difference was found in the feature of users—the rate of foreign tourists from all over the world, groups made up of family members, and old people increased remarkably. Regulations were also different; thus, so were the user activities. Taking photos, and making sound was allowed. Visitors who made exclamations seeing the gigantic dinosaur models are divided into two different types. The first type is composed of younger people, usually couples. Their manners are exactly same as the tourists. They photographed themselves and objects of the room are utilized as background. They neither read the label carefully nor observed the object thoroughly. The other type of user is usually a group of family members. Of course, they do take pictures, too; however, they tend to read and to watch the objects as well as the labels meticulously. Parents seemed to let their children remind them of what they were already aware of through books or other media—they were making conversations and parents were trying to be as educational as they could be. So their average time of staying in the room tends to be

longer than the first group's. There are touch screen audio visual tools, mostly used by the second type users. These tools explain how all kinds of dinosaurs are located in the evolutionary trees.

Metropolitan Museum of Arts (The Met)

www.metmuseum.org

Date and Time: February 12th 2010, Friday, from 6:00 pm to 7:30 pm

Located at the upper east side of Manhattan, the Met faces Central Park. Since its establishment in 1870, exactly one year later from that of AMNH, the Met has been considered one of the most prominent art museums in the world along with the National Galleries in London, and le Louvre in Paris. The Met declared its mission “to collect, preserve, study, exhibit, and stimulate appreciation for and advance knowledge of works of art (...), all in the service of the public and in accordance with the highest professional standards.”² The collection has more than two million pieces of art, occupies two million square feet and attracts 5.2 million visitors annually.

The present writer visited the Met on a Friday evening, when the museum runs longer hours and is open until 9 pm like many other museums in New York. Comparing to other weekend afternoons crowded with diverse tourists it did not seem that packed. Presumably the fact that it was Friday around dinner time of Valentine's Day weekend may be the additional reason of its being less full. Among many various special exhibitions such as *The Drawings of Bronzino*, *Surface Tension: Contemporary Photographs from the Collection*, and *Sounding the Pacific: Musical Instruments of Oceania*, and *Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage* was visited.

The gallery where this exhibition is displayed is the Howard Gilman Gallery on the second floor. Firstly organized by The Art Institute of Chicago, *Playing with Pictures* shows the short lived trend of Victorian women's private photo album making: combining early portrait photos with paintings and decorations. In the room with approximately twice the dimensions of our classroom, overall 36 pieces of work are presented. Supplementary materials, such as un-collaged portrait photos of those times and eight albums of which each item could not be displayed, are also exhibited in transparent display boxes. The images in these albums are available by three monitors, which will be explained later.

By the time when the present writer entered the gallery, there were 20 people—mother

² MET 2009 Annual Report, p.9

and daughter, three old couples, one young couple, six old men, three old women, and one young woman. Most of them seemed to be Caucasians and residents of the city. Mainly because each work is in a relatively small frame and contains many details, people were forced to get close to the artifacts. Seeing photo albums from almost 150 years ago, they seemed interested in confirming many things in common and in difference with that of present time. Basically, two different kinds of reactions were detected from people's reactions: the intimacy of seeing other people's private photo albums and the devoutness of facing the actual piece of arts. Under the surveillance by guards and the policy of 'no photographs', users tended to spend enough time staying there taking a closer look at every single detail and supplementary tool in the room. Along with two catalog books there are three monitors to show the images from the albums exhibited. Users can examine each image by full image and by detailed images from different parts as well. In most cases all monitors were occupied and every user tended to spend more than one minute browsing and clicking the images.

To figure out whether users in that gallery had been aware of this special exhibition beforehand or they just dropped by on their way to permanent exhibitions, a brief and casual interview was conducted. A middle-aged male whose name is Sal, a high school English teacher in New Jersey, introduced himself as a museumgoer. He stated that he visits any museum in the city every Friday and Saturday. Especially the Met, being his favorite museum he keeps track of all the exhibition schedules by email subscription. "The museum during the evening time, it feels like a magical time and space," said Sal, who stays approximately three hours every Friday/ Saturday.

However charming the special exhibitions are, it is the permanent collection that attracts the majority of usual visitors to the Mets from all over the world. Unlike the special exhibition rooms it was easy to hear diverse foreign languages and the average duration of time users spend on a single work was shorter. Whereas most users in the galleries on the hallways were passing by the objects, galleries of European Arts had a considerable number of users who carefully look on the objects. Most users were checking each label and this tendency became more obvious in cases of rather famous and popular pieces of art. People with audio guides sitting on benches in front of the big sized frame were easily found. The distance between the object and user seemed to be broader than that in *Playing with Pictures*.

Conclusion

In museums we hear a story. Whereas we can choose the story we want to read in

libraries, we are appreciating the story told by museums. Not only objects which users face in the museum but also the entire atmosphere that organizes user activities are both critical parts of that story. As monumental museums of natural history and art, AMNH and the Met present many disparities in ways of telling the story.

While AMNH is interactive and entertaining, the Met is forcing its users to be rather serious and to keep a certain level of respect. By allowing photography, the natural history museum functions as a theme park and an educational institute at the same time. On the other hand, the no photography policy of the Met implies its taking account of authority of arts. Other than the photography policy, users may feel more being forced to follow certain rules in art museums. Rules are expressed as the existence of the guards, as the pace created by the audio guide, and even as the self-regulation to read all the labels more carefully. This is also the reason of why only the original works can obtain the proper value in classical art museum whereas the originality means almost nothing in the natural history museum.

Besides the main exhibition spaces, additional rooms such as a gift shop and the main lobby also vary. At the lobby of AMNH, visitors become already so excited by facing the gigantic dinosaur model that they take pictures as if they are at the entrance of the zoo. The gift shop, filled with various dinosaur T-shirts and animal dolls, also seems to be a toyshop or the gift shop in a theme park. In contrast, there are not that many things to take pictures of in the lobby of the Met. Instead of exciting spectacles, you will be listening classic music in a gracefully decorated interior. Same as the Met Store—the main target of this shop is more adult-like comparing that of AMNH. In addition to these spaces, the Met provides their users with almost total experiences regarding so-called high culture: classic music concert, opera, and a high-class restaurant.

However, several things in common between AMNH and the Met also need to be clarified. As two great museums in NYC facing each other from the opposite sides of the Central Park, established in similar era, they have been enjoying a great number of users from all around the world. Whether it is permanent exhibition or special one causes the discrepancy between the rates of residents and foreigners—foreign tourists will be majority in permanent exhibitions and vice versa in special ones. As home to encyclopedic collections, AMNH and the Met seem to take great account of contextualization of each item when they exhibit anything—this is what makes natural history museums differ from zoos as well as art museums from private galleries.