

American Museum of Natural History and New York Historical Society Museum: A Comparative Observational Study

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Despite the geographic proximity of the American Museum of Natural History and the New York Historical Society—situated directly across West 77th Street from one another along Central Park West in New York City’s Upper West Side—both institutions offer notably distinct visitor experiences. While the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) offers a world-class visual and hands-on experience of world history, science, and culture, the narrative and contextual information it provides for its exhibits seem to be mostly overlooked by visitors in favor of simply marveling at the items themselves. Visitors at the New York Historical Society Museum (NYHS), in contrast, appeared to devote much of their time in each exhibit to following the narrative of the space and reading the contextual information provided for both the exhibit as a whole and for individual items. Observing this difference—among many others—allows one to consider the ways in which exhibit design, display of objects, conveyance of contextual information, and visitor demographics shape the way museum-goers experience and interact with distinct museum spaces.

This study will highlight some of these key differences in visitor experience between the AMNH and NYHS. The findings presented here are based on roughly one hour of observation in the museums, each of which was visited on a weekday between 1:00pm and 5:00pm; observations were primarily focused on the visitors themselves and the ways in which they interacted with the museum spaces, but also took into account the spaces themselves to aid in speculating on the underlying motivations behind visitor behavior. Though observations were made in the museums at large, this study will center around one specific space in each museum to illustrate the differing experiences of two narratively-driven exhibitions: the NYHS exhibit

The Vietnam War: 1945-1975, and the AMNH Rose Center for Earth and Space. Both of these spaces have distinct start and end points, and follow a chronology of some sort, a similarity which allowed for a more precise comparison between the two institutions.

The AMNH Rose Center for Earth and Space is an exhibition showcasing facts about and the history of the known universe. The space centers around the massive, multipurpose Hayden Sphere; following the proper narrative direction, visitors start by circling the upper level of the sphere and reading placards which use the sphere to depict the scale of various things of the universe, from stars, to planets, to the human brain, to individual atoms. Having circled it completely, visitors enter the sphere (the inside of which functions as a small theater) to watch a four-minute, Liam Neeson-narrated history of the universe from Big Bang to present. Visitors exit the theater onto the “Cosmic Pathway,” a spiral ramp leading to interactive displays on the bottom floor; along the pathway are placards, images, and objects illustrating the history of the universe.

The ways in which visitors moved through the Rose Center and interacted with its displays seem to exemplify the trends observed in visitor behavior in the museum at large. Though many visitors began the exhibit by reading the “scale” placards surrounding the Hayden Sphere, most appeared to either lose interest or grow impatient after the first few (or were dealing with small children, on whom the information would more than likely be lost). These visitors end up walking past the vast majority of the placards without giving them more than a glance, much more interested in arriving at the sphere itself. The sphere is by far the key attraction of the Rose Center; almost everyone who moved through the first part of the exhibit chose to enter the sphere, and all of them watched the four-minute moving image attentively. Upon exiting the sphere, however, all of the people with whom I had watched the show walked

briskly down the Cosmic Pathway, past the entire history of the universe, without so much as glancing at the images and objects on display, focused instead on arriving at the interactive displays and demonstrations below. Though visitors did indeed interact with the displays below, the atmosphere in that part of the Center—the clear end of the exhibition—felt more like a gathering place, with a focus more on socializing or deciding where to go next than on the actual museum objects and information. In all, I estimate that it took the average visitor no more than 20-30 minutes to complete the entire exhibition. The behaviors observed here exemplify what seems to be a larger trend of the AMNH: that the average visitor is interested much more in seeing the more grandiose and interactive of the displays, and not so much with reading contextual and historical information about the exhibits or objects.

In rather stark contrast to this experience was that of the NYHS *Vietnam War* exhibit. This exhibit follows a clear chronology, beginning circa 1945 and ending circa 1975; between start and finish is a history not just of the war itself, but of the factors leading up to the war and the immediate aftermath, as well, using text, images, moving images, sound, objects, and interactive displays to tell its story. Unlike the AMNH Rose Center, visitors here moved through the exhibit space slowly and meditatively. In fact, attempting to follow a single person from start to finish took nearly an hour, surprising given the exhibit's relatively small size (it's a mere fraction of the Rose Center, through which visitors moved in half the time). The pace of this exhibit seemed here due to a genuine interest on the part of the visitor in the narrative and in the historical/contextual information about the exhibit and its objects. Rather than merely viewing objects on display, everyone I observed took the time to read the textual information and to watch the moving image displays. Their experiences of the content seemed far more internalized, as well: whereas the Rose Center was teeming with talking people, I didn't hear so much as a

whisper in the entire *Vietnam War* exhibit, even from those who appeared to be visiting in couples. The trend observed here, as well as in the NYHS at large, is an audience much more interested in and attentive to historical context and narrative in their museum-going behavior.

The behaviors observed in both institutions seem to be motivated by a number of factors. For example, the total number of visitors at a given time in each museum can certainly be thought to influence the ways in which people interact with the objects and with each other. The AMNH, even on a weekday, is swarming with people, and most of these people appeared to be visiting in groups, whether friends, family, or classmates. The large crowds—and with them a significant volume level—seemed to make visitors comfortable with socializing as they moved through exhibit spaces. The NYHS, however, had only a handful of visitors; any one of them socializing would surely have been audible throughout a significant portion of the exhibit space. In that respect, visitors at the NYHS tended to be quiet and introspective. However, the nature of the exhibits must also be considered here: the NYHS *Vietnam War* exhibit is naturally a more emotional experience, especially for those who lived through it or perhaps even fought in it (boxes of tissues were provided at multiple points throughout the exhibit space). The museum even stationed guest books at the start and end of the exhibit, encouraging visitors to share thoughts on what the war means to them, a practice which, in turn, encouraged silent reflection as opposed to verbal. Though one could certainly argue that exploring the scale and history of the known universe in the AMNH Rose Center is an emotional experience as well, the exhibit does more to provoke wonder and amusement which, combined with the volume of people, created a more social and interactive space.

Important as well is the ways in which information is arranged and presented in each of the exhibit spaces. In the AMNH at large, displays are rather grandiose, and each exhibit tends to

have one (or at least a few) displays that steal most of the attention: The Rose Center has its domineering Hayden Sphere, and visitors in the various animal exhibits were clearly drawn to the larger, more popular of the animals—the elephants, the lions, the grizzly bears—paying much less attention, if any at all, to the smaller, lesser known of the animals. The NYHS exhibits were far more modestly displayed; the *Vietnam War* exhibit didn't seem to have any one centerpiece object, a fact which promoted the narrative cohesion of the whole exhibit rather than just one aspect of it. Thus, visitors here, free from any one show-stopping object, seemed much more intent on viewing each object in turn and considering its historical context.

A comprehensive examination of the underlying motivations of these museum-goers' behaviors would undoubtedly have to include numerous other factors. One might consider the average demographics of the visitors at each institution: families and generally younger crowds at AMNH, those more impatient with historical context and more drawn to grandiose displays; the almost-entirely adult crowd at the NYHS, those going individually or in couples and intent on learning the history of the objects on display and the events they represent. Or one might consider the nature of the museums themselves: the AMNH being a science museum, one might expect and intend on experiencing the mere pleasure of its intricate displays; the NYHS being a historical society, one would surely visit with much more of an interest in the historical context of artefacts and events. Yet those observations presented here seem to exemplify the larger trends in visitor experience at each of these institutions, and to illustrate the ways in which two geographically proximate museums, each showcasing the histories and cultures of the world, feature visitors who experience and interact with their objects in entirely different ways.