

# THE IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENT ON THE PERCEPTION OF ART

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## ABSTRACT

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When we see a work of art, no matter the environmental setting, we have some sort of reaction to the piece. An analysis of some of the art housed in museums in New York City, Paris, and Rome, this thesis outlines some examples of different environmental factors affecting a viewer's perception of that specific visual representation. The surrounding works, the accompanying wall texts and labels, as well as the structure of the building or specific room that houses the work, affects how a viewer might perceive it. Similar works offer different experiences when displayed in different places, such as Monet's *Water Lilies* in MoMA and in the Musée de l'Orangerie. Other art pieces gain significance because of the harmony or contrast that they create with their surroundings—whether it be other paintings, as in the Frick Collection, or large machinery, as in the case of the Centrale Montemartini in Rome.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thank you to my parents for taking me on the trip of a lifetime, and to the Plan II office and scholarship donors for making that trip possible. Also, I want to endlessly thank John Clarke, my supervisor, for standing by me while I tried to make sense of this project, and for suggesting museums and galleries for me to visit while doing my research. Thank you, Trent Thurman, for being a great second-reader and agreeing to read a thesis that turned out to have nothing to do with business. You both have been so patient with me during this process. To all of you—this project would not have been possible without your help and advice.

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## INTRODUCTION

In her essay *The Museum as a Way of Seeing*,<sup>1</sup> Svetlana Alpers references something that she names “the museum effect”—rather than being taken for what they literally are, objects on display in a museum space automatically become objects of visual interest. On the same note, Elizabeth Vallance of Indiana University states that “art-museum objects—many of which were never intended for display on bare walls or under glass—can show us how to look at things in our environs and discover interesting qualities that might be obscured by general clutter, by the non-art messages of contexts where we never expect to find the beautiful, by the object’s not being unique, and by many other signs that what we are looking at really isn’t ‘art.’”<sup>2</sup> When presented in a museum or gallery, things that we might discount as ordinary objects in our day to day lives suddenly become art objects placed on a pedestal of high-art and admiration. They are taken out of their everyday context, where surrounding decor or distractions of furniture might outshine and overshadow them, and they are isolated on a wall with an accompanying plaque that leads the viewer to believe that this piece is not only important, but that this piece is, by definition, “art.” The museum or gallery as a building itself creates this experience, and the architecture and internal structure of the room or building which houses a visual representation has the capacity to either overpower or enhance the viewer’s perception of the art objects inside.

Through funding provided from Plan II Scholarship funds, I was able to take a trip to New York, Paris, and Rome to visit famous museums and marvel at masterpieces that I had only seen

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<sup>1</sup> Alpers, Svetlana. "The Museum as a Way of Seeing." In *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, by Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine, 25-32. Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991. PDF.

<sup>2</sup> Vallance, Elizabeth. "Visual Culture and Art Museums: A Continuum from the Ordinary." *Visual Arts Research* 34, no. 2 (2008): 45-54.

before in pictures. Words cannot quite describe this experience, but this thesis is a start.

Each museum that I visited has its own chapter, with each chapter broken up into sections, based on different accounts of my experience or observations at the respective museum or gallery. The chapters have been sorted in the chronological order in which I visited each museum in order to show the building of my ideas along my way. There are photographs to supplement the text as needed, most of which are my own, unless otherwise noted. Within each chapter, the words in italics come from my own opinions and experiences within the museum space under discussion.

There are two viewpoints to consider here: that of an experienced visitor, one who has a general knowledge and appreciation for the art world, and that of an inexperienced visitor, someone who is not really interested in art, but might visit some of these sites for other reasons. Throughout this thesis, I will make comments about the effectiveness of each environment from both perspectives.

**CHAPTER I**

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

New York City

Located in the Upper East Side of Manhattan, the Met's iconic steps draw in over seven million visitors yearly to see the treasures inside. The giant building itself poses a threat to overwhelm the art within. The following are descriptions of four collections that I saw at the Met that I found to have a unique environment or display style that enhances the pieces.

### **In Pursuit of Fashion: The Sandy Schreier Collection**

The museum setting can serve to elevate the meaning of a work of art, or even seemingly ordinary objects. From November 27, 2019 to August 16, 2020, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Anna Wintour Costume Center hosted an exhibition called, *In Pursuit of Fashion: The Sandy Schreier Collection*.

*As I walked through the rows of ornate and luxurious dresses created by some of the biggest names in fashion, such as Chloé, Chanel, Balmain, Dior, Balenciaga, etc., I had no choice but to look at these articles of clothing in glass cases and on pedestals as carefully crafted pieces of art. There was a particular grouping of dresses towards the end of the exhibit that explicitly caught my attention, because each dress seemed to have a hidden meaning, or some sort of commentary within it, that might be missed if it were not displayed in a museum on a platform, with a block of text next to it that causes the viewer to pause and think critically about the meaning of the design of the dress.*

Within this collection of Sandy Schreier's wardrobe exists a piece that Karl Lagerfeld created when he was head designer for Chloé for the 1984 spring/summer collection. It is a

simple black dress that has a smaller beaded dress shape affixed to the front, along with a beaded hanger below the neckline of the actual black dress (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> If someone wore this dress on the street, passersby might notice the unique design, but likely would not stop to critically consider the designer's intention or intended message. According to the label in front of this dress, Karl Lagerfeld's purpose for creating this unconventional garment was to pay "homage to the needleworkers who produced [the garments] ... a way of paying his respects to the women who sew the clothes he and other designers



*Figure 1A*

envision." After reading about Lagerfeld's intention and looking at the "dress within a dress" again, the viewer begins to think about the work that goes into creating such a dress. The needleworkers, in this case, did not sew beaded flowers or geometric patterns onto this black dress to decorate it, but rather a full dress, with designs and patterns of its own, complete with a hanger. Without the museum setting, and without the accompanying wall text, the meaning of this piece could easily be lost-in-passing on the street.

In terms of the physical space surrounding this exhibit, the Costume Center at the Met is actually not a particularly favorable place to display these pieces. It is dark, and feels like a

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<sup>3</sup> Cope, Nicholas Alan. Dress, Karl Lagerfeld (French, born Germany, 1938-2019) for Chloé (French, founded 1952), spring/summer 1984; Promised gift of Sandy Schreier. Photograph. Digital file.

basement. However, the Anna Wintour Costume Center carries with it a sense of fashion gravitas, so that anyone who wanders down the steps into the Costume Center likely has an interest in fashion or popular culture, and specifically some knowledge of Vogue's Met Gala. When the visitor descends the steps into the costume center, they enter a high-fashion world, and adopt a high-fashion mindset. This intrinsic significance of the location, in the case of *In Pursuit of Fashion*, aides in the elevation of the clothes within the exhibition, while the physical aspects of the space are not particularly suitable for displaying these dresses in all their glory.



Figure 2B

### **Temple of Dendur**

The Temple of Dendur was completed in 10 B.C. and later given to the United States as a gift from Egypt is housed in the Sackler Wing of the Met. This room is a large, open space with a

slanted wall of windows (Figure 1B).<sup>4</sup> The shape of the room mimics a pyramidal shape that combines the old Egyptian aspects of the temple with the newer, more modern architecture of that wing, while also allowing plenty of natural light inside in order to give a sense of what the temple could have looked like when it was flooded with light in the Egyptian landscape. In addition, the color of the bricks in the walls almost matches the color of the bricks of the temple, and makes the temple look like it is in a natural environment, instead of contrasting it with stark white walls.

In a completely enclosed room, the temple with the shallow pool of water in front of it would look misplaced and crowded. The Sackler Wing, which was constructed around the temple, gives a more natural environment for the temple to exist in. At the same time, however, placing the temple in a seemingly “natural” setting does not evoke the same kind of critical thinking about the structure itself as it might if it were housed in a room in which it did not at all look like it belonged. This kind of juxtaposition is quite effective in causing viewers—both inexperienced and experienced—to notice non-obvious aspects of the displayed works, as will be further discussed in Chapter IX in reference to the Centrale Montemartini in Rome.

### **Lucas I, Chuck Close**

Painted in 1986-87, Chuck Close’s *Lucas I* commands the attention of a passing viewer—no matter how experienced or inexperienced they might be. Hung on its own wall, this painting looks more realistic the further away the viewer stands from it. As a result, the viewer becomes more aware of Close’s unique painting style and technique with each step that they take closer to

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<sup>4</sup> Getty Images. *The Sackler Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. Photograph. Digital file.

the painting—a phenomenon that cannot be captured through a still photograph.

*I turned a corner and was met head on with a giant, photorealistic Chuck Close painting. In one of my classes, we learned about Close and his large scale paintings, but the actual size and detail are not effectively conveyed through virtual reproductions or photographs. Standing up close to this piece, I could see the individual grid squares that Close was known for utilizing. Within these squares, there were not just small dots, like I expected based on the photos I have seen and pieces that I have read, but also lines and brush strokes that added more detail, and circles within other circles. Up close and detailed photographs can capture this technique, but then you sacrifice simultaneously experiencing the scale and overall product when only observing a detail picture. The only way to fully interpret the enormous scale, and careful detail, is to see this painting in person. This was the first example of this phenomena that I recorded on my trip.*

### **Alpha Samplers**

In the American Wing of the Met, there is a small room that is filled with needlepoint alphabet samplers (Figure 1C). These pieces look like they should be hanging over your grandmother's sink in her bathroom, but in a museum setting, the viewer can pause to appreciate the craftsmanship and further understand the significance of the needleworks. The wall text at the entrance of the room explains how the daughter of the founder of Dartmouth College opened



a school for women in 1785, where the women learned skills like needlepointing. The instructors at this school, according to the wall text, “played a key role in the growth of female education in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, and the samplers themselves document the artistic and intellectual output of young women of the time.” These samplers represent one of the steps towards advancing the availability of education for women, but

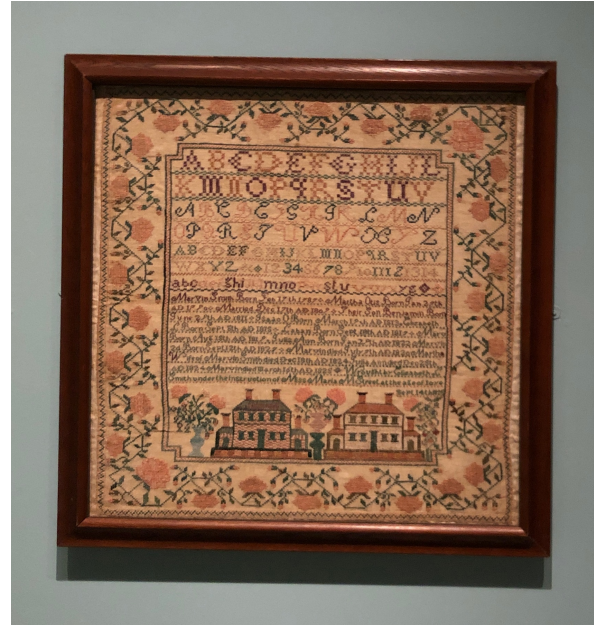


Figure 3C

without the wall text’s prompting, or without their physical space on the Met’s wall, they might seem rather outdated, ordinary, and insignificant. Alpers’ museum effect is clearly at play here. I have seen many of these needlepointed wall hangings, and never have I stopped to admire one and consider it to be “art.”

**CHAPTER II**

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

New York City

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, has an iconic shape that lends itself to hosting creative exhibitions. It is a cylinder, wider at the bottom than at the top, with the exhibition spaces running in a continuous helix from top to bottom. The white gallery walls allow artists and curators to create and imagine unique installations without much limitation. Because the museum is structured as a spiral walkway with small open galleries directly along the visitor's path, the Guggenheim provides a trail that is quite easy to follow. Each gallery space is very minimally decorated, with the paintings hanging on white walls, accompanied by minimalistic white labels on the side walls with supplemental text to give the viewer some context. Since the Guggenheim has such a distinctive shape that allows for creative use of the space by different artists and curators, I want to look at past exhibitions that have utilized the space in different ways.

*During my trip to the Guggenheim, the exhibit used the flow of the museum as one continuous shape to its advantage, rather than using the circular shape as I have seen examples of in the past. The exhibit was called Artistic License: Six Takes on the Guggenheim Collection. My experience at the Guggenheim was unique in that I was never confused about which room to enter next—the flow was clear and so was the relationship between each level.*

### **Artistic License: Six Takes on the Guggenheim Collection**

As the first artist-curated exhibition at the Guggenheim, *Artistic License: Six Takes on the Guggenheim Collection* utilized each level of the museum.<sup>5</sup> The museum's unique shape, as

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<sup>5</sup> Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. "Artistic License: Six Takes on the Guggenheim Collection." Guggenheim. Last modified 2020. Accessed May 8, 2020.

mentioned before, is a continuous spiral, meaning that none of these six floors is completely isolated—each level continues seamlessly into the next. The exhibit was curated by Cai Guo-Qiang, Paul Chan, Jenny Holzer, Julie Mehretu, Richard Prince, and Carrie Mae Weems, with each artist curating one level, and with each level providing a different take on different parts of the Guggenheim’s collection. This exhibit, while unique in its curation style, utilized the continuing flow of the museum rather than the actual circular rotunda shape itself.



Figure 2A

### James Turrell

In 2013, James Turrell created one of his famous skyspaces within the Guggenheim Museum’s rotunda (Figure 2A).<sup>6</sup> Turrell defines a skyspace as “a specifically proportioned chamber with an aperture in the ceiling to open the sky...[they] can be autonomous structures or

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<https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/artistic-license-six-takes-on-the-guggenheim-collection>.

<sup>6</sup> Heald, David. Installation view, *James Turrell*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, June 21-September 25, 2013. Photograph. Digital file.

integrated into existing architecture.”<sup>7</sup> Skyspaces exist on campus at The University of Texas at Austin on the roof of the William C. Powers Student Activity Center (*The Color Inside*) and on Rice University’s campus (*Twilight Epiphany*).

*These two skyspaces, both of which I have visited, could not be more different in structure: the one at UT is round and almost completely enclosed, while the one at Rice is square and open-air. However, both locations have the same sense of serenity, and calming effect on the visitor. I can only imagine what such a gigantic skyspace in The Guggenheim must have been like.*

The Guggenheim’s architecture is the perfect space for Turrell to transform into a skyspace. While Turrell’s work has proven to be popular and successful in other, smaller, differently shaped spaces, the Guggenheim’s unique shape, with its large-scale simplicity, creates a balance that allows the art installation to complement the building’s architectural design, while also allowing the architectural design to complement the art. Neither overwhelms the other—both are simple and scenic.

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<sup>7</sup> "Skyspaces." James Turrell. Last modified 2020. <http://jamesturrell.com/work/type/skyspace/>.

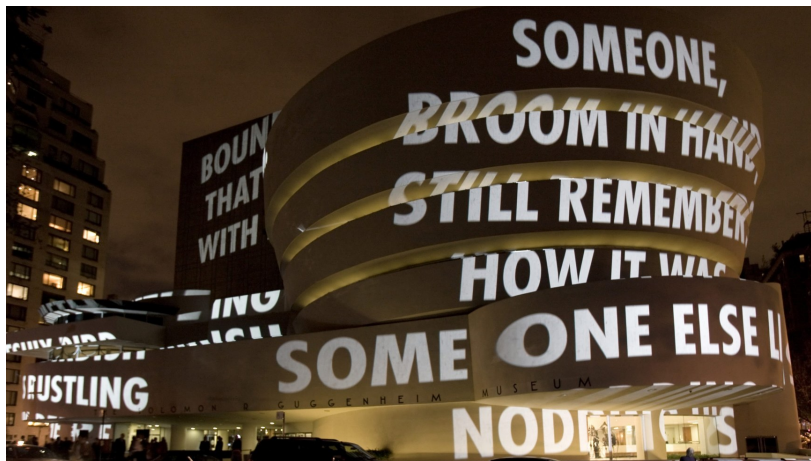


Figure 2B

### Jenny Holzer

Such a unique space has the capacity to completely distract from an exhibition, or to absolutely elevate an exhibit through a creative utilization of the space. Jenny Holzer's *For the Guggenheim* (Figure 2B)<sup>8</sup> is an excellent example of the artist utilizing the unconventional space to create a visual representation that works flawlessly with the space.

In Jenny Holzer's exhibit, the spiraled lines on the outside of the building serve as a blank canvas on which her work can be displayed. The lines almost mimic those of a sheet of notebook paper. To someone unfamiliar with Holzer's work, these words on the outside of the museum might just look like some sort of marketing tool or decoration for a specific occasion. Not every passerby would appreciate the artistic value or significance of these words.

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<sup>8</sup> McKay, Kristopher. Installation view: *Jenny Holzer: For the Guggenheim*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, September 26-December 31, 2008. Photograph. Digital file.

**CHAPTER III**

The Museum of Modern Art

New York City

In midtown New York City, the Museum of Modern Art is nestled in the middle of a full city block. Inside, there is so much natural light and space. In a city where there is not much breathing room, MoMA serves as a display space that feels open and light. This generally bright environment serves to elevate almost every work in the museum that I came across.

### **Equal, Richard Serra**

Richard Serra's *Equal* consists of steel blocks, stacked atop one another, near each of the corners of the room (Figure 3A).

*There are eight giant steel cubes arranged in four stacks of two. The steel is rusty in some areas, smooth in others. I knew these blocks were large, as I had learned about Richard Serra and researched some of his works, but the experience that walking among the blocks has changed my perception of the scale of this piece. I feel completely dwarfed by each stack of blocks.*

These blocks are in their own room at MoMA, as they should be. Imagining these steel giants in a room with paintings or other sculptures aids in my understanding of the curator's decision to isolate this work. These steel blocks are quite interesting when they are the only thing in the room, but bringing in anything into the room introduces the



*Figure 3A*



likelihood of overshadowing—whether it be the blocks overshadowing a painting or sculpture, or a painting or sculpture overshadowing the blocks by detracting the viewer’s attention. The plain white walls in which the blocks are housed create a stark contrast between the gray, brown, and black hues present on the steel, and helps to further emphasize the industrial nature of Serra’s sculpture. The museum space elevates these steel blocks from what they are—steel blocks—to what Serra intended them to be—art. In a junkyard, they might fit in and go unnoticed, but in the MoMA, they are colossal sculptures with a breathtaking scale.



Figure 3B

### **Water Lilies**

Inside MoMA, two *Water Lilies* paintings by Claude Monet hang in an irregularly shaped room. The lighting is standard, as it is within the rest of the museum, and the room is quite small for such a large painting. The panels of the painting line the edge of the polygon shaped room,

following the edges and vertices of the wall shape (Figure 3B).<sup>9</sup> This display method is congruent with the overall modern theme of the museum. Though an experienced viewer might notice that the ceiling height and the artificial lighting do not do this panel of *Water Lilies* any favors when compared to the *Water Lilies* displayed at the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris, MoMA's setting causes the viewer to notice how different the experience is and how different the feeling of the room is. The way that these panels are hung, aligning with the angles of the walls, elevates an impressionist piece to something that has to be noticed and considered through a more modern lens than it would be if it were to be displayed in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.

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<sup>9</sup> Museum of Modern Art. *Water Lilies*. Photograph. Digital file.

**CHAPTER IV**

The Frick Collection

New York City



*Figure 4A*

Upon entering the Frick Collection, visitors step into an atrium with a fountain and green vegetation (Figure 4A). Entering this “sanctuary” sets the tone for the remainder of the visit. It is a quiet and calm space with natural light that causes the visitor to pause and marvel at this indoor oasis in the middle of New York City. This is the only area in the museum where photography is permitted. Visitors can get their photo-taking out of their system before they enter the ornate hallways and rooms where some of the world’s most famous artists’ works hang, so that they can put their cameras and phones away, and admire the architecture and the art housed within.

The Frick Collection provides a unique case because it is technically a repurposed residence, although the architecture firm of Carrère and Hastings designed the mansion specifically to showcase Henry Frick’s collection. Unlike the Centrale Montemartini, which I will discuss later, The Frick Collection is not contained in a space that is intended to create a stark contrast with the works it houses, but rather in a space that complements the art objects and

allows the viewer to experience the pieces in a space that seems like a residence—because it was designed to be one.

*Walking into the Frick Mansion is surreal. Any home that I have ever been to in New York is quite small and compact, with little breathing room, and usually with someone living on the floors above and below. That is not the case with the Frick Mansion. Central Park borders one side of the building, and typical New York City buildings stretch down the block on the other sides. While the outside of the building is exquisite, the inside is even more impressive, and the art collection is extraordinary. As my dad put it, if there was a painting in there by an artist that you did not know, it's because you don't know your art history. He's right. From the Goya and Rembrandt paintings in the great halls, to the El Greco seemingly casually placed above the fireplace, and the Titian in the den, there is not an unimpressive square inch. Even the details in the molding along the ceilings seem like art works to be marveled at. Additionally, the atmosphere is very quiet, and it is relatively empty—a real contrast with the Met. The creaky floors and existing ornate furniture gives me a unique sense of what the works of these artists—whose paintings I have only ever seen in large museums—would look like in a residence.*

There is no doubt that the physical environment of the Frick complements and elevates the works of art within the establishment. However, it is possible that the distractions of the residence, like the wooden molding on the walls, and the furniture throughout, might divert an

inexperienced viewer from appreciating the paintings. In this furnished space, the art almost seems like just a decoration. As mentioned above, the mansion was built in order to display Henry Frick's collection, but someone who does not know that, and someone who does not know very much about art, could easily walk through without stopping to marvel at the talent of the master painters whose works are hung throughout.

## **CHAPTER V**

Musée du Louvre

Paris, France

With a record-breaking 10.2 million visitors in 2018, the Louvre is the most visited museum in the world.<sup>10</sup> The sheer scale of the building is enough to make anyone, an inexperienced visitor or an experienced visitor, pause to admire the enormous, ornate structure in front of them.

*I have never been so overwhelmed and awestruck by the size of something than I was standing outside of the Louvre—until I got inside and saw the paintings that measure 20 feet tall. I did not know paintings could be so enormous in scale, and at the same time so detailed in methodology. I thought the scale of Pollock*



Figure 5A

*paintings were difficult to grasp, but the scale of these enormous classical paintings was even more shocking when I confronted them directly (Figure 5A). Standing in front of this painting by David and looking directly up, I wondered logistically how the artist managed to paint something of this scale. How large the room must have been where he painted the canvas, how he avoided messing up already completed areas of the painting as he maneuvered to finish up the rest*

<sup>10</sup> Musée du Louvre. "10.2 Million Visitors to the Louvre in 2018." Musée du Louvre Press Room. Last modified January 3, 2019. <https://presse.louvre.fr/10-2-million-visitors-to-the-louvre-in-2018/>.



*of the painting, and how it might look if I had a ladder and could see every inch of the painting as close up as I could see the small area that was within my sightline. Without standing in the grand hallways of the Louvre and experiencing this in person, I never would have been inspired to ask these questions.*



Figure 5B

### ***Mona Lisa***

Painted in 1503 by Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa* is one of the world's most famous paintings. An estimated 10 million people visit the Louvre each year, with approximately 80% of them coming to see *Mona Lisa*.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Rea, Naomi. "I Have Never Seen Such Chaos': Mass Confusion Ensues After the Louvre Moves the 'Mona Lisa' to a Different Gallery." *Artnet News*. Last modified July 31, 2019. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/louvre-mona-lisa-crowd-1613794>.

*Prior to my visit to the Louvre, I had been told how small and underwhelming Mona Lisa was in person. People talked about how you cannot even get close to it, and how it was so small and ordinary that it probably looks better in pictures. However, when I walked up to see Mona Lisa in all her glory, I was taken aback. This is when I realized that there really was a difference between the perception of an inexperienced museum-goer, and an experienced one. An inexperienced one waits in a line to see the world's most famous painting with expectations that it will completely blow them away with its glory. An experienced visitor has realistic expectations, and understands how the history of a painting can enhance its significance, and notices the mastery of DaVinci.*

The line to reach a front row view of the painting stretches through a crowded queue (Figure 5B). With people flailing around selfie sticks and the sound of camera shutters going off constantly, that room is chaotic. For an inexperienced museum-goer, the *Mona Lisa* might be the only work of art that they came to the Louvre to see. In their journey to see *Mona Lisa*, visitors might want to stop to look at other paintings in the same room, or in hallways along the way. However, the chaos of the room makes it quite difficult to maneuver around the crowds, and this inconvenience might dissuade inexperienced museum-goers from exploring the surrounding paintings.

*In the room with Mona Lisa, I found my favorite piece in the entire Louvre Museum, Madonna of the Rabbit by Edouard Manet, after Titian. Above it hung*

*the original painting by Titian. The label to the side explained how Manet himself is thought to have come to the Louvre to study Titian and paint his Madonna of the Rabbit while sitting directly in front of Titian's original masterpiece. In doing this, Manet opened the perfect opportunity for a direct style comparison. As I admired the paintings and read the supplemental text to the side explaining the story behind this unique pairing, I thought about how many people in this room would miss this incredible instance of artists inspiring other artists, simply because the world's most famous painting seemed to command the attention of all who entered the space.*

The way that *Mona Lisa* is displayed in the Louvre, in a glass box, on a solitary wall of its own in the center of the room, elevates the significance of the painting without a doubt. But, at the same time, this display makes the other masterpieces in the room seem unimportant and irrelevant to an inexperienced visitor. An inexperienced visitor might simply follow all of the signs throughout the entire building to find *Mona Lisa*, stand in line for a while, get 15 seconds to take a selfie in front of the painting from 25 feet away, and then walk straight out of the room without perusing around the gallery, because they achieved their objective. As I mentioned before with Richard Serra's *Equal*, putting such an unmissable object in the middle of a room with other great works of art hung on the walls, creates a distraction that diminishes the importance or noticeability of the other pieces.

### **Pierre Soulages**

When I visited the Louvre in January, Pierre Soulages had an exhibit in a room that looked like a typical modern art gallery—until you look up. The ceiling of the room is ornate and

decorated with gold plaques which line the border of the top of the walls, inscribed with names of classical artists like Raphael, Rubens, and Michelangelo. As one can gather from looking at the photograph of the Salon Carré (Figure 5C),<sup>12</sup> the view



*Figure 5C*

looking straight up gives the visitor a completely different impression than the view looking straight forward at Soulages paintings. One view feels very ornate and classical, while the latter view feels very modern and contemporary. The contrast between the two, combined with the mildly shocking sensation that the visitor feels upon entering the room, having just come from rooms of classical religious paintings, creates an elevated appreciation for Soulage's style of art. His art is so different from the other works housed in the Louvre that one cannot help but stop and notice the difference. An experienced visitor might notice the difference and want to take more time to explore this contrast, while an inexperienced visitor might peek inside the room, notice how different it is, and pass through. A similar room exists in the Vatican Museum, as well, which I will discuss in Chapter X.

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<sup>12</sup> Aveyron.com. The Carré du Louvre Lounge. Photograph. Digital file.

## **CHAPTER VI**

Musée d'Orsay

Paris, France

Centered in the city of Paris and situated across the Seine from the Jardin des Tuileries and the Louvre, sits the Musée d'Orsay. The building once acted as a railway station and hotel that was built to function during the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1900. Once the train station became no longer functional, President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing designated that the building be classified as a historical monument, and that it would be transformed into a museum to display 19<sup>th</sup> century art.

In an article from the *New York Times* written in 1987 by Paul Goldberger, the author asserts that though it is very typical for old architectural masterpieces in Paris to be refurbished into art museums relatively seamlessly, the renovation and repurposing of the Gare d'Orsay into the Musée d'Orsay was, quite frankly, a failure. The architect, Gae Aulenti, seems to have botched it, from the clunky and “bunker-like” structures that line the old station walls, to the broken down structure that interrupts the natural museum flow. “The real moral of this sad story,” Goldberger suggests, “may be that not every building, no matter how great its architecture, is suited to every new function, and that the particular demands of a railway station and a museum of 19<sup>th</sup>-century art have almost nothing in common.”<sup>13</sup> Goldberger’s statement about a railway station and a 19<sup>th</sup> century art museum having nothing in common is correct—but neither do an old energy plant and ancient Roman antiquities. Yet for some reason the Centrale Montemartini, which will be discussed in Chapter IX, works as a space that actively enhances the works that it houses.

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<sup>13</sup> Goldberger, Paul. "Architecture: The New Musée d'Orsay in Paris." *New York Times*, April 2, 1987, sec. C, 21. Accessed December 11, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/04/02/arts/architecture-the-new-mussee-d-orsay-in-paris.html>.

There is an apparent contrast between the methodologies employed by Herzog and de Meuron of the Tate Modern in London, and the ideology of Aulenti. Herzog and de Meuron took advantage of the large and open space in the Turbine Hall, for example, while Aulenti attempted to break up the large, open space of the train station into miniature branches that shoot off from the main area of the building. As Goldberger states, “Gare d’Orsay is scaled to trains, not 19<sup>th</sup>-century sculpture; put almost anything smaller than a train in it and it is bound to seem too small. If you try to compensate for this by creating littler buildings within the great building, as Mrs. Aulenti has done, you end up compromising the integrity of the very thing you are trying to save.”<sup>14</sup>

Goldberger argues that the architecture of the original train station designed by Victor Laloux was unique in the sense that it combined a rather strong, industrial structure with an ornate “Beaux-Arts richness.” Aulenti, rather than choosing one end of the already existent spectrum of industrial-to-ornate, chose to add onto the space in a manner that disregarded either style—unlike Herzog and de Meuron, who utilized the existent style and structure and simply transformed it in a clever way.

Although the ornate and open architecture of the train station was indeed compromised through the addition of the smaller galleries in the main corridor, visitors do not really notice once they enter the individual side galleries. Yes, the train station’s tall ceilings and wide halls could have provided an enormous, spacious, and light area for the paintings, but, the smaller galleries allow curators to make interesting contrasts within the rooms and between the rooms, as

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<sup>14</sup> Goldberger, Paul. "Architecture: The New Musée d'Orsay in Paris." *New York Times*, April 2, 1987, sec. C, 21. Accessed December 11, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/04/02/arts/architecture-the-new-mussee-d-orsay-in-paris.html>.

well as allowing visitors to concentrate on smaller collections of paintings, rather than risk getting overwhelmed in one giant gallery space. In my opinion, the collection at the Musée d'Orsay is so strong that not even Aulenti's questionable design can detract from the enjoyment and delight and awe that the paintings inspire.



Figure 6A



Figure 6B

### Luncheon on the Grass vs. Luncheon on the Grass

Upstairs in the museum, at the end of a long hallway, visitors run into Claude Monet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, or *Luncheon on the Grass* (Figure 6A) with the painting's predecessor, Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Figure 6B) hanging just 180° away. This creates a rather interesting contrast between the two artists' painting styles and scale of their works. The wall on which Manet's painting is hung is a purple-grey color, while the background behind Monet's painting is painted a brown-grey. This must be due to the differences between the color palettes that the respective artists used. While Monet's painting sports bright green leaves and



grass, with colorful dresses and a white picnic blanket, Manet's painting exhibits primarily dark green vegetation, with the lightest color in the painting coming from a female bather's body. A colorful background brightens up Manet's painting, while a more muted background allows Monet's colors to shine.

Additionally, the wall text next to Monet's painting explains the background story, and gives the viewer some context for the situation. The wall text describes who the people in the painting are (Monet's friends), and that Monet painted this piece with the intention of rivaling Manet's version to create a stir at the 1866 Salon. The text goes on to explain that Monet never actually finished this piece, and ended up using it as collateral because he could not pay his rent. Once he retrieved the painting, it was in such a poor state that Monet chose to cut it up in order to preserve the majority of the piece. Without this knowledge, a viewer might just notice that the paintings had the same name, and miss the significance of the "rivalry" between the two artists. One also might see the odd shape of Monet's painting, and think that it was intentionally painted on two completely separate canvases.

*Seeing a "showdown" between Manet and Monet, each painting such similar scenes, helped me notice distinctive differences between the two painters, particularly surrounding issues of color and scale. Monet's painting is noticeably brighter, but I don't typically think of Manet as a painter with a dark color pallet, necessarily. This contrast allowed me to look back at Manet's works with a new perspective—one that makes me notice the color choice and style of his painting. As far as scale goes, Monet's painting is much larger, even though that is not even the entire painting. Of course, Monet has works like Water Lilies and other*

large paintings, but I do not think that I have ever seen a Manet that compares in size. This contrast made me realize that.



Figure 6C



Figure 6D

### Van Gogh's *The Bedroom*

In July 2019, I visited a Van Gogh exhibit in the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas. Upon arrival, I felt underwhelmed. It did not take me long to realize that *The Bedroom* and *Sunflowers* looked a bit off. I read the fine print of the wall text, and discovered that many of the works in the exhibit were reproductions, including *The Bedroom*. I carefully observed the impasto techniques implemented by the artist that replicated these famous works, and found myself critiquing the reproduction, even though I had never seen the real paintings before. At the Musée d'Orsay, I got to put my theory to the test. As it turns out, I was right. The real Van Gogh's *Bedroom* (Figure 6C) was immensely more impressive than the reproduction. The colors in the reproduction (Figure 6D) were blander, the impasto was sloppier, and the brushstrokes

were clearly less thought-out. Even with the technology and precision tools available to artists today, a reproduction of a masterpiece cannot give the viewer the same experience as the real thing can.

## **CHAPTER VII**

Musée de l'Orangerie

Paris, France

## Water Lilies

After Claude Monet gifted his series of eight *Water Lilies* paintings to France, the paintings were installed according to a specific plan and specially-designed rooms in the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris (Figure 7A).<sup>15</sup> Twenty-two panels line the curved walls of the carefully-constructed space, but some remaining panels are now on display in the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, as discussed in Chapter III.

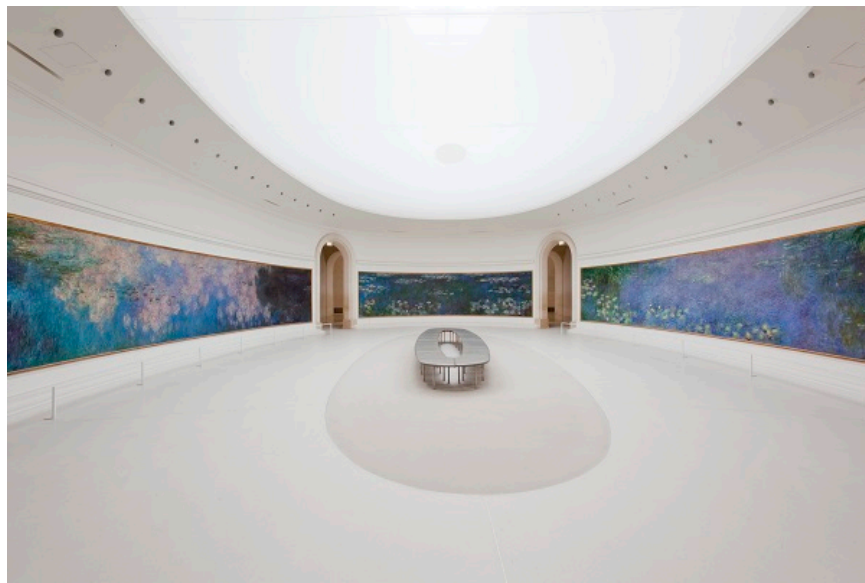


Figure 7A

*Sitting in the center of the white oval room with the natural sunlight pouring in from the ceiling made the viewing experience seem sacred. Everyone inside seemed to have a mutual understanding that the space was supposed to serve as a place for quiet reflection, rather than shutter noises and loud chatter. The wide open space allowed everyone to spread out between the two rooms, find*

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<sup>15</sup> VIVE Arts. *Musée de l'Orangerie*. Photograph. Digital file.

*a spot on the bench that mimics the shape of the room itself, or quietly walk around the border of the walls to appreciate Monet's paintings in such a favorable environment.*

Musée de l'Orangerie's *Water Lilies* display creates a very interesting contrast to that of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. At MoMA, the relatively low ceilings and artificial lighting constrain the paintings in a way that is unimaginable after seeing the free and bright display at the Musée de l'Orangerie.

## **CHAPTER VIII**

Centre Pompidou

Paris, France

All relatively unknown architects, Richard Rogers, Renzo Piano and Gianfranco Franchini created the Centre Georges Pompidou. From the outside, the Pompidou looks like a hamster cage, to be frank. The architecture of the museum stands out severely from the traditional Parisian buildings and cafes surrounding it. The exterior is eccentric, but so is the art housed within.

### Fontaine, Marcel Duchamp

Marcel Duchamp's fountain is among the Pompidou's collection. As shown in Figure 8A, Fontaine, or Fountain, is a urinal that Duchamp signed "R. Mutt 1917." Duchamp created the idea of the Readymade as an art piece—a concept that proved to be so shocking that it was rejected by the jury for the first, and only, exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York in 1917.<sup>16</sup>

The display of this famous Dada piece, in a glass case on a pedestal, is a perfect example of Alpers' museum effect. Even an inexperienced visitor to the museum would stop to observe the peculiar "sculpture" on display, and experienced visitors would be drawn to the famous piece out of recognition. Automatically, since it is displayed in



Figure 8A

<sup>16</sup> Howarth, Sophie. "Marcel Duchamp, Fountain." Edited by Jennifer Mundy. Tate. Last modified August 2015. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-t07573>.



such an important way, this piece becomes important to anyone who sees it, regardless of whether they are familiar with Duchamp.

### Sightlines

One of the beneficial internal design aspects of the Pompidou is that many of the gallery spaces are long halls that span the length of the building, with walls that separate individual smaller gallery rooms, without completely shutting them off from one another. This creates the potential for the curators to make wonderful

sightlines from one room into another, provoking the experienced viewer to think critically and make connections between the pieces in the different rooms. Figure 8B exhibits a perfect example of a sightline in the Pompidou. One can stand in the spot pictured above, and see Matisse's *Fillette au*



Figure 8B

*Chat Noir*, and Picasso's *Buste de Femme* in one glance. These two portraits, when displayed within the same sightline, offer a great comparison that allows an experienced viewer to re-visit each portrait and admire the differences in the two painting styles of the artists.

Similar to the Guggenheim, the flow from one space into another is intuitive, and helps the visitor travel in a way that does not distract from the art. There is less of an issue trying to keep track of which rooms one has entered, because the galleries are, for the most part, arranged in a linear fashion that makes the museum visitor's journey quite natural.

## **CHAPTER IX**

Centrale Montemartini

Rome, Italy

The Centrale Montemartini, which functioned as an electrical power plant just south of Rome's center until the 1960s, is a dedicated industrial interior complete with turbines and giant boilers that contrast with the works of ancient Greek and Roman art housed within. About 20 years after the abandonment of the building, a local utility company in charge of managing the plant, proposed turning the space into an energy and water museum.<sup>17</sup> In 1995, five years after the building's renovations had been completed, the museum opened—but not as a water and energy museum. As the Capitoline Museum underwent renovations, the Centrale Montemartini was chosen as the site for a temporary exhibition of a collection of works from the Capitoline complex entitled “The machines and the gods.” Once the construction at the Capitoline was completed, Centrale Montemartini was designated the permanent space for the Musei Capitolini's newer collections.<sup>18</sup> Today, the Centrale Montemartini houses hundreds of ancient sculptures and other antiquities originating between fifth century BC and fourth century AD.

The structure of the power plant, with its tall ceilings and spacious rooms intended for enormous pieces of machinery, serves as the perfect space to display things like “the colossal head, arm and feet of an eight-meter-tall statue found in the Area Sacra de Largo Argentina,”<sup>19</sup> (Figure 9A). This example of the



Figure 9A

<sup>17</sup> "Centrale Montemartini." A View on Cities. Accessed December 12, 2019. <https://www.aviewoncities.com/rome/centralemontemartini.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> "History of the Museum." Centrale Montemartini. Accessed December 12, 2019. [http://www.centralemontemartini.org/en/il\\_museo/storia\\_del\\_museo](http://www.centralemontemartini.org/en/il_museo/storia_del_museo).

<sup>19</sup> "Centrale Montemartini." A View on Cities. Accessed December 12, 2019. <https://www.aviewoncities.com/rome/centralemontemartini.htm>.

translatable functionality of a repurposed space is a testament to the potential successes that can be associated with transforming a building into a gallery space—like the Turbine Room in the Tate Modern.

*The Centrale Montemartini was virtually empty, besides a school fieldtrip, when we visited. This allowed us to walk around freely and take our time exploring the pieces and reading about them—a stark contrast to our experience with crowds at the Louvre or at the Musée d’Orsay. The giant ceilings and spacious factory setting at Centrale Montemartini created an echo in the turbine rooms that made me feel like I was in an abandoned warehouse with treasures hidden inside.*

In literature, writers use juxtaposition to create comparisons or to highlight areas of contrast. Similarly, visual juxtapositions, such as those created by placing an ancient Roman sculpture in front of a metal piece of machinery (Figure 9B), serve to emphasize and point out specific elements of the displayed visual representation. The boilers and machinery throughout the interior create



Figure 9B

an unexpected contrast that enhances the viewing and appreciation of the displayed antiquities

for an experienced viewer. For an inexperienced visitor to the museum, however, the large machinery threatens to overwhelm the smaller antiquities and statues.

## **CHAPTER X**

### The Vatican Museum

The Vatican Museum serves as stark contrast to the Frick Collection, where an inexperienced visitor might miss the art on the walls due to the ornate decoration of the rooms within the building. This is far less likely at the Vatican. The frescos painted on the walls and ceilings of these places in the Vatican cannot be missed, because they are the *walls*.

### **Collection of Contemporary Art**

After walking through rooms decorated with elaborate frescos done by Raphael and Michelangelo, Vatican visitors find their way into a wide corridor with enormous paintings by Henri Matisse lining the walls. Beyond these, up some stairs, there is a multi-room gallery filled with art that is much more modern than anything else on the tour. Pieces by Diego Rivera, Gauguin, and Van Gogh create a striking contrast to the frescos and classical paintings in the previous rooms, similar to Soulages' exhibit in the Louvre discussed in Chapter V. An inexperienced visitor might breeze through these rooms, as the paintings themselves do not seem to clearly connect to anything about the Vatican. However, an experienced museum-goer might travel through the side galleries, and notice some of the religious themes hidden in these contemporary art pieces, and compare them to the classical paintings around the Vatican Museum. The placement of this gallery directly before the entrance to the Sistine Chapel creates a spectacular juxtaposition for the visitor.

### **Sistine Chapel**

In the case of the Sistine Chapel, the visual representations housed inside remain in the space where their creators intended for them to be displayed. Even so, the experience of walking into the chapel creates a certain effect—similar to Alpers' 'museum effect,' that causes the

viewer to elevate what they see inside or assign the objects some religious significance. The space not only serves as a physical room in which the viewer sees the work of art, but also as a means for providing an overall aura of spiritual importance and gravity that adds to the viewer's experience and perception of the pieces that reside there. The fact that these paintings by Michelangelo have not been removed from their original setting preserves the religious sanctity of the pieces, and allows the viewer to relish that piece of history and spirituality. With near certainty, I can say that if removed from the Sistine Chapel's ceiling and hung on a wall, Michelangelo's masterpiece would still be greatly appreciated and adored, but the viewer would lose that aura of spiritual significance, and therefore might perceive the work of art differently.

*I could have very well sat on the bench in the Sistine Chapel for hours. Even if I had not possessed any art historical background about Michelangelo or frescos, I believe I still could have marveled forever at the mastery. It is slightly overwhelming, how much there is to look at, but at the same time that is what makes it so amazing. The fact that one individual painted the ceiling so precisely, on wet plaster, is unfathomable. The atmosphere inside was similar to that of the Water Lilies display at the Musée de l'Orangerie—sacred.*

The nearly silent environment and prohibition of photography create prime conditions for complete adoration of the painted ceiling and walls, while also providing a sense of religious sanctity with the altar at the front and cross hung above.



## The Pietà

Inside of St. Peter's Basilica, Michelangelo's famous sculpture, the Pietà, sits behind a large glass case (Figure 10A). This display comes out of a necessity to protect this masterpiece, as it was damaged by a museum visitor in 1972 when he attacked it with a hammer. In a way, the display compares nicely to that of *Mona Lisa*. Viewers cannot get very close at all, and there is a heavy crowd around the glass. In a space with so many objects of visual interest—from the painted ceilings above and the intricate detail of everything, it is conceivable that a viewer might miss the Pietà if it were not displayed with such importance.



Figure 10A

## CONCLUSION

Having an awareness of environment and an understanding of the museum effect that Alpers describes helps us understand how the space in which a painting or work of art exists alters the viewer's perception of that piece. The buildings and immediate surroundings of the visual representations can overwhelm or enhance the viewer's experience, and can either add to or detract from the visitor's appreciation for the art. Certain environments, such as the Frick Collection, or the Salon Carré where the Soulages works were displayed in the Louvre, can elevate the meaning of the works for an advanced viewer, while overwhelming the meaning of the works for an inexperienced visitor.

What I have learned from this on-site research is that the following variables in an exhibition space influence a viewer's experience and understanding of a work of art:

- 1) the local geography of an art piece, such as the paintings surrounding it, or the style of display
- 2) the building or interior space itself
- 3) the supplemental wall texts and labels explaining the history and significance of the piece

It is also important to note that each viewer approaches the experience of viewing visual art from the point of view of their expectations or previous experience—or lack of experience—of what the artist has depicted. We might compare a viewer's art experience to a set of tools that he or she brings with them into the gallery. Because of the subjective nature of this “toolbox,” each viewer's experience will be unique. The job of the curator is to create as many supplements to a viewer's toolbox as is possible, including everything from comparative hangings—like the juxtaposition of the two *Déjeuner* paintings—to the usual wall-texts.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Caroline Jones is from Houston, Texas, and came to UT to study Business Honors and Plan II. She also picked up a minor in Art History during her sophomore year, which helped inspire her to write on this topic. During her time at UT, Caroline served as the president of her sorority, Kappa Kappa Gamma, and worked as a Plan II Physics tutor. After graduation, Caroline is moving to Washington, D.C.