A Revolution in Art Viewership

Recent decades have witnessed an unprecedented revolution in art viewership and art education through the development of digitized museum collections and searchable databases. The potential of reaching and interacting with new audiences has caused museums to rethink their educational platforms and virtual connectivity. In addition to digitized collections, technology enhancements have transformed in-person museum experiences through the use of handheld tablets, downloadable apps, and gallery interactives allowing viewers to harness content from a variety of sources and platforms. Never before has art viewership been so egalitarian: we don’t even have to go to a museum to be enlightened, all we have to do is click, swipe, and tap our way through the virtual museum space.

But does all of this ease and facility come at a price? Is viewing an image of an artwork different from experiencing an actual work, or even perhaps, a printed copy of it? Do digitally printed copies differ from digital reproductions viewed on a screen? Although the questions might seem like a study in semiotics, they relate to the longstanding concern over the authenticity of reproduced material: does artwork lose its aura through the replication process? Moving beyond traditional reproduction methods (i.e. prints), does the digital reproduction of an artwork transform it to nothing more than pixels on a screen, capable of infinite reduplication?

The purpose of this study is to consider the virtual museum space as a tool for art historical e-learning, including the benefits and shortfalls of simulated e-viewing experiences. Although a rich theoretical framework exists in relationship to the concept of simulated experience in an increasingly technological world, very little research explores the potential of the virtual e-learning within the visual arts. This paper will unite practical with theoretical to support that argument that, although virtual viewing space is not a perfect substitute for live-viewing, the capabilities of high-resolution digital imagery and museum simulations allow for an enhanced viewing experience.

From Elitism to Egalitarianism: The Transformation of Cultural Heritage

Although its roots stretch back to the age of Vitruvius and Aristotle, the modern concept of the public art museum developed largely in the nineteenth century, as a byproduct of the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and the shift in power from royal courts to more democratic social and political systems. Art collections were no longer constrained to aristocratic cabinets of curiosity and the playrooms of royal palaces, as evidenced by the historical turning points of the opening of the Ashmolean (1683) and the Louvre (1793). Museums, particularly within the United States (and particularly post-Civil War), soon became tools for educating the populace, enlightening the masses, and even uniting the nation under the auspices of a shared cultural identity. Art critics functioned as intermediaries between artworks and viewers, ushering in an age of increased visual literacy. But yet, the power construct remained very much intact: although the role of Medici-style patrons and benefactors declined, critics and the art institution stepped in to define the purpose, role, and characteristics of art.
With the rise of Modernism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the institution played an even stronger role. No longer was the value of art understandable on its face. The average viewer, faced with abstraction and experimentation, was often locked out of the artistic code, not wanting to admit s/he didn’t understand the profound sublimity of overlapping squares of color, dripped skeins of paint, or empty glass cubes. Critics, curators, and historians became indispensable in helping viewers to navigate this brave new world of art. They defined the essential qualities of modernist styles, explained the significance of avant-garde trends, and predicted “the next big thing.”

In the late twentieth century, the postmodernists would actively seek to change this power construct by creating works that were more accessible and inclusive, although the diverse and eclectic nature of Postmodernism would still necessitate the need of an intermediary. In many ways, aesthetics has never been a completely neutral or egalitarian zone. Art creation, ownership, and consumption has always been subject to competing power constructs, be it from patrons, governments, or the art institution itself, and until the past few decades, the only way of experiencing historical artworks was either to visit collections in museums, or to imagine the experience through printed imagery. The Internet added a third possibility: the virtual viewing experience. But even this was limited at first, and it was not until the past decade that museums actively sought to digitize their collections (using new high-resolution capabilities) for a more universal viewing experience.