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Multi-Sensory Approaches to Art in Museum Settings: A Curator's View

As a curator of European sculpture, decorative arts and Judaica, and someone interested in the way works of art supported devotional experience in medieval and Renaissance Europe, I always have in my mind the question of bringing objects to life through sensory activation. Museum practice has traditionally worked against this impulse, leaving curators to rely almost entirely on the visual experience of the objects. "Please Don't Touch" signs abound in museum galleries, often along with explanations that touching objects can damage the works, eroding fine details and leaving the oil and dirt from fingers to accumulate over time, creating stains. Paintings are framed, their surfaces sometimes covered with protective glass. Sculptures are presented on pedestals or roped off to discourage visitors from getting too close. More fragile and smaller works are placed in cases with glass or plexiglass bonnets, to protect them from theft as well as the touch of curious hands. At the same time, museums today are prioritizing visitors' experiences of the works of art in our galleries. Creating a visitor-centered approach is the work of teams of curators, conservators, educators, interpretation specialists, museum designers ,and architects. All contribute to the potential for multi-sensory experience of works in a museum setting.[1]

Privileging sight over other experiences is no longer enough. As a museum curator, I am excited to try to bring audiences into close contact with objects I oversee, and I often select works exactly because they engage the senses. Many pieces require interaction through handing to function properly. Whenever possible, I write labels that encourage the viewer to imagine the sensory aspects of the works, in the hope of calling forth a response or a memory that can enliven the experience. Even if the visitor cannot actually touch them, looking closely to understand the objects, along with descriptions, guides, and additional visual images, can suggest what it might be like to use them. The objects themselves often reveal the ways they might have once engaged the sense of smell (open work on pomanders and spice containers

1 C. Classen, *The Museum of the Senses*, London and New York, 2017; G. Black, *The Engaging Museum. Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement*, New York, 2012.

allowed the scents to permeate the air), touch (jewels, small bronze sculptures, and books were meant to be worn, held, carried, opened and closed), and even taste (describing the contents of a chocolate pot or a honey jar can help to bring the memory of tastes to the viewers' consciousness). Display of objects can also set a scene: a table set for dining, for example, can enliven the experience of looking at plates, serving vessels and utensils, candlesticks, and decorative objects like small porcelain sculptures, creating a sense of immediacy even if the visitor cannot actually touch the objects (Fig. 1). All of these activations seek to provide a visitor with a more complete experience of an object that may be behind a barrier.

Fig. 1. Angelica Lloyd Russell Gallery (Europe 1700–1800), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (November 2010)

Museums sometimes include soundscapes, music, and audio-guides to provide shared or individual access to sounds appropriate for works in gallery spaces. At the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), for example, the musical instruments collection is frequently used in the galleries, so that the instruments can be played and so that visitors can hear their music. Recordings using these instruments are available on the MFA's website, and YouTube videos record them being played in the galleries. At the same time, setting music into appropriate gallery installations enhances the visitors' experience of the surrounding artworks, creating an environment for them. Sound is so central to the meaning of these objects that it is almost unthinkable not to use them in this way

It is harder to activate objects in the collection that once relied on sensory experiences beyond sight and sound. Objects that can be touched are so labeled,

reproductions are sometimes introduced that can be handled, examples of materials are presented to provide a sense of the "feel" of works in that medium. Aromas can be filtered into the air to convey, for example, the incense that accompanies ritual practices, and to help animate censers, spice containers, and perfume bottles. On certain occasions, taste can be introduced into installations with the controlled presentation of food or drink. Such interventions happen rarely and sometimes only for small groups, partly because of the challenges they present, including visitor sensitivities to such powerful stimuli. Special exhibitions can provide opportunities to convey sensory aspects as well. The Walters Art Museum, for example, presented an exemplary show *A Feast for the Senses. Art and Experience in Medieval Europe*, with objects selected specifically because they called for the engagement of the senses. The installation sought to evoke all the senses, including smell, taste, and touch, and the show was shaped by current scholarship on the history of the senses, presented in the catalogue.[2]

Artworks, especially figural art, allow for another kind of sensory experience that can help the beholder experience the work: the kinesthetic response to art, the feeling that when you see another body performing an action, you can sense it in your own body, almost as if you too were performing that motion or gesture. Audiences, sitting still in their seats watching dancers dance, can experience a muscular response, an empathetic sense of the motion they see. The same is true when watching sporting events. When viewers look at a sculpture like *Eternal Springtime* by Auguste Rodin (Fig. 2), an artist who deeply explored expressive postures and movements of the body, they may respond on this visceral, elemental level. They can feel the motion and the emotion in their own bodies. A similar sense of motion can also be seen and felt in abstract art, when one can feel the directional, spatial, and emotional cues of a piece. Recognition of this sense also supports including performance in gallery spaces: if you encourage visitors to watch real people dancing and moving in close proximity to works of art, the kinesthetic responses to actual movement may translate into similar responses when looking at works of art. Dance, yoga, life drawing, as well as other activities inspired by objects in a museum setting, like poetry and creative writing or story-telling, are popular programs, and can engage many senses, ideas, emotions, and stimulate creativity in the visitor.

Once you consider a viewer's somatic, kinesthetic, interior responses, it becomes clear that many different kinds of art can elicit these feelings. The human mind allows a person to imagine that they are in the same posture of a figure in a painting, projecting oneself into that scene. This mirroring is embedded in the human brain from infancy, as a baby learns through emulation and through touch.[3] Religious

2 *A Feast for the Senses. Art and Experience in Medieval Europe*, ed. M. Bagnoli, The Walters Museum of Art, New Haven and New York, 2016, with further bibliography.

3 M. Paterson, "Movement for Movement's Sake? On the Relationship Between Kinaesthesia and Aesthetics", *Essays Philos*, 2012, 13, pp. 471–497; C. Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*, Cambridge, 2009; B. Montero "Proprioception as an Aesthetic Sense", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 2006, 64, no. 2, pp. 231–42.

Fig. 2. Auguste Rodin, French, 1840–1917, *Eternal Springtime*, modeled about 1881, cast about 1916–17, bronze, 62 cm (24 3/4 in.). Bequest of William A. Coolodge, 1993.50

Fig. 3. *Saint Francis receiving the Stigmata*, Italian (possibly Urbino), 16th century, tin-glazed earthenware (maiolica), 36.8 x 33 x 22.9 cm (14 1/2 x 13 x 9 in.). Gift of Charles B. Barnes and W. D. Gooch, Executors of the Estate of George R.White, 53.2912

art often relies on the senses to activate the emotions and inspire spiritual experience.[4] Medieval and Renaissance prayer manuals, for example, urged the devotee to imagine the he or she was present at a sacred event, which created pious sentiments, leading to a sense of empathy and closeness to the divine. Works of art symbiotically encouraged similar interaction, for the same purposes, and relied on the kinesthetic responses of devotees looking at and emulating the figures in the scenes. This sense would have been encouraged through actual touching of objects. We read about Renaissance parents encouraging their children to perform acts that might be described as "holy play". They might arrange objects into little scenes, including dolls representing the infant Jesus swaddled and placed in a crib, they could place flowers and candles before these figures, and say prayers before makeshift altars. This kind of interaction with objects surely continued into adulthood, as suggested by objects like a 16th century maiolica *Saint Francis receiving the Stigmata* (Fig. 3) in the MFA's

Fig. 4. *The Last Supper;* Italian (Faenza),16th century, tin-glazed earthenware (maiolica), 21.6 x 32.6 x 58.1 cm (8 1/2 x 12 13/16 x 22 7/8 in.). Bequest of R. Thornton Wilson in memory of Florence Ellsworth Wilson, 1983.61

4 A. E. Sanger, S. T. Kulbrandstad eds., *Sense and the Senses in Early Modern Art and Cultural Practice*, Farnham, 2017; E. E. Benay, L. Rafanelli eds., *Faith, Gender and the Senses in Italian Renaissance and Baroque Art*, Burlington, 2015; A. Randolph, *Touching Objects. Intimate Experiences of Italian Fifteenth-Century Art*, New Haven and London, 2014; P. Dent ed., *Sculpture and Touch*, Farnham and Burlington, 2014.

collection, which has little channels to receive flowers, and a small fountain that could have held water, or this *Last Supper* (Fig.4), where the figures and stools were once moveable.[5] Pointing out these functions and the intimate histories of objects may help the viewer feel a sense of personal engagement with objects that are centuries old. Another way to engage a sense of touch in the viewer is to focus on the technical aspects of works of art, providing explanations of how an object was made, possibly opening up the experience of creation to the viewer, who conceptually becomes one with the artist or craftsperson who made the work.

Visitors come to museums hoping for meaningful experiences, and museum professionals hope to fulfill these hopes. Museum-goers can be encouraged to "sense" the collection in the fullest possible way and we should never forget that there are many ways to apprehend a work of art. This multi-sensory approach also allows visitors who are blind or have limited vision to experience works of art through their other senses, especially touch and the somatic sense. At its best, a museum visit will create new sensations, new ideas, new emotions, new memories, and stimulate creativity, providing experiences that may stay with the visitor long beyond the time spent in the museum.

5 Z. Sarnecka, "Experiencing La Verna at Home: Italian Sixteenth-Century Maiolica Sanctuaries and Shrines", *Religions* 2020, 11, 6, doi:10.3390/rel11010006.