

## *Museum as Meditative Environment*

Elena Polyudova, The Defense Language Institute, United States

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### **Abstract**

The article considers a special term "meditative space" regarding modern museums' environment. The term is considered in the context of modern venues in Museum Education that are concentrated on interactive communication with visitors. In accordance with a brief description of the contemporary museum philosophy, the author emphasizes the importance of keeping some elements of traditional expositions. Such a conventional demonstration way allows for the established communication style between museum visitors and works of art. Creating clusters of meditative space in modern museums meet a visitor's need for artifacts' independent perception. These clusters have to be planned by curators who need to be aware of the necessity of such silent activities in the museum's environment. To confirm the premise, the author provides examples from the aesthetic experience perception as well as views of modern researchers. The article provides examples of the meditative spaces organized in modern museums, the specific aim to give visitors a possibility to enjoy y their inner reflection during a museum visit.

Keywords: Aesthetic Experience, Museum Pedagogy, Meditative Space, Museum Environment, Modern Museum, Interactive Communication

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## Introduction

The article deals with the particular term "meditative space" in relation to the modern Museum environment. This term is considered in the context of modern Museum education platforms focused on interactive communication with visitors. In accordance with the brief description of modern Museum philosophy, the author emphasizes the importance of preserving some elements of traditional exhibitions. This traditional method of demonstration is well-established style of communication between Museum visitors and works of art. However, there is a need for special quiet place visitors might need to find self-retrospection and calmness while processing information about the collection. Creating clusters of meditative space in modern museums meets the visitor's need for the independent perception of artifacts. Planned by curators who are aware of the need for such silent activities in the Museum environment, these clusters could turn museums from silent set of artifacts to places of critical thinking and consideration. Several examples from the perception of aesthetic experience are provided in the article as well as examples of meditative spaces organized in modern museums.

The problem of the interactive museum recently has become central to the development of both general and museum pedagogy. Museums and schools around the world discuss issues of active interaction between the museum and the visitor. Many theoretical studies and practical developments in modern museum pedagogy offer new museums' concepts, define new strategies for developing museum activities and museum pedagogy. There are different options of understanding the place of the museum in the modern world. In the museums as the "museum-informative environment" (M. S. Kagan) visitors experience cognitive challenges, gain knowledge about collections and artifacts. The informative environment represents fields of cultural heritage that could be explored in a museums through exhibitions. The "information and cumulative culture of the museum" (Flier) collects cultural memory. Altogether with personal experience during the visit, it accumulates cultural background knowledge. To organize the better museum experience, cultural classification of museums (Sapanzha) is needed and was developed. For understanding "museum perception" (S. V. Pshenichnaya) and move it to the more developed level, museums constantly continue working on different types of materials for individual and group visits. The "typology of dialogue" of visitors with works of art (K. Dufresne-Tasse) gives museum educators the instrument for efficient management of visits. Overall, the museum space as a term combines all types of activities and is also considered from the point of view of interactive communication with visitors based on V. Benjamin's ideas about contact with "living" and "mobile" traditions represented by works of art in museums. The "constructivist museum" (Hein) develops educational methods in modern circumstances of visual culture and technology life. To achieve this goal, numerous approaches and programs are being developed in the field of museum pedagogy from the perspective of artistic perception development (B. A. Stolyarov). The majority of methods are based on interactive (G. Black) and socio-cultural activities of the museum (E. P. Olesina). In general, modern museum is considered as a social, educational platform (Hein). The endless list of existing theoretical research and practical developments could be discussed extensively for Museum Education is trying to hear museum visitors and to be heard by them too.

## Methodology

It is important to provide active involvement of visitors in museum activities. However, all the activities being interactive and socially engaged, there is a lack of having in museums a space for communicating with oneself. It is a more traditional and fundamental function of the museum: reflexive perception of the originals, the sensual contemplation (L. Feuerbach) and the special ways of connecting concepts and observations (I. Kant). "The imaginary museum" A. Malro combines the "impractical emotional activity" of a museum visitor into a single discourse of living an individual aesthetic experience while visiting the museum. Why this question was asked in a situation of active development of social projects and transformation of the role of museums in modern society. It would seem that the main requirement is speed and quickness of reaction. Many studies confirm both the clip-like thinking of modern man, and his impatience in the process of obtaining information, the desire to get search results quickly and effectively, emphasizing the dominant role of social networks and a constant connection to the Internet. Personal, psychological, and pedagogical qualities of both modern youth and adults are studied in connection with the constant use of social networks. The principle of individual psychological organization deepens in introversion and introspective thinking. To process new information, our brain needs time. With lack of the time the informational flow is rejected. Eye-opener for seeing the originals and perceive the silence of painting. Find yourself through artworks by immersing into the colors and silent sounds of a painting.

The concept of the deep silent perception could be expanded to a concept of the meditative perception. It does not intend to entertain, but to open a new world of images, phenomena, and information carefully selected by curators for demonstration. Getting into a Museum that does not entertain, but represents, the visitor enters a world that needs to be known and understood, which requires "concentration and immersion" (V. Benjamin). To realize understanding, in accordance with the laws of perception, the human psyche needs to go through three phases. The first is informational when phenomena appear in their true form. The second phase is a surprise, finding what is strange, incomprehensible, new, and so on. (This list may be endless, just as the moments of surprise are endless.) The third phase is searching for your place, yourself, in this space of phenomena and information. Search for the relationship between the presented and your experience, knowledge, and thoughts. Based on reflection, on the basis of such a search, there is a personal increment in a variety of directions, from the expansion of the information field (I did not know this – now I know) to the essence of the phenomena of disclosure (how people of a specific era thought and perceived the world). The peculiarity of the perception process is that we cannot program a sequence of phase processes. Often, when visiting a museum, the visitor is first surprised by something, and only then complements the interest with the necessary knowledge. Or, vice versa, coming to the Museum to learn something ("see" - the purpose of their visit, visitors determine how often), they experience a powerful surge of emotional perception, followed by both informational and reflexive phases. In this context, we would like to mention the concept of a model of Museum visitors' behavior, developed by the Canadian scholar K. Dufresne-Tasse. This model is based on the thesis that any visit to a Museum is, first of all, a dialogue. And just as a dialogue can be both successful and unsuccessful,

so a visit to a Museum cannot take place, that is, leave no trace, but can become effective, accompanied by feelings of "admiration and immersion" (Dufresne, 187).

The tourist industry demands displaying masterpieces, making museums "places of pilgrimage" (Borja-Villel). Business and commercial interests dictate ways and methods of museums' work, and is reflected in the organization of work, and in the ways of communicating with visitors. Modern museum narrate and engage in a new entertaining way, speaking with their audience in a special language of amusement. They respond to the trends of the time. And even with the modern fragmentation of perception of the world, reflected in the fragmentation of modern exhibitions and expositions, it is necessary to find opportunities for expressing general theoretical, aesthetic, and artistic concepts for building a meditative communication process with works. It could be named a "meditative space."

### **The meditative space: definition and museum experiments**

The meditative space of a museum is a special reflexive state reached by a visitor in the museum during the process of viewing a permanent collection or exhibition. It exists as a part of aesthetic perception and reflection. A person is deeply concentrated on his/her internal experiences in the process of contemplating on works of art. It intersects two worlds: the inner world of a person and the physical reality of the museum and its exposition. Thus, the visitor, being physically present at the exhibition, creates a specific additional space for their perception, impressions, experiences, and reflections. One of the factors that activate the meditative space is the presence of original works of art that carry an impressive aesthetic and emotional charge ("aura", according to Benjamin). They are also culturally representative of a particular epoch's style ("living and moving traditions", according to V. Benjamin). All of these factors immerse a person in internal reflections and, as a result, create the preconditions for "silent perception". Forestalling the argument about the possibility of using the term "contemplation", the attention should be drawn to the moment of presence inherent in this concept. Also, contemplation presupposes a response to a particular object. Meditativeness in this context emphasizes the intermediate state in which a museum visitor finds himself: physically, he no longer contemplates the work of art, but it is present in his perception, generating cultural analogies, questions, and internal dialogue. The term meditative space covers the entire complex of feelings, thoughts, and associations evoked by one or more works of art. This is an incomplete process of including a work of art in an internal museum that could be called "pre-state" that requires time and unusual thoughtfulness and mood.

Hence, the meditative space could be defined as a special form of the museum visitor's state based on the aesthetic perception of the original works of art. This space can be maintained by museum employees at the physical level using certain means of organizing the museum's segments and spaces. These segments could be useful to overcome visitors' "museum fatigue" (Black, 66) – "a special physical and mental state that occurs in visitors after a certain time spent in the museum" (Black, 66). Although the difference between the age and psychological features of this condition was not distinguished by age, education, and other criteria, organizing special zones with seats helps to regulate visitors' flow and relieve this fatigue. They could be allocated in the most important areas for familiarization with the help of signs, color zoning or thematic structuring of the exposition (Black, 92). The concept is important

and could have a further development toward the idea of the meditative space: for an unprepared visitor, it will be the “museum fatigue”; for a person with the reflexive experience, it could be a “meditative space”, a place of solitude and reflection. For example, the State Tretyakov Gallery (Moscow, Russia) has recently created a special “living room” zone in the middle of the entire exposition (<https://www.tretyakovgallery.ru/about/projects/gostinaya-novoy-tretyakovki-i-arzamas/>). The room is decorated in the style of 60s of XXth century with the minimalistic aesthetics of colors, furniture, and the interior’s details. The living room has books, comfortable chairs, coffee tables, and lamps. All the details create a special ambience of a cozy space for rest, relaxation, and nice friendly conversation. The zone became very popular: people gather there to chat, to look through the books and magazines, and simply to spend time in silence. The living room is intentionally located in the middle of the gallery to help people find a space of solitude and contemplation. Thoughtfully created, such zones not only support visitors, but also advance the concept of modern museums to the level of being people’s places.

The meditative environment helps visitors to find themselves in the ocean of associations and information. For example, the Garage Museum (Moscow, Russia), modern avant-garde museum, organized a chamber exhibition “Dolphin in the Fountain” in March 2018, by Ando Vekua (...). This exhibition is about “moving deeper, deeper into the imagination and memories. ([https://tvrain.ru/lite/teleshov/artificial\\_selection/ledi\\_bred\\_prinuzhdenie-459716/](https://tvrain.ru/lite/teleshov/artificial_selection/ledi_bred_prinuzhdenie-459716/)). The exhibition itself was created as a meditative space that generates visitors’ reflection. The curator’s intention is clear and goes around the main concept of provoking visitors to look inside themselves.

Another example is even straightforward: museum experience advertises meditative tours in the National art Museum of Belarus (Minsk, Belarus). This program was organized and conducted by the cognitive-behavioral therapist Ekaterina Karpovich: "according to statistics, the average time a user spends in front of a picture is 17 seconds. And how much time does an artist spend to think about an idea and paint a picture? And how much intellectual information and sensory depth can you get in 17 seconds? Art requires attention, awareness, and time. Unfortunately, often our trips to museums are more like a marathon." (<https://www.the-village.me/village/culture/culture-news/266613-meditatsii-v-muzee>)

E. Karpovich was concerned about deep understanding of a work of art based on the time spent to perceive it. Her intentions were about real perception, when a person not only watch, but sees. Her methods provides a possibility to go from a viewer to a perceiver. This approach is one of the examples of the meditative space, a live meditative space, when a certain atmosphere of perception creates a special “meditative bubble” that surrounds a group of visitors. At this point, they stop being visitors, but become a part of the museum environment in all means.

All the examples indicate that the process of defining and creating the meditative space is a live process. It is developing in the modern world and could be considered as the response to the pressure of the virtual culture, technological challenges, lack of live communication, and the sense of community. It needs to be developed in different ways by curators and museum educators to turn museums into places of solace, self-reflection, and psychological comfort.

## **The meditative space for educational purposes**

From the educational point of view, this space is the perfect end to a museum visit. Whether it is possible to create a meditative space during the tour is a controversial and complex question. The first response to this question is, of course, denial - how can a collective inner meditative state be possible? The process of deep perception, as well as experience, is an internal process. However, our experience shows that when conducting excursions by an experienced curator for a prepared audience of visitors, this space gradually sublimates, uniting the group into a whole unit. There comes a "moment of truth" for the whole group when everyone finds their own way to reflect on the work in a common meditative space created, supported, and guided by a curator. Such excursions were conducted for high school students of the Lyceum #3, Dzerzhinsky city, Moscow Region. A part of the General education program was the subject "History of World Culture". The teacher integrated the study of a certain era of art with visits to the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. A visit either started or ended the study of a certain goal of understanding the arts. The visits were conducted by one curator, with whom the school teacher discussed some aspects of the integrated course. For example, the students' response to the previous tour; or the correlation between the informative material and the time allocated for the analysis of the artwork. This organization of work allowed the teacher to expand the horizons of perception of the Gallery's artworks in many directions, from the information field to the development of skills for analyzing a work of art. For the curator, this form of work was also interesting, since it allowed to trace the dynamics of the group's perception of art, along with an increasingly growing individual approach. Students became part of the curator's educational and excursion space, who knew each person by sight and knew the group's individual characteristics and capabilities. For students, this form of work was a revelation. These museum visits have developed their ability and skills to perceive and analyze art, but finally to form their personal meditative space. Later, on the basis of such excursions, students were able to create a kind of meditative space within the framework of classes at the school, which became possible also because these students have a particularly developed rich artistic imagination. After the integrated course, conducting "imaginary excursions" in the classroom became a favorite type of practical training.

In modern life, when too many people gather, the significance of the exhibits is devalued, and in the absence of silence, the visitor does not have the opportunity to enter into an internal dialogue with the work of art, enjoy contemplation, and think about the cultural relations of the work.

## **Conclusion**

The trends in the development of museum space during recent decades considered in the article led to the concept of meditative space as an invaluable part of modern museum activities. The definition and the examples demonstrate a new turn in informative and educational approaches in Museum Studies and praxis. The new methods do not put aside traditional forms of displays and exhibitions for this allows maintaining a classical, "informative", form of communication with works of art. However, the role of modern museums is polyfunctional, from developing social skills and cognitive improvement to creating a field for art perception, reflection, and inspiration. Even being socially active and entertaining, the museum will remain a

meeting place with art if it creates conditions for a meditative space for visitors. Understanding the need for the meditative space and creating special clusters help visitors think about their independent perception. It shows respect to visitors, generates their appreciation of collections and exhibitions. In the world of constant pressure of the digital culture, the museum space, traditional or innovative, remains the interactive platform of cultural heritage with the involvement of visitors in a dialogue, as well as with specially organized additional areas of recreation, privacy, and reflection.

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