

Aesthetic encounters and learning in the museum

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses how museum settings can provide opportunities for sensory and aesthetic encounters and learning. It draws on research into museum education programmes that included examinations of curatorial construction and display, observations of teaching and open-ended interviews with museum educators. The examples selected here focus on themes of display and learning to illustrate how aesthetic experiences can emerge as incidental adjuncts to learning in other fields. They also acknowledge how museums draw on aesthetic judgements to categorise or present objects and employ aesthetic artefacts and practices as representative devices of cultural engagement, especially in learning themes in the humanities. The studies show how museums can offer opportunities and skills, and cultivate dispositions to the examination of challenging ideas about aesthetic status, sensibility, interpretation or value. Examples of purposefully constructed sites for aesthetic learning show how museum educators have rethought ways of facilitating affective sensory experiences, and raising questions of aesthetic status, response and the social and cultural functions of the arts. The studies discussed here suggest that museums can provide dedicated opportunities to cultivate independent aesthetic thinking and debate about aesthetic ideas as lifelong skills and pleasures.

KEYWORDS

Contingency; learning aesthetics; museum education; sensory engagement

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This article asks how museum educators and visitors can capitalise on museum resources for exploring issues of aesthetic learning through sensory experience of, and responses to art objects, taste and judgement, art status and value, as well as particular cultural significance of art objects and displays. It argues that quite diverse kinds of museums may nurture sensory responses and learning experiences to provoke reflections on aesthetic ideas. This is significant because museum models for sensory and aesthetic learning often provide exemplary pedagogies that visiting teachers and students are able to transfer into their classrooms. The aim was to cultivate positive dispositions towards these kinds of aesthetic experience.

Learning, or ‘improvement’, has long been a key motivator of museum visitation (Tinio, Smith, & Smith, 2014, pp. 200, 201). Art objects often provide evidence for learning about different worlds, motivating positive engagements in cultural histories as well as learning about the artworks themselves. Culturally laden artefacts have the capacity to provoke student’s curiosities. They may also represent the ideals, values and practices of different cultural communities for learning in the social sciences (Clarke et al., 2002). Visual objects can provide texts to mediate learners’ appreciations of cultural knowledge or practices (Callow, 2012). Learning with art objects from different cultures may also illuminate students’ appreciations of significant objects of their own cultural worlds (López-Sintas, García-Álvarez, & Pérez- Rubiales, 2012).

Aesthetic encounters in museums may emerge as complementary adjuncts to learning in other curriculum fields or be the intentional focus of curatorial agendas. Thus, the sensory pleasure of a garden walk, or exploring aesthetic qualities of shape, colour, texture, smell or sound might offer incidental complements to a planned scientific investigation into description, identification, analysis and classification in a botanical museum (VanDusen, 2015). Conversely, learner interests might be intentionally focused on hands-on art learning and questions of aesthetic status, history or value through dedicated curatorial displays and pedagogies (Lane & Wallace, 2015). In these latter instances, up-close engagements with real art objects or engaging in art-making activities allow students to engage with qualities of surface, scale, mass or sound which they are unable to apprehend in reproductions. Thus somatic experiences and aesthetic sensations are able to inform learning and enhance the pervasive pleasure of the museum visit itself.

To investigate both incidental and intentional engagements in aesthetic encounters and learning in museums, this article focuses on four case study examples selected from a longer, five-year, investigation of educational practices in museums. The project has aimed to locate and document exemplary practices for enhancing learning about art in museum settings. The author, also sole researcher, visited art, ethno-historical and horticultural museums in New Zealand, UK, the USA and British Columbia. Data were collected in selected museums from observations of learning groups in action, first-hand examinations of curatorial practice and display, and interviews and correspondence with museum educators. The following examples draw on curatorial, display and interview-sourced data, and from museum education resource materials, or during informal museum visits. Data were gathered during single half-day museum visits in each instance. The first two examples examine established museum visit programmes that build on students' prior learning in their school classrooms. The third and fourth examples describe settings for more open-ended visits that introduce learners to, respectively, an unfamiliar cultural context, and ways of challenging perspectives on aesthetic themes. In all instances, the writer adopted the role of passive observer to maintain professional distance from observations or viewpoints framed in conversations. Each example has been selected to demonstrate specific perspectives on aesthetic experience or learning in a different setting.

The studies present examples of the ways museum settings engage sensory experiences, maintain aesthetic agendas, embrace constructivist paradigms and invite learner's discussions about questions of aesthetics. The examples thus examine, first, an interface between sensory experience, learning and aesthetic encounter; second, questions of how conceptual frameworks in museums might condition learning about art; third, how museums frame representations of art status and taste, and how they accommodate different interpretations of objects; and fourth, how museum displays can provoke learning conversations about aesthetic ideas. The research finds that museums can stimulate pleasure and learning through sensory experience; that they assume an institutional authority in allocating aesthetic status to objects and practices; and that through themes of aesthetic cognition and contingency, response and evaluation, museums are able to empower young people for making their own aesthetic explorations and judgements.

1. Alcatraz: Sensory experience, connection making and aesthetic engagement

The first case study documents a visit to US Penitentiary Alcatraz in San Francisco. It examines the ways incidental sensory experiences contributing to learning in the social sciences may provoke or inform the construction of imaginative, empathetic appreciations of distant experiences. It discovers how an innovative curatorial intervention enhanced both the cognitive and aesthetic dimensions of museum learning. Sensory encounters can enrich museum learning in different ways—by bringing new evidence to inform richer student appreciations, and by providing data to support historical interpretations. Generic inquiry pathways for the Golden Gates national Parks education programmes inform learning visits at Alcatraz. Students focus on key episodes in the island's history, as a lighthouse, fort, military prison and federal penitentiary, in the confinement of

prisoners of conscience and in its 1969 occupation by Indians of All Tribes. Students can also explore the natural history of its rocky shores.

Grades 5–12 visiting school class groups join the *Alcatraz Uncovered* ‘archaeological inquiry’ programme through its sequence of pre-visit, on-site and post-visit learning activities (Alcatraz, 2015a). Participants examine objects, site and key events to explore the layered histories of the institution and build skills of observation, critical thinking, inference and written and oral expression that may be transferable to learning beyond the island. The aim is that from their observations and analysis of evidence, students will construct situational narratives on themes selected from different periods in the institution’s histories. They may reflect then on the relationships between evidence, perception, analysis and interpretation as archaeological tools of the historian or intercultural explorer. Grades 6–8 curriculum objectives for the US national Standards in historical Thinking focus on concepts of historical narrative, chronological and spatial thinking and historical interpretation. The *Alcatraz Questioning Artefacts* online resource provides access to photographic archives, national Standards links and learning objectives, forensic archaeologist work charts and linked sequences of lesson plans to support extended classroom learning in the weeks following the visit (national Park Service, 2016).

This programme develops practical, transferable skills for study in the social sciences. For most students, however, the experience also encourages them to exercise their imaginative facilities in the interpretation of evidence and the reconstruction of events and personal narratives from the past. More tacit sensory learning underpins these imaginative processes. It seems impossible to explore Alcatraz without being conscious of its chill, damp air and the whining moans of wind and crashing of waves. Its labyrinthine corridors reveal confusing contrasts between darkness and shadowed depths, cold, hard concrete surfaces and stark grey-green walls. The disorienting spaces and harsh, metallic echoes tend to generate unnerving responses, enhancing an ambience of sorrow, resignation or anger and resentment. Together, these sensory phenomena meld to inform imaginative aesthetic constructions of the experience of incarceration.

The tangible, alienating experiences of loneliness, cold or darkness at Alcatraz signal its removal from the quotidian world. Visitors experience a transition across the harbour to enter these new spaces, isolated from the sensations of everyday time and place, movement, work or social intercourse: a removal into a world of spatial and emotional emptiness. In combination with the institution itself, and vestiges of its past in objects, photographs and documents, these experiences have the capacity to inform empathetic appreciations of the lives of military personnel, prisoners, protesting occupiers, or warders and their families. Embracing sensory phenomena as historical evidence realises the learning potentials of ‘sensing the past’ through processes of imaginative, empathetic reconstruction (Smith, 2014).

1.1. @Large: Unexpected aesthetic encounters on the rock

The installation *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz* (September 2014–April 2015) introduced new arrangements of sensory provocations into the usual visit experience there (Alcatraz, 2015b). Seven installations—*With Wind*, *Trace*, *Refraction*, *Stay Tuned*, *Yours Truly*, *Illumination* and *Blossom*—elicited responses to, or complemented, the harsh ambience of the penitentiary itself. Bringing the works of a creative artist into the Alcatraz setting introduced a stimulating aesthetic counterpoint that underscored the island’s pervasive sensory impact, and encouraged imaginative connection making between sometimes discordant ideas or perceptions.

The Spartan austerity of *Illumination* and *Stay Tuned* played on the colourless sensations of light and dark, silence or sound of the penitentiary spaces. *Illumination* introduced subtle interventions into the eerie play of faintly glowing beams of light in the darkness of cells and corridors. The effect was disconcerting, dissolving the spatial markers of corners, edges or planes through confusing

ambiguities of space, light and time. *Illumination* drew participants into the liminal experience of perpetual half-lights and suspension of time of a life of incarceration.

Stay Tuned reversed the murky intervention of *Illumination*, acting on the unforgiving surfaces and bars, and the cold light of naked bulbs in rows of tiny cells. Visitors moved through a confusing aural fabric of crackling radio-like sounds. Instrumental recordings blurred into fragments of Pussy Riot, Fela Kuti or the Tibetan singer Lolo. Broken segments of commentaries like Martin Luther King's 1967 address echoed themes of civil rights, incarceration and freedom in *@Large*, but the tacit suggestions were of the endless repetitions of prison life, evoked in the chant-like monotony of Muzak, prayer and meditation.

Blossom was arranged in the dark prison hospital wards (Alcatraz, 2015c). Toilets, basins and baths were filled with profusions of delicate, pure white, porcelain flowers. The juxtapositions of porcelain against porcelain, white on white, sterile hygiene against peeling paint and concrete walls echoed the tensional *yin/yang* harmonies of conventional Chinese gardens or garden and floral themes in monochrome ink painting. The intervention generated contrasts between artificial and real and prison deprivation against the rich fertility of the garden. Suggestions of solace in gifts of flowers to patients in hospital or of solemn funerary associations with floral tributes seemed discordant in this unforgiving setting. As in other *@Large* installations at Alcatraz, *Blossom* brought overt political provocations into play. The brittle flowers suggested an ironic reference to Mao Zedong's 'let a hundred flowers bloom' (Farago, 2014) of China's 1956 *Hundred Flowers Campaign*, a precarious moment of tolerance for free expression that was immediately followed by an uncompromising suppression of dissent (Alcatraz, 2015c).

These works played with contrasts between harsh ugliness and delicate beauty that echoed aesthetic themes introduced elsewhere in the Alcatraz experience. Their tense juxtapositions of motifs of detention and freedom crystallised the ironic allusions of the exhibition's title. *@Large* articulated a reflection on the tensions between physical incarceration and the imaginative freedom of the mind. It positioned themes of political repression against freedoms of conscience and expression of beliefs. These political provocations reflected also on Ai Weiwei's own incarceration as an 'enemy of the state' (Kóvskaya, 2015). For Ai, the central issue in the *@Large* installations is freedom: the freedom of expression of the artist and the right to social and political freedom are synonymous. He argues that the central purpose for art is to protect and fight for freedom (Ai, 2015).

The confrontations of Ai's interventions generated challenging questions for students visiting during this period. Adaptations to the penitentiary's guided inquiry learning model during *@Large* encouraged students to question and debate these themes of incarceration and freedom, to contextualise them into the histories of confinement of conscientious objectors of Alcatraz itself. Inquiry conversations were enhanced through 'facilitative dialogue programmes' contrived to open informed conversations. Students had space to explore and reflect independently on each installation, to allow 'the art to speak for itself' (Marcus Koenen, Golden Gates national Parks, personal communication, October 28, 2015). Both these freedoms of inquiry and facilitative conversations encouraged critical reflections on the tensions between art and activism, imprisonment and freedom, physicality and imagination, freedom of expression and human rights. They challenged learners to reflect on their responses, and on whether political activism constituted a legitimate territory for the creative practices of artists, or of the ethical responsibilities of public institutions fostering aesthetic events.

@Large shed new light on the potentials of aesthetic learning in museum learning by making explicit the aesthetic dimensions of how sensory experience can inform memorable meaning-making. The installations encouraged young visitors to reflect on, and act upon, connection making between learning in social history and aesthetic exploration. They helped them to value the ways sensory experience informed imaginative constructions of meaning and empathy as integral dimensions of aesthetic engagement and intercultural learning. In its re-evaluations of past and present, and associations between the politics of reclusion and refined aesthetic sensibility of

Chinese convention in the very tangible present of an island penitentiary in San Francisco harbour, @Large provided a demonstration of how aesthetic phenomena can speak across and between cultures (Kóvskaya, 2015).

1.2. Rethinking museum experience and learning

Institutions like Alcatraz can thus nurture rich aesthetic experiences. Aesthetically aware museum education policies recognise how sensory experience is able to inform cognition and interpretation. Their value has been long-recognised in policies and practices of inclusion, in object-touching for visually impaired children, engaging olfactory sensations with incense or using music to support ‘verbal imaging’ commentaries in museum displays (US newswire, 2008). Embracing potentials for linking sensory experience and learning in language may contribute to research and learning in the social sciences. Thus, descriptions of the sensory experiences of smell, sight, taste, touch or hearing of events in the American Civil War informs reconstructions of how people experienced and felt about these sensations in ways that enhance the empathetic appreciations of those experiences for readers today (Smith, 2014). Sensory experiences are also significant in their own right. They can prompt diverse, open-ended responses that reach deeply into the cultural and aesthetic consciousness. Museums, in their many manifestations, provide rich capacities for engaging the multisensory experiences of their visitors (Lankford, 2002). Somatically sensitive museum educators provide structured pathways for children to move from playful, or incidental, sensory encounters into more active learning frameworks through sequences from sensing, exploring through close scrutiny, describing, visualising or imaginative translation, discriminating, selecting, categorising, connection making, interpreting and evaluating.

2. Learning why some objects are artworks

2.1. Museums, aesthetic status and essentialism

The second case study examines the ways museums confer ‘artwork’ status on objects. It asks how curatorial practices and display agendas can direct learners towards specific ways of appreciating art objects. In doing so, it acknowledges the tensions between essentialist and institutional paradigms underpinning the museum’s aesthetic judgements. Immediate impressions of the buildings and decorative object collections of London’s Victoria and Albert Museum reflect ideals of status, affection, affluence, taste, knowledge and power, dominion, and commemoration. Socially defined essentialist measures of this kind have long underpinned museum judgements and classifications of art objects. For example, Antonio Canova’s sculpture of *The Three Graces* in the Victoria and Albert may be defined as an artwork because it conveys an essential character of ‘beauty’.

Essentialist concepts such as these define characteristics that appear to be common to families of objects like Canova’s sculpture. They also generate problems: What, precisely, is beauty? Is beauty a consistent or universal value over time or between cultural contexts? or might Canova’s sculpture be defined as art because it embodies alternative—also essentialist—qualities of imitative realism, naturalism or perhaps sentimentality? Is it a vehicle of emotional sensibility or expression? or is does it demonstrate fine craft skill? however useful each concept may be for the works that it might embrace, each may explain only one dimension of that artwork quality, and each excludes objects that may be of real interest or significance that sit outside its purvey. This, in turn, can compromise learning about how different communities might appreciate objects that have some significance beyond the mundane.

For the diverse collections of the Victoria and Albert, a unifying understanding of art or craft status is defined in qualities of design, form, function and engagement with media. The Museum education guide clearly declares this aesthetic interest: ‘The V&A is the home of art, craft, design and

performance' (Victoria & Albert Museum, 2014, p. 1). This thesis is manifest in the backgrounds of some of its educators as design specialists, and in an education focus on learning through art and design practice. It also informs the museum resource packs that guide investigations into sources of motif and design, learning how things work, engaging with technical processes and developing problem-solving, research, critical thinking and literacy skills (Victoria & Albert Museum, 2015a). Students learn about qualities of design and making of objects—the use of materials, form, function, design and decoration. The value of students' practical, sensory, critical and evaluative aesthetic learning is implicitly recognised in these experiences.

Victoria and Albert pedagogies focus on kinaesthetic activities—'doing learning'—to cultivate students' fascination with how things work by handling original and replica objects. Students learn to understand design as a problem-solving paradigm by visualising in drawings, and making objects related to the object being studied—a box for a Japanese *inro*, for example. Encouraging questions like 'how does this work?' and engaging children in problem-solving is enhanced through the sensory experiences of handling, weighing, smelling and operating. Inquiring, planning, drawing and making enhance investigative, analytical or critical skills, which students can transfer to other learning in their own school classroom.

The Victoria and Albert *Learning* resource (Victoria & Albert Museum, 2015b) supports this pragmatic focus. It includes practical activity sheets recommending classroom attention to processes of observation, describing stylistic character, art making, object classification, material or process and adopting the technical language of design—all different dimensions of aesthetic engagements of museum settings. The Museum's *A Guide to the V&A* (2014, pp. 4–17) encourages students to 'explore historical and contemporary and design, making and manufacturing processes' by manipulating, tinkering, collecting, exploring, comparing and questioning. These skills can empower students for engaging with art and design objects beyond the museum visit, in their classrooms or homes. In all of these instances, somatic experience and hands-on activities provide practical media for aesthetic learning.

2.2. Reconsidering the aesthetic significance of art objects: Art and inter-cultural engagement

Like the encounters with sensory experience and meaning-making at Alcatraz, the elevation of a utilitarian object to artwork status at the Victoria and Albert demonstrates the authority of museums in the brokerage of art status. This is very much a dimension of George Dickie's proposition for an 'institutional theory' for art (Dickie, 1971, 1974). An institutional paradigm solved the problem of essentialist theories—their inherent exclusivity. Confronted by the array of objects that might lay claim to artwork classification, Dickie's paradigm allowed that objects obtaining the attentions of art world 'experts' could become candidates for artwork status. The wisdom of critics, museum historians, conservators or curators might empower them to make judgements on behalf of their communities. One important implication of an institutional paradigm has been the extension of art world attentions to objects and practices that once lay outside the 'high art' status of essentialist conventions. These extended domains include the elevation of culturally significant and defining practices of communities once marginalised as 'primitive' to artwork status. This in turn may empower communities to re-invigorate culturally significant practices, from Diwali festivals to dance celebrations, that enrich the aesthetic fabric of life for many audiences.

Thus, the Victoria and Albert brief embraces collections like its Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art. The teachers' resource for the Islamic collections provides links to national Curriculum objectives for Art and Design and Design and Technology (Victoria & Albert Museum, 2015a). These objectives encourage learning concepts of creativity, literacy, technical competence, critical understanding or evaluation. They provide tools for developing ideas through making, technical experimenting and sharing ideas. Students learn about Islamic designs and motifs from plant life and examine polychrome ceramics from the Islamic collections. They develop their own patterns and stylised designs by applying conventional strategies of repetition, reflective or rotational symmetry, and

tessellation. The resource recommends a logically scaffolded design methodology, building from researching and recording plant imagery, through generating ideas, developing ideas, researching materials and techniques, creating samples, evaluating, modifying and creating final products.

These curriculum links and strategies sit comfortably within the Victoria and Albert Museum design education brief. One further curriculum objective embraced in the brief does acknowledge the culturally loaded nature of many objects and offers opportunities for embracing aesthetic dimensions of socio-cultural contexts in the museum experience. The resource's 'cultural understanding' objective suggests potentials for understanding artwork significance in quite different ways, including dramatic interpretations supported by professional actors or storytellers in the museum. These activities acknowledge how artefacts might be seen in their own worlds as objects that perform culturally significant functions, signifying issues of identity, status, cultural value or practice and providing pleasurable experiences in daily life—aesthetic functions. The Islamic resource provides contextual information to inform appreciations of the role of plant-based design in Islamic cultural intercourse, and the place of Islamic decorative arts in religious and secular contexts. It directs learners and teachers to other resources (Stanley, Rosser-Owen, & Vernoit, 2004), a detailed glossary of art terms such as *arabesque* or *Chinoiserie*, and historical perspectives on the Turkish Ottoman Empire and the Shi'ite Safavid dynasty.

Other resources (Victoria & Albert Museum, 2015c) explain the aesthetic importance of mosques and palaces, relations between Islamic faith and the arts, international trade and cultural interaction, inter-cultural differences and similarities in artworks, and how religious ideas and beliefs can be expressed through the arts. Though these resources do acknowledge claims to aesthetic interest and status for Islamic arts, the weight of the Victoria and Albert paradigm remains with its synergies of art, design and technology. An engagement with the cultural significance of Islamic arts requires different strategies that capitalise on the contextual resources developed in the museum.

3. Aesthetic learning in the constructivist museum

The third study investigates the aesthetic interests of culturally significant function as they inform the agendas and selections made by museum exhibition curators. It also investigates questions around cognition, contingency and interpretation within the context of constructivist perspectives on inter-cultural arts learning. Dickie's thesis provides a generous, inclusive foundation for the allocation of artwork status. Museums are important art world institutions. Aesthetics find an important locus in curatorial practices and public engagements in these worlds. Like the Victoria and Albert, many museums use aesthetic judgements to categorise, thematise or present objects. Their displays may provoke questions, opinions and conversations which raise and address aesthetic questions. By accommodating different ways of understanding or appreciating aesthetic phenomena, museum approaches to categorisation appear to align with the constructivist agendas informing curriculum constructs in many parts of the world (Alcatraz, 2015a; Victoria & Albert Museum, 2015b).

In its Vancouver iteration, *The Forbidden City: Inside the Court of China's Emperors* (Vancouver Art Gallery, 2014) offered insights into life inside the once-hidden quarters of the Beijing Palace Museum. The exhibition illustrated the complex passages of life and cultural engagement within the privileged and cloistered world of the Imperial Palace. Its broadly inclusive selection of nearly 200 objects represented five centuries of life in the imperial households. The power, wealth, status, exclusivity and elevated taste of these quarters were represented in examples of verse, calligraphy, painting, ceramics, gold and silverware, jade, cloisonné, bronzes, cartography, arms, photography and textiles. These objects and themes of ritual, fashion, elegance, diplomacy and cultural intercourse provoked considerations on issues of aesthetic status, value and taste. *The Forbidden City* allowed learners to mediate the complex territories between their own worlds and a shifting fabric of 500 years of art collecting in a distant culture. It generated complex questions for aesthetic

learning. What, for example, was the aesthetic interest in the works and practices presented here? Who decided, and how, what agendas or judgements would inform these presentations? how could students learn about, or appreciate, concepts of taste and objects and themes from distant communities, and how might teachers mediate children's engagements with questions like these?

3.1 Art and culturally significant function

At the heart of the *Forbidden City* construct lays the notion that aesthetic status is afforded through the culturally significant functions objects might perform. This idea of 'aesthetic functionality' underpinned the presentations of the works in nine thematic threads and informed the comprehensive wall matter informing appreciations of each of these. Learners moved through an *Entering* display exploring ritual or court intercourse, into *Reigning*, a representation of the symbolic trappings of power. *Warring* examined aesthetic sensibilities in arms and armour; imperial exclusivity was located in *Symbols*. *Lineage* focussed on women of the imperial court, personal adornment and leisure. *Texting* explored taste and connoisseurship in calligraphy; *Consuming* explored privilege and social exclusivity; and *Collecting* reflections of taste, court patronage or diplomatic intercourse. *Farewell My Emperor* examined the aesthetic engagements of the final years of imperial rule. Each theme thus emphasised the cultural significance of objects as media of cultural intercourse, ritual, status, privilege, knowledge, leisure or power.

A recurrent theme for learners was the provocation of questions of aesthetic taste: what were beauty, taste or sensibility in the Chinese court? how might they have differed from those of other cultural contexts? Was 'beauty' a property of the materials, the media of these arts objects or of emotional responses to phenomena? Can an object of practical use (a garment or inkwell), a copy or a multiple, be a work of art? how do the ideals of austerity and humble simplicity of the scholar-monk recluse sit against material extravagance and displays of luxury? And especially in relation to the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908) and contradictory evaluations of her rule: is there a relation between morality and art?

3.2. Cultural cognition, sensibility, contingency and interpretation

Allowing learners to engage independently with objects in this exhibition, developing their own knowledge and responses, sharing, agreeing and disagreeing emphasises an important dimension of constructivist learning: contingency. Museum constructions of knowledge are contingent on the subjectivity of curatorial agendas, for example. one role of museum educators lies in mediating between museum displays and classroom learning, between curatorial agendas and learner's interests and knowledge. This practice favours the reflective and imaginative engagement of critical constructivist perspectives on the contingency of knowledge (Bentley, Fleury, & Garrison, 2007).

The Forbidden City revealed contingency in action in its multidimensional representations of Madam Cixi, the Empress Dowager. how do we understand the character and taste of a figure like Cixi? Viewed through different sets of eyes, representations in objects, paintings, photography and biography offer different appreciations of Cixi. The curatorial selections of brocade robes represented her as a woman of refined taste and discernment. Formal portraits by court painters depict a woman of dignified sobriety and elegant, if splendid, refinement. The retouched photographic documents by her 'spin doctor' court photographer Xun Ling (c. 1880–1943), however, reveal a hard, ruthless and extravagant ruler with a taste for opulence, pomp and rich decoration. These images complement accounts of the extravagance of a woman who diverted 30 million silver taels from the Chinese navy during Sino-Japanese war to construct a marble boat in the summer palace; the cost of a 128 dish banquet there could have bought millet to feed 5000 peasants for a day. A radically different portrait of Cixi as a 'highly regarded' capable, progressive, 'cultivated', proto-feminist, 'enlightened, even caring ruler' (Hilton, 2013) is rendered in recent biographical accounts (Chang, 2013).

Negotiating the contradictions between these representations was challenging for students visiting the *Forbidden City* exhibition. Constructivist paradigms for teaching and learning accommodate open conversations, however, embracing differences of response and interpretation. They inform inclusive strategies for engaging with different perspectives like these. They allow teachers and students to pose interesting questions and judge for themselves these contradictory evaluations of her rule. Learning might examine questions of aesthetics and morality. It could ask how Cixi's communities may have considered her engagements with the arts, or how her taste might interest audiences today. These different views challenge older frameworks for appreciating East Asian aesthetic engagements, as they manifest, for example, in notions of pan-Asian sensibility or spiritual unity (Okakura, 1903).

Constructivist paradigms nurtured through open-ended conversations find patterns and consistencies in knowledge, and also embrace difference. In doing so, they value the different cognitive stock of diverse learners. They acknowledge and value subjectively different responses to aesthetic objects and accept difference as a positive teaching/learning disposition. They also provoke further questions: how do we encounter objects? And what is the job of aesthetic education here? Is it to encourage appreciations of the Chinese Imperial court from the viewpoints of 2014 students? or is it to reconstruct past sensibilities, to provide pathways towards empathetic appreciations of the aesthetic engagements of court life in the Forbidden City itself? The exhibition itself was weighted towards empathetic appreciations of the culturally significant functions of objects in the Imperial court itself.

4. Asking aesthetic questions and inviting aesthetic judgements

The final case study introduces an example of the intentional curatorial proposition of aesthetic questions in the museum setting. It illustrates how museum displays can encourage vigorous conversations about art, and how constructivist agendas for open and inclusive learning may accommodate different appreciations of objects or ideas. one of the most fruitful capacities of constructivist museums is their facility for provoking interesting questions from, and between, young learners. Some are inevitably— and properly—personal: do I like this? how does it make me feel? Why does it make me feel that way? Some are pragmatic: who made that? how? Where? When? What was it used for? Who by? others enquire about value and status and encourage healthy debate on questions of taste, authority or response: who decides it is art? What is it worth? Playful challenges invite children to make decisions and discuss why they are important to them: 'The museum is on fire! What will you save? Why did you choose that?' (Lane & Wallace, 2015, p. 12) Encouraging learners to explain, question, disagree or find common ground is empowering for individual students and class groups alike. It equips young students with the skills and confidence to have aesthetic conversations and make personally legitimate aesthetic judgements.

For many museums, art objects open up inquiring conversations about cultural ideas, ideals and practices, but how might museums help students negotiate between the intensity of encounters with art objects and the responses they provoke? What pedagogies or museum strategies will empower learners to express and debate their opinions and feelings about art, to share them with others to see whether they were moved in the same or different ways?

4.1. Loaded Lounges at Oakland: What is art? How does art live in our communities? Which one of these is an artwork? Why?

The Oakland Museum of California's brief, 'The Story of California: The Story of you', invites students to confront and reflect on issues of local experience and identity through its displays on the social history, natural history and the arts of California. Displays are informative, but interpretations are often open-ended, inviting students to ask where they stand, where they come from, why their communities have developed as they have. The visual culture exhibitions explore themes of

California's art history, identity and creative practices, contriving thought-provoking juxtapositions of objects to challenge assumptions and invite discussion. Displays are interspersed with questions on wall displays, and opportunities for interactive participation, from touch screen explorations to wall-sized drawing boards.

The Oakland displays confront that important problem for aesthetics, the failure of essentialist concepts to explain all candidates for artwork status. By inviting learners to play with ideas around, and challenging, Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblance', the museum's 'open concept' approach recognises the diversity and unpredictability of creative practice and response (Weitz, 2004). *Loaded Lounge* displays are situated at strategic points around the museum. These comfortable corners invite students to speculate and discuss questions around broader museum themes. A key gathering area, the *Is It Art? Lounge*, presents a changing display of three similar objects arranged on a plinth, with clear Perspex voting boxes below. Students (and other visitors) decide which objects might be art works and register their votes with a green 'yes' or red 'no' ticket. The coloured voting patterns are visible to all visitors, and these and the objects can provoke conversations about art status and art-related issues of context and value: Which one of these is an art work? Why? What is art? how does art live in our communities? (Joby Inc, 2010).

The immediate question posed in the *Is It Art? Lounge* is engaging and challenging; it encourages children and adults to debate, interpret, justify and explain points of view. These art-focused engagements embrace language and communication skills and contextual knowledge. The challenge of the *Is It Art? Lounge* is open-ended. Its constructivist-style engagements welcome difference, respect diverse viewpoints and encourage participants to take risks and to explore. Their conversations can generate other related questions. These might be personal and subjective: how did it make me feel? What did you feel about it? What did it make you think about? Expanding on these questions may lead into discussions of questions of aesthetic ideas: Why does art matter? Does art have to be pleasing? Is beauty a property of objects, or is it subjective, experiential? Where is the artist in a work of art? how is artistic expression linked to culture? This last question is especially interesting in Oakland Museum, given its mandate of tracking Californian histories, but it also focuses the learner's attentions fully on big questions of aesthetic status, ontology and value.

5. Conclusion: Sharing in the aesthetic lives of museums

These case studies suggest that aesthetic learning can provide an accessible, engaging and positively challenging dimension of the museum visit for learners of all ages. The pleasure or discomfort of sensory experience, conversations around art objects and ideas, the freedom to have opinions or disagree, may inform aesthetic learning in these settings. As the Alcatraz and *Forbidden City* studies illustrate, visit agendas focused on learning in the social sciences or other curriculum domains is also able to accommodate somatic engagements informing aesthetic learning to enhance learners' empathetic and imaginary constructions of these different worlds. Class visits to the Victoria and Albert Museum may be motivated to support learning in history or technology, but they are also planned with the knowledge that hands-on art activities provide effective learning media and that decorative arts can provide insights into other cultures. In each instance, the interface between sensory experience and aesthetic learning can enhance learners' imaginaries of the tastes and sensibilities of distant worlds. More specifically focused on the provocation of questions of aesthetic status, value and relevance, Oakland's *Loaded Lounges* bring learners directly into aesthetic evaluations, conversations and debate in ways that recognise the validity of their own appreciations of the arts.

The findings of the research visits from which these case studies have been selected have been limited by the study's close focus on the museum experience itself. observations of display constructs and learning have been made in isolation from examinations of broader classroom learning contexts, and interview subjects have been confined to museum professionals. The

researcher acknowledges that examinations of school programmes, adoptions of virtual museum study options in the classroom (Alcatraz, 2015a), class teacher evaluations and measureable student learning outcomes might verify the effectiveness or transferability of the museum learning. These examples do, however, demonstrate how in these settings, aesthetic learning was nurtured through encounters with real objects, hands-on learning or engaging the authority of museum experts. In each museum, opportunities for experiencing, articulating, explaining or debating aesthetic ideas were planned against the educational expectations of national or state curriculum agendas (Alcatraz, 2015a; Victoria & Albert Museum, 2015b), and complemented by inclusive constructivist curriculum policies and pedagogies. These museum-situated learning strategies provide exemplary models that school teachers can accommodate into their own classroom programmes. The museum experiences also show that sensory discovery in museums is fun and that it may enhance learning and positive attitudes in other curriculum subjects. Seeking uplifting pleasurable aesthetic experience can assume its own significance in young people's learning.

Museums provide fruitful sites for aesthetic experience and learning. In many instances, they offer learning through arts practices that provide engaging media for experiencing, translating and interpreting objects. Their capacities for sensory aesthetic engagement may enrich diverse learning experiences across the curriculum that are also individually rewarding or satisfying. Learning in the aesthetic domains can perform important social and cultural functions: communicating ideas and ideals, informing other culturally significant transactions, maintaining cultural memory and informing aesthetic sensibility. Museums offer explanations for aesthetic status: what an artwork is, what it might be, or what it is for. Perhaps most pervasively, museums have the capacity to inform and validate individual responses and provoke invigorating debates on aesthetics, experience and knowledge to inform rich and memorable visit experiences.

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