

**Deeply Connective Encounters with Museum Objects**

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Abstract

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Deeply connective encounters with museum objects are a significant yet understudied phenomenon. These experiences are characterized by qualities such as transporting the person involved out of the flow of their daily life into a different sense of time or reality, and may contain components of reflection, absorption, deep understanding or intuition, sensory experiences, and awe. Deeply connective encounters are identified by those who have undergone them as personally significant and memorable.

This study sought to establish whether descriptions of these lived experiences exhibit recognizable patterns, on the premise that a better

understanding of deeply connective encounters could offer insight into the value of museums and of human-object interaction with museum objects. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 Library and Information Science, Museology, and Art History graduate students and alumni from the University of Washington; five of these interviews were transcribed and coded for significant statements and similarities. Emergent themes revealed a broad set of qualities often characterizing the experiences, as well as the contexts in which they occur. In general, the data points toward three core characteristics: a sense of being out-of-the-ordinary as opposed to part of everyday life; an encounter with a physical object or objects that enters the imagination and takes on symbolic significance; and a sense of connection oriented both inward to the deep self, and outward to something larger.

Although the data pool is too small for the results to be generalized, for the cases examined these experiences do appear to be a unique type of encounter useful for understanding how people relate to objects, and indicating the continued importance of physical objects in the museum. Significant for museums, the interviews shed light on the types of environments that might be conducive to such experiences. Further areas for research could include investigating the importance and influence of surroundings, and how commonly deeply connective encounters occur; delving more deeply into the particular qualities of deeply connective encounters using a greater number of respondents; and examining the differences between encounters with physical objects and digital media.

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## INTRODUCTION

Museums and libraries are formative because they make possible private transformations through discovery, exploration, and reflection beyond the information at hand [...] cultural institutions stand against fragmentation. (Carr, 2006, p.11)

What does “private transformation” look like? Carr touches on two nuanced, essential points to consider in thinking about the value of cultural institutions: first, their great power to touch and help reshape us; and second, the intimacy of these transformations that makes them so difficult, quantify, define, or analyze.

There are many ways to discuss and measure the importance of experiences facilitated by museums—behavioral changes, facts remembered, people met, money donated. Of course, any study pinning down a phenomenon will necessarily simplify and shave off some of its subtleties, and it sometimes appears as if the ease of describing and understanding experiences is directly inverse to their importance. Many people have had experiences in museums that have taught, entertained, moved, and challenged them. Along with these, however, are encounters, difficult to describe, but so deeply personal and transfixing that they can instigate private transformation, or shape perceptions of the value of museums. The goal of this study was to identify and define a particular type of experience—deeply connective encounters with museum objects—by determining patterns in descriptions of these encounters as lived experiences, and to begin the examination of what they are, and why they might be important.



## **Motivation**

Why undertake this particular route of study? I have myself experienced deeply connective encounters with museums and their artifacts, and it was these experiences that prompted me to seek a deeper understanding of the core value of museums and of experiences with objects. Of my own experiences, the most vivid is probably an encounter with the Rosetta Stone at the British Museum in late 2005 or early 2006, while I was studying abroad. I do not recall many specifics from this encounter, but do remember being struck breathless, and feeling removed from the space and people actually surrounding me, overwhelmed by the significance of what I was seeing; and finding a bench on which to sit and absorb the unexpected impact it had made—this thing I had heard and read about as part of history, and which now confronted me as part of my own reality. Whatever I did or didn't know or understand of the piece, however objectively grounded or incorrect my ideas about its identity or significance, the experience made a deep and memorable impression.

Reflecting on this experience, I realized that events such as this had not only deeply influenced my perception of the value of museums, but were also a deciding factor in my creation & pursuit of a dual degree in library and museum studies. These encounters left me, first of all, with a sense that there is something three-dimensional artifacts offer that 2D items, such as paper documents, may not; something that has to do with their very physicality, the space they take up in the world, and the ways in which we perceive and interact with that substantiated presence.

Second, the disproportionate effect these experiences had on shaping my own understanding of museums and what they have to offer led me to a fascination with the power of physical objects or exhibits in interaction with people—and, from thence, into wondering about the implications of these properties for the advent of, and emphasis on, the digital world. In particular, I suspected there might be a correlation between physicality and experiences of wonder.

Based on my own experiences and anecdotal evidence from various readings and conversations (especially with those in the cultural heritage field), I surmised that though (or perhaps because) they are by nature difficult to quantify or describe, these experiences might be deeply significant to others as well. If there are aspects of interaction and connection with objects that arise as unique to the physical realm, it is important to recognize and acknowledge these as part of the value museums offer, and to enhance the cultural heritage profession's ability to better steer its institutions toward the future. If these encounters are important but their discussion is neglected, there is a risk that their unique value might be eclipsed by other (important and relevant, and perhaps more fiscally pressing) conversations currently dominating the museum world.

In summary, then, I began with the perspective that the object-oriented nature of museums will continue to be critical to the role and people they serve; that humans as embodied beings may be affected by physical artifacts in ways not possible through other means; and that a better understanding of deeply connective encounters between people and objects could provide arguments for the significance and impact of museums, and would assist them in advocating for

themselves as they struggle to reconcile the complex and long-term benefits they offer with the demand for immediately quantifiable results.

### **Selection of the Phenomenon**

As it turned out, formulating an approach to the problem required first taking a step back. Rather than focusing on the anticipated importance of physicality, the sparseness of the literature around these type of experiences in the museum world meant that a concentration on the experience itself provided a better point of entry.

The definition of the experiential phenomenon at the heart of this study, then, was refined over the course of the study, but resonates with what Carr, in the quote above, indicates by his mention of “private transformations.” Within this study such experiences came to be referred to as *deeply connective encounters*, highlighting the unusual levels of engagement they engender, as well as the sense of connection that many of those interviewed highlighted as the main effect of the experience. In reality, of course, no single word or phrase encompasses all the aspects manifested by each deeply connective encounter. In one sense, the experiences are as varied as the people who participate in them.

However, one must find a way to speak even of the ineffable, and in setting out to discover whether it was possible to establish a proof of concept, I began with qualities remembered from my own experiences, as well as those related by acquaintances and discovered over the course of reviewing the literature. These included elements such as transporting the viewer out of the flow of their daily life into a different sense of time or reality; and components of reflection,

absorption, a sense of deep understanding or intuition, sensory experiences, and awe. Most of these aspects were scaled along affective and even perhaps spiritual dimensions, rather than being built through analysis or intellectual understanding. The encounters are identified by those who have undergone them as especially significant and memorable, especially compared to other museum experiences. They are used in the creation of meaning; in all cases located thus far were psychologically positive; and include a sense that they point towards the potential for transformation or expansion, and the embrace of possibility. Starting from this base and moving through data collection and analysis, the core concepts of deeply connective encounters were further clarified, providing the findings of the study.

### **Significance of the Phenomenon**

Given their esoteric nature and the difficulty of harnessing them for direct application, deeply connective experiences beg justification for their importance in the wider context of the museum field, its literature and audience, and beyond. Part of the working definition of these experiences was their importance within the lives of those who undergo them. These experiences demonstrate the real power experienced in proximity to artifacts and exhibits; a power that speaks to visitors as individuals or members of society, through their own identities and histories. This power, in turn, points to the very heart of cultural heritage institutions' purpose and possibility:

What does experience mean in a history museum, if the practice of history fails to touch the privacy of memory? What do our inquiries in cultural institutions mean if they do not evoke and challenge and confirm or disconfirm our intuition? What does it mean in an art

## DEEPLY CONNECTIVE ENCOUNTERS WITH MUSEUM OBJECTS

museum, if we think our task there is to replace what we feel with what we are told to feel, or with dim details we never needed to know? (Carr, 2006, p.120)

Museums are physical manifestations of present humanity's connection to the past and to the larger contexts of society and the world of which it is a part. People and the objects of their encounters co-create meaning at a deep place, challenging the boundaries of internal and external, private and public. As cultural institutions striving for relevance and effectiveness in reaching their audiences, museums would certainly benefit from a better grasp of these experiences their visitors associate with museum visits, and characterize as significant to their own lives outside the museum walls. If there are particular contextual factors that better facilitate these types of experiences, the implications for areas of future research could prove very valuable indeed, as museums seek to serve and advocate for their central role in our heritage, and to forge connections with their communities. How, then, can the field better understand these experiences, and what they can reveal to practitioners as human beings and as museum professionals?

The ripeness of this area of inquiry is evidenced by the surprising lack of research around these experiences within the museum field to this point (see Literature Review, below). Its timeliness is further indicated by the publication of several recent works acknowledging the importance of better understanding human-object relationships and encounters in museum settings, and of this understanding of the physical as a basis for making wise and effective decisions as digital capabilities expand.

## **Research Question**

Much literature exists concerning objects and their significance to the human world—material culture is a field of study unto itself—and there is some writing on the role of materiality in learning; the museum field as well has a well-documented history reflecting on the institution's role as a space of learning and social connections. There is even beginning to be an emerging literature on the use of digital technologies and objects (or quasi-objects) within the museum.

It is much more difficult, however, to draw together research from the perspective of museums as facilitators of object or exhibit-centered personal transformation, without an explicit focus on education or participatory design. At this point there has still been relatively little research looking directly at deeply connective encounters or similar experiences, approaching them in all their complexity and contextuality, and examining both their significance for those who experience them, and the implications of these experiences for museums and other cultural heritage institutions.

Before the field can effectively embrace new ideas and techniques, it must turn a critical eye on its past successes as well as failures, and make certain not to discount approaches that offer effective engagement and personal meaning-making. Exploring the “how” and “what” of deeply connective encounters with objects and exhibits is thus applicable not only to effectively shaping physical and digital projects within museums, but also for efforts to understand and utilize participatory elements and objects, and to curate experiences that take into account visitors' own memories and experiences as a basis for effective connection.

Of course, one research project cannot begin to answer all of the cascading questions implied here—but it may provide a starting point to help determine which questions to ask next, and where to direct future investigations.

### *Purpose*

The goal of this study, then, is to explore the possibility of locating the essence of deeply connective encounters—experiences inextricably contextualized by specific objects, spaces, and moments—based on descriptions of such encounters. More specifically, this study sought to discover whether there were identifiable patterns in descriptions of the components of these experiences, or in the perceived contexts that facilitate them. The direction of this exploration was based on the premise that these encounters exist as a particular type of experience that can to some extent be classified; that they are under-studied; and that they are an important part of the value museums provide society.

### **Definition of Terms**

The use of vocabulary can never be completely precise, but in an effort to aid comprehension and clarity, some elaboration on the use of specific terms in this study is included below.

### *Museum*

The current AAM Code of Ethics marks as the common denominator of museums their provision of a "unique contribution to the public by collecting, preserving,

and interpreting the things of this world.”<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this study, a museum is any setting in which someone who responded to the recruitment email believed “a sense of wonder, awe, or transcendence connected to an object or experience at a museum” had occurred (see Appendix A for full text). All of the interviewees’ encounters took place at institutions fitting within the AAM definition. During the portions of the study referring to the museum as a more theoretical construct, the important factors shaping the concept used were, in addition to the emphasis on collecting, preserving, and interpreting “things of this world,” the implied ability of an institution to facilitate deeply connective encounters with the aforementioned “things” that were part of the encounters by shaping the surrounding environment.

### *Object*

For this study, an object was considered to be an item held within a museum—a piece of art, an artifact, &c.—with which someone had (or could conceivably have) what they identify as an experience of personal wonder or a deeply connective encounter. The object also provides a unit of measurement for the study, insofar as it is the focus of such an encounter (though some participants spoke of entire exhibits, settings, or even entire museums as “objects” in this sense). As all the objects mentioned were physical, it was not necessary to demarcate whether or where digital artifacts would fall under this umbrella.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.aam-us.org/aboutmuseums/whatis.cfm>



*Deeply Connective Encounters*

No one word is sufficient to cover all the aspects of the experiences described by interviewees—each encounter was personalized and overlapped with others in certain areas, but no one encounter possessed all of the specific characteristics mentioned across the set of interviews, and it was common for aspects to be present to differing degrees in different encounters.

Within the literature, there are as of yet no set terms to describe exactly these types of experiences. Many words—transcendent, aesthetic, numinous, transformative, seminal, magical, and experiences of wonder or awe—are already in use with varying meanings. In the end, the phrase “deeply connective encounters” was chosen over previously used terms for its clarity, accessibility to the general reader, and broad applicability, as well as the implication that this study approached the phenomenon primarily on its own terms as a direct experience, rather than through previously-canonized ideas of what such an encounter would be.

In general, deeply connective encounters seem to be accompanied by three common properties: a sense that the time spent in the experience is out-of-the-ordinary as opposed to confluent with everyday life; an encounter with material objects that then take on significance and enter the imagination of the person undergoing the experience; and a sense of connection that often seems to move both in toward the deep self, and outward to something larger. Common instances of these characteristics include qualities such as transporting the viewer out of the flow of their daily life into a different sense of time or reality, and components of reflection, deep understanding or intuition, sensory experience,

and awe, arising from affective and even perhaps spiritual sensations as opposed to analysis.

The above themes and phrasing, honed through data collection and analysis, indicate that these experiences are deeply engaging in a way most everyday experiences are not; that they are encounters with a physical reality outside of the self, but are connective in that the process of the encounter brings together these realities to create something new and unique to that experience.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

While there is a fair amount of literature in various fields—material culture studies, cognitive psychology, education, and anthropology, to name a few—addressing people’s relationships with physical objects and reality, and some psychological and religious work on transcendent (out of the ordinary) experiences, with a few exceptions there is little work tying together the various components of these interactions and their meanings, particularly within the context of cultural heritage objects.

Of necessity, this review of the available literature was developed through an iterative process involving negotiation between the research methodology and the ways in which they study’s data reshaped its research question. Thus, research was begun in areas of anticipated relevancy; some areas were dropped as it became apparent they would not be the focus of the study, while others were added as discovered, without as much time for deep exploration as would have fully encompassed what the literature had to offer. What follows is therefore merely a sampling, but one that argues for the timeliness of the current study’s focus, and couches its origins and development in the foundational literature.

The premise of the study, again, was that there is a particular type of experience—the “deeply connective encounter” with museum objects—that exists, is significant and exhibits patterns, but is nonetheless under-studied. At the point orienting research began, the descriptive phrasing had not been set, and a wide net was thrown to find relevant literature. It was only as the study progressed that it became apparent which components of the experiences might be

considered core, and which were possible to develop more fully within the timeframe of the study.

### **Materiality**

The first broad category of investigation was that of materiality. Material culture as a topic of study investigates the relationship of a culture to its material artifacts. Thus, much of the literature on material culture examines these relationships on a broader level than that of this study, which focused on individual lived experiences rather than cultural or social constructs per se.

However, some of the work addressing materiality did help shape the study. Sherry Turkle, a researcher at MIT, has studied and written widely on people's formative and emotional relationships with objects; the ways in which objects inspired scientists as children to move towards their current field; and, more recently, the ways in which individuals and societies relate to technological objects, and the implications of this. Turkle's focus is on the ways in which objects assist thought—"objects we think with"—and the experiences she addresses do not take place in museums. Instead, most take place with personal objects with which subjects were able to touch and interact. Nonetheless, the reflective autobiographical essays which comprise *Evocative Objects: Things We Think with* (2007a) and *Falling for Science: Objects in Mind* (2008b) helped shape this study at its nascent stage, addressing as they do both the holistic, transformative engagement of people with objects, and the representative format of personal narrative reflections on these relationships and their significance.

Turkle also brings in psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott's idea of "transitional objects," or "those objects that the child experiences both as part of his or her body and as part of the external world" (Turkle, 2008, p.20), which brings up interesting implications for the sensory touch and use of objects, as well as their potential effects on (or melding with) identity. Although Winnicott extends this idea into adulthood, positing that we keep searching for objects with which we are able to connect, Turkle focuses on the root of these experiences in childhood. The possible anchor of such relationships as seminal or formative experiences is consistent the results of the current study as far as it goes, as well as with work by Wilkening & Chung and Piscitelli, below.

Other discussions of the physicality and symbolism of objects examine the space between the inherent identity and possible power latent in objects, and the activation of this potential through interaction—i.e., what are the qualities that make some objects more "charismatic" or memorable than others? Suggestions include human form, large size or scale, recognizable skill in production, history or longevity, and connection to personal context (Benjamin, 1968; Radley, 1991; Piscitelli and Anderson, 2001; Wingfield in Dudley, 2010; &c.).

The major work that helped frame and orient this study's approach to materiality, however, was a 2010 publication edited by Sandra Dudley: *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations*. With any luck, this work indicates a growing acknowledgement of the implications of materiality for the museum experience and for understanding objects, and a move towards a more holistic and elastic consideration of how these implications might be studied:

Within [the modern] world, objects behaved themselves. They did not shift their intellectual shapes, or change their places in the received scheme of things, or mean different things to different people, or different things to the same person at different times. But we have always felt that these things were not true; they did not match what happens to us and how we feel about it as we live our lives experiencing our material world. (Dudley, 2010, p.xix)

The work is a collection of essays addressing various aspects of materiality in museums, and seeking “[...] to shift the focus back to physical objects, but with a strong emphasis on their impacts—actual and potential—on real people” (p.4).

The component essays include Edwards’ address of the emotions and materiality of photographs; Stevenson (an artist)’s examination of potentially new ways for audiences to relate to art and archaeological artifacts, including interactions that “contribute to the associations and understanding of an object whilst simultaneously being asked to degrade its readability” (p.107); and Hancock’s analysis of encountering the materiality of others in house museums:

As we engage with its [the object’s] presence, we intimate several layers of archaeology: the object’s own material history; its significance in the history of Woolf and Bell; the way it chimes with similar dressing tables in our own past; its significance in the reconstructed context of the museal room. (p.126)

These explorations of how people interact with public museum objects are particularly informative and valuable, and provide a necessary foray into new territory; however, few of them explicate from the viewer’s perspective what the experience of undergoing such an interaction might be, or mean, and the parameters of the experiences they addressed were not delimited to focus on a particular type of connection with objects.

### **“Extraordinary” Experiences**

Because this study’s focus was a particular type of experience, resources from various fields having to do with out-of-the-ordinary experiences that seemed

similar to the phenomenon under investigation, and especially those centered around cultural heritage resources or objects, were another source of relevant literature. In much of the initial literature uncovered, as with David Carr's (2003, 2006) collections reflecting on the potential transformative power of cultural heritage institutions, or the essays in Turkle's books, discussion of out of the ordinary experiences is present as narrative, even anecdotal. This reflects both the personal impact that these events can have, and the challenges of examining them in more quantitative ways.

*Aesthetic Experience: Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson*

In fact, various sources have discussed experiences more or less similar to those this study was intended to explore. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990), for example, in *The Art of Seeing: An Interpretation of the Aesthetic Encounter*, investigated aesthetic experiences as a subset of Csikszentmihalyi's previously-established theory of "flow."<sup>2</sup> Their final characterization defines aesthetic experience as

[...] an intense involvement of attention in response to a visual stimulus, for no other reason than to sustain the interaction. The experiential consequences of such a deep and autotelic involvement [one providing its own end or reward] are an intense enjoyment characterized by feelings of personal wholeness, a sense of discovery, and a sense of human connectedness. (p.178)

This approach to aesthetic experiences in many ways matches the deeply connective encounters sought by this study, as evidenced, for instance, by an interviewee quoted in the book who speaks of undergoing "a transcendent

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<sup>2</sup> This theory refers to experiences characterized by the following components: a merging of action and awareness; the limitation of the stimulus field (no awareness of past and future); a loss of ego or self-consciousness; using skills to overcome challenges; clear goals and clear feedback; and an autotelic nature—that is, a lack of external motivation, because the experience itself is intrinsically enjoyable and rewarding (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 1990, p. 8).

experience [that] takes you out of the realm of everyday life” (xii).<sup>3</sup> They situate themselves as well within the tradition of aesthetic experience in Western philosophy, comparing flow to aesthetic experience as characterized by other figures. Their study was structured around four elements they identified as comprising the dimensions of aesthetic experience, the skills required to enter into a state of flow during these experiences, and the types of challenges offered by such experiences: perceptual, emotional, intellectual, or communicative. Both the complex way in which the study embraced multiple dimensions of experience, and the resultant finding of the importance of connectedness, work well as foundational precursors for the results of the current study.

A note here on useful aspects not within the scope of this study—there is a significant amount of work in the fields of art, religion, and philosophy concerned with aesthetic experiences, their politics and sociocultural implications (see for example Berger’s 1977 *Ways of Seeing*); the meaning of museums within this framework (Kopsa, 2010, “‘The Museum is History’: Museum of American Art in the Van Abbemuseum”); and the aesthetic connection to transcendence (i.e., Dewey, 1934, *Art as Experience*). This realm proved too sprawling to include in the current study, which was concerned more with individual experiences and the range of ways people experienced deeply connective encounters than with deconstructing cultural ideas of aesthetics. However, future examination of the work and history of thought around such experiences could shed valuable light on deeply connective encounters, and perhaps reveal a basis of already-existent literature useful to future investigations.

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<sup>3</sup> Brackets in original quote.



Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson include within their conception of aesthetic experience an interaction between person and object, and an increase in understanding or transfer of information: “The aesthetic experience occurs when information coming from the artwork interacts with information already stored in the viewer’s mind” (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 1990, p.18). Some sort of activation takes place, then, when the two come together, and something new is created from the admixture—again, a similar premise to the study at hand.

Their ideas of aesthetic experience, their methods, and their findings, however, also diverge at multiple points from the current study. They chose only to interview art and museum professionals, stating (in regards to the centrality of skill in the flow experience), “[...] we would not expect to discover what these essential skills are by studying the behavior of people who lack them” (p.xi). In effect, they hoped to study “ideal” situations from which to extrapolate ways to extend these experiences to everyday museumgoers, rather than examining the experiences of these museumgoers themselves. If skill is, as they claim, quite important in these experiences, the experience of experts versus non-experts might well be very different. Highly-developed aesthetic skills or subject knowledge, however, are not necessary to deeply connective experiences as understood in the current study; the potential contrast between these types of encounters might be another fruitful area for further research in the future.

In addition, their focus on art museums results in a primarily visually-centered focus. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson do acknowledge that it is not only in museums that these experiences can take place; however, they characterize aesthetic experience as different from other types of flow primarily due to its

visual focus on a static object (versus engagement in an activity) (p. 184). The finding that they highlight as perhaps the most basic, however, is “the importance of conceptually separating the *content* of the aesthetic experience from its *structure*” (p.177). This leaves room for extending aesthetic experiences beyond art. Might not other versions of this experience be possible utilizing a range of senses? It seems significant as well that, in their choice of art and museum professionals as subjects, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson ensured that at least some of their interviewees’ backgrounds included getting to know art as connoisseurs—that is, using senses such as touch, and other privileged modes of access to art objects. Thus the role of the senses may play a bigger part than is addressed by *The Art of Seeing*.

*Numinous Encounters: Cameron & Gatewood, and Latham*

In more recent literature, there were also a limited number of investigations into cultural heritage encounters covering a broader range of sites, and describing these experiences with emphasis on aspects similar to those of deeply connective encounters. Cameron and Gatewood, for instance, investigate experiences they termed “numen-seeking,” or exhibiting:

[...] the desire by some people to transcend the present and engage with the past in a highly personal way [...] Some people make a personal connection with a site that may be manifest as a deep engagement, empathy, or spiritual communion with the people or events of the past. (2003, p.57)

Cameron and Gatewood explicitly address experiences with a similar range of qualities to this study’s deeply connective encounters. However, they do so with a focus on historical sites, rather than examining interactions with objects; examine intentional and desired engagement in these dimensions, rather than

experiences that catch visitors by surprise; and address only a connection to the historical past. Their work arose from data gathered through an exploratory survey, though they also tested their findings in subsequent work, and provide several suggestions for avenues into further investigation and quantification of “numinous” experiences, including the aspects of deep engagement and/or transcendence, (including Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow); empathy for historical people, and awe or reverence. While these aspects are divided along slightly different dimensions than the results of the current study, many of the same components are present, and overall similar themes seem to emerge as important.

A more recent and even more closely aligned exploration of numinous experiences is found in Kiersten Latham’s “Numinous Experiences with Museum Objects” (2009). In this work, she brings together many of the elements and sources previously mentioned, including deriving from Cameron and Gatewood the definition of a numinous experiences as “a meaningful, transcendent experience that results in a deep connection with the past” (p. 9). Latham’s approach was similar to that of the current study, consisting of five interviews with museum members and volunteers, investigating museum objects as documents and seeking to “explore the meaning museum users make of their numinous experiences with objects” (p.7). From these interviews, she derived four main themes or patterns of numinous experiences: the experience as a holistic uniting of emotions and intellect with the object, or “unity of the moment”; the physical object as a link to the past through its tangible and

symbolic meanings; a sense of transport; and a sense of connection to something bigger than the self (p.139).

Latham uses a number of different theories and interpretations, framing her investigations at various times with conceptions of documentation, transcendence, transaction, reader response, flow, and aesthetic experience, to name a few. She addresses the implications of museum objects' physicality in invoking numinous experiences and the importance of the "real" thing in sparking genuine reactions (p.139, p.142); the possibility for public objects such as those on display at museums to have deep personal significance (p.143); museums' unique suitability to provide these sorts of object experiences (p.143); and the importance of expanding our definition of information or learning to take into account the insights gained through these experiences (see also Hetherington, 2003, p.1937-8 on "praesentia" and "nonrepresentational practice and knowledge").

Some of the groundwork (such as the proof of concept) laid by the current study is also addressed through Latham's work; had her paper been encountered earlier in the development of the current study, her findings could have provided a basis for investigation a particular aspect in more detail, or moving forward with the comparison of physical and digital interactions. However, the confirmation of her results by those of the current study only strengthen the argument for more and more thorough investigation into these types of encounters, and each of the two studies suggests different possible directions for future exploration.

### **Other Areas of Investigation**

A number of additional relevant topics arose over the course of gathering and analyzing data. In these cases literature focused on a specific aspect of extraordinary experiences, or a particular understanding of human experience, also proved useful.

#### *Memorability*

Other studies covered specific aspects of extraordinary experiences that are also components of deeply connective encounters, or indicated considerations important in focusing the current study. Piscitelli and Anderson (2001), as mentioned above, examined the museum experiences that children find memorable; although they did not examine the types of connections made, some of the same factors (in particular, the prominence of large-scale, static exhibits) make an appearance in the current study's results as well. In addition, deeply connective experiences were often vividly remembered after long periods of time; some of them even took place in childhood situations very similar to those Piscitelli and Anderson describe.

The three most important findings they indicate as correlated with recall were a high degree of personal involvement (which they define as peer teaching); links to curriculum (the context of children's everyday life); and multiple or repeat visits to the same institution. The importance of contextual connections is fully supported by the current study, and there was also a small amount of discussion by interviewees around revisiting institutions or exhibits. This fits as well with the arguments of Buchholz in her article on the importance of solitude

in “alonetimes” for reflection (discussed in greater detail below), who worries that “unless the museum experience becomes part of oneself, retention could be limited” (2000, p.6).

The importance of memorable childhood museum experiences is reinforced as well by the work of Wilkening and Chung in their 2009 publication *Life Stages of the Museum Visitor: Building Engagement over a Lifetime*, which found that a significant portion of interviewees had experienced a “seminal” museum experience with similar factors to those discovered by Piscitelli and Anderson, most often occurring between the ages of five and nine. The lead-in quote to their chapter, in fact, concentrates on one of the same objects referenced during a childhood experience discussed in the current study—the great blue whale at the American Museum of Natural History.

Harking back to Turkle’s essays, Michael Spock, who conducted impromptu interviews of many museum professionals regarding early interest in the museum profession, found similar patterns. While not a formal study, his investigation centered on childhood museum experiences that were “grounded in particularly vivid memories and frequently elicited strong emotions in the telling” (2000a), and touched on several of the themes emergent from the current study and in work such as Piscitelli and Anderson’s, including a lack of exhibit interactivity, the importance of the object or setting as a jumping-off point for imagination,<sup>4</sup> and a sense of connection to something larger. While the study was

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<sup>4</sup> Those Wilkening and Chung interviewed were “young adults” in 2008, and thus might conceivably have encountered some form of digital technology in their early museum experiences, though none seem to have mentioned these in their seminal experiences. However, given that digital technology is still relatively new in museums, and that often a new medium’s potential is not fully realized until a new generation of people, unconstrained by ideas of past media, begin to

not set up to draw causal connections between these experiences and career choices in later life, participants were also adamant about making a case for the significance of their experiences (p.28), and seemed to exhibit a general sense of positive affect.

This agrees with Piscitelli and Anderson's findings that a strong affective component—positive or negative—correlates with higher recall, as well as the conclusions of Anderson and Shimizu (2007), who upon investigation of the vividness of adults' memories of the 1970 Japan World Exposition found that their study fit a trend, wherein "the emotional aspects of visitors' experiences appear to be responsible for encoding the memories in ways that influence the quality (richness) of recall of those memories" (p.179). The work of Witcomb (in Dudley, 2010), Carr (2003, 2006), and Radley (1991) also points to the impact of affect on memory, especially in cultural heritage institutions dedicated to remembrances of powerful emotional events, such as war or genocide (cf. Carr, 2006; Cameron and Gatewood, 2003).

### *Reflection & Solitude*

Another aspect of deeply connective encounters that became more salient as the study progressed was that of the role of solitude or "alonetime" in museums (Buchholz, 2000; Spock, 2000b)—in contrast to the current museological focus on the communal potential of museums or the primacy of the cognitive experience in informal learning, these highlighted the integral purposes served by

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develop more effective application, the absence of digital components in these formative experiences is inconclusive. In any case, the importance of imagination and reflection (versus interactivity) in memorable or seminal museum visits is supported as well by the results of the current study.

time and space for solitary reflection and absorption, leading to integration of ideas and understanding as well as psychological wellbeing. In response to the shift towards an emphasis on more engaging and participatory museum experiences, Buchholz develops the idea of “alonetime,” which serve “to constitute or reconstitute functioning and control stimulation so as to maximize perceptual and cognitive organization, emotional well-being, and homeostasis—by oneself” (p.4-5), reminding the field not to completely disregard what it already accomplishes in the effort to embrace new ways of viewing the museum and its purpose.

### *Sensory Apprehension & Embodiment*

One of the recurring themes in literature addressing personal relationships to objects is the importance of the intimate interactions made possible through ownership and touch (e.g., Turkle 2000, 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b). For public objects, the flip side of this is an examination of the importance of senses other than the primary sense—vision—emphasized in the museum, and what the exclusion of these methods of interaction might signify. Elizabeth Pye, in her 2007 book, *The Power of Touch: Handling Objects in Museum and Heritage Contexts*, not only delves into the importance of touch as a way of knowing and confirming, but also points to growing evidence for the senses’ interconnectedness (p.47), the shifting importance of each mode of sensing based on context, and the swiftness of the body’s holistic ability to compensate for the loss of a sense: “[...] spending as little as 90 minutes in complete darkness can result in a significant short-lasting improvement in both tactile spatial acuity and



sound localization in sighted people” (p.56). This suggests that touch (and presumably other senses as well) *is* very important, and should be treated as such in museums—but also that even where this is not possible, there might be other ways to access the power of the senses in processing object encounters.

Kevin Hetherington also addresses touch, and the meaning and sense of place (and time) we create through it, in his development of the idea of “*praesentia*” (2003). The creation and experience of a sense of *praesentia* is a process of performing space haptically, involving “proximal,” or fragmented and up-close knowledge, rather than representation, and participating in both memory and continuity—“[...] the absent that is made real in material form through the *praesentia* that we feel around us” (p.1942). He also indicates the importance of an integrative view of the senses, and *praesentia*’s role in creating a sense of mingling and unity: “distance and proximity; presence and absence; secular and divine; human and nonhuman; subject and object; time and space; vision and touch. It has the effect of making those discursive categories appear uncertain and blurred” (p.1940). Both Pye and Hetherington refer as well to the historical significance of touch concerning religious relics, which could warrant further investigation into the literature on touch and transcendence as regards museum objects.

Another investigation into embodied and sensory experiences with art comes from Annamamma Joy and John F. Sherry, Jr.’s consumer research study, “Speaking of Art as Embodied Imagination: A Multisensory Approach to Understanding Aesthetic Experience” (2003). They focus on the sensory experience of 30 museumgoers as they experience art, emphasizing senses

understudied in the literature—smell and taste—which they argue, in being chemical and thus requiring physical ingestion of particles, make it impossible for the subject/object distinction to be maintained (p.275). Again, the emphasis is on integration—by “creating interiority as an avenue of knowledge for the body, sound destroys the subject/environment, self/other, and interior/exterior distinctions” (p.274); they also mention the significance of synesthesia as an indication of the senses’ interconnectedness, and the ways in which these types of experiences are known bodily before they can be examined analytically—“Smells are communicated to the limbic system before any form of cognition occurs, so an odor has an effect before it is recognized” (p.276)—reinforces the idea of body knowledge and visceral apprehension evident in some of the current study’s interviews.

Their main contention, however, is that “embodiment processes can be understood at two levels—the phenomenological and the cognitive unconscious” (p.261). According to this premise, the method through which the body shapes our understanding of art, and in which it is implicated in affective states, is through the metaphorical language used to express this unconscious connection. They criticize Csikszentmihalyi’s work for neglecting this level of analysis, and the same charge could be leveled at Latham’s. Taking inspiration from this aspect of their investigation, the current study asked interviewees to choose a symbolic color, shape, idea, or feeling for their encounters—a metaphor to represent their significance—which did result in the emergence of some patterns.

Joy and Sherry rely heavily on Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptions and development of physically-grounded metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980—

another fascinating area of study too far afield for this study to undertake). The theory of conceptual metaphor argues that human understanding of the world is based in embodiment, and this is made visible through examination of metaphorical language, grounding these metaphors at bottom in our orientation to the physical world. For example, the implicit understanding of cause as “causes are forces” would be analogous to physical forces. When one feels attracted by a certain object, then, there might be an underlying conception of physical draw.

However, accessing this level of unconscious understanding is quite challenging. At least in the article in question, the application of this analysis seems to falter in places, with the distinction between metaphoric levels coming across as muddled—as when one of the metaphors is given as, “emotions related to surprise are powerful” (p.268). Of course, their depiction of the deeper meanings here is constrained by the fact that they are also limited to using language to describe the meaning they invoke.

There are in fact many examinations of embodiment as a state of reality and thought—embodied cognition and cognitive metaphor are topics of interest in, at the least, linguistics, philosophy, anthropology, and artificial intelligence. The acknowledgement of embodiment as not only a condition of existence but of reality’s creation is examined at great length and in nuanced detail by a number of studies and books, and unfortunately cannot be fully treated within the scope of this work. However, the mentions of embodiment in much of the literature addressing sensory apprehension and affective museum experiences is not surprising, given that it holds in common with phenomenology an interest in “lived experience” as a primary conception of existence (cf., for example,

Csordas's emphasis on "being-in-the-world," or phenomenological existential immediacy as opposed to representation (1994, p.10)). This intersection also addresses the importance of imagination as a method of expanding perception, making it a valuable tool for phenomenological research (Steeves, 2001, p.372).

Although discoveries and hypotheses in these areas continue to challenge and refine one another, it is becoming clear that there is no "mind" versus "body," and that "I" and the world are intertwined rather than discrete. There is no doubt that this has implications for identity, emotions, memory, and better comprehending both the source and the significance of people's interactions with the physical world on a number of levels.

*"Real-ness:" Authenticity and Identity*

Authenticity is a much-discussed and hotly contested area of discussion for museums—including, in the realm of objects, the implications and significance of reproductions as opposed to originals (Saunderson in Dudley, 2010), and the critical importance of knowing an artifact's provenance, origins and intended context. However, there is no consensus on where this sense of "realness" and its impact are generated in regards to affective experiences or knowledge—it is one thing to argue that scholars must have access to original documents containing physical traces and information that might allow them to better understand their document as an object, but something different to examine what counts as an "authentic" experience. Imagination is important, and powerful affective associations can be real or imagined (Cameron and Gatewood, 2003), but there are limits when the imagined possible butts up against the actual.

Many of the works cited here examining meaning and the identity of objects struggle to place the origin of these experiences and the qualities of the objects themselves (authenticity included)—meaning is not solely imposed onto items, nor is it completely inherent in the object itself, but something occurs in the transaction between visitor and object—“objects are made meaningful according to how they are placed within relations of significance” (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p.50). Some potentiality based on that precise combination of realities is activated; these are experiences viscerally recognized as genuine and special—as seen by interviewee statements in the current study, often in reaction to the perceived genuine nature of “real” physical objects—but they can also be transitory and without obvious lasting effect (other than, often, a vivid memory of the encounter).

Siân Jones provides a thoughtful and powerful examination of how the “authenticity” of objects may come into being, questioning why people find issues of authenticity so compelling and what this means, and suggesting that “[...] when we look at how people experience and negotiate authenticity through objects, it is the networks of relationships between people, places and things that appear to be central, not the things in and of themselves” (Jones, 2010, p.189). Jones proposes that authenticity is important precisely because it is “[...] about *reconnecting* objects, people and places” (Jones, 2010, p.197),<sup>5</sup> when most of life’s daily experiences and encounters have become fragmentary.

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<sup>5</sup> (Emphasis in original.)

*The Role of the Digital in Museum Experiences*

This topic is quickly developing and finding its voice—a prime candidate for further research. I will mention briefly only a few of the indications in the sources I examined that touch on this discussion in ways relevant to deeply connective encounters. There are ties in a number of the sources addressing museum experiences to the idea of the constant connectivity of the digital world—Wands, Donnis, and Wilkening (2010) indicate that those under 30 years old who responded to their survey of Connecticut museum-goers “suggested that museums were a place to get away from the technology that pervades their lives” (p.22). Turkle also addresses the contribution of technology to a constant sense of being “on” or driving forward—information overload, so to speak (p.282). This is in direct contradiction to one of the major factors in Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow—that of focus and absorption, or losing a sense of oneself and of time. MacArthur gets to the heart of the question when he asks, “Now that physical and digital collections have coexisted for a number of years, it seems appropriate to ask: What have emerged as the peculiar strengths of each format? [...] And what have we learned that can inform our efforts to appropriately balance these activities moving forward?” (2011, p.56).

**This Study**

While the implications of the materiality of objects in museums is thus beginning to be addressed in publication (Latham, 2009; Dudley, 2010; MacArthur, 2011), and there is relevant literature in various fields relating to the essences of deeply connective encounters, there is no fully developed understanding of how deeply

engaging person-object interactions occur, how to speak of their importance, and what this means for cultural heritage institutions. Thus, there is room and necessity for further investigation into the phenomena of these experiences; it is this gap to which this study aims to contribute.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Preliminary Considerations**

The goal of this study was to identify and explore patterns in how those who experience deeply connective encounters describe these experiences, their context and importance. Because these experiences are quite personal, particular to individuals and their own meaning-making, and because the factors that determine an object's effect and relevancy in a particular situation are also unique to a given time and place, research methodology for the study focused on understanding and acknowledging interviewees' descriptions of their own lived experiences using natural language. A qualitative research approach was adopted to explore participants' realities, investigate descriptions of the experiences and their contexts, and negotiate the possible meanings and interpretations of these descriptions. Because the study was exploratory, adherence to formal methodology was loose, but the general approach was inspired by phenomenological research.

### **Research Strategy and Background**

#### *Phenomenology*

After the various types of qualitative research approaches were considered, phenomenology was selected as the research paradigm from which it would be most appropriate to draw inspiration and guidance. Phenomenological study is concerned with describing "the meaning for several individuals of their ***lived***



***experiences*** of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p.57).<sup>6</sup> To discover this meaning, a phenomenon is first identified, then data is collected from persons who have experienced this phenomenon, and the researcher develops a description of the essence of the experience across participants, focusing on “what” they experience and “how” they experience it (Moustakas, 1994 in Creswell, 2007, p. 58). Rather than seeking to explain or analyze the phenomenon, the main goal of a phenomenological study is to describe the essential nature of an experience. Semi-structured interviews with participants who self-identified as having experienced deeply connective encounters was selected as the most appropriate form of research for the study, and the best way to gain this insight.

The practice of phenomenology emphasizes suspension of judgment about others’ realities before supporting data is gathered, and encourages the researcher to bring out and set aside his or her own experiences with the phenomenon during research. (Husserl, the philosophers upon whose work phenomenology is largely founded, referred to this as “epoche” (Creswell, 2007, p.\_59).) Instead of relying on this experience to aid in interpretation from the outset, the researcher seeks to better understand participants’ experiences and the resulting significance as they themselves do. Although this study did not follow the formal procedures of epoche, the “Motivations” section in the introduction was intended to explicate these biographical experiences and the resulting perspectives they created, and an effort was made to set aside these established perceptions during the analysis process by immersion in the data.

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<sup>6</sup> (Emphasis in original.)

Interestingly, one of the four main philosophical perspectives underlying phenomenological research (Creswell, 2007) pertains to issues addressed by the central phenomenon under examination in this study—namely, how much, if any, of an object (or phenomenon)’s reality is its own, and how much of it comes into being through its interaction with observers. Phenomenology rests in part on a refusal of the subject-object dichotomy, asserting that “the reality of an object is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of an individual” (Creswell, 2007, p.59).

Although the understanding (and validity) of this separation between subject and object is one of the areas brought under consideration by the current study, the interpretive process of phenomenology does provide a useful framework for structuring data using interpretation. As part of the phenomenological process, the researcher periodically returns to the data, using it to mediate between different possible interpretations of the meaning of the lived experiences (Creswell, 2007, p.59).

The premise of this study is not that every object has demonstrated power—as Turkle notes, “the particular events of our lives inform the objects that compel us” (2008b, p.276)—but that there are commonalities between the ways in which these transformative experiences of objects, when they do occur, come about; commonalities that have relevance for museums and for the impending expansion of the digital world. These commonalities are the “essence” sought by the study.

### *The Phenomenon*

This research was structured with the goal of helping to further the understanding of deeply connective encounters with museum objects—that is, in the final definition, experiences of people interacting with museum objects that include a sense of being out-of-the-ordinary; physical objects entering the imagination of the person undergoing the experience; and a sense of connection that often seems to move both in toward the self, and out toward something larger. The study began with a sense of what these experiences were, rather than a set definition (as evidenced by the recruitment email in Appendix A), and the definition emerged over the course of the data collection, analysis and interpretation, as the essence of these experiences became clearer.

### **The Researcher's Role**

As the researcher, I was both the data collection instrument and driving force behind the research conducted; thus my values, assumptions, and biases are relevant to the study and are laid out as explicitly as possible. This acknowledgement emulates the phenomenological tradition of epoche, or bracketing. During this process, the researcher describes his or her own experiences with the phenomenon under examination, in order to set these aside and focus on the experiences of the participants with suspended judgment and as fresh a perspective as possible.

With that in mind, there are a few disclaimers and limitations to mention here in addition to the discussion of motivations put forth in the introduction to the current study. My perspective is not that of a psychologist of object relations,

or a scholar of related fields such as material culture or education, but of a museology and library science graduate student. I do not have an extensive history working in museums or conducting original research. However, while the problem is interdisciplinary and I can provide only my own perspective, a new angle brought to bear on such an issue can prove helpful in moving understanding forward. I am cognizant of the fact that a study of this scope and magnitude will provide only an initial foray into the complexities of these events, which exist at the intersection of various fields.

In addition, while the central tenets of phenomenology mesh with the purposes of this study, the exploratory nature of the study and the richness of the events under examination begged an approach that sacrificed as little as possible of their fullness to methodological adherence, and time constraints demanded an agile approach to analysis. Thus my use of formal methodology was limited by various constraints. Even scratching the surface of these issues, however, may provide a new perspective or reveal a previously unexamined layer. This study aims to contribute to the literature building an argument for these experiences as valuable and worth examination, and to indicate where future research might most effectively focus as the field seeks to move beyond description, towards explanation and analysis.

### **Sampling**

For the purposes of this study, it was important to locate enough participants to allow patterns to emerge, while still keeping the amount of data generated through in-depth interviews manageable—Creswell recommends ten to twelve

interviews as ideal for a phenomenological study (2007, p.126). The target population chosen for recruitment was current graduate students and recent alumni from the Museology, Art History, and Library and Information Science programs at the University of Washington in Seattle. The Library and Information Science program comprises about 200 online and residential students at any given time; Museology consists of around 70 students across both of its cohorts; and the Art History program has a total of about 35 graduate students.

This selection was purposeful, and based on criteria relevant to the phenomenon under examination. Those who aspire to study and/or work in the field of art history, or of cultural heritage in museums or libraries, provide a self-selected population who spend time at these institutions. They are thus likely to yield a fair amount of people who have undergone deeply connective experiences at museums, if and when these experiences happen. Additionally, those who have entered graduate programs in these fields will have spent time developing their reflective capabilities.<sup>7</sup>

To recruit volunteers, an initial email (Appendix A) was sent to the student listservs for the Library and Information Science and Museology programs, and posted to an online student board for the Art History department. From this, 12 responses were obtained from students and alumni who self-selected as having

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<sup>7</sup> This population falls well within the tradition of those selected for other studies on similar experiences. For their 1990 study of aesthetic experiences Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson focused solely on the experiences of art museum professionals. On the other hand, Latham (2009) found that museum professionals tended to be analytical of their “numinous” experiences in ways that hindered description of these experiences as direct experiences—a finding echoed in some of the Museology student interviews conducted for this study—but focused on museum members and volunteers to ensure a population who would be familiar with such experiences.

had an out-of-the-ordinary experience with a museum object. Five respondents were from the Museology program, five from the Library and Information Science program, and two were alumni from 2011, one from the Art History and the other from the Library and Information Science program, who had received an email for the pilot study. Participation was based on potential interviewee's self-identification with the experiences as described in the recruitment email, their ability to meet for an interview, and their willingness to discuss their experience(s).

### **Data Collection**

Following the distribution of the email, a pilot interview was conducted with an alumna of the library program (selected based on convenience and access as per Creswell, 2007) to refine the interview questions and procedure. Subsequently, the other 11 respondents to the recruitment email were interviewed. The follow-up email used to schedule interviews (Appendix A) further explained the structure of the meeting, the fact that respondents would be consenting to digital audiotaping, and the potential that their interview would be quoted in a resulting paper. Research was approved by and conducted in accordance with the guidelines of the University of Washington's Human Subjects Division.

Interviews were semi-structured (see Appendix B for a list of prompts), with focus questions sourced and adapted from an interview tool created by Kiersten Latham (2009), as well as work by Joy and Sherry (2003). The order and scope of each interview depended on the flow of the conversation, guided by the interviewees' inclinations to speak about their experience(s). Interviews were

conducted in a comfortable and conversational setting, allowing participants to express as full a range as possible of their memories and experiences—primarily at local coffee shops, and in a few cases at respondents' homes.<sup>8</sup> Each interview was digitally recorded using a small audio device.

### **Limitations**

Part of what prompted the choice of phenomenon—the need for more research and more involved research—also limited the constructs available as tools of investigation. Thus the process was necessarily an emergent and fluid one, descriptive in nature rather than explanatory. It required much negotiation and consideration of the data to predict or detect patterns, and decide which portions of interviews were important enough to warrant focus. I was the only researcher on the project, and so conducted all of the data collection, analysis and interpretation. Given this, and given the study's time limitations, there are important points made during the interviews on which I was not able to focus (for a more precise indication of some of these areas, see also the Literature Review and Suggestions for Further Research later in this study).

Several limitations also bear mention in regards to the pool of subjects. The interviewees constituted a small sample partially based on access, and though each of the respondents indicated that their experiences were deeply significant, the generalizability of the study to those outside the interviewee

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<sup>8</sup> One interview was conducted long-distance over Skype and telephone, but was partly unusable due to technological difficulties.

group is low. This study did not attempt to determine the frequency of occurrence of these encounters in any population.

In addition, the graduate programs in question are not representative of the surrounding geographic or other populations. They are necessarily somewhat restricted in age range and level of education. All three programs from which participants were drawn are dominated by women; this was represented within the sample, where 1/6 of the respondents were male and 5/6 female. Ethnic minorities also tend to be underrepresented in the programs, and were correspondingly underrepresented in the study. Because of its concentration at the University of Washington, the pool was limited geographically (except for one long-distance MLIS candidate) to people who have chosen to attend the same school, and to live in the Seattle area.

Finally, my previous association with some of the participants as classmates and colleagues, while allowing additional rapport and comfort in expressing personal experiences, may have played an unseen role in shaping the interviews. (Although the response rate to my initial email was satisfactory, the Art History program is by far the smallest of the three and the only program to which the recruitment email was not disseminated by listserv, I cannot be certain why none of the respondents came from the only program in which I am not also enrolled as a student).

In general, my own history, opinions, social position and time period have undoubtedly shaped both my interests and approach to examining the phenomenon under observation. As emphasized elsewhere in this study, no one is a passive, objective observer, but each person actively co-creates his or her own



reality. I can only hope that by laying things out as clearly as possible, I allow the reader to form their own conclusions as to whether my process and interpretations are well-conducted and worthwhile.

### **Data Analysis & Initial Findings**

After twelve interviews were conducted, five were subsequently transcribed, based on their representativeness of topics covered in all interviews; participants' effective articulation of their memories and experiences; and description of experiences that fit within the phenomenon as described in the recruitment email and considered by this study.<sup>9</sup> In an effort to facilitate and encourage interviewees' engagement with the interpretive process, I followed up with each participant, asking for clarification where needed, offering to send each of them their transcripts or my finished work, and inviting them to the public defense of the completed thesis.

Working from the transcription data, I began with the phenomenological idea of "horizontalization" (Creswell, 2007, p.61): developing a list of significant statements from the interviews, and seeking to break things down enough to see emergent patterns in topics of discussion. As I proceeded, I grouped these meaning units into clusters or themes to organize and examine the data. These categories were a mix of preconfigured and emergent—I brought some expectations (as indicated by the discussion prompts) and had begun to notice

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, four out of these five transcriptions were interviews with students in the Library and Information Science program, whose interviews tended to adhere more closely to the aspects of museum experience forming the focus of this study. These interviews provided more direct experiential description and had less of a tendency to veer into analysis of their experiences in terms of the wider museum field.

similarities even while conducting the interviews, but also wanted to give patterns I had not noticed a chance to come to the forefront. The goal was to pin down the type of experience well enough to identify and describe it, while also allowing the data to illustrate what these experiences look like and mean in practice, and where my initial expectations did not fit participants' descriptions.

I used the software NVIVO to assist me in grouping and keeping track of statements and themes (called "nodes" within the software), and later, to explore different ways of arranging the data. I coded statements (usually at the level of half a sentence to a few sentences) when a significant-sounding idea or reflection arose, indicated by the topic and/or the interviewee's vocal emphasis. After initially coding all five transcriptions using this process, I read through each interview three to four times, seeking to immerse myself within the world of the experience as described by the interviewee. During and after this process I revisited the list of nodes I had accumulated, verifying that they matched the data, and looking for similarities between interviews and across nodes, as well as anomalies—ideas or concepts that played a strong role only in a particular case. During the data coding process, I also marked quotes that seemed to contain insights into the core essence of described experiences for later use.

Most of the statements and patterns that arose during the initial coding process fit under the umbrellas of context or content, which helped to further refine the phenomenon under study. Although this part of the analysis was not as closely modeled on phenomenological research, these results (and the analysis as it was further developed) mirror the phenomenological goal of determining "structural" (contextual) and "textural" (what was experienced) descriptions of

the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2007, p.61). For each of these overall concepts the coded statements were placed into one of four main categories, as illustrated by Table 1.1, below (for a full list of nodes, see Appendix C):

Context	Descriptions/Qualities of Exhibits and Objects
	Sensory or Physical Components
	Overall Personal Context
	Other Factors
Content	Bodily Sensations
	Emotions and Feelings
	Thoughts and Consciousness
	Effects of the Experience & Reflections on Meaning

Table 1.1

This, then, provided a starting point for data analysis. As is apparent from Table 1.1, these distinctions were not mutually exclusive—“Sensory or Physical Components” is listed as a contextual factor, and “Bodily Sensations” as central to content. This reflects the nature of the encounters as a process—external characteristics instigating responses which are then perceived by the interviewees as making up the quality of the encounter.

During the write-up process and accompanying extended reflection, further patterns emerged as overarching themes to which the significant statements pointed. These themes were supported by interview statements addressing various facets of the experience, in many cases referencing both

context and content. As these more global patterns emerged, spanning initial divisions, they revealed the core components of deeply connective experiences as described by the study's interviewees. The first of these themes was the out-of-the-ordinary character of the encounters; second was a reaction to a physical object whereby that object moved into the person's imagination, taking on symbolic meaning for them; and third, a sense of connection between a deep aspect of self, and something larger.

## **FINDINGS & INTERPRETATIONS**

Following is a further explication of some of the significant patterns that emerged from analysis of the interview data, and how these patterns support the final interpretations of the study's results. The goal of phenomenology, and of this exploration, was to determine whether there are similarities in the essential facets of these types of experiences from person to person (and if so, where they might fall)—that is, whether the existence of deeply connective encounters as a phenomenon is evidenced by the ways in which the people who believe they have experienced such an encounter describe their experiences and effects. The sample was small enough that this study does not provide conclusions suitable for extrapolation without further research and wider-scale confirmation; however, based on the interviews conducted, there are indeed common aspects that reappeared in various descriptions, and warrant further investigation. These included the overall themes of out of the ordinariness; physicality and objects entering the imagination; and connection to something larger than the self, supported by descriptions of both contexts and content of deeply connective encounters.

### **Logistics**

To review the background of the data set, 12 total people were interviewed: five Museology Master's degree students, five Masters of Library and Information Science (MLIS) students, and one each Art History Masters and MLIS alumna. Interviewees spoke of 21 encounters and institutions total. Of these, they

collectively mentioned 12 art museums, three natural history museums, two history museums, and one each historical house, encyclopedic museum, ethnology museum, and church crypt. Estimations of remembered time spent with objects and exhibits ranged from five minutes to several hours (See Appendix D).

### **Themes**

The challenge of reducing these complex descriptions to neat patterns revealed almost immediately the personal nature of each encounter and its meaning to a given participant. That is, a given quality could be integral to one experience but completely missing from others. In all cases, even shared aspects were present to different degrees between interviewees, or between different experiences recounted by the same interviewee. This is not surprising; what speaks to a given respondent's understanding, emotions, beliefs, histories and self-identity is predictably dependent on multiple factors. Due to the small sample size, however, and the focus on quality of articulation and significance of experience to the individual versus quantity of descriptions, factors that seemed particularly salient in a given experience, even where they were not repeated across the majority of interviews, were considered in the analysis. In many instances, these characteristics did indeed fit under the same broad characterizations as more commonly mentioned aspects.

In the end, several broad categorical groupings were identified that, taken together, seemed to encompass many of the described features of deeply connective encounters and to manifest in varying combinations in almost all of

the interviews. Of course, it is important to reiterate that the boundaries here are not impermeable, and that such categorization is a compromise with complexity to allow discussion of a phenomenon that is experienced as a holistic encounter—a different prism taken to this issue might well show another portion of the spectrum.

In brief, meaningful statements in the descriptions given by participants fell into two broad categories: elements characterizing the environment and other factors surrounding the experience—the context—and those describing the qualities or effects—the content—of the encounters themselves as perceived by the interviewees. Although the focus of the study was on characteristics core to the encounters themselves, “content” descriptors referred primarily to the person’s own perceptions and experience, while including “context” descriptions allowed examination of the object and environment, crucial influences on the experience. Distinct patterns supporting the same themes also emerged from the data in relation to the contexts in which these encounters occurred.

### ***Context: Setting the Stage***

#### **Environment Conducive to Focus**

The first common theme surrounding the contexts of deeply connective encounters described by interviewees was the arrangement of the surrounding environment and its factors to facilitate focus, or a narrowing of the perceptual field to the interaction between the person and the object. The components effecting this facilitation included solitude; the materiality and certain physical

characteristics of the objects in question; and sensory factors such as quietness and the use of lighting as well as space (physical and metaphorical) for reflection.

*The Influence of Others (or, the Importance of Being Alone)*

The prevalence of solitude as a contextual factor for deeply connective encounters was an interesting finding of this study. In short, most of the experiences occurred while interviewees were at the museum by themselves; sharing space but not communicating with one or a few other people; or had broken off from a larger group in order to pursue their own paths and interests. In all five of the transcribed interviews, subjects mentioned the positive effects of being alone during their experiences (and sometimes museum experiences in general), e.g.:

I actually really prefer to be away from everyone else when I'm in a museum space. I don't like to talk to people about it, I don't like to look at what they're looking at, I don't like them standing too close to me, I don't like it. (Andrea)

I wanted other people not to be there. I wanted other people to disappear so that I could experience it. (Sarah)

It was comforting to be alone in the dark, and in a quiet space, and away from people.  
(Leah)

I actually don't like to look at art with other people. I prefer to do it alone so that I can have my own experience. (Ted)

The implications of this aspect of the experience are further developed below; suffice it to say, for now, that even in situations where people attended museums with others, going off on one's own emerged as a common precursor of deeply connective encounters.

*Objects' Physical Characteristics*

Descriptions of the material characteristics of objects and exhibits most often included perceptions of shape, color, and quality (i.e., depth or layers)—in sum,



how the object appeared to the person visually. Aside from these visually observable qualities—sight being the sense most often associated with museum visits, given the usual difficulty of apprehending museum artifacts in other ways—interviewees were asked about the sensory memories of these experiences, including those related to context

More so than patterns of specific sensory perceptions, there were references to the importance of the physical materiality of objects, and the effect of being in their presence, i.e., “Because I had seen it in books, but it’s 3[D]—you know, it’s an object, it’s something that to see in person is a different thing, and it was just amazing” (Ted). There were numerous mentions of the importance of objects’ presences and a sense of heightened awareness of proximity or orientation—sharing a perceptible sense of space, being close to the “real” thing was mentioned often as an important factor when participants struggled to explain *why* they thought a deeply connective encounter had occurred.<sup>10</sup>

One of the most salient themes that emerged from the descriptions of objects and exhibits was the importance of size and scale, and a sense of being “surrounded” that often accompanied deeply connective encounters. In some instances this was a literal or physical quality of the object—as in the case of a

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<sup>10</sup> The idea that artifacts or art objects possess an “aura” related to their authenticity (Benjamin, 1968) is an interesting area of examination, though to investigate it deeply would lie outside the scope of the current study. Briefly, though, there is certain self-evident sense in which objects do have their own physical identities; namely, “In relation to objects, meaning is to some extent constrained by material character” (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p.50). In addition, it seems there is space for the exploration of a more abstract sense of objects’ power—in *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* (2010), Conn suggests, “it is possible that the disappearance of objects from these history museums testifies to the subversive and less controllable epistemological power of objects. Perhaps objects aren’t presented in these museums because they can’t be trusted” (2010, p. 47). And there certainly seems to be a sense of agency attributed to objects in some of the current study’s encounters, with Sarah remarking on the potential of the giant blue whale to take action beyond its literal capabilities—“it’s going to eat me, it’s going to crush me.”

life-sized replica of a blue whale, “huge” paintings seeming to cover entire walls, or experiences in which the “object” under discussions was the entire setting of a historical house, or a piece of installation art occupying an entire room with light and sound. In other cases (sometimes, as with the Rothko paintings, in addition to physically surrounding the interviewee), there was a perception of being enveloped by some quality of an object or an emotion elicited by it—both respondents who mentioned Rothko spoke of actually becoming part of the painting, with Ted describing it as “kind of radiating, and it was mesmeri[zing]—I was like not really in the room anymore, like I was like in the painting, and the painting was in me.”

In still other instances (as with Leah), the encounter brought to mind the contrast between the scale of the interviewee’s physical body, and the expanse of the natural world or universe. A number of the interviewees, when asked whether they could recall similar experiences from other times, mentioned encounters with nature, again citing largeness of scale as a central factor in the way they were affected: “I think the intellectual awe is more a museum thing. And the physical awe is usually more of a size or a—I’m trying to think of another parameter that would do that” (Sarah). And in the encounter with a historic house, there was a sense that being surrounded by a physical recreation summoned up another time: “I felt like it was trying to obscure particular objects in favor of a whole experience” (Andrea).

In a number of instances, interviewees spoke of the discrepancy between the size of the actual object and previously encountered (smaller) reproductions as one of the major differences that they perceived, and that defined their

experiences with reproductions as opposed to original objects. These set up expectations tied into issues of authority (explored further below); Alex even referred to a fleeting sense of anger regarding the scale of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, almost as if she had been misled in a way that obscured the power of the actual object until she encountered it: “And it actually made me mad initially; I was like, ‘Why isn’t it this big in the books? Why don’t they show how big this painting is? This is mammoth!’

Reactions to this sense of being surrounded were varied; in some cases the reminder of scale was “overwhelming,” even physically paralyzing; but in others it was exactly the opposite, with the interviewee finding it:

[...] something I can turn back to, when I think that things feel overwhelming and the world feels too big. It’s like, well, it’s not really; it’s really small. And I’m barely anything on it, but—just like stepping back and scaling back. (Leah)

Regardless of its effect, in almost every interview there was at least one mention of size as a notable aspect of the artifact, or a sense of being surrounded (physically, emotionally, or by a new reality) as a part of the experience.

The importance of object size in the current study also correlates with the findings of others. These include Piscitelli and Anderson’s work regarding children’s recollections of museum experiences: “[children’s] salient recollections centre on experiences which appeared to be non-interactive in nature, and directed towards large-scale exhibits in a natural and social history museums” (2001, p. 269 & 278). Size appears to be a concrete physical component that makes certain objects more likely to be the focus of deeply connective (or memorable, or “seminal”) encounters with museum objects (Radley, 1991; Wilkening & Chung, 2009; Leahy in Dudley, 2010).

*Overall Sensory Environment*

There were a few mentions of touch (on the concluding end of the spectrum of proximity and the power of the material, mentioned below) and of smell, but by far the most prevalent contextual sensory experiences mentioned were the level of sound in the exhibits, and the effect of the lighting.

For instance, quietness was often mentioned as a conducive condition for deeply connective encounters. However, in certain cases the effective use of noises or other senses made a deep impact and contributed to the effect of feeling enveloped. As Andrea said, “[...] being totally surrounded by light and sound in a way that’s really holistic is different, I think, from how I normally reimagine history”—these factors provided an unfamiliar and therefore perhaps more effective feeling of immersion, augmenting the imagination in an uncommon fashion.

In regards to the overall sensory environment, light, dark, and the contrast between them also played a prominent role as memorable and thus important factors—as Radley (1991) found in examining vividly recalled museum encounters, “the qualities which originally made the objects interesting are significant in how the visit is remembered” (p.74). Leah mentioned explicitly positive feelings related to a sense of being enclosed in the darkness, almost reminiscent of sensory deprivation: “It was comforting to be alone in the dark, and in a quiet space, and away from people.” She also shared another experience that contrasted with this one mainly on the basis of the difference in lighting,

associated with a sense of openness: “everything felt really open instead. The other one was much more of a closed-off experience in the dark, and this is very—a brighter, lighter experience.”

Neither darkness nor brightness was mentioned as being negative or a detraction; indeed, several respondents drew a connection between moving from darkness into light, or vice versa, and moving further into their deeply connective encounter:

And the light was just pouring in in such a beautiful way that I could see all the dust motes in the air. And it was really—that was the moment that I felt like I was occupying my own space—I wasn’t conscious of it in the moment, that I’d moved back in time, but that was the feeling that I had, was that this was just how things were. And I felt like I was there. (Andrea)

When asked to choose a representative color, emotion, or symbol for the essence of their experiences, about half of the interviewees included either lightness, darkness, and/or a specific color as part of this overall impression. Beyond their interactions with the visual aspects of museum objects and exhibits, then, the surrounding environment’s light appeared to play a key role in interviewees’ impressions. As light is an important part of embodiment, and of the way in which humans move through space and time and regulate their life cycles, this is not a shocking finding; but the significance of light and sound according to interviewees’ accounts does argue for the importance of setting in affecting the connective interaction between person and object.

### **An Out-of-the-Ordinary Environment: Travel, Novelty, Surprise**

One of the unanticipated findings from this study was the prevalence of openness to out-of-the-ordinary experiences being correlated with participants’ having

removed themselves from their daily routines. That is, a number of interviewees mentioned that their deeply connective encounters with museum objects occurred while they were traveling, studying abroad, or on vacation (in fact, only two of the twelve interviewees did *not* discuss an encounter that happened while traveling), and/or at otherwise transitional periods of life. Several times these contexts were mentioned as specifically relevant to setting the stage for deeply connective encounters:

[T]he entire week led up to it, that's for sure. I was almost primed for it [...] I mean, we'd been to the Empire State Building—places that I had seen in a million movies and pictures, and always read about but never got to go to. And so the entire trip was kind of just one amazing adventure right after another. (Alex)

It is possible, of course, that travel itself is not an instigating factor here—most of the institutions where these encounters occurred were major museums in large cities, and if there is something about the objects themselves at the heart of these experiences, it could be that only larger institutions can afford the very large or famous pieces which are powerful in this way, or have gained cultural currency and surrounded themselves with expectations—“the eyes of many fall upon the one thing at the same time, and their presence together, their collective gaze adds to its particular significance” (Radley, 1991, p 70). People may also tend to vacation in “destination” spots more likely to contain these types of institutions and objects. Again, it could be that people tend to visit museums more often when traveling, or that they experience fewer museums where they live than during their travels. Even if there is some merit to these objections, however, the prevalence of references to travel was consistent enough—sometimes explicitly referenced as opening the door to new and exciting adventures and setting the scene for deeply connective encounters—to indicate that it can play a role.

Travel, or physical removal from the ordinary, was not the only extraordinary context that interviewees mentioned. There were also descriptions of the psychological effects of being at a transitional period in life—the difficulties of separation from family and a feeling of disconnection while studying abroad; struggling with questions of what to believe or how to view the world as a child; grappling with what is “real”—that came up as contextual factors, and were mentioned as opening one up to solace or answers (in these cases offered by interactions with museum objects).

Another interesting angle of out-of-the-ordinariness (one into which this study cannot delve fully) is the incidence of these experiences in childhood versus adulthood. While most of the experiences recounted during these interviews took place in adolescence or adulthood, those that took place while the interviewee was a child tended to exhibit some unique shared characteristics, including factors such as questioning the authenticity of the memory or encounter itself, and having to be reassured that this event, which seemed to transgress reality, did in fact occur. There is not enough data from the current study to compare closely with previous literature; however, Conn explicitly acknowledges the importance of better understanding the differences in object relations between children and adults:

[...] this influx of children into museums forces us to ask a set of very basic questions about museum objects: Does their power, whatever that may be, affect children differently than adults? Do children interact with objects in fundamentally different ways, and how? At the end of the day, do kids care much about an object's singularity or its aura, and do they derive different meanings from it for different reasons? (2010, p.56).

Piscitelli and Anderson's (2001) examinations of children's reactions to museum visits, as well as Wilkening and Chung's (2009) work indicating that museum-

lovers may be likely to have undergone a “seminal” museum experience between the ages of five and nine (p. 43), make this an especially interesting area for future inquiry. In general, however, it would seem that during the early part of life, as children are still learning how the world works and what “makes sense,” it is necessary for them to be continuously open to new and often startling experiences—what they know to be true about reality is changing all the time, and they must be able to adapt accordingly.

### **Detractions**

In general, detractions mentioned were exactly the opposite of the conducive conditions discussed above—distractions that broke focus or the feeling of being surrounded; crowds, or people whose attitudes were negative; loud or uncomfortable spaces; a dulling of appreciation by repetition; or a general lack of openness (though interestingly, neither low expectations nor physical discomfort such as illness precluded deeply connective encounters). Although the extended nature of some experiences seemed integral, limited time was also not an absolute bar to a deeply connective experience—several of the experiences described were estimated at only 5 or 10 minutes (see Appendix D).

### ***Content: What Happened***

For content as well as context, there was a wide range of senses and effects that emerged as possibly core to these encounters. In the end, the three broad groupings that seemed present and central in most of the experiences had to do with a sense of out of the ordinariness; an interaction with a physical object and



the symbolic significance the object took on as it was shaped by the interviewee's imagination; and a sense of connection through the self to something larger than the self.

Although discrete groupings would have made things simpler, there is necessarily some overlap between these categories, as all refer to aspects of the same experience, and in many cases are inextricably related; of course in many instances, factors mentioned as part of context helped shape the interviewee's encounter itself.

### **Out of the Ordinarity**

The museum offered me an invitation to leave the momentum of one life and enter times and spaces set apart, where I saw a different worldliness, and felt a different momentum (Carr, 2006, pp. 25-26)

To examine the extraordinariness of deeply connective encounters more closely, it is useful to note again the number of people who mentioned unusual contextual factors in their interviews—that is, when deeply connective experiences were described, they were often set during a period of the interviewee's life when the usual pattern of daily progression was already in some way suspended or unstable. These interviewees were thus already physically removed from their day to day lives, setting the stage for engagement with the world on different terms, or an openness to new types of encounters.

Aside from preexisting contextual factors, however, deeply connective encounters themselves also create a sense of removal from normal reality. That is, in some cases, it was the process of the experience itself that moved interviewees out of their usual perception of life and into the realm of the

extraordinary. This included various types of shifts in perception and reality, depending on the specific encounter and the person involved.

### *Perceptions of Time*

Several of the accounts make mention of losing track of time or being uncertain how much time had passed during the experience. Some of this should likely be attributed to the fact that in most cases, years had passed since the experiences had transpired (see Appendix D). However, there were also mentions of changes in the sense or quality of time, as with Andrea's description:

I felt like my whole system slowed down when I was there. I felt like the rhythm of life kind of changed in that space. At least as I'm recalling it now, I remember feeling like I was breathing really slowly, and my heart was beating pretty slowly.

While hers was the only interview that also mentioned a sense of actually moving back in time, only a few of the experiences related in the interviews took place at history museums, and hers was the only one referring to the carefully curated surroundings of a historical house—in this case, the “object” which transported her quite literally enveloped her as well. If “artifacts constitute the only class of historical events that occurred in the past but survive into the present” (Pye, 2007, p. 14), it is no wonder that their presence carries some of the import of their past, or even that “earlier meanings still remain as traces” (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p.50). Museums, as physical manifestations of connections with the past and culture, nature, and humanity, bridge the effable and ineffable .

Cameron and Gatewood mention this sense of being transported as a type of travel itself: “Time travel may function a little like foreign travel in that some people wish to make a more personal and emotional connection with a

time/place” (2003, p.56). Latham also found that a sense of transport was central to her interviewees’ descriptions—even more central than indicated by the findings of this study. A more frequent occurrence, however, was losing track of time, or the impression that more time had passed than in fact had occurred. This perception speaks to a sense of absorption and focus on the transaction occurring as the person entered into a deeply connective encounter, providing another indication of deep focus. Indeed, losing track of time is an important aspect of Csikszentmihalyi’s idea of flow. This change in the perception of time may also have contributed to the fact (noted above) that such deeply connective experiences did not always require an extended period of time.

### *Reality Shifts & Transport*

In addition to perceptions of a change in the quality or passage of time, some participants described the sense of entering into a new or different reality. In some cases this was an expanded or changed perception of the person’s own relation to reality or life due to a thought process or realization, living on as change, “something that affected my whole life” and was part of a pinpointed change in thinking (Leah), or opening doors of understanding and allowing other things to fall into place (Alex). In other cases the shift in reality was a case of reacting to artifactual prompts, entering temporarily into a different reality—the reality of the object. Of the storm painting, Leah said:

That one has a lot of different sensations. It’s very much like the feel, the floor is always really hard in that place, and so my feet are always tired because it’s very hard wood. And there’s a heavy smell of oil paint in the air there. And it’s always cold. And so it almost feels like you’re there at the cliff as well, because the ground is cold [...]

Andrea mentioned a similar sense of transport, embracing the reality of the historical house as her own as she entered fully into the experience: “I stopped feeling like I was in somebody else’s space, or in somebody else’s time, and [started feeling] that it belonged to me.” And in Ted’s case, as mentioned above, the sensation was neither precisely physical, nor mental, but a more abstract sense of shifting and entrance: “It felt like I was sort of pitched out of my reality. Like I was somewhere else. And it was in there [the Rothko painting].” In this way, many interviewees experienced a shift or expansion beyond their everyday perceptions or conceptions of reality. Reality is always co-created through interaction with the things of the world, but in this case the influence of the object or setting seems to have had a particularly strong effect.

In these instances, the transition from an everyday reality to a new one could often be pinpointed to a particular moment, event, or sensation—seeing the light falling across a desk, or feeling unbalanced and then “pitched” out of normality. And, too, some interviewees spoke of a sense of being “jolted,” having their breath taken away, being “struck” or “blown away”—confrontational, almost violent words. Even where these were used to signal encountering the object or exhibit, rather than a shift in reality, there is still a sense in which being arrested in this fashion throws into relief the background one usually moves through, bringing it into awareness and thereby opening one to new things. Perhaps this was also why novelty, mentioned as a common contextual factor above, seemed to come up frequently as a catalyst—people are evolutionarily conditioned to pay close attention to what is new and not yet understood, providing a point of entry for deeper attention and absorption, a higher level of engagement: “A moment of

insight does not emerge from memory, or from prior experience, or even from the brilliance of the object before us. It emerges from the situation created for something new to happen to us” (Carr, 2006, p.29-40)—or for us to embrace a new situation. People function by predicting what will come next and acting accordingly; when this expectation proves incorrect, they must shift perspective and adjust.

The individualized nature of this shift in reality, specific to a person, space, and time, also sheds light on the desire that many interviewees expressed to be alone in order to reflect on their encounter. It is difficult to bring anyone else into such a singular reality (especially when it occurs on a level that transcends vocabulary), and all of those who mentioned trying to communicate the significance of their experience or object to others while at the museum also expressed frustration at the failure of this tactic. In fact, the only instances in which people seemed to feel the presence of others contributed, or that they shared in the experience, were encounters where the other people in question were part of the context of the experience, rather than agents expressing the differences between their own reality and the interviewee’s.

Removal from the daily flow of life was, of course, one of the defining characteristics of the phenomenon with which this study began. In some ways, this was inevitable—out-of-the-ordinariness helps to establish salience; in many cases these encounters had taken place years in the past, and it was their very uniqueness that made them memorable. Through the interviews and data analysis, however, a more nuanced picture has arisen of how this removal occurs,

the internal perceptions or effects of its manifestations, and what it means to those who experience it.

*Focus, Reflection, Flow*

Altered perceptions of time, as mentioned above, are one example of absorption in these experiences to a level that is different than that usually experienced in day-to-day life. Another might be the aforementioned emphasis placed by interviewees on the importance of quiet and solitude for reflection. This constitutes, not exactly a shift in reality, but certainly a narrowing of focus (though not to the extent experienced by Latham's interviewees, who each spoke of focus on the object resulting in actual "tunnel vision" (2009, p.80)). Everyday trappings and surroundings seemed to fall away; as Ted expressed, "I think that's probably why it was so profound, because it was just my eyes and the piece;" a lack of distractions allowed Andrea to experience "the illusion that time had changed, or that the modern day had kind of fallen away." Notably, then, the deepest of these encounters were free of distractions such as loud noises or crowds, and allowed space (and in most cases time) for extended and focused engagement. In fact, the encounters for which the presence of other people was mentioned as being helpful were actually those in which the people seemed more like a part of the exhibit itself:

I appreciated the complete strangers in the Met; the ones who were sitting and sketching, the ones who were just quietly observing. They seemed to have a certain respect for it that I shared. And I think that added considerably to the experience. (Alex)

Again, this focus is very similar to a crucial aspect of the aesthetic "flow" experience as identified by Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, where one of the

main restrictions they stipulate for a conducive environment is that it be “[...] conducive to a centering of attention on the object and to a screening out of distractions” (1990, p. 19)

### *Authenticity of Experience*

Concepts of authenticity are a complex and layered morass; while we may approximately understand what it means for an object to be “the real thing” as opposed to a reproduction or forgery, it is still difficult to know exactly what effect this has on interactions with it. (Aside from the fact that knowing something is a reproduction *can* change people’s attitude towards it (Saunderson in Dudley, 2010)).

Measuring the authenticity of experience—or even determining the components which make up this authenticity—is more thorny still. Can an experience be authentic if it is not based in knowledge and understanding of that which it reacts to? What if the response is based on a misapprehension? In some cases in the current study, authenticity was perceived as relating to the veracity of a painting’s depiction of its subject. Leah, having been impacted by a painting of cliffs and a stormy ocean, was preoccupied with concern over whether what spoke to her from the painting was a true representation, or merely imagined power: “They’re beautiful, but do they really exist?” She felt reassured only after seeking confirmation in nature herself. The role of the imagination in deeply connective encounters is critical, but the issue becomes stickier when imagined reality contradicts the world of facts.

For an object to induce this type of encounter, it does not necessarily have to adhere to a certain standard of representing reality—however, one of the components of deeply connective experiences is a sense of genuineness, and discovering a contradiction of facts could have negative impact on the affective nature of the experience. This was part of what concerned Leah in her reaction to the storm painting. For the historical house, Andrea emphasized not the accuracy of the house’s portrayal of a time period, but the power of encountering someone else’s idea of what that past was: “It was just kind of this atmospheric concept of the past that he was recreating.” It is personal reactions, not facts, which make the experience especially memorable.

Indeed, Jones argues that such experiences can shape identity itself; “Thus the process of negotiating the authenticity of material things can also be a means of establishing the authenticity of the self” (Jones 2010, p.189). The interviewees in this study in some cases addressed similar ideas, with Leah in particular talking about figuring out how the world “really” was as a way of deciding who she would be. Again, some interviewees characterized deeply connective encounters as “the real thing,” or at least a different stripe of experience, contrasted with usual models of experience and learning:

I think maybe because it was this one specific thing [the whale] that did that, there was the idea of like, no other—just learning about them is not the same as standing next to it. And so therefore, if I can’t get that feeling and that experience from getting a book of it, I don’t need to do that at all. (Sarah)

Part of the power of the object’s impact, then, maybe attributed to its perceived genuineness—as Jones suggests, a deeply significant uniting of object, person, and place. In any case, an authentic experience requires some resonance with the



beliefs, reality, and identity of the person experiencing it—it is encounters which speak to deep parts of the self that carry the power of change.

### **Physicality and Objects in the Imagination**

While these encounters are emphatically not everyday experiences, in another sense they arise from moving through the world as one usually does, until coming upon the contrast of something different in the form of encounter with an object or setting. Because people navigate move through the world as, at the most basic level, embodied beings, and because these physical bodies are self-contained, it is in the physical dimension that one must encounter objects, converging on them in time and space. The senses used to apprehend reality, throwing consciousness out into the wider world, are always tied back to a being and a consciousness (and so, are relational rather than objective). Life is interactive; as Joy and Sherry found, people draw on physical mechanisms of awareness “not merely to negotiate but to cocreate their phenomenal worlds” (2003, p. 280).

Although there were no consistently mentioned physical sensations, bodily consciousness proved an important factor in deeply connective experiences.

### *Synesthesia*

In addition to some (comparatively) straightforward sensory recollections of context and content—crying, certain smells, &c.—these discussions with interviewees were also reminders of the ways in which sensory apprehensions of the world are not discrete. The most obvious manifestation of this interconnectedness is the tie between the sense of taste, and that of smell,

without which taste loses much of its intensity. Touch is a sense still infrequently exercised in museums, but often other senses or the imagination are used to bridge this sensory gap—Sarah spoke of the “sensation” of what something *would* feel like if she were to touch it, and Ted used as his primary description of why a painting had deeply affected him the fact that the vase it depicted “was so *soft*, it was the softest thing I think I’d ever seen, it was really just like round and soft,” the entire time using very specific, 3D gestures as he remembered the impression it had made upon him. In speaking of museum objects that they are not allowed to touch, people quoted in previous studies fairly often discussed their perception or imagination of how the surface or object would feel as if this texture were fact, and research has shown that perceptions such as surface texture are actually multisensory: “both vision and touch appear to contribute to people’s perception of the felt texture (or roughness) of a surface” (Pye 2007, p. 47). Even in the realm of the senses imagination is at work, and it not merely the attributes of the object itself, but the process of encounter that creates this sensation.

To take this connection a step further, in his interview Ted specifically referenced the condition of synesthesia. In its literal form, this is a mixing of the senses so that what would normally stimulate one mode of sense instead evokes another—for instance, one might consistently perceive a particular color upon hearing a certain note, or experience tastes as different shapes felt on the tongue. The sensory apprehension of objects to some extent appears to cross modalities; that is, to support the idea that “[...] perception is synesthetic [...]” (Joy, 2003, p. 264). In this instance, Ted’s experience was described as having “[...] a little bit of that [synesthesia] going on. But I wouldn’t put it with like taste or smell; it was

more like proprioception and sight, I guess. Like there was some sort of neurological thing going on..." The senses were intermingled with a sense of the body in space (and also, in this instance, with a sense of shifting reality: the feeling was that of being "not really in the room anymore, like I was in the painting, and the painting was in me").

Combined with the previous findings of the importance of size, scale, quiet, and light, the physicality of objects and spaces becomes highly important in these experiences. Objects have their own reality and essences, constraining the experiences possible with them. The potential for meaning is latent until activated by interaction with a visitor. Although the data from the current study does support the significance of physical objects in deeply connective encounters, the holistic nature of such encounters means that the range of statements regarding this dimension were broader than mere references to sensory apprehensions.

Objects have existence and impact in the realm of ideas as well: "Bodies move, sense, touch, smell, taste, and act in conjunction with thought and speech within a space, for people experience themselves simultaneously *in* and *as* their bodies" (Csordas, 1994, in Joy, 2003, p. 261). Latham also divides the significance of objects in what she calls "numinous" encounters (see Literature Review) into two pieces: their tangibility, and their symbolism. As an example of the way in which this distinction functions and these aspects work together, take the most prevalent physical characteristic found in this study—that of size and scale. Objects are apprehended in relation to the self, and the objective size of the blue whale at the American Museum of Natural History—its tangible nature—is

translated into a relationship of scale, the self in comparison and relation to the object.

### *Visceral Apprehension*

As mentioned above, at a basic level all of these experiences contained an element of surprise, often revealed by a bodily effect. Interviewees spoke of being “struck,” “smack[ed] in the face,” “blown away,” or the encounter creating a “jolt” or being “breathtaking”—and while in some instances they were speaking figuratively, the work of cognitive metaphor would ground these phrases in human embodiment, and its role in deciphering the world and defining experience. (Of course, this is in addition to language’s power in other realms, such as the affective: “[...] the language of emotions does not merely reflect, but in fact constructs, the feelings that we experience” (Joy, 2003, p.264).

In some cases responses to encounters also elicited strong physical responses—i.e., crying, “[...] like a bodily reaction. It was like eyes watering more than crying,” (Ted), or a “fight or flight” response so overwhelming, it seemed to incapacitate the mind: “It was like my brain was totally overloaded in fear and excitement [...] I just froze” (Sarah). A sense of awe, in particular, seemed to be tied to feeling surrounded, and being small in size or scale in relation to the object. In some cases, this emotion even veered into fear, without losing its magnetism: “[...] I think that above all was really what drew me to it, was that sense of safe scaredness. Or scary safeness” (Sarah).

These indications point to an apprehension or intuition bypassing the usual ways we expect to process museum experiences—in short, absorbing

information through the eyes to be analyzed by the mind. As Ted put it, the experiences he characterized as deeply connective “transcended that cerebral process and took me to a no-thinking zone.” In contrast to his typical museum experiences, which relied on analytically breaking objects down for understanding, in this instance the reality of the entire piece collided with his own in a striking and holistic moment of encounter: “Often, when I look at art, I will scan it in quadrants. Like really look and see what it is, what am I looking at. And this was all of a piece; there was no—I was just open to it.” Bypassing the usual processing allowed an experience of entirety and immediacy not otherwise possible—while some encounters took place over an hour or two, for others the engagement was instantaneous, and the entire encounter took only a short period of time.

As mentioned above, the systems of thought, emotions, and physicality are rarely truly separable—what we think and feel in turn shapes the actions we take and who we become. In general, however, respondents tended to characterize and sometimes even contrast their own experiences as being either “intellectual” and “academic,” filled with analysis; or “tangible,” “physically experiential,” or “emotional.”

[...]I think I can sort of divide them [the experiences] into the two categories that I’ve laid out, i.e., sort of physically experiential, like seeing the whale and having this chemical reaction in my brain, versus going to the museum and seeing what was going on, and sort of integrating that and going, “Huh,” sort of more of a intellectual... (Sarah)

While both types of experiences came up in discussions of deeply connective encounters, those that most closely fit the project’s definition of this type of experience tended to be predominantly experiential, or both experiential and intellectual. Indeed, engaging more than just the mind is part of what makes

these encounters special—wonder rarely exists on a purely comprehensible level.

According to Ted, for instance, “There wasn’t sort of analysis, there was no analysis going on, which is nice. To be relieved of that part of your mind.”

Upholding the pattern of inconsistency, however, there were one or two experiences characterized along the lines of Alex’s encounter with the Rosetta Stone, a “quiet epiphany;” “definitely more of a—less of an emotional reaction, more of an academic understanding”—which, nonetheless, she too contrasted with a less academic deeply connective encounter with a painting. In summary, physical objects can provide a solid jumping-off point for the imagination; their actual presence seems indispensable, but it is when they enter the minds and hearts of visitors as symbolic realities that their power is truly unleashed.

### *Imagination*

There seems to be something about the presence of an object, sharing space and time, that enables a different type of experience and learning—allows it to enter deeply into a person’s own present reality. Given that not all of these effects are physical, the imaginative capacity must be brought in as well: “Imagination is [...] at the heart of perception and is closely tied to the incarnate body” (Joy on Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 264). Though people often consider body and mind as binary, in fact engagement with one’s surroundings always occurs on multiple levels through intertwined channels (Hetherington, 2003). The results of this imagining vary according to what each person has in their past or identity, but whether a person encounters someone else’s imagination or memory through an exhibit, or revisits their own through telling a story, there is a corporeal force at

work. As Carr explains it, “[...] I learned that memory is embodied, that it exists in the person. Offered as evidence among objects, memory has a deep and disproportionate power to instruct and awaken the experiences of others” (Carr 2006, p.115).

The imaginative capacity is involved in various aspects of these encounters, from being reminded of past experiences, to wondering about the agency or history of the object itself, to feeling connected through objects to another time or place. And it is through imagination and associative connections that the reality of an object is combined with that of a person to create something new. In fact, the role the imagination plays in various types of experiences indicates that it may deserve more credit than it is generally given. For example, when Piscitelli and Anderson looked at children’s memorable museum experiences, they found “[...]evidence that exhibitions which provide readily accessible links with children’s past experiences result in more positive affect than exhibitions which are hands-on, engaging and/or multi-sensory in nature” (2001, p. 269). That is, exhibits which are static but engage children’s minds in making connections to their own realities may prove to have a deeper impact than those which rely on physical interactivity.

There are implications here as well for the topic of participatory exhibits and design, currently at the forefront in many museums’ considerations of how best to engage their communities; for instance, parents with children stand out as likely to prefer hands-on activities in museums (Wands et al., 2010, p. 22), but evidence from other studies of children’s own museum experiences also seems to suggest that it is not always these types of exhibits that make the biggest

impression. Wilkening and Chung found that memories of seminal museum experiences are, in most cases, of “‘old-fashioned,’ static, object-based exhibits that created internal narrative and internal activity. They weren’t viewed as structured or boring. Instead they allowed the imagination to soar” (2009, p.44). And it is the potential for traditional or “non-interactive” exhibits to stimulate personal reflection and connections is not limited to children; in 2008, Reach Advisors, the Connecticut Humanities Council (CHC), and Connecticut Landmarks examined the preferences of Connecticut’s museum-going population and found that older people were actually more receptive to experiencing technology in a museum setting, while “younger respondents suggested that museums were a place to get away from the technology that pervades their lives” (Wands et al., 2010 p. 22). Additionally, there is other evidence indicating that “[...] even in this technology-obsessed age, museum visitors still gravitate toward the basic elements that Goode was advocating more than a hundred years ago: a variety of compelling objects supported by well-written labels” (MacArthur, 2011, p.62). All in all, evidence from these studies as well as the current study seems to point to the fact that an imagination is a powerful thing.

### *Deeply Connective Encounters as Learning Encounters*

It seems to be at the intersection of the personal and private with wider reality that learning takes place in these encounters—through absorption, focus, and in some cases intuition. These experiences differ from the traditional sense of learning as intake of knowledge—in more than one instance, interviewees explicitly mentioned that continued research was *not* an effect of their encounter.



For Sarah, for example, “the interesting thing was, I didn’t want to learn all that much about the whale.” These experiences, then, and what participants learned, were less about the facts or reality of the object in isolation, and more about the object’s importance or meaning in relation to the interviewee, his or her own reality and past experience (which in some cases did include learning—as mentioned above, several encounters centered on a sense of recognition and connection due to previous knowledge). Sarah described the long-term effect and her memory of the experience as one for which “I do remember it experientially, but not informationally, not intellectually.” As Latham argues, this increased self-knowledge gained through connective encounters does constitute a type of information and learning: “These connections are about the person’s existence in this world, about who they are and why they are here. They helped the person understand things about themselves and their relationship to the world around them” (2009, p.97).

The connections formed during these encounters point to a type of transformation and learning not readily observable, but potent nonetheless: “there is more to learning than simply accessing information. A different type of learning or meaning-making happens in the presence of actual objects” (MacArthur, 2011, p.61). This meaning-making is a dynamic process—the connection comprises a large part of the encounter, but is also transient in nature. The person thus experiences the encounter not merely as an outcome, but also as a process they can feel moving through them. Multiple interviewees mentioned the lack of traditionally-defined learning—retention of facts—following their experiences. There were, however, also discussions of insight and

intuitive knowledge gains, at a different level than that of the “head.” This increasing (self-) knowledge is not to be discounted: “Perhaps this is learning. Among objects of belief and objects of doubt alike, among ideas of the past and ideas of the future, we strive to feel in some way continuous with the traces that mark other lives, while we also confirm the solitary uniqueness of our own” (Carr, 2006, p.140). It is a sense of the self as separate that allows examination and an increased understanding of its connections to the larger reality.

Of course, not every affective experience is necessarily educational. It is possible to respond powerfully to ideas and conceptions that are in fact erroneous. Heritage sites in particular walk a fine line between historical and personal, and museums traditionally have an obligation to educate as well as engage. When they fail to do so, they risk becoming, as Conn criticizes, merely “therapeutic museums [...] promis[ing] emotional resolution rather than critical engagement” (2010, p.45). What does it mean to have an authentic experience? This is a much larger topic than can be explored in this study, and one on which much work has been done (and which requires more still). But if emotion can obscure reality, words and intellect can likewise obscure or even prevent deep engagement. As one highly-educated participant in Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson’s *The Art of Seeing* declares in an interview:

‘There is a certain danger in being too articulate about these things, which [...] may remove the art experience, the aesthetic response, from what the real aesthetic response is, which is, of course, silent. It has nothing to do with words at all.’ (129) (1990, p. 68).

Inward and outward, social and private; all contribute to meaning-making and identity formation, and this balance is critical to facilitate and experience deeply connective encounters. Of course, the specificity of these encounters and their

reliance on the diverse backgrounds of visitors mean that no one museum can seek to provide these experiences for all visitors, or even assure that they will occur at all. But when they do happen, there is more at stake than just the engagement of a visitor with an object; something new is being put into the world, generating and adding to the life path of both: “[...] a fund of personal memories can create a new act of remembering, which, in turn, affects the aesthetic experience. Museum objects may trigger past memories, but every attempt to draw meaning from them kindles productive and creative processes” (Joy, 2003, p.271).

Memory can be a particularly strong connective trigger, coming at the intersection of imagination, emotion, and history. This connection is highlighted in the current study’s interviews by mentions of a sense of connection with people unknown to the interviewee, through the medium of their work. Heritage museums and battle sites—institutions based on individual and collective identities or memories of painful events—are perhaps most effective at eliciting a sense of the “numinous” (Cameron and Gatewood, 2003). “Offered as evidence among objects, memory has a deep and disproportionate power to instruct and awaken the experiences of others” (Carr, 2006, p.115). And here is the crux of what such private transformations accomplish—they allow, at one and the same time, connection with one’s place in a larger whole, and confirmation of individual identity as *someone*. These transformations unite mind and body, heart and head, in a fashion far more authentic than much daily experience:

I am grateful for my education, but I am also grateful that museums do not diminish or classify or disrespect the individual life. They help us to understand and feel passion—not hide it—to understand and feel at once. It is this integrity, this simultaneous knowing and feeling, that drives whatever and whomever we are meant to be (Carr, 2006, p.41).

### **Connection: Moving Inward to Expand**

#### *Moving Beyond the Self: Confrontation*

In many instances, in order to create connections it was necessary first to break the mold of expectation and disrupt usual relationships to self and surroundings. This is evidenced by the consistent descriptions of previous expectations or realities being confronted, even blown away, allowing transcendence beyond the everyday:

I think that was another time when my expectations were so far transgressed that I lost my own consciousness of myself, and was just totally focused on how exciting it was to be seeing something that I had never imagined before. (Andrea)

An interesting tension is at play here between physical and emotional comfort, and intellectual challenge, moving deeper into one's own understanding while also expanding outward, being introduced to the challenge of the new and unimaginable: "These moments of reconstitution, that discontinuity, opens up a world of experience which poses new questions" (Radley, 1991, p.77).

In this vein, interviewees were asked about their knowledge and attitudes prior to and during the experiences; in general, there was some way in which their everyday reality was upset, or they were faced with a situation that made them reassess their expectations. Few had extensive knowledge of artists or artifacts going into the experience, and no one was expecting a deeply connective encounter. Attitudes ranged from very open—being "primed," as above—to being fairly closed-off. This element of surprise appeared to enhance the power of the encounters:

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I guess I was expecting to gawk, more than I was expected to experience. But I was wrong, because it was beautiful. (Andrea)

I never anticipated it would be that size. (Sarah)

Because at that point, I was pretty sure I knew everything, and was really clever about it. And loved history and knew all about it, and then this comes around and I'm like, "Oh, wow." (Alex)

I really had never thought much of Picasso—but I also had not seen a lot of Picasso either, except for books and things. (Ted)

Novelty in this sense came into play as well during experiences involving recognition of an object or artist; often the interviewee expressed surprise after having encountered a piece through a reproduction, then confronting what it meant to be in the actual presence of the object—this applied in particular to differences in physical dimensions. Although unlike Csikszentmihalyi, this study does not focus on pre-accumulated skill as a central factor of the experiences under examination, it is worthwhile noting that prior experiences with reproductions also played a role in some deeply connective encounters in that for a number of instances (including this one), recognition and familiarity with the artifact in question influenced the power of the experience, or of the particular object in question.

### *Moving Beyond the Self: Connection*

As mentioned above, in some cases the result of these encounters was a feeling of movement into a new reality or time. In other instances, there was a description of being shown reality from someone else's point of view. Ted spoke of being "very keenly aware, or I was intuiting that he [Picasso] had a softness to him," based on his perceptions of the "softness" of the painting—for Ted, Picasso could

not hate women, because he was able to communicate something of how he perceived them through this work. Latham found similar results, with interviewees conjuring images and personalities of people they had never actually experienced—she refers to this as “imaginative empathy” (2009, pp. 85, 107).

Andrea spoke of the challenge of being transported by someone else’s imagination and perception of the world, and the value this added not only to her deeply connective encounter, but to her life:

[T]he value of remembering that your imagination is not the limits of what you can experience. That other people’s imaginations supplement that. So I think that’s a really humanizing experience, to come into contact with someone else’s imagination in a really fulfilling way.

In these cases, there is a connection to specific people—either unknown, as with the artist or historical house curator, or friends and family members (historical or contemporary). Here the study comes up against the crux of how “aloneness” factors into such encounters, without requiring them to be isolated or isolating experiences. Salient elements of deeply connective encounters in this study included descriptions of not just private reflection, but an active desire to experience museum exhibits and objects on one’s own, and often mentioned a sense that the presence of other people could actually be a detraction to the focus necessary to disengage from the everyday world of interaction and analysis, and truly engage with the reality of the objects:

[...] my concern about other people is really distracting from my ability to—for me, it’s easy to analyze the content of artwork, but it’s very hard for me to just let myself experience how colors or lines make me *feel*. And so that requires some significant concentration on my part. (Andrea)

Other respondents mentioned focus on the objects as a method of escape from “performing” themselves for others, or from the expectations they perceived

museums and exhibits to have for visitor behavior. Entering into a world inhabited only by themselves and their objects allowed them to forget about aspects of their surroundings that could have distracted them from the deeply connective interaction, and gave them the security to open themselves to the encounter.

For many of the interviewees, after they had experienced the encounter they felt the urge to communicate it to other people. Sometimes it compelled people to make connections with others in their family, recounting their experience or using it to connect through shared interests (Alex).

In multiple cases, however, a strong urge to share the experience while it was happening was mentioned; in all of these, the difficulty of communicating the essence of the experience or inability to verbalize the encounter brought a sense of frustration—Ted felt “flabbergasted;” Leah and Alex both spoke of attempting to share the encounter, but also of the challenge of translating their experience into words. When they pointed out the objects that had so deeply affected them, others did not seem to see the significance or be struck as deeply:

When I saw Washington Crossing the Delaware, the first thing I wanted to do was go find as many of my choir members as I could and say, “Look what I found! You guys, look; it’s in our history book! Look!” And I recognized that they wouldn’t care, or didn’t want to see it as badly. (Alex)

Every time I’ve gone there with someone else, I’ve dragged them over to stand in front of it, and they’re kind of like, “Oh, that’s nice.” And then they move on, and they’re like, “Oh look, it’s the Blue Boy!” And it’s like—can’t you see this one right here in front of you, it’s so much more beautiful! (Leah)

For some, in fact, these interviews were the first time they had put their experience into words. Given the direct, visceral, and contextual nature of the way in which these encounters affected the interviewees, it is no surprise that their impact often transcended participants’ abilities to describe them—either to

companions at the time, or during the interviews themselves, where there were many remarks on how difficult it was to translate or communicate such encounters verbally. Ted, for instance, described it as being “apophatic [...] there’s no word for the word. You know, like you can’t talk about it,” while Leah struggled to articulate the import of what her encounter meant: “I have a really hard time describing it, because it was very much a feeling without a lot of sub[—].” In spite of these challenges, however, all interviewees believed that their experiences were worth trying to describe, and enjoyed reliving their positive memories through recounting the episodes.

In some cases the general was easier to access than the particular, and descriptions of “connection” in the larger sense encompassed not only individuals, but on occasion humanity at large. As Alex put it, “I feel more like a relevant part of society just because I have seen them [the Parthenon marbles]”). Others mentioned a sense of connection with their own personal history or heritage.

A result of these encounters—what they create in the world—is a sense of relationship to the larger or external world, but also a movement bringing that reality closer to (or even into) oneself. People are fascinated with objects precisely because they persist through time and have histories of their own, serving as witness to people and events past. Crossing paths in this way allows an object to become part of a visitor’s reality, history, life story and therefore identity. Meaning is created from encounters that feel significant and genuine; their effects are internalized, allowing the surroundings to shape the person: “Once people have experienced an object or a display, that episode now becomes part of



their own personal history, so that what is being remembered is an occasion when their sense of the past was extended or deepened” (Radley, 1991, p.79).

The visitor, as well, enters into the history of the object, becoming forever part of its journey and adding to the weight that future visitors may sense— “[...]the materiality of objects embodies the past experiences and relationships that they have been part of” (Jones, 2010, p.190). Interactions (what exists) remind people of their pasts and of what could be, pointing them out of themselves toward the wider world.

Some interviewees were made more physically aware of their place within the wider world (Leah, Ted); most mentioned an emotional or psychological connection to their place within history, the web of humanity, or a sense as inchoate as “connection with something larger.” So, too, as this physical awareness made them more conscious of their own body or spatial orientation, there was less a sense of tension between “inward” and “outward” than of moving through oneself to arrive at a wider perspective: as one non-transcribed interviewee put it, her deeply connective encounter “takes me out of myself but also makes me more aware of myself” (Alisa). By becoming more aware of their bodies and how they move through space, people gain awareness also of the objects to which they relate. Sometimes it is necessary to disengage from wider connections and feel our own separateness to realize in what directions these connections pull. Or, to put it another way, the shrinkage of self creates room for more within. Loss of ego is a central aspect of flow theory, and just as with mountains or other natural phenomena that create a feeling of smallness and

sometimes insignificance, “anything that shrinks the self creates an opportunity for spiritual experience” (Haidt, 2006, p. 200-201).

Thus the impetus of deeply connective encounters to solitariness, or their ineffable nature, does not necessarily mean that they are not social. In fact, it could be argued that the focus on social interaction and community-building within the museum field often fails to take into account the important ways in which private reflection can contribute to social interaction, allowing people to create something to offer in conversation or interaction (see also Spock and Buchholz’s description of the importance of “alonetimes” as restorative and generative periods, mentioned above in this study’s Literature Review).

In addition to connections with people, there were also explicit mentions of deeply connective encounters fostering connections to history and place. Along with Andrea’s sense of integration into the past, referenced above, Alex mentioned a strong sense of coming to better understand and participate in history through proximity to, and viewing, the Rosetta Stone: “I felt more connected to history in just sitting there looking at this object.” She also attributed to these experiences (and to travel more generally) a broadening of perspective that included an increased sense of attachment to her hometown, realizing that

[...] my reality I’d constructed for myself, this perfect, wonderful [wider] world, wasn’t exactly how I imagined it—still wonderful, still extremely fascinating, but not exactly as I had envisioned it in my mind—suddenly I had to stop and kind of reorient myself to what was around me, and I think that was the beginning of any true appreciation for the place in which I existed [...]

She was not the only one of the interviewees to see this relationship. By connecting with something outside themselves, they seemed able to better understand their own identity and place.

This thread of connection continues with those who talked about a sense of being connected to something more abstract, of their relationship to “something larger” (cf. Latham on “higher things,” 2009, p. 109). For Leah, this was the natural world, and she gained a sense of perspective about her place within it: “I’m really tiny and I’m totally a speck of dust, but it’s pretty cool.” In Ted’s case, he connected being “[...] in the presence of something really, really big” (referring in this case not to the object itself, but the reality to which he felt it gave him access) with an explicit sense of sacredness and “spiritual excitement,” being drawn into the midst of the painting and attributing to this experience a sort of transaction or religious “transference.”

In the end, encountering a physical object separate from their own bodies allowed interviewees to imagine and feel a sense of connectedness beyond themselves. This speaks to the heart of how Jones describes authenticity, with people, places, and objects affecting one another’s identities and joining their histories with those of people and things no longer present:

It is the unique experience of an object, and crucially its network of relationships with past and present people and places, that are important. Furthermore, direct experience of an historic object can achieve a form of magical communion through personal incorporation into that network” (Jones, 2010, p.189)

That this connection happens through an object or objects cannot be overlooked; even when the effect of the experience or connection does not appear permanent, the fact that it remains as a memory speaks to the place it takes within that person’s narrative of self, and the way in which realities, once intertwined, are

never completely separated. Hetherington speaks of *praesentia* accessed mainly through touch, however, a broader reading of its effect is possible, too: “We leave behind a trace of our mobility and know that our bodies have passed through on their daily journeys with the fingertips in making or marking out places—the *praesentia* of ourselves is there, too” (2003, p. 1943).

Factors of both personal context and physicality, then, facilitate deeply connective encounters. In fact, the connections created through these experiences were so salient that they became the focal point of the study’s ultimate description of the encounters (“deeply connective encounters”). The results of this study point to the dangers of too narrow a definition of social effects or connections, or an over-emphasis on only those experiences shared in the moment, which risk missing out on important social benefits garnered from reflective experiences.

### **Summary of Findings**

Returning to the original research questions and goal, then, what has this study demonstrated? First and foremost, deeply connective encounters do appear to be a unique type of experience, exhibiting consistent patterns in both their context and content (namely out of the ordinariness, a physical object entering the imagination, and a sense of connection), and importance in the lives of those who experience them. Descriptions of these lived experiences reiterate the importance of physical objects in museums, and point toward areas for deeper investigation by museums wanting to facilitate these encounters, and indicate that there may

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be grounds for more inclusive conceptions of what constitutes “social experiences” or “learning” in museums.

## **OUTCOMES**

### **Implications**

At the end of the day, what is the significance of this study's findings for the museum field? Although the sample size was small and the study necessarily exploratory, the consistency of the results with the few other studies completed on similar topics—especially Latham's—indicate that there is, indeed, reason to further investigate the phenomenon.

### *Designing for Deeply Connective Encounters*

At the level of museum practice, given the central role of objects both in cultural heritage and deeply connective encounters (cf. MacArthur, 2011; Wands et al., 2010; Conn, 2010), it seems worthwhile to think about how institutions can take practical measures to ensure that their spaces and objects invite such powerful connections. People spoke of feeling privileged, and trying to recapture or repeat these experiences by revisiting the same objects; such a sense of connection and ownership for public objects can foster just the quality of relationship that will lead people to continue valuing museums as places of personal, intellectual, emotional, and psychological import. As digital technologies advance it will be interesting to see what work can be done deciphering how and whether our reactions to, say, an augmented reality artifact differ from those elicited by a physical item. It is also important that exhibits are designed in such a way as to allow people to become absorbed and lose a sense of self-consciousness. This seems to happen in spaces that are dark or light, quiet, and not too crowded,

allowing literal and figurative space for privacy and reflection, and the opportunity to enter into a state of flow. Aesthetic considerations of buildings and the provision of physically comfortable spaces aside, excitement can also be sparked by intellectual or emotional confrontation—the unexpected and powerful; items or settings that possess strong identities or evoke new and interesting ideas. All of it is important; the experience is holistic: “[...] these encounters were inevitably based on what I saw, what I felt within, and what surrounded me; the visual and the architectural often implied a promise that opened my senses wide” (Carr, 2006, p.26).

### *Education and Social Experiences*

Although the current study did not have the resources to delve more fully into how its results might affect the thinking of the field at large, there does seem to be a suggestion that there is potential for expanding how what constitutes knowledge or learning is discussed to include bodily and intuitive experiences, and those leading to greater self-knowledge. Using a more holistic approach to evaluate these aspects would allow a deeper grasp of how they happen, and their importance. More deeply understanding how these encounters connect people with objects, and how personal experience factors, will be of assistance in the widespread goal of reaching out more effectively to wider audiences, providing them with intellectual confrontation in the context of a space that they find welcoming and desirable—one that acknowledges their experiences, as well as asking them to weave in new encounters found within its doors.

Again, a broader understanding of what is valuable in terms of participatory or social experiences would be beneficial. In the midst of developing their roles as communal gathering places and facilitators, it is crucial for museums not to discount the importance solitude, reflection, and “alonetimes,” or the people who seek out museums to find these experiences. It is not a choice between solitary and social experiences, but a continuum with value all along the spectrum: “The need for more excitement does not cancel out people’s desires for more peace, for it is not an either-or situation if room is provided for social and solitude needs” (Buchholz, 2000, p. 7). Museums, with their range of objects provoking thought, connection, and (as one of the few remaining places geared toward encountering objects as more than commercial entities) allowing the negotiation of authenticity, provide a service not found elsewhere, and if museums cease to provide these opportunities, there are few other established institutions who can.

### *Physical versus Digital*

Third, there are fascinating implications here as we move further into the realm of the digital with “intangible heritage,” multimedia art, augmented reality, mobile applications, and digitized collections, to mention just a few applications. Underneath this spectrum of experience is a latent question regarding the role of physical objects in what museums are becoming; at its far end lies the explicit question posed in the title of Steven Conn’s 2010 monograph: “Do museums still need objects?” And of course, this question is impossible to answer unless we are



able to explain further—if we argue that museums do still need objects, we must be able to explain why.

There are concrete implications here not only for understanding, but for the allocation of museum resources among physical and digital projects (Macarthur, 2011), and the design of all exhibits with a deeply acknowledged sense of the impact of embodiment and personal history:

As museum visitors, what people bring to the display is an orientation which expresses their cultural and personal biography. They reach out to the object from the basis of personal pasts which remain tacit in their sensing of the object (Radley, 1991, p.76).

These decisions should ideally be based on knowledge of the best ways for different media to reach visitors, not on a sense of needing to take advantage of the next innovative tech idea. And while it may not be possible yet to know exactly what (if anything) differs between encounters with physical objects and digital replicas or experiences, a better understanding of what it is about objects that affects us is a useful start.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Any study such as this is bound to raise more questions than it answers. While I believe there is a convincing case for the importance and power of deeply connective experiences, and for the role which objects play within them, there is still much work to be done for a better understanding of how these experiences happen, and how they might be facilitated.

For example, one of the areas that would benefit museums were it to be further investigated is how the known ways in which people remove themselves from the ordinary prior to a museum visit—through travel, or being at a

particularly transitional period—might be considered or even utilized as exhibits are designed and marketing focuses chosen.

Both Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson and Latham found that while the structure of the experiences they investigated held similar across the board, the content or focal point of the experience—the object itself—did not signify. Given, however, the significance of embodiment and personal history in determining deeply connective encounters; the potential differences between interactions with physical objects and digital environments; and the dominance of art objects in the interviews conducted for the current study, there is need for a more thorough investigation of whether and how the tangible and intangible aspects of objects involved in deeply connective experiences shape those experiences.

As noted in this study and others (Spock, 2000a; Latham, 2009), there is also a wide-open opportunity for exploration of how these types of important experiences are distributed across those who are involved in the running of museums; museum-goers; and the general public. Are there correlations between those who have had these types of experiences, and later involvement in museums? Given the impact of such deep experiences, if this could be determined it might enhance the focus of strategies to get a wider range of people deeply invested in museums and their own cultural heritage. Once people have had such an experience, are they more likely to visit future museums motivated by some sort of numen-seeking, a la the 27% seeking “meaningful personal connections” found by Cameron and Gatewood (2003, p.65)? In this instance, although the recruitment email specifically mentioned museum objects, half of the respondents were from the Library and Information Science program, which

does not deal with objects at all. The extent to which these types of experiences are present in the general population would be an interesting area of future study, as would their concentration, if any, based on demographics, background, &c.

Along these same lines, further research on the differences between deeply connective encounters and their effects in children and adults is called for. This could become especially important as more and more children grow up in a digitally-focused world. What are the differences in reactions to digital and physical versions of objects? How does this affect people's sense of the objects' "realness," and is this sense of the authentic in transition? As Latham suggests, "(...) we need to know the repercussions of the reduction in physical transactions with documents" (Latham, 2009, p.151) (where documents include museum objects).

And as a final suggestion for further research, there is work yet to be done yet on the differences between how encounters are manifested with public and private objects to better understand the role museum objects can play in people's personal individual lives outside the institution. In what ways is the power of a deeply connective encounter carried forward after the transient moment of affect has passed?

## **Conclusion**

This study points to the significance of deeply connective encounters as a particular type of experience, and indicates a few salient areas of importance in deeply connective encounters with museum objects—out-of-the-ordinariness; the

significance of physical objects and the ways in which they stimulate personal understandings and imagination; and the important senses of connection that these encounters foster. A better understanding of how these experiences function and the effects that they have in individuals' lives will require much further research, and is an area of focus which it seems is rising in prominence, especially as the field contemplates what it means to embrace a more digital future. There is a deep connection between people and things—the meanings that are co-created in the space between these objects and the people who visit them, view them, think about them reveal to us parts of what it means to be human in the world, and thus reflect on the significance not just of the museum field, but of knowledge in the wider sense, and a more holistic understanding of being-in-the-world.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix A: Recruitment and Follow-up Emails**

#### **Recruitment Email:**

Have you ever experienced a sense of wonder, awe, or transcendence connected to an object or experience at a museum? Have you felt deeply moved, as if that moment were special, different, even removed somehow from daily life?

If so, I would love to hear from you! As part of my master's thesis for the museology program, I am looking for current and recently-graduated MLIS, art history, and museology students willing to talk with me about experiences similar to the above description.

If you are interested, please reply to [gdntmoon@uw.edu](mailto:gdntmoon@uw.edu) with your name, your program, a short description of the experience you have in mind, and any questions you might have. Participation in my research would take the form of a conversational interview, probably 30-60 minutes, sometime in February or March. There may also be an opportunity to take part in a group conversation later on, if you are interested.  
Thank you in advance!

#### **Follow-up Email:**

Thanks for responding! I'm basically looking to listen to people and find out as much as possible of what they recall around these type of experiences--around 30-60 minutes of conversation, hopefully. I'll have some prompts and things, but really mostly want to hear about the impression it/they made on you. The interview will be recorded, but only for purposes of supplementing my insufficient memory, and I plan to use only first names in the paper. If you have other questions or concerns, feel free to respond to this email; and if you think that sounds doable, here's a schedule of times I have open:

[URL]

If none of those work, just email me and we'll figure something out. I was thinking it would be nice to meet up in a quiet-ish coffee shop; but we could also do my house or yours, or somewhere else--again, just let me know!

## **Appendix B: Interview Prompts**

**(adapted from Kiersten Latham, “Numinous Experiences with Museum Objects”)**

**Introduction:** Talk about the project—give my experience as an example?

Tell me about the experience you have in mind—can you take me back in time to when you were there? What is the situation, and what is happening to you?

Do you remember a specific time when that happened?

How did that make you feel?

What you were thinking?

What was happening internally?

What do you remember about what you were seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, &c.?

What did you feel in your body?

What did that mean to you when it happened? What does it mean to you now?

Why was that important?

What did that mean to you then? What does it mean to you now?

How long ago was this?

How long did the experience last?

Were there other people with you? What effect do you think their presence had, if any?

Have you had similar experiences before? \*Do you have this kind of experience often?

What, if anything, did you know about the object before this experience? Was it the first time you saw it?

How did this affect you?

If you had to ascribe an image, color, &c. to this feeling/experience, what would it be? [cf. Joy]

Is there anything else we haven't covered that you'd like to share?

## Appendix C: NVIVO Nodes

Node			Sources (out of 5)	References
Context				
	Exhibit & Object Descriptions & Qualities		5	13
		Authenticity	5	18
		Being surrounded	4	14
		Charisma or Presence of Object	1	2
		Color	2	4
		Curation, Presentation	2	16
		Layers	1	1
		Physicality of object	2	3
		Proximity (Orientation...) to Object	4	9
		Simplicity	1	4
		Size & Scale	4	29
		Talent of artist	1	3
	Sensory or Bodily Components		4	29
		Alcohol	1	5
		Light vs. Dark	4	20
		Sense of Space	5	12
		Smell	3	11
		Sound	4	20
		Touch	5	16
	Overall personal context		4	4
		Age, Time of Life	2	9
		Attitude	4	10
		Desire to be Alone, Privacy	5	12
		Novelty	4	19
		Perception of artist	1	8
		Previous interests, knowledge, expectations	5	21
		Similar Experiences	4	8
		Travel	4	11
		Typical museum experience	3	9
		Uniqueness, out of the Ordinary	4	20
	Other Components of Experience		0	0
		Atmosphere	1	4
		Confrontation, Encounter	5	19
		Detractions	4	14
		Influence of other people	5	21
		Puzzle factor	1	2
		Time (Amount)	5	10
		Type of Museum	5	9

# Appendix C: NVIVO Nodes, continued

Node			Sources (out of 5)	References
Content				
	Bodily Sensations		3	9
		Crying	2	4
		Lightness vs. Heaviness	2	3
		Synesthesia	2	7
		Touch	1	1
	Emotions & Senses		6	21
		Agency of object	1	5
		Analysis vs. emotion	6	25
		Anger	1	2
		Awe, wonder, &c.	5	12
		Excitement	3	8
		Fear	1	14
		Ownership of Experience or Object	4	8
		Privilege...Serendipity - Gratitude & Chance	4	10
	Thoughts & Consciousness		5	11
		Expanded Perception	5	6
		Focus, Absorption	4	14
		Imagination	5	19
		Inability to Process with Mind	2	14
		Reflection	1	3
		Shift in Reality, Transport	4	20
		Time (Quality or Passage of)	4	14
	Effect, Reflections, Meaning, Essence of Experience		4	18
		Change	4	9
		Connection with History	3	9
		Connection with People	4	19
		Known	1	2
		Thwarted attempt to share	2	5
		Unknown - artist, historical, curator	2	5
		Connection with Places	1	2
		Connection with Something Large	4	18
		Nature	4	8
		Religious	2	6
		Difficulty of defining, communicating experience	4	8
		Lack of memory or learning	4	16
		Meaning	5	18
		Ritual, process, repetition	2	8

## Appendix D: Table of Findings

Name	Type of Museum (Type of Object)	Museum (Object)	Traveling? Location	Representative Ideas Chosen	Contrasts drawn	Estimated Time	When?
Alex	Art Museum (Painting)	The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Washington)	Yes – New York	“Quiet & dim”	Noisy vs. quiet	5-10 min.	c. 2003
	Encyclopedic Museum (Artifact)	British Museum, London (Rosetta Stone)	Yes (studying abroad) - London	“Light & glass”	Light vs. dark	<10 min.	c. 2004
Alisa	Art Museum (Installation)	Frye Art Museum (Of Breath and Rain, Susie J. Lee)	No - Seattle	“Horizontal stripes, dark gray with flashes of light”	Light vs. dark	20 min.	2012
Andrea	Historical House	Dennis Severs House	Yes (studying abroad) - London	“Shafts of light & spicy smells	Light vs. dark	30-45 min.	2006
Angela	Art Museum (Sculpture)	Musée Rodin (Eve)	Yes - Paris	Light & being present in the moment	Light vs. dark	5-15 min.	2004
Beth	Natural Science or History Museum (Entire exhibit)	Smithsonian (Kids’ exhibit)	Yes - Washinton, D.C.	“Connection” (to person, to self & greater universal emotions)	-	½ day	c. 1991
	History Museum (Artifacts)	local museum	No - Belgium			1-2 hr.	c. 1994
	Art Museum (Painting)	Smithsonian & MoMA (Rothko painting)	Yes (studying abroad) - DC or New York			a few min.	c. 2003

**Appendix D: Table of Findings, continued**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Type of Museum (Type of Object)</b>	<b>Museum (Object)</b>	<b>Traveling? Location</b>	<b>Representative Ideas Chosen</b>	<b>Contrasts drawn</b>	<b>Estimated Time</b>	<b>When?</b>
Jennifer	Art Museum (Sculpture)	Arthur M. Sackler and Freer Gallery of Art (Buddha statue)	Yes – Washington, D.C.	“Smooth, white, ceramic round ball”	“Wow!” moment, continued engagement vs. encounter with something studied	10-15 min.	c. 2008
	Art Museums (Paintings)	MoMA (Futurist paintings)	Yes – New York	-		10 – 15 min.	c. 2010
Leah	Natural History Museum (Installation)	EcoTarium (space exhibit & tunnel)	No – Worcester, MA	“Heaviness & darkness”	Scale & size; Closeness vs. openness, Light vs. dark	30 min.	c. 1996
	Art Museum (Painting)	Worcester Art Museum (storm painting)	No – Worcester, MA	“Gray-blue and bright”		45+ min.	c. 2004
Mary	Art Museum (Painting)	Georgia O’Keefe Museum (Black Hollyhock Blue Larkspur)	Yes – Santa Fe	“Royal blue”	Pure excitement & energy vs. being emotionally overcome	-	c. 2001
	Art Museum (Painting)	The Art Institute of Chicago (Starry Night & Haystack paintings, Van Gogh)	Yes – Chicago	“special”		-	c. 2002
Matt	Church crypt/ storage space (various objects)	Church crypt & miscellanea	Yes (study abroad) - Tuscany	An abstract painting	-	10 min.	c. 2007
	Art Museum (no specific object)	Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (no specific object)	No – Washington, DC		-	-	c. 2009

**Appendix D: Table of Findings, continued**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Type of Museum (Type of Object)</b>	<b>Museum (Object)</b>	<b>Traveling? Location</b>	<b>Representative Ideas Chosen</b>	<b>Contrasts drawn</b>	<b>Estimated Time</b>	<b>When?</b>
Sarah	Natural History Museum (Animal specimen)	American Museum of Natural History (blue whale)	No – New York	“Slate blue & murky green”	Experiential vs. intellectual	10-15 min.	c. 1994
	History Museum (entire museum)	Apothecary Museum (entire museum)	Yes (studying abroad) - Italy	“Bunches of sweet-smelling herbs hanging from the ceiling”		1-2 hr.	2006
Selma	Ethnology Museum (Stone chair)	Berlin Ethnology Museum (Stone chair)	Yes (studying abroad) - Berlin	“Uneasiness—it’s a positive experience”	-	~ 1 hr.	c. 2005
Ted	Art Museum (Painting)	Seattle Art Museum (Still- Life with a Pitcher and Apple, Diogenes)	No - Seattle	“Softness”	Figure vs. abstract	5 min.	c. 2010
	Art Museum (Painting)	MoMA (Rothko painting)	Yes - New York	“Church/sacred”		5-15 min.	c. 2009



