American Museums and the Persuasive Impulse

American Museums and the Persuasive Impulse: Architectural Form and Space as Social Influence

By

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Since most of my scholarship has been published in the form of research monographs, I have not usually had the opportunity to acknowledge my debt to the many persons who have influenced my thinking over the years and who, therefore, contributed indirectly to this book. I want to correct that omission here. G. Allan Yeomans, my first mentor in communication studies, made academia attractive to me while I was an undergraduate student at Howard College (now Samford University).

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PREFACE

This volume may seem to be an unusual one for a social scientist. It is not common for one whose typical approach is behavioral and whose method is quantitative to engage in an assessment of art, art history, aesthetics, museology, and the like using a visual semiotic frame of reference. However, my academic identity does not fully describe either my experiences or my interests. I am a product of the time in American liberal arts and sciences education when students routinely were required to take courses which were variously called art appreciation and music appreciation. I am also a product of the time in communication studies when the core emphasis was on the world's great speakers and the literary and rhetorical theory necessary to assess their work. Indeed, I did not become a single-minded social scientist until my professional career was well underway, and that change probably was as much the product of my interest in linguistics and psycholinguistics as it was of the scientific stirrings in communication studies at large.

I also came of age as a scholar at a watershed period in film history, namely the late fifties and sixties, when the visual syntax of cinema was being rewritten by such European filmmakers as Visconti, Truffaut, Godard, Bergman, Fellini, and Antonioni. This seemingly incidental event is important because it led me as a teacher and a scholar for the first time to confront the emerging aesthetic philosophies of visual communication. While the present work focuses on still images, the visual phenomena are nonetheless the same as in cinema.

To be quite honest, however, I am not an artist, an art historian, a museologist, nor an aesthetician, and this knowledge must inform every reader's understanding of what I am about in these pages. What I am, instead, is a professor of communication studies, a longstanding student and teacher of persuasion, and a lay devotee of the arts. What I propose here has to do with how art objects and the display of art objects communicates persuasive messages to those who contemplate these objects and displays.

This volume is built directly upon a previous work, edited by me and with contributions by my colleagues, entitled *Structures as Argument*, published by this Press. As I did in that volume, I would invite you in this one to regard what is said as an effort to enhance your understanding of

and appreciation for one of the grandest of all cultural phenomena: the museum. While I make no apology for being an academic, I think you will find that the approach here fits well within the average art lover's frame of reference. That it should also be engaging and interesting is my fond, and I hope not ill-founded, hope.

It is also important for the reader to know that each museum which I treat at length in this book is one I have actually visited in person, sometimes many times. There are increasing numbers of comprehensive websites available for studying museums, and some are referenced herein. There are also numerous illustrated compilations of the collections of most large and many small museums in printed form. However, nothing substitutes for an actual visit, especially for the assessment of visual persuasion. As the reader will see, I have utilized many sources for information about the museums in question, but the judgments of other scholars and mine do not always coincide. I blame no one else for my shortcomings, but I would like to take credit for any originality the reader may encounter!

I wish to note about the images that they are also mine for the most part, and they are more limited than I would have liked because of that. In particular, for example, there is no image of the Guggenheim Manhattan, because it was shrouded for renovation during my visits. Fortunately, this iconic piece of architecture is already familiar to many readers, and it is certainly an easy task to find images of it on the internet. While I respect the right of museum directors to restrict and sometimes prohibit photography within their buildings, it would have been wonderful to have had the freedom to photograph exhibition designs at will and to have been able to include them in this book without seeking special dispensation. However, my thanks do go to those museums that graciously gave permission to use images I took of their museum interiors or that offered alternative images from their libraries for me to use: the Met, the Getty, the National Gallery, the Philadelphia Museum, the Kimbell, and the Guggenheim.

CHAPTER ONE

ART AND MUSEUMS AS VISUAL PERSUASION

The very establishment of a museum is a persuasive act. As Macdonald (1996, 14) puts it, "any museum or exhibition is, in effect, a statement of position. It is a theory: a suggested way of seeing the world." Hein (2006, xix) points out that "the museum is, in a sense, imperceptible; it is the invisible eminence that wields power to move and reassimilate us." She adds that museums have "the unique ability . . . to change the way people think and feel, affected indirectly through the manipulation of things" (xxi). Subsequently, I will offer an assessment of the meaning of the term "persuasion," but for the moment the term's commonplace referent is sufficient. Clearly, any notion that a museum is merely the repository of artifacts is an incomplete one.

In a previous work (Ragsdale 2007), colleagues of mine and I argued that structures and their contents function as visual persuasion. Structures are not only forms of visual communication, they also alter the way people think and act. In that work, we examined a variety of European museums, such as the Louvre and the British Museum, as well as museums of natural history. We included Gothic cathedrals, Spanish missions, American Protestant churches, and non-Western structures in our purview, as well as monuments and cemetery stones.

The present work builds directly upon the previous one by an assessment of American museums as examples of the visual persuasive impulse, focusing primarily on museums that are traditionally called "art" museums. Additionally, this work delves more deeply into the nature of art and its presentation in museums, reexamines the typology of museums used in the previous volume, and reinterprets the theory of visual signs, which was the explanatory system for understanding how museums are persuasive. Its assessment of American museums attends to the buildings themselves, their enclosed space, and to the museums' collections and their display. Timeworn though it may be, the proper beginning point for this assessment is with the question of what constitutes art.

What is Art?

The question, "what is art?," is a daunting one for at least two reasons. It is daunting for me, because I am a social scientist, not an artist or an aesthetician, although my training and experience do extend to the visually communicative arts of film and still photography. Far more important as a reason is that the question has been posed so many times before and by some of history's greatest minds, yet without an answer that has commanded universal acceptance. Carey (2006) is so skeptical about extant definitions of art, all of which he finds wanting to some degree or other, that he offers the opinion that "a work of art is anything that anyone has ever considered a work of art, though it may be a work of art only for that one person" (29). The inclusiveness of this definition is appealing, especially for its application to modernist and postmodern works, but it is also unsatisfying in distinguishing between, say, a painting by Rubens and a baseball glove. As it turns out, a universally acceptable definition of art is unnecessary for the purpose of this work, since the subject of scrutiny here is whatever is contained in museums. However, evaluating the contribution of collections is a necessary part of understanding the social influence of the museums which contain them. To make that assessment requires at least the perspective of the range of ideas included in the concept of art.

The traditional definition of art dates to Classical times. For the Greeks, from whom so many traditions of art come, art (*techne*) was something made by human beings (Davies 2006). It was, in other words, not part of the natural world. The Greek word, *techne*, implied a systematic set of principles which, when followed, yielded art. This set of principles could be set down and taught. Hence, when Aristotle formulated the lectures to his students which were subsequently compiled into the *Rhetoric* (1954), he observed the forms of oratory in Athens and generalized a set of guidelines for "observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (24). Aristotle's advice was not a prescriptive list of rules to be followed slavishly, but it certainly was a systematic set of principles. He proposed that persuasion resulted from the use of logic and emotion as well as the persuader's own character. Oratory needed careful organization and delivery, after having been adjusted to the anticipated audience.

Like oratory, poetry, sculpture, painting, and the like all had their purposes and a set of principles to guide their execution. Excellence in this execution determined the greatness of both the artist and the art object. When Greek ideals of culture were passed along to the Romans, the

definition of art passed with them. At Rome, Aristotle's ideas about rhetoric were elaborated by such prominent figures as Cicero and, later, Quintilian. In Cicero's writings, the practice of rhetoric was formulated in even greater detail as a set of rules than it had been before, and Quintilian extended it into a full-blown plan of education in his *Institutes of Oratory*. The purpose of the art of rhetoric was persuasion, but that of the plastic arts was beauty and the sublime.

By the eighteenth century, "art is concerned with the beautiful and the sublime, these being the cardinal aesthetic properties" (Davies 2006, 7). Beauty is, of course, also a difficult term to define in a universally acceptable way, but Davies uses a rose to exemplify beauty because it is "a source of immediate delight." The notion of the sublime suggested being overwhelmed by emotion, as one might be by "the vastness of the night sky." Of course, these explanations remind one of the adage that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and of Carey's individualistic definition of art mentioned earlier. Connected with these traditional ideals of beauty and the sublime was the underlying notion that what art was about was *representation* (Carey 2006). Sculpture was the reproduction of a natural form, such as the human body, albeit with the presumption that nature had been improved upon by the artist's skill, a notion especially popular in eighteenth century thought (Cassirer 1951). Paintings as well were to reproduce scenes of nature, as in landscapes, or people, as in portraits, with sufficient "improvement" to render them beautiful or sublime.

Included in the tradition of representation was the notion that works of beauty and sublimity were beneficial to viewers. The idea is as old as Aristotle's belief that music enhanced character, although Plato, notably, believed that art led people astray from "the rational principle in the soul" (Carey 2006, 96). By the time of the Enlightenment, art was widely regarded as capable of improving "recipients morally, emotionally, and spiritually." By the nineteenth century, "it became a widespread cultural assumption that the mission of the arts was to improve people and that public access to art galleries would effect this" (97).

As the contemporary aesthetician, Arthur C. Danto, has observed, however, this tradition of representation came to an end by 1880 (Carey 2006; Danto 1992). From that time forward, the dominant "narrative" in art has been *modernism*, which has the goal of exploring "the potential of the materials—paints, canvas, etc." (Carey 2006, 17). In the narrative of representation, with its foundation in the Greek idea of *techne*, one might explain the beauty or sublimity of a work in terms of the artist's skill or talent in following the principles of art, although it might require someone

trained in the assessment of art to make the determination, such as an art critic or a museum curator.

Lest the distinction between these two narratives or traditions appear too categorical, it should be noted that representation, as it is used here, did not uniformly imply literal or near-photographic copying. The tradition from the beginning was broad enough to include symbolism, allusion, and similar figurative features. Rembrandt's *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer*, which hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, depicts the great philosopher dressed in clothing from Rembrandt's own period, not in the robes of Aristotle's time. Hieronymus Bosch's paintings, such as *The Garden of Earthly Delights* which hangs in the Prado, depict fantastic imagery, prefiguring twentieth-century Surrealism, and the depictions of the seasons by Giuseppe Arcimboldo, which hang in the Louvre, are portraits of people composed of fruits, vegetables, and flowers. Similarly, some art after 1880 has been representational, as the paintings of such Americans as Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, and Edward Hopper demonstrate.

In the narrative of modernism, no beauty or sublimity may exist at all, nor may it be very helpful to look for the realization of a set of principles in the object. Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram*, in Stockholm's Moderna Museet, uses "a stuffed angora goat wearing an automobile tire on a collaged canvas base" (Strickland 1992, 172). In keeping with Danto's idea of the goal of modernism being the exploration of the potential of materials, Rauschenberg's goal was "to prove that all materials are equally worthy of art." The result is presumably neither beautiful nor sublime, and to some it may be repulsive or offensive. However, any effort to understand how the contents of museums contribute to visual persuasion must account for the fact of modernism.

In the absence of a universally applicable definition of art, the assessment of the persuasive impact of museum pieces can be facilitated by thinking of art in terms of a set of continua. Grouped at the left side of each continuum would be terms describing qualities of art, while at the right side would be terms referring to non-art. Objects whose "scores" lay toward the midpoint of most of the continua might be thought of as poor or mediocre art.

In thinking about what some of these continua would be, it is probably most significant to say that art is first and foremost a type of *communication*. Even in the most expressive versions of modernist art, something is being communicated. Fundamentally, this means that a work of art is part of a system of *meaning* or semiosis, which is a subject treated at greater length in Chapter Two. Also generally, art is great to the extent

that it is multilayered with respect to meaning. Anyone, of course, may interpret the words of another uniquely, but art, like fine wine, evokes multiple meanings, suggests many nuances, and is *complex*.

Since art was traditionally thought to involve the application of principles, artists had to be *skilled*. Their work was also expected to exhibit *creativity*, *originality*, or *imagination*, with each of these words being roughly synonymous. The resulting art was supposed to be *beautiful* or *sublime*. Its effect was presumed to *move* the viewer in some way, probably through the senses and the emotions. The Roman poet Horace, for example, thought that one of the purposes of art was to delight (1951). Terms such as creativity, imagination, and beauty suggest that the appreciation of art is a function of the nonlinear, right side of the brain, hence art is *intuitive* rather than rational.

Art was normally *non-utilitarian*, meaning that a painting had no specific use. It was not created to accomplish some task, although to be sure the contemplation of beauty might legitimately be thought of as a use. But clearly a baseball glove is not art, most especially because gloves were created to serve a function.[1] Finally, some would argue that to be a work of art an object must be *approved* by the art world (Carey 2006). In other words, something is art if an art critic says it is or, tellingly, if it is part of the collection in a museum. This imprimatur should be redundant, since presumably the critic or the curator judges art on the basis of the other continua. There are, however, numerous examples of art being practically ignored until it was selected for an exhibition or a museum collection. When finally I examine the museum as partisan advocate, this issue will be addressed in more detail.

One must, of course, be careful in applying all of these terms, since one of the reasons there is disagreement over art's definition is that for each "rule" there may be several important exceptions. In the case of utility, for example, the first exception that comes to mind is architecture, which I regard as art, but which clearly exists for the function it serves. The probability of exceptions to any rule, however, only supports the need for a set of continua, so that it is the *relative* position of an object on *all* of the continua that "determines" the object's status as art. Additionally, the use of continua provides an equally useful scale of assessment and offers a point of departure for discussing the relative persuasive impact of a museum piece. In summary, the following continua offer a general set of distinguishing features of art:

- Communicative—Non-communicative (Expressive)
- Meaningful—Meaningless
- Complex—Simple

- Skilled—Unskilled
- Creative—Uncreative
- Beautiful—Ugly
- Sublime—Inglorious
- Moving—Unaffecting
- Intuitive—Rational
- Non-utilitarian—Utilitarian
- Approved—Unapproved

To see the usefulness of these continua, let us compare Edward Hopper's painting *Nighthawks*, which hangs in Chicago's Art Institute, with the by now familiar baseball glove.[2]

First, the Hopper painting clearly communicates what for most viewers is a sense of isolation, even alienation. The centerpiece of the work is a corner diner in some city viewed at night from the outside. There is no one on the street, nor is there any other element other than the street and its buildings. There are no cars, no animals, there is not even any trash. Four people only occupy the diner: a couple, a waiter, and a man whose back is to the viewer. No one is interacting with anyone else, although the waiter appears to be filling an order. There is, insofar as meaning is concerned, an incredible sense of emptiness, even nothingness. To think that Hopper did not intend to have this effect is to bend the accepted conventions of communication past the breaking point. At the same time, *Nighthawks* has evoked many interpretations and exhibited quite a complex texture (Spring 2007).

Hopper's technique, while more graphic than many of his predecessors or even contemporaries, was highly skilled, and it is no accident that he was able to supplement his income throughout most of his career by doing commercial illustrations (Spring 2007). Creative? Original? Imaginative? These words, of course, are more often used to describe Hopper's work than almost any others. Is *Nighthawks* beautiful or sublime? Although I am an admirer of Hopper, I think not, although surely the painting does not make it all the way to the opposite poles of ugly or inglorious. *Nighthawks* is an especially moving realization of the *Zeitgeist* of America at the time, and this judgment is an emotional response that is intuitive. Certainly one cannot ignore what is known about America at the time, which is a rational response, but the painting itself conveys its message as an intuition. *Nighthawks* is certainly non-utilitarian, and it was regarded immediately by the art world as a masterpiece (Spring 2007). It is, in fact, a work of art.

What of our baseball glove? It is certainly not a communicative message conveying meaning. It is just an object. Its creation does require

skill, although machines, rather than people, now are responsible for most of the work. The glove is not creative, original, or imaginative. While not ugly, it is hardly either beautiful or sublime, nor is it moving or intuitive. It is utilitarian. It is not a work of art, however many baseball players may use it artfully!

I find the continua especially helpful in assessing works of modernism and postmodernism, for they allow one to critique works of quite disparate styles and periods with a consistent set of standards. Hopper's work is sufficiently similar to the so-called narrative of representation that the foregoing discussion should suffice to illustrate that application. A similar example of how the continua might apply to contemporary work could be an assessment of Mark Rothko's *Painting*, which hangs in the Museum of Fine Arts Houston. Rothko's *oeuvre* is vehemently rejected as art by such organizations as the Art Renewal Center (http://www.artrenewal.org), although such rejection follows from an extreme conservatism with respect to the narrative of representation. The work does present a challenge for the critic however.

Painting, like most visual images, is difficult to describe, so the reader is encouraged to view it electronically (http://www.mfah.org). It is a rectangular composition, taller than it is wide, and whose predominant color is purple. One shade of purple provides the background for two other rectangles in graduated shades of purple. Above these two rectangles is another red one, which is wider than it is tall, and that is it. It is not hard to understand why some viewers might regard this object as non-art. Let us examine it with the continua.

First, *Painting* is communicative and meaningful, with the primary message appearing to come from one's emotional reactions to the rich colors. The message may well be unique to each viewer, but it seems clear that Rothko was not merely trying to pull the viewer's leg. It is a simple composition and, at first viewing, apparently unskilled. One thinks that anyone could have produced it. That is unlikely however, since Rothko is known to have experimented with and then used a technique involving the application of many layers of thinned oils, each allowed to soak into the canvas so that the layers applied last appear to float over the ones applied earlier (http://www.mfah.org).

Without question, the piece is original. Viewers will debate its beauty or sublimity, although the museum description uses the term sublime to describe it. *Painting* is intuitive, non-utilitarian, and approved. The one continuum on which its status as a work of art is questionable is moving—unaffecting. For me, and for many others, the work, while not entirely unaffecting, certainly is not moving. Like many other works of

contemporary art, however, such an assessment could well change for the better after more viewings and greater study. Like Hopper's *Nighthawks*, Rothko's *Painting* is a work of art.

I do not expect every reader to agree with me that this or any set of continua resolves the issue of art's essence. It will be satisfaction enough for me if such a system proves useful in assessing the persuasiveness of museum collections and helps to integrate the assessment of such highly varied museum items as representational art, modern art, and, yes, such indexical museum items as baseball gloves and bats. As noted in the first sentence of this chapter, the very establishment of a museum is a persuasive act, although persuasion is not the only, or even perhaps the primary, purpose of most museums. The question of the nature of museums must now be considered. Intertwined with the issue of museums' purposes are the questions of why art originated and for whom it was intended.

The Consumers of Art

The earliest art appeared some 25,000 years ago in the form of carved figures presumably useful as fetishes for controlling nature (Strickland 1992). *Venus of Willendorf*, housed in Vienna's Museum of Natural History, is among the oldest art objects and is thought to have been a fertility fetish. The cave paintings of animals at Lascaux in France were done perhaps as many as 15,000 years ago and may have been created to serve as targets with which aspiring hunters could practice. The earliest architectural objects, which were standing stones, began to appear about 5,000 years ago, with the most famous of these at Stonehenge in southeast England having been raised about 2,000 BCE. The purpose of these monolithic structures is unknown, and explanations range from places of worship to early meteorological instruments to burial grounds. Egyptian art, in the form of sculptures and paintings, decorated the burial places of the privileged and is as old as Stonehenge.

It is common today to think of art less as having to do with ceremonies or religious observances than as objects for decoration and perhaps for contemplation. Almost everyone is aware of the practice by the wealthy of collecting art, and for that point of view we are probably indebted to the Greeks of the "Golden Age, 480-430" BCE (Strickland 1992, 12). The Greeks of this period, and the Romans after them, also associated art with religious practices but extended the idea to the service of the state. Buildings were specialties of both the Greeks and Romans, and these buildings and other public places were decorated with exquisite sculptures,

painted friezes, and mosaics. The sculptures especially were influential in the development of Renaissance art.

The artists of Greece and Rome did not fit today's understanding of the term. These artists did not produce art at the behest of a religious body or a wealthy patron, nor did they starve in some garret waiting for the world to take note of their work. Although their work was truly art, in the Greek sense of *techne*, they were similar to tradesmen today. For them, art was done as part of construction or in service to the state. When Rome fell, however, artists once more became servants of religion, and Medieval art was done to adorn abbeys, monasteries, basilicas, and cathedrals. Notably, this art usually also carried with it a didactic purpose, with much of it having to do with the depiction of such religious scenes and stories as the martyrdom of saints, the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, and the lives of prophets.

One of the questions with which this section began concerned the issue of the intended consumer of art. Art had largely been for the wealthy and the religious when the Renaissance dawned, and it continued to be so. However, the current image of the artist also began with the Renaissance. While the wealthy supported artists and commissioned their work, as had the villa owners of Rome, the emphasis began to turn toward painting, and art became a separate and independent occupation. Patrons, as they had to some extent during the Middle Ages, collected paintings and other works of art and displayed them in their homes and buildings. Some of these paintings, of course, were family and individual portraits, but others were for the sake of contemplation and admiration. The possession of art symbolized the patron's social and economic status. Perhaps it also signified a sophisticated and discerning taste. In any event, this practice of acquiring art objects and displaying them, begun in earlier times but crystallized in the Renaissance, laid the foundation for the rise of museums. That rise was also fueled by the desire of collectors to preserve their possessions after death and, to a lesser extent, by a sense of *noblesse oblige* toward ordinary citizens who had no means to form their own collections.

The Rise of Museums

The "Library at Alexandria . . . is usually considered the world's first 'art museum,'" and the museum in Basel, Switzerland, "is the oldest of now existent public museum collections" (Burt 1977, 16fn). However, as Hein (2006, ix) notes, "historians of museums dispute their subject's origin." Some think of museums as originating with "temples to the

muses, 'sacred groves,' and ancient academies of learning." A wall plaque at the J. Paul Gerry Museum in Los Angeles reminds us that the word "museum" is derived from the Greek word "*mouseion,*" which means "a place dedicated to the works of the Muses, the goddesses of the arts." However, others trace the origin to collections of Medieval private owners. Finally, some argue that the rise of museums coincides with "the inception of the modern nation-state." Previously, my colleagues and I proposed a typology of museum types, one of which was the museum as cultural icon (Ragsdale 2007). Such museums promote, even magnify, the state itself. Notably, Napoléon I thought of the Louvre as an advertisement for his own magnificence and, of course, the cultural preeminence of France.

As noted, collections of art objects appeared in Europe in the Medieval period and were located at court and in churches (Prösler 1996). By the end of the sixteenth century, curators appeared. Such collections functioned principally as evidence of the owner's status, whether it was an individual, an organization, or a country. It was, for example, widely believed "in most countries that art works, even those that are merely acquired from abroad, *do* embody a nation's identity" (Zolberg 1996, 77). Burt (1977, 4) describes this embodiment with the expression "a kind of cultural glory."

The idea that such collections ought to be available to and benefit ordinary citizens was at first rather ill-formed. In fact, some writers did, and continue to, disparage taking art away from its primary context and putting it in the artificial confines of a museum. To do so removes art's original function (Davies 2006). Later, of course, more positive views emerged as justifications for collections: museums allowed for "the undisturbed contemplation of art;" they brought art to more people; and they preserved art.

From the inception of museums, there also seems to have been the presumption that the building containing great art ought also to be great. "Art museums have always been compared to older ceremonial monuments such as palaces or temples. Indeed, from the eighteenth century through the mid-twentieth centuries, they were deliberately designed to resemble them" (Duncan 1995, 7). "The central domes of older museums allude to the temple of the muses" and "walking up the entrance stairs elevates you out of ordinary reality into the art world" (Carrier 2006, 19). Associated, then, with the status-conferring function of the museum was the similar function of impacting the visitor. Both functions are, of course, essentially persuasive ones, ones "that Europeans recognize as a most powerful weapon of national propaganda and power" (Burt 1977, 4).

Fig. 1-1 Philadelphia Museum of Art

While my purpose here is admittedly to examine the visual persuasiveness of American museums and their contents, this is perhaps the appropriate time to acknowledge other museum functions too. The most obvious function to the average museum visitor is, considered in the broadest sense, an educational one. It is to museums that one goes to learn about art, art history, cultural history, and the like. Seeing a photograph of a painting in an art history text, however well-done the image may be, cannot compare to seeing the actual painting. Size, for example, which contributes so much to the impact of an art work, cannot be appreciated apart from an actual viewing. Without seeing it, who could conceive of the impact of the large Rembrandt painting known popularly as *The Night Watch*? For that matter, who could have guessed that *La Joconde (Mona Lisa)* was so small? Then, of course, the way the painting is displayed also cannot be captured in a textbook. Artist and art student alike, to say nothing of other visitors, learn much from trips to museums.

With the advent of the internet, museums are now able to distribute their contents in a form that is readily accessible virtually to everyone everywhere (Chapman and Ragsdale 2007). The educational function of virtual tours may now be the most ubiquitous form of museum influence, in spite of the absence of the ability to contemplate the art object in reality. Internet reach is concomitant with, and may also be a causal factor in, the present popularity of museums and museum visitation. There are more than 16,000 museums in the United States of America (http://www.greatmuseums.org), and interest in American museums appears to be at a record level. Museum visits are high on the list of tourist attractions in most vacation spots, and an average of 2.3 million people a day visit an American museum.

The proliferation and the popularity of museums contribute to financial prosperity as well. Museums have traditionally depended on private and public donations for their survival. Now, however, some draw considerable support from the sales of admission tickets, and most do a thriving business in their museum shops. Such financial prosperity not only ensures the survival of museums, it permits them to continue acquiring new works and to devote more attention to those other vital functions which are preservation and restoration. When wealthy collectors chose museums as the repositories of their collections upon death, a large motivation was the desire to see the works survive indefinitely into the future.

I have no desire to argue the question of the most important function of museums. I wish merely to have the persuasive function of museums become evident to all who visit, so that there may be a richer understanding of the cultural impact of these great places. That was the concern of my colleagues and me in the preparation of *Structures as Argument* (Ragsdale 2007). At this juncture, a brief summary of our approach in that volume is in order. As it happens, continued reflection on the subject of museums as visual persuasion has led me to believe that an extension of the approach in *Structures* is necessary. Such an extension involves reconsidering the categories of visual persuasion around which we centered our assessments. In turn, that reconsideration requires reexamining the nature and significance of visual signs in terms of the elements of visual literacy and will result in a modification of our typological framework.

Museums as Visual Persuasion

In *Structures as Argument* (Ragsdale 2007), I proposed a five-part typology of museums based on persuasive intent and offered the following classification:

- The museum as cultural icon
- The museum as polemic
- The museum as collective memory
- The museum as partisan advocate
- The museum as pure visual persuasion

While this typology must undergo something of an expansion later, it will form the basis for the assessment of American museums in the present work, thus an explanation of the categories is necessary.

Museums are cultural icons, as I and others have suggested above, when they embody the ideals and magnify the status of a particular nation.

Such museums are the grandest of all the types and are exemplified by the Louvre, the British Museum, the Rijksmuseum, and, in this country, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art, Chicago's Art Institute, and the Museum of Fine Art Boston. All such museums seek to glorify their countries or their cities both with their architecture and their holdings. The Louvre is easily the best example of a culturally iconic museum.

Originally a fortress and later a royal palace, the Louvre is itself a work of art and a glory of France. Elegantly built and decorated, and possessing the world's largest collection of works of art, the Louvre also contains what is arguably the largest number of the world's masterpieces. From *Nike of Samothrace,* to *Venus de Milo*, to *La Joconde (Mona Lisa)*, the Louvre is the cornerstone of France's claim to be the epicenter of world art and culture. Some of its collection is made up of the spoils of war, which were paraded in the streets for all to see before finding their home in the Louvre. The art was used as a persuasive message that the French army was the mightiest in the world, and Napoléon thought of the Louvre as an arm of propaganda.

Museums are polemic when they contain or represent extreme statements of appeal, such as the outcry against the Holocaust represented by the preserved camp at Dachau or the outcry against both Nazism and Communism represented by the House of Terror in Budapest. They support collective memory when, as in the case of the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, they memorialize an event or person so that no one may forget what happened. Museums as polemic and as collective memory are similar and differ primarily in degree. The former are strident, while the latter are more matter-of-fact.

It is well-known that art movements and individual artists have often been rejected by their contemporaries. Indeed, some continue to be regarded as unacceptable. Were it not for museums that were willing to house and promote such art, much contemporary and some much older art would perhaps have disappeared. Such museums which devote their space to unpopular or misunderstood art are museums of partisan advocacy. Many are today among the most important museums in the world and include the Museum of Modern Art, the Tate Modern, the Van Gogh Museum, and the Musée Matisse.

As noted above, it was often thought that for museums to house masterpieces, they should themselves be magnificent. Most of the world's well-known museums are certainly impressive, but a few stand out as masterpieces themselves. These are the ones I have called museums as pure visual persuasion. The Doge's Palace in Venice, Schönbrunn Palace

in Vienna, the Sistine Chapel, and the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris are all, arguably, as much masterpieces as the art objects they house.

This typology was not intended to exhaust the types of museums which exist. It merely was used as indicative of the persuasive purposes to which museums are put. The typology will be useful as well in assessing the visual persuasiveness of American museums, but it will require expansion in Chapter Two to represent adequately the variety of museums to be examined herein. However, it is important first to examine the theory of visual signs which underlies the typology. As we discovered in *Structures*, this theory needed augmentation to account for elements of visual communication which did not easily fit the elements of the theory. What I propose here is a reinterpretation and extension of the theory.

CHAPTER TWO

VISUAL SIGNS, VISUAL SYNTAX, AND THE ASSESSMENT OF VISUAL PERSUASION

An Extended Theory of Visual Signs

In *Structures as Argument* (Ragsdale 2007), I followed Paul Messaris's (1997) theory of visual signs for assessing persuasive communication. That theory was derived from the verbal semiotic system of Charles S. Peirce (Buchler 1955). It identified two types of visual signs: iconic and indexical. As defined in *Structures,* icons were *representational.* They looked like that which they stood for, and they were abundant in the portal sculptures, for example, of the great Gothic cathedrals. Indexical signs were *documentary* in nature, in that they were direct evidence of the existence of a thing. Included in this category were unaltered photographs and such artifacts as, for example, a tank used in the occupation of Budapest. Messaris chose not to identify a visual sign comparable to Peirce's symbolic sign. He did, however, recognize that how a sign is interpreted and what its impact may be often depended upon its juxtaposition to other signs. The theory of *montage* in film is an example of this juxtapositional effect. Messaris termed this phenomenon syntactic indeterminacy, and we used this idea to explain such persuasive effects as those of the great dinosaur skeleton in the rotunda of The British Museum of Natural History and the location in the Louvre of *Nike of Samothrace* at the head of a grand staircase.

We found in *Structures*, however, that we could not fully account for museums and museum contents with this simple system. It did not, for example, afford us a way to assess the difference between *discursive* and *nondiscursive* visual signs. By discursive signs, we meant those which seemed to have a clear parallel in language, such as the "sermons in stone" of the portal iconography at Notre-Dame de Paris. Those were clearly iconic signs. However, the light-gathering structure of a cathedral, intended, as it seems to have been, to represent the nature of God himself

or of heaven, seemed not to have any parallel in language at all. We used the term nondiscursive to describe such visual elements. In discussing Buddhist temples, we included color among such signs.

In assessing both Western and non-Western structures, we also found it useful to note the significance of space itself, or environment, or context. We could not assess the impact of the ruins at Oradour-sur-Glane near Limoges in France or the tranquility of a Shinto shrine without reference to the encompassing context. We also found it necessary to resort to the distinction between central and peripheral pathways made in the Elaboration Likelihood Model of how persuasive messages are processed (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). This distinction was useful in describing the differences between discursive and nondiscursive visual signs.

In the present work, I will assess American museums as visual persuasion in greater detail than was the case in *Structures.* In particular, I will examine museum collections themselves, which will also necessitate evaluating art itself as persuasive. Further, I will consider the exhibition of these collections in terms of persuasive effect. For all of these reasons, an expanded theory of visual signs is in order. While it is not my goal to point out shortcomings in the writings of those on whom I have myself depended so heavily, it is inevitable that I shall have to offer what I consider to be a more adequate interpretation of the nature of visual signs.

The Foundation: Visual Literacy

In the previous chapter, I explored briefly the nature of art. Like others, I concluded that finding a simple definition of art was probably futile. At least, such a definition would not be likely to command universal acceptance. Among other things, this conclusion seemed inevitable in light of the very different natures of representational and modern art. However, one must have a workable system for assessing the differing persuasive impacts of, say, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, and that system must begin at the most basic level: the elements of visual communication themselves.

Visual literacy is the term used to denote a trained awareness of the elements of visual communication. At the very least, a student of art must possess this awareness. Theories of visual signs, however, often begin at a macro rather than a micro level. It is also the case that efforts by teachers of art appreciation to guide students in "how to read a painting" frequently begin at a higher level than that of visual literacy. Strickland (1992, 1), for example, uses Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* to illustrate the "painter's tools" of which the student of art should be aware. She

discusses composition, movement, unity and balance, color, light/dark contrast, and mood. Of course, these painter's tools are relevant, but they do not represent the most fundamental units of visual communication, although they are certainly more basic than iconic and indexical signs. Before reexamining Peirce's and, therefore, Messaris's theories, a grounding in visual literacy will be beneficial.

Underlying the painter's tools mentioned by Strickland are some even more basic elements. As sounds or phones underlie spoken language, so "the dot, line, shape, direction, tone, color, texture, dimension, scale, movement" underlie visual communication (Dondis 1973, 39). These basic elements are used to formulate visual messages through the application of "visual techniques" or "communication strategies" (104), which are based on basic principles of human perception. To understand this system, a few working examples are in order. To be as clear as possible, let us keep the painter's task in mind as our frame of reference. Let us suppose that the painter in our first example wishes to be sure that the viewer looks first at a specific part of the painting. One principle of human perception is that the eye will be drawn to the lower left of the work (Dondis 1973). Another principle is that the eye will first notice stress caused by imbalance or asymmetry. Either technique will work to draw the viewer's attention first to a specific place on the canvas, so the painter paints a significant shape or color or texture in, say, the lower left of the canvas. For a second example, let us suppose that a painter wishes to convey a sense of peacefulness. She or he can accomplish this by balance and symmetry on the canvas, so the painter uses similar colors on the left and on the right of the center axis. In both examples, the painter is able to control how the viewer sees the painting by utilizing visual communication strategies based on principles of human visual perception.

Dondis (1973, 16) enumerates a number of the most common of these communication strategies as follows:

- Balance—Instability
- Symmetry—Asymmetry
- Boldness—Subtlety
- Simplicity—Complexity
- Depth—Flatness
- Sharpness—Diffusion
- Sequentiality—Randomness

Visual literacy, then, requires an awareness of the fundamental means of visual communication, i.e., the component dots, lines, colors, and so on, but it also requires an appreciation of the ways in which these components

may be put together to create such effects as depth, subtlety, sharpness, balance, and the like.

Of course, it is not my purpose here to provide training in visual literacy. What is essential is the awareness that a visual image is built up from a very basic set of visual elements, such as dots, lines, tones, and colors, by selecting from a set of choices or strategies which insure both how the artist's work will be viewed and how it will be decoded or understood. It follows necessarily that any system for assessing the persuasiveness of visual images will be clearer and on firmer ground to the extent that it is based on these facts of visual communication. What are the implications of these facts for a system of assessment based on a verbal theory of signs, such as we used in *Structures as Argument* (Ragsdale 2007)?

Peirce and Messaris Revisited

I have already mentioned that we found it necessary in our previous work to expand Messaris's tripartite theory of signs. However, the breakdown of visual images into icons and indexes was and remains a useful way of distinguishing some types of museums from others. What is insufficient about the theory is that it does not describe the variety of visual images one encounters in museums. What, for example, is one to do with truly modern art, in Danto's sense, with only icons and indexes as categories? What is surely one of the most significant works of art of the twentieth century, Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, which hangs in the Museum of Modern Art, is neither, although to be sure it is suggestive of representation. Jackson Pollack, Piet Mondrian, Vasily Kandinsky, and the like also did not produce icons and indexes. If one wishes to account for the possible persuasive effects of such works and of the museums which house them, then at least one other category is needed.

Even without the challenge of modern art, there are inadequacies in the icon/index categorization raised by the existence in what is probably the vast majority of art objects of symbolism, of elements which are clearly not to be taken literally or at least not exclusively so. Is one to take Arcimboldo's portraits, mentioned earlier, as representations of actual people and as simply quirky in the use of flowers, fruits, and vegetables to compose the portraits? Surely that would be to miss a message of possibly deep significance. Curiously, a recognition of just such a symbolic image is to be found in C. S. Peirce's theory of verbal signs from which Messaris took the idea for icons and indexes.