Western European Museums and Visual Persuasion

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By

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is now the third book I have written or edited on the subject of structures, particularly museums, as visual persuasion. Many of the acknowledgements I made in the earlier two publications should be made again, although I will be brief this time. I could not have written any of these works without the experience of actually visiting the structures in question. Since I am an academic, that means I could not have financed those visits on my own. I am particularly thankful, therefore, for the travel support to do research and to attend professional meetings in international venues of my dean, John M. de Castro. Likewise, I am thankful for John's enthusiasm for my research. It also would have been immeasurably more difficult than it was to do these assessments without the supporting materials in art, art history, and museology available to me through the Newton Gresham Library of Sam Houston State University.

It is always the case, in my experience, that one never works alone. That means that there must have been mentors, colleagues, and friends who either influenced the work directly or who provided a community of intellectual and emotional support. My mentors include my undergraduate professors at Samford University, my graduate professors at the University of Illinois, and my first chair at Louisiana State University. I am happy to acknowledge that my present colleagues at Sam Houston State University, who are also especially good friends, provide a climate of support for this work.

As ever, I am indebted to Cambridge Scholars Publishing and specifically to Andy Nercessian and Amanda Millar. Andy Nercessian has served as the general editor for all of my books. Amanda was my copy editor each time, and she was unfailingly cheerful and prompt. This press has provided me with wide latitude in my scholarship and great freedom of expression. That is absolutely invaluable and liberating.

I am, finally, especially grateful to my family for their acceptance of my work. Thank you Sandy, Paul, Alan, and Mike.

PREFACE

As I have said in the Prefaces of previous works, 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, I am a product of the time in American education when students routinely were required to take such courses as art appreciation and music appreciation. I am also a product of the time in my field of communication studies when the core emphasis was on the world's great speakers and the literary and rhetorical theory necessary to assess their work.

I came of age as a scholar at a great watershed period of 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.

I am not an artist, an art historian, a museologist, nor an aesthetician by profession. What I am, instead, is a professor of communication studies, a longstanding student and teacher of persuasion, and a devotee of the arts. What I propose here has to do with how art objects and the display of art objects communicate persuasive messages to those who contemplate these objects and displays. Assessing these persuasive messages is not unlike assessing speakers and speeches.

This volume is built directly upon two previous works, both of which were published by this Press. The first, edited by me and with contributions by my colleagues, was *Structures as Argument.* The second was *American Museums and the Persuasive Impulse.* As I did in those volumes, I would invite you in this one to regard what I say as an effort to enhance your understanding of and appreciation for one of the grandest of all cultural phenomena: the museum. Although I am 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 wish.

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 entirely mine, and there are no images of interiors. 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.

CHAPTER ONE

ART, EXHIBITION DESIGN, AND MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE AS VISUAL PERSUASION

Historically, the art of persuasion was a verbal one, reaching an early zenith in the law court and the assembly of the Greek city-state. In the Athens of fourth century BCE Greece, there were no lawyers, which left both the accused and the accuser to speak for himself before a large jury. This gave rise to logographers, or speech writers, who could prepare a person for his appearance before the jury. It also gave rise to treatises and teaching about how best to convince or to actuate, and the art of persuasion was born. Trying to convince another to change his or her mind or behavior is clearly an enduring human activity, for it remains with us as a central feature of our society.

Contemporary persuasion is ubiquitous. While it may be most often seen in the mass media in the form of advertising, its presence extends from the politician on the stump, to the classroom teacher trying to make a case for learning calculus, to the parent pleading with a child to stop throwing food on the floor. Persuasion remains primarily a verbal art, but modern students no longer ignore the obvious fact that language is not alone in its power to influence. Advertisers and media experts, of course, accept this observation as a given, but the truth is that artists and their compatriots in the art world have always known that art had the capacity to affect viewers powerfully. Moreover, it is also clear that a multitude of visual phenomena, ranging from monuments and cemetery stones to skyscrapers, and from casinos to retail malls, have a similar power to affect.

In *Structures as Argument* (Ragsdale 2007), colleagues of mine and I explored buildings as means of persuasion. We studied museums, zoos, cathedrals, Spanish missions, Protestant churches, non-Western buildings, monuments, and cemetery stones, finding abundant evidence of the use of architecture, adornment, and collections of art objects and artifacts to influence viewers and the world at large. We used a typology I created for categorizing museums in particular. In *American Museums and the*

Persuasive Impulse (Ragsdale 2009), I extended this study of buildings to an assessment of American museums, their collections, their exhibition designs, and their architecture, as additional examples of visually persuasive phenomena. By now, there can be no serious question that museums are means of visual persuasion. "From its official inception near the turn of the century, the museum has been more than a mere historical object; it has manufactured an image of history" (Maleuvre 1999, 1). Manufacturing an image of history is quintessentially a persuasive act.

Had I adhered to the principle of primacy, the treatment of American museums would have been preceded by an examination of Western European museums. Such institutions in Western Europe as the British Museum, the Louvre, the Prado, and the Uffizi are the quintessential art museums of the world and for the most part exceed American museums in age. If it was an oversight to have studied American museums first, I correct that error here. The present volume, building directly on the preceding two, assesses Western European art museums as visual persuasion. The museum typology devised in *Structures as Argument* (Ragsdale 2007) and expanded in *American Museums and the Persuasive Impulse* (Ragsdale 2009) will be used to categorize and provide a general evaluation of the European museums. The assessment approach followed in the latter volume will be followed again, so that each museum will be evaluated in terms of its architecture, its collections, and its use of exhibition design as social influence. The remainder of this chapter is a condensation of the theoretical discussions about persuasion, art, architecture, and exhibition design to be found in *American Museums and the Persuasive Impulse*, which I provide here for the reader who has not had the opportunity to examine that work.

The Processes of Persuasion and Visual Persuasion

The traditional view of persuasion is that it is effected by the operation of logic, emotion, and the persuader's character. These appeals normally appear in different degrees in a given message, and the outcome might easily be the function of one of them alone. Within the domain of logic, forms of reasoning called enthymemes predominate. Enthymemes are a popularized form of argument characterized by missing elements. Such parts are left out because the persuader can depend upon his or her listeners to supply them. When an American politician says, for example, that he or she favors change in Washington, there is every likelihood that listeners know well the information which underlies the presumption of a need for change. Enthymemes, the product of practical, popular discourse,

are dynamic and interactive and thus quite unlike formal syllogisms. Facts, examples, statistics, testimony, and the like also characterize the logical aspect of the art of traditional, verbal persuasion.

While such early writers on rhetoric, or the art of persuasion, as Aristotle, were wary of the influence of it, they did acknowledge the power of emotional appeal. Some advised its use as the primary means of persuasion, as in what came to be called "waving the bloody shirt." There are those today who remain wary of the inordinate effect raw emotional response can have on decision-making, as it did in the O. J. Simpson murder trial in California, where an ill-fitting bloody glove may have overridden volumes of DNA evidence. Social scientists, especially those in communication studies, have spent considerable effort investigating the very real operation of fear-threat appeals.

Aristotle especially recognized the special impact of the persuader him or herself on the outcome of persuasive efforts. He knew that listeners often bypass careful, critical thought when processing information in favor of simply relying on a communicator who is trusted, who possesses particular expertise, or who simply appears to have good will toward the listener. Listeners are especially likely to rely on the persuader's *ethos* alone when the issue at hand is relatively unimportant to them or when they are not ego involved in it.

The traditional view of the process of persuasion remains very much alive, along with more modern explanations of some of its operations. A popular model of information processing in persuasion, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), for example, claims that we do not process every persuasive element in the same way. Many elements, such as enthymemes, facts, testimony, and the like, are processed centrally, meaning that they are considered critically or rationally through conscious cognitive processes. Others, including perhaps emotional appeals and certainly including character appeals, are processed peripherally, meaning that they bypass the usual channels of critical thought and impact the listener directly.

The ELM is particularly helpful in understanding the process of visual persuasion. As we found in *Structures as Argument* (Ragsdale 2007), visual persuasion may be discursive, or language-like, as in the case of the depictions of stories from religious texts carved in the stone portals of Gothic cathedrals. It may also be non-discursive, as in the case of the symbolic uses of color, space, and form in the construction of Buddhist temples. Presumably, a viewer of discursive imagery processes it centrally, while the Buddhist temple is processed peripherally. In addition,

traditional representational art would seem to be processed centrally in large measure, while contemporary art would seem not at all to be.

The traditional view of persuasion also recognizes the multidimensionality of the process. The success of persuasion depends on interactions among several elements. The previous discussion has emphasized the primacy of the persuader and of the message. However, different audiences may not react the same way, and the context or environment of the persuasive message may influence the outcome. The literary critic and theorist Kenneth Burke likened the process to a drama, with five interdependent aspects: act, actor, agency, scene, and purpose. All but the most narrow views of persuasion acknowledge this multidimensionality as well.

In their persuasion textbook, Gass and Seiter (2007) differentiate between pure and borderline cases of persuasion. The term "pure" describes a view of persuasion that would presumably pass muster even with those who see the process narrowly. Pure persuasion is that which is intentional, symbolic, interpersonal, noncoercive, and effective. Borderline persuasion might instead be unintentional, nonsymbolic, intrapersonal, coercive, and ineffective. In order to study visually persuasive communication, it seems clear that one not only must recognize the multidimensionality of the persuasive process but must define persuasion itself broadly.

Art objects, for example, are of such variety that wide latitude is called for in their assessment as persuasion. Some works may be processed centrally, some peripherally, and some both centrally and peripherally (parallel processing). The portal sculptures at the cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris are likely candidates for central processing. A Barnet Newman or Mark Rothko painting would seem to require peripheral processing, and a painting such as Picasso's *Guernica* would seem to call for parallel.

Clearly, the consideration of how such a building as a museum might mean and might persuade calls for a broad view. Considerations of mass, site, and scale are quite beyond the scope of traditional persuasion. Within museum buildings, the ways art is exhibited also contribute to the impact it has on viewers, and the elements of exhibition design are equally outside the boundaries of traditional persuasion. To consider exhibition design calls for an understanding of spatial relationships, size, proximity, and the like.

Visual persuasion, however, should not be regarded as an alien notion even by traditionalists. There is something about it that is directly analogous to the study of the orators of Classical times. An art object is a message, like a speech. An exhibition design is also a message, albeit with

different elements than an art object, and so is a museum. Painters, sculptors, curators, and architects are not unlike orators in their persuasive roles. Like speeches, art, exhibition designs, and museums may fail or succeed in reaching their goals. As in the study of persuasion traditionally, studying visual persuasion illuminates an important cultural process and broadens our understanding of the art of persuasion itself. Let us now consider the role of art, exhibition design, and museums in visual persuasion broadly considered.

Art and Museums as Visual Persuasion

One of the most enduring and perplexing questions in any consideration such as this one is "what is art?" The traditional answer in Greece of Classical times was that art (*techne*) was something made by human beings (Davies 2006). The Greek word, *techne*, implied a systematic set of principles to follow in producing art. Oratory, poetry, sculpture, painting, and the like had their specific purposes and a set of principles. Excellence in execution determined greatness. The Romans adopted the cultural ideals of the Greeks, including the definition of art. By the eighteenth century, "art is concerned with the beautiful and the sublime, these being the cardinal aesthetic properties" (Davies 2006, 7). Connected with these traditional ideals of beauty and the sublime was the idea that art was about *representation*. Works of beauty and sublimity were also thought to benefit viewers. By the time of the Enlightenment, art was regarded as capable of improving "recipients morally, emotionally, and spiritually" (Carey 2006, 96). 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).

The tradition of representation, however, 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. 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. 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. In *American Museums and the Persuasive Impulse* (2009), I proposed a general set of distinguishing features of art. Grouped at the left side of the following continuum are terms describing qualities of art, while at the right side are terms referring to non-art. Objects whose "scores" lie toward the midpoint of most of the continua might be thought of as poor 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 demonstrate the usefulness of these continua, I used them to examine Edward Hopper's painting *Nighthawks*, which hangs in Chicago's Art Institute.

Hopper's painting clearly communicates, and what it communicates is a sense of isolation or perhaps even alienation. The work depicts a corner diner in an unknown city seen at night from the outside. No one is on the street, nor is there anything other than the street and its buildings. Four people occupy the diner: a couple, a waiter, and a man whose back is to the viewer. The occupants are not interacting with each other, although the waiter is apparently filling an order. Insofar as meaning is concerned, there is a sense of emptiness, even nothingness, an effect that Hopper surely intended, although *Nighthawks* has evoked many interpretations (Spring 2007).

Hopper's technique was highly skilled, and it is not surprising that he was able to supplement his income by doing commercial illustrations (Spring 2007). Words like "creative," "original," and" imaginative" are frequently used to describe Hopper's work. Is the work beautiful or sublime? Perhaps not, although the painting is surely not ugly or inglorious. *Nighthawks* is a realization of the *Zeitgeist* of the time, and the emotional response to it is intuitive. Certainly one cannot ignore what is

known about America at the time, but the painting conveys its message as an intuition. Judged by the set of continua, *Nighthawks* is surely a work of art. I find the continua especially helpful in assessing modern and contemporary art, for they allow one to critique works of quite disparate styles and periods with a consistent set of standards.

I do not expect everyone to agree that this set of continua resolves the issue of art's essence. It will be sufficient if the system is useful in assessing the persuasiveness of museum collections and helps to integrate the assessment of such museum items as representational and modern art. The question of the nature of museums themselves must now be considered, especially with reference to how and why they emerged from the history of art itself.

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. Art had largely been for the wealthy and the religious at the dawn of the Renaissance. The artist as we conceive of him or her today also began with the Renaissance. Wealthy patrons supported artists and commissioned their work. These patrons, as they had to some extent during the Middle Ages, collected paintings and other works of art to display in their homes and buildings. Art symbolized the patron's status and perhaps also his or her taste. The practice of acquiring and displaying art crystallized in the Renaissance and became the basis for the rise of museums. The rise of museums also reflected collectors' desires to preserve their possessions beyond death and to give ordinary citizens the opportunity to enjoy art.

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." Others trace the origin of museums to collections of Medieval private owners, while some argue that the rise coincides with "the inception of the modern nation-state." Some collections of art objects which appeared in Europe in the Middle Ages were located at court and in churches (Prösler 1996). They functioned principally as evidence of the owner's status, whether it was an individual, an organization, or a country. The idea that such collections ought to be available for ordinary citizens to view was at first rather ill-formed. Some writers disparaged removing art from its primary context and putting it in the artificial confines of a museum. Later, more positive views prevailed, and museums were allowed to offer art for study and enjoyment. Museums brought art to more people, and they preserved art.

There also seems to have been the presumption about museums from the beginning that the home of 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.

I do not wish to argue the question of the most important function of museums. Rather, I wish to emphasize their persuasive function. That was the concern of my colleagues and me in the preparation of *Structures as Argument* (Ragsdale 2007), and it continued to be my concern in *American Museums and the Persuasive Impulse* (Ragsdale 2009). In *Structures as Argument*, 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

Museums are cultural icons when they embody the ideals and elevate 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 Prado, and the Rijksmuseum. 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.

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 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, and some continue to be. Were it not for museums willing to house and promote such art, much contemporary and some older art might 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.

The museum of partisan advocacy includes two subtypes. Museums of Western Europe such as the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Tate Modern exemplify the first subtype. These museums offer a general collection of modern and contemporary art of all kinds and by a variety of artists. In the US, the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Manhattan exemplify the first subtype. Throughout the US, there are also museums of partisan advocacy of smaller size and perhaps more specific focus which form a second subtype. I have called this subtype *boutique* museums (Ragsdale 2009). They include the Salvador Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida, and the Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art in Winter Park, Florida, which houses what is perhaps the largest collection of items by Louis Comfort Tiffany.

As noted earlier, it was often thought that museums which house masterpieces should themselves be magnificent. Most of the world's well-known museums are certainly impressive, but a few stand out. These are the ones I have called museums of 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 as much masterpieces as the art objects they house. In the United States, this category includes the Getty Center and the Getty Villa, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Guggenheim Manhattan, and the like, all of which are treated at length in *American Museums and the Persuasive Impulse* (Ragsdale 2009).

These categories are not ends in themselves and merely serve the purpose of aggregating together those museums whose visual persuasiveness is similar and internally consistent. The typology was not intended to exhaust the types of museums which exist. Museums of natural history, examined in *Structures as Argument* (Ragsdale 2007), do not fit the typology exactly. Indexical museums, which are collections of actual objects such as aircraft and firearms, also do not fit. In the present work, I will confine the assessment of museums as visual persuasion to culturally iconic museums and museums of partisan advocacy. This is because to do more would be beyond the intended scope of this book. Western Europe is simply too well represented by museums to make such a task manageable.

The assessment of visual persuasion requires an understanding of the nature of visual signs and visual syntax, a topic developed at length in *American Museums and the Persuasive Impulse* (Ragsdale 2009). What follows is an abbreviated account of that subject.

A Theory of Visual Signs and Visual Syntax

In *Structures as Argument* (Ragsdale 2007), we followed a theory of visual signs for assessing persuasive communication derived from the verbal semiotic system of Charles S. Peirce (Buchler 1955) by Paul Messaris (1997). The theory identified two types of visual signs: iconic and indexical. Icons are *representational.* They look like that which they stand for, and they are abundant in the portal sculptures of Gothic cathedrals. Indexical signs are *documentary* in nature. They are direct evidence of a thing. Included in this category are unaltered photographs and such artifacts as, for example, a tank used in the occupation of Budapest. Messaris recognized also that how a sign is interpreted 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 *American Museums and the Persuasive Impulse* (2009), I found it necessary to extend Messaris's (1997) basic theory in order properly to assess art, art collections, exhibition designs, and museum architecture. 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. I concluded that such a 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. Underlying visual signs are some very basic elements. Like the sounds which underlie spoken language, so "the dot, line, shape, direction, tone, color, texture, dimension, scale, movement" underlie visual communication (Dondis 1973, 39). Much as we construct words and phrases from basic sounds, these visual elements are used to formulate messages through the application of "visual techniques" or "communication strategies" (104). Some examples are in order. Let us think of a painter's task and suppose that a painter wants a viewer to look 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 to a specific place on the canvas, so the painter paints a significant shape or color or texture in, let us 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. It follows 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.

I have already mentioned the need to expand Messaris's tripartite theory of signs. 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 Pollock, 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. 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.

Peirce's discussion of signs is set within the larger context of his notion of semiosis, or, in simpler terms, the process of meaning (Buchler 1955). Peirce recognized that semiosis could be both verbal and nonverbal. Semiosis consisted of three elements: a sign or a representamen; an object to which the sign referred; and an interpretant or the sense made by a receiver of the sign. The Peircean signs most often discussed by other semioticians were the symbol, the icon, and the index, but Messaris (1997) omitted the symbol in his adaptation of Peirce for visual purposes, observing that "symbolic signs are . . . even more characteristic of language" (x).

Messaris's (1997) interest was in visual persuasion in advertising, but my purpose here may be better served by including the symbol as a visual sign. For Peirce, a symbol was a conventionalized representation of its object. The best example is a word, such as "man." By contrast, a stick figure drawing of a man is an icon, and a photograph of a man is an index.

What, then, is a visual symbol in Peircean terms? While it might be more difficult in visual communication to find instances than in verbal communication, where symbols abound, there are conventionalized visual symbols to be found in every culture (Ragsdale 2007). Trees of life, owls, crucifixes, angels, and the like all have implications beyond mere representation. Accepting that visual signs may be symbolic provides a means for interpreting the many instances of traditional art, which are merely puzzling when contemplated as icons.

The paintings of Hieronymus Bosch are good examples of this category of visual signs. *The Ship of Fools*, which hangs in the Louvre, is no mere representation of sailors at large on the sea but instead is an allegory of human gluttony. The passengers on this particular ship are depicted as indulging in excesses of eating, drinking, and singing. Bosch appears to suggest that mankind itself is no more than a ship of fools. Bosch may be the most extreme of a painter whose visual signs are symbols, but he is by no means the only one. Botticelli, Michelangelo, and Picasso also readily come to mind.

Neither Peirce nor Messaris anticipated the rise of modern art and its practical rejection of representation. The works of such painters as Pollock, Kandinsky, and Mondrian cannot be classified as either icons or indexes. Neither can they be called symbols. For the many works in American museums of contemporary art, I proposed a new type of sign. I call this fourth sign a *presentation* for its terminological similarity to Peirce's representamen. It is also a term that is familiar within the world of artists and their teachers (Buster and Crawford 2007).

A presentation is a visual composition of dots, lines, tones, colors, and the like presented through visual communicative strategies such as balance, symmetry, sharpness, randomness, and the like, but it does not "represent" anything. The interpretant of a presentation will always be subject to more variation than the interpretant of a symbol, an icon, or an index, therefore the importance of the individual viewer's interpretation will also be greater. Presentations do not have clearly differentiated objects, unless one concedes that the subjective impression in the mind of the artist, his or her "intention," is an object. Objects of presentations are ordinarily unknowable, ineffable, indecipherable, and their persuasive impact, if any, is likely to be a function of subjective interpretation.

Signs are part of a system of meaning or *semantics*, for those who prefer this term to semiotics. Just as language has a *syntactic* structure governing the construction of sentences, so visual communication has a structure for the arrangement of signs. This idea is embodied in Messaris's (1997) notion of symbolic indeterminacy mentioned earlier.

Although language has an extensive set of structural rules, there would appear only to be a general principle involved in the juxtaposition of visual signs. This principle comes from the lack of logical connections, such as those to be found in language among verbs, in the arrangement of visual signs. The result is that viewers of such juxtapositions are free to draw their own connections.

From the standpoint of a persuader's purpose, however, it is also true that juxtaposing two or more images can suggest connections that are not necessarily either obvious or real. Seeing a well-muscled athlete using an exercise machine may influence the viewer to conclude that the machine caused the muscular conditioning. That this is not necessarily logical does not make it less effective, for example, in advertising. This is also a principle used extensively in cinematic *montage*. While the visual persuasiveness of a museum certainly is to a large degree a function of the museum's collection, it is also important to account for the contribution made by the spatial arrangements of that collection and of the role of the architecture of the museum itself.

Exhibition Design and the Visual Persuasiveness of Space

It might be helpful in considering the contribution of exhibition design to the persuasive impact of art objects to think of decorating one's home. Certainly, considerations of floor coverings, walls, lighting, and decorative art are part of one's thoughts. Living in a comfortable space and enjoying the environment are ubiquitous goals. Although the amateur home decorator is likely to choose decorative arts in terms of how they fit with the floors, walls, and furniture, what if the reverse were the case? What if all elements of a room, say, were made subservient to the display of the decorative art? Were that the case, then the home decorator and a museum's exhibition designer would be comparable persons. It is the designer's job, among other things, to choose a space for exhibiting specific works, to arrange items within the space, to hang works on walls, and, if possible, to determine the nature of the walls' construction, whether it be of stone, or plasterboard, or wood and whether it be painted, or covered with cloth, or left in a natural state. The question for our purposes here is "Do the choices made by the designer have a persuasive effect on viewers?" In short, does it matter how art is displayed?

Newhouse (2005) demonstrates that several aspects of the placement of art directly affect the viewer's perceptions. She compares the exhibition of art to dressing for a run on the beach, a visit to the opera, or an elegant ball. Wall texture, for example, makes a noticeable difference in display.

Soft textures, such as those found in displays where the wall is covered with textiles, make subtle nuances of color in a painting emerge more readily than do hard textures. Wall color also will either heighten or obscure a painting's colors and design. Both texture and color interact with light to affect the perception of art. A wall's width in relation to that which is displayed on it also contributes to our perception. It should neither dwarf the work nor cramp its viewing. Similarly, the scale of the wall, or its height in relation to the work of art, should enhance viewing. Finally, the frame of a painting, the place on the wall where the painting is located, other items nearby, and the gallery in which it is located, whether grand or intimate, are all crucial to the effect of a display.

Even among art historians, the importance of exhibition has been a neglected issue (Newhouse 2005; Staniszewski 1998), although as Newhouse (8) points out, "Placement has affected the perception of art . . . since the first cave paintings." The neglect noted by both Newhouse and Staniszewski, however, means that there seems not to be a thorough list of possible installation models with an interpretation of the meaning of each. This is analogous in language to the lack of a grammar. Fortunately, the range of installation possibilities is both narrower and less complex than a grammar would be in language. It is helpful to think of installation designs as a continuum from dense to sparse, which continuum also represents changes over time since the mid-nineteenth century.

While one still encounters museum walls containing numerous paintings, today's exhibitions and gallery spaces typically do not compare to the preference in the early nineteenth century literally to cover all of the walls with objects (Carrier 2006). As O'Doherty (1986, 16) puts it, "the perfect hanging job [was] an ingenious mosaic of frames without a patch of wasted wall showing." Such displays suggest different interpretations of art than do less congested ones. Over time, display conventions evolved into the spacious and often white galleries of today, although one may still notice examples which are clearly transitional. These displays do not cover walls with as many paintings as possible, but they group several paintings much as an interior decorator might arrange prints on the walls of a home. Today, "the wish for ever closer encounters with art have [*sic*] gradually made galleries more intimate, increased the amount of empty wall space between works, brought works nearer to eye level, and caused each work to be lit individually" (Duncan 1995, 17). The motivation for this style is to focus attention on the individual work of art. This discussion has been about the placement of paintings on walls, but another feature of installation design is the placement of art objects in the gallery space itself.

Many museums display sculpture for the gallery space, and a particularly interesting innovation of the 1920s was Frederick Kiesler's "Leger and Trager" or "L and T" method of exhibition design (Staniszewski 1998, 4). This type of installation introduced "a new language of form composed of freestanding, demountable display units of vertical and horizontal beams that supported vertical and horizontal panels" Cantilevers permitted viewers to move the mounted art for better viewing. This innovation violated the usual museum warning not to touch the art but made possible a direct, kinetic impact on the viewer. However the gallery space is populated, "modern installations dramatically change how we view individual older paintings" (Carrier 2006, 93). When a painting, for example, is made a part of an exhibition designed to show how art developed over time, the individual characteristics of the particular piece, its unique merits, are necessarily deemphasized. By contrast, a single painting on a wall certainly draws out the features of a work. While there may be no lexicon of installation design meanings *per se*, there are certainly elements and principles followed by designers much like the elements of visual literacy or of art. As in *American Museums and the Persuasive Impulse* (2009), the designs to be found in the Western European museums in this book will be assessed for their potential persuasive impact on viewers. The final aspect of museums as visual persuasion concerns the building itself and its architecture.

How Does a Building Mean and Persuade?

To answer the question "how does a building convey meaning?" requires that one begin with the nature of a building as a visual sign. Of course, buildings are not icons. They are not usually representations of other visual images. Neither are buildings indexes. They are not the evidence of an event or thing, nor do they remind one of an event or thing. Similarly, buildings are not symbols. The most appealing description for me is that buildings are *presentations.* They depend for their meaning on the visual elements and communication techniques mentioned earlier in connection with visual literacy.

Strickland (2001, xi-xiv) provides a very useful list of considerations for one who seeks to understand how a building may mean, which is as follows:

- Rhythm, or the regular repetition of such elements as walls and windows, columns, and the like
- Line, or the use of verticals, horizontals, and diagonals

- Scale or size
- Light
- Texture, or the comparative roughness or smoothness of surfaces
- Color
- Ornament
- Acoustics
- Site
- Space
- Weight and Mass

These elements of architecture do not have attached to them any value dimensions, which would enable one readily to assess any building, but the reader will notice the large degree of overlap with the elements of visual literacy. Like the dimensions of art, they must be applied by the critic with a degree of caution, but they do answer the question of what to look for. Additionally, it is the case that geometric shapes, color, light, and the like have symbolic significance and can be understood for what they imply (Tresidder 2006).

The best place to start with this explanation of how buildings persuade is probably with the *elaboration likelihood model of persuasion* of Petty and Cacioppo (1986) presented earlier. This model proposes that some persuasive messages are processed centrally, which is to say that their messages are subjected to careful scrutiny, and others are processed peripherally, meaning that their content is much less important than their "feel" or their emotional resonance. Visual images, especially those which are more abstract than concrete, are especially good examples of peripherally processed messages. While some aspects of buildings, such as the ornament on the portals of Gothic cathedrals (Ragsdale 2007), are language-like or discursive and would be processed centrally, the remaining architectural elements are nondiscursive and would be processed peripherally. In this respect, assessing the persuasiveness of a building is quite like assessing the persuasiveness of a painting.

It will most often be the case, therefore, that the assessment of a building as a persuasive message will begin with a description of its architectural elements—line, scale, size, color, and the like—followed by an attempt to answer the question, "Is this structure visually arresting?" If it is visually arresting, then the likelihood is great that the building by itself would draw visitors, that it would be a "crowd puller" (Oeschlin 2006, 7) and that it would thereby confer status on its contents. If one regards a building as an argument, then it might be useful to recall that popular argument is enthymematic. It is not structurally complete, because

it is missing one or more of its premises or its conclusion. Popular argument depends on receivers who can supply the missing elements. In assessing buildings, therefore, the critic may often be making a leap of faith, as it were, by forming a holistic judgment of a building's merit and only then seeking to find the architectural elements which justify the leap.

One would also be wise to recall Kenneth Burke's dramatistic pentad, a schematic device for assuring that nothing important is omitted from the assessment of persuasion. Of the five parts of the pentad, *scene* is the one which encompasses the building as persuasive message. Scene, in the case of museums, also includes interior architecture, but not just that space taken by itself. Rather, museum space, as already noted, must be considered in terms of its effectiveness in exhibiting collections. My consideration of museums as visual persuasion, thus, is an effort to assess the artistic merit of museum architecture followed by an estimate of the likely impact the museum building would have on drawing visitors and on conferring status on the art within. Additionally, but less significant in this particular analysis, is the iconicity of the building and the resultant status the structure confers on its location. Before turning my attention to the assessment of Western European museums as visual persuasion, I think it would be prudent to touch briefly on the question of the effectiveness of persuasion.

The Question of Efficacy

A classic case in persuasion is that of a public speaker seeking to change an audience's thoughts or actions through an address. How does one determine the effectiveness of such an address? One will only be able really to do so by actually measuring the effect. With modern polling techniques, close approximations of true scientific measurements are possible, but it is worth noting that one may want to know how effective a speaker was in the past, and in that case it is possible only to make an educated guess. The operative word is "educated." Can a critic reasonably make such a guess? Can I make such a guess with respect to museums? The answer would appear to be "yes."

Over the past 70 years, scientific research in communication studies and in the other social sciences has resulted in an large corpus of behavioral evidence about how many variables of persuasion function. Political campaign advisers and advertising writers, among others, use this evidence to answer their clients' questions about how to succeed at their persuasive tasks. Teachers in communication studies advise their students