



A Short Introduction to Visual and Museum Anthropological Methods to Teach in a Museum

ALISON L. KAHN*

Abstract: This paper explores the amalgamation of visual and museum anthropological methods, as a means of enhancing educational experiences during student-guide museum visits. It sets out a methodology to convert the traditional school visit into a multisensory experience that helps students understand more about cultures and related knowledge production and consumption. The paper outlines several objectives for museum trips. Learners should write their stories based on existing real-life objects, imbibe meanings through kinaesthetic empathy as well as utilise museums' collections as learning aids. Furthermore, it underscores the need for students to write self-reflecting papers to criticise and improve their own experiences in a museum. The theoretical starting point of this study is visual anthropology which explains human creativity using both traditional and digital approaches. It has also incorporated digital ethnography into its purview, bringing out the sensory basis behind it while involving people in the research process. Moreover, it highlights how these institutions have moved from redefining themselves against colonial heritage to shaping multivocality within them across time and space through dialogical exhibits. Therefore, the paper supports participatory learning models that both, the students and teachers might take advantage of during museum visits.

Through the incorporation of visual anthropology techniques, students are required to raise critical questions about the exhibits promoting thinking and openness towards other cultures. The material underscores the significance of varied forms of stimuli in learning and how the physical environment affects it. Museum visits thus become a moment of intellectual resilience where critical thinking is encouraged and new outlooks are developed. It therefore posits that merging visual anthropology methodologies

Received : 09 January 2024

Revised : 12 February 2024

Accepted : 21 February 2024

Published : 26 June 2024

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Kahn, A.L. (2024). A Short Introduction to Visual and Museum Anthropological Methods to Teach in a Museum, *Indian Journal of Anthropological Research*, 3: 1, pp. 15-25. <https://DOI:10.47509/IJAR.2024.v03i01.02>

* Dr Alison Kahn, Overseas Studies - Oxford, Bing Overseas Studies, Stanford University.

with museum practice can disrupt traditional educational pathways leading to an awakened sense of awareness and a lifetime rendezvous with learning.

Keywords: Visual Anthropology, Multisensory Learning, Museum Education, Participatory Learning

“Thank you again for such a wonderful seminar – you have permanently impacted how I experience, view and analyse the museum, and I could not be more grateful!”

(Stanford University Undergraduate Student to the Author, 2024)

Introduction

This paper identifies the museum space as an opportunity for cross-cultural awareness in educational practice by employing visual anthropological methods to reach beyond the parameters of the traditional school visit. By examining and prescribing methods to introduce students to a museum and its collections, a multi-sensory connection between visitor and exhibited is suggested to enhance the perception of cultural awareness about knowledge production and knowledge consumption in wider contexts. Let us consider the following objectives for a museum visit:

- To use the museum as a space of learning away from the screen to encourage the students to understand that ideas for stories are planted in the material world.
- Facilitate methods to absorb meaning through the *medium* as well as the *message* in a multi-sensory way, and to enjoy the corporeal experience of being in the museum space.
- To introduce collections as a learning prompt and to understand how objects tell stories about known and unknown topics.
- To present a rich aesthetic resource of material to begin creating stories as an independent learner.
- To engage students to create a self-reflexive report about their museum experience and suggest ways on how it could be improved.

Theoretical Preliminaries

Born out of the proliferation of the use of photography and film in our physical

world, visual anthropological research examines the processes and productions of human creativity cross-culturally. Methods include the observation of material culture and the collection of data that reveals conscious and implicit visual and other sensory forms of human expression through analogue and digital technologies. The skills of a visual anthropologist include a corporeal and sensory awareness of space and an acute awareness of symbolic forms of representation that give clues to culture beyond the text. Data collection tools can incorporate any kind of creative activity, with an aptitude to understand the process and consumption of material culture.

We ask questions about how different societies make their marks on the world : through the production of maps, architecture, dress codes, body art, dance, and music, historised in their institutions that oversee their systems of ordering, taxonomics and classification of their findings, and inventions. The interrogation of this material cultural evidence gives insight into human societies.

Over the last twenty-five years, the academic discipline of anthropology has broadened to include the digital worlds in which we now inhabit and the use of ethnographic fieldwork as 'doing' and 'sensory' anthropology (Pink, 2006, 2009) underpinned by participant-observer research methods and have led to a more engaged and applied relationship with the subjects of study. Building on George E. Hein's publication, *Learning in the Museum* (1998) where he showed how research in visitor studies and the philosophy of education could be applied to facilitate a meaningful educational experience in museums, digital ethnography is enhanced by competence in digital media and computer science technology.

A revised understanding of teaching cultural awareness in museums has created a revised academic and curatorial approach, now acknowledged in its domain of museum anthropology. This amalgamation of anthropology and museum studies promotes academic and curatorial reflexive processes about how museums situate their collections in social, political, and intellectual contexts, externalising commentary of their colonial heritage (in Western Museums) and appreciating multivocality in their approach to research and display.

The museum can be used as a space for learning away from the screen to encourage the students to understand that ideas for stories are planted in the material world. The museum presents a space of adventure and can be a transformative experience. It can lead to a sense of empowerment and learning beyond the school curriculum, leading to a deeper sense of engagement with

learning as an enjoyable life-long journey. The fragmented nature of information often displayed adds a sense of excitement and pleasure and gives agency to the student who is given the freedom to absorb the information in a multi-sensory way, and hook to their memory in ways that create meaning. Visual anthropological methods can add to this experience of employing suggestion, drawing attention to the architecture and the framing of information in both material and ideological terms. Reminding students of who collected and curated the material stimulates their imaginations and calls upon them to ask questions beyond the displays, such as, “How did the objects get here?”, “When was this exhibit last updated?”, or “Are the labels correct?” This term a student from Hawaii discovered an exhibit familiar to her heritage in an ethnographic museum fundamentally misrepresented. She went away to research the object and found inconsistencies in the labelling and historical ‘facts’ that were available on the website. I will present her case to the Director of this museum, and it may lead to further investigation. The lessons learned from this type of experience are that museums, generally accepted as places of authority, can get things wrong, and it is important to question information that is being presented to you, even if its genesis is from a formal and authoritative place.

It is not just students who benefit from spending time in inspirational settings such as museums and galleries. The teacher enrichment programme at the Fitzwilliam Museum aims to provide more than just improved curriculum knowledge, confidence, and skills (Noble, 2019).

As with most experiences with younger people, learning is a contagious activity. When students see and feel the enthusiasm of a teacher, they catch the wave of excitement and interest. Studies show that teachers also benefit from museum learning.

For the student to absorb meaning through the *medium* as well as the *message* in a multi-sensory way through the corporeal experience of physical presence, digital technologies can enhance a museum visit (Kahn & Child, 2021) and can add a rich tapestry of voices to otherwise voiceless objects. It has been suggested that objects are biographical (Hoskins, 1998) and their relationship with the observer or function alters according to the context in which we see or use them. They are also commodities and form part of a value system that underpins the institutions in which we see them (Appadurai, 1986). As objects are passed through diverse contexts, they gather agency as they define the social relations between the receivers and givers (Gell, 1998). They operate as objects that define power relations, embedded with spiritual forces, or valued as emotional connectors to lives and memories. Visual

anthropological approaches to museum visiting furnish the students with tools to tell stories about the exhibits they see and learn from, feelings and emotions resulting from a different type of learning experience based on prompts and informal conversations rather than formal classroom lessons where a different style of behaviour is expected. Marshall McLuhan prompted us to examine the medium through which information is being communicated. His phrase, “the medium is the message” alerting us to the environment in which information is gathered, signalling that the way we receive knowledge is as important as the content it carries. The technologies that are used through which we are communicating are not neutral entities. He proposed that each media has its language system and must be understood through its structures and relative systems. He believed that all media have effects on the users and that they continually shape and re-shape the ways in which individuals, societies, and cultures perceive and understand the world (McLuhan, 1964).

McLuhan’s work has acute relevance to the study of emerging technologies and new media; digital ethnography looks at how we live our lives online, which includes audio-visual. Visual anthropology has also moved on from foregrounding the visual but using it as a prompt to approach cultural situations in corporeal or sensory engagements that consider voices and perspectives often overlooked in museums and films.

McLuhan was able to see past the specifics of radio and television to some underlying characteristics that set electronic media (what he called electric media) apart from print media. Where others saw general continuity (or simply cultural decline), he saw fundamental difference and transformation (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 16; 1994b). Visual anthropological methods can add to the learning curve by asking students to see exhibits through different lenses. Asking them to note the different type of media being used in an exhibition, and how it is being used helps refine their gaze, and search from specific reference points. A criterion of observation helps students to hook information on to their existing knowledge. When visiting an art gallery, it is important to offer guidelines about how to ‘read’ a painting from a basic level, as it is far from evident for the uninitiated to know how to see a painting or a sculpture. Bourdieu’s theory of habitus is a set of preconscious dispositions, including tastes, a sense of the He self, bodily stances, and, crucially, skills or “practical mastery”. He describes the habitus as established primarily in the family, but in “differentiated” societies the school also plays a key role. Bourdieu comments on the class difference in cultural consumption emphasizing the different levels of understanding a museum visitor might have when visiting a museum or art gallery.

McLuhan was able to see past the specifics of radio and television to some underlying characteristics that set electronic media (what he called electric media) apart from print media. Where others saw general continuity (or simply cultural decline), he saw fundamental difference and transformation (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 16; 1994b). Visual anthropological methods can add to the learning curve by asking students to *see* exhibits through different lenses. Asking them to note the different type of media being used in an exhibition, and how it is being used helps refine their gaze, and search from specific reference points. A criterion of observation helps students to hook information on to their existing knowledge. When visiting an art gallery, it is important to offer guidelines about how to 'read' a painting from a basic level, as it is far from evident for the uninitiated to know how to see a painting or a sculpture. Bourdieu's theory of *Habitus* is a set of preconscious dispositions, including tastes, a sense of the self, bodily stances, and, crucially, skills or "practical mastery". The habitus is established primarily in the family, but in "differentiated" societies the school also plays a key role. Bourdieu comments on the class difference in cultural consumption emphasizing the different levels of understanding a museum visitor might have when visiting a museum or art gallery.

I have noted elsewhere how museums are gatekeepers of knowledge, and how social class plays an important role in the consumption of cultural heritage (Kahn, 2023). This work builds on Bourdieu's theoretical contribution to the study of class politics in his thesis on *cultural capital* and the concept of where he explains that "dispositions, appreciations, and practical mastery, is the product of class position, and more specifically the product of the volume and structure of capital that agents possess" (Bourdieu in Riley, 2017, pp 107-136). Riley's essay on Bourdieu remarks that the *habitus* is established primarily in the family, but in "differentiated" societies the school also plays a key role (Riley, 2017: 111).

Bourdieu's work also represents the epitome of the cultural studies agenda for interdisciplinarity—incorporating and transgressing, as it does, an extraordinarily wide range of theories, methods and fields (Webb et al., 2002).

Bourdieu's analogies on cultural and economic capital complement the theoretical standpoints that visual anthropology offers as we study visual culture as part of a network of systems. These systems have historical, political, and economic roots in dominant and subcultures of societies. Expanding the student's sense of being in the world and identifying geographic and cultural positions within the museum space help the visitor to imagine spaces and situations that bear upon museum collections. One practical method that is

offered in my class in the museum is the exercise *A Sense of Space* - students are asked to find a safe location in the museum and close their eyes for 60 seconds and just listen, smell, and sense the space around them. They are then instructed to open their eyes and spend another couple of minutes looking around them, up and down, paying attention to the connections between sound and the visual space they find themselves in. They then note down their findings and share their thoughts with the group. This initiation into a new space helps focus breathing and instincts as the student gains command of the scene and prepares them to use all their senses when investigating displays, interacting with exhibits, and eventually critiquing the visit.

Students are introduced to investigating its collections as a learning prompt to understand how objects tell stories about any topic known to humanity . Storytelling is at the root of all learning and induces instincts that are rooted in our primate senses that help decipher our environments and our relationships with others. The museum in all its forms attempts to break down large pieces of knowledge into bite-size chunks of data that can be absorbed by all types of learners. Successful exhibitions go much further than displaying collections; they engender a sense of curiosity from visitors who may have no previous knowledge of the subject. The Vark model (Flemming & Mills, 1992) incorporates different types of information in a three-dimensional space: visual learners , auditory learners , and kinesthetic learners. As an educator, we know that we all learn in different ways, and usually through a combination of sensory stimuli. Moving away from the classroom into larger spaces with high ceilings and different kinds of light sources hails 'adventure' for most students, who are jolted into an alternative learning world.

The freedom to move and think in a space stimulates the body and the mind frees the spirit into voluntary learning patterns. The teacher acts as curator of the learning experience and not the leader. This dissolution of hierarchy in the process of information gathering creates new forms of behaviour and lays the foundations for a more trusting relationship between the learner and the educator since both are experiencing a unique process together.

In a museum, students get a rich aesthetic resource of material to begin creating stories themselves. When visiting a museum or gallery each visitor experiences the space in individual ways. The aesthetic of the exhibition and space will appeal to the interactor in unpredictable ways. Some will investigate the margins of the displays, up above the display, or the floor, or be tempted to go off the intended curated trail, into the corridors, gardens, cafes, or bathrooms. These mini adventures serve as part of the learning process as each

fills the space on their own terms. When visiting an art gallery, the visual can be explored in several ways, but before we can start to talk cross-culturally, we can try to understand the aesthetic qualities of the exhibition on its own terms. An excellent free online resource, *The Superpower of Looking* (SPoL) is now available online from Art UK. This toolkit is for students who can read in English (although a translation could be made), and useful for teachers to create further study after visiting an art exhibition, and helps the student navigate the art pieces through guidance on their qualities such as composition, space, colour, line, light, scale, materials and techniques, figures, symbols, and attributes. The age of the student is also very important as their conceptual knowledge may not be as developed as older students. *The Superpower of Looking* uses a “‘questions approach, [which] gives anyone the ability to explore a work of art and develop their visual literacy skills.” Visual anthropological methods of framing collections give reference baseline points of access to culture and history, encouraging ‘making’ activities such as sketching, and observing how other visitors engage in the collections. Being a participant-observer in the gallery adds to the understanding of the context in which art is produced and consumed. Once students arrive at a competence to read the space on its own terms, they may be prompted to observe the labels and further details of access to the exhibition, such as physical access, cultural, gender, ethnic, and racial biases that may be apparent. Students who would otherwise gain little or no information from a visit can learn to ask questions about the exhibit and begin to critique it. A museum is an unfamiliar space for many students and reference points are necessary for them to begin to understand the collections. This alerts them to lives lived beyond their cultural experience and often helps to awaken a sense of empathy and understanding about different viewpoints and philosophies that coexist alongside their own.

Lastly, the students are asked to create a self-reflexive report about their museum experience and suggest ways on how it could be improved. Here, we turn to the learning outcomes of the process of museum teaching. How can we measure an enlightened and informed result from the endeavour? Self-reflection as part of the learning process serves in two distinct ways. The act of writing or speaking about the experience by the student is a clear way of gathering data on the process. The report itself needs definition and clear guidelines but is guided by a series of questions. For younger students questions that direct them to specific activities they undertook, and asking their opinion is a simple and efficient way to gather feedback as long as it is done immediately after the visit. For older and more educated students, questions can be more analytical

in nature and can be asked in different learning categories. For the art gallery, I added more questions to the SPoL, such as:

- Which historical period is the exhibition covering?
- Where are the painters from and why are they important?
- How are the galleries labelled and structured?
- Choose 3 of your favourite exhibits and use the Toolkit below to analyse form and structure.
- Prepare a presentation of 6 slides (2 per exhibit) to discuss in class next week.
- Are there any digital technologies incorporated in the exhibition?
- Look up meanings of 5 symbolic elements in the artworks.
- How does the exhibition appeal to your senses?
- Are there any problematic elements in the displays (access/labelling/text size?)
- After visiting the exhibition, please explore the other galleries in the museum.

In conclusion, using visual and museum anthropological approaches to the museum experience, we can prepare, advise, prompt, and suggest activities that challenge the ritualistic educational journey. Learning in the museum disrupts the journey of learning and often leads to an awakened sense of awareness as students learn to connect information in creative ways. Consider the reaction of our muscles to physical activity; they tear and repair and build resilience to pressure and use; the endurance of distance and unexpected terrain is managed with more ease and flexibility. By challenging the imaginative and creative capacities of the student, we build a similar resilience to intellectual and emotional pressures that can interrupt or put barriers in the way of connections. A new kind of intellectual and emotional flexibility begins to build, and fresh perspectives become more easily accessed. Entering a museum saturates the senses with all kinds of information that can bounce off already learned material as well as form new networks of knowledge.

Notes

1. **Cultural Intervention:** Cultural intervention involves intentional actions or strategies aimed at shaping cultural perceptions and practices. In the field of museum education, this means leveraging the museum's space and collections to challenge and transform students' understanding of culture, history, and societal norms. By presenting students with a variety of cultural artefacts and narratives, cultural intervention seeks to foster critical thinking and a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity.

2. **Multi-sensory Connection:** A multi-sensory connection engages multiple senses simultaneously—such as sight, sound, touch, and smell—to create a richer, more immersive learning experience. In museums, this approach can significantly enhance visitors’ interactions with exhibits, enabling them to perceive and interpret cultural artefacts in a more comprehensive and meaningful way.
3. **Bourdieu’s Habitus:** Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus refers to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals develop through their life experiences, particularly within their family and social contexts. This concept shapes how individuals perceive the world and their place within it. In general, habitus produces patterns of behaviour that reproduce the social agent in the position he or she currently occupies (Bourdieu,1991).
4. **Cultural Capital:** Cultural capital encompasses the knowledge, skills, education, and other cultural assets that provide individuals with social mobility and power. In the context of museums, understanding these concepts allows educators to recognise the diverse backgrounds students bring to their museum experiences. This awareness helps educators tailor their teaching methods to bridge cultural gaps and enhance learning for all students.

References

- Appadurai, A. (Ed.). (1986). *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Banks, M., & Morphy, H. (1999). Introduction to rethinking visual anthropology. In *Rethinking visual anthropology*. Yale University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1980). *Le sens pratique*. Les Editions de Minuit.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Pascalian meditations*. Stanford University Press.
- Cole, A., & Huntsman, P. (2021). *The Superpower of Looking Kit*. Art UK. Alison Cole and Penny Huntsman.
- Duncan, C. (1995). *Civilising rituals: Inside public art museums* (Selected Chapters). Routledge.
- Fensham, R., & Threadgold, T. (Eds.). (2002). *Understanding Bourdieu*. Jen Webb, Tony Schirato, & Geoff Danaher (Eds.). Cultural Studies.
- Fleming, N.D., & Mills, C. (1992). VARK® modalities: What do Visual, Aural, Read/write & Kinesthetic mean? *VARK Learn*. Retrieved from <https://vark-learn.com/introduction-to-vark/the-vark-modalities/>
- Gell, A. (1998). *Art and agency: An anthropological theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Grimshaw, A. (2001). *The ethnographer’s eye: Ways of seeing in modern anthropology*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hein, G. (1998). *Learning in the museum*. Routledge.
- Hoskins, J. (1998). *Biographical objects: How things tell the stories of people’s lives*. Routledge.

- Kahn, A. (2023). *Imperial museum dynasties in Europe: Papal ethnographic collections and material culture*. Springer.
- Kahn, A., & Child, C. (2021). Conversation pieces: How digital technologies might reinvigorate and reveal the social lives of objects. In Nongbri & Bhargava (Eds.), *Materiality and visibility in NE India* (pp. 37-53). Springer.
- MacDougall, D. (2006). *The corporeal image: Film, ethnography, and the senses*. Princeton University Press.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. Routledge.
- Here's the reference formatted in APA 7th edition:
- Noble, K. (2019). *Making the most of museums: The case for learning through objects*. *Perspective Article*. Retrieved from https://my.chartered.college/impact_article/making-the-most-of-museums-the-case-for-learning-through-objects/
- Pink, S. (2006). *Doing visual anthropology*. Routledge.
- Pink, S. (2009). *Doing sensory anthropology*. Sage.
- Riley, D. (2017). Bourdieu's class theory: The academic as revolutionary. In P. Bourdieu, *Pascalian meditations* (1991). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. Retrieved from <https://sociology.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/faculty/Riley/BourdieuClassTheory.pdf>
- Riley, D. (2017). Bourdieu's class theory: The academic as revolutionary. *Catalyst*, 1(2), 107-136. In P. Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique* (p. 93). Paris: Les Editions de Minuit.
- Troiani, I., & Kahn, A. (2016). Beyond the academic book: New "undisciplined" corporeal publication. *Journal of Architecture and Culture*. Routledge.