Art Education and Art Museums: Visitors' Learning

Hyungsook Kim*
Assistant Professor of Art Education, Seoul National University

Abstract

Art museums today have the opportunity to push the traditional museum paradigm to enable a broader approach to postmodern society. Since diverse visual images permeate through this society, traditional art museum communication approaches are no longer suitable. Artworks displayed in art museums not only suggest a single meaning, but produce multiple meanings in communicating with the public. The function of the art museum as a communicator demands new ways of thinking about issues of knowledge, power, identity, and language. This paper investigates communication methods and processes in art museums. Visitors in art museums are examined by focusing on the learning process. The conversation between visitors and art museums is discussed in order to understand how the meanings of artworks in art museums are constructed. Additionally, this study investigated the processes and aspects of diverse media that can be used in the exhibition spaces in art museums.

Key words: art museums, communication, visitors' learning, universal survey museum, contextual knowledge

I. Introduction

The meanings of art museums have been consistently constructed in the history of the museums. Art museums that collected, conserved,
and exhibited the old masters’ artworks and items of cultural heritage have been understood by the public as the institutions in which visitors obtain educational experiences. Artworks on display in the gallery space of an art museum are situated in an historical and cultural context when viewed by visitors. When viewing objects on display in art museums, viewers are the key element in producing the meanings of an exhibition. However, artworks in art museums do not suggest a single meaning, but produce multiple meanings for visitors. Conversation between ‘subjects (visitors)’ and ‘objects (artworks)’, that is, endless conversations between the viewers and the viewed, are part of the educational experience when the public visits art museums.

Therefore, this study asks several questions of how art museums function as the aesthetic institution of education mediating between these subjects and objects: Which educational effects can be obtained when visitors encounter artworks in museums?; How can we theoretically support visitors’ experience with artworks in art museums?; How can we analyze visitors’ experiences in art museums?; How can we develop the appropriate teaching methods for museum visitors?

Therefore, this study, first, examines the communication methods and process in art museums developed in the modern era. Additionally, a new communication paradigm in post modern society is also discussed. Second, visitors in art museums are discussed by focusing on the learning process. Visitors move back and forth between, on the one hand, information and artworks provided by curators in art museums, and on the other hand, participate in the process of learning. Third, the conversation between visitors and art museums is discussed in order to understand how the meanings of artworks in art museums are constructed. Finally, this study investigates the processes and aspects of diverse media that can be used in the exhibition spaces in art museums.

II. Background of Modern Art Museums and Communication