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To cite this article: David Howes, Eric Clarke, Fiona Macpherson, Beverley Best & Rupert Cox (2018) Sensing art and artifacts: explorations in sensory museology, *The Senses and Society*, 13:3, 317-334, DOI: [10.1080/17458927.2018.1516024](https://doi.org/10.1080/17458927.2018.1516024)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17458927.2018.1516024>



Published online: 13 Nov 2018.



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Sensing art and artifacts: explorations in sensory museology

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a sensory studies methodology for the interpretation of museum objects. The proposed method unfolds in two phases: virtual encounter via an on-line catalog and actual exposure in the context of a handling workshop. In addition to exploring the *écart* between image and object, the “Sensing Art and Artifacts” exercise articulates a framework for arriving at a multisensory, cross-cultural, interactive understanding of aesthetic value. The case studies presented here involve four objects from the collection of the Hunterian Museum as sensed and interpreted by scholars of psychology, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology. It is proposed that aesthetic judgment in the expanded (cross-cultural) sense contemplated here involves apprehending the museum object through multiple sensory modalities in place of the conventional Western fixation on visible form.

KEYWORDS

Art; artifacts; multisensory aesthetics; curating and connoisseurship; sensory life of things

Introduction

In a nineteenth-century novel called *Tomorrow's Eve*, Thomas Edison is presented as musing on the blindness of native peoples with respect to the values of Western art. He asks himself:

Suppose I place the Mona Lisa of Leonardo da Vinci in front of a Pawnee Indian or a Kaffir tribesman. However powerful the glasses or lenses with which I improve the eyesight of these children of nature, can I ever make them really see what they're looking at? (L'Isle-Adam 1982, 15)

This vignette poses in a rather stark way the problem of aesthetic judgment in cross-cultural context. The natives, it is suggested, just would not be able to fathom either the meaning or the beauty of the da Vinci painting, while the Edison character rests secure in his knowledge and judgment. The purpose of this inquiry is to relativize Edison's certainty and arrive at a more capacious (multisensory, cross-cultural, interactive) understanding of aesthetic value.

What if the tables were turned and it was a question of some Westerner being confronted with an artifact from an exotic culture? Take the case of the Inca quipu.¹ At first blush, a quipu might look like a string mop. But the quipu was not just a random tangle of cords. It was a highly intricate form of “writing” which engaged touch and

rhythm in the tying of the knots and involved a wide range of colors and patterns (Classen 1993, 125). Unlike writing, however, the quipu was not flat, nor was it linear. In *Code of the Quipu* Marcia and Robert Ascher write:

The quipumaker's strings present no surface at all ... A group of strings occupy a space that has no definite orientation; as the quipumaker connected strings to each other, the space became defined by the points where the strings were attached ... The relative positions of the strings were set by their points of attachment, and it is the relative position, along with the colors and knots, that render the recording meaningful. Essentially then the quipumaker had to have the ability to conceive and execute a recording in three dimensions with color (Ascher and Ascher 1981, 62).

Some of the quipu that survived the destruction of Inca material culture during the Spanish Conquest and its aftermath are to be found in museum collections (see [Figure 1](#)). There it is possible to look at them, but they remain silent and untouchable. All we know from contemporaneous written sources is that they appear to have served as recording devices for numerical data and were used for calendrical, census, and tax collection purposes as well as military organization. There may also have been literary quipu. But there is no Rosetta Stone that could help us decipher the quipu. In the absence of a key, how are we to begin to interpret them? The first trick is to open our senses – all of them, because there is often more to non-Western artifacts than meets the eye; such objects typically embody multiple sensory values (Howes and Classen 2013, ch. 1)

Horace Walpole (1717–1797), a man of letters, antiquarian, and politician, had the requisite disposition, and may serve as our guide. In 1780, Walpole was sent a quipu by his longtime correspondent, the Countess of Upper Ossory, herself a collector of antiquities (see [Figure 1](#)). In it, he discovered possibilities for new sensory idioms, such as a language of colors, and a tactile language in which one could weave poems and knot rhymes. He wrote to his correspondent that trying to understand the colorful quipu was like trying to “hold a dialogue with a rainbow by the help of its grammar a prism, for I have not yet discovered which is the first or last verse of four lines that hang like ropes of onions” (Walpole 1965, 261–263). He went on to speculate on the nature of a language of colors, dwelling on the

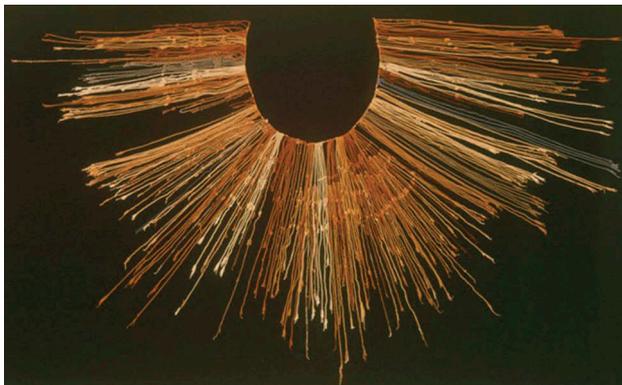


Figure 1. An Inca quipu, from the Larco Museum in Lima. Wikimedia. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Inca_Quipu.jpg

possibility of making puns through overlapping hues, or of expressing nuances through delicate variations in shade: “A vermilion *A* must denote a weaker passion than one of crimson, and a straw-color *U* be much more tender than one approaching to orange” (ibid.). The tactile qualities of the quipu triggered other reveries in Walpole. “I perceive it is a very soft language, though at first I tangled the poem and spoiled the rhymes.” Walpole confessed to being “so pleased with the idea of knotting verses, which is vastly preferable to anagrams and acrostics, that if I were to begin life again, I would use a shuttle instead of a pen ...” (ibid). Noting how the quipu’s strings also gave off odors, Walpole was further inspired to reflect on the possibility of an olfactory language. He wrote:

Why should not there be [a language] for the nose? ... A rose, jessamine, a pink, a jonquil and a honeysuckle might signify the vowels; the consonants to be represented by other flowers. The Cape jessamine, which has two smells, was born a diphthong. How charming it would be to smell an ode from a nosegay, and to scent one’s handkerchief with a favourite song! (ibid.)

In this flight of fancy, Walpole was obviously not accessing any of the indigenous meanings encoded in the quipu. He knew only that the quipu was used as a recording device by the Incas. However, handling this multisensorial form of “writing” served Walpole as a stimulus to develop ideas about sensory correspondences which were coming into vogue in Europe and which would find further elaboration in the Symbolist movement in the nineteenth century (Classen 1998). Furthermore, his physical contact with the quipu did potentially bring Walpole closer to the quipu’s indigenous significance in at least one sense. Walpole was able to conceive that different sensory aspects of the quipu might be used for encoding information, a notion that would later be suppressed by more visualist interpretations of the quipu – interpretations which assimilated it to writing as we know it. However, being three-dimensional or multi-linear, multi-colored, scented, and functioning more like Braille than like script, the quipu cannot really be assimilated to the purely visual, two-dimensional medium of writing. Indeed, the quipu scholar Robert Ascher writes that if only Western academics had a less visualist mindset, “we might understand [quipu] writing as simultaneously tactile and visual, and probably more. Being that we are who we are, it is difficult to internalize this notion so that it becomes a part of us, but I think that it is the next step that must be taken in the study of Inka writing” (Ascher 2002, 113).

Walpole was privileged to have such intimate, firsthand contact with the quipu. In this respect, his experience was more like that of connoisseur than an ordinary museum visitor, by today’s standards.² Of course, museums have not always been such hands-off places as they are today. Classen (2007, 2017) has shown how, in the 17th and 18th centuries, it was expected that visitors to such institutions as the Ashmolean Museum (est. 1683) and British Museum (est. 1750) would desire to manipulate (heft, shake, etc.), sniff and even gnaw on the objects in a collection,³ and were not disappointed. These practices were consistent with the sensationist epistemology of the period. Robert Hooke, an early curator of the Royal Society’s collection, held that “a collection is not for divertissement and wonder, and gazing ... like pictures for children to admire and be pleased with’, but rather a resource for scholarly inquiry which necessitated ‘manual handling ... of the very things themselves” (quoted in Classen 2017, 21).

The objective of the “Sensing Art and Artifacts” exercise presented here was to put the participants in the position of a Walpole or early museum visitor and let them exercise their senses in the appreciation of a museum object, instead of having to check their senses (except for sight) at the entrance, as is usually the case nowadays. But not immediately. The exercise unfolded in two phases: virtual encounter and actual exposure. The structure of Phase I was keyed to the fact that we live in a highly mediated or virtual society, and many museum collections are “accessible on-line” – that is, as images rather than objects. Accordingly, the participants were invited to select an object that piqued their interest from a pre-determined array of objects featured in the on-line catalog of the Hunterian Museum. The objects ranged from Native American snow goggles and an African mask to a Burmese statue of Buddha and a Japanese mirror once owned by Lord Kelvin, and also included James McNeil Whistler’s “Blue and Silver: Screen, with Old Battersea Bridge,” among other works.

Having made their selection, the participants were requested to write up their reflections on their virtual encounter with the object in light of the following questions:

- (1) How does the object speak to your senses?
- (2) What meaning does it have for you personally at first blush? At second blush (i.e. upon reflection)?
- (3) Reasoning by analogy, can you point to any object that it resembles in our own lifeworld?
- (4) What meaning(s) might it have conveyed in its culture or period of origin?
- (5) How would you rate its aesthetic value? What criteria are you using?

The second phase of the exercise took place three weeks later, on the occasion of the Glasgow workshop – the third of six workshops within the framework of the “Methods of Aesthetic Inquiry across Disciplines” research project, sponsored by the Leverhulme Trust. In this phase, the participants were invited to examine the object of their desire up-close, or immediately, as it were. There were curators present, both to respond to questions and to oversee our handling of the objects, so it was not as though the encounter was completely unfettered. The participants, who included a professor of music and psychology (Eric Clarke), a philosopher (Fiona Macpherson), a sociologist (Beverley Best), and an anthropologist (Rupert Cox), were also asked to reflect on how their encounter with the object in the flesh compared to their virtual experience of the object.

The accounts presented here represent a cross-section of the responses solicited for this exercise (there were 12 in all). It should be noted that Kelvin’s mirror was on loan at the time of this exercise, so Macpherson returned on a subsequent occasion to view it, and Whistler’s screen was displayed in its usual surrounding in the Hunterian Art Gallery.

Eric Clarke’s fine-grained analysis of the sensory qualities of the Native American snow goggles brought him to appreciate the elegance of their “fitness for purpose,” and the profound lack of correspondence between photographic representation and physical presence. His reflections on the different sort of presencing these different modes of display allowed in turn lead him to pluralize the definition of what the category of the aesthetic entails. Fiona Macpherson relates how she was attracted to Lord Kelvin’s Mirror and its unique perceptual effects for professional reasons (as a philosopher of perception interested in the production of illusions) and also derived delight from being able to

restage the demonstration that Kelvin would have conducted to entertain and instruct his students. Beverley Best's selection of a Burmese statue of Buddha was motivated by childhood memories of her interaction with similar figures in the shops of Vancouver's Chinatown. At the same time, her account is laced with reflections on "the fact of mediation," which lead her to question the sequential ordering of this exercise. She implies that it is next to impossible to untangle object from image.

Rupert Cox, for his part, chose to comment on a culturally hybrid object – namely, Whistler's overpainting of a Japanese folding screen with a nocturnal London scene. Cox is attentive to the visual, tactile, sonic, and, above all, mobile qualities of the screen. He brings out how it "creates its own conditions for viewing in the situations of its unfolding," and thereby "draws attention to its material features as the means by which perception becomes aesthetic appreciation." Cox's sensori-social analysis of the screen may be read as fusing Alfred Gell's theory of the agency of objects (Gell 1998) with the "social biography of things" approach to material culture (Kopytoff 1986). It unfolds across both sensory and social borders, and is a masterful example of current research in "sensory museology" (Howes 2014).

Native American snow goggles (GLAHM e.89)

Eric Clarke

I was attracted to this object (see [Figure 2](#)) for a number of reasons: I like its practical simplicity; I like its color(s) and texture(s); I like its sense of having been well used, and of having been in close contact with its user's body – it has a very "human" quality; and there is something about the shape of the visor part of it that appeals (the convex and concave relationship, and what I see to be the thinness and yet physical resilience of it).

How does the object speak to your senses?

It speaks to my seeing as something warm-colored, and burnished by contact with the skin of a human being. I play the violin, which may have influenced this attraction, since



Figure 2. Native American snow goggles. Courtesy of the Hunterian Museum. <http://collections.gla.ac.uk/#view=list&id=3e0a&accessionNumber=e.89>

older violins also have that attractive quality of having been worn and polished by contact with the human body. It speaks to my sense of touch in terms of the smoothness of the surface, and what I imagine is the rigidity of the visor, and the slightly rough and “chewy” bendability of the leather cord to hold it on the wearer’s head. I imagine it to have the slightly musty smell of an object made out of wood and leather that has been worn against people’s skin and has not, I imagine, been washed. It does not obviously speak to my sense of taste, although I have a rough idea of what it might be like to chew the cord!... I have quite a vivid sense of what it would sound like to tap the visor with a piece of wood (a thin but not too dead sound, possibly with a slightly pitched quality about it – depending on how it was held and where it was tapped).

What meaning does it have for you personally at first blush? at second blush (i.e. upon reflection)?

It means “something worn (in both senses) and useful and well cared-for and not ‘precious’ even if valuable.” Something domestic/utilitarian, but pleasingly/“craftily” made. And upon reflection, it means something to do with the effectiveness of simple technologies, the wide cultural dispersal of masks/visors of various kinds (military, ceremonial, ornamental, religious, theatrical).

Reasoning by analogy, can you point to any object that it resembles in our own lifeworld?

Similar in some ways to a welder’s visor; and also to a slightly hippy-ish piece of jewelry (the leather thong and the polished wood); and to the slit-like visor of European armor – though distinguished by the much warmer (physically, emotionally) material of wood as opposed to metal.

What meaning(s) might it have conveyed in its culture or period of origin?

It might have conveyed: practical utility (defense against blindingly white snow), careful ownership, “well-loved personal object.”

How would you rate its aesthetic value? What criteria are you using?

I would rate it as having high aesthetic value in quite immediate sensory-motor terms (I very much like the look of it, and would enjoy holding it), and in terms of its simple functional appropriateness – its elegant fitness-for-purpose. I would rate it is as low in aesthetic value in terms of the more conventional aesthetic value systems of the West: it lacks complexity, “rarefiedness,” abstraction from everyday life, “disinterested inutility” – though it scores in terms of materials and processes (the application of human craft and skill to wood).

On encountering the goggles

My encounter with this object in its full, three-dimensional concrete reality – well, almost (see below) – some three weeks later, in a handling room of the museum in which it is kept, was surprising in a number of respects. First, the goggles had considerably more three-dimensional depth than the photo had conveyed, and in particular (and most surprisingly) turned out to have a significant visor-like ledge pointing out and away from the face of the wearer, protruding above the eye slit and presumably functioning to

protect the wearer's eyes from falling snow or to shade them from bright sun. This feature of the goggles – completely concealed because the photo is from the inside of the goggles – significantly modified my sense of the three-dimensionality of the goggles. Having previously seen them as rather flat to the face and, therefore, thin and planar, they were now revealed to be much chunkier and more substantial. The top surface of this visor-like ledge also turned out to have two shallow indentations, each toward the edge of the visor ledge (of which more below). Second, the goggles had quite a deep and pronounced indentation on the lower edge of the inside surface to fit onto the bridge of the nose of the wearer, something that again had not been evident to me from the depthless two dimensionality of the photo. Third – and this seems to me often to be a characteristic of the relationship between an expert photo of a well-lit object – the goggles themselves seemed smaller, less impressive, and less imbued with “presence” than the catalog photograph had led me to feel and anticipate. And fourth, the wood of the goggles turned out to be duller in color and rougher in texture than the photo had suggested. In the photo, the wood had appeared almost burnished, quite varied in color, and with a sheen that was not evident in direct physical presence. Taken together, these attributes added up to a mixture of surprise (the first two) and mild disappointment (the latter two).

Concerns about the fragility of the goggles meant that I was not allowed to handle them myself, though in an effort to give us some sense of what it might be like to see through them a curator held them up at face height to peer through – though without contact being made between face and wood. Holding them up like this also enabled the curator to show how the index fingers of his left and right hands fit into the two indentations of the visor (with his thumbs supporting the lower edge of the mask) in an immediately convincing manner – a function revealed or confirmed, in the act of holding.

As my account of this encounter with the snow goggles I hope conveys, photographic representation and physical presence were significantly non-correspondent, with distinct perceptual and affective consequences: the physical goggles had less perceptual impact and less affective attraction than I had experienced from the photograph – perhaps paradoxically, given widespread assumptions about the perceptual impact of physical presence. One factor in particular perhaps accounts for this feeling of disappointment – and with this I close. I nearly wrote (above) of the “tangible” presence of the goggles, but it was the prohibition on touch – the intangibility in the end of the object – that denied me a properly plenivalent (and enactive) experience. Fully in view, seen from all angles, and present before me it remained nonetheless at arm's length, as it were, with particular consequences for that sense of the intimate, worn-by-the-body, cared-for quality with which my photographically mediated perception and reflections prior to the encounter had been filled. Denied touch, I was left untouched.

Kelvin's bronze mirror (GLAHM 105003)

Fiona Macpherson

How does the object speak to your senses?

Kelvin's bronze mirror (see [Figure 3](#)) speaks most to my sense of vision. The mirror is a “magic” mirror. It is flat on the front side – the reflecting side – and has a relief on the



Figure 3. Kelvin's bronze mirror, photographs by the author.

other – the bronze – back side. However, when you shine a light onto the front side and reflect that light onto a wall, an image of the relief on the back of the mirror appears on the wall. Yet the mirror is not at all transparent. It is solid and opaque. So how does the image of the relief get onto the wall? The mirror seems to work by some magical means. Such mirrors puzzled scientists for a long time. Eventually it was found that the method of manufacture was to place a copy of the relief that is on the back of the mirror behind the smooth front side in a way that could not be detected by the naked eye. Yet the presence of this second invisible relief affects the light reflected from the front side of the mirror so that it casts an image of the relief onto surfaces that it lands on.

I am drawn to this object as it demonstrates an interesting perceptual effect. I'd like to look at both sides of the mirror and the image that can be projected from it. I very much hope that I can see this effect when I get to encounter the object.

In addition to seeing the mirror and its "magic" effect, I imagine that I would want to touch the mirror to feel the relief and the smoothness and coldness of the brass. I'd like to see if I can detect the relief on the smooth side – but I do not suppose that I could.

The mirror does not speak to my other senses. I do not think that it will smell or taste or make a sound, and it was not meant to do any of those things. I suspect it will be cold and heavy. If there is a sense of cold separate from touch/pressure then this would be another sense affected by holding it. Perhaps the heaviness will be detected in part by my sense of proprioception. I wonder if the mirror would warm up when there is sunlight on either of its surfaces for a while. Of course there is a good question as to how many senses we have, and which ones. I cannot imagine it having an effect on any others that I think I have.

What meaning does it have for you personally at first blush? at second blush (i.e. upon reflection)?

My academic work consists in studying perception and perceptual phenomena. I did not know about "magic" mirrors until I came to do this exercise so I am excited to find out more about these mirrors and to see if there are modern equivalents. I suspect that these mirrors were fashionable items for a certain time, when the way they worked was

mysterious, and that when people found out how they worked, they fell out of fashion. I do a lot of public engagement work demonstrating perceptual phenomena to the public. I'd like to show this kind of object to the public and its effect. I also have an interest in, and love of, Japanese arts and crafts. This mirror, and many others produced at the time, were manufactured in Japan, and so Kelvin's mirror brings two of my interests together. Being a professor at the University Glasgow, I also like the fact that Lord Kelvin, also a professor at the University, owned this mirror and knew of its effect.

Reasoning by analogy, can you point to any object that it resembles in our own lifeworld?

This mirror resembles ordinary mirrors. It resembles projectors used for slides, for movies, for powerpoint presentations, and so on. It is like some Victorian and modern apparatus in as much as it is an object designed to demonstrate perceptual effects, or fool people into thinking magic is occurring due to its strange reflective effect.

What meaning(s) might it have conveyed in its culture or period of origin?

I believe that reliefs depicting spiritual subjects were often carved on these sorts of mirrors and that they were used in temples and shrines – both Shinto and Buddhist. I think that the fact that these mirrors seemed magical while depicting religious images would have had a powerful effect on people, that might persuade them that the religion was true and that spiritual power is real.

How would you rate its aesthetic value? What criteria are you using?

The mirror clearly requires great workmanship and skill to make. I cannot assess the quality of the relief carving until I see it: the picture that I have seen of the mirror on the website is not fine-grained enough. I also do not have a sense of what the projected image will look like, for example, how vivid it will be and whether it itself could be an object of aesthetic value.

Describe your subsequent interaction with the object

I went to the University of Glasgow new Kelvin Hall facility where the object is stored. I have never placed a special request to see and touch an object from a museum before, in this case the Hunterian Museum. I entered a room designed for looking at specially requested objects that contained tall desks. At one, the mirror lay waiting for me in a box, placed there by the museum staff. A member of the museum staff explained the rules of interaction with the object. First I had to put on a pair of blue tight-fitting latex gloves. Then I had to remove the long pendant that I was wearing so that it wouldn't accidentally hit the mirror. Then I carefully opened the box in which it is normally stored.

The mirror was astonishing. The relief carving in bronze on the back was stunningly beautiful and reflected its Japanese origin. It was a stylised image of flowers, foliage, and mountains. There was a central large flower that had wisteria around it, placed in a scene of mountains. The flower was out of proportion to its surroundings and it seemed to slip behind the mountains. Above it were highly stylized clouds and there was Japanese writing down one side. What did the writing say? I did not know but I was intrigued.

The mirror had a rattan handle and a raised edge around the back bronze relief. The other side – the side that had been described as the mirror side – was completely

smooth and flat. Much to my surprise, the mirror side was not glass. It consisted of the bronze that formed the whole head of the object – bronze that was polished very smoothly. While I had not expected this, it made more sense of the surprise that people had reported when they saw the light that reflected off the mirror side projected an image of the relief. There was no glass behind which a secret engraving of the relief could hide. The secret engraving was on the smoothly polished side of brass and was completely invisible to the naked eye. No matter from which angle I looked at the surface, I could see no sign of the second engraving. While the surface was not uniform in color – there were blotches and some slight discoloration of the brass due to the age of the object – there was no pattern apparent that corresponded to the relief image.

The mirror was very heavy – more so than I had imagined. However, I could not assess its temperature as I had imagined doing before I encountered the object as the latex gloves that I was wearing created a barrier between the mirror and my skin.

Luckily, I was in the room alone, so I was able to try to create conditions in which I could see light reflected from the mirror. I switched off the lights and closed the blinds. I used my iPhone torch to shine a light on to the mirror and then I reflected it onto a nearby wall. A faint image of the relief appeared on the wall. It was not very distinct and not very bright. The effect was less impressive than I had hoped. Nonetheless, with a little experimentation, I found out that the intensity of the image could be improved somewhat by both moving the light source closer to the mirror and moving the mirror closer to the wall. The image that appeared was a black and white image with the raised part of the relief corresponding to lighter parts of the image.

I wondered when was the last time that the image had been formed. The museum staff had no recollection of anyone trying to recreate the magical effect of the mirror. I imagined Lord Kelvin showing his students the image, and his delight in revealing its secret. I found it quite thrilling to be holding something that he had held and to be looking at the image that he himself had seen, and that must have prompted him to invest in the mirror.

Subsequent investigation led me to discover that the inscription did not pass on ancient words of wisdom warning of the transient nature of female beauty or such like. Rather, it read “Made by Mitsunaga Fujiwara.” The creator of this beautiful object must have been, rightly, proud of it. He wrote his name large upon it, lest we forget to think about the man whose skill crafted it, rather than just the owner, of Kelvin’s bronze mirror.

A Burmese figure of Buddha (GLAHM E.260)

Beverley Best

I chose the figure of the Buddha (see [Figure 4](#)) for this exercise because of a strong memory association (childhood and adult) I have with figures of Buddha. First, I currently have my own small collection of Buddha figures. Second, when I was a child I would visit the Vancouver Chinatown area regularly with my mother. Outside of the doorway of one shop that we would frequent was a large wooden carving of a Buddha, approximately 4 ft tall – as tall, if not taller than, I was at the time. The figure had a large round belly and the custom was for customers to rub the belly of the Buddha before entering and upon leaving the shop. The memory of the Chinatown Buddha involves smell, sight, and touch, and is



Figure 4. A Burmese figure of Buddha. Courtesy of the Hunterian Museum.
<http://collections.gla.ac.uk/#view=list&id=942d&accessionNumber=E.260>

associated with my early visits to Chinatown, which were occasions that involved all the senses in ways that radically departed from my everyday life in the small seaside town of White Rock where I grew up.

The white, marble Buddha figure in the Hunterian collection exists to me presently (in this, the first part of the exercise) as a photograph and a digital image on a computer screen. As such it engages me as a visual image. Of course, the image of the Burmese Buddha is very different from the Buddha figure of my childhood memory. On the one hand, the image engages my imagination as I recall previous tactile encounters with other marble objects: I imagine it to be cool, hard, smooth. I imagine the sterile, slightly dusty, air conditioned atmosphere of the museum.

It occurs to me that the figure in the photograph does not appear as though it was intended to be touched by viewers (but this might not be the case). The shape of the figure is sharp and jagged, the carving of the marble is highly detailed and does not appear hospitable to being handled. It appears fragile, as though it was meant to be regarded, an object for the eyes, and not an object that addresses one's sense of smell, touch, hearing, or taste. It looks like an object that was intended to be revered or contemplated. I imagine it had a ritual, collective, spiritual, or pedagogical function. I imagine it had a social life. In this way, it is both distinct *and* similar to the Buddha of my childhood. Nonetheless, the Hunterian Buddha strikes me as having a very different kind of sociality from that of the Buddha of my childhood visits to Chinatown. That Buddha addressed me as an object of sight but also as an object of touch, ritual, and pleasure. It marked a day of excursion.

The Hunterian Buddha serves as a trigger for this childhood association. My response to the figure is mediated by memory, personal narrative, and by a basic knowledge of the historical, cultural, and spiritual significance of the Buddha and the wide proliferation of images and representations of the Buddha one can find displayed and sold in

most cities including the one I visited as a child and the one I live in now. This fact of mediation problematizes the assumption that we first experience objects as sensory objects that are subsequently elaborated in concept, in representation, or narrative. The situation invites me to interrogate the framework of the exercise which is posed in more classical terms. The procedure begins with sensory qualities, then distinguishes between at least four different kinds of meaning (which are personal in two senses – both spontaneous and in reflection – as well as cultural and historical), and finally proposes an evaluation of aesthetic value. The procedure moves in a classical way from the material to the immaterial, or from the physical to the metaphysical: perception → interpretation → evaluation.

We have been told that, once on site, participants will encounter the artifacts up close, in order to see how our initial responses to the image of our chosen object might differ from our responses to the object itself. Does the procedure assume that proximity to the object itself will “[expand] your appreciation of its meaning and aesthetic value?” Will the expert mediation of the curators enhance (or is it required to produce) the auratic experience of the object and the specifically aesthetic quality of the experience? What other kinds of knowledge might be at work in the exercise?

For example, we could talk about the modalities of media. When looking at the photograph, do we concentrate solely on the object being presented or do we ask about the status of the photograph, its coding of the artifact as an object of curatorial knowledge, as well as the complex media that make it available on our digital screens? Do we bracket these mediations as transparent, or may this complex of questions be no less material than the materiality of the object sitting in the museum?

Or, are there grounds for examining the proposed scheme of interpretation and evaluation for this exercise? Even a few tweaks of the ordering (imaging the historical informs the personal or putting aesthetic value on the same plane as sensory perception) would generate different responses. And a sustained examination of the key terms might lead us to think that such terms already assume too much, or beg too many questions, about what we do when we look, hear, touch, and see. For example, we might begin by asking whether “cross-cultural” generalizations are pitched at the right level of abstraction for dealing with such problems. Are they too broad and imprecise, or not broad and encompassing enough?

The second part of the exercise, the “direct” encounter with the Hunterian Buddha in the museum collection, produced some anticipated responses and some unanticipated ones. In this scenario, my relationship with the object shed some of its mediations (its photographic or digital reproduction (I do not know which), the computer screen that mediated my viewing of it) and retained others (my basic knowledge of the history of the Buddha and the variety of cultural representations of Buddha). The museum setting itself, however, introduced a new and different mediation of the object that was not activated before. The museum setting bestowed both an authority and aura of authenticity and antiquity on the marble statue, an aura that is absent when I stand in front of the many shelves of polished stone Buddha statues that are sold in the shops in my neighborhood in Montreal. This aura signifies rareness, fragility, and historical value, so that I unintentionally hesitated to touch the statue even though we were invited to do so. My “training” – a product of a certain culture, education, and class experience – has

made *not* touching museum artifacts instinctual, and this had to be more consciously overridden for the exercise. The statue was cool, smooth, sharp, and jagged, as expected. My, again instinctual because learned, reverence for the object was sharply distinct from my childhood interaction with the Buddha outside the Chinatown shop. The latter relationship was distinctly irreverent, playful. I remember slapping the belly of the Buddha as you would slap the hand of your best friend, a peer. In contrast, despite the unusually de-rarified atmosphere of the museum exercise, my experience of the object was decidedly not peer-like, but rather hierarchical.

“Blue and Silver: Screen, with Old Battersea Bridge” (1871–1872) by James McNeill Whistler (GLAHA 46379)

Rupert Cox

“Blue and Silver: Screen, with Old Battersea Bridge” (see [Figure 5](#)) is a work by the American artist James Whistler (1834–1903), displayed among an assembly of his paintings, within a gallery of the Hunterian collection in Glasgow. It stands out in the gallery because it is derived from a type of Japanese folding screen (*Byōbu*), arranged in a glass display case so that it is free standing and, therefore, different from Whistler’s other paintings shown here, which are all designed to be wall hangings. The display case



Figure 5. “Blue and Silver: Screen, with Old Battersea Bridge” (1871–1872) by James McNeill Whistler. Courtesy of the Hunterian Museum.

<http://collections.gla.ac.uk/#details=ecatalogue.41285>

shows the screen as a folding/unfolding device, described affectionately by Whistler as his “lovely and beloved screen,” and featured in his various homes and studios. As a mobile device for dividing up and thereby creating certain kinds of space in the home, Whistler’s usage accords with its function in an original Japanese context and indicates how the folding/unfolding aspect of the screen is a necessary part of the way it was designed to be seen in a domestic setting. This has been appreciated by the curators of the Hunterian gallery who changed the method of its original display, where it was shown as a fully unfolded flat surface, viewable in the same ways as Whistler’s wall hanging paintings, to the present, free standing, half folded arrangement.

I want to consider what the folding/unfolding qualities of this screen can lead us to understand about the forms of perception that make this object appreciable in aesthetic terms. Most familiarly approached as a pictorial surface its “screen” meaning can be read aesthetically as part of Whistler’s interest in nocturnal views of London and in what has been called the urban picturesque. It is an aesthetic of flattening out and arranging forms into abstract patterns, which in romanticizing the nocturne as a melancholic form of the sublime, attracted the moralizing criticism of Whistler’s contemporary, the artist and critic John Ruskin, because it elevated art as a subject for the delectation of a privileged elite and elided the differentiated social topography of London at that time.

As an idealized, urban view made to be appreciated within a select circle of esthetes, comprised of the screen’s owner and their guests, the subject of Whistler’s screen painting is in keeping with that of many Japanese historical examples that also depicted city-scapes and is directly influenced by the woodblock prints of Hokusai and Hiroshige who famously depicted scenes of curved bridges over flowing rivers. These screens were displayed performatively on the occasions of meetings between the owner and visitors to their home. This performative aspect is present in the ways that the screen, being on a human scale (195 cm x 182 cm), can use the space created by its central fold to potentially frame the owner, when seated or standing with their back to the painted image, and to envelop and immerse the audience-viewer in the city-scape. Whistler himself used the screen in such a way, as an exotic backdrop in his sketch “Nude girl in Front of a Screen,” also in the Hunterian collection.

This screen can additionally be understood to reflect as well as absorb vision, because in Whistler’s painting over of a Japanese image, originally by the Japanese female artist Nampo Jhoshi (1866), it expresses an exchange of looks, indicative of the double vision that relates a history of *Japonisme* and Western borrowings of Eastern motifs and design features. As such it is part of a history of mimetic exchanges that goes back to the sixteenth century when Japanese artists copied and adapted the perspectivism and iconography of paintings brought by Iberian Catholic missionaries and merchants, so as to turn them into painted screens depicting the cross-cultural encounters between native and foreigner. Here, that gaze is returned by the look of Whistler the artist, suggested by the adaptation of this screen and the composition of the night-view of London’s Battersea bridge from over the river Thames.

Approaching this screen as a hybrid, mobile object, creating its own conditions for viewing in the situations of its unfolding, draws attention to its material features as the means by which perception becomes aesthetic appreciation. Here it may be insightful to think in terms of what the art historian and theorist Laura Marks (2010), following the ideas of Leibniz, Bergson and Deleuze, has called an “Enfolding-Unfolding Aesthetics”

and a model of perception in which the senses are filters for processing an infinite universe of “images” and distinguishing information from noise. In this model, “images” are multisensory, and the matter of the infinite is composed of folds that acts of perception unfold. Devices like Whistler’s screen can, in this account, be seen as planes of information that in their enfolding/unfolding convey a selective account of perception that is aesthetic precisely because of its contingency.

This model and these terms come into play when we consider how the screen has been mounted by traditional craftsmen and how it is treated materially in its museum settings in order that it can continue to convey the perceptual information and value that has been attributed to it through art connoisseurship and heritage classification. Contemporary conservation techniques of digital image processing in museums are a good way of seeing how ideas about perception, information, and value get entangled in technology.

The screens are susceptible over time to a wearing away through discoloration and a degradation of pigments because their wooden lattice core and layered paper composition are mounted under tension, in order that their surface be firm enough to receive several layers of paint. As these erosions need to be ascertained and treated via non-invasive/destructive means in the controlled environment of the museum, image processing techniques of spectroscopy and microscopy are applied so as to create data sets of extremely high-resolution images, conceived as information about the physical properties of the screen. This information reveals the component elements and interactions of matter as images of the operation of time on the physical substrate of the screen and technologises its perception through number, graph and algorithmic code as a form of electronic processing.

This is an account of perception that is sympathetic to neuro-esthetic approaches because it accentuates the expansive, if not infinite ground and variety that is the source of “images” – being accessed here down to an atomic level via spectroscopy – and makes the act of their selective unfolding an issue of information processing. It is also an account that is technologically dependent because the electronic image processing devices are the only way to sort out information from noise and in doing so show how maintaining the authentic “look” of the object through conservation practice allows for heritage value and aesthetic judgments to be verified.

But what if we think more critically of the concept of the multi-sensorial “image” in Marks’ (2010) folding/unfolding aesthetic and approach the “fold” not only as what image processing devices of electronic media reveal but also what the learned, skilled, perceptual mechanism of the sensate body of those craftsmen who mount the screens apprehend. These are the craftsmen whose screen mounting techniques follow the tradition of the Japanese *hysôsô-shi*, deploying non-electronic devices of intervention – the hammer and the brush – used to fix the screen onto its wooden frame, meld the layers of paper together and to attach the hinges that allow the screen to fold. These design features make the painted surface of the screens visible as part of their folding mechanism and express a regime of sensory cultivation whereby the craftsmen perceive the correct way to carry out the mounting not only through what they see and feel but what they hear. When they apply the hammer and brush to the screen, they use their hearing to detect if the materials are being properly put together. This apperception of the screen differentiates the senses into culturally particular modalities that complicate the conflation of aesthetic perception with information processing and make the fold a sound-image as well as a time-image.

The notion of the sound-image is analogous to the idea of “audio-vision” that Chion (1994) has coined in talking about how image and sound work together in the experience of the cinema screen. This modern sense of the screen as an audio-visual, cinematic device, focuses in on its folding/unfolding material features as a means for listening in, that can be positioned in domestic space to reveal a view and manifest a meeting place for conversation between its owner and guests. In aesthetic terms then, this object speaks to what Bruno (2002) calls an “architecture of emotion,” drawing attention to the way that it conveys meaning by occupying and articulating a physical as well as imaginative space for audio-vision. The physical nature and aesthetic significance of this aural space is not immediately obvious when we pay attention to the representational function of the work by privileging vision nor is it entirely clear in the idea of the multi-sensory “image” as a folding/unfolding processing of information. It becomes apparent when we acknowledge the particular sensory formations activated by the material presence of the screen as it is worked on through a cultural tradition of craftsmanship and when we consider, as Whistler did, the kinds of aesthetic conversations that can be engendered by these screens because they materialize a space for meeting and the play of the imagination.

In my own physical encounter with this screen, on the occasion of the “Sensing Art and Artifacts” exercise that this brief reflection is a part of, its enfolding aesthetic qualities were inevitably dispersed by its positioning in a gallery among other pictures, always partially in view, and by the play of gallery lights reflecting off the glass surfaces of the case. The line of sight to the front of the screen was also, as is familiar for any gallery visitor, framed by the movements and positioning of the bodies of the other members of the group. In this sense the multi-sensoriality that I have argued is a quality of the screen image, was also an aspect of the sociality of the viewing space, and I found myself catching glimpses of the screen as I moved among the assembled bodies and being caught in an exchange of looks and verbal comments. In an academic setting these exchanges can be charged with expectations of providing insightful, measured commentary, thus, tying vision to speaking. This experience of distracted looking, concentrated speaking and of the proximity of the bodies of members of the group, which were a kind of surrogate for the sense of being touched by the screen, was frustrating in terms of the kind of perception that is expected in art-historical connoisseurship. Upon reflection and thinking anthropologically though, the incompleteness of vision and the circumscription of the senses experienced on this occasion was not irrelevant to an understanding of the meaning of screen for Whistler and for the Japanese makers, owners and conservators of its archetypes who would have been folding and unfolding it in social gatherings and moving it around as part of a working environment. Its mobile visuality anticipates for me the world of screen based media that we carry with us today, with images that flicker and are swiped rather than unfolded. They offer an infinity of information and distraction but not the comfort of a singular image that is there, only there and always there, manifesting a meeting space that is particular and contingent and linked indelibly to the imagination of its owners and maker.

Conclusion

David Howes

The preceding accounts of what four of the participants in the Glasgow workshop brought to and took from their sensuous encounters with the objects from the Hunterian Museum should be read in conjunction with the essay by Andy Mills in the Sensory Design Review section of this issue of *The Senses and Society*. Mills directed a handling session which centered on the multisensory appreciation of tapa barkcloth from the eighteenth century, also in the Hunterian collection. These two exercises are exemplary of the sensory turn in museum studies, which has ushered in a radically new and expanded approach to the investigation of the materiality of objects. This approach, which goes under the name of “sensory museology” (Howes 2014) involves sloughing off the conventional museological and curatorial fixation on chronology, morphology, and provenance to make way for sensing and making sense of “the properties of things” (Dudley 2012). The emphasis is on sensing rather than viewing, interaction in place of classification, and feeling rather than disinterested contemplation. In this way it is possible to arrive at a full-bodied, multisensory, personal and at the same time cross-cultural and contextual understanding of the varieties of aesthetic experience.

Notes

1. This discussion of the sensory values of the quipu is derived from Classen and Howes (2006).
2. For a fascinating account of the rise and demise of the sort of expert object-handling associated with connoisseurship see Candlin (2010), ch. 4. See further Pearce (this volume).
3. Chewing an artifact – that is, tasting it – was the one sure way of ascertaining its chemical composition in the days before the science of chemistry was put on a more rigid experimental and quantitative footing by Lavoisier and his contemporaries (see Roberts 2005).

Acknowledgments

Thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their feedback, and to Dee Reynolds for choreographing this extraordinary interdisciplinary dance.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Leverhulme Trust [grant number IN-2015-016]

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