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Observational Study:

The Whitney Museum and the Tenement Museum

In this essay, I will compare and contrast two cultural heritage institutions in Manhattan: The Whitney Museum, a modern and contemporary art museum, and the Tenement Museum, a history museum. While visiting these two sites, I observed many similarities and differences in regard to the overall culture of these spaces, the demographics of their visitors, the nature of their respective exhibits, and the ways that visitors are encouraged to interact with those exhibits. Many of the contrasts between these institutions are illustrative of the distinctions between art and history museums more broadly.

The Whitney Museum of American Art (or “the Whitney”) was founded by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, an American socialite and art patron, in 1930. While the institution has changed locations several times over the course of its existence, it has been situated at its current location, an 8-story building in Chelsea designed by Italian architect Renzo Piano, since 2015.¹ Since its inception, the mission of the Whitney has been to showcase contemporary American art. According to its website, “The Whitney Museum of American Art seeks to be the defining museum of twentieth and twenty-first-century American art. The Museum collects, exhibits, preserves, researches, and interprets art of the United States in the broadest global, historical, and

¹ Schjeldahl, Peter. “The Whitney's Downtown Move,” July 9, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/04/27/new-york-odyssey>.

interdisciplinary contexts.”² Like most art museums, the Whitney emphasizes the value of its collection as an educational resource for the study of art and art history. For the purposes of this report, I visited three of the Whitney’s current exhibits: “The Whitney’s Collection: Selections from 1900 to 1965,” “Making Knowing: Craft in Art, 1950-2019,” and “Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925-1945.”

The Tenement Museum was founded in 1988 by Ruth Abram, a historian, and Anita Jacobsen, a social activist.³ The museum focuses on the history of American immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to its website, “at a time when issues surrounding migrants, refugees, and immigration have taken center stage, the Tenement Museum is a potent reminder that, as a nation shaped by immigration, our brightest hope for the future lies in the lessons of the past.”⁴ In this way, the mission of the Tenement Museum is as much about promoting social justice as it is about educating the public on the history of immigration in America. While admission to the museum can be purchased in the museum gift shop, the museum itself consists of a series of preserved tenement buildings on the Lower East Side, in which the apartments of families who used to live there have been recreated. The museum exhibits can be accessed only by signing up for a guided tour. In order to gain the full experience of the museum, I attended the “Sweatshop Workers” tour, which explores the lives of two Jewish families, the Levines and the Rogarshevskys, who lived at 97 Orchard Street around the turn of the twentieth century.

² <https://whitney.org/about/mission-values>

³ <https://www.tenement.org/about-us/>

⁴ <https://www.tenement.org/about-us/>

During my time at both museums, I observed some differences in their respective demographics. The average age of visitors at the Tenement Museum hovered around 50 years old, though there were a few families with older children. In contrast, the Whitney tended to attract a younger demographic. A possible reason for this is that the Whitney offers free admission to some New York-based college students. While there is a discounted student rate at the Tenement museum as well, the price of admission remains fairly expensive. On the whole, I found the Whitney more accessible to visitors with disabilities, as the museum features large wheel-chair accessible elevators. While my tour guide did offer the visitors in my group headsets in case they had hearing impairments, it would have been difficult for someone with mobility issues to visit the museum due to the steep staircases and lack of elevators in the tenement buildings. Because I attended both of these museums during the same Sunday afternoon, I doubt the demographics I observed were much affected by the timing of my visit. However, it is possibly that, during the week, the Tenement Museum features more young children, as the museum website indicates that they often host school field trips.

By virtue of being different types of museums (i.e., art vs. history), each of the museums has different types of objects on display. The significance and value of the artifacts in the Whitney's collection, like most art museum collections, resides in their uniqueness. For example, the only place in the world that you can see Edward Hopper's painting "Soir Bleu" in person is at the Whitney. However, in rare cases where the original object was not available to be included in the exhibit, but inclusion of that object was important to illustrating the themes of the exhibit, a reproduction of the item would be placed on display instead. For example, the "Vida Americana" exhibit, which explores the influence of Mexican painters on American social realist art in the first half of the twentieth century, displays the "Detroit Industry Murals" that Diego Rivera was

commissioned to paint for the Detroit Institute of Art via a panoramic video projected onto one of the walls. A blown up photograph of another mural by David Alfaro Siqueiros, which has since been destroyed, was displayed on another wall of the exhibit. Nevertheless, it is rare to find reproductions of artworks at the Whitney. In contrast, most of the artifacts on exhibit at the Tenement museum are not one of a kind, but stand in for a class of similar objects. For example, a display case in the museum houses many everyday household objects used by immigrant families that were excavated from the building while it was being repurposed as a museum. While the objects were relatively ordinary at the time and are not unique to the museum, they are valuable in that they give visitors a sense of the lives lived by the former tenants of the building, and offer insight into the immigrant experience more generally. In addition, in the recreations of the apartments of families who lived in the building throughout its history, many of the decorative objects in the room are not authentic or even from that time period, but have been chosen to evoke a sense of what those apartments might have looked like, and create empathy for the families who lived there.

The Whitney and the Tenement museum also contextualize the materials in their exhibits in different ways. The Whitney tends to curate materials to suit the theme of a particular exhibit. While exhibits at the Whitney typically span several rooms, each room acts as a mini-exhibit of certain kinds of materials, usually focused around a particular artist or theme. For example, there is a room at “The Whitney’s Collection Exhibit” devoted exclusively to the work of Edward Hopper. While some individual works are accompanied a few paragraphs of text providing context along with the usual descriptive metadata (title, artist, date of production, and materials used), more often a single block of text provides historical or thematic context for all of the artwork on display in a particular room. While audio guides are available, generally visitors are encouraged

to read about the objects independently, according to their level of interest and at their own pace. I observed that visitors generally moved through the rooms in the museum fairly quickly, pausing to look at each work for only a few seconds. Many visitors stopped only long enough to take a picture or selfie with a particular work of art. In contrast to the Whitney, the primary way objects at the Tenement museum are contextualized is through storytelling. The visitors are completely dependent on the tour guide to provide context for objects in the museum, as there are no written descriptions of any kind. At certain points in the tour, the guide handed out pamphlets featuring photos or census records to illustrate key points about the immigrant experience. Rather than talk about the experience of immigrants during the time period more broadly, they narrate the stories of two or three families in attempt order to generate empathy. Visitors were also encouraged to ask questions and share their own families' experiences of immigrating to the United States. In this way, the Tenement museum uses affect as a powerful educational tool.

Both the Whitney and the Tenement Museum encourage return visitors, albeit in different ways. The Whitney accomplishes this primarily by rotating exhibits, so that there is always something new to see. During my visit, the newly-opened exhibit "Vida Americana" was crowded with people, while the floor housing "The Whitney's Collection: Selections from 1900 to 1965," an exhibit that has been open since June 2019, had relatively fewer visitors. To me, this suggests that many visitors at the museum that day had already seen the earlier exhibit, and had come to see "Vida Americana" specifically. While the Tenement Museum does not rotate exhibits, it encourages return visitors by making the museum accessible only through guided tours, lasting between one to two hours each, with each tour focusing on a specific theme or time period. The structured nature of the museum visit makes it impossible to see everything on display in one day, forcing visitors to return in order to access areas of the museum which were not accessible during

the initial tour. At the beginning of my tour, our guide asked us whether any of us had visited the Tenement Museum before. While most of the visitors in my group were from out of town, three out of ten were New Yorkers who had visited the museum on more than one occasion.

The Whitney Museum of American Art and the Tenement Museum are both Manhattan-based museums which aim to educate visitors on different aspects of American history and culture through the exhibition of significant artifacts. However, as an art museum and a history museum, respectively, these institutions have different missions, policies, types of materials on display, visitor demographics, and ways of encouraging visitor engagement with their exhibits. As a result, my experience at these sites was vastly different and illustrative of the ways that the culture of museums can vary from institution to institution.