

CAML CINE-GT 3049

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Observational Study: Rubin Museum of Art & the New School UC Library

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For this comparison study, I visited Rubin Museum of Art and the New School University Center Library. In this report, I indicated my methodology, documented my observations, and reflected on my findings in each institution.

General Information and Methodology

The Rubin Museum of Art, located at 150 West 17th Street, is an art museum that collects and exhibits the art of Himalayan regions. It is a seven-story building with stairs in the center of each floor. The Rubin showcases both ancient and contemporary Himalayan art, as well as art about Himalayan culture. The exhibition contents are changed periodically; traveling exhibitions are also presented in the museum.

The University Center Library is one of the research libraries among The New School Libraries and Archives. It holds a circulating collection of books that support the research and teaching missions of The New School; the titles can be searched using BobCat. It is located on the 6th and 7th floor of The New School University Center at 63 5th Avenue. The library also provides study spaces, computers, and scanning and printing services on site.

I visited the Rubin Museum on a Friday from 7 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. I was walking around and browsing from floor to floor while observed the surroundings and took notes along the way. I did not interact with other visitors, but I talked to the guard for more information.

I went to the University Center Library on a Sunday from 3:40 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. I stayed at one seat on the 7th floor the entire time and wrote notes on the spot. I only talked to the librarian.

In both cases, the times were noted based on checking the clock on my phone/laptop and estimation; no stopwatch was used.

Visitor Behavior

The visitors of the Rubin Museum on a Friday evening were mostly in the 20–50 age brackets, with an approximate medium of 30. They seemed to be in the middle and middle-to-high socio-economic bracket. In estimation, among the visitors I observed, there were 40% single visitors, 40% groups of two people, and 20% groups of three and more. I also encountered a group of 10 people with a museum guide introducing the works. During the time of my visit, there were around 20 people on each exhibition floor at all times.

As there were only a small number of visitors, each visitor was able to spend more time in front of an artwork than they could in a crowded museum or exhibition. They usually glanced over the object, read the text caption carefully, and then observed the artwork in detail. They often spent more time reading the caption than looking at the artwork. On average, the visitors spent around one minute on each artwork they see, but the duration also depended on the amount of text in the caption and the artwork itself.

The people in groups talked to each other; I did not see anyone spoken to a stranger or a guard. I only encountered two people taking photos of the artworks with their phones. Most of the visitors were browsing in slow paces. Some of them walk directly to the largest or most eye-catching artworks.

The visitors of University Center Library on a Sunday afternoon were mostly in the 20–35 age brackets, with an approximate medium of 22. They were very likely students from the

New School or other associated universities, as the building requires a school ID to enter. They seemed to be in the middle socio-economic bracket or higher. A majority of them are by themselves, and there are less than ten groups of two. There were 25 to 40 people on the 7th floor study area during the time of my observation.

I did not see anyone access the books on the shelves on the 7th floor during my stay. Also, no one paused in their way to look at a lightbox display of all LIFE Magazine covers, which is an artwork named *Searching for Africa in LIFE* by Alfredo Jaar. The visitors mostly stayed in one place and worked on their laptops or notebooks. They usually spend at least one hour in the library; a majority of them stayed for two hours or more.

Environment and Display

The exhibition rooms at the Rubin Museum surround the staircase; there may be an object placed in the center of one room, but there is not an apparent center room or center object of an exhibition. For some exhibitions, they have a title panel indicating the entrance, yet there is no clear pre-determined pathway on each floor, as the rooms are arranged in a donut shape. However, the second floor is designed as a “gateway to Himalayan art,” introducing prevalent symbols and deities in artworks on the upper floors. The visitor’s guide indicates “start here” on the second floor.

The museum provides audio guides at the admission table; the numbers for audio guides are marked near each artwork. There are also interactive screens for some artworks, presenting a more comprehensive caption for the details of the works. There is a moving image display on the 4th floor of the Rubin Museum. Two screens were presented – one was showing an animation work, and the other showed runtime and description of the work. Seats and headphones were provided, and the lighting was dim in the room.

Based on my conversation with the guard, there is usually one guard looking over two floors. As an interactive exhibition was recently opened on the 6th floor, there are two people overseeing it for now. They are not trained in art, and they are mostly paying attention to people not touching the works or taking flash photos. No flash was written on the tour guide but is not clearly indicated elsewhere in the museum. There are more prominent signs of “no eating or drinking” as there is a dinner restaurant on the first floor. The restaurant is combined with a café; there were around 50 people dining on Friday evening. There is also a gift shop near the café; the display of the shop can be seen in the street through the windows.

The University Center Library did not have an exhibition, except the display of *Searching for Africa in LIFE*, which was fairly eye-catching due to its size. It is located next to the study area; therefore, people can see it from almost anywhere on the 7th floor.

The librarians usually stay on the 6th floor at the reference table, but they sometimes go up to the 7th floor to check the status of the study area. There are usually two work-study students at the front table and a librarian in the back room. The students will answer most of the frequently asked questions and help checking-in and -out books, but the librarian will come out to help if the students have difficulties responding to something.

There is a very prominent sign for ‘no beverage (except in a bottle with cap) or food’ at the entrance of the library, as well as a station for people to put their coffee cups. There is a quiet room on the 6th floor with more signs regarding keeping the silence, but the general area is more tolerant to conversations. There is a cafeteria on the 2nd floor of the building.

Hypothesis and Conclusion

Based on my visit, I speculate that the visitors of the Rubin Museum on a Friday evening (which are their free-admission hours) were likely local residents who just finished work or school, or waiting for dinner in nearby neighborhoods. There may be more tourists visiting

during weekdays. For the University Center Library, there may be more people study during weekdays, especially in-between scheduled class times. Still, the demographic will be similar, consisting mostly of the New School students.

In this study, I observed, summarized, and compared the differences between an art museum and an academic library in terms of their user behaviors and access environments. Despite the fact that they are both relatively small in collection and spatial sizes, they can both be seen as typical examples among these two types of institutions in NYC. Through my observation, I learned how the differences between memory institutions' roles and missions can influence the presentations of the space and the audience's responses to them.

Rubin Museum of Art



The New School University Center Library

