



SHOPPING + CULTURE

By Paco Underhill

When the Museum of Modern Art opened its new building in 2004, admission was priced at \$20. And the cultural world gasped. Behind closed doors, snobs carped that New York City's cultural elite would have to rub elbows with the unwashed in the galleries. Cynics speculated that the high cost of admission aimed to control the kind of customer passing through the Yoshio Taniguchi-designed doors. Today, admission costs \$25. The Metropolitan suggests \$25, the new Whitney is asking for \$25, and the new San Francisco Museum of Modern Art asks for \$25 as well. All the public museums in Washington D.C. are free, one of the benefits for residents and visitors in an otherwise elitist city. But escalating ticket prices have not discouraged all visitors. Major art museums around the country have seen a surge in admissions.

While shopping mall and high street retail traffic is down, major museum traffic is up. Museum design and operating protocols have adapted with changing public tastes. The museum's combination of culture, education and entertainment are giving theme parks a run for their money. What can we learn from this?

TRAFFIC PATTERNS

New York museums on a Saturday afternoon are crowded and long lines form at admissions, in the galleries, even the rest rooms. People-management issues have led museum planners and staff to seek solutions. Tickets can be bought online, saving time. Management is thinking how to spread out visitors so that African art can better compete with Impressionism. And yet, museums are

advertising, offering hints of their collections on buses and billboards. Events are being reimagined to drive traffic rather than as simply cloistered gatherings for patrons.

THE MERITOCRACY OF ART

How many visitors know the difference between "modern art" and "contemporary art?" Some museums are using iconic images rather than words to make art more accessible. In the beautiful new Crystal Bridges property in northwest Arkansas, gallery guards have been cross-trained as docents. Rather than merely play watchdogs, visitors can hear, "May I show you my favorite painting in this gallery?" The museum's range of visitors could not be more extreme. A recent Envirosell survey found that

Continued on page 12

Continued from page 11

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more than 20 percent of Crystal Bridges' visitors had never ridden an elevator or an escalator before. Yet, at the Arkansas Regional Airport an impressive line-up of private jets owned by the global art-world elite parks on the tarmac. Unlike New York museums, Crystal Bridges' admission fees are underwritten by Walmart and the Walton family. That cultural evangelism makes the museum well worth the visit. Museums built in the 19th Century were designed as sanctuaries and escapes. To enter the Metropolitan, visitors must march up the stairs, enter a closed rotunda and then climb another grand staircase to enter the first gallery. By contrast, Crystal Bridges embraces its natural setting. Most of the galleries welcome natural light and make the most from their windows. This is the brilliance of the new Whitney and the breakthrough design of Louisiana, outside of Copenhagen, the pioneer in making natural views as arresting as the contemporary art.

SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

The museum visit has evolved. Galleries are no longer quiet places for the one-to-one reflection between people and paintings. The institutions are social spaces.

For a millennial generation, going to the museum is a perfect second or third date. No alcohol, no personal information exchanged, and yet an hour-visit later, you know whether you like a person or not. The test of visual sensitivities and aesthetic empathy are windows into true character.

CULTURE FOR SALE

The museum transformation—from exclusive preservation sanctuaries to public forums—has invigorated the museum store. No longer do they stock a few dusty postcards and clunky art books designed to prove that you came/saw/left. The shops feature jewelry, fashion accessories, clothing, dishes and kitchenware and in some cases, furniture and electronics, sometimes customized to the museum itself. Even the once staid Met store pushed itself online beyond its brisk catalog business. The challenge has been to keep inventory fresh. Nothing gets stale faster than seeing those faux Vermeer earrings for the third time.

It is a reminder that typical chain stores buy only from suppliers that can fill their orders. That gives the independent merchant something of an edge. The

museum store buyer can cherry pick and experiment. The merchandise doesn't look mass produced. Much of it has a backstory. And a lot of it is offered as a short-run tied to a current exhibition. Go to the gift show at the Javits Center in New York City and you'll find an Etsy incubator. Museum buyers shop here with a focused aesthetic appreciation and sophistication. The creative edge in modern design is still rooted in the artisanal studio. And the idea of owning something unique and meaningful in its design or origin story holds allure for many customers looking for an experiential investment.

The advantage for the museum store is to serve as the mantle of culture, which gives merchandise the patina of legitimacy. But it functions within limitations. It may sell apparel, but there are no dressing rooms. Customers need to be comfortable trying items on in the store. Price points can fluctuate wildly. Many museum stores stock inexpensive souvenirs, but many also have high-end gold jewelry with precious stones. That high/medium/low pricing strategy presents staffing issues and customer service priorities. Employees need to be knowledgeable about the product and willing to serve as models for both jewelry and apparel.

LOCATION IS EVERYTHING

As museums undergo renovation, the trend has been to make the store accessible before the admissions gate, acknowledging that store patronage and museum visits don't always come at the same time. Some have experimented with satellite locations. Can I take the mantle of culture from the actual property and still get the same effect? The answer is, sometimes. Judge for yourself at museum stores in airports across the country. Both Disney and Warner Brothers stores found that selling merchandise and souvenirs are different businesses. Traditional

retailers might rethink their concession business with a museum store within the store. The range of merchandise from gift cards and calendars to ties, jewelry and home décor can provide a fresh, ever-changing collection of temptations, particularly at holiday times.

SOUVENIRS AS ART

The stores at MoMA in New York, and the Art Institute and the Museum of Contemporary Art, both in Chicago, are my personal favorites. I get more points from the Christmas and birthday gifts bought at museum gift shops than any other venue. There I find curated, interesting merchandise. Everything has a story. It appears to be unique, and my gift recipients won't find similar items at other retail stores. And the merchandise represents something bigger and more important than the object; it is a moment in time. It is also a reminder as to how

modern retail can function under a big radar screen. The traditional retail channels and brands are getting eaten away at their edges. Yes, the internet, but also the craft fair, the farmer's market and dedicated local and regional merchants are the quietly growing competition.

CURATION NATION

We are reminded that the power to curate remains one of the most powerful tools of a modern merchant. Crate and Barrel, Barney's and Container Store are three examples of organizations with roots in great buyers. I loved listening to Gordon Segal, Crate and Barrel's founder, tell stories of hunting down merchandise. He and his wife aimed to find stuff that fit their vision of chic. Whether they went to Europe, India or Mexico, Gordon took great pleasure looking for unique things to sell. And it worked. Some would argue that as the

chain grew it got harder to source and as Gordon aged, the searching took its toll. Today's adventure can turn into tomorrow's chore.

Barney's had its own unique personality: couture that wasn't cookie-cutter. The original store picked what it wanted to sell. Even as a multi-brand store, there was sense of urban up-market discipline.

The Container Store was a fresh concept when it opened in 1978, curated for the anal-compulsive. It is a store for the neat and tidy among us, selling systems. If you are into systems, this is your store.

Selfridge's in London sells store-focused souvenirs at one of the doorways on Oxford Street. An iconic branding strategy is focused on their ownership of a particular shade of yellow. Price points range from a few quid to many thousands. At one end of the shop are bottles of Coca Cola in a limited-edition centenary bottle, their signature shape transformed into yellow; at the other end is a stunning yellow motorcycle jacket. I wanted that jacket, but I knew I'd never have the nerve to wear it. What I really wanted was proof that I came/saw/bought/and left. **RR**



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Paco and Envirocell's work has been featured in The New York Times, 20/20, National Public Radio, Smithsonian Magazine, Wall Street Journal, and other major news media. Paco is also the author of What Women Want, which was published in soft cover edition by Simon & Schuster in July 2011; Call of the Mall, a walking tour of the American shopping mall; and Why We Buy, the bestselling book about retail in history. In addition, Paco's columns include regular features in major trade publication DDI Magazine.