

Art Galleries should allow artworks to speak for themselves

Whether art galleries should allow artworks to speak for themselves remains an ongoing debate. The role of a museum or art gallery is to inform and educate those who are interested in art. Where to draw the line on the provision of information on artwork becomes a problematic issue. Museums and art galleries see millions of people who come to enjoy the beauty of art. When considering how to accommodate its visitors best, the needs of students, connoisseurs, tourists and the unformed public alike need to be considered.

It is agreed that ideally artwork should be left to be viewed and interpreted by the public without any guidance or direction to allow visitors to appreciate the work in their own way. As a great creative artist in the music profession Louis Armstrong has said, “If you have to explain it you don’t get it.” However, the artwork on display at the Museum of Contemporary Art presents a different situation. This form of artwork, Contemporary art, needs a brief explanation of the meaning and feeling behind the piece to allow visitors to appreciate the value of the work. When no information is provided there is so much left unknown to the viewer.

Through this essay the value of explanatory notes or captions, particularly for contemporary art will be explained with the use of a personal example to highlight the advantages of additional information accompanying artwork to help educate people about the artwork.

Contemporary art is about a concept about ideas and is a reflection of the feelings and experiences of the artist. People viewing this art are often unable to interpret it without an explanation provided, as the visual is often abstract with no identifiable theme to the untrained eye. This is further highlighted by Oliver Bennet who states, “The case for explanatory text is simple; they are needed because the art is unfathomable without them.” Contemporary art is about the artist’s individual personal experiences and his or her own interpretation of the world we live in. Many people who are not confident of their own understanding and interpretation of contemporary art would feel they needed some form of guidance.

This is in contrast to the art gallery of New South Wales, 18th century European art collection. This collection’s audience finds it easier to interpret and understand the meaning behind the art works. This is due to their understanding of the history of Europe in the 18th century. Historical art generally is easier to understand, as the artwork is a visual representation of a historical event or a period. This artwork is also, more often than not,

less abstract than more contemporary art and can therefore be better understood. Theodore Gericault was one of the most dedicated artists working during the romantic period. He was most famous for his dramatic artwork "The Raft of Medusa" 1819. Romanticism was a wide spread movement that influenced artists, writers and musicians through France, Germany, Spain and even Britain. In such forms of art as this we can see the figure and interpret what is happening. In the artwork we can see without even being educated the emotion expressed through the faces and the stance of the figures.

An example of when I had such a difficulty in interpretation of Contemporary art was when I first viewed Alighiero Boetti's embroidered world map in the Museum of Contemporary Art. I found it difficult to identify what the map would have meant to the artist. Further, I initially questioned and tried to understand how a rug could be exhibited and represented as a contemporary piece of artwork. However when I researched Alighiero Boetti's art I learnt that this was his way of expressing his acceptance of all forms of culture, linguistics, music and crafts in a wide range of media. The research also explained why he embroidered his world; Boetti perceived a symbolic and poetic meaning in humble everyday material. With this new knowledge I was now able to look at Boetti's work with an appreciation and understanding I did not have when I visited the gallery.

Often brief captions include when the artwork was created, the purchased date, artists name and date of birth of artist and deceased date if deceased. Whilst there is a valid argument of "How does one interpret and understand artwork if they do not understand the history and practice of the artwork, artist and the world the artist lived in at the time," Kenneth Hudson has said of studying such information in an art gallery as feeling like "a preparation for an unseen exam". With essays on each and every artwork the feeling is increased. For many viewers of art, those who don't have a great understanding of art history, this information is useful.

This information does not provide what many visitors would ideally like to know of contemporary art, what does the art mean and symbolise to the artist. A brief explanation of the meaning and inspiration to the artist can help visitors to identify with the artist more than a short history of his life and work. For those people who wish to have their own interpretation of the art without being led by the artist they can choose not to read the explanations.

Some artists say that their artwork is simply about the audience's interpretation. How can there only be room for the audience's interpretation. An artist work is an expression to emotion about the world we live in. If this

is true which it is, how can the interpretation be left to the audience? If the artwork is the artist's expression, it must be his interpretation of the world. Intrigue always lies upon the viewer's mind wanting to know what drove the artist to create such a piece.

Art galleries and museums are designed not only for the art connoisseurs and art critics; they are also designed to meet the needs of students, and the public. For the less educated in art, Contemporary art in particular can provide some problems as the interpretation can be impossible and the true value of the work can be lost on the individual. It is therefore important to provide information to the public on the meaning behind such artwork and leave it to the public as to whether they wish to read and be led by the artist's interpretation. Captions must assist and address the needs of the majority of people, even if it is at the expense of a sophisticated view.

By Josephine Doyle