Art Tourism: An Ethnographic View

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ART TOURISM: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC VIEW

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ABSTRACT

This study is an examination of the relationship between the institution of the museum and artistic taste. Specifically, the study focuses on the relationship between high art and modern art by comparing London’s National Gallery to London’s Tate Modern. The central research question addressed is whether or not an individual’s opinion of art is influenced by the atmosphere created by a museum, including both interior and exterior gallery design and ornamentation. This thesis is not a comparison of the quality of high art to modern art; rather, it is a comparison of the context of art and the way in which context affects the opinions of a given classification of art. The research methods that are utilized in the construction of the study include participant observation at the National Gallery and Tate Modern, as well as ethnographic interviews consisting of an initial open-ended interview and a follow-up structured interview with my peers who have visited both museums. After analyzing the original data, this study argues that museum context does, in fact, influence the way that art is perceived and evaluated. However, it also shows that preexisting artistic taste greatly impacts the evaluation of art in a museum setting.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Finding the National Gallery and Tate Modern
As a student studying abroad in London, England, I was excited to get out and see the city. Prior to arriving in London, I made a long list of all the attractions that I wanted to see. I think that nearly the entire city was on the list and I could hardly wait to dive in and start checking some items off. High on the to-do list was an open bus tour which my roommate and I enjoyed after a couple of weeks into our stay. On the whirlwind tour, the bus weaved through the streets of London, passing all of the main points of interest.1

Then, we left the tour bus and boarded a boat to see London from the view of the Thames. As the boat sailed along the river, I saw Big Ben, Parliament, St. Paul’s Cathedral, and Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre; it was as though I could feel London as the cool breeze touched my face.

The boat’s tour guide, an older English gentleman whose gray beard had taken over much of his face, pointed out the major sites and provided some entertaining anecdotes about the city. As the boat sailed along the Thames, I saw a large building on one side of the Millennium Bridge. The tour guide said, “On your right you’ll see the Tate Modern which houses a huge collection of modern art.” The Tate Modern looked nothing like an art museum. Had I not been told that it was a museum I would have thought it was only a large warehouse. While studying the unique exterior of the Tate, the tour guide interjected, “But don’t bother going there; it’s a lot of rubbish.” The statement took me by surprise. At first, I thought I misheard him. Did he actually just tell a large group of tourists not to go to one of London’s most popular museums because it was full of “rubbish?” The man went on to say, “When I went there, all I saw was a brick wall with bullet holes and graffiti. They’ll call anything art these days.” The boat continued on and all thoughts of the Tate Modern were pushed to the back of my mind.

1 For a map of London with major points of interest, see Appendix A.
Later on, I kept coming back to the remarks that the tour guide made about the Tate. I pulled out the list that I had made months before coming to London. The Tate Modern was on the list, but it was not a priority compared to London’s other popular museums such as the National Gallery, Tate Britain, and Victoria and Albert. At that point, I had already visited the National Gallery. In fact, the first free day that I had was devoted to touring the National Gallery so that I could find all of the paintings that I had learned about in my art history classes. My new interest in the Tate Modern was so big that I felt the need to go the museum as soon as possible so that I could see for myself why the man on the boat tour referred to the art as “a lot of rubbish.” The next weekend I set out for a visit to the Tate Modern. I was curious to see how it would compare with the National Gallery, the only other art museum I had seen while in London.

Upon arrival to the Tate Modern, located in Southwark, I immediately had a different feeling from that which I had experienced when arriving at the National Gallery, which sits in the historic setting of Trafalgar Square. I proceeded towards the large building with great interest and excitement. When I walked through the doors, I was admittedly a little confused. All I saw was a dimly lit, open hallway with a massive formation of a spider and many metal bunk bed frames on the opposite end. Everything about it was gray: its color, energy, and appeal. I assumed that the building would be overflowing with art because of its massive size, but when I looked at a map there did not seem to be as much art as I would have thought. I went to each floor and weaved in and out of the various rooms, all the while thinking about how different the museum felt compared to the National Gallery.
The National Gallery is an absolutely beautiful museum both inside and out. It is a very dignified building as it sits above the base level of Trafalgar Square with its tall columns, pediment, and central dome flanked by two other groupings of columns. Visitors ascend up a set of stairs into the museum and enter a warmly lit portico containing information and museum maps. A central marble stairway acts as the main portal into the world of art that exists atop the stairs. To me, it really felt like another world; one that existed far away from the busy streets of London. When I ascended up the marble stairs, I felt like I was ascending into heaven, except in this case it was a heaven specifically for history’s great works of art. The ornately framed paintings hanging on the walls decorated with beautiful wallpaper felt like pieces of heaven that had been made sacred by their existence within the space of the National Gallery.

Entering the Tate Modern, in its gray and unwelcoming state, felt nothing like the ascension into an art filled heaven. In fact, one of the entrances actually takes visitors down a ramp leading to an open space for temporary exhibits. I found it somewhat hard to orient myself within the museum; the paintings were not organized in a linear chronology, making it difficult to determine which path I should take. While I wandered through the museum, I took note of the scuffed wood floors in some galleries and the gray cement floors in others, the white walls, and the openness. I quickly realized that the focus of this museum was placed entirely on the art itself, free of opulent furnishings. While such a focus is important to the process of presenting art in an unbiased way, I thought to myself that people’s disinterest in the Tate Modern makes sense. I wondered, however, if it was a disinterest in the art or a disinterest in the
museum that housed the art. Was the man on the boat tour turned off by the art or the way that the art was presented?

Statement of Problem

The institution of the museum has been fundamental in the categorization of “good” and “bad” art and has infiltrated personal tastes in such a way that opinions and biases are formed prior to seeing or understanding a piece of art. In turn, a hierarchy of taste has developed that is inherent in the presentation of art. High art, which has been historically approved as being “good,” is typically presented in ornate museums. The presentation of modern art, which is free from opulent furnishings in order to highlight art in the truest sense, is typically presented in seemingly bland museums. Such a presentation has the ability to negatively impact the way in which viewers perceive art, especially if the viewer does not understand the intentions of a museum. Therefore, it would seem that an individual’s opinion of art is highly influenced as a result of the way that art is received within the museum setting.

My research examines the hierarchies of taste demonstrated by the presentation of art and the way in which visitors respond to a given presentation. I will specifically examine the relationship between the National Gallery, which features art that is classified as high art, and the Tate Modern which consists of what is classified as modern art. When referring to art as “high art,” I am referring to the art included in the National Gallery, which contains art created between the thirteenth and twentieth centuries, including art from Late Medieval Renaissance Italy to French Impressionism. When referring to “modern art,” I am referring to the art included in the Tate Modern, which contains art created between 1900 and present day, including art from the movements of Fauvism to the Contemporary. It is important to note that while the Tate Modern credits itself as being a “national museum of international modern art” (www.tate.org.uk/modern), art historians view the Tate Modern as being a high art museum and would not support the classification of high art and modern art. Anthropologists, however, do separate each classification of art into categories of high and modern art. My research will reflect the anthropological approach. For further discussion of high art and modern art, see page 24.
art. My research does not compare the quality of high art to modern art; rather, it compares the context in which the art is exhibited. The purpose of this study is to examine the role of the institution of the museum in shaping an individual’s opinion of art.

**History of the National Gallery and Tate Modern**

While the National Gallery currently contains over 2,300 works of art, the collection began with only 38 Italian paintings owned by John Julius Angerstein, a wealthy English banker and collector in 1824 (www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/history). Angerstein’s paintings were never intended to represent a royal collection of art, but instead “were intended to form the core of a new national collection, for the enjoyment and education of all” (www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/history). In 1824, the British House of Commons purchased Angerstein’s collection for £57,000 in order to form the core body of a new national collection of what curator’s deemed to be...
quality art. Acquiring one masterpiece was far more important than acquiring twenty minor paintings of historical interest (Levey 10). As such, the reputation of the museum relied on its acquisition of paintings. The National Gallery did not initially have any kind of established collection policy; works were selected based on the personal tastes of the museum trustees. Over time, the Gallery acquired additional significant Italian works, such as Botticelli’s *Adoration of the Kings*, Dutch and Flemish paintings such as Hobbema’s *The Avenue at Middleharnis*, and a collection of over 1000 paintings and drawings by artist Joseph Mallord William Turner. (www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/history).

The paintings were originally housed in Pall Mall (Figure 1), Angerstein’s house located in central London, until the collection outgrew the site. In 1831, Parliament began plans to construct a new building for the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square (Figure 2). The Gallery’s current location was chosen because of its centrality; it was within reasonable distance to both the wealthy and poor areas of the city. “Trafalgar Square could be reached by the rich arriving in their carriages from the west of London, and on foot by the poor from the East End” (www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/history). With the commitment to the “enjoyment and education of all,” the National Gallery existed as a museum free to the public so that it could be enjoyed by the widest audience possible. In turn, the museum did not become a collection exclusively for the privileged. The collection moved to its current home in Trafalgar Square in 1838.

The National Gallery was originally designed by the architect William Wilkins, who designed the base of the building with the central, east, and west porticos and columns. The building’s central dome, designed by architect E.M. Barry, was added in
1876 along with seven additional galleries. In 1907, an addition five galleries were constructed at the rear of the building. Another huge addition came in 1985 when Lord Sainsbury of Preston Candover and his brothers donated money for the construction of an entire new wing. As a result, the Sainsbury wing, which contains the Gallery’s entire early Renaissance collection, opened in 1991. The National Gallery is one of the most popular attractions in London, drawing between four and five million visitors annually (www.nationalgallery.org.uk).

Despite the numerous additions made throughout its history, the collection eventually grew so large that it became necessary to find another location to house some of the works. In 1890, Henry Tate, a wealthy industrialist, funded the construction of a new gallery that would exclusively house British art. The Tate Gallery opened in 1897 at Millbank, located approximately a mile away from the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square. The majority of British pieces were transferred to the Tate Gallery, although a small selection remained at the Trafalgar Square location. The Tate Gallery ran under the same administration as the National Gallery until 1954, when the Tate formally established itself as an independent institution (www.nationalgallery.org.uk).

Just as the National Gallery’s collection outgrew its Trafalgar Square location, the Tate Gallery also eventually grew too large and required a satellite gallery to manage its growing collection. It was decided that the British art would remain at Millbank and the modern art would be moved to a new location. “This would mean, in effect, that Bankside would become the extension of the National Gallery, showing work from 1900 onwards” (Blazwick and Morris 13). A search began for a new location and the Bankside Power Station, located on the south bank of the Thames, opposite of St. Paul’s Cathedral,
was ultimately selected (Figure 3). Originally designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, the building, which operated as a power station from 1947 to 1981, was large enough to serve the purposes of the new gallery (www.tate.org.uk/modern). The location was ideal because of its close proximity to Millbank, which allowed the two museums to be connected through riverboat service. The creation of a museum devoted entirely to modern art was a new development, as no other museum of modern art had ever existed in London.

Though the building was already in place, it had to be transformed from a power station to a modern art museum. An international architectural competition was held to select architects to design the new museum. Museum developers evaluated various candidates based on “their approach to the architectural problem, particularly how to deal with the existing building and its position in the urban context, their ideas for the display and presentation of modern and contemporary art, and their interest in and understanding of art itself” (Martin 17). Ultimately, Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron were selected based on their proposal that embraced the existing building’s form, materials, and industrial characteristics. The interior was transformed from a boiler house power station into a museum consisting of “three floors given entirely to six suites of galleries, two to a floor, built around a central service core containing the main staircase, escalators, lifts and toilets” (Martin 19). Because the architects felt that the large Turbine Hall served as a dramatic entrance into the museum and could hold large sculptural
projects, the space was left relatively untouched. The main structural change to the exterior was the addition of a two-storey high frosted-glass beam running the entire length of the building. Herzog and de Meuron felt that this would separate the structure from a power station and instead distinguish itself as a gallery.

The Tate Modern opened to the public on May 12, 2000. Like the National Gallery, its permanent collection is free to the public. The museum is organized into four themes: “Material Gestures,” “Poetry and Dream,” “States of Flux,” and “Idea and Object.” Central hubs, located within each themed wing, highlight four influential periods of modern art including Surrealism, Minimalism, post-war innovations in abstractions and figuration, and the linked movements of Cubism, Futurism, and Vorticism. A wide range of related works that anticipated, challenged, or responded to the major movement surround the hubs. As such, “the historic dialogue would be encountered in dialogue with the contemporary” (Blazwick and Morris 33). Through the organization that is based on theme rather than linear chronology, which is the traditional way of organizing art collections, each work is examined by its content to determine where it belongs in the museum. The four broad themes overlap in such a way that some artists may appear across all four themes over various time periods. Furthermore, the display of the permanent collection changes regularly, with major changes typically occurring each spring, providing visitors with different experiences over time. By organizing the museum in such a manner, the reevaluation of the organization of the museum is made possible as ideas and interpretations change (Blazwick and Morris 36). As such, the Tate Modern takes a modern approach to displaying modern art.
The Tate Modern, which currently houses 1,148 works of art, has become one of the United Kingdom’s top three tourist attractions and reported approximately 4.6 million visitors in 2009 (www.tate.org.uk/modern). The pressure to keep up with the demand of the museum has lead to a redevelopment of the museum and surrounding areas. Over the past two and a half years, Herzog and de Meuron have worked on the project “Transforming Tate Modern,” which is a new project to “establish the full potential of the entire Tate Modern site and surrounding areas” (www.tate.org.uk/modern). Plans for the new development were passed by Southward Council on March 31, 2009. The project is expected to be completed by the London Olympics in 2012.

**Introduction to Review of Literature**

To examine the effect that context has on the perception of art, I have conducted an ethnographic case study composed of three methods: participant observation, open-ended interviews, and structured interviews with students that have visited both the National Gallery and Tate Modern. The qualitative data gathered from my research is organized to reveal patterns between respondents, which is analyzed primarily through Eileen Hooper-Greenhill’s theories of museum tourism alongside other theories pertaining to art and artistic taste in order to explain their meaning. Prior to conducting research, it is necessary to examine existing literature relating to this topic. As such, this study provides an investigation of relevant literature in order to establish a strong background in the theoretical knowledge of art, the workings of museums and museum tourists, patterns in tourism, and the aesthetics and concepts behind the classification of art as either high art or modern art.
CHAPTER 2

Literature Review
Art, an important element of culture, has been widely researched in a variety of contexts. Specifically, the comparison between high art and modern art is a topic that has been examined by many individuals. Literature that discusses the aesthetic differences of each classification of art, as well as the relationship that each classification has with society, are important elements in the examination of the context of art and how such context affects the way that people perceive art. This thesis, however, is not a discussion of high art versus modern art. While it is important to consider each classification of art, it is not the driving force behind the study. Instead, this thesis focuses on the context of art, which I relate to the presentation of art in the National Gallery and Tate Modern. As such, I argue that the way that a piece of art is presented within a museum setting directly affects an individual’s opinion of a given piece of art.

In order to investigate my theory regarding the role that museums play in the formation of opinions about high art compared to modern art, my research utilizes a variety of different fields and methodologies. First, this thesis consists of a heavy theoretical component that includes theories pertaining to the formation of taste. Second, an understanding of museums is a vital element to my research since high art and modern art are purposely presented in distinctly different ways, especially in the case of the National Gallery and Tate Modern. Third, in relation to the research based on museums and the context of art, it is necessary to discuss museum visitors and how they react to such context. Fourth, while considering the museum visitor, I also explore sources based in tourism to enhance my understanding of tourists in general and the way that they gaze upon tourism products, in this case the works of art in the National Gallery and Tate Modern. Finally, research related to the field of art, specifically modern art and art...
history, is important in order to understand the way that high and modern art are
presented. The existing literature encompasses research based on art and research based
on the sociology of museums and visitors. What is lacking in this field is literature that
primarily focuses on the fusion between the discourses of high art and modern art and
specific examples of museums in which they are presented. As such, this thesis will
examine the relationship between art and context by specifically examining the National
Gallery and Tate Modern.

The Formation of Taste

Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of the formation of taste, as demonstrated in
Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste, are very important in the
discussion of artistic taste and the application of taste when viewing art in museums.
According to Bourdieu, “a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who
possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded” (2). In
order to fully understand a work of art, one must have the cultural knowledge necessary
to do so. Without such knowledge, a piece of art only exists as brush strokes on canvas or
lines drawn on a piece of paper. “A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a
chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason” (Bourdieu 2).
Bourdieu suggests that in order for art to be meaningful to the viewer, one must
understand the symbolic in addition to the aesthetic makeup of a piece of art. He notes
that the encounter between an individual and a work of art is not the romantic “love at
first site” feeling that many people liken to the experience with art. Instead, the
disposition towards a piece of art is a product of history that has been enhanced by
education. Such education acts as a social map towards the acquirement of taste as taste reflects one’s social position.

Bourdieu introduces the concept of habitus, which refers to dispositions of the individual that result from the way in which the individual was socialized through the determining structures of family, class, and education, as a way of explaining the formation of taste (170). Habitus is produced by an individual’s distance from necessity, which is the distance between the individual and basic sustenance living. As such, an individual concerned with day to day survival will not possess a strong taste for elements of so-called high culture because they are too preoccupied with survival. According to Bourdieu, the necessary habitus to embrace and appreciate art is embodied via their cultural capital and, in turn, class position is expressed at an unconscious level. “The habitus is necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-given perceptions; it is a general, transposable disposition which carries out a systematic, universal application—beyond the limits of what has been directly learnt—of necessity inherent in the learning conditions,” says Bourdieu (170). The habitus, therefore, is a resilient organization of one’s body and its deployment in the world relating to the variety of experiences of an individual. It is a system through which people organize their own behavior and accept or appreciate others. According to Bourdieu:

The habitus is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgments and the system of classification […] of these practices. It is in the relationship between the two capacities which define the habitus, the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to
differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world, i.e., the space of life-styles, is constituted. (170)

If applied to art, habitus is the vehicle through which taste is formed based on the relationship between an individual’s position in class structure and the ability to creatively interpret or appreciate pieces of art. It mediates objective structures of social relations and subjective behavior while guiding the choices of individuals. As such, habitus is neither entirely voluntary nor involuntary.

While individual taste might seem, in fact, individual, taste is actually an embodiment of cultural capital, which refers to the social skills, linguistic styles, and tastes that one gains through education and distance from necessity, as evidenced through an individual’s habitus. As an individual’s level of education and distance from necessity increases, language, taste, and social skills typically become more complex. Therefore, taste directly reflects class. An individual that exists in a specific class, or one who strives to fit in with a certain class, will find his or her place among the hierarchy of taste.

According to Bourdieu, “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (6), meaning that taste does not simply distinguish the good from the bad in the mind of the individual, but it also shows where within the social class system the individual exists. Bourdieu goes on to say, “Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed” (6). By adapting one’s tastes to match those of high society, whether through similar tastes in music, literature, food, or art, an individual becomes associated in certain areas with a specific higher class. Through the predetermination of taste that results from the
way in which an individual is socialized, the distinction between the beautiful and the ugly is clearly defined. As such, the predisposition of art and cultural consumption fulfills the social function of legitimating social differences.

Habitus provides the practical skills necessary to organize one’s behaviors in order to navigate external conditions, which Bourdieu calls fields. A field is the setting in which the individual, or agent, and social positions are located. The agent is positioned in a field based on the rules of a particular field, the agent’s habitus, and the agent’s social, cultural, and economic capital (Bourdieu 87). In relation to art tourism, an art museum acts as a field that individuals must navigate. Therefore, the way in which individuals navigate art museums is based on the rules of art museums, artistic taste, and the amount of capital the individual possesses.

In the essay “The Social Basis of Museum and Heritage Visiting,” author Nick Merriman draws from Bourdieu’s theories of habitus and argues that visiting a museum that is associated with high culture facilitates the acquirement of cultural capital, made possible by the individual’s ability to “read” museums (161). Merriman argues that if Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and field navigation is applied to museums, then “museum displays can be seen as a code, a special form of communication which has to be correctly decoded in order to be understood” (161). The ability to decode a piece of art is, in turn, equated to the possession of cultural capital. When an individual does not possess the cultural capital relevant to a given museum, the museum can come across as imposing or uninviting. According to the survey data collected by Merriman, higher educated and affluent individuals feel most comfortable in museum culture. He attributes this to the association between museums and high culture as well as the “cultivated lifestyle
encouraged by the ‘habitus’ inculcated by family, school and peers” (Merriman 162). Both provide the capabilities to decode the intended message of the museum.

Constance Perin examines the interaction between museums and visitors and the subsequent formation of what she refers to as the “communicative circle” of museums in the essay, “The Communicative Circle: Museums as Communities” (191). Perin discusses the way in which visitors navigate and make sense of museums and asserts that in any given situation, a visitor draws on their position in society and their life experiences as a way of making sense of the museum in front of them. “The museum context, almost by definition, presents audiences with artifacts and information that fall outside of the demands of their daily routines and relationships, yet their responses are grounded in many of the same assumptions, world-views, knowledge, and associations through which they make sense of the world” (Perin 191). As such, an individual will perceive art through the lens of their life experiences, in turn affecting their overall opinion of a given piece of art. Perin’s notion relates to Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, which forms personal taste based on the relationship between an individual’s position in society and the ability to interpret the contents of a museum. Visitors interpret their surroundings based on previous knowledge or curiosity of a particular subject along with “the frames of reference through which they situate, contextualize, translate, evaluate, and interpret what they see and experience” (Perin 191).

In summary, Bourdieu’s theory of habitus argues that the dispositions that result from the determining structures of family, education, and class create a unique set of artistic tastes. An individual navigates through fields, such as an art museum, based on their habitus, the rules of the field, and the amount of capital that the individual
possesses. Merriman draws from Bourdieu’s notion of the habitus in suggesting that an individual’s cultural capital allows for the ability to understand and appreciate art on display. Perin’s theories relate to Bourdieu and Merriman as well, indicating that the individual draws upon the inherent knowledge and experiences of his or her cultural framework. Therefore, understanding and evaluating art within a museum is directly linked to the social origin of the individual.

The Museum Experience

The organization of a museum has a huge impact on a visitor’s overall experience, as argued by Eilean Hooper-Greenhill in *Museums and their Visitors*. Hooper-Greenhill examines the interaction between the cultural institution of museums and the audience that such institutions attract. According to Hooper-Greenhill, the function of museums has undergone a great transformation, as museums that previously existed to simply store artifacts have been converted into active learning environments. Museums have essentially become “springboards into the community” (1), rather than passive collections. As such, housing a collection of artifacts is no longer the focus; instead, connecting to people has become the main focus. Hooper-Greenhill specifically discusses the initial intimidation that many visitors feel upon the arrival at a very large and highly regarded museum. “Many first-time visitors find it difficult to feel comfortable when first trying out a museum” (Hooper-Greenhill 89). It can be easy for visitors to enter a museum and feel so overwhelmed that they may stay for a very short period of time or may even decide to leave the museum altogether. In an effort to connect to visitors so that they will feel comfortable rather than intimidated, museums now focus more heavily on
tourism services, such as cafes, shops, educational classes, and so on. According to Hooper-Greenhill:

For visitors to museums and galleries, it is the total experience that will be remembered. The total experience includes the exhibitions and activities, and also the shop, whether there is food and drink, the cleanliness of the toilets the friendliness of the staff and most importantly, the quality of the museum or gallery visit will depend to a large extent on how easy it is to manage, in practical terms, on an intellectual level and socially. (88-89)

In order to ensure a memorable and enjoyable experience, museums need to offer quality services and comfort facilities that are easily accessible.

Hooper-Greenhill also discusses the importance of educational opportunities within museums. “Education is now felt to be a primary function of all museums, underpinning all museum processes” (Hooper-Greenhill 19). Through the focus of education, a museum’s ability to offer well-rounded educational and enjoyable experiences has become the ultimate goal. People no longer visit museums simply to see artifacts; instead, they visit museums for the experience. “Tourists tend to seek an experience that packages its informational content in an entertaining form” (167), according to George F. MacDonald in his essay, “Change and Challenge: Museums in the Information Society.” In turn, visitors judge artifacts based on the experience and level of enjoyment gained within a particular museum. According to Hooper-Greenhill, the level of education and enjoyment must go hand-in-hand. If a museum is educational but boring or enjoyable but uninformative, tourists will come away with a negative experience. In turn, if visitors do not enjoy the museum experience, they equate such negative
experiences with a dislike towards museum artifacts. Therefore, an individual’s opinion of a museum, whether positive or negative, becomes synonymous with their opinion of the actual art displayed.

Art as Items of Worship

Visiting an art museum is often equated to visiting a church in the sense that displayed art acts as sacred objects to be worshiped. John Berger’s theories pertaining to the way that individuals see art are illustrated in *Ways of Seeing*. Berger relates to Bourdieu’s theories by noting that the way that one perceives art is affected by the assumptions that arise from the societal classification of beauty and importance. As such, society distinguishes between what is classified as “good” art and what Berger classifies as “typical” art. He specifically examines the elevation of particular works of art to the status of masterpieces based on a piece’s rarity, market value, and spiritual value. Masterpieces play an important role in the art collection to which they belong. “Such authority as it retains, is distributed over the whole context in which it appears” (Berger 29). Therefore, a painting that is considered to be a masterpiece can legitimize an entire collection even if other components of that collection are merely average. The importance of masterpieces in a collection is supported by Iwona Blazwick and Francis Morris in *Tate Modern: The Handbook*. “The international, civic and social status of the large institution ensures that the art it collects comes to represent a canon, an official pantheon of greatness. All such assertions rest as much on what is absent as what is included” (30). Berger also asserts that art history has failed to differentiate between what makes a masterpiece and what makes a typical piece of art. “Third rate works surround an
outstanding work without any recognition – let alone explanation – of what fundamentally differentiates them” (Berger 88). Thus, masterpieces become mystified in such a way that they become elevated to the status of religious relics that should be worshiped whether one likes the work or not.

John Urry discusses the way that tourists view foreign objects in *The Tourist Gaze*. Urry’s central thesis embodies the argument “for the significance of the gaze to tourist activities. […] There has to be something distinctive to gaze upon, otherwise a particular experience will not function as a tourist experience. There has to be something extraordinary about the gaze” (128). Though these ideas are fairly straightforward, the complexities of the nature of visual perception makes the tourist gaze more complicated, due to the fact that a universal experience does not exist since the cultural makeup that affects the gaze differs from one person to the next. Urry discusses the various types of the tourist gaze, such as the concept of gazing upon objects simply because they are famous for being famous. According to this type of gaze, tourists that visit art museums are motivated not simply by the art but more so by the artists included in a collection. For example, visitors are likely to be drawn to paintings by Leonardo or Rembrandt simply because they have famous names attached to them. Museums capitalize on this type of tourism by advertising such “artistic geniuses” in order to draw in the masses who effectively visit to worship famous artifacts. The capitalization of select artists reverts back to Bourdieu’s theories of cultural capital, as individuals seeking cultural capital are drawn to artists that society has classified as “artistic geniuses.”

Donald Horne, author of *The Great Museum: The Re-Presentation of History*, also draws upon the metaphor through which visiting a museum is equal to visiting a site
of religious worship. The contemporary tourist, according to Horne, is described as a modern pilgrim, carrying guidebooks as devotional texts. What matters is not what people actually see, but more importantly what they are told they are seeing. Therefore, the fame of an object becomes its meaning. According to Horne:

Tourists with little or no knowledge of a painting are expected to pay their respects solely to the fame, costliness and authenticity of these sacred objects remote in their frames. As ‘works of art’ from which tourists must keep their distance, the value of paintings can depend not on their nature, but on their authenticated scarcity. The gap between ‘art’ and the tourist’s own environment is hereby maintained. (16)

By creating the expectation that tourists should pay their respects to the objects housed in museums, a clear separation between tourist and object is created. As soon as art becomes relatable and part of the environment in which it is being consumed, it loses fame and consequently meaning. “Museums have thus been premised upon the aura of the authentic historical artifact, and particularly upon those which are immensely scarce because of the supposed genius of their creator” (Urry 129). Therefore, as museums become more focused on the scarcity of a piece based on the particular artist, visitors are attracted to a museum not because they are interested in seeing art as a whole, but because they are interested in seeing and worshiping the scarcity of an artistic genius.

In *Museums as Status Symbols II: Attaining a State of Having Been*, Robert Kelly notes that there are three fundamental needs of museum visitors, including intellectual, sacred, and social needs. Specifically discussing the concept of the sacred need, Kelly says, “Sacred needs are tied to the role of museums as pilgrimage sites, where visitors are
linked with their ancestral past, as well as to rites of passages conferring social status—
museum visiting being a traditional indicator of cultural good taste” (3). Therefore,
visiting an art museum is not simply to see the works of art within; it also serves the
purpose of solidifying social status by associating what has been defined as good taste
with a given individual. Kelly’s idea of sacred needs recalls Bourdieu’s theories
concerning cultural capital, since visiting an art museum effectively acts as an agent
through which cultural capital is transferred to the individual, which elevates the status of
that particular individual accordingly.

A Discussion of Art

As previously noted (page 5, footnote 2), this study uses the term high art to refer
to the art displayed in the National Gallery, which includes art from Late Medieval and
Renaissance Italy to French Impressionism. The term high art is widely used by social
theorists, such as Pierre Bourdieu and John Berger, and is meant to reference the art of
high culture through which cultural products, such as paintings or sculptures, were held
in high esteem due to the amount of social, cultural, and economic capital attached to
each piece (Bourdieu 250). High art is traditionally centered on the Greco-Roman
tradition and its renewal in the Renaissance onwards when wealthy urban-based societies
trained and financed artists to work under specific aesthetic frameworks. For the purposes
of this study, modern art, as displayed in the Tate Modern, refers to art created between
1900 to the present, including artistic periods from Fauvism to Contemporary. Because
modern art museums often do not present art in the same way as traditional high art
museums, understanding a modern art museum may prove to be more difficult for some
people. In order to fully understand the formation of meaning behind a modern art museum, it is necessary to first gain a general understanding of the differences between high art and modern art and the reasons for such differences. It does not take a trained eye to see that there are fundamental differences between high art and modern art. The differences between Johannes Vermeer’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (Figure 4) and Pablo Picasso’s *Head of a Woman* (Figure 5) are obvious:

![Figure 4: Girl with a Pearl Earring, Johannes Vermeer](image1.png)

![Figure 5: Head of a Woman, Pablo Picasso](image2.png)

The former is a realistic rendering of a woman while the latter is an abstract representation of a woman. According to Pam Meecham and Paul Wood, one piece is not better or worse than the other; rather, the two works of art are simply different methods of creating a similar subject. “It is common place that works of art in the modern period often appear strange and difficult. As a result of this they have frequently been subject to skepticism and ridicule” (Meecham and Wood 1). It is not enough, however, to simply say that modern art is “different.” Such a word of classification does not offer the necessary understanding of the concepts and reasons behind the modern form. Accepting
the differences between modern art and high art is a simple task, but embracing such differences in order to accept modern art as a valid art form is very difficult for many individuals.

One element that may cause many individuals difficulty in understanding modern art is the monetary value assigned to modern pieces. Meecham and Wood explain that in Western society, the monetary value assigned to an object indicates the value of the said object. Because of the lack of understanding towards modern art, the monetary value attributed to a modern piece is confusing for individuals because it would seem to indicate that the quality of modern art is equal to that of high art. Rather, the monetary value given to high art, which most people understand and appreciate, is the same value given to modern art, which fewer people understand and appreciate. “The connection to modern art and money, especially when set against established ideas about art concerning skill, beauty and value, can become mystifying and off-putting” (Meecham and Wood 1). Furthermore, the confusion that results from the connection between art and money is felt more heavily by individuals that do not possess any special knowledge of art and its histories.

The shift from high art to modern art is a direct result of the societal movement towards modernity. Despite the movement towards modernity and eventually towards postmodernity, accepting the shift of artistic ideals and functions can prove to be challenging for many people. Art presented in museums no longer exclusively embodies traditional paintings and sculptures. Instead, art encompasses “paintings and sculptures which do not conform to traditional expectations about one of the most important tasks of works of art – to depict real things in the world – and instead present either distorted
images of recognizable things, or completely abstract relations of shapes, colours and forms” (Meecham and Wood 1). Modernism impacted art in such a way that artists often worked to draw attention to the formal elements of artwork, such as the property of the pigment or the flatness of the two-dimensional surface, rather than creating an illusion of three-dimensionality. Modern art encompasses a diverse body of materials used in assemblage and collage including the incorporation of photographs, advertisements or images from mass media, real objects from the consumer world, and even debris or trash. For many, such a change in material transformed the function of art and the definition of what could be considered art. For others, modern art was not considered art at all.

Perhaps the most important factor in the difficulty of accepting modern art is the fact that modern art challenges the conventional definition of art. It confronts the habitus that embodies personal taste, which is modeled to reflect the taste of high culture. Modern art represents the modern world and challenges the traditional forms of art itself and the conventional forms of response to art (Meecham and Wood 6). Therefore, modern art calls into question the tastes that many individuals have been socialized to possess. In turn, modern art is unsettling because it defies the cultural logic that many people live by. Meecham and Wood argue:

One cannot employ a static set of ideas to look at changing forms of art. Both the ideas out of which art is created, and the ideas in terms of which critics, historians and non-specialist viewers alike interpret it, are in a continual state of development and even conflict. We have to begin by reviewing some of these key ideas; by acknowledging that art can perform different social functions; and perhaps most importantly by
acknowledging that our own perceptions about art need to be treated as provisional. (6)

Therefore, in order to open the mind towards accepting modern art, many people must set aside the tastes that are embodied in their habitus.

The fundamental characteristics of modern art translate into the formation of the modern art museum as evidenced through London’s Tate Modern, which refers to itself as “the national gallery of international modern and contemporary art [that] showcases art from 1900 to the present day” (www.tate.org.uk/modern). Developers of the Tate Modern made a conscious decision to create a space unlike the traditional art museum atmosphere. They wanted a museum that would focus entirely on the art and not on other extraneous details such as the architecture of the building or the décor of the galleries. Museum planners wanted to move away from the traditional museum, which “tended either to create sequences of more or less identical and characterless neutral spaces or to make self-consciously over-designed spaces where art was barely necessary” (Martin 17). Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron were selected based on their willingness to embrace, rather than reject, the existing building because of its connection with industrialization and modernity, which is an important aspect of modern art. Also similar to modern art, Herzog and de Meuron’s architectural plan was concept driven rather than design driven.

The ultimate conception of the Tate Modern was achieved through the conscious effort of moving away from the level of pretention that often exists within the traditional museum. As quoted from Futurist Manifesto by Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti:
Museums: cemeteries! … Identical, surely, in the sinister promiscuity of so many bodies unknown to one another. Museums: public dormitories where one lies forever beside hated or unknown beings. Museums: absurd abattoirs of painters and sculptors ferociously slaughtering each other … (cemeteries of empty exertion, Calvarias of crucified dreams, registries of aborted beginnings!). (Quoted in Blazwick and Morris 29)

In order to escape the “cemeteries of empty exertion,” museum planners had to reexamine the museum space. Therefore, the Tate looks visibly different from museums such as the National Gallery. Each gallery is designed to feel like an independent space that serves the sole purpose of highlighting art. The light fixtures are set up so that natural, rather than artificial, light appears to be primarily at work. The floors are either unpolished oak, which develops a natural patina from the millions of visitors, or polished concrete. The cast iron grids of the air vents are set into the floor. What would appear to be a cold method of decoration is actually intentional so that visitors will focus entirely on the art and will not be swayed by other elements (Martin 21). Art is never viewed in isolation but is instead always experienced in relation to other works of art, translated by “the architectonics of a building and the unconscious choreography of other people” (Blazwick and Morris 31). As such, viewing a piece of art is not as simple as it may seem, as other factors affect the way that visitors perceive art within a museum.

After examining the available literature related to this study and gaining the necessary understanding of the field, I conducted my own research through the collection of data using ethnographic techniques. My methodology consisted of the collection of ethnographic data through participant observation and interviews. Then, using Eileen
Hooper-Greenhill’s theories about museums and their visitors as the main theoretical component of analysis in conjunction with other theories concerning art and artistic taste, my original data was analyzed in order to understand the context of the relationship between personal taste and the museum setting as it pertains to my study.
CHAPTER 3

Research Methods
The purpose of my research was to examine the way in which individuals respond to the presentation of high art within the National Gallery versus modern art within the Tate Modern. Such a problem was best suited for a qualitative design since the research is inductive in that “abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, and theories from details” (Creswell 145) were formed. I acted as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. The data collected through fieldwork focused on meaning in such a way that the quantification of such data was not possible. The data came together to form a case study encompassing visitor responses to the art presented in the National Gallery and Tate Modern as well as my own observations within each museum.

In order to achieve a qualitative study, I used library research as well as three methods of ethnographic, qualitative research to collect my data: participant observation, open-ended interviews, and structured interviews. After collecting the data I evaluated my findings in comparison to the literature discussed in chapter 2.

**Data Collection Procedures**

The first step in the process of collecting data was to gather observational notes through conducting observations as a participant (Creswell 149). I conducted this step while studying abroad in London in 2008. The second step was to find informants with whom I would conduct two sets of ethnographic interviews: an initial open-ended interview about the broad topic of art and museum tourism and a follow-up structured interview about their experiences in each museum. I also performed library based research through the examination of books, articles, and video sources relating to the
broad topics of art and tourism, as well as sources specifically relating to the history of the National Gallery and Tate Modern.

**Participant Observation**

Participant observation, simply put, is a method of research through which the researcher participates in a setting that he or she wants to observe (Babbie 299). In this case, I participated as a museum tourist through visiting the National Gallery and Tate Modern, and observed all aspects of my surroundings including the art in front of me, the way that each museum was organized and decorated, and the actions of other museum visitors. Participant observation is extremely important for this study as a lack of personal experiences within each museum would require me to rely solely on secondhand sources consisting of information found in previously established theories as well as information provided in interviews. With a study such as this, observing each museum was vital in the discussion of context and allowed me to relate to my informants who also visited both museums.

Prior to visiting each museum, I had to examine my own biases towards art since such biases would inevitably affect the way that I consumed each museum. First, I anticipated that I would likely have a different response to each museum as compared to the average visitor because, in addition to being an anthropology major, I am also studying art and art history. As such, I think that I am more open minded to art, especially to the art presented in the Tate Modern because I have gained knowledge of artistic processes and meaning. Because of my previous exposure to art history, I already established my own preferences for art. I tend to prefer high art, such as works by artists
including van Eyck (Figure 6), Botticelli (Figure 7), and Delacroix (Figure 8) to name a few. Though most of my artistic interest rests in high art, I also enjoy many examples of modern art but for very different reasons. I enjoy high art because of its aesthetic value whereas I enjoy modern art for its conceptual value. Modern works by artists such as Rothko (Figure 9), Mondrian (Figure 10), and Braque (Figure 11) are all very intriguing not because of their aesthetics, but because of the concepts that are captured. While I often do not necessarily like a piece of modern art, I equate such feelings to a lack of understanding of the concept rather than writing the piece off as a poor example of art; something that I do not feel that the average person lacking an artistic and art historical education is able to do as easily.
Because the National Gallery and Tate Modern are public art museums, there were no steps involved in gaining access to each museum. My participation within each museum was not disruptive and therefore did not affect museum visitors or staff. Because this was an inductive study, I first visited the museums and then came up with my research question based on my experiences in each museum. The National Gallery and Tate Modern are the best museums for my study because they are so different from each other in the type of art that displayed, as well as each museum’s physical characteristics.

The process of collecting data through participant observation within the National Gallery and Tate Modern involved visiting each museum’s entire collection. Both museums have free admission except for special exhibits. I only toured the museum’s permanent collection that is free to the public because I felt that the temporary exhibits were unnecessary to my study since they do not add to the foundation of each museum’s permanent collection. I visited both the National Gallery and Tate Modern initially as a visitor and not as a researcher. Therefore, I did not take notes but instead concentrated on viewing the museum through the eyes of a typical visitor. After reflecting on my experiences, I returned to each museum to perform more in-depth observations.

At the National Gallery, I began my observations by taking in the surroundings outside of the museum. While walking around the exterior of the museum, I took notes on the visual and architectural aspects of the building and reflected on its setting within London. I then entered the museum and moved from room to room according to the chronological order identified by the museum. I started in the Sainsbury Wing, which contained art from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, and then continued on into the galleries containing sixteenth century paintings, seventeenth century paintings, and
finally eighteenth to twentieth century paintings. As I moved from room to room, I examined each painting, the gallery décor, and the actions of the people viewing the art while recording both descriptive and reflective notes in my journal.

I approached the Tate Modern similarly to the National Gallery. Prior to observing the interior of the Tate Modern, I observed the exterior of the museum, including the museum’s location and architectural elements. When I moved to the interior of the museum, the first major difference that I noticed, however, was that the museum was not organized chronologically and was instead divided based on broad themes. Because there seemed to be no intended “starting point,” I decided to start at the bottom of the museum and work my way up. I weaved in and out of each gallery observing the art, décor, and visitors while taking notes in my journal just as I had done in the National Gallery.

Selection of Informants

Before collecting qualitative data related to the personal experiences within the National Gallery and Tate Modern, I had to find a set of informants who had visited both museums. To gather informants, I utilized the techniques of purposive sampling, which is “a type of nonprobability sampling in which the units to be observed are selected on the basis of the researcher’s judgment about which ones will be the most useful or representative” (Babbie 193). I selected six informants that had visited both museums and had the capabilities to intelligently discuss their experiences. I met all six of my informants while studying abroad in London. Four of my informants, Nicole, Cora,
Megan, and Robert,¹ are currently seniors at Pacific University. Nicole and Robert are biology majors, Megan is an exercise science major, and Cora is majoring in creative writing. My fifth informant, Julia, graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 2009 with a degree in sociology. Patrick, my final informant, is originally from Northern Ireland but currently lives in London. He graduated from St. Mary’s in 2009 with a degree in Geography and Health, Nutrition, and Exercise. All informants are between the ages of 22 and 23 years old. I felt that it was important to gather informants that were of a similar age and educational background because both characteristics have the ability to affect the perception of art as indicated by several theorists. I tried to keep a gender balance in my informants, though I ended up with four females and two males. I ultimately decided that it was more important to gather informants that I knew would be helpful and insightful in answering my questions, rather than gathering informants to fulfill a gender quota.

Open-Ended Interviews

After gathering informants, I conducted an initial open-ended interview consisting of four questions related to the general topic of art.² An open-ended interview is one in which informants are “asked to provide his or her own answers” (Babbie 256). The purpose of this interview was to understand each informant’s attitudes towards the subject of art and museum tourism. This interview provided insight into each informant’s artistic preferences and the language that they use to describe art and museums. The open-ended interviews with my informants that are currently Pacific students were

¹ In order to protect the identity of each informant, all persons interviewed have been assigned a pseudonym.
² See Appendix B for interview questions.
conducted in person while recording the answers given on a tape recorder. I explained the study and the research question, obtained consent, asked if they had any questions, and then asked each interview question using appropriate probes when necessary. The recordings of each interview were later transcribed to be used for analysis. For the informants that do not live in the area, the process was the same except that the interviews were conducted over the phone. While conducting interviews over the phone is not as ideal as a face-to-face interview, I felt that it was the best available option since interviews via e-mail would not be as detailed or revealing as spoken responses.

**Structured Interviews**

After completing the open-ended interview with each informant and transcribing each interview, I then contacted my informants for a follow-up structured interview. The structured interview consisted of three sections addressing experiences in the National Gallery and Tate Modern, opinions and descriptions of high and modern art specifically, and the overall interest and involvement in art on behalf of each informant. The purpose of this interview was to discuss each informant’s opinions of the art relating to each museum, as well as their opinions of each museum as a tourist attraction. The data collected from the structured interview directly related to my research question of how context affects artistic taste as seen through experiences in the National Gallery and Tate Modern. Prior to performing the interview, I reminded informants of the study and the research question, obtained consent, asked if they had any questions, and then asked each interview question. The interviews with the four Pacific students were performed in person while the interviews with the other two informants were conducted over the phone.

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3 See Appendix C for interview questions.
phone. All interviews were recorded on a tape recorder, which were eventually transcribed to be used for analysis.

**Analysis of Data**

Data analysis occurred simultaneously with the acts of “data collection, data interpretation, and narrative reporting writing” (Creswell 153). The ethnographic techniques of open-ended and structured interviews as well as my own personal observations of each museum provided insight into specific issues that directly related to my primary research question. Using Eileen Hooper-Greenhill’s theories relating to museum tourism in addition to other theoretical sources including John Berger and Pierre Bourdieu, I analyzed the collected data in order to formulate a comprehensive examination of the patterns found in formation of artistic taste as related to the context of museums.
Because this study examines the nature in which visitors respond to art presented in the museum space, firsthand experiences in the National Gallery and Tate Modern were a vital component in my research. Physically standing in the presence of art and experiencing the unique environment created at each museum cannot compare to simply seeing the works of art as well as the architecture in a book. That being said, the participant observation aspect of my research was invaluable. In addition, the ethnographic interviews that I completed also acted as an extremely important resource in the study. After visiting the museums, I developed theories of my own relating to the relationship between context and artistic taste, but my opinions are certainly not all-encompassing of collective society. As such, discussing such a relationship with others was necessary in order to create a better framework for analyzing the primary research question.

Discussing art and museum experiences with my informants was both interesting and rewarding. Each of my informants offered insight into ideas that I had not considered previously, causing me to constantly rethink and reposition myself within the complexities of this study. While the participant observation acted as a strong foundation, the ethnographic interviews acted as the force that propelled the study. It is important to note that I only performed interviews with six informants. While my study does examine the relationship between context and artistic taste, it does so through an extremely small sample size. As a pilot study investigating the complex relationship for such a segmented group (college students), the results of this study cannot at this time encompass larger society. However, the groundwork for a larger study has been laid which will likely lead to further findings in a future study.
Participant Observation

As a lover of art, conducting research within art museums was exciting and enjoyable, especially within such high caliber museums as the National Gallery and Tate Modern. I began my observations at Tate Modern in the middle of a chilly Sunday afternoon in December. Before I entered the museum, I observed the atmosphere and happenings outside. Tate Modern (Figure 12) is located on the Thames near such notable landmarks as St. Paul’s Cathedral, which can be easily accessed by the Millennium Bridge, and Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre. The area overall was fairly quiet and calm as people steadily flowed in and out of the Tate and across the Millennium Bridge. Despite the building’s massive and imposing exterior, many people strolled along the riverfront, ignoring the museum altogether. I did not find the exterior façade, which did not look like a typical museum, to be particularly aesthetically appealing.

Figure 12: Tate Modern as seen from the Millennium Bridge
Upon entering the museum, I found myself standing in the Turbine Hall (Figure 13) which is a very large, open space with a concrete ramp that ascends downward from the west entrance.¹ From the point of view of the Turbine Hall, I saw the different levels of the museum including the museum shop, café, and windows into the galleries on the third, fourth, and fifth floors that protrude from the side towards the center. The windows on the ceiling allow for natural light to enter the space, enhancing the immensity of the hall. In the middle of the hall stood a giant sculpture of a black spider with painted bunk bed frames at the base of the spider. The temporary exhibit, called “TH.2058” by French artist Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, symbolized an apocalyptic vision of London in the year 2058. Many people sat or laid on the bunk beds, reading or writing in a notebook. People who appeared to be having a conversation also sat on several of the frames. While there were people who wandered around to examine the spider and bunk bed scene, the majority of people seemed to be unaffected by the unusual art installation.

After taking in the Turbine Hall and spider exhibit, I made my way to the third floor, which was identified on the map as “Material Gestures,” to the Weston Gallery containing contemporary paintings (Figure 14). The gallery contained two very

¹ For a floor plan of the Tate Modern, see Appendix D.
uncomfortable wooden benches which were not occupied by anyone. The wooden floors looked scuffed and creaked as visitors slowly strolled from painting to painting. The walls were painted with an off-white color and several metal air vents bordered the base of the walls. The room contained a wide variety of pieces dated from 1972 to 2006. Most of the paintings were large in size and were created using other media besides simply paint, such as ink, paper, polymer, salt, and gold leaf. Some of the paintings exhibited included *The Hedonistic Imperative* by Toby Ziegler, *No Woman, No Cry* by Chris Ofili, *Loa* by Albert Oehlen, and *Bird in Hand* by Ellen Gallegher. At the entrance to the gallery, an explanatory paragraph was posted on the wall which discussed the works inside as being reactionary, allowing for the reinvention of painting. The common theme of the gallery appeared to be a criticism of the media relating to race, censorship, and family living.

I sat on one of the benches near the center of the room to observe people interact with the art. People on the whole did not speak over a hushed whisper. Some moved slowly along the perimeter of the room while others rushed through, barely glancing at any of the art. Of all the paintings in the room, the pieces that were significantly larger drew the most attention. Furthermore, the paintings with clearer subjects attracted more visitors, especially those which depicted the human form in some way. When people did stop to stare at a painting, they moved extremely close to the work and were able to linger for a while since the room was not very crowded. Instead of having museum workers

Figure 14: The Weston Gallery in Tate Modern
posted at each doorway as many others museums do, I only noticed one museum worker stroll in and out of the room a couple of times.

Next, I moved to the fifth floor of the museum to the room titled “Cubism, Futurism, Vorticism,” which was held within the section of the museum called “States of Flux.” A large plaque of information was posted at the entrance to the gallery, explaining the history of Cubism, Futurism, and Vorticism, and the effect that each movement had on art and society. Some of the paintings displayed included George Braque’s *Clarinet and Bottle of Rum on a Mantelpiece* (Figure 15), Pablo Picasso’s *Seated Nude*, and Albert Gliezes’ *Painting*. The gallery felt extremely open, as the ceiling was particularly high, which allowed for the display of many paintings. One wall notably contained several layers of paintings stacked unevenly while the center of the room contained sculptural pieces. Unlike the “Material Gestures” gallery, people seemed to be in much more of a hurry, which surprised me because this room contained art by more well known artists such as Braque and Picasso. Again, when people did stop to study a piece, the most popular paintings were larger and depicted clearer subjects.

The final gallery that I observed in depth was “Around Minimalism” located in the “Idea and Object” wing of the Tate. Like “Cubism, Futurism, Vorticism,” “Around Minimalism” was a very open space with high ceilings. Because of the large, open space and stone floors, the room had a noticeable echo. The room contained large sculptural
forms and installation pieces, such as *Untitled* by Donald Judd (Figure 16). Information was posted at the entrance explaining the concept of Minimalism, which seeks to create art that is an independent object from the world and is defined by its physical characteristics rather than as an object of symbolism. As such, the art within this room did not feature a traditional subject but instead highlighted material, form and scale, and structural principles. Of all the galleries I walked through in the Tate Modern, this gallery was nearly empty. A few people walked in the room only to quickly glance at the art before walking out. Judd’s *Untitled*, which was by far the largest piece in the room, was barely noticed. The patterns that I had established in previous galleries, such as larger pieces gaining the most attention and visitors pausing at certain works, did not seem to apply to this room.

Immediately after completing my participant observation fieldwork in the Tate Modern, I proceeded to the National Gallery. Just as I had at the Tate, I first took note of the environment outside of the National Gallery, which was noticeably different. The National Gallery is located within Trafalgar Square (Figure 17), which at the time was filled with both heavy traffic and pedestrian activity, and is within walking distance of
Leicester Square, Chinatown, Piccadilly Circus, and St. James’s Park. Unlike the Tate Modern, the façade of the building looked like a typical historical art museum, featuring a large dome, columns, decorative details, and sculptures. While very large, the building looked natural within its environment. Entering the museum felt like an ascension into some kind of ancient palace. Visitors first climb steps to enter the museum and then continue up a marble staircase to get to the art displayed. The warm colors and rich decorations, such as multicolor marble, columns, dark wood floors, and decorative wallpaper, were very inviting (Figure 18). From my point of view, it looked like I would expect: like a fancy English gallery. Each room had several antique looking couches to sit on. Museum workers stood at the entrance to each individual gallery. Unlike the Tate Modern, the museum was organized by time period and genre. All rooms were labeled with numbers allowing visitors to orient themselves in relation to the map which made it easier to see the museum “in order.”

First, I observed the Wohol Room, containing Venetian art created from 1530-1600 (number 9 on the map). The walls of the gallery, which were covered with olive green fabric and gold stitching details, contained very large paintings with ornate gold

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2 For a floor plan of the National Gallery, see Appendix E.
frames. Each painting was located along a continuous line across the room, making the space appear very uniform. Notable paintings within the room include *The Adoration of the Kings* by Paolo Veronese, *Christ Washing the Feet of His Disciples* by Jacopo Tintoretto, and *The Good Samaritan* by Jacopo Bassano. The information provided about the art displayed focused largely on the advancement of style by particular artists. It seemed as if the focus was placed more heavily on the artist and style rather than the meaning of a particular piece. The room, which was larger compared to other rooms nearby, was extremely crowded. I noticed many people walk slowly along the perimeter in order to see each painting up close while others strolled down the center of the room, looking left and right to see all of the works. The couches in the center of the room were almost completely occupied. While standing within the gallery, the red walls of the neighboring room were visible and inviting, helping to maintain a flow of movement. While all paintings were labeled with the title, artist, date, medium, and place of origin, some also contained a short summary of what the painting depicted. Each painting was also assigned a number that visitors with audio guides could select in order to hear additional information.

Figure 18: The interior of the National Gallery
Next, I observed the Yves Saint Laurent Room (number 18 on the map), which contained art from France during the seventeenth century. The décor of the room was almost identical to the previous room that I surveyed, with the exception of the burnt red wall color. The room largely contained paintings depicting people, such as *The Finding of Moses* by Nicolas Poussin (Figure 19) and *The Four Ages of Man* by Valentin de Boulogne. Overall, this particular gallery was less crowded, allowing visitors to examine the art more closely. Many visitors carried audio guides and stopped often to listen to the commentary. The written information explaining the contents of the room focused on the historical aspects of French painting during the time period, highlighting the French preference to emphasize the elegance and clarity of a composition.

In the section of the museum devoted to eighteenth to early twentieth century paintings, I observed the gallery devoted to Van Gogh and Cezanne (room 45 on the map). The overall look of the room was very different than the previous galleries I had seen, which made sense because of the different style of art on display (Impressionism and Post-Impressionism). The walls were painted dark gray with ornate crown molding on the ceiling and the same rich hardwood flooring filled the room. Subjects of the art included people, nature, and still life scenes. *A Wheatfield with Cypresses* by Vincent van Gogh and *Hillside in Provence* by Paul Cezanne were among the paintings hanging
neatly on the walls. Of all of the rooms that I observed, it was by far the most crowded. As I watched people moving in and out of the room, I noticed that almost everyone immediately headed directly to the crowded van Gogh paintings first. Van Gogh’s paintings, particularly *Sunflowers* (Figure 20), were very difficult to see because of the persistent crowds that stood in front of each painting. People moved very slowly from painting to painting, stopping to examine most, if not all, of the pieces. The room was no where near as quiet as the other rooms had been, partly because of the fact that it was more crowded, and also because it appeared that more people were discussing the paintings. I saw small groups talk while pointing at different details of each work as they moved from painting to painting. Other nearby galleries, which included works by artists such as Monet, were also popular but this room appeared to be the busiest and the loudest.

As I left the museum I reflected back on the experiences that I had both in the Tate Modern and National Gallery, and how strikingly different one was from the other. The Tate overall was difficult to interpret and did not feel overly inviting to me. However, the layout and décor of the museum seemed to fit the art. The National Gallery was much easier to understand. The layout of the museum was clear, as each room was numbered so that visitors could move from room to room in order, the paintings were hung in an orderly fashion, and the décor matched the rich detail of the paintings. While

Figure 20: *Sunflowers*, Vincent van Gogh
observing the general movements of museum visitors was important for my research, discussing art and experiences within both museums was a necessary component in order to move beyond speculative observation. As artistic taste varies from one individual to the next, I wondered how others responded to high art within an ornate museum, as compared to modern art within an austere looking museum.

**Ethnographic Interviews**

In order to attempt to understand the relationship between artistic taste and the museum, I conducted two sets of ethnographic interviews with six informants that I met while studying abroad at St. Mary’s University College in London, including Nicole, Cora, Megan, Robert, Julia, and Patrick. Of the six informants, only Patrick and Julia have studied art history in school. Furthermore, Megan and Patrick were the only informants that have taken studio art classes. All six informants have visited both the National Gallery and Tate Modern. The average time spent in each museum was approximately an hour and a half to two hours, although Nicole noted spending between four and five hours in the National Gallery and Julia noted only spending forty-five minutes in the Tate Modern.

After obtaining consent, I performed two sets of interviews with each informant. The first interview consisted of six open-ended questions that addressed the broad topic of art and museums. The second interview consisted of three parts. First, I asked fourteen questions about experiences in the National Gallery and Tate Modern. Some questions pertained to their overall opinions of each museum while others were more direct questions of whether or not the museum context affected the way they viewed the art. For
the second set of questions, I chose a piece of high art that is on display at the National Gallery, a piece of modern art that is on display at the Tate Modern, and an Impressionist painting that is owned by the National Gallery but was on loan to the Tate Modern when I visited, and gave a copy of each painting to the informant. I then asked five questions about each painting so that I could see how they described specific pieces of art and whether or not they identified each piece as belonging to the National Gallery or Tate Modern. The third section consisted of questions related to the personal background of each informant including questions concerning their artistic background and interest in art.

Open-Ended Interviews

The first topic covered in the interview concerned the ways in which each respondent described modern and high art. Megan, Cora, Patrick, and Nicole collectively described modern art as being “confusing,” “cold,” “sparse,” and “just very weird stuff.” “ Lots of generations don’t appreciate it and it’s hard for me to think of it as art,” said Megan. Cora described the lack of appreciation along similar lines, even saying that modern art is a type of art that does not seem to have a purpose. Conversely, Robert and Julia described modern art in a more positive manner, using such words as “new,” “novel,” and “innovative.” Julia, who spoke very highly of modern art, described it as “something new and invigorating from this time period that can capture the essence of what an individual community or group is going through.” When discussing high art, Megan, Cora, Patrick, and Nicole indicated that high art is easier to appreciate and to enjoy, as it is a more realistic interpretation of reality that seeks to “capture a particular
moment instead of taking something and trying to make meaning out of nothing,” said Nicole. High art was described as being “rich,” “detailed,” “classical,” and “more cultured.” Furthermore, Megan, Cora, Patrick, and Nicole also felt that high art takes more time and effort to create. “[High art] is more of what I would define art in general to be. Whenever someone says art, I only imagine paintings, like landscapes or portraits,” said Patrick. Julia and Robert, who preferred modern art, took a different approach in describing high art. Julia remarked on the structure of high art, saying that creativity was stifled because artists had to put individual personalization aside in order to fulfill a particular style or technique.

When asked to describe “good” and “bad” art, each informant echoed the statements made in the first question. The group collectively described good art as being aesthetically pleasing and showing evidence of hard work and technical skill. Nicole described good art as being “beautiful and colorful with defined lines and subtle blending of color that challenges you cognitively so that you have to come up with your own interpretation.” Whatever artistic preference each individual had, the importance of being able to connect with art and understand the meaning of a particular piece was said to be essential in defining good art. “Whether it’s high art or modern art, if it’s something that you can connect to in any aspect, I think it’s good art,” said Robert. Bad art, on the other hand, was described as being art that lacks meaning in such a way that it does not make sense. Such confusing art that fails to spark a connection with a viewer was not simply described as being bad art but instead was questioned as to whether it should be considered art at all. For example, when asked how he would describe bad art, Patrick
said, “Bad art is the stuff that I really can’t understand and that I really can’t see how it can be defined as art.”

After discussing the dichotomy of good and bad art, I asked each informant to discuss who they thought was responsible for determining what art is good or bad. Two different approaches to answering this question emerged. The first was that good and bad art are defined by the individual based on their own unique set of artistic preferences. “Each individual person has their own taste and depending on how an art piece fits in with their tastes or style, it’s good or bad to that particular individual. To each their own,” said Julia. The second approach to answering the question credited the classification of good and bad art to museums and their curators based on what is and is not displayed. Furthermore, a museum distinguishes good and bad art based on who visits and who does not. If a museum is highly visited by the “right” people then the work on display is validated as being good. “The National Gallery has so much foot traffic and is in such a great area. It’s really easy to appreciate it because everyone else does. I heard people bash the Tate Modern and it made me doubt it,” commented Megan.

As previously indicated by responses in earlier questions, Megan, Cora, Patrick, and Nicole reiterated their preferences towards high art while Robert and Julia echoed their preferences towards modern art when asked about what kind of art they liked. Patrick added, however, that while he preferred high art to modern art, he also liked to see modern approaches, referencing British contemporary artist Banksy (Figure 21). Despite everyone’s preference towards either high art or modern art, the group communally said that a good museum contains artifacts of the past as well as the present.
When asked about the necessary characteristics required in creating a good museum, some of the common responses described a good museum as being clearly laid out with defined periods or genres, having an ample amount of information to read on site as well as information to take away, being reasonably priced, and having plenty of places to sit. Also, Julia mentioned the importance of physical size in saying that museums should be large enough that visitors have an adequate amount of space to integrate into the museum environment. According to the group, the possibility to interact with elements in order to form a deeper connection with a museum was another important element of a good museum. Such a response echoed previous indications of the importance of being able to connect with a piece of art, causing the viewer to appreciate a given piece in a way that would have otherwise been very difficult. “When I see art, I like having something describing it to me; you know, interpreting it. I like to have that background knowledge. A museum should be a connection between me and the artist so that I can understand why they’re expressing what they are expressing on canvas or in a sculpture. I found that having such a connection provided me with a much more profound experience,” said Cora.

The initial open-ended interviews gave me a good understanding as to where each of my informants stood in relation to art and museums. Some of the common themes that carried over into the second interview were discussions of meaning, appreciation, and
connection with art. An interesting idea brought up by several different informants concerned the acceptance of a piece as a valid example of art. Nicole, Cora, Patrick, and Megan indicated that the National Gallery contained valid examples of art while the validity of the pieces within the Tate Modern was questionable. Instead of thinking of the art in the Tate Modern as good or bad, they had a hard time even considering them as works of art.

**Structured Interviews**

The structured interview was divided into three sections: the first addressing each informant’s experiences in the National Gallery and Tate Modern, the second addressing the ways that each informant described high art and modern art specifically, and the third addressing each informant’s interest and experience with art. The first question asked for the reasons behind visiting the National Gallery and Tate Modern. As a group, the main reasons for visiting the museums related to the location, the museums’ inclusion on suggested points of interest in travel books, and free admission. Notably absent among the reasons for visiting was to see the art on display, with the exception of Patrick who said that he went to Tate Modern to see “the most popular art on display.” In addition to the Tate Modern being in an interesting location and being free, Megan also “heard it was weird and that it wasn’t really what you would call art,” which effectively incited her to go see what others claimed was not art.

When asked to discuss general reactions to the National Gallery and Tate Modern, Megan, Cora, and Nicole discussed the positive aspects of the National Gallery and the negative aspects of Tate Modern, while Robert and Julia discussed the positive aspects of
the Tate Modern and the negative aspects of National Gallery. Even though Patrick had previously indicated his preference towards high art, he discussed what he liked about both museums. In addressing specific aspects of the National Gallery that they liked, Nicole mentioned some of the qualities of the actual museum including its book store, gift shop, floor plan, and the availability of benches in each room.

An important aspect of the National Gallery that both Patrick and Cora mentioned was the physical characteristics of the building itself, which they said allowed for a more enjoyable experience. “The National Gallery was more impressive as a building for a start. It feels like an authentic type museum in the sense that it’s a lot more historical and the actual building has nice architecture,” said Patrick. Patrick’s comment is notable because he seems to indicate that the actual building helps to justify the overall quality and validity of the museum. Cora shared similar sentiment in saying, “I liked not only the art inside but I found the building to be really artistic as well.” Also, Nicole noted that the National Gallery’s size positively impacted her opinion of the museum. “It made it feel like there was something really big to it because you couldn’t see it all in a day.” Such a relationship between the building that holds art and the art itself is important in making the argument that context affects artistic taste.

In relation to the negative characteristics of the National Gallery, everyone said that the main aspect that they disliked were the crowds of the museum. Because the museum was so crowded, it was difficult to move close to paintings, especially the more popular paintings, in order to adequately evaluate them. As such, if or when it was possible to see a painting, it was hard to do so without feeling a sense of hurry as the crowds started to impede on each individual’s space. Other than the crowds, Julia
discussed the fact that her inability to relate to the art inside of the National Gallery caused her to dislike the museum as a whole. “It was insightful and informative but it wasn’t anything that I was necessarily wowed by,” she said.

In regards to the positive aspects of Tate Modern, some of the responses articulated that the Tate was new, stimulating, and contained art that was unique. “The Tate Modern was really cool in the fact that it has some really unique stuff, especially in the Turbine Hall where they have special displays. I like the fact that it has a bit more of a fun side and has stuff that you wouldn’t actually expect,” said Patrick. Julia shared a similar opinion in saying that the Tate Modern has a wider variety of art available. “In my opinion, the Tate Modern was more interesting and had more to offer than the National Gallery. I think that it had a lot of space to develop your own thoughts and interpretations of pieces that were there,” she said. Even though Megan does not typically enjoy modern art, she said that she enjoyed seeing the variety at the Tate Modern. “I liked seeing what people call art because there were some things that I would have never called art,” she said.

When asked about dislikes towards the Tate Modern, responses split between disliking the art displayed and the museum itself. In relation to disliking the art, Nicole and Cora talked about their failure to connect with the art displayed as a reason for disliking the museum. “I couldn’t connect to the art. I feel like half of the stuff there was something I could do in ten minutes. I just couldn’t appreciate the artist taking the time to do any of it,” said Nicole. Similarly, Cora said, “some of the modern art that I saw at the Tate was very difficult to look at and to perceive. I found things to be really random. It didn’t mean as much as an art museum.” Nicole and Cora also had negative things to say
about the physical characteristics of Tate Modern. Cora discussed the building’s original use as a power station and said that knowing what it used to be negatively impacted her experience. “The Tate Modern had art on the inside and felt safe but I got a chill on the back of my neck thinking about what it had formerly been. It conjured up scary images.”

Both Nicole and Robert disliked the layout of the Tate, which they found it to be confusing, thus causing a lack of overall flow. Robert said that because of the lack of flow, he did not see all of the art because it was easy to overlook some of the rooms. Even Julia, who spoke very highly of her experience at Tate Modern, mentioned that the way that the museum was laid out created wasted space, making it difficult to navigate through the entire museum without missing anything. In reference to the way that the museum was decorated, Nicole indicated that her opinion of the Tate was negatively affected. “I didn’t like the Tate Modern as much because it was less warm than the National Gallery. There’s so much wasted space with these tall walls of cement. There wasn’t much art on the walls. You couldn’t find what you were looking for because it was divided among four stories in separate areas of an entire huge building. It just wasn’t that fun.”

After asking each informant to recall their experiences in each museum, I asked whether or not they would recommend the National Gallery and the Tate Modern to others. While Nicole and Cora endorsed only the National Gallery, Patrick, Megan, Robert, and Julia would recommend both museums, but for different reasons. “I’d say go to the National Gallery because it has some amazing pieces. Go to the Tate Modern just to see what’s currently on display at the Turbine Hall because it’s something completely different,” said Patrick.
According to Eilean Hooper-Greenhill and other theorists, one of the aspects necessary in facilitating a good museum is the ability for visitors to learn. When asked if they learned anything from the museums, no one mentioned learning anything specific in regards to factual knowledge, but everyone said that they learned more about themselves in relation to their own artistic taste. Megan and Robert learned that just because something does not seem like it should be considered art, it is in fact art that can be displayed and appreciated. Patrick and Julia gained a new appreciation for high art while Cora learned that she does not enjoy modern art. “After visiting the National Gallery, I definitely appreciate the level of skill and detail that went into the types of high art,” said Patrick.

Besides the differences in the physical characteristics of each building and the type of art on display, another huge difference is in the location. The National Gallery, which sits in Trafalgar Square, was described as being “very beautiful,” “high traffic,” “cultured,” “busy,” and “more inviting.” “The location for the National Gallery is fitting because it’s in the middle of all that history in central London,” said Robert. The museum’s location helps its overall appeal in the sense that it is convenient, as it is near several Tube stations and is in close proximity of other popular attractions. However, according to the group, such a convenient location also hurts the museum in that it causes more crowds. The Tate Modern, which is located on the Thames in Southwark, was described as being “more of a modern scene,” “calmer,” and “quieter.” The location is beneficial to the museum because it creates a modern atmosphere that visitors will feel prior to entering the Tate. However, the museum’s location is a detriment in that it is not as central as Trafalgar Square. “It’s a beautiful area that was much calmer compared to
being in central London but there wasn’t as many opportunities to go to other places,” said Julia. “If you want to go to the Tate you have to put it on your itinerary,” said Cora.

After asking a series of questions about each informant’s experiences in the National Gallery and Tate Modern, I directly asked if they felt that the way that each museum was decorated affected the way that they viewed the art. All six of my informants said that yes, the decorations of the museum made a difference because they created an environment that either helps or hinders the enjoyment of art. Robert mentioned that the environment created within each museum complimented the art. Furthermore, Megan pointed out the industrial setting of the Tate Modern as creating a modern atmosphere conducive to view modern art while the overall antique finish helped her appreciate the art in the National Gallery. Cora felt that the openness of the Tate Modern created a difficult environment to reflect on the art, whereas the National Gallery was “elaborately carved. All of the rooms were painted very beautiful pastel colors. There’s a lot of wood so there’s a very warm cast to it. In lots of rooms there were frosted skylights and a lot of natural light. I felt that was very conducive to some place where I’d like to spend a lot of time.” The most notable support for the argument that museum decoration affected art perception came from Nicole. “Tate Modern wasn’t decorated, or it was really strangely decorated. I think that because Tate Modern didn’t have any embellishments to it, it felt cold and dry and that’s how I envision the art. When I think back to the National Gallery I envision warmth and lots of light. I remember that each little room was cute and it was color coded and organized well in order for me to enjoy the art more.”
In relation to the previous question, I asked for everyone’s opinion concerning why the National Gallery and the Tate Modern are decorated so differently. According to Patrick, Cora, and Nicole, the décor of each museum reflects and complements the type of art on display. In Robert’s opinion, the Tate Modern is decorated more plainly so that viewers will not be influenced by anything but the art itself, while the National Gallery is decorated ornately so that it will transport viewers back to when the art was created. “In the Tate Modern you’re trying to focus in on the art itself while in the National Gallery you’re seeing the surrounding scene of things. In the National Gallery you see a series of paintings by the same artist or a particular genre from the same time period and you remove yourself from 2008 so that you get what it was back then and how they saw it. In the Tate Modern, you’re living now but you’re trying to see it through the artistic eye of the artist. The ornate walls shouldn’t be the main focus of the art. It should be the color or lines of the piece that you’re focusing on.”

I asked everyone to imagine a scenario in which a work from either the Tate Modern or National Gallery was taken out of the museum that it is normally displayed and moved to the other museum. Would such a switch change the way that the art is evaluated? If a piece from the National Gallery was moved to the Tate Modern, Megan felt that she would not think of it as highly. “To me, the things in the Tate Modern aren’t as famous,” she said. Cora on the other hand would just want to know why the switch occurred, as she could not imagine the reasoning for such a change. Julia, who does not enjoy high art, said that her opinion would not change. However, if she saw a high art painting in the Tate Modern, she would choose not to spend time in that area. If a painting from the Tate Modern was moved to the National Gallery, answers differed as to
whether or not their opinion of the piece would change. Cora again expressed her need to know why the painting had been moved, but she also noted that she would have paid more attention to the piece because it must have been moved for a reason. Robert and Nicole felt that the display of a piece of modern art in the National Gallery would have been completely out of place. “I probably would appreciate it less because it would seem childish,” said Robert.

For the second section of the interview, I gave everyone a copy of a piece of high art, modern art, and an Impressionist painting that has been on display at both the National Gallery and Tate Modern.3 I then asked for general comments, whether or not they recognized the painting, and what museum they thought it might be displayed in. The first painting, Caravaggio’s The Supper of Emmaus, was an example of a high art painting that is on display at the National Gallery. Some of the general comments made about the piece were that it was “dark,” “very realistic,” and that it “shows emotion.” “It’s almost like a photograph. It captures everything and doesn’t take any detail out,” noted Patrick. While no one recognized that specific painting, everyone identified it as belonging to the National Gallery. However, Megan said that she could imagine it being in either museum, but that it most likely belonged to the National Gallery.

The second piece, Picasso’s Bowl of Fruit, Violin and Bottle, was an example of a modern art painting displayed in the Tate Modern. The group most commonly noted the painting’s essence of confusion. Robert and Nicole said that they did not like the piece as much because they could not understand it, while Megan and Patrick were content with not being able to understand it. However, the group generally liked the use of color. Also, Megan expressed that she liked it because she could relate to the painting’s chaotic

3 See section 2 of Appendix C for these images.
nature. “It feels like my life sometimes,” she said. Again, no one recognized the piece but everyone identified it as belonging to the Tate Modern with the exception of Megan, who said it belonged to the National Gallery. It seemed that Megan identified it as belonging to the National Gallery because she liked the piece and in her mind, the National Gallery houses art that she likes. Nicole, on the other hand, dismissed the painting simply because it is displayed in the Tate Modern saying, “If it was in the Tate Modern, I definitely don’t like it.”

The third piece, Monet’s *Water-Lilies*, is an Impressionist painting that belongs to the National Gallery but has been on loan at the Tate Modern. Everyone instantly recognized both the painting’s title and artist. Some of the descriptions included “calming,” “beautiful,” and “lovely.” “I think it’s definitely high quality and has a lot of detail in it even though it’s not as sharp as the other paintings,” said Patrick. Robert, however, felt that the painting was “bland” and lacked elements that might make it more interesting. Everyone felt that the painting was an example of high art that would be found on display at the National Gallery. It was notable, however, that Robert felt that the work could be displayed at either one of the museums and he considered the work to be modern.

The final section of the structured interview contained questions about each informant’s interest and experience with art. As mentioned previously, only Patrick and Julia have studied art history in school while only Megan and Patrick have taken art classes. Everyone noted that they are interested in art and that they appreciate art, although they do not create art. Patrick said that he considers his interest in art above average and especially enjoys photography. Julia once again reiterated her interest in
modern art in saying that she likes to see new ideas and points of view in nontraditional art. On the whole, the group indicated that they do not often visit museums except when traveling. Nicole, however, said that she does enjoy going to small galleries on occasion.

**Discussion**

The data collected from my informants proved to be very insightful and informative. In relation to the literature utilized for this study, the data supported several previously established theories, especially the research based on museum tourism. For example, responses given by informants support the argument that the total experience within the museum will be remembered, as theorized by Eilean Hooper-Greenhill. As such, my informants not only recalled the art that they saw but they also spoke often about physical characteristics of the museums, museum services such as gift shops or book stores, how each museum made them feel, the surrounding area of the museums, and so on. The formation of overall opinion pertaining to either the National Gallery or Tate Modern was influenced by many factors, some of which I had not previously considered.

In addition, John Berger’s theory that a masterpiece has the power to legitimate a collection was also supported by my informants. Many of the comments made by those who preferred high art at the National Gallery indicated that such support comes in part because of the established significance of the collection. The National Gallery houses very historical pieces of art that have been classified overtime as “masterpieces,” some more so than others, while the Tate Modern houses modern art that has not yet established a similar high regard due to its relatively short history. Evidence supporting
theories pertaining to art as items of worship made by Berger, Donald Horne, and John Urry were not very prominent among my informants, but based on the data collected during participant observation, I found that people do in fact “worship” pieces of art. I suggest that “worshiping” art might account for why people are so attracted to larger pieces because they think that they must be more important, causing them to “worship” them more than others.

While Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of habitus are very important in the discussion of the formation of artistic taste, they were not directly supported by my data as much as I had originally thought. Had I asked questions that worked towards uncovering the habitus of each of my informants, the application of such theories may have been more definitive. Furthermore, the data collected did not show each informant’s possession of social, cultural, or economic capital and in turn could not support Bourdieu’s theories of the way in which individual’s organize their behaviors in fields. However, his theories were interesting concepts to measure informant responses against and would make for a good springboard into a future study. Nick Merriman, who draws on Bourdieu’s theories in his argument that the ability to understand a piece of art is equated with the possession of cultural capital and without such an ability a museum can seem uninviting, also makes an interesting point; however, in relation to the scope of this study, it is difficult to adequately support such a theory. Had I researched a larger sample size with participants of varying social classes, the results would reveal other findings.
CHAPTER 5

Conclusion
The relationship between artistic taste and the way that an individual evaluates art displayed within a museum setting is extremely complex. Understanding the connection between preexisting artistic preferences, responses to art in a museum, and responses to a museum itself is an exceedingly difficult task. Despite the difficulties of understanding such complex relationships, this study worked to make sense of art tourism by specifically focusing on my experiences as a researcher in the National Gallery and Tate Modern, as well as the experiences of six college-age informants that visited both museums. Through the analysis of secondary sources researched along with the collection of original data, including participant observation and ethnographic interviews, this study argues that museum context does in fact influence the way in which visitors perceive and evaluate displayed art. However, the way that visitors evaluate art is also highly influenced by preexisting artistic preferences. Therefore, an individual is influenced by their artistic taste in evaluating art, which is further enhanced by the context that such art is displayed.

In *Museums and their Visitors*, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill argues that when an individual visits a museum, they do so not simply to see a collection of artifacts but for the experience of the museum as a whole. In turn, the entire experience is remembered, which consists of the artifacts on display, the availability of educational opportunities, and the availability of tourism services that allow for a comfortable experience. Such a claim was supported by my informants, who discussed the impact of certain elements of the museums on the overall experience, such as the availability of information, availability of places to sit, the quality of the gift shop, and so on. A museum must be both entertaining and educational in order for visitors to leave with a good experience.
Hooper-Greenhill, as well as George F. MacDonald who wrote “Change and Challenge: Museums in the Information Society,” asserts that such an importance placed on the entirety of the museum experience leads visitors to evaluate the actual objects on display based on whether or not they enjoyed the museum. Therefore, if an individual finds an art museum to be highly entertaining, they will leave with a positive opinion of the art. If the individual finds a museum boring or confusing, they will leave with a negative opinion of the art. Hooper-Greenhill and MacDonald’s arguments relate directly to the question of whether or not context influences opinions of art.

Hooper-Greenhill’s argument was supported on several occasions in interviews. For example, Robert said that he felt that the National Gallery was boring because of the repetition of overall décor while the Tate Modern offered enough variety in presentation that it made for a more entertaining visit. “The National Gallery all seemed kind of the same. In the Tate Modern, every room had its own vibes. It felt like the art wasn’t made for the room; the room was made for the art. Some rooms felt so colossal it just opened me up. Other rooms felt so confined that it made me look closer at everything.” As a result, the variety of galleries helped Robert enjoy the art on display at the Tate Modern, while the repetition of gallery style caused him to become bored in the overall environment of the National Gallery.

Perhaps the most important element that supports the argument that context affects the way that a viewer perceives and evaluates art is the fact that all of my informants, whether they preferred high art in the National Gallery or modern art in the Tate Modern, supported such a claim. When asked to describe elements of each museum that they liked or disliked, the answers provided supported the notion that the museum
environment affected the way that they evaluated the art on display. For example, Nicole said that the National Gallery felt inviting, thus allowing her to enjoy the art, while the Tate Modern felt cold, which hindered her ability to enjoy the art. Cora also discussed that the interior of both the Tate Modern and National Gallery shaped her overall experience and opinion of the art in that the atmosphere created either helped or hurt her ability to enjoy the art on display.

Through the atmosphere that is created in each museum, visitors respond positively or negatively to such an atmosphere, which is transferred to the way that they respond to the actual art on display. Even the Director of the Tate Modern, Lars Nittve, directly asserts that context impacts the way that viewers receive art. “Tate Modern emphasizes that nothing surrounding a work of art is neutral; that everything has an impact on the way we interpret what we see – from the way a collection is displayed, its narrative structure and physical rhythm, the character and even the location of the building, the place where we, the visitors, find ourselves” (Nittve 10).

When art is displayed in a museum, the piece is not viewed in isolation; rather, it is viewed in relation to the art that surrounds it. John Berger argues that the display of a masterpiece has the power to legitimate an entire collection of art. Berger’s notion was directly supported by my informants. When asked if the overall opinion of a piece of art would change if it was moved from the Tate Modern to the National Gallery, Megan said that such a move would cause her to reevaluate her views. “If a [modern painting] was surrounded by Van Gogh or Monet then I’d think, OK I’ve got to appreciate this,” she said. Therefore, the National Gallery, which contains better known historical
masterpieces than the art displayed in the Tate Modern, is easier to enjoy because such masterpieces have the ability to legitimate the entire collection.

When performing my participant observation in the National Gallery, I noticed that people interacted with paintings such as Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* in a completely different way from other paintings. Viewers typically observed the painting for a longer period of time and discussed the painting with others, which were actions that I did not often observe in relation to other works on display. In the Tate Modern, specifically in the gallery that contained Minimalism, many people barely gave the art a second glance while quickly entering and exiting the room. Because of the overall lack of historically established, widely recognized masterpieces such as *Sunflowers*, the room as a whole was not seen as valid as evidenced by the lack of viewers compared to the overwhelming crowds in the Van Gogh gallery. If the National Gallery did not contain as many established masterpieces and the Tate Modern contained more, viewer opinion of the museum as a whole would likely be affected. In *Tate Modern: The Handbook* Iwona Blazwick and Simon Wilson support Berger’s argument of the role of masterpieces by saying that the success of an institution is based not simply on what is included, but also on what is absent. If people accept the National Gallery as being a museum housing “good” art, then the absence of modern art might lead people to believe that modern art is not inferior to high art.

A common theme that surfaced throughout interview responses is the importance of being able to connect with the art on display. Hooper-Greenhill discusses the importance of a museum’s ability to form a connection to visitors. She argues that the focus of museums has moved beyond simply displaying artifacts and has evolved into
active learning environments that seek to form connections with visitors. Robert specifically mentioned the importance of establishing such a connection in saying, “Whether it’s high art or modern art, if it’s something that you can connect to in any aspect, I think it’s good art.” The formation of a connection between viewer and artwork is greatly impacted by the environment in which the art is displayed, as the museum essentially acts as a buffer between the art and the viewer. Viewing a piece of art is an experience; a silent interaction that will be different for each individual viewer. A museum has the ability to greatly impact such an interaction in the sense that it takes on the role of the moderator. If the moderator is appealing and inviting, then the interaction will likely be positive. If the moderator is confusing or alienating, then the interaction will likely be negative or even nonexistent.

While evidence shows that context influences a visitor’s opinions of art, it is important to note that the way in which an individual evaluates art received in a museum setting is also highly influenced by the prior biases that result from each individual’s artistic taste. Based on the initial interview that asked informants to reflect on their own artistic taste, it was evident that everyone went to the museums with preferences towards either high art or modern art. After viewing each museum, their opinions of art were enhanced by the experiences gained. Pierre Bourdieu discusses the formation of taste in Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste. He argues that art only has meaning to a person if they possess the necessary cultural competence that is required to decode art. If someone lacks the ability to decode a piece of art, he or she will feel lost and will, in turn, equate the lack of understanding to disapproval of the piece. Nick Merriman applies Bourdieu’s theories of taste to museums in “The Social Basis of
Museum and Heritage Visiting.” According to Merriman, museums are a code that must be decoded in order to be understood and appreciated. A visitor can only decode a museum if he or she possesses the required cultural capital.

Bourdieu and Merriman’s theories offer one way of explaining why my informants liked or disliked the National Gallery or Tate Modern. According to Bourdieu and Merriman, Cora, Nicole, Megan, and Patrick, who preferred high art, possessed the cultural capital necessary to decode the National Gallery and lacked the cultural capital necessary to decode the Tate Modern. Conversely, Robert and Julia, who preferred modern art, possessed the cultural capital necessary to decode the Tate Modern but lacked the cultural capital necessary to decode the National Gallery. In relation to this study, Bourdieu would argue that the way that each informant evaluated the National Gallery and Tate Modern as well as the art displayed is based on habitus. Constance Perin supports such an argument in “The Communicate Circle: Museums as Communities” in saying that the individual perceives art through the lens of their experiences. While this may very well be the case, the data that I collected cannot support such theories since the interviews did not directly address the social background of each informant in order to prove a connection between habitus, the possession of capital, and artistic taste. Because I did not focus on questions that directly related to each informant’s social, cultural, and economic capital, applying Bourdieu and Merriman’s theories to the study would only provide a speculative rather than direct explanation of the inner workings of museum experiences and artistic preferences.

This is not to say that Bourdieu’s theories of habitus were not alluded to in any way by informant responses. For example, several comments were made concerning the
ability to relate to a particular piece of art, which alludes to habitus. Even though the data does not directly support the idea that habitus affected the way that each informant evaluated the art and museums, one can recognize the links that most likely exist between the formation of opinions concerning each museum and the habitus of each informant. Directly examining such the relationship between habitus and museum experiences, however, could be performed in further research.

In “Modernism & Modernity: An Introductory Survey” Pam Meecham and Paul Wood state that in order to appreciate modern art, one must first recognize that the distinct differences between high art and modern art does not mean that one type of art is better than the other; instead, they are simply different. Modern art effectively challenges the conventional definitions of art by confronting what has historically been accepted as being “good.” In order to accept and appreciate the modern art form, most individuals have to put aside the cultural classification of good and bad art in order to evaluate modern art in an unbiased way. Meecham and Wood specifically argue that if an individual possesses specific knowledge of art or art history, they are more easily equipped to appreciate modern art. Such a theory is supported by the collected data. Julia and Patrick were the only informants who said that they had studied art history in school. In turn, they were more open to modern art. Even though Patrick indicated preferences towards high art, he specifically said that he also likes to see modern approaches and that overall, he enjoyed the Tate Modern. Megan, Cora, and Nicole, who had never studied art history, found the National Gallery more enjoyable most likely because the art displayed is culturally and historically approved as being “good.” Robert, on the other hand,
preferred modern art at the Tate Modern despite the fact that he has not studied art history.

As previously noted, this study investigates extremely complex relationships and theories. Based on ethnographic data collected in relation to preexisting literature pertaining to artistic taste and the role of museums, this study ultimately argues that an individual is influenced by preexisting artistic taste, which is augmented by the context that art is displayed. The results may have been different if the study was organized and executed in alternative ways. For example, if I had taken a more quantitative approach, I could have distributed surveys that posed questions specifically relating to the habitus and museum experiences. Data collected in this manner could have examined the relationship between habitus, the possession of capital, artistic taste, and museum experiences on a larger scale but would have failed to include the depth of insight that was gained through qualitative interviews. Results may have also been different if I had examined museums other than the National Gallery and Tate Modern. Finally, if I had interviewed a more diverse set of informants, results might have varied as well.

The most important aspect of this study, in my opinion, is the impact that museums have on the way that art is evaluated. As a pilot study that focused on a small margin of the population, results are very limited. While the end results are a good starting place, much more research is needed in order to fully understand art tourism, especially due to the complex nature of the relationship between context and artistic taste. Further research related to art tourism would provide the opportunity to probe the topics that I was not able to examine closely. Specifically, future research could focus on habitus in order to evaluate whether Bourdieu’s concept does in fact relate to the way that
people respond to museums. Research in the field of art tourism ultimately has the ability to shape the execution of the museum, which will continue to shape the way that viewers interact with the museum space and the artifacts on display.
Works Cited


Illustrations Index

**Pg. 1:** Piccadilly Circus, photo by Katherine Petcoff. September 2008.


**Figure 3:** Tate Modern, photo by Katherine Petcoff. December 2008.


**Figure 7:** Botticelli, Sandro *The Birth of Venus*. 1485. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. 9 Nov 2009. <http://www.botticellibirthofvenus.com/>.

**Figure 8:** Delacroix, Eugène. *Liberty Leading the People*. 1831. Louvre, Paris. 9 Nov 2009. <http://www.louvre.fr/lv/oeuvres/detail_notice.jsp?CONTENT%3C%3Ecnt_id=10134198673237674&CURRENT_LLV_NOTICE%3C%3Ecnt_id=10134198673237674&FOLDER%3C%3Efolder_id=9852723696500815&fromDept=true&baseIndex=2&bmLocale=en>.


Appendix A

Figure 22: Map of London with Major Sites
Appendix B

Interview Questions for the Open-Ended Interview

1. How would you describe modern art and high art?
2. What do you consider to be good art and bad art?
3. Who decides what art is good and what is bad?
4. What kind of art do you like?
5. How would you describe a good museum?
6. What kind of museum do you like?
Appendix C

Interview Questions for the Structured Interview

Section 1: Questions Relating to Museum Experiences

1. Why did you visit the National Gallery and Tate Modern?
2. What did you think of each museum?
3. What did you like about each museum?
4. What did you dislike about each museum?
5. Would you recommend each museum to others?
6. Did you learn anything from the museums?
7. How long did you stay at each museum?
8. How would you describe the surrounding area of each museum?
9. Do you think that the location of each museum helps or hurts its overall appeal?
10. If it cost money to go to the museum, would you have visited?
11. Do you think that the way that the museum is decorated affected how you viewed the collection?
12. Why do you think the National Gallery is so ornate and the Tate Modern is so plain?
13. If you saw one of the works that belongs to the Tate Modern displayed in the National Gallery, do you think your opinion of the work would be different?
14. If you saw one of the works that belongs to the National Gallery displayed in the Tate Modern do you think your opinion of the work would be different?
Section 2: Questions about Specific Pieces of Art from the Museums

1. Caravaggio’s *The Supper of Emmaus* (Figure 23):
   
a. What do you think this painting illustrates?
   
b. What are your first reactions to the work?
   
c. Do you recognize this work?
   
d. In which museum do you think this piece is displayed?
2. Picasso’s *Bowl of Fruit, Violin and Bottle* (Figure 24):

   a. What do you think this painting illustrates?

   b. What are your first reactions to the work?

   c. Do you recognize this work?

   d. In which museum do you think this work is displayed?
3. Monet’s Water-Lilies (Figure 25):
   a. What do you think this painting illustrates?
   b. What are your first reactions to the work?
   c. Do you recognize this work?
   d. In which museum do you think this work is displayed?

Figure 25

Section 3: Questions about the Interest and Involvement in Art

15. Have you ever taken art history classes?
16. Have you ever taken studio art classes?
17. How interested in art are you?
18. Do you often go to museums?
Appendix D

Figure 26: Floor Plan of the Tate Modern
Appendix E

Figure 27: Floor Plan of National Gallery