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Christ Carrying the Cross: A Power Statement for the Institution

Sara Woodbury

Introduction to Visual Arts

Professor Roberts

Christ Carrying the Cross: A Power Statement for the Institution

Art museums are temples, and the artworks they hold are to be revered. Carol Duncan proposes this theory in her book *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*. According to Duncan, museums display artworks in a way that encourages visitors to perform a ritual that allows them to become culturally enlightened under the museum's direction.¹ This type of display is especially evident in the Art Institute of Chicago, and one interesting example is its presentation of the painting *Christ Carrying the Cross*. By directing the viewer's access to the painting, displaying the piece elaborately, including additional information, and hanging the work between two important artistic periods, the Art Institute instructs the viewer to venerate both *Christ Carrying the Cross* and the museum itself.

Christ Carrying the Cross is a small religious painting located in Gallery 207, a small room containing early Northern Renaissance paintings. A Bavarian artist known as the Master of the Worcester Panel created it between the years 1400 to 1425, and it has been painted with egg tempera. Despite its small size, the piece is highly detailed and contains many figures. The Art Institute clearly believes that this painting is important and wants the viewer to react to it in a devotional manner. To ensure this reaction, the museum directs the viewer on a historical, enlightening journey to the painting.

The Art Institute's layout follows art history. According to Duncan, historical layouts are popular in art museums because they reaffirm traditional notions of artistic development and promote museums as enlightening institutions.² The Art Institute's access to Gallery 207 clearly follows a historical layout. To find the gallery, the viewer first ascends a grand staircase, symbolically ascending to a higher realm of consciousness. Once the viewer ascends the

¹ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York, Routledge, 1995), 20.

² Ibid, 13.

staircase, he or she accesses the European galleries through Gallery 215, an expansive room containing towering Renaissance paintings. With these overwhelming images in mind, the viewer then enters a hallway connecting to other galleries. As the viewer navigates this hallway, he or she travels back through time, observing centuries of artistic developments. This hallway finally ends with Gallery 207, suggesting that this room is the origin of all subsequent European art. Through this layout, the museum prepares the viewer to respond reverently to *Christ Carrying the Cross*, but the floor plan is only the beginning of the process. Gallery 207 also shapes the viewer's behavior.

According to Duncan, museums encourage reverence by creating liminal, timeless space.³ This is the case with Gallery 207's treatment of *Christ Carrying the Cross*. First, there are no clocks in the room; time has been symbolically removed. Second, *Christ Carrying the Cross* is the first painting the viewer encounters when he or she enters the room following the route established by Gallery 215. In addition, the gallery is small, pulling the viewer toward the painting. Also, the pieces in the room are spaced far apart, allowing the viewer's attention to focus on one piece at a time. Lighting from the adjacent hallway also directs the viewer. Glass covers *Christ Carrying the Cross*, but hallway lights reflect off of it. To block the intrusive lighting, the viewer must stand directly in front of the piece. Finally, the painting hangs slightly above eye level, allowing the viewer to study it intimately. Before the viewer admires the piece, however, the gallery wants him or her to behave seriously and devotionally. This mood is encouraged through the gallery's formal architecture.

Duncan argues that gallery architecture directs the viewer to behave seriously.⁴ Gallery 207 is no exception. Rectilinear molding accentuates the doorway and ceiling, giving the room a

³ Ibid, 12-13, 20.

⁴ Ibid, 10-12.

formal appearance. The viewer walks on a polished wood floor, a detail often reserved for formal spaces. Glass ceiling panels allow natural light to illuminate the room, suggesting the viewer's own enlightenment. Finally, a light gray wall color gives the room a somber appearance and serves as a backdrop for the painting. All of these details guide the viewer into a serious, devotional state of mind. The gallery, however, is not the only entity directing the viewer; the painting itself provokes devotion.

Christ Carrying the Cross is a religious work. It originally directed the viewer to meditate on the sacrifice of Christ. The piece still encourages contemplation, but the museum has changed the subject of meditation. Instead of Christ, the viewer now contemplates, and ultimately worships, the artwork's formal qualities. Between the museum's layout, the gallery's design, and the religious nature of the painting, the devotional mood the viewer is expected to experience is achieved. Once this mood is established, the museum channels that devotion toward the painting. To accomplish this, elaborate framing underscores the importance of *Christ Carrying the Cross*.

Duncan argues that artworks are framed in a manner that elevates their importance, and this is the case with *Christ Carrying the Cross*.⁵ The image lies on top of a gray canvas. This canvas is a platform for the piece, projecting it out to the viewer. The painting itself rests inside a black frame with an elaborate gold leaf pattern. The gold serves two purposes. First, its bright color catches the viewer's notice, drawing him or her to the piece. The second purpose of the gold is symbolic. Gold is usually reserved for precious items, implying that *Christ Carrying the Cross* is a treasured work that should be admired. The effectiveness of the elaborate framing, however, does not end with the painting itself. It also draws the viewer's attention to an informative, suggestive placard.

⁵ Ibid, 17.

The placard beside *Christ Carrying the Cross* heightens the viewer's reverence. It praises the painting, stating that it has, "extraordinary refinement," and that, "although he [the artist] remains unidentified...his style and expressive figures exercised a wide influence on Southwest German art."⁶ The placard asserts that *Christ Carrying the Cross* is an important piece deserving reverence. It also shapes the viewer's reaction to the other artworks in Gallery 207. The pieces are arranged chronologically, and *Christ Carrying the Cross* is the earliest work. As the viewer moves through the room, he or she looks for its influence. The museum's elevation of *Christ Carrying the Cross*, however, does not end with Gallery 207. It also projects the painting's importance into other galleries.

The museum deliberately hangs *Christ Carrying the Cross* between the Impressionist and early Italian Renaissance galleries. First, this juxtaposition emphasizes the museum's liminal space. Impressionism did not occur until the nineteenth century, but such time differences do not affect the museum. Artworks separated by centuries all inhabit one eternal, timeless space. This juxtaposition also intensifies the painting's significance. Impressionism and the early Italian Renaissance were two highly influential artistic movements. By placing *Christ Carrying the Cross* between these two movements, the museum suggests that the painting is, like Impressionism and the early Italian Renaissance, important and influential. This importance, however, not only applies to *Christ Carrying the Cross*. Ultimately, the reverence the viewer feels toward this painting applies to the museum itself.

The display of *Christ Carrying the Cross* promotes the Art Institute as a distinguished institution. The museum deliberately informs the viewer that the painting is an important, influential work, denoting that the museum itself is equally eminent. *Christ Carrying the Cross*,

⁶ Placard for *Christ Carrying the Cross*, Gallery 207 (The Honore and Potter Palmer Junior Gallery), The Art Institute of Chicago.

however, is more than just an important painting: the piece is also European. In the history of art, Europe is considered immensely significant, as the Art Institute's layout demonstrates. To earn equal prestige, the United States often claims itself as the heir to the European tradition. By acquiring an important, influential, European work of art, the Art Institute claims itself, and ultimately the city of Chicago, as the heir to Europe. These two entities are the next stage in artistic development.

The Art Institute wants the viewer to leave the museum believing that it is powerful. According to Duncan, this is the motive of all art museums, and the Art Institute explicitly states this message through its display of *Christ Carrying the Cross*. It guides the viewer with the intention of becoming the object of intellectual reverence.

Bibliography

Duncan, Carol. *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Placard for *Christ Carrying the Cross*, Gallery 207 (The Honore and Potter Palmer Junior Gallery), the Art Institute of Chicago.

Words from Sara:

Visiting art museums is one of my favorite pastimes. I always find it immensely satisfying to embark on such “culturally enriching” experiences. But why do we feel that art museums are so enriching? More specifically, how do art museums display their pieces to make us believe that their artworks are significant?

This was the question Professor Roberts proposed to my fellow classmates and me in Art 110. To answer this question, we were to visit the Art Institute, select a piece, and analyze its display. I ultimately selected *Christ Carrying the Cross*, a surviving panel from a lost Bavarian altarpiece dating from the early fifteenth century. Before I found this piece, I had been wandering around the museum for three hours, seriously wondering if I would ever find the right piece to discuss. Finally, this tiny painting, elaborately framed and hanging alone, confronted me as I walked through the doorway of Gallery 207.

I would like to thank several people: the judges who read this paper, my advisor Professor Benton, and also Professor Roberts, who not only provided an intriguing assignment but also assigned a word limit. While I initially cursed this word limit for what I believed to be a restriction on my essay, it ultimately proved beneficial, forcing me to focus and streamline my writing in a way that I had never before attempted. Finally, I’d like to thank the future readers of this essay. I sincerely hope that you all enjoy it.

