

Multi-dimensional Analysis of the Phenomenon of Audiences Neglecting Sculpture Exhibits in Traditional Art Exhibition Halls and Research on the Optimization Path of Curating

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Abstract. Traditional comprehensive art museums tend to overemphasize paintings while neglecting sculptures, reflecting an imbalance in contemporary exhibition ecosystems. Existing research tends to attribute this phenomenon to singular factors, failing to systematically integrate multiple influences including audience psychology, exhibit characteristics, spatial design, and socio-cultural contexts. This study systematically investigates the complex causes of this phenomenon and proposes a scientific exhibition strategy centered on sculptures. A mixed-method approach combining participant observation, questionnaire surveys, and literature reviews is adopted to conduct a comprehensive analysis of audience behavior, preferences, and exhibition environments. The findings reveal that audience neglect results from economic choices in attention allocation, inherent visual disadvantages of sculptures, optimized exhibition space designs for paintings, and the combined influence of popular culture and social media trends. This phenomenon stems not from insufficient artistic value of sculptures, but from mismatches in exhibition systems and viewing paradigms. The key to reform lies in reconstructing spatial narratives, transforming curatorial conventions, and establishing a "scientific attraction strategy" centered on sculptures' three-dimensional characteristics. This requires shifting from passive display to active engagement through coordinated environmental design, multisensory technology integration, and educational communication to foster deeper dialogue between sculptures and audiences.

Keywords: museology, audience psychology, sculpture exhibits, curatorial strategy

1. Introduction

A recurring phenomenon in traditional art museums worldwide reveals a striking contrast: while audiences linger in oil painting galleries, creating lively viewing zones around masterpieces, equally significant sculptures often remain overlooked, reduced to silent background elements. This notable disparity in attention represents a pervasive yet underexplored imbalance in contemporary art exhibition ecosystems. The issue extends beyond individual exhibit popularity, touching on core museum missions: how to showcase diverse art forms, guide public aesthetic appreciation, and fulfill educational responsibilities. Current explanations either attribute this to insufficient audience

art literacy or simplistically blame sculptures' lower "notability" compared to paintings. These singular attributions based on individual qualities or popularity fail to examine the issue within a systemic analytical framework that integrates cognitive psychology, spatial narratives, and sociocultural factors. Consequently, they fail to grasp the essence of the phenomenon [1].

This study examines the phenomenon of "audience neglect of sculptural exhibits in traditional art galleries." Rather than criticizing viewers or devaluing paintings, the research seeks to transcend superficial observations and singular attributions, adopting an integrative approach to systematically analyze the multifaceted, interactive factors contributing to this phenomenon. To achieve these objectives, this study employs a mixed-methods approach to establish triangulation and enhance the reliability of conclusions. First, participant observation is conducted by selecting representative traditional art galleries as field sites. Non-invasive recording of visitors' actual behaviors in sculpture and painting areas is performed, including dwell time, movement patterns, physical interactions, and facial orientation, to collect primary behavioral data. Second, questionnaire surveys are supplemented by sampling museum visitors to quantitatively gather their preferences, cognitive attitudes, viewing motivations, and evaluations of current exhibition methods, thereby supplementing behavioral observations with subjective perspectives. Finally, a systematic literature review was conducted to synthesize findings from museology, cognitive psychology, environmental psychology, art sociology, and curatorial studies, establishing a solid theoretical foundation and precisely identifying gaps in current academic discourse [2,3].

Theoretically, this study attempts to break disciplinary barriers by organically integrating audience psychology, environmental psychology, and museum exhibition research, constructing an analytical model to understand the complex interactions of "people-object-scene-environment" [4].

2. Analysis of neglect causes from multidimensional perspectives

The audience's neglect of the sculpture exhibits is not due to random individual preferences, but a systematic outcome shaped by multiple interrelated factors. This chapter analyzes the phenomenon from four interconnected dimensions, incorporating insights from the conducted questionnaire to ground the analysis in empirical data.

2.1. Audience psychological mechanism: attention allocation law and cognitive load

In museum exhibition halls with highly saturated information, visitors' attention becomes a scarce "cognitive resource". Utilizing attention economy theory, which asserts that attention is a finite resource in information-dense contexts, and cognitive load theory, which emphasizes the cognitive limitations of human information processing, audiences inherently employ efficiency-oriented strategies to filter and prioritize visual stimuli. This dual theoretical paradigm explains why paintings, with their immediate visual appeal, dominate attention allocation over sculptures, which involve higher cognitive engagement. Paintings, particularly narrative figurative works with vivid color contrasts, capture viewers' "instantaneous attention" through enclosed frames, clear visual content, and strong focal points, enabling rapid information decoding and aesthetic feedback. In contrast, fully appreciating sculptures requires time-consuming, energy-intensive physical engagement. Visitors must move around to view from multiple angles, mentally integrate information from different perspectives to reconstruct three-dimensional forms, and potentially associate with material textures, weight, and tactile sensations. This process demands higher cognitive participation, creating a greater "cognitive threshold" in exhibition environments where time is limited and physical fatigue may occur. Consequently, many visitors subconsciously follow

the "principle of least cognitive effort", favoring paintings that offer faster information reception and greater "understandability", leading to sculptures being overlooked in attention competitions. Recent studies on museum visitor behavior also confirm that visitors spend very brief durations at individual exhibits, with decisions often based on rapid visual judgments [5,6].

2.2. Characteristics of the exhibit: the natural disadvantages of sculptures as visual stimuli

From the perspective of visual immediacy, sculpture inherently struggles with the fast-paced browsing mode. Traditional materials such as marble, bronze, and wood often feature monochromatic or limited color palettes, and lack the immediate visual impact of painting's vibrant hues. Moreover, sculpture's aesthetic and depth rely heavily on form, space, and material—qualities that require contemplation and immersion to be fully appreciated [7]. The power, beauty, movement and balance of a sculpture often reside in the contours of its lines, the interplay of its volumes, and the textures of its surfaces—details that are not immediately apparent. The rise of 'check-in' culture reflects a broader societal shift towards experiential consumption, where the value of art is often measured by its shareability on social media platforms. This commodification of aesthetic experience further marginalizes sculptures, which resist easy capture and instant gratification." Additionally, the scale of sculptures constitutes a double-edged sword: large works may overwhelm viewers, discouraging lingering, while smaller pieces might go unnoticed due to their lack of prominence.

2.3. Exhibition hall environment design: traditional space narration for painting

Traditional art museums' physical spaces, including their architectural layouts, lighting systems, and visitor flow patterns, have long evolved a set of "default configurations" optimized for painting exhibitions. This design paradigm can be understood through the lens of spatial narrative theory, which posits that built environments are not neutral containers but active agents that structure experience, convey values, and privilege certain types of engagement over others. Standard "white cube" galleries feature flat, expansive white walls with evenly distributed wall wash lighting, designed to provide neutral, bright backgrounds for artworks [8]. The canonical "white cube" gallery, with its flat, expansive walls and uniform wash lighting, constructs a narrative of autonomy, contemplation, and visual purity perfectly suited to the two-dimensional logic of painting. This spatial script directs the viewer's gaze frontally, establishes a clear subject (the painting) against a neutral background (the wall), and promotes a detached, contemplative mode of viewing. Sculptures often find themselves in disadvantaged positions within these spaces: when placed against walls, they risk becoming mere accessories to paintings; when positioned centrally, they may act as obstacles in pedestrian pathways due to unclear spatial boundaries. More critically, lighting design—though crucial and frequently overlooked—plays a pivotal role. Improper overhead lighting casts distracting shadows on sculptural surfaces, obscuring details, while glass display cases produce glaring reflections that significantly hinder viewing. This two-dimensional-centric spatial narrative fails to create a "stage" for sculptures to showcase their three-dimensional qualities; instead, it weakens or distorts their visual expressiveness.

2.4. Social and cultural influences: pop culture and social media preference orientation

Audiences' aesthetic preferences are profoundly shaped by their socio-cultural contexts. In mass media and popular culture, classical paintings are increasingly replicated, disseminated, and

referenced, transforming iconic works such as "Sunflowers" and "The Call to Arms" into cross-class cultural symbols with deep resonance. By contrast, sculptures of comparable scale often remain underrepresented in public discourse. This disparity has been dramatically amplified in the social media era. Platforms' algorithmic curation favors easily photographable, compositionally balanced, and highly recognizable flat images, thereby embedding implicit value judgments into the flow of cultural consumption: artworks that are instantly legible, visually compact, and optimized for digital reproduction are deemed more "valuable" and worthy of circulation. This logic not only distorts the criteria for artistic visibility but also actively reshapes audience expectations and even institutional presentation priorities. Sculptures struggle to be fully captured in single-angle photos due to their three-dimensional nature. Viewers must take multiple angles or videos to grasp their essence, increasing dissemination costs and diminishing their appeal as social sharing content [9].

3. Countermeasures and prospects: constructing scientific attraction strategies for sculpture

Based on the above analysis, to address the neglect of sculptures, efforts should focus not only on encouraging audiences to engage more deeply but also on implementing systematic innovation from the source of curating and design and constructing a "scientific attraction strategy" that respects and highlights the unique characteristics of sculpture.

3.1. Reconstructing the spatial narrative of the exhibition hall

Curators should first shift their mindset to liberate sculptures from their role as mere "spatial fillers," positioning them as protagonists in spatial narratives. This can be achieved through creating "micro-environments" or "narrative units". For instance, establishing dedicated exhibition zones for significant sculptures by reducing surrounding exhibit density, adjusting wall colors or materials (such as using dark backgrounds to highlight light-colored sculptures), or applying special flooring textures or patterns to define their territories. Carefully designed viewing pathways utilize display walls, cabinets, or low partitions to guide visitors in naturally circling the sculptures. This creates an immersive experience that actively yet subtly engages the audience's physical presence, allowing them to discover the works' charm from multiple angles [10]. A notable example is Tate Modern's reorganization of its collection, where Henry Moore's sculptures were deliberately placed in open spaces near windows with carefully considered pedestal heights, fostering a dialogue with the urban landscape.

3.2. Optimization of display design and lighting technology

Professional exhibition design is pivotal to unleashing a sculpture's expressive potential. Lighting serves as the "second life" of a sculpture, requiring the abandonment of single overhead lighting in favor of composite illumination schemes: soft diffused light (3000-3500K color temperature, 150-200 lux) provides foundational, shadow-mitigating illumination, while precise side or backlighting with higher, directional intensity outlines contours, emphasizes volumes and textures, and strictly controls glare and reflections. The pedestal design should not be overlooked—they function not only as a support but also as a crucial link between the artwork and the viewer's gaze. Their height, material, and form should be tailored to establish the optimal viewing angle. Lowering the pedestal height to enable viewers to observe from a closer eye-level or overhead perspective can yield unexpected effects. For particularly valuable or fragile works, when glass enclosures are necessary,

anti-reflective glass should be selected with carefully calculated lighting angles to minimize visual interference.

3.3. Introducing multisensory and interactive experiences

Breaking the visual monopoly and effectively activating other senses is an effective way to lower cognitive barriers and deepen experiential depth. While strictly protecting the original artifacts, "touch stations" can be established to provide replicas or partial models crafted with identical materials and techniques, allowing visitors to physically experience the warmth of marble or the solidity of bronze [11]. Audio guides can extend beyond historical narratives by incorporating sound descriptions of material textures, casting techniques, or artists' studio environments, creating synesthetic associations. Digital technologies such as augmented reality (AR) offer new possibilities: Through tablets or smartphones, audiences can see virtual information superimposed on physical sculptures—restoring original colors, revealing internal structures, or recreating historical storage settings—transforming static artworks into dynamic narrative interfaces that carry multi-layered information [12].

3.4. Enhancing public education and marketing promotion

Proactive interpretation and promotion serve as bridges connecting artworks with the public. In exhibition displays, avoid obscure academic terminology and adopt vivid, concise language to highlight sculptures' unique artistic value, creative stories, and technical intricacies. Public education programs can be tailored to specific needs, such as hosting material workshops, inviting visitors to experiment with clay modeling, or organizing guided tours themed around "multi-angle viewing". The effectiveness of these programs should be systematically evaluated through methods such as pre- and post-visit knowledge tests, feedback surveys, tracking of revisit rates, and monitoring social media engagement and content generation related to sculpture exhibits. For social media campaigns, curators should proactively curate content using formats including short videos, panoramic images, and 3D models to showcase sculptures' beauty comprehensively.

4. Discussion

This study employed a mixed-method approach to investigate the multifaceted causes of audience neglect toward sculptures in traditional art museums. To complement observational data and theoretical analysis, a structured questionnaire survey was designed and administered to gather quantitative and qualitative insights directly from potential museum visitors. The survey instrument comprised 18 core questions, spanning four key areas: (1) basic visitation habits and demographics; (2) explicit preferences and comparative behaviors between painting and sculpture viewing; (3) ratings of specific barriers to engaging with sculptures (using a 5-point Likert scale); and (4) evaluations of proposed intervention strategies. Distributed primarily via online social platforms to reach a broad audience with art-going experience, the survey yielded 26 valid responses. While the sample size is limited and constrains broad generalization, the results provide valuable, concrete evidence that corroborates and enriches the multidimensional analysis presented in the main text.

The survey findings offer empirical support for several core arguments. First, they validate the audience psychology mechanism: 65.4% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they typically spend less time with sculptures than with paintings, aligning with the theory of cognitive economy and attention allocation. Although the sample size precludes rigorous statistical significance testing,

this majority trend (over two-thirds) strongly suggests a consistent behavioral pattern rather than random variation. Second, regarding the appeal of sculptures, the survey revealed that "material texture" (selected by 69.2% of respondents) and "historical story" (53.8%) were the top elements attracting viewers to sculptures, highlighting that appeal is tied to features requiring closer inspection and contextual knowledge, not immediate visual impact. The concentration of preferences around these two factors—each chosen by more than half of the respondents—indicates a clear and non-random trend in audience priorities. Third, on environmental design, 42.3% agreed that problematic lighting (glare/shadows) impaired their viewing, and "optimizing lighting" was the most frequently selected single improvement strategy (tied at 23.1%), directly validating the critique of default gallery configurations. Although not statistically significant in a strict sense, the fact that lighting emerged as both a prominent barrier and a top-priority solution across multiple respondents strengthens its relevance as a key curatorial issue. Finally, concerning solutions, strategies that lower cognitive and physical barriers—such as "providing touchable replicas" (the top choice at 26.9% for most effective improvement) and employing AR to restore context (46.2% agreement on its interest-enhancing potential)—received strong endorsement, confirming the proposed direction for multisensory and interactive curation. The consistency of these preferences across respondents further supports their potential effectiveness in real-world settings. Therefore, this survey serves not merely as supplementary data but as a crucial grounding mechanism. It transforms theoretical constructs—such as "cognitive load", "spatial marginalization," and "shareability bias"—into measurable audience experiences and stated preferences. The consistency between the survey results and the analytical framework strengthens the internal validity of the study's conclusions.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates through multidimensional analysis that the public neglect of sculptures in traditional art galleries stems from a complex interplay of factors: audience psychological preferences, the inherent characteristics of the artworks, flaws in exhibition design, and socio-cultural influences. The root cause is not the inherent lack of artistic value in sculptures, but the historical exhibition and viewing system—centered on two-dimensional art—that failed to fairly and effectively accommodate and present the artistic demands of three-dimensional physical works. Therefore, the fundamental approach to addressing this situation lies in consciously rethinking and reconstructing the existing exhibition paradigm. This requires curatorial practice to shift from passive "display" to active "guidance and construction", with the core task being to establish a "scientific attraction strategy" rooted in the three-dimensional characteristics of sculpture. By reconstructing spatial narratives to empower sculptures, activating their holographic charm through precise display techniques and multisensory design, and fostering deeper cognition via innovative public education, the ultimate goal is to cultivate a more equitable, profound, and vibrant dialogue among sculptures, audiences, and space. This study primarily relies on museum observations within specific cultural contexts and limited-sample questionnaire surveys. The generalizability of its conclusions requires further validation across different regions and art institution types. Looking ahead, long-term effects of digital technologies (e.g., holographic projection, interactive sculptures) in enhancing sculpture appeal, as well as global comparisons of cultural acceptance of 3D art, represent promising research directions.

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