Psychological Flow and the Numinous Museum Experience

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Psychological Flow and the Numinous Museum Experience

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Abstract

Psychological flow, the autotelic, intrinsically rewarding experience also known as optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) has been an important psychological construct for nearly half a century. Over the same time, drawn recently from the field of religious studies, the investigation of the numinous museum experience is in its infancy. Characterized by deep engagement or transcendence, empathy, and a feeling of awe or reverence, the numinous museum experience shares structural similarities with psychological flow. The purpose of this article is to look more deeply at the *structure* of the numinous museum experience and position it in the context of the psychological construct of flow. By investigating these parallels and making connections, the intent is to bring more focus on the numinous experience as a type of flow, an important kind of museum visitor experience that should be more directly infused into the general understanding of the potential "outcomes" of museum visits.

Figure 1. Site where Phil stood when he saw the tree, Little Round Top, Gettysburg Battlefield. The Brady photograph of the original scene is on the sign (photo by author)

An Experience Described

Below is a short quote of one man's (Phil) experience at Little Round Top, Gettysburg.

> Well, I'm standin' up there, and there's a photo taken from the same perspective that I'm standing [in] of the battlefield a couple of days later—there was someone standing on this hill, overlooking the valley in front of Little Round Top. And there was a small tree in that photo, which was about that Big—about 2 inches in diameter. Well, I'm standing on the exact same spot. Now that tree is about this many inches in diameter—it's probably a foot, foot and a half in diameter—and I just went "huuuuuuueehhh" [big air inspirated] and I could tell it was the same tree. You could see where it was in the rocks and I tell you what, just like now, just telling it, I had a rush. I mean, it's like the blood, my face is tingling here. And I'm just like, OH MY GOD! Things that I've read about—I came here with my family—but I wasn't mature enough to know the impact of what war is really about…And there I am standing on this hill where 110 years previously, a battle had been fought and someone stood at the exact spot I'm standing on and took a picture, and it had dead bodies and things like that in it…but this tree, I'm standing on the spot where this photo was taken, a day or two after the battle, I am [here] 110 years later on the exact same spot.

Phil was horrified, when he returned several years later to find both the photograph and the tree gone (see Figure 1 above).

Introduction

Of late, it seems that everywhere one looks the museum studies literature includes explorations around the purpose of museums. What do they mean to people? Why do they exist? Has our purpose changed in the context of the digital shift? This is a healthy exploration and worthy of the space it takes to conduct it. Asking these fundamental questions shows that museum professionals and scholars care about museums, their place in society, and the people who support them.

There have been many trends in museum studies over the past half-century. One of those (at least in the U.S.) is the shift to the primacy of the visitor, learning theory, and participatory practice. As part of this shift, a number of authors have asked what a "satisfying experience" consists of in a museum visit (Pekarik, Doering, and Karns 1999); what the expectations of visitors are (Pekarik and Schreiber 2012); whether a museum visit can be restorative (Kaplan, Bardwell, and Slatker 1993; Packer 2008); and what other positive outcomes there might be in addition to learning (Packer 2008; Perry 2012).

The intent of this paper is not to add to the list of studies defining types or categories of museum visitor experiences but rather to investigate the structure of one kind of experience: the numinous museum experience. A numinous experience is one that is deeply felt, highly affective and often felt spiritually. Where the numinous experience fits into the various schemes that have been offered (e.g., Annis 1986; Graburn 1977; Koran and Koran 1986; Pekarik et al. 2014) is not the subject of this paper. Such an investigation could be the topic of another paper entirely and has, in fact, partially been taken on recently by Kirchberg and Tröndle (2012). Here my intent is to look more deeply at the *structure* of the numinous museum experience and understand it as a form of the psychological construct of flow, or optimal experience. By investigating these parallels and making connections, this paper brings more focus on flow as an important kind of museum visitor experience that should be more directly infused into the general understanding of the potential outcomes of museum visits.

In this article, I first define numinous experiences in general, then summarize the work on numinous museum experiences. Following this, I will introduce a specific study I conducted in 2009 on numinous experiences with museum objects, share the results and compare them to a study carried out at the Getty Museum a few years earlier on psychological flow in the museum context (Cameron and Gatewood 2000, 2004; Gatewood and Cameron 2004). I will conclude by discussing the implications of these findings.

Numinous Experiences

Numinous was a term coined by Rudolf Otto (derived from the Latin *numen*, meaning divinity or divine presence) a religious studies scholar, in his 1917 book *The Idea of the Holy*. He made the numinous experience—what he called a "non-rational" religious experience—the center of his study. Otto described the numinous as:

- A state of mind, a moment that is inexpressible and in the same category as "the beautiful;"
- A qualitative feeling but more than that;
- A feeling that cannot be taught, it must be awakened;
- Endowed with power, transcendence, majesty,

and overpoweringness that goes beyond any created thing and is also beyond the familiar, the usual or the intelligible.

In the early 2000s, Catherine Cameron and John Gatewood (2000, 2003; Gatewood and Cameron 2004) brought the term *numinous* to museum research in a series of studies on numen-seeking in museum contexts (specifically historic sites). They wondered if there were other reasons people came to museums beyond getting information, being with family and friends, and having fun. Suspecting there was more to it—that some people might be seeking a deeper, more meaningful connection with a place or time—they called these people *numen-seekers*. Historic sites and displays, they claimed, can conjure in visitors a visceral or emotional response to a past event or time, one that could allow them to achieve a connection with the "spirit" of times or persons past.

Cameron and Gatewood started with a definition of numinous in the museum context as "a transcendental experience that people can have in contact with a historic site or object" (2000: 110, also 2003; Gatewood and Cameron 2004). In two different studies, they found that 27% of surveyed visitors were actively seeking some sort of personal experience with historic sites and museums. From these studies they refined their description of numinous experiences—with mainly historic sites and objects—by positing three dimensions that make up the experience:

- Deep engagement or transcendence;
- Empathy;
- Awe or reverence—an experience of being in the presence of something holy, or spiritual communion with something or someone.

Other authors have also discussed deeply felt (possibly numinous) experiences in museums (Graburn, 1977; Leichter and Spock 1999; Goswamy 1991; Greenblatt 1991; Perry 2002; Spock 2000a; Spock 2000b; Henrichs 2004; Huizinga 1948) but do not directly name them as a numinous experience. Cameron and Gatewood (2003: 67) noted that their research was just a beginning and put out a call for further empirical studies. Their research and call for more work on numinous experiences led to the research I conducted on numinous experiences with museum objects (Latham 2009, 2013), which focused on finding out more about how visitors describe these experiences. It was during this investigation that the role of *flow* in the numinous museum experience was clarified.

The Study: Numinous Experiences with Museum Objects

In 2009, I completed a study with the aim of digging deeper into the rich, subjective experience of individuals with regard to numinous museum encounters (Latham 2009, 2013; Wood and Latham 2013). This qualitative study was designed to investigate, from the visitors' perspective, how people describe a numinous experience with museum objects. The aim was to establish an empirically-derived baseline understanding of the lived numinous museum experience. The scope of the research was foundational: it was meant as a first step in understanding these kinds of experiences in the museum context. Because of the focus on lived experience, phenomenological methods were chosen, specifically interpretive (or hermeneutic) phenomenology, the study of lived experience coupled with, "the science of interpreting human meaning and experience" (Crist and Tanner 2003: 202). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009; Smith and Eatough 2006, 2007; Smith, Jarman, and Osborn 1999) was used as the specific guiding framework for analyzing the data.

Participants were drawn from five museums (of art, history, living history, and state history) distributed across the Midwest and Plains of the United States. These sites were chosen based on connections I had to staff willing to solicit participation from their audiences. In general, the recruitment process at all of the museums was as follows: participants self-selected to be a part of this study through some means of flier (e.g., email, newsletter, magazine) sent by the respective museums. These notices asked for anyone who had a story to tell about a transcendent or deeply meaningful experience with a museum object and to email that story to either the museum contact or me. After further email exchanges with respondents, those who were able to articulate a concrete instance with rich detail were asked to meet in person for an interview at the museum from which they were contacted.

Using a phenomenological approach, only one question was scripted, opening the interview: "In your email, you told me about your experience with X object. Tell me again about this experience with as much detail as you can provide." All subsequent questions were probes based on the direction the participant took, attempting to get the most detail about the moment itself using only the concepts, words, and ideas that the participant introduced during the interview. The probes included questions such as: "Take me into the moment so I can experience it." "Could you walk me through it?" "Could you give me a concrete instance of that, a time that actually happened, with as much detail as you can give?" "Could you tell

me what happened, from the beginning?" "What did that mean to you?" "Looking back now, could you say how long that incident stayed with you?" "Are there other occurrences?" "Is this one different from previous or subsequent others?"

A total of 18 people were interviewed in person. Five individuals became the basis for the current study. IPA instructs the researcher to restrict the sample to the number at which redundancy is reached. In my research this occurred at the analysis of four transcripts. One further transcript was analyzed for good measure, bringing the total number of interviews analyzed to five. A small group of participants such as this is appropriate for a phenomenological study (Creswell 2012) and typical for IPA (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin2009). The goal of my study was not to attempt a random sample of the museum-going population, but rather to explore and identify a phenomenon—the numinous encounter with an object. It is for that reason that demographic details about individuals were not collected in a systematic fashion. Table 1 provides a brief introduction to the five people interviewed, the objects they talked about, and the museums where the objects were experienced.

Person	Object(s) and Museum	Background
Annalise	Paper cut-outs by Matisse at the Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan; Tiffany lamps at a San Francisco museum, and an oil painting by Le Bain at the Louvre, France.	Her experiences began at age nine up through college. She was a volunteer at the Detroit Institute of Arts at the time of the interviews.
Erin	Renoir painting at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, USA	She was college age when it happened to her. Erin responded to the e-blast sent out to The Henry Ford's members. She was also an educator at a living history museum when she was interviewed.
Mary	The chair Lincoln was sitting in when he was assassinated, at the Henry Ford, Michigan. Also, a bit about a boarding house at Colonial Williamsburg, VA.	Both encounters occurred when she was an adult. Mary, a third grade school teacher, was recruited through The Henry Ford membership request.
Phil	Phil's encounter occurred at Gettysburg on Little Round top with a tree and a photograph from the time just after the Battle of Gettysburg.	He had just graduated from military college and got married and was on his way to his first officer job. He talked of a short moving clip from World War I as being second to Gettysburg in affecting him. These are woven together in the quotations from him. Phil was recruited from the pool of volunteers at the National World War One Museum, was a retired Army officer, and taught high school math when this study was conducted.
Richard	At the age of about ten, Richard had his encounter with the Lincoln chair at the Henry Ford.	Richard came to the study through The Henry Ford membership and taught high school science. He also acted as his school's leadership activities sponsor.

Table 1. The five participants in the study, the objects and museums they discussed and brief background information on each individual. All names are pseudonyms.

Following data collection, IPA (Smith and Eatough 2006, 2007; Smith, Jarman, and Osborn 1999), was used as the guiding framework for analyzing the data. This methodology can be roughly divided into two stages: reduction and interpretation. Phenomenological reduction involves the determination of themes—concise phrases that capture the essential qualities from the text—found across the data, staying true to what participants said during their interviews (Smith and Osborn 2003). In IPA, the themes are determined at the point of redundancy, and the *interpretation* phase is then undertaken. This phase involves the application of the researcher's own lens, or interpretation, of the themes, based on his/her scholarly research. The emphasis in this paper is on the interpretive portion of the IPA analysis (post-themes derivation), where psychological flow is discussed in the context of the thematic results of the analysis.

Elements of a Numinous Experience

The resulting themes, or elements, of the experience have been described at length in other publications and are briefly introduced here for the purpose of discussion (see Latham 2009, 2013; Wood and Latham, 2013). I will then use these themes to discuss numinous museum encounters in the context of psychological flow experiences.

Four elements of a numinous experience with museum objects were identified in my analysis (see Figure 2). These are:

- *Object Link*: The object initiates an experience that links the experiencer to the past through both tangible and symbolic meanings.

- *Being Transported*: The experience is felt as if being transported to another time and place; it affects the experiencer temporally, spatially, and bodily.

- *Connections Bigger than Self*: Deeply felt epiphanic connections are made with the past, self, and spirit.

- *Unity of the Moment*: The numinous experience with museum objects is holistic, a uniting of emotions, feelings, intellect, experience, and object.

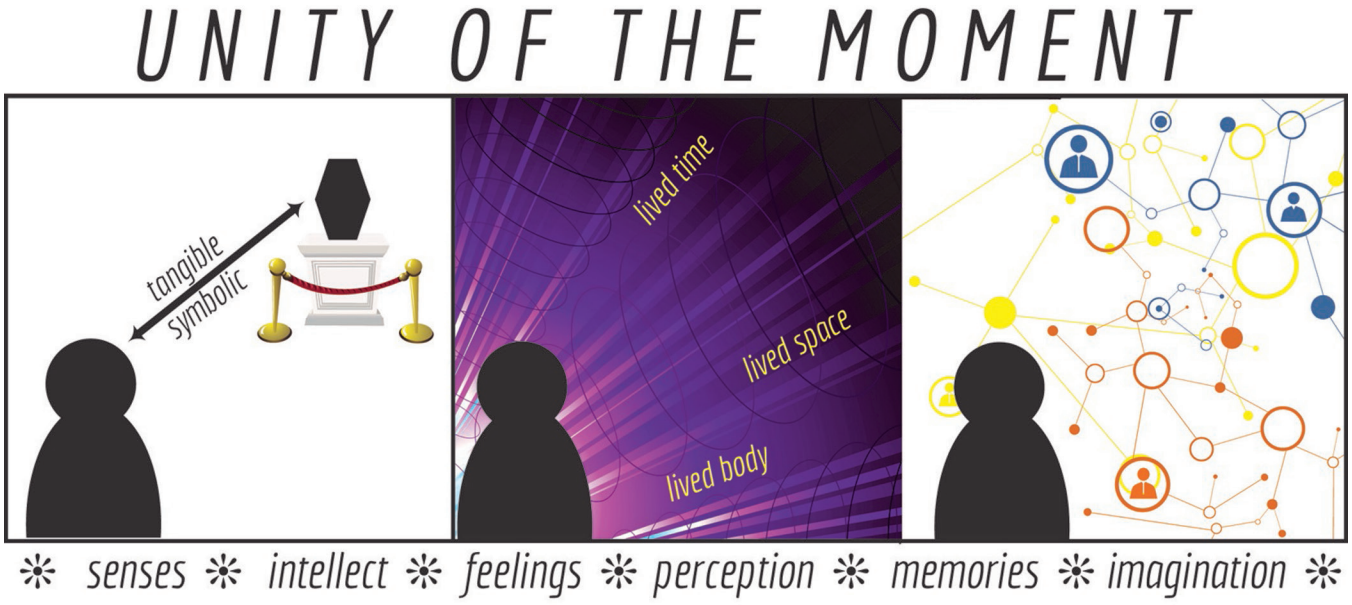

Figure 2. Graphic representation of the numinous experience with museum objects

In the *Object Link*, the museum object acts as the trigger for the user's imagination, feelings, sensations, thoughts. The object begins the experience; its presence endures through it and helps the person derive meaning in something "real." Without the physical object, the numinous museum experience would not be complete. It plays a significant role in both tangible and symbolic forms. In its tangible form, the object acts as a trigger or link by sparking the perceptions, thoughts, and/or feelings in this encounter, or acts as evidence of, or witness to, the past. In its symbolic form, the object is perceived to be a kind of receptacle, holding meaning far deeper and more profound than its simple function as a museum object. In fact, the object, at times, embodies grand symbolic meanings about profound issues such as death, patriotism, or the meaning of life. It acts as a tangible witness—embodied evidence of past human behavior and represented lived lives and real actions.

The theme *Being Transported* is about the qualities felt in a numinous experience. It is an event characterized by several physically, visually, and spatially perceived elements. Descriptions of the experience break down in relation to time, space, and body and are described here using those divisions—referred to as *lived time, lived space,* and *lived body.* Time stops or slows down, even transports the person "back in time" to the era or people surrounding that object. Time also compresses, leaving the individual feeling as if the experience is ongoing or happened only recently, when in fact it did not. Lived space tends to empty, leaving the person alone in the space despite the physical realities surrounding them, making them feel they are experiencing a one-on-one encounter with the object. All participants described a "tunnel vision," which is characterized by an intense focusing on the object, with peripheral vision either fuzzing out or becoming dark, and marked by a sense of moving towards or away from it. Participants felt the experience bodily, but in various ways—describing it as a "rush" of blood or adrenalin, becoming numbed or tingly, having butterflies, or feeling a "high."

The third theme, *Connections Bigger than Self*, refers to the deep encounters one has during a numinous experience with a museum object. The participants all speak of "connecting" to something, whether it be the object, the historic past, their personal past, or something higher in life (as defined by Kari and Hartel 2007). One participant said, "it felt different…there was definitely a connection there between me looking at this thing." These connections are about the person's existence in this world, about who they are and why they are here. They helped the person understand things about themselves and their relationships to the world around them. Connections seemed to be made in three areas—about oneself (reflective self), about the people of the past (imaginative empathy), and about the higher things in life (spirit). Participants felt strong connections to people of the past and seemed to connect very specific family stories and relationships to the experience. In addition, because the experience was often an epiphany, it involved realizations about oneself, one's identity and one's purpose in life. In this way, people connected to the higher things in life (Kari and Hartel, 2007) in a way that helped them understand and gave them meaning about their place on this earth.

The last theme of the numinous experience with a museum object, *Unity of the Moment* (Unity), is really a theme that cuts across all the others. It is often described by participants as a "moment," with definable parameters: a bounded thing, a discrete event. It is a thing in and of itself, this experience. It is holistic in that it involves all capacities of the human being: emotion, the intellect, physical feelings and even perceived extrasensory phenomena. Most participants described their experience positively, as peaceful or happy or as an understanding. This moment of unity—a coming together—could also be described as an epiphany: an understanding or realization of meaning. This theme, *Unity of the Moment*, is a wider theme, arching over the other three, with each contributing to the idea of *Unity.*

The Museum Experience and Psychological Flow

As will be discussed below, numinous experiences in museums share similarities with the psychological concept of flow. In order to illustrate this, I first outline the phenomenon of flow itself. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the positive psychologist[1] who fashioned the now popular (perhaps mainstream) concept of psychological flow—also known as optimal experience—described this experience as autotelic—an intrinsically rewarding experience characterized by a centering of attention, a sense of clarity, wholeness, and freedom (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). It is a holistic experience that people feel when they act with total involvement or complete absorption in the present moment. Flow experiences occur when an individual's goal becomes the experience itself rather than a future advantage or reward. It is a state of complete immersion in an activity characterized by focused concentration, clarity of thought, (often) feelings of joy and contentment,

[1] Positive psychology is the scientific study of well-being, a branch of psychology that focuses on improving the mental functioning of human beings.. The field is founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of work, love and play. See https://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/home for more details.

a distorted sense of time and a change in awareness of self. The state of flow is neither boring nor anxious and is never plagued by worry or distractions (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2011).

Flow experiences occur in different contexts for different people. Some might experience flow while engaging in a sport; while others might have such an experience while engaged in an activity such as painting, reading a book, or playing chess. There really is no limit to the type of activity that could elicit an optimal experience. Overall, all flow experiences share some combination of a set of very consistent characteristics found across all kinds of people and activities (Table 2).

Criteria of a general Flow experience	**Further explanation of criteria**
Merging of action and awareness	Attention is centered on an activity.
Limitation of stimulus field	There is no awareness of past or future
Loss of ego	Transcendence; there is a loss of self-consciousness
Control of action	One's "skills" are adequate to overcome "challenges"
Autotelic nature	There is no need for external rewards; activity is intrinsically satisfying.

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Kirchberg and Tröndle 2012)

Table 2. Characteristics of all flow experiences.

Csikszentmihalyi and his colleague Rick Robinson (1990) further investigated the relationship between flow and aesthetic experiences. In the interest of "finding ways to help non-specialists understand and enjoy art" (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990: viii) and to understand the nature of aesthetic experience, they interviewed 57 art museum professionals at the Getty, conducting both qualitative and quantitative analyses on the data. The authors concluded that an aesthetic experience may be a form of "flow," as recognized by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), characterized by deep concentration, a sense of control/freedom through balancing of challenges/skills, and continuous development of "meaningful complexity" or interactions with the environment that result in deep enjoyment.

Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) identified four major dimensions (which they also refer to as criteria or "challenges") of the aesthetic encounter that they termed *perceptual, emotional, intellectual, and communicative*. A person's experience of flow may occur in any one or more of these dimensions. However, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson do not classify each dimension as separate experiences, but rather view the aesthetic encounter as one experience with a common underlying structure. It is the underlying structure of the flow experience, and whether the numinous experience in the museum can be considered a form of flow, that is of interest in this paper.

Despite a wide range of contexts and contents, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) discovered an underlying structure to their participants' descriptions of the aesthetic encounter. They found that the aesthetic experience shares *attentional* elements with the well-documented optimal experience research, but they also discovered that this type of flow has its own unique dimensions that consist of an *existential* element and a *temporal* (structural) element (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990). In sum, an "aesthetic" flow experience is characterized by five elements:

Attentional:
- Focus on the Object
- Limitation of Stimulus Field
- Loss of Ego, Transcendence

Existential:
- Human Connectedness

Temporal:
- Sense of Wholeness and Freedom

An experience of aesthetic flow may be characterized as a dialectical (perhaps spiral) encounter in which new "skills" open up new areas of "challenge" and this facilitates the merging of awareness and attention (which will only be fully focused when skills and challenges are in balance). In turn, this new focusing builds new skills. It is cyclical.

One of the most important points made from the study is that the structure of aesthetic flow (and flow in general) seems to be universal, regardless of background or approach to situation/object.

Comparison of Aesthetic Flow to Numinous Experiences with Museum Objects

In their first study, Cameron and Gatewood (2000) suggested that the numinous experience in the museum can be understood as a state of flow. My research supports and expands on this suggestion. Based on the findings of my study, I propose that the numinous encounter with a museum object is one kind of *flow*, the well-documented, psychological construct of optimal experience. Below I provide more detail about the numinous experience and why it appears to be a case of psychological flow. Using Figure 3, I discuss each element of the numinous experience as identified in my research and show its relationship to Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson's (1990) Getty research on the elements of aesthetic flow. In my conclusion, I will suggest that viewing the numinous experience as a form of flow provides museum practitioners and scholars with a clearer understanding of this phenomenon in the museum context which can, in turn, aid in more intentional work to support these experiences.

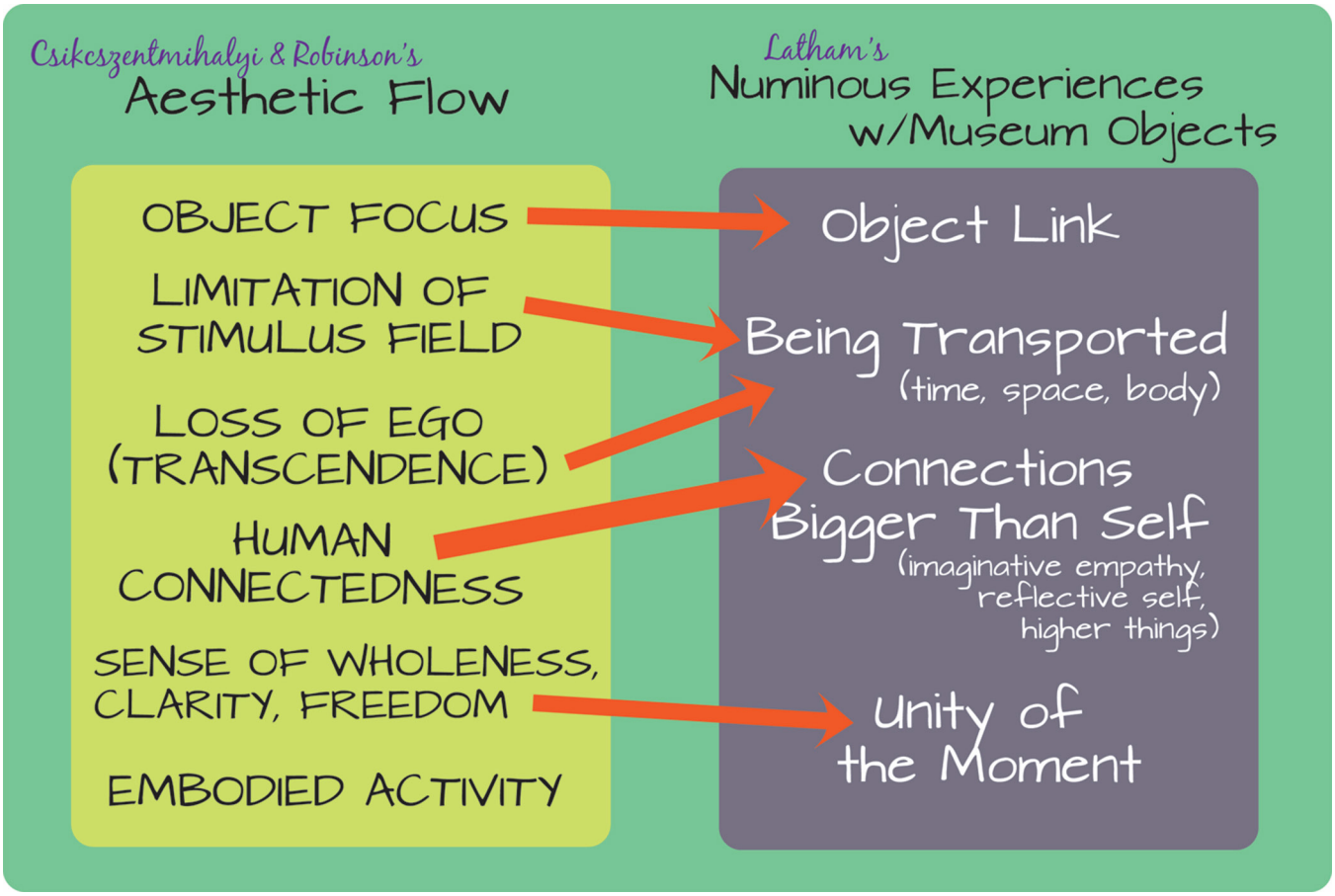

Figure 3. A comparison of Csikczentmihalyi and Robinson's elements of aesthetic flow with Latham's classification of numinous experiences with museum objects.

Object Focus: Object Link[2]

In identifying *object focus* as a key characteristic of flow, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) cited the object as the mechanism that stimulated the intense focus, the "perceptual hook" (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990: 118) that can lead to a flow experience, a concentrated point on which to center one's attention. The object was also considered the link to a human reaction, as "physical proof of their existence in my hand" (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990: 51), as one of their informants stated. Some of the participants in the Getty study used similar language as those in my numinous study, claiming that the object brought the past alive. The object was also understood as a source of information, holding an idea behind it: the object communicates, "it doesn't just sit there, it has something to give you" (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990: 62). The object is the trigger to a flow experience, which comes together when the certain "skills" of the viewer and "challenges" of the current situation meet (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990).

As in the Getty study, participants in my numinous study described an intense directedness or *link* to the museum object and the stories that are elicited by it, in both tangible and symbolic ways. The focus comes with a merging of the participant's background, mood and environment with the object's presentation, context and role in the larger story being witnessed. The tangible object acted as a trigger to the experience, as well as a device to elicit communication with the past, with the self and with others. Participants placed the object in a central position of the numinous experience: without its physical presence, the encounter may not be the same.

Limitation of Stimulus Field: Being Transported

A limitation of the stimulus field comes as a part of this intense focus. By this, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) meant that the field of consciousness is bounded to a limited set of "relevant" concerns, with relevancy being specific to both the viewer and the object. Because of the directed attention, fewer things—perhaps allowing more depth—are at the center of the viewer's awareness. Participants in the numinous study indicated a perceived limitation of the stimulus field in several ways: "tunnel vision," a sense of movement, and the sense of being alone.

[2] Note: In these comparisons, my terminology for the numinous experience is on the right, and Csikzentmihaly's and Robinson's terminology describing the aesthetic enounter is on the left.

The phenomenon of *being transported* identified in my study has multiple components. Participants describe what I have termed "tunnel vision" as the loss of peripheral vision or darkening around the edges of their visual field, resulting in a focus on just themselves and the object. They describe their vision narrowing or focusing and forming a "tube" or tunnel between themselves and the object or exhibit. The edges of their vision blur, darken, or fuzz out and the object is highlighted, illuminated or details are enhanced. Within this sensation, they describe a second component of being transported: the experience of spatial movement, a sense of moving towards or away from the object. The sense of movement and tunnel vision are actually wrapped up in each other, not separate experiences. In describing her encounter with a painting, one participant said she felt she was being pulled away from the object. The disappearance of people around the person-object duo is a manifestation of this limitation as well. During these encounters, participants state that no one else is around, even if they might be in a room full of other visitors.

Transcendence or Loss of Ego: (also) *Being Transported*

Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) see this element of aesthetic flow—loss of ego—as a culmination of object focus and limitation of stimulus field, as participants are "pushed to their human limits" (p. 122). The participant's focus is so intense and the stimulus field so confined that the person becomes "enmeshed" in the object, losing his/her own self-consciousness.

This element is comparable to the third component of the theme *Being Transported* experienced by participants from my numinous study : losing a sense of time, getting lost in the moment, or feeling alone with the object—all aspects of this absorption. The entire theme of *Being Transported* may refer to this loss of ego, as people felt literally moved to another time or place, not in their normal surroundings. In fact, it is difficult to separate the *Being Transported* experience into two discrete elements as Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson have done.

During a numinous experience with a museum object, the description of what happens to time was very consistent among all of the participants I interviewed. Time is described as slowing or stopping. One person I interviewed said he felt like he was frozen in time during the encounter. Another described time as "standing still," saying, "I think that's when time stopped that day, and I could just take a breath and life was good again." Time is also perceived to

compress or feel very recent during the experience. One person observed that the episode, which occurred in 1975, felt "like it happened yesterday." During her interview, when asked how long she stood looking at the Matisse cut-outs in her encounter, said, "I don't know. I'm still… standing there…in my 40s, so probably 30 years I've been standing there." In addition, people often described themselves as "being transported back in time." One participant described his encounter at Gettysburg's Little Round Top, "like being in a time machine, and dialing the date back to July 1863, and 'being there!'"

Human Connectedness: Connections Bigger than Self

Unique to the aesthetic flow experience, in contrast to other flow experiences, is the decidedly human quality perceived in the object by the viewer (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990). Museum objects are intrinsically connected to humans by the very fact that they are made by, used by, experienced by, and/or are about people. The encounter with a museum object, then, is a kind of communication with humanity, a connection to the entire range of human thoughts, conditions and feelings over the course of human history (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990). The recognition of this communication is felt as a kind of discovery or connection to others, which somewhat paradoxically leads to a loss of self.

The numinous encounter is very personal, yet participants describe forming deep connections with people they have never known. They clearly connected to people of the past in a way that they felt helped them understand what it means to be human. The presence of the object helped them relate to the world from which it came, or helped them to dream, stimulate fantasy and imagine. This experience between a viewer and object is a dialogue that crosses the boundaries of time. In other words, museum objects provide ways in which humanity can communicate with humanity. In my study, for example, one participant expressed the desire to talk with the people in a painting. Others in this study use dialogue-oriented language to describe their interaction with the past through the object.

Through *imaginative empathy*, people described an active conjuring process, trying to bring to the surface the actual people who once encountered the same object they now stand in front of. One woman spoke of becoming a "fly on the wall" of the reconstructed boarding house at Colonial Williamsburg so that she could observe the people of the past following their daily routine. Others made reference to the "real person" who was the subject associated with their object. And another said that having this experience made him feel like he was "a part of something" when he connected with these people who came before him.

This was a powerful experience for informants. They indicated a feeling of smallness or a sudden understanding of the grandeur of the meaning of the world around them and their place in it. This element of a numinous experience, *Connections Bigger than the Self*, speaks to the basics of what it is to be human—we are both social and individual. We have internal experiences within a framework of culture and social discourse. An experience with a museum object brings the two together and in a numinous reaction can fuse personal feelings with the seemingly impersonal.

Sense of Wholeness, Clarity, Freedom →Unity of the Moment

The authors of the Getty study found that the aesthetic experience was perceived as a whole. As one Getty participant said, "it absorbs, it involves all of the senses in a unifying manner," (1990: 119). In my study, I use the phrase *Unity of the Moment* to refer to the total holistic and dynamic experience. Participants used language that revealed the experience as something distinct and complete in and of itself, something different from other experiences. One person called it "interfacing" and another said that "all things kind of align together," to summarize the encounter.

The Getty study authors believe that the spiritual-like feeling coming from the aesthetic encounter provides a sense of transcending everyday reality and an affirmation of a higher order or a "sense of the absolute." In my study, this manifested itself almost as a kind of euphoria and for many resulted in a message that will last/ has lasted their whole lives. This message is characterized by connections that are reverential, full of awe, spiritual, deeply meaningful and extraordinary. Participants frequently talked about having an epiphany—a profoundly illuminating realization or discovery—as part of the numinous experience. For example, Phil, who opened this paper with his experience at Gettysburg, said that the experience "dinged" him. He had the most explicitly spiritual encounter of all the participants. He called it "earth-shattering," a "revelation," a "religious awakening," the "flame that sparked his heart." Another participant called it a "coming-to-Mecca sort of thing." This often manifested as a personal feeling of elation, awe, or wonder.

[Embodied activity]: Lived Body

The Getty study, while not explicitly discussing the aesthetic encounter as an embodied activity, alludes to this phenomenon. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) explain that some people felt a visceral physical reaction during their aesthetic experience. Respondents described themselves being "grabbed" by the object (or something unknown) or as being "hit in the stomach," completely overwhelmed (p. 35). One person described it as "thrilling you in all of your senses, not just visually, but sensually and intellectually," (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990: 36).

In the numinous study, participants describe having a rush, a feeling of blood to the face, butterflies, tingly excitement, being overwhelmed, exhilarated, and having visual "feelings" such as the need to "soak it up" with one's eyes. These physical sensations were an integral dimension of the total experience.

Summary of the Comparison of Aesthetic Flow and the Numinous Experience

The above comparisons reveal that the aesthetic museum experience (aesthetic flow),as described by Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson and the numinous museum experience that I documented, both involve sensing, feeling, thinking and communicating during viewers' intense experiences with musealized objects. Further, both studies reveal that these dimensions of experiencing objects, along with the viewer's "skills" help build the "challenges", or perceived opportunities from Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson's aesthetic encounter, that may occur in an encounter with a museum object. The well-documented features of a flow experience clearly closely correspond to those of the numinous museum experience.

It is important to point out a few differences between the Getty study on aesthetic experience and my research. First, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson's (1990) participant population was professional: curators, art historians and other museum professionals. Because of this, the authors conclude that a person must have significant "skills" in order to experience flow. In contrast, the participants in the numinous study were self-selecting visitors from a wide range of museum types, not museum professionals of any sort. Yet they too were able to achieve flow. Second, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson stated that the content of the focus (i.e., the museum object) did not affect the results; nonetheless, the Getty study was exclusively focused on art and artistic processes. My numinous study, in contrast, considered a wider diversity of museums and objects and reveals that numinous experiences happen in a wide range of museum contexts, ranging from art to history to natural history.

Implications

The numinous experience as described in this study is confirmed as a form of psychological flow that manifests as: an intense centering of attention, limitation of the stimulus field and loss of ego, a strong sense of connection to humanity, and a feeling of wholeness or freedom. In 2003, Cameron and Gatewood posited three dimensions of the numinous museum experience: 1) deep engagement or transcendence, 2) empathy, and 3) awe or reverence. Only their first dimension explicitly included the potential link to flow. My study deepens their findings by showing that all of their dimensions support the interpretation of the numinous experience as one of flow. In other words, the current study supports Cameron and Gatewood's dimensions and expands on them, by adding unity, and considering them all as a whole to be psychological flow.

One of the significant findings in both the Getty study and my research is that the major dimensions of the encounter are not separate entities, but rather jointly constitute elements that cut across all aspects of the experience. The Getty study introduces four dimensions of "aesthetic" flow (perceptual, emotional, intellectual, and communicative) and makes a distinction between the content and the structure of the experience: "as soon as the two are seen as separate issues, it becomes much easier to see that while the felt quality of the experience may be the same for every aesthetic encounter, the details that make the experience possible are infinitely varied," (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 177-178).

I use the phrase *Unity of the Moment* to describe the simultaneous nature of the multiple dimensions of the numinous experience. To separate them creates a construct that does not exist in reality. Ideas, learning, aesthetics, people and emotions are all part of a single experience that is stimulated by encounters with objects. John Dewey (1937) wrote about this extensively in *Art as Experience*, describing *aesthetic experiences* as those that include a sense of completeness, an understanding of the experience as unique and whole, unifying emotion (see also Bedford 2014; Dewey 1937; Jackson 1998). Emotions, according to Dewey, are qualities that are always contextual and serve as a sort of glue to hold all of the elements of an experience together (discussed in Jackson 1998). For the people in my study, the experience was a transaction—a coming together of the past, the self, the present, emotions, senses, and more with the object (Dewey 1937; Latham 2009, 2014). Together, these resulted in *an experience*. The transaction

perspective sees together—in a whole system–that which has conventionally been seen as separate (Palmer 2004). For Dewey (1937), experience refers to the undivided continuous transaction(s) between human beings and their environment. Dewey observed that ordinary experience happens all the time but occasionally there are segments of this experience that are heightened, marked by a sense of wholeness, unity and fulfillment (Jackson 1998). He called these kinds of experiences "*an* experience" (Dewey 1937), entailing active engagement. Such experiences stand in contrast to experience that is cumulative, an outcome or product, and used later to affect future experiences (Ansbacher 1998; Kesner 2006).

At the heart of the numinous experience (or perhaps more accurately the *museum flow experience*) is *visitor attention.* In *Attention and Value,* Bitgood (2013) focused on understanding why, when and how people become motivated and pay attention to museum exhibits. He argued that learning only comes *after* a visitor's attention is focused and engaged on something in the museum experience. Bitgood observed (2013:10): "learning is a byproduct of attention," and so focusing on learning without looking at attention is like putting the horse before the cart. His book provides detail on the psychology of attention.

If attention is the true start of any positive museum experience (Bitgood 2013), perhaps the flow concept should be given another look as a valuable construct in museum visitor studies. Understanding the role of attention and the need to create an environment that allows for a balance of "skills" (of the visitor) and "challenges" (opportunities provided by the museum)—in any kind of museum—could aid greatly in enhancing positive and meaningful visitor experiences in museums. This, along with clear goals and feedback from both the museum and the visitors, according to Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990), will serve to deepen the encounter.

After asking whether or not museums are "getting in the way of" visitors having these kinds of profound experiences, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) also offer some possibilities for creating more positive encounters. They recommend that museums experiment based on this knowledge of the flow model elements. Changes that could facilitate the flow experience might, for example, include practical adjustments, such as e.g., good lighting, benches, and areas for relaxation. Other suggestions from Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) include providing greater didactic support to enhance the viewer's confidence, more effective handling of crowds and noise, and work to eliminate distractions. Helping visitors set manageable goals for their museum visit (such as, only aim to see your 10 favorite pieces, or plan to visit only new artifacts or exhibits, etc.,) as well as giving them opportunities to provide feedback to questions posed are other suggestions for creating a positive experience that could lead to flow (Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson 1995). One aim of the Getty study was to identify techniques that could promote such experiences. The results of my study (see also Latham 2009, 2013) add to the understanding of these experiences (see also Harvey, Ross, Loomis, Bell and Marino 1998) and help build a toolkit of sorts for museum professionals to use in creating meaningful exhibitions and other programs.

In addition, I suggest that research on the flow experience in the museum would likely be better positioned on its own—extracted from terms such as "aesthetic." Whether we like it or not, the word "aesthetic" is often conflated with "art." My numinous study shows that flow can happen in any type of museum. In fact, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) mention that there was not an association with type of object even within the art museum, giving support to this view. They showed that the structure of the experience is universal, while the content—the source of the hook or trigger—varies greatly.

Conclusion

There are indeed profound implications to drawing more attention to flow experiences in museum work. Extensive research has been done on flow and this arsenal of knowledge can be immediately accessible to those doing museum work. As shown above, my research shows that the numinous experience is a type of flow experience in the museum. A large body of psychological research has shown that those who attain flow develop a stronger, more confident self because more of their psychic energy has been invested in goals they themselves chose to pursue (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). In fact, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) conclude that the aesthetic experiences that engender flow enhance the quality of lived experience.

In a now classic article about intrinsic motivation in museums, Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson explain how flow in the museum setting can lead to growth and motivation in museum visitors:

> If a museum exhibit induces the flow state, the experience will be intrinsically rewarding. The visitor will be motivated to explore, and as he or she learns more, skills will increase. The consequence of this dynamic involvement is a growth of sensory, intellectual, and emotional complexity (1995: 74-75).

In addition, they note that

> [These] activities lead to personal growth because, in order to sustain the flow state, skills must increase along with increased challenges. Flow involves the person's entire being and full capacity. Since flow is inherently enjoyable, one is constantly seeking to return to that state, and this need inevitably involves seeking greater challenges (1995: 70).

The research presented here supports and builds on their conclusions. As museums intentionally work to promote flow experiences, they can improve and advance the lives of their visitors. In turn, visitors will continually seek out more such experiences, returning time and time again, supporting sites of cultural heritage and perhaps become advocates in support of museums overall.

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