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Museum Thresholds: The Design and Media of Arrival

Edited by Ross Parry, Ruth Page and Alex Moseley

## **Suspended** Art in the threshold

*Peter Ride*

Gertrude Stein memorably quipped, ‘I like museums. I like to look out their windows.’ (quoted in Wright, 1988). Stein’s cryptic quote can be read in many ways, starting with the description of the museum as ‘a window onto the world’. But to expand on Stein’s metaphor, windows not only offer transparency but also create ancillary spaces, or spaces of transition and connection. This chapter examines how the artwork in the threshold is a window in reverse – a window *into* the museum. Artwork allows the museum to enrich the visitor’s experience, but in the manner of Stein’s quote it is also ambiguous. This chapter explores how the creative language of artworks can augment the functionality of a museum threshold and contribute to the narrative that the museum visitor experiences.

The chapter explores a series of examples that illustrate ways in which artworks in the museum threshold<sup>1</sup> can also be seen to function as metaphors for the museum itself. From a projection of shadows on a white wall, the reclaimed wood of an old sailing ship and a granite table where visitors could take away a flower, to a tapestry made out of pins, these examples of artworks show how different strategies involve the visitor in complex ways. In some of the examples, artwork is literally suspended, but the significance lies in the way that artwork can metaphorically suspend meaning that the visitor then awakens and engages with as they journey through the threshold into the museum. The examples in the chapter are categorized as different types of metaphorical connection between the museum and the artwork. These categories are of course not exclusive, nor are they definitive; they are indications of the many ways that artworks can operate. The chapter also aims to show that by thinking of the artwork as having metaphoric qualities we can think of them as having a role beyond their material and aesthetic role.

The concept of ‘artwork’ is itself broad and is used in this chapter in a very inclusive way, covering works by artists commissioned by the museum, works by artists acquired or on loan, and works created by museum designers. Artworks could also be made by public participants. They could be incorporated within the building itself or they could be

virtual. A fundamental part of most the examples featured in the chapter is that, when interviewed, curators and museum professionals were particularly interested in how visitors encountered the artwork and incorporated it within their own narratives. While visitors might be aware that the artworks might be a new creation by an artist, an object from the collection or a design product, in the context of their threshold experience what mattered to the curators was how the artwork facilitated the visitors' comprehension of the museum. Artworks that created metaphors could be seen as one of the elements that contributed to the 'authentic experience' (Lord and Piacente, 2014) of the visitor. In being open to interpretation, the artworks offered an ambiguous entry point to the experience of the museum, indicating that no one visitor's experience is more or less authentic than that of any other person, irrespective of what they might encounter or how they might respond to it. Not all artworks hang suspended in space, but a museum threshold can be seen as somewhere where many things are momentarily in suspension as the visitor moves from one environment into another. Of the many ways that the museum can facilitate this movement through the liminal space, the examples in this chapter show how artwork can be used in a powerful but non-didactic way to enable the visitor to make sense of the museum. In doing so the artworks can communicate important ideas about the way that the museum understands its relationship with its public.

The significance and potential of incorporating artworks within non-art museums is demonstrated by the continued importance of seminal projects that radically created interventions in the museum, notably that of artist Fred Wilson in *Mining the Museum* (Wilson, 1994), by curator James Putnam in *Time Machine: Ancient Egypt and Contemporary Art at the British Museum* (Putnam, 2001) and even as part of linked initiatives that connected different organizations, such as the 2007 bicentenary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade that was commemorated by museums in the UK by commissions and exhibitions of artworks.<sup>2</sup> Museums have used the arts as a means to demonstrate that there are many approaches to understanding what constitutes knowledge and to create alternative narratives to the dominant story being explored in the museum galleries. Artists have been used to offer ways to interpret and engage with empirical information (Redler, 2009); they have explored the notion of collective and personal memory; their practice has been used in laboratory environments where creativity can be seen to work 'in process' (Muller, 2011); and they have been used to help facilitate public interaction and enable voices from local or marginalized communities to be represented in the museum.

However, much of the literature on artworks in the museum takes an art historical approach, providing a critical 'reading' of the artwork in the context of artistic practice, the intentions of the artist and external cultural reference points. Of course these points are significant with artwork in the threshold, but to understand how it plays a part within the narrative of the museum it is also important to consider how it operates within a museum as a specific space. In this way, the artwork can be understood as part of a series of relationships and interactions between the public and the institution. These issues

around the way art operates within a space are akin to the way in which public art is discussed in terms of place-making, presence and the way that it facilitates community engagement (Doherty, 2015).

As the examples in this chapter show, artworks in the museum foyer also have an additional power. They draw attention to the importance of the visitor's own entrance narrative or subconscious expectations, as these are important to consider in the way that the visitors 'make meaning' during their journey through the museum (Doering and Pekarik, 1996). They also demonstrate how the threshold is a space where multiple narratives play out. The power of artworks often lies in their ambiguous meanings, and as such they also have complex roles, as writers such as James Elkins (2000) and Terry Barrett (2002) have argued. Yet their function can also be to operate as a device that helps transition the visitor into the gallery, and they do this in relation to other devices that could range from signage, to layout, to human contact. This could be thought of as something similar to the way that literary theorists describe the visual, graphic and written information contained from the cover to the introductions and prefaces of a literary text or cultural artefact as the paratext (Fludernik, 2009) that frames and orients the main narrative, a concept that has been adopted in other fields such as video games (Jones, 2008). As a paratext, an artwork in the threshold<sup>3</sup> therefore works with the museum's institutional metanarrative. But it also acknowledges that visitors need to find their own way to engage with the museum space upon arrival and the artwork facilitates this by providing a metaphoric entry point.

### **Msheireb Museum: threshold artwork as consolidation**

The Msheireb Museum in Qatar consists of four historic houses in the heart of Msheireb district, the 'Old Town' of Doha. Each house has been developed as a self-contained museum, each with its own subject area: three of them cover the social history of Doha, local archaeology, and the history of the petroleum industry. The fourth house, Bin Jelmoed House, examines the history of the slave trade in the Indian Ocean, firstly within the context of the global slave trade and also as a form of human exploitation that played a crucial part in the history of the economic and social structures of Qatar. Visitors entering the Bin Jelmoed House come in from the street up a small flight of steps, through the traditional heavy doors of a Qatari house and into a small foyer that is a square, predominantly white and unfurnished space. On the facing wall a projected image intermittently breaks the purity of the pale surface. It appears to show the shadows of a procession of individuals and small family groups in traditional Qatari clothing that walk from right to left; the shadow figures disappear heading towards the doors that open onto the museum's internal spaces. It is not clear if the figures are contemporary or historical. This artwork is an example of a piece created by the museum curators and design team and can be seen as a metaphor that responds to different elements of the museum concept, its spatial design and philosophy. Visually and thematically it draws the visitors into the museum space as they enter the threshold. Museum Manager, Colin Jones, describes this

device as a ‘shadowy conversation’ that can invite people into the story of the museum without being didactic.<sup>4</sup> The artwork has the power to consolidate various threads of the underlying narrative of the museum and by being visual without any supporting text it can operate only as a metaphor.

*Figure 5.1 Bin Jelmoood House, Msheireb Musuem, Qatar, showing the projection of moving shadow figures in the threshold (Image: Peter Ride)*

Slavery in Qatar is a contentious subject and has a contemporary resonance. The Indian Ocean slave trade, under which people in East Africa were captured, trafficked and forced into slavery in the Middle East, continued until the late nineteenth century. However, the legal practice of slavery, including ‘ownership’ of people born into enslavement, was still in force while the country was a British protectorate and was only officially abolished in Qatar in 1952. Consequently, enslavement is still within the living memory of Qatari people.

The inhumanity of contemporary slavery in the Middle East is also given substantial coverage in the museum displays. It examines the situation of foreign workers trapped into work under contracts and conditions that deny their human rights and it addresses the subject of women forced into prostitution or trafficked through supply chains. Therefore, the museum is dealing with a subject that cannot easily be addressed at a historical distance.

The shadow image in the foyer is also intended to evoke the idea of a community that could have occupied the house in previous generations. Original architectural details such as recesses and doorframes have been left to emphasize that the house is a historic building and pre-dates the development of modern Doha. The foyer leads onto a communal social area, the majlis. In a traditional Qatari house there are two majlis, one for men and another for women.

The museum approach aims to prompt a familiarity in visitors’ minds with the social conventions of an Arab home where the interior is a very private space (Mahgoub and Theodoropoulou, 2014). Although visitors unfamiliar with Qatari culture would not necessarily understand the references, this would be very familiar to Middle Eastern audiences. Within the majlis families and social groups have the kinds of conversation that cannot easily be raised outside in a public space. ‘We wanted people to feel that this is a safe space in which to have difficult conversations, to subtly allow people to engage without forcing it upon them [. . .] the subject of slavery was in the shadows’, Jones explains.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, the shadow is a motif that runs throughout the museum’s displays. In the

foyer, the minimal appearance of the projection forewarns the visitor that objects are not a key component in the museum's displays.

The main exhibition in Bin Jelmood House primarily uses didactic panels and video, only occasionally punctured by historical artefacts, unlike the other museums in the Msheireb complex that are distinctly object-based. Mohammed Bin Jassim House, for example, exhibits objects uncovered during the construction of the site; Company House uses everyday objects and industrial items in displays on the pioneering petroleum industry workers; and Radwani House recreates domestic room environments from the house as it was when it was built in the 1920s. Many of the video installations are animations with a dramatic scenario that follows a family from East Africa as they are captured by slavers and traded along the slave routes of the African coast. Eventually they are sold to work for Bedouin tribespeople and to work in the pearl industry, the two main economies where people were made to work. The animations use silhouettes of human figures, which create a visual consistency with the shadow figures in the entrance, but the last video in the series is a filmed 'talking head' in which a Qatari woman of slave origin tells her life story. Crucially, the street entrance to the house is also the exit, which is a reminder that a threshold operates in many ways, not only facilitating a visitor's journey into a museum but also being a transition space where they leave the museum behind. Therefore the artwork provides the departing visitor with the opportunity for summative reflection at a point where the full effect of the different themes may resonate. The artwork not only provides an introductory metaphor but it also offers a concluding one.

The metaphor of the shadowy figures not only consolidates the themes of the museum but it can also be thought of as aggregating them, building and intensifying the idea that the story of slavery is one shared by everybody who enters the space. Its subtle suggestive quality works with the latency of its effect so that as it transitions the visitor from the threshold into the museum space it enables associations to be made with other aspects of the museum.

As a single artwork the piece itself is minimal and does not immediately demand attention as it is not at all self-explanatory. The effect of this artwork is to introduce and thread together complex and disparate themes that can lead the visitor on an emotional journey.

### **V&A: threshold artwork as declaration**

The shadow procession of the Msheireb Museum draws together narrative threads that might otherwise be left unconnected, and it stands in contrast to the way that another museum might use artworks in the threshold to confirm core elements of the museum identity and make conclusive or definitive statements about the institution. Where the power of the Msheireb artwork as a metaphor lies in its subtlety, in other museums the metaphorical meanings of the artwork can operate as a bold statement, a declaration of what the museum is and what the threshold offers. These strategies operate effectively

when the narrative of the museum is strongly established and the visitor could be expected to anticipate what they are likely to encounter. A declaration metaphor creates a singular and impactful threshold experience, announcing the presence of the museum, signifying its status, its function and the qualities it wishes to represent. The Victoria and Albert Museum in London presents itself as ‘the world’s leading museum of art and design’. Visitors entering the foyer of the V&A are confronted by a magnificent glass sculpture by Dale Chihuly (2001) that is nearly 30 feet high, suspended from a rotunda and hanging above the information (and visitor services) desk. This is a prestigious object that signals how the visitor’s experience of the museum will emphatically be an aesthetic one in which they experience refined material objects. The presence of the sculpture celebrates masterful design and craft skills, and heightens the awareness that the V&A has a world-leading collection. Described as ‘wonderfully dramatic in its effect, a real *coup de théâtre*’ (Dorment, 2001), the artwork intensifies the drama of the entry into the museum space and the magnificence of the early twentieth-century architecture. It also signposts the museum’s interest in modern design and craft. In this context, the artwork is used as a statement of contemporary panache in an institution that is very aware of the importance of the image that it conveys and also aware that the museum has a brand that is upheld and managed through key moments in the visit (Whitemore, 2013).

*Figure 5.2* Dale Chihuly, V&A rotunda chandelier (2001) at the V&A, London. (Image: Victoria and Albert Museum)

The artwork therefore communicates the presence of the museum, and endorsement or celebration of the visitor’s expectations. Its purpose is not to make subtle suggestions in the manner of Bin Jelmoor House or to provoke questions. The V&A is a national museum of a vast size and with

a huge amount of choice on offer and a potentially confusing number of directions in which people can turn when they are in the foyer area. An artwork that presents the visitor with a metaphor of certainty and belief in the resonance of objects is in line with many of the nineteenth-century values of the museum which upheld the scholarly interpretation of the collection as its key function and saw the museum as a space of enlightenment (Conn, 2010). The metaphorical power of the sculpture also suggests that while the visitor’s journey may have been arduous, the bag check frustrating and the crowds disorientating, the spectacle of a dramatic artwork provides an aesthetic reward and is in keeping with the grand architecture of the foyer.

### **MOHAI: threshold artwork as metaphors of site**

A sculpture at the Seattle Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI) demonstrates how an artwork can operate as site-specific. Created by artist John Grade, the sculpture *Wawona* (2012) is a vertical structure standing 65 feet from floor to ceiling as a tapered

tower that recalls both a ship's mast and a tree. The work is made from the reclaimed Douglas fir timbers of a nineteenth-century windsail schooner, *Wawona*. The sculpture can be examined and 'read' critically in the context of art history discourse, as an aesthetic object with integrity and visual meaning, but it can also be seen as a site-specific artwork in that the space it occupies is crucial to what it communicates. It in turn gives added meaning to the threshold. It also demonstrates how a threshold can extend from the external environment through which the visitor approaches the museum to the interior space, which in the case of MOHAI is a large atrium leading on to the galleries and which contains objects and displays.

*Figure 5.3* John Grade, *Wawona*. Seattle Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI), showing the positioning of the sculpture in the threshold (Image: Peter Ride)

The sculpture draws on many different themes of the museum. The Douglas fir timber industry dominated the early industry of the Seattle region. The *Wawona* ship itself had a history as an iconic object in Seattle's maritime and industrial history. Dating from 1897, it was one of the best examples of the ships that transported timber on the US north-western coast. Retired in the 1960s and later dry-docked, it became the first vessel to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places and, in 1977, was designated an official Seattle landmark. However, its condition made it unsalvageable and only the timbers that had been below the waterline could be restored. The owners, Northwest Seaport, offered the reclaimed timbers to the artist John Grade for his proposed project for the museum's competition for an artwork as part of the development of its new building, which opened in 2012. The sculpture was designed, computer-cut and hand-carved from the timber planks, with structural engineering provided by Arup Seattle and the incorporation of water-jet cut steel rib plates (Blomgren, 2012).

*Figure 5.4: John Grade, Wawona. Seattle Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI) interior of sculpture, looking up. [Image: Peter Ride]*

*Wawona* draws on and evokes the maritime industry of Seattle. The exterior of the sculpture has been re-hewn to create bobbles along its surface, often in line with the knots of the wood, giving the impression of plankton brushing against the surface of the vessel. It has also been engineered with a hollow interior large enough for people to stand inside and from this point of view it creates the impression of the interior cross-section of a ship's keel. The sculpture is suspended as a pendulum so that when visitors press against its exterior it starts to slowly move like a boat rocking in the water.

When a visitor stands inside the object the pinpricks of light emerge through the

knotholes of the wood in a mesmerizing starlight pattern. The sculpture uses a poetic sensibility and through its physical interactivity it enables visitors to have a sense of tactile engagement with the artwork. *Wawona* is supported by didactic information panels but allows visitors to explore and learn through touch, sight and imagination. The artwork also employs a constructivist approach to museum learning and engagement.

*Figure 5.5: John Grade, Wawona. Seattle Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI) visitors interacting with sculpture. [Image: Peter Ride]*

Once *Wawona* has been encountered, it becomes obvious that this artwork draws on all the narrative threads being explored in the museum: the historic industries of the region, natural ecology, human endeavour and resource management. Not only does the sculpture create connections to the subject areas of the museum, but it also addresses its physical site. The museum is in a historic harbour building, the former Naval Reserve Armory, on the shores of Lake Union. The sculpture extends through the building, starting below the floor of the museum, in the waters of the lake and rising through the roof. When visitors stand inside the sculpture they can see down into the waters of the lake below and up towards the sky where the sculpture punctures the fabric of the building. While the museum protects the main body of the sculpture from the climate, the extremities are revealed to the elements and will weather over time. Therefore, as well as being housed in the museum it the artwork connects directly to the local environment.

The threshold of the museum covers a large area, from the entry point in the lakeside park. The foyer opens onto a central atrium of the building which houses a number of exhibits as well as *Wawona*, including major objects from the collection such as a dramatically suspended US mail aircraft. The museum's brief to the artist was broad, requiring that it dealt at least loosely with Seattle history and, in relation to the architecture of the building, that it could be located near the elevator shaft.<sup>6</sup> As visitors go up to the higher floors of the museum the sculpture becomes a constant reference point. A 2014 visitor survey showed that a quarter of museum visitors move around the exhibits on the ground floor starting from the direction of *Wawona*.<sup>7</sup>

The significance of this sculpture is that it exemplifies how an artwork resonates beyond the physical space of the museum and connects to local interests, stories and histories. Metaphorically it combines the spectacular power of the Dale Chihuly artwork at the V&A and the suggestive quality of the shadow projection in Qatar and in addition it has an additional attraction as a site-specific work drawing an awareness of the location into the space of the museum.

### **Aga Khan Museum: threshold artwork as subtext**

Threshold artworks such as those discussed already may be outstanding because of their

dramatic quality and because of the way in which they relate with a context of the museum collection or displays. However, in many situations it is hard to consider the qualities an artwork brings to a space without considering it in relation to the architecture. Indeed, in some situations the architecture creates such a defining concept for the institution that what an artwork offers is a subtextual way of understanding the physicality of the museum. The artworks serve as a reminder that museum buildings can be conceptualized as dynamic spaces where meaning is not static but results from the interactions of the people and material within them (Jones and MacLeod, 2016).

The Aga Khan Museum in Toronto illustrates the way in which a threshold artwork can respond and contribute to the qualities of the building but can also address a subtext of the museum narrative. The Aga Khan Museum houses and exhibits some of the most important works of Islamic art in the world.

Founded by His Highness the Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslim community, the museum aims to celebrate the geographic, ethnic, linguistic and religious pluralism of Muslim civilization and the museum collection highlights 'objects drawn from every region and every period, and created from every kind of material in the Muslim world'.<sup>8</sup> A six-metre-long tapestry hangs in the café area of the museum outside the galleries housing the permanent collections and temporary exhibitions. Created by Pakistani artist, Aisha Khalid and titled *Your Way Begins on the Other Side* (2014) the work was commissioned to be part of the museum's opening exhibition *The Garden of Ideas* and designed specifically for the space. It was subsequently acquired for the permanent collection. From one side the tapestry appears to be delicately patterned in the style of a Persian carpet, but on closer inspection it becomes clear that instead of stitching the artist has used gold and steel pin heads to puncture the velvet and silk to create outlines of animals and a garden. Looking at it from the reverse side, the pins protrude and form a shimmering, beguiling but dangerous surface. The tapestry was made in Lahore with skilled tapestry craftspeople and consists of over one million pins and weighs over 100 kilos.<sup>9</sup> The title of the work, drawn from the writing of the thirteenth-century mystical poet Rumi, alludes to the connection between the spiritual and everyday life.

However, the use of artwork in the Aga Khan Museum demonstrates that it can be complicated for artworks to have an independent presence when the architecture defines the mood and feel of the building. The museum opened in 2014 in an elegant, white granite modernist building designed by Fumihiko Maki, and the entrance is approached through an open square where formal gardens are placed amongst shallow granite-lined pools. The entrance leads past a restaurant and bookshop to a dramatic central courtyard. This internal open space within the building is the climactic part of the threshold approach, and is lined with glass panels that are decorated with repeating designs based on traditional Islamic designs. Beyond the courtyard are the galleries housing the museum collection and temporary exhibitions. However, there are no museum objects or

images on show as visual evidence of the collection at this point in the visitor's journey. The only exception to this is the tapestry *Your Way Begins on the Other Side*. Its positioning is a reminder that what constitutes the threshold experience is not defined by architecture but by the way in which the building is used. The threshold area at the Aga Khan Museum is not only extensive but free, whereas entry is charged to the main galleries that lie beyond the lobby and courtyard area, thereby fostering a different type of visitor engagement.

*Figure 5.6: Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, exterior looking towards the main entrance. [Image: Peter Ride]*

The key visual element in this area, and throughout the building, is light. The central well of the courtyard throws patterned shadows that move across the adjacent walls and floor throughout the day, reproducing the patterns on the glass that are inspired by Islamic Jali screens. Skylights also cast delicately patterned shadows onto the floor. The use of light is typical of the architect's practice but it is also symbolically important within the institution, the museum's mission being to foster knowledge and understanding within Muslim communities and between these societies and other cultures. The museum uses light as a metaphorical concept shared by many faiths and a metaphor of tolerance and understanding (Monreal, 2014). The tapestry by Aisha Khalid, *Your Way Begins on the Other Side*, picks up the theme of light by having a surface that glistens and glimmers, reflecting light from different directions. Linda Milrod, Head of Exhibitions and Collections at the Aga Khan Museum, identifies that the light patterning is a crucial creative element in the museum threshold that other artworks or displays would disrupt. From the perception of the museum staff, light is crucial for the mood of the museum, contributing directly to the ambience of the interior space and making it comfortable for visitors. Because it is not a large building, visitors are always aware of the dimensions of the light from the courtyard.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, it was recognized that as well as the light patterning, the scale and height of the lobby would diminish the impact of anything other than very large works. Therefore, as a threshold artwork the tapestry differs considerably from the way that a declarative artwork such as the Chihuly operates at the V&A by making a grand statement. In an architectural space such as the Aga Khan Museum an artwork is required to have a subtle presence so that it provides subtext rather than an explosive impact.

*Figure 5.7: Aisha Khalid Your Way Begins on the Other Side (2014), Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, interior. [Image: Ian Rashid]*

However, the power of the tapestry as a metaphoric artwork also lies in the way that it works with the subtext of the museum's narrative. Principally, the museum collection focuses on the history of Islamic Art from the seventh century until the seventeenth. It deals with creativity across the art and with artefacts that relate to a variety of cultural practices as well as material from different geographic communities. This emphasis on historical work is not unusual with collections of Islamic art and is justified by the excellence of the material on show, much of which has been contributed from the family collection of His Highness the Aga Khan. However, the tapestry by Aisha Khalid represents a contemporary approach to a traditional subject and suggests a relationship between the history and the present. The museum has been committed to a vision of plurality from the outset, of interaction between faith groups and communities, Muslim and non-Muslim:

In a world in which some speak of a growing clash of civilizations we hope and believe that the museum will help to address what is not so much a clash of civilizations as it is a clash of ignorance.

(His Highness the Aga Khan, 2014)

The modernist architecture places the museum in a contemporary milieu but the tapestry contributes a missing element that is the visible contribution of contemporary Islamic culture. It provides the necessary representation that the museum has a self-declared role as an agent of social engagement and interaction and engages in current debate as well as showing and studying historic material. The tapestry at the Aga Khan Museum is an example of the way in which institutions use artworks to offer visitors different ways of experiencing the building and allow an entry point into the museum's concepts and concerns. Like *Wawona* at MOHAI and the shadow projection at Msheireb Museum, the tapes- try prompts metaphors in a way that is open-ended, offering suggestions rather than fixed meanings. Its placement recognizes that the threshold can be a liminal space where the many threads of the museum's narrative are suspended, and the visitors' interaction with the space can be subtle as they progress on their journey into the museum.

### **Brooklyn Museum: threshold artwork as participation**

Brooklyn Museum is another museum that shows how the interaction of architecture and artwork lets the visitor approach the museum in ways that might not otherwise come about. Like MOHAI in Seattle, it also shows how artworks can emphasize the connection between the museum and its physical location but furthermore it emphasizes its place within the public realm by enabling and facilitating public participation.

In 2012 Brooklyn Museum commissioned Taiwanese-American artist Lee Mingwei to represent his artwork *The Moving Garden*. The artwork was a process-based, conceptual art project and consisted of a 45-foot-long granite table with a jagged channel along its

length and from which over 200 flowers appeared to grow. It stood in the lobby area of the museum. Visitors were invited to take a flower as they left the museum but on the condition that they made a detour in their journey to give it to a stranger before they reached their next destination.<sup>11</sup> As each day progressed, the stock of flowers was depleted but was then replenished the next day. Although the table and flowers existed as an object in the museum, the real activity was in the interaction of the visitor. This interaction then put them into the role of a protagonist, first in taking the flower and second in making a gift of the flower to another person, in a location outside the museum. The artist was inspired by the concept of gift-giving but also by a fascination with the conscious or unconscious deliberations that people make when deciding to whom they would offer the flower.<sup>12</sup> The artwork therefore shifts the role of the museum visitor from being a passive viewer to an active participant in the artwork. It also suggests that the foyer is not only an entry and exit point but also a transitional space that links the business of the museum with people and their daily lives. In a museum environment where objects cannot often be touched, it is highly memorable when an object can not only be handled but becomes something that can be transferred to another context, and in doing so can acquire any number of personal or evocative meanings.

*Figure 5.8: Artist Lee Mingwei, The Moving Garden (2009/2011) Brooklyn Museum (Image: Brooklyn Museum)*

On a metaphoric level, the artwork is not only concerned with site, and with participation, but it also embodies metaphors of social engagement. It demonstrates how the museum can intensify the visitor experience through the use of artwork. *The Moving Garden* was also part of a visitor engagement strategy by the Brooklyn Museum to include works from the collection and present temporary works in the threshold area. It reflects an acute awareness of the importance of bridging the museum with the surrounding area and its social dynamic and of exploring the opportunities provided by the architectural space.

An extensive visitor experience evaluation that took place over three years addressed how the institution could create a dynamic and responsive museum that fostered dialogue and sparked conversation between staff and all its visitors. Using focus groups, discussion forums and observation, the evaluation included the part played by the museum threshold.<sup>13</sup> Opened in 1895, the museum is an imposing Beaux Arts building with a classical portico. In 2004 the ground floor entrance was redesigned to expand the lobby area and to create an extensive glass pavilion coming out from the building. This meant that the doors of the museum seamlessly connected onto a large open plaza.<sup>14</sup> Through its evaluation, the museum examined the contrast between the way that the plaza could be a vibrant and exciting community gathering point and the visitor's entry into the museum threshold. The museum's audience engagement team found that public feedback showed that visitors identified that they would walk in from the outside where the mood felt

relaxed and hip with people playing, reading, and kids on skateboards, but when they approached the beautiful glass front door the mood became silent, imposing and sterile. Consequently, the museum's engagement team took on the challenge of how to take the mood that existed outside and bring it indoors.<sup>15</sup>

In response to the challenge, changes were made in the spatial arrangements of the lobby area by moving visitor information desks and changing signage but the evaluation also resulted in a commitment to use the space to present art. As well as temporary projects like *The Moving Garden* that could be located in the pavilion area other artists' projects, for example *Stephen Powers: Coney Island Is Still Dreamland (To a Seagull)* (2015) were programmed so that work was displayed in both the gallery space and the plaza, thereby bridging the interior of the museum with the outside. The museum also continued an existing strategy of displaying significant works from the collection in the threshold area making key works from the permanent collection accessible and aiming to ensure that visitors did not feel intimidated by the artworks they were encountering. For example, Auguste Rodin's sculptures *The Burghers of Calais* (1889) were placed in the pavilion area for an extended display. Significantly, these iconic works of European modernism were not placed on plinths but were placed at ground level so people could move in and among them, match their body size to that of the sculptures and take selfies in front of them.

*Figure 5.9: Brooklyn Museum visitor interacting with sculptures by Auguste Rodin Burghers of Calais (1889) in the pavilion. [Image: Peter Ride]*

The relationship between Brooklyn Museum and its local community is an indicator of this approach. A 2016 survey indicated that 70 per cent of the museum's visitors were from New York City and 50 per cent were local to the Brooklyn area. The social media engagement also showed that the people who were the most engaged on digital platforms were also local audiences.<sup>16</sup> This information underscores the importance of the threshold because not only is it the space where the visitor's journey begins and ends but it is also the point at which the community accesses the museum. The use of art in the threshold, inside and out, is therefore an important part of the way in which Brooklyn Museum can reflect upon its community role.

It illustrates its commitment to social engagement by making the threshold a place of performance, shared ownership and social activity. Brooklyn Museum demonstrates how artworks can help address some of the barriers to participation that exist with museums. The example indicates that it is not only relevant who crosses the line into the museum but also how they are then facilitated to engage with it. Lee Mingwei's project *The Moving Garden* is not only an example of the way that a museum can support its relationship with its community but it also shows that the threshold is a space of two-way traffic. While on the one hand it is the space where the public comes into the museum, it

is also the space where the museum can take itself out, even symbolically, into the community.

### **Museum of London: threshold artwork as wayfinder**

Another aspect of the part played by artwork in the threshold is that it provides non-directional guidance to the visitor. This is demonstrated by artworks in the lobby of the Brooklyn Museum but also more specifically in museums where the movement of people through the museum space is a particular concern. As in the Brooklyn Museum, artwork can be used to facilitate the visitor experience, but in these museums the artwork has a role both as a way finder that orients people through their approach and entry and to enable to them to transition through the space. These examples also illustrate that way finding is more than creating directions through text and graphics, it is about enabling visitors to understand the complexity of their journey. Contemplating the way that artworks can contribute to way finding also recognizes that different audiences need different experiences. The Museum of London shows how artworks in the museum are not just single items but they can operate as a suite that gives a range of different opportunities to the visitor. The entrance to the Museum of London is positioned above street level as part of the Barbican inner city complex that is connected by walkways, which means that although it is in the heart of London's financial district it has no street traffic and few passing pedestrians. The threshold of the museum could be said to start from the point at which the visitor approaches the stairs and escalators that will take them from the street to the overhead walkways and from there to the museum's entrance. The museum foyer is a large square area that houses the visitor information desk and bookshop and has exit points to the café and the museum galleries on the same level. It also includes a stairwell which leads to galleries on a lower level, including the exhibition gallery which houses the high profile temporary shows. The foyer has two wall spaces, one used for promoting museum activities and the other a temporary display space for commission or small scale projects. The programme team at the Museum of London describe the foyer as being a complex transition zone, where it is important to manage how visitors pass from being in one state to being in another as they begin to be involved with the content of the museum.<sup>17</sup>

In October 2014, the Museum of London launched a major temporary exhibition *Sherlock Holmes, The Man Who Never Lived And Will Never Die* and created a trail of related displays going from street level to the exhibition itself. On a large wall in the centre of a traffic roundabout were placed large-scale stick figures of 'dancing men'; above ground level where a rotunda leads to the entrance of the museum a short story by Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Adventure of the Dancing Men', was reproduced in its entirety. This explained that the figures below were a code that spelt out 'come at once'. Inside the foyer was an installation consisting of brightly coloured doorways. Titled *Mind Maze*, and designed by Seán & Stephen and Neu Architects, each was a version of the famous front door at 221B Baker Street, with clues and illustrations relating to a Sherlock

Holmes case.<sup>18</sup>

*Figures 5.10-5.13: Museum of London, following the visitors' entrance from the external rotunda, inside the rotunda to the foyer display. [Images: Peter Ride]*

Encountering the artwork in the extended threshold area in this instance was not just part of a physical entry into the museum space but an entry into a whole season of activities and displays. Elsewhere in the museum, apart from the major Sherlock Holmes exhibition itself, was a display of photographs of Holmes-inspired menswear. In addition, the museum commissioned an online performance audio work that audiences could download before taking part in a 'walk' of the neighbourhood streets. Described as a site-specific, 'cinematic, walking, theatrical experience' the piece was titled *A Hollow Body* by the art collective Circumstance.<sup>19</sup> The final crescendo point of the visitor's journey was the exhibition itself which included original manuscripts, historical objects that related to the fictitious clues from the Holmes stories, and artworks of London from the period. Entry to the museum is free but temporary exhibitions are significant revenue earners for the museum, so as well as delivering a high-quality and rewarding cultural experience the museum also needs to reach attendance targets. The visitor's journey, and their satisfaction, therefore needs to be thought of as operating on a number of levels.

The *Mind Maze* installation in the foyer was itself a playful pun on the concept of the threshold, using the doorway of 221B Baker Street as a motif because the consulting room is the starting point of most of the Sherlock Homes stories. The installation was designed as a game, but one that required detailed knowledge of the Conan Doyle stories. The museum employs a very detailed and precise form of audience segmentation when planning its programmes<sup>20</sup> and the Sherlock Holmes exhibition was primarily designed for the segment typified as 'London Insiders', who are trendsetters and cultural advocates. The *Mind Maze* was therefore designed to be appropriate for this group. Ironically, this was not the audience segment that spent most time at the display. The museum's visitor research looking at overall museum experience showed that a minority of 'London Insiders' who visited the exhibition paid attention to the foyer installation.<sup>21</sup>

However, additional university research through observation confirmed that although adults as individuals or groups did not often appear to spend sustained time solving the puzzle it was very popular with family visitors as a play space, because of its interactive, physical nature, so that it served multiple roles and audiences.<sup>22</sup> The example of the Museum of London demonstrates the complexity of the physical boundaries of a threshold and how artworks can be used to facilitate the visitor's journey not only through the physical building but into the heart of the programme. The non-directional guidance it provides emphasizes that the 'paid' exhibition is at the heart of the experience, and furthermore it rewards the visitor who wants to engage deeply with the

museum across a number of platforms or cultural offers and possibly across different visits.

## **Conclusion**

These examples have illustrated what happens when an artwork is one of the features of the museum that visitors encounter in the threshold. They demonstrate how the multiple roles of the threshold space go well beyond the utilitarian functions. Alongside introductory or wayfaring signage, invitations and instructions on how space is to be used and negotiated or suggesting the social mores that are in place, and promotions for exhibitions, events, products and income-generating activities, there are many other ways in which the threshold conveys meaning to visitors. Artwork gives the museum visitor a nuanced and complex way of understanding what the museum has to offer.

Artworks contribute to the meaning of the museum threshold in ways that are ambiguous and diverse by offering a creative experience to the museum visitor. They can be impactful or resonant, experimental or playful and they can deconstruct or interpret the experience of the architecture. These examples have shown how artwork can offer metaphoric meanings that play a part in the museum narrative, either framing it as a paratext, working as a subtext or extending the connections of the museum's narrative with its physical and social sites of engagement. Ultimately, the study of artworks shows that museums operate as flexible spaces where the meaning that the visitor takes with them on their journey comes about through a complex interaction of space, materials, objects and other people. To return to the metaphor with which this chapter opened, we can think of the artworks in the threshold as openings that create windows for the imagination.