

# **Colliding Sensibilities: Exhibition Development and the Pedagogy of Period Room Interpretation**

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines the exhibition development process of an art museum period room (paneled room). In these pages I have adopted an alternative ethnography, drawing concepts and methods from the arts and social sciences. The two questions propelling this dissertation are: (1) How did the methodology of the exhibition development process of the Régence Room affect its intended interpretation? and (2) How do visitors respond to their Régence Room experience? This is an arts-based autoethnography, which uses ethnographic drama to express research findings. Evocative narratives communicate introspection, emotion, and subjectivity, and a reflexive dialectic of childhood memories to reflect my attempt to understand what the Régence Room is and what it means, and to locate a place for myself in the world of art education. I review the literature on period rooms, tracing the changes wrought through time and space from their inception to recent re-examinations/installations in museums across America. I proffer a historical sketch of one paneled room's history from its original location in Paris to its acquisition, installation, and interpretation at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, California. I connect data gathered through standard academic research conducted in special collections archives, participant interviews and observations with fictionalized accounts of period interiors in literature and film. I engage in non-traditional ways of thinking about and looking at a period room. I point out some issues that have restrained a richer interpretation of the Régence Room, including aversion to change and risk-taking, intolerance for ideological differences, poor inter-departmental communication, and a lack of period room programming for visitors' edification—general and informed public alike. Evocative narratives offer a pedagogical approach to this type of museum display that can communicate the transformational aspects of museum period rooms by questioning those who construct them and those who experience them. Engaging in non-traditional ways of thinking about and looking at period rooms can bring the varied experiences of the room to life, and this is enhanced by the ethnographic drama in Chapter Four. Scenes, based on unique participant conversations and observations of visitors, create a fictional virtual reality (incorporating some fiction) in which readers can imagine themselves and make their own interpretations. Data gathered from archival research, interviews, and observations are viewed as a complex group of performances found in and carried through sounds, words, images, gesture/movement, costume, and setting. Finally, I speculate about the implications for developing and interpreting period rooms in ways that incorporate a strategy for an ethic of care and consideration for multiple perspectives and principles from the visual arts, performing arts (culinary, music, dance, and theatre), and literary arts.

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