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Program Plan

Introduction

“Chinese Garden” is a themed tour that takes place in the Asian Art collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met). The primary audiences are college students and adults aged from 18 to 25 years old who are interested in learning more about Chinese culture. During the tour, I will let audiences dive deeper into symbolizations and elements that are important to Chinese people. In this way, college students are the most suitable group to discuss these topics.

When visiting the Met, I will always be dazzled by various collections. Although these collections are classified based on geographical locations and cultures, most of the time, I still need clarification and need help to link these collections to cultures. As an international student from China, I always felt amazed when I encountered the Astor Chinese Garden Court in the Met, which always reminded me of traveling in southern regions of China. There are many things contained in the garden to let people discuss, such as symbolizations and cultural elements. Therefore, this is the main reason why I want to design a themed tour around the topic “Chinese garden”. In fact, my topic in the presentation was “Garden as a space” because I wanted to focus more on the elements and functionality of the Chinese garden. After that, I saw feedback from a classmate who suggested changing the title to “Chinese Garden” to give audiences a more precise direction of what will be covered in the tour and attract more targeted audiences. I felt the same way, so I decided to adopt this suggestion.

During the planning process, I kept asking myself two questions: How to let audiences feel engaged,

and better approach the art and culture they are not that familiar with? How to let audiences gain more knowledge of Chinese art and culture? I hope audiences can not only feel enjoyable and engaged in the tour but also have some takeaways related to Chinese art and culture.

Artworks

1.

The Astor Chinese Garden Court, 17th century, Taihu rocks, granite terrace, ceramic tile flooring, roof tiles, and door frames, various woods, brass fittings (The Met, n.d.).



As a Chinese student, whenever visiting the Met with friends, I would lead them to this space and introduce them to Chinese culture more lively. So, I believe the garden is a good start for audiences unfamiliar with Chinese culture to get some ideas at first and gradually dive deeper into symbolizations and other elements. If I ask them to look at the painting at first, they will quickly feel bored and distracted. In addition, this artwork is an architecture. So, unlike most artworks, audiences can interact with it through walking, touching, and listening. Triggering body movements other than eyes can give audiences meaningful encounters with artworks and are always associated with long-term memory

(Lupton & Lipps, 2018). In this way, I will plan a non-discursive activity in this space.

After bringing audiences here, I will first ask them to walk around for 3 to 5 minutes. During this time, they can touch different things, such as wood and rocks; they can sit on stone stools; they can listen to the sound. In short, they can interact with the artwork in ways they want. Then, I will let each choose one element they have found exciting or personally meaningful in this space and share it with the group. I hope some of them can mention the trees and rocks in the garden. So, after that, I can introduce the purpose of constructing Chinese gardens, which is the manifestation of the natural world. For example, rocks in Chinese gardens always represent mountains in nature. Moreover, Chinese gardens are often seen in the royal palace, government agencies, temples, and wealthy merchants. This specific one in the Met can be seen in the southern region of China, such as Suzhou nowadays. By having which type of people own Chinese gardens in mind, audiences can better understand the symbolizations of rocks and trees when I introduce them later. If no one mentions trees and rocks, I will ask them, “what do you think of the connection between the garden and the natural world” to bring their notice to trees and rocks. Although the focus here is the purpose of Chinese gardens, when audiences want to discuss other elements, such as the pavilion, I am also open to that. So, the estimated time spent on discussion is between 5 to 10 minutes, depending on the cohort size which ideally is around ten people.

By introducing them to this artwork, I want audiences to have a general idea of what the Chinese garden looks like and what are some of its main elements. So, they can make comparisons of these elements among different artworks by themselves.

2.

Wu Boli, *Dragon Pine*, late 14th-early 15th century, hanging scroll, ink on paper (The Met, n.d.).



In the first artwork, we discussed trees and rocks in the Chinese garden. So, for the second artwork, I chose the one with trees and rocks in it as well. Unlike the one in the actual garden space, this one is a painting on a hanging scroll, a medium used very often in ancient Chinese art. I want audiences to have a dialogue around this painting.

Firstly, I will ask audiences to do a close observation for about 1 minute. During this time, they are welcome to walk back and forth and observe the artwork from different perspectives. After that, I will ask them, “What do you notice from the painting?”. As discussed in class, audiences would probably bring up

their observations in materials, medium, and compositions. I will reconfirm their thoughts if they say something important and relevant to the tour. For example, I will let them know the artist used ink in painting, and the medium was the hanging scroll. I will also provide some objective information related to hanging scrolls: “they are intended to be displayed for short periods of time and then rolled up to be tied and secured for storage” (Wikipedia, 2022). Because of it, when showing the hanging scroll to other people, they would see the artwork from top-to-bottom sequence. This piece of information will give audiences more ideas about the medium they are not that familiar with.

The second question I will raise is, “What kinds of feelings do you have when seeing the artwork?”. Audiences will come up with different thoughts and ideas, such as oppressive and abnormal. After that, I will summarize their feelings and reveal the title of the painting, which is “Dragon Pine”. Usually, at this point, audiences familiar with Chinese culture would naturally see the connection between the title and the pine tree’s unusual compositions, which conveys some oppressive feelings. If no one in the group is familiar with Chinese culture, I will ask them, “what do you think might be the connection between the title and the painting?” to let them freely discuss their guesses. I will also let them discuss their thoughts on the symbolization of dragons and pine trees in Chinese culture. Some information I will provide includes that the dragon represents power, good luck, and wisdom in China. Due to the evergreen feature of pine trees, they are always associated with longevity and hope. When introducing the symbol of pine trees, I will also bring up the fact that this is why it is prevalent to see in the Chinese garden, letting audiences reflect on what they have seen previously.

After discussing symbolizations, I will ask audiences, “Based on what we’ve discussed about

hanging scrolls and symbolizations of dragon and pine trees, what do you think of the purpose for the artist to construct this painting?”. I will reveal the truth at the end that Dragon Pine was painted for a Daoist pope to show Wu Boli’s appreciation. Ancient Chinese artworks with pine trees were often used to send as a gift to celebrate important dates and festivals, including birthdays.

For this artwork, I want audiences to get better ideas of symbolizations in Chinese culture and connect symbols to what they have seen in the Chinese garden. The estimated discussion time is around 10 to 15 minutes, depending on audiences’ interests and participation.

3.

Brush holder with scholars in a garden, late 18th – early 19th century, Bamboo (The Met, n.d.).



After discussing the symbolizations of trees in the Chinese garden, I will turn to a more macro aspect of the Chinese garden, which is what ancient Chinese people would do in the garden, to let audiences

learn Chinese culture from different perspectives. And I would like audiences to have a dialogue around this artwork.

Firstly, like what I did before, I would invite audiences to do a close observation between 30 seconds to 1 minute. This artwork is three-dimensional, which would give audiences different feelings when looking at it in person rather than through screens. After that, I would ask them “What do you see in this artwork?” to bring their attention to the action and identity of the people in the scene. Some are playing musical instruments, some are playing chess, and some are discussing with each other. After discussing actions, I will reveal the fact that this artwork depicted scholars in the Chinese garden. Playing instruments, such as Guqin, and communicating with each other to find inspiration to compose poems are considered elements of elegance, which ancient Chinese scholars favored. The tradition for scholars to compose poems in Chinese gardens began in the late 13th century during the Yuan dynasty--the reign of Mongols. When they found “official employment either disagreeable or hard to obtain, and therefore devoted themselves to self-cultivation and the arts” (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004). Scholars often used natural scenes, such as trees, as symbolizations to make metaphors in their poems. By introducing this information, I hope audiences can connect this artwork and the two we talked about previously of Chinese gardens and symbolizations.

The second question I will ask audiences is, “Based on its shape and material, what do you think might be the use of this artwork?”. At this point, I will ask them to reflect on objects in their daily life and form ideas about the use of this particular object. Even though their answers are incorrect, I will still ask them why they think this way and see the collision among different cultures. After sharing their ideas and

thoughts, I will tell them this is a brush holder made of bamboo. The scenery and pattern on brush holders are usually for decorative purposes. Even though the label does not mention the owner of this artwork, audiences are welcome to discuss freely here for about 2 to 3 minutes. They can also analyze its material, bamboo, for 2 minutes. And I would conclude the discussion by summarizing their points.

In all, I assume the discussion around “brush holder with scholars in a garden” should be between 10 to 15 minutes, depending on audiences’ interests and participation. And audiences should have a clearer and better understanding of what scholars in ancient China usually did in gardens after discussion.

4.

Bowl with children in a garden, mid-16th century, porcelain (The Met, n.d.).



After learning about scholars’ behaviors in the Chinese garden, I will lead audiences to see this artwork related to what children in ancient China usually did in gardens to let audiences get better and deeper knowledge of Chinese culture. I plan to lead a dialogue for this artwork as well.

Firstly, same as the previous artwork, I will ask audiences, “What do you see in this artwork?” after

they do the close observation. Waiting for them talking about some traditional Chinese folk games played by children, such as catching bugs and playing with paper windmills, I will ask them, “What do you find about similarities and differences between this artwork and the previous one with scholars?”. In this way, I hope they develop both understandings of arts and critical thinking skills through comparing and contrasting. I expect them to mention behavioral differences between scholars and children. For example, scholars’ activities were more for spiritual pursuits, while children were merely for play purposes. Also, I expect them to mention medium differences as well. I will bring up this topic if they do not mention the medium. After letting them discuss the medium, I will summarize their points and explain that brush painting on porcelain would give artists more freedom to represent facial expressions. Although these two artworks are both decorative arts on traditional Chinese handcrafts, the way artists depicted them, and their effects were very different.

When looking at this artwork, I would spend more time to let audiences focus more on comparing and contrasting. Therefore, the estimated tour time is around 15 minutes.

5.



At the end of the tour, I will ask them to return to the first artwork space, “The Astor Chinese Garden Court”, and we will do a small non-discursive activity to conclude the tour. The prompt is “Imagine yourself in a Chinese garden like this in Suzhou right now (a city in the southern region of China), what would you do in this garden? Each of you, or groups of two to three, needs to form a theatrical pose showing what you’re doing. You can also use facial expressions to show your feelings. Anyone have any other questions?”. They would have 5 minutes to brainstorm ideas, and I will check with them from time to time to see if they have understood the requirement. After 5 minutes, each person or group needs to choose a specific place in the garden to present their poses one by one, and let other people guess what they are doing. As I mentioned before, bringing body movements inside the museum can sometimes strengthen people’s memory for this particular topic. And I believe this activity will encourage audiences to think beyond the Chinese garden as they integrate themselves into this place. After this activity, I will say thank you for participating today to conclude this tour.

Tour Sequence and Time

At the beginning of December, I went to the Met to find these artworks and made a route to connect them. So, the sequence I mentioned above is the most suitable one to avoid repetition for audience visits. Considering audiences’ movements from one artwork to another, the estimated tour time is between 1 hour and 1 hour 30 minutes. And I hope this tour will let audiences gain more knowledge of Chinese culture and arts around the central theme of the Chinese garden.

Additional Sessions

Because my ideal participants are college students and adults aged from 18 to 25, the two additional sessions after the Chinese Garden theme tour should happen in the museum as well. During the first session, I will ask them to reflect upon the whole experiences they have spent with me and draw a journey map. On the map, they can label their feelings towards each stage. Through mapping out experiences, they can strengthen their memories towards the tour and gain some ideas of museum education. Their journey maps can also serve as a tool to let me know what I need to improve for future tours. After that, I will ask them to choose one of the artworks they like in China collection and needs to relate to the Chinese Garden theme, and come up with a non-discursive activity to introduce others of the artwork. They can begin brainstorming by themselves, with others, or even with me as the facilitator.

During the second session, each of them, or groups of two to three, needs to lead a 10 to 15 minutes non-discursive activity in the museum. This is a good way for them practicing being a museum educator after seeing me to do so. And they can also write this experience in their resume or cover letter if they want to find jobs in this field. Their ideas can provide me with new thoughts, letting me improve my future tours.

References

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