

Making



Objects

Speak

Wisdom Paper: Finding Objects

Tour 3. “And pilgrims were they alle”: The Cloisters and the World of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*

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When I read in a text about an object I can move seamlessly between its physical and contextual details: its color, who owned it, its fabric, where it was made, its size, how it was used. I receive all these pieces of information from the text, and store them in the object file in my brain, my understanding of the object enriched. Yet were I standing in front of that same object rather than reading or hearing about it, only its color, fabric, and size would be immediately apparent to me. As a literary critic who creates texts about texts I had the greatest difficulty in appreciating this simple distinction when writing the tour. Used to interesting myself in objects only insofar as they could bend to an idea or make sense of a text, I wrote about them as if they floated in space. Early tour drafts featured long, lecture-mode sequences of information I deemed necessary for the tour-taker to know (and still do) but was unable to make emerge from simply looking at the object. What were tour-takers supposed to do with their eyes and bodies whilst I delivered the lecture? Moments when they withdraw their senses from their museum location in order to listen to disembodied information on the ipod are moments when they may as well be seated in the lecture room, taking notes as I talk. Those moments need to be few and brief when creating a tour.

The tour as medium of learning thus requires that care be taken to make the experience happen in the museum moment. For if the tour tends toward the armchair lecture then that is exactly where students will take it rather than visit the museum, aided of course by the museum website or guidebook, with images of the tour’s featured objects.

Part of the motive of museum displays is curatorial, taking care to preserve objects in optimum temperature, humidity, and lighting conditions. Beyond this, it puts objects into relation with each other, using similarity and difference to draw out implicit or unnoticed features of things. There is a practical reason why I avoided hanging too much weight on what Bettina Carbonell calls the “syntax of objects” in their display cases, namely, they get rotated and loaned, often moving not to a different case but to an altogether different part of the museum. So the challenge is to direct the tour-takers’ attention to their surroundings while at the same time not lean on those surroundings too heavily for fear they change; how to get the tour-takers interact with the actual object in the actual moment and make connections between the object and its environment. Here are a few suggestions:

* Ask tour-takers to view the object from varying perspectives, by walking around it, or from far and close range. Find details to observe that require up-close scrutiny.

* Ask tour-takers for impressions not only of the object but also of the whole scene, of the object-in-its-environment. This requires them to include temperature, lighting, surrounding color, and spatial disposition in the overall impression.

* Sometimes museum surrounds echo features of an object (e.g. the ceiling of the Campin room is similar to the ceiling in the scene of the Annunciation in the Mérode Triptych). Ask tour-takers to note any such features when they occur, and to ponder why the object has been placed in its particular environment.

* Museum displays place objects in relation to each other, offering opportunities for *in situ* comparisons. However, they often rotate and lend objects, rendering those comparisons only temporary. It is best then to avoid over-specific prompts for inviting comparisons. Phrase the prompt as a more open-ended invitation to find nearby objects that have similar or contrasting function or feature.

* Ask tour-takers to describe how they might rearrange and display the objects in a case or room. Doing so requires them to think about the ideal way to look at an object. Hopefully, they will realize that there isn't one, that no one position affords knowledge of the object in its entirety.

* Ask tour-takers to guess the weight or flimsiness of the object, or how might feel in the hand or against the skin—some impression that requires encountering it in three-dimension.