NUMINOUS EXPERIENCES WITH MUSEUM OBJECTS

by

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Emporia, Kansas

April, 2009

A Dissertation

Presented to

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Library and Information Management

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Kiersten F. Latham for the Doctor of Philosophy

in Library and Information Management presented on April 10, 2009

Title: Numinous Experiences with Museum Objects

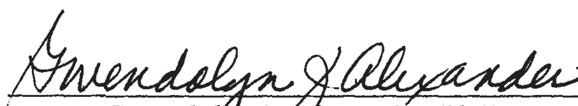
Abstract Approved:
(Chair)

The framework of Library and Information Science (LIS) underscores libraries, archives and museums alike, as they are all cultural institutions with many parallel issues. One area of inquiry within LIS is the study of information behavior—how individuals encounter and make sense of their world. This study explores experiences of the museum user that are non-practical goal-oriented and deeply affective—specifically numinous experiences with museum objects. A numinous experience in the museum context refers to a deeply meaningful, transcendent encounter. The aims of this study were to: 1) describe the meaning museum users make of these special encounters; 2) identify patterns or themes, if any, that emerge from their descriptions of these experiences; and 3) contribute a perspective to the overall understanding of the museum user experience. This inquiry used interpretive phenomenological methodology, drawing on perspectives informed by documentation studies, reader response theory, and Deweyian notions of transaction and experience.

Data analysis based on five intensive interviews with museum users revealed four essential themes (meanings) of these experiences, with the first theme acting as an over-arching grand theme to the others: 1) Unity of the Moment – the experience is a holistic,

uniting of emotions, feelings, and intellect with the experienced object; 2) Object Link – that the object links the experiencer to the past through both tangible and symbolic meanings; 3) Being Transported – the experience is felt as if one is being transported to another time and place, and is felt temporally, spatially, and bodily; and 4) Connections Bigger Than Self – the experience consists of deeply felt epiphanic connections with the past, self and spirit.

These four themes are interpreted in the frames of Dewey's aesthetic experience, Csikszentmihalyi's psychological flow, and William James' mystical consciousness. The combination of these three sets of concepts helps illuminate the meanings behind the numinous encounter. This research demonstrated that the physical object is central to the user's numinous experience, as part of this total holistic encounter. These findings underscore the multidimensional modes by which museum objects affect visitors, and the need to compare such experience with the effect of surrogates such as digital images on people.



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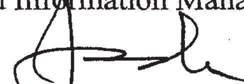

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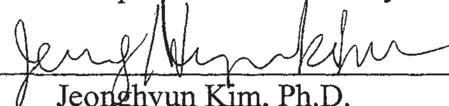

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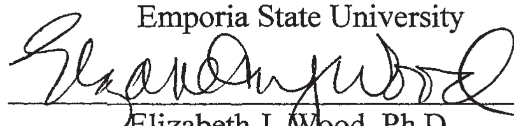

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is hard to convey in words my gratitude to so many people during my time at Emporia State University. To my committee, who has worked very hard with me on this project for such a long time, I thank you. To Dr. Kim, for your willingness to learn about a line of study (Museum Studies) that you were previously unfamiliar with—and to care about it—thank you. To Dr. Wood, who has devoted so much of her precious time to answering my questions, having philosophical conversations with me, and joining me in professional endeavors—thank you. And to Dr. Agada, my dissertation Chair, who has been with me on this project from the very start; thank you for inspiring me, encouraging me, and for providing such incredible insight into the deeper, underlying meaning of LIS research. I also send a special thank you to the Richel family for supporting SLIM students through scholarships—myself a grateful recipient.

I also must thank Dr. Salvatore, who spent a good portion of my tenure here as my mentor, a valuable and a most compassionate adviser. To Dr. Nancy Thomas, who, in my first semester at SLIM, encouraged my interest in museums and objects by saying, "Of course, you can study that, Kiersten!" Without the continuing encouragement of these two faculty members, I may not have progressed to where I am now.

One person gets her own paragraph in this acknowledgement, Catherine Closet-Crane, also of SLIM, who has helped me more than any one person should be able to give. Thank you for the many hours of conversations about interesting information topics (and then some), for reviewing and commenting on various works along the way, and for your tremendous emotional support throughout this process called a "PhD."

I would also like to thank the museum staff at the study sites who worked with me to recruit participants: Kansas Museum of History, Johnson County Museum (KS), National World War One Museum, Detroit Institute of Arts, and The Henry Ford. Special thanks go to Donna Braden at The Henry Ford for her extra time working with me on recruitment, as well as her willingness to join me in long discussions about my research. To Neil Steiner of TouchPoll for his time and effort working with me on a recruitment project at the NWWI Museum. And, of course, thank you to my participants. Many people were interviewed who did not make it into this study, but their participation should not be minimized. I learned something from each and every one of them and left each interview inspired and touched by their stories. I appreciate the time they took to spend with me and for opening up such personal stories to a perfect stranger.

If it were not for three people, I would not have even begun my work at SLIM at all. Thanks to my aunt Chris Aquila, my friend and mentor John Simmons, and my dad, Patric Fourshé, who left this world before he could see me finish what he helped start. It was the strong encouragement from these three that caused me to make that leap and begin my doctoral studies.

Finally, to my family, for their support and encouragement throughout these past five years. Mark and Callan, I cannot express enough how much I appreciate your sacrifices to help Mama "do her work." You are very special, both of you, and I am lucky to have you both in my life.

For my Dad, who understood the numinous all along.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

One of the agendas of library and information science (LIS) research is to explore and understand how people use information. People today find themselves immersed in an information-rich society, with many messages bombarding them from all directions. Museums, as one kind of information system, are struggling to understand their place in a rapidly changing, technology-driven society. The trend in many American museums is to provide many overlapping layers of data to the user—such as exhibit elements, text, sound, recreated scenarios, animation, interactives, and digital sources of information—rendering the museum object, the core of the museum, to become lost in the experience. The goal of this service orientation is to provide *everything* for the museum user, leaving little to the imagination and perhaps resulting in information overload. As a result of this purposeful heightening of museum visitor experience, this trend has involved a major shift away from collections. A decade ago this involved creating more interactive exhibits, but more recently it involves the creation of entire worlds that only exist virtually, increasingly de-emphasizing the physical presence of objects that were once the mainstay of the museum. Many museums are now moving towards the virtual, with concepts and technologies such as Second Life, creating worlds that they claim, "make the impossible possible" (Seligson, 2007, p. 56). Ironically, in the process of creating "experience" for users, museums are minimizing the experience that makes them unique—the experience of the physical museum object. This study seeks to find out more about a special museum experience—the numinous—a deeply meaningful encounter between a visitor and the physical museum object and attempts to understand the basic

structures of this encounter, the role of the museum object, and the meaning that results from this transaction for the museum user.

Museum Value: A Return to the Museum Object

In the rapid move toward new technologies, there remains a need to return to the basics, the foundation of museums—their collections of objects. Yet, the object—the physical thing—seems to be getting lost in the contemporary process of museum-going. At least in the recent past, museums have been the repositories of cultural and natural representations from around the world and across time (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). Museums, in this sense, are the holders of multiple individual and collective histories that tell stories about some event, person, animal, thing, time, or place. These collective histories are embedded in the physical symbols that are represented in museum objects. Almost daily, museums struggle to understand their purpose in today's society. What, they ask themselves, makes us unique, worthwhile, and valuable to our publics? Gurian (2006), an American museum philosopher, wonders how we can make the museum "essential," that is, transforming it into a place where users consider the museum vital to their lives. How can museums become not only important, but *essential* to our public? Gurian is seeking to describe what is unique about museums and how this might be shared with the public. Ironically, the museum's uniqueness may be the very thing that is presently being taken for granted, the museum object. It is the museum object that will help make museums "essential" and unique and, therefore, valuable to the public. It is out of this conundrum that this study arose.

The answer may lie somewhere in the simplicity of an individual encountering an object of the past. What constitutes the basic level of a person experiencing a museum

object? What encounters are special in the presence of a physical thing? Carr (2008), in an attempt to understand the connective experience one may have at a museum, points out that:

> Each work is awake (and awakens us) in a different way. The engaged museum will assume that artists and museum users have much in common; each leads to a feeling life and constructs and revises provisional ideas grounded in familiar contexts. And each person, whether artist or museum user, has the power of presence as one among others. Museum, artist, artwork, museum user: these are the four sources of energy given to the art museum educator. Given these sources, how might a new fusion of museum experience and personal experience occur? (p. 224).

Carr is, of course, speaking here of the art museum, art museum workers and visitors, and objects of art. But his question can equally apply to all museums, their visitors, workers and collections. His quote reminds us of what the museum can be—a place for communication, thinking and inspiration. He wonders how museums become (or remain) the sites of intensely personal experience, as places that cause us to think. And what differentiates, he asks, museums from other cultural institutions or communication/information agencies in society?

Immersed in this technology-rich, often over-scripted environment, museums need to understand these unique encounters people can have at museums. What can occur when we bring together physical representations of the past—with their form, beauty, function and residue of past lives—with individuals from the present, living a moment in time within their own complex lives? Museum objects, like books, belong to a continuum

of document-types; while they hold real, tangible evidence of past human behavior, they also tend to be meaning-laden. What a museum object means depends, at least partially, on the viewer.

Although there remains a great scholarly interest in the museum visitor experience, many studies on these experiences are based on cognitive science principles and positivist research assumptions. What is needed is a more holistic understanding of human experiences that acknowledges the intersection of the cognitive and rational with the emotional and spiritual. Only such an approach will enable some understanding of the deep human experiences that take place in museums. Only then can we begin to understand the lived experience of a museum user.

As a member of the group of cultural facilities that can be characterized as memory institutions, the museum has encountered changing trends in technology that have thrust it into a period of change. Just as Online Public Access Catalogs (OPACS) and the digital library have helped to re-define the library as place, the digitization of museum objects and the existence of the virtual museum forces upon us the need to understand more about the lived experience of museum users with real, tangible, three-dimensional things found in museum spaces. The question about experiencing the physical object persists. Museum workers continue to ask what remains to make the museum experience unique? Learning more about the encounter a user has with a museum object can potentially provide answers to these questions.

Relevance of Study to Library & Information Science

The framework of LIS underscores libraries, archives and museums alike, as they are all cultural institutions with many similar issues (Usherwood, Wilson & Bryson,

2005). One area of inquiry within LIS is the study of information behavior, how individuals encounter and make sense of their world (Case, 2006). Within this area of investigation are user studies, which emphasize people as creators, finders and users of information (Case, 2006). As the central core around which LIS studies merge, the term "information" must be clearly defined as it is viewed in this study. Using Buckland's notion that information is anything that informs (Buckland, 1991a, 1991b) and Case's (2006) description as "any difference you perceive, in your environment or within yourself" (p.5), it is clear that museum objects are eligible as one thread in this line of study. Indeed, Buckland (1991a) further argues that museums are information systems and museum objects are documents and, hence, forms of information. Kniffel (as cited in Usherwood et al., 2005, p. 90) points out that the "library and museum capture a collective cultural knowledge, hold it for use, and expand it by allowing it to connect to our inward thought…They are all…about the possibility to construct unrestricted knowledge, and to craft personal trust of individual design."

Even with an understanding of museums as information systems and places where knowledge is constructed by the user, studies within LIS on museums tend to focus on the management, organization, and socio-technical aspects of museums and their objects (Marty, 2007) and not on the meaning and interpretation of these objects by their users. A handful of user studies on museums exist (e.g. Booth, 1998, 1999), and these tend to focus on the rational, practical and purposive behaviors of museum users. In 2004, Orr provided an excellent review of the literature on the information-seeking behavior of museum users. Interestingly, very few scholarly works from LIS are noted in this review,

even though concepts and models developed in user studies are highly relevant to research on museum visitors.

A museum user does not necessarily go to the museum to reduce an uncertainty or to fill an information gap the same way a library user does. As such, studies in LIS on non-purposive user behavior are of interest to museum user studies. A few examples of LIS studies have used concepts of non-purposive user behavior such as information encountering (e.g. Erdelez, 1996, 1999, 2005), incidental information acquisition (e.g. Williamson, 1996, 1998), serendipitous information retrieval (e.g. Toms, 2000), and passive acquisition through enjoyable behaviors (e.g. Hartel, 2003; Ross, 1999).

This study, within the context of LIS, seeks to understand those experiences of the museum user that are non-practical, goal-oriented and deeply affective, which entail other forms of information response—specifically numinous experiences with museum objects. Within this LIS user perspective, I seek to find out more about what it means to have these responses (uniquely personal experiences) with sources of information (museum objects) from the view of those who experience them.

This Study

The research done for this dissertation hones in on the museum object and its role as a meaningful symbol to the museum user. Museum objects, just as books, archival documents and other text-based materials, are carriers of symbols with multiple layers of meaning. In particular, this study focuses on a very intimate experience that may occur between the user and an object of history. This phenomenon—referred to as a numinous experience—has been described as a deeply affective, transcendental, almost spiritual

encounter one may have in the presence of a museum object (Cameron & Gatewood, 2000, 2003; Gatewood & Cameron, 2004).

The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning museum users make of their numinous experiences with objects. The central research question was: *What meaning do museum users make of a numinous experience with museum objects?* This question was kept purposefully simple in order to attain descriptions of the phenomenon as it is recollected and recounted by those who have experienced it. Using qualitative methods and perspectives informed by interpretative phenomenology, documentation studies, and reader response theory, this inquiry sought to gain a deep understanding of this elusive museum encounter. Through qualitative phenomenological interviews and written participant narratives, the descriptions of these lived experiences of a sample of museum members and volunteers were meant to help us to gain insight into these little understood, transcendent events. The aims of this study were to:

1) Describe the meanings made of numinous experiences with museum objects by those who experience them;
2) Identify patterns or themes, if any, that emerge from people's descriptions of these experiences; and
3) Contribute a perspective to the overall understanding of the museum user experience.

A study such as this is important to the museum field's perspective of that fundamental unit in the museum—the encounter between a museum visitor and the museum object. Focusing on this unit will help visitor-oriented decisions that affect every department of the museum, from exhibits, to curation, to administration. The research

focus here addresses those user behaviors not typically discussed in the literature of LIS, museum, or archival studies, such as the role of affect in the acquisition of information and more passive forms of information behavior. Within this fast-paced and increasingly technological world, it is vital that we ask questions related to the foundation of our information institutions—the personal as well as the physical experience of users (Wood & Latham, 2009).

Definitions of Terms

Museum

A museum is a permanent institution, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment (International Council of Museums, 2009). This definition also incorporates historic sites, natural parks, zoos, aquaria, and children's museums.

Object

An object is a physical entity made or arranged by human beings. Other terms used may be: thing, stuff, artifact, specimen, item and material culture (Pearce, 1994). Although there is debate surrounding the semantics of each of these terms, for the purpose of this study all terms are used interchangeably to describe a three-dimensional, physical thing that can be held, touched, used and/or seen. Susan Pearce describes them as "selected lumps of the physical world to which cultural value has been ascribed" (Pearce, 1992, p. 4). These two components—the thing itself and the cultural value ascribed to it—are the main ingredients in the definition of "object." The use of the word

"object" in this study, then, refers to something made or modified by a human being (Prown, 1982).

Museum Object

The term museum object refers to any of the above physical entities found in a museum, historical site, or cultural venue. It may include less obvious attributes as structures, archaeological features and natural objects conceptualized by humans—if found in the museum context.

Numinous Museum Experience

Broadly defined, a numinous experience is described as a meaningful, transcendent experience that results in a deep connection with the past (Cameron & Gatewood, 2000, 2003; Gatewood & Cameron, 2004). Other wordings of the concept used in this dissertation are numen, numinosity, and numen-seeking.

Structure of this Dissertation

The remainder of this dissertation is divided into five sections: context of the phenomenon (chapter 2), conceptual framework of the inquiry (chapter 3), research methodology and design (chapter 4), analysis and results (chapter 5), interpretation of results (chapter 6), and summary, implications, and suggestions for further studies (chapter 7). The literature review, or context of the phenomenon, will review current research on museum objects, as well as the work done to this point on numinous experiences in museums. Following this, the conceptual framework will then help explain the point of view taken when approaching the problem and embed the current study in the broader perspective of information behavior studies and LIS. Because of the methodology used in this study—interpretative phenomenology— the approach here was

to leave descriptions of the phenomenon to the participants in the study. In the methodology chapter, this approach to exploring the phenomenon is explained and the fit between this approach and the research question asked is described. In addition, details about site selection, participant selection, data collection and analysis procedures, role of researcher, ethical standards, credibility of study, and strategies of validation will be provided in this section. As part of the focus on participant description, an entire chapter will be devoted to the thematic results from the data, with a special emphasis on the voices of the participants. The chapter following this (chapter 6) will be an interpretation of the results using extant literature in support of the findings. Finally, the study will be summarized and the implications of the findings to LIS and museum studies will be discussed and potential future work will be recommended.

CHAPTER 2

CONTEXT OF THE PHENOMENON

Past memories, present experiences, and future dreams of each person are inextricably linked to the objects that comprise his or her environment.

(Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981:ix)

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the intellectual context surrounding the phenomenon of numinous experiences in museums. It is a literature review, but also a mechanism to inform the reader of the context in which the phenomenon is situated. This review is comprised of three sections. First, the origin and definition of the numinous concept within the field of religious studies is provided. Second, an overview is given of the research that has been done on numinous experiences in the museum. And finally, a sample of other research related to numinous experiences in museums that helps contextualize the experience in the field of museum studies is provided.

The Numinous Experience

In 1917, Rudolph Otto, a distinguished German professor, wrote *Das Heilige* (The Holy or The Sacred) in an attempt to find a deserving place for "non-rational" behavior in religious studies. Among many other translations, the English version, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relationship to the Rational,* came out less than a decade later in 1923 and has been popular in religious studies ever since (Gooch, 2000). Otto introduced the term "numinous" as the central concept of his book and explored the place of this seemingly non-rational experience in the spiritual world—an experience that he claimed lies at the

core of all religions. The numinous, according to Otto, contains a "moment" that is almost inexpressible in normal terms and concepts. It is a state of mind, or a *numinous consciousness*, and is in the same category as one's reaction to "the beautiful." It is a qualitative feeling, affect, but more than that. The numinous cannot be taught, only awakened or evoked in the mind of the person and "can only be suggested by means of the special way in which it is reflected in the mind in terms of feeling" (Otto, 1917/1965, p. 12). The numinous is endowed with power, transcendence, majesty, and overpoweringness that goes beyond any created thing and is also beyond the familiar, the usual or the intelligible (Lopez, 1979).

Otto explains that there are two elements that make up numinous consciousness: *mysterium tremendum*. The mysterium component has two elements: that the numinous is experienced as the "wholly other," something outside of our normal experience, and fascination, which causes the person feeling the numinous to be enraptured or caught up in the moment. Otto (1917/1965) explains the wholly other this way when likening it to ghosts:

> ...because it is a thing that "doesn't really exist at all," the "wholly other," is something which has no place in our scheme of reality but belongs to an absolutely different one, and which at the same time arouses an irrepressible interest in the mind (p. 29).

Fascination, the other main element, is less complex, at least the description of it is. The numinous fascinates or draws us to it with a force that is nearly irresistible. At its most intense, it transforms into the mystical moment or direct contact with the numen.

The tremendum component has three elements: awefulness, overpoweringness, and energy. Awefulness, or awe, is the sense of absolute inapproachability. Perhaps it is best summarized as *mystical awe*, as Otto at one point describes it. Overpoweringness, related closely to awfulness, is the power than comes over a person, making one feel "nothingness"; it inspires a feeling of humility. Finally, energy is a vigorous, compelling urgency or passion, will, movement, excitement or activity.

Otto believed that there was a close relationship between the feeling of the numinous and the aesthetic experience (Gooch, 2000; Lopez, 1979; Otto, 1917/1965). The elements of both include feelings of the sublime, non-rational and wholly other. He also points out another similarity between religion and art, stating that with art one can also reach that point of transcendence, beyond the magical and into the numinous itself (Otto, 1917/1965).

From the beginning, Otto (1917/1965) states that the numinous is difficult to quantify, describe or relate. He even says that the numinous must be directly felt to be understood and "knowledge of its truth comes into the mind with the certitude of first-hand insight…" (p.137). When the numinous is experienced, there is an immediate certainty that this is a realization of a deep truth (Lopez, 1979).

Previous Research on Numinous Museum Experiences

In relation to museum objects and exhibits, the term *numinous* emerged with the authors Catherine Cameron and John Gatewood (2000, 2003; Gatewood & Cameron, 2004), who wrote a series of articles about numinous experiences at historic museums and sites. They were exploring the underlying motivations of tourist visits. Why else, beyond information-gathering, having fun, and creating family memories, do people go to

historic places? Cameron and Gatewood (2000, 2003; Gatewood & Cameron, 2004) hypothesized that people often seek a deeper, more meaningful connection with a place or time period and they called these people *numen-seekers*. They borrowed the term *numen* from Rudolf Otto's book, *The Idea of the Holy*. In their first study (2000), they offer a non-religious context for this response. Historic sites and displays, they hypothesized, can conjure in visitors a visceral or emotional response to an earlier event or time, one that could allow them to achieve a connection with the "spirit" of times or persons past. In this description, Cameron and Gatewood refer to Csikszentmihalyi's work on "flow" and cite another study on tourism that describes this kind of experience as "cognitive states in which there is intense engagement, a loss of the sense of time passing, and a transcendence of self," all related to an optimal experience (Prentice, Witt & Hamer, 1998, p. 3). Cameron and Gatewood start their journey with this definition of numinous: a transcendental experience that people can have in contact with a historic site or objects.

In their initial study, done on visitors to historic sites in Bethlehem, PA, Cameron and Gatewood found that 27% of the people were actively seeking some sort of personal experience with historic sites and museums. Their resulting taxonomy of coded open-ended answers to the survey question, "What do you want to get out of your visits to historic sites or museums?" showed a personal motivation for seeking historic institutions. In 2004, Cameron and Gatewood expanded their study by doing not only open and closed-ended surveys but participant observation, archival research and interviews with park personnel—this time at Gettysburg National Military Park. Again, Cameron and Gatewood found that 27% of visitors surveyed were "numen-seeker types."

In this study, the authors went more in depth and discovered more detail about the phenomenon. They were able to refine their description of numinous experiences with mainly historic sites and objects by positing three dimensions that make up the experience:

1. *Deep engagement or transcendence*--which can involve such concentration that the individual loses a sense of time passing or may have a flow experience of the kind suggested by Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi (1988).
2. *Empathy*--a strongly affective experience in which the individual tries to conjure thoughts, feelings, and experiences, including hardships and suffering of those who lived at an earlier time.
3. *Awe or reverence*--an experience of being in the presence of something holy, or spiritual communion with something or someone (Gatewood & Cameron, 2004, p. 208).

While Cameron and Gatewood's data were partially based on open-ended survey questions asked of museum users, their results were limited because their questions were restricted by the survey-format and a lack of intensive, in-depth interviews in free-flowing and informant-directed format. Participants who provided open-ended answers to survey questions were not able to guide their own descriptions and the authors' findings were limited within the framework of the survey instrument. In the end, their definition of a numinous experience was based on their own notions, derived indirectly from their survey data, and not based on direct accounts of those who lived the experiences themselves.

In addition to Cameron and Gatewood's work, there are a handful of others who studied these kinds of objects or experiences, although not necessarily in the same detail or did not use the same terminology. In 1993, Maines and Glynn wrote an article entitled, "Numinous Objects." As they define them:

> …Numinous objects are examples of material culture that have acquired sufficient perceived significance by association to merit preservation in the public trust. They are the objects we collect and preserve, not for what they may reveal to us as material documents, or for any visible aesthetic quality, but for their association, real or imagined, with some person, place, or event endowed with special sociocultural magic. The "numinosity" of an artifact or place, the intangible and invisible quality of its significance, consists in its presumed association with something, either in the past or in the imagination or both, that carries emotional weight with the viewer (p. 10).

Whereas Cameron and Gatewood (2000, 2003) focused on numinous experiences, Maines and Glynn (1993) focus on numinous objects. These kind of objects, they say, help tell stories that can be personal, national, or social in nature. They provide a "taxonomy" of numinous objects that includes personal objects, personal events or places, ideas, group identity, achievement, or spiritual identity. They point out that objects with numinosity may or may not be identified as authentic, depending on the perception of the viewer. In their scenario, numen remains in an object only as long as there is someone to remember the association of the object with its significance and can be lost if no one remembers the association (or if documentation about it is lost). In other

words, the perception of the object requires a framework of understanding to grasp its significance.

In this context, one other study is important to mention before moving on. In the late 90s, the Smithsonian traveled a two year exhibit of 300 of the nation's treasures called *America's Smithsonian* and presented it to the public in twelve major cities across the United States. Examples of items in this show were Abraham Lincoln's hat, the Apollo 11 spacecraft, Dizzy Gillespie's trumpet, and Dorothy's ruby slippers. Over and over, people were awestruck by the power of the exhibit and, in more than a few cases, were found weeping before the cases of objects. Kurin (1997) reports:

> I am an object-speaks-for-itself skeptic. Yet in Los Angeles, even though I found problems and difficulties—with a carousel, the lighting, the hard-to-read labels, the overbearing nature of the convention center—I was also drawn to the objects on display. And despite hardened scholarly nerve endings, I was taken by Lincoln's hat. Despite its state of disrepair, its unassuming nature, it was after all Lincoln's hat—the real thing. Then the space suit, the space capsule, Edison's light bulb. All the real stuff…The power of America's Smithsonian was in such epiphanies sparked by individual objects, and in the repeated cumulative effect of the whole. Over and over, visitors were hit with the impact of this experience… (p. 37).

Although Kurin does not call these experiences with object numinous, his description of them seems to be of the kind both Cameron and Gatewood and Maines and Glynn discuss.

Other Related Concepts to Numinous Experiences in the Museum

There are other authors who weave in and out of describing deeply felt (possibly numinous) experiences in museums. Nelson Graburn (1977) called these types of museum experiences "reverential," part of "the visitor's need for a personal experience with something higher, more sacred, more out of the ordinary, than home and work are able to supply" (p. 13). He characterized it as one of magic, fantasy, and sacredness. Graburn (1977) considered the experience to be personal and private, a "solitary one of contemplation, meditation," filled with feelings of freedom and "eternal verities," and he adds, "freedom to fantasize and make connections is part of this unstructured ritual" (p.14).

Spock, Perry, and Leichter (Leichter & Spock, 1999; Spock, 2000b) undertook a large exploratory study investigating "pivotal" museum learning experiences of museum professionals (Spock 2000a). From their study, Perry (2002) outlined four kinds of learning: (a) sparking an interest, (b) delayed learning, (c) visceral learning, and (d) wrap-around learning. Table 1 outlines the salient points of each kind of learning.

Table 1.

Perry's (2002) Four Kinds of Learning, Pivotal Learning in Museum Professionals study

Sparking an Interest	Delayed Learning	Visceral Learning	Wrap-Around Learning
•Museum experience sparked an interest in something not previously of interest	•Takes place over long periods of time •When a person is exposed to a new idea but does not recall it until much later & with greater clarity of understanding than before the encounter	•Experiences felt by the body •an internal understanding (a way of knowing) that has little to do with intellect or cognition •Takes learner by surprise •Deep, profound understanding of something	•Being in the presence of a wonderful object •Sensory & holistic •Learning that is felt with whole body & via all senses

Johan Huizinga, a Dutch Historian, speaks directly about a specific kind of experience with historic objects. He claims that authentic historical objects can produce a "historical sensation" in the mind of the visitor that he likens to the aesthetic experience in an art museum (Henrichs 2004; Huizinga 1948). The historical feeling one may get which is stimulated by the historical imagination (or intuition), Huizinga (1968) says, cannot be separated from aesthetic pleasure. After all, Huizinga posits, the mission of history is the evocation of the past and, therefore, historians must go beyond the conceptual by evoking dynamic images of the past. Without this empathic understanding of those who lived in the past, he claims, will affect humanitarian decisions in the present.

Greenblatt (1991) speaks of resonance and wonder in museums. Resonance refers to "the power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural force from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand" (p. 42). Wonder refers to "the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention" (Greenblatt, 1991, p. 42). Resonance, he says, depends not on visual stimulation but on "a felt intensity of names…voices…" of those whom the museum is about. Greenblatt (1991) refers to the transformation of all objects into *objects of art*.

In addition to these more broadly conceived experiences with museum objects, many authors have explored numinous-like phenomena specifically in relation to art objects. Goswamy (1991) speaks of *rasa* in the context of Indian art. Rasa, which he

defines as "aesthetic delight," is key to the understanding of art in India—the average viewer, listener, or reader of art sees the connections with rasa as a part of his/her everyday views. As Goswamy (1991) describes it:

> The notion is that *rasa*, or aesthetic delight, is a unity, but comes within reach of the viewer through the medium of one of these sentiments. At the same time, *rasa* being essentially an experience, it does not inhere in the art object; it belongs exclusively to the viewer or listener, who alone can experience it (p. 71).

In *The Art of Seeing: An Interpretation of the Aesthetic Encounter*, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) interviewed 57 art museum professionals and found four major dimensions of the aesthetic encounter. They are: perceptual, emotional, intellectual, and communicative. The authors pointed out that the content of each individual's aesthetic experience was varied and unique, but the underlying structure was similar, characterized by a centering of attention, a sense of clarity, wholeness and freedom. About content—or triggers of an aesthetic experience—Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) say:

> The criterion for the aesthetic encounter is not the adherence to a canon of essential attitudes—be they formal, historical, religious, sociological, emotional, or any other. Any or all of these will do. The criterion for the aesthetic experience is the experience itself, however it is arrived at (p. 178).

In their conclusion, they define an aesthetic experience as:

> ...an intense involvement of attention in response to a visual stimulus, for no other reason than to sustain the interaction. The experiential consequences of such a deep and autotelic involvement are an intense enjoyment characterized by

feelings of personal wholeness, a sense of discovery, and a sense of human connectedness (p. 178).

There is no mention of the stimulus being art-based, even though this study was focused on art objects. The authors conclude that an aesthetic experience may be a form of "flow," or optimal experience as recognized by Csikszentmihalyi (1990): 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.

The above authors represent the core of exploration into numinous encounters with museum objects. There are other authors who weave in and out of describing or studying what here we are calling numinous experiences. Still there are others who talk about the museum in other, related ways: as sacred (e.g. Bazin 1967; Duncan, 1995; Schildt, 1988); as transformative, reflective, and mindful (e.g. Carr, 1991, 2003, 2006); as space and place (e.g. Walsh 1992; Woltman 1993); about meaning-making (e.g. Ham 2002, 2004; Rounds 1999; Silverman 1993, 1995, 1999; Spock 1999); about objects as signs (e.g. Pearce 1986, 1989, 1992; Taborsky 1990); and about meaningful objects (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000), but none of these gets into the specifics of how Cameron and Gatewood, Maines and Glynn, and Kurin talk about numinous experiences with museum objects. And none of these authors explore the lived experience of encountering numinous objects.

Conclusion

The numinous encounter with a museum object is one kind of experience a person can have in the museum context. While deeply moving and transcendent museum

experiences have been the subject of minor discussion over the years, it has only recently emerged as an object of study in and of itself. Current trends in both LIS and museum studies are moving away from understanding the museum object's role in meaning-making and, likewise, both fields tend to veer away from understanding immediate experience—especially lived experience—as a valid source of research about users. The museum object and the deeply felt museum experience are aspects of the understudied layers in the realm of information behavior. While it seems that the elements of a numinous experience—the user and the object—are present in the literature independently, there appears to be very little research about what happens when the two come together to form an experience.

CHAPTER 3

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE INQUIRY

The conceptual framework of a study provides an understanding of the way in which the researcher approaches his or her inquiry. As a part of this framework, aspects of the broader context within the two fields this study straddles—Library and Information Science and Museum Studies—are provided in order to help the reader understand the perspective and approach of this particular study. Specific to the current inquiry, this chapter also outlines the conceptual elements used in framing the research perspective. These elements are drawn from each of the following concepts or theories: the museum object as a document, John Dewey's concepts of transaction and experience, and Louise Rosenblatt's Reader Response Theory.

The Broader Conceptual Framework of this Study

Information Concepts and the Role of Museum Objects

Library and Information Science (LIS) abounds with many definitions of *information*. In addition, definitions of data, knowledge, and meaning share similar unresolved issues of consensus among LIS peers. In these dynamic times, the issues are obfuscated even more by the rapidly changing nature of information in our society. In order to be clear about the approach used in this study, the specific understanding of information, kinds of information, and its relationship to museum experience and museum objects is explained here in detail. In this study, information is understood as anything that informs (Buckland, 1991a).

Other Ways of Knowing: Being Aware. At its core, the Library and Information Science field is responsible for researching symbolic communication that informs human

beings. Traditionally, most research in LIS narrowly focuses on only a small portion of that range—cognitive, textual or text-like communication—leaving out other ways of knowing such as multi-sensory, affective, or even metaphysical aspects of communication (Dervin, 1977; Introna, 1999; Kari & Hartel, 2007; Schwarz, 1990; Sonnenwald & Iivonen, 1999). However, if information consists of those things involved in the process of being informed, we must include everything that falls under that rubric (Buckland, 1991a, 1991b).

Information has been defined above, but what are the kinds of information that exist? Upon what kind of information does current LIS research focus? In a 2002 keynote speech of the Information Needs, Seeking and Use in Different Contexts conference, Bates pointed out that much work on information seeking and searching is limited to a reduced number of "layers of understanding." The layers are as follows (and in order by Bates):

Spiritual (religion, philosophy, quest for meaning)

Aesthetic (arts and literature)

Cognitive/Conative/Affective (psychology)

Social and Historical (social sciences)

Anthropological (physical and cultural)

Biological (genetics and ethology)

Chemical, physical, geological, astronomical

She observes that most contemporary research is focused on the Social and Historical layer. While these are appropriate as points of research, Bates believes that the Anthropological and Biological layers are being ignored, to the detriment of information

behavior studies. I would say that a large portion of current information research is done in *part* of the Cognitive layer as well (but not in the conative and especially not in the affective portions of that layer). I would argue that even more than the Anthropological and Biological, the Spiritual and Aesthetic layers are almost completely ignored or inadequately addressed in information behavior research. If Spiritual, Aesthetic and Conative/Affective ways of understanding can lead to our understanding about information-related behavior by people, then why are they not a focus of information user studies? In other words, information behavior research tends to ignore many of the layers by which we know the world.

Another model by Bates (2002a) is important to this issue. In it, she describes the total universe of possible Modes of Information Seeking, as presented in Table 2. According to Bates, 80% of all our knowledge is through simply being aware—most likely the realm in which we find numinous experiences with museum objects. Yet, the literature seems to emphasize research on searching, monitoring, and browsing. Why is this? Perhaps part of the reason is that it is hard to study "Being Aware." But, if it is true that 80% of our knowledge is gained that way, it seems that it might be worth it to try figuring out some methods of learning about the process of being aware. Research on undirected, passive acquisition of information is lacking in LIS.

Table 2.

Bates (2002a) Modes of Information Seeking.

	Active	**Passive**
Directed	*Searching*	*Monitoring*
Undirected	*Browsing*	*Being Aware*

Kari and Hartel (2007) would agree that something is amiss in information behavior research. In their 2007 article, they put forth a call for the study of "higher things" in information research. By "higher things" they mean pleasurable or profound phenomena, experiences or activities that transcend the daily grind…" (p. 1131). Current information research tends to focus on the "lower things" of everyday life that tend to be neutral or negative in nature, the majority of which has focused on information phenomena in an occupational setting. Kari and Hartel (2007) believe that a focus on the "lower things" of information science is causing us to only see " half of what it is to be human" (p. 1133), for it is impossible to think about one side without the other. The higher things in life can be extraordinary, intuitive, special, meaningful, interesting and pleasant, whereas the lower things consist of the ordinary, problem-solving, rational, routine, survival, and the unpleasant.

Kari and Hartel (2007) put forth two basic categories of the higher things in life: the *pleasurable*, something one finds enjoyable and satisfying, and the *profound*, something regarded as deep, sublime. In providing a framework for new LIS research, they suggest that all higher things can be approached, from the individual's point of view, as *inside* (personal or subjective) or *outside* (social or objective). Within this, research can be oriented to be descriptive (neutral delineation of phenomena and their inter-relationships) or prescriptive (or intervention). Kari and Hartel (2007) believe that research in this "uncharted territory" emphasizing qualitative methods will help to balance the scales of current understanding of information behavior.

Museum Objects as One Type of Information. As part of the spectrum of information types, the physical thing can be considered information because it holds the

potential to inform through its ability to signify some set of information to the person encountering it (Buckland, 1991a, 1991b). As Buckland (1991b) explains:

> Objects are collected, stored, retrieved, and examined as information, as a basis for becoming informed. One would have to question the completeness of any view of information, information science, or information systems that did not extend to objects as well as documents and data (p. 354).

Therefore, the object—including the museum object—is considered to be potential information.

Buckland (1991a) points out that human-made objects are forms of "documents" or a thing that signifies—equivalent to papers and books. "Recorded information" is just that—a representation of knowledge that humans have put into a relatively stable, lasting, and somewhat unchanging form. In anthropology, the term "material culture" refers to any physical manifestation of human action (Schiffer, 1999). While many anthropologists have used the term more specifically in the realm of archaeological remains, the true origin and meaning of the term applies to all forms—recent or from the past—of these manifestations. Pearce (1989, 1990, 1994) and Taborsky (1990), from museum studies, each take a semiotic view of an object of material culture, albeit from the different realms of semiotics (i.e. Saussurean and Peircean). Where they agree is with the object understood as a signifier—a symbol of something in the mind of someone. What these scholars are saying is that human-made objects are physical forms of information. In information science, Buckland posits that "things" regarded as informative are valid as information and that information science has concentrated too narrowly on data and documents as information resources. If we posit that information *is that which can*

potentially inform, it does not make sense to leave human-made, three-dimensional objects out of the picture. Like a continual feedback loop, human-made objects are created by humans with knowledge, who produce the object from information they gather and put together into the thing they then produce. Museum objects, or physical artifacts of human activity, are both representations of knowledge as well as potentially informative (Buckland, 1991a). Although an object may not have written words upon it, it is still "evidence" of human activity. As Buckland says, the term evidence used to describe information implies passiveness—it does not do anything actively. Rather, humans do something with it when they encounter information (for example, an object); they may react to it, be inspired by it, think about it, or act upon it. At the same time, a person who is transacting with an object is experiencing it. In this way, an encounter with a historic object, for example, is an experience with evidence of past human action—with past human knowledge.

Experience as Information. This view of information acquisition processes takes into account both the object and the viewer, acknowledging that it takes both to result in information. At the juncture of this encounter lies a layer of information acquisition that often goes ignored, the process of experiencing information. People do not simply read words on a page; they experience what they are reading, where they are at the moment, the way the room is lit, the temperature of the air, their feelings and mood at the moment, in addition to their goals for reading the text (if any), and the processes of searching, finding, looking. Moreover, the memory and knowledge of past events that have a bearing on the reading also can be evoked. This total experience should be a factor when understanding information acquisition and behavior. Information, whether it is physical

or not, is experienced by the user. As such, this fact points out that processing information is a constant process and involves more than reading books, searching for websites or interpreting labels. Awareness, therefore, of one's total environment is a factor in what is processed and used as information.

Museum Experience and Information. The information science literature rarely includes inquiries about information acquired through experiencing phenomena. Experiential learning theories are directed more towards context, environment and social situations, but the actual *lived experience of* something is left out. For example, there are many writings on users and archival material, retention, dispersion, selection, retrieval, use—but the *experience of using* the archives is rarely discussed (e.g. Latham, 2007).

Most studies that are at the crossroads of information studies and museums are focused on museum informatics—storage systems, organization and recording of museum artifacts. Very few studies of museum and information explore *experience* in museums. Yet, as David Carr (2003) points out, museums and libraries alike are places of reflection and potential transformation. For instance, he says that an educative museum, like a library, is a "cognitive environment… where intellectual change happens as experiences are constructed by the questions of its users" (2003, p. 17). Through proximity to artifacts and experiences, the educative museum "creates the circumstances for informing, illuminating, and exploring knowledge" (Carr, 2003, p. 18).

In the field of museum studies, scholars have worked extensively on social interactions (e.g. Falk & Dierking, 2000; Leinhardt, Crowley & Knutson, 2002; Rowe, 2002), learning (e.g. Hein, 1998), and meaning-making (e.g. Silverman, 1993, 1995, 1999), to name a few. Many of these scholars have briefly mentioned deep and moving

experiences people have had in the presence of museum objects or exhibits. Few directly explore the lived experience of the museum user.

The museum is a perfect scenario for exploring information through experience. Museums are structures, full of objects, colors, design elements, lighting, text, and activity. All of the senses are used in the process of potential information acquisition—sight, smell, touch (but not always), hearing and sometimes even taste! Social interaction can occur. Cognitive processes are intertwined with emotions, feelings, and moods. Personal reflection and deep experience are potential responses to what people encounter. A museum abounds with potential information, in many layers. Meaning is made in the transaction between the person and the available information. The resultant effect can be *an experience*, a lived encounter that is rich with the intertwining multiple kinds of information that can result in a sense of the total moment.

The Museum Object in LIS. An important question at this point is: how does the museum object fit into this information scenario? A few LIS scholars point out that their discipline has narrowly focused on the textual aspects of knowing. They claim that LIS should understand the task in the more ultimate sense—that human-information interaction is more complicated and richer than we have been treating it. Huang (2006), Raber & Budd (2003), and Buckland (1991b, 1997) argue for a broader perspective of the problem of information. In sum, they point out that if we look at information as a semiotic system of signs and meanings, this opens the field up to a more diverse and productive perspective. In semiotics, the sign is a signifier of meaning produced during an interaction with an individual. Whether the sign is text, data, records, artifacts, or formulae, it does not change the fact that it is a vehicle, or representation, for some sort of

knowledge. Meaning, ultimately, is generated by an encounter between the vehicle and the individual. In this perspective, objects—those lumps of matter produced or arranged by human action (Pearce, 1992)—are signs, and, therefore, potential information (Buckland, 1991c; Huang, 2006). As such, they are a valid subject matter for LIS. As Hudson (1998/2004) put it, "...museums are essentially places in which objects—"real things"—are used as the principal means of communication" (p. 88). MacDonald (1992) states that museums are:

> ...at the most fundamental level, concerned with information: its generation, its perpetuation, its organization and its dissemination. Implicit in this premise is the idea that museums' principal resource—their collections of material remains of the past—are of value, and are worth preserving for the information embodied in them. The information may be intellectual, aesthetic, sensory, or emotional in nature (or more likely some combination), depending on the object and its associations (p. 160).

In other words, the museum object can be seen as a document. And because of its physical properties, it can be experienced directly. Below is a short review of current concepts of the museum object within Museum Studies. Following this summary, an explanation of the museum object as a document, a signifying thing, will be provided in order to situate it in the context of the specific conceptual framework of this study.

The Museum Object in Museum Studies. As a material-oriented culture, Americans are very attached to their things. The magnitude of this relationship is often overlooked in our everyday functioning. This person-object relationship exists in the minds of people, evoking a number of responses: personal memories, cultural memories,

sense of identity, ideological, or as a transcendent experience—all associated with three-dimensional, unanimated "stuff." It stands to reason that this strong relationship would be very apparent in the object-filled world of the museum.

Objects in museums are on display in multiple ways: decoratively, informatively, as icons, and for entertainment purposes, for example. This role changes with time, with museum and even with exhibit. During the early years of the museum (and perhaps even until recently), the role objects played was one of authority; meaning was assigned by the museum workers, the "experts" on all there was to know about certain objects. "Truth" was externally located (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). The change in perspective of the museum object comes with the change in identity of the modern museum, from private to public, from curator-driven to visitor-driven (Weil, 1999). The past 20 years or so has seen some significant shifting and reorganization of the museum and, in this mix, has been the shift away from museum objects. Like other social institutions, museums have had to struggle to justify their existence. Funding is tight everywhere and museums have had to organize—and re-organize—their priorities. In this reprioritizing, it has become clear that museums are now well understood as knowledge centers (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). It is still up in the air, however, as to what counts as knowledge. It appears, unfortunately, that in this shift, museum objects are serving ever increasingly minor roles in this scenario (H. Hein, 2000).

To simplify a very complicated picture, museum objects have variously taken on two broad but different roles during the history of the museum: one of authority from the experts, of having a pre-defined meaning presented for the visitor by the curator and one of multiple meanings, discursive, allowing for a feedback loop between museum workers

and visitors. Evans, Mull and Poling (2002) believe that a shift occurred between the late 19th century and the late 20th century museum in the understanding of the museum object. In that shift, we saw a transformation from an object-based epistemology—where the focus was on "the clear presentation of unembellished facts regarding the natural history and taxonomy of the object" (p. 56)—to an object-based discourse that centers on the participatory aspects of the museum object and the museum visitor's own cultural and historical understandings. Simply put, the shift took the focus off of the object as a set of natural facts provided by "experts" and onto the visitor's experience and their perception of it, whatever that might be.

Lord (2007) contributes another, more complicated view of the museum object's recent role in history. Lord claims that museums of the 20th century have been in a constant balancing act between two poles, that of communicating information (didactic, Platonic model) and that of giving power to the artifacts (aesthetic, or hermeneutic model), the former being the more objective view and the latter the subjective. Museums, she says are trapped in this dichotomy, feeling as if they must join one side or the other and be either collection-centered or visitor-centered. The Platonic model stresses objects as "particular instances of universal concepts," and we encounter these universals through the particulars (which in the museum, are the objects) (Lord, 2007, p. 356). It is assumed in our daily museum practice that visitors know these universal concepts. Museum staff do this through a tendency to select exemplary object examples of a type, genre or era and assume its role is obvious or unquestionable to the museum user, who will recognize it as representative of this universal, recollecting something "already known" (Lord, 2007, p. 356). The hermeneutic model involves a shift to meaning-making in the museum

and recognizes the situatedness of each person. To interpret is to draw out a truth from the object, to replay the piece of the past under scrutiny in the present situation. Both models maintain the idea of fixed truths being separated by present particulars that can be linked through memory. This combination of models in the 20th century, Lord says, placed limits on the way objects are perceived in museums up to the present and the way in which visitors are expected to relate to topics.

In sum, researchers seem to refer to museum objects in these two broad ways, as carriers of single, monolithic meanings or as carriers of multiple, changing meanings. These two characteristics are here referred to as *monosemic* and *polysemic*. Monosemic things, or those with singular meanings, are usually decided upon by an authority—in the museum or by someone working with it—and, therefore, these meanings become imposed on the user (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). Although many authors claim museums of the past used objects monosemically, there really is no time-related change associated with the level of meanings associated with objects. One can still see in publications and hear conference sessions today in which objects are spoken about as if they have authoritative, clear and unchanging meaning. The other view is to see objects as polysemic—or as carriers of multiple meanings, often constructed by the user rather than an authority on the inside (although there is always a minimum of their presence there). Because this study understands objects to be polysemic, a brief review of the literature on such subject follows.

The Polysemic Museum Object. One of the earliest definitions of "material culture" was provided by the anthropologist, A. Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers, in 1875 as, "outward signs and symbols of particular ideas of the mind" (p. 23). By his description as

outward signs and symbols, Pitt-Rivers placed the *material*, i.e. the physical, into a category with the non-tangible thought—the two together had *meaning*. Since his time, the emphasis by researchers placed on the "stuff" of human agency has waxed and waned (Miller, 1997). In addition, the role objects play in the study of culture has oscillated, expanded, and crossed disciplines (or become part of new ones). The object is a topic in many fields, but the emphasis on which aspect of the object varies depending on the theoretical lens of the researcher (Wood & Latham, 2009). Rarely do we see a holistic perspective of the perceived object, the ontology of the object itself. The long and winding path of material culture studies has brought researchers back to Pitt-Rivers' original definition and the notion that material objects are more than just inanimate lumps of material and more than just symbols representing ideas. In other words, museum objects are polysemic, they can have many layers of meanings.

Meaning in the museum is widely discussed in today's scholarly museum circles. Partially due to trends in constructivist learning theory, many museums have made a shift in viewing the visitor as passive and compliant, viewing exhibits that are "objective" and wholly fact-based to a less formal, visitor-centered approach (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, 2000). Today's museums understand better the role of the visitor to be dialogic and that a single exhibit is not the objective "truth" but rather one interpretation of some topic. A museum user's experience is filled with many variables: the environment, the visitor's mood, the colors, the sounds and the smells of the exhibits, and who accompanies the visitor (Falk & Dierking, 2000). Throughout most museums, the consistent thread running through these meaning-making experiences are the three-dimensional artifacts.

The museum object is the topic of many studies, its role ranging from a learning device to the carrier of political agency. At the core, all of these discussions lead back to a simple concept: that the object itself is a sign in the process of signification. That is, an object itself has no inherent meaning and can only be understood in association with some socially ascribed value and dependent on both culturally ascribed values and meanings as well as personally constructed ones. Several authors discuss this important aspect of the museum object. In particular, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill and Susan Pearce provide useful insight into the meaning of the object. Their ideas are discussed below to provide a sample of works on the topic.

Most of Hooper-Greenhill's works are in the realm of learning in the museum, but she has also written many conceptual pieces about the nature of museums (e.g. Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). In these works, she alludes to objects since, in her opinion, they are one of the main building blocks of the museum. Of interest here, however, is a book she wrote on meaning in the museum. *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000) is an exploration of the many facets that contribute to visitor experience in the modern museum. In this book, she goes into great detail about the meaning of the museum object and offers a unique and interesting perspective from a different quadrant (i.e. from collections studies) of the museum studies field. Hooper-Greenhill believes museum objects are polysemic; and that their meanings are constructed from the viewer's position. Objects, she says, can play many different roles, and thereby have many different meanings to a person. Notions of the sacred, personal or social identities, feelings of nostalgia, and as symbols for issues in society are some of the many meanings an object can take on. As Hooper-Greenhill (2000) states:

> Objects enable reflection, and speculation. Philosophical reflection is mobilized by the artifact, and through the observation...specific histories are recalled. Objects can bring together and give material form to elusive intangible abstract ideas such as "home," "nation," "sacrifice." In some ways, it is only through objects that these abstract ideas can be thought at all; without the concrete material thing, the idea would remain at an abstract individual level and it would be much more difficult to share it (p. 110).

In addition, Hooper-Greenhill points out that objects are encountered as much by the body as by the mind and, she thinks, it is not possible to split the relationship between the senses and cognitive processes. In fact, both are required to interpret something. In combination with hermeneutic theory, Hooper-Greenhill believes that current ideas in educational theory and social constructivism contribute greatly to our understanding of the museum object. In particular, these points are highlighted:

1. Construction of meaning relates to pattern recognition.
2. Meaning exists because of context in which things are placed.
3. Understanding happens when new information or experience is fitted into pattern.
4. Perception and memory are linked—already-existing schemata, mental maps of knowledge, store these patterns and process new knowledge into existing schemata, which are then reorganized to fit new information.

Since each person has their own mental maps that are dependent upon prior cultural and personal experience and knowledge, each person processes new information unique to both that background as well as their learning styles. This acceptance of new information, fitting it into mental maps, and then adjusting the new information to create new mental

maps is a continual, never-ending process. In other words, according to constructivist learning theory, there is no knowledge outside the knower. "Knowing" an object may entail more than just looking (sight), where talking about it, touching it, or even smelling it can help a viewer attain a "broader sensory experience" for the museum visitor. To Hooper-Greenhill, then, the museum object elicits meaning through this kind of interpretive process. And the act of interpretation involves not only the object, its qualities and sensory manifestations, but also what the visitor brings to the situation and all the many complex interactions that can be produced as a result of these unique encounters. In that way, objects come to embody significance, emotion and meaning. According to Hooper-Greenhill (2000), an historical object (or any object for that matter) is only meaningful through an interpretive framework.

Susan Pearce is another prolific researcher from a British school of museum studies (in same university department as Hooper-Greenhill). Her work almost always involves the object and can be divided, roughly, into two realms: 1) work on collectors and collecting, and 2) the meaning of museum objects. She views objects using semiotics. Her ideas about the meaning of objects are born out of Saussure's structural linguistics, where she incorporates ideas from Barthes (a linguist), Iser, (a literary critic), and Leach (an anthropologist).

Pearce (1989) provides a very different and complicated semiotic analysis of the object. She feels that, although this semiotic system was developed to help understand human language, it is perfectly and equally applicable to material culture and the study of objects.

Pearce says that "social ideas cannot exist without physical context, but physical objects are meaningless without social content. Idea and expression are not two separable parts, but the same social construct" (1992, p. 21). At the same time, language does not always match material culture in a one-to-one sense, she says, and finer details are stored, perhaps, in a combination of the senses and cultural memory. This is why we feel we must see and perhaps touch objects in order to give descriptions or opinions about them.

Her goal in using these analytical techniques is to show that the object works as a message-bearing entity that acts as both an intrinsic sign and a metaphorical symbol. A sign is something that is a part that stands for a whole and must be contextually placed with other related things (signs) that have an intrinsic relationship (e.g., a golden crown representing royalty). A symbol involves no intrinsic relationship and can be an arbitrary assignment (e.g.,a golden crown representing beer). As such, the object is capable of carrying a very large range of interpretations. Further, Pearce (1992) wants to "explore how this relates to ways in which the present is created from the past" (p. 26).

Her point is that the sign is a mediator between the object and the meaning; it interacts with both the material (object) and the person—"it is the bridge between material and individual reality…we do not understand the object directly in its own physical essence but only within a group or social reality" (Pearce, 1990, p. 58). Pearce believes that all museum objects—whether of a famous event or local history, unique or mass-produced—can be approached using her techniques of understanding the dual nature of the artifact acting as both a sign and a symbol.

The application of her model leads to an explanation, ultimately, of the interaction between the object and the viewer and the formation of meaning. Based on literary critic

Wolfgang Iser's concept "virtuality," which refers to the constantly active interplay between the viewer and the object, Pearce says:

> As the viewer stands in front of the showcase, he makes use of the various perspectives which the object offers him…his creative urges are set in motion, his imagination is engaged, and the dynamic process of interpretation and reinterpretation begins, which extends far beyond the mere perception of what the object is. The object activates our own faculties, and the product of this creative activity is the virtual dimension of the object, which endows it with present reality. The message or meaning which the object offers is always incomplete and each viewer fills in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding other possibilities: as he looks he makes his own decisions about how the story is to be told…(1994, p. 26).

This, Pearce conveys, is what happens when a user visits a museum.

Hooper-Greenhill and Pearce, albeit with underlying different approaches, agree about the following six statements about museum objects:

1. Meaning is socially determined.
2. Meaning is contextual and changeable.
3. Meaning is only found in the interaction between object and person.
4. The object acts as a mediator.
5. A single object can have multiple meanings.
6. Meaning (and interpretation) is temporally and spatially situated.

Hooper-Greenhill points out that an encounter with an object involves an act of interpretation. This active transaction is dialogic in that there is a back-and-forthness

between the person and the piece they are viewing. To Hooper-Greenhill, interpretation is constantly changing, being updated with new information in the environment. Context, pattern, perception and memory are all components of a visitor's experience with a museum object. A person's place in history (time) and culture affects their understanding of an object. Hooper-Greenhill's emphasis on tacit knowledge and recognition of all our senses in this interaction are especially important to this investigation.

Pearce has provided one of the most intricate and consistent models on the meaning of museum objects. Inherent to Pearce's conception of object meaning is "the power of the real thing" (Pearce, 1994, p. 20). Although she does believe that interaction creates meaning, she holds that the actual events associated with a piece are vital to the recipe of meaning. An object is a "message-bearing entity" and its meaning lies somewhere between the piece itself and its realization by the viewer (Pearce, 1994). In other words, the object only takes on significance when the viewer brings out its inherent features. At the same time, she claims, if we know nothing about the life history of the piece and its place in time and space, it cannot carry a message. The notion that an object is both a sign and symbol at same time—and that one is constantly feeding the other, introducing the past into the present (sometimes defining the present)—is very important to our understanding of meaning in the museum.

These two approaches to the polysemic museum object illustrate that meaning is not so straightforward when trying to understand the role of objects in the public sphere. And even with this in-depth research on museum objects, still little is known about the reasons behind human attachment to them in the museum context or about the ways they

become incorporated into people's identities (Schlereth, 1984/1992). Few studies focus on the lived experience with museum objects.

The Specific Conceptual Framework of this Study

In the context of the complicated role objects and information play in the museum, three sets of concepts are used to help guide and understand the current research. The conceptual framework used to understand numinous experiences in museums is informed by the following: 1) the museum object as a document, and 2) Dewey's notion of *an experience* or coming together of many things at one point in time resulting in a unique moment, and 3) the encounter between a person and a museum object as a transaction, as understood through Rosenblatt's reader response model. Below, each of these ideas is explained in detail.

Museum Object as Document

Just as the book, the manuscript or the microform are physical objects that are potentially able to inform someone, museum objects are also potentially informative. The best way to understand museum objects is to use Suzanne Briet's (2006) criteria of what defines a document, as "any concrete or symbolic indexical sign [indice], preserved or recorded toward the ends of representing, of reconstituting, or of proving a physical or intellectual phenomenon" (Briet, 2006, p.10). When we divide the world between all objects and museum objects, her suggestions show how museum objects fit as documents—as material, intentional, processed, and phenomenological. Understanding the museum object as a physical entity that represents something to someone adds important dimensions to our understanding of user reactions in a museum context.

The origin and early use of the word "document" comes from latin, *docere*, to

teach or to inform (Buckland, 1991b). But the word *document* has become muddled and layered with many associations over the years, mostly in connection with textual material and printed matter. As a result of wrestling with how to define a "*document*" in Information Science, Buckland has suggested that a document is "any signifying thing" (Buckland, 2007, p. 316) and is the true central concept of information science (Buckland, 1999). *Documentation* is both the process of documenting and the outcome of that process (Buckland, 2007). Concerned with the common constrictive use of the word "document" (at least in the United States), Buckland noted that today's interest in "*multimedia*" "reminds us that not all phenomena of interest in information science are textual or text-like," (Buckland, 1991c, p. 586). Multimedia, he says, can be phenomena, representations, forms of expression, or a physical medium (1991c). Documentalists use the term "document" to denote *any physical information resource* or any expression (representation) of human thought (Buckland, 1998) rather than limiting it to specific text-bearing media (Buckland, 1991b). Documentation is concerned with access to *evidence*, not texts (Buckland, 1998). Buckland (1998), summarizing Briet's rules for when an object has become a document, defines it as such:

1) There is materiality: physical objects and physical signs only;
2) There is intentionality: it is intended that the object be treated as evidence;
3) The objects have to be processed: they have to be made into documents; and,
4) There is a phenomenological position: the object is perceived to be a document (p. 217).

In addition, Buckland makes a special note about Briet's term *indice* (translated as indexicality)—being placed into an organized, meaningful relationship with other

evidence. It is the use of this semiotic concept, *indice*, that makes a document a document (Buckland, 1998; Day, 2001). In other words, the document is present as evidence.

In this way, the museum object can clearly be seen as another form of document. Objects are material, physical signs that are treated by museum workers as evidence of some piece of the past or idea. The very reason the museum collects objects is because they are evidential and provide information that is to be used for a future purpose. Museum standards include processing of objects, organizing, cataloging and displaying them as representations of some event, person, idea or meaning. Both museum workers and visitors see the object as a document, as a representation of something meant to be understood.

While museum workers have traditionally not seen museum objects as "documents," they understand, perhaps more than most, that museum objects are involved in communication. Van Mensch (1992) claims that these "artefacts become communication artefacts in the process of musealisation; musealized artefacts are by definition communicative artefacts," (chap. 12, para. 7). The reason they are documents is because:

> Museum objects are objects separated from their original (primary) context and transferred to a new, museum reality in order to document the reality from which they were separated. A museum object is not just an object in a museum. It is a collected (selected), classified, conserved, and documented object, (van Mensch, 1992 chap.12, para. 8).

And I would add to that, *experienced*—that is, by visitors. Gregorovj (as cited in van Mensch, 1992) believes museum objects as documents refer not just to the object itself

but to activities, phenomena, or functions in wider contexts. Museum objects are limitless sources of information.

Although many of these authors understand the dynamic nature of what museum objects mean, many only hover around discussions from the museum worker's perspective. Rarely is there a discussion of the contact point between the museum object as document (and all the museum perspectives, maker intentions, and unintended results from exhibit design) and the encounter with the museum visitor. For example, in discussing his new model of museology, van Mensch provides us with three properties of the object: structural identity (physical), functional identity (use), and contextual identity (object in context). He also layers on three more, diachronic identities: conceptual (the potential object in the mind of maker), factual (sum of total characteristics of object as it turns out) and actual (as object appears to us now). These layers (van Mensch, 1992) are either intrinsic (information content in the object itself) or extrinsic (information gathered through documentation), and intentional (intended by maker) or unintentional (all properties of object's materials, technology, and deterioration). Van Mensch (1992) is interested ultimately in the information value of museum objects. It is apparent that he has implicitly left out the information that is created at the moment of connection between a person and an object. He (and others) leave out the person-object transaction, a unique moment in time when many things—the individual's knowledge, thoughts, mood; the object's context in the exhibit, lighting, color, sounds, temperature; and the total immediacy of the moment—come together to result in an experience.

Evidence, being a central concept in the notion of "document," is also important with regards to the museum object. Since all museum objects are indeed physical, they all

contain some sort of "proof." Granted, there are many potential layers of proof for a museum object since evidence is dependent on the people encountering them and the situations in which they may be presented. Intentionality, another criteria of "document" is also directly applicable to museum objects. Materials are collected for a purpose, to preserve some evidence of past lifeways, people, events or activities.

An Experience and The Person-Object Transaction

In 1981, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton wrote a book, *The Meaning of Things*, reporting the results of their study of people's deep connections to everyday domestic objects. They called this meaningful encounter a *person-object transaction.* A *transaction*, derived from the work of John Dewey, is a psychic activity, or communicative sign process, where meaning is gained only in the context of the transaction itself—in other words, the elements of the transaction are not actually independent of each other (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). The authors recognized the dynamic role of objects in the human world: "Objects are not static entities whose meaning is projected on to them from cognitive functions of the brain or from abstract conceptual systems of culture. They themselves are signs, objectified forms of psychic energy" (p. 173). The introduction of this concept, a person-object transaction, while not the most cited component of their work, is the most useful for the purposes of the present study. It points out that neither the object alone, nor the person alone holds the meaning associated with a museum object. This concept brings forward the idea that *direct experience*—an immediate and continuous act—is an important element in understanding museum objects (Ansbacher, 1999). Both concepts—transaction and experience—were central to the thinking of 20th century philosopher, John Dewey. The

utility of Dewey's principles is not new to the museum field. Both Hein (2004, 2006) and Ansbacher (1998, 1999), for instance, have illustrated the connection between Dewey's ideas and the museum experience of visitors. A *transaction*, simply put, sees together—in a system–that which has conventionally been seen apart in separation, including knowing people and the world they know (Palmer, 2004). It is an observation that considers the whole system of action involved, while leaving room for future amendments to these observations and the understanding that change is normal and inevitable. Central to his overall philosophy, Dewey (1937) defines *experience* as that which refers to the undivided continuous transaction between human beings and their environment. It is not static, involves both the past and the future, and is always historically situated. It includes not only thought, but also feeling, doing, perceiving, suffering and other aspects of living in the world. Dewey said 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). These kinds of experiences he calls *an experience* (Dewey, 1937), that is, active engagement—in contrast to experience that is cumulative, an outcome or product, and used later to affect future experiences (Ansbacher 1998; Kesner, 2006). Of particular interest here is Dewey's notion of *an aesthetic experience*. According to Dewey (1937), the essence and value of art are not in the artifacts themselves, but in the dynamic and developing experiential activity through which they are created and perceived (Schusterman, 2000). Dewey defined *an aesthetic experience* as occurring not just in the presence of art or "beauty," but in the presence of something that causes the reaction one has in this situation (Jackson, 1998). This can be any kind of situation for any person, and it varies from person to person. It involves all that is

experienced, as well as the experiencer, and the way he/she experiences. It incorporates aspects of the individual as well as the shared. By rethinking art experience in terms of this more broadly defined aesthetic experience, Dewey hoped we could enlarge the domain of art and integrate it more fully into the real world. It is important to note that Dewey's conception of aesthetic experience was embedded in his understanding of how the world works—his transactional view and his overall notion of experience. He said that experience, "...signifies active and alert commerce with the world; at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events," (1937, p. 25). As Phillip Jackson (1998) explains in his book, *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art*:

> Experience, in other words, is transactional. It is not just what registers on our consciousness as we make our way through the world but includes the objects and events that compose that world. The objects and events are as much a part of experience as we are ourselves. When we are fully immersed in experience, its components so interpenetrate one another that we lose all sense of separation between self, object, and event (p. 3).

It is this coming together of things, these optimal gathering of conditions with the self that constitute *an* experience. Being open to an approach that sees experience as a melding of many simultaneous factors working in a single moment is important to the understanding of deeply moving experiences.

From Dewey, Jackson (1998) outlines three "generic traits of *an* experience: 1) completeness—an organic wholeness that can be described as a fulfillment of a total related set of things 2) uniqueness—a unity, a singular quality that is difficult to describe

because it is unlike any other experience, and 3) unifying emotion—"emotional but ...not separate things called emotion in it" (Dewey, as cited in Jackson, 1998, p.10).

Much research has recently focused on the experience of museum visitors; experience is an important term in museum studies. An important point, however, is often overlooked. Objects, being inherently physical as well as potentially symbolic, are experienced—an immediate and continuous act—by people. Typically, these studies do not ask *what it means to experience a museum object.* In addition, many studies do not take all factors of an experience into account. They do not view the experience as transactional, that is, holistically, temporally, historically, and personally situated. Although many authors understand the dynamic nature of what museum objects mean, many only circumvent discussions of this lived encounter by museum visitors. Rarely is there a discussion of the moment when the museum object as document and the museum visitor come together.

Dewey's concepts of *an experience* and *transaction* are holistic and dynamic. Especially insightful is his conception of *an aesthetic experience*, as a transaction between everything present in the moment, from internal to external, that shows us the connectedness of objects and events in our world, our own mind's contents and activities, and the current situation in which we find ourselves. These concepts are important to the understanding of numinous museum experiences with objects. One theory in particular makes special use of these ideas; Louise Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of the Literary Work provides an integrative model useful in understanding the numinous experience with a museum object.

Reader Response Theory

Reader Response Theory (RRT) is an approach to literary criticism that allows for an interpretation of text. Central to RRT is the idea that the text gains meaning by the purposeful act of a reader reading and interpreting it, making the *relationship* between the reader and the text of primary importance. The focus is on what happens in a reader's mind when s/he reads and the meaning of the text that occurs during this encounter. The origins of RRT are in the late 20th century writings of Stanley Fish (Lang, 2007), but there are now many different versions of RRTs. Particularly useful to this study is the RRT of Louise Rosenblatt and especially her treatise, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work (1978)*. Rosenblatt treats the experience of reading a text as a *transaction*—adapted from the philosophy of John Dewey—which refers to an observation that considers the whole system of action involved, dynamic and always changing (Dewey & Bentley, 1949). Dewey distinguished this from *interaction*, a causal interconnection between two or more separate elements (Dewey & Bentley, 1949). Transaction sees elements together—across and through a system—what inter-action sees apart as static, separate elements. Dewey used transaction to stress this dynamic system more emphatically than in an interaction. Rosenblatt, then, sees the process of reading as an encounter between the reader, the author, the text, and the moment in which these all come together (this includes the reader's physical surroundings). To her, these are all elements of the whole, which results in an experience of the written work.

Rosenblatt's model consists of four basic elements: 1) the active reader, 2) the continuum of types of experience, 3) the "poem," and 4) the ecology of the event. All four aspects of this model, in addition to the Deweyian notions of transaction and

experience, are useful in the understanding of numinous experiences in museums (and, in fact, all experiences in museums).

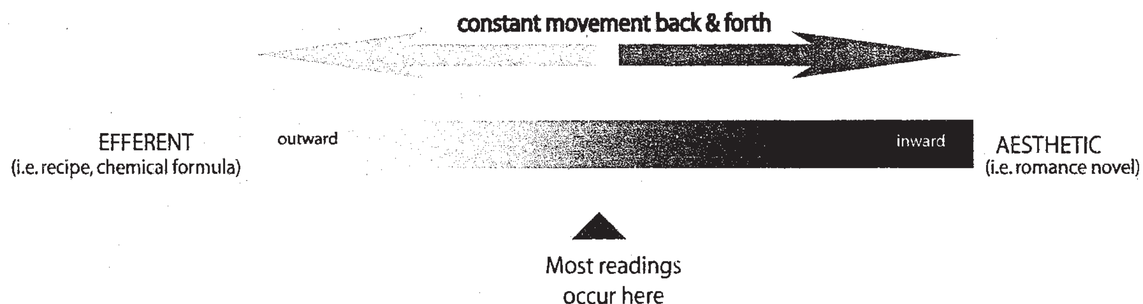

Figure 1. Rosenblatt's Continuum of Efferent to Aesthetic Reading.

Rosenblatt's model is useful in understanding the encounter between a museum user and a museum object. For Rosenblatt, there are two kinds of reading, to be viewed on two ends of a continuum (Figure 1): efferent and aesthetic. In efferent reading, the reader seeks to take away "residue" or bits of information to be used in some way, as one would do when reading a recipe, newspaper, or instructions on a medicine bottle. Aesthetic reading is of-the-moment; the reader's primary concern is to involve him or herself in the experience elicited by a combination of the text and the reader's mind. The reader's attention is centered directly on what s/he is living through and his/her relationship with that text. Aesthetic reading involves deciphering images and concepts of words that lead to an interpretation of the text aroused through one's feelings, associations, attitudes and ideas. Involved in an aesthetic reading of a text can be the text itself, the author's intentions, the reader's knowledge, experience and mood, and the current surroundings in which the reader finds him/herself. According to Rosenblatt (1978), it is "the reader's moment to moment alertness to what is being activated in his

(1978), it is "the reader's moment to moment alertness to what is being activated in his consciousness by this particular pattern of words during the period of actual reading" (p. 26). When a reader experiences an aesthetic reading, it is at this point that the text becomes a "literary work of art" or "poem." However, a reader does not necessarily read in one domain or the other, but may shift back and forth between efferent and aesthetic even in one reading of one text. A person may also have different levels of experience in aesthetic transactions with the same text, making each encounter unique. And a poetic experience is not limited to a certain type of text. One might encounter the "poem" while reading the newspaper, a recipe or even a chemical formula. The terms *poem* and *poetry*, in this sense, are not literally a type of literature but a source for a special kind of experience. The concept of transaction emphasizes the relationship between the text and the reader. Best put in her own words, Rosenblatt (1986) says in a later summary of an aesthetic reading, "The transaction with the signs of the text activates a two-way, or, better, circular, stream of dynamically intermingled symbolizations which mutually reverberate and merge" (p. 123).

Conclusion to Conceptual Framework of the Inquiry

In the broader context of LIS and Museum Studies, the approach taken to this study sees both lived experience and passive acquisition of information as important avenues to our understanding of human information behavior. Information is understood to be about the meaning made in process of being informed. It is neither thing nor process alone but both, the resulting effect of a person transacting with their environment. In addition, information acquisition is considered to include many kinds of understanding and must include aspects of the total environment in the consideration of information

behaviors. The study of numinous experiences of museum objects can be seen as inquiry into the *higher things* in information research, an investigation of the profound and subjective experience that may occur in the processing of information.

The specific conceptual framework for this study is informed by three sets of concepts: 1) the museum object as a document, and 2) Dewey's notion of *an experience*, the coming together of many things at one point in time resulting in a unique moment, and 3) the encounter between a person and a museum object as a transaction, as understood through Rosenblatt's reader response model. In this study, the museum object is regarded as a document, a signifying thing that has materiality, processed and perceived as a symbol by those who view it. In addition, the experience of a museum visitor encountering a museum object must be understood as a transaction, a total coming together of many elements that can result in *an experience.* Museum objects are always experienced but sometimes, because of the uniqueness of each moment, the experience can be different, reflecting a "unified whole" one that stands out as unique, powerful, and memorable (Dewey, 1937). At the base of all these concepts, lies the a fundamental respect for understanding phenomena through the recounting of lived experiences, the foundation of the research methodology, presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Qualitative researchers are interested in meaning—how people make sense of their lives, experiences, and their structures of the world. (Creswell, 1994, p. 145)

Strategy of Inquiry: Interpretive Phenomenology

The methodology chosen for this study is interpretive phenomenology, the study of lived experience coupled with, "the science of interpreting human meaning and experience," (Crist & Tanner, 2003, p. 202). Because of its focus on the rich subjective experience of individuals, phenomenology as a scientific method has been useful in drawing attention to previously ignored affective phenomena in other fields, such as nursing, psychology and pedagogy (Smith & Eatough, 2006; van Manen, 1990; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). The general aim of interpretive phenomenology is to transform lived experience (the "lifeworld") into a textural expression of its essence (van Manen, 1990). The concept of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), which originated with Husserl, refers to the whole of a person's lived experiences. It emphasizes that human existence is characterized by the "natural attitude," or the taken-for-granted everyday immersion of one's existence in the world and our perceptions of it (Dahlberg, Drew, & Nystrom, 2001). The natural attitude is simply "the focus we have when we are involved in our original, world-directed stance" (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 42). In the natural attitude, we do not focus our attention on or ask questions about what we live, we just live it. It is the "default perspective" (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 42), the one we start off with each and every day. But, it is the scientist who adopts a different stance, or "attitude" that asks the questions about the natural attitude (Dahlberg et al., 2001; Stewart & Mickunas, 1990).

Sokolowski (2000) calls this the "phenomenological attitude" and says that it is from here that we reflect upon the natural attitude and carry out philosophical analyses on it. These methods that are used to "go to the things themselves" are focused on remaining true to the informants' descriptions, usually through in-depth interviews. Importance is placed on "openness," or the researcher's ability to suspend judgment of what people are describing and letting the information show itself (Dahlberg et al., 2001). The interpretive aspect allows for an explanation of these "texts" with the purpose of obtaining a valid and common understanding of the meaning of that text (Kvale, 1996). In interpretive phenomenological research, meaning is understood to be contextual, continually expandable, and emergent in relation to the *lifeworld.* It is embedded in language, but not totally expressed by it (Dahlberg et al., 2001). The ultimate goal of the phenomenological researcher is to reduce the meanings of the experience to their essential structure.

Analyzing data using interpretive phenomenology is a process that is directed toward finding meaning, with results that are structured and summarized in a systematic and scientific format. The "struggle" for scientific openness is central to all aspects of interpretive phenomenology, including the analytic stage (Dahlberg et al., 2001). As with most qualitative procedures, analysis consists of a vacillation between "whole-parts-whole" (Creswell, 2006). Following a non-linear, iterative and simultaneous process, researchers constantly compare the "whole" (i.e., full transcripts), with "parts" (i.e., extracted meanings from those texts). Interviews, transcriptions, reflections, and developing lines of inquiry could take place simultaneously and iteratively as the study progresses, with meanings and interpretations emerging as the study proceeds (Crist & Tanner, 2003). Van Manen (1990) also states that the purpose of hermeneutic-

phenomenological reflection (analysis) is to try to grasp the essential meaning of a phenomenon. He points out that we analyze phenomena in order to determine the structures (themes) of experience.

Overall, then, interpretive phenomenology is precisely the methodology to help study the kind of experience that is not always tangible; a numinous experience is a phenomenon that is hard to describe and has no necessary physical or observable manifestation. The purpose of this study is *not* to develop a theory, or to look at individuals in their particular situations, to find causality, or to describe an underlying cultural mechanism (Creswell, 1998). The purpose is to understand the structure, meaning, and elements of a particular phenomenon—in this case that deep, moving experience that people may have when in the presence of museum objects. Within an interpretive phenomenological frame, this study was designed to gather rich, qualitative data first-hand from museum visitors who self identified as having had numinous experiences with museum objects. The aim has been to explore the meaning made by those who have had these experiences and to understand the phenomenon from their tales of lived experience. The intent was to find out how people describe these experiences and express what they mean, to understand the essential patterns of this kind of experience and to interpret those meanings in the context of current research.

The remainder of this chapter will include several elements of the study's methodology. First, the aspects of the research design—site selection, participant recruitment, researcher's role, issues encountered during study, and ethical standards—will be provided. After this, the specific data collection methods and analytical processes

will be presented followed by discussion about the strategies for determining the value of this research.

Research Design Elements

Museum members or volunteers from five museums were solicited to take part in this study. Using slightly varied methods of recruitment at each museum, respondents self-selected after an initial request for participants. After email exchanges between myself and those responding, in-depth interviews were undertaken with 18 individuals, five of which were used in the final analysis.

Site Selection

Several museums took part in this study. They were selected based on several factors: my familiarity with the museum, rapport with the staff of the museum, and (in one case) a museum that expressed interest in participating by contacting me (DIA). In all, five museums were involved in varying capacities. These museums were (in order of recruitment): the Kansas Museum of History (KMH) in Topeka, Kansas; Johnson County Museum of History (JCMH) in Shawnee, Kansas; National World War One Museum (NWW1) in Kansas City, Missouri; Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) in Detroit, Michigan; and The Henry Ford (THF) in Dearborn, Michigan. While all museums assisted in the process of recruiting participants, not all resulted in interested parties or successful interviews. For example, there were no responses at all from the Kansas Museum of History even though the recruitment device was a very nice color page in their monthly members magazine. The Johnson County Museum sent out over 400 letters with the sole purpose of asking for participants in this study. There were several return calls, but only two interviews resulted. Neither of these interviews was used in the study because the

participants' experiences did not resonate with the subject matter (see below for detailed description of situation). Only one interview resulted from the NWW1 Museum, and several from the DIA. The majority of interviews used in this study came from the last museum to join the study, The Henry Ford.

Identifying Study Participants

Staff from each museum expressed how they felt best to advertise for study participants and from which population they wished to recruit. Within IRB parameters, I worked with each museum contact to choose the population from which they wished to draw participants. Selecting a group outright—such as members—for all museums did not work well across the board and therefore it was determined to give each site some choice in the procedure. For example, one museum chose to use their larger, fancier full-color monthly membership publication, while another chose to simply email only their volunteers.

Table 3.

Participant museums, their method of recruitment, number of responses, interviews and selected transcriptions.

Museum	***Mechanism used to elicit participation***	***# of responses***	***# of interviews***	***# interviews used in study***
KMH	Monthly publication (one issue) for members	0	0	0
JCM	Individual letters mailed to all of membership	3	2	0
NWW1	Email to all volunteers from volunteer coordinator	4	1	1
THF	E-blast to membership	66	6	3
DIA	Email to volunteers and letter in volunteer break room	16	5	1
Pilot	Arranged through personal professional contacts	4	4	0
TOTALS		**93**	**18**	***5***

The general recruitment process at all of the museums was as follows. Participants self-selected to be a part of this study. They were asked if they had a story to tell about a transcendent or deeply meaningful experience they have had with a museum object and to email that story to either the museum contact or to myself. I then read their responses and asked more questions, based on what was provided in their original email, to solicit further detail about their experiences. Participants who were able to articulate a story, with rich detail, were asked to meet in person for an interview at the museum. All interviews were taped on a digital recorder with the permission and signed consent forms of informants. Most interviews lasted about an hour, with the exception of one (Phil) that ran one and a half hours. All participants were in contact afterwards via email for any additional thoughts or to clarify any questions I had (from the transcribed interview).

The Henry Ford (THF)—the museum with the most responses—used an e-blast to their entire membership. Emails were exchanged between myself and several departments over the course of five months, and the e-blast was sent out to over 5000 people. Interested parties were asked to send an email stating their "museum object story" to a THF contact, who then sent the information on to me. I then reviewed each one, dividing the responses into three categories: 1.) Yes, looks promising, ask for more detailed description via email, 2.) No, do not ask for more information, and 3.) Not enough information given to make a determination, ask for more via email if more participants are needed. Of all the final responses, six face-to-face interviews resulted. With the other museums, everyone who responded to the participant request was interviewed. Getting participants proved difficult in the early stages of this study, and so

all respondents who agreed to do so, were interviewed. Before THF e-blast, only two out of seven interviews were successful.

In total, 18 interviews (including pilot study) were conducted and, from those, eight were potentially usable in the study, and five were ultimately transcribed and analyzed (Table 3). As is customary in an interpretive phenomenological study, the actual number of people interviewed/analyzed depends on the point at which the researcher begins to sense increasing redundancy in the data being collected (Crist & Tanner, 2003). In this study, redundancy came early, after the fourth transcription and analysis. For good measure, I continued on with one more beyond that point, to make a total of five interviews in the sample.

Pilot Study

Prior to this study, a pilot study was conducted in order to explore avenues of research directions on the topic of numinous experiences with museum objects. Three interviews of museum professionals were conducted through qualitative in-depth interviews. Interview data was analyzed using descriptive phenomenological methods proposed by Colaizzi (1978) and further informed by Giorgi's methods (1997). The pilot study allowed me to utilize descriptive phenomenological methods and determine that an interpretive approach would be more suitable for my own epistemological views as well as for the goals of the study. Doing the pilot study also made it clear that the sample population needed to be museum visitors/users rather than professionals. Museum professionals tended toward interpretations of their experiences rather than simply describing their own lived experiences. It also helped me to refine the research question and goals, and to narrow the opening interview question specifically to numinous

encounters with objects. In the pilot study, the initial interview question was left broad, simply asking about meaningful encounters in museums, in order to leave as much open as possible to the interviewees. The results helped to re-form the research question and focus this study more specifically on objects, and well as use narratives as an initial marker to help choose interviewees who have had numinous experiences.

Role of Researcher

The role of the researcher in interpretive phenomenological inquiry is to be open and true to the phenomenon as it is expressed by participants and to be able to clearly distinguish the points at which the researcher's voice of interpretation is used. The researcher must be reflective, sensitive to language, insightful, and constantly open to experience (van Manen, 1990). To remain true to phenomenology, both a constant awareness of my stance as researcher (during all stages of collection and analysis) and an explanation of my perspectives will be made explicit in this section.

Researcher's Background. As the researcher of this project, my own background includes over 20 years of work in museums and in the museum studies field. My overarching philosophy of the modern museum as a cultural institution involves the museum object as the core of the museum, the spark for all else that occurs in these institutions, including education, learning, socializing, thinking, seeing, and so on. I believe, that due to various historical and technological factors, we have moved too far away from the object as the central unique aspect of the museum. In that move, museums have begun to emphasize non-object-based experience for visitors and in that process have, "thrown the baby out with the bath water." As a result, museums have minimized the special role of person-object transactions. By purposefully repackaging the museum

object with multiple and competing layers of information, its importance is reduced. I am interested in a return to the object-centered museum, one that views the object as the jumping off point of meaning, one that sees the object as the elicitor of experiences, as the catalyst for all else—for the visitor AND for the museum worker (H. Hein, 2000). In my mind, this kind of object-centeredness comprises the many layers of meaning tied to a single object and the relationship between the viewer, the object, and the total environment in which they find themselves. I consider this view to be of the "minds-on" museum (G. Hein, 1998): objects in this scenario, lead to ideas, facts, events, and the final convergence of all these elements into an experience for an individual visitor at a particular point in time.

With regard to numinous experiences, I immediately identified with the Cameron and Gatewood descriptions of these deeply felt encounters because I have experienced the kinds of encounters they describe. While not an active numen-seeker, I believe that the value of museums lies in these meaningful connections we have to objects. In the past two years, I have reflected on some of my own numinous experiences in order to explore them further. These reflections have become part of my reflective journal for this study.

The interpretive phenomenological approach to studying numinous experiences fits well with my total conceptual framework. Ontologically, interpretive phenomenology is in line with my own views, as I believe reality does not exist completely as an entity "out there" but in the understanding that there are multiple constructed realities, which constantly undergo change (Laverty, 2003). There is an epistemological fit here as well; that knower and known are intricately linked and the individual and the world constitute

and are co-constituted by each other (Laverty, 2003). In other words, there is no such thing as value-free research (Laverty, 2003).

Issues Encountered During Study

Throughout the process, I was very careful to listen to my thoughts, to work at identifying any instance in which I place my own views or descriptions at the forefront of this study rather than the participants' views. By using pre-determined probes during the interview sessions, I was able to limit myself from having too much conversation with participants, risking superimposing my own views onto theirs. In a few cases, the nature of the relationship between myself and the participant was in fact, conversational, and necessary to create an atmosphere of comfort and openness needed to allow the person to open up.

It turned out that these interviews were very personal for everyone involved. Many people cried and sometimes made me cry as well. Clearly, deep emotions were being tapped, making the sessions very intimate and in some cases, one of self-discovery for the participant. Several interviewees told me that the time we spent together was special to them, helping them to realize or remember things they had not thought of for a very long time, if ever. I found myself trying very hard to be a listener—not my normal behavior. I found myself really truly wanting to hear what they had to say, being excited by *their* descriptions—not *my* words for them. Most participants surprised me with their ability to express themselves.

During analysis, I chose to transcribe and analyze each interview on its own, without any thoughts about any other interviewee during that time. At the completion of each transcription then analysis, I felt that all interviews were honestly done

independently of the others. Enough time was buffered in between each transcription/analysis so that a fresh approach at the start of each was there. While my memory would inevitably conjure up thoughts from other interviews, I carefully listened to what each person said and determined their meaning units and pre-themes based only on what they themselves were saying. Only when the time came to look at them all together and determine overall themes did I begin to compare and contrast their contributions in any formal way.

One problem I had along the way had to do with the treatment of the museum object in the research design. The original design of this study focused on the historic object. This was purposeful because it seemed that the bulk of literature on object experiences was on art. Generally, historic material has not been a focal point of user experience. But, even with this original intent, the participants, who chose which objects to discuss, made it difficult to corral the numinous object into one *kind* of thing. Participants talked about photographs and video as well as typical three-dimensional objects. They talked about objects of art as well as objects of history. I wanted participants to talk about *their* experiences, so I did not want to limit the kind of object they spoke of. For that reason, this study, although originally about historic museum objects, now comprises all museum objects, including those that are not necessarily three-dimensional (photographs). While I do in fact have a broad definition of object (a physical entity made or arranged by human beings; see chapter 2), and all of these items fall under that description, the study was meant to be about historic items. I had trouble with this for a while—that the objects spoken about were not necessarily historic—but

eventually I decided that the data had to speak, and the study had to be true to what the people spoke about.

Ethical Standards

The research plan for this study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Emporia State University, and great care was taken to protect the identity of participants in this study. All participants signed an IRB-approved informed consent form where their participation was assured to remain confidential. The plan was to store any documentation with the informant's identifying information in a secure location in my home office and in password protected computer files, and to destroy them at the conclusion of the project. Also, informants were asked if they would like to see the results of the study, and would be provided with copies of results. Each informant chose their alias name which has been used throughout the study. As the researcher of this study, I followed the highest ethical standards of human subject research.

Specific Methodological Applications in This Study

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) Method

Within the broader frame of an interpretive phenomenological approach are various ways to conduct a study. The method used here is adapted from Jonathan Smith and his colleagues' Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which is derived from both hermeneutic (interpretive) and phenomenological philosophies (Smith & Eatough, 2006, 2007; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). According to Smith and Osborn (2003):

> ...the aim of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world, and

> the main currency for an IPA study is the meanings particular experiences, events, states hold for participants (p. 51).

This approach, which comes out of psychology, is particularly useful in dealing with issues that are complex, or novel (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The IPA approach is both phenomenological—studying the participant's lifeworld—and hermeneutic (interpretive), i.e., emphasizes the researcher's active role in the process. In other words, the researcher tries to get close to the participant's perspective but since this cannot directly happen, the interpretive activity that ensues is understood to be an overlapping two-part process—a "double-hermeneutic"—with the participant trying to make sense of their world, while the researcher tries to make sense of the participant's sense-making (Smith & Eatough, 2007). Underlying IPA, is the appreciation that a person is a cognitive, affective, linguistic and physical being and assumes that there is a connection between talk, thinking and emotion—albeit a complicated connection (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Interview questions are broad and open with the aim to explore flexibly and in detail, the area under study. In an IPA study, researchers often make links between the findings of their study and their own experience, as well as to the current literature on the subject.

Generally, IPA begins with the semi-structured interview, followed by transcription of the interview, immersion in the text, development of pre-themes, then overall themes, and a narrative write-up of the results.

Analysis in IPA places meaning at the center of the study, and helps the researcher try to understand both the content and complexity of those meanings. This involves an "interpretative relationship" with the data, the interview transcript. According to Smith and Osborn (2003):

> ...while one is attempting to capture and do justice to the meanings of the respondents to learn about their mental and social world, those meanings are not transparently available—they must be obtained through a sustained engagement with the text and a process of interpretation (p. 64).

It is important to remember that qualitative analysis is also a personal process and that the analysis is the interpretative work the researcher performs throughout the process (Smith & Osborn, 2003). At each step of the analytic process, the researcher is making decisions based on his or her previous knowledge, encounters and feelings. Analysis in IPA is nearly a free textual analysis, with no specific rules about what is commented on, how it is divided out and how to assign comments to each unit. Comments can be summarizing, paraphrasing, use of language, results of associations or connections made and other preliminary interpretations and even a sense of something coming from the interviewee. The intensity of the process is most important and the ability of the researcher to totally immerse him or herself in the data and the emerging meanings coming out of it.

IPA method was selected for this study for several reasons. First, the aim of the project was to gather lived experiences about numinous encounters with museum objects. The inherently phenomenological approach of IPA was important to the entire data collecting and analyzing process. Second, as the researcher, I believed that I was an active participant in the process of research and recognized my role as an interpretive being who constantly compares personal and professional experience with those of others. IPA explicitly acknowledges this relationship and provides ways in which to account for it. And last, IPA as described by Smith and colleagues (Smith & Eatough,

2006, 2007; Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999; also e.g. Storey, 2007) provides a very useful framework within which researchers can guide themselves through the detailed and real-life examples of other IPA studies. Smith has written several articles providing a detailed explanation of a method that is typically left for new researchers to figure out on their own and this guidance was helpful during each step of the research process.

As a result, the methods and procedures of interpretive phenomenology comprise both empirical and reflective methods (van Manen, 2001). Empirical methods in this study included the gathering of written accounts of participants' experiences (e-mails), followed by in-depth interviews of such experiences. The reflective methods refer to the analytical portion of the study process. Analysis is roughly comprised of two sub-sets of processes: the phenomenological reduction (chapter 5) and interpretation (chapter 6).

Data Collection Methods

During this study, there were two methods of data collection: written narratives by participants via email and intensive phenomenological interviews in person. In the written descriptions, I looked for narratives that showed: 1) an ability to express oneself in detail, and 2) the potential identification of a numinous experience. Once participants provided a narrative that could be assessed, they were asked if they would be willing to do a recorded, in-person interview. Those who agreed met with me at a museum and went through the interview process.

Since these were phenomenological interviews, there were three goals: to collect experiential accounts, not opinions, views, or interpretations; to keep the phenomenological intent of the interview clearly in mind by bringing subjects back to concrete examples of experiences about the phenomenon of interest; and try to obtain

rich, full, concrete stories of particular situations (van Manen, n.d.). Most interviews were conducted at the museum that held the object(s) written about in the individual's narrative. Originally, the intent was to visit the object discussed in the interview. The idea was that by returning to the physical object itself more detail about the experience would be recalled for the informant and perhaps lead to descriptions of similar experiences in other museums they have visited (van Manen, n.d.). In only one of the five interviews used for the study did we go to visit the object in the museum. With the exception of the one interview, a visit to the object did not seem to be necessary and in the one case where we did visit the object(s), no more detail was retrieved during that part of the interview. Interviewees seemed to exhaust the telling of their stories by the hour mark and many interviewees talked about objects that were at other museums or no longer on display.

For IPA interviews, at least a small amount of structure is suggested. In this study, an opening question (*Tell me about your experience with this object?*) and a list of probes (Appendix A), geared towards collecting the concrete lived experiences of the individual, were created before any interviews began. Most interviews came after an initial email where the first question was asked. Interviews then began with the discussion started on email, and the rest of each interview was guided by the participant's responses and the list of probes made prior to the interviews. For the most part, the participant guided each interview, with only gentle nudges from the interviewer. Depending on the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee, some sessions were more conversational than others. All along, however, the interviewer was careful to let the participant speak for themselves. Every session, in the end, resulted in a genuine feeling of comfort and friendliness that was expressed by all participants in some form or another (and was felt

by myself as well). Immediately following each interview, I took notes about the session, indicating perceptions of how the interview went and points of interest within it. Subsequent interviews or further communication with participants were done when a question came up during the transcription process. Interviews were taped on a digital audio-recorder, then transferred to my personal computer to be transcribed. Transcription was done entirely by myself, which helped in achieving a holistic understanding of the data before me. Informants were given different names than their own throughout the entire process in order to maintain anonymity.

In addition to the interview notes, a reflective journal was kept throughout the entire investigation, as recommended in phenomenological research. This practice helped me articulate my views and understandings of the experience under study, keeping track of connections made, and promoting thinking about the study during downtimes. In this journal, I also detailed my own experiences, perspectives, understandings, and assumptions about numinous experiences with museum objects.

Data Analysis

As outlined above, interpretive phenomenological analysis can be roughly divided into two stages: the reduction and the interpretation. Below, details of both stages are explained further.

Phenomenological Reduction. Phenomenological reduction refers to "a certain attitude of attentiveness" during the process of discovering meaning in the phenomena of interest, which, in this case involves the determination of themes found across the data. Reduction refers to how one chooses to look at the data. In this study, van Manen's (2002) concept of *thematic reflection* was used, which is "a process of recovering

structures of meanings that are embodied…in human experiential representations in a text," (van Manen, 2002). Themes are defined here as "concise phrases which aim to capture the essential quality of what was found in the text," (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 68). Thematic reflection, albeit complex and creative, entails roughly the following general process: (a) after transcription, translate text of interview into meaning units; (b) work back and forth between meaning units and raw text to compile pre-themes (loose ideas or statements that allow one to finally "see" themes); and(c) organize into themes that emerge from this iterative process.

In this study, Smith's IPA (Smith & Eatough, 2006, 2007; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999) was used as the specific guiding framework for analyzing the data. Each interview was first analyzed separately, then analyzed as a whole together using both the raw individual transcript text and the resulting individual analyses. The specific processes are outlined below.

1. Transcription and review of the interview (done by the researcher).
2. Several close, detailed readings of the data (interview text) are done to obtain a holistic perspective so that future interpretations stay grounded within the participant's account.
3. Meaning units are delineated within the text and collected together in a separate file on that individual interview.
4. From the meaning units, initial themes (in this study, called pre-themes) were identified and ordered into clusters that make sense to the researcher and checked against the interview text.

5. This same process is done for each interview until redundancy is reached (in this study, it was at the fifth transcribed interview).
6. Pre-themes of all the interviews were compared and reviewed against each other and the interview texts, and as a result, emerging themes were developed.
7. Final Themes were developed from this process of going back and forth between the pre-themes, emerging themes, and raw data.
8. Narrative of thematic results were written using actual text from interviews (Chapter 5).

Interpretation. Following thematic reflection, the researcher enters the interpretive phase of the analytic process, and interprets the thematic results using literature that informs us about the phenomenon. In the interpretive approach to phenomenology, the researcher attempts to make sense of the data (Creswell, 2006). This involves stepping back to form larger meanings of what is going on in a particular situation—with the understanding that results are always tentative (Creswell, 2006). In this analysis, the researcher can "play around with" other theories, throwing these ideas against the results to see what one gets (Dahlberg et al., 2001). Specific results of the study can be found in chapter 5. Interpretive discussion is done in chapter 6, discussed in the context of current, appropriate research that can inform and be informed by the results of this study.

Strategies for Determining the Value of this Research

Traditional, positivist conceptions of reliability and validity are not necessarily appropriate to the assessment of qualitative research (Creswell, 2006; Smith, 2003; Yardley, 2000). Positivist perspectives attempt to evaluate qualitative validation in terms of their quantitative counterparts (Creswell, 2006). Instead, issues of value—credibility,

sensitivity to context, rigor and commitment, coherence and transparency, and impact and importance—will be reviewed as they pertain to this work, as these are more appropriate to the evaluation of qualitative research.

Credibility of Study

Efforts made to ensure credibility of this study are: (a) staying true to the participants' descriptions of their experiences, (b) clear explication of the researcher's own contributions to interpretation, (c) clearly stated interpretation, (d) partnership with the participants, with a respect for the contribution they make by providing descriptions of their lived numinous experiences, and (e) systematic data collection, record-keeping and analysis (Dahlberg, et al., 2001; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Kvale, 1996; Smith & Eatough, 2006).

Commitment and Rigor of Study

Commitment and rigor are fairly straightforward expectations of thoroughness in a study's data collection, analysis and reporting (Yardley, 2000). Commitment is shown through prolonged engagement with the topic (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yardley, 2000). This topic could be said to be a lifelong concern of mine, with my overall interest in other ways of knowing and the meaning of objects spanning a long period of my career as a museum and information professional. The topic of numinous experiences in museums was at the forefront of my research as a doctoral student and remained a topic of interest in all coursework, publications, and conference presentations for the past several years. In addition, I built up a web of dialogue with colleagues about the subject and plan to continue work on the subject after this study.

Rigor is the resulting completeness of data collection, analysis and interpretation (Yardley, 2000). In phenomenological research, a researcher knows they have reached a stopping point in data collection and analysis when they begin to see redundancy in the data (Smith & Eatough, 2006; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 2007). While more interviews were done than were analyzed, it became very clear during the analysis phase that I was achieving redundancy by the fourth transcription/analysis. To confirm this redundancy, one more transcription and analysis was done before ending this phase and moving on to the overall thematic analysis and interpretation.

Transparency and Coherence of the Study

Transparency and coherence relate to clarity and cogency of the study and the resulting power of persuasiveness of argument (Yardley, 2000). Transparency can be achieved by detailing every aspect of the project's processes. In Appendix B, I have included an excerpt from one interview detailing the first analytical step taken in this study, determining meaning units from the raw transcript text. In addition, my committee chair and an independent expert conducted an audit of the transcripts and analysis to assess the quality and credibility of the results (Patton, 2002). Transparency is also shown in the open reflection of the researcher to report how certain factors may have affected the research investigation, often referred to as reflexivity (Yardley, 2000). Throughout this study, instances of these occurrences are reported openly and honestly.

Coherence refers to the fit between the research question and the philosophical perspective and method adopted for the investigation. This topic has been addressed above at great length.

CHAPTER 5

ESSENTIAL THEMES OF A NUMINOUS EXPERIENCE WITH MUSEUM OBJECTS

Phenomenology is the study of essences (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. vii), an essence being a "linguistic construction, a description of a phenomenon," (van Manen, 1990, p. 39). It is a device that helps us grasp the nature and significance of an experience in a previously unseen way, to grasp the essential meaning of something (van Manen, 1990). In an interpretive phenomenological study this is done by describing themes.

Themes may be understood as the structures of experience (van Manen, 1990). In literature, a theme is understood as an element that occurs frequently throughout the text and is here used the same way. Themes come about through the researcher's need to make sense of something, in combination with his or her open-ness to the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). They allow the researcher to proceed with phenomenological descriptions. Since phenomenological themes are the structures of experience, our analysis of the phenomenon is the process of trying to determine the experiential structures of the numinous experience. Analysis, then, is the process of recovering the themes that are embodied in the interviews (the text) (van Manen, 1990). This process does not include frequency count or breakdown of the content based on some protocol. Rather, it is a process of interpreting meaning from the data.

Since instances of lived experience are the goal in this type of research, it should be clear that this analysis is not about creating categorical statements or conceptual abstractions. It is important to understand that as in any qualitative study, the focus is on particulars—a small set of people's described experiences—and that their experiences can inform us about overall experiences but are not meant to define them as universals.

In this analysis, I use the selective, or highlighting approach, where first I listen to the whole transcript, then read it over many times and ask, "What statements or phrases seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described?" (van Manen, 1990, p. 93). Appendix D consists of one complete transcript from this study (Mary), shown in the meaning unit stage of analysis.

A Return to the Research Question

At the outset of this dissertation, a central research question was posed: *What meaning do museum users make of a numinous experience with museum objects?* From this basic exploratory question, my goal was to describe this phenomenon as it is recollected and recounted by those who have experienced it. The descriptions of participants' lived experiences guided the study through intensive semi-structured interviews using phenomenological principles. This chapter presents the thematic results of the analysis. The voices of the participants are heard through the essential elements arrived at during the iterative analytical process. It is necessary to recall here that the aims of this study were to:

1) Gain insight into the meanings made of numinous experiences with museum objects by those who experience them;
2) Identify patterns or themes, if any, that emerge from people's descriptions of these experiences; and
3) Contribute to the overall understanding of the museum user experience.

The bulk of this chapter discusses the first two goals above, to gain insight into numinous experiences with museum objects by listening to the description of those who have lived it, and to identify themes or essences from these descriptions. The first aim consists of the

pure descriptive narratives of participants, the raw data. The second aim becomes an interpretive move on my part, as the researcher. It is during this process of identifying patterns in the raw data that my own interpretations of that data begin. The third aim will be discussed at length in chapter 6, where the raw data from the participants and my interpretive results from that data in the form of themes are presented in the context of extant literature on museum visitor experience and object meaning.

Analytical Processes

There is an odd contradiction in doing qualitative work. On the one hand, the researcher wants the user to speak, to give them voice. One of the overriding principles in all naturalistic inquiry is to avoid operationalizing the data. Researchers strive to keep results close to the data. But, in the process of reporting patterns found while performing analyses, we end up with a representation through language that is somehow distant from the reality reflected in the data. This is particularly true in this study. The numinous experience with museum objects is truly one unique, dynamic and transactive encounter. But in presenting the results, the experience appears compartmentalized and linear. It is therefore necessary to be mindful when reading the essential thematic results below that this is a model, a representation that cannot be truly achieved by the written word alone. Lived experience can only be partially understood through words.

An Overview of the Thematic Results

This first section provides an overview of the results. First, I introduce the five participants in this study. Following that is a quick synopsis of the thematic results, provided to give the reader an overall picture before launching into a detailed description of each theme.

The Players

Below is a brief introduction to the five people interviewed in this study and the artifacts and museums they talked about during their interviews. Their true names have been changed to maintain their anonymity.

Annalise. Annalise talked about three sets of things: paper cut-outs by Matisse at the Detroit Institute of Arts, Tiffany lamps at a San Francisco museum, and an oil painting by Le Bain at the Louvre. 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. The main artifact Erin spoke about is a Renoir painting at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. 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. Most important to Mary was the chair Lincoln was sitting in when he was assassinated. The chair is at The Henry Ford. She also spoke a bit about a boarding house at Williamsburg. 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.

Introduction to Thematic Results

The goal of an interpretive phenomenological study is to seek the essences of a phenomenon. As a result of this analysis, four essential themes (meanings) of a numinous experience with museum objects were drawn from the data:

1) *Unity of the Moment*: The numinous experience with museum objects is holistic, a uniting of emotions, feelings, intellect, experience and object.
2) *Object Link*: The object initiates an experience that links the experiencer to the past through both tangible and symbolic meanings.
3) *Being Transported*: The experience is felt as if being transported to another time and place; it affects the experiencer temporally, spatially, and bodily.
4) *Connections Bigger Than Self*: Deeply felt epiphanic connections are made with the past, self and spirit.

The numinous experience with a museum object (Figure 2) is often described as a "moment," with definable parameters, a bounded thing, a discrete event. It is a thing in and of itself, this experience. It can be described. The experience here, labeled *Unity of the Moment (Unity)*, is holistic in that it involves all capacities of the human being: emotion, the intellect, physical feelings and even extrasensory phenomena. Most participants described it 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*.

In the *Object Link*, the object plays a significant role in both its tangible, physical form and in its symbolic form. In its tangible form it acts as a trigger or link, it sparks the perceptions, thoughts, and/or feelings in this encounter, or acts as evidence or a witness to the past. It begins the experience. In its symbolic form, the object was a kind of receptacle, holding meaning far deeper and more profound than its simple function or features. In fact, the object, at times, embodied grand symbolic meanings about larger issues in life such as death, patriotism, or the meaning of life.

The theme *Being Transported* is about the felt qualities of 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 therefore described here using those headings. Time stops or slows down, even transports the person "back in time" to the era or people surrounding that object. Time also compresses, 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, making them feel one-on-one 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, some describing it as a "rush" of blood or adrenalin, becoming numbed, or tingly, having butterflies or feeling a "high." Changes in vision are also perceived.

The last theme, *Connections Bigger Than Self,* refers to the deep encounters one has during a numinous experience with a museum object. Participants felt strong connections to people of the past (imaginative empathy) 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 in a way that helped them *understand,* gave them meaning about their place on this earth.

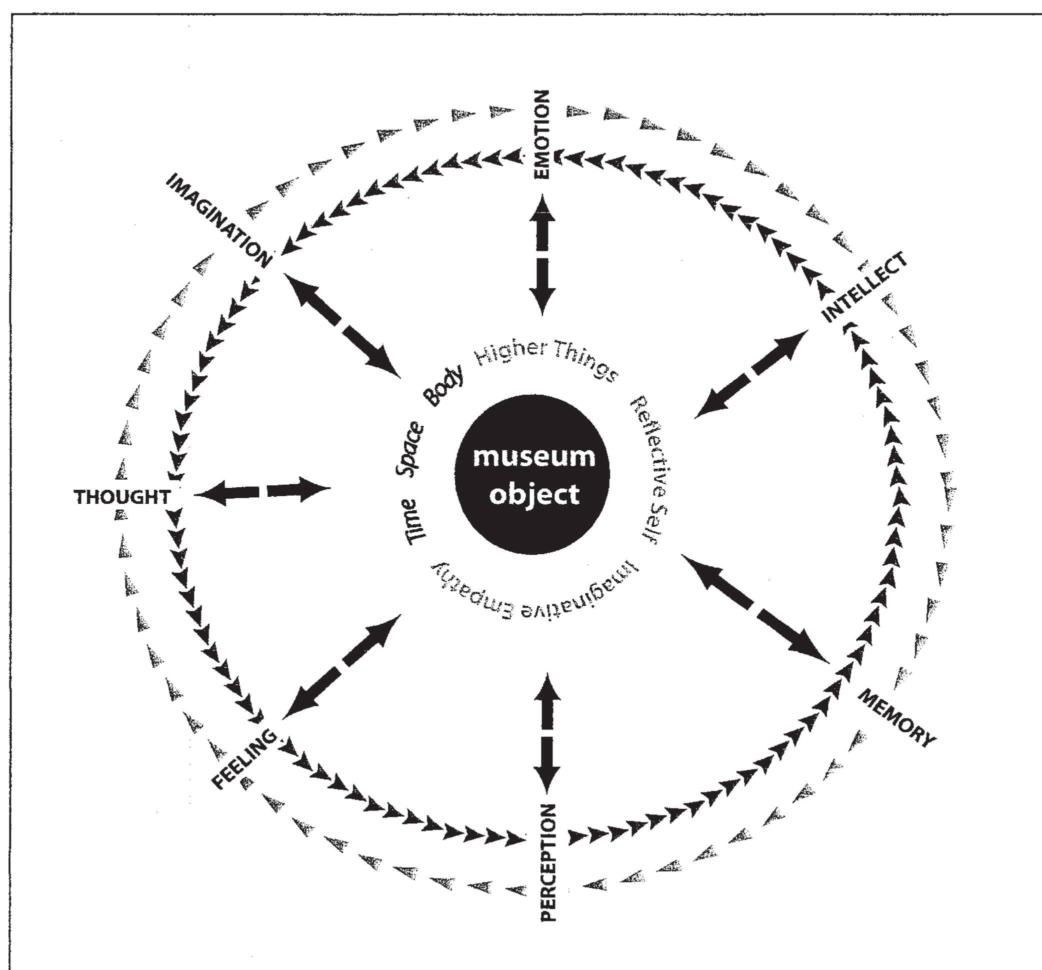

Figure 2. A Model of the Numinous Experience with a museum object, *Unity of the Moment,* is represented by the total interacting parts (the object link at the center and elements of the two other themes in red and green).

The remainder of this chapter consists of a detailed accounting of these thematic results, including an extensive presentation of textual data directly from the participants' narratives that help the reader grasp the whole meaning of each theme.

Thematic Results in Detail

Unity of the Moment: Holistic Experience

Unity Of The Moment, the total holistic and dynamic experience, is the overarching theme of a numinous experience. It is the "bubble" in which the other three essences (below) occur. Participants used language that revealed the experience as something distinct, something different than other experiences. Mary called it "interfacing" and Erin felt that "all things kind of align together," (Erin, p. 13) to summarize the encounter. Richard repeatedly called it "my moment" and used an analogy to describe it:

> …it just was like, this is MY moment, you know, like a lot of people don't get, you also see those cheesy Disneyworld commercials where its got one kid chillin' in the bush and then Mickey comes out of nowhere…and the kid goes "HHHHHUUUUH!", you know, and he's all geeked and here's Mickey and that's that kids moment, that was, that was kinda the concept where, that was *my* moment at Henry Ford, like, that was my, that was *my* thing right there like you could have made a Henry Ford TV commercial out of my moment (Richard, p. 5)

His moment was grand, and deep, involving his intellect and experiences as well as his emotions and feelings. Wrapped up in the story of his moment, as you will see below, is his identity, his family, his career and the bigger questions of national pride and the meaning of life.

When participants talked about their moments, they tended to describe them as dynamic, "vivid" and with great detail. As the elements united in each person's experience, sudden moments of clarity occurred. Immersed in this experience is the person's interaction with the object, as well as his/her lived experiences of time, space, body and Other. Each person was deeply touched by the experience, describing connections that transcended memory, time, and self. The uniting experience is not a connection flowing through the experience, it *is* the experience. The following three sets of essential themes are actually interacting elements immersed within the unity of the numinous experience.

The Object as a Link

In all the interviews, the object plays a significant role in the person's numinous experience. Participants spoke of the importance of seeing the "real" thing and its presence made the difference for them. Its role here can be roughly divided in two, as a tangible witness to the past and as a container for a multitude of significant symbolic meanings.

The Tangible Object. The physical presence of the object is fully integral to the numinous experience. The object acts as evidence of the past. For Richard, seeing the object of history goes beyond reading about the history:

> ...anybody can read about it books. I mean, anyb-, I can, I've read about this stuff for years in books, every time...I'm not even a history teacher. I mean, you read about it in books, and, people talk about it and things. It's just different when you see it (Richard, p. 7).

According to participants, the object's solid presence helps bring "it" to life. "It" may be history, people, or actions, but always something that can be real. For example, from Richard:

> ...It was just odd to be that close to [pause] something like that... there's a difference there, you know, so its, it just felt odd 'cause Lincoln was this like mythical character that was out of a book almost. But that made it real... 'Cause that connects me to that event, that makes me feel like, I don't know, I don't wanna say, you know, part of that history, or whatever, but it felt like it was just, you know, I felt like I was there and it was just interesting to be somehow or another I connected with that event...[seeing the chair] made it *real*... That made American history *real* (Richard, p. 3).

And from Mary:

> ...it brings all the things from the printed page that I've had the, uh, you know, the pleasure of reading over the years, it just brings it alive at that moment when I'm viewing the item (Mary, p. 2).

From Phil:

> ...it brings history home, it makes history alive, to use commercial-type phrases there, but it brought [?] right here, this happened. I've read about this for years, but I'm standing on the spot where it actually happened. And it's like earth-shattering and I'm seeing evidence that was during the battle is still here (Phil, p. 8).

Sometimes participants talked about this "bringing to life" by talking about seeing the hand of the maker, the artist Renoir, as Erin describes here.

> He sat in the studio somewhere, a hundred some years ago painting this. And I can see it. I can get close enough that I can see where his paintbrush was and I can see what he did. If I close my eyes, you can see just how long the br- strokes are so you can kind of picture well, maybe he used that kind of brush…and he was looking at this lady, you know (Erin, p. 8).

Annalise, talking about the Le Bain oil nativity painting:

> A: Um, I remember seeing the realism in it. And, the um, again the colors. That always seems to attract me. But they just jumped right out of the frame, the way he stylized it and created it…
>
> K: Really?
>
> A: Yeah, yeah. It was very, very interesting how that happened…
>
> K: So, what, so they jumped out of the frame, as if they were…
>
> A: …like 3-D, it almost appeared 3D to me…well, that's why I sat there for 20 minutes, I just wanted to talk to them (Annalise, p.6)

This element is heavily related to *imaginative empathy*, the active bringing forth of other people's feelings and thoughts, which will be described in the following section in reference to *Connections Bigger Than Self*.

Because of its physicality, or three-dimensional nature, the object has become a "witness to history," seeing events and people of the past and bringing them in to the present. Related to this is a slightly different twist to the ideal of bringing forth reality. At one point in her life, Erin worked in the Louisa May Alcott house in Massachusetts. While she was describing an example of seeing someone else have a numinous experience with an artifact there (Alcott's writing desk), she said this:

> To me, it means, we write journals, and you write diaries and you hear st-, you know, letters that John Adams wrote. And you know a person can be a witness, you know, I'm gonna write down what I did today. But working in that house…I was always struck by the history that the House had seen. You know, that, that her desk had seen. That her bed had seen. And, and so for me, it was kind of an interesting—I guess you're talking about how do objects move you—and, and I've carried that with me to think, "wow" you know, inanimate objects bear witness to history. And if we can only get them to talk, but…but part of what historians do is to try to get them to talk. We try to get that story out of them (Erin, p.6).

In addition, Erin often spoke of the object almost as a living being. She described the Renoir painting as "speaking to" her, "calling" her, and talking about the person in the picture as a familiar friend.

Another element of the tangible object as a link to the past has to do with proximity to the artifact or the need to touch it. Erin seemed to have the strongest need to touch the Renoir painting she talked about.

> …feeling that somehow, and I knew better not to tou-, but if I could touch the painting, you know that feeling of "huh" [air inspired quickly], maybe I'll touch the spot that nobody else has touched since Renoir put the paint there, you know, just that feeling of, I'm gonna find it… it was just that overwhelming sense that if I could just touch this, you know, that I would be touching—that the hundred years would slip away and I, and I felt I knew him just by looking at what he had done. Yeah (Erin, p.2).

And from Richard who thought about if only he could sit in the chair, the experience would have been even more intense:

> Well, I think it would have been even more powerful just because I think, I mean, that would have been like, the ultimate of that experience, just you know, here I am in the *exact* same chair that Abraham Lincoln got shot in and, and jus-, ths- is very odd, [laugh]. You know, I mean, it's [nu] literally, that would like literally be being part of history. That would lit-, to me, that would have like literally been like I am now part of history, somehow or another (Richard, p. 2)…it was just odd to be that close to [pause] something like that (Richard, p.3).

And Mary describes how she would feel if she were allowed to touch Lincoln's chair:

> M: [inspired breath] I'd probably go, like "AHHHH!" I'd probably freak out. Um, I would, I would probably think next to, you know, having my three children born healthy, that would be like the most exciting experience as far as on a, you know, physical level in my life.
>
> K: Touching the Chair?
>
> M: Yeah!
>
> K: Why?
>
> M: Because, it's like, woah, you know, somebody's [?] reading it in the book, and you go, that's *there*! That was then [pause], that's there! I mean, I guess I have kind of a very distant reverent view of it. By my response now I guess that's what I'm noticing. It would be like, you gotta be kidding me, you know. It's not the same, maybe, as for some people, touching the Pope's garment or something. If he's driving by in the Pope-mobile, you know, something like that. But,

> something that, to some people some things are, like a real "wow" experience, so (Mary, p. 11).

Richard also spoke of proximity to the real thing, the chair and the limousine Kennedy was shot in:

> And it was out, you could touch it. Like, it wasn't, it wasn't behind glass, you could, it just had like the rope around it…it was just out, it was just there. Like, there was no glass around it, there was no, you could st-, you could look at it, I mean you couldn't really touch it, obviously they would yell at you, but, here I am in middle school…You could see it, you could look at it, and it was just weird to be *that* close to something, just like it's weird to be *that* close to like the JFK limo. I mean, it's right there, it's like, those are two important events in American history, major events in American history and I'm TWO feet from them (Richard, p. 2).

Despite the clear sense of the tangible, no one actually touched the object central to each of their encounters.

Close to this need to touch is the importance of being "on the spot" where something historical happened. The actual space or ground in which a past event occurred helps connect the person with "real" history. This can be specific or general. Phil, who talks about his trip to Little Round Top gives us a good example.

> Well, I'm standin' up there, and there's a photo taken from the same perspective that I'm standing, of the battlefield, a couple of days later…Well, there was someone standing on this hill, overlooking the, the valley in front of Little Round Top, it was called. 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 know you could just see where it was in the rocks and I tell you what, just like now, just telling it, I just had a rush. I mean, it's like the blood, I, I, my, my face is tingling here. And I'm just like, OH MY GOD! you know. Things that I've read about, I came here with my family, but I didn't, you know, I wasn't mature enough to know the impact of what war is really about and there I am standing on this hill that, where, let's see, hundred and ten 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 and the photo was taken a day or two after the battle and here I am 110 years later on the exact same spot (Phil, p. 7-8).

Phil was horrified, when he returned several years later to find both the photograph and the tree gone. In this respect, Phil talked about how the tree was "evidence" of past events. Mary also mentions being in the same space where something occurred:

> ...this is what I've seen, this is what I've heard about, this is what I've learned—but *now*, now *I'm* in the same space with it. So, I guess that proximity is very important to me (Mary. p. 14).

The Symbolic Object. Thus far, it is clear that the tangible object is an important component of the numinous encounter. The object also plays a symbolic role, as a container of sorts, which is equally as significant as its physical counterpart. In some

cases, the object itself actually embodies the creator, the user or even the events that surrounded it in the past. Mary, who talks about the chair that Lincoln was shot in, says it well:

> As solid as that Chair is when you look at it—it it's solid, it's carved, heavy carved wood—and a very bold and courageous man sat in that and he um, you know, really withstood a lot and uh went through such a tough time in our history. And was a good man and I think that Chair embodies—I never thought of it before but as I'm explaining—that Chair embodies a lot of what I feel is important in life and a lot of what I think our country has been and has stood for (Mary, p.6)…I look at that Chair, for whatever reason, or reasons, it just embodies, it just embodies Lincoln and that period and what was going on and that's how it comes to life for me. That, that reaction with that Chair is just really different for me (Mary, p.9).

Richard also felt the chair "contained" more than just a place to sit. To him it symbolized, the "what-ifs" of history and the big issues of the Civil War:

> It just makes you think about [pause] what would have happened if Abraham Lincoln would've never got shot? Um, what would have happened if Abraham Lincoln had nnnnnnn decided to not free the slaves? Where we- where would we be today? Things would be a lot different in society, you know, and I don't think, you think back to [?] you don't know. I mean Abraham Lincoln knew he was doing big things, like Emancipation Proclamation and things like that but I don't' think, I don't think he ever knew how big and important those things were gonna be in, you know, 100 years down the road… (Richard, p. 8).

To Richard, the chair went beyond Lincoln's assassination; it made him think of issues of the nation—now and then—and the meaning of slavery.

Being Transported

Overall, the effect of the numinous experience affected people in ways beyond purely cognitive manifestations. Participants actually felt time and space alter and physically reacted to the encounter through their body. Although *Being Transported* involves all of these elements as a whole, below I describe them in terms of lived time, lived space and lived body.

Lived Time. During a numinous experience with a museum object, the description of what happens to time is very consistent between all of the participants. Time is described as slowing or stopping. Phil says he felt like he was frozen in time during the encounter. And Annalise describes 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." In addition, people often described themselves as "being transported back in time." Phil described his encounter at Gettysburg, "…like being in a time machine, and dialing the date back to July, 1863, and "being there!"" (Phil, email). Mary too felt "transported":

> …every time I saw Lincoln's Rocking chair, it really did something special and deep for me. Um, even looking at a picture of it today as I walked through the hallway, seeing the tattered, stained, ripped, deep rose color of that—with the wood trim—just transports me, in a manner of speaking, back to that era of history (Mary, p.1).

And in a reflection she wrote to herself, she said:

> Looking at that incredible, full of history REAL artifact actually "transports" me, in a sense, back in time to that era long ago. It's like having my own personal "time machine" - how cool is that? (Mary, email).

When Erin was asked if she has had another experience that seemed similar to the one she had with the Renoir painting, she said:

> Well, you know I did. I was a theatre major at one point. Well, actually that's what I graduated, my undergraduate degree is in. And there were times when you do theatre where you are suspended, where if it works really, really well, you are not on stage doing a play, you are somehow transported into a different time and the lines are comin' out of you like, like you hadn't memorized them. Like, just…and you lose track of time and you're so in the moment. Doesn't happen often but when it does, you get caught up in the sense of "I'm not of this place and time anymore." And that's kind of a similar experience. Yeah, that would be probably the only thing similar (Erin, p.13).

Time also seems to compress or feel very recent regarding the experience. Phil felt like the episode, which occurred in 1975, felt "like it happened yesterday." During her interview, when asked how long she stood there looking at the Matisse cut-outs, Annalise said, "I don't know. I'm still…standing there…in my 40s, so probably 30 years I've been standing there," (Annalise, p.2).

Lived Space. Lived space in the numinous encounter is characterized by a sense of movement, "tunnel vision," and the sense of being alone. The sense of movement and tunnel vision are actually wrapped up in each other. Participants 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 moving towards or away from the object. Annalise, in her encounter with the Le Bain nativity scene, said she felt like she was being pulled away from the painting (Annalise, p.7). Erin also speaks of the movement and the illumination of the painting:

> And [pause] that sense of…I mean, it is, it is funny, I'm doing the hand motion towards me, but if you…in TV shows you know sometimes they do that, that camera trick where the person's being, something's being sucked towards the person, [?] the camera. That's kinda what you felt. I, I mean, I felt I was, like I was being drawn to it. Or drawn into it. (Erin, p. 5)…as I'm looking backwards on it, you know, I can see it [the painting] framed in the doorway and I'm sure there was a light hanging right over it, you know kind of like the—everything else was dark, you know, except for this painting (Erin, p. 11).

Richard said the space around him and Lincoln's chair got smaller and darker:

> It was one of those like movie moments where the lights dim out and there, you're standin' there [laugh] and you're like, [silent gesture], you know. It's like you and the thing, you know, and you just think about it (Richard, p. 8)… Everything got more enhanced, like, you could, you could see the detail better on the, I could see the detail better on the Chair, which you can't really see now 'cause it's got the glare off the glass (Richard, p. 9).

Phil kept talking about the Little Round Top photograph and tree "capturing him," and so I asked what he meant by "capture." He said:

> This one is like HhhhhUUUuu [deep air inspired], you know, you're kind of like, your jaw does drop, you know, not literally, I've learned how to keep my jaw up there, but for that three-second burst, you're really, it's kinda like there's nothing else around, you're just focused on that, it's kinda like you're lookin' through a paper tube, or somethin', it's like that's the only thing that's on your attention, uh, or, captures your attention. (Phil, p. 17)… it kind of freezes you in time and, and everything else that could be a distracter goes away and you're just focused on this for three seconds and you wish it lasted longer. Uh, but during that three seconds 'ere, you're just so focused on … and it's like looking through a paper tube, it's like the only thing that's in your focus or in your attention span. Everything else, in the museum or even, you know, next to the uh, video clip being played, it fuzzes out, it just, you're just focused on this one thing for three seconds (Phil, p. 18).

In his description, Phil mentioned there being "nothing else around" and others describe the sense that people around them have disappeared, real or not. While in the very crowded, blockbuster (her description) Matisse exhibit, Annalise said, "It's like all the people disappeared" (p.1). And Mary, with Lincoln's Chair:

> It feels like I'm alone in the room; it doesn't matter how many other people are there…(Mary, p.4)…And again, I can be walking with other people but it's a very one-on-one-experience, for me at that moment. Even though there might be a crowd and you're moving along quickly... (Mary, p. 8).

Some participants also mentioned that the place in which they had the experience actually was quiet, empty or they were alone and they felt this was important.

Lived Body. Lived body refers to how the experience was felt physically. Everyone except Erin described physical sensations from the encounter. Annalise felt numbed, and Richard said he felt "odd." Phil described his experience as a "rush" and said that just talking to me about it brought the rush back:

> I'd just say it's a feeling of, I think, the blood rushing to your face, you know, and it's like, uh, uh, I believe that's it 'cause I get other things, that, I don't' know, if you say something embarrassing and you know your face is red, "is my face red, it feels it?" "yeah, it looks it", its that sort of thing, I guess blood or adrenalin rushing to your—, it's a tingling sensation, mostly in my face, but I'd say my upper body too, uh, and seriously, I've had it 4 times just talking here as I bring these emotions up (Phil, p. 18).

And Mary describes it as "total tingly excitement," and felt "butterflies" and also gets this from seeing pictures of the chair:

> But, it's as though for that few minutes that I'm exposed to that artifact that I literally can picture, I can feel, just it's almost like a physical feeling (Mary, p. 2)…I remember lingering and just *looking* at it and literally—this may sound strange but— literally, feeling the butterflies, literally feeling a physical reaction. Yeah (Mary, p. 3).

In her original e-mail to me, before her interview, Mary described having a "sensation" and so I asked her about that during the interview:

> K: Um, in there you described having a "sensation" every time you see the Chair. Can you describe the "sensation"?

M: I think what I meant by that is the physical feeling kind of in the stomach area, you know, butterflies or little bit of a tremor, something like that. It's just like, WOW!, you know, in capital letters with a million exclamation marks after it.

K: Is that every time you see it?

M: Yes.

K: Really?

M: Yeah. Even when I looked at the picture of it in the...cabinet [an exhibit area at The Henry Ford].

K: Even the picture does it?

M: Oh yeah. Even the picture... (Mary, p. 11).

She speaks of visual "feelings" as well, the need to "soak it up with her eyes" as well as her body:

> I know my attention was very dramatically drawn to looking at the Chair. And, uh, after people started dispersing and the docent was done, I stayed. You know, who knows if it was you know 5 minutes, 10 minutes. But it was enough time that I could soak it in. I need to soak it in with my eyes and, um, just feel it... (Mary, p. 4)... I soak it up. I soak it up. It's as though—man I didn't realize [laugh] [?] felt this strongly—it's as though my pores are literally absorbing it for the time I'm there (Mary, p. 15).

Other references to vision changes also apply and were discussed above in reference to the tunnel vision phenomenon.

Connections Bigger Than Self

Thematic reflections on the data may result in something that appears somewhat neat and packaged. By definition, however, the features of the numinous experience (in particular) are difficult to delineate because the experience itself is defined by its intertwining complexity of relationships. The theme, *Connections Bigger Than Self (Connections)*, is particularly bound up with the other themes. While, as you will see, it brings in elements from all the other themes, it shows itself as something distinct enough to tease out as an important element of the numinous experience. The participants all speak of "connecting" to something whether it be the object, the historic past, their personal past, or something higher in life. Richard, for example, said, "it felt different…there was definitely a connection there between me looking at this thing," (the chair) (Richard, p. 3) and spurred him to think about, "where I've gone, where I've been, what I'm doing here, how I've been there" (Richard, p. 6). He believes there is an "attachment" between him and the chair that continues today (Richard, p. 10). For Erin, seeing the painting gave her a connection to the past, the artist and to her childhood, "I can see the brush strokes and picture the artist's hands at work and I truly felt transported to his time and connection with him that seemed to me almost eternal," (Erin, email). 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 relationship to the world around them.

Connections seemed to be made in three areas—about oneself, the people of the past, and the higher things in life (spirit). Below, I discuss these three areas of connection: *Reflective Self* and one's sense of being, purpose and relation; people of the

past who have never been physically encountered (*Imaginative Empathy*); and with *Higher Things*—the more spiritual phenomena of reverence, awe, and meaning of the big things in life.

The Reflective Self. This connection was extremely meaningful to each person, having a lasting effect on them and for some, altering or influencing their life in a dramatic way. For instance, Annalise said the experiences determined her path in life, "well, that's why I'm where I am today" (Annalise, p. 4). She got a masters degree in non-profit management, wove a life of volunteerism and membership in the arts, and makes it a priority to infuse art into her family's life:

> ...yes...made it a priority, um, and it spurred me to volunteer at museums, first of all become a member because I wanted to be a greater part of the, those experiences and have those experiences more often, and be a member and a volunteer now, (Annalise, p. 7).

Erin too was inspired by the experience. It affected her career choices and work philosophy:

> ...it was just that feeling of, as I said personal discovery and personal connection (Erin, p. 2)...and I think that, coupled with a couple other kind of things that happened really led me to, going into museum work (Erin, p. 2)... I think *that* experience—in my professional life—I take it with me because I understood then...So, if we can get any of our guests, young and old, to find something that connects them—and you never know what that's gonna be, so you can put a whole lot of money in showcasing the Hope diamond but if it doesn't speak to

> anybody, you know, then, it's gonna be worthless. It's worth a lot of money but that's not enough (Erin, p. 12).

The encounter inspired her to give it to others, to "open the door" for others as it did for her:

> And that's what I think, what I, when I, go out and do programs for kids and when I go out and do programs for teachers—that's what I try to incorporate. You know, the only person's history that really matters is your own. And, if I can connect with your history something, you know—whether it's macaroni and cheese or, you know, growing up on a farm in the nineteen sixties—*then* I can open up the door for you in many other ways. And I think that's what that Renoir experience did is it opened up the door for me because I had this connection I was interested and it was successful and it was my art and my work (Erin, p. 14-15).

The experience also affected Mary and her life choices.

> I really believe that I would not have, um, [pause], hmmmm. Instead of doing my homework at Michigan State as a freshman, I would not have been reading every Civil War book I could get my hands on. I don't even think that tied in with the class I had, I don't know. I don't know that I would've ever majored in history slash sociology, because, of course, that's another component, the sociology of what we're talking about. That's the other thing that I had many classes in. If that Chair had not been there—I don't want to sound too cliché here—I really believe I would be a different person today. I don't think my path would have been the same. I don't think, you know, without that Chair, without a place like the Henry Ford Museum that treasures and values and puts the time effort and money into

things like this. I don't think I would have been as excited about pursuing, um, historical reading, and, uh, you know you feel in certain ways you're a bit of an expert in a few areas of that as you read a lot, and, it's exciting. I don't' think that's valued enough in society (Mary, p. 6).

Phil said the encounter changed his whole understanding of his role as an Army officer. Before the encounter at Gettysburg, he had been somewhat complacent about his career. Also in this quote, we see the "epiphany" discussed earlier:

> I'm glad that it came at the beginning of my Army career because it makes you realize, you know, it's like, hey, I'm in a profession that is deadly, and, you talk about the depths of human emotions here, and the heights and that really crystallized, like OK, now your trained to take up that mantle where others have fought and died for their country and I'm like, ok, you've just been "DING" dinged and you, you know, better take this seriously… I mean it really was almost like, "bbbbwwwwup [noise] Phil! Wake up!" (Phil, p. 8).

And more narrative from Phil on his encounter at Little Round Top, which caused him to choke up while he was telling me his story:

> You know, I was trained technically, during the four years, but THIS, you know, wh-, what's the flame, what's the spark that ignites somebody's heart and soul? [got choked up, pause]… Somebody's heart and soul [voice cracks] towards this, as opposed to "hey, I just want to go out and get a job, earn a lot of money"? You know, you're entering a profession that your, if your heart and soul's not in it, you know, as they say, get your butt out of it. I think, this, more than the four years I spent, um, did more to ignite my soul into embracing this career of a, of an off-, a

> professional officer in the army, than anything else. I would say, me standing at Little Round Top at the end of my, you know, beginning of my officer career, probably did more to ignite my…heart and soooul, as opposed to just my mind, uh, for the career I was about to enter, than anything else. And I, I think I carried that. You know, it's like, hey, this is serious business—the tradition of being in the United States Military, you know. It's like, I'm a part, you know, we talk about the looong grey line at West Point, it's in one of our, in our alma mater. And it's like, I'm about to enter that profession, 'cause the Civil War had a lot of West Pointers on both sides. And it's like I'm becoming part of that and I might have to put it all on the line here and put my, my soldiers lives on the line here, you know. Like these guys did. And, I think that did more than anything else (Phil, p. 10).

The experience also seemed to spur some of the participants on to seek out more museum experiences. Mary said that, coupled with her childhood experiences, the chair made her want to see more. And Erin said,

> I went to lots of other museums after that. I had similar reactions to other paintings, not as intense because…but just that, that kind of connection wher'u, I, I began to look, I guess I actually looked at paintings differently after that. You look at 'em and go, "wow" [whisper] (Erin, p. 9). So, every weekend I had free, you know, I, I would go. And I would go to every little and big, you know, and yeah, I mean, and then organize little field trips with my friends and [?] oh, let's go!... But everywhere I have gone since, every place I have moved, I have always sought out their art museums and… their history museums… (Erin, p. 3).

Erin also felt the experience was very personal, that seeing the painting that day was like "unearthing a treasure" and had the sense that the painting was put there just for her. She called the painting "hers" and that "everyone else could look at it but it was really mine" (Erin, p. 8):

> And the sense of discovery, number one, which I know I've mentioned. But, feeling like I had unearthed a treasure that I didn't know I was going to expect t-find. (Erin, p. 4)…And being, just overwhelmed with emotion, and it was, as I said, it was that feeling like, that, that Renoir had painted this painting just for me to discover. Here I was, you know, and, and of course, it was for me to discover because I had had the painting at home and… Here I was on my first outing (Erin, p. 2)… Um, and I've had it [pause] that connection. Always made me smile. It was always my special painting. You know the MFA is filled with, I don't know, thousands? I don't' know. I don't know how many pieces they have in their collection. They certainly have one of the finest collections of impressionist work in the United States. That was almost my painting [whisper]. That was my special painting (Erin, p. 8).

The painting, which she had purchased a copy of as a 9-year-old girl, had strong associations with her identity:

> I felt smart because I studied Renoir and…most of my kids in my high school, I'm not sure they would have known who he was, but I knew. So, I had all that intellectual level—of being smart and going to the museum and, and you know, even going to the MFA that day, you know, I was being adventurous and I was

being cool and I was being smart… And then all of a sudden, I was kinda this 10 year old girl (Erin, p. 5).

Most of the participants talked about their family and childhood in the context of this experience, whether it reminded them of family events, as it did for Richard, or of connections to family as it did for Annalise. About The Henry Ford, Richard said, "I guess the whole place kinda defines my, defines certain parts of my childhood," (Richard, p.6). And Annalise connected her reaction to the Matisse paper cut-outs with her grandmother's art. Mary's family was integral to every part of her story. She talked of family vacations with her mother, who took them all over the United States to see historical "spots" and of her own family as being with her on all her adult adventures to museums and historic sites. She thought that perhaps her children were with her during her first encounter with the Lincoln chair. Tradition and family are heavily wrapped up in her experiences:

> So, again, with that [the chair] as a solid foundation, and having the tradition, having the family value of coming to this place ever since I was a little girl, and the memories of taking my children from the time they were tiny, that tradition cannot be underestimated. There is a bond, my family---this is a bond for my family, so. Good memories, having taught my children things, two of my children went on to be in education. One is a lawyer herself. Who knows what coming to a place like this contributes to a person's life? (Mary, p. 6).

She even compares the chair to a family member when discussing proximity to the object:

> And, you know, hence the Chair being so important. If it's something you love, it's just like, you know, family member, when you're closer it sure is different than emailing, you know (Mary, p. 14).

Both Erin and Mary talk about touching the object of their encounter being the next best thing to getting married and having their children.

The experience also left most participants with the need to share the experience with others or to "pass it on" as part of their philosophies of life and career. Participants talked about sharing their experiences with others, either by talking directly about the encounter or in the form of passing it on, to their children, students, or as a philosophy of life. All of those interviewed except Annalise specifically mentioned taking what they learned from their encounter to others. Phil mentioned taking his students to Little Round Top and he also discusses passing on his understanding of what it means to be an officer in the Army, something he tried to teach his "men" ever since his time at the tree. Erin spoke heavily about the meaning of these experiences being the reason for teaching and learning history and having museums.

> I actually was working in a museum at the time but never—I was a school teacher, or going to be a schoolteacher—and I was working in a museum part time, during the summer, and I think it was partly that connection that I thought, you know, wow, here I am, 21, 22 years old feeling this, what if I could get kids to feel that? I mean, *that's* what it's all about. You know, and I hadn't really had that feeling with history museums *before* that sense that this was somehow speaking to me (Erin, p. 2).

Richard described his encounter as "the point" of American history, what it is all about (Richard, p.5) and talked about bringing his high school leadership group to the museum to try to show them "the point." Both her own children and her elementary school students were taught by Mary, who takes every opportunity she can to make them feel what she feels when she sees the chair.

Erin describes two incidents when she claims to have seen another person have this experience, both written to me in our first email exchange. Below is one of the stories. It is about an encounter between a "little old lady from Alabama" and Louisa May Alcott's desk (upon which she wrote Little Women):

> I was a young guide starting my museum career in Orchard House in Concord Mass…As I was in the house, trying to get set up I see a Motor Coach/Bus pull up in front and stop. "OH GREAT" I thought, "Don't they know we are closed?" I decided to ignore them and hope they would go away. Well, of course, someone gets out and comes to the door and rings the bell... With a heavy sigh and probably not a great customer service face, I went downstairs and answered. I immediately said I am sorry we are closed, we'll be open in an hour but I am just here by myself setting up. The escort with the coach said he knew but could I please let just one person in. No, I was sorry, I could not... "You don't understand" she explained "We are on this trip to see the new England Sites. You are not on our itinerary but there is a woman in her 80's from Alabama on board and she has talked non stop about wanting to see the house where Louisa May Alcott wrote. Truly she has talked of nothing else and we altered our plans so that we might drive by and just let her see the house... Please can you just let her in"...

> (heavy sigh)... "Ok", I relented and probably not too graciously, "I can take you to ONE room... It would be Louisa's bedroom but it is UPSTAIRS and she'll need to walk and I cannot show you anything else... Will that work?" Very gratefully the escort thanked me and ran back to the bus to get the passenger. I was still very grumpy as I went upstairs to turn on the light and came back down to meet them. The passenger was walking very slowly with a cane and I thought she would never get upstairs but with the help of the escort she did... I met them upstairs and proceeded to give my 'spiel' about Louisa... But the woman just quietly went over and touched the desk. She asked if that was where Louisa wrote Little Women and I said yes... She had a huge smile and just stood with her eyes closed touching the desk... Suddenly, I got it! This woman from Alabama loved Little Women like I did. This wasn't a tourist trap for her, it was an EXPERIENCE...suddenly, I realized how poorly I had behaved... After a few silent minutes, she opened her eyes and with a wonderful Southern accent said "Thank you so much. I have loved Little Women since I was a child in the 20's. I always wanted to come visit the house where she wrote it and I never could afford it. When I heard about this bus trip, I thought it was my only chance. Thank you for fulfilling the dream of an old woman," and with that she and the escort walked away... (Erin, email 1).

Erin referred to this story often in her interview and stated that she felt like her experience with the Renoir painting was similar to what she saw this lady experience with the desk.

Imaginative Empathy. Empathy is defined as understanding and entering into another's feelings, (Empathy, n.d.) or as "a sense of shared experience, including emotional and physical feelings, with someone or something other than oneself," (Empathy, n.d.). The participants in this study *connected* beyond simple empathy; they seemed to be trying to conjure images and personalities of people and events that they did not ever experience in their own lives. There was a real sense of them trying to pull, extract out of the objects, stories and personal feelings of distant past, an active act, rather than a passive one. The cognitive process seems to go very deep for each person, becoming emotional and personal. Because of this strong sense of an active conjuring of the past, I labeled this *Imaginative Empathy* to emphasize its dynamic nature. Referring to the people from the historical past, Phil said, "it's like I was a part of something that these people were there before me" (Phil, p. 20). Here is an example from Mary, describing an experience in a Williamsburg boarding house:

> The places, the boarding houses, you know where real people that you studied about and read about used to actually pay their couple of cents, you know whatever, and ah, and sleep up there in the crowded conditions and sharing beds and not taking baths and [laugh] all that stuff. I guess for me the visualization that a real person sat in that chair or slept in that bed or was in, you know, drinking ale in that tavern, you know, on the pew- with the pewter mug and the plates n' stuff. It just, the only way to say this is it just POPS it right out at me and, I'm just excited even talking about it [laugh]…I think [pause; laugh] at the risk of sounding a little strange here, I think it's actually, like, at that moment I just think what if I was the fly on the wall and I was there observing. It brings it to life—

> from the pages. And it brings it, just in a sense, to life for me, like I can really picture what it might have been like to literally live at that time (Mary, p. 4-5).

And from Richard, speaking about Lincoln's chair:

> I thought back to all the things that my teacher had said about what we were talking about in the Civil War and how important Abraham Lincoln was to the Civil War and how, how important Abraham Lincoln was to our country, and … it was probably some sort of level of sadness there to an extent too, just, you know, and it was odd, because I mean I had never met Abraham Lincoln, I'm 30 years old… I mean, you know, nobody wants to see anybody die in American…Lincoln's an American hero, you know, if you look at the American history books and how they portray him and everything an'… it's, yeah probably some sort of sadness, I don't know, there was, I don't' know, you just, I still look at it the same way today I think. I stop and look at it and I sit there and I just stare at it for a few minutes and just try to… (Richard, p. 4-5, edited).

Erin, talking about Renoir, the piece's creator, and his model, who with another man, is the subject of the painting:

> It was probably a posed shot but …then to connect with that model and say, she's a real person somewhere along the way. Now she might have been, who knows who she might have been! You know, and they dressed her up and put a hat on her. She was a real person too… And here—and they had some kind of connection. And here they are, and the feeling that—here I am looking at all this a hundred years later. I'm looking in the face of a real live girl, seeing the brushstrokes… And it started with, a simple painting, you know. That, who

> knows, who knows what he was thinking when he painted it. I don't know (Erin, p. 8).

And more from Erin, likening the experience she had with the painting to a connection across time, as shown symbolically in the Sistine Chapel artwork:

> You know the only thing that comes to mind is there's the...Michelangelo on the Sistine Chapel, right, anyway. Um, the hand of God reaching down and touching Moses, I mean that sense of a hand reaching across time and touching you. You know, and th-, I'm not trying to be blasphemous in saying that God and Renoir are the same but it's that image of a hand reaching out from the past and touching you (Erin, p.12).

Higher things. Using the definition from Kari and Hartel (2007), the *higher things* in life refers to "usually positive human phenomena, experiences or activities that transcend the daily grind with its rationality and necessities" (p. 1133). In particular here are *profound* higher things, regarded as deep and sublime, "anything that objectively reflects humanity's possibilities for reaching its full potential" (p.1133). In the present study, this category is characterized by *connections* that are reverential, full of awe, spiritual, deeply meaningful and extraordinary. Often participants talked about having an epiphany—a moment of understanding—as part of the numinous experience. An epiphany is " a sudden realization or comprehension of the essence or meaning of something," (Epiphany, n.d.) "an illuminating realization or discovery, often resulting in a personal feeling of elation, awe, or wonder" (Epiphany, n.d.). Annalise describes her feeling about the Matisse paper cut-outs, "I can't put a word on it. Um, it was something awesome" (p. 1). Erin, while comparing her experience with someone she witnessed

having the same experience, called it a "coming-to-mecca sort of thing." She described the encounter with the painting this way when I asked her how it felt:

> Oh, wonderful! I mean, it was, yeah, it was just a very emotional [pause]; and it was, it was, alm-, it was kind of almost sanctuary-like, you know, Sunday morning, it was quiet, it wasn't very busy at the museum. And it was a very personal, *sort-of spiritual*, you know, experience, kinda touching that, that core of you. Um, as I said, I'd always studied in a very intellectual way and thought of it as, you know, I'm smart, I know about painting. But, to, um, to look at it in that very spiritual way [pause]…(Erin, p. 12).

Mary believed it brought out her love for her country and her realization of how lucky she and others are to be a part of this "great country," that seeing the chair helps her "build up courage" and creates almost a euphoric feeling for her:

> …it's like feeling so fortunate, it's like feeling like "I'm so lucky, I'm so fortunate, I'm so blessed, my life is so beautiful that I would be able to have this experience, that I live 30 minutes from the Henry Ford and I can come anytime I want,"… life offers these opportunities, these journeys, these voyages of the heart and mind. We need to take advantage of them (Mary, p. 14).

And, as mentioned earlier, Mary likens touching the chair to a religious person touching the Pope's robe, a comment she made while describing her reverential reaction to the chair.

Phil 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":

> Ok, so I'm standing up there and there's a photograph, there are many of them but one of them that—as I tell my students sometimes—I said this was like a religious experience to me. This was almost, I said—I'm being a little melodramatic—but this is almost like the clouds opened and like, Phil, pay attention, you know. You're an Army officer now, you need to grasp the heart and soul of what that really means (Phil, p. 7)...I would say there's a good five-minute period there where I was, I was kind of awestruck by all that (Phil, p. 15).

The experience, in fact, changed his life.

Summary of Thematic Results

After thematic reflection of these five interviews, four themes (meanings) persist as essential elements of the numinous experience: unity of the moment, object link, being transported, and connections bigger than self. These four elements appear to be core characteristics of the encounter but are not mutually exclusive from each other and contain complex elements within and between. *Unity* is the overarching whole of the numinous experience with the other three themes contributing as elements within. The tangible and symbolic object, the alterations of time, space body and the deep connections—through self, spirit, and people of the past—were all wrapped up in the moment, the unity of the moment. The numinous experience ultimately is one whole swirling entity of these things, overlapping and connecting. It is the uniting of all these things that results in meaning for the experiencer. Gadamer (1975) pointed out that when something is considered *an experience* "its meaning rounds it into the unity of a significant whole" (p. 60). The numinous encounter with a museum object is *an experience* and indeed, in Gadamer's words, has formed a significant whole.

CHAPTER 6

INTERPRETATION OF THEMES

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime,
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
and the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
a motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.
--William Wordsworth

Within the process of naturalistic inquiry, interpretation—the act of attaching meaning and significance to what was found—is used to help make sense of the findings (Patton, 2002). Thus far, this work has provided descriptions and thematic patterns of the phenomenon of interest—the numinous experience with museum objects—as understood through the interviews of five participants. My original goal was to understand further the meaning people make of these experiences and to understand them in the context of other knowledge about such encounters. It is the intent of this chapter, then, to attempt an interpretation of the analytic results, or themes, to explore what they mean or are about.

The results of this study are interpreted in the context of three broad areas. The numinous encounter with museum objects is: 1) a document-centered transaction, viewed in the Deweyian sense of an aesthetic experience, 2) a form of psychological state of flow, or optimal experience, and 3) a form of mystical experience as defined by William James. The combination of these three sets of concepts helps illuminate the meanings behind this elusive encounter.

The Numinous Experience as a Document-Centered Transaction

The museum object emerged in the numinous experience as a central force. While it may seem obvious that the object would be integral to this experience—since the object was the beginning point for the interviews—its role exceeded being a simple physical presence and central starting point. The museum object was not only integral to the numinous experience it was required in order to link the experiencer to other dimensions, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. As a document—a signifying thing—it served as a portal to the deeper meanings of the past (Goldman, Chen, & Larsen, 2001), with both tangible and symbolic meaning to the perceiver.

For the people in this study, the experience was a transaction— a coming together of the past, the self, the present, emotions, senses, and more. This transaction has at its center the object—the document—and therefore it can be seen as *a document-centered experience*. My understanding of this experience comes from Dewey's notion of *an aesthetic experience*, one segment of ordinary experience that results in a transaction marked by a sense of wholeness and unity, and often feelings of fulfillment and delight (Jackson, 1998). Even though Dewey discusses this experience in the context of an "art object" rather than the more broadly conceived museum object, the concept fits well here.

Within the Deweyian framework, this experience finds itself as one kind of ordinary experience in life, only as a subset with certain elements enhanced within. In the realm of ordinary experience, the *document-centered experience* is but one type of *an experience*. The *document-centered experience* comes when certain conditions are "just right" and takes on a more intensified form of *an experience*. The generic traits of *an*

experience, according to Dewey are completeness, uniqueness, and unifying emotion (Jackson, 1998). Completeness rounds out the experience; it is a consummation not a cessation and is integrated from within. Uniqueness is that single quality (despite varying elements) that pervades every normally complete experience. And unifying emotion refers to the fact that the experience is emotional but there are no separate things called emotion in it. Emotions are qualities that are always contextual and serve as a sort of glue to hold all of the elements of an experience together (Jackson, 1998). Emotion is like a filter, through which perceptions are screened (Jackson, 1998). In the *document-centered experience*, these elements are, according to Dewey, more intense than usual and this quality is what sets them apart from other kinds of experience.

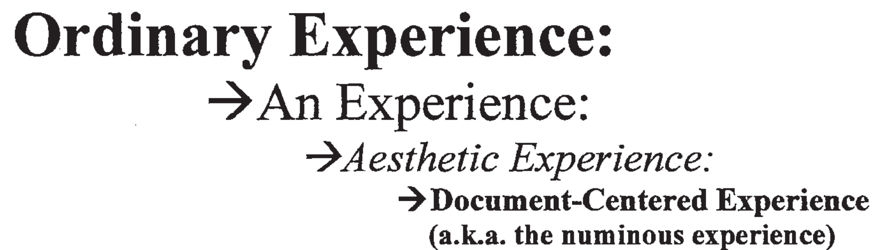

Figure 3: Where the Document-Centered Experience Fits in Dewey's Scheme of *Experience*.

All of the elements of a *document-centered experience* can be seen in the interviews from this study. For instance, the experience itself was often referred to as a "thing," a unit, a moment. It was described as something with a beginning and end, definable and yet complex within. Many people said they could not quite find the right words to describe it. Perhaps this was the "single quality," the thread of uniqueness that

Dewey believes is found in such experiences. He explains that the immediacy of the experience is never as vibrant as the actual experience and that the description of it can only be given reflectively, never approximating the true experience. Emotion is the glue that holds the experience together. Many participants in the current study called the experience emotional but several couldn't give any more detail than this, saying it was hard to expand on it. According to Dewey, that is because emotions are not pure; they are not things in the way we refer to them. Instead, they are an amalgam of contextual feelings, senses, thoughts, and perceptions that meet at the moment of an event or encounter. Understanding the numinous experience with museum objects as a Deweyian *document-centered transaction* helps us understand it as a potentially universal human experience, within the confines of an already accepted kind of experience.

Special Features Of A Numinous Document-centered Transaction

At least three insights from this study regarding this kind of transaction stand out to be highlighted. Participants talked often of the need to touch the object, to feel it as a physical thing. They also felt that being in the same space with it or being "on the spot" where something happened held a particular power for them in their experience of the object. Related to both of these were notions of the "real thing" and the object being viewed almost as a living being. The following section interprets these elements as a *document-centered transaction* and emphasizes the importance of the tangible thing that can be experienced.

Touching the Object. The human need to touch is very strong. It is the natural and instinctive way we test our surroundings and learn about the environment (Pye, 2007). It is interesting to note that touch, in Western thought, is a sense associated with

emotion (Pye, 2007). As a sense (and an emotional one at that), it has been downplayed in importance for many years, especially in museums. If we look to religious history, touching objects, or religious relics, gives a person power (Geisbusch, 2007; Pye, 2007), yet in the museum, we have severe limits on touch, and, in the library, talk about touch (as a sense) appears to be nearly nonexistent even though books and paper documents are tangible, palpable things (Latham, 2007; Schrock, 2005). There is mounting evidence that touching and handling objects aids in learning (Trewinnard-Boyle & Tabassi, 2007). Touch constitutes a genuinely multi-dimensional experience; it is completely bound up with the other senses as well as intellect and emotion (Spence, 2007). As Hornik (1992) explains, "there is more to touch than 'meets the hands'" (p. 457). Current research shows that haptic (tactile) perception is influenced by, and influences, visual, auditory and olfactory perceptions (Spence, 2007), aids in stimulating memories, and can even provide a therapeutic benefit (Jacques, 2007). Imagined touch, then, in this study reveals yet another dimension of exploring the total museum object through the senses. While participants could not touch the object, they imagined doing so and in this process felt it would provide them with even more authentic information about the people and events of the past. It brought them closer to the real past.

The importance of touch to the participants in this study makes sense as an element of the holistic character of the encounter. The numinous encounter is multi-dimensional by definition and so it should be no surprise that those experiencing it are trying to conjure other senses by which to experience it. Participants revealed that they imagined touching the museum object during their encounter, expressing the power such an experience might give them. Again, through this need to touch, we see that the

numinous reaction is an almost systemic experience where every reaction is connected to the overall reaction, or sense. For instance, Erin imagined touching the Renoir painting, that she might be able to touch the spot "that nobody else has touched since Renoir put the paint there" (p. 2) and this would somehow connect her with the artist who lived so long ago. Richard said that sitting in Lincoln's chair would actually make him a "part of history." And Mary felt it was almost too much for her to think about touching the chair, that doing so might be too stimulating and she would "freak out" (p. 11). She also likened touching Lincoln's chair to a religious person touching the Pope's garment.

On the Spot. Another interesting element emerged in relation to the tangible object in the numinous experience—that one got a special feeling when near to or on the same location as the "real thing." Museum objects have the curious character of existing simultaneously in the past as well as the present (Lowenthal, 1985). This characteristic may help explain the strong reaction participants had when they described feeling close to history by being nearby an actual physical piece of the past or on the exact location where a historical event occurred. From the literature, there are many different ways one could interpret the notion of being "on the spot where it happened," heard in the interviews. There is extensive research on space and place that could speak volumes on the topic. For instance, Tuan (1974, 1977) tightly links place with meaning, noting that it is an anchor for personal and societal meanings. And in a study of National Park Service monuments on the mall of Washington D.C., participants indicated that "being there" physically made a difference for them, changed their understanding of history (Goldman, Chen, & Larsen 2001). One man on the mall said it transformed his "head knowledge"

into something physical, emotional, and personal (Goldman, et al., 2001). His sentiments (below) amazingly echo those in this study:

> That is why I wanted to come here, because I am fascinated with American history in particular. I can't imagine a better place to come...I've read about it. I've learned about it. I've taken exams on it. But this actually makes it physical and personal. You know, I've seen pictures of it, but there's nothing like walking through the Smithsonian...That's very emotional (Goldman, et al., 2001, p. 16).

Tuan (1977) believes that intimate occasions often allow us to become relaxed and open to new experiences and that *place* is a "pause in movement" making it possible for "a locality to become a center of felt value" (p. 138). In a museum or historic site, we are perhaps vulnerable to these openings, and in this place, we are more readily set up to encounter ghosts of the past. When Phil paused at Little Round Top, he suddenly connected the live tree with the Civil War photograph of the tree which made him realize the meaning of where he was standing—on the site of a battle, where real people lost their lives over 100 years earlier.

The Real Thing: Object As Document. Perhaps a related meaning to the notion of "on the spot" is the sense of witnessing something "real." This seemed to be a very important aspect to participants' experiences of a numinous object. While the notion of what actually constitutes "real" is interesting, it will be treated here as whatever the participant interprets as real.

The concept of the object as a "document" elucidates the role that the real object plays in the current study. For the person experiencing the numinous with an object, exchange of information or message are not the main points of this kind of encounter.

Deeply felt perception and meaning—both physical and symbolic—are the result of a person transacting with the document. Yet, it is not enough to say that the object is a symbol or that it elicits a story in the viewer's mind because its physical presence goes beyond those things. Acting as a link, the object is tightly bound up with cognitive, sensory, and affective processes—all intermingling and feeding each other in a dynamic multi-dimensional transaction with the object. The physicality of the object cannot be understated in the current study. It was the beginning, middle and end of the experience. Its three-dimensionality and physical qualities-- just as much as its symbolic qualities—were an integral part of the experience. The concept of document as "any concrete or symbolic indexical sign [indice], preserved or recorded toward the ends of representing, of reconstituting, or of proving a physical or intellectual phenomenon" (Briet, 2006, p.10) is at the center of the notion of what is real. Documentation is concerned with access to *evidence*, not texts (Buckland, 1998). The numinous museum object did indeed act as a form of evidence: of past events, past people and past emotions. It stood—as a real thing—to represent some piece of history, some story that was told in the mind of the observer. Several participants talked about the object "bearing witness to history," that it "saw" certain events and because it was present during these events, it allowed the museum visitor see these things more clearly themselves. The object as a piece of *evidence* helped "bring history to life" for many interviewees. One person even said that it is the object that *is* history [Richard, Chair].

The museum object, then, acted as *evidence* on these two intertwining levels—as a three-dimensional physical being and as a representation or symbol. Mary illustrates this mingling of levels by repeatedly describing the materials of Lincoln's chair, stressing

the importance of seeing the fabric and the wood and the bloodstain. In the same thought, she stresses the importance of what the chair represents, Lincoln—a man whom she reveres deeply—and events surrounding his death.

In this study, the materiality of the document is meaningful to the experience. Its presence creates meaning that would not be the same for the viewers if it were not there. Tangibility contributes to meaning; it is essential to the formation of meaning in a numinous encounter with a museum object. Its physicality as a document makes people's perception of it as more real.

The Real Thing: Object As Magical Contagion. As evidence, the object in this study acted to inspire awe in participants. In this case, the object may be eliciting an experience known as *magical contagion*, a form of sympathetic magic that is mediated by the imagination of the visitor (Nemeroff & Rozin, 2000). The "law of contagion" states that "contact between the source and the target results in the transfer of some effect or quality (essence) from the source to the target" (Nemeroff & Rozin, 2000, p. 3). Evans, Mull and Poling (2002) believe that magical contagion is what explains such a deep reaction to an "authentic" object. They consider the *source* to be the authentic object and the *target* to be the museum visitor, "this contact may be direct or mediated, and it leads to an increased feeling of connection between the target and the source, which can have a positive or negative valence" (Evans, et al., 2002, p. 72). In this study, we are seeing positive contagion (i.e., from a positive source), which results in a positive transfer of value to the target who feels an enhanced sense of self and "an increased sense of connection with the sublime," (Evans et al., 2002, p. 73). The museum context itself heightens this reaction, with buildings that inspire awe and museum staff who may see

the worksite as a place of veneration (Evans et al., 2002). Ironically, then, the real object is only real because it allows the imagination to work. Inspired by the source—the museum object or the site on which some event occurred—participants in this study were overtaken by positive magical contagion, the values generated by their interaction with the thing which produced a sense of awe and wonder at the notion of being on the very place where something occurred in history.

The Real Thing: Object As Living Being. In some cases of this study, participants viewed the museum object as a living thing. Several participants use language that refers to the object as a being that has persisted into the present from long ago. Erin, in particular does this repeatedly. She describes the painting as "speaking" to her, "calling" her and refers to the girl in the painting as her "friend." Annalise too indicates that she felt a desire to talk to the people in the Le Bain painting, describing them as "three-dimensional" indicating that they perhaps appeared more alive. Likewise, many participants claimed that the museum object brought history "to life" and described their memory of the encounter as "vivid." The word vivid has roots in "life" and so connects the object with the living. In addition, the object was identified as a "witness" to events of the past, as if it had eyes to "see" actual happenings from long ago and mouths to tell us their stories. At one point, Erin says that the Alcott house where she once worked had "seen" so much history. And about museum objects, she says, "if we can only get them to talk…" (Erin, p. 6). The object in some cases became so much a part of the person's life that it became a friend or family member as in Mary's case where she talks about Lincoln's chair as a family member and an old friend whom she must visit whenever she is in town.

The Object at the Center of Flow

In the Getty study on aesthetic flow experiences, Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson (1990) cited the object as a mechanism that stimulated the intense focus, the "perceptual hook" (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990, p. 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 & Robinson, 1990, p. 51), as one of their informants stated. Some of the participants in the Getty study used similar language as those in this study, claiming that the object brought the past alive. It was also considered 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 & Robinson, 1990, p. 62). The authors cite Beardsley's (Wreen & Callen, 1982) study on aesthetic experience who says that in all cases of aesthetic encounter, the object is first, something that "arrests attention" and is the one essential feature in an encounter, what Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) call "object directedness" (p. 122). 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 & Robinson, 1990). Likewise, in the current study, 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. As indicated earlier, the data placed the object in a central position of the numinous experience; without its physical presence, the encounter may not be the same.

The Numinous Experience as a Psychological State of Flow

Based on the findings of this study, it is apparent that the numinous encounter with a museum object—*a document-centered experience*—is one kind of *flow*, the well-documented, psychological construct of optimal experience. Flow is characterized by a centering of attention, a sense of clarity, wholeness, and freedom. It is an autotelic experience and is intrinsically rewarding. A document-centered flow encounter is, "an intense involvement of attention in response to a visual stimulus for no other reason than to sustain the interaction," which results in intense enjoyment characterized by "personal wholeness, a sense of discovery, and a sense of human connectedness," (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990, p. 178). Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) believed that they were describing the *structure* of the experience, which can be elicited by a wide range of contexts and contents. In other words, one can experience flow in the context of any kind of object (not just art objects). In their study about museum art objects, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) came to a similar conclusion about the *document-centered experience*. Their study on aesthetic experience as a form of flow concluded with amazingly similar results to the current study, leading me to surmise that the numinous encounter is one type of optimal experience.

The Getty study showed that experiencing a museum object involves sensing, feeling, thinking and communicating and that these dimensions of experiencing objects, along with the viewer's skills, help build the challenges that may occur in an encounter. Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson (1990) actually break down the encounter to involve three parties: the viewer, the work (object) and the "artist" (a convenient word to represent perceptual, emotional, intellectual, and communicative factors that went into the creation

of the work). In this study, the "artist" may be better represented here as "story," the information that is "out there" about the object. This includes a combination of cultural or national traditions that may surround the object. For instance, the story that surrounds Lincoln's Chair is a shared story of Lincoln's assassination, the Civil War, slavery and freedom. All Americans know the story, as children are taught these things in grade school as a standard part of the school curriculum. In addition, aspects of this story and its associated mythologies are perpetuated through national holidays, politics, and the media.

As a result of their study on the aesthetic encounter, Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson (1990) determined that this kind of flow consists of *attentional, existential and temporal dimensions*. The three attentional dimensions of an aesthetic flow experience are: focus on the object, limitation of stimulus field, and loss of ego. Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson (1990) summarize it this way:

> …the merging of attention and awareness on the art object and the bringing of the viewer's skills to bear on the challenges that the work presents. The experience is one of an initial perceptual hook followed by a more detached, intellectual appreciation that returns the viewer to the work with a deep understanding (p. 118).

They found that this type of flow has its own unique dimensions that consist of an existential element and a temporal (structural) element. In addition, the current study reveals another dimension of an aesthetic flow experience, called *embodied experience*. The elements of each of these flow dimensions are described and related to aspects of the current study in the following sections.

Attentional Dimensions of Flow

The type of focus that Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson (1990) refer to is not a simple recognition of a thing, but rather an intense and rare absorption into the object of attention. Descriptions from the current study's participants about losing a sense of time, getting lost in the moment, or feeling alone with the object are all aspects of this absorption. In fact several participants use the word "absorb" to describe how they felt. When Phil describes the moment "capturing" him, he identifies this intense focus, "you're just focused on that, it's kinda like you're lookin' through a paper tube…it's like that's the only thing that's on your attention" (p.17). This "tunnel vision," described by others as well, relates this absorptive focus as a physical (or visual) manifestation of narrowing one's attention on the object. Participants in this study described an intense directedness to the museum object, and the stories that are elicited by it. 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. Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson (1990) refer to the viewer's "skills" as the total package of what they have brought to the scene with them that day. From this juncture, at the meeting point of the person's skills and the object (with its stories) come the unique "challenges" raised during the encounter. In other words, the person-object transaction, as a unique encounter poses contextual challenges for the viewer at that point in time. In the right circumstance of object, skills and challenges, one may have a numinous experience. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) point out that the directed attention to the object comes <u>first</u> and this resonates with the theme of *Object Link* in this study, that the object is the trigger and is necessary to stimulate the whole subsequent experience.

A limitation of the stimulus field comes as a part of this intense focus. By this, the authors 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. Again, participants in this study indicated an actual lived limitation of the stimulus field by describing the loss of peripheral vision or darkening around the edges of their visual field, resulting in a focus on just him or herself and the object. Some people actually felt movement towards or away from the object in this scenario, amplifying its effects as a felt experience. The disappearance of people around the person-object duo is a manifestation of this limitation as well.

In this study, the limitation of the stimulus field, allowed for a sense of standing still or time stopping. And in that intense focusing, depth of thought is enabled by "standing still," thereby allowing the attention to linger, in great detail and depth, about peoples and contexts of the past. Ironically, "time travel" may be possible because of this standing still. Time stops moving ahead on one plane to allow time to move up or down, into the deep past.

The third attentional dimension is transcendence or loss of ego. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) see this dimension as a culmination of the other two dimensions being "pushed to their human limits" (p. 122). The focus is so intense and stimulus field so confined that the person becomes "enmeshed" in the object, losing his/her own self-consciousness. Participants in the current study described losing a sense of time, or that time compresses, making it "feel like yesterday" that the experience happened. Erin even said that it made her feel as if "I'm not of this time and place anymore" (p. 13). 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.

Ironically, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) point out that the loss of self seems to happen in the same encounter when the sense of self is strengthened—and that is precisely what we see in this study. This was a powerful experience for my informants, as they clearly expressed. In their descriptions, they indicated a feeling of small-ness or suddenly understanding the grandeur in the meaning of the world around them. The Getty study authors believe that this spiritual-like feeling provides a sense of transcending everyday reality, and an affirmation of a higher order or a "sense of the absolute" (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990, p. 68). In the current study, this manifested itself almost as a kind of euphoria and for many resulted in a message that will last their whole lives.

Existential Dimensions of Flow

Unique to the aesthetic flow experience is the decidedly human quality perceived in the object by the viewer. Museum objects are intrinsically connected to human beings by the very fact that they are made by, used by, and 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 & Robinson, 1990). The recognition of this communication is felt as a kind of discovery or connection to others:

> The aesthetic experience develops sensitivity to the *being* of other persons, to the excellence of form, to the style of distant historical periods, to the essence of

> unfamiliar civilizations. In so doing, it changes and expands the being of the viewer (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990, p. 183).

Participants in this study clearly connected to people of the past and in a way that helped them understand what it means to be human. 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. Mary spoke of becoming a "fly on the wall" of the boarding house so that she could observe the people of the past following their daily routine. Erin, Richard, and Phil made reference to the "real person" who was the subject associated with their object. And Phil 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 conjuring also links back to the notion of the tangible object, as a real thing that bore witness to some historical event. The presence of the object helped participants 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 (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990). In other words, museum objects are ways in which humanity can communicate with humanity (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990). In the current study for example, Annalise expressed the desire to talk with the people in the Le Bain painting. Others in this study use dialogue-oriented language to describe their interaction with the past through the object.

The numinous encounter is very personal, yet participants describe forming deep connections with people they have never known. This characteristic 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 seemingly impersonal things.

Temporal Dimensions of Flow

The temporal aspect of an aesthetic flow encounter with an object involves a change within the viewer without a change in the object. In other words, the experience continues through time but the stimulus for it does not, resulting in a seemingly static thing (e.g., museum object) somehow eliciting new understandings and insights in its viewer. The object itself does not change, move or speak, but, nevertheless, viewers achieve new insights, revelations or epiphanies during their encounter with it. In this study, it is difficult to delineate this element of flow from the rest of the encounter, as the nature of the numinous experience is the transaction between the person and the object. Perhaps one way to look at it is to compare previous museum visits by the same person to the same object in which a numinous experience did not occur. Phil and Mary both had prior visits to their respective numinous objects, but only in the later encounters did they experience internal changes. The object itself remained the same during all visits.

Embodied Dimensions of Flow

Although it is not mentioned as an explicit element of aesthetic flow in the Getty study, I believe that the embodied aspect of this encounter is yet another dimension of aesthetic flow. In the current study, the numinous encounter was felt bodily, as a physical reaction. This finding is an important contribution to understanding the lived experience of the museum user because it is often ignored in research. A person exists and perceives only through his/her body; and this is coupled with the physicality of the object, its

"body" so to speak. It is interesting to think of it this way, as two physical beings coming together in a transaction, each thing bringing with it certain histories.

The current study reminds us that mind and body are not two separate things but rather aspects of one organic process (e.g., Johnson, 2007). What we are seeing in a numinous encounter with an object is the resulting meaning that emerges from an embodied activity. For centuries, acts of the body have been hidden from our consciousness of the world through the smooth-running nature of our neurology and our belief that thought is disembodied (Johnson, 2007). Polanyi (1969) called this the "from-to" character of perception, and phenomenologists call it intentionality. That is, when we experience something, it is always in relation to something else—consciousness is always consciousness *of* something (Sokolowski, 2000). This tends to externalize our reactions to the world. In addition, the body itself helps us to take it for granted through a continuous process of organism-environment interactions (Johnson, 2007). Everyday complex perceptual reactions are so fluid that they are no longer in our consciousness. We do not say, "oh, I am feeling the rods and cones of my eyes helping me to process that picture on the wall"; it just proceeds. Johnson (2007) spells out his embodied theory of meaning as relational:

> An embodied view is naturalistic, insofar as it situates meaning within a flow of experience that cannot exist without a biological organism engaging its environment. Meanings emerge "from the bottom up" through increasingly complex levels of organic activity; they are not the constructions of a disembodied mind (p. 10).

The Getty study (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990), while not directly highlighting this element of an aesthetic encounter, alludes to it. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) explain that some people felt a visceral physical reaction. 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 & Robinson, 1990, p. 36). Interestingly, the authors classify this as an emotional response. In the current study, participants describe having a rush, a feeling of blood to the face, butterflies, tingly excitement, being overwhelmed, exhilaration, and visual "feelings" such as the need to "soak it up" with one's eyes. These physical sensations were tightly bound with the total experience.

The Numinous Experience as Mystical State of Consciousness

The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. –Albert Einstein

As a result of this study the numinous document-centered transaction is also interpreted as a mystical experience. In this sense, I use William James' (1910, 1958) notions of mystical consciousness, which he considers a "real" experience worthy as a topic of psychological investigation. Considered a "personal religious experience," James suggests a whole spectrum of types, ranging from non-religious (i.e., understanding the deeper significance of poetry and music to déjà vu to revelations in nature) to more obvious religious mystical experiences (James, 1958). These are states that "modify the inner life of the subject" (James, 1958, p. 320). As a mechanism for allowing discussion, James (1958) identifies mystical states of consciousness as having the following four characteristics:

1) Ineffability
2) Noetic Quality
3) Transiency
4) Passivity

The first two alone (ineffability and noetic quality) can define a mystical state, but the two other qualities (transiency and passivity) are usually associated with it as well. All of these elements are present in the numinous experience with a museum object. In the context of being a document-centered flow transaction, recognizing the encounter also as a mystical experience provides another layer of understanding in these meaningful encounters. I will go through each one below and relate it to the current study.

The Four Characteristics of Mystical Consciousness

Ineffability. Ineffability refers to an experience that defies expression in words (James, 1958). It has a quality that must be directly experienced to be understood. It resembles a feeling state more than an intellectual state. Throughout the interviews in this study, people indicated that it was difficult for them to explain the experience to me and all indicated that it was the first time they had spoken of it to someone. Some even described it as something that does not have adequate words to express it. Richard kept using the word "odd" to describe his experience and even with several probe attempts during the interview, he could not break down what he meant into any further words. Much of this inability to describe it verbally probably comes from the nature of the experience as a uniting of many states, including the perceptual, emotional, and intellectual. The coming together of these things into one *Unity of the Moment* made it a *wholly other* thing, something different and difficult to translate.

Noetic Quality. Even though it is considered to be closer to states of feeling than intellect, a mystical experience is perceived as a state of knowledge to the experiencer, resulting in "insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect" (James, 1958, p. 319). Revelations and illuminations full of significance and importance occur during these episodes and stay with the person as moments of authority. For all five participants, the numinous encounter was seen as pivotal, as a moment of keen and deep understanding about something, whether it was of themselves or the world around them (or both). Experiencing the tangible object that represented some set of information for them caused them to acquire extraordinary knowledge of their own existence in both large and intimate frames.

Transiency. According to James (1958), mystical consciousness cannot be sustained for long. It is fleeting, but when it recurs, it is recognized as such. In a cumulative sense, subsequent experiences can be felt as inner richness and importance. Although participants did not have an exact notion of how much time they spent in this state, most indicated that it was quick. However, many claimed that it felt longer than it actually was. Perhaps this feeling that the moment lasted so long is due to the richness and "authority" of the experience.

Passivity. When this type of consciousness sets in, the person feels as if he or she has been "grasped" or held by a superior power. Erin, for example, indicated that the moment surprised her. And when Phil says he was "captured" and "dinged," these are examples of the sudden nature, the surprise many participants experienced.

The Expanding Field of Consciousness

According to James (1910), a person experiences a mystical state as his or her "field of consciousness" expands. This leads to the dissipation of boundaries between internal and external information which causes a loss of self or a kind of "cosmic consciousness" in which a person suddenly understands issues of life and the order of the universe (James, 1958, p. 333). This is very similar to what Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) call "loss of ego" in the flow state. James (1910) describes the field of consciousness as:

> ...a mass of present sensation, in a cloud of memories, emotions, concepts, etc. Yet these ingredients, which have to be named separately, are not separate, as the conscious field contains them. Its form is that of a much-at-once, in the unity of which the sensations, memories, concepts, impulses, etc., coalesce and are dissolved (p. 86).

With ever so slight a shift in this field, one encounters a whole new "sensation-mass" which can lead to conditions which are termed here as mystical (James, 1910, p. 86), similar to Dewey's notion of *an experience* and Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson's (1990) "limitation of stimulus field." James says the experience will be felt plurally; it will be transient, enlarged, illuminated and "possibly rapturously so" (1910, p. 87). One may feel a sense of unification and a strongly enhanced sense of relation in an intuitive or perceptual way. This has been described in the current study as the *Unity of the Moment*. By James' description, the mystical experience is by definition felt not singly, but as a sense of "tremendous muchness" (p. 87)—in other words, a coming together, a uniting of everything at one point in time. To illustrate, James tells of his own mystical experiences,

claiming that they came suddenly and during seemingly mundane situations, had the character of reminiscence, the sensation of being "real fact," and left him excited and amazed at his sudden vision (1910, p. 87). He observed that his perceptual consciousness was moving so fast that there "seemed no time for conception or identification to get in its work" (p.87). He had a feeling of sudden opening. James claims that this "uncovering" is the essence of the phenomenon mystical consciousness. In the current study, this shift in consciousness, this uncovering seems to be at the heart of the numinous experience. For some, the experience did not occur on the first visit but after they had seen it many other times before. Mary said she had seen Lincoln's chair as a kid but it was not until she saw it in a different part of the museum complex, out in the open and in the context of Lincoln's life before he was famous. She was an adult by this time and had her children with her. Something had changed in her field of consciousness that caused *this* time to be different. And Phil said his numinous experience at Gettysburg came after many earlier trips he had made there as a kid. He suspected that it was his point in life that brought home the meaning of the site.

Mystical Consciousness and Higher Things

The mystical is inextricably linked to notions of the spirit. James considered mystical consciousness to be "personal religious" experience, defining religion as " the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (1958, p. 46). In the current study, profound connections were made with a form of higher power, an individual feeling of "the divine." These experiences, as mystical states, have a decidedly spiritual character. Characterized by a feeling of awe or reverence, this

element of the numinous encounter seems to align more with a feeling, a powerful sense one receives in the encounter than a specific belief in a defined religious doctrine. It is not so unusual that a mystical experience could occur in a museum setting. McDonald and Schreyer (1991) believe that the sacred shows itself in many kinds of situations, including leisure settings. And, as a leisure setting, the museum finds itself as one of those situations. The ways in which participants described their numinous experiences in the museum—as awesome, as a revelation, "sparking" one's heart, or touching one's core—leads me to interpret these as spiritual, mystical experiences.

Recalling the original meaning of the term *numinous*, this dimension is described as an experience of being in the presence of something holy, or as a spiritual communion with something or someone (Otto, 1917/1965) and it is, in fact, why the Cameron and Gatewood (2000) called the encounter *numinous* in the first place. Just as in Cameron and Gatewood's study, participants in the current study described the feeling of being on hallowed ground ("on the spot") and having a spiritual communion with objects. One participant (Phil) explicitly described his experience as a religious awakening. Others were not so direct in their descriptions of the spiritual, but indicated a sense of awe, that they were witnessing something greater and more powerful than themselves.

Conclusion

The numinous experience with a museum object is interpreted as a document-centered *flow* transaction that can be characterized as a state of mystical consciousness. The cumulative (but still individual) experience in this study reveals that the numinous encounter is a complex, personal, multi-dimensional experience, triggered by and transacting with, the museum object at its center. It proceeds as a form of psychological

flow with an intense centering of attention, limitation of the stimulus field and loss of ego. Existential, temporal and embodied elements all play a role in this transaction as well. The experience is categorized as mystical in the Jamesian sense, that it is something difficult to convey but identified when it is felt. It is both a state of feeling and a state of knowledge and may be short-lived, fleeting and take the experiencer by surprise. It is indeed an experience that is *wholly other*.

CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

This chapter provides a summary of the research presented in this dissertation, and suggests implications that stem from the findings, as well as potential future areas of study. Overall, the findings of this study provide empirical evidence that physical museum objects are essential to the unique value of today's museum. In addition, the concept of experiencing an object as a document—a representation of human thought—opens an avenue of study to LIS researchers interested in other ways of knowing in information behavior studies. The person-object transaction—or the juncture at which an experience can occur—is an important unit of study and shows that *lived experience* can reveal multiple layers of information acquisition typically overlooked. Additionally, this study demonstrates that the use of phenomenological methods in researching human information behavior provides an enlightening window on the multidimensional nature of user experience.

Summary of the Study

This study was designed to investigate *the meaning museum users make of a numinous experience with museum objects.* The aims were three-fold: to describe the meanings made of numinous experiences with museum objects by those who experience them; to identify patterns or themes, if any, that emerge from these descriptions; and to contribute a perspective of the overall understanding of the museum user experience.

There is indeed a pattern to the numinous encounter with museum objects. Using interpretive phenomenological methods, in-depth interviews with five museum users were conducted, resulting in four essential themes about the meanings participants made

of numinous experiences with museum objects. These themes must be considered specific to the five participants, but nevertheless provide insight into the encounter as a whole. First, the experience can be seen as a holistic uniting of emotions, feelings, intellect, experience and object—a "poem" in the sense Rosenblatt has described. Second, the object plays a central role in the experience, linking the experiencer to the past through both tangible and symbolic meaning. Third, the person feels as if he or she is being transported to another time and place, affecting the experiencer temporally, spatially, and bodily. And finally, deeply felt connections are made with one's self, the past, and spirit that communicates to others and endures throughout a person's life.

These four themes were interpreted in the frames of Dewey's aesthetic experience, Csikszentmihalyi's psychological flow, and William James' mystical consciousness. This study confirmed that the physicality of the museum object is equally as important as the symbolic aspect and that the *kind* of object does not dictate the kind of experience. One's perception of something as real, three-dimensional and tactile, spurred on the experience and allowed the imagination to wander deeply. The object—as a physical thing that signifies—stayed at the center of the encounter from beginning to end. As a *document-centered experience*, the numinous encounter with a museum object manifests itself as a form of "flow," or optimal experience, the mental state of operation in which the person is fully immersed in what he or she is doing, with a feeling of energized focus and full involvement in the process of the activity. Flow is a kind of meaning-making process; it is positive psychic energy that can be brought about intentionally (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This flow experience is interpreted as a mystical

state of consciousness, a deep state of knowledge that is felt integrally as both emotion and intellect.

Overall, this study suggests a perspective of the numinous museum experience as a gestalt, with an emphasis on the wholeness of the patterns seen. One encounters the numinous simultaneously at many levels—intellectual, emotional, imaginative, sensual. It is the “poetry” of the museum. By experiencing this holistic and mystical flow through the person-object transaction, the user’s life can be affected in major ways. Effects of the experience, such as life lessons, endure and spread through the desire to share these lessons with one’s family, pupils or clients. The numinous experience played a significant role in the daily lives of participants in this study. That this took place in the museum is no small realization. Museums have the potential to unleash powerful experiences for visitors and, in the long run, to become valued and necessary institutions in society.

Implications

“...the more you look, the more you feel...” (on paintings; Elkins, 2004, p. x).

Findings from this analysis indicate that the object in the museum can occupy a central role in the visitor experience. The data from this study reveal that, even in the context of emerging technological trends, the physical object has not lost its importance in the act of meaning-making and its presence in the museum is integral to a satisfying visitor experience. This study also illuminates that it is the experience of the museum object as a document and not the content of the object (i.e., type of object) that elicits a reaction in a person. In other words, the kind of object central to a numinous encounter is not a specific determinant of the experience but, rather, it is the total transaction between object, viewer and environment that inspires the effect. In addition, the holistic nature of

the numinous museum experience contributes to our understanding that other ways of knowing are at least as important as traditionally emphasized cognitive paradigm in the study of human information behavior.

The Meaning of the Tangible Object

Possibly the single most important implication from this study is the re-positioning of the object (i.e., the document) at the center of a meaningful museum experience. Without the physical object, the numinous experience would not be complete. It acted as the trigger—for the user's imagination, feelings, sensations, thoughts. The object began the experience; its presence endured through it, and helped the person derive meaning in something real. It acted as a witness—embodied evidence of past human behavior and represented lived lives and real actions. This study elucidates the need *to bring attention back to the object* as document (H. Hein, 2000). It re-iterates that the object-as-document can have a deep impact on people's lives. It can help conjure sensations and transport users to other worlds and times. The object-as-document/museum visitor transaction embraces both the cognitive and affective dimensions of information use. Libraries, archives, and museums are the sites of these documents, these potential sources of psychic energy and positive experience. They hold the things that elicit intense reactions and, in so doing, hold some very powerful sources of meaning.

However, recent trends in memory institutions veer distinctly away from the object (*thing*), ignoring its rightful place as an important source of unique meaning for users. Museums, libraries and archives seem to minimize the document's role—as the unique physical representations of something or someone else—held within their walls.

The *experience of the document*—that physical things are meaningful to people is often taken for granted. While most museums would admit that they would never consider removing the actual objects from their exhibitions, in reality, we are seeing it happen more frequently. As funding for digital conversions increase, digital interactives are replacing the exhibit space in which objects once stood, and replica scenarios are becoming more prevalent. Over the years, museums have increasingly used a "less is more" approach when it comes to putting out objects. Yet, when I explain my research to people, they express the wish for the "old days" when more (real) objects were out on display.

What this study shows is that both the physical and symbolic nature of the object play an important role in users' lives. Tangibility of the object links human experience across time, as notions about touch, the visual, and the material from this research reveal. The "real" thing—the presence of a three-dimensional object—is necessary to spark the reaction to it as a symbol. Without the physical thing, the reaction may be lessened or absent. As this study exemplified, the implications of digitizing objects *as a replacement* for the real thing are extensive and troubling. If deeply felt impact is had with a physical object—such as a numinous reaction—and we replace this object with a digital copy, how might this affect our visitors' understandings? What potential meaning is removed from the encounter? In writing about evocative objects, Turkle (2007) said, "we live our lives in the middle of things. Material culture carries emotion and ideas of startling intensity" (p. 6). She correctly pointed out that it is only recently that objects have begun to receive the attention they deserve. This seems counterintuitive because many fields study the material object. Yet, research on objects has been uni-dimensional, focusing on

a singular aspect rather than their complete meaning and function in the human world (Wood & Latham, 2009). What is missing is the ontology of the object—understanding of the object's existence in the human world. The current study provides empirical evidence that—to museum users—objects are vitally important factors of the deeply meaningful experiences in museums. It shows that the museum object is more than polysemic, that its role as a physical piece of the past makes it a unique feature of today's museum.

Research on the meaning of *personal* objects shows that physical things are deeply important to people (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Pearce, 1992; Wood, 2005). The current study shows that *public* objects, such as those in the museum, also have deep meaning to people. The central position of the object in the numinous experience is an important example of the intricate balance between the external physical world and the internal personal world. Deeply felt encounters were sparked and deepened by the presence of a material thing. With current trends in professional services that move the object away from the center of the museum's purpose, we risk losing what makes the museum unique. This study reminds us that the museum user needs the object to achieve meaning and that museums are uniquely positioned to provide that important human need. Even if only a few users experience the numinous with an object, this sort of evidence helps support the notion of the museum as indispensable to society; that it is, in fact, the cultural role of the museum to be the place for individuals to understand the past, other cultures, and their environment. Numinous experiences with museum objects get at the essence of a person's existence—it is the real thing that people are seeking to make meaning and connections. Museums are the place

to go to find real things. This study has raised a question of whether digital surrogates of objects have a similar impact on museum users.

The Document And The Poem

Two concepts from this study have revealed themselves as potentially vital objects of inquiry for both LIS and Museum Studies: the document and the poem. What this study highlighted is that it is the object as a *document*—as a physical bridge to symbols processed in the mind of the viewer—that causes the numinous reaction. And the reaction itself can be seen as what Rosenblatt called "the poem," the coming together of person, object and environment that results in a deeply moving experience. As central units of study, these two notions could open up the possibilities into understanding more about the total user experience.

For instance, much museum user research tends to emphasize content, or topic, of an object or exhibition. Yet, this study has shown that it is not necessarily the content of the object that elicits personal responses from users but rather the dual nature of the object as a physical and symbolic thing—as a document. This is an important distinction that is hardly recognized by many practitioners and scholars alike, as reflected in recent publications and conference papers. For example, there are numerous articles that discuss the experience of art as a mechanism for more inclusive learning. The recognition that experience leads to richer learning is correct but, according to the results of this study, it is not inherently art that is responsible for the experience; the document (object) too is implicated. With respect to the whole range of museum objects, there is nothing inherent in an artistic work that causes a unique reaction in the visitor (Storr, 1997). A historic baby coffin (as shown in the pilot study of this dissertation) is just as likely to elicit a

deep reaction as a 16th century oil painting (from Annalise during the present study). Objects of history, anthropology, and nature are equally as likely to elicit a deep reaction as an art object. With regard to a numinous encounter as evidenced in this study, the structure of the experience with an object was very consistent, but the kind of object itself varied greatly. No matter what the object was—a photograph, a tree, a chair, or a painting—all participants experienced a feeling of unity, profundity, and holistic understanding.

The implication here is that museum staff might benefit from stepping back from their museum's topical emphases and taking a broader look at the meaning of objects and their contribution to human experience as potentially meaningful documents. Museums tend to identify themselves with a type—history, art, anthropology, zoo, etc. What is lost in the process of focusing intently on one's subject content is the common denominator of the role of museums and other cultural facilities—as institutions of understanding. Some organizations and museum studies programs promote the threads of commonality between all cultural organizations, but many compartmentalize into areas of content or practice, leaving a false separation and reduction in communication between institutions that have the potential to share valuable insights with each other. This does not mean, however, that we should create formulaic prescriptions for experience over all museums. Instead, an attempt to understand the underlying elements of human lived experience and the human reaction to the public object could lead to an opening up of knowledge between these groups that do not normally cross paths. For example, more attention to the "the poem" in a document-centered experience as it is felt through the body, through time and through space could yield some fascinating and informative results for those

developing exhibits and creating programs in *all* kinds of museums. A realization that users process information not only cognitively, but affectively, and sensually would be yet another progression towards a more comprehensive understanding of the museum user experience. In a similar vein, research in archives and libraries aimed at understanding how users perceive, sense and make meaning out of experiencing things could add new dimensions to our understanding of user behavior. A study of genealogists, for instance, could yield fascinating perceptions which users have of documents. As this study showed, focus on the total structural aspects of user experience may lead us to a deeper understanding of our users' needs, desires, and reactions.

A Holistic Approach to Information Problems

A final implication of this research is that there is need to move beyond the rational approach to the study of information (Kari & Hartel, 2007). A holistic approach—an understanding of lived experience in the information user's understanding of a document—can provide museum and other information workers with a broader purpose and increased value to society. This study has shown that at least some of the museum's value is as a site for stimulating interest, motivation and enjoyment in the form of optimal experiences (flow). This role aids not only in enhancing learning, but also in providing a sense of purpose and meaning for individuals. Intrinsic motivation—enjoying an experience for itself alone—may stimulate higher creativity and enhance achievement levels (Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson, 1994). Numinous encounters in museums happen. And although they are difficult to identify by observation or survey, they are nevertheless part of the array of potential museum users' experiences. If

museums are concerned with the products of a visit, numinous experiences should at least be on the list of valid and important goals they aim to achieve.

Understanding a numinous experience as flow and mystical consciousness suggests that acquisition of information is not a simple mind-body dualism. Intellect is wound up with emotion and perception with sense-making and so on. Flow is felt on many levels and, by definition, is a multi-faceted experience. Mystical states are fleeting and ineffable, yet profound and inspirational. The end result is an enduring realization of sorts. It is meaningful and becomes incorporated into the person's being and, in turn, is shared with others. A move beyond the rational approach, an integration of affect and cognition as a source for information acquisition, could yield a better understanding of the processes behind information seeking and meaning-making. For too long, museum practice has focused on measureable, discrete pieces of information resulting from a museum visit (Roberts, 1992). But what this study showed is that visiting a museum does not necessarily end with discrete products of information understood by the user; rather, it is about the process of experiencing the museum, feeling and sensing information qualitatively—in other words, *being aware* in the museum. The total experience a person has with a museum object in the form of a numinous encounter takes information—learned before or during the visit—and melds it with affect, which results in meaning, deeply felt and abiding. The meaning may be different for each person, but this outcome, if you will, is certainly a result any museum should seek to facilitate for its visitors.

Still, there is a perennial problem with regard to our understanding of information acquisition in the study of human action, especially in LIS and museum studies. Many studies compartmentalize and provide prescriptions for the information professional,

artificially and implicitly perpetuating false dichotomies and un-natural dualisms. Equally valid, perhaps more so, is that the library and museum user is understood as a whole being who *experiences* each information encounter. People are not comprised of dualisms; they are complex, dynamic and diverse. There are some new trends in research epistemology appearing on the horizon that attempt to resolve issues with this traditional approach to researching humans. Broader epistemological frameworks such as *enactivism* (e.g., Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1993) explains the co-emergence of the learner in his or her setting, embedding the person in their environment as an embodied experiencer, part of an organic relationality (Fenwick, 2000). Enactivists investigate how "cognition and environment become simultaneously enacted through experiential learning," with the premise that the systems of person and context are inseparable (Fenwick, 2000, p. 261). The numinous experience, through this renewed way of looking at the world, could find its rightful place in the spectrum of knowledge acquisition processes.

Studying user experiences like "the poem" in not only museums, but in libraries and archives could open up a whole new avenue of research in LIS. How do users experience books, archives, and paper versus digital forms of similar documents? What role do photographs play in affective user experience and how are photographs perceived in their different forms? A holistic approach to these kinds of questions could yield interesting findings that aid LIS workers in making decisions about access to materials, contextual use of information, and how to approach search scenarios.

Significance of This Study

One aim of this study was to contribute a perspective to research on museum user experience. This study is significant in at least three contexts. First, the model that

emerged from this research adds additional dimensions to museum user experience by providing a more comprehensive understanding of the numinous encounter than in previous studies. Second, a numinous experience with a museum object, as a mystical flow experience, is a unique kind of positive information encounter that adds to our overall understanding of human information behavior. Finally, the methodology used in this study proved to be a powerful way to get at ineffable experiences of users. Demonstrating its effectiveness in eliciting insightful and rich museum user data, this methodology has great potential to produce important insights into other LIS areas of study.

Overall, a more comprehensive understanding of the numinous museum encounter was realized with this study. The model of the numinous encounter with a museum object that emerged in this research reveals a dynamic, transactive experience that is holistic and lived, through every part of a person's senses and intellect. Other studies on the numinous museum experience did not highlight this feature. In addition, previous research either did not focus on the object's role in the experience or was based only on expert testimonial rather than typical user descriptions. The holistic model of unity which came out of this analysis was derived directly from museum visitors' descriptions and the resulting model attempts to underscore the many layers of the experience with a museum object. The study, therefore, underscores our understanding of the object as a document that is central to the user's experience.

Furthermore, the numinous experience with museum objects as a form of mystical flow should not be underestimated as a source of positive information behavior. Flow is a well-documented psychological phenomenon. These optimal experiences embedded in

mystical consciousness speak to the height of human positive experience and may lead to more intense interactions with the environment and to the development of a person's potentialities (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990). Viewed as an information encounter, new possibilities are opened up for the museum. By recognizing the museum as a site for flow, museum workers can consciously build exhibits and programs that aim to achieve these encounters. And if museums become recognized as sites for positive experience, marketing and funding potentials could open up, public perception of value could soar, and the question of whether or not society needs museums becomes moot.

Finally, interpretive phenomenology, as a methodological approach to this research, proved to be remarkably useful in drawing out details from participants that are typically difficult to express. With an intense focus on lived descriptions, a simple but honed research question, and open interview techniques, insightful and detailed descriptions about very personal experiences were elicited. Using interpretive phenomenology in the exploration of numinous essences turned out to be an important match between research interest and research process that yielded rich narratives from participants. The use of this methodology in this study is an example of how phenomenology can be used successfully in information user research.

Future Studies

From this research, there are many areas that could be explored based on the findings. Below, I will suggest only a few, and what I consider to be the most interesting or pressing issues of the moment. First, there is a real need to investigate users of museums and libraries with more qualitative methodologies. In particular, phenomenological methods are substantially underrepresented in museum studies (Wood

& Latham, 2009). Details *from the user* about their *lived experiences* could contribute tremendously to our understanding of human-information dynamics and psychology. The current research illustrated that phenomenological methods do indeed help reach deeper levels of description from users.

In addition, the museum field, as well as LIS, could benefit from detailed investigations into the phenomenology of the "real." Museums consistently claim that the authentic and original are not only what makes them unique, but are important to the preservation of human representation. But, what does it mean when something is real? In context of the digital revolution in our culture, this question is more pertinent than ever. An exploration of the differing reactions to something real versus something reproduced would be a highly useful study (e.g. Frost, 2002). In addition, revisiting the concept of "information-as-thing" (Buckland, 1991b)—with respect to the notion of document, physicality and contemporary digital trends—and the notion of what it means to be real could yield some valuable data. This would be a worthwhile pursuit in this increasingly digital age. With the increasing decline in opportunities for physical interactions in society, we need to know the repercussions of the reduction in physical transactions with documents.

Another potentially informative thread of inquiry may be in the area of touch and lived embodied experience. Museums have gradually been accepting the importance of this feature over the past few years, with a stronger emphasis on hands-on exhibits and activities. But, it goes further than this. Western thought has systematically put human touch on the backburner, even though there may be strong indications that the need to touch is wrapped up in our evolutionary information-seeking processes (Bates, 2002b).

Related to touch are other felt capacities that should be explored as well. What does it mean to feel time or feel history in a museum? And based on the findings in this study, what is it like to experience time travel? Additionally, what does the research area of "space and place" have to say about numinous experiences? How does space affect visitors emotionally, not just functionally? And whether any of these factors affect library or archives users is another avenue worth pursuing. These are all interesting and potentially useful questions to explore.

Finally, with an understanding of what the structure of numinous experience may be, arises the need to research the *causes* of numinous experiences, and the patterns that present themselves. It may be that there are no direct parameters, but it would be interesting to explore this goal specifically. Such research could aid in the planning of museum programs using objects, exhibit design, and marketing.

Conclusion

The significance of a numinous experience as understood in this study speaks to deeper levels of human existence. The numinous mind is one of the few features that separates us from other animals and is an integral aspect of human consciousness. Our capacity to mediate between self and others, and time and space is another feature that makes us human (Oubré, 1997). A numinous encounter with a museum object was filled with traveling the paths of deep meaning—of humanity, of spirit, and of one's purpose on earth. As a result, the museum became a site for the formation of personal values. In leisure contexts, such as museum and libraries, we often form our values in life:

> As a person matures, the most rewarding experiences still tend to occur in expressive leisure contexts such as games, sports, intimate interactions, artistic,

> and religious activities. These experiences provide criterion for fulfillment that can and often does serve as a critical standard for the rest of life…thus it could be argued that the most basic meaning of work and other instrumental activities is naturally determined by reference to meanings developed in leisure settings rather than vice versa (Csikszentmihalyi, 1981, p. 333).

This is precisely the point that Kari and Hartel (2007) were making to the LIS field as a whole, with a call for more work on the "higher things" in information behavior research. A numinous experience in a museum is a "higher thing," a profound experience that "transcends the daily grind," (Kari & Hartel, 2007, p. 1131). A mystical (flow) experience is part of the overall human experience, the human capacity to take in the world and process what it means. It is one of those positive, extraordinary experiences about which Kari and Hartel (2007) seek to know more about; it is internal, personal, and subjective. This study, using descriptive qualitative methods, suggests that with regard to the higher things in human information research, we are only at the tip of the iceberg.

Otto, the originator of the concept of numen, said that the numinous presents itself as something "wholly other," something basically and totally different. He was both right and wrong. He was correct in that it is felt by an individual as something *wholly other*, something unique and special. But he was wrong about implying it is unusual. True, we do not have statistics about how many people on average have a numinous experience in the museum, but the combination of this study and the literature on aesthetic experiences (extending back to the ancient Greeks) shows that this is a *normal human experience*. The mistake has been with its recent association solely with art or "beauty" (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990), not with the fact that it exists as a phenomenon,

with common structures and an essence. Likewise, it is a part of the normal range of human experience, as are other mystical experiences (James, 1958).

Over 20 years ago, Prince (1985) concluded a study on museum visitor motivation by asserting that "the 'dreamland of the museum' is thus a potentially rich area for further research" (p. 248). Even at that time, Prince understood the multi-dimensional and complex nature of the museum experience. Since then, the ebb and flow of museum user research has crossed into and out of the realm of affect and perception. This study supports the need, after all these years, for more work on non-rational avenues of experience—into the "dreamlands" of the museum. The numinous experience, a kind of flow, a mystical state of consciousness, is indeed an intriguing and important encounter that happens in the museum. The originator of the flow concept, Csikszentmihalyi (1981), affirms that museums should be incorporated into a life-management strategy, acknowledging that cultural institutions are places of undiscovered psychological significance used by some to create meaningful order out of life's confusing changes. The museum, in this respect, is more than an information system (Buckland, 1991a); it is a source of meaning for people, a place for poetry, dreams and inspiration.

At the beginning of this study, I indicated that the museum's purpose is currently being questioned, that its foundations are unclear, and that there is a shift away from the object as its central starting point. The current research demonstrated that the museum object—from the user's perspective—is still located centrally in a museum encounter, as the center of an intricate and dynamic web that involves a total transaction between the object and the person encountering the object. The story that is ultimately elicited from

this encounter is more than narrative, more than physical: it is a lived experience that involves imagination, thoughtfulness, spirit, and feelings as much as it does knowledge and information. The numinous encounter with a museum object is a holistic mystical experience, a form of flow, and results in positive associations and connections on a humanistic level that are deeply meaningful and enduring. These are the kinds of things that speak to the value of the museum as a necessary component of contemporary life.

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Appendix A

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

The School of Library and Information Science at Emporia State University supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research and related activities. The following information is provided so that you can decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time, and that if you do withdraw from the study, you will not be subjected to reprimand or any other form of reproach. Likewise, if you choose not to participate, you will not be subjected to reprimand or any other form of reproach.

This study is an exploration of deeply moving museum experiences with historic museum objects. In-depth interviews of each participant are the method of acquiring data and should take at least an hour but can last as long as the participant cares to share information. The interviews will be taped and later transcribed. No identifying data about the participant will be shared.

The contributions of participants, by providing full descriptions of their experiences of connection with material objects can help contribute to our overall understanding of why people visit museums, what makes them important, and how society values historic material.

Any inquiries about this project can be directed to the researcher, Kiersten F. Latham at klatham@emporia.edu or 785-819-2070. If any problems occur, you can contact her or the SLIM office in Emporia, KS at 800-552-4770.

"I have read the above statement and have been fully advised of the procedures to be used in this project. I have been given sufficient opportunity to ask any questions I had concerning the procedures and possible risks involved. I understand the potential risks involved and I assume them voluntarily. I likewise understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without being subjected to reproach."

______________________________ ______________________

Interviewee Date

______________________________ ______________________

Researcher Date

Appendix B

Interview Probes

Can you call up the scene and imagine what is around you and what is happening to you? (at that moment in time)

Could you give me a concrete instance of that, a time that actually happened, with as much detail as you can give?

It sounds as though you had a pretty strong reaction?

Take me into the moment so I can experience it.

Could you walk me through it?

Could you tell me what happened, from the beginning?

Can you remember what it felt like internally?

What was going on in your head? What were you thinking about?

Do you remember the first time you saw it?

How did it make you feel? What were you experiencing?

What response did you have physically or emotionally?

What did you feel in your body?

Tell me about how that works?

What did that mean to you?

How was that important to you?

What do you think that is?

Looking back now, could you say how long that incident stayed with you?

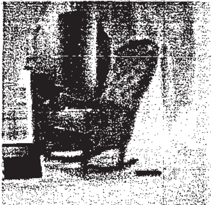
Are there other occurrences? Is this one different from previous or subsequent others?

Do you seek them out?

Appendix C

E-blast to Members of The Henry Ford

Tell us about your experiences with Museum objects



Dear Member,

Have you ever felt a unique or special moment while viewing a Museum object, an encounter that seemed deeply moving or particularly mysterious, or out of the ordinary?

The *Henry Ford Museum* staff is working on a new master plan and is interested in your experiences and insights. As part of this, we are connecting with a current dissertation research project looking at people's transcendent experiences with Museum objects. We would like to find volunteers who would be willing to tell their stories about their experiences.

Volunteers will not be identified and their interviews will be confidential. A small gift will be provided as recompense for your time.

Please contact Donna Braden, Lead Experience Developer at **The Henry Ford**, if you are interested in participating in this fascinating research project or have questions.

Please click once on the following email address and send an email including your preferred contact method (phone number or email address).

donnab@TheHenryFord.org

Thank you very much. We hope to hear from you soon!

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Appendix D

Meaning Unit Analysis Sample

LOCUS	MARY (first step in analysis, prior to pre-theme step)	Meaning Units
& Descrip	*Interview on 10/14/08 at The Henry Ford* *Started transcription 10/29/08; proofed 11/6/08; analysis begun 11/6/08*	
	[nu=not understandable; ov=overlap of talk]	
	K: In your email, um, you told me about your experience with Lincoln's Rocking Chair. So, if you want to kind of go over that again for me so that we can start from that point and talk [ov] about it.	
	M: Ok, um, from the time I was a little girl, I should back up—I grew up in Dearborn, uh, when I got married I stayed in Dearborn for 5 years and, and started my family. So, I always lived just a few minutes away from, ah, what is now known as The Henry Ford, and whether it was a school field trip or my parents bringing me here or a combination of both, I soon learned that I loved this place, but particularly, *every time I saw* Lincoln's Rocking chair, it really did something special and deep for me. Um, even looking at a picture of it today as I walked through the hallway, seeing the tattered, stained, ripped, deep rose color of that—with the wood trim—just transports me, in a manner of speaking, back to that era of history. And ever since I first, um, interacted with that beautiful artifact, um, Lincoln became my favorite president, uh, I ended up majoring in social studies at, ah, Eastern, before I became a teacher. And most of the concentration was early American History, with that degree. And I'm sure that this was starting point for it, it was the catalyst. Um, I love teaching history. I'm a third grade teacher currently and I have to say that I'm very sad that we're moving away from teaching history in the public schools. I am watching it happen.	Special and deep reaction Transports to another time Catalyst
	K: Oh no.	
	M: Twenty years of teaching, my children all going through, uh, local schools as well. We don't have time because we're putting so much emphasis on the reading and the writing, both which are very important, and the math. Children don't' know American history. So, it's been my personal [laugh] project to keep that going and, uh, it's not just on, you know, Lincoln's birthday in February, but any chance I get, my books, my centers, when we have time, I'm, you know, reading things about, for example, Lincoln and some of the other early presidents. Ah, um, and letting them know how important this was and how it helped shape history. I've been very blessed because I still live close to the Henry Ford and I've been a member for years and years and I can come any time I want, to look at Lincoln's Chair or anything else. It's surprising how many children, when we came on a field trip here, last year from my school, said it was the first time they had ever been here. I felt sad for them. And I made sure I talked it up and that they knew this was a special place. And when I	

	get my emails about special events here, I just broadcast it to the whole class.	
	K: [ov] yea!	
	M: It doesn't hurt that one of my very best friends from college has worked here for many years. And so I have a special, you know, link that way too. But, regarding the artifact of Lincoln's Chair and many other related things of that period of history, I really believe that if you are a voracious reader of history and you see an item that literally pops right off the page, of whatever you've been reading, it not only solidifies in your mind—the dates, the time, you know, the dress, the costumes, the political environment—it really, uh, spurs you on to reading and studying more. And ever since I was young and found out that I loved that period of history, I became a very, yo'ow, very frequent reader of civil war books, when I was first in college as a young girl. And to this day, anywhere I am if I can especially find a Lincoln book, I pick it up! So, it's no coincidence that this launched me into that love of history and even today, you know, perusing my book with his quotes that I got from a dear friend for my birthday, um, it just, it feels like I'm back there, either as a child first learning about that period of history, as a college student taking courses, certainly as the teacher I am today, you know…	Relationship w/reading "POPS" off page Feels like she's "back there"
	K: What is "back there," do you mean back in the museum? M: No, it takes me back there in time, in a manner of speaking, Um, I just, I just love learning about early American history and, as I say, enjoy Williamsburg and some of the other things, Plymouth Plantation and things like that, from the different periods. But, it's as though for that few minutes that I'm exposed to that artifact that I literally can picture, I can feel, just it's almost like a physical feeling, like, WOW, yeaaahh, that's how it would've looked or sounded, and it brings all the things from the printed page that I've had the, uh, you know, the pleasure of reading over the years, it just brings it alive at that moment when I'm viewing the item.	Takes her "back in time" Exposure to artifact elicits physical feeling Brings it alive at that moment
	K: Do you remember the first time you saw the Chair and felt those things?	
	M: I think it used to be in the Logan County Courthouse [I confirmed that it was]. I'm thinking they've changed the location, I'm not sure. I would think that that might be legitimate. Um, I don't remember if that was the first time I saw it but I remember when I was in that courthouse, and if I'm correct and memory serves me, and I saw it there, it jumped out at me, so to speak, in a different way. I don't know why but maybe because having learned, you know, that, Lincoln was a lawyer and of course, he came from such humble roots and, and did all those many jobs that he had. And he worked his way up. Maybe somehow seeing that, the culmination of how his life ended when it was in the courtroom, which made me remember where he came from, you know the roots he had before he became president. It seems like there was an interfacing of those two things and I hope I'm not	Chair jumped out at her in different way "interfacing" of Chair in Courthouse setting

	just imagining that [laugh] but it's a very vivid memory so I think it was [ov]	Vivid
	K: [ov] that's what's important, is that you have the memory. Really, memory is important to…You say it "jumped out at you a different way." A different way than inside the museum?	
	M: Then, then it we-, had been in the past, in the museum and you know again—maybe it was a special event that it was there. But if that is correct and that is where I saw it that time, it would have been when I was an adult and it was different to me because since it wasn't—I hate to use the word just—since it wasn't just in the building housing the artifacts, it was out with the dirt, you know in the area that had the dirt roads, and the original buildings and other, um, you know, other things on display from that time period, it made it much more realistic and that way it made it come alive to me more.	Context—wasn't just in a building Made it come alive
	K: In your mind, that's your first memory of having that experience where you said your were, where you were "transported" by it?	
	M: I think so. That was the strongest experience, I'm sure.	
	K: Describe to me, take me to that day, if you can, and explain to me, from beginning to end, that experience with the chair.	
	M: Well, I, I, I'll um back up a step and tell you that I am known in my family, I have a notorious reputation for lingering when it comes to anything museum or history related. And I'm the type that reads every word on every sign and that sort of thing. I remember lingering and just *looking* at it and literally—this may sound strange but— literally, feeling the butterflies, literally feeling a physical reaction. Yeah. You know again, I think its because I just love that type of learning so much and, uh, its been an important part of my life but somehow seeing it *that* day there was a real need to linger more than I normally would, even after having seen it since I was a little girl. I'm almost positive that I had, uh, at least one of my children with me, uh, if not, couple. And um in that sense, as a mother and as a teacher there may have been also, a connecting, of, you know, generations in history, thinking this is what I've seen and I've always taken you to see this and, you know, kinda that thought—are you feeling what I'm feeling, almost…	Physical feeling—butterflies Discussing it with her children
	K: [ov] So, you spoke to them?	
	M: I, I'm sure that I did. I, I always do in these kind of situations. And, um, yes, you know, looking, wwww- the um, descriptive language would have been a definite part it—"are you noticing" or "do you see the bloodstains? Or the tatteredness(?)" and "can you imagine that that's where he sat?" you know. And I love reading about the aftermath of the assassination with John Wilkes Booth and um, Ford Theatre and the book that I've been reading recently, uh, has been talking about you know the theatre itself and the pandemonium and the chaos that happened in Ford Theatre after the shooting	Discussing Chair w/her children

	occurred. And there's just so much out there I just almost wanna [laugh] take the parents of my students sometimes and say, "would you make sure they get this" " would you make sure that you bring them and they see it?" So, for me, it's just a, um, a very involved experience, its very emotional for me	Want to spread the 'joy' to students Emotional experience
	K: Emotional in what way? Can you give me more description? M: Ummm, it makes me very excited, it makes me feel very alive because, you know I do enjoy this part of my life so much with the study of history. It makes me feel very sad as well. I think there's a gamut of emotions because, um, since it's brought to the forefront of my mind that, you know, this is not just something you are taught in school or read about. This really happened. You tend to dig deeper with your thoughts. So, emotions, its, its' almost a giddiness with me when I see this kind of stuff, um, I just love it [laugh].	Gets excited Feels Alive Feels Sad too (Gamut of emotions) This is Real; makes you dig deeper mentally (conjure)
	K: And, what came first—the reading of the books about Lincoln or seeing the Chair?	
	M: Oh boy, I'm, I'm going to guess that it was the reading. Um, because, I, well, I was raised in Dearborn public schools. We were literally cutting edge many years ago and I had an excellent education. My guess would be that some wonderful teacher or teachers really inspired me to, um, find out more and, you know, enjoying that component of school. It, um, really got me excited to research, even as a young kid. I know the types of books I often read, even in 5th or 6th grade would be historic or even historical fiction. Um, I, sometimes feel like it's a waste of time to read just a novel for pleasure, unless it's historical [laugh] cuz I just, you know, that seed was planted many years ago, so. But, I do think that um, it was the reading first and then the artifact itself, just brought it, you know, so much more alive to me.	Reading then seeing artifact brought it alive
	K: So, that day that we're talking about where it was in the courthouse, you said?	
	M: um-hmm. [made a face or gesture that showed she wasn't sure] [laugh]	
	K: Ok, let's just pretend like it was, no matter what [laugh]. It was in the courthouse. Um, tell me—since I couldn't be there and since I didn't experience it—tell me what was around you at that time. What was going on?	
	M: Um, there was a docent, or whatever they're called here giving a description, that we listened to it first about Lincoln's, uh, days as a lawyer in the courthouse. And, um, I, I know, I'm positive that it was crowded and I was near the back of, you know the court, actual, where they would have practiced law was here and I was at the very back of the courthouse, near, where I'm visualizing the glass case with the Chair. And, um, although I pride myself as being a good listener when people are speaking, I know my attention was very dramatically drawn to looking at the Chair. And, uh, after uh people started dispersing and the docent was done, I stayed. You know, who knows if it	Lots of activity around, crowded Attention drawn dramatically to Chair

	was you know 5 minutes, 10 minutes. But it was enough time that I could soak it in. I need to soak it in with my eyes and, um, just feel it, so, that day was…	Time to Soak it in with her eyes
	K: What does it feel like when you soak it in?	
	M: [sigh] It feels like I'm alone in the room; it doesn't matter how many other people are there, because I'm just enjoying the experience of being reminded of our great moments, or not-so-great moments, in that case of course, of American History, and, you know I'm very patriotic. I love my country and, and that for me just kinda goes along with who I am and um, but I can get, like I say kind of lost in the moment and then I get the "hey, mom" or you know, "hey, [mary], it's time to move on" So, uh, [laugh] I'm sure that's what occurred that day, I can visualize it.	Feels alone in room no matter how many people present Patriotic Goes along with who she is Lost in the moment
	K: You talk about it as if you've had it happen with other things.	
	M: yeah [smiling]	
	K: Have you had that [nu] with something other than the Chair?	
	M: Um,	
	K: anywhere.	
	M: anywhere. It happens to me in Williamsburg,Virgina. Yeah.	
	K: Really.	
	M: Yeah. I've been there, uh, maybe, four times, and um, I could go back like every year there too.	
	K: Anything specific there that does it to you?	
	M: Let me think. [pause] mmmmm…yes! Um, I, I'll try and describe this. The places, the boarding houses, you know where real people that you studied about and read about used to actually pay their couple of cents, you know whatever, and ah, and sleep up there in the crowded conditions and sharing beds and not taking baths and [laugh] all that stuff. I guess for me the visualization that a real person sat in that chair or slept in that bed or you know was in, you know, drinking ale in that tavern, you know, on the pew- with the pewter mug and the plates n' stuff. It just, the only way to say this is it just POPS it right out at me and, I'm just excited even talking about it. [laugh]	Real people, doing real activities Visualing a real person POPS out at her Excited
	K: Me too. You keep saying "pops it out" and in your email you wrote, "brought to life for me" and in 'to life' you put quotes around to life. What did you mean by that? M: Um, I think [pause; laugh] at the risk of sounding a little strange here, I, I think it's actually, like, at that moment I just think what if I was the fly on the wall and I was there observing. It brings it to lif—from the pages. And it brings it, just in a sense, to life for me, like I can really picture what it might have been like to literally live at that time, so, um…	 Wishes could observe that moment in time Brings it to Life Can literally picture life in past
	K: Do you try to have these experiences?	
	M:[ov] No.	

	K: Do you seek them out?	
	M: Well, I seek out going where there's history. Um, I, I was very fortunate because, uh, years ago when I was a young teenager, it was unheard of for people to go on expensive vacations. But I was lucky, my mom worked locally here and she saved her money to take us on vacations. And by the time I was 18, I had been to all 48 continental states. And had, in some more than once. Well, the kind of trips that my family went on where almost always to historic spots [laugh]	
	K: [laugh]	
	M: sound familiar? [laugh]	
	K: yes, I love it.	
	M: And then when I grew up and married and had my 3 daughters, I thought we only took them to about 42 or 43 but they corrected me and said, mom, it was 46. So, um, anyway, my husband now needs to get me to Alaska and Hawaii and I'll be all set, in all 50. My experience has been, from the time I was 13 years old, seeking out, because my mother sought out, uh, places that she wanted her children—makes me want to choke up—I'm very grateful for that and I'm sure you can understand, very fortunate. And, um, so I, I, had an experience that many people will never have, their whole life. And, uh, my best friend, who happened to—she knows me so well she bought me this Lincoln book, she had the same experience—her parents made an effort and spent the time and money to take their 3 kinds around and uh, my daughters now living all over the county and out of the country, uh, that has, you know, going to learn about who you are and where you came from, learning about the evolution of the country, I think allows a person to be very strong in themself and be a risk-taker to a certain degree and be very comfortable with, obviously, with travel and seeking out new experiences. So, even in a peripheral way, I see my museum and village experiences and my traveling to the um historic spots really kind of building up a courage, if you will, in, in myself and my three daughters.	Identity Builds up courage
	K: Does the Chair contribute to that?	
	M: Yes. I, I think that you cannot know where you wanna go if you don't know what your roots are or where you came from. And, I guess in a nutshell that Chair for me symbolizes, you know, this great country and many of the wonderful people that formed it and carved it out. And um I've always been a goal-setter and I always aspire to learning doing trying something new. And I would have to say that there's a foundation. As solid as that Chair is when you look at it—it it's solid, it's carved, heavy carved wood—and a very bold and courageous man sat in that and he um, you know, really withstood a lot and uh went through such a tough time in our history. And was a good man and I think that Chair embodies—I never thought of it before but as I'm explaining—that Chair	Chair—symbolic of country, helps with identity Foundation (solid chair/symbol) Chair embodies what's

	embodies a lot of what I feel is important in life and a lot of what I think our country has been and has stood for. So, again, with that as a solid foundation, and having the tradition, having the family value of coming to this place ever since I was a little girl, and the memories of taking my children from the time they were tiny, that tradition cannot be underestimated. There is a bond, my family---this is a bond for my family, so. Good memories, having taught my children things, two of my children went on to be in education. One is a lawyer herself. Who knows what coming to a place like this contributes to a person's life?	important in life Tradition, family values, good childhood memories, family bond Effect on people's lives
	K: give me tingles.	
	M: [laugh]	
	K: What would happen if the Chair hadn't been in your life? What would be the difference?	
	M: I really believe that I would not have, um, [pause], hmmmm. Instead of doing my homework at Michigan State as a freshman, I would not have been reading every Civil War book I could get my hand on. I don't' even think that tied in with the class I had, I don't know. I don't know that I would've ever majored in history slash sociology, because, of course, that's another component, the sociology of what we're talking about. That's the other thing that I had many classes in. If that Chair had not been there—I don't want to sound too cliché here—I really believe I would be a different person today. I don't' think my path would have been the same. I don't' think, you know, without that Chair, without a place like, you know the Henry Ford Museum that treasures and values and puts the time effort and money into things like this. I don't think I would have been as excited about pursuing, um, historical reading, and, uh, you know you feel in certain ways you're a bit of an expert in a few areas of that as you read a lot, and, it's exciting. I don't' think that's valued enough in society.	Chair caused her to be interested in history Would be a different person if Chair hadn't been in her life: -career -excitement -hobby (reading)
22:11	K: So, if, even though the information was available to you through books, something about the Chair makes it different? M: Yes! [emphatic]. Again, getting back to that, 'makes it come alive.' You can read and read and read and visualize….although if there's a book made on a, I mean a movie made off of a book, I don't like to see the movie usually, because I kinda like they way I visualize. But that's if it's just a novel that 's not historical. But if it's historic, I want to see it. When I was at Monticello, many years ago, they were doing a, a dig, the day we were there, when our kids were there…	Makes it come alive
	K: [nu]	
	M: [nu] Oh my gosh, and those shards of things that not only were on display, as you walk through— I think there was a tunnel thing that had things on display in the glass—but to actually see that they were doing it as I was there, that archaeological component is—that's another thing	Seeing it with your eyes is

	where you just say, 'yeah, I could read about it, somebody could tell me about it, but to see it with your eyes…it's like feasting on it, you know, and, and yes- I thought you were going to say, what if they closed all the museums, I was gonna start freaking just at the very thought [laugh]	different than reading or being told Feasting on it
	K: [laugh]	
	M: Because obviously the preservation of, of our country, who we are and people that came before us is so critical.	
	K: You talk of Lincoln's Chair, and clearly everyone would agree with you that that's an important artifact…	
	M: right.	
	K: What about artifacts that aren't so obvious. Have you ever experienced these kinds of tings with something that's a little less obvious? M: [sigh] Uh, yeah, yeah, I really kind of have this a lot now that I think about it. You mentioned DIA. Uh, when I'm there---even when I'm looking at a period of history that is not top on my list, such as Egyptian—that's just never been my favorite—um [laugh]. I know we all have that forte' as far as what we like to study. But, anytime I look at any of those things, yeah. Things from other countries, you know, French period, and so, uh, I, I think I have it a lot.	
	K: Yeah. Do you feel as if it's the same thing as when the Chair 'transports' you? [nu/ov]	
	M: It is, it is, really. I, yeah.	
	K: Do you get the same physical reactions?	
	M: [pause] Not as much. No, not as much.	
	K: What kind of physical reaction do you have, say, let's—can you think of an Egyptian piece? Do you have one in your head we can talk about?	
	M: Uhhhh, one of the mummy cases, let's say.	
	K: Ok, let's talk about that one.	
	M: Um-hm. Actually, with that one is scares me [laugh]. So, it's still an emotional reaction. So, um, I guess, you know, one would learn from this, from what I'm seeing(saying?) that there is an emotional *hook* for me, regardless of what I'm looking at and, um, but if it's something that's more to my liking from the standpoint of something I've spent more time with or studied more, it's a more intense reaction.	-Mummy scares her -Emotional hook there, regardless of what looking at -having an interest in it, makes it more intense
24:44	K: Do you know a lot about Egyptian time period? M: Um. No. Uh, you know, somewhat but not enough, probably to have the appreciation, of it, and I imagine if I had more appreciation, I might have more intense reactions, or responses to some of them, the pieces.	

	K: If we were to compare your reaction to the Chair to this reaction to the mummy, would you say they are equivalent, or…?	
	M: [pause]	
	K: …in quality?	
	M: Um, no. Ah, the, ah [laugh] the little bit more negative or whatever moments with the Egyptian thing, that is something I'm very aware of and then I just kinda go llike woo, you know I don't know if I woulda been comfortable [laugh] with that. Um, but it's not the same, no. It's not the same, no. It's a, I don't know if I'm unusual but, with that Chair, with that period, it's a much more intense, in a positive way, yeah.	Chair (positive & more intense) not same as mummy (negative)
	K: Do you get butterflies with the mummy?	
	M: No. Mmm-mm.	
	K: Um, did it "pop out"?	
	M: uhhhh [pause], No. I, I would have to say, I'm very observant, uh, about detail, color, you know, the etchings, different things, but no, it's more like I'm just observing it, I'm not feeling it.	Observing (mummy) not feeling it (Chair)
	K: oh.	
	M: I would have to say there's a distinct difference that way.	
	K: Yeah, I understand what you mean. That's what I was trying to understand.	
	M: [laugh] Ok.	
	K: So, take me to the boarding house.	
	M: Mmm-hmmm.	
	K: One of the ones—you mentioned houses—but take me to one of the boarding houses at Williamsburg and describe it to me. Describe to me what's happening to you when you're in it and seeing things. And tell me what's around you.	
26:24	M: Well, since I just happened to go a year ago, um, to Williamsburg, it's very fresh in my mind. And I have to say, I have this problem, that if other people don't feel things [laugh] like I do when they see the stuff, I get a little irritated with them. It's kind a like, 'don't you get this?' I have to kinda be aware of that, but we happened to be ups-, we were on a little tour, and, uh, we were upstairs, very narrow, you know, hallway. And there were a couple of rooms, and the docent-type was, um, explaining so-and-so slept here and you know it was known to share a bed with this person and it cost this amount and so you're hearing all of that. But, I'm just looking, thinking, I wish I could've been in that room, listening to a conversation, with those people. Or, seeing how things looked when they got off their horse, you know, and tied it up in front of Miss Sarah's, you know, like Sarah Jordan type thing, you know here. Um, it makes, the response I get, it just makes	Wishes could have been back in time with people One-on-one experience, even in

	me wish I could have met those people, so. Anyway. And again, I can be walking with other people but it's a very one-on-one experience, for me at that moment. Even though there might be a crowd and you're moving along quickly [nu].	presence of someone else
	K: You said 'we,'	
	M: It was my husband and myself.	
	K: I guess you wouldn't have little kids…last year.	
	M: No, no.	
	K: [laugh]	
	M: And no grandchildren yet, so….but they'll be coming here [laugh]	
	K: Ok, I'm going to do another comparison…	
	M: ok.	
	K: We talk about the Chair and they way you felt with the Chair, and you have the boarding house. Is that similar or different and in what way?	
	M: [pause]	
	K: those reactions	
29:03	M: Um, [pause]. It's similar because of the periods in history, because I also love Revolutionary war history and so that's like, you know, a close second so-to-speak to Civil War history for me. And, if war's can be my favorite—that's kind of a strange way to say it—so if it were something else, I might not have had a similar experience but because I love the Revolutionary War period and as I say, I love Williamsburg, um, it was uh, it's it's similar in that I'm excited but it's, it's *not* the same because when I look at that Chair, for whatever reason, or reasons, it just embodies, it just embodies Lincoln and that period and what was going on and that's how it comes to life for me. That, that reaction with that Chair is just really different for me.	Similar reactions bc loves periods of history Excited is similar but Chair is different Chair embodies period Comes to life for her (chair)
	K: Really? M: Yeah.	
	K: Do you think it's unique?	
	M: [sigh] You mean like comparing myself with other people, do they feel it? K: No, I mean for you, for you, unique for you. Is it the only time you felt that way about something in a museum.	
	M: Yes. Did that….	
	K: [nu] unique?	
	M: It's very unique to me.	Reaction to Chair is unique
	K: Um, what's interesting too is the boarding house is a building and the Chair is an artifact so I'm	

	curious about your reaction to the artifacts in the boarding house.	
	M: Maybe it's a furniture thing? And I'm not trying to be silly here. Um, but period furniture is very interesting to me. I don't' deal in antiques I don't have period pieces in my home, but um, I do love looking at it and studying it, you know. And, um, in the Governor's Palace for example, in Williamsburg and so on, just all the homes here, just, I love to stand there until I'm scooted along and look at what did their dining room table look like, their sideboard? What, you know, um, uh, little, you know nick-nacks did they have and lamps, and wallpaper and stuff like that. So, it's possible that there's a bit of a furniture thing with me. I don't' know but that was just kinda jumpin' out at me right now.	
30:44	K: What do you think of the, sort of mini furniture exhibit here in the museum? Do you know what I'm talking about [nu] ?	
	M: That doesn't do much for me. I don't know why. I, uh, I respond much more intensely in the Village than I do in the Museum as a rule. There's another item here in the Museum that I have a very profound reaction to, that is, the um—Woah, look at that! Oooo—the car that Kennedy was in when he was shot. Um, the age I was, was very very traumatic for me. I was very impressionable. I think I was 13 when we was assassinated. Now, it's interesting, there's an assassination theme going on here, the Lincoln Chair and the other [laugh]. But anyway(?) [laugh]	Profound reaction (Kennnedy car) but different Due to actual personal past experience, re-lives
	K: [laugh]	
31:37	M: [ov/nu] It's your fault, I'm not lookin' for this connection. But I was thinking of that before I came over today, you know, in case you had said, is there anything else? That one literally transports me because I can go back in MY life and remember. And you know you say, ok, "where were you when it happened?" It was very traumatic for me and so that, seeing that, you know, and remembering what teacher's class I was walking into in junior high school here in Dearborn, when he announced it, you know that Kennedy was shot and stuff. Um, and I'm sure that's very typical for a lot of people when you see some of those things that were very, you know, huge in history. Um, yeah, but other than that, probably not. So, the furniture thing, maybe that's not really of a, that's more of a tangent that kinda looks like a connection, because, yeah. It doesn't really. I like doll-houses. That's furniture too. Got some good dollhouses out there too, but…	Literally transports—re-lives
	K: Have you ever been to Lincoln Museum in Springfield?	
	M: Ah, glad you asked. I was writing about this, because part of our writing program teachers are really encouraged to be writing at the same time their students are. I decided, since this was on my mind, that I would write about my experience, you know, with Lincoln's Chair. And I went on to mention that a year ago Easter, we were literally on our way to Springfield. That was the blizzard at	

	Easter time, I don't know if you remember, it was, close the roads. We barely made it safely off of the expressway. Ended up in Paw Paw Michigan at the Super 8, because we could crawl up, you know, the exit. And I wrote to myself, this was not just a mere—and I read it to my students too and they go, woah, you're a good writer [nu] kind of exciting. Anyway, I said, it was not just mere disappointment that my husband and I got jipped out of a nice trip; that we ended up having to, you know, not get refunded on the, uh, the reservation and so on. It was, because I was not going to be able to be in Springfield! And to learn more things about Lincoln. And I remember writing, to view, to hear, to see, to learn. It was not going to be able to extend my passion as a life-long learner—period. But especially about, you know, historic things. And I was bummed. I was bummed. And so we do want to get there.	
	K: You didn't get there? Even after the…	
	M: No, we didn't…	
	K: …after it calmed down?	
	M: No, it was pretty bad still and we decided just to turn around and go home. It was so scary. We were in such a white-out. We literally didn't think we were gonna survive, so.	
	K&M: [brief unrelated…]	
	K: Back to your email.	
	M: Mmm-hmm.	
	K: Um, in there you described having a 'sensation' every time you see the Chair. Can you describe the 'sensation'?	
	M: I think what I meant by that is the physical feeling kind of in the stomach area, you know, butterflies or little bit of a tremor, something like that. It's just like, WOW!, you know, in capital letters with a million exclamation marks after it. Um, yeah.	-Sensation—physical feeling (in stomach, butterflies, tremor) -WOW!!!!!!! Experience
	K: Is that every time you see it?	
	M: Yes.	
	K: Really?	
	M: Yeah. Even when I looked at the picture of it in the…cabinet.	Physical reaction every time
	K: Even the picture does it?	Even in picture of Chair
	M: Oh yeah. Even the picture. Because I looked at the picture and, I thought, what a coincidence, I just happened to look up and there it was. I wasn't trying to find it.	
	K: [makes spooky noise in background]	
	M: Yes. And I thought, Ok, Mary, so get in. Just kinda, just kinda center your thoughts on what it is you want to describe. And, I see the fabric [laugh], something about the fabric! You know? And	Fabric triggers feelings, thoughts, imagination

	seeing where it's worn, knowing that, that something gets worn because a real person is in it. Although of course it's not as intense as when I see it in person. But I do still have the reaction. Even if I see a book of Lincoln sitting on a bookshelf, I get excited. So, it's gotta be, it's gotta be having learned, but particularly having viewed, you know, as a young person.	Evidence of real person shows in artifact Even book on subject causes it
36:40	K: What would happen if you could touch the Chair?	
	M: [inspired breath] I'd probably go, like "AHHHH!" I'd probably freak out. Um, I would, I would probably think next to, um, you know, having my 3 children born healthy, that would be like the most exciting experience as far as on a, you know, physical level in my life.	2nd most exciting experience in life—to touch Chair
	K: Touching the Chair? M: yeah!	
	K: Why?	
	M: Because, it's like, woah, you know, somebody's [nu] reading it in the book, and you go, that's *there*! That was then, that's there! I mean, I guess I have kind of a very distant reverent view of it. By my response, now I guess that's what I'm noticing. It would be like, you gotta be kidding me, you know. It's not the same, maybe, as for some people, touching the Pope's garment or something. If he's driving by in the Pope-mobile, you know, something like that. But, something that, to some people some things are, like a real 'wow' experience, so.	Presence of real thing amplifies reading about it Reverent view of Chair
	K: Have you ever thought of that, would you like to touch it?	
	M: Sure. I've never thought of it. Never thought of it…	
	K: [ov]…first time? M: First time.	
	K: [nu]	
	M: You know, because see, I'm a very rule-oriented person and when I see something in glass or roped off, you know, just [laugh] no.	
	K: [nu; something about my daughter]	
	M: [laugh] And you can't get her to change? [laugh]	
	K: Amazing. An [nu] with rules.	
	M: Oh boy.	
	K: [unrelated banter]	
	K: Ok, so let's do kind of a little experiment.	
	M: OK.	
	K: Let's say that I want you to make a movie about your experience with this Chair. And you're in charge of the special effects.	

	M: Ok?	
	K: So, if you could, make that movie and describe to me what the special effects are, coming from you—what your experience is of the Chair. How would you play that out?	
	M: How would I want somebody to portray that with special effects?	
	K: How would you want the audience to see what that Chair does to you?	
	M: Uhhm. Special effects would be…somewhere, you know, panned in the background or in some lead-in, would have to be, um…Well, since this is my wish, I'll explain it [laugh] the way [laugh]…	
38:56	K: It's all yours!	
	M: You know, little girl, avid, you know, hanging on every word, to the teacher teaching about history. And, uh, you know, in a school and you know kind of panning forward where books, um, movies, uh, visiting places—where that's all part of this, it's all just leading up to this *ongoing experience*. Because obviously, um, that's what I have and that would be what I'd want to portray and convey to my audience. That seeing something need not be, or in my opinion, should not be, just *looking*—to look is not to see. And I would want to try and get the point across of how important it is to have, um, life's experience, really all come together, kinda synthesize into what an incredible, you know, response could be enjoying these beautiful places such as a museum, that, uh, have these things. And so, special effects would probably be some dramatic music, you know, leading up to. And then just whatever pure joy would be—maybe fireworks?! Like they often have here at the Village. Um, one of our favorite times to come is, uh, 4th of July. We do that every year, and, and it's exciting. It's just, it's a celebration. And to me, I guess viewing that Chair, being here and allowing myself t- that's a gift I give myself. Allowing myself to have that pleasure, it's a celebration to me of a lot of the good experiences I've had in my life. Because a lot of good experiences have been surrounding the trips, the vacations, the educational experiences, that wonderful people in my life have, you know, provided for me. And, so, obviously, there's a lot wrapped up to me. That Chair symbolizes more than just, even mere history.	-importance of past experiences, tied up w/ encounter -"ongoing experience" -not just looking "to look is not to see" -life's experiences come together in response to places/things -pure joy -seeing Chair is gift to self -seeing Chair is celebration of good things in her life -a lot wrapped up in it
	K: What would be the perspective [nu]?	
41:10	M: Oh, perspective would be, um, I guess kinda what my paradigm is in how I approach life in this country, that you have to be very careful to not just be so engrossed in what is happening currently or looking too much ahead that we do not look back at, enjoy, um, k-, rediscover, keep discovering or re-discovering things about the past, because, you know, as I said earlier, you know, who are you if you don't know kind of where you came from as far as, you know, um, values, and morals and traditions and just kind of what it means to be—I won't I won't say an American because we have so many wonderful cultures that are now a part of our American landscape—but, um, I think it's	[misunderstood my question; "perspective"]

	very critical that the perspective be [pause; sigh] kind of advocated, I guess is the word. That, don't just get self-absorbed or so busy with your day-to-day that you don't' take time out to really see and appreciate what is all about you. And, and what is part of, you know, who, what you are about, I guess. Little poetic there, but…	
	K: Do you, Have you ever talked about what you are talking about with me to anybody else?	
	M: Never. To this extent, ever. And, um [laugh] frankly, it makes me a bit emotional. Because, um, I've always wanted to work here. And I never have. And, ah, it makes me feel like you really have to be true to yourself and know what floats your boat and what really, you know, kind of excites you and what your passions are. And it's very obvious to me that this is more of a *passion* of mine than I even realized, even though I knew how important history is and educational trips are to me and, uh, makes me even more unhappy that we're losing the time to be teaching it in the schools…	Talking about this makes her emotional
	K: [nu]	
	M: Yeah, yeah. But, no I never have. Um, my daughters know, they know mom's like, oh, just, she's at the Village again? [laugh] Texting me, 'you're there again?' you know. But, um, no, and as I say, going back to what I said earlier as well, I don't understand—I mean, it's new, I have to just know this—but I don't know what it's like to NOT feel excited to be at Mount Vernon or anywhere else or…I was so fortunate to, first time in my life, go to Europe at Christmas because my one daughter lives southwest of London now. And, it was like, Woah! You know, [nu] got off the plane at Heathrow and I said, 'all my life I've wanted to come. I'm here!' And the tears started. And so that kind of, uh, and I know you know what I mean—that interfacing with it, you know?	-don't know what it's like NOT to feel excited about historical things -"interfacing"
	K: Did you have any kind of experiences that were similar to the Chair in Europe? [ov/nu] M: Ummmmmmm, let me think. Uhhhhm. [pause]. Well, I, at the Tower of London [laugh]. I've read many, um, historic, historical fiction novels, um, set in England over many years. And so when I saw that—and then especially when I came back and continued to read my wonderful Phillippa Gregory historical stuff about queens and kings…	
	K: [nu]	
	M: Oh my gosh, I was like, you gotta be kidding me. I was just [laugh] [standing? there?]	
	K: [laugh]	
	M: You know, so yes I guess I would have to say I did. I, um, I think probably the Tower of London was the only place I really had it, but I know I will have it when some day I get to Paris and I might be real fortunate, we're hoping to go at Easter, when—before my daughter moves back to America. And I know I'll have it there because I took 9 years French in school—haven't remembered a darn thing lately but…	

	K: You will.	
	M: Good, I hope so. And so, I know that I need to have those experiences in Europe because I have them here and I have them here when I'm reading the books, looking at the pictures. I even was able to teach French for 3 or 4 months when I was a substitute teacher years ago. And although, thank goodness it was elementary and I could handle it. But even when I would show, you know, the documentary things and hear the language and you would do the role play in the café and so on. It was like, 'oh my gosh' [whispered]. So, see, and I had great schooling. I think that makes a diff—I had excellent schooling. And so I've been very turned on about [nu?] things, you know?	
	K: Don't you wish every body could grow up like you?	
45:59	M: Yes, Yes. And actually, to know you want to be a teacher from the time you're 5, like I was…	
	K: Wow.	
	M: I mean really. I knew. I played in the basement with my chalkboard and I knew. [laugh], so. Took me a long time but I finally did it. [laugh]	
	K: When you were at the Tower of London, you said "I had it there" and "I know when I go to Paris, I'm gonna have it there" M: Oh yeah, so what's it? [laugh]	
	K: What's 'it'? [at same time]	
	M: I would get mad at my students if they didn't' explain…Um, the sense of total tingly excitement and saying, 'this is what,'—as I mentioned a few minutes ago— 'this is what I've seen, this is what I've heard about, this is what I've learned—but *now*, now *I'm* in the same space with it". So, I guess that proximity is very important to me. And, you know, hence the Chair being so important. If it's something you love, it's just like, you know, family member, when you're closer it sure is different than emailing, you know. And, um, yeah, um [pause]. And there's something else too. Uh, it's like feeling so fortunate, it's like feeling like "I'm so lucky, I'm so fortunate, I'm so blessed, my life is so beautiful that I would be able to have this experience, that I live 30 minutes from the Henry Ford and I can come anytime I want." That—even though I, you know, miss my daughter for 2 years being there, by the time she's done—look at the experience that that opened up for me. Have to go see my daughter, right? So, just happens she's in Europe, you know, I kid about that—so of course, I have to go, you know, to England and France. But, life offers these opportunities, these journeys, these voyages of the heart and mind. We need to take advantage of them.	"it"= total tingly excitement "it"=in the same spot (vs. just reading) -loving it makes it different -higher purpose, deep beautiful feeling (euphoric?) -voyages of heart and mind
	K: Yeah. [pause] Ay. And that makes me think about all those children…[nu]	
	M: Yes.	
	K: You mentioned having "it" in places. As opposed to, with museum objects. Does that mean	

	anything?	
	M: Oh, um, as far as do I find that one tends to give me that more or just? Ok.	
	K: Is there something there?	
	M: Um [pause]. It's the place, it's the whole ambiance, its the environment. That's why I love to wander here the Village. That's why Williamsburg, even though it was literally, you know, 100 degrees last summer, um, and you know, and you're roasting, uh, I didn't care. They give you the fan and just keep walking [laugh]. I soak it up. I soak it up. It's as though—man I didn't realize [laugh] [nu] felt this strongly—it's as though my pores are literally absorbing it for the time I'm there and I always have to talk about it afterwards. I do process, as many women do, you know, verbally. And, uh, I have to talk about it, it's like going to a good movie, and if you don't' discuss it over dinner and in the car on the way home you feel like something's missing. So, um, the places are far more what really gets me. And gets that emotional reaction and then, I think because it opens up my thinking so much then I can observe and enjoy, you know, the items.	-place, whole environment important -soaks it up -pores absorbing it -needs to talk about it afterwards -places "get her" more
49:26	K: The Chair isn't a place?	
	M: Right. That one—and as I keep looking, there on the wall at that one, uh, color, you know, the the jacket [pointing to a jacket behind me on the wall] its not the same but it just keeps reminding me of the color of the Chair, yes, and the fabric. Um, so, I guess with the Chair, it makes me think of the battlefield and the Civil War and what was going on, makes me think of the place—Washington DC, and I, I know that they're refurbishing the Ford Theatre and trying to make it more accessible to children's groups. And I got something recently, we're gonna contribute cuz I say that's so important. And so I need to go there. I don't think I've ever been there. So, when I retire, which might be, you know, a year or two, I need to do that. I owe it to myself to just soak up more of that stuff, you know.	Fabric trigger
	K: When you're looking at the Chair, do you have the 'soaking up' thing? Like you said, just goes into your pores?	
	M: Yes.	
	K: Is that what the Chair is about? M: Yes.	
	K: What happens to it once it goes into your pores?	
	M: [pause] Um. It just makes me very grateful and happy that I have learned so much, that I live in a country that values education, that I've been allowed—as a female—to um you know [sigh] have all my college experiences and be able to of used all that and become the professional I am and be able to, um, infuse, hopefully, many little minds, you know, with a lot of this historical	Once in pores= grateful, happy, patriotic (euphoric?) -infuse-wants to spread to kids

	knowledge…	
	K: [nu] I can't imagine you wouldn't… [laugh] just from the short time I've been with you!	
	M: [laugh] Yes, well, I do enjoy talking about what I like.	
	K: Ok, can you, is there anything else that you want to tell me about that we haven't talked about, or, do you have any questions for me?	
	M: I don't think so.	

END

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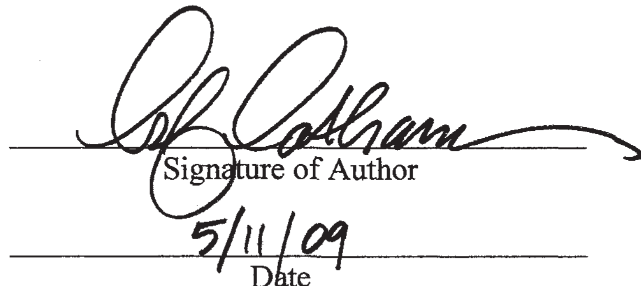

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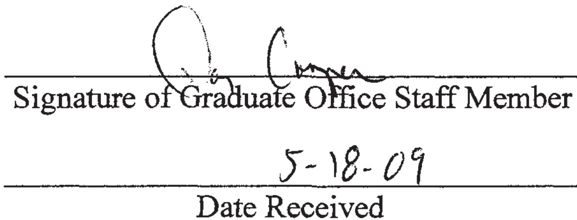

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