

From Viewing to Experience: Exhibition Design for Social Aesthetic Education

Xinyi Chen

School of Art, Guangdong Peizheng College, Guangzhou, 510830, China

Abstract: This study argues that the aims of social aesthetic education require a shift in exhibition design from knowledge transmission to aesthetic cultivation. This study addresses two questions: why does the aim of social aesthetic education require a fundamental change in exhibition design? What are the actual paths for this reorientation? Dewey proposed the concept of "experience" in his analysis, and based on this idea, this paper advocates moving away from a "viewing-centered" model of exhibition design to an "experience-centered" one. This is not a change in style but in concept; it seeks to create an aesthetic experience rather than present art history. The three links in the analysis are: space-time narrative construction, interactive participation and judicious use of digital technology. All of the above ways can help create an active, generative aesthetic experience for the audience. The three persistent tensions in the current practice are also studied in this paper: the effectiveness of participation, the appropriate application of technology, and problems with outcome evaluation; it is proposed that addressing these tensions should be the direction of future research. Methodologically, this paper is a conceptual review that uses illustrative cases from museum and gallery practices in China to integrate theoretical ideas and practical observations, providing a framework for rethinking exhibition design in the pursuit of social aesthetic education.

Keywords: Social Aesthetic Education; Exhibition Experience Design; Museum Exhibitions; Aesthetic Experience; Visitor Participation.

1. Introduction

The Demand for aesthetic education has risen significantly in recent years. During the 2025 Two Sessions (the concurrent annual sessions of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference), Wu Weishan, a member of the National Committee of the CPPCC, put forward the construction of a national coordinated system for broad-based aesthetic education. In response, the Government Work Report called for the improvement of the public cultural service system and the dissemination of high-quality cultural resources at the grassroots level (State Council, 2025). At the same time, the Ministry of Education has launched the School Aesthetic Education Immersion Action and designated immersion as its main way forward (Ministry of Education, 2025). Museums and art galleries have gradually taken on more roles in aesthetic education. In 2022, Shanghai launched the "Social Large-scale Aesthetic Education Plan". By October 2025, 8,593 art outreach events had been organized through 143 community-based educational sites, serving over 5.8 million participant-visits. Social aesthetic education has moved from concept advocacy to institutional construction (Shanghai Municipal Government, 2025).

The number of activities and the level of improvement in the effectiveness of aesthetic education have not increased together. As the main carrier of social aesthetic education, exhibitions have been limited to displaying works of art and spreading knowledge without much innovation in recent years. There is a noticeable gap between the physical exhibition space and the audience's aesthetic experience, and the actual experiential results have not fully met the goals of aesthetic education. Although the quantity of activity provision has grown significantly, few studies have systematically examined the quality and longevity of visitors' aesthetic experiences to date. Among the many

reasons for this deficiency, institutional resource constraints, staffing shortages, and operational pressure are common; this paper focuses on one in particular: a lack of understanding of how aesthetic experience is created in exhibition spaces and how design can better promote it.

Following Dewey, aesthetic experience can be understood as: aesthetic experience is a special kind of experience that has a high degree of perception, emotional resonance and a sense of unity or wholeness, and it results from the interaction between an individual and their environment. It is not passive reception of sensory information, but an active and integrated process of perception, emotion and thought. Therefore, effectiveness refers to the exhibition's ability to create such experiences and hold the attention and thoughts of visitors [1]. Immersion refers to a state of deep concentration and reduced self-awareness in the presence of a particular environment, story, etc.; it should not be confused with simple distraction or novelty-seeking behaviour.

The Path from Exhibition Design to Aesthetic Effect is not direct or uniform. Some mediators of this relationship include: Visitors' prior knowledge and cultural capital determine what they focus on and how they interpret it; their motivational orientation—whether leisure-seeking, learning-oriented or social—affects their intention to continue participating; the actual time spent at the exhibition changes the depth of processing; and physical and cognitive accessibility determine who can participate fully. The above reasons indicate that "effectiveness" should not be judged by the number of attendees or short-term satisfaction, but rather by the quality and longevity of the experience. This understanding provides the basis for the analysis in the rest of this paper.

Based on the above conceptual foundation, this paper proposes the following three interconnected research questions: (1) How can Dewey's theory of "experience" provide a theoretical basis for rethinking exhibition design in

the context of social aesthetic education? (2) Through what mechanisms—space, interaction and technology—can exhibitions promote aesthetic experience? (3) What are the boundaries and evaluation criteria for each pathway?

1.1. Method and Analytical Framework

This study is a narrative conceptual review rather than an empirical investigation. No interviews, observations, or visitor surveys were conducted. Literature was searched in Web of Science, Scopus, and CNKI for empirical and design-related publications on exhibition experience published between 2010 and 2025. The search combined terms such as “exhibition experience,” “museum experience,” “aesthetic education,” “visitor engagement,” and “interactive exhibition design.” In addition, foundational theoretical works, including Dewey’s theory of aesthetic experience, were incorporated through hand-searching and backward citation tracking. Recent publications that appeared before the completion of this manuscript were also considered where they directly informed the review. Sources were included if they addressed the theory, design, or evaluation of museum and exhibition experiences; purely technical or commercial reports were excluded. Therefore, the literature search was narrative and purposive rather than exhaustive or systematic.

Illustrative cases are taken from publicly available sources (government reports, museum websites and media coverage, 2023-2025): Capital Museum's "Read City" series, Chinese Archaeology Museum's touch interaction devices, Nanjing Art Museum's "African Wood Carvings", and Pudong Art Museum's "Paris 1874" VR project. These are shown as instances that realise the conceptual paths, not as proof of efficacy.

For each path, the analysis will determine the following: (a) the theoretical basis, (b) specific design strategies, (c) representative cases, and (d) boundary conditions and scope of evaluation. As a conceptual review, this study does not test causal relationships; the selection of cases is purposive rather than systematic, and the analysis is based on publicly available documents rather than first-hand observation.

2. The Positioning and Internal Contradictions of Exhibition Art in the Social Aesthetic Education System

Social aesthetic education, as defined in this paper, refers to aesthetic education for the general public rather than for students in formal schooling. Its providers include museums, art galleries, libraries, theatres, community cultural centres and media platforms, etc., and its goal is to foster an aesthetic sense and enrich people's lives through voluntary, open-access participation in artistic and cultural resources. It has many forms and does not need to follow a fixed curriculum or evaluation system, so it is different from school-based aesthetic education. This paper will focus on the exhibition environments of museums and art galleries to explore how their Design can promote social aesthetic education, although it does not claim that these institutions have fully encompassed the concept.

In this case, the visitors do not need to follow a fixed route for observation; they can experience the beauty of the exhibition freely at any time and in any area. Museums and galleries are important places for social aesthetic education; they have large collections and, as shown by research, their

space organisation can also affect people's perception and memory of art works [2], offering unscripted encounters with artworks that cannot be predicted in advance. This openness to various, situated responses is a quality that social aesthetic education particularly values, as it can enable a kind of active, personal meaning-making in aesthetic experience that differs from passive reception of information. Based on the above foundation, two more problems arise: Why do many existing exhibition designs fail to convey this value system? What are the internal contradictions preventing them from doing so?

Openness is also the cause of the problem. People walk into the same exhibition hall, but they are of different ages, have different knowledge bases, and the goals of aesthetic education must address these differences among visitors [3]. Truly high-quality aesthetic experiences always require a certain level of perceptual training and cultural inheritance. If aesthetic education fully meets the demands of the public's taste, it will be very easy to become superficial. At this stage of exhibition design, there is a conflict between the democratization of aesthetics and high aesthetic standards. Indeed, the general education level of the audience has risen, and their demands for experience are now more varied. They are no longer content to be told about the knowledge structure passively by curators. On the contrary, a rush to create popular and visually striking works will reduce the depth of art.

This tension shows up in two types of exhibition design, which are better viewed as positions on a continuum rather than as alternatives. One views the exhibition as a way to transmit knowledge, organises the display and interpretation materials systematically to present art-historical content, and believes that aesthetic literacy is built through the accumulation of contextual and critical knowledge. The other believes that it is an experience trigger and aims to activate the visitors' perception, emotion and imagination; therefore, aesthetic education is to create meaningful associations between the audience and the work. These orientations are not in opposition but work together; knowledge, historical context and formal language are resources for aesthetic experience, not barriers to it.

At present, the dominant mode of operation is still knowledge-centric; it provides a set of regularised procedures, standardised delivery, and simple assessment, and fits the traditional role of curators as expert interpreters. Social aesthetic education aims call for a revision of this dominance. The problem is not the knowledge itself, but aiming to spread it as the end goal of the exhibition. If the delivery of knowledge does not create conditions for perception and personal meaning-making, then aesthetics will not be realised. Given the above deficiencies, a new direction for exhibition experience design has begun.

3. From "Viewing" to "Experience": The Theoretical Shift in Exhibition Experience Design

The internal contradictions mentioned above show that exhibition design cannot continue in the same way. We need to deepen the theoretical revision of the idea of "observation" into "participation". Dewey's "experience" is a specific idea and not only perception [4]. He divides the flow of ordinary sensation and what he refers to as "an experience" into two categories. Experience is the result of doing and undergoing, that is, active manipulation and receptive registration of consequences. At this time, the rhythm of perception and

meaning are in harmony; thus, the experience is having unity and consummation. Dewey believed this was the start of aesthetic experience; it was not a distant place but rather an expansion and coordination of daily life achieved when the conditions for both perception and action were fully realised.

This decision altered the basic foundation of exhibition design. Exhibitions are no longer temples of art where people feel the urge to be in awe; now, they seek to build an accessible connection between the audience and the works of art that touch their hearts. Therefore, the "experience" of watching the exhibition is an aesthetic-quality experience in a flat "viewing". Next are new studies on the way the audience's cognition works. The traditional way views the audience as the end-point for learning. The exhibition is considered a deconstruction and extraction of fixed meanings. However, if the essence of aesthetic experience is understood as active construction rather than passive extraction, then the role of the audience has been reversed; they use memories of their own lives and emotional intuition to repeatedly engage in dialogue with the formal language and historical information of the works, and each exhibition can lead to a different understanding [5]. Although this view does not align with the authoritative narrative of art history, it precisely reflects the internal texture of the formation of aesthetic literacy; that is to say, it is based on the coordinated operation of sensibility and rationality, rather than on the mechanical memorisation of knowledge items.

At the operational level, this transition includes three changes in design orientation: from standardised information to space for autonomous aesthetic experience; from a single narrative thread to differentiated contexts; and from measuring knowledge possession to measuring experiential richness [6].

These changes are not the same at the same level. The first proposes a new aim for exhibition-making; the second investigates the space of presentation; the third revises assessment standards. To realise the above operations, the paper proposes three interconnected paths: space, interaction and technology.

Space provides the environment; organisation, scale, light and material all create a perceptual field. Interaction Design refers to the behaviour-changing mechanisms by which visitors actively participate and experience things themselves. Technology can be used to expand the space and interactivity of experience, but it should support and enhance the experience rather than replace it.

These paths are not independent modules but rather interdependent features. The following chapters will be presented in sequence, beginning with space, followed by interaction, and finally introducing technology.

4. The Generation Path of Spatial Narration and Aesthetic Context

The three changes correspond to the three types of operation: space, interaction and technology. The foundation is space; therefore, the first type of exhibition experience is spatial. Wall-text reading is sequential; bodily movement in exhibitions can take many different spatial paths as visitors wander, pause, turn around, etc., and their embodied movements become part of the experience. The organisation of space is thus a system of signs that determines what the audience can see and also affects their emotions [7]. The Design of exhibition spaces for the purpose of social aesthetic

education should create an aesthetic environment with narrative tension and emotional direction, rather than a neutral physical container. The people in the vicinity are already aware of it to some extent.

How to make Space narratable? Scale, proportion, light, colour and material are sensory languages that affect the body non-conceptually to set an emotional tone and psychological expectation. Spatial contraction and expansion can create a sense of rhythm to attract attention; changes in light intensity guide perception and vary densities for cognitive rest and contemplation. Together, these factors will create a path for visitors that is both physical and emotional, as well as a map of their thoughts.

The Capital Museum's "Read City" (Ducheng) series is an example of the above. The third iteration, "Read City—Exploring Beijing's Central Axis" (2019-2020), organised the exhibition by setting up 25 question-based waypoints in a T-shaped gallery and created an exploration trail instead of a linear display. Specific audiences were considered in the spatial adjustment; sightlines were lowered by 10 centimetres for younger visitors, and thus the perceptual field and bodily orientation of all visitors were subtly adjusted. The three parts of the layout were arranged in a sequence: "Tracing the Legends", "Exploring the Grandeur", and "Telling the New Chapter", and thus the visitor's emotions and thoughts were guided in this way. The end of the exhibition was an intentionally empty gallery for the visitors to contemplate themselves. Thus, the exhibition created a "learning space" out of a "display area" by adding a narrative system and sensory variation, and thus shaped the way visitors moved in and experienced it.

Another is the "Novice Curator Project" at the China Art Museum (Shanghai). In July 2023, the project invited members of the public without art education to serve as curators. In the first season, five groups of six curators were selected from various professions, including a nurse, a professor, a property manager and a retired teacher; none had professional backgrounds. Each group was assigned a professional curatorial assistant and independently selected works from the museum's collection of nearly 20,000 items to present a total of 72 works. The exhibition space no longer worked according to the logic of art history but instead unfolded around the personal stories of these "novices" (Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture and Tourism, 2023). It was at this time that the museum first granted curatorial rights to ordinary members of the public. When the narrative logic connects with the cognitive schema of various audiences in an open way, the inclusiveness and generativity of the exhibition as an aesthetic space are greatly enhanced [8]. This is the realisation path of social aesthetic education's "popular immersion" at the spatial level: not to integrate everyone into the same framework, but to allow the space to accommodate the coexistence and interweaving of multiple threads.

5. The Mechanism of Interactive Participation in Deepening Aesthetic Experience

Space offers a setting for aesthetic experience, but it is not sufficient; a closer connection between the audience and the work is also needed. This is the purpose of interactive participation. In the old exhibitions, the objects were behind glass, and people only "looked". Meaning is considered to be

in the work itself, and the viewer is a passive extractor. Aesthetic Experience is also much more complicated. Vision is used to a certain extent; without the support of touch and movement, people's attention will soon wander, and the memory will be short-lived [9]. Interactive Design can bring the audience closer to the exhibition area, create a sense of closeness, and thus change the nature of aesthetic experience from passive observation to active participation in multi-sensory interaction.

The exhibition "interaction" does not mean technological interactivity. Touch screens and motion-sensing devices can offer people an interactive experience, but real interaction requires building a two-way semantic connection between the audience and the exhibits at all levels of technology.

The ceramic-touching and chime-experience installations at the Chinese Archaeological Museum offer a typical example. These devices are technologically simple, but they combine visual, auditory, and tactile sensations. Visitors can touch designated ceramic replicas or handling objects and experience their texture and weight directly. Through this bodily contact, the pottery becomes less an isolated object behind glass and more an object that was once made, used, and held by people in the past. Physical sensation therefore bridges historical distance and transforms aesthetic experience from "seeing" into "feeling." Bodily participation can also generate emotional association and personal meaning, which is why interaction may enhance aesthetic experience. In this study, significant interaction is understood as a modification of perception rather than simple operation. Three conditions are used to distinguish it: an alteration of perception, meaning a change from passive observation to active awareness; the creation of personal meaning, connecting the object with the visitor's own experience; and lasting emotional resonance, extending beyond the visit itself.

Interactive Design still needs to prove its "effectiveness" in social aesthetic education. Taking pictures and playing game quizzes can motivate people behaviourally, but they are not always experiences of aesthetic quality. Such interactions are still at the operational level and do not change modes of perception [10]. Good interactive design should involve people physically and emotionally, expanding their perception and adding a sense of emotion.

The "African Wood Carvings" exhibition at the Nanjing Art Museum in October 2024 is a typical case. Linen was used for the display stands and cases of the exhibition, warm-toned point lights were employed to enhance the symbolic connotations, and ten African drums were arranged in a circle at the centre of the gallery. The above Design choices have created a space for touch and sight. A discussion of this project suggests that immersive design can create a "perception-behaviour-emotion" cycle to enhance embodied cognition and cross-cultural understanding [11]. Therefore, the purpose of good interactive Design is not to be new; instead, it should meet the aesthetic goals of the exhibition through a specific mechanism.

6. The Enabling Conditions and Usage Boundaries of Digital Technology

If the goal of spatial narrative is to create a specific environment and interactive participation requires physical interaction, then digital technology provides an alternative that alters the relationship between the audience and the work in a virtual space [12]. Digital Technology is changing the

Design of the Exhibition Experience. Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) create virtual or enhanced environments for people to experience, AI-driven personalised guided tours offer customised information services, and big data analysis can be used to measure the impact of exhibitions quantitatively. Many explorations have been carried out in practice, such as the superposition of historical buildings and opera scenes using AR technology at the Shanghai Opera House, and "Tonight with the Impressionists, Paris 1874" by Pudong Art Museum, which employed VR equipment to transport the audience back to 1874, the birth of Impressionism. The experience was created by the French company Excurio and co-produced with GEDEON Experiences and the Musée d'Orsay, and is about 45 minutes long. Monet, Renoir, Degas and others' works can be experienced by the public in a virtual environment. Such efforts demonstrate the potential of technology to extend the bounds of exhibition experience [13].

But technical means alone do not provide aesthetic education. Novelty is appealing, but it may not contain the main content of the exhibition. Too much emphasis on technology may fail to transmit the continuous character and profoundness of real aesthetic experience. Some scholars have pointed out that if sensory stimulation replaces engagement in the work, "immersion" will be lost. This problem is especially noticeable in social aesthetic education because of the diverse backgrounds and senses of the learners.

Instead of the general standard of "shortening aesthetic distance", this paper puts forward three specific conditions for appropriate use of technology. First, the technology should focus on presenting the work of art, not itself. Second, it should offer a perceptual entry point—such as improved visibility, alternative angles or multi-sensory access—that enables rather than replaces direct experience. Third, it should leave some reflective space for visitors to take a moment and think for themselves. Otherwise, the technology will not be able to provide the intended aesthetic and educational outcomes.

Selectively connect technology with the exhibitions in a more targeted way. A tool should not be judged by how new or impressive it is; instead, it should be judged by whether it can help the viewer experience the work more perceptually and reflectively engaged. Technology, for example, cannot replace work as the focus of the experience. The technology of experience should have artistic qualities in its creation, not just be for entertainment, and it should also offer the audience a space for observation and reflection. The Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture and Tourism has used the term "Technology Grafted onto Art" to promote "Social Large-scale Aesthetic Education Classrooms", which suggests that technology should grow on the branches of art rather than covering the art.

7. Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, social aesthetic education needs to change the fundamental mode of exhibition design from knowledge transmission to the evocation of aesthetic experience. It will be a change from "seeing" to "feeling". An exhibition that only serves as an information platform will not achieve the goal of aesthetic education. The space provided by an exhibition for active perception, construction of one's own meaning and reflection is more likely to cultivate aesthetic literacy in knowledge transmission. Therefore, the exhibition is not intended to convey knowledge directly;

rather, it is a place where people can gain experience with that knowledge, and only under such circumstances can aesthetic education take root.

Based on the above main judgment, this paper has studied three related aspects: space narrative, interactive participation and digital technology. Spatial Narratives construct moving aesthetic spaces in the exhibition Hall. Interactive participation connects the body and the work, and through multiple senses, creates a shared experience of emotion. Digital technology should be used sparingly, or it will no longer help visitors feel a deep aesthetic connection to the work. Although the specific focus of each dimension is different, they all aim to inspire visitors to engage with the artworks actively and fully through their emotions and thoughts.

However, practice does not always realise these conditions. Aesthetic experience is highly subjective; the same exhibition can evoke different emotions in different people, and currently, there is no reliable way to predict or adjust for this variation in design. Evaluation Practices are also lacking. Most exhibitions are still assessed by rudimentary metrics—visitor counts and satisfaction ratings—that capture little of experiential quality. A more suitable framework would need to add indicators such as perceptual engagement, emotional resonance, meaning-making, behavioural continuation (e.g., return visits or further exploration), and accessibility and equity for all visitor groups. These are not additions; they are necessary conditions for the exhibition to achieve its goals of social aesthetic education. In addition, experience-oriented Design generally requires a larger investment of time, expertise and materials, and is therefore difficult to implement under the resource constraints of many public cultural institutions. Optimisation of exhibition design is thus only one part of the problem; its actualisation requires the full support of policies, professional training and institutional evaluation systems.

In the future, it will be valuable to explore how the three routes can create different designs for all kinds of exhibitions, how to develop evaluation methods that can reflect the quality of the aesthetic experience, and how to find a feasible path under budget constraints. The final goal of exhibition experience design is not to have the audience remember a large amount of knowledge about the exhibits, but whether they have been genuinely moved by beauty upon leaving the exhibition hall. This is the goal that social aesthetic education seeks to achieve.

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