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VISITING AN EXHIBITION **Part 1**
information and resources for second
level teachers and students about
visiting an exhibition

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VISITING AN ART
MUSEUM OR GALLERY

THE ART MUSEUM OR GALLERY

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with thanks to

What is an Art Museum or Art Gallery?

A public art museum or art gallery is an environment designed to display artworks for public viewing which can contribute to a greater understanding and appreciation of art. A private art gallery may also display artworks for public viewing however their primary focus may be commercial rather than civic or educational. Art museums and galleries may also have other functions such as the collection, conservation and study of art. Some art museums and galleries display a range of art historical and contemporary artworks while others may focus on a particular period such as contemporary art.

The Irish Museum of Modern Art

The Irish Museum of Modern Art is Ireland's leading national institution for the collection and presentation of modern and contemporary art. The Museum presents a wide variety of art in a dynamic programme of exhibitions, which regularly includes work from its own Collection. It also creates access to art and artists through its education and public programmes.

What is an Exhibition?

An exhibition is the display of a range of artworks either by an individual artist or a group of artists. This may

- include paintings, drawings, sculpture, video, film, sound, light, installation, text, performance, interactive art and new media
- focus on the recent work of an individual artist or a range of their work over a period of time
- focus on the work of a group of artists who share a common theme, technique or subject matter
- focus on aspects of the Museum's collection, such as recent acquisitions
- adopt a thematic approach, such as:
 - art work created during a particular time period
 - the methodologies and materials of art making

What is a Collection?

A collection is the total body of artworks a museum possesses. The collection of a museum forms an important part of its programmes, such as exhibitions, education and access. A museum can build its collection by buying artworks, commissioning artworks and/or accepting loans and donations of artworks.

Policy An art museum will have a collecting policy which sets out the conditions by which works are acquired, presented, conserved, stored and loaned. For example, a museum may choose to collect only the work of artists within a particular timeframe or from a particular period or school.

Storage The conditions for storing art works need to take into consideration the delicate and potentially perishable nature of any artworks. Works need to be easily accessed to monitor their condition, to make exhibition selections and for research purposes.

Conservation Many artworks are fragile and vulnerable to deterioration and damage. A conservator is a specialist employed by a museum or gallery who uses a range of skills and techniques to restore the work as closely as possible to its original condition. The variety of materials, formats and techniques employed in contemporary art practice presents an ongoing challenge to conservation.

Collection of the Irish Museum of Modern Art

The Collection of the Irish Museum of Modern Art, which comprises approximately 4,500 works, has been developed since 1990 through purchase, donations and long-term loans, as well as by the commissioning of new works. The guiding principle behind this process is that the Collection is firmly rooted in the present.

The Museum's acquisitions policy is to concentrate on the work of living artists, but it accepts donations and loans of more historical art objects with a particular emphasis on work from the 1940s onwards. The Museum's Collection is made up of the Permanent Collection and a number of loan collections including the Weltkunst Foundation Collection of British Art from the 1980s and '90s. The Madden Arnholz Collection of some 2,000 old master prints, including works by Rembrandt van Rijn, Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, William Hogarth and Albrecht Dürer, also forms a part of the IMMA Collection.

The Museum displays its Collection in rotating temporary exhibitions, exploring the work of

individual artists in solo displays, and through curated group exhibitions. The Museum's Collection is also the focal point for the IMMA National Programme, where art works are made available on loan to a range of venues nationwide, such as art centres, libraries, arts festivals and schools.

CREATING AN EXHIBITION

What is a Curator? A curator is a person who devises, implements and directs plans for exhibitions. This is similar to the role of a choreographer in dance or a director in film.

How does a Curator Create an Exhibition? There is no standardised approach to creating an exhibition. Each exhibition is unique and is informed by the curator's ideas and the practical considerations of the exhibition space. A curator will develop an idea for an exhibition, which may be to focus on the work of a particular artist or group of artists or on a theme, such as artworks concerned with the landscape or the use of new media.

Teamwork Usually working as part of a team, the curator will then devise a plan for the selection and arrangement of the artworks within an exhibition space. The curator will select works to be included in the exhibition, possibly drawing on a museum's collection and/or borrowing works from other museums and galleries or collectors.

Loans Borrowing works from other museums and galleries or private sources involves the creation of loan agreements, which outline the terms of the loan, arranging transport and insurance. A work which is made available on loan is subject to a condition check before it is sent and when it arrives. Any damage as a result of transportation is referred to a conservator.

Layout The layout of the exhibition is informed by the curator's plan for the exhibition and will take into account several factors which will inform the placement of the artworks:

- the relationship between the art works
- the overarching theme of the exhibition
- the security and preservation of the artworks
- lighting, safety, security
- the engagement with the viewer/audience
- the physical contingencies of the building and exhibition spaces

- Relationship between the artworks** An exhibition usually comprises a number of artworks and, whether they are all by the same artist or by a group of artists, consideration must be given to how the artworks interact with and relate to each other.
- Curatorial strategy** The relationships between artworks can contribute to the communication of the overall idea for the exhibition - the curatorial strategy.
- The way in which art works relate to each other may:
- create relationships which reinforce or subvert the curatorial strategy;
 - relate to a theme underpinning the exhibition;
 - demonstrate a phase of development or a shift in the artist's practice;
 - give an overview of the artist's entire practice, such as a retrospective;
 - emphasise the artist's technique and use of materials;
 - reflect the subject matter, timeframe or context.
- Tension** It is also possible that the art works may not relate to each other and this may be part of the curatorial strategy, to juxtapose and create tension between works.
- Security** Security strategies need to be included in the planning and implementation of an exhibition. Security and information staff invigilate exhibitions and additional security devices, such as alarms and CCTV cameras, are employed to ensure the safety of the artworks. Some artworks in an exhibition may be particularly vulnerable to damage or theft. These concerns will inform the placement of such artworks within an exhibition and whether additional security measures, such as placing a barrier in front of the work or placing the work in a glass frame or vitrine, need to be employed.
- Lighting** The lighting used in an exhibition space is an essential element in the display of an artwork. The role of lighting in an exhibition space contributes to the preservation of the artwork and facilitates the viewer to see the work.
- Light wavelength** Light wavelength and intensity can damage an artwork, especially a delicate artwork such as a print, drawing, photograph or watercolour. An artwork's level of tolerance of light will depend on the materials used to create the work and the level and duration of exposure to light during the exhibition. Some inks, pigments and fabrics are susceptible to lengthy exposure to light.

- Light levels** The level of visible light employed in a display space needs to take into consideration both the preservation needs of the artwork and the needs of the viewer. Creative lighting strategies can be employed to address the need for low lighting levels; for example by reducing the levels of ambient light below the level falling on the exhibit, or by the balancing of warm and cool light and the use of spotlights. Other issues which need to be taken into consideration are the use of natural (daylight) versus artificial light and the impact of such light on both the artwork and how it facilitates the viewer's experience. Filaments may be placed over windows to minimise the impact of daylight exposure.
- Display Mechanisms** The way in which artworks are displayed can vary considerably depending on the nature and materials of the artwork and also on the curatorial strategy of the exhibition.
- White cube** Conventional gallery spaces are often white or neutral colours with little or no furniture. This is referred to as the 'White Cube'. Traditional artworks such as paintings and prints tend to be hung on walls either individually or collectively.
- Three-dimensional work** Three dimensional art works are often displayed on plinths, in vitrines (Perspex cases) or on the floor, depending on their nature and size.
- Challenges** Security and preservation concerns inform such decisions. For example, fragile artworks may require specialised frames, cases or guard rails. Contemporary art works, such as installation and performance, and artworks created using new media, such as film, video and digital technology, present considerable challenges to conventional display methodologies and have contributed to the expansion of display methodologies and mechanisms. Innovative curatorial strategies often seek to subvert traditional approaches to display by seeking out new and unconventional ways of displaying art works and also to challenge the viewer's expectations of how the art work should be seen.
- The Audience or Viewer** The layout of an exhibition also needs to take into consideration the needs of the viewer in terms of access to the artworks and to information about the artworks. The layout of the exhibition and the way in which the viewer finds their way through the exhibition contributes to the viewer's engagement with the artwork.
- Linear or chronological approach** Some exhibitions employ a narrative or thematic approach which involves a linear or chronological viewing of the artworks, starting and finishing at

designated points.

- Labels and guides** This approach may be reinforced by the provision of supplementary information to guide the viewer through the exhibition, such as labels next to the artworks, extended text labels at the beginning or at intervals throughout the exhibition, exhibition guides, maps providing a layout of the exhibition spaces and/or audio guides. The labels usually include the artist's name, the date of the artwork, the materials used and if it's part of the collection, it may also include the acquisition number. Extended text panels may provide some contextual information about the artworks.
- Open-ended approach** Many exhibitions, especially exhibitions of contemporary art, employ an open-ended rather than a chronological approach, where there is no clear starting or finishing point to the exhibition. With some exhibitions the content of the exhibition changes over the course of the exhibition. Supplementary information about the exhibition may be provided before entering the exhibition or at a designated 'reading space' within the exhibition.
- Gallery guides/mediators** Gallery guides or mediators - the gallery-based staff - are employed to monitor the safety of the artworks but also to engage the viewer with the art works and to provide supplementary information either in conversation or in the form of a guided tour.