THE DIGITAL ART CENTRE:
EXPERIENCING IMMERSIVE MASTERS' PAINTINGS
AT L'ATELIER DES LUMIÈRES

Anaïs Dos Santos

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Dr. Wilco Versteeg

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INTRODUCTION

CONTEXT

Museums around the world are institutions where the history of humankind is preserved and presented to educate the future generations about civilisation's heritage and traditions. Or as defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary* museums are "buildings where objects of historical, scientific, or artistic interest are kept" ("Museums"). Over the past decade and despites the important role attributed to these cultural spaces, museums are experiencing a decline in their numbers of yearly visitors. This issue reveals the disinterest of a new generation regarding art and most particularly, with visiting cultural institutions. Therefore, museums are confronted with new challenges which imply that they must reconsider their current practices, in order to engage with a modern audience. The decreasing number of visitors observed has multiple political and sociological causes, yet, the most impacting factor resides in the inclusion of new technologies, such as the internet and smartphones, into society's daily lives. The omnipresence of images into the public space changed the way people interact with visuals. Furthermore, these technological revolutions prompted the digital reproduction of artworks, making content that was previously only available in museums now accessible at everyone's fingertips. Numerous online platforms offer educational content based on iconic artworks, and therefore, make art entertaining to a digitally-oriented generation. As a result, the audience became incurious to visit a museum to observe the original version of a painting, as they might have already digitally experienced it multiple times. Consequently, the emergence of digital technologies into everyday activities affected people's relationship to cultural objects and institutions. Taking the example of Paris (France) a city renowned for its cultural history, a decline in the number of visits of emblematic institutions has been observed. According to Martine Robert from *Les Echos*, a liberal French financial newspaper, between 2018 and 2019, the Louvre Museum's number of visitors decreased by 6%. The Musée du Quai Branly, a

French museum where indigenous and African artworks are conserved, lost 12% of its yearly visitors. Under those circumstances, a greater number of institutional museums attempted to re-engage with a newer audience by incorporating into their existing exhibitions additional digital content. Nowadays, it is common for museums to install touchscreens in their buildings or design smartphones' applications where visitors can obtain more information regarding the artwork in front of them. By introducing such innovative tools into their exhibitions, institutions aim to bridge the gap between a cultural object of the past and new media of today. Although most museums are trying to modernise their display, their use of digital technologies stays primary, and consequently still insufficient. Technologies are mainly employed as additional tools to facilitate visitor's exploration and understanding of the artworks. Despite their attempt to modernise themselves, institutional museums struggle with including the latest technologies in a meaningful way into their spaces. On the other hand, new cultural spaces are emerging and aiming to attract an audience captivated by numeric content. An interesting example is l'Atelier des Lumières, opened in 2018 in Paris (France). The fairly new space dedicated to art is transforming the way artworks are displayed, by solely exhibiting digital reproductions of emblematic paintings. Designed by Culturespaces, this old foundry was rebuilt into an art digital centre and attracted more than one million visitors last year, competing with institutional museums, such as Le Mussée du Quai Branly, which was visited by 1,1 million of people in 2019 (*Les Echos*). Bruno Monnier, president of Culturespaces, is an advocate for the inclusion of numeric technologies into museums and describes his new project as a "vector of diffusion, capable to create bridges between different eras" (Monnier) which allow them to engage with a greater number. L'Atelier des Lumières is not the first numeric centre of the genre. The year prior to its opening, TeamLab inaugurated in Japan their own digital space, which exhibits colourful and futuristic digital installations. However, what makes l'Atelier des Lumières unique is that it offers to its visitors a new experience of emblematic

artworks from masters, while Team Lab offers immersive exhibitions where people have the possibility to walk through imaginary landscapes designed by emerging artists. The success of digital art centres and immersive exhibitions rely on the fact that they allow visitors to experience art without physical boundaries, through impressive narrative and scenography. Where institutional museums forbid people to touch artworks, L'Atelier allows them to be at one with the reproduced painting and physically interact with it as they wish. By removing the physical barrier existing between a painting and a person, l'Atelier des Lumières provides a new kind of experience to visitors, which entails the development of a new relationship between them and the paintings.

RESEARCH QUESTION

In only a few years of existence, digital art centres gained in popularity due to their innovative exhibitions, which combine entertainment and education. These new kinds of displays seem to attract a broader audience than traditional museums. Consequently, it is interesting to investigate in which ways does experiencing digital reproductions of iconic paintings, exhibited in an immersive space such as l'Atelier des Lumières, differ from the experience of the same work displayed in an institutional museum?

By using the example of the immersive exhibitions displayed l'Atelier des Lumières, this thesis will investigate how new cultural spaces, through the inclusion of emerging technologies, influence the way individuals consume and engage with art. In order to answer this question, this thesis will draw comparisons between the experience of visitors in institutional museums and at l'Atelier des Lumières. Additionally, this discussion will respond to the interrogations regarding the ways original paintings differ from their reproduction; the differences between the experience of an original artwork and its immersive digital

reproduction and the ways the experience of immersive space impact visitors' perception of a painting compared to exhibitions in institutional museums.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The cases of digital art centres are fairly new and therefore not much research has been conducted so far on how these new cultural spaces impact people's perception of an artwork. However, scholars have studied the differences of the experience between an original artwork and a reproduced one. Therefore, this thesis will be based on the research conducted by cultural critic Walter Benjamin. The author renowned for his influential work in the field of aesthetic theory, literary criticism, and historical materialism, investigated in his essay *The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935) the value granted to reproduced artworks. Benjamin states that mechanical reproduction of art devalued artworks, as they lose their uniqueness and aura. Moreover, the author argues that the value of an exhibition relies upon the object and the way it is displayed. Therefore, it is interesting to investigate the purpose and cultural value of staged digital reproduction of paintings displayed at l'Atelier des Lumières by using Benjamin's theory.

In addition to Benjamin's work, the work of English essayist and cultural thinker John Berger, and particularly his book *Ways of Seeing* (1972) will be employed. Adapted from the television series of the same name, this book investigates the audience perception of artworks and most importantly draws on the work of Walter Benjamin to study the impact of reproduced images and their interpretations. Consequently, Berger's work will be used to evaluate the difference in perception and value between original paintings and their reproductions. By transforming the original form of a painting, l'Atelier des Lumières offers a fresh approach to museology which differs from official institutions' narratives. However, it also inscribes itself

into the leisure market by offering entertainment to its audience, questioning its own value as a cultural space.

The singular narrative used at l'Atelier des Lumières permits the visitors to be at the centre of the paintings, making them the main subject, as physical barriers have been removed. Consequently, the audience develops a personal attachment with the reproduced paintings. For this reason, theories of phenomenologist philosophers and particularly the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty will be used to understand how the bodily experience when seeing immersive paintings influenced the audience's experience of it. Merleau-Ponty was a leading figure of the phenomenologist movement and renowned for his work on perception and embodiment. In his book *The World of Perception* (1948), the author reflects upon human's relationship with others and art in relation to science and space. Merleau-Ponty's principal argument that will be used throughout this thesis, is his belief that everything is firstly experienced through the body before being experienced by the mind. This theory will support the conclusion that the information regarding artworks displayed in immersive exhibitions are experienced primarily by the body before being processed by the mind, and consequently, immersive exhibitions establish a new relationship between a work of art and a visitor.

METHODOLOGY

In order to study the experience of immersive exhibitions the visitors encounter at l'Atelier des Lumières, this thesis will compare the differences existing between the original paintings and the reproduced ones along with the disparities of experiencing still artworks in institutional museums and experiencing immersive reproductions displayed by Culturespaces. Consequently, this thesis will explore how new technologies are used into emerging cultural spaces and how they influence visitors' experience of familiar artworks. For this purpose, theories from the fields of museology, perception of art, aesthetic theories and phenomenology

will be used in conjunction with studies of interactive art, immersive art and the inclusion of technologies in art.

OUTLINE

Firstly, this thesis will investigate the differences between digital reproduction of paintings and original ones exhibited in institutional museums. The first chapter will additionally analyse the motivation behind the use of digitally duplicated artworks at l'Atelier des Lumières.

Secondly, this thesis will focus on the differences between experiencing an immersive digital reproduction of a painting and a still original. In the second chapter, the focus will be on establishing how the digitalised and animated artworks displayed at l'Atelier des Lumières are perceived in comparison to the original ones found in institutional museums.

Finally, this essay will study the experience of an immersive exhibition compared to standard exhibitions. Consequently, the last chapter will bring focus on how the immersive space developed by Culturespaces for l'Atelier des Lumières transform the way iconic paintings are experienced.

CHAPTER ONE:
THE ORIGINAL ARTWORK AND ITS DIGITAL REPRODUCTION

1.1 CASE STUDY: L'ATELIER DES LUMIÈRES

Situated in a renovated old foundry in the eleventh arrondissement of Paris and refurbished by Culturespaces, l'Atelier des Lumières is the second digital art centre developed in France. Aiming to address a larger audience than institutionalised museums, the space exhibits innovative and contemporary manner to display paintings. L'Atelier des Lumières acquires high-quality images of famous paintings from image banks and museums and uses them for projection, in order to create immersive exhibitions of a new genre. Culturespaces, the organisation behind this innovative space, is a French foundation specialising in the management of museums and the creation of digital art centres. The organisation focuses on the creation of singular displays by concentrating on the inclusion of new technologies into their exhibitions. The foundation started its digital journey by opening its first venue in 2012 in Les Baux-de-Provence (France) under the name of la Carrières de Lumières. To achieve a virtualisation and projection of digitally reproduced artworks, in high resolution, Culturespaces developed at the same time AMIEX® (Art & Music Immersive Experience). Based on video installation and spatialised sound systems, the technological process allows the projection of artworks onto large surfaces which permits the creation of a totally immersive space. Following the immense success of their two first venues, Culturespaces is planning the opening of the largest space dedicated to digital art in the world, in Bordeaux, France, later this year (2020).

1.2 THE USE OF DIGITAL REPRODUCTION OF PAINTINGS

The enthusiasm encountered by visitors for Culturespaces' immersive exhibitions relies on the multi-sensorial experience offered to the audience, through the merging of images and audio.

At l'Atelier des Lumières, it is the dimension of the space that enables the unique experience to materialise itself, as the digitalised artworks are displayed in a 3,300 square metre surface and onto 10-meter-high walls (Fig.1). Thanks to the simultaneous use of 140 laser video projectors, paintings are mapped on the walls, ceiling and floor, giving to the visitors a 360-degree view of the artworks.

Figure 1: "Monet, Renoir... Chagall. Voyages en Méditerranée". 2020. L'Atelier des Lumières, *Culturespaces*. https://www.atelier-lumieres.com/fr/monet-renoir-chagall-voyages-en-mediterranee. Accessed 14 June 2020.

Additionally, speakers are programmed to work in symbiosis with the visuals, resulting in a totally immersive experience. Consequently, Culturespaces uses digital and audio technologies to create new cultural spaces where visitors are at one with the paintings. When interviewed about the motive behind the opening of digital art centres and immersive exhibitions by the French news channel CNews, Bruno Monnier, president of Culturespaces, answered that "70% of people don't have any relationship with art" (Monnier) and that the digitalisation of artworks could solve the matter, as a new generation accustomed to virtualised images will be more

responsive to such spaces. Monnier however, does not diminish the importance of institutional museums as the guardians of humanity's patrimony. The president of Culturespaces claims that l'Atelier des Lumières and other emerging digital centres must be seen as an initiation to art. Monnier's argument implies that digital art centres could sensitise a larger part of society to art and therefore, encourage them to visit institutional museums, in order to see the original paintings. Nevertheless, although Culturespaces assert that their use of high-quality reproductions of artworks is motivated by the desire to address a wider audience, it is hard to disregard the monetary reason behind this decision. By using virtual copies of renowned paintings, the organisation avoids the difficulty of regrouping into one space artworks from an artist that are dispersed all around the world. Furthermore, the limited availability of these artworks and their monetary value on the art market results in the very high cost of renting them or conserving them permanently. Consequently, by displaying digitally reproduced artworks, Culturespaces save money on the cost of producing an exhibition and achieve high profits by coincidently selling highly priced entry tickets.

1.3 THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AN ORIGINAL WORK AND ITS REPRODUCTION

If digital reproductions of artworks are easily found in today's digital era, the question of the difference between the experience of seeing an original painting compared to a virtualised one arises. Therefore, it is relevant to investigate the disparities existing between the two and how it impacts the cultural value of the artwork itself. When reproduced, works of art are deprived from their unique existence in space and time. Walter Benjamin argues in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935) that "even with the most perfect reproduction, one thing stands out: the here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in the place where it is at the moment" (5). Therefore, it is an artwork's material presence in the spatial-temporal world that gives it its "aura" as "the uniqueness of every painting was once part of the

uniqueness of the place where it resided" (Berger 19). Furthermore, Benjamin emphasises that what distinguishes an original artwork from its reproduction is its singular existence, as the author states that "what shrinks in an age where the work of art can be reproduced by technological means is its aura" (7). Technological innovations permitted the reproduction of artworks through different mediums; however, it is their digitalisation that enabled their large-scale diffusion. The wide distribution of reproduced artworks participated in the familiarisation of society with art objects. Consequently, individuals became accustomed to master artworks and might not feel the need to experience them in their material form. Previously, works of art were singular and "could never be seen in two places at the same time" (Berger 19) due to their exclusive presence in cultural institutions. Artworks were assimilated with the idea that their visibility belongs to an elite part of society. Consequently, original paintings are considered unique and acquired a mystical aura over time due to their singular existence in the world and their presence in the official intuitions where they are conserved. Alternatively, technological innovations that allowed the mass reproduction of artworks increased their visibility, which impacted their cultural value. The ease with which one can enter in contact with a reproduced artwork appears to make them more accessible for a large part of society. Once an artwork is seen outside of their display at an institutional museum, it loses its mystical aura. Consequently, it is plausible to consider that digital reproduction of paintings stimulates a larger part of society to art by encouraging its democratisation.

1.4 THE ACCESSIBILITY OF REPRODUCED ARTWORKS

In *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger argues that the reproduction of an artwork increases its visibility, by giving a larger number of people access to it. Additionally, the reproduction of art eliminates the inability of the mass to view the same artwork simultaneously (Benjamin 27) resulting in its wide diffusion. While studying the impact of reproduced artworks on the public,

Berger came to the conclusion that "The majority of the population do not visit art museums […] The majority take it as axiomatic that the museums are full of holy relics which refer to a mystery which excludes them" (24). When displayed in museums, artworks are seen as mystical and impressive due to the authoritative aura they hold. Berger argues that "works of art are discussed and presented as though they were holy relics" (21) resulting in the apprehension one might feel to go and experience it. However, when an artwork is digitally reproduced, its displayability depends on the location where the viewer will encounter it, which could be at home, on a phone screen, or on a postcard. Consequently, the artwork is presented in a familiar environment to the viewers and therefore, is demystified, resulting in a sense of approachability. Therefore, "what the modern means of reproduction have done is to destroy the authority of art and remove it" (Berger 32). Reproduced artworks hold no authority and therefore one might feel less constrained to experience it on its own term as "what we make of that painted moment when it is before our eyes depends upon what we expect of art" (Berger 31). Reproduced images of iconic paintings are now a part of the mainstream culture and therefore, valueless and free of authorities. This suggests that reproduced artworks permitted the abolition of the idea that artworks belong only to an elite part of society. Previously, artworks were isolated from society behind closed doors of museums, hence why some today still feel impressed and excluded from such locations. Consequently, a digital space such as l'Atelier des Lumières opens a new perspective that art is not reserved to the elite but equally belongs to the mass.

1.5 CONCLUSION

Considering these statements, it is apparent that what differs between an original painting and its reproduction is its singular existence in space. When situated in official institutions such as museums, artworks are highly valued and mystified due to their history and worth on the art

market. Consequently, works of art can be seen by a majority of society as unapproachable due to the authoritative aura emanating from them. On the other hand, the emergence of new technologies made possible the mass reproduction and diffusion of famous paintings. While some argue that a copied version might lack authenticity or singularity, it however, obtains value through its displayability and accessibility. Walter Benjamin states that "Today, in the same way, because of the absolute weight placed on its display value, the work of art is becoming an image with entirely new functions." (13). Consequently, the reproducibility of artworks caused the democratisation of art, as the accessibility of artworks erased their authoritative aura. Ultimately, new technologies induced the digitalisation of artworks making them visible at anyone's fingertips within seconds. Therefore, famous paintings are now recognised easily by a majority of society as they hold an important place in popular culture. Consequently, fewer people feel the need to visit museums to experience them in their original forms. For this reason, organisations such as Culturespaces, revolutionise the way art is displayed, as an answer to a lack of interest induced by the emergence of technologies. Accordingly, l'Atelier des Lumières rely on their unique and immersive display to reconnect with an audience disconnected from art. By using new technologies and digital artworks, l'Atelier des Lumières creates a medium proper to the numeric era: a cultural space where viewers are invited to re-discover a work of art that they might have seen numerous times before. By creating multi-sensorial exhibitions, Culturespaces aims to address a wide audience that could feel threatened by having to visit institutional museums in order to experience art. Consequently, the reproductions of paintings encountered at l'Atelier des Lumières offer to the visitors a new experience of a familiar work of art by demystifying it and animating it. Therefore, these displays are created in order to entertain and educate an audience, which becomes more and more unresponsive to original works of art displayed in institutional museums.

CHAPTER TWO:
EXPERIENCING AN IMMERSIVE PAINTING

2.1 EXPERIENCING A PAINTING

The purpose of every piece of art is to be seen. Artists use various media through which they share their emotions and viewpoints of the world with an audience. Therefore, they use different techniques to attract viewers' attention. The use of rich colours, textures or meticulous details all reflect "the painter's way of seeing" as it is "reconstituted by the marks he makes on the canvas or paper" (Berger 10). In other words, a painting is the visual representation of an artist's imagination and perspective on a certain subject. Therefore, when one observes a painting, one needs to pay close attention to it, in order to understand the meanings behind it. Consequently, when looking at art, even if the sense of sight is primarily used to perceive the artwork, the mind is equally involved in the understanding of it. According to Berger "although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends upon our own way of seeing" (10). Hence, even if the artist's intention while creating a piece of art is meaningful in the appreciation of an artwork, at last, it is one's own perception that will give meaning to it. Consequently, contemplating works of art and understanding them is an experience proper to each viewer. The cerebral stimulation required to experience paintings, in conjunction with the necessity to have previous knowledge on the matter, can appear intimidating to an audience not familiar with art. According to professor of psychology Arthur Shimamura, "we must experience art within the realm of our cultural and personal knowledge" (1). Furthermore, the author explains "that our senses and emotions are engaged when we look at art but we do not readily appreciate the prominent role that knowledge plays in this experience" (Shimamura 2). As a result, prior knowledge as well as the personal investment and focus one needs in order to experience a painting can lead to the exclusion of a part of society from museums and other cultural institutions. Hence, why many visitors parade through

museums halls, passing artworks briefly without taking the time needed in front of each of them to understand their meanings.

2.2 THE MULTI-SENSORIAL EXPERIENCE OF IMMERSIVE PAINTINGS

When looking at painting, a dialogue is established between the object and the viewer. The emotional and cerebral connection created between the visitors and the works of art is essential to understand its meaning. In an institutional museum where works of art are displayed onto walls, visitors are restricted from approaching them from too near or touching them. Consequently, this dialogue remains distant. On the contrary, in a space such as l'Atelier des Lumières, viewers are encouraged to experience artwork further than by simply observing them, by using their different senses. While in standard exhibitions the audience is expected to stand still in front of an object to understand it, at l'Atelier des Lumières, visitors have the possibility to touch the walls or sit on the floor where the artworks are projected, resulting in a physical connection with them. Therefore, an audience that might be intimated to go to museums due to a lack of previous knowledge about art might feel more comfortable enjoying an exhibition primarily through their body. There, visitors are not expected to scrutinise each artwork to understand it, but rather to enjoy the immersive paintings. The curators ensure that the most important elements of work are displayed, making it easier for viewers to focalise on the sensorial experience. Consequently, the experience offered at l'Atelier des Lumières is based on a physical and sensorial dialogue between the paintings and the audience, rather than on a purely cerebral one. Therefore, the experience provided by Culturespaces is addressed to a larger audience, which might not be familiar with the art world but still wishes to experience it.

2.3 THE BODY EXPERIENCE

When experiencing a work of art, a viewer will ultimately engage with it emotionally. Emotional responses often lead to the simultaneous stimulation of different senses resulting in a sensory experience which involves the entire body. It is, therefore, interesting to investigate how the engagement of the body in the experience of immersive paintings exhibited at l'Atelier des Lumières could be more effective in the creation of a dialogue between the audience and the works. Immersive art spaces broaden viewers' involvement into the understanding of a piece of art, as they bodily take part into the exhibition and become part of the artworks, by being in symbiosis with their surroundings. Interactive exhibitions confront viewers to their relationship between their body and their experience of the world, resulting in a questioning of the Cartesian idea of the splitting between the mind and the body. A belief refuted by phenomenologist philosopher Martin Heidegger, who believed that humans apprehend interactions with others and the world firstly through their bodies. Furthermore, the work of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty emphasised the influence of the body when experiencing objects and others. Merleau-Ponty states in his book *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) that "we are our body" and consequently we experience our surroundings through it as "the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception" (239). Consequently, Merleau-Ponty deduced that anything one might experience in its mind is beforehand experienced by the body through tactile understanding. In other words, what is perceived by the body is translated into the mind. On the ground that one experiences its surroundings through its body, it is consequently interesting to take a phenomenological approach to understand how paintings presented in an immersive exhibition, where the body is highly stimulated, are experienced by the audience. While in standard museums, the visitors are expected to keep distance with artworks and at no cost touch them for preservation reasons, in immersive and participatory exhibitions the body becomes the main medium through which

viewers are experiencing them. Therefore, their understanding of it and the emotions it might provoke is based on their bodily experience. Phenomenologist theories affirm that one is embedded into the world as it experiences it through its body, consequently, when entering an immersive art experience, one becomes embedded into an artwork. The viewer finds itself at one with the painting and according to art curator Denice Leach "anything museum educators can do to bring the person closer to the object will improve sustained interactions" (206). Consequently, immersive paintings are more likely to offer visitors an experience which facilitates their understanding of a work of art by stimulating their bodies. Furthermore, curator Lizzie Muller analysed that "in computer-based interactive artwork the activity is not only psychological, but constituted through exchanges that occur materially between a person and an artefact" (197). Therefore, immersive paintings combine dialogues between one's consciousness, one's body and the digitally reproduced work of art.

2.4 THE IMMERSIVE ARTWORK

In a research on virtual museums Daniel Halpern and James Katz observed that "virtual environments manifest a unique set of characteristics that lead users to engage more with the content and learn as they interact with a subject" (778). This can be explained by the fact that digital and virtual images highly stimulate viewers' cognitive skills by deepening their visual memory. Therefore, one might remember better a digital reproduction of painting rather than the original one. Immersive paintings displayed at l'Atelier des Lumières go beyond a cerebral dialogue by creating a physical exchange with the audience, which is enabled by the scenography. While observing an original painting in real life, one might engage emotionally with it through the perception of the colour employed, the movement of the artist's brush or the texture. However, while observing a reproduction mapped at l'Atelier des Lumières, what might stir one's emotion is the artistic direction, the scenography and the storytelling which are combined in order to encourage emotional engagement.

The desire to immerse viewers into painting is not a recent process, as immersive images can be traced back to the late Roman Republic. Frescos were found in Pompeii, which covered the entire walls of a room in order to give the illusion to viewers to be in the image. One early example of this process can be found in Pompeii in the Villa dei Misteri (ca. 60b.c.). In such a room, the viewers were able to observe events depicted in a spatial and temporal unity which created an illusion of continuity. This kind of panorama eliminated the invisible boundary between the viewers and the image. The purpose of immersive images is to temporarily allow viewers to enter an environment where they can intimately interact with an object. Furthermore, "the desire to be in the picture, in both the metaphorical and non-metaphorical sense, did not disappear with the panorama but lived on in the twentieth century" (Grau 2003) and can now be observed in new emerging cultural spaces which propose immersive based content.

2.5 CONCLUSION

The experience of iconic paintings proposed at l'Atelier des Lumières enables visitors to create a dialogue between the work of art and themselves through the stimulation of their body. The use of the body in the understanding of art permits a better assimilation of the information as the audience's tactile experience will inscribe itself into their mind. According to phenomenologists' thinking, the experience of works of art primarily through the body facilitates the visitors' emotional engagement with it. Consequently, by favouriting a bodily experience rather than a cerebral one, Culturespaces' exhibitions are targeting a larger audience and suggestively appear more accessible to an audience unfamiliar with art. This is due to the fact that the immersive paintings displayed at l'Atelier des Lumières requires less intellectual stimulation than the experience of painting in museums, as the works are animated and

displayed in a manner that imbed into visitor's mind essential information regarding the work

of art without having them to study it in details.

CHAPTER THREE:

THE IMMERSIVE SPACE

3.1 THE USE OF THE SPACE

The art of visual storytelling is age-old: the first known cave paintings show humanity's wish to recount their experiences in a comprehensive way. Today's digital practices have enlarged how stories can be told as the number of ways one could recount them are now unlimited. Therefore, museums' curators are confronted with a wide range of mediums and techniques that could be used to transmit and educate their audience. The democratisation and increasing development of digital technologies impacted and keeps impacting the way humans communicate and accordingly how society communicates cultures. Consequently, the museum experience greatly changed. The development of immersive and multi-sensory exhibitions that allow the viewers to become part of the artworks are the result of research on how museums could improve their display, in order to remain attractive to an ever-changing audience. One of the main differences that can be observed between an exhibition in a traditional museum and in an immersive location is the use of the space. While both kinds aim to educate an audience about works of art, however, immersive spaces use rooms as interactive sites where viewers and artworks physically merge together. On the other hand, institutional museums use the space available by displaying artworks on plain walls, most commonly white ones, to focus viewers' attention solely on the artwork. Therefore, immersive spaces rethink the museal practices to answer the new expectation of their audience. According to Anderson Maxwell, "Museum-goers today are invited by the museums themselves to think of museums the way they think of other destinations intended to cajole and entertain" (141). Therefore, museums are seen by the visitors as potential entertainment spaces rather than educational ones. Consequently, when visiting institutional museums, where the exhibitions remain fairly standard, visitors "have

certain expectations of comfort and convenience, and unlike malls and amusement parks, museums often fall below their expectation" (Maxwell 141). Furthermore, with the democratisation of smartphones with incorporated cameras, individuals developed the habit of snapping photographs to document their daily actions frequently throughout the day. As a result, the practice of taking a picture to immortalise one's action is now also embedded into the visit of cultural exhibitions. Consequently, museums go to greater extent to ensure the safety of original paintings resulting in a clear distancing between visitors and the artworks. Numerous museums have nowadays glass panels or cords all around paintings to ensure they will not get damaged or vandalised (Fig. 2). Furthermore, the lighting is also kept dimmed to ensure the conservation of the art pieces.

Figure 2: Loïc Venance "La Joconde, le tableau iconique de Leonard de Vinci et emblème du Louvre" 2019. Photograph. The Louvre Museum. *RTL*. https://www.rtl.fr/culture/arts-spectacles/louvre-pourquoi-la-joconde-va-t-elle-etre-deplacee-7797943104. Accessed 13 Apr. 2020.

All these measures are essential to assure the conservation of priceless pieces of art but can seem quite intimidating for the visitors and can make them feel unwelcome. In a space such as l'Atelier des Lumières where no physical boundaries exist between the audience and the works of art, viewers are free to experience the exhibition as they wish and therefore might feel more comfortable with this kind of display. Visitors are immersed in a multi-sensory environment that in contrast to an inert object of art displayed in a museum, becomes animated and tactilely accessible to them.

3.2 THE IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE

The experience provided by immersive exhibition differs from the one on institutional museums where one can only apprehended artworks visually, by being a static viewer in front of a canvas. In immersive exhibitions, such as the one displayed at l'Atelier des Lumières, one has the possibility to feel the reproduced work by touching the walls or the floor, while hearing about it, thanks to the audio composed of music and voice-over played. Consequently, the experience is taken further than ocular sense and involves multiple senses simultaneously, which allow visitors to dialogue with the artworks on a deeper level. Historian and media theoretician Oliver Grau, noted while investigating the relationship between viewers and immersive art, that it is "characterised by diminishing critical distance to what is shown and increasing emotional involvement in what is happening" (207). Additionally, art theorist and curator Chritina Grammatikopoulou states in her research on participatory art experience, that viewers get a better understanding of an artwork when in implication with it, as opposed to being a passive observer (45). Commenting on the established practice of maintaining a distance between viewers and artworks, the author affirms that "bridging the gap between the two appears to be more effective" (Grammatikopoulou 45) for viewers to understand the meaning of it. Consequently, the desire of Culturespaces to experiment with interactive display

aims to provide their audience with a multi-sensory experience that establishes a physical dialogue between a piece of art and a viewer, in order for them to engage emotionally with it.

3.3 THE USE OF CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES

In order to immerse its visitors into their artworks, l'Atelier des Lumières uses cinematic techniques such as animation, montage and projection. Postdoctoral researcher Elisa Mandelli in her article "A Walk-through Images" (2019) observes the use of cinematic techniques inside museums and studies the differences between watching a movie and experiencing cinematic elements inside an exhibition. The author analyses that the main difference between experiencing moving images in a cinema or a museum is that, at a screening the audience remains still and on the contrary in an exhibition, the viewers can move around. Consequently, during an immersive exhibition, where cinematic elements are in use, the visitors have the possibility to control their own viewing experience. The desire to include cinematic techniques into museums arise from "the possibility of controlling a sequence of images, of imposing on the visitor a planned progression of pictures, impressions and information" (Lugon 131). The storytelling used in institutional museums is constructed around the idea of a separation between the artist, the artwork and the viewers. In a space such as l'Atelier des Lumières such dichotomies dissolve and allow the viewers to be at one with the paintings. Sociologist Tony Bennett studied in *The Birth of the Museum* (1995) the museums practices during the nineteenth and twentieth-century and how these institutions organised their collections and the impact it had on visitors' experience. The author concluded his research by stating that institutions arranged their exhibitions in a way that took visitors on organised walks where they had to follow an established path through the museum. This created a display of authority from the institution, resulting in the formation of a power relationship between the museum, the artist and the viewers. Opposingly, at l'Atelier des Lumières, visitors can choose their own path to

discover the paintings. However, visitors' experience is still guided, as the projection of the paintings does not allow the audience to observe the works on their own terms. The fact that the paintings are animated with the use of cinematic techniques constraint the viewers to an experience pre-established by the curators of the exhibition, which influences their personal experience of the object.

3.4 CONCLUSION

The multi-sensorial experience provided by Culturesapces allows viewers to move around in a designated space and experience the paintings both visually and physically. However, even if visitors are free of movements into the space, their experience is still guided through the audio and the montage. The cinematic techniques employed to animate and project the artworks constraint the viewers in an experience that is pre-established for them as they must hear and see what is there. The immersive display allows the viewers to experience painters' works without having to halt still in front of them. As opposed to traditional display, viewers do not have the decision to concentrate on chosen details but enjoy the selection made by the creative directors. Therefore, their experience of a painter's work is limited to the selection made by the curators. Consequently, even if visitors are free of movement within the designated space, the way they observe each painting is controlled by the director of the exhibition. Nevertheless, even if immersive display does not allow visitors to focus on painting's details the way they could in an institutional museum, it might encourage an audience unfamiliar with museums to visit these spaces to learn about a painting they experienced at l'Atelier des Lumières.

CONCLUSION

The immersive exhibitions presented at l'Atelier des Lumières are aiming to welcome into their location a broad audience than institutional museums. By using new technologies and techniques proper to cinema, l'Atelier des Lumières is able to project onto walls reproduced and animated paintings from famous masters. Furthermore, each presentation is accompanied by a soundtrack where classical music and voice-over merge to offer to viewers a multi-sensorial experience. Besides the financial and logistical advantages that these displays propose, l'Atelier des Lumières distinguish itself from other cultural spaces and institutional museums, by combining entertaining content with educational elements. By doing so, Culturespaces attempts to engage with an audience unfamiliar with the art world or intimidated by the idea of visiting a museum.

The first chapter of this thesis concentrates on establishing the differences existing between an original artwork and its reproduction. The differences existing between the two were important to evaluate, as at l'Atelier des Lumières only digitally reproduced paintings are exhibited. Consequently, it is primordial to point out the disparities between original works and reproduction, as it influences the experience of the audience. According to the work of Walter Benjamin, the most significant difference between an original painting and a reproduction is its singularity. Therefore, when reproduced and diffused widely, an artwork loses its aura. The other major difference between an original work of art and a reproduction is the authoritative and cultural value the object acquires. When displayed in institutional museums, artworks are mystified and preserved as holy relics, and consequently, they obtain an authoritative aura. On the other hand, when reproduced and shared in mass, an artwork loses their authentic value and becomes part of the popular culture. Consequently, one might not feel the need to see an artwork in "real" as it might have seen its reproduction before.

The second chapter of this thesis aims to develop further the study of the differences between original paintings and digital reproduction. This chapter focuses on how the experience of immersive digital reproduction of famous paintings displayed at l'Atelier des Lumières differs from the experience of an original artwork in an institutional museum. The immersive content proposed by l'Atelier des Lumières appears to be more memorable for the audience, as moving images stimulates cognitive skills deeper than still visuals. Furthermore, immersive paintings require the audience to experience the images through their body as much as through their sense of sight. Consequently, and based on the theory of phenomenologist thinker Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the involvement of the body in the experience of art creates a more stimulating and efficient dialogue between the audience and the artworks.

The third and last chapter of this thesis concern the way space is used in immersive exhibition, compared to the use of space in institutional museums. In the case of immersive exhibition, the way space is utilised is playing an influential role in the audience's experience of the artworks. It is because of their ability to totally immerse the visitors into the paintings that l'Atelier des Lumières is capable of proposing a new approach to art exhibition. By using digital reproduction of paintings, Culturespaces is able to remove any physical and invisible barriers that could exist between an audience and the painting. The use of cinematic techniques is also fundamental in the experience of the visitors. Although the projection of the artworks allows the audience to wander around and still see all the visuals at once, visitors are still thoroughly guided. What the audience gains in terms of freedom of movement compared to institutional museums, it loses it in the experience of painting. Because artworks are projected, the viewing time is pre-established and the audience does not have the possibility to stop and inspect further the details of a painting. Consequently, even if immersive space and immersive artworks appear more appealing to a larger part of society, their experience of the painting stays limited.

Digitally reproduced artworks acquired a different cultural value through their wide diffusion. While original paintings are kept in pristine condition in institutional museums, reproduced works of art can be encountered anywhere by anyone. Consequently, paintings are demystified, as they lose their authoritative aura. Taking the example of l'Atelier des Lumières, their use of digitally reproduced paintings as for purpose to create a multi-sensory and immersive experience where visitors are at one with the artworks. To achieve this effect, Culturespaces developed its own technology that enables the high-quality projection of digital reproduction of paintings. Thus, creating an immersive space, through the use of cinematic techniques, which breaks the barrier between the visitor and the paintings, typically found in institutional museums. By breaking this boundary, l'Atelier des Lumières encourages the viewers to experience the artwork with multiple senses simultaneously. While in institutional museums visitors are kept at distance from the artworks and are forbidden to touch them in order to avoid possible damages, at l'Atelier des Lumières visitors are free to touch the walls and floor where the artworks are being projected on. Consequently, visitors experience the paintings primarily through their body. This fundamental difference between an institutional museum and l'Atelier des Lumières greatly impacts the visitors' experience, as the distance created between an artwork and a viewer at museums could seem unwelcoming. On the contrary, at l'Atelier des Lumières, the playful and immersive display encourages the visitors to live the experience thoroughly by giving them a sense of freedom of movements which create a new relationship with already known paintings. Consequently, the displays in place at l'Atelier des Lumières target a wider audience than institutional museums. Immersive exhibitions propose displays which invite visitors to bodily experience the artworks in virtual spaces. Therefore, their cognitive skills are stimulated further than when experiencing original painting, as moving images inscribes themselves better into one's consciousness. Consequently, even if experiencing a digitally reproduced piece of art in an immersive

exhibition does not allow visitors to observe details or texture, they might still remember it better. Therefore, by using digitally reproduced paintings and displaying them in an immersive manner, l'Atelier des Lumières offers a new experience of famous paintings to their audience, which impact their relationship with art. However, by making use of cinematic techniques, and relying on the montage of paintings together, the educational elements of the exhibition appear to be secondary in the visitors' experience. Consequently, even if the playful display is quite captivating and attracts a wider audience than institutional museums, the content found at l'Atelier des Lumières remains primarily entertaining. Therefore, immersive exhibitions could not replace the educational experience of a standard museum.

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