Up Close and Personal:
The Vairocana Buddha at the Royal Ontario Museum
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Abstract

It is a common practice for museums to display and present artifacts objectively to their viewers. Religious artifacts in particular are frequently framed through the use of display techniques to appear less like sites for personal reflection and more like sites where only objective facts may be absorbed. Viewers are cast as active participants of the viewing experience who impart their own ideas and biases onto the object. Artifacts are then cast as passive participants in the exchange, only engaging with a visitor through its label. By employing a visual and spatial analysis of the Vairocana Buddha, a statue on display at the Royal Ontario Museum, I argue that despite attempts by museums to neutralize their agency, artifacts are able to prompt and evoke subjective or personal reactions from viewers.

Keywords

museum labels, museum placement, object analysis, museum visitor experience

In this essay, I will analyze the placement and display of the Vairocana Buddha in the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM). Although the ROM's display of this statue may attempt to dissuade viewers from experiencing it on a more personal level, I believe that the bronze figure of the Vairocana Buddha is able to transcend the objective blinders which have been offered to its viewers. I was inspired to personally reflect on the Vairocana Buddha, not because I was able to move past an objective reflection, but because the very nature of the object itself seems to elicit such a response.

In the Samuel Hall Currelly Gallery, the large bronze statue of the Vairocana Buddha (Figure 1) sits to the right of the first floor washrooms, just beyond the entrance to the Matthews Family Court of Chinese Sculpture. Although the bronze figure belongs to the Matthews Family Court collection, the 8 foot by 5 foot statue does not fit in the actual gallery (Royal Ontario Museum, 2014). Gifted to the Royal Ontario Museum by D. A. Dunlap, the cast bronze, partially gilded figure of the Vairocana Buddha comes from Shijiazhuang, a province in Northern China, and is dated to be from around the 16th to mid-17th century (ROM Images, 2014). The label provided by the museum chooses to focus on the figure's religious and artistic significance by stating that Vairocana is known as “the Buddha of Light... the supreme manifestation of the Buddha principle. He embodies millions of worlds with millions of Buddhas” (Royal Ontario Museum Label, 2014). Although the label's description of Vairocana's significance provides enough information for a viewer to recognize its importance, scholar of Buddhist philosophy Francis H.
Cook (1972) expands on this description and explains that, “Vairocana Buddha exists everywhere and every time in the universe, and the universe itself is his body” (p. 403). Along with Cook’s statement, it becomes easier to understand the artistic rendition of Vairocana and even allows for the interpretation of its symbolic significance. The large bronze statue points to Vairocana’s symbolic immensity, that he is as limitless as the entire universe. The remnants of gold leaf which remain on the figure may seek to emphasize his status as the Buddha of Light, or the Buddha of Great Illumination (Cook, 1972). Although only partially gilded, it is easy to imagine the whole figure covered in gold leaf, bright, compelling, and magnificent.

In their study of the characteristics and functions of a museum lobby, cultural studies academics Mortensen, Rudloff, and Vestergaard (2014) argue that museum lobbies “prepare visitors for the experience they are about to have and... [function as] a space for welcoming visitors” (p. 330). Moreover, the lobby also works to establish the mood and the frame of mind in which a visitor will experience galleries and artifacts of the museum itself (Mortensen et. al., 2014). In a way, the Currelly gallery functions as a museum lobby. It is in this space that visitors can perform aspects of their everyday lives, like checking their cell phones, taking family pictures, or allowing their children to play, without feeling as if they are violating the social etiquette required when visiting a museum. The objects in the Currelly gallery, then, function as welcoming objects: artifacts that are easy to view and naturally compelling, but that do not demand the kind of reverence or respect required in other galleries. The welcoming aspect and tone of the Currelly gallery is emphasized on the ROM’s website, which states that the Vairocana Buddha is positioned in order to “welcome visitors” (Royal Ontario Museum, 2014). Because of its placement in the Currelly gallery, the viewing experience of the Vairocana Buddha becomes more detached from the social context and viewing experience of its original setting. This separation between the museum space and the space of the everyday is complicated in the case of the Vairo-
cana Buddha because the figure is not separated from visitors by any kind of glass case or rope. In comparison to other objects, for which such boundaries are set, this implies that the bronze figure is either strong enough to withstand being touched, or that it is not significant or delicate enough to be placed behind a boundary.

The atmosphere of the Currelly gallery is loud, the lighting has an unpleasant yellow hue, and the base the Vairocana Buddha sits upon is an undecorated, plain white square. If the museum site is a frame and directly informs the visitor’s interpretation of an artifact, as stated by scholar of museum studies Marlene Chambers (2006), then it becomes clear that audiences are not meant to view the Vairocana Buddha with its ritual and religious significance in mind. Rather, the museum frames the Vairocana Buddha objectively. Viewers may be encouraged by the statue’s current display to cast aside any thoughts regarding its religious and ritualistic importance. Although the label for the Vairocana Buddha discloses its religious significance, it is mounted on the upward facing side of the base and so is difficult to locate and read. Yet despite these apparent attempts to display the Vairocana Buddha without evoking any kind of spiritual interpretation or experience, its sheer size draws the visitors’ eyes toward it, capturing their attention.

Linda Duke (2010), the director of the Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art, discusses museum experiences versus museum lessons, and notes that “aesthetic experiences have particular value as areas for growth because, by nature, they fall outside of the right/wrong, true/false paradigms that pervade American education” (p. 272). When viewing the Vairocana Buddha for the first time, I was captivated by the object’s aesthetic appeal. Although I wanted to learn more about its social and ritual meaning, there was something about the calmness and peacefulness of the statue’s facial expression that was intriguing. Because there is no right or wrong way to experience an artifact like the Vairocana Buddha, viewers are likely to reflect on their inner thoughts and personal experiences, and on how the object makes them feel. The subjective experience of museum objects, I propose, is something that might have a greater impact on a visitor than their learning about its historical significance or provenance. The bronze figure of the Vairocana Buddha, in my opinion, is one of the artifacts that has the ability to inspire such an experience. The figure itself is not smiling, but somehow it evokes a smile from visitors as they pass by or as they take a picture with it and mimic the statue’s hand gesture.

Reception theory, the framework of analysis used by anthropologists Appadurai and Breckenridge (1999), is the idea that the meaning of an object cannot be read by a viewer as if it were a passive entity like a label or a sign. Instead, the meaning of an object is created when a viewer engages with the object, imparting their own interpretations, biases, and personal experiences onto it. In the Indian context, Appadurai and Breckenridge (1999) state that “the mutual gaze (darsan) of sacred persons or objects and their audiences create bonds of intimacy and allegiance that transcend the specifics of what is displayed in any given context” (p. 416). In the case of my own darsan experience with the Vairocana Buddha, the allegiance I felt toward the artifact manifested in my distaste for its placement. My allegiance did not originate from any affiliation with Chinese Buddhism, but from my aesthetic experience and the personal value that I ascribed to the artifact. The “specifics” Appadurai and Breckenridge refer to can be taken to mean the political conditions with which this artifact was acquired, its ties to colonialism, or perhaps the cultural customs and religious significance the statue embodies. During my experience however, these specifics did not cross my mind. It is important, then, to recognize that artifacts in museums are not as passive as we might assume.

My analysis of the Vairocana Buddha’s placement and display in the Royal Ontario Museum shows that, despite the museum’s attempt to present the Buddha neutrally, my encounter with it was a subjective and personal one. As viewers, we do not merely see the object, impose our own ideas or biases onto it, and then move on. Rather, the artifacts both inform our experience and evoke reactions. Although the Vairocana Buddha sits in the Currelly gallery rather humbly, the figure still maintains a kind of agency in the way it visually, and personally, affects and attracts its viewers. Subjective experiences, and the personal reflections which accompany them, are more positive than museums might think.

References


