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**Mindfulness At Art Museums:
An Exploration of Theory & Practice**

The Mindfulness Movement

For the past decade mindfulness, in some ways used as a synonym for meditation and/or wellness, has gained popularity for it offers a set of practices that center stillness and present-moment awareness. When looking to define mindfulness, there are definitions founded in medicine, clinical psychology, social psychology, and from its historical roots in Buddhism. Considered one of the most widely accepted frameworks in the West (developed within the medical community) is by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D. Professor of Medicine emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, founder of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society and creator of the world-renowned Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program (Mindful, accessed December 15, 2022). As Dr. Kabat-Zinn defines, “mindfulness is the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). According to the American Psychological Association, mindfulness can be defined as the “awareness of one’s internal states and surroundings. Mindfulness can help people avoid destructive or automatic habits and responses by learning to observe their thoughts, emotions, and other present-moment experiences without judging or reacting to them” (Accessed December 15, 2022). Furthermore, there are a variety of mindful practices that date back thousands of years and span several countries such as India and Nepal; each with their own rich traditions that center contemplation. From a more spiritual lens, as described by Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh, “in mindfulness one is not only restful and happy, but alert and awake” (1976, p.60). For the sake of this paper, mindfulness is understood as a framework that encompasses each of the above definitions for there is no one-way to experience mindfulness.

Today, many mindfulness practices have been integrated into the West and into a variety of contemporary fields such as healthcare, education, and museology. As a forum that bridges research and practice across disciplines, many speakers from public TEDx Talks state the advantages of implementing mindfulness into their field. For example, in 2015, Dr. Dave Johnson, Professor of Nursing at the University of Saint Francis (amongst other positions) presented “Integrate Mindfulness with the Power of Pause” where he discussed his own clinical

social work and how mindfulness practices helped build resiliency and capacity to contest stress. Then, in 2018 Sam Chase, Lead Facilitator for RISE, Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health's evidence-based resilience training program (amongst other roles) presented a TEDx Talk, "Paying Attention & Mindfulness." Here Chase shared information about the brain's capacity (or lack-there-of) to focus and multi-task and how mindfulness activities activate the brain's capacity to pay attention. In addition to the health and wellness field's application of mindfulness, there is interest in these practices being implemented in education. AnneMarie Rossi, founder and director of the Colorado non-profit, Be Mindful, presented her work in "Why Aren't We Teaching You Mindfulness" for TEDxYouth@MileHigh in 2015. She spoke of how mindful practices can be used in public school classrooms to enhance the capacity of teachers and students to focus, diminish distraction, and improve listening skills.

As an extension of mindfulness in k-12 classrooms, university courses have also begun to utilize mindfulness (Gradle, 2011; Graham, & Lewis, 2021). In one qualitative study, Graham, and Lewis (2021) examined how mindfulness and more general self-inquiry practices influence pre-service art educators in their teaching and art-making practices. One goal was to explore "transformative learning experiences and critical responsiveness" by placing mindfulness in the seat of a critical pedagogical approach. As an extension of this goal, they were also interested in investigating "knowledge-seeking and questioning strateg[ies] about the nature of personal and social experiences" (Graham & Lewis, 2021, p. 475). This study was informed by a/r/topography and applied an arts-based research methodology. Students in the 16-week study would write or create reflections in a designated artmaking journal, 5-7 times a week. Among the findings were: observational drawing allowed students to direct their attention to the present moment and cultivate a mind-body relationship; data visualization became a platform for communicating and understanding (emotions and experiences); and that relationships with/conceptions of time were positively impacted by integrating artmaking and mindfulness. From these findings, recognition was given to "data visualization [which] emerged as an effective strategy that connected self-inquiry, mindfulness and artmaking [... for] it required students to devise their own areas of reflection and then translate them into visual terms" (Graham & Lewis, 2021, p. 487).

Making Space for Mindfulness in Museums

What about museums? How can these spaces, unlike a hospital, yoga center, university, or k-12 classroom, be optimal places to practice mindfulness? Within the primary museological publication, *The Museum Experience Revisited*, John Falk and Lynn Dierking use an identity lens to describe five most common types of people that visit a museum: explorers, facilitators, professionals/hobbyists, experience seekers, and rechargers (2013, p. 47-48). The authors also describe respectful pilgrims and affinity seekers as additional categories that relate to specific exhibitions or entire museum devoted towards “national, ethnic/racial, or affinity groups” (Falk & Dierking, 2013, p. 49-50). For this review, the most pertinent identity marker is *rechargers*, those “who are primarily seeking a contemplative, spiritual, and/or restorative experience. They see the museum as a refuge from the work-a-day world or as a confirmation of their religious/spiritual beliefs” (Falk & Dierking, 2013, p. 48). Building on this view of the museum and those that visit, there is also much research that looks at why and how the museum is a therapeutic space (Banzi, 2022; Ghadim, Daugherty, 2021; Hamil, 2016; Ioannides, 2016). Packer and Bond (2010) investigated the therapeutic environment of museums drawing from environmental psychology and the psychology of leisure/restoration/motivation and tourism. In their study, museums were established as therapeutic when they concluded that “feeling comfortable in the physical surroundings of the site was confirmed as a predictor both of visitors' perceptions of the restorative attributes of the setting, and their satisfying experiences” (Packer & Bond, 2010, p. 431). Positioning museums as restorative and in many respects therapeutic, is also well situated within the larger and more expansive arts and health field and the growing movement for museums to be socially/civically engaged.

Aside from the physicality of the museum to encourage wellness, museums as culturally significant institutions are shifting their core purpose by becoming more visitor-focused and community-oriented, by way of leaning into their social responsibility. Within this framework, museums are increasingly engaged with efforts to address social issues from racism and homelessness to climate change and public health (Camic & Chatterjee, 2013; Silverman, 2010; Whelan, 2015). In Silverman’s (2010) *The Social Work of Museums*, there are five ways museums can contribute to social change in their communities by: “promoting relaxation; an

immediate intervention of beneficial change in physiology, emotions, or both; encouraging introspection, which can be beneficial for mental health; fostering health education; and acting as public health advocates and enhancing health-care environments” (p.51). Camic and Chatterjee (2013) support the notion of the museum having a social role in its community and offer a culture and health framework founded on three components: healthcare, social care and museum partnerships; healthcare and social services referring people to museum-based programs, (also known as the burgeoning practice of social prescribing); and local museums/ art galleries offering health and wellbeing and social inclusion activities for different groups of people. If museums are to expand their role as public serving institutions with social responsibilities, evidence of existing programs that partner with health/wellness professionals and/or integrate contemplative practices is crucial. Thus, considering Silverman’s social work in museums framework, and Camic and Chatterjee’s culture and health framework, contemplative pedagogy and museum-based mindfulness programs contribute greatly to social change and can transform community and individual wellness.

In January 2022 mindfulness made several major headlines in the international *MuseumNext* health blog. The first, “What are Mindful Museums and how can they help us with our mental health?” (Coates, 2022), was quickly followed by “How museums are offering meditation and mindfulness sessions” (Deakin, 2022a) and “Museum visits can be a powerful tool in the quest for greater mindfulness” (Deakin, 2022b). In this last article, the author notes that in the “in the UK alone, there are more than 600 museums now running programmes that explore and utilize mindfulness as a technique for establishing and maintaining good mental health. These include both activities designed to improve mental wellbeing and exhibitions reflecting on mindfulness” (Deakin, 2022). Referring to the therapeutic aspect of museums, Deakin (2022) further notes “museum environments can stimulate the senses without sensory overload,” thus making them ideal for mindful programs and activities. Mindfulness as a manifestation of contemplative education is popular in relation to another growing interest in the arts and health field, specifically museums that incorporate/study psychology, neuroscience, and art therapy (Banzi, 2022; Das & Maley, 2022; Ghadim & Daugherty, 2021). In chapter 8, “Museums: How They Foster Wellbeing. A Round-Up of Initiatives” Banzi (2022)

dedicates seven pages to slow-looking and mindfulness bringing international examples of contemplative practices, spanning in-person and virtual programming. In fact, Banzi (2022) notes that mindfulness practices transcend time and geographic borders, using the global event, *The Slow Art Day*, as an example. The goal of this international event is “to help people discover the joy of looking at and appreciating art [and] regardless of the design, all events share the focus on slow-looking and its transformative power” (2022, p. 97).

Pedagogies That Support Contemplative Practices

Moving further from the macro to the micro of museology, within the museum education field there are various structured and flexible pedagogies that relate to contemplative practices and/or can inform museum-based mindfulness programming (Echarri & Urpi, 2018; Hubard, 2006; Thompson & Tobin, 2018). One experimental pedagogy is embodied learning as discussed by Olga Hubard (2007). Hubard distinguishes embodied engagement as a form of non-discursive teaching. Auxiliary, in this pedagogy, museum educators can facilitate physical and emotional ways of knowledge through various approaches, including responding with poetry, becoming the artwork, creating a soundtrack, drawing details, and transforming paper (Hubard, 2007, p. 49-51). This approach could be of great use for mindfulness programs for it offers visitors the opportunity to empathize with a work's emotional tone or cultural significance rather than centering intellectual or critical art historical techniques of viewing and learning.

Another approach is a pedagogical framework that infuses observation, interpretation, and dialogic teaching, as explored by Fernando Echarri and Carmen Urpi (2018). These authors created a program and research study at the University of Navarra Museum to explore mindfulness in art contemplation and meaning making. The experimental program, created for 9 students in an art therapy and mindfulness course, intentionally engaged with one artwork, *Untitled* by Mark Rothko. As part of the two-hour program, three activities encompassed the museum educator's pedagogy: slow-looking and contemplation, artmaking, and a relational/conversational element. By employing a multifaceted approach to engaging with contemporary art, the students were able to generate meaning.

One other museum-based pedagogy in conversation with the approaches above is the larger body of activity-based pedagogies as discussed by Kai-Kee, Latina, and Sadoyan (2020). In response to dialogic teaching museum text published several years earlier (Kai-Kee & Burnham 2011), Kai-Kee, Latina, and Sadoyan explore the theoretical framework of activity-based pedagogy through cognitive theory and a theory of play. Within this interdisciplinary framework, play is explored through embodiment and affordances, skills, movement, the senses, drawing in the museum, emotion, empathy and intersubjectivity, and mindful looking (Kai-Kee et al., 2020). The authors suggest that “mindfulness and looking at art allow for a third term, *mindful looking*, which appropriates techniques and insights from mindfulness training coupled with close observation that might be successfully applied to onetime engagements with works of art” (Kai-Kee et. al, 2020, p. 161). The authors offered a review of 11 mindfulness programs across the country discerning similar phrases and familiar key words such as “present-moment awareness: finding stillness within ourselves” (Kai-Kee et al., 2020, p. 160). The authors conclude that this final aspect of play, mindful looking, is ripe for investigation. Across the several pedagogies explored, one recurring theme is the integration of slow-looking, observation, reflection, and dialogue. Thus, when conceiving of mindfulness in museums, there are various pedagogical tools that support this contemplative practice.

Mindful Museum Moments: A Survey of Current Programs

Using Kai-Kee et al. (2020) as a starting point, what other museum programs integrate mindfulness practices? How has the COVID-19 Pandemic influenced pre-existing programs? Have new ones been developed and are they available to the public? Expanding the survey of Kai-Kee et al. (2020), 9 additional museum programs across the United States will investigate how pedagogy is conceptualized and experienced within mindfulness programs. Out of these 9 programs, one interview was conducted with an Associate Curator of Education who inherited the mindfulness program over 6 years ago and has since, grown its internal and external programmatic sustainability. An additional mindfulness program, a larger convening, is also offered as a case study to investigate field wide lessons and implications for the use of mindfulness as a contemplative and critical pedagogy.

Starting in the west, The Portland Art Museum in Oregon offers a *Midday Mindfulness* program. Initially this was an in-person 30-minute program but throughout 2021 the museum began to offer 25-minute virtual programs. Included in the description of this program was “looking at art can help us slow down, reflect, focus on the present, and connect. Using artwork to ground our mindfulness practice cultivates skills such as close looking and empathy, while also helping us to be more self-aware” (accessed November 25, 2022). In addition to live opportunities to engage, recordings from the 2021 programs are available to watch on the museum’s website. Each of these sessions focus on one work of art with the opportunity for participants to reflect and discuss. This description insinuates that the pedagogical approach that centers close observation.

The Denver Art Museum in Colorado offers a more regular, yet entirely virtual program. *Mindful Looking*, a 45-minute program, takes place every Tuesday afternoon. While this program initially was in-person and would often add drop-in drawing or drop-in writing experiences, the museum makes it very clear by its website that the program (as it is today) “invites you to slow down and spend time with a single work of art from the Denver Art Museum. Discover overlooked details, pose questions, and explore ideas as we linger, look, and connect with art and each other” (accessed November 25, 2022). For this institution, it appears the pedagogical approach might vary depending on whether the program is in-person or virtual.

To the southwest, the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art in Arizona throughout 2022 hosted in-person and virtual mindfulness programs. Partnering with a meditation center in Phoenix, *the Art of Mindfulness* three-part meditation series was facilitated by a Kadampa Buddhist Monk. In response to Mental Health Awareness Month, the museum announced, “an all-new series, *Keys to a Happy Heart*, featuring meditation classes that empower us to generate feelings of peace, joy, and loving kindness toward others” (personal communication, May 1, 2022). In email notifications from the museum, this mindfulness meditation series was thematic. The first centered on gratitude, then rejoicing, and finally cherishing and were available to purchase individually or as a collective package after the event (personal communication, May 1, 2022).

Moving east, the Wexner Centre for the Arts in Ohio, the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pennsylvania, and the Phillips Collection in Washington DC each offer their variations of mindfulness programs. At the Wexner Centre for the Arts, an organization inside Ohio State University, there is a larger Art & Resilience programming structure. Within this framework there is the *On Pause* program, an ongoing series of free art and meditation workshops. Beginning in 2018, the 1-hour program was initially offered in-person, Wednesday afternoons, in partnership with the local spa and yoga space, Replenish. Since the COVID-19 Pandemic the program transitioned to a virtual format where facilitators go live on Instagram and Facebook. From the last program registration page, the program description included what Hubbard (2007) might refer to as an embodied learning experience, one where participants are invited to “align mind, body, senses, mood, and space through meditative and creative techniques as you include moments for contemplation and rest in your everyday life” (Accessed November 25, 2022).

The Carnegie Museum of Art in Pennsylvania offers a 30-minute, virtual mindfulness program *Weekly Art Meditations*. In this program, “each week works of art from the collection serve as inspiration for achieving balance and a sense of inner calm or insight. Visualization exercises, breath awareness, noting techniques, and loving-kindness meditations are just a few of the practices explored on this journey” (Accessed November 25, 2022). Thus, pedagogically speaking, there are a variety of tools that incorporate embodied learning. Further, the museum offers over 20 recorded meditations, each one connected to a work of art in the collection as part of the *Self-Care Sunday’s* series.

The Phillips Collection in Washington, DC offers a slate of art and wellness programs. One of these is *Guided Meditation*, a 30-minute virtual program. Offered weekly, this program is led by a local yoga instructor who invites “techniques for mindful looking and thinking that we can carry with us wherever we are” (Accessed November 25, 2022). Here it is noteworthy that facilitation, and thus pedagogy is influenced by a wellness professional rather than from a museum-perspective.

Additionally, the National Museum of Asian Art, a Smithsonian institution, offers a *Meditation and Mindfulness* program. This program is on the museums calendar every Friday

afternoon, virtually, for 45-minutes. On a December 2022 event registration page, the organizers highlight “sessions include inspiration from art in the museum collection as well as appearances by special guest teachers and artists” (Accessed November 26, 2022). Again, the program is framed by an interdisciplinary set of facilitators which set the pedagogical implications of this program to be multifaceted and embodied rather than intellectual.

Moving southeast, there are several art museums that engage in a variety of in-person and virtual mindfulness programs. The Lowe Art Museum located within the University of Miami in Florida offers a variety of mindfulness programs. *The Art of Mindfulness*, established in 2016, is a virtual, 40-minute program that takes place every Tuesday afternoon. It includes a guided meditation practice and a reflection. The museum also offers a *Mindful Looking* program, offered three times a month that incorporates looking and observation techniques in connection with a work from the Lowe’s collection. Further, on the first Tuesday of the month the museum offers a *Mindful Sitting* program that focuses on traditional guided mindfulness practices without a connection to the museum’s collection (Lowe Art Museum, personal communication, September 26, 2022).

The Georgia Museum of Art, located at the University of Georgia, offers several programs within an art and wellness programming framework. For this study, the focus is *Morning Mindfulness*, a 1-hour program offered every other Friday morning during the academic year. Whether in-person or virtual, “a variety of instructor-led meditation, movement and mindfulness techniques” are offered (Accessed November 24, 2022). To further investigate the framework and pedagogies utilized in museum-based mindfulness programs, in November 2022 I spoke with the current Associate Curator of Education and the *Morning Mindfulness* program manager, Sage Kincaid. Of several key factors to the program, Kincaid highlighted the importance (and journey it took) to create a sustainable model for the invited mindfulness instructors. Under Kincaid’s leadership, the program developed a cohort of instructors, rather than its previous method of relying on one experienced instructor. Further, this cohort of instructors is now offered a stipend for the programs they facilitate similar to what teaching artists receive for other programs at the museum. This breadth of instructors allows for flexibility and for themes in each session to alter depending on two factors: the museum

perspective and what is available for viewing; and the preferences of the mindfulness instructor. As described by Kincaid, the pedagogy of this program is “open-ended [...and centers] connecting and interacting with art through looking techniques [and invites] art appreciation” (Zoom Interview, November 23, 2022). Additionally, what makes *Morning Mindfulness* a unique program at this institution is that it allows for an “open gentle curiosity that is so appropriate for looking at art” (Zoom Interview, November 23, 2022). Built into the program is a conversation component where participants build community, fostered trust amongst each other, and build a sense of empathy for the artist.

Across these 9 programs, there is much to deem regarding logistical frameworks and pedagogical implications for the growing interest in contemplative museum education. First, while there was similarity in program titles and descriptions, by means of website material, it appears the connection to the museum’s artwork was less unanimous. Some institutions directly state how the programs mindfulness and meditations were directly tied to artwork while some did not. There was also evidence of museum educators partnering with meditation/wellness facilitators. However, across several programs outside facilitators were given the space to practice while others collaboratively facilitated programs. Further, the world events of the COVID-19 Pandemic significantly impacted the accessibility and longevity of mindfulness programs. In response, museums not only shifted to virtual programs, but they were able to potentially reach more audiences and were able to record sessions for local and non-local communities to participate in. Finally, pedagogically speaking there appears to be a wide variety of approaches, some including more embodied experiences and others integrating looking and dialogue.

Mindful Museum Moments: A Case-Study Expanding Mindfulness at the Getty

Building on the mindfulness work Getty educators wrote about in *Activity-Based Teaching in the Art Museum, Movement, Embodiment, Emotion*, the Getty Center recently organized and hosted a *Mindfulness in Museums Convening* this past August 2022. It was a daylong event that invited museum professionals and mindfulness researchers and evaluators “who have a mindfulness practice or a curiosity about mindfulness-based approaches [with the goal] to share and learn from one another” (Accessed November 20, 2022). The program

structure included “a series of talks by inspiring thought leaders [who offered] case studies and strategies for integrating mindfulness with art in a museum setting” (Accessed November 20, 2022). Rhonda V. Magee, Mindfulness Teacher and Author, Professor of Law, University of San Francisco opened the convening with excitement around mindfulness in the museum as it can be “a support for the work you do in deepening the capacity of museum spaces to teach, to be spaces of teaching and learning” (Keynote Address and Meditation, 15:10). This element of support and spaciousness set the stage for the day.

After the keynote address, the convening encompassed three panels with mindfulness practices sprinkled between each session, pairing research and practice with embodied learning. Many of the panels uplifted museums that were represented in the *Activity-Based Teaching in the Art Museum* book but gave more space for the managers of those programs to share what programs they offer and have learned thus far. In the first panel, “Slowing Down Together: Mindfulness: Mindfulness Practices at Museums” Dawn Eshelman, Former Head of Programs at the Rubin Museum of Art made an important note about acknowledging secular or spiritual connections/lineages. They invited museum educators doing this work or those who want to initiate this work to discuss and articulate their own definition and/or traditions of mindfulness. This will inform praxis and experience, for both the facilitator and the participants.

Across the panels there were several recurring themes that frame the current landscape of museum-based mindfulness programming. One takeaway was across various museum-based mindfulness and other wellness programs (such as yoga and classes for medical students) is the importance of co-leading these programs or allowing outside facilitators to lead; collaboration and connection. This insinuates the museum taking a social responsibility by engaging mental health professionals and experienced wellness facilitators. Another emergent theme was how the museums present had larger art and wellness programs, of which mindfulness was only one type of program. This is reflective of the larger Getty Center, who has, in addition to their regular *Mindful Moments in the Museum* program since 2016, now also offer a mindfulness youth program, *Art Impact*. This framework of larger art and wellness programs in museums speak not only to the increasing integration of contemplative pedagogy in museum spaces, but to the larger, more rigorous field of arts and health.

Mindful Implications for the Field

From analyzing museum websites, to watching video panel presentations, to speaking with one museum educator who manages mindfulness programs, it is clear there is vast visibility and flexibility with this type of programming. While from these sources it is clear mindfulness is its own type of contemplative practice, the extent to which museum educators articulate it within their own pedagogy is still in development. Further, the extent to which these programs directly engage with art, whether visually or tacitly, varies and brings to question whether these programs are impactful due to the nature of museums being “restorative” places (as noted by Falk and Dierking) or because of the combination of place and activity (utilizing art). Most written materials, including the Getty’s convening, offer a landscape of the current mindfulness programs offered noting similarity in program logistics (titles, key words descriptors, time frame, placement in museum, payment, etc.). What the field needs is evidence or perspectives from the participants themselves. This could be in the format of formal or informal evaluation on one-time or frequent participants in these programs. Further, within museum education, with the increase in art and wellness programs it might be advantageous to incorporate mindfulness training in addition to partnerships and collaborations with health and wellness professionals. In turn, expanding the skillset of educators that tailor to the social needs of their shifting museums and communities. It would also be beneficial to research how these programs can truly be collaborative between the museum educators and wellness facilitators. This echoes similar goals within edu-curation and the desire to not just move over and offer someone a seat at the table, but to have that seat built in from the beginning.

Mindfulness as praxis and pedagogy within the museum is only at the beginning. The impact of museums taking a health-oriented role by implementing wellness practices such as mindfulness can result in what Whelan describes as building “social cohesion and [a reduction in] social exclusion” (2015, p.217), something we all need in lieu of the recent and on-going traumatic events spanning from the COVID-19 Pandemic to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and the raging wildfires and destruction of our environment. The mindful capacity of museums, on top of the shift in becoming visitor-centered and socially responsible,

makes these spaces optimal to engage and heal from such traumatic events. Museums can encourage the social, emotional, and mental well-being of their communities. And the educators within them can expand the therapeutic role of education and begin, or continue to shape, an interdisciplinary and critical contemplative pedagogy.

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