

# **The Art of Appreciation: The Value of Art and Its Role in a University Community**

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## **Abstract**

The visual arts play an important role in the aesthetic environment. The condition of the aesthetic environment has the potential to have positive or negative effects on people. Understanding the importance the visual arts play in enhancing an academic and social environment within a university campus is important in order to maximize the role of the university. The university today has become the chief agent in formulating and handing on our cultural tradition- this is what its visual environment should make visible. By providing visual artwork which represents social responsibility and artistic substance, as well as by offering an educational forum in which dialogue between artist and viewer and art and community is encouraged the university can provide outside learning experiences for students and faculty to be continually engaged in critical thinking about abstract concepts and academic issues. Research surrounding the possible negative or positive effects the conditions of an aesthetic environment can have on individuals is lacking and the scope does not extend as far as college, rather focusing on the visual environments of elementary schools. When considering the role of the visual arts in terms of its display within the buildings of a university community the value and importance can often be overlooked or greatly misunderstood. The purpose of this research inquiry can be defined in with three progressive goals; identify key characteristics to evaluate tangible attributes which make a visual art piece “valuable” and thus significant for an academic community, find research and literature which will support an understanding of the value and importance of viewing and purchasing art in a tangible context for a university, and finally developing a measure to discover and recognize how members of the university community perceive the role of the arts in their environment. With this proposal I hope to bring attention to the importance of the visual arts in higher education and the role of the arts in enhancing an academic environment.

## **Introduction**

The visual arts play an important role in academic community, fostering critical thinking, inspiring creativity, and pushing viewers to move past the tangible knowledge into that which can only be conceived through a process of deeper engagement and thought. When considering the role of the visual arts in terms of its display within the buildings of a university community the value and importance can often be overlooked or greatly misunderstood. The tendency for the visual arts to be seen as frivolous and perhaps less important than other ventures occurring within a universities academic community, is a trend that is seen across various stages of educational systems. In times of financial crisis the arts are often quickly weaned down.

There are many advocates for the art in education cause, there are various organizations and associations which stand to protect the visual arts place within education, however what is missing from the argument is strong empirical research surrounding what tangible, measurable benefits can be documented from an education that embraces the importance of the arts.

When considering the role of visual arts within a university community the perceived value is even more precarious. What is the university’s responsibility to the student body in terms of art and culture? The role of the visual arts within a university does not follow an outline which would might be found in an elementary school, the value may not come from requiring students to engage with some tactile form of art, rather in a more reasonable sense to make art viewing a common part of every students daily experience by displaying meaningful and thoughtful visual art displays.

Therein lays the problem, with an economy that is current financial crisis how would one justify the purchasing of expensive contemporary art over other cost reducing benefits for students like scholarships? In essence the justification of art purchasing lies in the ability to convey what in explicit terms the importance of viewing and interacting with visual arts, the benefit to the university community as a whole, and the university plays in providing enriching opportunities to not only compliment the college experience, also to enhance the academic communities across discipline.

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Within this research proposal the initial investigation begins with understanding all of these aspects defined with the purpose in a more literal way. What role do the visual arts play within a university’s center for student life building, where students from every academic background have an opportunity to interact with the art? The aesthetic environment of educational buildings plays an important role in the student’s interactions within that environment, thus this proposal will focus on the value the visual arts add to an aesthetic environment as a whole.

What makes purchasing art important or valuable? Answering the question how to justify the purchasing of expensive contemporary art, the same question could be posed to almost every academic community. While it would be ideal for the university to admit as many students as the possible can and making college more affordable through scholarships by cutting back funding for projects on campus. The college experience is made up of mixture of experiences which work together to create a cultural awareness. It is during this time that the university has an opportunity to influence and provide an academic experience that results not only well taught students, but contributors to a cultural society beyond themselves and those who look like them. The visual environment of university communities is an important component of fostering culture and outside-of-the-classroom experiential learning opportunity. Edward Sekler (1965), in his classic essay *The Visual Environment, for The Fine Arts and the University*, writes:

It goes without saying, however, that there are a number of factors which make the responsibility of the university greater than that of most other big organizations. One of them is the special cultural impact and prestige which, of necessity, is attached to its actions. The university today has become the chief agent in formulating and handing on our cultural tradition- this is what its visual environment should make visible... For this reason a university cannot apply to its visual environment the same considerations of economical profitability that would prevail in a commercial undertaking. (p.86)

Setting the university apart from other entities instills the idea that because there is something special which sets it apart, in the sense of its goals and responsibilities the argument for the importance of culture within that small environment can be made more profoundly.

Developing a tangible understanding the visual arts provide for an academic setting will provide empirically based and founded support for the merit of the arts which are often overlooked. It is also important to understand the types of visual art a university should invest in to provide maximum benefit for the school and the students.

## Theoretical Perspectives

When considering theories which provide understanding to the importance of the aesthetic environment as it relates to educational settings, two theories, looking at them in correlated manner, influenced and added support to the ideas within this literature review. The first theory used was Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, an educational psychology theory which specifies four types of nested environmental systems, with bi-directional influences within and between the systems. Bronfenbrenner posits that development is an influenced by interacting systems with the child at the center. The outer layers, larger more abstract concepts trickle down to affect the child in more specific ways as you move through each layer.

The innermost system is identified as the Microsystem. The microsystem is the setting where the individual lives; it includes family, peers, school, classroom environment, and neighborhood. This system is where the most direct interaction with the individual occurs, with the individual also helping to construct the settings within this system.

The Mesosystem refers to how the relations between entities in the microsystem. How home interacts with school and school interacts with peer relationships.

The next system the Exosystem does not directly involve the individual, but still impacts them. A common example would be a parent’s job does not directly affect the child, however the experience the parent has at the job and how this experience affects the individual is where the interaction becomes evident.

The Macrosystem discusses larger, broader concepts such as the culture the individual lives in and the many manifestations of incontrollable aspects that affect them, such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and country of origin.

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Understanding how all these interconnected systems affect each individual is an important part of creating an effective learning environment. Universities create atmospheres that will be comfortable and stimulating for students of vastly varying backgrounds. Even more important to understand is the microsystem which directly relates to my inquiry about the importance of the environment on learning and social interactions. Within the microsystem are areas which directly impact the individual, the classroom and in this case the university can be seen as the classroom as social interactions and academic endeavors occur in various buildings across campus and is concentrated within a center for student life which brings together students from different backgrounds with common goals, a place to study, a place for relief and relaxation, and exciting activities that provide an outlet.

The second theory used for to understand aesthetic needs in general is found in Abraham Maslow's theory of personality, Maslow's Hierarchy of Need. According to Maslow we are all motivated by needs and our needs motivate us to action. Humans are born with their most basic needs known as biological and physiological needs such as air, food, drink, warmth, sex and, sleep. Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs helps to explain how these needs motivate us all. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs states that we must satisfy each need in turn, starting with the first, which deals with the most obvious needs for survival itself. Only when the lower order needs of physical and emotional well-being are satisfied are we concerned with the higher order needs of influence and personal development. In order the needs are listed as follows; biological and physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs, recently added cognitive and aesthetic needs, and finally a need for self actualization.

Understanding aesthetic needs in terms of human satisfaction as a step before the ability for self actualization gives merit to the validity of the importance of an aesthetically pleasing environment.

## Delimitations

While this study will investigate the role art within a university environment, this study will not address areas of art education or introducing the creative arts into academic curriculum. This study while addressing the importance of the aesthetic environment will not address the physical environment in terms of architecture. The discussion of the aesthetic environment will be used as a means to open up an inquiry of the explicit role the visual arts play within the aesthetic environment and to what extent does the role affect the university. This study will also be focusing primarily the value of having timely art within an area students of any academic background will have access, for a example a student center for life, as opposed to an art building which may not be beneficial for the campus community as a whole.

## Definitions

In this section I would like to take an opportunity to define some commonly used terms within this proposal and put them in an explicit context in how it relates to discussion and use of them.

- **Visual Arts:** art form that includes the traditional fine arts such as drawing, painting, printmaking, sculpture, which are primarily visual in their construction.
- **Value:** The definable characteristics of an individual art piece which make it relevant, aesthetically pleasing, and beneficial for a university community to experience.
- **Aesthetic Experience:** An individual's personal interaction with the intrinsic features of a piece of art that elicits their attention and reflection encouraging deeper thought and critical thinking of subject matter with in the piece.
- **Visual/Aesthetic Environment:** The aspects of an environment or space which make it visually stimulating and appealing which go beyond architecture and into the creative and artistic sensibilities of creating an inviting environment, specifically for this study, the thoughtful selection of works of visual art on display in an engaging environment

## Analysis and Discussion of Literature

### Literature Review

#### *Effects of Esthetic Surroundings*

Psychologists such as Maslow and Mintz (1956) have found that visual-esthetic surrounding can have significant effects upon persons exposed to them. In their classic 1956 study, *Effects of Esthetic Surroundings: Initial Effects of Three Esthetic Conditions Upon Perceiving "Energy" and "Well Being" in Faces* where they set out to address the

lack of experimental studies on the effects of beautiful and ugly environments upon people. Tested short-term effects of three visual esthetic conditions; “beautiful room” (BR), “average room” (AR), and “ugly room” (UR).

Participants were taken to different rooms where they were left alone by some pretense and allowed to essentially soak in the atmosphere after which they were asked to rate feelings of well being, energy, fatigue, and displeasure from their perceptions of people’s expressions on note cards. The average ratings for “energy” and “well being” in the beautiful room were significantly higher (beyond the .001 level) than ratings in the ugly room mean of the ratings given by subjects in both the average and ugly rooms was in the range defined as “fatigued” and “displeased” significantly higher (beyond .05 level) than ratings in average room. The average ratings in average room were higher, but not significantly than ratings in ugly room. The group in the in the “beautiful” room gave significantly higher ratings (more “energy” and “well-being”) than groups in either the “average” or “ugly” rooms.

Essentially what this study suggest is that the conditions of our environments may affect our perceptions well being and energy which could in turn affect our social interactions with others within the same environment. While this study presented some interesting information regarding possible effects of negative or positive esthetic environments the results are not transferable due to a small sample size. Also the effects of the conditions may have been short term, and how could they prove that the subjects were affected explicitly by the aesthetic condition of the room.

### *Perceived Quality of Care*

Arneill and Devlin (2006) conducted a study, *Perceived quality of care: The influence of the waiting room environment*, to understand what potential effects the aesthetic environment of physician’s waiting areas would have on potential patient’s perceptions of the physician’s quality of care. The study involved 147 college students (ages 18-24 yrs) and 58 senior citizens, (ages 59-90 yrs). Participants viewed 35 slides of physicians’ waiting rooms all varying in condition. They were asked at the beginning of the study to rate the physicians quality of care based solely on having viewed an image of their waiting room. The primary hypothesis was that perceived quality of care would be greater for waiting rooms that were nicely furnished, well-lighted, contained artwork, and were warm in appearance versus waiting rooms that had outdated furnishings, were dark, contained no artwork or poor quality reproductions, and were cold in appearance.

Factor analyses of the care and environment ratings produced factors consistent with the hypothesis making the results were consistent with their hypothesis. Participants largely rated those rooms which were nicely furnished as having better quality of care than those physicians whose waiting rooms were perceived cold and out dated.

Other literature focusing on the visual environment as it relates to academic performance and well being focus primarily on elementary schools. A study done by Killeen, Evans, and Danko (2003) *Role of Permanent Student Artwork in Student’s Sense of Ownership in an Elementary School*, suggest that displaying student’s artwork within the school fosters a deeper sense of belonging and encourages children to take an active part in their education and fosters a sense of student ownership in the learning process.

## **Implications of Literature**

After having searched through the literature I have found there are many studies which address the issue of visual arts within the school, although primarily within the elementary school. The studies I have found which focus closely to my inquiries on the effects of aesthetic surroundings have provided useful resources, however as they are far and few in between the results are often inconclusive or perhaps it would be too much of a stretch to try and pinpoint a cause and effect essentially making the results co relational.

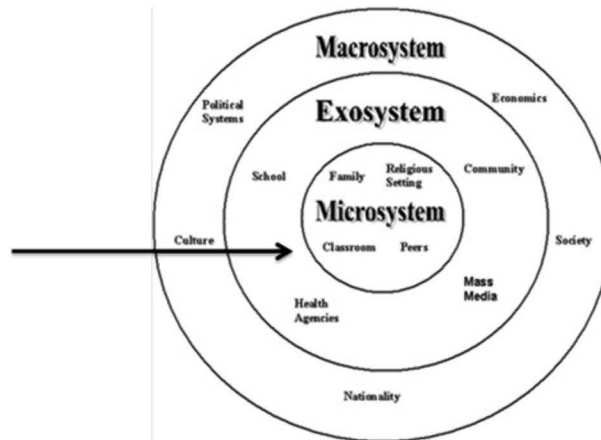
## **Theoretical Framework**

I will discuss the main aspects which make each theory significant to this proposal rather than explaining each level of each theory.

The first theory ,an education theory, and the most prominent in this study, is Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, which describes the ecological environment as a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next. Bronfenbrenner defined the innermost ecological environment, the microsystem, as discussed by (Kumar, O’Malley, & Johnston, 2008) “ as a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing persons in a *given setting with particular physical and material characteristics* [italics added]” (p. 3). Essentially the climate educational and social interactions take place is just as important as the activities and experiences that occur within the environment.

In further discussion of Bronfenbrenner's systems it is important to note that this theory is based on the idea of interconnectedness throughout all of the systems which affect the "child" in this case the university student. Students are influenced by the all the many systems which stem outward from the microsystem. The model seen below [Figure 1], shows systems model with an arrow pointing towards the microsystem layer.

**Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory**



The second theory used to further explain why the aesthetic appearance of the educational environment is important, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. This psychological theory proposed by Abraham Maslow is often seen in pyramid form to symbolize the progressive nature of humanistic needs and ability to achieve those goals. Maslow has set up a hierarchy of five levels of basic needs. Beyond these needs, higher levels of needs exist. These include needs for understanding, *esthetic appreciation* [italics added] and purely spiritual needs. In the levels of the five basic needs, the person does not feel the second need until the demands of the first have been satisfied or the third until the second has been satisfied, and so on. The aesthetic needs Maslow refers to could be described as an appreciation and search for beauty, balance and form. This understanding that humans need and search for aesthetic appreciations extends the argument for the need of art greatly. Suggesting that in order to obtain self-actualization, as aesthetic needs falls a level below the ultimate human satisfaction, presents the value of art as more than frivolous but essential to the human condition.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

The purpose of this research inquiry can be defined in with three progressive goals; identify key characteristics to evaluate tangible attributes which make a visual art piece "valuable" and thus significant for an academic community, find research and literature which will support an understanding of the value and importance of viewing and purchasing art in a tangible context for a university, and finally developing a measure to discover and recognize how members of the university community perceive the role of the arts in their environment. Within this research proposal the initial investigation begins with understanding all of these aspects defined with the purpose in a more literal way. What role do the visual arts play within a university's center for student life building, where students from every academic background have an opportunity to interact with the art? The aesthetic environment of educational buildings plays an important role in the student's interactions within that environment, thus this proposal will focus on the value the visual arts add to an aesthetic environment as a whole. What makes purchasing art important or valuable?

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## Literature Sources and Methods for Analyzing the Literature

For this proposed study the majority of the literature used to further understand the proposed questions was found using the University of Maryland library systems Research Port, an online program which provides access to various academic databases with peer reviewed journals, graduate student dissertations, and other forms of information from a myriad of different fields. After narrowing down my search terms I focused on the select articles that were in close context with my interest with the aesthetic environment. Choosing these articles lead me to various other interrelated articles based on the reference sections of the previous articles. Analyzing the literature I made different categories for the literature; the article which focused on the importance of visual arts in academic environments, the role the aesthetic environment has on perceptions and behavior, and how visual artworks play a role in the aesthetic environment.

## Study Design

Along with the written research and critical literature analysis I would like to have members of the university community complete an online survey to gauge their perception of the value of the visual arts and their perception of its role within their university community. Understanding the student and faculty perspectives on the universities responsibility to the visual arts and the aesthetic appearance of the student for center life will add a richer balance between discovering and analyzing the benefits the artwork has on the student body and the community's actual attitude to the purchasing and viewing of the artwork.

Participants will be solicited through departmental list serves to fill out the survey through a link which will be provided in the email with a description of the project. Questions will focus on the student's affiliation with the university and with the visual art community. Participants will then be asked about whether or not they feel that it is important to have artwork on display within the center for student life, within other non art affiliated buildings, and if so why or if not why not. Participants will also be asked who should select the art and whose artwork should be chosen, students, professors, non affiliated artists.

And finally participants will be asked whether they believe purchasing art is a necessary expense for a university. This question is pertinent because the trend I predict I will find will be that many may believe it is in fact important to have artwork within the universities buildings and that students should select it, however they may feel that the expense is unnecessary.

This part of the study will essentially benefit to gauge the university community's response to the visual arts as it relates to their environment, which will open the path to offering information to those who may be skeptical as to why the university budget includes art purchasing and how this commitment to cultural excellence benefits them and their peers.

While I do hope to conduct this survey with significant results I do anticipate that I may not be able to get a large enough sample of students and faculty to participate in the survey without some sort of tangible incentive. Other limitations may be difficulty finding stronger researcher more grounded in explicit and tangible results as to the benefits of the visual arts on environments and the people who inhabit them.

## Expected Contributions

Since this a proposal for a study there are no concrete findings to report, only expectations of contributions to the general field of study. Based on my inquiry about what benefit the visual arts have for a university community the literature suggest that the role of the arts can be analyzed through a discussion of the contribution of the visual arts as an enhancing feature of the aesthetic environment. Based on analysis of the literature I have found that the condition of the aesthetic environment can play an important role in perceptions of negative or positive emotions, it can also play a part in perceptions of quality of care. The environment the university displays sets the tone and mood for the sort of interactions will occur within a space. Creating an engaging aesthetically pleasing center for student life building will encourage productive and inspiring academic and social interactions.

For a future study I would like to delve deeper into empirically supported measures of how the visual arts can benefit a university community whether on a physical or emotional level. I would like to also focus on the measurable affects of aesthetically pleasing and unpleasing environments can possibly have on people and whether the arts play a significant role in that effect.

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