

On Hanging

By [Richard Dorment](#)

Art and the Power of Placement

by Victoria Newhouse

From the moment the artist sells a picture or a work of sculpture, how it is displayed usually lies outside his or her control. Once the artist is dead, all decisions about where to hang or place his work, in what frame and against what color and texture, at what height and wall length and in what light, lie with the owner, and, more and more, with the museum curator. Victoria Newhouse's *Art and the Power of Placement* is about the vulnerability of works of art in the hands of their owners. From the Musée d'Orsay to Tate Modern, she demonstrates that the people who build and run our most important cultural institutions sometimes have little understanding of the art that it is their responsibility to show under the best possible conditions. She has written an important book, one that could be read with profit by everyone in the art world. Some of the case histories she cites amount almost to an indictment of the curatorial profession.

Newhouse's method is to look at the different ways museums have shown a single object or group of objects both in their permanent displays and in loan exhibitions. She contrasts insensitively conceived installations with those that allow works of art to be seen undistorted by curatorial interference. The examples she discusses in detail range from Egyptian antiquities to Richard Serra's *Torqued Ellipses* and from Roman bronzes of the first century AD to Jackson Pollock's mural-size poured paintings. In each case, she uses written and visual sources to document as far as possible the conditions under which works of art were first seen; she then examines the presentation of the same artworks at different periods in their subsequent history. In two of her most incisive chapters, she looks at the installation of two recent blockbuster exhibitions—of Egyptian art and of the work of Jackson Pollock—at the different venues in which they were shown.

1.

The classic "hang" for museums in the twentieth century was epitomized in Alfred Barr's installations at the Museum of Modern Art. He presented the art in a neutral setting, hung in a single line, arranged by school and by date. The advantage of this way of hanging is that it minimizes the personality of the curator. All works of art in all installations are susceptible to manipulation. The curator may use the works on view to tell a story or prove a theory of his or her own. But those shown chronologically are less vulnerable to distortion. If one picture was painted before or after another, the fact is inarguable. But even the strictest chronological hang has to be mitigated by aesthetic considerations, so a mixture of the two criteria—aesthetic discrimination and categorizing by time and place—usually serves the works of art best.

There are, to be sure, successful museum installations that are not chronological. An example cited by Newhouse is the Wallace Collection in London—a private collection assembled by the third and fourth Marquesses of Hertford and Sir Richard Wallace over three generations that is still shown in the family's London townhouse, like the Frick Collection in New York. The splendid display in the great gallery includes works of art that range in date from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century. But the installation works well because the collection represents the personal taste of private collectors displayed in a domestic setting.

Elsewhere in the building, the curators try to show like with like, with Dutch pictures exhibited in one suite of rooms, French cabinet pictures in smaller galleries, and Jean Baptiste Greuze given a gallery (almost) to himself. Renaissance majolica, glass, and sculpture are shown separately from the important collections of French furniture, Sèvres porcelain, and French painting. In America, the best-known decorative hang is in the Barnes Foundation, once again reflecting the private nature of the collection—and in that case the theories about art of the eccentric man who brought his astonishing group of pictures together.

Until recently the division between a decorative hang and a chronological display seemed fairly clear. Then, about five years ago a fad for thematic hanging swept through the museum world like a virus. Both the Museum of Modern Art in New York and Tate Britain^[1] in London chose to show their permanent collections in this way on a temporary basis. Both institutions house encyclopedic collections of, respectively, twentieth-century art and British painting and sculpture from the seventeenth century to the present day. Apart from the distressing visual chaos that resulted from these installations, a thematic display meant that the visitor who wanted to see a specific painting might not find it on view—or, if it was on view, it may have been used to make some art historical point of the sort usually best left to the scholarly article, textbook, or didactic exhibition. The problem here is not that museums can't use art to explore questions of, say, gender, politics, or social history (art history would be a very narrow discipline if it couldn't). But once a museum places a picture in a particular setting it can be very difficult to see it in a different way. The distinction between what the curator can do in a temporary exhibition as opposed to a permanent display is crucial in a discussion of art and its placement.

At MoMA the thematic display might have worked if it had emphasized the visual similarities between different artists. This is normally done by placing works of comparable aesthetic intention together, as for example when you hang a white-on-white painting by Robert Ryman near a metal floor piece by Carl Andre, comparing and contrasting two different approaches to minimalism in late- twentieth-century American art.

Instead, there have been jarring leaps between medium, school, and date. An example cited by Newhouse was the placement at MoMA of Cézanne's famous *Bather* (1885) next to a large-scale color photograph by the contemporary Dutch artist Rineke Dijkstra of an adolescent boy in his bathing suit (1993). The curator John Elderfield noted that when painting his *Bather* Cézanne had relied on a photograph, which Elderfield exhibited in an adjoining gallery. The juxtaposition was meant to "demonstrate the formal similarities between the Cézanne and the photographs, and the interrelationship of different mediums and different times." While the academic argument may sound reasonable, it doesn't take into account the visual experience of seeing Dijkstra's photograph and Cézanne's painting side by side. As Newhouse observes,

Pairing the weighty nineteenth-century symbolic figure with the late-twentieth-century realistic adolescent...did the Cézanne a tremendous disservice. While both images are highly formalized modern statements that derive from a classical tradition, the photograph is about a bather, whereas the painting is about painting.

Another problem with thematic hangs is that they could discourage potential donors. Let us say you were the owner of a large private collection and were thinking of donating an early Cézanne strategically—that is, to an institution that had wonderful examples of his mature work, but nothing from the 1860s. Would you give it to a gallery whose holdings of that artist were distributed thematically throughout the building? Or to one that attempted to show the broad range of the artist's achievement and allowed you to follow it, step by step?^[2]

2.

When the Queen opened Tate Modern in May 2000, London acquired its first important museum since Edward VII opened the Tate Gallery at Millbank one hundred years earlier. Before Tate Modern, alone of all capital cities in Europe, London was without a museum of modern art. Everyone expected great things from this former power station on the banks of the Thames opposite St. Paul's, now transformed by the Swiss architects Herzog and de Meuron into a gallery with space and light suitable for showing contemporary art. But for this critic, high expectations turned to dismay when I saw the way the art was hung. Chronological and to some extent aesthetic presentation had been discarded in favor of a thematic installation, accompanied by wall labels that condescendingly told viewers what to think and feel about the art they were looking at.

And yet, the idea of hanging the galleries at Tate Modern thematically was not, in itself, as reckless an idea as it had been at MoMA. What was wrong for comprehensive collections like MoMA and Tate Britain may be suitable for a less encyclopedic collection, and Tate Modern's holdings of twentieth-century art are notoriously patchy. The curatorial solution was to distribute the works of art over two floors in themed sections broadly corresponding to the categories of art established by the French Academy in the seventeenth century: landscape, still life, nude, and history painting. Within each section there were some galleries devoted to a single artist—for example Francis Bacon, Bridget Riley, Frank Auerbach, and Joseph Beuys.

Had it been done with sensitivity, Tate Modern's hang could have been interesting. But the result was flat-footed. Many of the galleries became didactic lessons in art history illustrated not with slides but with real works of art. Often the visitor was forced to read lengthy wall labels in impenetrable art-speak to understand why these particular paintings or sculptures were placed together. Whether the displays were aesthetically coherent or visually arresting didn't appear to enter the curators' heads. In an example cited by Newhouse for its absurdity, Monet's *Water Lilies* hung opposite two works by the contemporary British sculptor Richard Long. One work was a stone circle on the floor, the other a dramatic wall piece created by spattering and dribbling mud on the gallery wall. In order to make sense of this comparison the visitor needed to work his way through a wall label lugubriously ticking off the similarities between each artist's approaches to landscape. The curators did not seem to care that the scale and violence of the monochromatic wall piece by Long killed the pastel blues and greens of the Monet, making it appear insignificant.

Wherever you looked, there were terrible solecisms. Rereading my review of the opening exhibition, I see that I found particularly unfortunate the placement of Matisse's series of monumental bronze reliefs, *The Backs*, opposite drawings by the contemporary South African artist Marlene Dumas. Not only did the physical mass of the sculptures visually crush Dumas's delicate drawings, but to see the Matisses on the side wall of a small gallery that felt like a corridor between two more important spaces diminished a great artist. Astonishingly, all this was intentional. A young Tate curator told me that to place a great Francis Bacon or a superb Picasso at the end of a vista or at the center of a wall was to "privilege" the work (i.e., to indicate, by its placement, that it was better or more significant than other works in the collection), and this was something to be avoided at all costs. But as Newhouse shows, it is precisely by isolating works of art that we emphasize their beauty or signal their historical importance.

Indeed, this is the theme of her first chapter, on *The Winged Victory of Samothrace (Nike)* at the head of the Daru Stairway in the Louvre. Newhouse traces the work back to the archaeological site where it was discovered in 1863 and shows how, over decades, it was gradually transformed from just another Greek torso into the icon it has now become—for, along with the Mona Lisa, it is today the best-known exhibit in the Louvre. First shown in the Salle des Caryatides without its wings, its importance was diluted by a clutter of other antiquities placed nearby. The first stage in its rehabilitation occurred in 1883 when it was moved to the top of the Grand Stairway. As Newhouse observes:

In replacing the cultural context for which an object is made, the museum consecrates the object as art and at the same time establishes its relative importance by the way it is installed. Isolation and visual focus denote importance: the greater the masterpiece, the greater its separation from other objects that might compete for attention.

Placing the *Nike* high above the heads of arriving visitors simulated the placement and appearance of the statue in antiquity, when it stood above the Sanctuary of the Great Gods at Samothrace, and would have been seen isolated against the sky above the amphitheater. But until 1927, the Louvre was still showing the statue next to an assortment of antiquities and plaster casts. In that year, a new director, Henri Verne, elevated the *Nike* onto a modern stone block, and cleared the landing of all art except for the *Nike*. Crucially, he then brought the statue forward by about 5'3" so that as visitors ascended the stairway from the long gallery below, they saw revealed the base on which it stands, then the feet and legs, and finally the full torso. Even now, Newhouse observes, the statue is not shown at its best, for it should be rotated slightly to favor the more finely carved left-hand side, rather than presented from head on.

Still, relatively slight adjustments—clearing the landing of other works, raising the statue, and moving it forward by a few feet—made all the difference to how the work was seen and interpreted. When I.M. Pei's grotesque *pyramide*, the new entrance to the Louvre, opened, it changed the way many visitors approach the statue. The new approach deprives visitors of what Newhouse calls "the thrilling processional along the lengths of the Daru Gallery, which conveyed the illusion of the figure floating down from the sky....," but whether this will make a difference to the statue's iconic status remains to be seen.

3.

Newhouse is highly aware of how many and how complex are the problems the display of art presents. In her chapter "Art or Archaeology: How Display Defines the Object," she looks at the exhibition "Egyptian Art in the Age of the Pyramids," which was shown at three different venues in 1999 and 2000: the Grand Palais in Paris, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. To discuss in depth a display of Egyptian art was an inspired decision, since soon after these particular objects were created, they would never have been seen at all, buried as they were in royal tombs. This means that no one knows how they were first meant to be seen.

At the Grand Palais, the curator Christiane Ziegler created a highly theatrical installation, using a color scheme of deep ochre and bright blue enlivened with painted decorative motifs. Dramatic spotlights illuminated the darkened galleries. Objects were crowded into vitrines sprinkled with sand to suggest the mystery and disorder of the ancient tombs in which they were found. At the Met, the curator Dorothea Arnold took a completely different approach. She treated the works primarily as art objects and gave them a simple modern display. "We are modern people and this is a museum," she is quoted as saying. "We're not reconstructing." Her installation did little to suggest the atmosphere of ancient Egypt. Objects were given more space than in Paris and shown against neutral background colors under pin spot lighting.

When children first visit a museum they are taught to look at Egyptian art according to its function in daily life and religious ritual. The implied message is that aesthetic considerations were of secondary interest to the work of craftsmen who made tomb paintings, carved effigies, and covered royal regalia in beaten gold. What was refreshing about the Met's approach was that the work was shown as art, not as archaeology, and the approach to display was based on aesthetic discrimination. As a result, visitors saw the hand of the fine artist at work, not the hand of a mere craftsman.

Newhouse shows how individual works of art were changed by each installation. To take one example, in both Paris and Ontario four "Reserve Heads"—portrait heads found in royal tombs of the Fourth Dynasty (circa 2575–2465 BC)—were shown in a single glass vitrine. In New York, however, Arnold singled out the largest head for placement in a separate case. The size, distinctive features, and undamaged condition of this particular head certainly merited separate treatment. But Arnold alone of the three curators who installed the show in its different locations recognized and acted on this fact. In Newhouse's view, singling out the head was "a stroke of genius" and though she doesn't quite spell it out, the superiority in general of the Met's display was owing to the sensitivity, knowledge, and experience of the curator. Only a person who had examined many such heads would have realized the superior quality of this one.

If we ask which installation served the objects best, the answer has to be New York. But if we turn our attention to the experience of the public, then Paris may have had the edge. There were two hundred objects in "Egypt in the Age of the Pyramids," and it is usually not possible to look attentively at so many works of art in one visit. To encourage viewers to learn something from a complex exhibition with a large number of objects, the curator needs to create a strong overall impression. The price the curator at the Metropolitan Museum paid for her neutral installation was to minimize one of the themes of the exhibition—the distinction between royal and nonroyal objects, which in Paris was made clear by placing royal objects against ochre-colored walls and nonroyal objects against blue.

Newhouse feels that in Paris the theatrical presentation and the color code of the walls made the show's theme easier for the public to grasp; she reminds us that because the permanent collection of Egyptian antiquities at the Louvre is presented in a notably austere manner, the French curator had an incentive

to make a splash and do something dramatically different. Temporary exhibitions offer a chance to experiment with new ways of presenting material with which visitors may feel they are familiar. There is no clear right or wrong here. In fact, two very different audiences went to the Paris showing of "Egypt in the Age of the Pyramids"—people who had considerable knowledge of Egyptian art, who may have thought the installation vulgar, and less well informed viewers, many of whom were delighted by the dramatic setting.

If curators could feel free to show Egyptian art in any way they thought effective, the opposite is true of the art of Jackson Pollock. Not only do we have films and photographs of him at work in his Long Island studio in which he created the poured mural-size paintings, but Pollock himself installed several of his early shows at the Betty Parsons Gallery, and these too were photographed. We therefore have clear guidelines about what he considered the optimum conditions under which to view his paintings. Pollock's studio (which still exists) and the Betty Parsons Gallery (where he had his first important shows) were each about twenty-two feet square. When Pollock worked on a canvas, which could be over seventeen feet long, he was able to step back only about twenty feet, which Newhouse observes "not coincidentally [is] the distance at which the mural-size canvases come into focus." In both the studio and Parsons Gallery, works like *Lavender Mist* made a greater impact when they were shown in relatively small spaces. According to the architect Peter Blake, Pollock's Long Island studio was "a dazzling, incredible sight—like the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. Despite the modesty of the barn, the place was majestic." His feeling in the barn was of being "surrounded by paintings on the floor and walls that reflected each other in a magic series."

For his fourth show at Parsons in November and December 1950, Pollock installed his own paintings—hanging masterpieces like *Autumn Rhythm: Number 30, 1950* and *One: Number 31, 1950* flat on the walls without stretchers to emphasize their mural-like quality and packing the room from floor to ceiling with other paintings to intensify their effect. Years later the artist Allan Kaprow described the Parsons exhibition:

When [Pollock's] all-over canvases were shown at Betty Parsons gallery about 1950, with four windowless walls nearly covered, the effect was of an overwhelming *environment*, the paintings' skin rising towards the middle of the room, drenching and assailing the visitor in waves of attacking and retreating pulsations.

In these paintings Pollock replaced the idea of a traditional easel painting with art that is one with the wall—in Newhouse's phrase "displacing rather than embellishing architecture." Significantly, Pollock in several cases was willing to alter the size of a canvas to fit a specific wall—so that the setting would appear to take precedence for him over the integrity of the original canvas. Immediately after Pollock's death in 1956, all this was understood. The installation of three of his most magical canvases—*Echo: Number 25, 1951*, *One: Number 31, 1950*, and *Blue Poles: Number 11, 1952*—in the large West Side apartment of the collector Ben Heller could hardly have been more sympathetic. Each picture filled the wall vertically and horizontally, just as it had done at Parsons. Heller said:

Art looks best at the artist's studio, next best at home, then a gallery, then the museum. In the studio you see art with the art-ist's other works, in the light the artist painted in. In a museum there is a lack of intimacy; you can't focus; paintings aren't lit individually. The museum operates as a *Frigidaire*.

Newhouse then demonstrates the truth of this observation by publishing photographs that show how sadly diminished Pollock's paintings looked when they were shown in museums in San Francisco and Des Moines, Iowa. But she also has high praise for the curators who installed the posthumous retrospective of his work both at MoMA (1956–1957) and at the Whitechapel Art Gallery when a show of Pollock's art toured Europe in 1958. She then makes clear how easily an insensitive curator could vitiate the impact of this art in her analysis of a display in Rome in 1958 and a disastrous installation at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1982. In both instances, she shows how the placement of a canvas on a wall that is too long for it, or the hanging of a picture so high that it loses its relationship to the floor, can rob it of life.

Newhouse compares the installation of the great Pollock retrospective held at MoMA in 1998 to the same show as installed in the Tate Gallery in 1999. Both were impressive. In New York the lack of natural light and the airless quality of those old exhibition galleries made you aware of the violent and destructive forces that fueled Pollock's creative processes. Whether looking at early figurative work or at the mature abstract paintings, you never forgot the vicissitudes of Pollock's life—the poverty and addiction of the formative years in New York, the Jungian therapy that enabled him to find his subject in his own dreams and fantasies, the period of sobriety and creative achievement that followed his marriage and move to Long Island in 1945, the return to drink, renewed depression, and virtual suicide in a car crash in 1956. In short, the New York installation took you, step by step and painting by painting, through the narrative of Pollock's life. Tellingly, the show's curator, Kirk Varnedoe, called the show "a fabulous story."

Violence and tragedy could of course still be found in the paintings that traveled from New York to London (a little more than 50 percent of the show was sent) but at the Tate what was made much more evident was the radiance, lightness, elegance, and sheer aesthetic range of Pollock's art. In large part this was because in London natural light from the high-ceilinged galleries gave the pictures a sparkle—almost an infusion of oxygen—that wasn't possible in MoMA's galleries.

Possibly the smaller size of the exhibition actually enhanced its beauty. As long ago as 1967 the artist Mel Bochner observed of a show of 172 Pollocks at MoMA that "seeing a great deal together makes seeing anything difficult." Newhouse faults the 1998 show in New York for presenting 225 works in a way that she felt "dissipated Pollock's energy" (I have to say that this is not what I remember—I was drawn to the work throughout). The smaller London show was, however, easier to take in during a single visit.

The Tate director, Nicholas Serota, is quoted as saying, "We wanted to ensure that each work spoke for itself, rather than as a link in a narrative." That meant the hanging was aesthetic rather than chronological. The spaces available to the Tate were totally different—instead of the artificially lit linear plan of the show at MoMA, the Tate's galleries were open plan. Again, Newhouse thinks some spaces were too big for the pictures, making the smaller ones look like postage stamps and overwhelming the larger ones. But for me the natural light compensated for these faults.

The most significant difference between the presentations in New York and London occurred in the last pictures. After the celebration of life in paintings like *Lavender Mist*, the black paintings of 1951 can look grim. Executed in the period immediately after Pollock's return to alcohol, they are like a visit to the underworld. In New York, they formed a sad coda to the great works of the years preceding them. But in London, it was possible to connect their imagery of crushing, grinding, and piling up to the oppressive mood you find in the semi-abstract works Pollock painted before 1947. In London, pictures of the early 1950s like *Portrait and a Dream* and *Ocean Greyness* stood up as great works of art in their own right, and not—as in New York—as symptoms of the renewed depression that signaled the end of Pollock's career. In London *Blue Poles* (which was shown to little effect in New York) was given a position of honor and emerged as one of the stronger works on view. As Newhouse comments,

Exhibitions can be primarily educational or aesthetic, either purpose necessarily including aspects of the other. The key curatorial decision—what an exhibition is supposed to convey to the public—determines a long line of subsequent decisions about how to present the art.

And she quotes Christian W.H. Döring, a Viennese curator: "If we couldn't see the same objects differently at different times, they would die."

In places Newhouse's book reads as if it were a textbook for curators. She discusses in depth the basic aspects of art display—the height, length, texture, and color of walls, the choice of frames for paintings and pedestals for sculpture, labeling, scale, quality of light, and placement of labels. She shows by the example of the egregious Musée d'Orsay how the story of art can be distorted by curators and architects anxious to do something new at whatever cost to the art on the wall. My favorite quote is again from Kirk Varnedoe, who described the Musée d'Orsay's hanging of works by progressive artists like

Courbet and Manet alongside academic paintings by Salon artists such as Thomas Couture as assassinating "the richest part of French culture: it's the revenge of Bouguereau." Newhouse has taken on a big and important subject, and has not tried to simplify it. She acutely discusses the pros and cons of museum displays that emphasize the historical circumstances in which works of art were created, as for example in the Victoria and Albert Museum's recently reinstalled British Galleries. And in taking up the question of how far a display of antique objects should reflect their original setting she raises the possibility that the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum could be shown at the level of the gallery's cornice in order to replicate their original placement in the Parthenon. Even if you find yourself arguing with some of her conclusions, you admire her courage and her tenacity in challenging the practices of major museums today.

Notes

- ^[1] The Tate Gallery ceased to exist in 2000 with the division of the collection into Tate Modern at Bankside and Tate Britain at Millbank. Neither institution is prefaced by the definite article, so it is wrong to refer to the Tate Modern or the Tate Britain as Newhouse does throughout this book.
- ^[2] Newhouse's book does not consider in detail the hanging of works of art in Yoshio Taniguchi's new Museum of Modern Art, which opened in November 2004. But in general the hanging was a retreat from the hard-core thematic presentation we saw in 1999–2000. There are still themed galleries, and not all the works by a single artist are hung together, but in general the curators have kept together works according to their school and date.