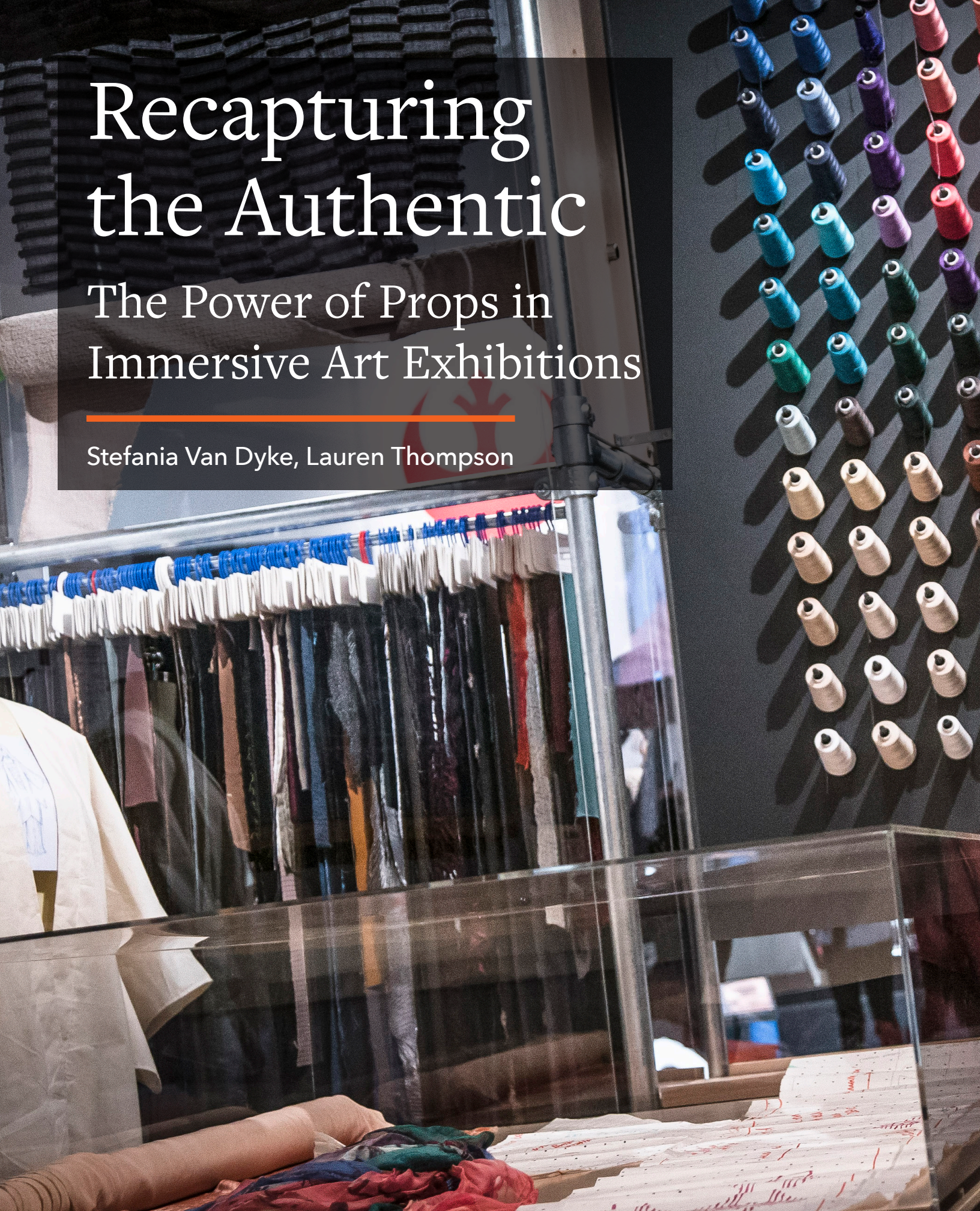


# Recapturing the Authentic

## The Power of Props in Immersive Art Exhibitions

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Combination of DAM-sourced accessories and original artworks and ephemera in the Costume Shop section of *Star Wars™ and the Power of Costume*, 2017.

The pursuit and elevation of the authentic is a cornerstone of the missions of most art museums. As we now navigate the age of ubiquitous digital reproduction, many art museums see even greater comfort in the original, authentic object as marker of their societal value.

But what of the power of the inauthentic and the unoriginal? At the Denver Art Museum (DAM), our thinking about the role of authenticity has shifted in recent years. As we move from a more passive position of conceiving the artwork *as* the catalyst for experience to now asking how we can actively *catalyze* the artwork for experience, we have begun to embrace avenues of interpretation that are more open to leveraging the inauthentic. We believe this approach creates an experiential abundance, instead of diminishing or threatening the primacy of the original object.

All objects in museums – whether authentic works of art and artists’ ephemera, or inauthentic props (accessories) – are transformed as soon as they go on display. Art historian Svetlana Alpers describes this as the “museum effect,” which “turns all objects into works of art. It heightens our ability to apprehend objects that were

fig. 1. Objects from Jamie Wyeth's studio mixed with items sourced by the Denver Museum of Art staff in *Wyeth: Andrew and Jamie in the Studio*, 2015.

made with the ideology of the museum effect in mind, but it can obscure or change the meaning of objects taken out of context and into the museum.”<sup>1</sup>

Further, exhibitions themselves are constructed arenas developed out of the collective interpretation of the museum team. So the very situation within which these objects now live is untrue to the conditions in which they were originally created. At the DAM, we've been aiming to recapture something authentic about a work of art by providing context with accessories, graphics, and immersive design that can evoke or reimagine a feeling, place, or internal state an artist was trying to capture. This point of view, of course, is not new to many history museums and science centers. However, since the rise of Modernism, many art museums have subscribed to the idea that artworks can speak for themselves.

Embracing these new entry points came out of a desire by DAM staff to create opportunities for visitors to develop and indulge in implicit, or tacit, knowledge. This type of learning is defined by psychologist Arthur Reber as one in which visitors acquire knowledge independently from conscious attempts to learn, and largely without a concrete realization of what was acquired.<sup>2</sup> These experiences are difficult for visitors to verbalize and can be challenging for museum staff to record or evaluate. Acquiring implicit knowledge may also mean that connections may be sparked later, even years later, or that visitors come away from an exhibition with an unexplainable, but personally meaningful feeling.

1 Quoted in Steven Lubar, “Museums are places to forget,” *Medium*, accessed June 16, 2017, <https://medium.com/@lubar/museums-are-places-to-forget-ba76a92c5701>.

2 Arthur S. Reber, “Implicit Knowing and Tacit Knowledge,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 118, no. 3 (1989): 5.

Explicit knowledge, on the other hand, can be readily articulated, codified, accessed and verbalized – and in exhibitions, most commonly takes the form of wall text and explanatory media. We believe that planning for and creating space for both kinds of experiences gives our exhibitions a greater chance of living on in our visitors' long-term memories. Christoph Heinrich, Director of the DAM, recalled an exhibition about the Maya he saw about thirty years ago:

It was one of the most amazing Pre-Columbian shows ever organized... and I don't remember one object. But I do remember the feeling of the gallery. I do remember that it took you on a discovery journey, and you looked at things very closely. I mean, Pre-Columbian was something I didn't know anything about, and I didn't have the [art historical] system to [understand].... But I remember that we were very fascinated by this show.... Maybe subconsciously I appreciated this art more afterwards.<sup>3</sup>

By making room for the visitor's holistic experience rather than focusing on explicit knowledge sharing, the organizers of that Mayan exhibition decades ago had created a lifelong memory for Heinrich.

We've heard directly from visitors that they're looking for these types of memorable exhibition experiences that immerse and spark imagination. Denver Art Museum interpretive specialists, who are part of the Learning & Engagement Department, regularly organize what we call visitor panels, or small focus groups around different collection areas and interpretive approaches. In five of our recent visitor panels, participants have mentioned the

3 Christoph Heinrich, conversation with authors, July 18, 2017.



power of immersive museum spaces, telling us that these spaces and experiences make them “feel more one with the works of art,” that such DAM installations “transport” them, and that they are interested in “stimulating all of [their] senses.”<sup>4</sup>

We characterize immersive spaces as those that incorporate bold design – spatial, graphic, lighting – often with some mix of intentionally selected supporting accessories. These accessories, which have ranged from an interactive stereoscope reproduction in a Western art and film exhibition, to the inauthentic furniture and objects in a period-esque parlor room for a 19th-century Paris exhibition, all help create a context in which original works of art and artist ephemera can be better understood by visitors, both implicitly and explicitly. Timothy Standing, Curator for Painting and Sculpture at the DAM, thinks of these accessories and design elements as “stimulants”: “I would go back to the metaphor of different salts. You know, [in cooking] there are finishing salts that

4 Denver Art Museum, unpublished visitor panel reports, Western American Art (2016), Asian Art (2016), Technology (2016), Painting and Sculpture (2017).

lend a little spike of flavor that otherwise wouldn’t have existed.”<sup>5</sup>

Following are three recent exhibitions in which we put these ideas about immersive design into practice.

#### ***Wyeth: Andrew and Jamie in the Studio***

In 2015, Standing curated the exhibition *Wyeth: Andrew and Jamie in the Studio*, which focused on an artistic conversation between the father and son painters. The exhibition team’s goal was to share with visitors the power of the places where these artists lived and worked, by incorporating some components of the artworks’ and artists’ lived experiences. We included large-scale photographic graphics, dramatic design, and props – actual items from the Wyeths’ studios (boots, odd sculptures and manipulated G.I. Joe action figures) and accessories that we had purchased or borrowed (taxidermy from the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, Maine lobster buoys) (fig. 1). Close collaboration between all members of the team, which at DAM

5 Timothy J. Standing, conversation with authors, July 13, 2017.

fig. 2. Taxidermy bird borrowed from the Denver Museum of Nature and Science juxtaposed with a Jamie Wyeth painting in *Wyeth: Andrew and Jamie in the Studio*.



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includes the curator, interpretive specialist, graphic designer, exhibition designer, and project manager, resulted in an immersive experience for visitors. The exhibition designer, Ben Griswold, recalls:

A word that was used a lot by the project team was ‘evoke.’ As in, we want visitors to experience Jamie’s studio space, but we don’t want to try to recreate it.... I think the team was really moved by the spaces that Andrew and Jamie inhabited and worked in, and wanted to convey some of the feeling of being there. That magical grounding quality of a place that also connects with the life and minds and creative vitality of its principal occupants is a very difficult thing to replicate, impossible even.... To recreate is to try to fill in all the gaps. The end result may be faithful to the original, but it is airless.... To evoke is to allow for, even design for, gaps that can be imaginatively bridged by the visitors themselves. It is not an easy thing to do. I personally found this to be one of the most difficult projects I’ve ever worked on. But focusing on the poetic aspects of the props made it easier, and ultimately (I believe) successful.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, by visitors’ own accounts, these additions – these catalysts for implicit learning – helped them get to know the artists and their work more fully. We conducted a study specifically to ascertain how the props and graphics impacted the

visitor experience.<sup>7</sup> Eighty-two percent of visitors we interviewed reported that these exhibition components contributed to a positive impact on their perceptions of the artists and the artworks, helping them to look more closely at the art and connect emotionally with the artists (fig. 2).

Visitors responded, for example:

*“I became engrossed, submersed in the subject, the environment – an environment was created.”*

*“[The props and graphics] helped me imagine the inspiration and process the artists may have employed while planning or executing the pieces.”<sup>8</sup>*

There was no evidence that visitors became confused about which props were authentic (from the Wyeths’ studios) and which were borrowed or purchased. In fact, Jamie Wyeth himself enthusiastically supported the mix. We made sure to be transparent about the sources of our props by including labels that indicated their origins.

### ***Degas: A Passion for Perfection***

In our forthcoming exhibition, *Degas: A Passion for Perfection* (spring 2018), we are incorporating lessons about evocation from the Wyeth project. Our hope is to

<sup>7</sup> Ellen Roth, unpublished report, “Evaluating Wyeth: Andrew and Jamie in the Studio for the Denver Art Museum,” Denver Museum of Nature & Science, submitted January 25, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ben Griswold, email to authors, July 27, 2017.

**fig. 3.** Tom Fricker's rendering of Edgar Degas's attic laboratory during the design phase of planning *Degas: A Passion for Perfection*, 2017.



help visitors feel as if they have peeked into the working mind of Edgar Degas, one of the foremost artists of the Impressionist era, and have seen the world through his eyes. Halfway through the exhibition we have imagined Degas's "attic laboratory" studio in his 1890s Parisian apartment, a place not only where he created most of his later works, but one that is crucial to understanding his personality and methods of working. Visitors snake through a space designed to recall a staircase and alight upon his private retreat where few were invited. Layers of scrim, some printed with graphically enlarged journal entries and sketches, obfuscate a jumble of accessories conjuring the often surprising objects he collected in his studio – art supplies, dusty tutus, a collection of canes, bowler hats, decaying sculpture, and Neapolitan dolls (fig. 3).

These accessories, along with the graphic and spatial design, are meant to evoke the sensation of being inside Degas's studio

(and perhaps his mind or memory). Visitors are able to make out the items but they can't see clearly – an intentional effort to help visitors focus their attention on the *feeling* of the space, which hopefully allows them to implicitly understand something new about Degas without reading a word.

### ***Star Wars™ and the Power of Costume***

We again mixed authentic ephemera and inauthentic accessories with artworks in *Star Wars™ and the Power of Costume* (2016–17), which explored how a creative thinker like George Lucas can develop an idea into a fantastical universe beloved by millions. We used original concept drawings, fabric samples, alteration notes, costume mechanics, and more to focus on imagination, creative process, and craftsmanship. We put many of those authentic things in spaces that conjured working environments and were also populated by accessories we sourced ourselves.

Visitors often gloss over artworks quickly, or see them as intimidating, which happens even with artworks related to such a popular phenomenon as *Star Wars*<sup>™</sup>. To reduce barriers and encourage deeper engagement with the artworks in this particular exhibition, we created immersive settings with accessories that we felt would be relatable to audiences, what psychologist Sherry Turkle calls “*evocative objects*” – things that serve as “companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought.”<sup>9</sup>

The familiar objects we placed strategically in the exhibition – tools, binders, a pink iMac<sup>®</sup> –

9 Elizabeth Wood and Kiersten F. Latham, *The Objects of Experience: Transforming Visitor-Object Encounters in Museums* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2014), 49–50.

helped connect visitors’ own life experiences with the original pieces on view (fig. 4). As museum scholars Elizabeth Wood and Kiersten F. Latham write, the shared meaning of functional objects like these can be a catalyst for enduring memories and inspired action, and lend personal value to artworks put in their proximity.<sup>10</sup>

The ephemera and accessories in *Star Wars*<sup>™</sup> and *the Power of Costume* are largely what told the story in the exhibition, and visitors understood what we aimed to communicate (intro image). We sent a post-visit survey to attendees that included open-ended questions (e.g. “Please share any comments about your experience”) and received more

10 Ibid, 51.



fig. 4. Combination of DAM-sourced accessories and original artworks in the Art Studio section of *Star Wars*<sup>™</sup> and *the Power of Costume*, 2017.



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than 5,000 responses. Many visitors said that they appreciated the props:

*“I particularly enjoyed the fabric samples, the pattern pieces, and the behind-the-scenes information about the creation of each costume piece. Just walking through and seeing costumes on a form is not nearly so fascinating.”*

*“Very well produced including all of the set and workshop mock-ups in addition to the costumes. The sets really helped tell the story of costuming for the series.”*

*“Each section was decorated vividly to provide a real immersion experience.”<sup>11</sup>*

Denver Art Museum Director Christoph Heinrich called our presentation of *Star Wars™ and the Power of Costume* “magic” because “you felt like you were part of it.”<sup>12</sup>

In all of these exhibitions, we’ve attempted to bring to light the magic of the authentic through the meaningful and memorable experiences that original ephemera, evocative accessories, and bold design can help generate.

## Conclusion

For our visitors, the right balance of art and context can create something special – a 45-minute visit can turn into a lifelong memory. In art museums, objects will always

be central. But, as historians Spencer Crew and James Sims argue, objects cannot speak; they “are not eloquent, as some thinkers in art museums claim.”<sup>13</sup> We are working to find different ways to help them speak. An immersive approach may not work for every exhibition, but at the Denver Art Museum, the fact that we have inclusive planning teams ensures that a range of ideas are considered and debated. Challenging traditional exhibition norms may seem risky to many art museums whose staff raise concerns about “interfering” with original art objects. But as curator Timothy Standring says, “There are other ways of creating hierarchies of importance.”<sup>14</sup> For the Denver Art Museum’s exhibition teams, it’s worth pushing at the boundaries of those hierarchies.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Leslie Bedford, *The Art of Museum Exhibitions: How Story and Imagination Create Aesthetic Experiences* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2014), 93.

<sup>14</sup> Timothy J. Standring, conversation with authors, July 13, 2017.

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<sup>11</sup> Denver Art Museum, unpublished summary of visitor responses to *Star Wars™ and the Power of Costume* (2017).

<sup>12</sup> Christoph Heinrich, conversation with authors, July 18, 2017.