How are we to truly experience a ritual object or artifact when it is taken out of its natural context and put in a museum for anyone to see? Are we able to give the object the full level of appreciation it deserves? Are we able to learn about the object to the fullest extent? These questions are at the center of Joan R. Branham's article, “Sacrality and Aura in the Museum: Mute Objects and Articulate Space”, (1994/1995). In her article, Branham examines the work on display at the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem, and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. (p.33) in terms of their effectiveness in giving the viewer an educational experience. Branham frequently references Walter Benjamin in his application of the term “aura” and “fabric of tradition” and their connection to the museum experience.

Branham speaks in length about the role the museum plays in uprooting sacred objects and relocating them into a formal museum setting. By taking objects such as a crucifix that was once on display in religious or ceremonial setting and placing it on a pedestal amongst other religious iconographic objects, the sacrality or holiness of the object is no longer present. One would no longer kneel down in front of that object when it is on display in a museum or gallery, as they would have in a holy setting. Benjamin’s term “aura” or distance is applied to this specific example. We are physically close to the object, yet so far away from it in terms of understanding it’s power in it’s original setting. Branham argues that this very processes essentially neuters the object and yields them mute, no longer able to communicate their original meaning.

Some objects are created with the intention that they will one day be on display. These objects are deemed as self-conscious works of art. In contrast, naïve works of art were constructed from makers who did not intend for them to be on display in a museum setting. The difference between these two types of art is vast, yet Branham points out that “we often view both naïve and self-conscious works within the space of the same museum and equipped with the same set of formal criteria” (p.35).
In an effort to give the viewer a more holistic experience, Branham points out the recently acquired practice of “putting the cathedral back into the crucifix” (p.37) where museums stage tableaux’s to mimic original settings, perfect lighting techniques, and even move entire rooms or spaces in order to give the viewer a more original experience. Through all the theatrics to create a riveting experience for the viewer, Branham points out that the meaning of an artwork in closely linked to the perceptions of the viewers. The audience’s reaction is a crucial component to a successful exhibition. In this way, Branham proves that Benjamin’s concept of “aura” happens when we take an object out of it’s original context, pair it with other objects, and input various viewers into the setting.

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum is given as an example of a museum that has made every effort to recreate spaces to give the viewer the desired impact upon viewing the work. The museum works to make the viewers identify with victims of the holocaust and have made the viewers experience as realistic as possible by recreating barracks, train cars, and ghetto dwellings. Sounds are played as the viewer walks through the museum and the experience has been made as somber as possible in order for the viewer to get the full impact of the artifacts on display. Would the objects on display be as powerful if they were put in a glass case, in a white gallery room, filled with other objects? Would the viewers have the same gut-wrenching experience if they were to walk through a modern and clean museum space with the same items on display? Branham argues to the contrary and declares that the aura in places like the Washington, D.C. based museum is much less noticeable than in a formal museum setting.

All of this brings up the notion of what we are choosing to display and learn about, in a museum setting. If we take naïve objects and place them in a museum, we first have to ask ourselves, what do we want the viewer to get from viewing this item? If the full impact of the piece cannot be attained by simply reading a label and viewing the object in congruence with several others, the answer then lies within recreating the sacred space that it originally belonged. Having experienced the Holocaust museum and recreated spaces in other museums throughout the world, I can attest to the fact that the impact on the viewer is heightened and the overall experience is enhanced. If we are making such an effort to recreate spaces, I can’t help but ask myself, why go to a museum at all? If what Branham says is true, it seems more effective to travel and experience work in it’s original
context, rather than waste my time at a museum. What have I been missing all these years by walking past items on display and not taking the time to learn about the original context in which they came from?
Resources