

# Social interaction in a gallery shapes our reception to art

**Home > Impacts of arts and culture > Intrinsic impacts of arts and culture**

This research was conducted by **Dirk vom Lehn** at **King's College London, UK**

## Summary

This paper is primarily about the potential of audio-visual recording as a tool to understand the reactions that people have when encountering art in a museum. But there are useful findings that can help inform our understanding of the impact of art and how that impact occurs. The research found that the moment of interaction with an artwork in a gallery is a social one. In addition to collecting video recordings they also observed people's behaviour and interviewed museum staff and visitors.

## One example of an encounter with art is described in detail

To illustrate the way that the observational technique worked the authors describes one particular application in which two women are looking at a Rembrandt painting in the National Gallery. Through talk and gesture one of them directs the other's attention to features of the painting. And although both of them encounter the work at the same time and form their own initial responses (as detected through body language and talk) they then refine their perspectives as a result of an interaction between them. For a second they then view the painting in the same way before another social interaction breaks the moment. The response to the artwork is what the author calls a 'sequential organisation of verbal, visual and bodily conduct'.

# There may be useful lessons for museum and gallery design

By deploying this research method the author suggests that museums and galleries need to take better account of the embodied and physical nature of the way in people respond to artwork and exhibits. Visitor experience may be enhanced by ensuring that interaction is allowed (or even encouraged) to take place.

## Keywords

**museum** **gallery** **talk** **observation** **gesture** **UK** **response**  
**interpretation**

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