

PROPAGANDA FOUND IN THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

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In today's society, propaganda is visible in every direction we turn. It floods the television, Internet and radio. It is disseminated through the government, opinion leaders, and our friends. It is hard to determine the difference between propaganda and persuasion; however, there is a fine line between the two.

I pose the question: Is it typical for an art museum to employ propaganda? This could be the case with the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts. Through a discussion of propaganda and its features, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts will be analyzed to prove if propaganda is present in their architecture and the way it is guided by its current director, Malcolm Rogers. And, even if propagandistic, is the museum sticking to their mission statement which is to "[house] and [preserve] preeminent collections and [aspire] to serve a wide variety of people through direct encounters with works of art" (mfa.org). This paper will discuss what propaganda is, and if the MFA Boston is trying to employ propaganda.

The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts, is one of the largest museums in the United States. The original museum was founded in 1870 and was located in a Gothic Revival building on Copley Square, in the Back Bay neighborhood of Boston. It moved to its current location on Huntington Avenue, in 1909. It is a significantly imposing structure, with its modern, yet Romanesque concrete columns located and facing the colleges, businesses and residences in the surrounding areas. The museum has the second largest collection of permanent art in the western hemisphere. It has many different collections: the Art of Asia, Oceania and Africa; the Art of Europe, the America's, and of the Ancient world; Contemporary Art, Musical Instruments, Prints, Drawings, Photographs; and Textiles and Fashion Art.

This paper will be discussing two different aspects of the structure and function of the MFA Boston. It will be shown that the MFA is run by Malcolm Rogers in a systematic, deliberate way in order to promote the MFA to bring visitors to the museum.

In order to draw a conclusion about the MFA, you must first know what propaganda is. Jowett and O'Donnell, two experts in propaganda, believe, in simpler terms, that it is the deliberate, systematic manipulation of a behavior to form an ideology. It is a form of communication that requires a desired response from the receiver, intended by the propagandist. To be able to analyze propaganda, you must be able to recognize and identify it. It is not always easy to recognize propaganda because of intricate development and execution of an ideology in the different forms of communication.

Propaganda can take many different forms, but in order for it to be successful, there must be some action taking place. It can come in the form of either agitative or integrative propaganda. Agitative propaganda attempts to get an audience to actively react to the propaganda and usually causes a significant change. Integrative propaganda is when the audience is made passive by the propagandist; it is used more often because it requires no challenge. It is easier to produce integrative propaganda because people do not know they are being molded into believing an ideology. The receiver does not have to act in order for the information to sink into their lifestyles.

In order to achieve successful propaganda, you need to base your ideology on common grounds. These common grounds include: people like to be happy, history is about progress, materialism is important, and people are generally good. These common grounds become even more effective when they are presented to a group. It is easier to manipulate the way people think when there are other people around because they are less likely to disagree with the propagandist if they feel they are going to be left out of the group or become isolated.

Worth noting though, is that it has been argued that not all propaganda is negative. Sometimes it is important to have propaganda because it forces us to make decisions and move forward in everyday life.

As asked above, is it typical for a museum to use propaganda techniques? Metaphors play an important role in propaganda because they are often used to associate different or new meanings to visual or rhetorical examples. They are used to conceptualize a new meaning, in order to shape an ideology which could be considered as propaganda. It has been observed that “visual metaphors pertain to those used in artistic presentations” (Kaplan, 247), finding that metaphors in the art world are more effective because they are visual and create a sense of freedom. Gibson, a visual theorist, feels that “visual thinking is freer and less stereotyped than verbal thinking” because you can make your own interpretations and use your own experiences to put meaning to a subject, which in return, causes a disjointed ideology. Since the MFA could be considered as a visual learning experience, a disjointed ideology may result because everyone will view and decipher works of art differently, but it still forces them to find an ideology which is caused by the contents of the MFA.

The first aspect discussed is the way that Malcolm Rogers directs how the museum functions in a specific way. This will be an attempt to see if he and his curators are trying to influence social thinking and promote a particular viewpoint or trying to make the museum a more comfortable place to visit, creating positive propaganda.

The museum’s current director Malcolm Rogers assumed the position September 1st, 1994. Since then, he has changed the MFA dramatically. Before he was director, under the direction of Alan Shestack, the museum was running a financial deficit, had low attendance rates, and had the main Huntington Street entrance closed. Many visitors and the surrounding community were very disappointed with the closing of the entrance. They felt he was closing off the museum to the general public, making it seem that he did not care about the community.

Since Malcolm has been director, he has created a surplus of funds, increased attendance by the thousands and re-opened the main entrance on Huntington Street. Malcolm has produced some of the most attended exhibits in all of the MFA’s history. Not only has he raised attendance rate, he also made it easier to visit the museum. He extended the museum viewing hours, and took away admission fees for children under 17. This makes the MFA a more accessible place. His strategy is that art should be available to the average person, not only by the elite rich.

By making the museum friendlier to the public, it makes people believe the common ground that people are generally good because he wants them to be able to view art in a comfortable, affordable, peaceful environment. As has been stated, not all propaganda is bad. Malcolm’s bold moves to make the museum more inviting and accessible to the general public could be interpreted as a form of propaganda appealing to a large group in an attempt to modify their behavior. By applying his ideology, Malcolm becomes the institution. This initiates propaganda and the museum then becomes his propaganda agent which distributes the propaganda. This is most evident with his idea for the new expansion project of the MFA.

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Even though Malcolm Rogers has accomplished a lot for the average person in the art world, his style can be controversial. Many curators dislike and fear him. He fired a pair of longtime curators because they did not agree with his remodel of the departments for the museum.

Malcolm wanted to create a “one museum” feeling, so he merged departments. Curators would have to work together and create a more cohesive exhibit. This is when the different collections were merged together so the museum worked as one unit. For example, he had his curators arrange the art of Europe, whether it was paintings, drawings, sculpture or furniture so that they were all gathered in one wing. This made it easier to view the various arts of that time period and style instead of having it scattered all over the museum.

This could be propaganda because one of the forms of successful propaganda is to produce it for the masses. This can sometimes cause a “spiral of silence” effect and it means that people are more likely to agree with each other out of fear of isolation, for instance firing curators due to their resistance. By Malcolm merging the departments, it would be easier for him to convince the departments to adhere to his ideology for the benefit of the MFA. The people (the curators in this case) would not speak against him.

This also is a way to connect the museum to the people (the general public in this case) and make it easier and more accessible to view works of art and understand them in their context. Since people like to be happy, a common ground to successful propaganda, Malcolm molded the museum into an easier place to navigate and view works of art together, which in return could create a sense of happiness.

One of the many things Malcolm Rogers and his curators have done is to produce many different special exhibits in the Gund Gallery and other smaller galleries in the museum. Some exhibits, such as those from private collections of the elite rich, have been more controversial than others. Some people complain about a “single-collector show [that] just flatters the vanity of a wealthy collector, in the hope of winning future donations of cash or art” (Cook, 2007). This could be argued that the curators are only doing it for the financial benefit of the museum rather than showing brilliant works of art. MFA curator George Shackelford argues that “[we] don’t do a single-owner if it isn’t great stuff,” which supports the notion that the museum is looking to show great art to the public and not just keep it private to the elite rich. This then proves that the museum is trying to stick to the mission statement and show works of art to the average public for enjoyment, and promoting an ideology that art is for everyone.

The second possible propagandistic technique discussed will be the architectural structure of the museum and how it could be used to employ propaganda. Victoria O’Donnell, in her essay, *The Influence of the Built Environment*, explains that the physical structure of a building can shape the behavior of a person and influence them to act a certain way. The MFA could be employing a version of propaganda because “the physical environment on human behavior is also the study of persuasion and propaganda that grows out of a process” (O’Donnell, 214). Since human behavior is often shaped by the environment, there could be a systematic pattern in the structure of the MFA, especially including the new expansion.

People have emotional reactions to physical areas and this can cause them to have a different array of emotions, helping a propagandist form an ideology. The way that the new MFA will be structured is going to have people feeling many different emotions, making it easier to force an ideology on a visitor.

The best example of propaganda formed in the MFA is the way that the new expansion project uses metaphors to shape the ideologies of the visitors. A different mix of factors is going into the expansion project, creating propaganda. It has been stated in MFA communications that the new enclosed courtyard is a “jewel box of glass and steel”, and is meant to cover the old building which looks like a “bank, palace, fortress or prison.” By calling the new courtyard the “crown jewel” in his video

presentation on the new addition, he is playing to the propagandistic strategy that materialism is important.

The new transparency of the courtyard is to be a metaphor for the “openness” Malcolm has tried to bring to the museum and it will hopefully strengthen its local ties to the community. By describing the old part of the building as a bank, palace, fortress or prison puts a forceful, powerful and strong meaning to the MFA. Since all these buildings are considered to be safe, secure and prosperous, people already get a feeling that the MFA is a safe, secure and prosperous place to be. But by covering it with a new glass courtyard, it creates an ideology that is trying to promote an open and inviting environment.

The new expansion project creates a central axis in the MFA structure. The goal of the new structure is to create a sense of community to all the surrounding neighborhoods by opening the Fenway entrance. No longer will people come in through the back of the museum and see only the advertised exhibits. While the advertised exhibits held in the I.M. Pei wing were a great draw, the access to the rest of the museum was limited. People would not freely venture to the core of the museum. The new expansion project is meant “to improve the public’s access to the collections, strengthen our ties with our neighborhoods and the City of Boston, and create more imaginative and historically relevant ways to exhibit our objects” (mfa.org). This statement covers all the commons grounds of successful propaganda, proving that there is specific reasoning to the expansion project and trying to create an ideology that the community is important to the success of the museum. The Museum expansion project was developed in a systematic, deliberate way to benefit the general public and create a sense of community to both the people and the areas surrounding the MFA.

In conclusion, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, has many classical propaganda techniques evident. Malcolm Rogers has an agenda for the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. There are many deliberate, systematic representations that the museum portrays. The intricate designs for the expansion and unification of the museum are classic metaphors which are important for successful propaganda. Even though Malcolm Rogers is systematic and deliberate, I do not believe he is trying to manipulate the thinking of the viewers, but trying to make the best environment to view and enjoy art. Propaganda isn’t always a negative word, and in this case, Malcolm is benefiting the structure and viewers of the MFA. Under the leadership of Malcolm Rogers, the MFA has the cohesion to persuade its audience systematically and deliberately to form an ideology largely shaped by him. The MFA does this through various media, especially its architecture. However, Malcolm Rogers truly sticks to the museum mission statement and wants to “encourage inquiry and to heighten public understanding and appreciation of the visual world” (mfa.org).

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