At the advice of my Museum Studies classmates, I chose the Director’s Tour at the Metropolitan Museum of art for this assignment. I’ve been to the Metropolitan more times than I can count so I was looking forward to the fresh perspective that guidance from the audio cues might afford. I was not disappointed, though the experience wasn’t as rich as I had expected.

When I arrived the afternoon of Columbus Day, a day off from work, but a dreary one and therefore a perfect museum day, the Great Hall was bustling (others apparently assessed the day similarly). I made my way to the ticket booth and purchased admission; inexplicably, I had to purchase the audio guide in a separate transaction at the same register. I then went to pick up The Guide, an iPod cloaked in black plastic with a bright ribbon (to hang around your neck?) and a pair of cheap headphones. The woman who dispenses them gave me quick and courteous introduction on how to use it, specifically pointing out the volume control button on the side. I was ready.

But the friend I was meeting had not yet arrived. Waiting, I explored the interface and noticed an architecture themed tour which began exactly where I was standing (in The Great Hall). I pushed play. Morrison Hecksher introduced himself in his upper crust New York accent and told me where the volume controls were. He then told me about the Hunts and Beaux-Arts and that there were supposed to be sculptures where I now saw flowers. Then my friend arrived.

I gave him a device; we selected the Director’s Tour; pushed play. This time Thomas P. Campbell, Director The Metropolitan Museum of Art, introduced himself in a British accent. His voiceover cadence wasn’t as natural as Morrie’s, but it too, sounded authoritative and expert, and congruous with stereotypes associated with art and museums.

He told me about the Hunts (again) and then about the “special map” that accompanied the Director’s Tour-- which I had to go ask for from the center information desk-- another inexplicable idiosyncrasy. Why not distribute them *with* the audio guides?

Map in hand we had negligable trouble orienting to the first next stop on the tour, The Tomb of Perneb. It was crawling with visitors which is why I’ve always breezed by without ever stopping before. This time I went inside as directed. It was too crowded to walk slowly enough to follow along and look at its various features being described in my ears, but I appreciated hearing about how the Tomb came to be at the Museum.

At each of the stops I heard at least one memorable nugget. I don’t think I was learning *more* than I would have ordinarily-- self-selecting which wall labels to read-- but I was learning about *different* objects/topics than I might have picked to focus on myself. Which leads me to ponder the rationale for the pieces that were picked for the tour.

The guiding principle for sequencing seems related to the museum’s layout. Not inappropriately, the tour takes you on a fairly direct, circular route through the galleries (notwithstanding an unacknowledged detour due to a gallery that was temporarily closed). However the stops along the way, and the details which are mentioned, seem somewhat arbitrary. I’m sure they’re not, but they seem so unrelated to each other that it makes it seem random. I would have expected that the Director would spin a more continuous thread connecting each stop and give the listener something to grab on to and build upon. Perhaps that’s not possible when highlighting a collection as vast and diverse as the Met’s. Or, if there is a theme, that is it.

At one point my friend signaled to me by tapping me and pointing to the restroom. He had to go. I’m sharing this, because that’s when it clicked that taking the tour was similar, sensorially to snorkeling. Underwater communication is also limited to tapping and pointing. Gestures replace speaking because you’re effectively muzzled and can’t talk.

And, strangely the headphones covering on my ears affected my vision in the same way a snorkeling mask does. Walking through the museum while listening to the audio guide is like wearing blinders that cut off peripheral vision. The guide sends you right passed hundreds (thousands?) of objects which may as well be “other fish in the sea.” You barely notice what’s by your side as you propel yourself along, marveling only at what you see in front of you.

Perhaps listening is less like wearing blinders and more like wearing a viewfinder. By asking me to zero in on and focus on things I hadn’t been attracted to before to read about in the interpretive labels, the Tour taught me interesting things (about armor and Queen Elizabeth I’s court, for example) that I wouldn’t have otherwise learned. The Director’s Tour asks the listener to surrender decision-making.

That’s not a drawback per se, but there are technical aspects of the tour that limit choice in a way that detracts from the experience. Most annoyingly there is no fast-forward function, or I couldn’t find the button (which is still a problem). There is rewind, but if you rewind too far you can’t skip forward. Despite the quirks and deficiencies, taking the Director’s Tour was a wonderful way to see the museum again for the first time.

have preferred not to contend And some segments have “hear more” addenda which you can’t skip to if you (or I accidentally) rewind to the main segment.

reminded me of the way you communicate underwater and that the sensation I was experiencing on the tour was similar to the sensation of snorkeling. using a form It was then that realized the sensation I was having while navigating from directions.

Always for a reason

Who is it for.