

Chapter 11

Superstar Museums and Special Exhibitions



Abstract Superstar museums are a “must-see” for tourists and have achieved cult status. They attract large and increasing numbers of visitors and have a major impact on the local economy. Superstar museums feature paintings by world-famous painters and prominent architectural design. Their income stems to a significant extent from the revenue of the museum bookshops and restaurants. Most art museums run a special exhibition of some sort. They attract new groups of visitors, focus attention on the museum and on the exhibits, and enable lucrative sponsoring revenue to be gained. The cost of mounting such exhibitions is relatively low. They allow more artistic creativity than is possible with the museums’ own collection.

Keywords Most visited art museums · Must-see · Cult status · World famous-painters · Blockbuster exhibitions · Architecture · New visitor groups · Attention · Media · Exhibits · Sponsoring · Commercialization · Total experience · Amenities · Production cost · Creativity

11.1 Characteristics of Superstar Museums

There are a few well-known and world-famous museums. They can be called superstar museums because they have a special status setting them far apart from other museums. Table 11.1 gives a selection of some of the best-known art museums in the world.

Superstar museums have five notable features:

- Superstar museums are a “must-see” for tourists. Such museums are featured prominently in guidebooks. Superstar museums have achieved a cult status that almost everyone is aware of. Few tourists visit for example, one of the cities listed in Table 11.1 without visiting its superstar museum.
- Superstar museums have large numbers of visitors and have experienced a dramatic increase in the numbers of visitors. As Table 11.1 shows, superstar museums have visitor numbers ranging from more than 1 million to the Art Institute of Chicago and to the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna to more than 8 million to the Louvre in Paris.

Table 11.1 A selection of superstar museums of art

Museum	Location	Number of visitors per year (2017, in millions)
Louvre	Paris	8.1
Metropolitan Museum of Art	New York	6.7
Vatican Museums	Rome	6.4
Tate Modern	London	5.7
National Gallery of Art	Washington	5.2
National Gallery	London	5.2
State Hermitage	Saint Petersburg	4.2
Reina Sofia	Madrid	3.9
Prado	Madrid	2.8
Museum of Modern Art	New York	2.8
Rijksmuseum	Amsterdam	2.2
Galleria degli Uffizi	Florence	2.2
Art Institute of Chicago	Chicago	1.6
Kunsthistorisches Museum	Vienna	1.4

- Superstar museums feature world-famous paintings by world-famous painters. The collections in large museums comprise works by thousands of artists; only a few of them are known to art lovers, let alone to the average visitor. Museums wanting to attract a large crowd concentrate on a few superstar artists. Some paintings are known to virtually everyone in the Western world and far beyond. Examples include the *Nightwatch* in Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum and *Las Meninas* in the Prado. The quintessential superstar painting is Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa*. The Louvre has responded by indicating a direct route to the *Mona Lisa* right at the entrance. Even the Vatican Museum now posts the (more or less) direct route to another world-famous work of art, Michelangelo’s frescos in the Sistine Chapel. From the visitors’ point of view, even very large museums are closely associated with or defined by very few, often one or two, paintings: the superstar phenomenon. Museums are not only the proud owners of these masterpieces; they are also their captives. They are forced to exhibit them, but this also means that their other paintings lose prominence.
- Superstar museums often have an architectural design that makes the building itself a world-famous artistic feature. Examples include Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim Museum in New York; Renzo Piano’s Centre Pompidou in Paris; Mario Botta’s San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Richard Meier’s Getty Center in Los Angeles; and Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron’s Tate Modern in London.
- Superstar museums are commercialized in two respects: A significant part of their income derives from the revenue of the museum bookshops and museum restaurants. And superstar museums have a major impact on the local economy.

Superstar museums differ in the importance of these five characteristics. Ideally, they must fully meet all of them; the Musée du Louvre is an example, the architectural feature being Ming Pei's pyramid at the entrance. Other superstar museums are very strong in some characteristics, while barely meeting others. An example of this phenomenon is the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, which excels in its architecture, including its location, but does not have as many paintings by world-famous artists as other superstar museums.

Although some art museums have reached the status of superstars and become household names to hundreds of millions of people, only a few museums attain this rank. Those that do are mostly associated with major tourist cities, which in turn owe part of their prominence to the superstar museums. One may even argue that there are "super-super-star" museums—the Louvre, the Metropolitan and the Vatican. They have such famous and extensive holdings that one would think that they do not even have to mount special exhibitions; they nevertheless attract a huge number of visitors.

Superstar museums are able to exploit the economies of scale by being known to a large number of people. These museums are not only featured in newspapers and on the radio and TV but can raise enough money to produce their own videos and virtual museums. These costs are essentially independent of the number of consumers and therefore favour the major museums, because the set-up costs are normally too large for smaller institutions. While the latter will certainly catch up (a homepage is a matter of course for all museums), the major museums will have the funds to improve their scope and quality so as to maintain their lead. Superstar museums have started to establish museum networks. Thus, for example, the London Tate Gallery has spawned satellite museums at Liverpool and St. Ives, and the Prado has started to lend out about one third of its holdings to museums in the provinces.

Superstar museums find themselves in a new competitive situation. Their frames of reference shift from other museums in the city or region to other superstar museums. This competition between the superstars extends over a broad area, including commercial activities and sponsors.

The superstar museums must make a huge effort to stay in that category. Frantic activities are therefore often undertaken: special exhibitions are organized in the hope that they turn out to be blockbusters, visitors' amenities are improved (e.g. a larger variety of fancy restaurants), and new buildings with stunning architectural designs are added (e.g. in the case of New York's Museum of Modern Art). The superstar status tends to transform museums into providers of "total experience". This new role stands in stark contrast to the traditional notion of museums as preservers of the past.

The total experience offered by the superstar museums, and demanded by the huge crowds of visitors, must meet two conditions:

- Art must be placed in the context of history, technology, and well-known events in politics and entertainment, such as motion pictures. Superstar museums are forced constantly to also embed the permanent collection in a context attractive to large numbers of visitors.

- Superstar museums must be able to provide a wide range of amenities, not unlike entertainment parks. The activities offered extend beyond cafés, restaurants, and museum shops. The Louvre, for example, opened a large underground shopping mall called “Le Carrousel du Louvre”. Activities of superstar museums comprise all sorts of educational activities, not only for children but also for adults, and most importantly, plain entertainment.

11.2 Special Exhibitions

There is hardly an art museum not running, or at least preparing, a special exhibition of some sort. Such an exhibition may feature one particular artist, often in commemoration of his or her birth or death, or a group of artists; may focus on a period or a genre of paintings; or may establish a connection to some historical event.

Table 11.2 shows some of the most successful blockbuster exhibitions.

Some special exhibitions are composed solely of paintings from the holdings of the organizing museum, but most such special shows bring together works of art from various museums and private collections. Once collated, large temporary exhibitions frequently travel to other museums cooperating with the organizer. Some exhibitions, indeed, are designed from the beginning to be sent to various countries. Quite often, important museums simultaneously display several shows, which they have either mounted themselves or received from other organizers.

Museum exhibitions do not always meet with enthusiasm. The director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Philippe de Montebello, complained that whenever he meets people, they ask him what show he is presently preparing, to which he retorts that he is the director of the Metropolitan Art Museum and not the Metropolitan Opera.

Special exhibitions and festivals are closely related in various important respects.

Table 11.2 Blockbuster exhibitions, 1963–2014

Content	Year	Museum
Mona Lisa	1963	Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
The Treasure of Tutankhamun	1976–77	National Gallery of Art, Washington DC
Turner	1983–84	Grand Palais, Paris
Cézanne	1996	Philadelphia Museum of Art
China’s Terracotta Army	2007–08	British Museum London
Ashura and Masterpieces from Kohfukuji	2009	Tokyo National Museum
Master of Impressionism—Claude Monet	2014	Art Mall, Shanghai

11.2.1 Demand Side

- *High Income Effect.* Consumers tend to spend an increasing proportion of their rising incomes on visiting art exhibitions.
- *Attracting New Groups of Visitors.* Many people are overawed by the “temples of culture”, feel insecure and unwelcome, and therefore do not even consider visiting the local art museum. This is less the case for special exhibitions, which are broadly advertised and which are made attractive to new groups. This is partly overcome by “dressing up the museum”: special exhibitions are always marked by huge banners and other advertising ploys and even the museum entrances are made welcoming. Extensive promotion also plays a role.
- *Focusing Attention.* An exhibition seeks to attract consumers by presenting some extraordinary and special cultural experience. As a result, visitors interested in a particular form of art come together, often from distant locations. This development is, of course, supported by low and falling travel costs. Public attention is drawn away from the permanent collection towards a special and unique (or at least rare) event.
- *Newsworthiness.* Special exhibitions are news and thus attract the attention of television, radio, and the print media, which is otherwise impossible to obtain to the same degree, especially free of charge. Such exhibitions are also featured in the social media. It is easy to persuade media people to report on a special exhibition, while the permanent collection hardly ever makes any news.
- *Location and Timing.* Special exhibitions are mostly organized by major museums, which are located in large cities, so the period outside summer holidays is more attractive. Winter is a good season for special art exhibitions as prospective visitors are prepared to travel to these centres, thus combining holidays with a cultural experience.
- *Low price elasticity.* Managers of special exhibitions have more leeway to increase their revenue by setting higher entrance fees. Entrance prices for special exhibitions are often much higher than for the permanent collection.

11.2.2 Supply Side

Several determinants of supply contrast with the conditions faced by the permanent venues and contribute to the success of special exhibitions.

- *Low Production Cost.* The absolute cost of special exhibitions is certainly high. The organizing museum has to cover the insurance and transport costs, which may be substantial. But it is low compared to the sum of money they would require if all the resource inputs used were attributed to these special events. Museum employees are taken to organize and run special exhibitions, but the corresponding cost is not attributed to the special events. One such cost is the neglect of cataloguing and maintaining the permanent collection. In addition, the museum rooms where the

special exhibitions are shown do not enter the costs as the forgone opportunities are not part of normal bookkeeping.

The costs of mounting a special exhibition are also significantly lowered because the art works shown do not have to be rented at market price. A rental market for art works only exists under very exceptional conditions and is of little importance. Rather, the exhibits are lent free of charge. The cost of such lending appears in a non-monetary form. The whole system of special exhibitions is built on mutual exchange or on the principle of reciprocity. Only museum directors who are prepared to lend art works from their own permanent collections are able to participate in this exchange system. The production costs can be further lessened by arranging travelling, circulating, or touring exhibitions, where costs can be shared by those museums showing the exhibition.

- *More creative possibilities.* Museum directors are bound by artistic conventions. The particular hanging of pictures at many museums has become part of cultural heritage, and it is next to impossible to rearrange the permanent collection to any significant extent. Special exhibitions offer a chance of avoiding such historical restrictions. One of the major tasks and potentials of an art exhibition is to arrange the art works so as to create new insights and effects. In addition, the assembly of art works from many different permanent collections provides a challenge to museum directors, curators, and exhibition and graphic designers to exert their artistic creativity and sense of innovation, and possibly to raise controversy—aspects which are highly valued by museum people, not only for their own sake, but also because it is beneficial for their careers.
- *Higher revenues.* Special exhibitions provide a good opportunity for directors of art museums to appropriate at least part of the extra revenue generated. Being an extraordinary event, the museum directors are in a good bargaining position vis-à-vis the public budgetary authorities to use some discretion where these funds are concerned and not be fully penalized by a reduction in future budget allocations.
- *Increased sponsoring.* Politicians and public officials have a pronounced interest in special grand exhibitions. Business sponsors want a well-defined, high-quality event aimed at a specific audience where they can present and advertise themselves.
- *Career opportunities.* Museum directors are increasingly chosen from, and transform themselves into, exhibition organizers, and move ever further away from being merely respected scientists and art experts. This change in the museums' career system may run into problems in the long run. There is a rising perception that travel of art works going with special exhibitions tends to reduce, and sometimes damage, the quality of art objects, which makes it increasingly difficult to collect the objects necessary to mount an attractive exhibition.

11.3 Conclusion

Superstar museums and blockbuster exhibitions are here to stay. They usefully attract people who otherwise do not visit museums, and they are able to attract attention to artists and artistic movements that are otherwise disregarded. They may also help to improve the financial situation of museums.

There are, however, major disadvantages. The normal collections of museums tend to be disregarded, and museums that do not have the capacity to engage in such activities become less important. Too much attention from the media, politicians, and the public goes to the few superstar museums and their special exhibitions.

Relevant Literature

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