

Colliding Sensibilities: Exhibition Development and the Pedagogy of Period Room Interpretation

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In my dissertation, I examine the traditional methodology of installing and interpreting an art museum period room. The evolution of a methodology is a dynamic process. I wanted to display a method for creating and linking lived experience that would keep in mind critical developments in art education and ethnography. The empirical focus is the Régence Room, but the ethnographic experience, though common to traditional qualitative methods of collecting data, is represented as an arts-based ethnographic drama. Representing my research in this manner is my attempt to add a new approach to the pedagogy of period room interpretation, a rather underdeveloped topic. I acknowledge that it is a fairly esoteric one, potentially attracting a select few among the readers for whom I am writing: art educators and museum administrators. I am advocating making the Getty Museum's Régence Room an interesting, meaningful experience for museum visitors. My aim is to connect with readers who wonder about the meaning(s) of museum period rooms: what are they? why do museums have them? how do they relate to my life, my students' lives, visitors' lives, and our experiences?

Research Questions

My assumption is that the Régence Room—an art museum period room—is a passive, isolated space, in the sense that “if a museum is first of all a place of things, its two extremes are a graveyard and a department store, things entombed or up for sale” (Harbison, 1977, p. 140), and of these two, the Régence Room would be in the graveyard

realm—entombed. The fundamental question that I pose is this: how did the methodology of the exhibition development process of the Régence Room affect its intended interpretation? The secondary question I ask is, how do visitors respond to their Régence Room experience?

In 1997 I read Lisa Roberts's newly published book entitled *From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum*. It was a pivotal moment for me because her content expressed the diverse, complex job of museum educators—a profession I was pursuing. In the book, Roberts carved a place for narrative in museum education. A consequence of this narrative insight was that I wanted deeper understanding of the conditions that empower or prohibit educators from performing their work in non-traditional, thought-provoking ways. I was particularly interested in how narrative might be applied to the interpretation of a material culture display, moving beyond a museum's use of standard wall text, object label text, and teacher- or docent-led gallery tours.

I began to question how museum displays are interpreted. Having already decided that my research topic would examine the interpretation of an eighteenth-century French period room, I initiated my inquiry by deconstructing the narrative of the Régence Room. A few of the early questions that helped to focus my arts-based research (Barone, 1995; Barone & Eisner, 1997; Eisner, 1981, 1997a, 1997b) were the following: What pedagogical philosophies guided the process of developing the period room? Did the exhibition developers think in terms of a story, and, if so, what is it, and from whose point-of-view is it told? Who chose the artifacts that would tell the story?

Narrative Ventures

The Régence Room suggests a narrative structure, one that functions pedagogically. Narrative form and content vary in the ways they are shaped and shared. The Getty Museum has constructed one narrative about this period room, but there are others. There are the textual and oral narratives that interconnect and expand with various interpretations of the space, as well as with the retellings of it. Roland Barthes (1915-1980) describes narrative this way:

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances—as though any material were fit to receive man’s stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances, narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting, stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself. (1977, p. 79)

What happens when pedagogy is predicated on the curator’s structure of the room? What about all the possible other narratives? How are they to be constructed and expressed? Educators could offer narratives in which the pedagogy would be fleshed out making the room more accessible to the museum’s visitors as a result. Would visitors experience the room differently if the museum were to reveal how it was constructed? This dissertation has a pedagogical purpose. By this I mean that the following narratives—the stories and play I have written—function as pedagogy. They are based

on different kinds of historical information and interpretations of personal experiences, as well as analysis of research material. These structural elements are arranged in various sequences. Combined, they serve to illustrate a process of how narratives about the Régence Room can be developed. It is important for me to point out, however, that “the knowledge they present is incomplete and unfinished; that it is derived through a never-ending process of discovery and revision; and that its advancement is subject to ongoing debate” (Roberts, 1997, p. 143).

Arts-based Research

In this dissertation I use evidence from participants’ interviews, observations of visitors, and documentary sources to show the collective activity that was involved in the presentation of the Régence Room as well as the various roles in creating meanings for the period room. I do this following elements taken from Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner’s *Arts-Based Educational Research* (1997). To explore the significance, meaning, and interpretation of the Régence Room and how it was made, subsequently contested and renegotiated, I overlay Barone and Eisner’s seven features of arts-based research onto the accounts of my participants, observations of visitors, and documentary sources. These ingredients go into Chapter Four’s ethnographic drama and are linked to this dissertation’s overall autoethnographic layered account.

Autoethnographic Layered Account

I use autoethnography to tell the story of the Régence Room. It is a relatively new method in the ethnographic field, a genre of writing and research typically written in the first-person voice. The method (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) can take various forms of

connecting the personal to the cultural such as “short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose” (p. 739). A layered account (Ronai, 1992, 1995, 1996), which I use here, is one of the ways a researcher can embody the dialectic of dialogue, emotion, and self-consciousness in the context of relational and institutional stories, histories, and culture (Bochner, Ellis & Tillmann-Healy, 2000). A layered account also complements the seven design elements of arts-based research listed above. A discussion of autoethnography and layered accounts follows in Chapter Three. In order to assist the reader, I have used a visual cue, $\cup \tau \cup$, to demarcate layers—illustrated by three diamonds.

Personal Background

Prior to entering the doctoral program at Penn State and moving to State College, I had been living a comfortable life with my fiancé in Burbank, California. John and I submitted to a long-distance relationship so that I could move to the farmland of central Pennsylvania. Before leaving greater Los Angeles, I had had a great job as a collections cataloger in Special Collections at the Getty Research Institute, and I really enjoyed it. The emotional and culture shock of moving from Los Angeles to State College could have been enough to put me off Penn State’s art education program, but I am tenacious. I was determined to succeed.

Upon entering Penn State’s art education program, I already knew what topic I wanted to research—museum period rooms of domestic interiors. I had been studying the subject since being a Master’s candidate and conducting research in the archive I had been processing and cataloging at the Getty Research Institute, years before applying to the art

education program at Penn State. Going back even further, ever since stepping inside the U-505 at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry in 1965, I was hooked on museums' representations of domestic interior spaces.

Huh? You might be asking yourself: What's the connection between a submarine and period rooms of domestic interiors? Well, for the sailors onboard the U-505, those spaces were a kind of home. More to the point, the submarine triggered my fascination for foreign, three-dimensional interior spaces, spaces completely different from any in my everyday life experience. This museum experience affected how I played at school. Rather than spending my entire recess walloping a tether ball, climbing on the jungle gym, or spinning on the parallel bars, I started playing in the dirt under the outdoor lunch tables, making layouts of houses with walls made of mud and furniture fashioned from twigs, all the while making up stories. I could have been channeling Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712-1754) *Emile (1993/1762)*—an association I can now make because of my book learning in art education (Efland, 1990, 2004; Morales, 2000). In Book II of Rousseau's educational treatise, an orphaned boy named Emile is tutored by Rousseau. The child is brought up outdoors honing his senses playing among animals, plants, and natural objects, and experiencing climatic elements. Rousseau's philosophy stated that education is a developmental process inscribed by Nature, basically predispositions that human beings are born with. From knowledge gathered through my own experiences, I knew that period rooms had a lot to offer museum visitors, something that I felt museums hadn't begun to tap. I myself didn't know how to tap the well, but I trusted it wouldn't dry out before I learned how.

The Régence Room

In Paris in 1725, two years after the close of the Régence period of Philippe II (1674-1723), oak panels (*boiserie*) were installed in the bedroom of a new French townhouse at 18 Place Vendôme, overlooking the fashionable square of residences commissioned by Louis XIV (1638-1715) before his death. Over two hundred years and numerous residents later, in 1932, the panels were removed from the walls of the second floor room (called the *premier étage* in France) when Société Carlhian, a family-owned and -operated firm of decorative arts dealers and interior decorators, purchased the panels for FF 55,500 (in five separate lots, equivalent to \$41,990, in today's currency exchange) from the Westminster Foreign Bank, Ltd., which owned and conducted business from 18 Place Vendôme at the time (Carlhian Records, Box 314; Bidwell, 1970).

In 1939, one year before the French government signed an armistice with Hitler's Third Reich, the Régence *boiserie* was shipped on commission to Duveen Brothers, fine art dealers in New York City. Following the *boiserie* eight years later (1947) was a watercolor *maquette* of the room illustrating the panels integrated with tapestries (Carlhian Records, Box 247). J. Paul Getty first saw these panels—by then called “antiques”—in the New York showroom of Duveen Brothers in 1950. Twenty-one years later, Mr. Getty bought them for the decorative arts galleries in his new museum in Malibu (Carlhian Records, Box 602). Now, almost three centuries after they were carved, the panels make up a different room, a gallery display at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Brentwood, California.

The Régence Room, as it is known at the Getty Museum, was originally a

bedroom in a townhouse in Paris, and installed there sometime around 1725-1726. The townhouse was located in the city's financial center, the prestigious architectural square named the Place Vendôme. At the time, the houses in this square were considered modern. Counter to traditional aristocratic styles of planning and use, architects in this area adapted the sizes and shapes of rooms according to their use. Number eighteen was one of twenty-eight parcels, a smaller, L-shaped plot situated along the northeastern range of the square, nearest the intersection of Rue de la Paix and Rue Neuve des Petis Champs (Ziskin, 1999).

Louis XIV conceived of the site in 1685. The site—named Place de Louis-le-Grand during his involvement—was to have been a physical manifestation of his power housing royal academies, the royal library, the mint, and residences for visiting VIPs. However, a few years later, the king re-directed money that had been allocated for his royal square, to the war being fought in Europe and Colonial America. In 1698, the project was taken over by four venture capitalists, among whom was Nicolas-Hiérosme Herlaut, the first owner of 18 Place Vendôme—the Hôtel Herlaut, home of the Régence Room (de Saint Simon, 1982; Kalnein & Levey, 1972; Ziskin, 1999).

The bedroom, made up of carved oak and walnut panels, occupied a space on the second floor. The gilt, carved panels are attributed to Charles-Louis Maurisan after designs probably made by Armand-Claude Mollet; the plain, white panels in the room today are modern replacements for original gilt panels lost over time. The Getty Museum re-installed the Régence Room at Brentwood following the room's original dimensions and configuration (with a few alterations that I will note later). It includes two windows on

one side; three doors on opposite sides, two of which are arranged in *enfilade*; three mirrors on three sides, two of which are *enfilade*; and a chimneypiece. The two windows overlooked the square, and the doors led to other apartments (rooms) in the townhouse.

Gillian Wilson, the decorative arts curator at the Getty, used the gilt, carved panels as a backdrop to display early eighteenth-century objects that she had acquired, “to give them some context” (Jeffrey Weaver, personal communication, February 18, 2003). Wilson decorated the room at the Getty Museum with the same domestic furnishings used in her earlier Getty Villa installation—primarily objects made in Paris for the aristocracy. The luxurious materials include gilt bronze, gilt wood, precious woods (amaranth, kingwood, tulipwood), porcelain, hard stones (alabaster, *breche d’alep*), semi-precious stones (agate, amethyst, carnelian, jasper, rock crystal), and silk. Positioned around the room for aesthetic effect are five chairs (*fauteuils*); one stool, three dressers (*commodes*), a desk (*bureau plât*) with writing tools, lighting fixtures, lighting fixture stands, a clock, a large tapestry, a large carpet, andirons, and assorted porcelain from China, Japan, and Germany. The window draperies and the chimneypiece are modern.

The in-depth characterizations of the room’s provenance are among the layers in this account that demonstrate education as a narrative endeavor. Museums are stewards of culture and educational institutions. As such, they—with the efforts of museum stakeholders—have shifted from a focus of disseminating knowledge, on the model of libraries and universities, to a focus on making meaning. And, they have become less object-centered. Historically, objects have been valued for perceived inherent qualities. However, increasingly, since the 1990s, objects are understood to get their value and ideas

in part “from narratives constructed and imposed from without” (Roberts, 1997, p. 147).

The Problem

The Régence Room’s design was conceived to incorporate specific objects and to give each one a fixed position in the display. It is a room with restricted circulation, preventing visitors from walking in and around the space. As displayed, the room can be only looked into, not experienced with full freedom of movement. The room’s design and installation required a sizable investment of time and money to conceive and produce, especially the restoration of the panels in Paris—using eighteenth-century techniques—and their subsequent installation in the museum by French artisans. To transform this established room from its current display, which the Museum tried to present as historically accurately as possible, would be far more complicated than rehang a paintings gallery, both logistically and conceptually. Decorative arts departments have less practice mounting exhibitions, because their objects are lent less frequently. The objects are precarious and expensive to move, even within a museum. Decorative arts require specialized platforms or stanchions or cases, not just a picture rail. Furthermore, the surrounding architecture of the South Pavilion was literally built around the Régence Room, and the other period rooms, fixing its location within the museum.

In addition to the issues just stated, the Museum’s few period rooms (there are four) are seemingly insignificant. The Museum does not give period room tours, nor do the highlights or themed focus tours even begin to delve into the many meanings and perspectives offered by the room’s social and historical contexts or by its objects. I admit the difficulty of touring large groups through the space, but the Museum’s design

for the room did not attempt to alleviate this. Domestic interiors are spaces where life is lived in all its richness, where passions are felt from woes to rapture. As survivors of a volatile historical past, the room and its objects today are passive, unable to communicate the possibilities of exploring everyday experience—from the bottom to the top of the social strata—in Paris during the Régence. More to the point, how can Los Angeles’s inner-city population relate to this simulated aristocratic interior? How can it mean something to a group of second-grade Latino children—tired and grumpy, hungry and hyperactive after being bussed in from Riverside County (over sixty miles away)? Could a static museum period room—without any creative stimulus—capture the imagination of these kids? Yet they might be more easily taken in by the room than Anglo adults, or tourists in general.

In the previous two paragraphs I explain why I think the room is a pedagogical failure, but we can learn from situations that are unsuccessful as well as from those that triumph. We can learn from things that capture our attention and imagination and even from things to which we are indifferent. Just for a moment, let us assume that the Régence Room is the last place in the museum you would want to visit. You can make no associations with it, it has nothing to do with you personally, or culturally. What can we learn from this adverse condition, which invites learning from both the negative and positive aspects of lived experience? The Régence Room is an example of a museum display that maintains its hegemonic historic value, but its pedagogy is misplaced due to the display’s inability to connect to visitors and their everyday lives. In this dissertation, I propose an explanation of this troubled condition and a possible solution.

The idea that museums change the meaning of the objects they hold is not new. In the nineteenth century, critically informed observers noted that curators obscured their former uses (Duncan, 1995), and twenty-first-century period rooms are no exception. The interpretation of the Régence Room's current display does little to interpret for visitors the 280-year gap between 1725, when the panels were installed at 18 Place Vendôme, and 2006, the time of this writing; neither does the interpretation consider what visitors bring to the space, their personal knowledge and experiences. The room is a decontextualized, static space, disengaged from its museum audience.

Arts-based Practice for Interpreting Material Culture

To concentrate on the practical problem of how to make the Régence Room a more transformative space, I have applied the seven features of arts-based research and a layered account to the process and results of making the Régence Room. In so doing, my dissertation offers a model of arts-based practice for interpreting material culture in museums.

Art educators, in their study of objects and artifacts, have focused attention on folk arts, popular culture, and mass media and how these areas of study are “often neglected or omitted from traditional studies in art history and art education” (Bolin, 1992/1993, p. 144). My research fills a gap in this category by directing research on the interpretation of material culture in a museum context. Linked to the growing relationship between material culture studies and art education, this autoethnographical layered account of the J. Paul Getty Museum's Régence Room creates an alternative reality that functions as a heuristic device. The accounts of “familiar and nearby

concerns” (Barone & Eisner, 1997, p. 74) that raise questions are meant to affect you, my readers, and, to affect my ultimate goal of bringing ideas and imagination into the period room in order to pique museum-goers’ curiosity and interest, to help visitors to make meaning of what they see, hear, smell, and touch.

Interpretation

In this section I introduce the concept of interpretation. First, I acquaint the reader with approaches to interpretation, and second I introduce the interpretive conditions that I believe currently operate in the Régence Room. Throughout this dissertation I refer to interpretation, which is a widely used word in museums. There are similar yet different perspectives on interpretation. The first two that I offer here demonstrate theoretical and practical approaches. Arthur C. Danto, an American art critic and philosopher, gives a theoretical structure to the topic, and Graham Black, a senior lecturer in Museum and Heritage Management at the Nottingham Trent University in England, contributes a practical framework. Black is also a professional interpretation consultant. Their viewpoints will shape some of the discussions of interpretation that follow below and in subsequent Chapters.

Danto (1981) contends that the act of interpreting is “determining the relationship between a work of art and its material counterpart” (p. 113). But an interpretive relationship can be tricky because “works of art may so closely resemble mere real things, [and] an act of disinterpretation may be required in cases of inverse confusion, where we take a mere thing to be a work of art” (p. 113). This perspective is relevant to interpreting material culture because things such as tables and chairs are real things used

by many varied cultures, but they can also be works of art. Interpretation is a transformative act performed by individuals who see an object, and in seeing an object it is transformed by the interpretation made by virtue of seeing it. As Danto maintains, “the object was not a work [of art] until it was made one” (pp. 125-126). Moreover, “a new identity” is created (p. 126). The Getty Museum has created a new identity for the material culture of the Régence Room. And the identities continue to shift and change with each person who sees it.

Another view of interpretation is given by Graham Black (2005), an award-winning interpretation consultant whose exhibitions have received the Gulbenkian Prize, the Museum of the Year award, the Special Judges Prize at the Interpret Britain Awards, and the English Tourist Board’s “England for Excellence” Tourist Attraction of the Year award. Black’s views on interpretation are practical and focused on how museum exhibitions are interpreted. He suggests that interpretation has two viewpoints: what museums provide for visitors and what visitors provide for museums from their “direct, individual interpretive responses . . . to our presentations” (p. 179). But it is the “three-way conversation between museum audience and collections” to which Black has fastened his research (p. 185). He contends that the conversation shapes the practice of creating “museum environments and exhibitions, and associated programming” (p. 185).

I believe there are two interpretive conditions at work in the room today, which are qualitatively similar to, and quite possibly exactly, how it was interpreted in Malibu. Condition number one comprises the verbal and aural, and number two, the physical. The verbal and aural interpretation is changeable, and the physical interpretation is

unchangeable. Interpretation that fits the first category is didactic: for example, gallery labels, wall text, gallery cards, audioguides, and docent or gallery teacher tours. These devices are specifically designed for visitors' edification. Changes that may occur are related to content, caused by new research or object movement, or wear caused by visitors' handling. Making alterations to these conditions is not uncommon nor is it exorbitantly costly. In the second category, however, where physical conditions dominate, cost is a significant issue. Once installed, the physical interpretation of a period-paneled room is typically static due to the expense. As you might imagine, the costs of materials and labor required for installing a period interior are high. The time and money that go into constructing and installing foundations, walls, floors, electrical systems, and any conservation of objects all add up. Moreover, with regard to the Régence Room, the curator's choice to display specific objects there was essentially to fix them in space and cause them to be unchangeable.

To elaborate on the changeable aspects of the Régence Room's interpretation, the kinds of interpretive tools and techniques displayed or utilized in the Getty Museum period rooms are object labels (reading), wall text panels (reading), gallery cards (reading, looking at pictures/illustrations), audioguides/acoustiguide (pushing buttons, listening), computers located in alcoves a distance from galleries (typing, reading), and the occasional gallery teacher/docent tours (listening, maybe talking). In my estimation, these tools and techniques are passive and isolated, like the Régence Room itself. Visitors stand in the room reading or listening and occasionally talking with companions, who may be in the room also, about what they are reading or hearing. How can interpretation of the room be

expanded from the use of these tools and techniques?

Interpretation of museum displays is part of the process of planning exhibitions. As such, the process should bring together designers, museum practitioners, and architects on equal footing from the beginning of the design project (Grasso & Morrison, 1994; Roberts, 1997). In the case of period room interpretation, professional scriptwriters, voice coaches, and theatre groups also could be involved as consultants to assist educators (Hughes, 1998; Fricker, 2002). Another narrative of the interpretive process to consider is demystifying the creation of period rooms in order to “reveal the processes and choices which lie behind museum exhibitions” (Moore, 1997, p. 58). If goals, objectives, themes, meaning-making, and persuasion are the predominant attributes of interpretation, as scholars claim (Ham, 1983/1999, 2002, 2003; Ham & Weiler, 2003; Tilden, 1957/1977), then interactive methods such as communicating and disclosing information could encourage visitors to share opinions and insights and to review what they see.

Community involvement—meaning different kinds of individuals interacting within society—enables the public to undertake object analysis themselves. As Danielle Rice commented at a conference at Winterthur Museum titled *How to Put on a Traveling Exhibition* (2000), “It’s remarkable what you can learn if you just ask.” An example of this would be to borrow an academic model, distribute a “Call for Participants” to various museum and community stakeholders stating the parameters of the project and inviting anyone to contribute her or his time and knowledge to the interpretive process. Locating such narratives from another perspective potentially would generate dimensions

otherwise unconsidered by museum practitioners. After the breakdown of communities—a consequence of the Industrial Revolution—education became more challenging. John Dewey wondered how a school could make itself “a genuine form of active community life [not just the well-to-do], instead of a place set apart in which to learn lessons” (Jackson, 1998, p. 167). I wonder the same about museum period rooms. What do visitors notice about the Régence Room? How has it changed over time? Is the museum’s display really how the room looked hundreds of years ago? Was Paris really different from America in the 1720s? How about today? Who lived in this room? What kind of people were they, and how did they live? What kind of jobs did they have? Were they like me or not? How so? How did aristocrats occupy themselves? Who worked for them and how were they treated?

Moreover, using evidence of real people and events taken from the history of the Régence Room would help visitors believe that what they are experiencing is not merely some distant point in history but still has an influence on them today (Black, 2005; Tilden, 1957/1977). Why not ask the community which narratives are most interesting to them? For example, might they be curious about what connections can be made between the shrewd diplomacy and loose morals of the Orléans Regency and the United States government? Or between the financial scandal affecting stockholders of the first Bank of France under the influence of John Law and today’s WorldCom and Enron scandals that destroyed some of their own stockholders?

I have used the term interpretation in three different ways. In one way I refer to the physical interpretation of how the room was re-installed and to what decisions were

made by the curator and exhibition development team about installing the panels as artworks themselves—in Brentwood as a paneled room and as context for period furnishings. In this interpretation, the room is displayed as a *salon* during the French Régence and not the bedroom it once was in Paris. A second avenue explains the verbal and aural educational tools used by the Museum educators, such as object labels, text panels, and audioguides. In the last approach I plead for connections that visitors might make between the Régence Room and their own experiences. I maintain that making meaning and contextualizing their experience of the period room potentially gives visitors richer associations with the space. Accessing and incorporating their prior knowledge and personal experiences are pivotal to this possibility.

What I am arguing here is that the current installation of the Régence Room and the information given for it are lacking. Neither fully stimulates interpretation to make personal connections that could enliven visitors' experiences with the period room.

Moving beyond the physical elements of interpretation is what Danto's (1981) theory highlights:

Consider the way in which a child can play with a stick: it can be a horse, a spear, a gun, a doll, a wall, a boat, a plane; it is a universal toy. But two cognitive conditions must be satisfied in order for the child to execute his acts of imaginative reconstitution. The first, of course, is that he knows that the stick is not a horse, not a spear, not a doll. (pp. 127-128)

Danto attaches limits to such child-like behavior because “[f]or a child to be imagining or pretending that a stick is a horse, he has to know something about horses, and the limits of his knowledge are the limits of play” (p. 128). What this suggests for the Régence Room is that visitors are unable to imagine—or play—in the period room because they

have little or no knowledge about it or about period rooms, as a genre. Once the Museum provides visitors with information sufficient to stir mental and emotional responses to the Régence Room, then visitors will be able to connect to the material culture through their knowledge and imagination.

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