"My work is not influenced by anybody,"

declared artist Clyfford Still at the time of his 1973 retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. A provocative statement certainly worth investigating, but how to do it at a museum that displays works only by Still? With some innovative thinking and the help of augmented reality technology.

The Clyfford Still Museum’s current exhibition, Still & Art, performs the vital task of examining Clyfford Still’s work through the lens of other artists in order to gain a deeper understanding of this complicated man. Dean Fishel, director of the Clyfford Still Museum, explains that the museum had long considered an exhibition that paired Still’s work with that of other artists, but that the traditional ways of presenting comparative images, such as printed wall decals or lightboxes, have limitations in terms of image quality and visitor experience. Unsurprisingly when the museum opened in 2011, augmented reality offered a fresh solution to this challenge. “The most significant thing about using augmented reality,” says Fishel, “is that the paintings are three-dimensional and textured; these digital works are like living organisms in many ways.”

"It's like seeing these paintings for the first time because you don't really get the same experience from looking at a reproduction."

- Dean Fishel

"AR is all about connection and engagement with what people are seeing. You are interacting with your body and you are interacting with people around you; it creates a more memorable experience." — David Lerner

Arriving at the Museum, visitors can check out a phablet loaded with the augmented reality experience created in partnership with tech design firm Goldfinch. Using indoor geolocation technology, the device knows when it enters a new gallery and buzzes to alert the user to the presence of visual elements that are viewable only through the device. What is a blank wall one minute, is filled with color the next as one looks through the device to discover a proportionately scaled virtual painting that seems to hang on the wall next to one of Still’s massive canvases. Thanks to motion tracking technology, the perspective of the virtual image changes as the user moves around the gallery. Just as one would do to examine a real painting, users can walk toward the virtual artwork to zoom in on details.

“This technology allows you to deep-zoom and see the images in a better way than any book ever will, and the phablet on a good display present works of art amazingly well.”
— Dean Sobel

In all, 13 works of art, some of which would be nearly impossible to get on loan or even fit through the doorways of the Still, are presented as part of the augmented reality experience. To create this seamless blend of real physical space with life-sized digital elements, the Goldfinch team first mapped the galleries by walking through the museum with an augmented reality device that recorded colors, walls, door frames, stairs and other visual cues. Next, virtual objects in the form of high-resolution digital images were mapped to specific walls in the museum using special software developed by Goldfinch. As David Lerner, founder and CEO of Goldfinch, explains, “What is amazing with augmented reality is the sense of scale, which you don’t have with virtual reality, and which you don’t have while just looking at a painting on your screen. Here you have a sense of scale and it totally feeds your brain. You didn’t see the painting for real, because you saw it through your device, but the memory you have is as if it were really there.”

Not a gimmick or tech toy, the augmented reality experience woven throughout “Still & Art” makes a compelling case for the use of technology that is grounded in reality, but pushes our understanding and sense of possibility beyond physical boundaries.

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"Still & Art"

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2500 Rossell St.
cliffordstillmuseum.org