

THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE IN CONTEMPORARY ART INSTITUTIONS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE ALMATY MUSEUM OF ART AND TSELINNY CENTER OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

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Abstract. This article examines the newly established art institutions in Almaty, Kazakhstan, namely Almaty Museum of Art and Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture, and analyzes how these institutions shape visitor experience within museum space. The study aims to analyze how architectural design, curatorial framework, and public programming influence visitor engagement in newly opened emerging art institutions. The research is grounded in Falk and Dierking's (1999, 2000) Contextual Model of Learning. The study explores personal, social, and physical experiences in museums. The methodological framework is based on a qualitative comparative analysis of two contemporary art institutions through institutional observation, exhibition environments, review of public programming, and social media engagement during the opening period of September-October 2025. The study finds that the Almaty Museum of Art and Tselinny develop two different models of visitor engagement. The Almaty Museum of Art relies on architectural space and guided interpretation, while the Tselinny foregrounds participatory discussion and educational initiative. Both institutions demonstrate that Kazakhstan's contemporary art spaces are moving away from didactic museum models toward more visitor-centered, community-based practices.

Keywords: contemporary art institutions, museum visitor experience, museum learning, curatorial framework, educational programs, visitor engagement, museums.

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Introduction

Over the past three decades, museum studies scholarship has increasingly noted the transformation of museums from traditional institutions focused primarily on collection toward participatory cultural spaces that prioritize visitor engagement, dialogue, and interpretation.

The expansion of contemporary art institutions in Almaty, Kazakhstan, has become a topic of growing scholarly and public interest. The growing trend of arts and cultural institutions has attracted diverse audiences, and seeking to construct meaning and build a new experience within art institutions.

The recent opening of the first contemporary museum in Almaty attracted large audiences. The visitor numbers at the Almaty Museum of Art were unprecedented as the public interest reached 14.000 visitors during the first three days alone (Almaty Museum of Art). However, the visitor's interest in contemporary art institutions suggests a museum space constructed to international standards, with architectural forms, and at the same time indicates a generational shift toward seeking cultural learning. Contemporary museum research emphasizes that visitors approach museums with diverse motivations and expectations, shaping individual experiences rather than following predetermined interpretive pathways. Thus,

it is significant for museum staff to navigate different visitor patterns to understand the intentions and meanings visitors create while visiting museums and to encourage sustained engagement with interactive practices within museums (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999).

What we see now from international trends is how museum staff try to create public, educational, and visitor programs that are more interactive, engaging, and attractive to respond to the public's needs. "Over the past 10 years, however, museum culture has begun to shift from focusing on collections to communication with visitors. Museums are changing from static store-houses for objects into active learning environments for people" (Chang, 2006, p. 171, citing Hooper-Greenhill, 1994a, 1999). While the rapid expansion of contemporary art institutions in Kazakhstan has attracted unprecedented public interest, visitor engagement often remains architectural and symbolic rather than interpretive and educational.

This study investigates how art institutions build their programs to attract visitors and affect their behaviors, particularly the interaction of visitors with museum interpretive practices. Within Kazakhstan, the museum expansion landscape, visiting museums becomes a way of learning not only about art, but also about cultural interpreters and how participation is performed in public

space. Despite the rapid emergence of contemporary art institutions in Kazakhstan, little scholarly attention has been given to how these institutions shape visitor experience and interpretive engagement within museum space. This article contributes to museum studies by analyzing how newly emerging arts institutions in Almaty, Kazakhstan reinterpret visitor engagement practices within a post-Soviet context.

Method and materials

Before I analyze the two major art institutions in Kazakhstan, the Almaty Museum of Art and Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture, this study draws on the Interactive Experience and Contextual Learning Models by Falk and Dierking (1992, 2000), which are applicable to museum visiting and learning and their learning experience. In the article “Interactive Experiences and Contextual Learning in Museums,” Eun Jung Chang (2006) outlines three contexts of visitor experience: personal, social, and physical. The personal context includes motivations, expectations, interests, beliefs, prior knowledge, and experiences. The social context includes co-visitation patterns and social interactions within groups, between visitors and staff. The physical context includes institutional restrictions, policies and rules, architecture, layout, activities, collections, and facilities (Chang 170).

The recent opening of two major contemporary art institutions - the Almaty Museum of Art and the Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture, using Falk and Dierkin’s (1992, 2000) Contextual Model of Learning, this study examines the visitors’ prior experiences and behavioral patterns and intention to be educated within museum practices. While the surge in attendance may partially reflect growing interest in cultural education among younger generations, social media analysis suggests architectural forms and symbolic

participation in early visitation. The analysis draws on institutional observation, spatial analysis, interpretive materials, and social media content to assess how each institution shapes visit behaviors and meaning-making processes. Particular attention is given to how architectural design, curatorial research, and modes of mediation influence visitor’s motivations and levels of engagement. Rather than treating visitor behavior as a matter of individual preference, this approach emphasizes how institutional design and curatorial strategies shape modes of engagement and self-understanding within museum spaces. This observation does not seek to evaluate visitor satisfaction or learning outcomes quantitatively, but rather to examine the institutions’ capacity for developing engagement programs for the visitors.

This study employs qualitative institutional analysis, combining observational research and spatial analysis of exhibition environments during the opening in September 2025. Data were collected through the visitor’s behavior on the first opening day, reviewing institutional websites and public programs, and analysis of the social media engagement and visibility between September and October 2025. The comparative analysis focuses on how architectural space, curatorial strategies, and public interaction initiatives influence visitor engagement within the framework of Falk and Dierking’s Contextual Model of Learning. This research does not aim to measure visitor satisfaction quantitatively but rather focuses on the institutional strategies that shape visitor engagement.

Discussion

Museums function as spaces for learning. Through the museum experiences, people create communities, learning outcomes and motivations to participate in cultural environments. Learning is the name we

give to the complex biological process that underlies our ability to engage in such diverse activities as hitting a tennis ball, singing, knowing how to “read” facial expressions and “read” a work of art (see Falk, Dierking and Holland 1995).

Chang (2006) argues: Viewed from this perspective, most human learning is self-motivated, emotionally satisfying, and personally rewarding. A number of investigators have found that humans are highly motivated to learn when they are in supporting environments (Deci 1992; Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman, and Ryan 1981; McCombs 1991); when engaged in meaningful activities (Dewey 1890; Maehr 1984; McCombs 1991; Salami 1998); when they are freed from anxiety, fear and other negative mental states (Diener and Dweck 1980; McCombs 1991); when individuals have choices and control over their learning (Covington 1992; Griffin 2004; Paris 1997; Paris and Cross 1983; Pintrich and DeGroot 1990); and when the challenges of the task meet the person’s skills (Csikszentmihalyi 1990a; 1990b) (p.172). Since then, the museum’s goal as expressed above is to concentrate their mission to create learning space for their visitors, even if they have different motivations and approaches to visit museums.

Aesthetic learning also develops when interpretation is carefully facilitated. Abigail Housen’s research, as presented in *The Eye of the Beholder: Measuring Aesthetic Development*, identifies five stages of aesthetic development, which later informed the Director of Education at the MoMa in New York to develop an educational program called Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). Her work in art education encouraged young visitors to question themselves: “What is going on in this picture?”, “What do you see that makes you say that?” and “What more can we find?” (Yenawine 25). Through these questions now VTS is no longer an art education program for children, it has

become an interpretive framework in how museums communicate with visitors across all ages, departments and institutional structures. Newly opened contemporary art institutions are entering a cultural landscape where public expectations of museum experiences are rapidly changing. These institutions have the opportunity to go beyond architectural spectacle by designing exhibitions and public programs that foster active engagement, meaning-making, and learning.

The learning and engagement experience can also be invisible to the visitors’ experience. The visitor’s route during museum visits allows museum staff to navigate installation practices and curatorial work. For example, the Tangible Things project came from the concept of “Things in Stories”, which emerged from a Harvard course focused on connecting collections across institutions. The aim of placing objects in the right place is a real change in museum interpretation, where the collection comes together depending on its themes and stories. Ethan Lasser, Head of the Division of European and American Art, and Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., Curator of American Art, led the reinstallation of the American galleries in their approach:

“We decided to do something different and put all the cultures together to hang the galleries thematically and chronologically rather than by culture. As a result, we were all involved in every space ... We brought together objects and media, meaning instead of showing paintings in one area and sculpture in another, we mixed drawing, prints, photographs, paintings, and sculpture all in the same gallery.” (Brinich, 2016; Lasser 2016). Such curatorial strategies demonstrate how interpretive frameworks direct the visitors, shaping visitor’s understanding without explicit didactic instruction.

Contemporary museum research increasingly recognizes that visitor engagement is shaped not only by

interpretive texts but also by exhibition design, spatial organization, and curatorial framework. Sharon Macdonald notes that museum visiting should be understood as a complex interaction among social relations, media, and exhibition design, in which visitors actively construct meanings and relationships with museums rather than simply receiving institutional narratives. (Macdonald, 2007). In the context of a post-Soviet educational landscape, the museum's past experience functioned as a space limited to questioning and interpretation, whereas contemporary art institutions open a key function of the museum, allowing cultural authority to be questioned through participatory interpretive practices.

Results

This section analyzes how the Almaty Museum of Art and the Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture construct visitor experiences as art institutions through architectural design, curatorial strategies, and interpretive materials. The observation was based on a qualitative analysis conducted between September and October 2025, which reviewed public communication and social media channels during the opening periods of both institutions. The comparison demonstrates how newly emerging art institutions in Kazakhstan are reshaping modes of cultural participation, moving away from didactic models towards learning and visitor engagement.

Following Falk and Dierking's Contextual Model of Learning, the analysis is organized into three dimensions of visitor experience: the physical, personal, and social contexts. These dimensions show how each institution structures visitors' encounters with contemporary art through architectural design, interpretive narratives, and public programs.

The architectural environment is the first interpretive framework through which

visitors encounter museums. The Art Newspaper stated: "...Kazakh and Central Asian artists will be housed in a new 9,400sq/m building designed by British architects Chapman Taylor. This statement shows that the building itself operates as a cultural center, aligning with international museum standards, commissioning internationally recognized architects, and outlining in scale, materiality, and visual impact (Wave). According to the Contextual Learning Model, the physical context is the space that accommodates the visitor's flow and allows them to work uninterrupted (Chang, E. J., 2006). The scale and spatial organization of the Almaty Museum of Art created an environment aligned with international museum standards, emphasizing open circulation and large exhibition halls. Public reactions indicate that during the museum's opening, architecture played a significant role in attracting visitors. Social media posts and public comments emphasized the building itself as a cultural landmark and as important to the city. Positioning the museum as a cultural signal and its presence in the urban landscape of Almaty.

In contrast, the Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture framed its opening around intellectual curiosity and curatorial exploration of the exhibitions. As evidenced by the institution's curatorial statements and early programming, the Art Center adaptively reused a Soviet-era building with new perspectives, and its programming was based on the transformation and continuity of Central Asian heritage. Through the physical context, it showed that the new face of the building is a mediator of history and contemporary art for visitors, not merely a site of visitation.

These institutions represent two distinct institutional strategies for engaging audiences and reflect different approaches to visitor participation and interpretive mediation.

The level of public interest correlates with the museum's high visibility on social

media, international press coverage, and the involvement of internationally recognized scholars and curators, as evidenced by public comments at the opening of the Almaty Museum of Art. In museum studies, high public response often indicates the museum's significance as a new cultural center and space for interaction. According to the Contextual Model of Learning description by Eun Jung Chang, the personal context relies on people's expectations and motivations, sometimes based on prior knowledge (Chang, E. J., 2006), which was a key factor in visiting one of the big cultural projects in Kazakhstan.

The Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture's prior motivation to involve visitors was to present contemporary artists' work and its context in the exhibitions. The institution's public programs are based on historical narratives to communicate with audiences interested in cultural narratives, memory, and artistic practices. For example, the Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture led numerous projects and programs before the official opening of the space, initiating international art projects by Kazakh artists and curating exhibitions with significant social relevance.

Analysis of the Tselinnyi center database shows that in 2023, they led several discussions and research-oriented events dedicated to Central Asian contemporary art. These programs created opportunities for young researchers, museum educators, and cultural practitioners to participate, thereby providing a context for local communities to construct a collaborative intellectual environment around the institution. Public programs such as "Reimagining the Future and Post-Soviet and Postcolonial the Central Asian Crossroads" (2023), *Beyond the Post-Soviet: where do we go from here?* (2023) demonstrates the dialogue-based initiative. Through these engagements, Tselinnyi developed a space where visitors

are not merely observers but participants in broader cultural conversations. This strategy helped build a community that was encouraged to return through ongoing educational programs and critical discussions.

These art institutions show how the institutional framework is significant in the personal context, where one institution positions the visitor as a primary participant, and the other as an active negotiator, constructing continuity through meaning and inquiry.

The interpretive practice of each art institution may vary depending on its research, position, and social preferences. John Veverka is a key figure in advancing interpretive practices; his approach to interpretation aligns with the definition provided by Interpretation Canada: "Interpretation is a communication process, designed to reveal meaning and relationships of our cultural and natural heritage, to the public, through firsthand involvement with objects, artifacts, landscapes and sites" (Veverka 8). If the interpretation is a communication mode, the Almaty Museum of Art remains a traditional strategy, relying on curatorial texts and guided tours to demonstrate expert knowledge, which is a globally acceptable practice. The nature of big museums remains, leaving a visitor in a self-directed mode of engagement, where the discussion is limited and facilitates a more in-depth experience with the museum. At the same time, the curatorial team of the Almaty Museum of Art engages visitors through culturally resonant artworks that foster familiarity with Kazakh artists and a sense of cultural proximity for local audiences. For example, the exhibition "Qonaktar" represents the museum's major collection, inspired by the works of two prominent artists: Aisha Galymbayeva's "Shepherds Feast" and Salikhitdin Aitbayev's "On the Virgin Lands". These artists capture the spirit of nomadic life during the Soviet period,

depicting pastoral traditions and communal gatherings that resonate with the cultural experiences of many visitors and with their own social and historical backgrounds. Such representations activate what Falk and Dierking describe as the “personal context” of museum learning, which enables visitors to interpret artworks through their own cultural memories and social histories.

Sorin Brut wrote in “Art Focus Now” that Tselinnyi initiated public programs, educational programs for children and adults, the digitization of Kazakhstani art, and artistic laboratories (Art Focus Now). In the social context, the Tselinnyi positions visitors as co-curated participants and learning as a shared, social process in which visitors contribute to meaning through dialogue, discussion, and collective interpretation. Visitors can say what they see, connect artworks through the social, political, and personal experiences, and hear what others say about the same work.

In the post-Soviet cultural landscape of Kazakhstan, where museums served as authoritative repositories of knowledge, the emergence of these art institutions signals a significant shift. These institutions not only showcase contemporary art but also transform the museum experience, where knowledge is circulated and shared, and where participation is acknowledged in public space. The comparison between the Almaty Museum of Art and the Tselinnyi Center of Contemporary Culture reveals two models of visitor engagement that emerged within Kazakhstan’s contemporary cultural arena. While the Almaty Museum of Art emphasizes architectural features and collection-based interpretation, Tselinnyi foregrounds participatory discussions and programming. Together, these approaches illustrate how contemporary art institutions in post-Soviet contexts experiment with different engagement strategies and participatory experiences.

Basic Provisions

Taking into consideration the above research and analysis of two major art institutions, the model proposed by Falk and Dierking (1999, 2000) shows that learning experiences in museum space depend on people’s social, personal, and physical preferences, which involve them in relating to or repeating their experiences. To follow up on the research, this article offers suggestions to help build a meaningful, concrete relationship with visitors.

Firstly, the architectural forms have proven effective in attracting large audiences, shifting from symbolic attendance to sustained visitation. It is very important in the case of Kazakhstan, because local visitors encounter contemporary art for the first time and lack confidence in interpreting art. A key mechanism for fostering museum learning is the art education programs targeted for children and adults. The active participation of the younger generation and the building of meaningful connections through discussions, visual prompts, and interactive tools increase understanding of contemporary art and the museum system.

Secondly, art education programs should be supported by a curatorial vision rather than being merely supplementary activities. The internal collaboration among the education, exhibition, and curatorial departments fosters a diverse learning pathway that addresses different knowledge lenses, motivations, and cultural backgrounds. In the post-Soviet context in Kazakhstan, the didactic and authoritative modes of knowledge prevail in the museum system. A structural shift toward participatory and visitor experience models reconstructs and shapes a new mode of learning experience, where the knowledge is co-produced and responsive to local audiences.

Thirdly, as newly opened art institutions, their focus moves beyond

just evaluating the attendance and pays attention to the systematic research, such as visitor behavior, engagement patterns, and interpretive experiences. Museums should aim for long-term visitor research, including observational studies, qualitative feedback, and visitor identity through the running exhibitions and public programs. Institutional strategies can better understand the evolving patterns of visitors while they are engaged in museum practices. Together, these recommendations highlight the importance of shifting from a structural museum system to sustainable, visitor-centered learning, interpretive engagement, and community-centered programs.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the expansion of art institutions in Kazakhstan is not merely an architectural transformation but a new perspective on how museums can be presented as learning spaces. The comparative and qualitative analysis of the Almaty Museum of Art and the Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture's study demonstrates how art institutions shape visitor experiences in different modes. One

emphasizes the symbolic presence and collection richness; the other, through dialogue, interpretation,, and collective meaning-making.

Applying Falk and Dierking's Contextual Model of Learning to the Almaty Museum of Art and Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture reveals distinct experiential patterns. The Almaty Museum of Art focuses on the physical and personal dimensions that establish curatorial authority and guided tours, while the Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture prioritizes visitor engagement through social interaction and dialogue. Through these changes, it is evident that post-Soviet models of museum experience can coexist with and merge into emerging participatory practices, educating the younger generation.

It is important to note that contemporary art institutions represent institutional development from traditional to contemporary museum models, while also seeking to preserve narrative, awareness, and institutional mission. By establishing contemporary art institutions, the article demonstrates that through the visitor experience, art institutions challenge their exhibition practices, public programs, and art education in museum space.

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Ақмарал Құлбатырова

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ҚАЗІРГІ ӨНЕР ИНСТИТУТТАРЫНДАҒЫ КЕЛУШІЛЕРДІҢ ТӘЖІРИБЕСІ: ALMATY MUSEUM OF ART ЖӘНЕ «ЦЕЛИННЫЙ» ЗАМАНАУИ МӘДЕНИ ОРТАЛЫҒЫНЫҢ САЛЫСТЫРМАЛЫ ЗЕРТТЕУІ

Аңдатпа. Мақалада Қазақстанның Алматы қаласында жаңадан ашылған өнер мекемелері, атап айтқанда Almaty Museum of Art пен «Tselinny» заманауи мәдениет орталығы қарастырылып, олардың музей кеңістігіндегі келушілердің тәжірибесі мен білімін қалай қалыптастыратыны талданады. Зерттеудің мақсаты – архитектуралық шешімнің, кураторлық тұжырымдаманың және қоғамдық бағдарламалардың жаңа өнер институттарындағы келушілердің қатысуына қалай әсер ететінін айқындау. Зерттеудің теориялық негізі ретінде Фальк пен Диркингтің (1999, 2000) контекстуалдық оқыту моделі алынды; бұл модель музей тәжірибесін тұлғалық, әлеуметтік және физикалық контекстер аясында қарастыруға мүмкіндік береді. Әдіснамалық тұрғыдан мақала екі заманауи өнер институтын сапалық салыстырмалы талдауға негізделеді; зерттеу барысында институционалдық бақылау, көрме кеңістігін талдау, қоғамдық бағдарламаларға шолу және 2025 жылдың қыркүйек-қазан айларындағы ашылу кезеңіндегі әлеуметтік желілердегі белсенділік қарастырылды. Зерттеу нәтижелері Almaty Museum of Art пен Tselinny келушілерді тартудың екі түрлі моделін қалыптастыратынын көрсетеді. Almaty Museum of Art негізінен кеңістіктің сәулеттік көрінісі мен интерпретацияға көбірек сүйенсе, Tselinny келушілерді тарту мен білім беру бастамаларына басымдық береді. Бұл екі институт та Қазақстандағы заманауи өнер кеңістіктігінің дидактикалық музей үлгілерінен келушілерді тартуға және музей тәжірибесіндегі белсенді оқуға біртіндеп бет бұрып келе жатқанын көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: заманауи өнер мекемелері, мұражай келушілерінің тәжірибесі, мұражайда оқыту, кураторлық құрылым, білім беру бағдарламалары, келушілерді тарту, заманауи музейлер.

Дәйексөз үшін: Құлбатырова Ақмарал. «Қазіргі өнер институттарындағы келушілердің тәжірибесі: Almaty Museum of Art және «Целинный» заманауи мәдени орталығының салыстырмалы зерттеуі». *Central Asian Journal of Art Studies*, т. 11, №1, 2026, 198-209 бб., DOI: 10.47940/cajas.v11i1.1152

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Акмарал Кулбатырова

Музей Бас (Майами Бич, США)

ОПЫТ ПОСЕТИТЕЛЕЙ В ИНСТИТУТАХ СОВРЕМЕННОГО ИСКУССТВА: СРАВНИТЕЛЬНОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ ALMATY MUSEUM OF ART И ЦЕНТРА СОВРЕМЕННОЙ КУЛЬТУРЫ «ЦЕЛИННЫЙ»

Аннотация. В этой статье рассматриваются недавно появившиеся художественные учреждения в Алматы, Казахстан, а именно Almaty Museum of Art и Центр современной культуры «Целинный», и анализируется, как эти учреждения формируют опыт посетителей и их обучение в музейном пространстве. Используя контекстуальную модель обучения Фалька и Диркинга (1999, 2000), авторы исследования исследуют личный, социальный и физический опыт в музеях. В методологическом отношении статья опирается на качественный сравнительный анализ двух институций современного искусства, включающий институциональное наблюдение, анализ выставочной среды, обзор публичных программ и изучение активности в социальных сетях в период открытия с сентября по октябрь 2025 года. Результаты исследования показывают, что Almaty Museum of Art и Tselinny формируют две различные модели взаимодействия с посетителями. Almaty Museum of Art в большей степени опирается на архитектурную выразительность пространства и на интерпретацию, тогда как Tselinny выдвигает на первый план по привлечению посетителей и образовательные инициативы. Обе институции демонстрируют, что пространства современного искусства в Казахстане постепенно переходят от дидактических музейных моделей к вовлечению посетителей и активному обучению в рамках музейной практики.

Ключевые слова: институты современного искусства, опыт посещения музеев, музейное обучение, кураторская структура, образовательные программы, вовлечение посетителей, современный музей.

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