



# Recommended Practice for Museum Lighting

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**Recommended Practice  
for Museum Lighting**

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has been approved by IES.  
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should be directed to IES.

Prepared by:  
The Museum and Art Gallery Lighting Committee of the  
Illuminating Engineering Society of North America

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**FOREWORD:  
MUSEUMS — BY HOWARD BRANDSTON**

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A museum is the chronicle and exhibition of humans and their world. It has a public trust to allow us access to our heritage. In providing this access to everyone, the design of a good museum should be analogous to the art itself.

Museums are not meant to be vaults in which to store art. Indeed, they are places where art is revealed, not hidden. These revelations allow the visitor to expand upon his or her personal, perceptual, and emotional responses. Such individualized responses refresh the soul, awaken the spirit, and feed the creative impulses so essential to a personalized sense of self-worth.

A museum is not one space. It is an itinerary through a sequence of spaces. It is the responsibility of those who design museums to ensure that such spaces will generate rather than drain energy, that they will help the visitor appreciate the exhibit, linger, learn from it, take refuge in it, enjoy it, return to it—again and again.

A walk through a maze of uniformly lit, monotonous corridors will induce museum fatigue in even the most enthusiastic art lover. As a fine symphony should carefully be conceived and executed, so should the design of a museum be composed with great sensitivity to the physical environment that houses the art. This design should be concerned not only with the preservation of the work exhibited, but with a harmonious blend of space, light, and objects as well. It is with light that art is perceived, and a contrast of lighting qualities, quantities, and focuses can make a space stimulating or fatiguing. Equally important is the diversity of spaces: the shape and size of a room and how it relates to the series of rooms adjoining it can make a visitor hurry through or calmly view the exhibit.

Each visitor should at once feel special and be able to participate in a fulfilling sequence of experiences within the museum. There are no class boundaries in such a space; a museum cuts through the vocational distinctions. The environment should be appropriate and not so overpowering that one feels distracted. The larger and more complex the museum, the clearer should be one's sense of place within the building. These considerations are not mere afterthoughts; people do not want to stay in places that are not comfortable for them. A museum may house the most exemplary of collections, but if its design does not foster this sense of comfort and a desire to return, it fails in its purpose.

A museum is first and foremost a place for people. A place where human beings can take refuge from the routine of their lives, sit by a Rodin, and allow their thoughts to carry them where they might. A place where young children can be exposed to the heritage of past generations and have the seeds of inspiration planted in them to possibly help determine their roles in the future. A place where artists can study the masters of their craft, and where serious students can formulate avenues of academic discovery.

A museum is a place for discovery. Whether it's a painting, a dinosaur, a concert, a movie, or a scientific theory doesn't really matter. The importance of the enrichment of life is the process of discovery, this ability to expand upon what we know and in so doing, what we are. To protect existing art and best facilitate this process of revelation should be the mission of every museum.<sup>1</sup>

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**1.0 INTRODUCTION TO MUSEUM DESIGN**

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**“Light is the most efficient form of information transmission.”** — Artist Nam Jun Paik

Museums and art galleries collect, preserve, and display natural artifacts and/or examples of human achievement. Effective exhibit lighting should balance exhibition presentation goals (which enrich the visitor experience) with conservation techniques (intended to protect artifacts for appreciation by many generations to come.)

Decisions regarding museum lighting may be influenced by a number of people with varying educational backgrounds and lighting expertise, including:

- The curator, who has a story to tell
- The exhibit designer, whose aesthetic presentation supports that story
- The conservator, whose role is to protect the collection from the ravages of time, heat, humidity, museum visitors, and light

The purpose of this document is to enhance the decision-making process by providing specific standards for satisfying the special requirements of museums and art galleries. Updated information is included on current lighting techniques and new lighting technology since 1996. While this document is intended primarily for lighting designers, other decision makers—such as the museum administrator, curator, conservator, and exhibit designer—can