

Feminine Exhibit Design

Reader Guide

Written by a designer for designers, *Feminine Exhibition Design* is an exploration of the ways femininity is expressed—and repressed—in the qualities of the museum visitor experience. By focusing on feminine gender expression instead of women and girls, the article addresses sexism in design while rejecting gender essentialism. The article proposes six feminine design principles as concrete examples of how femininity is expressed in museum exhibitions.

This reader guide pulls quotes from the article and poses questions to help you reflect on your own practice with colleagues or on your own.

The article can be downloaded here: margaretmiddleton.com/writing

“I wondered what it would feel like to experience a museum space that valued femininity.”

1. Where have you experienced the feminine design principles in use?
 - What were the qualities of your experience?
 - How did it make you feel about the content? the museum? yourself?
 - Can you recall an experience where you felt feminine qualities were missing?

“Because femininity is associated with women, ingrained sexism has aligned the American cultural understanding of femininity with negative characteristics like superficiality and frivolity. Masculine design however, is perceived to be more serious and respectable. This systematic devaluation of femininity is known as femmephobia.”

2. How have you experienced femmephobia in your work? your personal life?
 - Have you ever been asked to “tone down” feminine aspects of a design for a client or employer or self-censored feminine aspects of your work?
 - Have you ever suppressed feminine aspects of your own gender expression?

“Though not exhaustive, this list of principles is meant to be a way for exhibit designers to begin to name and notice femininity so we can examine the implicit biases that might prevent us from expressing it in our work—even when it serves visitors best.”

3. What are ways you can incorporate each of the feminine design principles in your work?
 - Curvilinear form
 - Softness
 - Nurturance
 - Sparkle
 - Color
 - Humility

“Exhibit designers may not always be brought into institutional discourse about inclusion and as a result they may not see themselves as part of the larger movement to make museums more welcoming. Yet as evidenced by the examples of feminine design in practice, the choices designers make can have powerful effects.”

4. Within your role, what other ways can you help make museum exhibits more inclusive and welcoming for people of all identities?