



DETROIT  
INSTITUTE  
OF ARTS

## Phase 2 Summative Evaluation of DIA Interpretive Strategies

*What Strategies Did Visitors Use to Find Personal Meaning in Art*  
— Marianna Adams

*A Study of Visitors' Photo Essays in Three Gallery Suites: Analysis by Art / Interpretation*  
— Beverly Serrell

In November 2007, the Detroit Institute of Arts completed a major reinstallation that sought, among other things, to rethink the display of the museum's permanent collection and to renew the museum's commitment to creating an engaging visitor experience. One of the most notable aspects of the reinstallation is the integration of a range of low- and high-tech interpretives throughout the galleries. The DIA invited two consultants — Beverly Serrell of Serrell & Associates and Marianna Adams of Audience Focus, Inc. — to collaboratively design and conduct a summative study of the new interpretation.

Assembling a team of consultants with complementary backgrounds, strengths, and skills can help foster new approaches to evaluation and enhance its effectiveness. It also requires communication, flexibility, and thoughtful consideration about how best to integrate the work styles and contributions of each consultant. During this phase of the evaluation, Dr. Adams and Ms. Serrell shared responsibilities for designing the study, interviewing participants, and developing a basic framework within which to conduct data analysis. Then each consultant chose a different aspect of the overarching evaluation question to explore, analyzed the data, and wrote an independent report.

**The two reports are pulled together here under one umbrella to highlight the basic common framework within which they were developed and the complementary nature of the approaches.** Each report, however, ultimately represents the work of the individual consultant. While the consultants shared their work at each step along the way and the reports have much in common, the process was not designed to ensure consistency in their conclusions, reconcile all differences, or reach consensus on every question. It is hoped these differences will be thought provoking and that the reports, when read together, will promote a rich understanding of the complex ways in which interpretation contributes to visitors' engagement with art at the DIA.

Matt Sikora  
June 2012

This project is made possible by a grant from the  
U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services.





Phase 2 Summative Evaluation of DIA Interpretive Strategies:  
Finding Personal Meaning

*What strategies did visitors use to find personal meaning in art?*



**Detroit Institute of Arts**

June 2012

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**  
**Finding Personal Meaning:**  
**How Visitors Interpret the DIA Mission in the Gallery**  
**What strategies did visitors use to find personal meaning in art?**

The mission of the Detroit Institute of Art is to help people find personal meaning in art and the interpretive approach in the museum's 2007 comprehensive reinstallation sought to address that mission head-on. A comprehensive summative study of these efforts, funded through an IMLS Museums for America grant, was designed to assess the effectiveness of interpretive strategies designed to help visitors find personal meaning in the DIA's art galleries. This report is one of two reports on "Finding Personal Meaning," each analyzing the same set of data with a different guiding question. The guiding question for this report was: What strategies did visitors use to find personal meaning in art?

For this phase of the summative study, the evaluators developed a photo-essay methodology that would yield rich and layered information about the ways people make personal meaning in and through art. A set of three broad meaning-making strategies emerged from the data analysis: Connection & Familiarity, Discovery & Learning, and Preference & Properties.

The findings from this study strongly suggest that the interpretive strategies created by the DIA for the collections reinstallation do support the institution's mission of helping people find personal meaning in art. Most subjects in this study reported making high to moderate use of a variety of written interpretation strategies available to them. This varied by the type of gallery suite, however.

Few subjects reported low reference to text and the perceived differences across the three gallery suites are small. As museum practitioners, steeped in information about the art historical and social context of works of art, it is easy to assume that knowing more about works of art is the best way to derive meaning from an object. Yet, this was not the case in this study. Additionally, the danger of labeling the range of label use in this study as low, moderate, and high use, may further reinforce that higher use is better. In listening to the subjects in this study, it is clear that this is not necessarily the case. It is indeed the trend, that most subjects made use of some form of written interpretation more than half the time. It is important, however, to continue to respect the variety of ways visitors find meaning as the DIA has done throughout the reinstallation.

Subjects tended to talk about more meaning-making strategies in the Renaissance gallery suite than in the other two gallery areas. For the Renaissance and Contemporary suites, both Connection & Familiarity and Discovery & Learning were used about the same amount, with Preference & Properties trailing behind. For the African gallery suite, Connection & Familiarity were used much more than the other two strategies, which were used about the same amount.

We cannot say that these trends would be as strong with a larger sample, but they do raise interesting questions: Why were some meaning-making strategies used more and less frequently in the different galleries and would this trend still show up in a larger sample? If the trends did hold in a larger sample, why did people in the African galleries use Connections & Familiarity more frequently than the other strategies? This is particularly curious because the African gallery suite had the most people making high reference to use of written interpretation.

That the DIA set their mission to help visitors find personal meaning through art means that the institution seeks to step up and contribute significantly to the well-being of the community.

The visual power of a work of art is often key to attracting a visitor's attention. And for some visitors, this is enough. To see something beautiful, amazing, unique is personally meaningful. This study also found that most visitors do not stop at a purely visual experience. The majority of subjects in this study, across all three gallery suites, said that personal meaning in art meant that the work had to relate in some way to their lives, interests, or experiences. For most of the participants, the various ways that the DIA provided information facilitated and enhanced the meaning that they found in the art.

Finding meaning in this study was, for the most part, a balance between the heart and the mind. After finding something to relate to, most subjects wanted something more. That could include information about the artwork, the artist, the process, what to look for in an artwork, and/or the socio-historical context of the work because for some people, the meaning comes from learning anything and everything they can. Other visitors noted that they found it meaningful when the information caused them to shift their prior conception or expand their perception. Still, some visitors looked for some insight into their own lives through the art.

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**Phase 2**  
**Finding Personal Meaning:**  
**How Visitors Interpret the DIA Mission in the Gallery**  
**What strategies did visitors use to find personal meaning in art?**  
**Detroit Institute of Arts**

June 2012

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## Introduction

The mission of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) is to help people find personal meaning in art and the interpretive approach in the museum's 2007 comprehensive reinstallation sought to address that mission head-on. Museum educators played a key role in developing an overall interpretive plan that integrated evaluation and cross-departmental staff teams. The summative study of these efforts was funded through an IMLS Museums for America grant that sought to assess the effectiveness of interpretive strategies designed to help visitors find personal meaning in the DIA's art galleries.

The Phase 2<sup>1</sup> Summative evaluation study focused on two key areas of inquiry and this report focuses on the first question. The second question is addressed in a report by Beverly Serrell.

- a) What strategies did visitors use to find personal meaning in art?
- b) What was the role of DIA interpretation in helping visitors find personal meaning in art?

Results from this study will help DIA staff to understand how visitors make meaning in the galleries and to enable DIA to clarify its mission in visitor-centered terms that can help guide programming and marketing efforts in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Phase 1 of the summative evaluation, completed in February 2012, focused on how interpretive exhibits contributed to visitors' engagement with art and, specifically, how visitors' experiences with special interpretives related to the initial purposes of those experiences.



## Methodology

For this phase of the summative study, the evaluators developed a photo-essay methodology to yield rich and layered information about the ways people make personal meaning in and through art. As the methodology was developed it became clear that a pilot-testing phase would be necessary and that was conducted on October 19 and 20, 2011, with a selection of 16 DIA staff. With the assistance of the museum's senior leadership, evaluators recruited staff members who did not have specialized knowledge in art, art history, or museum studies. Pilot study participants were drawn from a number of museum departments, including development, environmental services, finance and enterprise activity, marketing, museum shop, organizational development and human resources, research library, security, and visitor services.

Results from the pilot test strongly suggested that the data from a full implementation of the photo essay methodology would yield rich and useful information about ways the DIA mission statement plays out for visitors. Subjects were invited to the DIA during December 2–4, 2011. Because the interview process was likely to take longer than many visitors would be willing to spend as part of their visit, evaluators recruited subjects to come to the museum specifically to participate in the study during assigned time slots. Evaluators sent an e-mail invitation to DIA staff and volunteers requesting they forward the invitation to friends or family members who: 1) were 18 years old or older, 2) might be interested in spending time in the museum and talking about their experiences, 3) have no specialized training in art or museum practice, and 4) attend the DIA an average of two times per year or less. (See Appendix A for a copy of the email invitation.) People who responded to the invitation were briefly interviewed over the phone to confirm that their level of art and museum training and DIA attendance fell within the desired ranges.

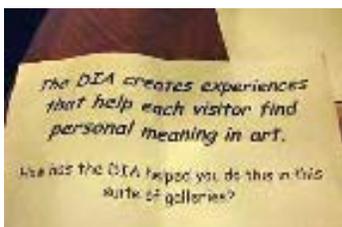
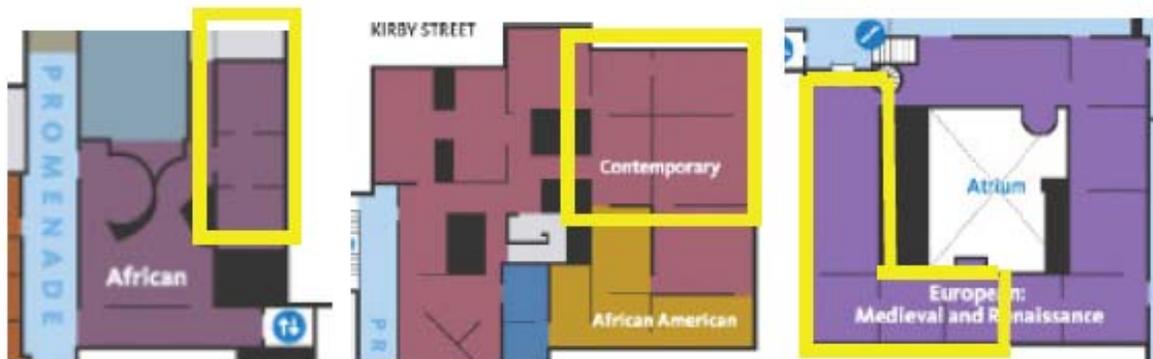


Figure 1: Mission statement prompt given to photo-essay study participants.

Three gallery suites were selected as the site for the photo essays, for both the pilot and full implementation phase. Subjects were given a copy of the DIA's mission statement: "The DIA creates experiences that help each visitor find personal meaning in art" (See Figure 1) along with a brief explanation of the study. They were then given a camera, shown how to use it, and invited to take up to 20 minutes to roam about a specific gallery suite and take between six and nine

photographs where the DIA helped them find personal meaning in art. One interviewer stayed close by each subject in case there were problems or questions and to let them know when 20 minutes were up. The three gallery suites were Renaissance, African, and Contemporary. Figure 2 outlines, in yellow,

the suites within these collections areas and provides a list of the individual galleries within the cluster.



Collection area	Gallery number	Gallery name
African	N105	Art and the Cycle of Life
	N105.1	Art and the Yoruba Spirit World
	N105.2	Art and Other Spirit Forces
Contemporary	N280	Identity, Not Portraiture
	N281	Found/Fabricated
	N282	Mapping, Not Landscape
	N284	The Times, Not History
Renaissance	W220	Art as Theater
	W230	Urban Prosperity
	W231	Medici and Courtly Living
	W232	Aspiring to the Real

Figure 2: DIA Floor plan with gallery suites marked in yellow and detailed gallery list.

The interviewers then accompanied the subjects to a private room where the photos from the camera were uploaded to VoiceThread online service and subjects were video-recorded talking about how each photograph represented a point where personal meaning was found or created. Interviewers for both the pilot test and full implementation were Marianna Adams, Ken Morris, Beverly Serrell, and Matt Sikora. See Appendix B for the full description of the photo essay protocol.

Analysis: After an initial review of the data collected for this study by both evaluators, Dr. Adams and Ms. Serrell, it was decided to approach the analysis from two different perspectives:

1. An analysis of each individual study participant for the strategies they used to make meaning and the role that written interpretive text played in their meaning-making (Dr. Adams' focus);
2. An analysis of each artwork where a special interpretive (pull-out panels, eye spy labels, layered labels, viewpoint labels) was installed, as well as extended object labels and gallery summary panels, in order to better understand the role of the special interpretives in personal meaning making (Ms. Serrell's focus).

In the process of the initial analysis, the two evaluators developed a shared set of meaning-making strategies that were supported by the data. This set of strategies was applied to both reports.

### Connection & Familiarity

*They saw themselves or were reminded of something...*

Visitors made connections between ideas and/or subject matter in the artwork and the visitor's experience including work life, family, hobby, religion, personal feelings/emotions, and/or a sense of empathy with the subject and/or idea presented. Visitors confirmed and/or reinforced memories, prior experience, ways of thinking, and/or knowledge.

### Discovery & Learning

*They discovered and/or learned something...*

Visitors found out about context, details, intention, and process. They compared and contrasted works of art and/or ideas about art. Their understanding of the art was enriched and deepened. They gained confidence to look more carefully. They discovered something they didn't know before or didn't expect, were taken by surprise, were intrigued, their curiosity was piqued. They learned something about themselves, they changed the way they thought about something.

### Preference & Properties

*They liked it, enjoyed it, were attracted to it because of...*

Visitors were drawn by their preference for the visual qualities of an artwork and/or strength of the subject matter or story. They appreciated visual properties of color, technique, and other formal properties. They appreciate the full visual effect of an artwork or group of works or gallery configuration.



## Results & Discussion

### *Description of Sample*

Fifty-eight people participated in the pilot and full implementation of this study. The following figure provides exact counts of males and females by gallery suite and phase of study.

	Pilot Test			Full Implementation		
	Male	Female	TOTAL PILOT	Male	Female	TOTAL FULL
<b>African gallery suite</b>	1	5	6	4	9	13
<b>Contemporary gallery suite</b>	1	3	4	4	11	15
<b>Renaissance gallery suite</b>	3	3	6	5	9	14
<b>TOTAL</b>	5	12	16	13	29	42

Figure 3: Number of photo essay study participants by gallery suite and stage of study.  
*Due to technical problems, interviews were not recorded or the video data could not be accessed for three subjects.*

### *Strategies Visitors Used to Make Personal Meaning*

During the interviews, subjects talked about where they found meaning and the interviewers probed for use of written interpretation in that suite of galleries, sometimes asking people directly if they noticed or used any written interpretation about a particular object.

There was a definite pattern in how subjects in this study used written interpretation. They tended to fall along a continuum from low to high reference to their use of written interpretation. Keep in mind, however, that this continuum is fluid and the three positions along the continuum are constructs that enable us to understand something about the ways people make personal meaning and the effect of written interpretation on that meaning making. In addition, the frequency interpretation use in the galleries does not indicate anything about the quality of the experience the subjects had with art.

Low-reference: In the low-reference end of the continuum, people rarely made any use of written text when they photographed a place where they found personal meaning. These people reported using written text in less than a quarter of the places where they stopped. In many cases, subjects were conscious about and confident in their choice to consult written interpretation very little.

Moderate-reference: The subjects who fell in the area on the continuum shared characteristics with both the low and high reference to interpretation subjects. Roughly half of the time these people were



attracted by the visual “whammy” of artworks, seeming to not want or need much external information to augment their experience. For the other half of their experience they appeared to find great pleasure from reading and finding out more about the object in order to create more meaning from the art.

High-reference: Subjects at the high-reference end of this continuum made reference to using written interpretation in at least three-quarters of the stops where they photographed and talked about personal meaning. This group tended to talk specifically about what they gleaned from labels as well as the ways in which the information facilitated their meaning-making process.

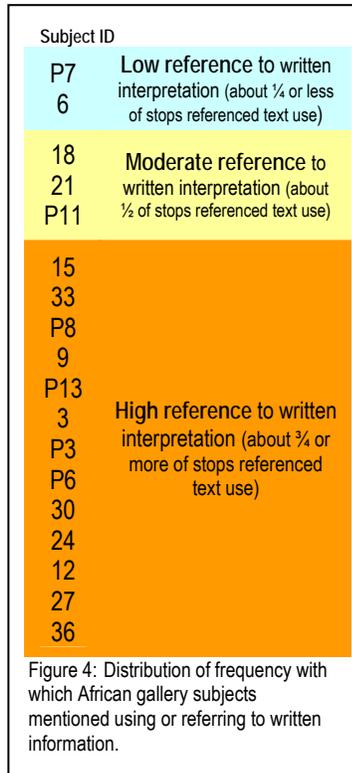


Next, the interview transcripts were analyzed for the types of strategies subjects used to make personal meaning using the three broad strategies of meaning making developed by the evaluators: Connection & Familiarity; Discovery & Learning; and Preference & Properties. These strategies are described more fully in the methodology section above (See page 4). They emerged from the data and both evaluators in this study found them useful

in organizing and describing how visitors found personal meaning. Then, the evaluator looked at relationships between subjects’ use of written interpretation and their meaning-making strategies.

At the end of the interview, subjects were asked to step back and reflect more broadly on what personal meaning in art was for them. These responses were analyzed for larger over-arching trends in the ways people thought about the process of meaning making at the DIA. Patterns in the data are reported below for each gallery suite, followed by a look across galleries to see the influence of the type of art on ways these subjects used written interpretation and meaning-making strategies.

The sample size for each suite was between 18 and 20 people so general trends will be reported and are intended to provide a snapshot of how these people responded to the prompt to photograph where the DIA helped them find personal meaning. These findings are not generalizable to the population of DIA visitors.



## African Gallery Suite

### Use of Written Interpretation & Meaning-Making Strategies - African

Figure 4 identifies the subjects by their number (P# indicates pilot test participants) according to how much they referred to using written interpretation during their visit in the African gallery suite.<sup>2</sup> A large majority of the subjects (13 of 18 people) made high reference to using text; of the remaining five people, three made moderate reference to labels, and two made little or no use of written text during their visit. Sample case stories for each category of label reference in the African galleries are included below.

#### **Low Reference to Interpretation - African**

Two subjects reported making little or no use of written interpretation in the African suite (blue area Figure 4). Primarily the artworks stimulated memories or associations – Connections & Familiarity – with occasional references that fell into the Preference &

Properties group of strategies. Ways these two people made meaning rarely fell into the Discovery & Learning group of strategies and when it did the reference was to information gleaned from contextual photographs rather than text.

The photographs that these two people took did not include labels, special interpretives, or text panels. As one of these subject said:

*"I did not read labels. I was mainly looking at the objects. I didn't want to be influenced by the signage. I just wanted an unmediated reaction." (6)*

#### **Case Story: Low Label Use – African**

Lahrey connected every work that she photographed to a memory or hobby. For example, with the Ancestral Screen she explained her interest in it the following way:

*It reminded me of... [being at a] drive-in sitting – family time, watching a movie, and everyone is focused on the movie. Everyone is captured by whatever is going on. [In this work I noticed] the way everyone's eyes are looking at the same thing. And that does bring personal meaning to me because growing up we did that.*

In some cases, Lahrey seemed to free-associate a combination of personal experiences and preferences as she explained her interest in the Married Woman's ensemble in this way:



*I selected this exhibit due to the colors and the sizes and I thought, "oh wow, that's a cool purse. Oh wow, that's a pretty cool apron." And then I thought about skirts and dancing.*

When asked to step back and reflect on how she found personal meaning in art, she said:

*I identify the objects in the museum with upbringing, people, places and things that I can recall that are similar [to the art]. And then it brings back memories. Good memories. (Subject P7)*

<sup>2</sup> Note that the respondent numbers are listed in order of frequency from least to most.

## Moderate Reference to Interpretation - African

### Case Story: Moderate Label Use – African



Ted varied in his recognition and use of written text in the African gallery suite. In several instances he mentioned that he saw a label for an object he photographed but just gave it a cursory read or, as in one case, read it but did not remember anything he read about it during the interview. In some cases he was drawn to the uniqueness of an object and the written label helped him understand something unfamiliar.

*The first couple of times I had to get adjusted to the way the human body is depicted here versus the European style of art and the Oriental, Chinese art. This is very, very different. But as I read I would see that there is a certain significance, the rings around the neck for example and it showed social position.*

His primary meaning-making strategy was to make personal connections between what he saw and something he was familiar with or felt strongly about.

*Christianity is very important to me. I had a strong feeling of attachment with fellow Christians who have been gone for centuries and centuries. So that was the personal meaning to me.*

Ted's second most frequent meaning making strategy was in the physical properties of the works themselves. For the wedding clothes he noted:

*...the detail, the care that's put together for that particular wardrobe.*

When reflecting on the nature of personal meaning in the art museum, Ted said:

*It's got to touch me both emotionally and intellectually. I'm pulled in emotionally at first. What is that? It's beautiful or it's ugly as hell or whatever. And then from there I begin to intellectualize and want to know what the artist meant or wanted to have happen when they were creating the piece. (Subject 18)*

Three people referenced using written interpretation about half the time in the African gallery suite (orange area Figure 4). Like the low-reference group in the African suite of galleries, the moderate-use group tended to engage in Connections & Familiarity meaning-making strategies. Often the associations were very personal. For example, one subject on viewing a maternity figure said:

*"I'm 32 and I'm starting to think about marriage and starting a family and this was a fertility statue." (21)*

Another subject reflected on the figures in wedding dress:

*"It made me think back to when I was watching Roots as a little kid and they had that scene where they jumped the broom." (P11)*

Other types of connections involved references to the people and cultures represented by the artworks:

*"All of the figures together began to give me a sense of the community in this particular village or area. I walked away and said, 'well, I'd like to get to know these people or I feel like them'." (18)*

These people also used the Preference & Properties strategy fairly often. One of these subjects was drawn to the Ritual Figure saying:

*"This one stuck out for me because it was pale and like ghost white." (21)*

Then he went on to make a connection between that figure and his perception that the figure represented white people. He

reflected:

*"The races, they existed together then. Why is it so hard for us to exist now? Together. Why is it such a huge line between the races?" (21)*

People in the moderate use area of the continuum tended to use written text in a cursory or efficient manner. They would reference a small bit of information gleaned from a label to augment their initial visual and emotional response to the works. Subjects with moderate label use did occasionally include summary text panels and extended labels in the photographs they took. In some cases, the label itself became the meaning-making experience. For example, one subject took a picture of the text panel "Death is but a mere transition." The conversation around this photo did not include a particular object. Rather the content of the label prompted him to say:

*"My father passed away in July and when I first read that [label] it made me think that, not that he was still here, but that his spirit made a transition to a better place. It made me feel better about it, not so sad." (P11)*

### **High Reference to Interpretation - African**

The majority of subjects in the African galleries sample (13 of 18 people) referenced the use of written interpretation for most or all of the photographs they took, employing the strategy of Discovery & Learning, as a point where personal meaning occurred (orange area Figure 4). These people explained that the written interpretation provided important information allowing them to connect with the artworks on a variety of levels, as this subject explains:

*"I found a lot of the information, little placards and stuff to be very informative and because I was unfamiliar with the subject matter, those placards were able to kind of guide my journey through the exhibit and looking at what I was looking at and going, 'okay well what is this?' And then it tells me some brief bit and I can put myself into that place and go, 'okay, I can see where they've used this for this and why'." (36)*

Another visitor who made a high use of labels referred to how the special interpretive at the Shrine case facilitated her making a deeper personal connection:

*"When I first walked into that corridor, that was the sculpture that kind of... drew me in and then I went over to read about it and it became a spiritual thing...and what really helped me is reading about what it was." (33)*

As one subject summed up the value of written interpretation:

*"[Labels] make it easier for you to think about the personal meaning because you're not trying to figure out, 'what am I looking at?'" (9)*

People with a high use of written interpretation were similar to those along the moderate and low ends of the continuum in the frequency with which they



### Case Story: High Label Use – African



Anita referred to the role of written interpretation in finding personal meaning for every photograph she took. In many cases, the labels were included in the photograph. A school teacher, Anita, greatly valued how labels could quickly provide context necessary to help her relate to an artwork and relating is what it's all about for her:

*When we're looking for finding personal meaning in art it is being able to relate – I mean the relatibility of it.*

She found photographs of the objects in their context to be particularly useful in relating to the work:

*You have a picture of somebody using the beads next to the explanation of what the beads are, and then you can look up and see the beads, and when you're looking for personal meaning, you can't just look at the beauty of the object. You have to know what it's done, what it's used for, and why it's interesting. You know, who cares? Why do we care?*

Anita finds that the DIA labels facilitate her visual literacy skills:

*So you can be reading, looking, and then what I liked is then from there you can look at the next thing and pick up those same traits that you just learned.*

Perhaps because Anita values context and is also a teacher, she noticed that the Viewpoint labels informed her about the source of the interpretations:

*That's the only way you can connect is if you can trust your data.*

It was not surprising that Anita frequently created meaning through personal connections because being able to relate to the art is so important to her. Reflecting on the Nail Figure, she said:

*Anybody who has ever dealt with a speeding ticket or anything like that knows that it's really nice to get closure at the end. And for this [Nail Figure] – for minor infractions it's a piece of metal and for big infractions like murder it's a nail. And you're like, "Wow! That's closure." That's something I can be personally related to. I like that closure.*

In addition to "relatability" Anita values being able to connect:

*...the past to the present and to other cultures and other people and other ideas. When I go see art I like to see that connection.* (Subject 27)

engaged in Connection & Familiarity meaning-making strategies. The art works in the African suite of galleries elicited a wide range of memories and personal connections as evidenced by the following quotes:

*(About the Twins) "Well I've lost children before. I had kids and I lost them. And I thought that probably would have been a kind of a comfort thing, you know, mentally. So I felt a little compassion for that."* (15)

Subjects who made frequent mention of using written interpretation in the African gallery suite did occasionally find meaning in their preference for certain types of works as well as in their appreciation for the visual properties of objects. A few comments that illustrate the ways this group engaged in Preference & Properties strategies follow:

*"I like patterns, I like beadwork, I like textiles."* (12)

*"It was interesting because it was mixed media."* (33)

*"The images are really striking...it looks like it's carved out of a single piece."* (30)

## Thinking about Personal Meaning - African

For most subjects in the African sample personal meaning required relating to something in their personal life. As one person said:

*"It's your experience, your thoughts, your ideas, your relationship that you can see through the art and even the information that is represented in the museum." (24)*

Many people noted that by relating personally to the work of art they could then identify similarities between their own lives and the idea or situation represented by the art.

*"I think that's what the art exhibit really does. It just shows you that the more people think that we're all different, we're all the same. We all have the same needs and wants and loves in our lives and I think that's what I like about museums." (9)*

Several subjects in the African gallery suite sample noted that meaning came when they felt emotionally connected to the art and/or the ideas represented by the works. An aspect of making an emotional connection for these subjects was being able to be transported by the art to a different world or way of feeling.

*"That's the thing. That's why I like it here, just because you can see all these things and it gets you away from the drudge and the chaos that we go through every day." (3)*

One person noted that she found it meaningful to:

*"...imagine myself looking at [the art], being a visitor in another place." (P6)*

Another subject took the imaginary travel idea a bit further by saying:

*"[Personal meaning is] something that draws me to it and I don't have to think about it. I can feel my soul literally drop, stir, almost like escaping." (6)*

A few people in this group talked specifically about how meaning was a balance between the emotions and the intellect.



Figure 5: Layered label interpretive at the Nail Figure in the African galleries.

## Contemporary Gallery Suite

### Use of Written Interpretation & Meaning-Making Strategies - Contemporary

Subject ID	
P12 10 22	Low reference to written interpretation (about ¼ or less of stops referenced text use)
13 1 37 43 7 4	Moderate reference to written interpretation (about ½ of stops referenced text use)
40 P5 P14 P16 28 34 16 32 25	High reference to written interpretation (about ¾ or more of stops referenced text use)

Figure 6: Distribution of frequency with which Contemporary gallery subjects mentioned using or referring to written information.

Figure 6 identifies the subjects by number (P# indicates pilot test subjects) as to how much they referred to using written interpretation during their visit in the Contemporary suite of galleries.<sup>3</sup> Half of the subjects (9 of 18) in the Contemporary galleries made frequent reference to using some form of text in their process of finding personal meaning. About one-third of this group (6 of 18) tended to alternate between referencing the role of written interpretation in their meaning making and not referencing it at all. Sample case stories for each category of interpretation reference in the Contemporary galleries are included below.

#### **Low Reference to Interpretation - Contemporary**

Three subjects in the Contemporary suite of galleries reported making very little use of written interpretation (blue area in Figure 6) when discussing the places where they found personal meaning. The meaning-making strategies that these subjects tended to use the

most were Connection & Familiarity and Preference & Properties.

Subjects made a range of personal connections with the works they photographed, from recalling memories stimulated by the object, associating something in the work with their current life or work, to relating emotionally to the work. Even if they happened to read some part of a label, their personal connection was so compelling that they sometimes discounted or rejected the information. They seemed confident in their ability to relate to the art without external help. The following quotes illustrate the ways they made these connections:

*"I like things that relax me, put me in a certain chill mood. And the sky kind of did that because it was mostly one color, one shade. Like on days when I'm stressed with a lot of stuff going on you know you need something to relax you. And if you have a painting that can do that right away then why not? That would be great." (P12)*

*"I used to drive a forklift and this reminded me of a forklift. I'm always on the forklift so I never would ever actually see how it would feel to be in front of it. And this gave me the feeling of being in front of it. So that's what gave me a personal meaning to me." (22)*

<sup>3</sup> Note that the respondent numbers are listed in order of frequency from least to most.

### Case Story: Low Label Use – Contemporary



Darlene rarely consulted information in labels beyond seeking a title or description of media. As she said:

*I guess I was more just looking at the object. Yeah. I think I should have read [the labels]. I guess when I come [to the museum] and look at something I'm just more or less looking at the object and then just visualizing myself.*

Her primary meaning-making strategy was to connect something about the artwork to a personal experience or memory. When explaining what she found personally meaningful about Lot's Wife she said:

*I like this one because it represents me. Always busy, looking behind, seeing what things I have to do, backtracking and standing on one leg.*

For the Office of the Hussars she connected to her son:

*I just stood there and stared at the picture and it just looked like my son, and with the sword right there it just reminded me of telling him okay now be careful, you shouldn't do that.*

Occasionally, Darlene found a work meaningful through an appreciation of the way it looked. Here she described her pleasure in just looking at What Will Come:

*I just enjoyed looking at the different decorations on it. Some of them open and close. Some of them went closer to the center. There's really nothing in here that I can relate to in my life but I just enjoyed standing there looking at the different objects go around in a circle.*

Since Darlene did not seek to find out information about artwork, she did not use meaning-making strategies related to learning something. Once she noted that she was drawn to a work of art because it was unique, different from anything she had seen before. When reflecting on what personal meaning in art meant, she said:

*You can look at [art] and if it's interesting or it's something you want to look more into it, how everything was made. Art is something where I just notice something that may not grab the other person. Sometimes I think about the person who [made it] – you know, what were they thinking about?*

(Subject 10)

The visual appeal (Preference & Properties) of the art in the Contemporary suite of galleries was either what drew these subjects to the work in the first place or once they made a connection, they found additional meaning in their appreciation of the way the work looked and/or the process used to make it. A few representative quotes are as follows:

*"I liked it because it was really complex...it just makes you look at it for a long time and stay there longer just wondering, looking around." (P12)*

*"There was no color and everything was monotone. It allowed me to pay attention to the shapes and the patterns and the sequence of the patterns." (22)*

Two of the three subjects in this group used strategies in the Discovery & Learning category. They most frequently noted that they found a work's uniqueness meaningful as these quotes illustrate:

*"I like the fact that it was something different and new to me. And in my life I like to – I guess I like to experience new things. So that's how it relates to me – the personal meaning was that it was innovative. It was new." (22)*

*It was just a different picture. (10)*

One subject (22) was

somewhat of an anomaly and straddled the line between low and moderate use of written interpretation. He made more use of written interpretation than the other two subjects and he had varied opinions about the usefulness of the information:

*"So when I read the label it did not actually fit what I was thinking."*

*"I wanted to find out what the artist was trying to say with this or do with this and it was showing the designs and the outlays of this. So this helped me further investigate why this was so intriguing to me."*

*"(I was prompted to read label but) I didn't really get that interpretation from it. But I could see what they were trying to do from reading it."*

He also took many more photographs than we suggested, which many visitors did, and many of those photographs were of written interpretation. When there was not time for subjects to comment on all of their photographs we let them choose which ones to talk about. When he did choose to comment on his photographs of labels it was usually to indicate that he liked the graphic design of a summary panel but that he did not feel he had time to read it as he felt rushed by the time constraint given him in the galleries. Or he commented that a label should have been larger and better designed. So clearly, he consulted written interpretation and it is possible that, when visiting on his own, he might use written interpretation to help him find personal meaning. He was put in this group because, for most of the works he chose to talk about, he either said the label did not help or he did not mention reading the label at all.

### ***Moderate Reference to Interpretation - Contemporary***

Visitors clustering in the middle range of written interpretation use (yellow area in Figure 6) mentioned that the use of labels was a part of their meaning-making process roughly half of the time. Subjects in this area of the continuum were equally likely to engage in all three categories of meaning-making strategies: Connection & Familiarity, Discovery & Learning, and Preference & Properties.

Connections that these subjects made to the artworks included memories, family relationships, work, religion, and hobbies or interests as these quotes illustrate.

*"The personal meaning here is, I stayed with my grandmother and grandfather until my grandfather got ill and then we moved with my mother. And my mother had a coal furnace in the basement. I hated that place. I was scared to death of the basement." (7)*

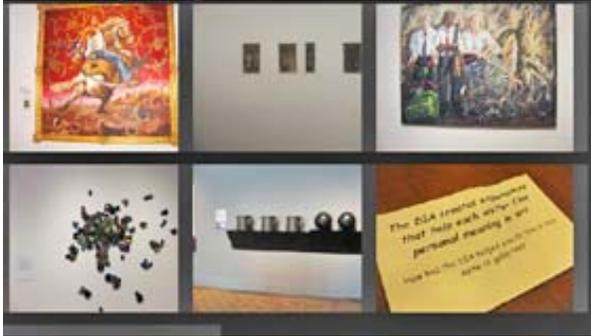
*"In my own life I relate to this a lot because it's sometimes hard to stay where you are and be focused on today instead of thinking about what came previously." (1)*

*"I'm very much into the Bible and, basically, just that scene that has brought me back into the whole story itself." (13)*

*"Because this church that I belong to they have stones from way back from Egypt and everything that were shipped in." (4)*



## Case Story: Moderate Label Use – Contemporary



Brenda tended to approach the works in the Contemporary gallery suite that intrigued her first on a purely visual level. When she read labels she usually did so after she had looked and thought about the art on her own. When talking about C.E.L 109 she said:

*It looked like a scattering of stars or whatever and then the label explained that it could also be magnified human cells. And I hadn't thought of it that way at all. And it said to me that you can look at things in different ways.*

She seemed to enjoy or be drawn to works that puzzled or surprised her. In the case of the Group with Dead Wolf she said:

*I walked up and actually read the little label before I looked at it... [the label] didn't really explain it for me.*

Brenda found it meaningful to make frequent connections on an emotional level as she did with Atrabiliarios:

*That's sad. That so little can separate us from each other. You know that little piece of gauze in front of the shoes. It made me think of the little girl that they're still looking for. I haven't heard the news today.*

And on a personal level with one minute managers IV-1

*"I do a lot of thinking lately about hoarding because I've had to combine two homes – my husband's home into my home. I read the caption and it was about why you have to have so much stuff. And it really did speak to me."*  
(Subject 43)

*"That's something that as a professional you know I have a lot of experience with. Because I've always worked in kind of male dominated fields. And so I'm always the odd one out." (37)*

When subjects who fell along the moderate interpretation use continuum used Discovery & Learning strategies they frequently described how the information enhanced their efforts to find meaning in the artwork. The following quotes are representative of the ways people in this group employed these strategies:

*"It just gets your attention and you want to find out about it." (4)*

*"I really was intrigued by the artist's description about the lace on it being like a woman in a man's world." (37)*

*"[The label] was more like directing me to think on my own." (7)*

*"Now this one I had to read the label first. Because I really didn't know what was going on." (13)*

*"It was projected from the top which I didn't really know until I read about it and looked at it." (1)*

People in this group often found that the visual appeal of an artwork was meaningful. Sometimes the way something looked drew them in and made them want to find out more about the work, while other times they found that looking was meaningful by itself as the following quotes illustrate:

*"I don't know what that means but I just noticed that and I thought, 'oh I like that'." (7)*

*"I just happen to like motion things. And lights and things like that so it is attractive to me that way." (13)*

*"It makes me realize that art can just be fun - and then I think you can say it's okay to even be fooled by art because I don't know that much about art and it*

*just thought it was fun.” (1)*

*“It just like caught my eye to see something like that, that someone would take it and make it into a statue to be on display.” (4)*

### **High Reference to Interpretation - Contemporary**

#### **Case Story: High Label Use - Contemporary**



Martin admitted to finding Contemporary art galleries “really hard.” Perhaps that is one reason why he used written interpretation at every one of the stops to facilitate deeper, more meaningful connection to works of art. Over half of the photographs he took were of some form of written interpretation in those galleries and he explained how the information contributed to his finding personal meaning. For example, when he talked about his photograph of the layered label for The Square, he said:

*This page [in the layered label] talks about how part of [the artwork] resembles a concentration camp in World War II and being Jewish and having family that went through the Holocaust in World War II, at that point it made me look more at this work than a building in a 3rd world country as something that had a little more meaning than what was originally just presented on the plaque [ID label on the wall].*

Martin’s initial connection to Carnival Time related to a family memory then reading the label added another layer of meaning for him:

*It just brought back memories of my family trips to Disneyland and then I went back and I read the plaque above that one. When I was first looking at it I didn’t notice the guillotine on the side of it and it kind of brought up just the killing of my adolescence.*

Written interpretation also enabled him to find special meaning in Stone Line that he would not have gained otherwise:

*I studied architecture in college, it’s something very dear to me, and I wasn’t really interested in this piece until I read that, until I saw [the Layered Label].*

Personal meaning for Martin was found primarily through connections and associations with the artworks and written interpretation was essential for him to create that meaning.

(Subject 28)

Visitors clustering in the high range of written interpretation use (orange area in Figure 6) mentioned that they used written interpretation in most or all of the places where they photographed as meaningful. As might be expected, Discovery & Learning was the most frequently used meaning-making category of strategies and Connection & Familiarity category was used almost as frequently. These subjects did find meaning through Preference & Properties strategies but to a lesser degree than the other two categories of strategies.

Since people in this group frequently used and photographed a variety of written interpretation in the Contemporary suite of galleries, it stands to

reason that they would engage heavily in the Discovery & Learning strategies for meaning making. As a group, these subjects tended to find personal meaning



through knowledge (Learning) about the work of art as the following quotes illustrate:

*"It's more just the personal meaning for me is just having knowledge. It wasn't about me personally but it was more just that I was excited to get the knowledge." (34)*

*"That little booklet in the front gives you so much more information that you appreciate each facet of it you know even more just by reading the literature on it." (16)*

*"[I read label] and then [the artwork] had even greater meaning. It all of a sudden became something very powerful." (25)*

*"Flipping through the book made that humongous piece – all of a sudden it just came into focus where each section, I understood. And I mean it just made a personal connection with that piece." (P14)*

*"Then I read the [label] and suddenly it just took on a whole new meaning for me and I thought it was a brilliant artistic display of you know the people that have disappeared in some of the purges in South America." (40)*

*"I feel connected to the painting when I know more about the artist and why it came about. I don't know how better to say that but that makes me feel important." (P16)*

The discovery aspect to the Discovery & Learning strategy tended to express itself as surprise as evidenced by the following quotes:

*"It was interesting because it was like a puzzle. I had to look for the question marks and I found them." (16)*

*"I walked up on a piece of art and I said what the heck is this?" (P16)*

*"I was surprised when I read it that it said it had a table in there. And I'm still looking for the table." (P5)*

*"This one I was really surprised – the performance itself is very low key." (32)*

*"Once I got close I was intrigued, like, well, what are those shoes doing there?" (40)*

Connecting the artwork to one's personal life and experiences was important to this group as well (Connections & Familiarity strategies). Most of the connections were based on memories and familiar associations, although some of connections were on an emotional level, as the following quotes illustrate:

*"I knew immediately it was a Jewish Challah which has meaning to me because of my own Jewish heritage and so I was attracted to that." (25)*

*"My fiancé is a plumber. So just that water and the tool thing and all that was close to home." (16)*

*"It just looked like something that [my boyfriend] has at home. So it really struck me because I like the work that he has. The meaning is that it's something from home, that belongs to someone I love." (25)*

*"I was drawn to the piece but then when I read about the smokestacks and the Holocaust that really touched me because a lot of my relatives, I'm Jewish heritage." (34)*

*"There was just something very peaceful about that." (40)*

*"I just related to the glances and I just felt a personal connection to that*



*painting – you know I didn't even have to read that.” (P14)*

Meaning-making strategies relating to the Preference & Properties category for the high-reference group emerged less often than the other two categories. Yet, the visual impact of an object had a strong effect on many in this group as the following quotes show:

*“I really liked it because, first of all, it's beautiful.” (P14)*

*“I was attracted to it because that's the kind of art that I like.” (40)*

*“It is an enormous work that sort of stands by itself. I was drawn to it.” (32)*

*“There's a lot of detail in that picture. A lot of work in that picture which would make you stand there for a few minutes and look at it.” (P5)*

*“It would catch your eye because it was making noise when you walked in the room.” (P5)*

### Thinking about Personal Meaning – Contemporary

When asked to reflect overall on personal meaning in art, most subjects in the Contemporary sample said that it was found in being able to relate to the artwork. Yet, meaning, for most of these people was not found just in making a personal connection. It also included learning something, about themselves, about ways of thinking differently, as well as about other people and places. The following quotes illustrate how this was expressed:

*“Personal meaning for me is, you need to pick something that I can relate to, that hits close to home. That gives me some kind of growth possibility, just looking at different facets of life in different ways. Makes you think a little deeper than you normally would.” (16)*

*“When something is meaningful to you it helps you clarify where you're going and what you're going to do in life. I was appreciative of the work that these artists did – at the same time, I actually learned a little bit about myself.” (22)*

*“I think personal meaning is about things that you're particularly drawn to or that remind you of things and then you can learn more and I think that helps you learn about yourself.” (34)*

*“I like art because I like to see what somebody else is thinking or just interpreting what somebody else is thinking. And looking at art it gives you visions of a lot of different type people and the way that people think.” (P5)*

Two subjects in this group noted that evoking emotion was a characteristic of making personal meaning:

*“Personal meaning to me means that I would encounter something that*



Figure 7: Layered label interpretive at the Stone Line.

*reminds me of something in my own life either historical, a past life, or something in my past or in my family or would arouse an emotion about something.” (40)*

*“Induces emotion, makes you feel a certain way – even if you like it or even if you hate it, that’s still finding meaning in it because it’s inducing emotion.” (P12)*

In a few cases, subjects reflected on whether or not just liking a work of art was a form of personal meaning making. One person felt that liking was definitely not the same thing as finding personal meaning:

*“If I didn’t read about these rocks (Stone Line) here I wouldn’t have liked it because I like the concept. I like the way it looks. I thought it was kind of a cool idea. But it would have just been like. It wouldn’t have had meaning.” [25]*

On the other hand, two people indicated that liking an art work was, in itself, personally meaningful:

*“I could have just pure admiration for seeing something and saying, oh my God, how could someone have painted something that beautiful.” (40)*

*“It just resonates with me in one way or another either through personal history or it has a visual appeal.” (37)*



## Renaissance Gallery Suite

Subject ID	Frequency	Reference Level
8	17	Low reference to written interpretation (about ¼ or less of stops referenced text use)
P15	5	
11	26	
26	P2	
41	20	Moderate reference to written interpretation (about ½ of stops referenced text use)
35	P10	
20	2	
29	38	
38	P4	
23	14	High reference to written interpretation (about ¾ or more of stops referenced text use)
14	31	
31	P1	
P1	P9	

Figure 8: Distribution of frequency with which Renaissance gallery subjects mentioned using or referring to written information.

### Use of Written Interpretation & Meaning-Making Strategies - Renaissance

Figure 8 identifies the subjects by number (P# indicates pilot test subjects) as to how much they referred to using written interpretation during their visit in the Renaissance suite of galleries.<sup>4</sup> The number of people in the Renaissance suite of galleries who made moderate reference to interpretation use (8 of 19 people) was the same as those who made high reference to interpretation use; four people made little or no reference to label use. Sample case stories for each category of label reference in the Renaissance galleries are included below.

#### **Low Reference to Interpretation - Renaissance**

Visitors who clustered in the low end of use of written interpretation (blue area in Figure 8) mentioned using few or no labels or other written interpretation when discussing the photographs they took in the galleries. In some cases, they may have glanced at a label or two but their discussion primarily revolved around how the object struck them on a visual or emotional level. The

photographs that these four people took rarely included labels, special interpretives, or text panels.

Despite being encouraged by the interviewers to attend to the ways in which the written interpretation in this suite of galleries aided in their making personal meaning, people in this category often stated how they preferred as one subject put it:

*"When I come to an art museum I don't want to read, I'm not here to read. I'm here to appreciate. I'm here to look with my eye."* (P15)

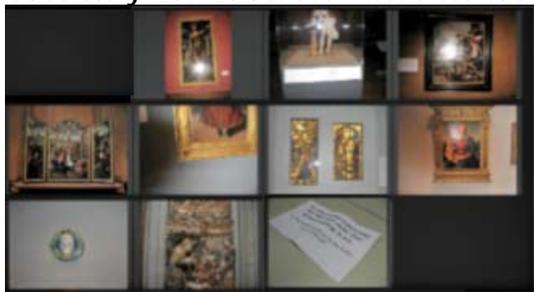
The most frequent meaning-making strategies for people who tended to reference little or no written interpretation in the Renaissance galleries fell into two of the three categories that emerged from the data: Connection & Familiarity and Preference & Properties. In general, the four subjects with low reference to written interpretation did not seek information about a work of art. They tended to identify personal connections through their family, work, and

<sup>4</sup> Note that the respondent numbers are listed in order of frequency from least to most.

religion. They frequently identified similarities between the present and the past, as this subject explained:

*Things are similar today – they did things the same way or sort of similar to the way we do them now.” (17)*

#### Case Story: Low Label Use – Renaissance



Greg made very little reference to any interpretive text during his visit to the Renaissance gallery suite in this study. In the one case where he did remember looking at a label, he first thought he had not looked at a label but then remembered he found out some information about the Christ at the Column from an extended label. When talking about the art he photographed, he frequently remarked on his preference for the visual properties of an artwork as in:

*I like the beauty of this picture.*

*It's very vibrant, bright colors. I really like that.*

*I mean the colors are – just pop out at you.*

*[It was] just very striking.*

Greg also paid attention to the feel and ambience of a gallery as well as the ambience surrounding an individual artwork:

*I like the ambience of it.*

*You can imagine with light shining through them [stained glass] how nice they would be.*

*It gives you a real sense of what it must have been like.*

Another aspect of the art where he seemed to find meaning was in his discovery of an object's uniqueness or ability to surprise him:

*That was quite unique.*

*I didn't expect it I guess. I saw that there and I thought, wow!*

*Quite a unique picture with the sides [triptych] and the way that's presented.*

*I've never seen anything like this*

Once, Greg connected an artwork to his religious background but his primary patterns in making meaning were through the visual and emotional power of the artworks. (Subject 8)

Other ways that these people related personally to the art were:

*"This one has meaning because I'm from a family of domestic violence and I wish that there had of been someone who could have came and helped my mother at the time you know when my father was being abusive." (5)*

*"I just want to look at the art and just imagine what time period it was, and what the person was actually doing – what gave them the inspiration to make this particular piece of art?" (P15)*

*"It just brought me back to the days when I studied all this stuff." (8)*

On the rare occasions that they consulted written interpretation, these subjects noted that the text helped them confirm how the past was similar to the present, but they found these commonalities on their own without reading labels. Two of the four people with low reference to text specifically noted their attention to the overall feel of the gallery itself as an important aspect of meaning making. For example:

*"Before I even look at the picture or a statue, it's the room, the colors of the room, and just the overall ambience of the room. And once I'm in tune with that then I'll just go to a particular piece that I find interesting." (P15)*

Many of the subjects in this group found the physical qualities of artworks to be meaningful:

*"I guess I fell in love with the whole scheme of the picture. I like the vibrant colors." (8)*

*"I noticed the detail, it was like a photocopy of (the artist's) mind." (P15)*  
*"I like how they made the difference about this one was more subdued and this one more pronounced." (5)*

**Case Story: Moderate Label Use – Renaissance**



Lance shifted back and forth in his use of written interpretation in the Renaissance cluster of galleries. A psychologist by profession, he made several references to the emotional quality of artworks:

*As a psychologist I've always been very sensitive to people's suffering. The Christ figure is someone that presumably I would identify with. I've had personal experiences where people have sort of been out to get me.*

He looked for the ways different knowledge disciplines related and integrated because he said that was the way he processed information:

*[The summary panel] helps me understand where this is in the history of art. I'm drawn to that mystery and having that instructional panel there really helps me to be drawn into that mystery, and to appreciate it more. Because there's a lot of time to respond to elements that you're not aware of and like how the light works and how the hand is posed and things like that. And it really helps to make it a richer experience. All those little kind of details [in the POP] just make it a richer experience and certainly a very human one.*

For Lance, written interpretation appeared to enhance and deepen his meaning making on a personal, emotional level. Even the way he described the visual properties of a work (Ecce Homo) suggested that he connects emotionally:

*Just the way it's painted. I mean, it's all done so dramatically, in a sense so quietly but so intensely.*

(Subject 2)

**Moderate Reference to Interpretation - Renaissance**

Visitors clustering in the middle range of written interpretation use (yellow area in Figure 8) mentioned that they used written interpretation in roughly half of the discussions about the photographs they took in the galleries. The photographs taken by people in this group frequently included labels, text panels, or special interpretives along with the art object. They most frequently used two of the three meaning-making strategies: Connection & Familiarity and Discovery & Learning. When these people did make reference to written interpretation as an aid to meaning making, they frequently noted that the labels provided interesting information and served as a guide for them, appreciating that it helped them focus on what to pay attention to in the work of art. The following quotes provide an insight into the ways these subjects relied on written interpretation to make meaning:

*"Why would they put this painting up here – by them having a little sign there and you read that, you look at the paper and you read the sign, the picture, you can really understand what's going on." (P2)*

*"I like these because they give you sort of a brief description in simple language as to what's going on in the gallery and what kind of things you might want to look for or understand." (P10)*

When these people did not reference using written interpretation, they

tended to describe the meaning from a personal and emotional level as evidenced by the following quotes:

*"It's a particular portrait of pain, of sorrow, it evoked some spiritual meaning for me." (20)*

*"Growing up - I'm a product of a single parent mother and we would go to churches asking for help when we were young." (26)*

*"I'm Catholic and that has meaning for me. Very sad and very joyful in the same way because Christ rose from the dead." (29)*

*"I'm sensitive to suffering." (2)*

*"I like music and she's playing the violin." (P2)*

*"I used to do a lot of woodworking with my father and that's what originally drew me to this." (26)*

### **High Reference to Interpretation - Renaissance**

Visitors clustering in the high range of written interpretation use (orange area in Figure 8) mentioned that they used written interpretation in most or all of their discussions about the photographs they took in the galleries. As might be expected, their most frequent meaning-making strategy was in the Discovery & Learning category, frequently explaining that written interpretation provided information that helped them understand the artist's intent, to orient and guide them around the gallery as well as within a specific work of art, and to provide historical-social context. The following quotes illustrate the ways in which this type of visitor made meaning using written interpretation:

*"[The label] helped me understand some of the use of the subtler colors in the background, the fuzzy, so the foreground gets more strongly depicted. [The label] spoke about this (tapestry) is harder to do than a painting. I can believe that." (31)*

*"I found the information was very helpful in getting to understand what was going on in the artist's mind. [Without it] I wouldn't have come to all that knowledge." (38)*

*"I knew nothing about [the art] going in, so, more than anything it's just capturing something brand new to me. Like it's something I'd never seen before up until this point." (P1)*

*"If I come here I want to be informed and able to view the artwork from a position of a little bit of knowledge. I found [the label] very helpful. So it gave me a base upon which to stand and say, 'Oh I see what's going on here'." (38)*



*"It gives you a reason, motivation, it's important to take the time [to look more closely]. Helps guide your thoughts, helps you develop personal meaning. Description brings everything down for you." (14)*

*"Helped me understand why I had the feelings that I had." (P9)*

People who made frequent use of written interpretation also frequently engaged in strategies related to the Connection & Familiarity category, yet the connections often came from something they read in the gallery:

*"I noticed the label for the ewer, I remembered it was a Medici pottery. I just read a book on Medici. I know these people." (23)*

*"It's another one of the pieces that remind me of something from my past - I argued with my teacher that he looked dead - And on the informational placard it states directly that this man was dead. So this piece in particular is something I knew about going in." (P1)*

People in this group tended to use strategies related to Preference & Properties less often than did people in the other two groupings of moderate and low use of written interpretation. When they did find something meaningful just because it pleased them in some way they resembled the subjects in the

#### Case Story: High Label Use – Renaissance



Norma's first photograph was of the stained glass installation in the Renaissance galleries because:

*It just evokes a sense of peacefulness and churches and I love stained glass windows and the religious windows.*

In this instance, Norma was only vaguely aware that there was a label accompanying this installation explaining that she normally reads a lot in museums but just didn't at this installation. This only happened one other time during her visit at The Wedding Dance, one of her favorite works, as she had studied it in college and *"I have always loved Bruegel."* The rest of Norma's photographs frequently depicted extended labels and special interpretives, explaining here meaning-making process in the following ways:

*That [Summary panel] was really informational and really helpful to people going through to kind of frame things and to know what they're looking for and the significance rather than oh that's a pretty picture.*

*This [POP] I absolutely love because it took all the different parts of the painting and it would say, look at this, and so then I'd go back and I'd look at that. And okay I see that. And then, oh, look at this. I love the Eye Spy ones. They're just fun and I think going to an art museum should be fun. It kind of adds a game to it that I can look for things to pick out because otherwise you know you can just get caught up with being surrounded by beautiful things but you don't know what you're looking for.*

*I really like the placards - I found myself taking more pictures of the placards than the artwork because that's what was making me relate to the artwork.*

When a photograph did not capture a label she talked a lot about how the written interpretation helped her make meaning. For example, at the Childbirth Set, Norma connected to her experience as a mother and found that the group label helped her envision the objects being used in *"a nice comforting scene as you're giving birth"* (Subject 23)



other two groups when they found meaning just because they liked the way something looked.

These subjects were very articulate and tended to talk more than the other groupings of study participants. The fact that they read more than the other two groups perhaps explains why they had more to say. In any case, language and reading appeared to be an important way that these subjects created meaning. Photographs taken by subjects in this group frequently consisted of just the extended label, text panel, or special interpretive.

### Thinking about Personal Meaning - Renaissance

For most subjects in the Renaissance sample, particularly in the moderate and high interpretation use groups, personal meaning involved an interplay between the heart and intellect, as one visitor put it:

*"...between emotion and knowing what you are looking at." (31)*

People in all of the interpretation use groups constructed meaning through connections to their personal experiences, memories, or feelings. Many subjects found meaning by connecting the past to the present, as one visitor said:

*"[I see] that people didn't live all that much differently than we do now." (29)*

For some of the subjects, primarily those who made low or moderate use of written interpretation, this connection between past and present was constructed from a combination of their prior knowledge and what they grasped from a visual study of an artwork. For visitors who made higher use of written interpretation, this connection between past and present also included the augmentation of their prior knowledge, the visual scanning of the object, along with interpretation provided by the DIA.

Many visitors said that meaning occurred when there was something they could relate to such as a work or hobby connection, family, religion, and memories. As one visitor said:

*"[Artwork] holds value because of a memory that [the art work] brought forward." (P1)*



Figure 9: Layered label interpretive at The Wedding Dance.

Once the personal connection was formed then most visitors sought information that deepened the experience. Visitors liked interpretation that helped them know what to focus on, that guided their viewing, that illuminated the purpose of the work, and that helped them feel what it might have been like to live during that time or to be the person depicted. Many visitors noted that they liked learning new things and value opportunities to fill in gaps in their knowledge. Several visitors mentioned their enjoyment in being guided by the written interpretation to compare and contrast works in a grouping. As one visitor said:

*"The more I know about a piece, the more valuable it gets." (P1)*



## Conclusions & Implications

The findings from this study strongly suggest that the interpretive strategies created by the DIA for the collections reinstallation do support the institution's mission of helping people find personal meaning in art.

African	Contemporary	Renaissance	
P7	P12	8	Low reference to written interpretation (about ¼ or less of stops referenced text use)
6	10	P15	
18	22	17	
21	13	5	
P11	1	11	
15	37	26	Moderate reference to written interpretation (about ½ of stops referenced text use)
33	37	P2	
P8	4	41	
0	7	35	
P13		20	
3	40	P10	
P3	P5	2	
P6	P14	29	
30	25	38	
24	16	P4	
12	28	23	High reference to written interpretation (about ¾ or more of stops referenced text use)
27	32	14	
36	34	31	
	P16	P1	
		P9	

Figure 10: Comparison of Interpretation Use across three suites of galleries.

### Using Written Interpretation

Most subjects in this study reported making high to moderate use of a variety of written interpretation strategies available to them as illustrated in Figure 10. This varied by the type of gallery suite, however. Subjects in the African suite of galleries were more likely to reference using labels than subjects in the Contemporary and Renaissance galleries. One possible explanation for why this was the case may have to do with the level of subjects' familiarity with traditional African art and culture, causing them to consult written interpretation

more often than the other types of galleries. It is also possible that the difference perceived in Figure 10 is a result of a small sample. If the sample for each gallery suite was larger, this difference may or may not show up.

Few subjects reported low reference to text and the perceived differences across the three galleries in Figure 10 are small and might not be significant in a larger sample. This finding raises an intriguing question that warrants further investigation, however. If visitors were asked to rate their label use, for specific collections areas, on a rubric similar to the one developed here, would the distribution of label use resemble that of this study? Or might visitors, if asked directly to rate themselves, answer in ways they think they ought to use written interpretation in the galleries? It was interesting that, even though subjects in this study were told that the study was specifically interested in the ways the written interpretation influenced visitors in their meaning making, a few people in each gallery suite made little or no use of the information. Some of those people consciously avoided written interpretation and were confident in their reasons

for doing so.

As museum practitioners, steeped in information about the art historical and social context of works of art, it is easy to assume that knowing more about works of art is the best way to derive meaning from an object. Yet, this was not the case in this study. Additionally, the danger of labeling the range of label use in this study as low, moderate, and high use, may further reinforce that higher use is better. In listening to the subjects in this study, it is clear that this is not necessarily the case. It is indeed the trend, that most subjects made use of some form of written interpretation more than half the time. It is important, however, to continue to respect the variety of ways visitors find meaning as the DIA has done throughout the reinstallation.

### Strategies for Meaning Making

Across the three gallery suites, subjects in this study varied somewhat in the meaning-making strategies they used. Figure 11 illustrates the average number of times the three meaning-making strategies were used by study subjects in each gallery suite. Although the small sample size prevents generalizing to the larger population of DIA visitors, the trends in this set of data were interesting.

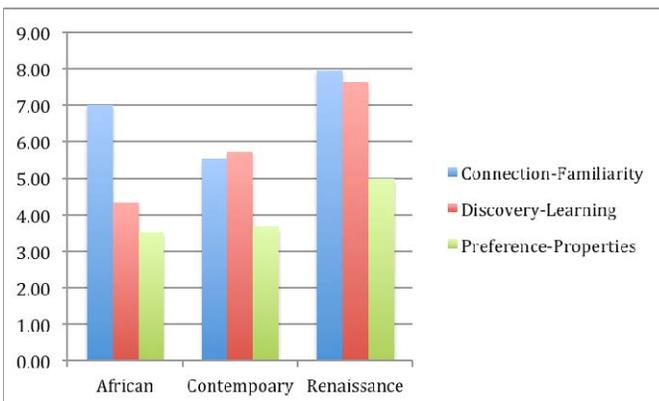


Figure 11: Comparison across gallery suites – average number of times a meaning-making strategy was used.

People tended to talk about more meaning-making strategies in the Renaissance gallery suite than in the other two gallery areas. For the Renaissance and Contemporary suites, both Connection & Familiarity and Discovery & Learning were used about the same amount, with Preference & Properties trailing behind. For the African gallery suite, Connection &

Familiarity were used much more than the other two strategies, which were used about the same amount.

We cannot say that these trends would be as strong with a larger sample, but they do raise interesting questions: Why were some meaning-making strategies used more and less frequently in the different galleries and would this trend still show up in a larger sample? If the trends did hold in a larger sample, why did people in the African galleries use Connections & Familiarity more frequently than the other strategies? This is particularly curious because the African gallery suite had the most people making high reference to use of written interpretation.

## What is personal meaning in art?

That the DIA set their mission to help visitors find personal meaning through art means that the institution seeks to step up and contribute significantly to the well-being of the community.

*"A relatively large number of empirical studies have clearly demonstrated that meaning in life is an important variable in the buffering of stress and the enhancement of physical, psychological, and mental well-being." (Reker & Woo, 2011, p. 1)*

The visual power of a work of art is often key to attracting a visitor's attention. And for some visitors, this is enough. To see something beautiful, amazing, unique is personally meaning. Is this a way of meaning-making that is outside the sphere of a museum's influence or is there something that museum can do to more deeply engage the visitor in looking without using a lot of text?

This study found that most visitors do not stop at a purely visual experience. As Lois Silverman (1995) noted:

*"Visitors 'make meaning' through a constant process of remembering and connecting." (p162)*

So it is not unusual that the majority of subjects in this study, across all three gallery suites, said that personal meaning in art meant that the work had to relate in some way to their lives, interests, or experiences. For most of the participants, the various ways that the DIA provided information facilitated and enhanced the meaning that they found in the art.

Finding meaning in this study was, for the most part, a balance between the heart and the mind. After finding something to relate to, most subjects wanted something more. That could include information about the artwork, the artist, the process, what to look for in an artwork, and/or the socio-historical context of the work because for some people, the meaning comes from learning anything and everything they can. Other visitors noted that they found it meaningful when the information caused them to shift their prior conception or expand their perception. Still, some visitors looked for some insight into their own lives through the art.

Although a relatively small trend in the data, the finding that some people found meaning in art because something about the experience caused them to discover something about themselves, reexamine their path, or set new ideals is fascinating and warrants further study. Are there ways that interpretation can facilitate this type of self-discovery or is it something totally under the control of the individual?



## References

- Reker, G.T. and L.C. Woo. (28 April 2011) "Personal Meaning Orientations and Psychosocial Adaptation in Older Adults. *SAGE Open* published online: <http://sgo.sagepub.com/content/early/2011/04/28/2158244011405217.full>
- Silverman, L.H. (1995) "Visitor Meaning-Making in Museums for a New Age." *Curator*. 38/3. pp. 161-170.



## Appendix A: Study Participant Recruitment Invitation

From: Kenneth Morris □  
Sent: Wednesday, November 16, 2011 10:59 AM□  
To: Outlook All DIA Staff□  
Subject: Recruiting Friends & Family - DIA Gallery Experience Evaluation

Good morning All,

We're looking for people to participate in an evaluation of museum gallery experiences as part of our study of the DIA reinstallation project.

Please pass this information to your friends and family who might be interested in spending time in the museum and talking about their experiences.

Criteria for participation

- Participants must be 18 years of age or older
- Participants should not have specialized training in art or museum practice
- Participants should be infrequent DIA visitors, attending an average of once or twice per year or less (people who have never visited the DIA are welcome)

Each participant will spend approximately one hour going through a few galleries and then being interviewed about that experience.

The one-hour sessions will be scheduled during the following dates and times:

Friday, December 2	10:00 am – 8:00 pm
Saturday, December 3	10:00 am – 4:00 pm
Sunday, December 4	10:00 am – 4:00 pm

Participants will receive a small token of appreciation, which includes the cost of parking, for their time.

Those interested in participating should contact Kenneth Morris using the email or phone information below.

**Important Note:** Pre-registration is required for participation. Those interested in participating must contact Ken Morris no later than Wednesday, November 30. People who are selected to participate will receive confirmation from the museum before their scheduled dates and times. We cannot accommodate walk-ins.

\*\*\*\* Please share this information with our colleagues without email access. \*\*\*\*

Thanks

Ken

Kenneth R. Morris, Evaluator  
Department of Research and Evaluation

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Detroit MI 48202  
Ph. [313-833-1380](tel:313-833-1380)  
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## Appendix B: Photo Essay Protocol

The mission of the DIA is to create experiences that help each visitor find personal meaning in art. (Point to card you gave visitor.)

Your task is to go into this suite of galleries. (Point to and describe the suite boundaries) While there, take 6-9 photographs with this camera of things/areas in these galleries where the DIA helped you find personal meaning in the art.

We are particularly interested in how particular information strategies help you in achieving this mission. (pointing out the various interpretive approaches in that gallery)

- Do you understand what we want you to do?  
(Be sure visitor knows how to work the camera.)

Take around 6 – 9 photos – Please no more than 9 photos of how the DIA helps you find meaning in the art.

And remember, we are particularly interested in how particular information strategies help you in achieving this mission. (pointing out the various interpretive approaches in that gallery again)

- You can spend up to 20 minutes or less looking around these galleries. I'll keep track of time and if you aren't finished before 20 minutes I'll come get you.
- Then we will go sit down, look at your photos and talk about them.
- Is this clear? I'm happy to go back over something, I know it's a lot to remember.

### **INTERVIEW**

While I'm loading your photos on the computer, take a few moments to gather your thoughts about this big idea. (Point out the prompt card – place it prominently on the table)

- Now we're ready.
- I have the ability to video record our conversation. Is that all right with you?

### **FOR EACH PHOTO**

- Select a photo you want to talk about first (second, etc.)

Questions for each photo:

- What about this had personal meaning for you.
- If the visitor's answer doesn't touch on anything personal, in what ways was that personal to you?
- Do you remember seeing any information about this? If yes, tell me about it.
- Is there anything else you want to say about this photo?

### **AFTER FINAL PHOTO**

So to sum up, personal meaning for you is...

(If they haven't included a photo or reference to any of the interpretive strategies:) As I mentioned, in this study we are particularly interested in how particular information strategies help visitors find personal meaning in art and you did not reference any of them in these galleries. Can you tell me more about that choice? If you didn't use any special information strategies, who do you think they are for?





## **Phase 2 Summative Evaluation of DIA Interpretive Strategies Finding Personal Meaning (FPM) Report**

June 2012



### **A Study of Visitors' Photo Essays in Three Gallery Suites Analysis by Art/Interpretation**

Beverly Serrell  
Serrell & Associates  
Chicago, IL

*Oh, wow, that really made a personal connection!*

# A Study of Visitors' Photo Essays in Three Gallery Suites

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## Executive Summary

The Detroit Institute of Arts' mission is to create experiences that help each visitor find personal meaning in art. This mission-related study, Finding Personal Meaning (FPM), was the third part of a summative evaluation of the reinstallation and reinterpretation of the DIA's permanent collection, and this report addresses the question, What was the role of DIA interpretation in helping visitors find that personal meaning in art?

The FPM participants (n=55) took photographs of places and things in three main gallery areas (Renaissance, Contemporary, and Africa) where they had meaningful experiences. Out of many available choices, they were attracted to certain artworks more than others. The things that drew them to these "hot spots" included physical, emotional, and conceptual features of the art, such as the look on St. Ives' face, the enormity of *The Square*, the joy of the *Wedding Dance*, the intricate beading of the *Bride's Ensemble*, and the intriguing incongruities of *Officer of the Hussars* and the *African Triptych*.

As visitors' attention was focused on an artwork, they were often motivated to read one of the interpretive strategies. Out of the ten different formats, several proved to be equally effective. No single type of interpretation stood out as "best": Extended object labels, layered labels, group labels, and pull-out panels were helpful to many people in all three gallery areas. The human interest content of all the labels stressed the stories and details of the art on view for the benefit of the target audience, which did not have any specialized training in art.

In the early stages of the data analysis, three main "ways of finding meaning" emerged in visitors' narratives of their photos:

1. Preferences & Properties. They were drawn to it visually. It was enjoyable or fun. They thought it was beautiful. It was big, beautiful, colorful, moving, or making a noise. They liked it.
2. Familiarity & Connections. They were reminded of something. They saw themselves or made connections to the story. They knew about it already. They felt confirmed and validated.
3. Learning & Understanding. They learned something new. Incongruence and complexity attracted their attention: They wondered and questioned and sought out information. Knowing more, understanding, and making sense was meaningful.

The 20 most popular "hot spot" exhibits in the galleries are discussed in this report. In the majority of cases, the DIA interpretation played a role in providing visitors with connections to both familiar and new information and experiences. The interpretive materials and modalities reinforced or supplemented visitors' prior knowledge and interests and/or enabled them to easily integrate new information into their experiences with the art. The interpretives helped visitors connect with the art through seeing a familiar subject or artist, learn something new, put themselves into the story, and have their questions answered.

In fewer cases, the interpretives were missed or visitors chose not to use them. Instead, they relied only on their experience of looking at the art and found meaning by interpreting it for themselves, or they simply were enjoying the properties and aesthetics.

The least helpful type of interpretive was the viewpoint label, not because visitors didn't like it, but because they didn't find it or didn't realize that it could be turned to reveal contrasting ideas.

The role of the DIA interpretives in helping visitors find meaning was most important when visitors were seeing something familiar, being reminded of something, or feeling confirmed or validated by the interpretation, and also when visitors were seeing something unfamiliar and wanted more information to make sense of what they were seeing and feeling.

What *was* the role of DIA interpretation in helping visitors find personal meaning in art? The answer turned out to be, in short, to help them say, "Oh!"

1. They were drawn to it visually. *I went Oh, wow!*
2. They were reminded of something. *Oh, look at this.* They saw themselves or made connections to the story. *Oh, they look just like me.* They knew about it already. *Oh, there it is!* They felt confirmed and validated. *Oh, yeah, I see that.*
3. They learned something new. *Oh look, it's down there.* Knowing more, understanding, and making sense was meaningful. *Oh, okay, that makes sense.* They wondered and questioned. *Oh, maybe it's in the flip book?*

The body of this report is filled with the complete quotes from visitors as they interacted with their self-selected meaningful encounters with art and interpretives at the DIA.

The effectiveness of the interpretive strategies seemed to be less about the format (wall label, stanchion label, booklet) and more about the consistently useful content that visitors found helpful for making connections, making sense, and feeling like the information was meant for them.

*Oh, wow, that really made a personal connection!*

## **A Study of Visitors' Photo Essays in Three Gallery Suites Analysis by Art/Interpretation**

### **Introduction**

In 2011 the Detroit Institute of Art began a summative study on the intentions and impacts of the interpretive strategies developed for the reinstallation and new interpretation of the permanent galleries. They invited Beverly Serrell of Serrell & Associates, and Marianna Adams of Audience Focus, Inc., to design and conduct a study to address the following overarching evaluation question:

*How have the interpretive exhibits contributed to visitors' engagement with art, particularly in relation to the initial purposes of the interpretives?*

Phase 1 of the summative evaluation included two areas of inquiry:

- The first used existing visitor-behavior data—through tracking and timing—that had been collected in 12 galleries to assess the number of visitors attracted to the exhibits, to see which interpretives attracted more visitors, and to compare the amount of time spent in the galleries by visitors who used the special interpretive exhibits with non-users. The tracking-and-timing (T&T) data will be analyzed and discussed in a future report by the DIA.
- The second approach collected new data—through observations and responses to a questionnaire—that focused on 17 individual special interactives (e.g., layered labels, pull-out panels, eye spy labels, viewpoint labels), looking at how visitors engaged with them and what they said about them. In the focused observation-and-responses (O&R) study, Serrell and Adams collaborated closely in developing the methods, instruments, and organization of data. They approached the analysis of the data in two different but overlapping and complementary ways, and submitted a report in February 2012.

Phase 2 of the summative evaluation, the subject of this Finding Personal Meaning (FPM) report, focuses on the DIA's mission statement: *The DIA creates experiences that help each visitor find personal meaning in art.* The goals of this study were to gather information from visitors that would help us understand how they

interpreted “personal meaning,” where they found it in the galleries at the DIA, and the degree to which the DIA’s interpretive strategies helped them find it.

The target audience for the DIA reinstallation and new interpretive strategies for both Phase 1 and 2 of the summative evaluation is people who do not have a special background in art history. This audience is assumed to be diverse in age, education, ethnicity, interest in art, and art museum visitation patterns. Unlike other art museum visitor studies that asked visitors in an abstract way about their knowledge, experience, expectations, motivations, and preferences about art, the DIA Phase 2 study was conducted in the galleries where visitors made concrete choices about artworks that engaged them.

Once again, Serrell and Adams collaborated closely with the DIA in developing the methods, instruments, and organization of data, and approached the analysis of the data in two different but overlapping and complementary ways, to answer two main questions:

1. What strategies did visitors use to find personal meaning in art? (Get to know the people and their ways of finding meaning—analysis by visitors)  
and
2. What was the role of DIA interpretation in helping visitors find personal meaning in art? (Get to know the artworks and what was meaningful about the art and the interpretation—analysis by exhibits)

To answer these questions, we developed a process that sent visitors into the permanent collection galleries with a digital camera to take photos of the art and interpretation that they found personally meaningful. The details of this process are explained below. The goal was 20 visitors per gallery, in three galleries, N=60.

## **Methods**

The DIA staff selected three areas of the permanent collection for the Phase 2 study that contained dissimilar types of art:

- Renaissance
- Contemporary
- African

These were chosen for having a mix of several features, which included

- a suite of three or four galleries that together ranged in size from 2,310 to 4,937 square feet, containing approximately 30 to 90 artworks;
- areas with a variety of interpretive strategies, such as wall labels (e.g., summary, group, and extended object labels), pull-out panels, layered labels, eye spy labels, viewpoint labels, and response stations; and
- areas that had been part of Phase 1's T&T and the O&R study.

### Creating a Photo Essay

Visitors were individually escorted to the galleries by an evaluator who showed and read them the DIA's mission statement (*The DIA creates experiences that help each visitor find personal meaning in art*). Each was given a digital camera with the instructions to take six to nine photographs in the galleries of things or areas where the DIA helped him or her find personal meaning. The evaluators also emphasized that we were particularly interested in how identified special interpretive strategies may have helped them. Each recruit went through the galleries on his or her own, spending up to 20 minutes—the advised amount of time. Afterward, the evaluator escorted the person to a quiet room where he or she could sit down, look at the photos downloaded onto a laptop computer, and talk about them. As the visitor discussed the photos, the conversation was videorecorded by VoiceThread software for later reference and transcription.

### Recruiting Visitors

In-house evaluators Matt Sikora and Ken Morris recruited 45 adult participants for the study (see Appendix for protocol) and scheduled them for 1½-hour timeslots over a three-day weekend: Friday to Sunday, December 4, 5, and 6, 2011. Almost all of the participants had been to the DIA in the last 12 months, and the highest level of knowledge or interest in art was a college class in art history or the humanities. The mix of ages and gender matched the overall demographic of the DIA (favoring females, favoring older adults).

### Pilot Testing the Methods

Before inviting the recruits, we practiced and tested the methods with 16 DIA staff members who resembled the demographics of the study sample (e.g., familiar with the DIA but not experts in art). Pilot tests demonstrated that the process worked: It took about an hour per subject; the web-based technology was appropriate; transcriptions proved to be desirable; and a realistic goal for the number of subjects was identified as around 60. Because the pilot testing went relatively smoothly (aside from some learning-curve bumps with the technology), we decided to keep the test responses in the database.

### Narrating the Photos

Study participants took as few as three and as many as 16 photos, although they were encouraged to not take more than nine pictures. To reduce the amount of data input, the evaluator did not include every photo in the discussion, usually keeping each person's essay to the desired six to nine photos. Images included individual artworks, groups of art, interpretive devices, and spaces (e.g., areas of the gallery). For each photo, the participant was asked, "In what ways did this have meaning for you?" or "What about this had personal meaning to you?" If the person did not make any reference to the interpretives, the evaluator probed, "Do you remember seeing any written information? Did you read anything about this?" People were also asked, at the end, to summarize their experience by completing the statement, "Personal meaning (in the art museum) to me is...."

### Data Processing

Video recordings and the photos were captured and stored on the VoiceThread website, where they could be accessed by the evaluators. An audio version was transcribed into hard copy, and each statement was matched to the name of the art being discussed. DIA evaluator Ken Morris created a spreadsheet for each of the three gallery suites with every visitor's photo choices. This allowed us to sort the database by area, artwork, interpretive strategy, individual study subjects, or the number of visitors who included a specific artwork/interpretive in their photo essays. Out of the original target of 60 participants, we ended up with 55 complete and usable datasets (photos, narrative, transcription); N=18-19 per gallery.

## Data Analysis

Marianna Adams looked at the data by reviewing each person's photo narrative to answer the question, What strategies did visitors use to find personal meaning in art? Her task was to get to know the people and their ways of finding meaning, and to analyze the data by the *person*, i.e., individual visitors.

Beverly Serrell looked at the data by reviewing each artwork/interpretive that was included in the photo sets taken by the visitors. Her task was to answer the question, What was the role of DIA interpretation in helping visitors find personal meaning in art? Her emphasis was to get to know the artworks and what was meaningful about them and the interpretation, and to analyze the data by *exhibits*, i.e., the aspects of the artwork/interpretation provided by the DIA.

The remainder of this report will cover Serrell's findings by gallery (Renaissance, Contemporary, and African) and a general discussion, followed by conclusions and recommendations. A separate report contains Adams' findings.

## **Overview of Ways of Finding Meaning**

In the early stages of the data analysis, three main “ways of finding meaning” emerged in visitors’ photo narratives:

1. Preferences & Properties. They were drawn to it visually. It was enjoyable or fun. They thought it was beautiful. It was big, beautiful, colorful, moving, or making a noise. They liked it.
2. Familiarity & Connections. They were reminded of something. They saw themselves or made connections to the story. They knew about it already. They felt confirmed and validated.
3. Learning & Understanding. They learned something new. Incongruence and complexity attracted their attention: They wondered and questioned and sought out information. Knowing more, understanding, and making sense was meaningful.

All three of these ways of finding meaning have an emotional basis. The positive affects include feelings of pleasure, curiosity, intrigue, being confirmed, and satisfaction. Sometimes the positive feelings came about as a resolution of feeling confused, unconnected, or overwhelmed. For example, they didn’t know what was going on with the art or what it was about until they read the label.

In the first part of this report, Serrell will review the data through 20 case studies of the most popular exhibit elements in the three galleries, showing the ways that visitors reacted to them, including aspects of Preferences & Properties, Familiarity & Connections, and Learning & Understanding. In the discussion section, these 20 cases will be regrouped according to the extent to which the DIA interpretives seemed to be important in helping visitors find personal meaning. While there was evidence for all of the ways of finding meaning in all three galleries, there were some trends and slight differences depending on the gallery and the particular context of each artwork.

## Twenty Case Studies of Art/Interpretation

In each of the three gallery suites (Renaissance, Contemporary, African), Serrell looked at the spreadsheets of the data for the exhibit elements that were photographed most frequently by the participants in the FPM study. These were exhibit “hot spots” (art and related interpretation) where six or more people included them.

### RENAISSANCE

	<i>Art</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>	<i>Gallery</i>	<i>Total</i>
1	The Wedding Dance	Layered Label	Urban Prosperity	13
2	St. Ives	Pull-out Panel	Art as Theater	13
3	Triptych: Crucifixion	Extended Object Label	Urban Prosperity	8
4		Gallery Summary Panel	Art as Theater	7
5	Adoration of Magi	Pull-out Panel	Aspiring to the Real	6
6	St. Augustine	Group Label	Aspiring to the Real	6

### CONTEMPORARY

	<i>Art</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>	<i>Gallery</i>	<i>Total</i>
7	The Square	Layered Label	Times Not History	13
8	Officer of the Hussars	Photo Label	Times Not History	11
9	Stone Line	Layered Label	Mapping	10
10	What Will Come	Extended Object Label	Times Not History	9
11	Atrabiliarios	Extended Object Label	Times Not History	9
12		Response Station	Times Not History	7

### CONTEMPORARY AND RENAISSANCE

	<i>Art</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>	<i>Gallery</i>	<i>Total</i>
13		Eye Spy Labels		7

### AFRICAN a

	<i>Art</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>	<i>Gallery</i>	<i>Total</i>
14	Shrine	Pull-out Panel	Yoruba Spirit World	13
15	Triptych	Group Label	Ancestors and Spirits	11
16	Bride's Ensemble	Extended Object Label+Viewpoints Label	Cycle of Life	9
17	Nail Figure	Layered Label	Ancestors and Spirits	8
18	Divination Tray (Case)	Pull Out Case+Extended Object Label	Yoruba Spirit World	7
19	Zulu Doll (Case)	Group Label	Cycle of Life	6
20	Maternity Figure	Extended Object Label+Viewpoints	Cycle of Life	6

Twenty hot spots listed in the tables above are featured in the case studies that will be discussed in this analysis. These 20 hot spots include the following totals of different DIA interpretive strategies, some of which were discussed in the O&R report:

- 5 Extended Object Labels
- 4 Layered Labels
- 3 Group Labels
- 3 Pull-out Panels
- 3 Eye Spy Labels
- 2 Viewpoint Labels
- 1 Gallery Summary Panel
- 1 Photo Label
- 1 Pull-out Case
- 1 Response Station

Quotations of what visitors said during their photo narratives have been edited for clarity and focus, and are identified by their code numbers. The original 55 transcriptions are available for further review and study by other interested researchers.

**Hot Spots in the Renaissance Galleries**

The four most-photographed elements in the Renaissance Galleries were The Wedding Dance, St. Ives, Triptych: Crucifixion, and the Gallery Summary Panel “The Curtain Rises.” They were stopped at, photographed and discussed by seven or more (37% and greater) of the 19 visitors in the FPM study in these galleries.

RENAISSANCE

<i>Art</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>	<i>Gallery</i>	<i>Total</i>
The Wedding Dance	Layered Label	Urban Prosperity	13
St. Ives	Pull-out Panel	Art as Theater	13
Triptych: Crucifixion	Extended Object Label	Urban Prosperity	8
	Gallery Summary Panel	Art as Theater	7

The first three most popular “stops” were artworks linked to interpretive strategies—a layered label, a pull-out panel, and an extended object label. The fourth was a gallery summary panel—an interpretive alone. These will each be analyzed separately below for the ways that people used them and found personal

meaning in the art, which included aspects of familiarity, new knowledge, and preferences.

## 1 Wedding Dance/Layered Label

### Finding personal meaning by learning more about the art

The layered label at Wedding Dance was used by most of the visitors who stopped at the painting, especially those unfamiliar with the art.



Although this is a famous work of art, many visitors were not familiar with it before. They could, however, relate easily to the content—a joyful wedding celebration. They found meaning by learning about the details in the painting, which were explained in the layered label.

*We all looked for the bride and then the lady said oh maybe it's in the book. And so she turned to the page and we all found out that the bride was actually wearing black. It was just a really, really handy way of knowing more about this particular piece. (20)*

*It drew my eye to this part of the painting, so then when I went back to look at the painting I could locate what I might be looking for a little bit more. (31)*

Some visitors already knew of the art and the artist. For them, the DIA interpretation was not as important. They found emotional connections through their prior experiences.

*I don't know why, but I have always loved Bruegel. So when I saw it, I'm thinking, Oh! there it is. (23)*

*He [Bruegel] just makes me happy. He always has. It makes me want to dance. (26)*

There was evidence of “text echo” in visitors’ comments—they used words from the layered label, such as “renowned picture,” “joy,” and “celebration.” When visitors are incorporating words from the label into their own narrative, it is evidence that they are feeling competent about the information and they are using the meanings for themselves.

One person paraphrased the label content into her own words, another form of making meaning:

*These are commoners that are celebrating a wedding. This artist wanted to raise that awareness among the rich and famous, and I thought he did a great job at it. And I thought the booklet was really very helpful in putting all that together. (38)*

Another person noted that she found meaning in being able to touch the pages of the book and liked the interactivity, the physical action:

*Because you can't touch any of the art, you want to touch something. (P14)*

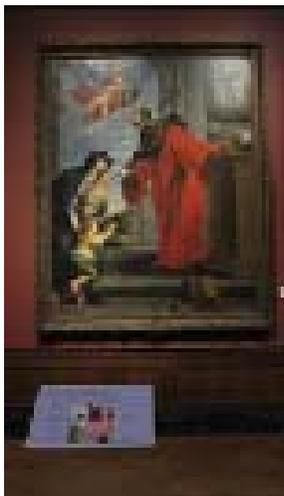
Because he was close to the wall, and the label is located a distance away, one person missed the layered label:

*I didn't even see that book... I think the book should be up closer to the painting. (17)*

Visitors liked the layered label because it told them what to look for. They found meaning through understanding more about this intrinsically engaging painting.

## 2 St. Ives/Pull-Out Panel

### Finding meaning by seeing themselves and making emotional connections



This pull-out panel was used by most of the visitors who stopped at the painting. They were drawn to it largely by the emotional content, and the information on the panel gave them a richer experience with the art.

*I really don't know what's going on. And by having a sign there and you read that, it gave me the full impression of what this is. (P2)*

*I really like the way it was explained. And not just a general explanation but a very definite explanation pinpointing okay this little area, this is what you're to gain from that, here's why this is important. I really like that. It made it interesting.*

*So I know what I'm looking at. Because otherwise it just is a picture. (23)*

*Sometimes you don't know what the artist really meant. That's why you need tools to inspire your own definition. You need tools to inspire your own creative thoughts. (14)*

The pull-out panel helped people see the details of the story, and different people identified with different parts of the painting. They saw themselves:

*I'm a product of a single parent mother. And we would go to churches asking for help when we were young. (26)*

*This one speaks to my personal passion of reaching out and helping those who are disadvantaged and disenfranchised. Since I am a social worker it just speaks to my heart. (38)*

*A lot of the work that I do is with mothers and babies in poverty. It's depicted there with the look on her face, and the look on his face, his compassion. (31)*

*Okay, this one has meaning because I'm from a family of domestic violence, and I wish that there had of been someone who could have come and helped my mother. (5)*

Visitors were drawn to this painting by the bright red cape and by the emotional content in the facial expressions. The information on the pull-out panel helped them because it gave them a way to connect meaningfully with the story by putting themselves into the picture.

### 3 Triptych: Crucifixion/Extended Object Label

#### Personal meaning came from prior knowledge and experience



People were commonly drawn to the painting because they knew the story of Jesus that was depicted on the triptych, they were Christian, or just liked triptychs. They found personal meaning in the familiarity of the content and the beauty of the art.

*You know I'm Catholic and that has meaning for me. (29)*

*I saw tons of these in Italy. This one is especially beautiful. (38)*

*My parents were big antique collectors and they would frame a lot of their collections like this with different periods and eras of pieces like that. That's what I really liked really, because everything is paired up together. (26)*

One person read the label and recalled some details that she found interesting:

*The person on the left had this commissioned. He wanted to be in the picture. Which is a little egotistical but, hey, I guess he thought that would buy him some ticket into heaven or something. (29)*

The extended object label for this painting did not play a role in finding meaning for most people. It was only used by one person. The others found personal meaning because they were familiar with the art, either the content (crucifixion) or the modality (a triptych). They were confirmed and validated for what they knew already and saw things that they “liked.”

#### 4 Gallery Summary Panel “Curtain Rises...”

##### **Finding personal meaning was aided by knowing what to expect**



Seven people photographed this gallery panel. They found it meaningful because it helped them understand what was going on in the gallery. Knowing more made them feel better oriented conceptually—a prerequisite for a positive learning experience.

*I had really no clear representative of what the Renaissance Era was which was embarrassing. I really loved how it oriented me to that and then I ended up really liking that gallery. (31)*

*It prompted you to get ready to think about what you were going to see from a more informed viewpoint. (38)*

*I guess I personally just like to know what I'm looking at. (23)*

*They bring it to a level that, you know, for someone like me, makes the whole thing more accessible. (P10)*

Most people used the word “helpful” or “informative” to describe why they noticed and used this gallery summary panel. It helped them find personal meaning by letting them know what to expect.

## ***In the Renaissance Galleries, continued***

### RENAISSANCE

<i>Art</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>	<i>Gallery</i>	<i>Total</i>
Adoration of Magi	Pull-out Panel	Aspiring to the Real	6
St. Augustine	Group Label	Aspiring to the Real	6

The next two FPM case studies were selected because they were relatively popular—six people included them in their photo essays. But more importantly, they were also part of the T&T study in the gallery where, in comparison, St. Augustine, Adoration of Magi (and Nativity) were also the most-used exhibits— attracting more than 30% of the 128 visitors—in the “Aspiring to the Real” gallery. The interpretations for these two exhibit elements included a group label and a pull-out panel.

## **5 St. Augustine/Group Label**

### **Personal preference for liking the medium was meaningful**



Six people included St. Augustine in their FPM photo essays, but not everyone discussed it in the VoiceThread files. Those who did mention it said that they found it meaningful because they liked stained glass.

*To tell you the truth I was surprised to see stained glass hanging up on the wall like that. I didn't expect it I guess. I saw that there and I thought wow. What a nice picture. (8)*

People who used the label gained knowledge and made comparisons.

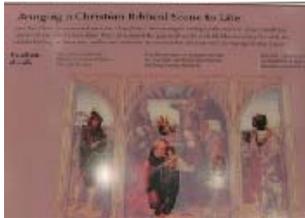
*I've always liked stained glass so of course I'm drawn to it. And then to have the explanation of why this one differs from this; here's what impact that has. It was neat. (23)*

*I read what they said about the way it arched up here. And how this one was real detailed in the clothes and this one was more subdued and this one was more pronounced. I did see that. So I liked that as well. (5)*

People were attracted to the medium of stained glass, surprised to see it as art, and appreciated the group label that made comparisons between the two pieces of art, which added more meaning to their experience.

## 6 Adoration of Magi/Pull-out Panel

### Christians could relate without reading, but reading gave more meaning



Six people included Adoration of Magi in their photo essays, but fewer people discussed the interpretive panel in the VoiceThread files.

For some, the meaning was in the familiarity of the painting's subject and their identification with religion.

*It's a nativity scene basically and that was what meaning it had for me because it's a nativity scene. I'm Christian you know and I believe in Christ. I didn't read anything on any of the pictures that I took. I just saw the pictures. (41)*

*The picture was meaningful to me. I'm Catholic. But the panel gave me much more information – like the coloring, the shading. I wouldn't know exactly because I'm not an artist. And that gave me the ability to look at it and see it. (35)*

This interpretive panel's emphasis was on the realistic details used by the artist, which were noticed and recalled:

*This one is about the artistic features. It just helped me understand some of the use of the subtler fuzzy colors in the background so that the foreground gets more strongly depicted. How the gold gets kind of captured, the richness of the tapestry. I like the emotional impact of the pictures, but I also like to know the historical and then the qualitative aspects of what the artist did. (31)*

The panel might have been missed or not noticed by some people, because as they walked close to the wall the panel on the pedestal was behind them. The DIA interpretives can't help visitors find meaning if they can't find the interpretives in the first place.

## Nativity

### **Eye-catching gold and a familiar story**

There was no special interpretation for the Nativity, but it is included here because it was one of the most popular artworks in this gallery in both the T&T study and in the FPM photo essays for this gallery.



It is fairly large, shimmering in gold, and just inside the doorway to the right as you come in. The story is familiar and the vertical design and material was intriguing.

*This was a nativity scene on wood. And I found it really interesting because I just spent the morning putting up my own nativity scene at home. So I could relate to this. Here the nativity scene is being kind of stacked on top. This was a vertical one and that was kind of interesting. So I wanted to snap that. (23)*

*I used to do a lot of woodworking with my father and that's what originally drew me to this. Was just the intricacy of the work, but then you see the tale that it tells. My eyes are drawn right to the nativity scene first but then as I look back up higher and higher and higher and you get different story upon story upon story and layer upon layer upon layer. And you really – I don't know, I felt a whole lot more than just the nativity scene was there. That's why I liked that. (26)*

Since there was no DIA interpretation at Nativity, visitors found meaning through familiarity with the subject—the information and experiences they brought with them and the medium.

## Finding Personal Meaning Analysis by Art/Interpretation

### Hot Spots in the Contemporary Galleries

The five most-photographed elements in the Contemporary galleries were The Square, Officer of the Hussars, Stone Line, What Will Come, and Atrabiliarios. All of these were stopped at by nine or more of the 19 people (47% or more) who did their photo essays in these galleries. (There were fewer exhibits in these galleries than in Renaissance, so the number of people stopping turned out to be larger; that is, visitors didn't spread out their preferences over a larger set of possibilities.)

Four of the most popular Contemporary exhibits were all in the gallery "Times Not History." This space was included in the T&T study, in which The Square, Officer of the Hussars, What Will Come, and Atrabiliarios attracted the most attention from visitors in the T&T. These were the exact same ones that attracted the most attention from visitors in the FPM study.

#### CONTEMPORARY a

<i>Art</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>	<i>Gallery</i>	<i>Total</i>
The Square	Layered Label	Times Not History	13
Officer of the Hussars	Photo Label	Times Not History	11
Stone Line	Layered Label	Mapping	10
What Will Come	Extended Object Label	Times Not History	9
Atrabiliarios	Extended Object Label	Times Not History	9

The five hot spot exhibits and their interpretive strategies will be discussed below for the various ways that visitors found personal meaning, the roles of the interpretives, and any trends that emerged.

### **7 The Square/Layered Label**

#### **Hard to miss; intriguing multi-layered meanings were found by visitors with help from the layered label**

More people included The Square in their photo essay than any other exhibit in the Contemporary galleries. Thirteen of the 19 people (68%) photographed it.



Visitors were drawn to this painting by its size and they wondered about its meanings.

*It's very overwhelming. It's gigantic. I didn't know where to start. (P14)*

*Yeah, it took up the whole wall. (P5)*

*It's hard to miss. From a distance it resembled a building or something from the past that I've seen. (22)*

*I was like, What is this? (34)*

*I didn't know what it was. In fact I even took my cellphone out and tried to Google "Das Geviert," because I wondered what that meant. (40)*

Many people found and used the layered label, which helped them get new perspectives on the artwork. They found personal connections and felt appreciation for the design and content.

*Flipping through the book made that humongous piece – all of a sudden it came into focus.... I just made a personal connection with that piece. (P14)*

*I like the layout to explain this for the exhibit. I like how it was not cluttered. It was particularly interesting to me. (22)*

*Not so much personal meaning, but that little booklet in the front gives you so much more information that you appreciate each facet of it. (16)*

*I was drawn to the piece, but then when I read about the smokestacks and the Holocaust that really touched me because a lot of my relatives... I'm Jewish heritage, and so when I saw that I went oh wow that really made a personal connection, and I appreciated the way the artist incorporated that. (34)*

*When I first read the sign here on the side it was in German. It had no meaning to me and I didn't like that I didn't know what the German meant. But then I saw the*

*book, and realized that it's brick work in India, which has meaning to me because I was just in India. (25)*

This person did not find the layered label, but his own meanings were very similar to the artist's intentions:

*There was no explanation of what it was. Which was fine because it left me to imagine what it was. The first thing that struck me, it was rubble from some great conflict. I saw the German name, and I thought maybe this has something to do with the Holocaust, and then I thought well maybe it's archeological. I wondered whether it was some remnants of a civilization that had been dug up. And then I thought well maybe it's just a brick wall. (40)*

Due to the size of the painting and the amount of information in the layered label, it took time to take it all in. People acknowledged that it took time to find meanings—from the label or on their own.

*There's a lot of detail in that picture. A lot of work in that picture which would make you stand there for a few minutes and look at it. You know if had I had more time I probably would have understood that picture before I walked out of the room. (P5)*

*That book really helped me to actually look through it. To take the time to do that. I'm usually rushed when I bring my kids and I'll just run through. I always wondered about it so I got to spend more time looking at it. (34)*

*I could look at this for a long time. I think I could get some meaning out of this by going through some more imaginings of what this was. So it intrigued me. (40)*

The Square was a very popular painting that inspired people to stop, look, and wonder. Many found meaning through connections to the information and issues in the layered label. Knowing more was personally meaningful.

## 8 Officer of the Hussars/Photo Label

### Incongruity was one of the ways that visitors found meaning



Visitors were first drawn to this painting by its size and colorful nature.

*I mean it was just a beautiful sight. (P14)*

*What first gravitated me to this picture was the artist's detail, the size of the picture, and the vivid colors that were used. (22)*

*The brightness of it is eye catching. (16)*

Once their attention was captured, they were drawn in more by the content and the incongruity.

*At first I was confused when I read it because I didn't know which one they were talking about. Then I went okay it's both and then I really liked it. It wasn't so much personal, but I wanted to learn more information about it. It helped me to make a connection. (34)*

*I never really stood there and read about it until today. It's an interesting concept – it looks like he has the wrong clothes on for the sword time. (P5)*

The information on the photo label gave them new knowledge.

*When I saw the description on the left that it was from an old painting and saw the implications about race and it made me think about all kinds of race, culture, ethnicity, religion, women and that gave it a lot of meaning to me. It wasn't just some guy on a horse. (25)*

The fact that the artist was African American was meaningful to several people.

*It's a black artist and I wanted to see his work. (P5)*

*The artist transformed a piece of art that was, I guess, a Caucasian was in it, and he put an African American person in it. It made it more personal for me. (16)*

*I have a 16-year-old son and it just caught my eye. I just stood there and stared at the picture and it just looked like my son, and with the sword right there it just reminded me of telling him, okay, now be careful, you shouldn't do that. (10)*

People were attracted to Officer of the Hussars through its visual and physical properties. The photo label that compared the original painting to the one before them answered people's questions.

## 9 Stone Line/Layered Label

### **Stones on the floor reminded people of something familiar**



Most of the people who talked about Stone Line did not rely on the layered label to help them find meaning in this art; instead, they were reminded of places or things that were similar in some way—beaches, cobblestone streets, stone buildings, a puzzle.

*It kind of reminds you that this should be on a beach display or along the shoreline where people pick up rocks. That's what that kind of reminded me of. Or when I was living in California when I was actually walking on the beach. (P5)*

*I don't know why it reminded me of – even though I was not at the beach or the shore I envision water around this. It caught my memory to something relating to being at the end where there was water. (22)*

*I liked it because it reminded me of a time when I was a kid and we used to go to the beach. The little booklet describing the rocks and why it's significant – I personally to be honest I didn't really care for that. (P12)*

*It reminded me of the Detroit Historical Museum in the lower level where they have those streets of old Detroit. (16)*

*The church that I belong to has stones from way back from Egypt and everything that were shipped in and it's just very unique and it's very interesting. There's a lot of history and culture in it. (4)*

*I'm always putting a puzzle together. And this just really caught my eye because it's just amazing how each piece, even if you put them close together will fit like a puzzle. (10)*



The artist's drawing in the layered label also reminded people of something familiar—an architectural sketch, a diagram, a path.

*It's a scale drawing of what he wanted his work to finally be. I studied architecture in college and I wasn't really interested in this piece until I read that. It happened to be the page that that booklet was open to ... and I read the rest of it about how he looked through his walks and plotted out day by day where he was going to go. (28)*

*I wanted to find out what the artist was trying to say or do with this and the diagram was showing the designs and the outlays of this. It helped me further investigate why this was so intriguing to me. (22)*

*When you read the booklet that's in the front it gives you a different appreciation for something as simple as the ground you walk on. The irregularities of each stone. And how each one is unique but it still makes a straight and narrow path. (16)*

Two people mentioned that the layered label was “helpful” and added “appreciation” but did not offer any specific details.

The layered label did not seem to be as important or necessary for people to make a meaningful connection to Stone Line as for other, less familiar media or content.

## 10 What Will Come/Extended Object Label

### **Music, movement, and incongruity were “moving,” but not the artist's intent**



The attracting power of this exhibit was largely due to the motion and sound.

*It swirled and changed, and each direction I looked at it, it was different. (1)*

*When I walked in the room it was making a sound and it was twirling. (P5)*

One person found it attracting, then distracting.

*It was kind of loud in this space ...you hear this music going on. And I know that is the art, but it just is overwhelming. When I was in the other gallery looking and reading, I still heard that music playing. (P14)*

Half of the people did not read. They missed or could not find the interpretive label that was located on a pedestal. They were curious, but didn't see the information.

*I didn't see anything that gave information about what I was looking at. And that kind of bothered me. I looked under the table. I looked on the wall. I didn't see anything. And it's almost like it's sitting there and it's just expected for you to just understand what's going on with it. (P14)*

*Where is the beginning and the end when there is continuous activity? That's what intrigues me about it personally. I want to know. (37)*

The incongruence and uniqueness of this piece as art was interesting, enjoyable, or memorable.

*I think to be able to see art from different directions...is a real good way to realize that art isn't always just straight on and flat and static. Because this is moving. So this gallery really made me kind of stretch my concepts of art. (1)*

*There's really nothing that I can relate to in my life but I just enjoyed standing there looking at the different objects go around in a circle and open and the way some of them went into the center. I guess it was sort of like a fast cartoon. I just enjoyed looking at it. (10)*

*I like the concept. I like the fact that it's ever changing and it's not something you would just glance at and you would move on very quickly. You would have to stand there a while. It's one of the memorable pieces, because it's so different. (22)*

One person found several personal connections: herself, her son, her stuff:

*What intrigues me about it personally is I'm very technical and logical in some aspects. This is actually one of my son's favorite things in the museum. He is a graphic designer and does digital animation. And, it reminds me of my patio table. (37)*



Movement and music drew visitors to this artwork, but only half the people used the interpretive information. No one mentioned that it was related to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.

## 11 Atrabiliarios/Extended Object Label

### Easy to miss, this 50-word object label brought an emotionally meaningful punch to the artwork

The artwork and the label were almost missed by many people, but once they were drawn to the barely visible shoes set into the wall and the nearby label located on the wall, they had a meaningful experience.



*I walked by this a couple times, paid no attention to it. Once I got close I was intrigued. What are those shoes doing there? And then I read the label and suddenly it just took on a whole new meaning for me. I wasn't attracted to it as a piece of art until I really understood what the artist was trying to portray, and then I was very impressed. (40)*

*These shoes. That's sad. So little can separate us from each other. You know that little piece of gauze in front of the shoes. And you know these people are gone. It made me think of the little girl that they're still looking for. I haven't heard the news today. (43)*

*As I looked closer I saw the shoes. And I thought okay, what is this about? I read the card and immediately visions came to my mind. My heart was totally racing just thinking that these are shoes of missing children. The emotional connection was immediately there and I felt it all over my body. (P14)*

*Looking at something as simple as putting one shoe with the fact that people are missing. Makes you think a little deeper than you normally would. So, yeah, that one little exhibit was very, very educational for me. It gave me a new appreciation for DIA. I will definitely be back. Definitely. (16)*

*This had personal meaning because as soon as I saw it, it reminded me of the Holocaust Museum, the shoe exhibit. That made that interesting to me and the fact that also it was about some other people's plights. (25)*

Some people did not notice or pay as much attention to the interpretation, instead, relating the art to their own connection to shoes.

*I read this one because my sister actually took ballet classes and is a ballerina. I could see what they were trying to do from reading, but I didn't really get that interpretation from it. I got something personal related to my background. (22)*

*Okay, to me it's a box of shoes. It just reminds me of a box of shoes in my closet.*  
(10)

People found meaning in a variety of ways: seeing things they already knew about, learning new things, and experiencing the emotion of the story of people who had disappeared through reading the wall label.

#### CONTEMPORARY b

<i>Art</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>	<i>Gallery</i>	<i>Total</i>
	Response Station	Times Not History	7

Seven people included the special interpretation Response Station in their photo essay, and this exhibit will also be discussed.

## 12 Response Station Computer Interactive

### **Taking time to find personal meaning through learning more about the art and the artist**

The interactive response station was used by 37% (7 of 19) of the people in the FPM study, far more than the T&T study. Perhaps this was because the cued visitors in FPM study had lots of time to spend. They were told that they could take up to 20 minutes in the Contemporary galleries before they were interviewed.



Whereas in the T&T study, unobtrusively observed non-cued visitors were moving at normal pace, spending less than four minutes on average in the "Times Not History" gallery. Only 11% (13 of 118 tracked visitors) stopped at the computer.

Those who took the time in the FPM study to use the response station, used words such as "interesting," "understanding," "information," "meaning" to describe why they liked it.

*After using it, then to walk in the gallery and see the pieces, there was a true connection. And I actually looked at those different areas and had a deeper understanding as to what I was looking at. (P14)*

*It wasn't until I went to this and used the touch screen and went through the whole process that I really understood the paintings and what the artist had in his mind when he was creating his works. (28)*

*The computer gave a picture much more meaning to learn about the artist and made it much more interesting. (25)*

*I wish it was closer to the painting or something, because I had to search for something that could tell me about it. But once I found it I was excited. I wanted to know about the artist. To make a personal connection. Art can be very intimidating, and it feels good to bring it to a level like "we're all people" and learning about this person really helps to be able to relate to it. I thought it was actually my favorite tool in the whole exhibit. I really, really liked it. (34)*

The response station helped visitors find personal meaning by helping them gain new knowledge.

CONTEMPORARY AND  
RENAISSANCE

<i>Art</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>	<i>Gallery</i>	<i>Total</i>
	Eye Spy Labels		7

### 13 Eye Spy Labels

There were two different eye spy labels in the Renaissance galleries and one in the Contemporary suite, and seven people took pictures of them.

#### **For many people who used the eye spy labels, meaning included FUN**

Many raved about them in their photo essay interviews.



*I just thought that was brilliant. (31)*

*I love the eye spy ones. They're just fun and I think going to an art museum should be fun. (23)*

Several people noted that they were good for kids, to get them more involved with the art or keep them busy.

*Eye spy will give you a picture to look for within the other picture that gives you a chance to see all of the art you know. It kind of gives you a reason to. It gives you a little motivation versus skimming through it. (14)*

*It allows you to keep the kids busy while you're trying to look at things. (P10)*

Some people admitted that they enjoyed using them, too.

*Being a college student it's not all words for me. (14)*

*Occasionally I lift one up to look at it. (P10)*

*I thought it was absolutely adorable to open that up and engage me even though I'm an adult. As a child I'm sure that would be so fun to open up and then to have to look and find this art within that gallery. It was fun for me. (P14)*

Having fun added meaning for many people who used the eye spy labels. The role of the eye spys was to add some levity to a typically serious art museum visit.

## Finding Personal Meaning Analysis by Art/Interpretation

### Hot Spots in the African Galleries

AFRICAN

Art	Interpretation	Gallery	Total
Shrine	Pull-out Panel	Yoruba Spirit World	13
Triptych	Group Label	Ancestors and Spirits	11
Bride's Ensemble	Extended Object Label+Viewpoints Label	Cycle of Life	9

There were three galleries in the suite of African art where the FPM study took place: Yoruba Spirit World; Ancestors and Spirits; and Cycle of Life. One exhibit in each gallery was a top hot spot: Shrine, Triptych, and Mpondo Bride's Ensemble, and we'll start with them.

#### 14 Shrine/Pull-Out Panel

##### **Noticing the individual figures and the shrine as a whole was meaningful**

This large artwork attracted attention and people found meaning in it in a variety of ways, including familiar spiritual connections and new understandings from the interpretation materials—the photo, the pull-out label, and the wall label.



*I go to St. Josephat, one of the Polish Catholic churches. Beautiful. Every time I go there there's an enormous spirituality that I get just from the space itself. When I saw this, it brought me there intuitively. (6)*

*When I first walked into that corridor that was the sculpture brought me in. I think it was the color, because everything else is just bland. And then you look further at it and I went over to read about it, and it drew me to seeing it in another way. (33)*

*Each sculpture here represents different things, the different people who worshipped this god of thunder. And so this whole picture was a recreation of this historical shrine and the people that worship here. I think even in today's society although we are all different we have some ties together that we find a common*

*ground and that's sort of what this image portrayed. That's what I really liked about it. (P13)*

Even though one person saw herself as not being a spiritual person, she appreciated what the shrine meant to others.

*I took a picture of the photograph and not of the shrine because shrines don't really hold any significance for me. I don't go to church. I don't have altars or anything. But this reminded me of being a tourist learning about another culture and taking pictures of things that other people find important. (P6)*

Almost half of the people mentioned that the parts about mothers and children were the most meaningful for them.

*There was a woman who had a child on her back as I recall. This was just one of a number I saw where the children were so very important, and the sense of community that I could see in this and others. But the whole sense of the importance of the child impressed me. (18)*

*I'm 32 and I'm starting to think about marriage and starting a family. And this was a fertility statue. She's carrying a baby on her back as a sign of fertility and strength and protecting the baby. When I read the little description that one stuck out to me the most. (21)*

*I read the information about the mother with the bowl on her head, and she's surrounded with other things, multi-tasking, so it just reminded me of a multi-tasking, working mother like myself. (24)*

Although many people said they read the panel and got a sense of the significance or meaning of the different figures, some people said they couldn't remember what they read.

*I know I read the one on the wall...and this one I think – I've kind of forgotten what it said on here. (24)*

*I'm sure I must have found something really interesting there when I was reading. I don't honestly recollect what it was. (30)*

One person did not choose to read.

*I was mainly looking at the objects. I didn't want to be influenced by the signage. I just wanted an unmediated reaction. (6)*

Most of the FPM visitors read or glanced at the pull-out panel. Some said the details helped them think about and compare the spiritual and community cultural aspects of the Shrine with their own lives, especially about motherhood.

## 15 Triptych/Group Label

### People were surprised to see stories of Jesus portrayed in African art



Although the content of the triptych's imagery was familiar to people, they hadn't seen anything like this before.

*I did not know that Christianity had reached into African at that early date. I'm accustomed to the European or North American art. I'm sure that there was a strong influence from the missionaries who came and brought Christianity to the village. I had a strong feeling of attachment with fellow Christians who have been gone for centuries and centuries. (18)*

*I like this one because you've seen pictures of black Jesus but you never see anybody else in the Bible too much depicted as African American. I can look at it and be like, Oh they look just like me. (21)*

*This is when Christianity was incorporated into these people's beliefs in I think they said like 1700 years ago or something like that. They started using these three fold art pieces...So of course being that I'm a Christian I like that one. (24)*

Two people commented about the colorful style of the triptych.

*It showed a connection for me between African culture and probably other cultural influences. You know, ideas flow across cultures. And maybe it's the silhouette, the style and colors – I don't know, it's almost like a street art or something that's kind of odd stuff. That looks like a Shepard Fairey print. (30)*

*The color in the three piece picture itself was kind of interesting given that most of the other pieces in the exhibits were all natural earth tones. To see bright pigments used was a definite difference that I liked how it was portrayed. (36)*

Both the Christian subject matter and the physical properties of the triptych were meaningful. The label information was important in that it set the time period for people.

## 16 Bride's Ensemble/Extended Object Label & Viewpoints Label

### People found meaning in the objects themselves and made relatively less use of the interpretive materials

Visitors talked about weddings, wedding outfits, and made comparisons between different customs and cultures.

*They created all this beauty for their wedding and it's different than here where you go to the store and you spend thousands and thousands of dollars to buy a dress that you're going to put in a closet. (3)*

*I can identify with the use of wardrobe to express yourself and send word out to those around you as to how you would like to be treated. I'm sure that people who wore these clothes had that same feeling of self-confidence. (18)*

*I sort of liked the idea that you're conveying a message through your wedding clothes. I think women think they do that here but they're all wearing big puffy white dresses for the most part that make them look good as opposed to symbolizing their family. (P3)*

*The outfits are what attracted my eye because of the colors. And it made me think about different types of weddings in different types of cultures. (P7)*



People were impressed by the beautiful beadwork and the amount of effort it must have taken to make the outfits.

*This took time, and I just think we need to just slow down in society and take our time with things. With you know relationships, everything. That somebody actually made that by hand just like boggles me. I can't even imagine how long that would take. It was just so beautiful to me. (21)*

*The industry that was necessary to create those costumes...I mean thousands of hours had to go into making all of that beaded adornment. (3)*

*The beauty of the beadwork was what drew me to this originally and the support... I mean it had to take hundreds of hours to do all the beadwork that they were wearing. (9)*

A few people mentioned information that was on one side of the viewpoints label about the beading skills passed through generations (but only one person mentioned that they turned it).

*I read about the beading being handed down through generations. (33)*

*The statement there showed how the grandmothers taught the mothers who taught the daughter and how that was passed on through generations. My grandmother was a seamstress and she taught my mother and my mother taught us. And I thought that was a real link to this culture too. The more we think we're different the more we find out that we're basically all the same. (9)*

*When I was a kid my cousin Carol and I both got bead looms... I guess I wouldn't normally think that stuff that I did as a kid growing up in Michigan was the same thing that somebody would have done in Africa. I didn't learn how to do it from my grandmother like this artist says, but my cousin and I made each other bracelets and some of the bead work that they showed here looked a little bit like the beads that we had. I thought that was really cool. (P6)*

The properties of beauty, intricacy, and labor-intensiveness of the beading were meaningful. People identified easily with the marriage theme, and often made cross-cultural comparisons.

AFRICAN b

<i>Art</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>	<i>Gallery</i>	<i>Total</i>
Nail Figure	Layered Label	Ancestors and Spirits	8
Divination Tray (Case)	Pull Out Case+Extended Object Label	Yoruba Spirit World	7

The next two hot spot exhibits to be reviewed—Nail Figure and the Divination Tray Case—were included in the photo essays of eight and seven people, respectively, and the interpretive materials were prominent in making their personal meaning connections.

## 17 Nail Figure/Layered Label

### The layered label for this popular figure gave people new insights



For many people this was a familiar and favorite artwork at the DIA.

*I have to say this was my fiance's favorite thing in the entire museum. He comes, he goes "I want to see the nailman and I want to see the suits of armor" and then we can go home. Every time. (27)*

*So this one in particular was maybe one of my favorites. I had seen a lot of pictures of this. I never knew the meaning behind it all. (P13)*

Although familiar, this was the first time several people had taken the time to look at the layered label and it was very helpful to them for making new meanings.

*Everybody at the DIA knows about this piece but I don't spend a lot of time in the African galleries so I had never read this one before. (P6)*

*Initially I found this piece interesting but not picture worthy. Then I happened to find the material in front of it and actually looked at what it represented and the way the breakdown was. I really found that piece of information to be one of the best laid out. (36)*

People went into some detail about the significance of the figure, the nails and blades, what it meant, and what it reminded them of.

*The blades are for smaller crimes. Which was kind of strange because I think of a blade as potentially doing more damage than a nail. But I also like this idea that maybe conflicts could be resolved by sticking some things in something else. It almost reminded me of like a voodoo doll except that with a better outcome. (P6)*

*This one was a statue that the priests used. The blades and the nails were a symbol of problems that were resolved. And when I saw this it reminded me of, because I'm a Christian, the many scars and problems and sins and everything that Jesus Christ has taken on for us here on earth when he died upon the cross and the nails were put into his hands and the bruises were placed upon his body. (24)*

*I was drawn to it. And so that's personal. Certainly the belly button is a major focal point when you walk past. There was something there about the belly button to*

*ward off spirits. This was an individual who takes the brunt of a lot of punishment for the entire village, and I've never been in that kind of a position, but yes I could identify. It was interesting to me that that was a way that these events could be tallied. (18)*

*I like the idea that you could keep turning the pages to learn more. Everybody either has been to court or they know somebody who has been to court and basically this is to say this is over. That's something I can be personally related to. I like that closure. (27)*

*In the booklet it tells about each of the symbols that are represented on this piece called the nail figure. It was believed that this figure contained power and was able to heal medically. It said to restore and maintain the wellbeing of the community through special materials and it also protects against negative diseases. In today's society and culture we go to a drugstore for medicine. But in this culture they looked to goddesses or sculptures and they feel as though it protects them. That was very interesting and I really like this piece. (P13)*

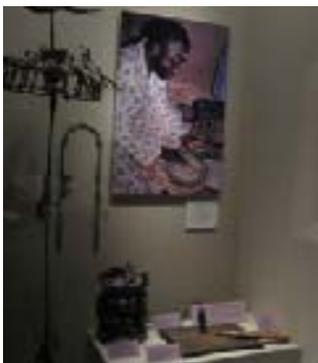
Many people used the layered label, and it helped them find familiar and new meanings in the art. They made connections and comparisons between their culture and African customs. There was lots of evidence of text echo between visitors' photo narratives and words in the label text.

## **18 Divination Tray Case/Pull-Out Case and Extended Object Label**

### **People found meanings in the labels about how these objects were used**

Visitors used words in the labels about the ways that the objects were used in a ceremony.

*The beads were used for rituals...they were shaken or banged on the ground. (27)*



*The tapping piece was very intricately carved, and I found that to be really interesting that they put that amount of effort into a ceremonial piece. (36)*

*I know that that stake is for tapping on the wood plate to try and kind of summon spirits and things. It was just interesting, the mechanics of how they would incur the deity power. (30)*

Reading and looking and reading and looking (R-L-R-L) was a very engaging aspect of this exhibit.

*I can imagine myself picking up this wand-looking thing, and I think, Oh I could pick this up. And it tells me right next to it, right on that label, what I would do with it. I really liked that all of the labels that are around it told me this is how it was laid out and used. The photographs helped a lot. It made this art less like a theory of what somebody would have used some time and more like this is actually what happened. I mean they're not especially pretty. They're intricate. But they had a real purpose. I like that a lot. But I loved the little labels that told me how I would use the stuff. (P6)*



*There's a priest. Okay, you look at what he's using. Oh look, it's down there. And it made the whole thing almost interactive where you're looking at a picture and then looking at the tool. And then trying to figure out what they can be used for. And that makes it personal and interactive because you're like, What would I use it for? And that's that question, what would I do with it? What does that mean to me? That's what I liked about it. (27)*

All the different labels in the Divination Tray case contributed to visitors' understanding of this exhibit. The labels helped them find familiar and new meanings.

AFRICAN

Art	Interpretation	Gallery	Total
Bride's Ensemble	Extended Object Label+Viewpoints Label	Cycle of Life	9
Zulu Doll (Case)	Group Label	Cycle of Life	6
Maternity Figure	Extended Object Label+Viewpoints	Cycle of Life	6

The Cycle of Life Gallery was included in the T&T study and the data (n=25, preliminary findings) showed that the three most popular exhibits were the Bride's Ensemble, Zulu Dolls, and the Maternity Figure, which were also among the most used exhibits in the FPM study. The Bride's Ensemble was discussed earlier (see page 34). The other two will be included here in the last part of the African gallery discussion, starting with Zulu Dolls.

### 19 Zulu Dolls/Group Label

**The group label helped visitors scaffold what they knew about dolls (familiar) to how these were used (new information)**



People used words from the label to describe what they found meaningful about these dolls.

*I was intrigued by the idea that anybody would give something that heavy and seemingly painful to a child to play with. If my children had that they would have broken a lot of things in the house not to mention probably each other. But I also liked the idea that the dolls represented something before the child was born. (P3)*

*These were the children's dolls. They were prebirth and then you know the information told me that they were then potentially passed on as childhood toys. I also noted a distinct and interesting thing, based on my summation of what I saw from their fertility aspects, they all have a phallic nature. (36)*

*They say they gave the ornately carved doll because sometimes they represented children lost, I mean infant mortality. That's interesting. I thought that was a good way to personally connect, show us what babies play with. I had a doll growing up when I was a kid. I'm the youngest. I have three brothers. We called them action*

*figures. Even Barbie was an action figure. (27)*

*Any object that is designed to represent a human has been used in training and ritual in every culture forever. So I stopped to look at it because it is dolls. I thought it was interesting that the one with the beadwork – the explanation was there – that the beads represented the status and the wealth and influence. (12)*

The group label clearly stated “dolls” in the title, and everyone used that word to describe what these objects are, and mainly took their personal meanings and cultural comparisons from that point.

## 20 Maternity Figure/Extended Object Label & Viewpoints Label

### **The object label was helpful because it enhanced new knowledge and reinforced existing knowledge**



The nursing mother caught people’s attention and they related to personal maternal care and health issues.

*It wasn’t just this but there was a whole corner that was about breast feeding and nourishment and stuff. We’ve got babies so it was kind of interesting to see. You know like other cultures valuing that kind of natural nourishment. (30)*

*This was the very beginning of the gallery, and I think the placement of the mother and child was probably very purposeful to give you the idea the gallery was all about family and growth. (33)*

*I know this one said how that particular statue depicting a baby breastfeeding with the mom is to insure the health of the baby and the mother. Because I know back then I’m sure the death rate was high during childbirth so I really like that. And I like the closeness of the mom. I read somewhere that if a child breastfeeds they get all kinds of extra nutrients from the mom. It also makes them closer. My wife breast fed both of my kids. So that kind of brought back memories. (P11)*

They noticed the label about how the royal mother was raising a future king.

*This one I liked because the caption said that she was feeding a future king. She’s birthed something and is nurturing something that is about to rule an empire. Mothers need to cherish and protect and nurture the children that they have. You don’t know what you have, you know, like you can have the next president. (21)*

*I read the information that went along with this one. It told you that it was a royal and that she was nursing her baby as a symbol of carrying the royal dynasty on*

*through her lineage. I am a mom I really like this one. All mothers should be treated and looked upon as royalty because they do so much. They're the ones that carry the seed. They're the ones that help to continue the lineage of everyone upon this earth. (24)*

Although everyone appeared to read the label at the front of the case, no one used or mentioned the Viewpoints label installed on the side of the case.

*Sorry. I did not see that. (33)*

*That label wasn't to be turned. (21)*

*I missed it. (24)*

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## Conclusions and Discussion

The DIA interpretives helped visitors find personal meaning in many ways that seem to group into three main categories: Properties & Preferences, Familiarity & Connections, Learning & Understanding. (See page 10 for a full description.) These categories are not mutually exclusive in people's reactions; they often found familiar *and* new meanings in the art/interpretation; familiar aspects *and* aesthetic properties; new ways of making sense *and* just liking it.

The art in the three gallery suites (Renaissance, Contemporary, African) selected as the sites for the FPM study were chosen because they provided vast contrasts in their topics and subject matter. In general, these differences did not seem to significantly influence people's ways of finding meaning, but there did seem to be slight differences in *evidence, frequencies, trends, and importance*. Each of these will be discussed below.

<i>Collection</i>	<i>Artwork</i>	<i>Interp.</i>	<i>Properties &amp; Preferences</i>	<i>Familiarity &amp; Connections</i>	<i>Learning &amp; Understanding</i>
Renaissance					
	Wedding	Layered		●	●
	St. Ives	POP	●	●	●
Contemporary					
	Square	Layered	●		●
	Officer	Photo	●		●
	Stone Line	Layered	●	●	
Africa					
	Shrine	POP		●	●
	Triptych	Object		●	
	Bride's	Object	●	●	

● = Considerable evidence in visitors' feedback

### Evidence for Ways of Finding Meaning by Gallery Collection

The table above shows the eight exhibits most often included in people's FPM photo essays—the hottest of the hot spots (nine or more people included them)—and the most common ways in which people found meaning from the art and interpretation strategies at these places. They were attracted to art/interpretation that drew their attention, provided a way to make a personal connection, and satisfied their need for information to make more sense out of what they saw. These ways of finding meaning varied with the specific contexts, as shown in the following eight examples:

The two artworks in Renaissance each had familiar elements, and the labels helped expand visitors' experience.

*The Wedding Dance*/Layered label—People found personal meaning in a familiar celebration by learning more about the art from the layered label.

*St. Ives*/Pull-out panel—The art was attractive and powerful; meaning occurred by visitors seeing themselves and making emotional connections; the story's details in the label were engaging.

The three artworks in Contemporary had unusual visual properties, and some visitors learned new things by using the interpretation.

*The Square*/Layered label—This large painting had multiple layers of meanings that were found by visitors with help from the layered label.

*Officer of the Hussars*/Photo label—Incongruity was one of the attractions to visitors, who found meaning in this eye-catching painting from the straightforward wall label that explained it and included a photo of the painting that helped inspire it.

*Stone Line*/Layered label—Stones on the floor reminded people of something familiar, e.g., a beach.

Visitors made personal connections with the African art by associating the use of the unfamiliar objects with something in their lives.

*Shrine*/Pull-out panel—Noticing the individual figures, especially mothers and children, was meaningful, and the shrine as a whole resonated on a spiritual level.

*Triptych*/Group label—People were surprised to see stories of Jesus portrayed in African art.

*Bride's Ensemble*/Extended object label—People found meaning in the beauty and purpose of the objects and made relatively less use of the interpretive materials.

### Frequency of Ways of Finding Meaning

In the table above (page 43), eight artwork examples were used to illustrate and compare the evidence for the ways of finding meaning in the different galleries. The trends in frequency across all 20 case studies are discussed below.

**Learning & Understanding seemed to be the most prominent way in which the DIA interpretives helped visitors find meaning, especially in the Contemporary galleries.** Making sense through using the DIA interpretives helped visitors make personally meaningful connections. In the Contemporary galleries, the interpretives gave visitors new knowledge and understanding about the art because it often raised the question for them, “What’s this about?” which was answered in the label.

**In the African galleries, more people made cultural comparisons and saw familiarities between cultures.** Making cultural comparisons and connections seems to be a subset or combination of Familiarity and Learning. Here the question might be, "What was the role of DIA interpretation in helping visitors find personal meaning in African art?" When visitors learned about the meaning or significance of an unfamiliar African object, they could then relate it to something familiar in their own lives, for example: what brides wear; what dolls children play with; the importance of mothers; conflict resolution.

**Familiarity with the content was often the way that visitors found meaning in the Renaissance galleries, especially for Christians who knew the Bible stories in the art.** Jesus, the crucifixion, Mary and the baby Jesus, the saints, and other Biblical content in the art in these galleries were familiar to those with religious training, an apparently fairly common trait of the FPM visitors. The question here might be, "What was the role of DIA interpretation in helping Christian visitors find personal meaning in art?" The interpretation reinforced the information they brought with them.

**Properties & Preferences appeared less often** as the primary way of finding meaning in the art, although it was an important companion or prerequisite to the other ways.

These trends were based on Serrell's impressions of the 20 hot spot case studies and are subject to further discussion and refinement. According to Adams' report, which included all of the artworks photographed and discussed by the 55 FPM participants, Familiarity & Connections was the most common overall strategy, which makes sense because her sample included the less-popular works of art. That is, people were attracted to certain artworks because of personal, idiosyncratic connections rather than the commonly shared reactions of the more popular displays where people were motivated by the visual properties, complexity, and questions to seek Learning & Understanding.

## Trends in How the Ways Were Used

Across all three galleries and collections, the 20 case studies showed the following trends in how different art and interpretation afforded different sequences of finding meaning:

### *Starting with something familiar, seeking confirmation...*

When the artwork afforded a familiar starting point (e.g., Biblical reference, wedding scene, nursing mother, stained glass, flat rocks), many visitors found meaning from their prior experience, knowledge, and memories (e.g., religious training, family celebrations, hobbies, vacations). In the Renaissance galleries, Christian iconography afforded an immediate connection for many people. The interpretation served to confirm or add depth to their understandings.

### *Starting with something unfamiliar, seeking information...*

In the Contemporary galleries, where much of the art was unfamiliar, many people seemed to need help to find meaning, and they looked to the interpretation to give them information for answers to their questions: What is going on here? What was the artist trying to say? They were seeking new understandings. The large size of many of the artworks along with the spaciousness of the galleries may have given people the room to ponder and read more without feeling overwhelmed.

### *Starting with something unfamiliar, seeking connection...*

In the African galleries, the art was also unfamiliar, and, in addition, a bit overwhelming in its otherness and in the density of objects. People seemed to rely primarily on the interpretation to establish connections between aspects of African culture and their own lives. Rather than seeking new information about the art, artist, or medium, they were looking more for personal connections: What is this about that I can relate to? They found connections in the topics of motherhood, marriage, and spiritual life.

*Using their own preferences, connections, and understandings...*

A minority of participants in the FPM study in all three galleries preferred to make their own meaning without using any of the interpretive devices. They bypassed the various labels not because they were already familiar with the content or stories, but because they preferred to rely on their own interpretations. They found personal meaning in the art without help from the DIA, although certainly the gallery layouts and design could have contributed to their positive experiences.

### Importance of Interpretation Differed by Artwork

The role and importance of the DIA interpretives seemed to differ with works of art being interpreted more than with the format of the interpretations (e.g., layered label, extended object label, pull-out panel).

The 20 hot spots reviewed in the main body of this report were the places where the exhibits attracted attention from the highest number of visitors. People stopped, paid attention, thought about what they were looking at, often read the label, and took a photo. They made personal connections—physically, emotionally, intellectually. What was so attractive about these hot spots, and to what extent did the DIA interpretives play a part in making the experience meaningful?

Below is a regrouping of all 20 hot spots according to the importance of the DIA interpretives in creating a meaningful experience. (These groups are based on Serrell's impressions, evidenced by the quotes and trends reviewed above, and are subject to further discussion and refinement.)

#### **Interpretation was very important in answering questions and guiding attention to details.**

DIA interpretives played a very important role in many visitors' experiences with the art in exhibits where people were drawn by something visually striking—their

attention was captured by size, bright colors, sound or movement, or mystery. People were motivated to read because they had questions about what was going on or what it was about. The sequence of attention seemed to begin with visitors trying to make sense, and then they looked to the interpretation for help, which led to personal connections and new understandings. These included:

*The Square/Layered label*—This large painting had multiple layers of meanings that were found by visitors with help from the layered label.

*Officer of the Hussars/Photo label*—Incongruity was one of the attractions to visitors, who found meaning in this eye-catching painting from the straightforward wall label that explained it and included a photo of the painting that helped inspire it.

*Atrabiliarios/Extended object label*—The art was mysterious, curious, and easy to miss, but the 50-word object label packed an emotionally meaningful punch.

*Nail Figure/Layered label*—The layered label for this striking and popular figure gave people new insights about conflict resolution, an unusual topic for a work of art.

*Divination Tray Case/Pull-out case label and extended object label*—People found meanings in the labels about how these objects were used. The juxtaposition of labels near the objects in the case was helpful.

The next two places where the interpretation seemed to be very important were not associated with one artwork or case. These were interpretation strategies that covered a grouping of artworks:

Gallery summary panel “Curtain Rises...”—Orientation was very important to the users of this label. Finding personal meaning was aided by knowing what to expect.

Response station computer interactive—Taking time to use this exhibit helped people find personal meaning through learning more about the art and the artists. This exhibit was a hot spot in the cued FPM study, but it was not hot in the uncued T&T study.

**Interpretation was important to confirm prior knowledge, evoke a memory, or add information to something familiar.**

In many exhibits, DIA interpretives played an important role in some visitors' experiences with the art to confirm what they knew and to add to existing feelings or experiences. Here the sequence seemed to be that they saw something that they personally connected with and then sought validation or more meaning from the interpretation. These included:

*St. Ives*/Pull-out panel—The art was attractive and powerful; the story's details were engaging. Finding meaning occurred by visitors seeing themselves and making emotional connections.

*Adoration of Magi*/Pull-out panel—Christians could relate without reading, but reading gave more meaning.

*The Wedding Dance*/Layered label—People found personal meaning in a familiar celebration by learning more about the art from the layered label.

*Triptych*/Group label—People were surprised to see stories of Jesus portrayed in African art.

*Zulu Dolls*/Group label—The group label helped visitors put together what they knew about dolls (familiar) with how these dolls were used (new information).

*Maternity Figure*/Extended object label and viewpoints label—The object label was helpful because it contributed new knowledge and reinforced existing knowledge, but no one used the viewpoint label.

*Shrine*/Pull-out panel—This large group of objects attracted people's attention. Noticing the individual figures, especially mothers and children, was meaningful, and the shrine as a whole resonated on a spiritual level.

### **Interpretation played a less important role in some hot spots.**

Some visitors seemed satisfied to use their personal preference or prior experiences to find meaning. The sequence of attention began with a personal connection and didn't necessarily go any further. These included:

*Stone Line*/Layered label—Stones on the floor reminded people of something familiar, e.g., a beach.

*Triptych: Crucifixion*/Extended object label—Personal meaning came mostly from prior knowledge and experience.

Eye spy label—For many people who used the eye spy labels, the activity itself was seen as social and fun, but it did not relate to deriving more meaning from the art.

*St. Augustine*/Group label—Personal preference for liking the medium was most meaningful, although the group label was mentioned by two people.

*What Will Come*/Extended object label—Music, movement, and incongruity were “moving,” but not the artist’s intent.

*Bride’s Ensemble*/Extended object label and viewpoints label—People found meaning in the beauty and purpose of the objects themselves and made relatively less use of the interpretive materials.

There were no lift labels as part of the FPM study. In the O&R study, lift labels were considered relatively popular and effective, and it is probably safe to assume that they helped people find personal meaning in the same ways in which the other strategies did in this FPM study, although the question-and-clue format may have afforded additional outcomes.

### [Finding Personal Meaning was Forecast by the T&T Studies](#)

The FPM data from the Phase 2 study appeared to confirm and validate the findings from the Phase 1 tracking-and-timing study. Uncued, unobtrusively observed casual visitors in the galleries showed the same patterns of hot spot attraction to certain artworks as did the cued participants in the FPM study who were instructed to take photos of places/experiences that had special meaning to them. In 10 cases, the same artworks in both studies were the most attractive and meaningful. That is, the data for the hottest spots mapped onto each other in both studies.

Hot spots in the Renaissance and Medieval “Aspiring to the Real” gallery—

*Adoration of Magi, St. Augustine, and Nativity*

Hot spots in the Contemporary “Times Not History” gallery—

*The Square, Officer of the Hussars, What Will Come, Atrabiliaros*

Hot spots in the African gallery “Cycle of Life”—

*Bride’s Ensemble, Zulu Doll, Maternity Figure*

Thus, in T&T studies, when the data show an above-average number of visitors stopping at a certain exhibit, we can assume that some special affordances of that

artwork/interpretive are helping people find personal meaning in a variety of ways, often with some shared reactions in common.

## Recommendations

All types of DIA interpretation were helpful to many people in all three galleries. Extended object labels and group labels provided immediate and useful information that answered visitors' questions and added to their prior knowledge.

- More wall labels could be added in the Contemporary galleries, where visitors are less likely to feel an immediate personal connection to the art. These would help communicate or reinforce the main ideas in the gallery summary panels.

Labels on the walls or next to the object or artwork were easier to locate than the pull-out panels and the layered labels, as visitors tended to move along the periphery of the room, often walking in between the art and the stanchions that held the interpretive panels.

- Perhaps the wall label could refer to the stanchion label, with a small picture of the label "right behind you" (e.g., at The Square or Wedding Dance).

In a permanent collection, fewer visitors are motivated to seek information; they are also moving more quickly compared to in a temporary exhibition. Still, there are clearly hot spots. The DIA can take advantage of people's intrinsic motivations to become engaged.

- Add brief information to hot spots that don't have it (e.g., at Nativity).

Layered labels, pull-out panels, and response stations are great resources, but they take more time to use. There's a temptation to make them longer for those mythical visitors who "want more information." T&T data showed many low percentages of users, and short time-stays in the galleries. FPM and O&R data confirmed that visitors who do use them found them meaningful, but DIA needs to be realistic about people's time budgets.

- Keep them short.

Viewpoint labels were underused because people didn't notice them. People can't find new meanings if they don't find the label.

- Change the icon on the label so it doesn't look like a "don't touch" message, and prototype some new graphics that will capture visitors' attention with the correct intuitive response for the viewpoint labels.

The DIA interpretive strategies are meant for visitors who do not have a background in art history, but they still *look* pretty much like typical art museum labels. People have to read them to find out that they are not your basic art-speak.

- Design labels to be a bit bolder, with larger titles that clearly address common visitor questions but without making them seem like they are for children.

For every new interpretive strategy that is developed, consider the relative importance and strengths of the three ways of finding meaning that visitors typically use: Preferences and Properties, Familiarity and Connections, Learning and Understanding.

- Which "ways" apply most appropriately and can be reinforced best in the specific context of each artwork that is being interpreted?

Finding personal meaning means seeing yourself, being reminded of prior experiences, having an emotional connection, and feeling competent. In this study we saw the many ways in which people do this for themselves and the many ways that the DIA played an important role in helping to make these things happen. The DIA should continue to value visitors' attention by supporting and reinforcing the interpretive strategies that foster personal meaning and using formative evaluation to fine-tune and assure the effectiveness of them.