



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Cleveland Museum of Art
Permanent Collection Reinstallation
Formative Evaluation Study
April 2009

The staff at the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA) focused this first phase of collections reinstallation visitor research on better understanding the ways in which visitors use and make meaning from the current collections installation. These findings provide a baseline measure that can inform their interpretive decisions in subsequent installation phases. The overarching evaluation questions that guided this evaluation were:

1. What meaning do visitors make and take from the objects and how is their meaning linked to or aligned with the intended key messages?
2. How do visitors make meaning in the CMA galleries?
Including the role of in-gallery interpretive strategies (sight-line objects, wall panels, labels, and gallery cards), other people (within group, other visitors, and museum staff), and prior knowledge, experience, and interest

Three inter-related methodologies were used to address the evaluation questions: focused observations, post-visit gallery interviews, and brief written questionnaires. Data were collected in five galleries, each distinguished by a unique key message.

Visitor Meaning-Making & Relation to Gallery Key Messages

When pressed, most visitors could identify a theme or message of the gallery in which they were intercepted. Many visitors focused on specific time periods, artistic styles or genres, and/or geographical regions. Themes also focused on overt subject matter and motifs found in the artwork, such as religion, mythology, royalty, and nature.

Visitors tended to use one or more of three basic strategies to help them locate main messages: 1.) art works; 2.) interpretive devices (such as wall panels, labels and gallery cards); and/or 3.) prior knowledge and experience.

In each of the five galleries, visitors pointed out art that was particularly interesting or intriguing. Visitors' tastes and interests varied widely as did their explanations for why they were drawn to certain works of art. Categories of why visitors preferred an artwork included: subject matter/content, stimulated curiosity, craftsmanship, comparison of then and now, familiarity with the artist or style, elements and principles of design, uniqueness, personal connection, placement in the gallery, the type of art, and a general, but unexplainable, preference.

The study sought to better understand the strategies visitors used to make meaning of objects that attracted them, including use of sightline objects, text panels and wall labels, gallery cards, and within-group social interaction. Visitors were attracted to works that either visually caught their attention or related in some way to their interest and/or experience. Whether or not these objects were CMA sightline or sub-sightline objects did not seem to affect the degree to which visitors were drawn to objects. Overall, few visitors read the gallery text panels where the themes were explained, which explains why very few visitors identified themes articulated by CMA staff. Labels for individual art works were read more often than wall text panels and, in general visitors found the labels clear, legible, and interesting. The ways in which labels helped visitors understand the art varied between identifying the who, what, when, and where of the object,

providing information about the artist, giving the history or “back-story,” and other interesting details about the art. In general, visitors read labels for the art works that most interested them.

The visitors who read few or no labels said they preferred to look at the art instead of reading. Although this study did not specifically ask visitors about the design of labels and text panels, some visitors offered comments suggesting that reading was difficult because the background of the labels was the same color as the wall and, in some cases, the type font was white or light against a dark background – the most difficult way to read small type. Very few visitors used the Gallery Cards. Some said they noticed the cards in other galleries but they were generally not able to explain why they did not use the cards.

Some galleries and specific objects within galleries appeared to stimulate social interaction. Observers noted when visitors in social groups of two or more talked with each other and determined the degree to which that conversation related to the work of art. Most social interaction consisted of simple identification of the subject or objects within a work of art. The gallery cluster that stimulated the highest level of social interaction was the British/American cluster. The next most socially stimulating gallery was the French/German (Paris as International Art Center). The gallery with the lowest quality of social interaction was the American gallery.

When asked to select the top three most important concepts to have on a label, the majority of the visitors selected historical context. Other top choices included where an object was from and significance and value. Concepts that were often cited as the least important included: sports, entertainment, and popular culture, how we know it's authentic, and history of ownership.

Visitors were asked to select the preferences for ways that they liked to get information in the art museum. The most commonly selected choices included: gallery interpreter posted to a gallery, audio tour, and electronic hand-held device. Reasons cited for why these information delivery systems were preferred revolved around the idea that these interpretive approaches allowed visitors choice and control over what they saw, when, and in what order. Few visitors selected the traditional docent-guided tour as either least or most preferred. When visitors preferred the docent tour they mentioned that simplicity of a tour and the fact that it was something they were accustomed to. When a docent tour was least preferred the reasons related to a lack of choice and control and a feeling of getting “stuck” in something they could not get out of.

There were mixed reviews for interactive hubs. Visitors warmed more to the idea of these hubs being integrated into the galleries than they did to their being hubs separated from the art. When visitors liked the interactive hub idea the reasons revolved around choice and control plus the added fun, modern, and new qualities of computer technology. Negative responses frequently related to the feeling that these hubs would be noise and distracting. This is a common response to the idea of computer technology in the art museum. People associate “interactive” with their experiences in science or children's museums and assume that it is the computer interactive that causes the noise. There appears to be some misconceptions about the nature of fun and its relationship to noise. Visitors may need to see that technology can be incorporated into museum galleries that not only respects the contemplative nature of the experience while providing interesting and quietly fun ways to access meaning.

The delivery system most often cited as being the least preferred was the cell phone tour. Many visitors felt it was inappropriate to use a cell phone in a museum, citing the disturbance of hearing the rings and people talking. When it was pointed out that visitors would only listen to the phone, much like an audio tour, it did not change many opinions. Some people indicated that they did not want to use their minutes on the cell phone tour. This is an interesting finding as

cell phone tours are often well-used in other museums. CMA visitors did not appear to be familiar with this use of cell phones so it may be worth testing the concept on a small scale to see if this negative response was related to unfamiliarity with a new approach.

Visitors were asked to rate their preference for points of view that might be conveyed about an object. This task, in itself, was confusing for many visitors as they had not considered that there were different ways to look at and think about an object. Once the approach was explained many visitors could make selections from the choices given to them by the evaluators. The overwhelming majority of the visitors were most interested in hearing about the artist's point of view. All other points of view were rated low and some visitors said that they did not want to see any of these points of view. The least preferred point of view was the celebrity/pop culture perspective. Sometimes, visitors were hesitant to select any of the choices, saying that the point of view should depend on what is relevant to the artwork being discussed. Visitors often emphasized accuracy and expertise, saying that presenting different points of view is fine as long as the person is knowledgeable about the art. Again, this response may be related to visitors' general lack of familiarity with the idea of different perspectives. We know that people enjoy the story aspect surrounding a work of art and different points of view are threads in a very rich story. This idea warrants further testing with more specific examples so visitors better understand what the museum means by points of view.