

The Denver Art Museum Interpretive Project

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PREFACE

The Denver Art Museum Interpretive Project was a two-and-a-half-year effort funded by the Getty Grant Program and the National Endowment for the Arts. The project had two main goals. The first was to develop a conceptual framework for creating interpretive materials for novice, or lay, visitors. We wanted to devise a way of thinking that would inspire and challenge our interpretive efforts; that would be based on a strong understanding of our visitors; and that would help novices become more expert in, and more rewarded by, their encounters with works of art. "Building a Framework" describes how we evolved this way of thinking and the materials we used to do so.

Our second goal was to create thirteen experimental label and gallery guide projects based on this framework. "Creating Interpretive Experiments" and the following project reports describe our efforts and the response we received from visitors. While these projects aren't definitive solutions for all museums, or even for every collection in the Denver Art Museum, they show how we grappled with several types of interpretive materials.

The study results included in this report were invaluable to our work, but many of the

smaller sample studies are not generalizable to all museums. Institutions committed to creating quality interpretation must explore the types of experiences *their* visitors are having with *their* collections.

Perhaps the most important outcome of this grant was the higher level of thinking on interpretive issues it inspired in our staff. These two-and-a-half years gave us a chance to delve into the complex issues of aesthetics, the nature of visitors' art experiences, and human psychology. Our curators, educators, and editors entered into more fulsome discussions about interpretive issues. These discussions, in turn, helped us make sound and creative decisions about the content, style, and format of our labels and gallery guides.

We hope this report on the Interpretive Project generates discussion and critical thinking, and we welcome any comments or critiques. Further, we urge other institutions to set similar tasks for themselves--to learn about their visitors, to articulate their interpretive goals, and to keep experimenting with ways of enhancing novices' encounters with art.

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Our label and gallery guide projects owe much to our curatorial and publications staffs. We'd like to thank curators Dick Conn, David Curry, Ron Otsuka, Dianne Vanderlip, Deborah Jordy, and Julia White for sharing their expertise and sensibilities in shaping the content, format, and goals of many of our experiments. Marlene Chambers and Margaret Ritchie were invaluable in making sure we communicated our ideas effectively. We'd also like to thank Richard Teitz and Lewis Story for their administrative support.

Our designers and fabricators--Scott Annis, Connie Asher, Carol Durham, Roger Fountain, Jim Lewis, Glenn Miller and the Denver Museum of Natural History design crew, Lehlani Murray, Joan Pacos, Steve Reinhardt, Steve Setlick, and Wally Soderquist--showed great ingenuity and a willingness to tinker with prototypes until they worked right. Special thanks to Daryl Fischer for her innovative designs and fabrication expertise on several of our more challenging projects and to our in-house designer Jeremy Hillhouse for all his advice.

Our evaluation efforts would not have been possible without Ross Loomis's expertise, patience, and humor. Over a hundred volunteers, staff aides, and interns assisted us in screening potential interviewees by phone, distributing questionnaires, tracking visitors through the galleries, videotaping our interviews, and countless other tasks associated with studies. Of special note are Kathryn Becker, Viviana Carro, Bruce DeCameron, Carolyn Don, Susan Frawley, Natalie Gaskins, Michelle Ideus, Irene Karsten, Marilyn Knox, Lisa Kring, Donna McElroy, Helen Muir, Lori Pachelli, Brett Phares,

Jennifer Rashleigh, Katie Russell, Nora Segal, and Kierin Thompson. Ruth Edwards and Marc Fusco offered their expertise in analyzing our 1,000-plus person survey and several project evaluations. We're also greatly indebted to the hundreds of visitors who participated in our studies. Their willingness to share their experiences, insights, and criticisms was essential to the success of this project. We also appreciate the insights and perspectives of our three outside consultants/evaluators, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Beverly Serrell, and Evan Turner, as well as the informal feedback we've received from our colleagues.

A project of this magnitude has an impact on departments throughout a museum. We'd like to thank Mary Ann Igna, Keith Swanson, Sharon Polhamus, Joe Prochnio and his crew, and the entire security department for their cooperation and assistance. Cynthia Nakamura, Bill O'Connor, Lloyd Rule, and their photography volunteers were wonderful in documenting our projects. Our secretarial assistants, Lisa Aylesworth, Susan Frawley, and Joan Pacos, kept the project running smoothly (and deserve special recognition for the hours of tapes they transcribed). Thanks to Emilio Lobato III and Stephanie Taylor for helping with this report. We'd also like to thank Lori Mellon of our development office for seeing this project through from the initial grant proposal to the final report. Steve Grinstead, Joan Pacos, and Margaret Ritchie have our gratitude for their time, dedication, and skillful editing and design.

Finally, we would like to thank the Getty Grant Program and the National Endowment for the Arts for their generous support.

BUILDING A FRAMEWORK

Our plan of action was three-pronged. First, we needed a grounding in research that had already been done. While no member of our staff had the time to do a complete literature review, we were still able to explore topics as varied as adult learning styles, aesthetics, readability formulas, museum visitation patterns, and peak experiences. As our bibliography on p. 155 indicates, we believed it was important to look at how people learn, how they visit museums, and how they experience art. We also explored visual perception and written communication.

Second, we needed a useful understanding of our audience, in relation to our galleries and specific works in our collections. No matter how much we knew about museum visitors and interpretation in general, we needed to know about *our* visitors and their experiences in our museum. This information also had to be genuinely useful when we sat down to write a guide or develop a label. While demographic information, percentages of members versus nonmembers, and attendance statistics can be invaluable to other museum functions, they don't have a large impact on the goals, content, or format of a label.

Our information-gathering took many forms: tracking adults' viewing patterns in our Asian galleries to see which objects attracted and held their attention; setting up boxes soliciting visitor questions in front of key American works; and conducting a 1,000-plus person survey of visitors' backgrounds and interpretive needs.¹ But, ultimately, what were most useful and thought-provoking were the in-depth interviews we conducted, trying to understand our visitors' experiences with art. What went through

their heads as they looked at individual pieces? What were their most memorable experiences with objects? And what expectations did they bring that shaped their encounters with art?

Our in-depth interviews and evaluations were not pristine, academic studies. Instead, they were vehicles for us to gain insights that could help us make better decisions. In deciding how far to pursue our studies and how much weight to place on the results, we asked ourselves three questions: 1) How critical are the decisions we need to make, and are we willing to make them based on the information we have? 2) Have our studies in conjunction with our reading and teaching experiences *adequately* enabled us to meet visitor needs in a given project and achieve our goals? 3) Is our "data" sufficient to leverage change?

Once we had our visitor information, we needed a way to determine specific interpretive goals. We knew we wanted to "enhance visitors' experiences," but we needed to define what that entailed. To do this, we turned to an "expert model." Most expert models are constructed by looking at the differences between the way unskilled and highly skilled people perform the same task, then reconstructing the steps or stages in between. By comparing novices' and experts' experiences with art, and by identifying some of the skills, attitudes, and underlying assumptions each group brought to these experiences, we believed we could identify some key areas for interpretation. Our intent was never to turn visitors into quasi art experts, even if this were possible in a leisure learning environment. Nor should our

approach suggest in any way that we think aesthetic experiences can be defined in neat steps, or that there is one ideal experience all visitors should (or could) have. Rather by identifying where novices' experiences were short-circuited and where there was potential for even richer encounters with art, we hoped to identify interpretive directions based on visitors' real experiences and needs.

We initially targeted two groups for interviews--the expert and the novice--assuming that we would look to our own professional staff for "experts" and to visitors with limited art background for "novices." As we thought this through, we began to question whether art professionals' experiences were the best model for lay visitors, or whether knowledgeable, nonprofessional art lovers might be more appropriate given the avocational nature of their museum visits. Motivation was also an issue when we looked at the novice end of the spectrum. Were there differences between the experiences of novices who came primarily for an outing (e.g., to bring out-of-town visitors) and those who came for an art experience? Ultimately, we decided to look at four groups: museum professionals;² advanced amateurs (people with a great deal of knowledge about art, but who pursued it as an avocation versus a profession);³ art-motivated novices; and outing-motivated novices.⁴ While we still believe the distinction between art- and outing-motivated novices may be fruitful, our 1,000-plus person survey suggests that the number of outing novices at the Denver Art Museum did not warrant pursuing these differences within the context of this grant.⁵

As our research progressed, members of the education, publications, and curatorial staffs met to discuss the similarities and differences we saw between experts and novices, and to weigh which aspects of novices' experiences

should be considered and respected in developing interpretive materials. These discussions served as a shared baseline for staff members who then pursued the ideas they found personally intriguing in label and gallery guide experiments (see "Creating Interpretive Experiments," p. 47).

1. Copies of the observation studies are available from the Denver Art Museum Education Department. Survey results are discussed in "Cluster Analysis of Visitor Characteristics and Expectations," p. 139.

2. We are greatly indebted to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Rick E. Robinson, et al., who discuss museum professionals' aesthetic experiences in "The Art of Seeing: Toward an Interpretive Psychology of the Visual Experience" (Report on research submitted to the J. Paul Getty Foundation, July, 1986), since published by Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson as *The Art of Seeing: An Interpretation of the Aesthetic Encounter* (Malibu: J. Paul Getty Museum and the Getty Center for Education in the Arts, 1990).

3. "Advanced amateurs" are roughly comparable to a group Robert Wolf and Barbara Tymitz called "connoisseurs" in their 1980 study of visitors to the Hirshhorn Museum. Wolf and Tymitz describe "connoisseurs" as "the most frequent repeat visitor[s] at the Hirshhorn. They are best characterized as regular art museum goers and usually have a solid background in art through previous studies or some art related avocation." ("When Will the Fourth Floor Be Open? A Study of Visitor Perceptions of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden," p. 18). Recently, we've started using the term "committed visitors" to describe this group.

4. We chose the term "novice" after much deliberation. We wanted a word that would conjure up a shared image for our staff, and be less open to interpretation than "general visitor." We also wanted a term that was respectful, so we shied away from a designation based on literacy or sophistication. By calling this group "novices," we are not suggesting that there aren't people more naive about art, only that they are the most novice of our visitors.

5. This study estimated that 71% of our visitors were art novices and only 1% were outing novices. A later survey of our membership showed no outing novices and 65% art novices.

THROUGH THEIR EYES

Novices and Advanced Amateurs

Melora McDermott-Lewis

Introduction

To create a framework for interpretation, we needed a better understanding of how experts and novices experience art--what enables both groups to have successful encounters with art, which aspects of their experiences they value, and, in the case of novices, how their experiences are limited. The studies in this report are based on small samples using a qualitative approach.¹ They were invaluable in helping us think about our interpretive goals in a new way and in giving us a vehicle for making the much discussed, but somewhat elusive, novice visitor more real to our staff.

Ideally, if staff time and financial resources were available, we'd follow up our work with large-sample studies that would be more generalizable. As is, we believe our findings form the basis for what Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss call a "grounded theory"--a set of propositions, grounded in exploratory research *and* experience, that will be strengthened or modified by future studies.² It's imperative that these future studies be done, so the museum education field can develop a strong theoretical base that is valid for most institutions. We also believe it's critical for individual museums to pursue their own visitor studies whether they are generalizable or not, to best determine how adults experience works in their specific collections.³

The following report is divided into two sections. The first focuses on "art novices," visitors who rated themselves as having

moderate to high interest in art and low to moderate knowledge.⁴ The second looks at "advanced amateurs," knowledgeable visitors who pursue art as an avocation. Both sections examine 1) expectations these groups have for museum visits and how those expectations affect or are affected by their experiences with art objects, and 2) the group's characteristic ways of looking at art. The quotes in the reports are taken directly from the interviews and are identified by a letter for individual interviews or a number for group interviews. To show how strong a particular trend seems, we've noted the number of interviews containing similar statements. This trend is expressed as a ratio of interviews illustrating a particular point to the total number of interviews (i.e., 17/20). Our rule of thumb for all small samples was that if 70% of our interviewees showed the same pattern, then we had a notable trend.

Patterns among the advanced amateurs aren't nearly as strong as those among novices. This may be due in part to the complex and personal nature of more expert aesthetic experiences (see Robinson and Csikszentmihalyi). But it also has to do with the range of expertise represented in the group; while all advanced amateurs claim "high" to "very high" knowledge of art, some were clearly more advanced than others. As a result, we've included several ideas that are minority views or exceptions, but that we think are worth noting and possibly exploring further in future studies.

Method

The novice study consisted of sixteen individual and four group interviews with adults selected through a phone screening form (see Appendix A, p. 40, for profile of interviewees and Appendix B, p. 41, for screening form for advanced amateurs and novices). Names for potential interviewees were drawn from exhibition guest books, free pass forms, previous questionnaires, and screening forms filled out at the Denver Art Museum and the Denver Museum of Natural History. We conducted fifteen advanced amateur interviews. Five names were drawn from the same interview pool as the novice interviewees and the other ten were selected from a list of nominations composed by our curators and associate director.

Each interview lasted about an hour and a half and covered a prescribed list of topics (see Appendix C, p. 45), including the interviewee's 1) art background and areas of interest, 2) expectations for museum visits, 3) preferred ways of visiting museums and looking at objects, 4) memorable experiences with art, and 5) recommendations for good art museum visits. After spending about an hour on these topics, we looked at two objects the interviewee had selected beforehand. (Novices were asked to choose any two objects they liked.⁵ Advanced amateurs were also asked to select two objects they liked--one they were familiar with and another they knew nothing about.) While viewing these objects, interviewees were asked to talk about what they noticed, thought, or felt.⁶

Originally, two staff people intended to review the interviews independently to ensure that our findings were not one person's subjective interpretation. But time and staff limitations made this impossible, so one

person listened to and read the transcribed interviews several times, looking for patterns. Coding categories were then created using a simple notecard system. Any topic that emerged more than once during the interviews was recorded onto a note card. Once these cards were sorted into logical groupings (much like those presented in the report), the staff person went back through the interviews to see how many times and in what context these topics appeared.⁷ With the advanced amateur materials, the staff member looked first for trends that emerged, independent of the novice findings, and then went back to make comparisons.

Novices

Expectations for Museum Visits

A Pleasant Experience

Novices (17/20) voice a strong desire for an "appealing, soothing, and pleasing" museum visit (W), an "Ah, that's beautiful" experience (O). In general, they want to avoid "feeling negative" (II). This desire for the peaceful and the positive applies to both their individual encounters with works of art and the overall feeling they wish to take away from the visit.

Sometimes it's the piece of art.
Sometimes it's just the pleasure of being there. Sometimes it's the notion that you pass by eleven things you can't remember, but, hey, the end result for you is that you're just calm and at peace. (W)

For many⁸ novices (14/20), a museum visit is a "little corner of revitalization" (F), a respite from the pressures of graduate school, social work, or homemaking, a time for "the world [to go] away for a while" (C).

I look for things to enhance my life, to make me aware of the beautiful things that are going on around me, something that adds to my life, something outside eating and sleeping and working and, you know, the mundane, everyday things. (E)

For several interviewees (11/20), visits take on an almost therapeutic value.

I would say that it's probably self-renewal, not just in terms of the value of the art but maybe in getting your own life in order just a little bit. You need those few moments to kind of center on what you think, what you feel about a painting even. You don't get a chance to do that very often. (DD)

Novices seem to want a "light" experience, not one filled with a lot of effort, or "must do's."⁹

It's frivolous time, so to speak. . . . This is my time to do as I please. There's no commitment, . . . you can just enjoy whatever you see. (S)

I look for it to be a pleasant experience, not terribly deep and heavy. (O)

In roughly two-thirds of the interviews, novices discuss the terms "appreciate" and "enjoy." "Appreciate" seems to describe something that's good for them, and it has very little to do with the pleasure or "enjoyment" they take in their visits. Though they more often suggest that enjoyment is the purpose of their visits, they seem to feel there are things that "should" be done in a museum. This dichotomy is expressed by a new mother speaking about what she will do when her daughter is old enough to visit a

museum.

I'd show her the basics of European art, . . . the basics of American art, and then I would go take her up to the dollhouses and the fabric, and [I'd] let her have fun there. (F)

Or another woman speaking of the type of course she thinks she needs to take.

I'd have to start with a basic course telling you how to enjoy art, . . . almost like Great Books. . . . They sort of guide you through the books that you should--like is probably not it, but *should*--read, you know, for the basic knowledge of books. (R)

A Social Experience

For most novices (17/20), doing something with someone else is an important part of their museum experience. For some, this is the focus of the visit, and museum objects simply become, as Sheldon Annis once put it, "living room conversation pieces."¹⁰

I'm with my wife, and she brings up a point that I hadn't considered before or even just a pleasant notion--not so much a point of art, but [something like], "Gee, the *Two Girls* look wonderful. Hey, let's have kids." You know, some kind of nice feeling. (W)

For others, the social aspect is actually an important part of the way they look at the art.

That's part of appreciating it for me, . . . seeing my perspective and hearing it and then having someone else there to either agree or disagree, but to foil off. (CC)

A few novices (3/20), who generally visit with others, note the merits of being alone, like the lawyer who commented:

I get my most enjoyment out of it when I have time to reflect on what I'm looking at without an intrusion from someone else. (HH)

But these same novices go on to explain that their time for socializing is too precious to them or their art background too limited to make visiting alone a truly desirable option.

I guess maybe if I knew more about art I'd come by myself to look. (G)

A Learning Experience

Many of the interviewees (15/20) expect to "learn something" during their visits. When pressed about what they mean by "learning," their definitions are quite broad.

You're always learning, as long as you observe and you keep watching. And I think there's hardly a time you'd ever go to a museum that you surely would not see . . . something that you weren't aware of before. (R)

Oh no, [learning in a museum] is not information-related. It's more the art itself. The sense of wonderment of how a person could think to create. It has something to do with the creativity of people, of human beings. . . . Although with the actual information that you give on each piece, who did it, what period of history it was--that's very necessary to fill that out, you know--that completes it, but I don't know if that's the learning. [Pauses] That's not it because, if that was it, then I could read a book.

That's very nice, but that's not as nice as coming to a museum is. (C)

For many novices, being exposed to something new, "a technique you may not have known much about, or . . . a type of work you may not have had the opportunity to see before" (DD), constitutes a learning experience.

Seeing "something I haven't seen before, something I hadn't expected to see" (S) comes up several times (10/20) in the interviews as an expectation. Novices seem to derive a great deal of pleasure out of viewing things that *pleasantly* surprise them, like an exhibition of Duane Hanson figures or a John deAndrea nude that's "like nothing you've ever seen before" (5). About half of the interviewees also mention that seeing traveling exhibitions or changes in the permanent collection is important to them, because they can see something "new."

Novices consistently want labels, tours, and other learning opportunities of the sort that would help them see more or give them a "very basic idea about . . . what you are looking at" (G). Only one interviewee is really interested in learning as much as possible about art and art history in general. The others just want to get more out of the objects they're viewing (19/20).¹¹

See, if there was something under about it, then it would be easier for me to look at and say, "Oh, I see that." (5)

And the different things that [the docent] said about the paintings I probably wouldn't have noticed if she hadn't been there. I would like to see more of that. (8)

For the most part, novices aren't looking for heavily structured learning experiences. As one woman explains, she'd like to be gently guided "for a little while, and then I'd have to be set free" (R). They want the option to choose what they want to learn about and how hard, if at all, they want to work.

You should be able to decide when you want to learn more about it. . . . Certain works of art you want to learn more about and others you don't. (3)

It would be neat and ideal to say every time [I visit a museum] I've learned one little unique, different thing, and I hope that would happen, but I don't seek to accomplish that goal. I just hope it happens. (W)

Characteristics of Looking

A Reactive Stance

Perhaps the best description of how novices look at art comes from a woman who explains, "I just let [the art] hit me" (F). In general (19/20), novices take a very reactive stance in their looking and hope that somehow a painting or a sculpture will "knock their socks off," move them deeply, or simply make them feel good. Their strategy is "just [to] receive it, sort of leave yourself open" (R).

I think there's . . . less for you to do when you look at art because it's portrayed right there in front of you. And maybe it's because I know less about art than I do about music . . . but listening to music you have to use your mind and your feelings and your knowledge. . . . Art sort of jumps out at you, and you can enjoy it easier

without putting as much of yourself into it. (G)

The following attitude is decidedly an exception among novices.

A work of art expects a lot of me. I have to work harder at observation. I have to think more when I look at a work of art. . . . I don't sit there passively and let it emit sparks or whatever. . . . It only is what I bring to it. (F)

Only a fifth of the interviewees, in describing how they like to look at a work of art, mention taking some sort of an active role. These novices talk about "scrutinizing" a work or "dissecting" it, though, when pressed, they're very vague about what this entails.

You know, looking at it closer and seeing what it is that I'm looking at, taking it apart. (E)

When novices are actually looking at works of art, they tend (15/16) to concentrate on the obvious.¹² Mainly they focus on subject matter.

I'm not seeing anything that's not obvious. . . . It's just a simple street scene with buildings and people walking. (O)

Novices' observations are somewhat random, again more reactive than deliberate. There are, however, several indications that they try to pursue something that catches their eye. In some cases (6/20), details or aspects of a work intrigue them enough to ask themselves a question. One interviewee tried to figure out the type of tree depicted on a Chinese screen, another searched for halos in reli-

gious works after noticing a painting of Christ without one. A third became intrigued by the materials of a work:

It was oil on linen. And the next thought that occurred to me is, well, I wonder if you can paint with more clarity on linen than you can on canvas. So that led me on to finding another painting on canvas that seemed as clear as this one. (O)

Others (4/20) tried to figure out how a particular work was made, and/or whether there were any “mistakes.”

I try to determine what the artist’s order would be. I try to guess, obviously I don’t know. . . . I may be wrong. I probably am most of the time, but I feel that’s the best way to approach it. (F)

I kept looking at all the little parts of it to see if he made any errors in the shadows. You know, got them in the wrong parts. . . . Well, not in a critical way, just for fun, just to see if I can see something different than I would see the first time I looked at it. (E)

For both of these novices, the value of framing a question is as much in guiding and focusing their looking as in coming up with some sort of answer.

Quick Fixes

For many (16/20) of those we interviewed, the ideal way to visit a museum is to wander through the galleries until something “catches their eye”—until they get “a visual flash” (HH), as one man calls it.

The first thing, it’s got to attract me.

It’s like opening, like thumbing through, a magazine. You know, you see somebody in a magazine stand, they thumb through a magazine, and they’ll stop. (I)

While the following quote is perhaps a bit extreme, it does underscore many novices’ attitude that a work has to earn their attention before they’re willing to invest any real time in it.¹³

It may have often extremely deep, significant message, [but] won’t draw my attention over to look at it. And if it doesn’t, as far as I’m concerned, it’s failed. (I)

Both our interviews and our gallery observations¹⁴ indicate that the time novices spend with art works is minimal. Their recommendations, however, to “take your time” (12/20) and focus on a few things (8/20), the pleasure they get out of seeing old favorites,¹⁵ and comments like the following one, seem to indicate that novices believe you can get more out of a work by spending time with it.

I suppose most, or an awful lot, of art has things that you don’t initially see the first time, and you’ll come back around and see more later if you look at it. (O)

But their characteristic ways of looking simply do not seem to yield enough rewards to warrant attending to a piece for very long.

The Power of Emotion

For most of the novices we interviewed (19/20), having an emotional response to a work of art is a large part, if not most, of their experience with that piece. The topic

comes up repeatedly in all but one interview. Novices obviously value highly the feelings they get from art.

My experience with art is the feeling I get from looking at it. The overall effect. (E)

Well, it moves me. It has to make me feel something . . . and to me that separates art from, I don't know. (5)

Several (13/20) of the novices' most memorable experiences with art are instances when they have been deeply moved, or, as one man describes it, "washed over with a feeling that is kind of powerful" (HH). It's "an overwhelming kind of thing, . . . a purely emotional kind of thing" (C), like "being spell-bound by [the object] and not wanting to leave it" (4). These experiences are obviously very powerful, even many years later; one woman broke into tears as she recounted seeing *The Pieta* at the 1964 World's Fair.

And the people were so quiet as we walked through to look at it. It had light shining on it. I think it's made of alabaster or something like that that has a quality of light--holding light within itself. And it was so beautiful, you know, it just felt spiritual. . . . I think I could have sat there for hours looking at it. . . . It was the object I think, the sadness of it. I felt really sad. . . . I felt sorry for the people--you know, the two people involved in that, in the sculpture--for the grief and the pain. . . . I haven't thought about that in a long time. (E)

As some of the novices point out, having an emotional response is something they're capable of doing with an art work.¹⁶ One

interviewee goes as far as to call "feeling" the "layman's appreciation of art" (4).

Though they emphasize the more emotional aspects of looking, some novices (7/20) are aware of the potential to enjoy a more intellectual experience.

I've been on some very good tours where people really helped me see the painting. . . . [That type of experience] is more something that happens intellectually. . . . It's a different kind of experience, but I think it's very valuable. (C)

But, as we will see later, novices are reluctant to adopt what they consider a colder, more impersonal, intellectual stance--especially given the pleasure they already derive from a work just by reacting to it.

No, I think I'm looking at the overall. . . . I'm not picking it apart. I'm looking at this overall thing and thinking, "That's nice. I like that." . . . I don't need to take it apart to find something positive. (O)

Because I'm not looking at it technically. I'm not saying, "Wow, there's gold on that. There's a dandelion in the corner" . . . or trying to figure out if it's useful or if it's working or what it's made of. . . . I'm just saying, "Wow, I like that." (II)

Making Judgments

Novices are quick to form judgments about what they like and dislike or whether something is "good" or "bad" and frequently confuse the two. If they like something, it's "well done." If they don't, it's of a lesser quality. Making judgments is a very natural,

and often enjoyable, facet of their museum visits.

It's also the fun of that quick judgment. In the law profession, you can't make quick judgments. You can't in life about people or anything, but in art it's almost like there's no reason not to just say, "I like this. I hate this. This is good. This is bad." (HH)

I go to the museum with the mind-set that I'm going to look, and I'm going to like what I like, and not like what I don't like. That is okay. (3)

While novices are frequently adamant about what they like or dislike, they can't always articulate the reason (8/20).¹⁷

Some pieces strike your eye for no real obvious reasons. That's it, you like it. (S)

Because I don't know why I like a particular piece. You know, you don't really analyze it that closely after all. (R)

Roughly a quarter of the interviewees mention thinking about why they like something. The following individual is unique, however, in thinking there's really something to be gained by doing so.

And each individual has to ask himself or herself what is it that causes a sensation when looking at a work of art. Sometimes you don't even ask yourself, you just enjoy it. Sometimes you might cheat yourself by not asking more about this experience. It's complicated. (3)

In general, novices want works to be pleasant (17/20), to show "talent" (17/20), and to have an easily accessible meaning (17/20).

Novices' need for pleasantness in individual works of art may be linked to their desire for a pleasant, easy visit. Also, "the simpler and the softer" works are, the "easier [they seem] to get into" (W).¹⁸ Not surprisingly, interviewees are frequently drawn to the work of the French impressionists.

I could look at the impressionists for hours, and I don't know why really. Maybe because they're easy to look at. . . . They're very pleasing to your eye. They don't jar you. (EE)

Novices generally avoid works that startle them or make them "feel uncomfortable." In some cases, they reject a work because a particular feature is distasteful.

That looks like blood, and I associate that with not being pleasant. And this looks like the rose is bleeding, and I really don't want to know why. (O)

In other cases, it is the overall impact of the works they dislike, as in this interviewee's explanation of why he dislikes medieval and Renaissance art.

The paintings seem to convey a message of suffering, and hardship, and oppression--a very narrow attitude about life. There's no joy. (HH)

A few novices (2/20) are aware that their need to look only at pleasant things is limiting.

Maybe that's kind of a narrow view of life that you're always looking for

beauty rather than the seamy side of life, but I guess I gravitate toward the things that are peaceful and beautiful rather than the things that express a lot of violence. (Z)

In fact, over half recommend that people be open-minded and try new things when looking at art. But ultimately, what really matters to many novices is finding a piece they like.

Sometimes it's ruined my visit because I didn't like anything in the museum. But then again, I went, and I said, "Okay, I appreciate that, but I'm not going to do that again." (II)

I'm not going to look at it and say, "Wow, that's really ugly, but I'm glad I saw it." That's never going to happen. (I)

Besides being pleasant, a work needs to show "talent" in order for novices to like it.¹⁹ This means that a piece has to be 1) realistic or "lifelike" (17/20), 2) detailed, intricate, or painstaking (12/20), and/or 3) something they themselves aren't capable of doing (10/20).

I'm drawn to art where I see a lot of virtuosity. Where even as unskilled and untrained as I am, I can recognize the talent that created it. It's either so intricate, or it's so lifelike, or the lighting is such a way that it's real, or it looks like it's coming off the canvas. I can recognize those things. (4)

For novices, "realistic" means being recognizable, believable, or, as one man expresses it, "all there" (S).

They're all carrying their bedrolls, and saddlebags, and water supply. Relatively crude clothing, . . . the color of the horses is what I'd expect. . . . You know, it's all there. . . . It adds up to being a good art work. (S)

I like the trees here because even though they're kind of dark, he hasn't left out, he hasn't forgotten, a detail. (HH)

It doesn't matter if a work is romanticized or somewhat expressionistic, so long as the subject matter looks convincing.

Look at this one of the fish, the way he made the skins look so slick that you can just tell if you tried to pick one up it would slip right out of your hand. You know, to me that's very well done. (8)

Novices also admire art work that shows "tremendous amounts of time" (R), work, and effort by the artist. The more "painstaking" (I) and "meticulous" (S) the better, for this proves that the artist was "dedicated to doing a good job" (S) and that a work is "good."²⁰

Say if you took a ski slope and you had a bunch of skiers, and they were just little blobs and stuff, not detailed, that wouldn't interest me as much as if they showed one individual skier going through the gate with detail--the hair flowing, the look on [his] face, the muscles, that kind of thing. To me that's a higher quality. (8)

Details are also necessary if a work is to hold a novice's attention.

If you're going to spend twenty minutes standing here examining it, it needs detail. (DD)

The other major criterion (10/20) novices use to evaluate the talent in a work is whether *they* could do what the artist has done.

My appreciation comes from my own sense of limitation, like the things I've chosen here I could never do. I know they're so far beyond me that I appreciate them more and more. (HH)

I know I could never do that. I was just impressed. (3)

For most novices (17/20) the presence of details, hard work, and other signs of "talent" is not enough. They also need to believe²¹ they understand the meaning of a work.

Well, [I don't like] Salvador Dali and stuff like that because they don't seem to me to be very meaningful. The amount of work and so on that goes into some of these works is rather huge, but . . . their meaning escapes me, and so I guess I don't dawdle at that part of the exhibit. (P)

I like something that you can look at, and a lay person can get something out of. (5)

Understanding meaning is a greater issue with contemporary pieces:

[It's as if there were] some kind of secret message that the guy was trying to convey rather than just a picture. . . . I guess I'm dumb, too dumb to interpret that, and I don't enjoy that. (Z)

The idea of masterpieces and "classic painters" (5) comes up in over half of the interviews. Name recognition and age are the most commonly (15/20) cited ways of identifying the "real classic painters" (5).

If I recognize something I automatically know it's a classic. . . . I think that I tend to accept something as a classic by antiquity, recognizing the artist's name, recognizing the subject matter--like if it's of a famous person or a famous setting or something like that. (F)

One woman explains that she could identify "the masters" by remembering the pictures she and her mother looked at in the *World Book* encyclopedia when she was a child.

For a few of the interviewees (3/20), knowing that a work is considered a masterpiece, or at least of high quality, is somewhat intimidating.

It's kind of like looking at the Constitution . . . like this is a classic thing. I'm supposed to appreciate this whether I like it or not. (F)

Well, it wouldn't be in the museum if it weren't good. . . . And that is intimidating, especially when you don't get it. . . . That makes me feel ignorant, like he was saying that they're here for a reason, [and] I don't know why they're here. (3)

Need for a Personal Connection

Most (18/20) novices want the art they look at to "touch some spot in [their] life," to "relate to something you have done, seen, or felt" (DD). This often affects the types of works they're drawn to:

I'm 29 years old and just had my first kid, so I enjoy looking at pictures of children right now, whereas I wouldn't have noticed them before. (F)

I've spent my whole life out in the country and in the wide open spaces, and that's the kind of art I like. (Z)

I like a lot of Lautrec because his stuff in Paris reminds me of some things I saw in Chicago growing up, so I have the hook of the past remembered. (CC)

And those they avoid:

Perhaps in parts of the museum there are things [from] South America or somewhere . . . that I don't feel connected to. . . . I don't dislike them. I just don't seem to have too much of an interest in them. (G)

Sometimes the connection is not so direct--as in the case of the man who claimed he had no ties to Boston, but still loved seeing *The Bostonians: Artists of an Elegant Age*--but, rather, based in a sense of shared humanity, as we will see in the next section.

The need for a personal connection seems to affect not only the works novices spend time with, but also the content of their experiences with those objects, for novices often (16/20) use works of art as touchstones for personal associations, memories, or what one woman called "life thoughts" (B).^{22,23}

Well I was thinking about my daughter and the fact that she's going to look like [the girl in the painting] one of these days. (F)

The first thing that struck me when I saw it from a distance was that it looked like something my dad had. You know, the case of the TV set brought back memories of my childhood. We got our first TV set in 1949. (E)

The meaning novices derive from works is often very personal and frequently idiosyncratic.

. . . a painting of various geometric shapes. I feel that way from time to time, which way was I going and why? (W)

Like the Wiley that I was looking at, *Hound Harbor*, reminds me of my life, but in a real nonspecific way. All the junk he takes with him, that's kinda like all the junk I've left behind. (F)

One of my favorite paintings is Picasso's mother with a big shoulder. That's how mothers feel. . . . It's like he painted it for me. You know, it takes big shoulders to bring these children up to be adults, to be productive human beings. (S)

Searching for Humanity

The interviews are filled with accounts of trying to make a link with the "human elements" in and behind a work of art.²⁴ Sometimes this takes the form of wondering what the person who created the piece was like, "you know, life stuff" (C), or marveling at the creativity of the artist (14/20) and "the wonderment of being a human being" (C).

I've just never been so moved be-

cause I saw the creative process. . . . I was just blown away by the process. His thoughts. What led him to making the great sculptures, works of art, architectural pieces. . . . That's the best experience I've had. (II)

Other times (12/20), it's identifying with the "common human-beingness we all share" (3) and trying to "get a feel for the people" (EE) when looking at paintings and cultural artifacts that "convey a human that is gone" (II). Still other times, it's responding to the personality of a subject (9/20).

I wonder what the guy was like. . . . He seemed like the kind of person that I'd want to get to know. . . . It's interesting how that feeling of wanting to get to know someone can transcend . . . time, language, culture. (HH)

Or creating a story around the characters in a work (7/20).

The women sitting there with their plates, back in the corner, watching everyone else and just going on and on. I'm not sure whose ears are burning in that room, but I'm sure someone's must be. (C)

Even when one did not exist.

It wasn't [meant] to represent a story, but I could see one in it. (8)

Novices often rely on their imaginations to make this human connection. They try to envision themselves in another time or place, or theorize about what the subject of a portrait or the artist was like.

I try to place myself in the different exhibits and try to visualize how I may have reacted in that particular setting or that particular era or period. That helps me associate better with what I'm looking at. (EE)

I kind of get off into a dream world--imagining things, wondering what their life was like. (4)

Novices are most easily "transported" by paintings depicting a particular period²⁵ in time or by a period room. A quarter of the novices cite these rooms as their favorite parts of the museum because they make another age "come alive" (EE).

Like the little houses that you have set up on the American floor and the churches on the same floor. You try to show . . . the art people used every day. I really got a feeling of how people lived, and I liked that a lot. (C)

It's back to seeing the whole picture at once rather than just seeing it disjointed. That's what I liked about [the room]. "Immerse yourself in the atmosphere" is a good way to describe that feeling. (S)

Individual objects displayed in cases are less conducive to novices' thinking about a human context.

I would bypass screens and hangings probably because there's not enough life in them to appeal to me. (R)

Unless they already have a context to put the objects into.

When I see something from the past that I can relate to, that I can understand, it's really easy for me to put myself back in time. (3)

Novices' imaginings are occasionally colored by their need for things to be pleasant. If an artist painted pretty things, he must have "been a pleasant man, . . . not terribly depressed or trying to think on a negative level" (O) (7/20). For some novices, if an artist created a beautiful image, he obviously loved his subject.

You have a sense that he loved children in the way he made that painting, the way he painted them. It is just beautiful, the cherubic little faces. (EE)

You know, they loved the women they were painting. They just adored her, and you get this feeling of joy. . . . You can tell the artist loves what he's doing and is awed himself by the subject matter. (HH)

If novices think a painting is unpleasant, then they assume the artist was an unpleasant person or was up to no good. In some cases, this could not be further from the truth. Consider this comment about Edward Hicks' *Peaceable Kingdom*.

I think it's the human faces on the animals. . . . I don't really know what the artist is trying to accomplish with that painting, but it seems to me that he did not mean well. It gives off a feeling of evil to me. (F)

Novices also enjoy admiring the cultures that produced the works of art and sometimes (9/20) refer with awe to the artist's achieve-

ment in the face of poor living conditions or limited technology.

The things of beauty that they were able to portray when, you know, the conditions they lived under. (8)

To me this goes back to my wonderment about Chinese history, and it's hard to imagine the way things are now that things like that were possible back when they were done. (P)

When asked what the museum could do to make their visits more enjoyable, novices cited interpretation (labels, tours, photographs, etc.) that would make the art more personal and "alive" (EE).

You know, the kind of books that they'll show the picture and then give you a narrative about what it was like back then--what life was like, how the artist lived, things like that. . . . They tend to give you a wider picture . . . and they make it more personal than just a description of the picture, and that's why I like it. (C)

They had a video on him. And I liked learning about him because it gave a lot of life and meaning to his photos. (II)

Novices are particularly interested in the human beings behind the works²⁶ and what went through their heads as they created a piece (16/20). They often see knowing something about the artist's life or thought processes as the key to the piece's meaning.

Well, I think I'd like to ask the artist, "What is that? What did you see? What did you feel when you painted

that?" (5)

Did the artist live there? Did he live down the street? Why did he do that? (O)

Like this one with the fish, did he paint that because it was there on the table, or did he have a real meaning he was trying to communicate? (4)

Limited Perceptual Skills

Not surprisingly, novices are fairly limited in their abilities to look for and analyze the formal elements in a work. They mention elements such as color (18/20) and space (9/20) in the look-aloud portions of the interviews, but often say little beyond whether the colors are pleasing or the depiction of space "realistic." As many novices note, they are "limited by [their] vocabulary" (G) and really don't know what to look for.

They were just so full of light . . . and the colors were just so beautiful, and the light . . . was shining, and that fascinated me. That's about as far as analyzing a picture as I get because that's all I know. (G)

Color, along with subject matter, is often the first thing novices notice in a work. Their most frequent comments (16/20) on color are about whether they like certain colors or find them pleasant.

The *Two Girls* appeal to me so much. For one thing, I love the colors. I love blue. (4)

Occasionally they follow these comments with a remark about how "pretty" the color is, or that they have something of the same color at home.

Novices often base decisions about whether an artist has made "good" or "bad" color choices on personal color preferences or on whether the colors seem "realistic."

Certain colors just turn me off completely. I just don't like them. They're too bright or garish, or they don't blend together . . . and you do find a lot of pictures that, I think anyway, that the artist used a very poor selection of colors. (Z)

About a third of the interviewees talk about how colors "moved them" (5) or "did something to [them] in a purely emotional sense" (II).

Well, the colors of it. That's a lot in the feeling. . . . The colors add a feel to it, the brightness of it. I don't know how else to put it. (C)

And another one of the pictures was in Boston, Boston Common I believe, and it's at twilight, and it shows the color of the evening and the coldness. . . . You could just see the cold in the picture. (G)

For the most part (14/20), novices give no indication they even think about the artist as making deliberate choices in color, composition, etc. to create a work. One interviewee says he was almost bowled over when he saw a series of cathedrals by Monet, for he saw for the first time how an artist could use color to manipulate the mood of a piece.

It's exactly, measurement by measurement, the same painting, but he's done different things with it, and that really moved me personally. Wow! Now that's talent! . . . I think it was

Notre Dame or something, but he created these moods with his paints. (5)

A few (3/20) mention color contrasts but don't necessarily think about their being deliberate. Looking at an O'Keeffe painting, one man commented, "I think purple is a neat color, and the contrast with the green is really neat," and then wondered five minutes later "why [she chose] a purple petunia as opposed to a red petunia or black?" (EE)

A few (3/20) note how painters, such as the impressionists, used a variety of unexpected colors to create their works.

And then you go up closer to the paintings, and it's got orange and blue and these weird colors. It's not the real colors that you've seen in your mind, but he's used them. (5)

Brushwork also seems to fascinate a good number of novices (8/20), and some got up close to paintings to see "the artist's hand" or "how he did it."²⁷

[It] really almost looks like you can put your hand around it, so I just kind of peeked up real close to see how that was achieved. Obviously I can't really tell, but, you know, I want to see if he painted around or straight across or whatever. (F)

Now I can see how they blurred the brushwork so it has become a soft image, almost as though you were seeing it through a foggy day. (R)

Over one-third of the interviewees talk about the light in a work, but again focus on its pleasing character. A few (3/20) checked the

direction of the light to make sure it was consistent and therefore realistic.

References to compositional elements are sporadic. Two people note how their eyes were directed to one central point in the work. One explains that a painting was well laid out because it followed the "one-third" rule of composition (the focal point of the work should never be in the middle third of the painting). And one talks quite eloquently about how the swirling pattern of the forms creates a sense of movement through the painting.

Knowing There is More, but Protecting What They Have

Novices' attitudes about the role of knowledge and art experts in their experiences with art create something of a push-me, pull-you dilemma. They clearly indicate that they want to get much more out of these experiences and that they want help doing so.

I don't come to the art museum more than I do because I don't know enough about it. I'd like to know more. . . . I don't know enough to get my ticket-money's worth out of it. (5)

Yet, they're very protective of their experiences and aren't interested in anything that might interfere with or diminish their current pleasure.

I wasn't interested in the time period because of this big, overwhelming image of pleasing and soft. Big deal if somebody else who I don't recognize painted it. You know, for me big deal that it doesn't fit in a certain category like impressionists at this point. I really like it like that. (W)

I guess it's nostalgia. It brings back memories of childhood and the fun that we used to have, and those sorts of things are I guess important to me rather than other impressions of art that other people may have. (Z)

Novices do feel that knowledge about what they're seeing could significantly enhance their experiences with objects.

I couldn't say that I really enjoyed it until I read about it, and I read that it was an illustration of a psalm in the Bible and that it was painted by a Quaker minister that admired William Penn and his ability to be fair with people. . . . And I didn't really like the picture until I knew the history of the painting and the artist. (3)

I would love to go see [the painting] now because now I know what to look for. . . . I want to go look at that very carefully now, whereas I probably would've just said, "Ah, this is a pretty classic" before. (F)

And in fact, occasionally (8/20) feel uncomfortable because of their lack of knowledge.

You're such a beginner that you don't even know the terms. And I think that kind of scares people away a little. It kind of scares me a little. (5)

I would like some help learning about things as a layman, where I didn't have to go in feeling like I didn't know anything about this period of art. I feel so stupid among all those people that have studied it. (4)

Yet, they also feel knowledge is not necessary for their enjoyment of a piece (8/20),

and sometimes that it is even irrelevant.

Of course that doesn't mean that you have to know anything about a work of art to appreciate it. You can come in freshly to a new work of art and be overwhelmed by it. (3)

It's irrelevant. It's the feeling like, "Look at this nice smile. I'd like to meet that person." . . . I don't have to know who painted that. I don't even care what period of history it is. It is that person I like. (HH)

A few novices (3/20) believe knowledge could actually ruin their experience with a work of art.

I think it would kind of flatten it out because you tend to embellish and imagine, and it tends to lend a mystery about the painting. If you had it--this is this and this is this--it would make it a little bit flat. (3)

Their feelings about art experts and expertise are also quite mixed (only twelve of the interviews covered this topic). While novices acknowledge that experts know something that might be useful to them, they quite adamantly don't want anyone to decide for them what's good or bad. They feel this decision is theirs to make.

Art is a personal experience. . . . I am not receptive to people telling me you ought to like this, or this is not good. (DD)

They (6/12) also don't want someone to tell them that something they really like is not "good."

If they [the people who work in the museum] don't like something they're gonna, they sit there and la-la-la [makes pompous-sounding noises] constantly. They don't have an open mind to the fact that maybe somebody else likes it. (B)

When asked about unpleasant experiences with art, one man quickly cited the critics' comments about Picasso's Chicago Monument, because they "ruined" the piece for so many people.

Why was it necessary for them to try to downgrade something that meant a lot to the people of the city of Chicago [by asking questions like] was he doing something nasty? Is he trying to pull one over on the city? (I)

Novices (5/12) don't want to be talked down to or treated as if they were incapable of understanding.

I don't want somebody to presume, if you'll excuse the term, to say, "This is a good painting. I can't possibly expect you to understand why." (F)

Interviewees also seem to believe that experts look at objects in a very intellectual, unfeeling way (6/12)--an approach that has limited appeal to them.

Well, I suppose they'd know about the artist, how he/she were qualified or categorized as to talent to begin with, and then they would probably pick the painting apart and analyze the color or whatever they do, the proportions or whatever there is in the painting. . . . Look at it more technically than someone just looking at it.

. . . I sort of focus in on the human element and the enjoyment. It's pretty simplistic, but that would be my first interest. (G)

They're [experts] deadly. . . . If nothing else it's facts. (5)

I'm sure there are very different techniques or styles and artists for different types of pottery, and that's something I think a specialist or a person that is greatly versed in that kind of thing would enjoy and love. To me that's not appealing. (EE)

In spite of all these negative comments, novices (6/12) are somewhat intrigued by experts. They're curious about the *people* who make value judgments in the art world:

Who are these people that say this is great? . . . Who decides if this is going to be worth my money? (5)

So I'd be interested in the person who, person or persons, who chose [the art objects]. Why did they choose them? What kind of taste, what kind of background leads them to make the decisions they make? (F)

Novices also believe that objects in museums are there for a reason, and they are curious about those reasons.

Why is it considered important? Why are these things important to the art world? to history? to society? Why would you have somebody look at that? Why do you think it's important? (II)

I'd like to know why some things

become valuable and some don't and some become very famous. Sometimes something is very valuable and I don't see the appeal. . . . I'd like the museum to tell me why some of these pieces are so famous. (4)

Novices are not really interested in the object's art historical significance per se, but rather why someone felt the piece is wonderful.

I don't want somebody to say, "This is a good piece of art. This is a bad piece of art." I want them to say what is exciting about this piece of art, or "If you approach it from this standpoint you will see, *you* yourself, will see what's good about it." (F)

Advanced Amateurs

Expectations for Museum Visits

An Enjoyable Experience

Almost all the interviewees (14/15) expect their visits to be enjoyable.²⁸

I think I'd probably take as my major goal to just enjoy something. It makes me happy. (V)

I guess if there's an umbrella word, *entertainment*, that's it. (TT)

Art is fun. . . . It gives me enjoyment. It's something that I like to do. (OO)

Some²⁹ of the interviewees (5/15) go as far as to stress that museum experiences shouldn't be thought of as good for you, but rather as purely pleasurable.

I think the only expectation you

should come with is to come in and enjoy, because that's what it should be. It should be enjoyable. (K)

This is not Sunday school. . . . Is it Horace . . . where he says there are two great things that art has, to give us pleasure and to teach? . . . Maybe we should put more emphasis on the pleasure. People need to be attracted by the things they like, things they enjoy. And they shouldn't feel guilty about that. And they also shouldn't feel it's a duty. (QQ)

Escapism doesn't come up as often in advanced amateurs' expectations as in novices' (14/20), but some of the group (6/15) do see their visits as a respite from daily cares.

For fun, to just be able to relax. To go and forget whatever else I'm doing and still somehow be connected to something that means very much to me. (BB)

Well, a lot of people come into museums to sort of contemplate. I do. It's not the only reason I come to museums, but every now and then it's real nice. Just to get away and to see pretty things, and forget about what's going on outside. (K)

A Planned Visit

Advanced amateurs are much more deliberate (13/15) in what they are going to see than novices. While this is not an expectation per se, it should definitely be considered as a context for their looking. Advanced amateurs either know what they want to look at before they arrive at a museum:

I pretty much know what I'm going

to encounter in whatever museum I'm going to. I've generally read about it in advance. You know if we're in Vienna I've got my various guide-books, Michelins, years of reading or whatever. I'm generally heading for such and such museum in such and such room and such and such a painting. (LL)

I was in Washington, DC, and I just had a very short time, and I wanted to pop into the National Gallery and see the Rembrandts that I like. (RR)

Or, they structure their visits *after* they arrive--by consulting museum maps, visiting the postcard section of the bookshop to find out what's worth seeing in the galleries, or walking up to the information desk and asking, "What do you have that's great?" (TT).³⁰ Roughly a third (6/15) do allow some time for wandering, but this is generally in addition to targeting a specific area.

Roughly a third of the interviewees (6/15) also mention focusing on a few works instead of "trying to see it all."

If these objects are all as wonderful as we all believe they are, [trying to see everything] is sort of like being taken to 200 wonderful restaurants in one night. You know, you just can't do that. It's indigestion. (QQ)

Good Viewing Conditions

Comments about viewing conditions come up frequently in the interviews. Many interviewees (12/15) expect "good visual access" to the works of art. This includes being able to move around a piece, to step back from it without running into something else, and to have a view unimpeded by glare

or "hordes" of visitors (9/15). Even too many works of art can be a problem.

I went through the Paul Klee show at the museum in New York and it was so huge that you couldn't enjoy the show. It's overkill, the typical New York overkill show. And you walk out and you say, "God, I can't remember anything." (SS)

Several interviewees (9/15) even mention the role display has on their viewing.

Bad taste in presentation, the colors surrounding it, the texture surrounding the object, everything to do with the way it's presented can help or hinder. (MM)

But while visual access is important, bad conditions are not insurmountable.

And I know that it's going to be dirty and dusty and not air-conditioned. And that these wonderful pieces are going to be falling apart. And you're not going to be able to see them because they are not lit . . . and there are probably bugs. I know all that, but I expect that there will be enough fabulous quality that it's going to be an experience I'll never forget. (LL)

A Learning Experience

Many advanced amateurs (10/15) expect their visits to be learning experiences. And, like novices, their definitions of "learning" tend to vary. It can mean seeing new things (3/10), acquiring new knowledge (4/10), or both (3/10). For roughly a third of the interviewees who expect a learning experience (4/10), learning is not something deliberate, it just happens.

Every place I go, holes in my knowledge are filled by maybe a work by an artist I know that I haven't seen before, maybe an example of a school that I hadn't seen before. But I don't go to get smarter. I go to sort of correspond with the things I see. (MM)

[Learning's] accidental. It's not intentional. I mean the motivation is by and large to see objects that are engaging and interesting. It isn't necessarily to learn anything. It's hard to look at things and not take something away. (AA)

Many of the interviewees (10/15) note that they don't want to feel forced into learning. Any educational opportunities should be strictly optional.

What I don't like is a museum that tries to teach me too much. I get angry sometimes at William Rubin and the exhibits that pinpoint. Like the African primitivism exhibit was a specific one where I felt he really was, well, I found it really got in my way of looking at the work. I didn't like to be told like a child to go to case one and compare this to case [two]. (LL)

You're not forced unless you buy the audio tour to listen to someone else describe it. No one says you have to read the labels if you don't want to. . . . There is a freedom there of choice, of pace, that I appreciate. I hate to be force-fed anything, even if it's good for me. (MM)

Many advanced amateurs (11/15) feel that

they don't have to know about an object to enjoy it.

I was looking at the church vestments. I know nothing about [them]. They're beautiful objects of art. And obviously if you knew all the interrelationships of why and so forth, that adds much more to it. But I can just look at it and enjoy it. (SS)

I don't know that great art historians enjoy art museums more than a kid with wild eyes. (MM)

Over a third (6/15) think a lack of knowledge can actually be beneficial.

[People] have to get over the idea that it's only people that are educated in art that can enjoy it. In fact, I sometimes think just the opposite would be true. Because the more you know, the more cluttered your mind [is]. (H)

One always hopes that you don't lose that naive enjoyment of all these things. You hate to lose that sense of abundance or appreciation of something you saw at the beginning. (QQ)

But in spite of this, the clear majority (13/15) see knowledge as advantageous. Knowing something about a work can help them notice more.

I'm not sure I would've gotten half as much out of the Caravaggio exhibit if I hadn't rented one of those speaker things . . . "Notice the lighting in this painting, how wonderful it is, and the way the texture of the fabric is painted so beautifully." So those are interesting little things to find out and

notice, that you wouldn't necessarily notice. (PP)

It can flag them where to stop and what to spend time with.

I obviously pass things because I don't know of their importance or uniqueness. (SS)

And, it can even affect their opinions of things.

I saw O'Keeffe as a surrealist. The skull in the sky kind of thing, and I thought, "Oh, I don't really like this." And then I read her book . . . and she explains what I had taken as a kind of unpleasant, surrealist, literary sophistication, turns out to be the ultimate simplicity. . . . She talks about, "I saw that bone. I was painting a sky. I put the bone in the sky." It was wonderful. I looked at her in a whole other way. (QQ)

Reactions to labels are mixed. A few people (3/15) feel basic identification labels are sufficient. Others (6/15) want more information than these identification labels provide.

You see this thing that has obviously caught your attention, and here's this little piece of paper next to it that says the acquisition number 596, given to the museum by who-gy boo-gy, and acquired at this date. Who cares! You know, tell me something about the creator. Tell me something about the object. Give me something that's entertaining. (TT)

Even among those who want more information, half (3/6) admit reading can be disruptive.

It's kind of focus on [the label], then look, then focus on [the label], and there may be something that I'd read part-way through and then look at the object to see if I saw it, and then go back and finish reading. So it was much more disjunctive. (AA)

The ideal, according to one interviewee, would be a "platonic voice" (QQ) that would murmur the information in your ear when you wanted it.

A Private and a Social Experience

Reactions to having a private or a social experience are mixed. Roughly half (8/15) of the interviewees prefer to look at art by themselves so their viewing is uninterrupted.

I like to be alone because I have time to look at things. I can move at my own pace. I can really get absorbed in what I'm doing and feeling. (BB)

[I] wouldn't want the chance to look at things to be cluttered up with too much talking. (RR)

A third (6/15) see advantages and disadvantages in both, and feel that their decision to be private or social depends on their mood and the circumstances of their visits. A few (3/15) want someone with them, so they have someone to bounce ideas off of or "turn [to] sometimes and say, 'Look at this. This is pretty neat!' " (A).

Characteristics of Looking

Making a Human Connection

Many advanced amateurs (12/15) make some form of human connection with the works they are viewing, whether thinking about the people who produced the work:³¹

Art is all sorts of stuff, but for me it's mostly emotion presented in a communicable way. And feeling captured and presented in such a way that another person can 300 years later, or 3,000 years later, feel at one with the artist. (RR)

One of the things that amazes me is that all these different works of art are produced by different people. They're just all so different. It's almost like walking in and remembering that everybody's unique. I think that is amazing in a way. (A)

Feeling a connection with past generations (5/15):

And the realization, you know, when it comes to you, that you live in a world in which Herodotus, or Dante, or van Gogh, or Georgia O'Keeffe, or this nameless Indian potter, they are as much your companions as anybody who's living and maybe more. . . . And that's a wonderful quality of these things, I think. (QQ)

You know, the repository of all man's achievements. I feel I need to be connected to that. I'm impressed by it. It helps me feel more alive. (V)

Or, deriving very personal meanings about the nature of being human (5/15):

Art is a necessary part of our experience, of humanity. It's been around forever. It's a way for us to relieve our frustrations, express ourselves. It's part of our being. (PP)

I think the visual arts, all the arts, put life into perspective, giving it some meaning, understanding . . . I think in a very human and in a very political sense. (AA)

A work doesn't have to be representational for the human aspects to come through.

And even in, well, modern art . . . there's a human side to it. Certain colors are certain emotions, and certain textures are, you know, they really grab you, or others have a softness that's almost like you want to touch it, so there's definitely a human aspect. (K)

Some advanced amateurs (6/15) draw on art objects as artifacts that can give them information about a particular period or culture.

And also here is a people in some ways almost lost to us, portraying themselves. This is how they see themselves. And it's interesting to see, you know, as one who's interested in the period, here they're, they have guns. So, it's a certain period, yet they still have lances. The kind of headdress that people are wearing, the kind of clothing. They're not wearing saddles. (QQ)

But, they also use the pieces to get a larger "feel" for the beliefs or world views of a civilization.

You can talk all about Christianity that you want, but when you turn the corner and walk into Bernini's arms at St. Peter's, it's, I mean that's it. So that's what I mean about understanding, in that sense. (AA)

I guess to use the Buddhist term, you almost have a mantra. . . . It's like these things. They're so simple. They're very self-contained . . . and yet, there's a whole world that you can construct there. . . . It opens up other things for you. . . . Each of those things is like an incantation of a particular other world, other time, but you're in it. (QQ)

Here, imagination can play a role in helping determine what a place or an existence was like (5/15).

Begin to climb into it and kind of measure what's happening, . . . kinda put yourself in the piece . . . you know, what does it feel like? What does it sound like? (TT)

I take on a role. . . . Like if I were doing this lady over here, how would I feel if I had that dress on? Would I sit like that? Would I put my legs out like that? Where is she going or what has she done? I will do things like that to put myself in the painting. (OO)

Two-thirds of the group mention evocative exhibition techniques as helping them understand the broader context of works.

You could sit out in a coffee shop in the style of the Viennese of that time and have the coffee and the cakes. . . . The whole thing was beautifully staged. Some people thought too much Hollywood, but it really carried the whole theme. You had a real feel for it, rather than just the individually hung bunch of paintings. (SS)

I think displaying it helps see things better. It forces you to look a little differently. . . . When you think of a museum, you think of art work lined up around the walls, and you become very tunnel-visioned, and you don't have, you're not allowed to expand on your thoughts. This is creating a situation where you can look at things a little differently. (OO)

Advanced amateurs are interested in the people behind the work. They (12/15) tend to focus on an artist's intent or the thinking behind a piece versus an artist's personal life (3/15). They are interested in the artistic concerns of a period (7/15) and significant issues in an artist's work (7/15).

I like to know what they were doing and what they were thinking, but not necessarily who they were and where they lived and that type of thing. (OO)

It's interesting to know where the artist is coming from. It's always interesting to know when you go into a show and talk to a gallery owner or whatever and they tell you, "This artist likes to do this and this, and this is what he did before, and this is what he's doing now." So it all helps you understand the work better. (PP)

Though one woman admits:

You don't have to know that much about van Gogh's mental state, but I could wonder, sure, I'd be the type who would want to read more about it anyway. (V)

Advanced amateurs are also aware of the

choices an artist makes in creating a piece. They think about sources of imagery (9/15) and how elements are used to create a desired effect (7/15).

It's very dark, and the two characters are separated by a large space. And they're both looking in different directions. There's even, I think, a curtain between them. And David is playing his musical instrument, and Saul is pondering and being depressed, and there is just no way those two people are ever going to communicate. . . . It's one of the most powerful pictures of an abyss between two people. (RR)

The way the focus is on those little girls that's, if you were going to take a photograph of them sitting there the same things wouldn't be in focus. I'm sure some of the background wouldn't be as blurred as it is, and that's part of making a painting able to emphasize areas that the artist wanted to emphasize. (PP)

Exploration and Discovery

Advanced amateurs often (10/15) start their viewing with what one interviewee calls an "intense look-at" (H)--a visual exploration of the work of art. Sometimes this exploration is very deliberate, as with the woman who was looking for symbols on a Chinese robe.

I also look at it to see what kind of symbolism I see there. I see the butterfly. I'm sure there's a bat in there someplace. (OO)

Other times, it's more of a general inventory of a work with no specific end in mind.

Many advanced amateurs (11/15) talk about "just looking at details," and are pleased when they stumble upon "surprises" (TT), "little treasures" (OO), or something they "didn't notice before" (PP).

Meandering, mentally meandering.
. . . You just look and spend some time. You wonder and you question and you compare. (TT)

Frequently comparisons play an important role in these explorations (13/15). Advanced amateurs either compare adjacent pieces (9/15) or draw on works they've seen before (10/15). Roughly half of the interviewees (8/15) mention that explicit groupings of objects help them see more.

Time is also an important factor. Several interviewees (9/15) note that having enough time with a work is critical to their enjoyment.

But I've also noticed that if I sit down and rest and I look at something I'll have more fun looking at it than if I'd just walked right through. (OO)

Often, problems or questions arise as the interviewee (11/15) is perusing a work, and spark new explorations or discoveries.³²

Interesting that the figure would be finished on the rear and nothing else would be, except the pedestal, makes me wonder what sort of architectural place it was in originally. (MM)

It's funny because he's really not looking at her. . . . Yet, he's the one that gives her the annunciation, the message. But, he's not looking at her. [Pauses] That's what brings

around the composition. (K)

It has all the energy of the child's thing and all the sort of abandonment. You would work so closely over here and do these tipis [so carefully] and then, [pause] and then, I guess [these are] the tipis of the enemy and they don't deserve to be done. (QQ)

Roughly a third of the interviewees (6/15) stress how satisfying these quests/discoveries are.³³

I think that you can take just about any piece, and you can look at it, and you can hypothesize, and . . . you can begin to climb into it and look around. You know, I find that entertaining. (TT)

I want to be able to say, "Oh, my god, look at that!" (OO)

A few of the interviewees (3/15) even become quite adamant about being able to make discoveries for themselves.

So I think that's important, not to lead someone by the nose. Then they lose the experience of discovery which is so important in a museum. (LL)

And it was fun for me to see that and discover that, and I thought, "I like that, for those hidden clues to be there." I don't want anybody to tell me about them though, because I want to discover them for myself. (OO)

There seems to be a real sense of ownership³⁴ about their discoveries and a greater kinship

with a work as a result. (One man [RR] who had had a particularly memorable experience with an Assyrian lion relief talked on and on about "his" lion).

The point in these explorations is not always to come up with an answer, however. In fact, some of the interviewees (5/15) talk about not always wanting to reach a resolution.

No, it never has to be resolved. And in fact that is probably crucial to the enjoyment, is that it isn't resolved. Because maybe once it's resolved it no longer holds the fascination. (TT)

Defining Preferences

Advanced amateurs generally accept that people's likes and dislikes are highly subjective (10/15) and that "each person's gut has a different place where it hits." (LL)

I suppose that's a nicer one than a lot of them that I've seen, now that I look at it. I just don't, his style doesn't interest me . . . but, that's a personal thing. (PP)

Their criteria for liking works are quite diverse and frequently personal. Their reasons can range from the primitiveness of a work, to its faddishness, to the appeal of a particular color.

Many advanced amateurs (11/15) cite some formal aspect of the work--be it an "elegant sense of space" in a pot (QQ) or the particular use of colors in a painting--in their reasons for liking a piece. (In general, advanced amateurs mention more formal elements, more frequently than novices).

Almost two-thirds of the group (9/15) talk

about whether a piece is strong enough to hold their attention both at the first viewing and over time.

I like to look at something and see something different each time. [It's] not a finished experience. . . . You don't see it once and say, "I've seen that." (V)

There's kind of a mystery there and quiet about the artist. [It's the] kind of art you can think about a lot and look at it and go away wondering and go back and look again. (LL)

Many advanced amateurs (10/15) cite artists' facility with materials and their skill as reasons for liking and respecting a work.³⁵

And I go through and I say, "Did the person even know how to handle their materials?" Forget anything else. (SS)

Unlike novices, advanced amateurs don't necessarily equate craftsmanship with detailed work or intricacy. Though, some interviewees (5/15) note that they are drawn to and respect the huge amount of work that goes into a detailed piece.

All the detail. It's just marvelous! . . . It's so subtle, and it's so delicate. . . . Geez, it must have taken a lot of time to do. That's what impressed me. (K)

Elsewhere in the interview, this same person talks about the faultiness of using time as a criteria.

Novelty, the unexpected, and surprise also come up frequently as criteria for liking a

work (9/15).

And it was really interesting because there were little surprises every time you looked at it, there was a new little surprise. (TT)

Let's put it that way, styles that haven't been done before that I don't recognize. I love stuff that I don't recognize. (MM)

And conversely, too much familiarity can breed disinterest (4/15).

I probably feel that certain things I've seen a little much, such as impressionist work. That bothers me because I don't want to reject something just because it's so familiar to me, but I'd probably pass over that a little more than the others. (V)

The final shared criteria that surfaces is whether a work "knocks their socks off" (9/15).³⁶

I think art is very, you can know a lot, but it still has to hit your gut. (LL)

If it upsets my stomach is the biggest criteria. If it takes my stomach and turns it 360°. . . . It has to be something that just hits us. (PP)

Either you like it visually or you don't. When you don't you might give it the benefit of the doubt by the technique or whether it's new, and that's where your background comes in, I would imagine. But the other is like any other person. That's either you like it or you don't. (K)

Over half of the interviewees (8/15) note that they reflect on why they like particular pieces.

If you liked it, why? Ask yourself, "Why?" That would be my thing, but maybe to get to know that particular piece a little bit better you should ask, "Why?" (K)

Though, one interviewee was adamant that he didn't want to over-intellectualize his experience.

I mean it's more sensory than anything else. How does one respond? I don't look at art and necessarily intellectualize how does that make me feel or that sort of thing. (AA)

The Importance of Emotion

For many of the interviewees (10/15), having an emotional response to a work of art is an important part of their experience.

That's why I guess I like art because it moves me, and that's why I like going to museums because there will be works that move me. (PP)

I guess what I'm talking about is feelings. . . . I like that in a painting. I like to feel whatever it is that the artist is trying to imply. (OO)

And that's what excites me about [contemporary] work is when I see that the artist's brushstroke or his anger or his, whatever emotion he's feeling, that's what I'm drawn to. (BB)

The balance between the intellectual and the emotional aspects of art experiences came up

in eleven interviews. Of these interviewees, roughly half (5/11) feel that their experiences are primarily emotional.³⁷

It's not so much the mind. It's emotional. It's more the right side of the brain rather than the left side of the brain--logical. . . . It's a different, it's not a rational feeling. (K)

The others see their experiences as a combination of both.

I think those two things [emotion and intellect] go together to present a total picture . . . and to have one of those things missing is to have a piece missing from the total picture. (TT)

So, I guess there's not really anything that gives you that same feeling . . . because I guess it involves mental as well as emotional and physical. All those things worked up into one is intriguing. (PP)

You go back and forth. Because, you just really love it because it makes you feel a certain way. And then that appreciation of, you know, who produced it, how it was put together technically. It goes back and forth. (BB)

A third of the group (5/15) stress the importance of reactions, and are quite adamant about their right to react.

Don't throw away that basic feeling because that's what art is, is feeling that you came with. Don't let them stomp that to the ground or shove [it] under the table or anything else in acquiring all those nice other things

that go with it. (H)

One man even notes that he has always had trouble with art history classes because they rely so heavily on an intellectual approach to art.

I always was kind of disappointed that they sort of discounted the emotional. (BB)

Drawing on Personal Experiences

While advanced amateurs don't necessarily strive for a personal connection with a work of art, several (9/15) feel their looking is enhanced by personal experience.

I see these Japanese things now much more, as Yeats would say, much more as a "felt truth" since I have been to Japan. (QQ)

I think since I grew up seeing [pre-Columbian art], I see that in Henry Moore, and I find an affinity with it. (K)

I think art really is life. . . . It's really about what goes on inside of you, so when it doesn't seem to be about that, seems too foreign, sometimes it's because it's not really very accurate, it becomes too much of a technical abstraction. (RR)

Like novices, many advanced amateurs (12/15) draw on personal memories and associations when looking at art. And like novices, the object-relatedness of their memories varies.

Glitter! Doesn't that gold look like the glitter you used to work with when you were a kid? (K)

Oh, it reminds me of nature. That's a very traditional response, but it doesn't have to be that. I think that it suggested it to me. (V)

And it had a lot of emotional associations that in some ways had nothing to do with the work. It wasn't . . . one of those experiences of the work of art qua work of art. (QQ)

Giving Works A Chance

I'm hoping to find some things that I'll just love. That will warm the cockles of my heart, and that I'll go away feeling better for having seen. (RR)

While finding something they like on a visit can be important, it's not imperative. Half the interviewees (8/15) note that they can enjoy looking at a work that's interesting, significant, or "mind-stretching" even if they don't like it per se. For example, one woman, who is not a fan of contemporary art, always visits contemporary shows out of curiosity, just "to see what the real modern stuff is." (H)

Several advanced amateurs (7/15) seem willing to give things they don't like a chance.

Maybe if I looked at it longer something would happen. I don't know, I've looked at it for a couple of years and I've never been drawn to [it]. (OO)

If you'd asked me, "Are you interested in Assyrian bas relief carvings?" I'd say "no," but I went in that room and was transfixed. (RR)

I went into the exhibit saying, "Look, I'm really going to try to like these paintings, see the kind of collection they put together." . . . I wanted to be educated, I wanted to have my mind stretched, if you will, and I wanted to be able to experience the art, and all those things were satisfied and I came out going, "Blek!" Now, I know I really hate this stuff. (PP)

However, three people noted that "there is so much more out there to see" (AA) that they'd rather not waste their time on things they don't like.

A work also isn't all good or all bad. Roughly a third of the interviewees talk about liking certain aspects of a work and not others. For example, one woman doesn't like Georgia O'Keeffe's imagery but is always drawn to her work because of its colors.

Seeing some of the Greek sculptures stood out in my mind as just beautiful to the touch and the flow. I like that feeling. And [Greek sculpture's] not something I like either. (OO)

A Final Note

As this report illustrates, advanced amateurs are a varied group. It's difficult to find a single idea or statement that summarizes their experiences with art or museums. The following quotes are taken from their descriptions of memorable encounters with art. The quotes underscore both the diversity of this group and the pleasure they've had in looking at art.

I had to stop right there, spend a lot of time right there. And the emotion of the piece, the feeling of the people

in the piece was so strong. [It] just stopped me right there. I mean, you could say things like transfixed, or what have you, but I don't. I just stopped. (RR)

Does anybody else just kind of break out in goose bumps when they are excited about a piece? (J)

Almost worshipping. Almost like, you know, an altar. Something to really be admired and to meditate on. Sort of that same religious feeling. (BB)

It was just like watching Larry Bird score forty points or something. It was just that the adrenalin was flowing and I was feeling charged the whole time. (AA)

In fact, I enjoyed it so much that I said, "I don't want to even see anything else in the museum today. I want to leave with this." (A)

1. The very personal, complex, and ephemeral nature of individuals' experiences with art called for a methodology that permitted interviewees to give subjective accounts of their experiences.

2. Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Aldine Publishing, 1967.

3. Over the past few years, we've conducted focus groups on topics ranging from the reinstallation of our American Indian collection to reactions to the museum in general. These structured, 1 1/2-2 hour group discussions, led by a trained moderator, have been very powerful agents for change. When you hear visitors on the other side of a two-way mirror talking about what happens to them in the museum, their concerns and needs become very real.

4. We decided to use a self-rating instead of a more objective measure because we believed visitors' percep-

tions of themselves were an important component of their expectations and experiences with objects.

5. We felt it was important that interviewees discuss works they would naturally be drawn to in a gallery.

6. In designing our study protocol, we drew heavily on the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (*Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: The Experience of Play in Work and Games* [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975]), Csikszentmihalyi and Rick E. Robinson, et al. ("The Art of Seeing: Toward an Interpretive Psychology of the Visual Experience" [a report on research, submitted to the J. Paul Getty Foundation, July, 1986]), and the advice of Ross Loomis, professor of social psychology at Colorado State University. Towards the completion of our interviews, we became aware of Abigail Housen's talk-aloud, stream-of-consciousness technique for scoring aesthetic development in adults. We strongly urge anyone interested in how people experience art to read her dissertation, "The Eye of the Beholder: Measuring Aesthetic Development" (Ed.D. diss., Harvard University, 1983), as well as Philip Yenawine and Nancy Richner's section on novices, general visitors, and experts in "MoMA as Educator: A Retrospective, a Blueprint" (1986).

7. We recommend that anyone interested in complete coding protocols refer to the works by Housen, and Robinson and Csikszentmihalyi cited above.

8. In the context of the novice report, "most" refers to 17-20 interviewees, "many" to 13-16 interviewees, "several" to 9-12 interviewees, "some" to 5-8 interviewees, and "few" to 2-4 interviewees.

9. In "Metaphors in 'Treasures of Tutankhamen': Implications for Aesthetic Education" (*Art Education* 37 [Jan. 1984]), Sonja K. Foss and Anthony J. Radich suggest that the metaphors we use to describe exhibitions create, or at least reinforce, visitors' perceptions/expectations of art. They cite one of the prevailing metaphors in museum advertising: "Art as Entertainment suggests that art is pleasing, enjoyable, and preferably beautiful; it is not something that should challenge or tax the viewer or make him or her question. . . . When art is viewed as entertainment, the appropriate response for the audience is passivity and non-involvement" (p. 10).

10. Sheldon Annis, "The Museum as Symbolic Experience," unpublished manuscript (Chicago, 1974), p. 13.

11. This is very much in keeping with the theory that adults take on learning projects that have immediate applications or rewards. As Allen Tough notes, "Most adults, in most learning projects, are motivated by some fairly immediate problem, task, or decision that demands certain knowledge or skill. In relatively few learning projects is the person interested in mastering an entire

body of subject matter" (*The Adult's Learning Projects: A Fresh Approach to Theory and Practice in Adult Learning* [Toronto: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1971]:38).

12. In describing her first phase of aesthetic development, Housen notes, "the viewer is headlining the more concrete and obvious aspects of the content, subject matter or the color. . . . This process of noticing is characterized by the perceptually obvious" ("The Eye of the Beholder," p. 7).

13. In "First Steps in Contemplation (*Museum* 21 [no.1, 1968]:6-7), Jules Lubbock talks about the "reluctance gap"--the time-lag between the viewer's first look at a work and when he begins to feel something or grasp its meaning. Lubbock's contention is that many unskilled viewers don't know what to do during this time-lag, or even how long to wait to let a work "kick in."

14. Our observation studies in the Asian and American galleries show that over half our visitors spend a *total* of ten minutes or less in each of these collections. If we define "looking" as spending ten seconds or more with an object, 64% of visitors to the American galleries and 54% of those to the Asian galleries look at a maximum of four objects.

15. Over half of the interviewees recount good experiences looking at "old favorites." For a few, seeing these works is "like visiting an old friend" (4).

There was one painting that my father really liked. The last time I brought him here it wasn't hanging in the gallery. . . . He was really disappointed and ready to leave. He was so attached to that one painter. (4)

Others value being able to see something new every time they look at the piece. Only a few (2/20) mention that they aren't ones "for going back to, let's say a Matisse, and saying, I've seen this and I'd like to see it again, or again and again and again" (S).

16. In "Discovering More than Expected: A Study of Visitor Perceptions of the J. Paul Getty Museum" (May 1983), Robert Wolf notes that many visitors "wanted to make more intelligible sense out of the objects, but found themselves reacting to works from a purely 'gut-level' or emotional position" (p. 18).

17. In his "Report on Audience Surveys, 1981-1987" (Unpublished report, 1989), Philip Yenawine states, "It is striking that most general visitors are apparently unable to examine their feelings and articulate or substantiate reasons for their preferences, particularly regarding works they dislike. . . . They arrive at judgments with no evidence of how they got there" (p. 19). Other researchers, such as Housen and Michael Parsons (whose work on the aesthetic

development of children has interesting parallels with the novice adult), have discussed this inability in less sophisticated viewers. Both Housen and Parsons also discuss how judgments and preferences often get confused in the earlier stages of aesthetic development.

18. In discussing his second of four stages of aesthetic development, Parsons notes a similar tendency in children. "The subject matters that are most acceptable are those that invite a whole and unhesitating response, where there is no difficulty to be mastered and no repugnance to be overcome" ("A Suggestion Concerning the Development of Aesthetic Experience in Children," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 29, no. 3 [1976], p. 311).

19. In their descriptions of memorable experiences, novices often (14/20) talk about "being knocked off their feet" or "awestruck" by talent.

Like, say, Rembrandt and stuff. There are some things that make you want to cry. Not because they're particularly sad, but because he captured that person so well you're just like, "Oh my god, how did he do that?" (HH)

I think I was awed by it. . . . The piece itself and the lifelike look to it, . . . to think that a person had that kind of gift—that they could produce sculptures like that. (R)

20. In describing her second phase of aesthetic development, Housen notes, "The practical lessons of daily life are also included in this emerging framework [for viewing and classifying a work of art]. Hard work, technical proficiency, craftsmanship, time, are standards he is familiar with and by which he is able to judge the aesthetic object" ("The Eye of the Beholder," p. 147).

21. For some novices, "getting the meaning of a work" means simply recognizing the subject matter the artist was trying to portray.

Those old masters are pictures of people and pictures of places. . . . You know what they are, and you can see where the artist got the idea. (E)

22. Yenawine and Richner note that 50% of their general visitors cite "evoking a memory" as important in finding meaning in a work ("MoMA as Educator," p. 6). Similarly, Housen notes that a relatively inexperienced viewer (Stage II of Housen's aesthetic development model) "relies heavily on his own memory of personal events, relating aspects of his past to the randomly viewed details in the art work" ("The Eye of the Beholder," p. 143).

23. What's interesting to note is that none of the novices' accounts of *memorable* art experiences include this type of personal reminiscence. One woman even points out that

perhaps it was the *absence* of such connections that allowed her to be memorably moved.

Maybe one of the real compelling things about it may have been that it's not something that I could instantly relate to—it really did take me out of myself. (4)

24. The idea that visitors need to make a human connection is not new. In "Children, Teenagers, and Adults in Museums" (ed. Nina Jensen, *Museum News* 60 [May/June 1982]:29), Adrienne Horn suggests that "relating museum programs and collections to the broad threads of the human experience is one means of bringing objects to life in a way that is emotionally stimulating and meaningful to a broad spectrum of adult audiences."

25. Some novices (6/20) seem to take works quite literally and don't think about the artist as an "interpreter" of his own time.

[He seems to be] depicting a very special age, a long time ago, that we can connect with and say, "This actually did happen because there were people who recorded this by painting it." (EE)

26. While novices are generally interested in "human-interest-type facts" (C), most of them (13/20) want information that relates directly to what they're seeing.

Stuff like that [why the artist painted a piece] would help me a lot. Just knowing where they live and their date of birth, . . . I don't care about that. (5)

This is borne out by the MoMA study. As Yenawine and Richner note, general visitors "seek information to direct their looking at works of art rather than to supply background data" (p. 26).

27. This fascination with the "hand of the artist" may be another manifestation of novices' attempts to get at the human being behind the work.

28. The fifteenth interviewee didn't expect his visits to be *unenjoyable*. He simply didn't mention enjoyment as an expectation.

29. In the context of the advanced amateur report, "most" refers to 13-15 interviewees, "many" to 10-12, "several" to 7-9, "some" to 4-6, and "few" to 2-3.

30. Issues of museum quality come up in almost half (7/15) of the interviews. And in each case, the concern is that museums often display works that aren't of the best quality.

Not everything an artist does is art. Artists have

bad days too. Like with all those Picassos out there now. All those jillions of Picassos. Some of them are marvelous and some are rubbish, but they all wind up in museums. (LL)

Several of these interviewees (5/7) feel this can be a real disservice, both to those people who aren't aware of the range of quality in museums:

We're often guilty of presenting all [works] as treasures and masterpieces. (MM)

And to people like themselves.

I look to a museum to educate me on quality and I feel very cheated if the museum puts something that, that is not of good quality in there. . . . [Because] I use a museum as a judgment basis, . . . as a standard of reference. (OO)

31. Over half (8/15) of the advanced amateurs use communication metaphors to describe their experience with a work.

I'm generally just talking to that painter. (LL)

It is bringing itself to me and I am taking myself to it. I think there is a sort of nonverbal communication going on there, not that it is learning anything from me. . . . Internal dialogue I guess is the answer. (MM)

32. To solve these problems, interviewees draw on knowledge about a piece or period roughly a third of the time, and rely on visual cues and conjectures the other two-thirds.

33. In "The Art of Seeing," Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson discuss the importance of challenge and discovery in experts' significant encounters with art. 63% of their interviewees discussed the process of discovery as a central component of their aesthetic experiences (p. 94).

34. A third of the interviewees actually use "ownership" as a looking ploy, deciding which piece they would like to own.

One of the things we like to do is go through a show and say, "Okay, if you could pick one piece out of that show for yourself, what would you pick?" And to me that's a very good way of, you know, that really makes you look at things. (SS)

[By selecting an object] it becomes a much more complex experience versus just going and looking and ooh-ing and aah-ing. (PP)

35. Roughly half (7/15) find their own knowledge of techniques useful in looking, and another three interviewees wish they had that experience to draw on.

I mean if you've constructed something, you have some respect for the underlying stuff, for the stuff that you can't see. (TT)

36. Some of novices' criteria for liking a work do surface in the advanced amateur interviews, but not with the same strength. Three interviewees mention not "getting" a work as a reason for disliking it.

A lot of it to me wasn't talking to me. It was talking to somebody else. Grotesque, wildly done field paintings, things that I really didn't understand in theory and didn't care about learning, and I sorta left saying, "Well, I guess that is good art, but damn, I don't like it." (MM)

In contrast, another three interviewees talk about the dangers of "getting too hung up on the 'right' meaning" (J).

Three interviewees want works to be pleasant.

I don't like bloody paintings and stuff. You know, things like that. Things that make me feel very uncomfortable. Although I like to see them, it's just that I don't spend a lot of time. (A)

We usually like things that . . . aren't too down pat, too obvious, not too pretty. But at the same time I don't like sadistic things or anything with too much angst. (PP)

Though to other interviewees "pleasant" and "pretty" can be a negative (3/15).

[Impressionism] is a little too giddy and light in feeling for me. I think it was important at the time, but I've never been attracted to most of it. It's too sweet. (LL)

Finally, over a third of the group (6/15) prefers realism.

The way the face was carved, little bones that most sculptures don't put in, lifelikeness like someone had been turned to stone a few minutes ago in all one color. It had life in it. (MM)

37. In their study, "The Art of Seeing," Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson note that 100% of their interviewees reported some emotional involvement with works, and 90% made references to the cognitive or intellectual dimensions of their experiences. 23% saw the emotional dimension as their primary mode of experiencing a work.

50% felt the intellectual was their primary mode. Both Housen and Parsons also note a play between the intellectual and the emotional in their more sophisticated viewers.

APPENDIX A: PROFILE OF NOVICE INTERVIEWEES

Self-Rated Knowledge of Art

Low 24% Moderate 76%

Self-Rated Interest in Art

Moderate 49% High 39% Very High 12%

of Museum Visits Last Year

1-2 73% 3-5 18% 6+ 9%

Age

| | | | |
|----------|-----|-------|-----|
| under 25 | 9% | 46-55 | 15% |
| 26-35 | 34% | 55+ | 18% |
| 36-45 | 24% | | |

Educational Background

| | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| Some High School | 3% |
| Graduated High School | 9% |
| Some College | 30% |
| Graduated College | 18% |
| Graduate or Prof. School | 37% |
| Undetermined | 3% |

Sex: Female 55% Male 45%

Denver Art Museum Member: Yes 26% No 73%

Profession

| | |
|---|--|
| Municipal Bond Trader Architectural Photographer Homemaker (3) Airline Employee Owner, Employee Screening Service Priest/Teacher Retired Personnel Specialist Admin. Sect'y, Law Firm Exec. Asst., Engineering Firm Homemaker/Accountant Record Sales Clerk (2) Staff Asst., Insurance Marketing Representative Exec. Dir., Physicians for Social Responsibility | Professor Student/Waitress Fraud Investigator Building Manager Lawyer Anthropologist Reporter Architect Retired RN Psychologist Retired Civil Engineer Telemarketer School Administrator |
|---|--|

APPENDIX B: PHONE SCREENER

Good afternoon/evening, my name is _____ from the Denver Art Museum and we're conducting a brief survey to find out how we can better serve our visitors. Do you have three to four minutes to answer a few questions? Thank you.

1) How often in the last year did you visit *any* art museum?

0 times ()

1-2 times ()

3-5 times ()

6+ times ()

2) In general how would you rate your *knowledge* of art?

low () Go to novice questions

moderate () Go to novice questions

high () Go to advanced amateur questions

very high () Go to advanced amateur questions

Novice Questions

3) In general how would you rate your *interest* in art?

low () Assign 0 points

moderate () Assign 0 points

high () Assign 0 points

very high () Assign 1 point

TOTAL POINTS:

4) Please answer YES or NO to the following questions.
During the last year have you . . .

--attended an art lecture YES () NO ()

--read an art book or magazine YES () NO ()

--purchased an art work YES () NO ()

- gone on a tour at an art museum YES () NO ()
- watched a television show on art or on a particular artist YES () NO ()
- taken an art class or created art work on your own YES () NO ()

IF RESPONDENT ANSWERS YES TO ONE OR MORE OF THE ABOVE ASSIGN 1 POINT.

TOTAL POINTS:

5) Please tell me which of the following statements describe you:

- I go to art museums to do something with my family or friends () YES = 0 points
- I go to the art museum to see a few of my favorite objects () YES = 1 point
- I go to the art museum to see the changing exhibits () YES = 1 point
- I go to the art museum for special events like jazz concerts () YES = 0 points
- I go to art museums to look around and have a good time () YES = 0 points
- I go to art museums to learn something about art () YES = 1 point

TOTAL POINTS:

.....
Total all points: _____

0-1 = Outing Novice
2 = Terminate Interview
3-5 = Art Novice
.....

6) Into which of the following categories does your age fall?

- Under 25 ()
- 25-35 ()
- 36-45 ()
- 46-55 ()
- 55 or over ()

7) What levels of schooling have you completed?

- junior high school [7th thru 9th] ()
- some high school ()
- graduated from high school ()
- some college ()
- graduated from college ()
- post-graduate or professional degree work ()

Indicate SEX: Male () Female ()

We are inviting a few select individuals like yourself to talk about their experiences at art museums.

These discussions last no more than two hours and you will receive _____ dollars and _____ free passes to the art museum as compensation for your time. We would like very much for you to attend and share your opinions and experiences with us. Can you help us with this project?

Our next session will be _____. Will that be convenient for you?

Advanced Amateur Questions

3) In general how would you rate your *interest* in art?

- | | | |
|-----------|-----|---------------------------------|
| low | () | TERMINATE AFTER A FEW QUESTIONS |
| moderate | () | TERMINATE AFTER A FEW QUESTIONS |
| high | () | |
| very high | () | |

4) Please answer YES or NO to the following questions.

During the last six months have you . . .

- | | |
|--|----------------|
| --attended an art lecture | YES () NO () |
| --read an art book or magazine | YES () NO () |
| --purchased an art work | YES () NO () |
| --gone on a tour at an art museum | YES () NO () |
| --watched a television show on art or on a particular artist | YES () NO () |
| --taken an art class or created art work on your own | YES () NO () |

TERMINATE IF RESPONDENT ANSWERS NO MORE THAN FOUR TIMES

5) Is your work art-related?

- | | |
|---------|-----------|
| YES () | TERMINATE |
| NO () | |

6) Into which of the following categories does your age fall?

- | | |
|----------|-----|
| Under 25 | () |
| 25-35 | () |
| 36-45 | () |

46-55 ()
55 or over ()

7) What levels of schooling have you completed?

junior high school [7th thru 9th] ()
some high school ()
graduated from high school ()
some college ()
graduated from college ()
post-graduate or professional degree work ()

Indicate SEX: Male () Female ()

We are inviting a few select individuals like yourself to talk about their experiences at art museums.

These discussions last no more than two hours and you will receive _____ dollars and _____ free passes to the art museum as compensation for your time. We would like very much for you to attend and share your opinions and experiences with us. Can you help us with this project?

Our next session will be _____. Will that be convenient for you?

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDES

Novice Questions

1) ART BACKGROUND

- do you have any background?
- when did you start going to art museums?
- types of art like/dislike?
- tastes change over time? why?

2) EXPECTATIONS OF MUSEUM VISIT

- feelings, mood?
- same or different from something else?
- RECOGNITION as a factor?
- COMFORT as a factor?

3) HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT VISITING A MUSEUM?

- know what going to see?
- how do you pick what to look at?
- appreciate versus enjoy?
- knowledge as a factor?
- perception of expert?

4) IDEAL VISIT

- what factors?
- what would ruin a visit?

5) IDEAL EXPERIENCE LOOKING AT AN ART OBJECT

6) MOST MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE WITH AN ART OBJECT

- when, where, what?
- what aspects most memorable?
- initial reaction/change over time?
- what about you made experience possible?
- happen often?
- like anything else?

7) IF GOING TO EXPLAIN WHAT WORKS REALLY WELL FOR YOU IN HAVING GOOD VISIT

- whole visit?
- with individual objects?

8) IDEAS ABOUT ART

- "Art is . . ."
- "Art isn't . . ."

Advanced Amateur Questions

1) ART BACKGROUND

- what first got you interested?
- when did you start visiting museums?
- how did you learn to look at art?
- particular experiences that shaped way you look at art?
- changes over time?

2) EXPECTATIONS OF MUSEUM VISIT

- feelings, moods?
- same or different from something else?
- RECOGNITION as a factor?
- KNOWLEDGE as a factor? how and what?
- have expectations changed over time?
- visit with someone else?

3) IDEAL VISIT

- what factors?
- what would ruin a visit?

4) HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT VISITING A MUSEUM?

5) IDEAL EXPERIENCE LOOKING AT AN OBJECT

- what experiences give you the greatest satisfaction?
- optimal way to look at art?
- relationship between appreciation and enjoyment

6) MOST MEMORABLE & WORST EXPERIENCE LOOKING AT AN OBJECT

- when, where, what?
- initial reaction/change over time?
- what made it so memorable?
- what aspects most vivid?
- awareness of time?
- frequency?
- what about you made experience possible?

7) RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A GOOD VISIT

- do's and don'ts?
- whole visit?
- with individual objects?

8) IDEAS ABOUT ART

- "Art is . . ."
- "Art isn't . . ."

CREATING INTERPRETIVE EXPERIMENTS

We started with two premises. First, there's no "best" or "right" way to do labels and guides; second, by varying our approaches we're more likely to produce materials that will appeal to a variety of visitors. Once we established a common baseline through our discussions about experts and novices, individual staff members were free to explore the issues and formats that intrigued them. We deliberately avoided any sort of group brainstorming or priority-setting at this stage because we didn't want to limit ourselves only to ideas that met with group consensus. We also wanted people to be able to let an idea evolve without having to defend it, and possibly lose creative momentum, in the early conceptual phases.¹ The richness and variety of these projects--ranging from puzzles to a "first-person" guide to a color-matching activity--are indicative of the different problem-solving styles and values each staff member brought to the grant.

We were also interested in experimenting with a variety of approaches so we could find interpretive methods that worked well for specific types of art (what's appropriate for a cubist painting might not be for a 17th century chair). While it was not by design, we ended up working with a range of museum collections--American, European, Asian, Native American, and contemporary. The rationale behind the choice of collection varied. In some cases, we worked with a particular collection because a curator indicated an interest in the project. Other times, people gravitated to areas they had worked in previously. And in the case of the Samaras (p. 101) and Bouguereau (p. 111) labels, a staff member had ideas she wanted to try out and the two pieces worked well given her goals.

Curatorial involvement in the projects varied, depending on the role curators wanted to play and their availability and interest. In some cases, curators wrote the labels. In others, they agreed to be tape-recorded or provided other input. Some projects had no curatorial involvement. Working collaboratively with curators can create rich interpretive materials, but the nature of this collaboration depends on the time, vision, and personalities involved. In some projects, a team of people working closely together was ideal. In others, we came up with very innovative and successful solutions when an educator or writer pursued an idea on her own.

Several of the projects required innovative formats, so we were constantly grappling with designs that would achieve our goals, be compatible with specific galleries,² and survive visitor wear and tear. We relied heavily on contract designers, and found we were most successful when they felt a sense of ownership in the project beyond their contract, when they had experience with museum environments, and when they valued communication as much as aesthetics.

Visitor feedback was crucial. While our evaluations varied from project to project, we found ourselves asking the same questions over and over. Did the label or guide work well for the public, *and* did we believe the project was worth-while? As Ross Loomis explains in "Small-Sample Techniques in Project Evaluations," p. 129, we experimented with several evaluation techniques, trying to find methods that would provide us with the type of information we wanted, given the time and resource limitations most museums face. In retrospect, we all agree

that we would have benefited from more formative testing earlier in the grant.

Questions about any of the label or gallery guide projects should be addressed to the individual report authors, care of the Denver Art Museum, 100 W. 14th Avenue Parkway, Denver, CO 80204. We'll be happy to provide additional information about project rationales, fabrication, evaluation, or costs. Information is also available on three experiments not included in this report--an orientation area for our Asian gallery, a children's "Eye Spy" game for our Native American collection, and landmark maps keying visitors to collection highlights.

1. Of course, we didn't work in total isolation. On some projects, staff members bounced ideas off each other or asked for help as needed.

2. We never found the perfect balance between being unobtrusive and intrusive, and, in fact, we didn't always agree about whether a design was intrusive or not (it often came down to personal taste and subtle degrees). Sometimes we erred on the side of being too unobtrusive and our projects went almost unnoticed by visitors. Other times, we drew too much attention to our projects, disrupting the ambience of a gallery. Unfortunately, this is not an area in which formative testing can help. Most mock-ups draw attention to themselves in ways a more polished display may not.

EXPANDING THE NOVICE EXPERIENCE

Jan Krulick and Margaret Ritchie

Rationale

We based our project on three major findings from current research about the differences between novice and expert experiences with art objects.¹

1. According to Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, the expert's aesthetic experience occurs in four different modes: perceptual, emotional, communicative, and intellectual. Novice experiences, however, rely mostly on the emotional component alone.
2. Experts know that they can experience art in different ways and accept this greater range of experience as positive. Thus, their aesthetic experiences tend to be multidimensional, richer, and more complex than novice experiences. Novices tend to shy away from the "intellectual" areas, either because they lack knowledge or because they don't want to risk ruining what they perceive as a good experience based largely on emotional involvement.
3. The amount of time spent with an art object is crucial to the expert's aesthetic experience, both in one-time encounters and in successive experiences with the same object. It can result in a changed understanding and appreciation of the work. In general, experts spend more time than do novices with any given object.

Goals

From the rationale, we derived the following goals:

1. To encourage visitors to spend time with an object.
2. To make novices aware of the different

types of experiences they can have with art objects.

3. To teach skills and critical awareness that will enable novices to move closer to the range of aesthetic experiences experts can have.
4. To impart "empowering ideas" that novices can apply to encounters with other art objects.²

Project

We chose Thomas Cole's *Dream of Arcadia* (fig. 1) as our object because former American art curator David Curry considered it among the most important pieces in the American collection and because it was the most popular object in the gallery, according to an observation study of visitors to the American floor.³ The painting, which was displayed on a wall with several other works, incorporates many features novices cited as appealing: "pleasant" or "beautiful" subject, "detailed," "realistic," "meticulous."

To encourage visitors to spend time with the painting, we created an inviting exhibition area that signaled the work as "important." Aided by Curry and interior designer Daryl Fischer, we furnished an alcove in the gallery like a living room, with a rug, two comfortable chairs, and fresh flowers on a low table.⁴ We chose chairs of contemporary design to make it plain that they could be sat on and weren't part of the museum collection displayed in adjacent rooms. The seating arrangement focused on the painting, the only art object in the alcove (fig. 2).

With designer Connie Asher and fabricator



Fig. 1. Thomas Cole's Dream of Arcadia was chosen for its popularity and significance. Denver Art Museum: Gift of Katherine H. Gentry.

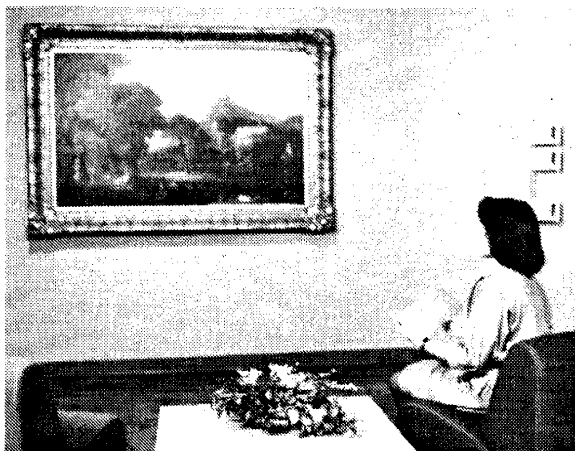


Fig. 2. An inviting seating area encouraged visitors to spend time with the painting.

Roger Fountain, we devised an interactive wall label to hang near the painting. Design and fabrication addressed ease of use, aesthetic compatibility with the exhibition area, and durability. Curry worked closely with us throughout the entire process of developing the label. We tried to make our text lively and nonthreatening and to make a direct connection with Cole, the artist, by quoting him wherever possible.



Fig. 3. Each pull-out paddle pursued a different way of thinking about the painting.

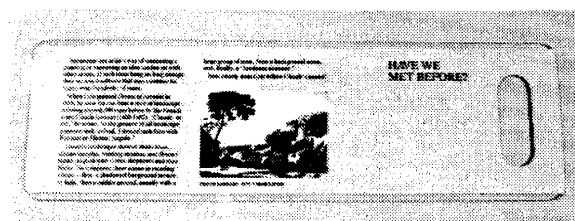


Fig. 4. One of the paddles, "Have We Met Before?" dealt with the cognitive dimension of the aesthetic experience.

An introductory text, silkscreened onto the front, invited visitors to explore different ways of experiencing Cole's painting by selecting one or more of four randomly arranged pull-out paddles. A title on the visible handle of each paddle suggested what the user would learn if he chose that one. Each paddle corresponded to one of Robinson and Csikszentmihalyi's four modes of aesthetic experience, introduced an empowering idea, and presented a relevant activity or piece of information (figs. 3 and 4). Users could carry the paddles with them as they looked at the painting.

Label Text

On front of paddle box:

THERE'S MORE HERE THAN MEETS THE EYE

If a work of art catches your eye, you'll probably find it rewarding to stop and take a longer look. The more time you spend with it, the more you'll get out of it.

These pull-out panels show you different ways of understanding and enjoying Thomas Cole's *Dream of Arcadia*. Choose whatever interests you most or choose them all.

Pull-out paddle texts:

JOURNEY THROUGH ARCADIA [with diagrammed photo of *Dream of Arcadia*]

When an artist creates an object, he carefully arranges the parts to help you see it in a certain way.

Here, Cole has created a world de-

signed for the imagination to enter and wander about in. He guides you, the imaginary traveler, by a path of zigzagging diagonals from the foreground stream to the far-distant background.

Cole also directs your gaze from detail to detail. In 1829 he wrote, "When we view the lovely scenes of nature, the eye runs from one object of beauty to another; it delights in the minute as well as the vast."

Are there other ways that Cole keeps your eye wandering through the painting? Color? Light?

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Sometimes you feel a flood of memories, associations, or emotions the first time you see a work of art. These reactions come from your personal experiences and from what the artist chose to include in the work.

For one person, *Dream of Arcadia* triggered memories of a summer trip to Greece. "I saw a lot of ruins, including the Parthenon, and I particularly remember thinking how amazing it was to be standing where one of the world's great civilizations flourished."

Another felt "caught up in a dream, like no place I'd ever been before. I could almost hear the shepherd's flute and the waterfall and smell the burning incense. I felt transported to a calm, faraway world."

The first person responded with feelings only he could have had. The

second response involves a more direct interaction with Cole's painting. When you think about your own reaction, how much are you responsible for it? How much is the artist?

WHAT'S ARCADIA? WHY ARCADIA?

Artists often speak to us through symbols--single objects or entire subjects that stand for particular ideas. Why do you think Cole, a 19th century American landscape painter who often painted New York's wild, rugged Catskill Mountains, picked ancient Greek Arcadia as his subject? Here's a place to start:

Arcadia, a mountainous region of Greece, was used by the Roman poet Virgil (70-19 BC) as the setting for pastorals--poems describing the carefree joys of idealized country life. One of Virgil's best-known pastorals foretells the return of a Golden Age, a mythical time of peace and perfection.

In 1836, Cole noted a changing American scene: "The ravages of the axe are daily increasing--the most noble scenes are made desolate, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation. Another generation will behold spots, now rife with beauty, desecrated by what is called improvements. This is a regret rather than a complaint; such is the road society has to travel."

Two years later he announced, "I intend to paint a scene in Arcadia (of course in the Golden Age)."

HAVE WE MET BEFORE? [with photo of Claude Lorrain's *Pastoral Landscape*, 1644]

Sometimes one artist's way of composing a painting or expressing an idea catches on with other artists. If such ideas hang on long enough, they become traditions that may continue for many, even hundreds, of years.

When Cole painted *Dream of Arcadia* in 1838, he took his cue from a style of landscape painting started 200 years before by the French artist Claude Lorrain (1600-1682).

"Claude, to me," he wrote, "is the greatest of all landscape painters: and, indeed, I should rank him with Raphael or Michael Angelo."

Claude's landscapes showed shady trees, distant temples, winding streams, and flowery banks peopled with Greek shepherds and their flocks. He composed these scenes in receding planes--first, a shadowed foreground broken by light, then a middle ground, usually with a large group of trees. Next a background scene, and, finally, a "luminous distance."

How closely does Cole follow Claude's model?

"Journey through Arcadia" (perceptual mode) targeted the novice's limited ability at formal analysis. We introduced the empowering idea that an artist carefully composes a painting to guide the viewer's eye. We included a photograph diagrammed to follow some of Cole's visual clues of line and detail and asked the visitor to look for other ways to travel through the work.

“First Impressions” (emotional mode) recognized that most novices’ primary reaction to art is on an emotional basis, which may have little to do with the object. The written format made this the most difficult paddle to conceive. We felt hampered by being unable to have a dialogue with the visitor about his reaction to the painting. To get across the idea that this reaction comes partly from the viewer and partly from the artist, we “quoted” two such experiences: one depended heavily on the viewer’s personal memories and associations, the other stemmed more from Cole’s work. We asked visitors to examine critically their own reactions with these examples in mind.

“What’s Arcadia? Why Arcadia?” (communicative mode) introduced the idea that artists sometimes use symbolism to convey meaning. We gave basic information about Arcadia and two pertinent quotes from Cole and asked the viewer to consider why Cole chose this particular subject.

“Have We Met Before?” (intellectual mode) addressed the cognitive dimension of the aesthetic experience; historical or art-historical knowledge can enrich the viewer’s experience. To illustrate the idea that art often comes from art, we provided a photograph and a verbal description of a typical Claude Lorrain landscape, the 17th century prototype for Cole’s 19th century painting (see fig. 3). We asked viewers to decide how closely Cole followed Claude’s model.

One problem we tried to address in the communicative and intellectual paddles was how to involve the novice viewer in aesthetic activities that basically depend on expert knowledge. We hoped that after using these paddles, visitors would be more aware of this type of involvement and might actively seek out gallery labels or books containing bio-

graphical, historical, or art-historical information.

Evaluation

We evaluated the project by observing 100 visitors in the project area and interviewing fifty others. (A complete evaluation report is available from the Denver Art Museum Education Department).

A majority of visitors (82%) used the exhibition area and the label. Almost half (42%) used the seating, and 90% of those people looked at *Dream of Arcadia* while sitting. The average time spent looking at the painting was 1 minute, 8 seconds, and the total time spent in the area averaged 2 minutes, 32 seconds.

These percentages show a considerable increase from those gathered in the baseline study prior to the project: only 47.3% of visitors looked at the Cole, the average looking time was 27 seconds, and only 6% used random gallery seating.

Visitors took advantage of the label’s multi-dimensional approach. A majority (68%) removed at least one pull-out paddle, while one-fourth (23%) removed all four paddles, a higher number than removed only one, two, or three paddles. No one paddle was favored over the others; they seemed to be chosen fairly equally.

There was general awareness that the label taught skills applicable to looking at other objects and introduced new ways of looking and thinking. It also conveyed the idea that spending time with an object is important. Most users (88%) said the label caused them to see things they might not otherwise have noticed. A majority (86%) learned things they said would “carry over” into other

objects, such as "spending more time looking," "noticing details," or "following paths through a painting." As one visitor mentioned, "Having this information and suggestions is like turning a light on inside my head that reminds me that there is so much to look for in paintings."

Visitors found the exhibition area extremely attractive and commented on the "comfortable seating," "dramatic" and "inviting" atmosphere, and "obvious focus" on the work of art. They also liked being able to carry the pull-out paddles with them as they looked at the painting. It wasn't clear to some users, however, that they could pull the paddles completely out of the box. We watched several people pull a paddle just far enough to read the text and then stop, apparently afraid they'd break the panel if they continued pulling.

Conclusions

Overall, we think the project achieved our goals. It encouraged people to spend time with the painting, it made novices aware of the broad range of experiences it's possible to have with one art object, and it imparted skills and ideas that can be applied to other works of art.

Our efforts in designing an inviting exhibition area with an optional and user-friendly interpretive label were generally successful. To attract people to the object, we created a "human" space, a space where people felt comfortable and, consequently, more inclined to spend time with the object and explore different ways of experiencing art.

1. Our source for novice experiences was Melora McDermott-Lewis's study "Through Their Eyes: Novices and Advanced Amateurs," p. 7 of this report. For information on expert experiences, we turned to Mihaly

Csikszentmihalyi and Rick E. Robinson et al., "The Art of Seeing: Toward an Interpretive Psychology of the Visual Experience" (a report on research submitted to the J. Paul Getty Foundation, July 1986).

2. Marlene Chambers describes an empowering idea as one that: "helps the visitor make sense of a particular exhibition and all its specific parts; lends itself to further elaboration and application by each visitor, so that, by the time he leaves the exhibition, he has made the idea his own by experiencing and practicing its power to give meaning to the specific; is applicable to other art exhibitions the visitor encounters; has powerful implications that suggest fruitful lines of inquiry in other aspects of life." See "Improving the Esthetic Experience for Art Novices: A New Paradigm for Interpretive Labels," p. 101 in this report.

3. "Baseline Study of the American Galleries," reported in a memo from Jan Krulick, September 2, 1987. Copies are available from the Denver Art Museum Education Department.

4. Prior to our project, bentwood chairs were the only seating provided for visitors to the gallery. Because the chairs were usually arranged in formal clusters of three, visitors either were reluctant to move them to a different location or thought they were part of the collection and not to be sat on.

MAKING THE EXPERT ACCESSIBLE

Jan Krulick and Margaret Ritchie

Rationale

This project came about because we were surprised to discover that art novices are often uncomfortable with learning from art experts, the people most able to provide the knowledge novices seek. We considered the following points extracted from Melora McDermott-Lewis's study of art novices:¹

1. Novices want to find the "human elements" associated with a work of art.
2. Novices are quick to judge art. They often equate what they like with "good art" and what they don't like with "bad art" because they generally lack the criteria for judging an object and are often unable, or see no need, to articulate their assessment of it.
3. Novices admit that expert knowledge might be useful to them, but they emphatically don't want an expert talking down to them, telling them if an art object is good or bad, or questioning their judgment.
4. Novices believe that experts look at objects in a very clinical, unemotional way.
5. In spite of their negative attitude toward experts, novices are intrigued by the people who make professional judgments about art. They want to know why certain objects wind up in museums, what makes them "wonderful."

Goals

From the rationale, we established the following goals:

1. To break down the novice's image of art experts as "unfriendly, intellectual, and unfeeling." We wanted people to realize that experts can be very emotional about art and are eager to share information in an

unintimidating way.

2. To show novices some of the reasons curators choose certain objects for museum collections.
3. To give novices a chance to use these criteria in forming their own judgments.
4. To encourage novices to look more discriminately at decorative arts, particularly chairs, the vehicle we chose for our project.

Project

We chose decorative arts for this project because they constitute a major part of the American art collection and no previous projects dealt with them. Then we focused on chairs because they're very "human" objects (they have backs, arms, legs, knees, feet, and even ears) and they're easy for visitors to relate to, since they live with them every day. We also picked chairs because they're a major interest of then curator David Curry, our designated art expert, who showed great enthusiasm and affection for chairs when he talked about them. We thought that if we could get Curry talking directly to museum visitors about chairs, he'd quickly break down the negative impression novices seem to have of art experts.

With Curry, we selected ten American chairs that represented a range of styles and clearly demonstrated several of the criteria he used in choosing them for the museum's collection. Our choices included two chairs known to be popular with visitors and three that had little appeal compared to other objects.² Our challenge was to present all ten in such a way that people would voluntarily spend enough time with them to learn what made the chairs

museum quality. We also hoped they'd learn that you can appreciate a piece of art without necessarily loving it. And we wanted to give them an opportunity to practice their newly acquired expertise.

The project took the form of an exhibit of ten chairs, accompanied by a brochure. To attract visitor attention, we displayed the chairs in the carpeted alcove used for the Cole label (see "Expanding the Novice Experience," p. 49). They were arranged "like people at a cocktail party," as Curry put it, to show off points made in the brochure about the chairs' distinctive "personalities." The installation plan originally called for some chairs to be raised on platforms to ensure good visibility and for each chair to be spotlighted. Due to circumstances beyond our control, neither the platforms nor the spotlights materialized, so the exhibit was not as dramatic as we had envisioned. The display was attractively fenced off with a two-foot-high brass rail, a measure necessary to prevent visitors from touching or sitting in the chairs (fig. 1). An introductory label explaining the project, illustrated object labels, and the brochures (in Plexiglas boxes) were stored on the wall at either end of the rail (fig. 2).

The introductory label, which specifically addressed novice curiosity about objects and concerns about experts, encouraged people to take a brochure:

CHAIRMANSHIP

The Art of Choosing Chairs

What can make a chair, an everyday functional object, so special that it winds up in a museum?

There's no one reason. It's a combi-

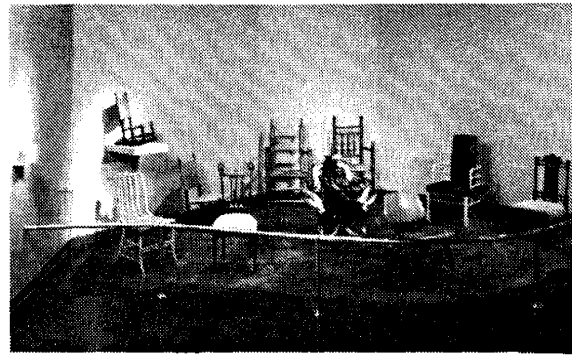


Fig. 1. The chairs were informally arranged to show off their "personalities."



Fig. 2. Brochures were stored in a Plexiglas box under an introductory label.

nation of several factors from an instant reaction--I like it, I don't like it--to a careful consideration of objective criteria, such as design, craftsmanship, historical significance, or rarity.

Curator David Curry shares his love affair with chairs and explains his reasons for choosing these particular ones.

Take a brochure and check out his choices. Then decide which chair you'd save from disaster if you could rescue just one.

The brochure started with a brief introduction--Curry telling why the museum collects chairs and why he loves them--and continued with a short statement about each chair, which was identified by a picture. We tried to make each statement read like a "first-person label," as if the expert were right there talking to the visitor. At the end of the brochure was a do-it-yourself exercise and a reading list (for those inspired to learn more about chairs). A photocopy of the brochure appears in the appendix to this article.

To present the curator as a friendly, nonthreatening kind of expert, we tried to capture on paper Curry's relaxed, humorous, and affectionate way of talking about chairs. We got our raw material by taping a session with Curry and the chairs. For each example, we asked him to discuss a major reason he selected the chair for the collection, a "fascinating fact" about the chair, and his personal feelings about it.

From the thirty-two-page transcript of the tape, we culled and revised the nuggets printed in the brochure. Curry had final approval of the text. Although the process was time consuming, we think it is a valuable model for label writing. It allows the curator to speak naturally and informally to a novice audience. One of our most difficult tasks was to duplicate the flavor of Curry's speaking style on the printed page without losing or changing his meaning. And Curry was sometimes surprised to read what he had actually said. A remark that sounds wonderful coming from a live speaker who inflects and gestures can give an amazingly different impression in the cold anonymity of print. Although the final product is carefully orchestrated, we think it has a spontaneous ring. Obviously, the success of our project depended on our expert's ability to enter into

the spirit of it and his willingness to devote the necessary time to it.

The brochure format was not our original plan for the first-person labels. We wanted to discuss each chair with an individual label attached to the rail so visitors could pick and choose. If someone decided to read about a chair she liked, we hoped she'd be interested enough to read more, or even all, of the labels. However, the number of objects in the small space made this approach aesthetically unacceptable. As exhibit designer Lehlani Murray pointed out, the railing would have had to be at least a foot wide to support labels of easily readable size for all the chairs. And the crowded cluster of ten labels would probably intimidate rather than entice.

Connie Asher designed the brochure as separate blocks of text--we wanted users to feel they could still browse among the chairs and not be put off by thinking, "I have to read the whole thing." The advantage of a brochure (as opposed to an installed gallery label) is that it can be taken away and used later. The disadvantage is that people don't always pick up a copy or use it in the gallery, which defeats its purpose as a device to increase looking time or convey information dependent on having the object present.

Sometime, we'd like to try the first-person label idea as an audio tour. While this approach would take equally careful writing and editing, a curator who could read the script "naturally" would give visitors a friendly, spontaneous, and genuinely first-person experience.

Evaluation

Patterson Williams reviewed the project in a group interview with twelve novice visitors,

who also completed a written questionnaire. Discussion focused primarily on the brochure.

In general, participants found the brochure attractive and helpful. Most found it easy to use and an improvement over gallery pamphlets typically found in museums. They particularly liked the brochure's format, clarity, and first-person conversational style. Presenting the curator's expertise and opinions in this manner seemed to "open up" the museum for these visitors.

When somebody loves something and they're talking about it, then you sort of love it too because they're speaking from their heart. But when they're speaking from their mind, you don't necessarily get that connection.

It's friendly. You read it, it has a sense of humor. It's obvious that the man who did this is intelligent. He knew what he was doing and he gave it on a one-to-one level. I think art in a way is so snobby because it's for very few. It's not something that everyone can go and appreciate. Whereas here, it's on our level and whether we have a high interest of art or a low interest, we can understand what he's trying to tell us.

Furthermore, users gained information and insights about the chairs.

It tells about the work. It really does give a very good description of it. After you read the description, you really take another look at the chair.

As one person put it, "It is rare that a brochure is so interesting and informative."

Panelists, however, did have a couple of important reservations about the brochure. First, the size of the original piece, with all the labels printed on one side, was too large for easy use. We corrected the problem by reprinting the brochure with copy on both sides, thus cutting its size in half. Second, the make-your-own-judgment exercise at the end got mixed reviews from the visitor panel. While they liked the idea of a participatory activity, about a third of the group found it confusing or easy to overlook. This section of the brochure could have benefited from some formative testing.

Reaction to the exhibit itself confirmed our reservations about the installation. Panelists thought the chairs were too far away. They would have reacted with a greater sense of psychological immediacy had some of the chairs been elevated or set closer to the viewer.

1. See "Through Their Eyes: Novices and Advanced Amateurs," p. 7.

2. See "Baseline Study of the American Galleries," an observation study conducted by Jan Krulick and reported in a memo September 2, 1987. Copies are available from the Denver Art Museum Education Department.

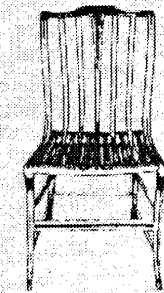
APPENDIX

"Chairmanship: The Art of Choosing Chairs"



Curator of American Art David Curry tells why he picked these chairs for the Denver Art Museum collection.

"We're actively collecting American furniture from the late 19th and early 20th centuries because it's still possible to find masterpieces in this area, because we can afford them, and because I love this stuff. I especially love the human qualities of chairs—they've got arms, legs, knees, feet, ears, and backs. For me, each one has a personality that's shaped by its individual qualities. Let me show you what I mean."



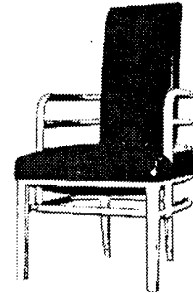
Fancy Chair, 1808-1813
Samuel Gragg (active 1800-1830)
Steamers and painted oak, American ash, oak maple, and beech
Purchased: Henry J. Smolander Endowment Fund

Fancy Chair, 1808-1813
Samuel Gragg (active 1800-1830)

"The Gragg chair is an incredibly lucky find—only about 60 survive. When I first located a dealer who had some, six were available. By the time we'd found the money and I'd called the man, there were five. When I got to his shop in Philadelphia, only three were left. One had major painting losses. The second hadn't been cleaned and was very dark. This chair had less sophisticated decoration than the first, but the painting was all there and nicely in balance."

"People called these 'fancy chairs' because of their extravagant, exuberant decoration. Look at the little hairy knees, and those minding goat feet on the front legs (they're a haat), and the peacock feather up the back."

"Technologically, the chair is well ahead of its time. Wood generally wasn't steam bent in this way until 25 years later."



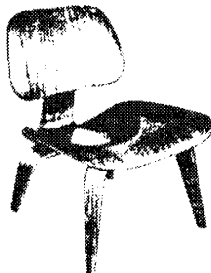
Dining Room Armchair, 1928-1929
Ken Webber (1889-1963)
Manufactured by Grant Rapids Chair Company
Bent and lacquered wood, leather
Purchased: Mabel Y. Hughes Charitable Trust Fund

Dining Room Armchair, 1928-1929
Ken Webber (1889-1963)

"This chair is rare because it still has its original paint and upholstery. Too often, painted furniture becomes a victim of taste. A difficult, minty green like this might have been stripped off if it offended a later eye."

"I'm fascinated by the early 20th century idea that everything should suggest machines. This chair tries hard to look manufactured, but it's completely hand made. It's not even metal—where the paint has worn, you can see that the frame is steam-bent, hand-joined wood. But it creates the illusion of machinery."

"It reminds me of an electric chair—it's severe, almost cruel. But the piece continues to grow on me. You have to think about tastes of other eras. I've had to learn to separate the familiar from the unfamiliar and to assess not just beauty but also historical significance."



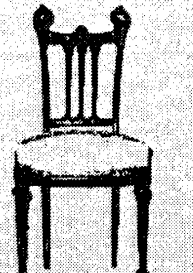
Potato Chip Lounge Chair, 1947
Charles Eames (1907-1978)
Molded and bent birch plywood
Purchased: Earth M. Duley Fund

Potato Chip Lounge Chair, 1947
Charles Eames (1907-1978)

"Here we've got a chair by an extremely important American designer. It's conceived as sculpture, with big, broad planes that recall the snack food it's named after. I wanted some pieces of modern decorative art to go with our paintings of that period."

"This chair continues 19th century ideas about making a material do what it is best suited to do. Everything is a bent piece of wood, even the legs are wide, bent pieces. And see how beautifully the grain of the wood follows the forms. Eames thoroughly understood his material."

"Eames also designed his chair to be comfortable. That upright center element gives slightly so the back has a bit of spring to it."



Inlaid Side Chair, 1885-1890
Probably New York City
Mahogany, rosewood, mother-of-pearl, brass, ebonized, and silk moiré
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Woodward

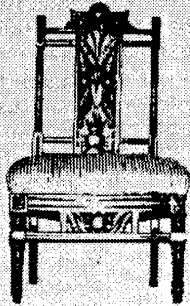
Inlaid Side Chair, 1885-1890

"This chair represents the finest in American furniture making of the 1880s. That's part of its appeal. We only know of two others like it, and we don't know who made them. Great cabinet makers signed their work inconsistently—some did, some didn't."

"The chair is quite feminine (it was a feminine era). It lived in the parlor, where it got perched on, if it was sat on at all. The workmanship is exquisite—the carving is excellent and the inlay complex. It's a bit on the decadent side, with its exaggerated and curvaceous form. It's got a wasp waist, like a lady in one of those tight corsets. And the copper, brass, and mother-of-pearl inlay resembles jewelry of the period."

"The chair also has its original upholstery, although not in very good condition. That's a valuable document of earlier taste."

(OVER)



Slipper Chair, about 1880.
African rosewood.
Purchase, Mabel T. Hughes Charitable
Trust Fund

Slipper Chair, about 1880

"The minute I saw this chair I wanted it. You can see the quality of the workmanship. The shallow carving is wonderfully crisp. I love the rhythmic repetition of the ring turnings on the front legs and the tiny blossom of each knee. Those flat, frontal, stylized sunflowers on the back are really abstract, a word that often scares people when it comes to modern painting. Age has given the rosewood a delicious 'plum pudding' sheen, or patina.

"The sunflower symbolized renewal and enlightenment in late 19th century art, particularly in the decorative arts. Some people believed that if you surrounded yourself with beautiful things, you'd become a better person.

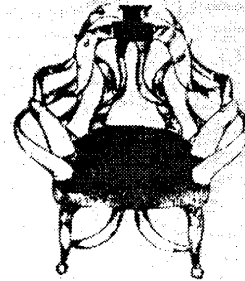
"If this wasn't an art object to trip over in a crowded parlor, it was probably used in a bedroom for putting on shoes. Hence the name 'slipper chair.' Its lowness made it easier to button your shoes or tie your laces."

Armchair, about 1880

"The first thing I bought for the DAM was this horn chair. I was surprised that a museum in a western city like Denver didn't have one. It's become one of our most popular objects.

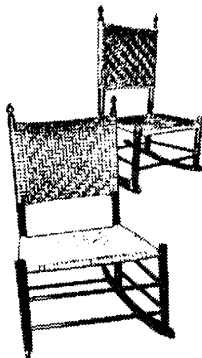
"Although this is not the finest horn chair, it's a wonderful example. A great one—with an ocelot-skin seat and inlaid stars—would cost 10 to 20 times what the museum was able to pay at the time. We'd like one some day.

"Some horn chairs blast out in all directions. This one is ladylike, keeping its elbows in. See how it curves in on itself and takes advantage of the shape and texture of the horns? Horn chairs graced the hunting lodges of rich industrialists who wanted to get back to nature on weekends."



Armchair, about 1880.
Possibly Tiffany & Co.
Steel horn, velvet, metal, glass.
Purchase, Degen Fund for Western Art

Child's Rocking Chair, late 1800s
Shaker, Mt. Lebanon, New York
Wood, cotton
Purchase, Wayne Slukey Memorial Fund



Rocking Chair, early 1900s
Shaker
Woods, cotton
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Harley G. Higbie Jr.

Child's Rocking Chair, late 1800s Rocking Chair, early 1900s Shaker

"I've loved Shaker things since I was a child. I bought the little rocker because we already had a collection of miniature furniture. Also, we didn't own anything Shaker. For me, the tiny rocker evokes the toddler who might have used it, and I knew people would find it appealing. The elegant big rocker is privately owned. Together they look like mother and child.

"Shakers had an enormous impact on early 20th century design. Their pieces seem quite contemporary to people who equate plainness with modernism, a notion that isn't always accurate. The design of these rockers actually goes back to the early 1800s.

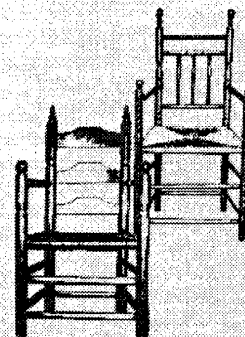
"Shakers made some chairs to order, like tailor-made pants. They mass produced others, including these, for public sale. But because the rockers came in 7 sizes, you still got sort of a custom fit. The small rocker is size 0, the large one is size 4."

Carver Chair, 1650-1700 Pilgrim Slatback Armchair, early 1900s Wallace Nutting (1861-1941)

"The Carver 'pilgrim-century' chair was already here when I came to the Denver Art Museum, so I don't have the kind of personal relationship with it that I do with chairs I've found myself. But see how the seat broadens as it comes forward—that's a powerful form. You picture someone enthroned in it, grasping the knobs.

"I got the Nutting chair to compare with the older Carver chair. I'm very interested in the colonial revival, a phenomena of the 1870s. Americans revived earlier styles as a way of glorifying their cultural roots. You can see this in the Nutting chair's exaggerated heaviness and confidence. Look at the knobs—they're stronger, more forceful than on the older chair. This chair is proud, but self-conscious."

Carver Chair, 1650-1700
Walnut, rush
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Wayne Slukey



Pilgrim Slatback Armchair, early 1900s
Wallace Nutting (1861-1941)
Marquise hardwoods, rush
Purchase, Mabel T. Hughes Charitable
Trust Fund

Now It's Your Choice

Imagine fire is sweeping through the Denver Art Museum. You have a chance to save just one of these chairs for the museum. Which one would you choose? Dr. Curry has organized some of his criteria into a recipe of things to consider as you make your choice.

Design + Craftsmanship = Personality
of your chair

| | |
|--------------------|----------------------|
| color | use of materials |
| shape | quality of execution |
| texture | |
| line | |
| sculptural quality | |

Now that you've chosen a chair for the Denver Art Museum, try applying this recipe to the chairs you live with. If you'd like to learn more about chairs, their history and design, here are a few books to get started with:

American Furniture: 1620 to the Present
Jonathan L. Fairbanks & Elizabeth Bidwell Bates, 1961
19th-Century America: Furniture and Other Decorative Arts
Marilyn Johnson et al., 1970.
300 Years of American Seating Furniture: Chairs and Beds from the Mabel Brady Garvan and Other Collections at Yale University
Patricia E. Kane, 1976.
Furniture Treasury (Most of American Origin)
Wallace Nutting, 3 vols., 1928.

Label project funded by generous grants from the J. Paul Getty Trust and the National Endowment for the Arts
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EXPLORING COLOR

Melora McDermott-Lewis

Rationale

Given that novices experience art primarily through subject matter, I wanted to experiment with ways to help them focus on the formal elements of a work. Since they were already drawn to color, this seemed a natural place to start--to find a way to get them to go beyond whether they liked a color or thought it was realistic.¹

In my interviews, I had been struck by advanced amateurs' open-ended perusal of works and their delight in discovering a detail or element *they* chanced upon. While my goal was to focus novices' attention on color, I didn't want to rig the activity so they would make a predetermined discovery. Instead, I wanted to encourage a free-style exploration of color that could yield individual discoveries.²

I was also interested in experimenting with basically nonverbal interpretive materials. I liked the idea of visual exercises as a way of accommodating nonreading-oriented visitors and of bypassing the translation step involved in moving from verbal to visual and back again. By avoiding a lot of words, I also hoped to make it seem less like a heavy-duty learning activity and more like the "light" experience novices wanted.

Project

The project took the form of a simple color-matching activity consisting of five paddles stored in a cabinet, a solution board, and instructions (fig. 1). Each paddle bore daubs of different colors matching the colors in one of five paintings on the wall behind the

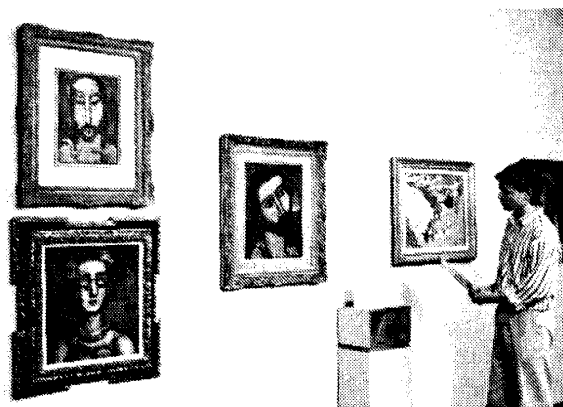
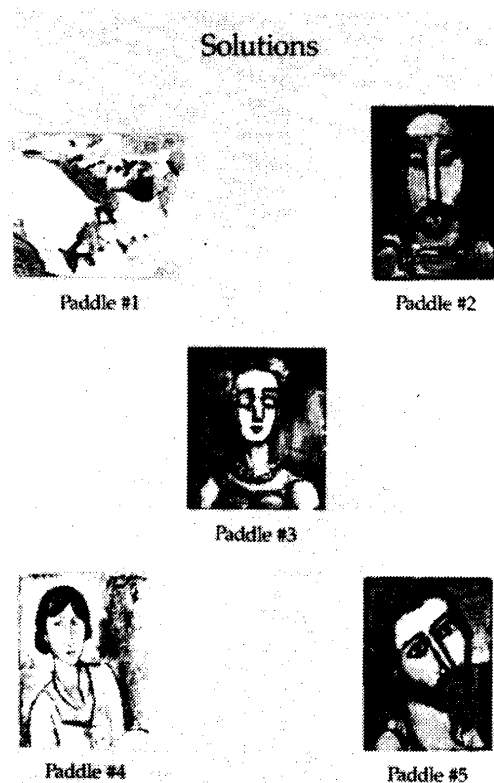


Fig. 1. The activity consists of five paddles (corresponding to a group of five paintings), simple instructions, and a solution board.

cabinet. Visitors were encouraged to select a paddle and decide which painting contained all five colors on that paddle. Paddles were numbered so visitors could check the solution board to see if they had the right answer (fig. 2).

Designer Daryl Fischer and I had several concerns in making the cabinet and paddles. First, we wanted a format that would appeal to visitors but not seem too childlike. We originally thought that a palette-shaped paddle might be intriguing and decided to test it against the rectangular shapes used for the Asian art human-connection labels (fig. 3). Second, we wanted a system that would allow us to make revisions easily as paintings changed. We debated whether to make a separate paddle for each painting or a single paddle with all five color groupings on it. While we liked the comparisons the latter solution set up, it didn't give us the flexibility we needed.³

Finally, we didn't want visitors to stumble inadvertently on the solutions before they



Funded by generous grants from the J. Paul Getty Trust and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Fig. 2. The paddles are numbered so visitors can quickly check their results against this solution board.

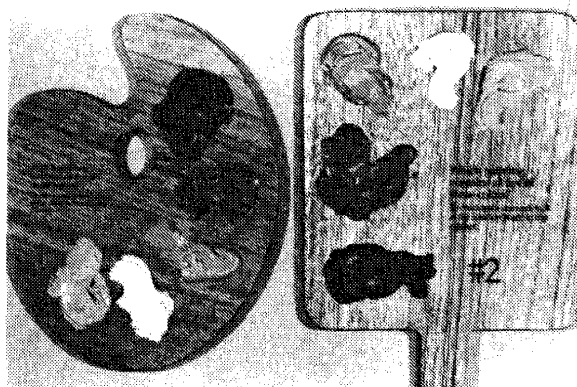


Fig. 3. We modified our earlier, palette-shaped paddles to a rectangular shape, since many viewers thought the paint daubs represented the artist's entire "palette." Numbers were also added for ease in checking solutions.

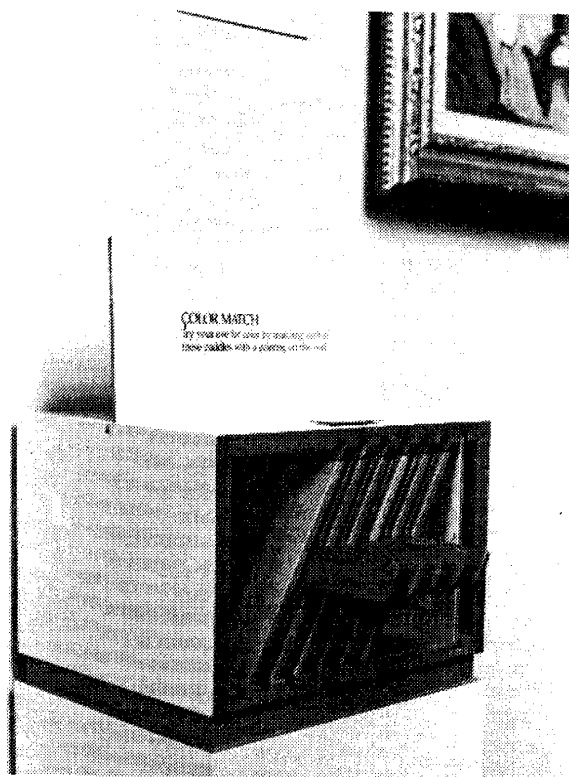


Fig. 4. The five diagonally-fitting paddles are easily distinguished from the vertical solution board on the far right.

had tried the exercise.⁴ We used a different shape and material for the solution board, which we set in a vertical slot to contrast with the diagonal slots of the paddles (fig. 4).

Instructions for the exercise were two-tiered. The sign on top explained the activity and, we hoped, intrigued people:

COLOR MATCH

Try your eye for color by matching each of these palettes with a painting on this wall.

The text on the paddles restated the instructions (for those who needed further explanation or who hadn't read the sign) and told users where to find the answers:

Which painting contains all five of these colors?

To check your answer, look at the solution board in the cabinet.

Artist and color-theory instructor Carol Durham created the paddle colors. After studying the paintings, she brought her materials to the gallery and made up approximately ten “color chips” for each work. We reviewed all of the chips and came up with five colors per work that we felt would be challenging yet clearly identifiable. Carol then painted these colors on the paddles to resemble daubs of paint on a palette.⁵

The five paintings used in the activity were: André Derain’s *Fisherman at Collioure* (1905), Amedeo Modigliani’s *Portrait of a Woman* (1918), and Georges Rouault’s *Head of Christ* (1930), *Portrait de Femme* (1939), and *Head of Christ* (1939). These paintings were selected because several of their colors seemed close enough to create a challenging match game. They also offered visitors a chance to look at a single artist’s use of color, as well as compare his work to that of other artists. And as a practical matter, all five works already hung on a single wall, which made it easy for visitors to view all the paintings included in the activity.

Evaluation

Patterson Williams reviewed the activity with a panel of art novices who had tried it. In general, the response was positive. The paddles focused their attention on the paintings and encouraged them to think about the colors in the works.

Looking for individual colors that you find was exciting. You’re look-

ing more at the interplay of colors.

At first you look at [the paddle] and say, “Well, I don’t know, these colors really wouldn’t go together.” And then you go up and examine the paintings and see how he painted them. It just makes you enjoy how, I mean, to me he must have worked really hard to get it because it came out looking so nice.

When I first looked at [the painting], it just didn’t seem to have as many colors as I saw on the palettes. But, because of these colors I was looking closer, and every once in a while in the lower part of the painting I would see a bright color that I hadn’t noticed when I first looked at the painting.

I enjoyed it and found it interesting. It gave me another perspective on how to look at a picture.

Unfortunately, several panelists based their most exciting “discoveries” on the mistaken assumption that the artists used *only* the colors on the paddles to create their paintings.

I found it challenging to try to figure out how they got this [bright yellow] when I didn’t see it on any of the palettes. So that made me look closer. Would these two colors make this yellow? . . . It made me think, “Okay, these two colors could make this color.” I never would realize that.

To clarify this in the final version of the game, I substituted the word “paddle” for

“palette” in the instructions and used the rectangular-shaped boards. After trying both paddle shapes, users commented that the rectangular paddles were easier to replace in the cabinet than the palette-shaped ones, although they still found inserting the paddle into the angled slots tricky.

The other issue that surfaced during the panel discussion was whether visitors felt they had sacrificed the overall impact of the work by focusing only on color. As one man explained, “It’s sort of like going to a symphony and looking at the instruments and not hearing the interplay of music.”

I wasn’t looking at the picture. I was looking at the colors.

I think I missed really what the paintings were about and focused just on the colors. . . . I really didn’t look at the picture until I was done.

These remarks seem typical of novices’ frequent assumption that a painting is only about subject matter.

For some members of the group, focusing on color wasn’t an issue:

I did look at the pictures because I was looking at how the color made the pictures, . . . the way he blended the colors to make the different kinds of shapes. What he was actually painting. So, I did see the picture as well.

For others, the ends justified the means:

Maybe it will take away from the pictures you looked at, but the next pictures, or drawings, or portraits you

come upon, you’re going to be looking more for color . . . and you’ll appreciate [it] a little more than you did.

A final problem was that visitors wanted to get too close to the paintings. Recent informal observations and discussions with guards show that people often hold the paddle close to the work when searching for colors. We’re currently experimenting with low, roped stanchions to allow close observation without endangering the art.

Conclusions

Overall, the project succeeded in accomplishing its goals, although panelists’ concerns about concentrating on a single element warrant further consideration. It would also be useful to see how the activity affected participants’ subsequent perceptions of color in other works.

Like the Bouguereau-Degas project (“Learning to Look,” p. 121), the activity could be supplemented with a guide that encouraged visitors to investigate other color issues. Also, the match-game format could be adapted to explore other formal elements. We might use photographic blow-ups, for instance, to help people learn about brushstrokes or texture.

1. For a discussion of novice observations on color, see “Through Their Eyes: Novices and Advanced Amateurs,” p. 20.

2. For a more complete description of this ownership/discovery pattern, see “Through Their Eyes,” p. 31.

3. Informal observations in the gallery suggest that some visitors prefer seeing the different color groupings simultaneously. Several visitors pulled out two or three paddles at a time so they could compare the colors.

4. I noted several visitors, mostly children, starting with the solution board. Once they knew which paddle belonged with which painting, they searched for the individual colors.

5. Carol used LIQUITEX Acrylic mixed with LIQUITEX Gel Medium and Celite #499, a thickening agent that creates a heavy, oillike body. We encountered some difficulties when the varnish we used to adhere the instructions to the paddles proved incompatible with the paint and turned some of the colors a slightly greenish hue. We solved the problem by repainting the daubs and applying a combination of SOLUVAR Matte and Gloss Varnish.

MAKING COMPARISONS

Melora McDermott-Lewis

Rationale

I was struck several years ago by Elliot Eisner's comment that expertise is based on "the ability to discern increasingly subtle differences" and that in many ways our training from Art 101 on has been centered on seeing these differences through comparisons.¹ For curators and other art specialists, comparisons are vital in their decisions about the quality of objects and their display. Comparisons were also very important to the advanced amateurs I interviewed, who used them as a looking tool (see "Through Their Eyes: Novices and Advanced Amateurs," p. 30). Yet, comparisons seemed to play only a minor role in novice experiences.

Because comparisons can be such a useful tool and because they require visitors to look actively rather than passively, I wanted to develop some sort of problem that would lure novices into using them. I also felt it was important to address novices' strong preference for "realistic" art. If "being realistic" was an important criterion for novices in judging "good art," then I wanted them to begin thinking about what they really meant by "realistic" (see "Through Their Eyes," p. 15). I didn't expect to change their criteria, only to encourage them to be a little more discerning. Finally, I was intrigued by comparisons because they offered another chance to experiment with primarily nonverbal materials (see "Exploring Color," p. 61).

Project

The comparison activity consisted of a wooden tray with instructions printed on its

lower edge and seven laminated color prints. One print was attached to each end of the tray to mark the ends of the continuum, and the other five were loose (fig. 1).² The prints included:

Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Joys of Motherhood*, about 1752

Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, 1936

George Biddle, *Tenement* (detail), 1936

Adolph William Bouguereau, *The Little Shepherdess*, 1889

Jean François Millet, *Woman Returning from the Well*, 1855-62

Jean Simeon Chardin, *The Scullery Maid* (detail), 1738

Jules Breton, *The Gleaner* (detail), 1900

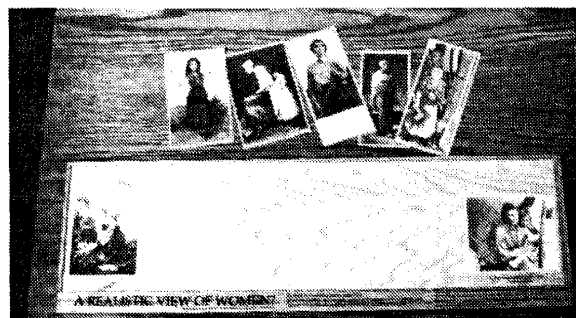


Fig. 1. The comparison activity involves a wooden tray with one fixed print at each end. The visitor arranges five loose prints to complete the "continuum."

The instructions along the bottom of the tray read:

A REALISTIC VIEW OF WOMEN?

Realism in a painting can be judged by 1) how accurately an artist has captured the appearance of things and 2) how true to life the message (or content) is.

With this in mind, decide how “realistic” each of these images of working women is by arranging them on a scale from Fragonard’s sugary *Joys of Motherhood* to Dorothea Lange’s stark photograph of a migrant mother.

There is no correct way to order the photographs. In fact, I deliberately chose the images so that no one arrangement would fit both of the criteria suggested in the instructions. Also, since I wanted to focus attention on the Breton (the one Denver Art Museum piece in the activity), I selected images that I thought people would group around the Breton without making it the obvious center of the continuum. To ensure that visitors looked at the actual painting in the gallery, I included only a small detail of the work on the laminated card along with this text:

This is only a detail. You’ll want to study the entire painting on view here before you rate its realism.

Assuming that people would spend more time thinking about the works if they could sit, I set the game trays up on a small table with chairs in front of *The Gleaner* (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. A comfortable seating area was set up near *The Gleaner*, one of the works highlighted in the exercise.

(I also hoped to attract people who were just looking for a comfortable place to rest their feet.) The chairs and game boards are arranged so two visitors can work independently, then compare and discuss their answers with each other. While a single visitor might be reluctant to use the game with a stranger seated across from him, I wanted to encourage interaction among people visiting together.³ This seemed particularly important given the number of visitors who come to the museum with at least one other person (76%) and the importance of social interaction to novices.

Evaluation

Patterson Williams reviewed the activity with a panel of novice participants. In general, they found the activity interesting and the difficulty level acceptable. In making their decisions, panelists considered everything from facial expression to overall “intensity” and “emotional feel.” Some noted the backgrounds of the works and others the poses of the figures. There was little consensus about how the works should be arranged (I found this quite encouraging).

While the group did not come to any final decisions about realism per se, several panelists did note that the two suggested criteria did not always work together:

I kept moving this one around . . . because if you really look at it, she’s a real hard worker, [but] the way the picture is, it doesn’t look real.

You know, *The Scullery Maid*, that’s a horrible job, but the way the painting was done it looks kind of idealized.

One of the most heartening aspects of the visitors' accounts was the active attitude they described in their looking. Instead of waiting for aspects of the works to "hit them," they tried to come up with their own "guiding rules" for looking.

This one you set your own rules.
You could decide it was expression.
You could decide it was form of art.
You could decide anything. . . . But,
this is absolutely wide open in terms
of how you categorize and the rules
you make.

Many panelists also noted that several different factors could influence their decisions:

It's how you looked at the picture.
Whether you look at the face, or the
surroundings, or what they were
doing.

I thought it was interesting, kind of
fun that way, because you could
approach it on different levels, and
try and juggle them all together and
differentiate what you thought was
most important.

. . . and that the works were quite complex:

You can look at it and set your pattern, and look at it again and say, "Wait," because you see something different. And you could just go on and on, and just keeping changing [the order] because you'll just keep seeing something different in another picture.

The activity did seem to focus novices' attention on the Breton:

When I first looked at the [Breton], it looked very idealized, but then by looking at this spectrum of prints and especially comparing it to the shepherd[ess], it made me look more at the woman in the painting, and think more about what's going on in the picture.

For me, the woman in *The Gleaner* took on a much different perspective when you looked at the picture on the wall. When you look at [the print] I get the same sort of impression just by looking at the picture of the shepherd. When you look up at the picture, you get a much different perspective.

Actually, seeing just a detail and then the whole work seemed in itself to be a catalyst for looking:

There's a lot of difference and it made me look at this painting a little bit harder to get a bigger view, to see the women working in the back and to me that really helps rate it on the board because it draws you in.

Finally, the panelists were critical of the quality of the prints (I used color photocopies for the testing) and the shininess of the lamination. I have since substituted color photographs laminated in a matte finish.

Conclusions

Overall, I was pleased by the comparison format and the type of looking and thinking it generated, although I think more formative testing on the instructions could encourage visitors to carry the realism idea further. The

format could be used for a variety of looking problems and would probably be very effective in getting novices to think about stylistic elements. I think the exercise would be even more successful if all the works used were actually on view near the game. You'd still need laminated prints or some other device, though, to maintain the hands-on aspect of the game.

1. Remarks made at AAM conference session, "A Theoretical Framework: A Working Necessity for Museum Educators, Part I," June 12, 1986.

2. Given the "pocketable" size of the prints, we've been pleasantly surprised by the lack of thefts. In the one-and-a-half years the project has been up, only four prints have disappeared. Since all four were discovered missing at the same time, we assume a single culprit.

3. I've been very excited by the discussions, even heated arguments, I've overheard both between adults and adults and children.

DEVELOPING PERCEPTUAL SKILLS

Puzzles

Gretchen Diner Johnson

Rationale

The overall goal of this project was to design an engaging, self-directed activity that would help visitors of all ages and abilities practice perceptual skills that would enhance their experiences with art. I hoped that by learning to look carefully at and analyze the relationships among formal elements (line, shape, color, and texture), art novices could start building the skills that would increase their understanding and enjoyment of Native American works. I also hoped that spending time with the puzzles would induce novices to spend time with the actual objects in the gallery.

I chose the newly installed Native American floor because it has two rest areas situated to give clear views of the galleries. The areas offer comfortable seating and a variety of other activities--books for children and adults, a video monitor with six short videos on Native American life and culture, and headphones for listening to Native American songs, stories, poems, and prayers.

Project

To appeal to family visitors, I devised puzzles based on three ability levels. We designed different containers--one for each type of puzzle--that were easy to pick up and store (Fig. 1).¹ In creating the puzzles, I collaborated with craftsmen and fabricating firms.

Beginner Puzzles (ages three to six)

Beginner puzzles are jigsaw puzzles of six to eight large pieces. From works on view in

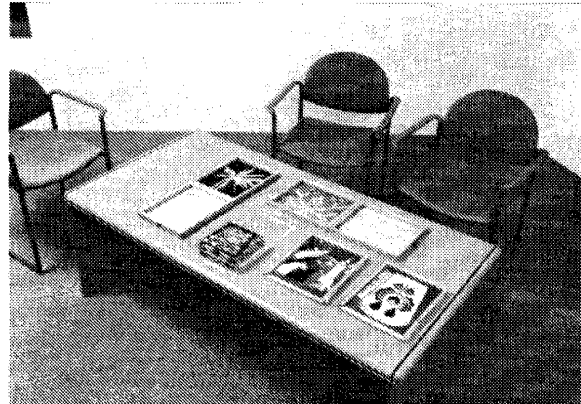


Fig. 1. The puzzles target three ability levels--beginner, advanced, and expert. Each level has a distinctive container.

the gallery, I chose four images of horses, birds, flowers, and figures in bright, primary colors--images that would have strong attracting power for this age group. When possible, I picked objects near the rest areas so children could work on a puzzle while sitting in front of the object.

To make the puzzles, we laminated eight-by-ten-inch color photographs (C-prints) to sheets of Sintra, a synthetic material. We chose Sintra over wood or masonite because it's extremely durable, lightweight, and has a smooth surface that is pleasant to touch. Before cutting the image into pieces, we spray-painted the back of each puzzle a different color so the pieces could be easily returned to the proper container.²

When Lehlan Murray, one of the museum's exhibition designers, cut Sintra with a jigsaw, he found that curvilinear shapes worked best; sharp angles caused the photo to pull away from the board. With a marker, I drew the puzzle shapes onto a sheet of mylar for

Murray to follow when he cut the pieces. Each puzzle is unique, with each piece in a different shape.

The containers for the beginner puzzles are shallow oak boxes with clear acrylic tops (I wanted the images to show, to encourage children to use the puzzles). The top, which fits into a groove, slides in and out and locks the puzzles in when the box is closed. Children can dump the pieces out and reassemble them on a table, the floor, or in the box itself.

Advanced Puzzles (ages seven to thirteen)

Advanced puzzles are similar to beginner models, but they have more pieces (eight to twenty) and more complex images. Containers for these puzzles are all oak. Brass hinges and a brass clasp secure the lid to the container. Both lid and container can serve as work surfaces, one to hold the pieces and one to assemble the puzzle on. You must open the box to see the image, although labels on the front of the boxes name the subject and level of difficulty.

Expert Puzzles (ages fourteen to adult)

The three-dimensional expert puzzle is made of nine three-inch wooden cubes that together form a block nine inches square and three inches high. Each puzzle includes six separate images, chosen either because they are closely related in color and texture or because they have complex patterns. I wanted visitors to look closely and make fine discriminations--to think about the orientation of the designs and to discern subtle nuances of color, texture, and pattern. To solve the puzzle, the user must identify matching surfaces and arrange them in the proper relationship. No solution sheets are provided, and, since all of the images are details of objects, the only clues are the formal elements themselves--line, texture,

color, and shape.

We made the puzzles by laminating six color photographs to individual precut blocks, one side at a time. The containers are hinged boxes made of clear acrylic so visitors can see all exposed surfaces of the cubes.³

Puzzle Cabinet

To store the puzzles in the gallery rest area, we designed a cabinet with easily accessible open shelves on each end. It matches the furniture in the rest area and looks somewhat like an end table without doors. It sits on casters for easy movement (Fig. 2). A small sign⁴ on top of the cabinet reads:

PUZZLES

Use, enjoy, and please return to cabinet.
All of the puzzles are from art objects
on this half of the floor.

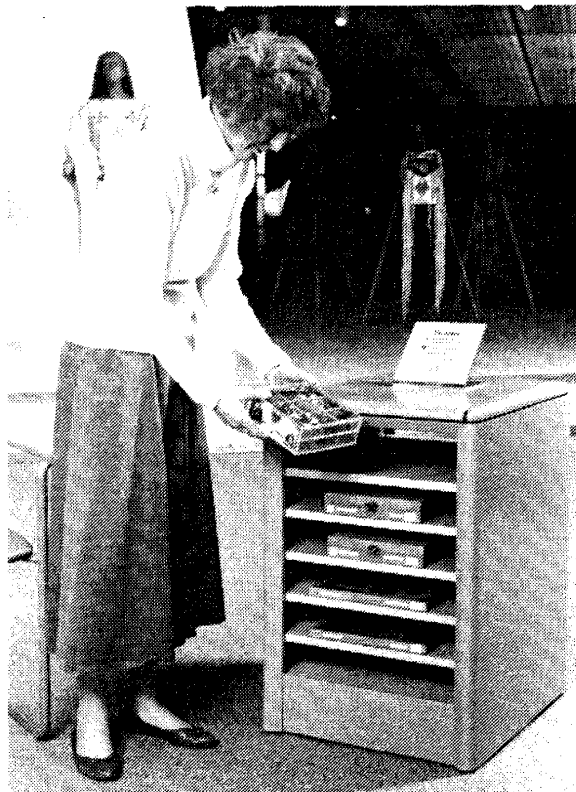


Fig. 2. The cabinet has open shelves, so puzzles are easy to remove and store.

Evaluation

To evaluate the project, a staff aide and I interviewed twenty-nine people--eleven adults and eighteen children, in two age groups. A complete evaluation report, as well as a list of puzzle subjects, resource people, and a bibliography, are available from the Denver Art Museum Education Department.

Overall Impression

Most people had a positive reaction to the puzzles. Typical adult comments ranged from "I'm greatly impressed with the puzzles," "It's really kind of fun," "I really liked it," and "Very interesting," to "It had me fooled--it's harder than it looks" and "I thought it would be easier." All but one of the children enjoyed doing the puzzles and wanted to do another in the future.

Adults consistently mentioned their feelings about puzzles in general, and whether or not they were a "puzzle person." Most expressed anxiety about failure. Because the cube puzzle reminded them of a Rubic's Cube, which they felt was difficult (if not impossible) to solve, they sometimes hesitated to try the puzzle. They noted feelings of anxiety when asked to try the puzzle, didn't like being watched while working it, and felt frustration if they couldn't solve it quickly.

I was frustrated at first and hoped I'd be able to complete it.

Is this an I. Q. test?

I hate puzzles but was pleased I solved it.

Adults separated their personal feelings (both positive and negative) toward puzzles from whether or not they thought puzzles were a good idea in museum galleries.

I think it's a wonderful idea for those who enjoy puzzles.

It's a great place to drop kids.

Books are a good idea, but I'm not sure about puzzles.

Games and puzzles belong in the shop.

Practicing Visual Skills

During interviews, adults tended to select the image they thought would be easiest to solve. They expressed reluctance at "failing" or appearing "stupid." Four subjects tried several sides of the puzzle before finding one they could work on with any level of satisfaction. Two people expressed anxiety about being watched. Once the initial barriers of the interview situation were overcome, however, all but two adults said they were able to concentrate and focus their attention on the puzzle. Of the two who couldn't, one mentioned "time constraints," the other a lack of "personal involvement."

The seven adults who correctly completed the puzzle expressed pleasure and surprise at mastering the task; five said they'd like to do another.

It was frustrating at first, but kind of fun.

The pleasure overrides the frustration.

I liked the experience.

It was frustrating at first. . . . I hoped I could solve it.

They all thought that including pictures of the completed images in the box would make solving the puzzle easier, but less challenging. In response to the question, "How did you begin to think about solving this puzzle?" all talked about matching and identification.

I looked for matching blocks.

I saw what matched.

I looked for blocks the same color and design.

I found matching sides.

After finding the matching sides of the blocks, users solved the puzzle by paying close attention to the formal qualities of the images. The specific image selected influenced the factors used to solve the puzzle. These factors were line, color, texture, the shape of the pieces or empty space, the orientation of elements, the subject matter, and the image's overall design. Three people mentioned up to six factors, and no one mentioned fewer than three.

Children looked most often at the shape of the pieces and the negative shape of the missing pieces. They mentioned color and design much less frequently than shape. Most were conscious of edges as guidelines for solving the puzzle, but few were aware of corners. A few did mention corners but didn't actually use them in solving the puzzle. Only one child talked about subject matter when putting the puzzle together, and another said he was looking at the object across the gallery while he did the puzzle.

Children seemed to know how to solve the puzzle--using corners, edges, color, line--but usually developed personal approaches and weren't concerned about how long it took them. Some found puzzles for their age group too easy and mentioned that even within age groups certain images were easier to put together than others.

Conclusions

Overall, the puzzles seem to appeal more to children than to adults, but they proved to be a successful activity for families wanting to sit down and take a break. They are a good exercise for practicing perceptual skills.

Rather than produce more jigsaw puzzles for children, I'd like to try flat puzzles of the same size, cut into square pieces to shift the emphasis to matching colors, lines, and textures, rather than just the shapes of the pieces. By helping children pay more attention to formal qualities, square-pieced puzzles would present more of a challenge.

The cube puzzles are difficult and costly to fabricate in their present form. A flat puzzle would be more practical and easier to make. The puzzles' difficulty could be increased simply by increasing the number of squares. This would present the same visual challenges as the cube puzzle, but without the novelty.

Signs need to be explicit and include what seems obvious to museum staff. Our evaluation showed that people didn't make the connection between the images on the puzzles and the objects in the gallery; this connection needs to be stated. We changed our original signs accordingly and, as a follow-up, we plan to find out if visitors spend time with the actual objects after working the puzzles.

Nine out of eleven adults expressed curiosity about the object in their puzzle: "What is it?" "What is it used for?" "What material is it made from?" "Who made it?" Several asked for the location of the object in the gallery. It would probably be worth-while to incorporate this information into the puzzle containers or the rest areas for visitors who want to know more.

For adults, the word "puzzle" may be too anxiety-provoking or intimidating to make this activity one they'd try during a museum visit. We know novices want their visit to be "pleasant,"⁵ so puzzles may be more appealing to children than to adults. But we need to gather more information about adult reactions to puzzles through unobtrusive observations and after-the-fact interviews.

1. After phone conversations with teachers and museum educators, I decided that containers were essential for storing the puzzles. Ours have been in public use for two years, and so far we haven't lost any pieces. People are careful to return the puzzles to their containers, which they usually replace in the open-shelf storage unit. Guards make sure all puzzles are in the rest areas at the end of the day.

2. If a child doesn't have time to finish a puzzle, the color on the back allows for a quick return to the container. This would also make it easier for guards to put away pieces left out at the end of the day, although children have been good about returning the puzzles.

3. After a few months, it was apparent that acrylic was not a good choice of material. It scratches easily and cracks or breaks when dropped, even on a carpeted floor. I replaced the containers with wooden boxes with acrylic tops. These have proved much more durable. We've also had to replace the brass clasps with heavier ones.

4. We made this sign after interviews showed that most visitors didn't associate the images on the puzzles with objects in the galleries.

5. See "Through Their Eyes," p. 8.

