

# MAKING THE HUMAN CONNECTION

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## Why Make the Human Connection?

Common sense has long told us that one major difference between an art expert and the average museum visitor is the knowledge experts have of the historical and creative background of an art work. In seeking ways to help visitors have richer, more rewarding encounters with art, we analyzed this difference in knowledge. We discovered that making a human connection--providing information about the people who made, used, or owned an art work--was one way to enhance the visitor's experience.

Our visitor evaluations at the Denver Art Museum told us that art novices (most of our visitors fall in this category) have a strong interest in being transported back in time and in getting inside the artist's mind.<sup>1</sup> Two evaluations--Melora McDermott-Lewis's work with art novices and Susan Malins's study of adult visitors to our Native American collection--demonstrated that an important reason visitors look at art is to make this sort of human connection.

For our analysis of experts' art experiences, we turned to the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Rick E. Robinson.<sup>2</sup> After interviewing art experts, they concluded that one central element of professionals' aesthetic experiences is the "human quality" of art. Some of those interviewed associated this with the fact that art is, by definition, man-made. Others focused on the pleasure they felt in sharing another person's life by looking at his work. Experts look at works of art to cross personal boundaries (communicate with the artist), as well as

boundaries of time and space (to communicate with another culture).

In assessing the differences between the art novice's experiences with works of art and those of the expert, we concluded that although novices are interested in cultural context and the artist's perspective, they usually have little information, and sometimes much misinformation, in these areas. In contrast, experts have a body of knowledge and a set of interpretive skills that allow them ready access to the human quality of art works.

We found a revealing similarity, however: both novices and experts consider looking at a work of art a rewarding way of getting in touch with another human life. Novices particularly enjoy learning about other periods of history and the conditions under which people lived, as well as touching base with the artist by understanding his creative process. By appealing to art novices' interest in these subjects, we hoped not only to grab their attention, but also to help them toward more rewarding experiences with individual works of art. In developing labels and self-guides that make human connections, we also kept in mind a point stressed often by McDermott-Lewis and Malins--visitors respond best to information that's personally meaningful and easy to take.

## Defining the Human-Connection Label

It's almost easier to define the human-connection label in terms of what it *isn't*,

rather than what it is. The human-connection label doesn't base the importance of an object on its fame or the prestige of its owners. It's not what experts think visitors "ought" to know, it isn't the expert's vehicle for sharing knowledge with her peers, and it's not the subject of a test. A human-connection label isn't written in that impersonal, academic style we tend to use for college papers, textbooks, or scholarly publications. But it's also not the equivalent of a gossip column or an entry in *Ripley's Believe It or Not*.

If a human-connection label isn't any of those things, what is it? The ideal human-connection label is primarily about *people*--the artists, craftspeople, patrons, or users connected with a work. It articulates their perspective, especially their way of prizing the object. It establishes the aesthetic quality, technical virtuosity, or iconography of the object from the perspective of those who made or used it.

A good human-connection label includes first-person testimony (quotes and photographs) whenever possible. By giving basic information about the artist or user, it answers typical novice questions: Why did she create it? What did it mean to those people? How did it fit into their lives?

Content, selected to help visitors "step back in time" or "get inside the artist's head," should focus on a single object (or a small group of similar objects) and connect the work's visible characteristics to the artist's techniques or the motivations and values of its maker or user. A good human-connection label will help visitors see aspects of objects they would normally miss.

Human-connection labels must be written in an accessible style. Although grounded in

objective accuracy, they should reflect a subjective or emotional view. And the writer must always keep her audience clearly in mind. Marlene Chambers, director of publications at the Denver Art Museum, notes two requirements of such labels and guides:

Make sure you include live people (*we* and *you*). Test for human interest by counting all personal names, personal pronouns (except *its* and *theys* when they don't refer to people), all masculine and feminine words like *father* and *old maid* (but not words like *artist* or *director*), and the words *people* and *folks* in your text. If you have six or eight such words in every 100 words you've written, chances are you've given the reader plenty of opportunities to identify with your subject.

All factual writing needs some story-telling, all story-telling benefits from dramatic dialogue--if only questions and answers.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, while content selection is the key to great human-interest labels and guides, even the best ideas will die if the text is too long or poorly organized.

In other words, the ideal human-connection label should emulate the best film documentaries or popular science writing. It should be the kind of thing Calvin Trillin or Isaac Asimov might write.

## Experiments with Human-Connection Labels

### Asian Art Labels

We conducted three major studies in prepara-

tion for the Asian art labels (all are available from the Denver Art Museum Education Department). The first study, a 1,000-person survey of Denver Art Museum visitors, demonstrated general levels of knowledge, interest, and involvement in art and helped us identify the “average” visitor. We found that 71% of our visitors are art novices. The second, an unobtrusive observation of 100 visitors to the Asian art floor, showed us general patterns of gallery use and identified objects with high and low attracting and holding power. Our key discovery here was that time visitors were spending in the galleries and viewing individual objects were both considerably less than we had hoped.<sup>4</sup>

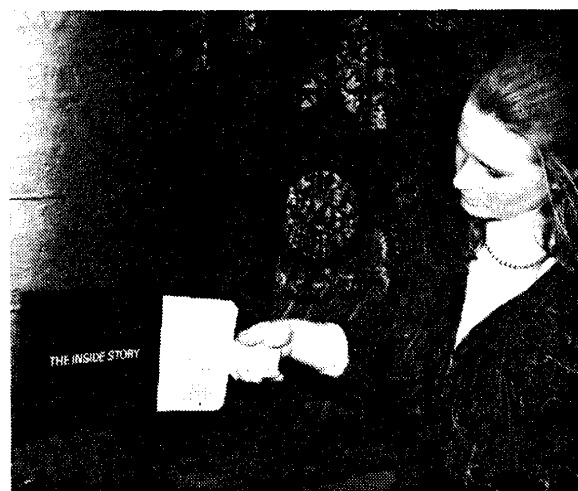
The last piece of visitor evaluation used for the Asian art labels was McDermott-Lewis’s summary of art novices’ probable reactions to three proposed label themes: Curator’s Perspective, A View from the Past (cultural context), and Artist’s Perspective (see Appendix A, p. 92). Because novices voiced mixed feelings about the curatorial perspective, we settled on the last two themes, which received more consistently enthusiastic endorsement.

Our team of curators, educators, and editors created the Asian labels to “articulate the perspective of those who owned or made the object originally, as well as their particular way of prizing those objects” and to help “transport” visitors back in time. Some of these labels were also designed to help visitors “get inside the artist’s head”—to help them understand his thoughts as he created the piece.

Curators Ronald Otsuka and Julia White wrote several drafts of the labels as we gradually defined our goals and improved our skills in sharing ideas. In the final writing stages, educators drew up guidelines

for focusing content on the stated interests of art novices: Where would objects be used, and how? Would they be used in a special place, like a desk I have in my home? Are they treasured pieces? What would it be like to sit down and use these? Who would use them?

Daryl Fischer designed the physical label format—a paddle hidden in a pocket—as a solution for adding interpretive material to an already-completed installation without redesigning cases or interfering with the aesthetics of the installation. This solution is, in effect, an unobtrusive physical format for labels. The title on the pockets, “THE INSIDE STORY,” was intended to intrigue visitors. An advantage of the paddle-style label is that the copy can be easily and inexpensively changed (Figs. 1 and 2).



*Fig. 1 The paddles are made of lightweight acrylic with two sheets of paper inserted back to back (one with text, the other with a color photocopy of the objects in use). Paddles fit into a wooden pocket lined with loop Velcro (to prevent scratching) and finished on the exterior to coordinate with the cases or walls they're mounted on. The title ("THE INSIDE STORY") and directions ("PULL OUT") are silkscreened in coordinating colors.*

This label, illustrated with a painting of a scholar's study in a garden retreat, was attached to a case displaying tools used by scholars:<sup>5</sup>

#### THE SCHOLAR'S STUDY

The scholar's study gave him a place to escape from the pressures of official duties. Everything that surrounded him in his study--furniture, brushpots, ink, and seals--was chosen for its simplicity, elegance, and beauty.

A calm and restful place (usually in the countryside or surrounded by a garden), the study was sometimes given a special, poetic name reflecting the interest, abilities, or inabilities of the scholar. For instance, the study of the famous 16th century Chinese painter Wen Zhengming was known as the "Zhou Zhen Yuan" or "Garden of the Unsuccessful Politician."

#### Evaluation

To evaluate the Asian gallery labels, the interpretive team came up with questions about content, format, and use. Under the supervision of Ross Loomis, interns conducted two studies--a direct observation of fifty visitors to the galleries and forty interviews--to answer these questions. Because both samples were small, we used a 70/30 rule to identify strong trends. This meant that when 70% or more of the sample reacted in a certain way we estimated that "most" visitors would follow suit. If less than 30% behaved in a certain way, "few" visitors would follow suit. Only when there were such strong trends in our sample did we feel justified in drawing *any* conclusion about visitors. A complete report is available from the Denver Art Museum Education Department.



*Fig. 2 Visitors can carry the paddles into the light and hold them at a comfortable reading distance. They can also hold the paddles close to an object to compare it with the photograph or check a detail. Two visitors can comfortably share a paddle.*

Most visitors (92.5%) found the paddle format easy to use; 87.5% tended to read only labels accompanying objects that interested them. There was a strong tendency (72%) to refer back to the object while using the label.

Many comments referred to the labels' "personalizing" of the visitor's experience:

It gives you more information. You can personalize and take the paddle to the piece.

For the moment it's yours--more personal.

In terms of content, the overwhelming majority of those interviewed (90%) felt that

the text held their attention and found it worth-while to read the entire label. For 89%, the illustration enhanced their understanding of the object. Of those interviewed, 80% thought the label helped transport them into the culture of the object, and 77.5% experienced a feel for the people behind the work of art.

On the downside, the title, "The Inside Story," was "too ambiguous" and confused visitors. The labels were not visible enough--they were, perhaps, too discreet in design. Finally, visitors didn't find that the labels helped them "get inside the artist's mind." They recalled comments about the artist's techniques, but didn't associate this kind of information with "getting inside his mind."

### Native American Labels

We created these labels to complement the reinstallation of the museum's Native American collection.<sup>6</sup> The installation is broadly organized by geographic region and culture groups within each region. An orientation label introduces each region, and selected object labels include descriptions beyond basic "tombstone" information (i.e., artist, tribe, object identification, date, accession number).

To bridge the gap between the general and the specific and help visitors relate to individual art works, we needed a series of cultural context labels that made the human connection. For each culture group, we decided on two to six labels that focused on the human aspects of certain objects or groups of objects. Labels could be complemented by photographs. Led by our native arts curator Richard Conn, a team including educators Susan Malins and Patterson Wil-

liams, editors Marlene Chambers and Kitty Silvey, and designers Judy Anderson and Jeremy Hillhouse tackled the project.

The team drew on background information ranging from general theory about adult learning to Susan Malins's focus-group research. The focus groups consisted of adults who were asked to visit our previous Native American installation and discuss their expectations, disappointments, and general interest in the art. This study led to two major recommendations for our cultural context labels:

1. Include baseline humanistic information. In order to relate to the art work, visitors clearly need information that focus-group participants described as "people centered:" Why did the artist create this work? What did it mean to the person who used it? What role did it play in daily life? How did the artist actually make it? When and where was it created?
2. Build a *leitmotif*. Visitors need an overriding idea to give meaning and shape to their total experience. This should be reinforced throughout the visit to provide a context for what they see and experience.

We decided that cultural context labels should highlight aspects of the collection that would satisfy visitors' stated needs and help them toward more powerful experiences. All featured aspects should:

1. Be essential to visitors' understanding of the leitmotif and the art work.
2. Entice visitors by relating to their own interests and attitudes.
3. Emphasize a people-to-people approach. *Lifestyle* should be stressed, not economics or other less intimate aspects of a society. Using the actual words of artists, owners, or

others directly connected with the objects would be the most effective way to accomplish this.

Keeping these guidelines in mind, Conn and Malins mapped a strategy for developing people-to-people labels. We agreed to make the text anecdotal and replete with concrete details and active verbs. The content would focus on the interests and achievements of human beings, not on abstractions or sociological generalizations. As a leitmotif, each label would start with first-person testimony from the Indians who made or used the objects.

Conn then wrote four sample labels. Together we reviewed them and decided ways to make them even more appealing to the average adult visitor. The sample-writing step saved Conn the time and trouble of drafting all thirty-five labels before finding they needed changes. Chambers and Silvey, our editors, carried out the final honing of the label text.

In physical format the Native American interpretive labels complement the design and color-coding of the new galleries. On each label, the introductory quote is printed in the color designating that tribe's region; the short text is printed in black. The label itself is placed close to the objects referred to in the text. Texts for all labels are available from the Denver Art Museum Education Department. Here's a sample:

#### **KEEPING THE WORLD IN ORDER**

*And that, I guess, is what it all boils down to--do the right thing, everything goes fine; do the wrong thing, everything's a mess.*

*--Robert Spott, Yurok, about 1890*

There were rules for every part of life--everything a Yurok said, did,

and even thought. When making a basket to be used exclusively for eating acorn much, the maker had to know and follow rules that governed: 1) the correct relation of height to diameter, 2) the limits of size (neither too small nor too big), 3) which materials were permissible for the basic structure and decoration, 4) where decoration went, and 5) what designs could be used.

By following the rules, the Northern California natives promoted everybody's welfare. If the Creator was pleased by their work, the world stayed in harmonious balance.

#### Evaluation

In September 1988, in connection with another audience evaluation project, two focus groups were asked to review the Native American floor along with other areas of the museum.<sup>7</sup> Their review included all the interpretive and design aspects of the new installation, including photomurals marking each tribal section, children's puzzles and "Eye Spy" games, and audio and video areas, as well as written labels. Conclusions show that participants liked the breadth of information the labels provided.

Great descriptions and interesting facts.

The newer types of labels--larger printing and at angles--are easier to read.

They made a better effort on the second [Native American] floor . . . to bridge the concept of setting the piece in its perspective of its culture and its time.

There were descriptions of the best pieces on this level. The descriptions were very precise and thought provoking.



*Fig. 3 Native American people-to-people labels feature a quote from an American Indian, followed by a short explanatory paragraph. The collection is displayed on open platforms, and labels sit at raised angles on the edge of the platforms. We've observed that some people have to bend over slightly to read the text. We need to monitor this situation and make adjustments if necessary.*

## Experiments with Human-Connection Self-Guides

### A Glimpse of the Times

This interpretive tool was one of the easiest to produce. Essentially, it's a custom-designed scrapbook made with the help of a desktop publishing system and color photocopies. Several student interns worked with me throughout the project. We chose the museum's gallery containing French painting and sculpture from 1847 to 1908 as the setting for the scrapbook, which features captioned human-interest photographs and illustrations designed to bring this period to

life. As the cover page says, it gives the reader "a glimpse of the events, fashions, and inventions of that period."

The scrapbook zeroes in on one of the aspects (noted by McDermott-Lewis) of art novices' search for a human connection in art: novices often try to envision themselves in another time or place when they look at art. But reaching another era through a work of art can be quite difficult if one has little or no information about that period. Entering earlier times may be easier for novices if they're looking at realistic paintings that portray interior family scenes or streetscapes. But abstract works, landscapes, or still lifes often pose problems.

First, we carefully reviewed the paintings and sculptures in the gallery, keeping specific works in mind as we searched for scrapbook subjects. We looked for items that would also have human-interest appeal: sensational events (an unusual train wreck); familiar themes from daily life (a butcher shop, fashion); popular subjects (the Eiffel Tower, Sarah Bernhardt); and "sexy" subjects (Folies-Bergère girls). At the same time, we wanted our choices to have historical significance. To find themes that set an accurate tone and emphasized the importance of progress, exploration, and change in late 19th century France, we turned to time-line encyclopedias; books on fashion, cars, and individual artists; books that emphasize daily life such as *France, Fin de Siècle* by Eugén Weber and Theodore Zeldin's wonderful two-volume *France: 1848-1945*. Keeping in mind art-novice needs, the works in our gallery, and the historical period, we scoured our local library for photographs and illustrations, as well as concrete bits of information for our captions. Photographic history books were excellent sources.

We selected forty illustrations, arranged them over twenty-seven pages, and supplemented them with twenty captions. Some captions simply described an illustration; others placed an illustration or group of illustrations in a broader context (Fig. 4).

We made four copies of the scrapbook for gallery use. Pages were laid out and printed on a desktop publishing system; color photocopies of the illustrations were glued in by hand. We inserted the finished pages in plastic sleeves and installed them in gray plastic three-ring binders. Pages are readily replaceable at little cost. The title, "A Glimpse of the Times," and a Daumier print of Nadar photographing Paris from a hot-air balloon are reproduced on each binder cover. For gallery use, we had a special "A-frame" acrylic holder made to display two scrapbooks. The holder sits in the middle of a long bench in the gallery.<sup>8</sup>

### Evaluation

To test the scrapbooks, we asked eleven visitors to use them and talk with us about their experiences. They kept notebooks during their gallery visit and filled out a questionnaire before the group discussion (see Appendix B, p. 95). (A complete evaluation report is available from the Denver Art Museum Education Office.) The discussion centered around this script:

1. What did looking at this do for you?
2. What did you find most interesting? Least interesting?
3. What did you find most entertaining?
4. Did the book have any effect on how you looked at or thought about the art in that room?
5. Did it give you a sense or flavor or idea of that time? How? What?
6. What about improving it physically--photos, type, stands?

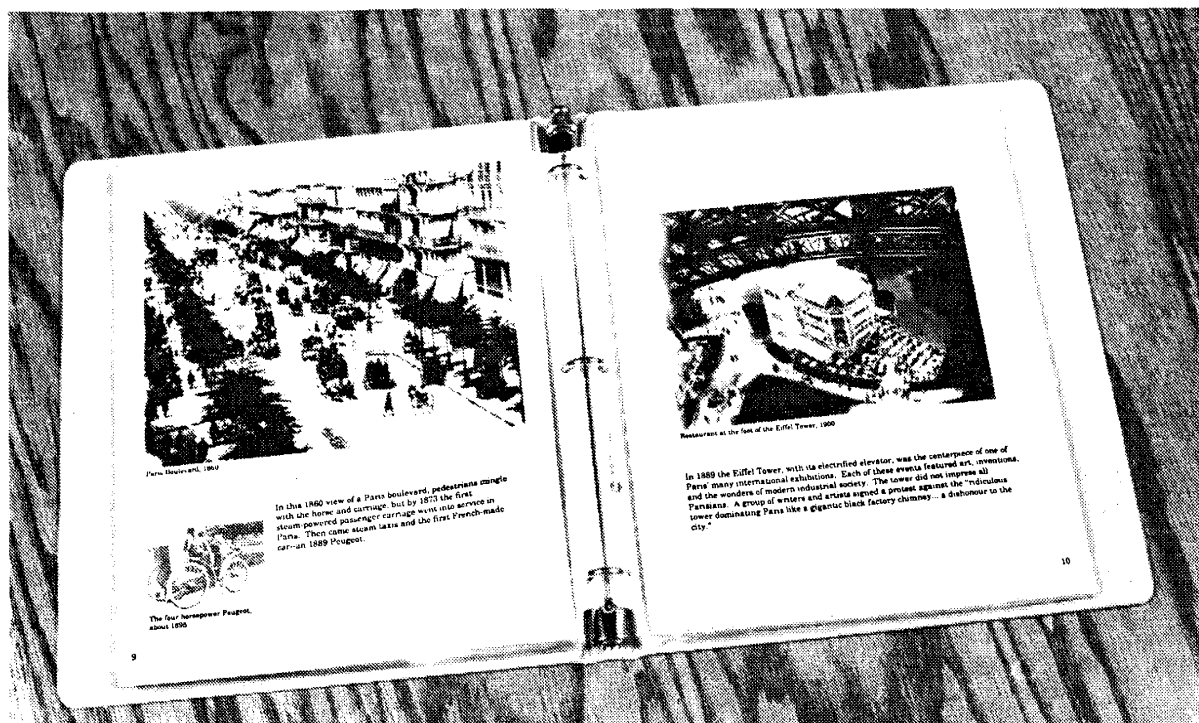


Fig. 4. Two pages from "A Glimpse of the Times."



Two of the eleven participants thought there were too many words or pictures in the books, but everyone considered the balance between words and pictures just right. Ten felt the scrapbook gave them a sense of the past. Nine thought other galleries in the museum should have such books. Nine looked at the art as well as at the book, but one said he “didn’t look at the art in the room, didn’t cross my mind.”

Although it’s difficult to draw conclusions from the interviewees’ notebooks, some entries were of particular interest in planning future scrapbooks:

I liked the use of photography to illustrate happenings of history, gives history more realism.

Books’ paper holders [plastic sleeves] are too reflective and bright reflections distract from book.

Historical context but not a mention of particular elements reflected in particular paintings.

What did men wear? [Only women’s fashions appear in the book.]

For the group interview, we tried combining discussions of the “Glimpse” scrapbook with four other interpretive projects. By the end of the two-and-a-half-hour session, the interviewees were exhausted. They’d been asked to review too much over too long a period. Future interviews should involve fewer people (six to nine) and should be limited to one project.

### Conclusions

Our goal for the scrapbook project was to help novice visitors “visualize the times.” Certainly “A Glimpse of the Times” did so,

although the impression we created of late 19th century France was undoubtedly fragmentary. The progress-and-change theme apparently came across to some of our interviewees.

For history buffs, the scrapbook is probably a great addition to an art gallery. The major improvement we’d like to make in future scrapbooks is to strengthen the connection between the information and pictures in the book and the art works in the gallery. Some illustrations were chosen for their relationship to paintings. For example, a plate from *Souvenirs d’Algerie* showing a reclining Arab ruler was picked to go with a Schreyer painting of Arab horsemen. However, we should have pointed out the relationship, perhaps by including a small photo of the Schreyer painting on the same page. Several illustrations and captions made points about the invention and growing popularity of photography. But no statement explicitly related this phenomenon to the impressionist paintings in the gallery. Only a visitor already knowledgeable about the art of that period could make the connection.

Finally, photographs of painters at work or illustrative of important aspects of their personal lives would be another good addition. Nonetheless, the scrapbooks should probably not be limited to art subjects. One of the strengths of the history (as opposed to *art* history) emphasis of the books is that they try to give a broad view of the period and send the implicit message that art doesn’t exist in a vacuum.

### **Getting Inside the Artist’s Mind**

In her report on art novices, McDermott-Lewis indicates that they strive to make a link with the human elements behind a work

of art. But when novices look at a painting and try to imagine the artist's working style or creative choices, they're often perplexed or make errors. Even experienced art lovers can mistakenly decide a particularly avant-garde artist was "crazy" and that this accounts for his artistic choices. On subtler levels the world of choices that absorbs the creative energies of a Picasso or a Michelangelo (not to mention a medieval manuscript illustrator or an African mask carver) cannot be comprehended without external information. As Jules Prown points out, such external evidence about the maker's purpose or intent plays an essential role in the scholar's ability to investigate culture through artifacts.<sup>9</sup> So, too, the average visitor needs information in order to understand the human being behind the work. Prown also points out the other technique both novices and scholars must pursue--careful and intense observation of the object and all its characteristics.

### Goals

This self-guide model was inspired by the interest *and* difficulty visitors have in getting inside the artist's creative process. Its aim was:

1. To help viewers "make a human connection" with the artist by conveying a sense of the person behind the work--the choices he made and what was going on in his mind.
2. To direct viewers in what to look for in a painting and to pique interest in "browsing visually."

We decided to accomplish this by focusing on a single work of art, Picasso's *Still Life*, 1914, from the Denver Art Museum collection.

### Project

The first steps in creating this self-guide

prototype were to:

1. Review visitor research:
  - a) to discover a way to entice novices to study works of art more carefully.
  - b) to attend carefully to the words visitors use in describing their interests and, thereby, to get inside the visitor's mind.
2. Review art history research:
  - a) to discover what the best scholars thought or knew about Picasso's way of working both mentally and physically--his formal, subject, and stylistic choices and reasons for them in terms of both psychological and sociological causes.
  - b) to discover facts, anecdotes, or particularly eloquent phrases that could help visitors grasp Picasso's intentions.
3. Synthesize novice interests and scholarly thinking in preparation for writing a visitor-centered guide that would help the user learn that speculation about an artist and his work must be rooted in accurate information about the artist (his words, direct observations by friends) and in evidence within the works themselves.

Criteria for content and layout of the guide were:

1. To make it short and appealing to novices.
2. To select points deemed significant by scholars that would also be useful to visitors.
3. To structure the guide to show the user both external and internal ways of seeing Picasso's creative process. Readers got their clues from two kinds of tips:
  - a) tips from Picasso--his words, his life, his way of working--that could help viewers think about why and how this still life was created. The tips presented a way of making discoveries based on valid information, as well as personal associations and imagination.
  - b) tips in the work--stylistic elements and

ways of treating subjects. By drawing the visitor's attention to a few of these features, the guide should encourage him to look the still life over more closely and notice details he might otherwise have missed. In the early stages of developing this guide, I decided to avoid evaluating the subjective properties of the work. This meant avoiding interpreting the effects of formal qualities (e.g., "Picasso's constant shuffling of his subjects from near to far creates a strong sense of ambiguity in the viewer's mind"). It also meant avoiding aesthetic judgments ("One of the most deft touches can be seen in the delicate drawing of the Cupid behind the jumble of cubist objects"). Although it can be justly argued that any attempt to explain "what Picasso was trying to do in this painting" should cover this ground, such comments intrude on an area I consider the private preserve of the viewer. This guide attempts to lead the horse to water but not force it to drink.

4. To get the point across, draw on graphic and verbal communication techniques used in magazines:

- a) human-interest photographs that reinforce text and pique curiosity.
- b) captions that titillate the imagination.
- c) broad titles that tell what's in the article.
- d) diagrammed illustrations that quickly direct the viewer's eye.

The final step was to print fifty inexpensive guides, test them, and make revisions before printing the final version. (See Appendices C, p. 96, and D, p. 98, for both versions.)

I'd like to elaborate on two factors that entered heavily into the production of this self-guide:

1. Learn from magazines. Sales-driven magazines use every technique they can to get readers to consume their pages. Student

intern Paula Romero and I took a close look at the use of photos and captions in *National Geographic* and at *Harper's Magazine's* annotated diagrammatic layouts. Romero's analysis of these two techniques yielded useful hints for the Picasso guide. *National Geographic's* guidelines for writing picture captions proved helpful.<sup>10</sup> Of particular interest were *Harper's* two-page "annotation" layouts showing, for example, a Christmas card surrounded by blocks of text explaining elements of the card. These layouts use lines to direct the viewer's attention and to connect text to elements in the card.<sup>11</sup>

2. Edit for substance. Marlene Chambers, editor for this project, was intimately involved in the many of the interpretive projects. She helped develop the overall theoretical approach of this grant and created several of the experimental projects herself. Given her familiarity with the overall goals, she was in a good position both to copy edit and "edit for substance."

In editing for substance, Chambers helped us achieve our goals by commenting on the concept's appropriateness for novices and by pressing for a more comprehensible text. Building on a foundation of clear and mutually accepted goals, an assertive editorial approach to substance (not just spelling, punctuation, and grammar) makes for better communication. As an expert in written communication, Chambers could judge the likely reaction to the guide. Even though I had ample audience research behind this project, I still had to make subjective and instinctive judgments about visitor reaction. Double-checking my judgments with someone knowledgeable about art novices was extremely useful.

### Evaluation

Fourteen novices were asked to visit the gallery and use the Picasso guide. Each

made written comments on a copy of the guide, answered a questionnaire about it, then took part in a two-hour group interview conducted by McDermott-Lewis, who used a script based on the goals for the guide and structured by evaluation consultant Ross Loomis.

The questionnaire responses made it clear that the guide affected how these visitors experienced the painting (92%), changed their awareness of the painting (85%), and gave them a greater sense of the artist (92%).<sup>12</sup> Some representative comments:

This guide gave me the means of understanding certain details about the picture. The guide also gave the facts about where the thought of this picture took place.

It turned from being a jumble of lines to familiar objects.

Opened my mind to all the possible ways Picasso might have approached his work. He loved to experiment, didn't he?

Comments on the questionnaires were useful reminders of the diversity of our visitors, as were the cautionary notes about the pitfalls inherent in any interpretive guide:

Well, it directed me to look at some things specifically, but I don't know if I enjoyed it more.

It distracted me from the pure aesthetic experience.

I still liked it, but I felt a little dumb for not seeing what the guide said to me.

Questionnaires also indicated that the textured gray paper made the guide difficult for some people to read, and that some couldn't tell where to begin reading.

After reviewing the group interview, Loomis made three summary points:

1. In general, interview responses supported the summarized questionnaire data:

a) the guide influenced awareness of the painting and other artworks as well.

b) the guide made the artist and his life more real to visitors.

c) the guide, or ones like it, could influence the experience with art by focusing attention or providing background.

2. Interview responses suggested formative changes, such as placing the diagram on the front rather than the back. The responses supported starting with a "rough," or simple mock-up, then using comments to develop a better final project.

3. The always-present problem of *variability* of visitor expectations surfaced in the group comments. In general, however, I get the impression that the brochure reaches the novice level of visitor; i.e., respondents seem to be helped and their experience of Picasso enriched even though they disagreed on what should have been in the pamphlet.

Several ideas for improving the guide surfaced in the prototype testing. For example, we:

1. Added line drawings of hard-to-see cubist depictions of the bottle and wine glass.

Verbal descriptions and arrows weren't enough.

2. Changed the paper from gray to white.

3. Revised the text to make certain points clearer and changed words that visitors didn't understand.

#### 4. Eliminated unnecessary information.

We refolded the guide so users would start on the side with the guide-to-looking diagram--the first version began on the other side with "Tips about Picasso." We decided it was better to begin with the looking activity, then elaborate on what had been seen. In making all these changes, we addressed both the things the vast majority of visitors in our small group agreed on and more isolated suggestions that seemed, in our judgment, to be worth acting on. When responses were evenly divided, we interpreted this as a problem needing attention, such as the color of the paper.<sup>13</sup>

### Conclusions

In both the Asian and Native American label projects, a team (curator, educator, editor, designer) struggled to maintain close and effective communication, with particular attention paid to bridging the gap between staff experts in art and staff experts in audiences. Educators conducted audience studies and shared results with curators. Editor, curator, and educator articulated shared goals for the labels. Curators drafted text, and editors and educators reviewed the drafts. Successful partnerships for writing effective label content required knowledge and expertise from both curators and educators, and enough sharing of values to permit communication.

An educator and an editor produced the self-guide projects. The writer (an educator) used an audience-centered approach that stretched a bit beyond the normal boundaries of gallery communication. If a curator had been available (the European art curatorship was vacant at the time) to review the text, the content

could have been sharpened. A curator might have directed the writer to specialized research materials or, in the case of the Picasso guide, suggested ways to emphasize the painting's aesthetic features.

When a team worked on a human-connection project, it was necessary that the review process allow for honest criticism of the project's interest to visitors, as well as its accuracy. Two ways to facilitate such reviews have been mentioned:

1. Writing a few labels and rigorously reviewing their content to develop examples for the remaining labels.
2. Using questions from the user's perspective as guidelines for content selection.

To make audience research and its interpretation useful, an early decision must be made about which audiences to target for each project. This, along with an explicit statement of content and stylistic goals, can reduce communication problems within a team.

The key to successful human-connection copy is content. Curators can learn about visitors and select content based on what they've learned. Or, editors and educators can select content and let curators review it for accuracy and thoughtfulness. In each of these scenarios, the emphasis must be on selecting information that will grab the average viewer.

Finally, all members of the interpretive team--curator, educator, editor, and designer--need to keep communication open even when disagreements arise. Carl Rogers, in an article on communication in the workplace, notes that one of the most serious

problems in communicating is a tendency to judge the statements of another person in the group, an action that often brings communication to a halt. He stresses the need "to listen with understanding," or to see things from the other person's point of view.<sup>14</sup>

In selecting and writing the materials for these four projects, the most serious disagreements arose from differences in point of view or basic values. Indeed, an underlying purpose of a team approach is to provide a superior solution to a problem by bringing together people with different perspectives and areas of expertise. Those who immerse themselves in audience research and hone their skills in audience communication are best at selecting what interests visitors. But this kind of knowledge alone cannot supply the raw material for selecting the content of human-connection materials. This must come from intimate and often long-term knowledge of the art object and its history. Unless both kinds of expertise reside in a single person, teamwork is the only way to create excellent human-connection labels and self-guides.

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1. Art novices are people who rate themselves low to moderate in knowledge of art and moderate to very high in interest in art. They participate in art-related activities and visit museums once or twice a year. Most have attended some college.

2. 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). Of particular note are their sections on the uniqueness of the aesthetic experience and the communicative approach to experiencing art.

3. Chambers prepared a list of "Hints for beefing up the 'human interest' of your writing" for the Native American

label project. These were adapted from Rudolf Flesch, *The Art of Readable Writing* (New York: Collier Books, 1962).

4. This area of 5,850 square feet contains about 350 objects. Over half (52%) the visitors studied spent ten minutes or less in the galleries. Most (82%) spent less than twenty minutes. If *looking at* an object is defined as stopping in front of it for at least ten seconds, over half (54%) looked at four objects or less. If it is defined as stopping for at least forty-five seconds, 75% did not look at any objects.

5. Label texts are available from the Denver Art Museum Education Department.

6. These labels were funded as part of the Native American reinstallation, made possible through the generous support of Joan and George Anderman, Noel and Tom Congdon, Martha and Cortland Dietler, and Jan and Frederick Mayer.

7. For this research, one group of museum visitors and one of nonvisitors were interviewed before and after a visit to the museum. Findings are available from the Denver Art Museum in "Denver Art Museum Focus Groups Research Report" by Alan Newman Research Associates, Inc. The work was sponsored by The Getty Center for Education in the Arts.

8. Since making our first "Glimpse" books, we've produced scrapbooks for a temporary exhibition of American folk art. This version featured photographs of the art works as they were originally used--as shop signs or weathervanes, for example. The folk-art scrapbook looked like an old-fashioned family album, with a black cardboard cover and black pages.

9. Jules Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio*, 1982.

10. Caption guidelines are available from the National Geographic Society, 17th and M Streets NW, Washington, DC 20036.

11. For examples of such layouts, see *Harper's Magazine*, December 1988, 68-69 and February 1988, 54-55 and 58-59.

12. Consistent with other small-sample evaluations, a "trend" is designated only for results of 70% or more or 30% or less.

13. We also added a section on the guide-to-looking side in response to a remark by one of our expert reviewers, Evan Turner, director of the Cleveland Museum of Art. He

said he'd certainly include a comment on the drawing of the Cupid in the background.

14. "Barriers and Gateways to Communication," by Carl R. Rogers and F. J. Roethlisberger from *People: Managing Your Most Important Assets*, 1987.

## APPENDIX A

From a memo on novice interests by Melora McDermott-Lewis, August 27, 1989.

### Curator's Perspective

Novices have very mixed feelings about hearing what experts think about art objects. While they acknowledge that the experts know something that might be useful to them in looking, novices are quite adamant that they don't want anyone to decide for them what is good or bad. They feel the judgment is theirs to make. They don't want someone to tell them that something they really like isn't "good."

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

They also don't want to be talked down to:

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 . . . ."

Novices also perceive experts as looking at objects in a very intellectual, unfeeling way:

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 of 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.

As novices tend to have their most pleasurable experiences with art when they look at it in a very emotional, feeling-laden way, they aren't interested in a more intellectual approach.

[This painting] 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.

They're [experts] deadly. . . . If nothing else, it's facts.

In spite of all these negative comments, novices are somewhat intrigued by experts. They are curious about the people behind decisions:

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



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

Novices also believe that objects in our galleries 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?

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.

They are not really interested in the art historical significance of the object per se, but rather why someone felt that that piece was *wonderful*.

### **A View From the Past**

Novices derive great pleasure from admiring past cultures and feeling "wonderment" about what they were able to achieve:

The things of beauty what they were able to portray when--you know the conditions they lived under . . . .

To me this goes back to my wonderment about the Chinese history and it's hard to imagine the way things are now, that the things like that were possible back when they were done . . . and you wonder about the people who did it, to the culture that caused it to happen.

They also enjoy imagining what things were like in a particular era. They often speak of being "transported" or "stepping back in time."

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.

They are most easily transported by paintings depicting a particular period in time or by a period room. Solitary objects are more difficult unless novices already have a context to put them into:

. . . and to me when I see something from the past, that I can *relate to*, that I can *understand*, it is really easy for me to put myself back in that time . . . .

This is not always the case with Asian objects.

I would bypass screens and hangings probably because there is not enough life [referring to a human context] in them to appeal to me.

Novices' interest in the past is strongly linked to their need to make a human connection with the objects they are seeing. They talked about "recognizing a common humanity," "getting a feel for the people," "conveying a human that is gone." They expressed strong interest in "human-interest type facts" and information that would make a piece or a period "come alive."

### **Artist's Perspective**

Novices consistently voiced a fascination with the creative process:

I'd like to know a little bit about the mechanics of it. Just so that maybe I could get inside the artist's mind and see what he was trying to do.

What was she feeling? How did she arrive at using the colors? Why did she choose a purple petunia as opposed to a red petunia?

Just trying to figure out how in the heck he could have seen that in his head . . . .

While this interest in the creative process sometimes extended to wanting an understanding of a specific technique, the emphasis was really on trying to understand what an artist was thinking about as she was creating a particular piece.

Many of the novices felt they gained insight into this creative process with the help of their artist friends--either watching them work in their homes or studios or by coming to the museum with them. The novices seem to believe that their artist friends are able to see and understand things they can't. The fact that they are friends also seems to make the information-giving less intimidating and more human.

## APPENDIX B

### Scrapbook Questionnaire

1. Check one choice for each of the following:

- a. Were there \_\_\_\_\_ too many or \_\_\_\_\_ too few pictures in the scrapbook?
- b. Were there \_\_\_\_\_ too many or \_\_\_\_\_ too few words used in the scrapbook?
- c. Was the balance between words and pictures  
\_\_\_\_\_ too slanted towards words  
\_\_\_\_\_ too slanted towards pictures  
\_\_\_\_\_ about right between words and pictures?

2a. Would you want to see more of any of the things pictured?

\_\_\_\_\_ no          \_\_\_\_\_ yes

Which things?

b. Are there other things you would like to see pictured in the scrapbook?

\_\_\_\_\_ no          \_\_\_\_\_ yes

What things?

3. Do you feel other rooms should have scrapbooks like the one you used?

\_\_\_\_\_ no          \_\_\_\_\_ yes

4a. Did looking at the scrapbook give you a sense or flavor of the past times?

\_\_\_\_\_ no          \_\_\_\_\_ yes

b. If yes, could you give a specific example of how?

5. Did you look at the art in the room

\_\_\_\_\_ before the book

\_\_\_\_\_ after the book

\_\_\_\_\_ both before and after?

6. If you looked at the art after the book, did the scrapbook influence the way you looked at the art in the room?

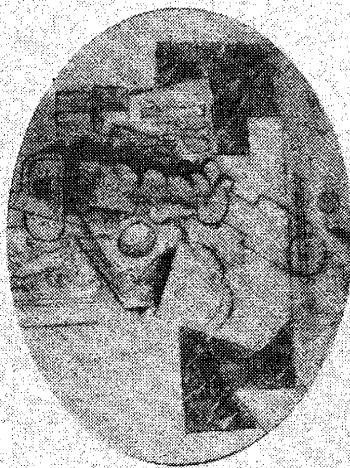
\_\_\_\_\_ no          \_\_\_\_\_ yes

## APPENDIX C

### "Tips About Picasso" - Preliminary Version

#### Tips About Picasso

**W**e'll never know exactly what Picasso was thinking as he made this 1914 painting, but we have clues in his own words and work. Though he could draw in a very realistic way when he was only 13, by 1914 the 33-year-old painter made paintings like this one that looked like nothing ever seen before.



#### Still Life, 1914

Denver Art Museum

Watercolor, oil, and pencil

Gift of Miss Marion G. Hendrie

#### Reality or Illusion

In the two or three years before doing this work, Picasso's paintings were even more abstract. In this 1914 still life, a wine glass, a green marble table top, and recognizable letters appear—not photographically real

looking things but clear hints of them. What single thing in this painting is the most "real"? Is it the marble table top? He painted the green marble realistically, but you can also see that if you touched it, it wouldn't feel cool and smooth but like rough streaks of paint.

By deliberately making paintings that can be read in different ways, Picasso asks us to stop and speculate: What is illusion? What is reality? Is reality in the eye of the beholder? No realistic painting focused on the surface appearance of tables and wine glasses could tease out such questions.



Chemmy Kikawa-Pelgrom, 13, Barcelona



Chemmy Kikawa-Pelgrom, 13, Barcelona

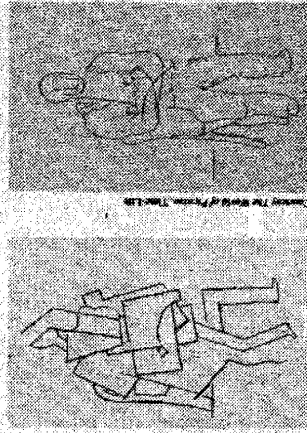
At just 14, Picasso took the entrance exams to the senior classes at Barcelona's School of Fine Arts. What normally took older students one month to finish took Picasso only one day. Child prodigies are rare in the visual arts, but Picasso, at age 13, could complete school exercises, like this drawing of a plaster cast, as well as the adult students at the art college where his father taught.

stronger than I am; it makes me do what it wants."

For a painter like Picasso, being guided by rules, popular taste, or even a desire to copy appearances would be like being a prisoner--deprived of essential freedoms.

In this 1914 still life Picasso challenges earlier rules for how to finish works of art. He experiments with a mixture of watercolor, pencil, and oil paint and presents a final work that hardly looks completed. While earlier artists chose to show luxuriant flowers or elegant tableware, Picasso chose to show cheap wine glasses and letters from mass-produced signs or wine bottle labels--the ordinary remains of a drink and a conversation in a cafe.

Then, once these rules were broken, Picasso claimed the right to the freedom to use any means, any subject according to his own vision. No longer a prisoner of anyone's rules, Picasso could take up a brush or pencil and, as he described it, "...get behind the canvas and perhaps something will happen."



In the Picasso drawing on the left, a faint, realistic sketch of a seated man underlies the darker cubist shapes he finally used. On the right, another artist has redrawn the underlying man to show how Picasso's sketch started.

# Still Life, 1914

Denver Art Museum

Watercolor, oil, and pencil

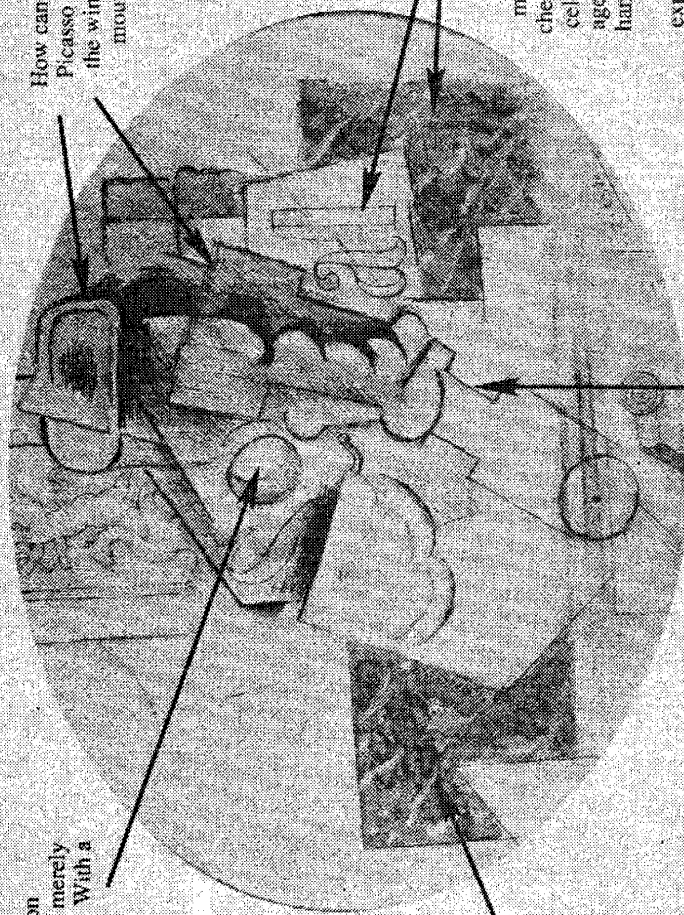
Gift of Miss Marion G. Hendrie

## Is it or isn't it?

The *O* may pose a playful question Picasso didn't want answered but merely asked: Is the *O* a letter or a hole? With a blink of the eye it can be either.

## How can "time" be included in art?

How can an artist put *time* in a painting? Picasso includes more than one view of the wine glass--stem from the side and mouth from above. In real life we'd have to lift the glass, peer into its mouth, then set it down in front of us to see both views--taking a few moments of time.



## Can jokes be made in paint?

Picasso enjoyed the 1914 equivalent of contact paper--oil cloth printed to imitate such things as marble surfaces. By painting "fake" versions of "fake" marble, he makes something like a pun in paint.

## A Celebration

Cheap wine glasses, brand names in large print, imitation marble--these bits and pieces of a cheap café are Picasso's subjects--a celebration of the new commercial age where mass produced replaced hand made. In 1914 France was in the midst of the machine age explosion. In 1907 three thousand motor vehicles moved on France's roads. By 1913 France alone manufactured 45,000 motor vehicles.

## What's the "essence" of a wine bottle?

If the human figure were reduced to its visual essence, it might be a stick figure. Reducing a wine bottle to its essence, Picasso uses two very simple lines to trace the outline of a bottle's neck and lip.

### What was Picasso trying to do in this painting?

#### Reality or Abstraction?

Along with abstract versions of a wine glass and bottles on a table top, Picasso included a more realistic line drawing of a cupid in the background of this painting. Perhaps he wanted to show the range of styles in which he could paint. Or perhaps he was saying "I can paint realistically but I *choose* abstraction!"

#### Is it or isn't it?

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#### Jokes in paint?

In his paintings Picasso sometimes used the 1914 equivalent of contact paper -- oil cloth printed to imitate wood or marble. Here he uses paint to imitate green marble oil cloth. Perhaps it amused him to paint an illusion of something that was itself an illusion.

#### How can "time" be included in art?

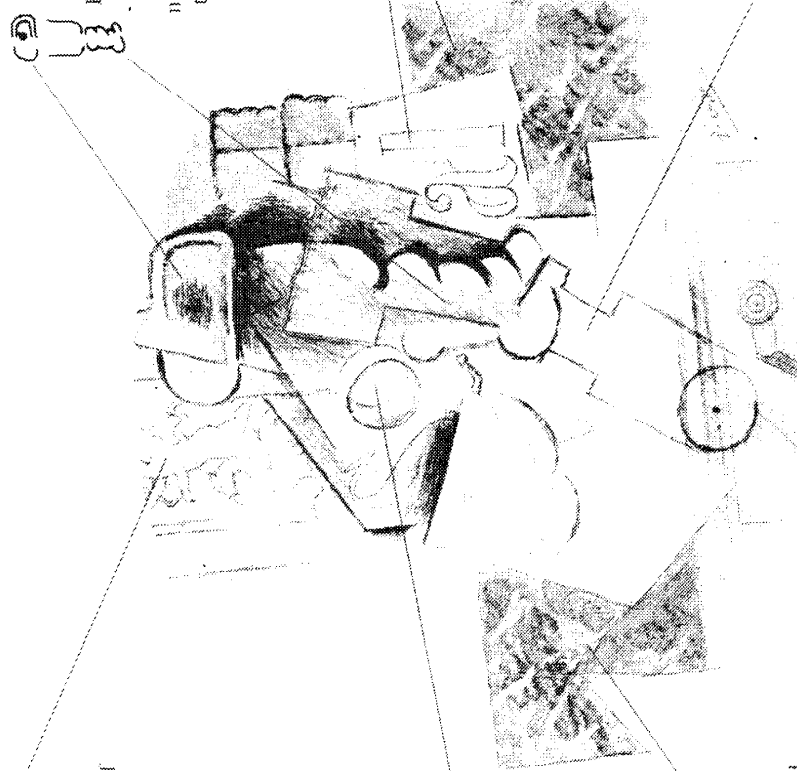
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#### Pieces of Life?

After visiting local cafés and inexpensive bars, what could be more natural than painting the debris on the table-- wine glasses, bottles, fake marble table tops, and bits and pieces of brand names from wine or tobacco?

#### What's the "essence" of a wine bottle?

A stick figure is one way of reducing the human figure to its visual essence. Reducing a wine bottle to its essence, Picasso uses two simple lines to trace the outline of the bottle's neck and lip.



#### Still Life, 1914

Watercolor, oil, and pencil

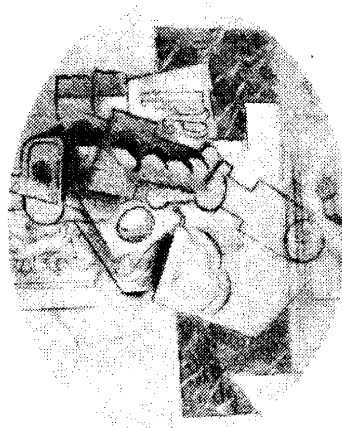
Charles Francis Hendrie Memorial Collection

For more about Picasso, turn over



## More About Picasso

**W**e'll never know exactly what Picasso was thinking as he made this 1914 painting, but we have clues in his own words and work. Though he could draw in a very realistic way when he was only thirteen, twenty years later the painter was making paintings like this one which looked like nothing ever seen before.



Still Life, 1914

### What's Real

**I**n the two or three years before doing this work, Picasso's paintings were even more abstract. In this 1914 still life, a wine glass, a green marble table top, and recognizable letters appear—not photographically real looking things but clear hints of them. What single thing in this painting is the most "real"? Is it the marble table top? He painted the green marble realistically, but you can

also see that if you touched it, it wouldn't feel cool and smooth but like rough streaks of paint.

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Child prodigies are rare in the visual arts, but Picasso at age 13 could complete school exercises like this drawing of a plumed cat, as well as the adult students at the art college where his father taught.



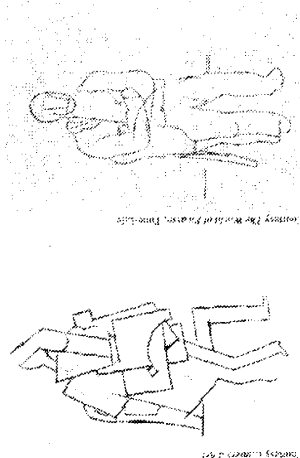
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In this 1914 still life Picasso challenges earlier rules for how to finish works of art. He experiments with a mixture of watercolor, pencil, and oil paint and presents a final work that hardly looks completed. While earlier artists chose to show luxuriant flowers or elegant tableware, Picasso chose to show cheap wine glasses and letters from mass-produced signs or wine bottle labels—the ordinary remains of a drink and a conversation in a café.

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# IMPROVING THE ESTHETIC EXPERIENCE FOR ART NOVICES

## A New Paradigm For Interpretive Labels

Marlene Chambers

I'm proposing a new paradigm for art museum labels that is fundamentally different from the traditional information-driven paradigm. Even the best labels whose subject matter is selected according to the traditional paradigm assume that once the visitor has been handed certain information, his responses to art objects will automatically become more like those of the "expert." The new paradigm offers, instead, an immediate opportunity for an esthetic experience whose structure is the same as that of an expert, though the specific content of this experience may be quite different.

The label example I've included here provides a model for selecting subject matter according to the goal of enriching the quality of esthetic experience for art novices. Innumerable changes can be rung within this model, for it will accommodate any specific factual information, empowering idea, perceptual or engagement skill activity, attitudinal appraisal, or exercise for enlarging critical judgment.

The theoretical basis for both the paradigm and the label model grew directly from my comparison and analysis of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's "flow" or "expert" experience model with preliminary conclusions of the Getty/NEA Interpretive Project at the Denver Art Museum--audience research that examines and describes the novice visitor's esthetic experience of art objects.<sup>1</sup> Csikszentmihalyi's study lays bare the structure of expert experience by stripping away its content to define the common-

alities of such disparate self-rewarding activities as chess and rock-climbing. The new experience-driven paradigm for interpretive labels focuses on this structure and makes use of any appropriate subject matter to create conditions that facilitate the flow experience.

### History

The particular tripartite form the label takes--which is not an essential characteristic of the model--draws directly on an exercise Melora McDermott-Lewis (Getty/NEA project manager) and I set ourselves at a label workshop we attended at the Toledo Art Museum, April 1987. Our aim had been to plan a label for the Toledo installation of a David Hockney photocollage exhibition that would go beyond providing specific information. Instead of using the label for didactic instruction, we wanted to develop a model for the communication of what I had begun calling "empowering ideas." We had been discussing such an approach for some time,<sup>2</sup> and it was our joint belief that more than one such model could be developed and that a variety of empowering ideas might be communicated through them.

I have defined an "empowering idea" as one that: (a) helps the visitor make sense of a particular exhibition and all its specific parts, (b) 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,

(c) is applicable to other art exhibitions the visitor encounters, (d) has powerful implications that suggest fruitful lines of inquiry in other aspects of life.

Melora and I also shared a number of other assumptions:

1. The unique experience offered by an art museum is the opportunity for direct esthetic experiences with objects.
2. Through interpretive devices, including labels, it is possible to teach “novice” visitors (self-described as art lovers with little knowledge of art) skills and attitudes that will move them closer to having the kind of esthetic experiences “experts” have.
3. Novices are likely to lack certain knowledge and skills needed for engagement with the object (active looking).
4. Novices are likely to have certain common preconceptions and expectations that act as barriers to their having a full and complex esthetic experience.
5. Gallery labels and other interpretive devices could lead to greater engagement with objects instead of conveying information that could be learned in another setting through other means (lectures, books, films).
6. Since the museum experience is “open” and self-directed, written material should be as concise and interesting as possible, as well as easy to read. At the same time, it should challenge the intellectual powers of a well-educated, though art-illiterate, audience and provide opportunities for “discovery” experiences.

By the time of the Toledo workshop, Melora had already conducted many hours of intensive interviews with novice visitors. As I recall, this was the first occasion on which she described to me some of the shared esthetic criteria valued by novices: pretti-

ness, recognizable and pleasant subject matter, lots of detail, and an easily accessible message. I believed that our model label could help the novice begin to expand his horizons beyond what seemed comfortable.<sup>3</sup>

I think it was the multiple viewpoints of the Hockney photocollages that suggested to us the idea of multiple vantage points the viewer might also explore, although we had been talking for some time about offering viewers multiple themes or “paths” to follow through an exhibition. At this point, I realized that the empowering idea implicit in both the works and the vantage-point concept was that of the three elements that operate in communication--the sender, the message, and the receiver. In the brief time allotted for the exercise, we arrived at this tentative introductory label:

#### LOOKING FOR ANSWERS

You might want to explore this gallery from more than one vantage point.

1. What Hockney chose to capture
2. What you choose to see
3. What’s “really” there

Feel free to take these vantage-point cards home after you’ve used them in the gallery.

We expected (had there been time) to develop a printed take-away card for each of the three vantage points with suggestions on ways to explore each one. These would have been presented in pockets at the bottom of the label.<sup>4</sup> Our idea at the time was that this model could accommodate a variety of specific art works or types of art and address any number of barriers encountered by the

novice. In this case, we intended to get the visitor to realize that communication with art objects is a two-way street and to start thinking about the limitations he might be placing on his enjoyment of art by refusing to contemplate unpleasant subject matter.

We both knew the difficulty of using the written word as a "coaching" method of teaching.<sup>5</sup> And we were especially concerned about how we could surmount the problem of providing one of the essential conditions of a flow experience--a challenge equal to the visitor's current skills.<sup>6</sup> Although one of my goals for labels had long been to return the visitor to the art object and increase the time he spent looking at it, we now recognized this as another *sine qua non* of Csikszentmihalyi's flow-experience model. It was essential for our label to bring about a fully focused encounter with the object, no matter how briefly, if the viewer were to have an experience that bore any similarity to that of an expert.

### Goals and Objectives

In developing an exemplary label for the Getty/NEA project, I wanted to test some of the assumptions that shaped both the Toledo label and my present goals. The paradigmatic label that evolved attempts to help the novice have an experience whose structure duplicates the structure of the expert "flow experience" defined by Csikszentmihalyi: a focusing of attention, a challenge equal to current skills, and a discovery (positive feedback, sense of being in control). I believed that a label whose informational content was selected according to this goal might set the novice on the path toward an expert esthetic experience more surely than one whose goal is to offer expert-level information. "Object-centered" labels

whose subject matter bears directly on what the visitor can see before him and "human-interest" labels that appeal, like advertisements, to basic psychological needs and interests, though good examples of the old information-driven paradigm, still take as their goal the communication of information.

Instead, I hoped to develop a label whose goal would be to facilitate an immediate flow experience that would contain all the conditions and features of the expert's and, thus, enrich the quality of the viewer's esthetic experience. Whether it communicated an empowering idea, taught engagement skills, effected attitude changes, and/or enlarged critical judgment, the subject matter of this label would be selected because it enabled a flow experience to occur.

As it turned out, I discovered how liberating this goal could be for the label writer, how rich and complex its possibilities for selecting specific objectives and content that would facilitate the flow experience. It was no longer my task to pass on some expert's discovery to the viewer, but instead to set up conditions that would lead to his making a discovery of his own--perhaps one that no other viewer would ever share.

Nonetheless, the experience-driven paradigm demands much more from the writer than the information-driven paradigm. Since it deals with a flow experience that is specifically "esthetic" in nature, it must provide conditions for fuller responses along several avenues at once--perceptual, emotional, intellectual, and communicative or integrative. The emotional dimension of the esthetic experience, our research has shown, occurs naturally in the novice; the problem here is to help him learn to recognize and differentiate between his personal, "knee-

jerk'' responses and those the artist may have been striving to elicit, to prevent his private associations and reveries from coming between him and the apprehension of the object (see endnote 3). The other three dimensions of the esthetic experience all appear to be atrophied in the novices we have interviewed. All three need to be nourished in the experience-driven label. In selecting the specific content for the exemplary label, I tried to address all four dimensions of the esthetic experience.

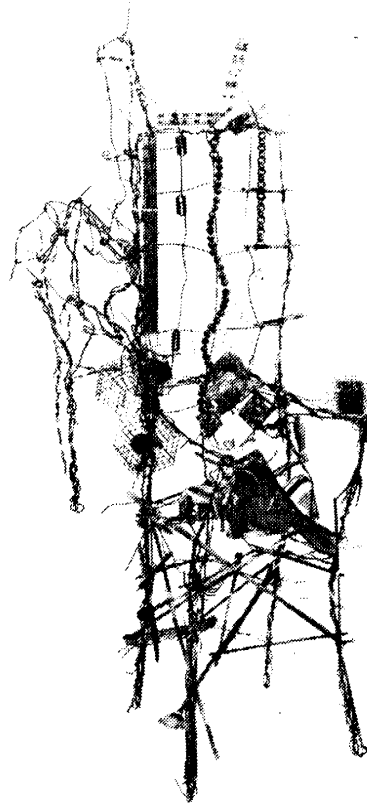
The empowering idea that I wanted to embed in the model label (see Experience-Driven Label that follows) is that distasteful or disquieting ideas can be worth thinking about, just as distasteful or threatening objects can be beautiful. A corollary to this idea is that "what you see is what you get," that the viewer who invests effort in an object is usually repaid.

The engagement skill that I hoped to provide practice in is that of seeking correspondences in the elements that make up an art work. In this case, the correspondences the viewer is encouraged to seek are primarily in subject matter and meaning, rather than visual elements like line, color, shape, etc., though the two are so intertwined in the Samaras work (fig. 1) that some viewers may become more aware of the visual correspondences if they actually search out some of the subject correspondences by using the suggestions in the label.

The attitude change that I aimed for is related to the empowering idea. I'd like the novice viewer to become more open to initially off-putting art as a result of being more aware of how his preconceptions and aversions limit both communication and enjoyment.

I hoped, finally, that the novice would expe-

rience a more complex esthetic response to the object as a result of a more complete engagement with it--and that the feeling of success in this case would encourage him to try to repeat the experience with other objects.



*Fig. 1. Samaras's Wirehanger Chair was chosen for its use of potentially off-putting materials. Wirehanger Chair (Couples), 1986, Lucas Samaras. Mixed media, 54 3/4 x 25 7/8 x 26 1/4. Saatchi Collection, London. © Lucas Samaras 1986.*

### Experience-Driven Label

This label (fig. 2), like the information-driven label that follows (fig. 3), consists of an introductory label in large type on a ground that accommodates three vertical "pockets," each of which contains a paddle that carries the expanded label text corresponding to the subject shown on the introductory label.

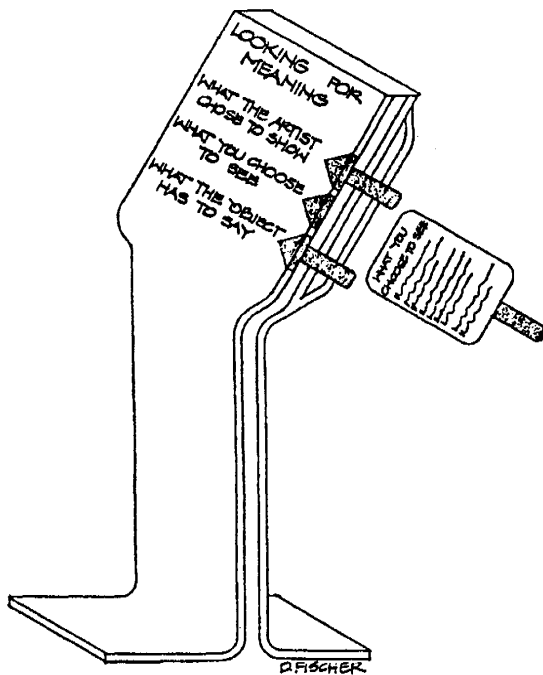


Fig. 2. The label was designed to hide blocks of text that might otherwise seem formidable.

Introductory label:

### LOOKING FOR MEANING

What the Artist Chose to Show

What You Choose to See

What the Object Has to Say

Paddle texts:

### WHAT THE ARTIST CHOSE TO SHOW

Lucas Samaras has explained on more than one occasion that he often uses lethal, dangerous objects in his work "partly for psychological reasons and partly for esthetic reasons.

"When I look at a razor blade, it has associations of being cut, but it's also a wonderful looking object in itself.

Or a glass. If it's broken, it could cut you. But it also has strange qualities that have to do with transparency, translucency--a beautiful way of catching color."

Can Samaras count on viewers to respond the same way he does to pins and needles, knives and forks--to see them as both threatening and beautiful?

### WHAT YOU CHOOSE TO SEE

Samaras once wrote, "Artists don't talk anymore about having their work last a thousand years. I guess it's frightening to think about being dead for a thousand years. But I like to tiptoe over morbid thoughts, perhaps find something significant."

Most people really don't want to think about death--even on tiptoe. Nobody today commissions artists to paint a "memento mori," once a favorite subject. "Remember that you must die" is a message that turns us off.

Even the twisted coathangers Samaras uses to outline his chairs are enough to warn some viewers away. They simply stop looking when they feel threatened. How far are you willing to follow Samaras "over morbid thoughts"?

### WHAT THE OBJECT HAS TO SAY

The wires make a framework that's a little like 3-D tic-tac-toe, a little like a skeletal Christmas tree whose orna-

ments seem to hold each other up. The eye can move in any direction to find the “couples” Samaras refers to in the title and that he invites us to join together mentally--to analyze and connect.

Sometimes we see the link first in shape or color--as with the corrugated yardstick and its mate, the scalloped knife. And then we have to let our minds search for links in meaning between the two.

Sometimes it's the use the objects have that couples them, whether this use is real or only suggested. The meat grinder and the mirror might seem to have little in common until we see Samaras has cut the mirror in the shape of a meat cleaver.

It's like a game--but one that's deadly serious.

### Information-Driven Label

Introductory label:

LUCAS SAMARAS  
*Wirehanger Chair (Couples)*, 1986

Concerns as an Artist

Autobiography and the Private Self

Intimacy and Isolation

Paddle texts:

### CONCERNS AS AN ARTIST

Samaras found an audience early when he exhibited paintings and pastels at the Ruben Gallery in New York in 1959. But he soon turned to new media that often incorporated found materials.

On the face of it, his development in these early years seems similar to other artists of his generation. His move from paintings to new media reflects the widespread turn away from formalism to art forms that relate to life more directly. But Samaras was different. His themes and concerns led him to explore the



Fig. 3. The paddle format allowed the visitor to hold the text at a comfortable reading distance and to experience a sense of control.

meaning of self rather than questions of social relevance and connection.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE PRIVATE SELF

Samaras has spent most of his life apart from his family and homeland. As a child, he remained in his native Greece with his mother while his father worked in the United States during the years of World War II and the Greek Civil War that followed. Though the family was reunited when Samaras and his mother moved to New Jersey in 1948, Samaras was left alone again when his family returned to Greece in 1964.

Since then, Samaras has continued to stand apart both as artist and man. His art has never fit into easy categories. And, though the subject of his work centers on autobiography, it is so generalized that his personal life and personality are submerged in the public persona of his art.

## INTIMACY AND ISOLATION

One of Samaras's recurring themes has been the paradox of the self's isolation at the very moment of self-revelation. The more we reveal ourselves, his works imply, the more formidable the barriers we throw up to true connection with others.

In *Wirehanger Chair (Couples)*, one of a series of such chairs Samaras created in 1986, we can see his fascination for what he has called

"intimate but quite lethal things." Sharp edges appear everywhere. Samaras seems to be warning us away from the piece and, thus, from any intimacy with the work or himself as the artist.

The embracing couples he shows us are totally self-absorbed. They seem locked in a life-and-death struggle that excludes the viewer entirely. On a symbolic level, the work tells us to back off, that, like the act of procreation, the creative act of the artist is a private and personal affair.

## Comparison of the Old and New Paradigms

It was tempting to write a comparative information-driven label that would be typical of those in use in museums today, one whose purpose would be to impart art historical, biographical, and/or cultural information that seems important or interesting to the expert. Such labels generally ignore the context of the museum setting entirely, and the information they convey could just as well be sought in a library. Instead, I have tried to write a comparative label (see Information-Driven Label) that would represent the traditional information-driven paradigm at its best, a label that selects information directly related to an object with the purpose of returning the reader's attention to the object. Within the old information-driven paradigm, object-centered labels are the closest we have been able to come to facilitating the unique experiential aspect of a museum visit.

Both labels contain a certain amount of object-centered information. The major

differences between the two follow directly from their radically different paradigmatic structures.

Information-driven, with a bow to the importance of the present object in selecting this information, the comparative label takes no account of the esthetic experience or its potential as a flow experience. It makes no attempt to focus attention on exploring the object, to provide challenges appropriate to the novice's current skill level, or to facilitate discoveries that reward his efforts and encourage him to repeat the experience. It is didactic in the most literal sense. It instructs with little thought to the kind of experience it provides or invites. By giving answers, it sends the implied message that these can be discovered only by experts.

The experience-driven label, on the other hand, asks the novice to participate in making discoveries about the object, the artist, and himself. It focuses attention on the process of communication, not just with the present art object, but with any art object. Because it shows how to go about exploring an object and points the way to practice, its teaching method is not didactic, but experiential and participatory. And the experience it offers contains all the elements that make up the structure of an expert esthetic response. Though the skill level, content, and complexity of the novice's flow experience may differ considerably from the expert's, the label invites a satisfying esthetic encounter that encourages future advances.

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1. At the time this article was written in late 1987, Melora McDermott-Lewis, project manager, was nearing the end of a study whose direction had been influenced by the flow-experience model Csikszentmihalyi establishes in *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (1975). She had interviewed both novices and advanced amateurs and analyzed their

subjective descriptions of significant esthetic experiences. I am much indebted to stimulating and sympathetic exchanges with Melora, whose rigorous critical skills helped shape my thinking.

2. Melora and I had agreed early on that perhaps gallery labels should concentrate on teaching principles that would act as "coathangers" for the visitor to use in organizing supporting ideas and facts--not a particularly original concept, though one not in general practice in museums and one we had difficulty explaining and selling to our colleagues. We began to believe we might be on the right track when we discovered that the structuralist theory of Jerome S. Bruner (*The Process of Education*, 1960 and 1977) had long championed the role of theorems and principles in the learning process. Our hope was that the principles would also provide a "controlling idea" (generally called a "thesis statement" by teachers of composition) that the label writer could use in selecting supporting ideas and specific information. An important difference between our position then and the experience-driven model is that the goal of improving the quality of the visitor's esthetic encounter is now the "controlling" element in fleshing out the label.

3. More recent Getty/NEA project findings indicate that novices generally experience a fairly one-dimensional esthetic response to art objects, heavily weighted to the emotional and often significantly removed from the perceptual. Their tendency to value experiences consisting primarily of personal reverie touched off by some element in the work is a far cry from the cognitive character of the complex experience valued by the expert. Monroe Beardsley has defined cognition of the art work as "the apprehension (but not the misapprehension) of the thing's qualities and relations. . . . It covers both perception and interpretive understanding" ("In Defense of Aesthetic Value," *Proceedings and Address of the American Philosophical Association*, 1979, 52:728). The communicative process of the esthetic experience is short-circuited and turned inward by the novice.

4. In keeping the wall text to a minimum, we hoped to overcome the quite valid objections museum curators have to labels that become objects in their own right, vying with art objects for the viewer's attention. At the same time, we sought to address visitor resistance to formidable blocks of print by making the wall label a "teaser," breaking the total text into three manageable parts, and presenting these in a portable form that could be adjusted by each visitor to an optimum reading-ease distance.

5. Mortimer J. Adler's diagram of the three modes of learning and teaching offers a graphic illustration of the dilemma facing museum educators (*The Paideia Proposal*, 1982, 22). The first of these modes, the acquisition of organized knowledge by means of didactic instruction through lectures and textbooks, is not well-suited to a



gallery situation, even through human interpreters (guides). Although it has been the mode most frequently used in museums, this mode of learning neither depends on the presence of real objects nor results from occasional hit-and-miss opportunities for instruction. The second mode, the development of skills by means of coaching, exercises, and supervised practice, if used at all in museums, has depended almost entirely on the presence of human interpreters, who can be trained to offer visitors this sort of experience rather than the didactic instruction usually provided by museum guides. But it is, on the face of it, a mode of teaching and learning that is not well-suited to the "textbook on the wall" approach labels traditionally take. And the third mode, even more rare in museums, enlargement of understanding of ideas and values through Socratic questioning and active participation, has seemed entirely dependent on the presence of a modern-day Socrates and beyond the limitations usually associated with labels.

6. Csikszentmihalyi identifies the "clearest sign" of the "flow experience" of experts at various "game" activities as a "merging of action and awareness," so that one is "aware of his actions but not of the awareness itself." He singles out three conditions that are critical to this state: the tasks must be within one's present ability to perform, attention must be centered on a limited stimulus field, and, usually, the experience must contain "coherent, noncontradictory demands for action and provide clear, unambiguous feedback" (1975, 38-46). In summing up all the elements of the flow experience, he describes them as "linked together and dependent on each other. By limiting the stimulus field, a flow activity allows people to concentrate their actions and ignore distractions. As a result, they feel in potential control of the environment. Because the flow activity has clear and noncontradictory rules, people who perform in it can temporarily forget their identity and its problems. The result of all these conditions is that one finds the process intrinsically rewarding" (48).



# SUITABLE FOR FRAMING: MAKING VALUE JUDGMENTS ABOUT ART A Discovery Label<sup>1</sup>

Marlene Chambers and Helen Muir

Clearly, looking at art is among those countless unproductive activities that men and women pursue for the pure joy of the doing. They have no other end in sight but the intrinsic reward they find in the experience itself. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the University of Chicago behavioral psychologist who has defined the common experiential characteristics of such diverse self-rewarding activities as rock climbing and chess, has chosen to use the word flow to characterize them "because that term was used frequently to describe the deep involvement and effortless progression" felt by experts "when the activity was going well."<sup>2</sup>

More recently, with support from the J. Paul Getty Trust, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson studied art experts' perceptions of their esthetic experiences.<sup>3</sup> At the outset of his review of earlier attempts to describe the character of the esthetic experience, he discovered an amazing similarity between the philosophical criteria set forth by esthetician Monroe C. Beardsley and the psychological criteria his earlier studies had established for the flow experience. He paraphrases the five features of the esthetic experience identified by Beardsley as: object directedness (attention focused on visual stimulus), felt freedom ("release from concerns about past and future"), detached affect (object distanced emotionally), active discovery (cognitive involvement in challenges of stimuli), and wholeness ("sense of personal integration and self-expansion").<sup>4</sup> These characteristics closely mirror Robinson and Csikszentmihalyi's own criteria for the flow

experience: merging of action and awareness ("attention centered on activity"), limitation of stimulus field ("no awareness of past and future"), loss of ego ("loss of self-consciousness"), control of actions ("skills adequate to overcome challenges"), clear goals and feedback that make the experience intrinsically satisfying.<sup>5</sup>

This is heady stuff for those interested in enriching the quality of the esthetic experience for museum visitors, for it gives us an ideal standard against which to measure the experience--as well as a new paradigm for museum learning. As Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson argue, by regarding the esthetic experience "as a form of flow, it becomes easier to understand its structural characteristics, its dynamics, and hence it becomes easier to predict and influence the chances of its occurrence."<sup>6</sup> Whether in playing chess or in looking at art, the conditions for experiencing flow are essentially the same: "delimiting reality, controlling some aspect of [reality], and responding to the feedback with a concentration that excludes anything else as irrelevant."<sup>7</sup>

In practical terms, to facilitate flow experiences for visitors, museum interpretive efforts must focus viewer attention on the object and offer a challenge equal to the viewer's current skills.<sup>8</sup> By meeting the challenge, viewers derive the positive feedback that promotes continued concentration and the desire for repeated experiences. As Beardsley points out,

... one of the central components in art experience must be the experience of discovery, of insight into connections and organizations--the elation that comes from the apparent opening up of intelligibility. I call this "active discovery" to draw attention to the excitement of meeting a cognitive challenge ....<sup>9</sup>

Viewing the discovery that Beardsley places at the core of an esthetic experience as the essential ingredient of a flow experience allows us to see discovery as a critical motivational element in museum learning. Attempts to teach the visitor what he needs to know to enjoy art fully cannot succeed unless they facilitate discoveries that provide a flow experience.<sup>10</sup>

The Getty/NEA Interpretive Project at the Denver Art Museum has focused on research that describes the significant esthetic experiences of art novices.<sup>11</sup> These experiences, we have found, are atrophied along both the intellectual and perceptual dimensions and grossly exaggerated on the emotional. The integrative process of the esthetic experience, a dialogue with the work that extends along all three dimensions, is thus short-circuited in the novice experience. The novice tendency to value art experiences that consist primarily of personal reveries touched off by some element in the work is a far cry from the primarily cognitive character of the complex experience valued by the expert. We are convinced that this is because novices don't know how to identify the cognitive challenges offered by a work of art.

Attempts to offer the novice visitor an experience of the same quality or complexity as the expert's are obviously doomed to failure. The novice cannot be turned into an

instant expert.<sup>12</sup> There are too many perceptual skills and too much specialized information needed for a true dialogue with an art object. Even more critical to the transformation from novice to expert is the necessity to abandon dependence on emotional monologue as the focus of an encounter with art. Beardsley pinpointed the dilemma when he defined cognition of the art work as referring to "the apprehension (but not the misapprehension) of the thing's qualities and relations" and including "both perception and interpretive understanding."<sup>13</sup> If novices are focused on personal memories and emotions, they can hardly focus on the object or free themselves from the past. They are condemned instead to misapprehend the challenges the object offers the expert who is able to distance herself emotionally from it.<sup>14</sup>

But, if the esthetic experience is viewed as a variety of the flow experience, there is a possibility that museum interpretive efforts can facilitate for the inexperienced visitor an experience of the same order as the expert's. Though the specific content of the art novice experience may not resemble that of the expert experience (no more than the novice rock climber's resembles the expert climber's), the structural characteristics of both experiences will be the same. Given the right challenges, art novices can feel the same thrill of discovery that marks the esthetic encounters of the most knowledgeable experts. It is this discovery--with the satisfaction that attends the sense of success in meeting a challenge--that motivates repeat encounters and continued progress on the learning continuum. What this means in practice is that museums must abandon the information-driven paradigm for an experience-driven paradigm founded on the discovery principle. Unfortunately, experts in every field tend to forget that discoveries

motivated their own passage from novice to expert. So anxious are they to share their cumulative knowledge that they try to short-cut the motivational *sine qua non* of learning by an outpouring of facts and figures that merely drowns the neophyte in a sea of unworthiness and indifference.

This is not to argue that labels and other interpretive devices should not contain any information, but that this information should be carefully selected to provide a springboard to a discovery that makes looking at and thinking about art a satisfying experience. Information can be used to illustrate and point the way to practice in a perceptual skill, to initiate inquiry that leads to a dialogue with an object, or to offer a clue to the resolution of a problem. Whatever its specific purpose, only that information should be included that passes the test of setting up a challenge or helping the novice meet it. What novices need to learn is not information, but rather how to set up their own challenges, how to explore the art object in a way that will make it intelligible.

As Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson admit in the conclusion of "The Art of Seeing," "It is extremely difficult to lead a person to experience something he has no interest in, or has no abilities for."<sup>15</sup> For that reason, attempts to help visitors understand and respond to the challenges of art objects must be firmly grounded in research that tells us something of novice preferences and attitudes. It is important to identify those objects in a museum that have wide appeal, for they are obviously objects in which people already find intrinsic satisfaction. Helping the visitor broaden this interest means paying attention to why he finds certain objects attractive and what abilities and knowledge he needs to move beyond them.

In setting up the present label project, we based both its concept and its specific content on interviews with five art-experience novices and one advanced amateur.<sup>16</sup> All respondents had singled out the museum's Bouguereau painting, *Two Girls* (fig. 1), as a favorite.<sup>17</sup> In talking about their responses, all spoke primarily of the personal associations its subject evoked rather than about formal, art historical, or contextual aspects of the painting. Those who referred to these aspects at all mentioned the work's lifelike realism and its soft colors and blurred brushwork. Responses most often seemed based on a sentimental reaction to the subject's "innocence" and "simplicity." Although all interviewees expressed some awareness of the emotional basis for their responses, two seemed to have examined their responses more critically: one novice (EE) singled out the painting's "cherubic faces" and "idyllic setting," and the advanced amateur (PP) mentioned that the artist had emphasized the work's "prettiness" by diffusing the background and making the rosy charms of the children "larger than life." It was this very prettiness that made her think she would soon tire of the painting if she owned it, though she admitted that whenever she was on the European floor she "always" came to take a look at it.

These same two interviewees expressed some interest in knowing more about the actual circumstances of the painting's creation: Who were the girls? Was the work a labor of love or a commission? Neither mentioned a desire to know anything about the painting's place in art history, the history of style, or the artist's own oeuvre. The novice drew a distinction between enjoyment and appreciation while also noting that greater appreciation based on knowledge might enhance enjoyment.<sup>18</sup>



*Fig. 1. Because it usually evokes sentimental responses, Bouguereau's Two Girls was chosen for this project. Two Girls, 1900, Adolphe William Bouguereau. Oil on canvas, 1.02 x 1.3 m. Denver Art Museum: Gift of the Lawrence C. Phipps Foundation.*

Others seemed to value art as a primarily emotional pleasure whose genuineness can be tainted by an intellectual approach.

Whatever appeals to me simply appeals to my senses. . . . You don't always weigh and analyze why you like it. (R)

You can have different feelings, and you can find out a lot about yourself by looking at something and reacting to it. (B)

I usually expect [from a museum visit a] . . . kind of unwinding . . . peace of mind kind of thing. (W)

[Knowledge] just gets, it kind of makes you more picky, shall we say. . . . Because then what you end up

with then is so many other people's ideas of what is good or bad or indifferent that you begin to doubt yourself. (H)

This distrust of intellectualizing the art experience finds a corollary in novices' determination to retain absolute independence in their emotional responses and value judgments.

I could enjoy [some] guidance. For a little while. And then I'd have to be set free. (R)

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

body else likes it (B)

The tidbits [of information that make art interesting] come from experiences in my own life . . . rather than being forced to learn this or told what to look for . . . . (W)

Don't throw away that basic feeling because that's what art is, the feeling that you came with. . . . Don't let them stomp that to ground . . . in acquiring all [the information] that can go with it but you can live without if that's not your thing. (H)

In fact, for these novices, knowledge seems to have nothing to do with liking or not liking a work of art.

I would need . . . guidance with art work. Not that I would force myself to like something. If you don't like it, you don't like it. (R)

Or, as the single novice interested primarily in learning general information about art put it in speaking of his lack of interest in pottery,

I don't know whether I would enjoy it [if I knew more about it], but I would probably appreciate it better. . . . I need to learn more about it to really appreciate it and maybe if I were to do that I would enjoy it. (EE)

And maybe not. Even the advanced amateur, who continually equated knowledge and familiarity with the growth of her own appreciation, expressed some doubt that knowledge and understanding inevitably lead to enjoyment.

It's important to learn more and more, and that's why I should go take that class because then I'll enjoy the art that we have more because I'll understand it better, hopefully. (PP)

At one point, she even says "a lot of people . . . try too hard to understand [art]."

I don't expect to understand everything I see, and that makes it more accessible. (PP)

But, even to a willing learner, there are unaccountable preferences.

It's just ugly to me. It just looks like vomit. I don't like it at all. . . . I go up and look at it every time. I try to like it. . . . [It's] a personal thing. (PP)

The idea that knowledge actually interferes with enjoyment was most forcefully expressed by the same novice who believed that "feeling" is "what art is."

For one thing, [newcomers to art] 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. . . . Sometimes the more you know, the more handicapped you are. (H)

Bearing in mind these attitudes, as well as our knowledge of the necessity for emotional distancing in the ideal esthetic experience, we decided the Bouguereau painting presented a good opportunity to facilitate a flow experience commensurate with novices' current abilities--one that might lead to a dialogue with this and other art objects whose appeal is primarily emotional. At the

same time, we knew quite well that this would be a risky undertaking. We would have to proceed very carefully to avoid limiting the discovery with holier-than-thou analysis, formulas, or injunctions. We would have to guard against invalidating personal emotional responses if we were to avoid undercutting positive feedback. If viewers were shamed, overawed, or outraged by the discovery, we would leave them worse than we found them.

We eventually decided on an impartial presentation of two opposing points of view

about the painting--both based primarily on emotional preferences--as the best way to facilitate a discovery about value judgments and/or the role of emotion and knowledge in art experiences. We refrained from offering expert rationale pro or con, and we abandoned as prejudicial to our primary goal the natural desire to point the viewer to a specific discovery. We introduced only one bit of factual information, and, even then, we disguised it as ammunition that could support either side of the argument. However, this one fact--that Bouguereau's models were not all they seem to be--was calculated to offer a

<b>If you like this painting, is it because . . .</b>	<b>If you don't like this painting, is it because . . .</b>
You find yourself emotionally attached to the scene.	You feel like your emotions are being manipulated.
You immediately feel comfortable with the painting.	You easily grasp the meaning of the work and no longer find it challenging.
You recall memories you enjoy exploring in your mind's eye.	You find yourself thinking about personal memories instead of the painting.
You are charmed by the artist's portrayal of youth and innocence.	Although you find the subject pleasant, it seems trite and uninspired.
You think that the artist showed imagination by idealizing two young Parisian beggars as happy, healthy children in an idyllic landscape.	You think the painting would be more interesting if the artist had shown the street urchins he used as models in their real setting.
<p><b>Is your reaction to this painting influenced more by the personal associations you bring to it or by the painting itself?</b></p>	

*Fig. 2. Final label text. All but the top two lines of the text ("If you like/don't like...") are covered by sliding doors.*



challenge that might, in conjunction with the two sets of value-judgment criteria, lead to a discovery. Given the open-endedness of the label content, we expect the number of potential discoveries to be almost as great as the number of readers. But we expect all these discoveries to open a door to emotional distancing and intellectual dialogue in future art encounters.

We modified the wording of the label slightly after small-sample formative testing. A summary of the formative testing report follows, as well as a photograph of the fabricated label (fig. 3).

### Formative Testing Summary

In order to test the effectiveness of our initial design and label text, we conducted five unobtrusive observations of visitors' use of a

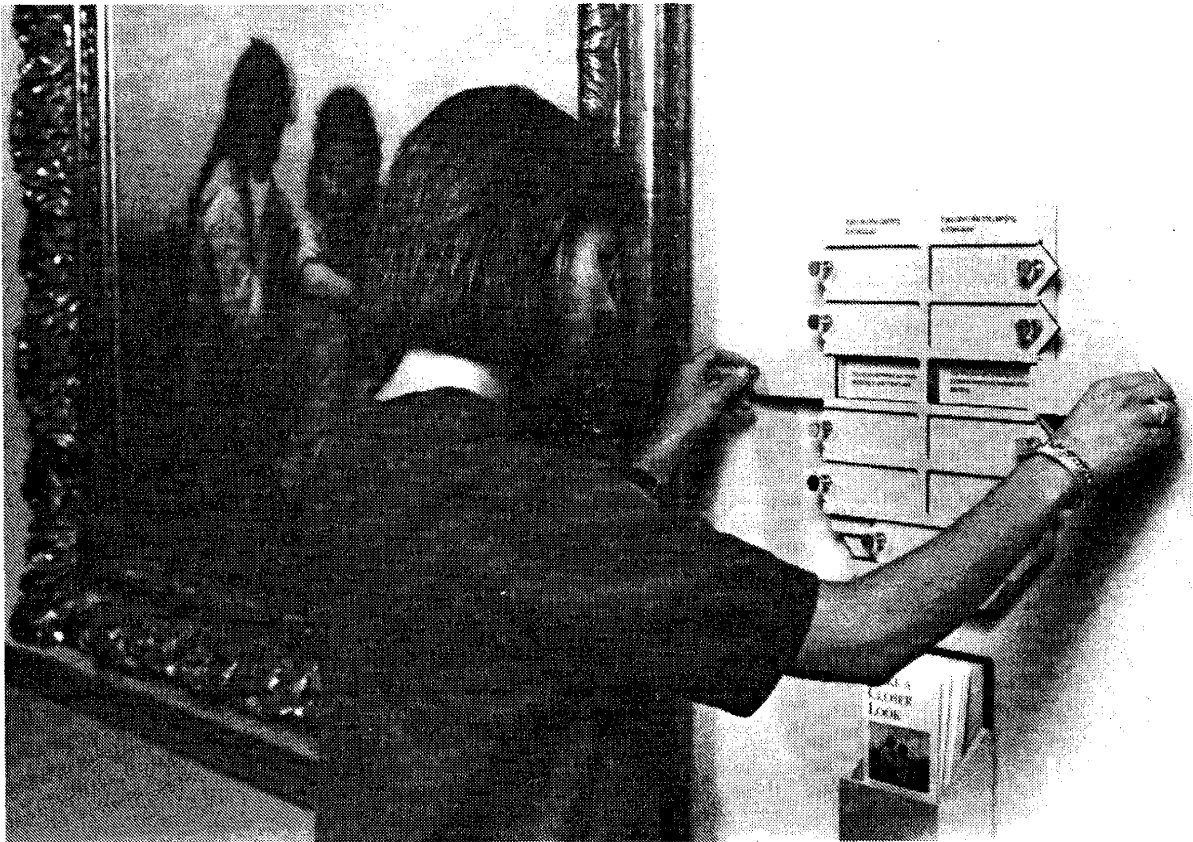
mock-up without sliding doors and fifteen observations and fifteen interviews when sliding doors were added. (A complete report is available from the Denver Art Museum Education Department.) We wanted to know whether any fine tuning in the wording or format would improve the label's attracting and holding power, comfort level, or provocativeness.

Our two major concerns were:

1. To avoid prejudicing or limiting the viewer's discovery by injunctions or value-laden vocabulary.
2. To avoid invalidating the viewer's initial emotional response.

More specifically we wanted to know:

1. Would visitors prefer to be able to see the



*Fig. 3. The label was designed to present two opposing points of view about the painting.*

opposing statements of both columns at once?

2. Do the statements offend the visitor? Does he feel a sense of loss at having a fantasy punctured?
3. Do the statements allow/promote a discovery about making value judgments?
4. Does the final question help or hinder the discovery process?
5. Do the statements change the visitor's opinion in any way?

We particularly wanted to see how visitors used the label. Of the thirty people who approached the label with doors, twenty-five opened them, but in a more varied pattern than we had anticipated. Eleven opened the "If you like this painting" side first, and seven of those were curious enough to find out why people wouldn't like the painting. Nine opened doors under both headings randomly, while the remaining five systematically opened the opposing elements from left to right and top to bottom. The rough mock-up of the label seemed to attract attention and interest. With the doors removed, the amount of exposed text seemed to intimidate and discourage visitors since only two of the five visitors observed appeared to read it.

The sliding doors provided a game-board type of instrument that made the label fun to use. They appeared to help users focus on the text rather than what was going on in the gallery. They also seemed to promote discussion among visitors in groups of two or more. When the doors were removed, visitors in groups tended to read the text to themselves.

The interviews provided more feedback than the observations. We watched visitors use the label before we interviewed them so we

could note their reaction before being cued.

Comments from one couple overheard during observations:

Hey, look at this; it is really neat. Do you like this painting or not?

They are trying to get you to think.

How would you know that these were street urchins; they just put ideas into your head.

This woman couldn't understand why the label included a fact visitors would not have known. However, the label did make her think about the models, the setting, and the bit of outside information. Even so, she expected answers and was frustrated because they were not presented in the text.

Comments made during interviews:

I really found the label neat. Liked seeing and reading my reasons for liking a painting in print.

The "If you don't like this painting" side was interesting and made some sense, but I really like the painting too much to change my opinion of it.

One group of high school students read the label aloud. All agreed with the left side of the label, with mumbles of "Ah, yea" and "That's *my* reason!" As they continued on to the other column, it was interesting to see them realize that there were also valid reasons for not liking the painting. Remarks included, "Yea, that could be true" and "That's interesting." They all denied finding anything offensive, and one said, "It gave me something to think about--they may

have their reasons to feel this way and not like the painting.”

One visitor noted, “It’s nice to have something to make you think and evaluate. I usually just ‘look’ at something without really knowing how to examine a painting.”

Two women saw the label as a “do-it-yourself art-criticism game.” The first woman read the label while her friend was looking at other works in the gallery. Then she called her friend over to the Bouguereau and asked her to examine the work and discuss whether or not she “liked” it. They spent at least ten minutes with the painting before the second woman looked at the label to compare her responses to the text. They spent another ten minutes discussing both their personal responses and the responses given in the label. During the interview, both women praised the label for providing a new way to approach art that stimulated “interest, thought, and discussion.”

Another woman said the label offered “stimulating comments. . . . I usually only walk and see the paintings, but now have to check in with my emotions. . . . [It] helped me to learn how to look at art.” Her husband observed, “The last question is a toughie; I can’t separate [my personal associations and my reaction to the painting itself], especially since we have daughters.” The label’s question prompted them to think about their reactions to other pieces in the Denver Art Museum; they referred to a painting seen earlier in the contemporary gallery that they had hated on sight. After reading the question on the Bouguereau label, the man began to wonder why he had felt so strongly about the contemporary piece: “Was it a reaction based on personal

associations, or was there something within the painting that made me feel this way?”

Another couple mentioned the concluding question and said it was the best and most important part of the label (twelve of the twenty-five visitors who manipulated the label read the question). This couple read the “If you like this painting” statements and agreed with them all, though they had to back up and reassess their reasons for liking the painting after each statement. After reading the first statement under “If you don’t like this painting,” they decided not to continue reading because they “didn’t want it to taint my vision of the work.” We asked them to read the other side, and, after doing so, they said that it was “offensive to the artist and his talents.” They suggested cutting the label in half and throwing away the right side. They especially reacted to the statement suggesting that one could become “bored” by such a piece after grasping its meaning.

A person not included in our testing group wrote in the museum’s guest book: “Please get rid of the ‘Why you like picture/Why you don’t.’ It’s pretentious and somewhat insulting.”

As a result of the formative testing, we changed the wording of one negative statement (“You easily grasp the meaning of the work and soon find it boring”) to: “You easily grasp the meaning of the work and no longer find it challenging.” We decided to include the sliding doors since they seemed to make the text less intimidating and provoke discussion. They also provide the user with a sense of control by letting him choose the parts of the label that interest him. And we decided to add horizontally color-coded

handles to the doors to emphasize the relationship of the opposing pairs of statements and suggest another pattern of investigation.

1. This report, greatly altered, appeared as "To Create Discovery" in *Museum News* 68, no. 3 (May/June 1989): 41-44.

2. 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):9. Csikszentmihalyi's major book on the flow-experience model (*Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: The Experience of Play in Work and Games* [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1975]) influenced Melora McDermott-Lewis's research for the Getty/NEA Interpretive Project at the Denver Art Museum and has played an essential part in the development of a new paradigm for museum interpretation. See McDermott-Lewis, "Through Their Eyes: Novices and Advanced Amateurs," p. 7, and Marlene Chambers, "Improving the Esthetic Experience for Art Novices: A New Paradigm for Interpretive Labels," p. 101. Versions of both articles appeared in *Program Sourcebook* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1988):133-162, 213-227.

3. Based on over eighty hours of interviews with art curators and museum educators in the Chicago area, the study aimed at constructing a model for the ideal esthetic experience that would shed light on the problem of making that experience widely accessible to the nonexpert (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, vii).

4. Beardsley emphasizes the tentativeness of his list and suggests the criteria be applied "as a family" with only "object directedness" as an essential condition. "An experience has aesthetic character if and only if it has the first of . . . [these] features and at least three of the others" (*The Aesthetic Point of View*, Michael J. Wreen and Donald M. Callen, eds. [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982]:288-289).

5. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 8-9. Csikszentmihalyi condensed Beardsley's criteria from *The Aesthetic Point of View*, 288-289. Csikszentmihalyi's criteria are taken from *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*, 38-48. Our condensation here of both sets of criteria is based entirely on Csikszentmihalyi's summary in "The Art of Seeing."

6. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 4.

7. Csikszentmihalyi, 53-54.

8. "Flow seems to occur only when tasks are within one's ability to perform" (Csikszentmihalyi, 53-54).

9. *The Aesthetic Point of View*, 292.

10. It is important to remember that all museum learning is voluntary, open, and self-directed. The museum setting offers minimal conditions for the acquisition of an organized body of knowledge, but excellent opportunities for discovery experiences that motivate repeated experiences and further learning.

11. We have defined art novices as visitors who describe themselves as having moderate to high interest in art but little or no formal background. McDermott-Lewis, project manager, interviewed both novices and advanced amateurs and analyzed their subjective descriptions of significant art experiences.

12. Practice in the fully conscious perception of art plays a large part in the expert experience. "Our capacity to respond richly and fully to aesthetic objects depends upon a large apperceptive mass" (Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2d ed. [Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1981]:53).

13. "In Defense of Aesthetic Value," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 52 (1979):728. Quoted by Ralph A. Smith in "The Aesthetics of Monroe C. Beardsley: Recent Work," *Studies in Art Education* 25 (1984):143.

14. We do not mean to imply that the art object has no affective content for the expert. We are, however, in general agreement with Beardsley's view that the expert has learned to distinguish the fictive nature of this content from "real-life" emotions and to integrate it into a coherent whole with the work's perceptual and intellectual qualities (*The Aesthetic Point of View*, 294-295). George Dickie, while objecting to the term disinterested attention to describe the kind of emotional distancing required for apprehension of a work's qualities, clearly identifies withdrawal into personal reverie as inattention to the work (*Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974]:116-117).

15. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 263.

16. We made use of transcripts of McDermott-Lewis's interviews. Quotations are identified by the same letter codes she uses in her published report on novices.

17. Fifty-six percent of visitors to the European galleries stop at the Bouguereau painting (mean looking time, eight seconds; median looking time, three seconds).

18. This novice was the only one among the larger group of sixteen novices participating in individual interviews who was "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 (90%)." See McDermott-Lewis, 10.

# LEARNING TO LOOK

## A Coaching Brochure for Art Novices

Marlene Chambers and Helen Muir

Novice viewers have a tendency to value art experiences that consist largely of personal reveries<sup>1</sup> and to value objects that trigger pleasant associations. They are forced to respond to art in this way because they lack the skills that allow for a more complex esthetic experience. This brochure focuses on perceptual and analytical skills the art-experience novice needs for more expert and rewarding interactions with works of art.<sup>2</sup>

Instead of giving the viewer art historical information or pontificating about the relative merits of the two paintings it compares, the brochure coaches the novice through a rewarding esthetic experience that is similar in kind, though not in complexity, to an expert's experience. It points out specific features of design and shows how these features give each of the two works under comparison its distinctive quality. Our hope is that novices will feel confident enough after working through this exercise to repeat the experience on their own with other objects.<sup>3</sup>

Our immediate goal is for the visitor to have a flow experience that is esthetic in nature.<sup>4</sup> While the expert understands the need to investigate the perceptual, emotional, and intellectual qualities of a work before making a value judgment,<sup>5</sup> the novice depends upon his emotional reaction as the basis for valuing an object.<sup>6</sup> The brochure attempts to show the novice how to analyze a painting as a design so that his intellectual and emotional reactions are object centered.<sup>7</sup>

The brochure is also designed as a closure to

a companion exemplar, a nondidactic gallery label that provokes viewers to examine the basis for value judgments they make about art.<sup>8</sup> Although the label points the way to the conclusion that some emotional distancing and greater attention to the qualities of the art object might lead to a different value judgment, it makes no attempt to argue either for this point or for a particular valuation. The label focuses on Bouguereau's *Two Girls* because the painting is a prime example of a well-loved work that elicits from the novice an emotional monologue rather than a dialogue with the object. When discussing the painting, novices rarely mention its esthetic features and qualities. Instead, their comments show that the painting acts for them as a stepping stone to personal associations and memories. The label's format--two columns of seemingly rational arguments actually cloaking psychological preferences that support liking or not liking the painting--is designed to raise questions and prompt visitors to think about the role emotions play in the formation of value judgments. The deliberate failure of the label to offer closure to the questions it raises places visitors in a particularly favorable psychological set toward the nearby brochure, especially since the brochure's heading, "Take a Closer Look," seems to promise the answers they've come to expect in museum interpretive materials.

The brochure compares Bouguereau's painting to another work in the same gallery, the more complex and off-putting *Woman Scratching Her Back*, a Degas pastel that doesn't meet the art novice's desire for

something pleasant.<sup>9</sup> By opening doors to a perceptual and intellectual approach to art, we aim to show the novice how to distance herself emotionally from the object.<sup>10</sup> Once the novice looks closely at the works, she will understand the artist's power to manipulate a viewer's emotions and, thus, begin to recognize and differentiate her personal, "knee-jerk" response from a more perceptually aware and intellectual examination of the work.

We tried to make the brochure as precise and interesting as possible, as well as easy to read. It is intended to challenge the intellectual powers of a well-educated audience with moderately high interest in art but little knowledge of it. By walking the visitor through some of the esthetic features and qualities of the two works, we hoped to provide opportunities for "discoveries" that will motivate repeat experiences.<sup>11</sup> The title, "Take a Closer Look," invites the visitor to do just that and shows him how to do it. Black and white reproductions of the two works help the visitor find the Degas quickly and offer the option of reading the brochure at home. A carefully selected quotation from each artist, highlighted in large type, gives the viewer a quick idea of the divergent attitudes that led to such different works. By putting a new spin on the old chestnut about not having to know anything about art to know what you like, the cartoon allows the reader to align himself on the side of the expert, for by now he presumably realizes that "liking" is not the same as understanding and critical judgment. Finally, a bibliography offers the visitor a list of resources if he wishes to expand his skills and pursue some of the issues raised by the brochure.

We conducted three stages of formative testing before printing the final version of

the brochure. Using a photocopied version (see Appendix A, p. 125), we briefly interviewed a small sample of users in the gallery to gauge their response. The first section of the brochure, which coaches the visitor through a looking exercise by pointing out specific comparisons between the Bouguereau and the Degas, was welcomed enthusiastically by all who read it. The second section, which uses a didactic method and is rather theoretical in content, was not easily understood: visitors' responses were brief and unsure. We followed up these informal interviews with a focus-group discussion that gave us further insight into where we had gone wrong.<sup>12</sup> Again, all participants responded positively to the first section. The second section of the brochure, originally titled "Boredom and Anxiety," aroused questions and disagreement. Many found this version condescending: they felt they were being branded "novice" without hope of ever bridging the gap to "expert." This response is exactly what we are trying to avoid; we want to instill a sense of control and accomplishment in the viewer, not remove any hope for success.

Our second version of the brochure (see Appendix B, p. 127) addressed these issues and, at the same time, tried to clarify the relationship between brochure and label, between critical analysis and value judgment. A new title, "Suitable for Framing," and a revised text for the second section created a more user-friendly document. We conducted another series of informal interviews that took place in the gallery to evaluate the revised text. Visitors responded favorably and easily to the new copy, with no sign of hesitation or confusion. Those interviewed found the revised version encouraging and helpful, though it acknowledged the difficult, yet worthwhile, task ahead for novice visitors.

As she uses the expert model for an esthetic experience, the novice visitor will begin to have a sense of control and confidence in her ability to repeat the method on her own. Interview comments show that visitors have more object-centered and well-rounded esthetic experiences as they gain skills in how to look:

The brochure brought me to a certain direction from just feeling what was going on, to thinking and feeling  
...<sup>13</sup>

Just looking at it, it may be the artist who's good, who has a lot of good things in his painting, but you just may not like the picture, so it's a whole different thing.<sup>14</sup>

I never notice that kind of a thing when I'm looking. . . . Even if I stare at a painting for a long time and try to think about it, I never really think about position and shape. And [now] I think that's something that adds another dimension to the painting.<sup>15</sup>

Some people can see the elements on their own. This helped me find them.<sup>16</sup>

Because if you just go and look at what is pleasing to the eye, then you miss out on something like the Degas, who isn't trying to be pleasing.<sup>17</sup>

Obviously, these visitors participated fully in the looking exercises the brochure was calculated to encourage by its experiential method. And their responses show a new confidence in their ability to approach art works. The positive feedback of this experience will motivate further growth in their perceptual and analytical abilities.

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1. Melora McDermott, "Through Their Eyes: What Novices Value in Art Experiences," *Program Sourcebook* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1988):133-162. As Getty/NEA Interpretive Project manager at the Denver Art Museum, McDermott interviewed both art-experience novices and advanced amateurs and analyzed their subjective descriptions of art experiences. She found that "... for most of the novices we interviewed (95%), having an emotional response to a work of art is a large part, if not most, of their experience of that piece" (143). A revised version of "Through Their Eyes" appears here, p.7.

2. Two versions of the brochure are included here at the end of the article. The goals and methods of the brochure are based on a new flow-experience paradigm for museum interpretation first published by Chambers in 1988 ("Improving the Esthetic Experience for Art Novices: A New Paradigm for Interpretive Labels," *Program Sourcebook* [Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1988]:215-227, and included here, p.101). Calling for a shift from information-driven to experience-driven interpretive materials and from didactic to coaching and Socratic teaching techniques, the paradigm was strongly influenced by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's study of the "flow" experiences of experts who pursue various intrinsically rewarding "play" activities (*Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: The Experience of Play in Work and Games* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1975). Readers may also want to consult Chambers and Muir, "Suitable for Framing," p. 111, which describes a related exemplar--a Socratic-method label whose goal is to challenge visitors to question the objectivity of their "esthetic" judgments. Chambers has written about both label and brochure in "To Create Discovery," *Museum News* (May/June 1989):41-44.

3. The flow-experience paradigm, unlike the didactic-information paradigm on which most art museum interpretive materials are currently based, aims at setting up conditions for a discovery experience that can motivate continued interest and effort.

4. Csikszentmihalyi and Rick E. Robinson et al., "The Art of Seeing: Toward an Interpretive Psychology of the Aesthetic Experience" (A report on research, submitted to the J. Paul Getty Foundation, July 1986):9. In *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*, Csikszentmihalyi had identified the commonalities in the flow experiences of experts engaged in such disparate "game" activities as chess and rock climbing. Among the conditions critical to the flow experience, he included: a close match between the challenges of the task and the participant's current abilities, the focusing of attention on a limited stimulus field, and clear demands for action that offer the opportunity for positive feedback. In this later study, he points out the similarities between these conditions for a flow

experience and philosopher Monroe C. Beardsley's criteria for an esthetic experience.

5. Monroe C. Beardsley, "Critical Evaluation," *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2d ed. (Indianapolis: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1981):454-499. The vocabulary we use in the brochure and our treatment of the features and qualities of the two works under comparison draw heavily on Beardsley's discussion of "The Categories of Critical Analysis," 75-113.

6. McDermott, "Through Their Eyes," 144-149. McDermott concludes, "Novices are quick to form judgments about what they like and dislike or whether something is 'good' or 'bad' and frequently confound the two. If they like something, it's 'well done.' If they do not, it is of a lesser quality," 144.

7. "It is essential to bring about a fully focused encounter with the art object, no matter how briefly, if the viewer is to have an experience that bears any similarity to that of an expert" (Chambers, "Improving the Esthetic Experience for Art Novices," 219). See also Beardsley, who suggests five "criteria of the aesthetic character of an experience": "object directedness," "felt freedom . . . from the dominance of . . . concerns about past and future," "detached affect," "active discovery," and "wholeness . . . self-acceptance and self-expansion." He asserts that "object directedness" is the sine qua non for an esthetic experience: "An experience has aesthetic character if and only if it has the first of . . . [these five] features and at least three of the others" (*The Aesthetic Point of View*, Michael J. Wreen and Donald M. Callen, eds. [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982]:288-289).

8. Chambers and Muir, "Suitable for Framing," p. 111. This label offers an extreme exemplar for facilitating a nondidactic discovery experience.

9. McDermott, "Through Their Eyes," 145. "In general, novices want works to be pleasant (85%) . . . Novices' need for pleasantness in individual works of art may be linked to their desire for a pleasant, easy visit."

10. Monroe C. Beardsley, "Aesthetic Experience," *The Aesthetic Point of View*, Wreen and Callen, eds., 288. Beardsley names "detached affect" as one of "a set of five criteria of the aesthetic character of experience." It is, he says, "a sense that the objects on which interest is concentrated are set a little at a distance emotionally--a certain detachment of affect, so that even when we are confronted with dark and terrible things, and feel them sharply, they do not oppress but make us aware of our power to rise above them."

11. Chambers, "To Create Discovery," 42. When a viewer's skills and the challenges an object presents are reasonably well matched, the discovery that results from

meeting the challenges creates a feeling of being in control that acts as the motivation for repeat experiences.

12. We convened a twelve-person panel of novice visitors on July 23, 1988, as the second step in formative testing. The procedure included a gallery visit, a written review, and a group discussion facilitated by Patterson Williams. The protocol for all formative testing was reviewed by Ross Loomis of Colorado State University, who advised us about evaluation techniques and procedures throughout the interpretive project.

13. Transcript, Bouguereau/Degas Brochure Panel Discussion, July 23, 1988.

14. Panel transcript. In trying to articulate the difference between liking and critical evaluation, this visitor shows a growing understanding of the role emotions play in her responses to art--the first step toward emotional distancing.

15. Panel transcript.

16. Gallery interview with a twenty-five- to thirty-five-year-old male, September 10, 1988; a review of the second, revised text. "I usually wander around the museum, but now I can begin to focus and find a direction among all the paintings."

17. Panel transcript. This visitor has made an important step toward expertise by abandoning the novice insistence upon "pleasing" subject matter.



# TAKE A CLOSER LOOK



Adolph William Bouguereau (1825-1905), French, *Two Girls*, 1900, oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 50 1/2 in. Gift of Lawrence C. Phipps Foundation.

It will come as no surprise to you that the Bouguereau [Boo'-grow'] painting of two girls is a great favorite with visitors—while they barely glance at the nearby Degas [De-ga'] pastel of a woman scratching her back. What is it about these two works that accounts for this?

Certainly the Bouguereau's large size and position in the gallery calls attention to it. But what are the esthetic qualities that make it so much more appealing than the Degas?

## POSITION

- Bouguereau places his subjects in a space that's rather like a stage. They're seated center stage, facing the audience at a comfortable distance. The flat, almost featureless landscape and empty sky create a sense of airy expansiveness and freedom.

- The shallow, almost two-dimensional space of the Degas forces a confrontation with a more intimate scene—a woman caught in a private, awkward gesture, her body turned away from us. Squeezing the figure to the very front of the picture space gives the pastel a cramped, claustrophobic quality.

## COLOR

- Bouguereau gives his painting a rosy glow by using pink and red everywhere. Pink underpainting warms the otherwise cool whites and blues. Even the ground is mauve, not brown. Bouguereau adds white and gray to all his colors to give the work its soft, pastel effect.

- But, pastel shades aren't always soft, warm, and inviting. With the addition of pale green and ochre, Degas's chalky white nude takes on a sickly quality. Patches of raw burnt orange on the arm, hand, and face look painful.

*"I see only the beautiful in art . . . art is the beautiful. Why reproduce what is ugly in nature?"*

—Bouguereau

## LINE

- Except for the dark outlines of the girls' heads against the light sky, there are no strong lines in Bouguereau's painting. Boundaries are merely implied by subtle color shifts. By allowing our eyes to flow freely, the soft edges and interwoven colors create a sense of restfulness.

- Degas uses heavy, black lines to set up strong rhythms and uneasy tensions. The curves of breast and stomach, shoulder and head echo one another. The lines of arms and elbows pull in opposite directions. The strong outline of the woman's figure propels the eye around the perimeter of her form in a closed and continuous motion.



Edgar Hilaire Degas (1834-1917), French, *Woman Scratching Her Back*, 1881, pastel on paper, 15 3/4 x 16 1/4. T. Edward and Tullah Hanley Collection.

over

## COMPOSITION

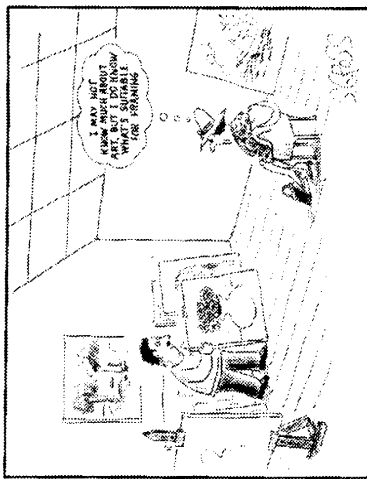
- Bouguereau arranges the figures of the two girls into a triangular space. The triangle's almost equal sides and wide base create a sense of balance and stability. The static quality of the pose suggests a moment frozen in time.
- The strong diagonals of the Degas pastel emphasize motion and instability. The partial cropping of the figure adds to the sense of impending change and contributes to the effect of seeing the figure through a keyhole.

When we look carefully at these two works, it's easy to see why the painting of the girls has such wide appeal and the Degas makes most people uncomfortable. Bouguereau has taken great pains to make us like his painting, and Degas seems to go deliberately out of his way to throw us off balance.

If you could have both works hanging in your home, which one do you think might hold your interest longer?

*"I show [my models] deprived of their airs and graces, reduced to the level of animals cleaning themselves."*

—Degas



© S. Gross 1987. Courtesy of *The New Yorker*, Feb. 16, 1987.

## BOREDOM AND ANXIETY

Making value judgments about art is something everyone likes to do. We all think we know "what's suitable for framing." But we don't all agree about what we'd hang on our walls.

Like rock climbers who attempt only climbs suited to their skill level, art museum visitors seek out—and value—works that fit their skills in looking and interpreting.

A work that's too easy can be boring. It just doesn't ask enough of us. But we feel anxious if we're not ready for the challenges a work presents or if we're not even sure what they are. The works we value most offer challenges that closely match our current level of skill.

Most of our visitors readily admit they don't know a whole lot about art. So it's only natural for them to look for works that are pretty and easy to understand. That's why the Bouguereau painting is such a favorite.

Novice viewers rarely speak of the Bouguereau's features and esthetic qualities. Instead, they use it as a springboard to dreams of the future or nostalgic memories of the past.

More advanced viewers are soon bored by the Bouguereau. It just doesn't offer enough for the eye to do or the mind to explore. Looking at art for these visitors is an activity that's pleasurable in itself. It's the challenge and the process of discovery that's important, not the easy answer, the quick fix. Rock climbers don't climb to get to the top. Their real goal is the climbing.

## APPENDIX B

### "Take A Closer Look" - Second Version

# TAKE A CLOSER LOOK



Adolph William Bouguereau (1825-1905), French, *Two Girls*, 1900, oil on canvas, 39 3/4 x 50 3/4 in. Gift of Lawrence C. Phipps Foundation.

It will come as no surprise to you that the Bouguereau [Boo'-grow'] painting of two girls is a great favorite with visitors—while they barely glance at the nearby Degas [De-ga'] pastel of a woman scratching her back. What is it about these two works that accounts for this?

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- The shallow, almost two-dimensional space of the Degas forces a confrontation with a more intimate scene—a woman caught in a private, awkward gesture, her body turned away from us. Squeezing the figure to the very front of the picture space gives the pastel a cramped, claustrophobic quality.

#### COLOR

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- But, pastel shades aren't always soft, warm, and inviting. With the addition of pale green and ochre, Degas's chalky white nude takes on a sickly quality. Patches of raw burnt orange on the arm, hand, and face look painful.

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—Bouguereau

#### LINE

- Except for the dark outlines of the girls' heads against the light sky, there are no strong lines in Bouguereau's painting. Boundaries are merely implied by subtle color shifts. By allowing our eyes to flow freely, the soft edges and interwoven colors create a sense of restfulness.
- Degas uses heavy, black lines to set up strong rhythms and uneasy tensions. The curves of breast and stomach, shoulder and head echo one another. The lines of arms and elbows pull in opposite directions. The strong outline of the woman's figure propels the eye around the perimeter of her form in a closed and continuous motion.



Edgar Hilaire Degas (1834-1917), French, *Woman Scratching Her Back*, 1881, pastel on paper, 15 3/4 x 16 1/4. T. Edward and Tullah Hanley Collection.

over

## COMPOSITION

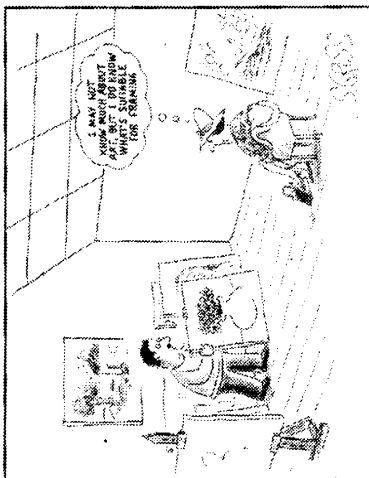
- Bouguereau arranges the figures of the two girls into a triangular space. The triangle's almost equal sides and wide base create a sense of balance and stability. The static quality of the pose suggests a moment frozen in time.
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If you could have both works hanging in your home, which one do you think might hold your interest longer?

*"I show [my models] deprived of their airs and graces, reduced to the level of animals cleaning themselves."*

—Degas



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## SUITABLE FOR FRAMING

Making value judgments about art is something everyone likes to do. Most of us have to fall back on what we "like" when someone asks us to explain why we think a work is "suitable for framing" . . . or why it isn't.

For most people, a painting is a "picture" of something. The first thing we usually notice about a visual design is that it shows a sailing ship, a can of soup, or two pretty children. In fact, it takes real effort to think of a painting as a design—as an enclosed arrangement of lines, shapes, and colors—even though it is these lines, shapes, and colors that make up the picture.

Often it is our reaction to what is pictured that influences our decision to like (or not like) a work . . . and whether or not to hang it on our wall. We judge it by its psychological impact: "It makes me uncomfortable." Or its value as an intellectual statement: "It has

something important to say about life." Or its moral significance: "It seems to glorify violence."

If we want to make an esthetic judgment about a painting, we have to begin by trying to see the visual design, by taking a really close look at its features and qualities.

## BOOKS

Looking at pictures as designs:

Francis Kennet and Terry Measham.

*Looking at Paintings*. New York: Van

Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1981. (for children)

Joshua C. Taylor. *Learning to Look*.

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957.

Kenneth Clark. *Looking at Pictures*.

Boston: Beacon Press, 1968.

Making esthetic judgments:

Monroe C. Beardsley. *Aesthetics:*

*Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*.

Indianapolis: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc.,

1981.

# SMALL-SAMPLE TECHNIQUES IN PROJECT EVALUATIONS

Ross J. Loomis

More and more I have come to the conclusion that the core of the scientific method is not experimentation per se, but rather the strategy connoted by the phrase "plausible rival hypotheses." This strategy may start its puzzle-solving with "evidence" or it may start with "hypothesis."

Donald T. Campbell, from the  
foreword to Robert Yin's  
*Case Study Research*

Donald Campbell is one of the most respected names in research methodology for education and social science. It is significant, therefore, that he prepared the foreword to Yin's book on case-study methodology. That book is but one of a number of titles that reflect current interest in expanding the methods used in both basic research (i.e., to investigate a theory) and evaluation. In fact, this interest in alternative methods has involved reviving techniques that have been known for many years. Thus, we see recent books about not only the case-study method, but also the long interview (McCracken, 1988) and focus group (Morgan, 1988). Interest in these methods stems from four concerns:

1. There has been too much reliance on established methods, like formal experimentation, at the cost of using other methods that could yield valuable insights to test rival hypotheses.

2. There is a need to use a variety of methodologies on a topic to validate trends or

common outcomes. This comparison may not always be possible, but it can be a valuable tool to ferret out the best explanation available.

3. Too much work has used a standard of quantitative rigor at the cost of insights that could be gained through qualitative procedures. For example, while much can be learned using a structured questionnaire and statistical procedures, some important information will be revealed *only* if a person is allowed to talk at greater length, as in a less structured interview, or is stimulated by the responses of others, as in group discussion. Qualitative information is not to be seen as a replacement for more rigorous data, but as an enhancement of other data forms that can lead to additional insights.

4. Finally, much emphasis has been placed on developing ideas based on large-scale samples, usually created with a random selection procedure. While this approach is powerful, it is now recognized that a great deal can be learned from small samples of people who represent a larger population. Small-sample methods are particularly useful in 1) exploratory or pilot studies intended to suggest fruitful lines of inquiry, 2) situations that are unique, such as hypothetical exhibitions, and 3) evaluation in which the goal is not to test rival hypotheses, but to quickly establish an estimate of their relative worth (Suchman, 1967).

## Method Development in Evaluation

The scope of the Denver Art Museum project

permitted an exploration of alternative methodologies. In particular, the need to evaluate a number of gallery aids called for using small samples. For some examples, the small sample was made up of individuals selected in a gallery. For others, a group (or "consumer panel") was created using a screening interview.

Understanding the development of methods for the Getty/NEA work involves keeping some important points in mind. First, *evaluation* rather than basic research was being done. The goal was not to prove a hypothesis or establish an explanation. Many people don't seem to understand this distinction as they continue to hold evaluation work to the standards of research. In evaluation, the aim is to see if a particular project is working as hoped and merits use in other situations. Often, evaluation can be used to detect *major* problems in time to correct the final product and avoid costly post-installation changes. In addition, getting information in a timely manner is often important; this calls for methods that can be done quickly. The kind of evaluation being done will influence the methods selected. If summative or final evaluation is called for, then larger samples and more extensive methods are desirable. In the present work, formative evaluation or pilot-testing was called for, and the use of small samples was especially helpful.

Second, small-sample studies are being used in a wide variety of situations. Consumer testing has long used panels made up of a few potential users of a new product. IBM, in testing new hardware or software, typically uses representative groups of fifteen or so. The goal is to simply evaluate and identify major problems with the product, so a pattern can often emerge after only five or so users have been tested. Additionally, it's

often desirable to use an *iterative* process to improve the product. That is, once a problem has been identified, changes are made to correct it and this process is repeated until evaluation indicates no more changes are needed. Exhibit evaluation literature provides another example of formative work. A leader in this area has long advocated using small samples of visitors to preview text, interactive exhibits, titles, or any other ways of communicating with an audience (Screven, 1990). In fact, formative evaluation using small samples is becoming one of the major tools of visitor evaluation (Loomis, 1988a). Problems often center around the visitor not understanding key terms, instructions, label placement, or simply what to do next.

A third point is that the testing of interpretive examples did not occur in isolation from other investigations. All these small-sample evaluations used conventional, large-sample (N=1,012) results (both about types of visitors and reactions to different kinds of educational assistance) as a baseline.

### Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research

As desirable as small-sample evaluation is, it's still necessary to do everything possible to have results that are reliable (consistent) and valid (i.e., does the study measure what it claims to and is it free from unrelated influences?).<sup>1</sup> To help insure the reliability and validity of the project, a number of guidelines were used whenever possible:

1. Early in testing, the staff (because of the large number of people involved) realized they needed to standardize evaluation procedures.

a) Goal statements were worked out *and* written down for each prototype. It's important to have this material for reference to avoid losing track of what's being evaluated. A critical function of evaluation is to set goals that relate *clearly* and in matter-of-fact terms to what is expected to happen to visitors. Ideally, these terms should include what visitors will feel, what they'll remember, and what they're supposed to do.

b) It was very important to make sure all workers were using standard procedures for interviews, questionnaires, observations, and subject selection. These requirements were written down and also reviewed by a member of the staff and an outside consultant. Many projects fail at this point because too much variability occurs across different workers.

c) When possible, results were checked as the study progressed, to watch for variations in data collection.

d) Standardized questions were established for basic demographics like age, sex, and whether the visitor was alone or with a group. It also was important to identify visitors who fit into the novice group, so levels of commitment to and involvement with art were tracked with four standardized questions about museum attendance, interest level, knowledge, and museum membership.

e) Protocols used for interviews and observations were pre-tested.

Of course, these efforts at standardization would be important for any type of study, but they were particularly crucial for keeping controls across a series of small-sample inquiries.

2. In the case of one prototype evaluation (see "Improving the Esthetic Experience for Art Novices," p. 101), a special statistical analysis for small samples was used (see Loomis, 1988b). This analysis entailed exact probability testing of the replies to structured questions. While this procedure was useful, a simple "70/30" rule worked just as well. By this rule, if seven or more people out of ten answered the same way, the outcome was considered a "trend" worthy of further consideration. These trends could then be compared with responses to open-ended questions. Using the 70/30 rule was appropriate for a pilot-level study; a more demanding standard would be appropriate in a summative evaluation.

3. When possible, samples were composed to represent a typical visitor profile and/or the novice visitor to the Denver Art Museum. A number of surveys done by other art museums, as well as the one done as part of this project, provided guidelines for whom to select. Within categories of visitors, a random selection process was used. Representative sampling of a known population can save time and is widely used in marketing research.

4. In these evaluations it was very important to test for *experiential* information--to get inside the visitors' minds and see if they were being influenced to experience art in a new way. A good example is the study for the brochure coaching art novices (see "Learning to Look," p. 121). Consistent with the purpose of qualitative methods, it

was important to get reactions that went deeper than the stereotypes about art (it's pretty, etc.). Group interaction, as in the testing of the Picasso gallery pamphlet (see "Making the Human Connection," p. 87), was an effective means of drawing out more subjective reactions by letting group discussion stimulate individuals to think about their experiences with art.

In conclusion, more work needs to be done in developing methods that can use small samples and yield findings that are valid and reliable. This project has demonstrated the desirability of such procedures, and has provided strategies for other museums where interpretive aids under development need quick and insightful evaluations.

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1. Kirk and Miller (1986) provide a good deliberation on the reliability and validity of qualitative research, both basic and evaluative.



# IMPRESSIONS OF THE DENVER ART MUSEUM INTERPRETIVE PROJECT

Ross J. Loomis

The project undertaken by the staff of the Denver Art Museum was a very ambitious one. Supported by funds from the Getty Grant Program and the National Endowment for the Arts, the project attempted to fill a major need: to develop a model or conceptual scheme that can guide practitioners in creating interpretive opportunities for gallery visitors that will enhance their perception and overall experience of art and, ideally, bring many visitors into a closer personal involvement with art.

Reaching for such a challenging goal entailed working with four important premises. It was necessary to 1) develop a good working knowledge of the audience for art, 2) stimulate group interaction and shared efforts among a variety of staff members with a wide range of expertise, 3) generate criteria for successful interpretive experiences that go beyond informational learning to develop a working model of art interpretation that could be applied across a range of situations, and 4) ensure that this model was not limited to the Denver Art Museum.

It would be pointless, in this observer's opinion, to try to determine at present the success or failure of this effort. First, ambitious projects will always produce frustrations and fall short in a number of areas. Bold projects are easy for critics (or should one say skeptics?) to pick at and disparage. And yet it is the bold project that challenges the status quo and questions conventional wisdom. It's the daring effort that, years later, appears too conventional because the ideas it stimulated have become accepted.

This brings to mind the second reason it is unsuitable to pronounce an overall judgment on this work. It is too soon to know its real value. Moreover, its value may lie less in matters of specific content than in the spirit of change and possibility it engenders. Only time will tell.

What follows is a series of impressions, not evaluations, intended to give some perspective to what has been accomplished.

## Understanding the Audience

I felt a key aspect of this project was staff willingness to look at visitors and try to define some audience characteristics that might challenge conventional thinking about visitors. A large-scale survey ("Cluster Analysis of Visitor Characteristics and Expectations," by Edwards, Loomis, Fusco, and McDermott-Lewis, p. 139) helped get this part of the project started. In-depth interviews (see McDermott-Lewis's "Through Their Eyes," p. 7) helped define the novice visitor. Finally, and most important, staff evaluated the thirteen gallery projects with visitor feedback. The essential element here is that information was collected from visitors that described not just who they were, but their reactions to art and the efforts of an art museum to communicate with them. That information became a critical part of staff discussions and planning.

## Development of a Model of Visitor Involvement with Art

A model that focused on different levels of

visitor involvement with art grew out of this formulation. The precedent in psychology, for this kind of model is the information-processing work in artificial intelligence and the evaluation of how people perceive and use computer software. That is, expert knowledge and behavior is compared to those of the novice. This approach appears to have high heuristic value, even though it breaks with a tradition of emphasizing more formal learning theories, such as control through reinforcement or learning through developmental stages. The expert/novice comparison appears to be fruitful in stimulating staff to think of ways to better orient a large segment of the audience to the world of art and the environment of the art museum. Through the thirteen pilot examples, the model seems to be stimulating a creative series of ideas for gallery interpretation.

### **Creation of New Criteria for Visitor Experiences**

One problem with much of exhibit and program evaluation is that it has focused on information learning (i.e., facts, concepts, procedures). While this kind of learning is important, the museum environment is unique in that it offers the opportunity for learning experiences that differ from those provided by classrooms, reading, TV, movies, and sound systems. This project looked at a number of other criteria that could describe visitor experiences as well as experimented with ways of trying to encourage them. This was done in the context of trying to bring the general or novice visitor into the realm of experience available to someone with a more expert or master level of involvement with art. I was strongly impressed by the conceptual papers generated by the project (in particular, Chambers and Muir's "Learning to Look" [p. 121] and Williams'

"Making the Human Connection" [p. 77]). The ideas in these papers were given expression in pilots that provided visitors with a variety of experiences and encouraged them to expand their involvement with art. These not only encouraged more active looking, but developed visitor abilities to look at art, to better understand the human background behind art, and to experience features like color in a more direct way. They also attempted to help the viewer see orientation within a collection, make comparisons, recognize how art makes one feel, learn about a curator's perspective towards objects, and develop perceptual awareness of art objects and designs through games and puzzles.

### **Visitor Reactions to the Project**

I was gratified, but not surprised, that visitors appreciated efforts to communicate with them. There were very few negative comments. Most visitors sampled liked the chance to be more active in their contact with art and welcomed the challenge provided by the pilot interpretive projects. Furthermore, expert visitors as well as novices appreciated greater interpretive opportunities. A novelty factor in finding something different from the usual art museum label probably accounts for some of the visitor enthusiasm, but I doubt this is a major problem. Visitors seem to accept and enjoy interpretive features in galleries as long as they're done in good taste and don't compete directly with the objects.

### **The Role of Formative Evaluation**

It seemed that one important outcome of the project was that the Denver Art Museum staff increased their confidence and respect for *formative* evaluation. This iterative approach to developing and testing products

before they appear in final form is becoming one of the most helpful aspects of visitor studies. Formative evaluation does require a frame of mind that runs contrary to traditional thinking in a museum. This project helped this observer see some sources of resistance to formative evaluation in a clearer light.

Reasons for resistance include, of course, the additional time and effort required to collect information and make revisions. Many projects run behind schedule as is, and it's hard to justify still another step in the process. In a large museum, production must work through a number of people and departments, which creates still more sources of delays. A third source of resistance seems to be the use of mock-ups. Museum professionals are trained to expect very finished products in an exhibit. At times, far more emphasis seems to be put on form than function. Whether a label looks respectable counts more than how well it delivers interpretation, or whether any visitors even bother to read it! Mock-ups, by their very nature, are somewhat unkempt and incomplete. The coming of desk-top publishing via personal computers is helping solve this problem, since attractive temporary labels can be quickly printed.

For places like the Denver Art Museum, it may be best to use consumer panel group interviews, as was tried in this project. These panels were shown working mock-ups, then asked to suggest ways the materials could work better. This evaluation was completed behind the scenes, without the necessity of gallery installation. Such efforts work well for interpretation content, but issues of placement in the gallery are more difficult to simulate without testing in the exhibit setting.

A fourth problem was staff concern that formative evaluation would change the nature of what was being developed. This concern is important and perhaps not always appreciated by those doing evaluation. Even though goals are set at the start of an undertaking, feedback from evaluation can produce a shift, sometimes subtle, in what is being attempted. Evaluators and those designing projects must stay in close communication to guard against a drift in purpose that would frustrate what is being planned. At the same time, results from formative evaluation sometimes suggest a need to rethink a goal. Interpretive examples like the Samaras and Bouguereau labels ("Improving the Esthetic Experience for Art Novices," p. 101, and "Suitable for Framing," p. 111, respectively) were especially vulnerable to change in purpose, because they were designed to encourage subjective reactions that went beyond information-giving. In fact, the staff did use formative evaluation with these efforts and changes were made that helped.

Finally, staff gained an appreciation for the complexity of predicting visitors' reactions. You cannot gain this insight unless you're willing to expose your work to visitors and ask for their judgments. At the heart of formative evaluation is the awareness that things often look different through the visitor's eyes, and staff need to learn about these differences to better implement the goals proposed for exhibits and programs.

### Team Efforts

It would be easy for the staff to fault themselves for not producing a more smoothly functioning team effort at developing experimental gallery interpretive installations. Actually, this observer was impressed at the amount of team interaction he noticed. A

number of curators, educators, designers, and editors worked on the project at different times. In addition, several interns, volunteers, graduate students, and (heaven forbid) consultants were involved in project work. Moreover, my impression that some team interaction was achieved is also based on my opportunity to observe a number of other museum staffs working on exhibit development and serving as a reviewer to a similar project in West Germany that is attempting to develop a model of interpretive installation across a number of disparate museums.

Wearing the hat of a social psychologist for a moment, I must observe that trying to develop team efforts in a culture that encourages strong individualism is bound to be a limited-success venture. Team efforts in museums will probably remain a “now you see it, now you don’t” phenomenon. Individual museum professionals are rewarded and recognized for their personal reputations. That situation is not apt to change quickly and is by no means limited to museums. Teams must work to achieve a superordinate or major goal that everyone has a share in, while recognizing that individual contributions must be allowed and acknowledged. Any level of success at using team efforts effectively should be viewed as an accomplishment.

## CONCLUSIONS

Towards the end of our grant, the education and publications staffs met to discuss what we'd learned about creating interpretation for novices. As we identified conclusions we could draw from our projects, we came up with the following list of factors to take into account in order to create successful materials.

First, visitors want their learning experiences to be directly related to the objects they see. From our in-depth novice interviews to individual project evaluations, visitors made it clear that they wanted interpretation to help them with the specific object they were viewing.

Second, visitors tend to learn in short bursts. They want to commit, at least initially, to things that will only take a little time. As we talked this point over, we started playing with the idea of creating an environment "rich for initial investments." This environment would have several brief learning experiences to choose from. While these learning devices could be done quickly, they would also have the potential for a more extended investment. Both the Bouguereau label and the comparison game are examples of this. Visitors could use either of these devices for only one or two minutes and get something out of the experience. Or, they could spend ten to fifteen minutes with the materials, discussing and comparing their reactions with friends, or making comparisons using a variety of criteria.

Third, every interpretive device won't work for every visitor, so we need to accommodate the range and variety in our audience. As we began to look at different learning styles,

psychological sets, and even group sizes and dynamics, this became scary. How do we accommodate people who want to be actively involved versus those who prefer to be more passive, those who are verbally oriented versus those who lean more to the visual, or those who want a private experience versus those who require social interaction? We ended up with a buffet analogy, of having a variety of options available. Every offering might not be meatless, but there should be at least one vegetarian item. By offering a variety of interpretive devices, we could also help visitors vary the pace of their visit, so they wouldn't tire as quickly.

Fourth, we need to send a clear, hospitable message to our visitors. Many novices have a fragile, though positive, attitude about art and museums, and they need to see that we care about their experiences. We need to create materials with our visitors' vocabulary and knowledge in mind, so they won't feel the labels were "written for someone who knows more than I do." But sending this hospitable message involves more than just making the materials available. It means creating these materials and all visitor services with "value added"--like paying careful attention to the look and finish of a piece, making sure there is *comfortable* seating, checking interpretive areas regularly to keep them in good shape, or even adding touches like fresh flowers to a reading area--anything that signals the museum's concern for its visitors' comfort and enjoyment.

Finally, successful interpretation for novices means accepting where they are--keeping their backgrounds, preconceptions, and values in mind and, most importantly, taking

the position that we're not there to negate or downplay their experiences, but to build on and broaden them. Novices have enormous potential for experiences with art, and our labels and gallery guides should challenge them. This doesn't mean putting up barriers by using a specialist's vocabulary they "should" know or requiring a level of investment they aren't willing to make. Rather, we need to set our sights high and design goals, content, and formats that will let our visitors push their own experiences one step further.