



IMPACT PLANNING • EVALUATION • AUDIENCE RESEARCH



FRONT-END EVALUATION:

WHY CONCORD? EXHIBITION

Prepared for
The Concord Museum
Concord, MA

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SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This report presents findings from a front-end evaluation of the *Why Concord?* exhibition conducted by Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (RK&A) for the Concord Museum. The results are promising. First, they indicate many visitors think the events and ideas discussed in the current exhibition are relevant today—a positive finding since connecting the past to the present is a key aspect of the museum’s new Visitor Experience Plan. Second, visitors believe the proposed theme of protest and revolution is fitting to the core historical events and figures interpreted in the museum, and timely given the current political climate and social issues in the news (e.g., immigration and race relations). However—a word of caution: visitors are wary of changing the museum in ways that might detract from engaging with real objects and understanding the daily lives and experiences of people from the past. The following summary and discussion is organized by the study objectives.

The findings presented here are among the most salient. Please read the body of the report for a more comprehensive presentation of findings.

CURRENT VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Visitors most value the current exhibition as an authentic opportunity to immerse themselves in the history of a particular place. Results show that, without a doubt, visitors most enjoy the objects—particularly those related to Thoreau—and period rooms, as well as learning about transcendentalist authors and how their lives intersected in Concord. Visitors also enjoyed the feeling of “moving through time” in the exhibition because it helps them contextualize Concord’s history over time. Yet, despite the central role Concord played as the starting place of the Revolutionary War, results show that learning about the Revolutionary War is not foremost in people’s minds, as visitors did not mention it as most enjoyable. One explanation may be that the narratives related to the Revolution are co-mingled with other narratives, rather than telling a linear story. Consider using objects with clear connections to the Revolutionary War to help more visitors engage with this moment in Concord’s history.

Visitors find personal relevance in local, everyday elements in the current exhibition. Perhaps not surprisingly, results indicate that visitors connect to the commonalities they felt in terms of residence, professions, familiar objects, and human experience. One-half of respondents said they felt a personal connection to the exhibition because they were from the area (either a local or Massachusetts resident)—a finding that is indicative of our study sample,

which did not include many, if any, tourists visiting from other states. Tourists may find alternative entry points of personal relevance to the current exhibition related to familiar objects and broad human experiences.

In the current exhibition, visitors made connections between important themes related to Concord’s history and issues in the world today. Several visitors each named race relations, immigration, political discord, and nature preservation as themes they noticed in the exhibition that connect to the world today. Many of these themes are likely top of mind, considering the recent presidential election and news stories about race and immigration, but they are also enduring themes in American history, past and present. It is encouraging that visitors are finding Concord’s history relevant to life today—in aspects of everyday life as well as important historical moments.

EXPLORING AND MAKING SENSE OF OBJECTS

Objects direct much of the visitor experience. Objects were most often mentioned as an element visitors enjoyed because they help them connect to history in a concrete way. Our research at other museums shows that objects are central to the visitor experience; for example, a recent study at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC found that visitors most often named a specific object as the highlight of their visit,¹ and visitors to the Robert R. McCormick Museum and the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture rated looking at historic artifacts, specimens, or art highest in a list of 12 possible experiences.² Visitors connect with historic objects through varied personal lenses. In the Concord study, there was no single object that visitors gravitated towards, suggesting relevance varies for visitors based on prior experience and preferences. It is also noteworthy that several visitors cautioned that technology should enhance, not detract, from object encounters. As the museum explores reinterpretation of its collections, it will be important to anchor visitor experiences with opportunities to engage with and look closely at the stuff of museums—objects.

Visitors appreciate opportunities to look closely at and think critically about historic objects, but these skills do not come naturally. Choosing an object for the interview and following prompts in some of the period rooms were strategies that visitors enjoyed and caused them to look closely. However, some visitors do not readily understand the phrase “read an object.” The proposed History Learning Center at the Concord Museum would provide a valuable opportunity for visitors to engage in object-based learning and develop their skills to

¹ Walk-in Visitors to the Folger Shakespeare Library, Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (2017)

² [1] Potential Interpretive Concepts for the Robert R. McCormick Museum, Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (2015);

[2] Audience Research: Visitor Experience Study, prepared for the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture by Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (2012)

“read” objects. Object-based learning labs have been successful elsewhere—for example, the CultureLab at the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology and the Collections Lab in Q?rius at the National Museum of Natural History.³

Visitors are divided in whether they prefer to see many objects displayed together versus one object displayed in isolation. Visitors may become “overwhelmed” when there are too many objects, but showing many objects can be important in some cases—for example, in a period room where the relationship among the objects adds context. Regardless, visitors enjoy looking closely at and finding meaning and significance in objects, when prompted. Consider adding interpretation that helps visitors explore the objects they encounter in the museum, whether that means focusing closely on a particular object or looking for relationships among many objects.

EXPLORING AND MAKING SENSE OF PERIOD ROOMS

Period rooms are an entry point to historic moments or figures. Visitors are drawn to period rooms that represent an authentic historical situation or person as well as rooms that represent familiar scenarios they can relate to across time. They enjoyed imagining people using these spaces in the past—this is easiest in rooms that tell a clear story, often with the help of prompts (either through the strategic placement of certain objects or written guidance) from the museum. For example, visitors were able to create stories in the “baby” room, “mourning” room, and Emerson study because those rooms provide prompts that relate to common human experiences or audio that helps visitors imagine what the room might be like if someone was using it. In contrast, making a connection to a human story or historic moment was more difficult in the green room (early 18th century chamber) and blue room (mid-18th century chamber) where the storyline is less obvious. Consider ways to enhance the visitor experience in these rooms to communicate a story or help visitors imagine the space, as it might have been used in the past.

REACTIONS TO THEMES OF PROTEST AND REVOLUTION

Themes of protest and revolution were readily noticed and positively received by visitors as “timely” and “appropriate” for the museum. As such, there is an opportunity for the museum to strengthen existing themes and help visitors find relevance in history. They already see connections between this theme and various events and movements in Concord, such as the

³ [1] Ducady, G. “Using Objects in Teaching.” Process: A Blog for American History, September 14, 2106, <http://www.processhistory.org/using-objects-in-teaching/>

[2] Summative Evaluation: Q?rius, prepared for the National Museum of Natural History by Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (2014)

Revolution, transcendentalism, and the abolitionist movement. Purposefully applying protest and revolution as a cohesive theme can help visitors further these connections.

However, visitors warn that the museum should be careful to present a “balanced” perspective. Visitors feel strongly that the museum needs to incorporate multiple viewpoints of protest and revolution (e.g. a range of lived experiences, racial/ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic status, etc.) and avoid any politicization of the content.⁴ This could be an opportunity for the museum to tie in narratives from underrepresented voices (e.g., women, African Americans, minutemen, etc.) to explore how a range of Concord residents experienced protest and revolution differently. It should also be noted that while some visitors were aware of the idea of the “Third Revolution”⁵ in Concord—the notion that Concord is still a progressive community interested in social and political action—most of these visitors do not think the Third Revolution holds true.

The use of themes should be integrated with (rather than detract from) historic objects, people, and glimpses into daily life in the past. These are central pillars that many visitors value about their experiences at history museums. Again, we want to emphasize, objects are the entry point for visitors and should be the means to exploring thematic issues and stories (rather than vice versa).

USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Our studies in other museums suggest visitors often value seeing and interacting with real objects more than having technology-based experiences. Seeing an object in a museum provides a unique experience while visitors are surrounded by technology in their daily lives. For example, at the McCormick Museum we found that visitors rated looking at historic artifacts in exhibits and viewing historical living spaces highest on a list of possible museum experiences, while using technology like mobile apps, audio devices, and touchscreens were rated lower.⁶ Similarly, at the Burke Museum visitors rated “looking at real specimens, art, and artifacts in exhibits” highest and “using technology in exhibition spaces” lowest in a list of possible museum experiences.⁷

⁴ For example, one cautioned against taking too “radical” of a tone in the exhibition.

⁵ None used the term “Third Revolution,” but mentioned that the town of Concord likes to think of itself as a progressive and activist community.

⁶ Potential Interpretive Concepts for the Robert R. McCormick Museum, Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (2015)

⁷ Audience Research: Visitor Experience Study, prepared for the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture by Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (2012)

However, visitors are open to the idea of incorporating technology in history museums, as long as technology is used tastefully, enhances the experience, and does not replace real objects. Touchscreen technology may be a way to help visitors look more closely at fragile artifacts. Touchscreens could show visitors how to “look closely” and “read” objects in the collection. Our studies on technology preferences at other museums have found that visitors may be more receptive to touchscreens or accessing information through museum-provided devices versus personal devices (e.g., a mobile app).⁸ Audio, and other ambiance-inducing stimuli, may also be a well-received and appropriate use of technology in the museum. Visitors spoke highly of the existing audio components that accompany the Emerson study, and several others mentioned that audio components (e.g., voices or other sounds that recreate the atmosphere of a place) could help bring some of the period rooms to life.

CHRONOLOGICAL VERSUS THEMATIC ORGANIZATION

Visitors generally prefer exhibitions that are chronologically organized or blend chronological and thematic presentations. Most visitors feel strongly that they want information presented “in order” so they can orient themselves to other events in time and feel “lead through time.” Chronological presentation can also help the visitor feel spatially oriented in the exhibition—that is to say, they understand that they are on the “right” path through the space and have not missed important information.⁹ On the other hand, using themes in an exhibition can help visitors find meaning and make connections across time, place, and people. Themes can help visitors see something familiar, or something they thought they already knew, in a completely new light.

⁸ At the Reynolda House Museum of American Art, we found that visitors were most comfortable accessing information through museum-provided devices and touchscreen, and were less comfortable with downloading apps on their own mobile devices. In general, younger visitors are more comfortable with using technology in the museum than older visitors (RK&A 2015). Visitors at the McCormick museum rated using mobile apps lowest in a list of 12 possible museum experiences (RK&A 2015). Two visitors from our interviews at the Concord Museum specifically mentioned disliking mobile apps.

⁹ [1] N. Simon, “Should Museum Exhibitions Be More Linear? Exploring the Power of the Forced March in Digital and Physical Environments.” *Museum 2.0*, January 9, 2013.

<http://museumtwo.blogspot.com.au/2013/01/should-museum-exhibitions-be-more.html>

[2] R. Forrest, “Free choice and the forced march,” *Interactivate*, January 10, 2013. <http://reganforrest.com/2013/01/freechoice-and-the-forced-march/>

STUDY BACKGROUND

The Concord Museum contracted Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (RK&A) to conduct a front-end evaluation of its current permanent exhibition gallery—*Why Concord?*—in preparation for a comprehensive reinterpretation and reinstallation of the museum’s permanent collections funded by an IMLS grant. The goal of the evaluation is to understand the current visitor experience in *Why Concord?* and to explore visitors’ responses to several ideas the museum is considering for the updated exhibition. Specifically, the evaluation focused on one overarching goal for the study and six supporting objectives:

Gauge the extent to which visitors find history relevant (in general, in the current exhibition, and through the proposed concepts for the new Visitor Experience Plan)

a. Determine the current visitor experience in *Why Concord?* (e.g., What do visitors do? What do they find enjoyable? What do they dislike? What do they find relevant? And what do they take away?)

b. Investigate how visitors explore and make sense of objects (explored by asking participants to discuss one object in the current exhibition)

c. Investigate how visitors explore and make sense of period rooms (explored by asking participants to discuss one period room in the current exhibition.)

d. Test visitor reactions to three concepts being considered for the new VEP and determine what about these concepts resonates with, interests, or discourages visitors

e. Test visitors general thoughts and feelings about the use of technology in a history exhibition

f. Gauge visitors general interest in history exhibitions that are chronological versus thematic

METHODOLOGY

RK&A conducted 27 in-depth interviews with visitors on three days between January 6 and January 16, 2017. In-depth interviews are open-ended and encourage interviewees to express their opinions, understandings, and the meaning they construct from their experiences using their own words. Most interviews were scheduled in advance by the Concord Museum. A Concord Museum staff member at the front desk also recruited walk-in visitors to participate in interviews during times when there were no pre-scheduled interviews planned. Several interviews were conducted with walk-in visitors. All participants were asked to visit the *Why Concord?* exhibition before their interview.¹⁰ Each participant was asked to take a picture of one object and one period room as they visited the exhibition to discuss during their interview.

The interviewer conducted the interview using the guide in Appendix A and interview cards in Appendix B, asking probing or clarifying questions to better understand visitors' thoughts. During each interview, the interviewer typed notes on a laptop, capturing the conversation as close to verbatim as possible. All interviews were also audio-recorded with participants' permission as a back-up to the typed notes.

THE SAMPLE

The sample of interview participants was relatively homogenous—about two-thirds were female. Although we did not ask about participants' residence, many appeared to be from a nearby town or from within Massachusetts based on their responses to some interview questions. The nature of the sample is important to keep in mind when interpreting the results—the findings are representative of the sample included in the study, not necessarily representative of other Concord Museum audience segments, such as tourists from outside the state.

ANALYSIS AND REPORTING

The data are qualitative, meaning that results are descriptive. In analyzing the data, the evaluator studied the interview notes for meaningful patterns and grouped similar responses as patterns and trends emerged. The objectives of the study, as well as our professional experience, informed the analysis. Findings are reported in narrative and trends and themes in the data are presented from most- to least-frequently occurring. The findings are supplemented with quotations from interview notes (edited for clarity) to illustrate participants' thoughts and ideas as fully as possible. Keep in mind that quotations are based on interview notes, rather than verbatim interview transcripts.

¹⁰ For pre-scheduled interviews, first-time visitors were asked to arrive one hour ahead of their scheduled interview time. Repeat visitors were asked to arrive at least 30 minutes ahead of their scheduled interview time.

When describing the findings, this report uses qualitative data terms such as “most” and “several,” as is appropriate for the sample size and the type of data collected. Proportions, such as one-half or one-third, are used where appropriate. Such descriptive language is intended to provide readers with a sense of the general trends. Readers should regard the trends as general categories rather than rigid numerical counts.

INTERVIEW FINDINGS

PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

RK&A conducted 27 in-depth interviews with 29 participants.¹¹ Most interviews were one-on-one, but two were with small groups of two adult visitors. Of the interviewees:

- ◆ **Gender:** Two-thirds are female, and one-third are male.
- ◆ **Age:** Participants range in age from 22 to 74 years. Median age is 53 years.
- ◆ **First-time visitors:** About one-half were first-time visitors and one-half had been to the Concord Museum before.
- ◆ **Membership:** Two participants are members of the Concord Museum.

¹¹ 22 interviewer were pre-scheduled by the Concord Museum and 5 were with walk-in visitors recruited by Concord staff at the front desk to fill open time slots.

CURRENT VISITOR EXPERIENCE

MOST ENJOYABLE

Participants were asked what they found most enjoyable about the *Why Concord?* exhibition. Many participants named more than one idea in their response, so proportions exceed 100 percent. Responses included:

- ◆ **Objects:** More than one-third said looking at objects was the most enjoyable part of their visit—several of these spoke very generally about “seeing all the different artifacts,” and several more mentioned specific objects that stood out to them. Participants mentioned a range of objects, but most of the objects they discussed belonged to Thoreau.¹² Objects mentioned include Thoreau’s wind harp, flute, desk, tree tap, rocker, and bed, the lantern, and a toolbox.
- ◆ **Thoreau and Emerson:** Several said they enjoyed learning about the transcendentalist authors, with Thoreau referenced slightly more often than Emerson. Participants enjoyed seeing objects associated with Thoreau and the Emerson study, but a few also stressed their interest in learning about how their lives intersected in Concord. For example, one said “I really liked...hearing about not only what they did separately, but it was really interesting to see how a lot of the people mentioned worked together and interacted with each other as well.”
- ◆ **Period rooms:** Several said the period rooms were an enjoyable part of their visit.¹³ These participants liked the rooms because they “take you to a place in time” and help you “imagine the rooms people in Concord actually lived in.”
- ◆ **General Concord history:** Several said they enjoyed learning about the history of Concord in general, including “background on where [Concord] falls in history,” “the overarching history of Concord,” and “why Concord is important historically.”¹⁴
- ◆ **Chronological organization:** Several said they enjoyed the progression of the exhibition because it makes you feel like you are “moving through time.” A few specifically enjoyed learning about Concord’s early history, including the Native Americans who first inhabited the area, the interactions between Native Americans and Puritans, and seeing the progression through to the Revolutionary War period.

¹² No object was mentioned by more than two individuals.

¹³ This proportion excludes the one person in the above bullet who mentioned the Emerson study specifically.

¹⁴ Two said that although they liked posing the question, “Why Concord?”, they did not feel the question was really answered.

PERSONAL CONNECTION

Participants were asked what, if anything, they saw or read that connected to their lives. Responses included:

- ◆ **Local or Massachusetts resident:** One-half said they are from the area or recently moved to the area, and liked learning about a place “so close to home.” Many of these are from Concord and nearby towns, while a few said they felt connected because they are from Massachusetts. This local affiliation helped them contextualize the local history, landmarks, architecture, and furniture they saw in the exhibition.
- ◆ **Profession or hobby:** More than one-third made a personal connection through their profession—several reported they were active or retired teachers—or a personal hobby or interest. A few said they were revolutionary history enthusiasts, two said they were fans of Emerson and Thoreau, and one said that she was a dancer and connected to the art and musical instruments used for entertainment in the past.
- ◆ **Familiar objects:** Several said they connected to seeing familiar objects in new context—for example recognizing furniture in the museum that is similar to what they saw in an older relative’s house, or a common chair given new meaning because Thoreau sat in it when writing *Walden*.
- ◆ **Human experiences:** Several said they connected to the common human experiences portrayed in the museum, such as immigrant experiences, childbirth, and families celebrating holidays. For example, one said, “The part that connected was the working class part of colonial life and immigrant life. My ancestors were dirt poor. They were not rich people.”

CONNECTIONS TO THE WORLD TODAY

Participants were asked what, if anything, they saw or read in the exhibition that seems relevant to the world today. Responses included:

- ◆ **Race relations and/or immigration:** One-third said they saw connections to current race relations and immigration issues in the United States. Participants referenced different parts of the exhibition that brought those connections to mind. Several referred to the stories of first contact between Native Americans and Puritans (resulting in Native Americans losing land), with one connecting this to the current Native American protests over pipeline construction in the West. Several talked about slavery and the abolitionist movement, relating this to current race relations issues, such as the Black Lives Matter movement and immigration policies.
- ◆ **Dealing with political disagreements:** Nearly one-quarter said information about the dissatisfaction and protest against the government, such as the tea boycott and the abolitionist movement, resonated with current issues in the country today. A few said these narratives made them feel “hopeful” about the potential impacts of activism.
- ◆ **Comparing past and present experiences and traditions:** Several said they connected what they saw in the exhibition with their own current experiences and traditions. A few referenced the period room set up for a mourning family and comparing to their own funeral traditions today. A few said they connected to various elements of “domestic life,” such as the traditions around drinking tea, or the dishes and furnishings they saw and how they might compare to what is used today.
- ◆ **Nature and preservation:** A few said the transcendentalist theme of “returning to nature” felt relevant because they believe there is a growing group of people who want to move away from materialism and live more simply. One of these mentioned reading about Concord’s efforts to preserve its land and character and resist development.

RACE RELATIONS PAST AND PRESENT

“Certainly in the first room where they talked about the Native Americans... and this idea that they weren't as important and we can move them [off their land]. I feel lot of that still happens, particularly in this past political season. I teach in a school filled with immigrants, so this has been a concern for my kids and they worry about the future of the country. This is unfortunately not a new thing.”

—Male, 53

IMPACTS OF ACTIVISM

“The room about the Revolutionary War felt extremely relevant given our recent election, but also hopeful in an interesting way. Looking at the boycott of British products, the list that 80 percent of people signed...that felt relevant both to being in a political climate where you feel distressed and worried, and witnessing different ways of activism.”

—Female, 58

EXPLORING HISTORIC OBJECTS

Participants were asked to select one object they saw during their visit to the *Why Concord?* exhibition to talk about during their interview. Nearly all participants selected a different object to talk about. The only objects that were selected by more than one participant were the Aeolian harp (3), the tree tap (2) and a long firearm¹⁵ (2). All other objects were only mentioned by one participant.¹⁶

DESCRIBING AN OBJECT

Participants were first asked to describe the object to the interviewer.

Two-thirds provided a *detailed* physical description of the object, and one-third provided a *general* physical description of the object.



In addition, some participants gave alternative descriptions of their object beyond its physical description.

- ◆ **Background information about object:** One-third gave background information about the object, e.g., “I saw this musket...and I read that label and it seemed like the only thing from the British side they had, so I thought it was an interesting thing to recognize, just that most of the artifacts were from ‘this side.’”

¹⁵ Two participants reference a long “musket” or “rifle,” but it is unclear whether they were talking about the same particular firearm.

¹⁶ Other objects included: a small mug; the lantern, an account book, a high chest, a toolbox, Thoreau’s desk, Thoreau’s surveying chain, Thoreau’s bed, Concord memorabilia fan, food/meat cutter, mourning room mirror, Wallace Nutting painted lithograph, powder horn, arrowhead, money scale, canopy bed, Concord historic figures silhouettes in hallway, fireback, Middlesex alarm map, Egyptian statue in Emerson’s study.

- ◆ **Posed a question:** A few posed a question in their description about something they wondered as they looked at the object, e.g., “I was curious about how long [the rifle] was. I can’t imagine trying to aim with that and carry it around.”
- ◆ **Described other objects nearby for context:** A few described other nearby objects when describing their chosen object, e.g., “I call them high boys, you call them high chests...There were high chests in many rooms, but these were two in a room by themselves, side by side.”

When asked why they selected their object, participants gave a wide range of reasons, including:

- ◆ **Inspired questions/curiosity:** Over one-quarter said they chose their object because it made them want to know more about the object or it “brought up a lot of questions” about its creation, use, and/or owner.
- ◆ **Association with historic figure or event:** Several said they selected their object because it was associated with an important event or person they were familiar with—the Revolutionary War, Thoreau, or Emerson.
- ◆ **Personal interest:** Several chose their object because of a personal interest (e.g., a musician was drawn to the Aeolian harp as a unique instrument).
- ◆ **Easy to imagine object being used:** A few chose their object because it was relatable. It was something familiar or easy to imagine someone using in the past (e.g., a decorated mug or piece of furniture).
- ◆ **Beautiful:** A few said they chose their object because it was beautiful or intricate.

RESPONDING TO STATEMENT ABOUT HISTORIC OBJECTS

The interviewer read the following statement aloud and provided a printed copy of the statement for the visitor so they could read along:

Historic objects are like “texts” that can be read to reveal stories about the past; they are among the primary ways we learn about our history. Featuring more objects is a way to share more stories. Conversely, featuring fewer objects provides for more in-depth exploration of each object.

Visitors were asked what this statement meant to them, and how, if at all, the statement changed or added to what they talked about in their initial responses about their chosen object. Some participants mentioned more than one idea, so total proportions exceed 100 percent.

- ◆ **Less is more (or more is more)?** One-half of participants referenced the old adages “less is more,” “quality over quantity” or something similar. These were nearly evenly split between those who prefer the “less is more” approach, saying that when too many objects are presented together it can be “overwhelming.” However, others felt that providing more objects—particularly in the context of period rooms—is important because the relationship between all of the objects adds context. A few of these also said that providing many objects gives more opportunities for a visitor to find a personal connection.
- ◆ **Labels and text about objects:** Over one-third thought the statement referred to text and labels about each object, rather than “reading” the object itself—e.g., “If you have fewer things to focus on, you are more likely to read a more lengthy explanation.”
- ◆ **“Reading” the object:** Nearly one-quarter described learning about an object by just looking at its details—for example, one said “Personally I prefer more objects with less details about each object but having the object tell a story together rather than just reading about the story.”

EXPLORING PERIOD ROOMS

Participants were asked to pick one period room they saw during their visit to the *Why Concord?* exhibition to talk about during their interview. The “baby” or “bathroom” room (19th century chamber with the crib, washstand, and chamberpot) was the most popular choice among participants, selected by nearly one-third. A few participants each selected the green room (early 18th century chamber), blue room (mid-18th century chamber), the Emerson Study, or the “mourning” room. A few responses were not specific enough to identify the room to which they were referring and one chose the Thoreau furniture display as their period room.

DESCRIBING A PERIOD ROOM

Participants were first asked to describe the period room to the interviewer.¹⁷

Most provided a *detailed* description of the period room, mentioning at least three details from the room they chose.



When asked about why they selected their object, participants gave a wide range of reasons, including:

- ♦ **Imagining a story:** One-quarter said they chose their room because it was one where they could imagine the people using that space. This happened more often in the “baby” room, the “mourning” room, and the Emerson study than in the blue or green rooms. For example, one who picked the mourning room said, “I could really picture the mourners coming back from church. . . .and the little girl who made an embroidery for two sisters. Learning about how people dealt with death as a part of life.” Two commented about the sounds that accompany the Emerson study helping them imagine how the space was really used.

¹⁷ Visitors were asked to take a picture of an object during their visit to talk about during the interview. Most did not refer to this picture during the interview, instead speaking from memory. One or two pulled up their picture of the object for reference when asked to describe it.

- ◆ **Relatable:** Several said they chose a room because it related to something in their life or something they are very familiar with—for example one woman said she was a mother with two small children, so the “baby” room was “so relevant” to this phase of her life.
- ◆ **Prompts:** A few who chose the “baby” room specifically said the panel prompts helped them “look further” in the room or taught them something new—for example, one said it was a “mental exercise in imagining” to convert what they know about today’s bathrooms and to apply it to the bath-related objects in the room. Another said the information about new mothers and the “lying-in period” was interesting.
- ◆ **Association with historic figure:** A few said they selected their period room because it was associated with an important person—two selected the Emerson room and one selected the Thoreau furniture display as their “period room” because they contained objects that “actually belonged to the people.”
- ◆ **Miscellaneous:** Several gave miscellaneous reasons for choosing their period, such as a personal interest in the time period represented, an interesting object in the room that caught their eye, or because it was generally “different” than the other rooms they saw.

RESPONDING TO STATEMENT ABOUT PERIOD ROOMS

The interviewer read the following statement aloud and provided a printed copy of the statement for the participant so they could read along:

Period rooms feature the everyday things used in the lives of Concord residents of the past. They also are portals into the lives and stories of the people who inhabited these rooms.

Participants were asked what this statement meant to them and how, if it all, experiencing the room they chose helped them connect to the lives and stories of the people who inhabited that room in the past. Responses included:

- ◆ **Imagining how people lived:** Most said the statement means that period rooms can show “what life would have been like back then” or “how people used the rooms similarly or differently to you.” Many of these talked about imagining others using the room in the past during their “everyday lives,” thinking about the kinds of objects they used and/or valued, and looking at a “snapshot” of life during a certain moment in time. Beyond thinking generally about how people used a room in the past, there were some more targeted entry points for imagining life in the period rooms:
 - **Cues toward common experiences,** such as a crib (childbirth), veil over the mirror and table set for a reception (mourning), and wash basin (bathing).
 - **Ties to well-known events,** such as the tea sets present in some rooms. A few mentioned how the tea sets made them think of the tea tax and the Tea Party, and one even questioned whether the presence of tea could indicate the inhabitants support or opposition to the Revolution.
- ◆ **Miscellaneous:** A few gave miscellaneous or vague responses about the meaning of the period room statement.¹⁸

IMAGINING EVERYDAY LIFE

“I could put myself in the picture and imagine all of the rituals, the covered mirror, stopped clock, embroidery...and it makes you think about how close death was to people in the past. It was less sanitary. And the food that was served would have been so comforting to have all that rich and festive food. It creates a sense of warmth and hospitality.

—Female, 63

¹⁸ E.g., “They are a lens to explore history” or “It’s self-explanatory...everyday things, they could have been anywhere, but I am in the Concord Museum, so they must have to do with this place.”

EXPLORING PROTEST AND REVOLUTION THEME

The interviewer read the following statement aloud and provided a printed copy of the statement for the participant so they could read along:

America is a place known for its celebrated protest culture, a freedom-of-speech right protected by the U.S. Constitution. Concord has been a hotbed of ideas, protest and social action since its inception as evidenced by its revolutionary and literary history.

Participants were asked what this statement meant to them and how, if it all, experiencing the room they chose helped them connect to the lives and stories of the people who inhabited that room in the past. All but one respondent agreed that the statement “rang true” to them,¹⁹ but for varying reasons. Some participants named more than one reason the statement rang true, so totals exceed 100 percent:

- ◆ **Revolutionary history:** One-third said that the statement rang true particularly for Concord’s connection to the Revolution. Most of these talked about elements of “protest” associated with the Revolution—for example, “It reminded me of the early protests in our culture and stands people took fighting against the government in the Revolutionary War.”
- ◆ **Transcendentalists:** One-third said that the ideas and publications from transcendentalists who lived in Concord resonated with Concord being a “hotbed of ideas, protest, and social action”—primarily Emerson and Thoreau, although two mentioned Louisa May Alcott as well. For some this was a new revelation—they had always associated Concord with the Revolution, but had not made the connection between Concord’s literary history and its “progressive” identity.
- ◆ **Abolitionist movement:** Several said the statement brought to mind Concord’s residents’ involvement in the abolitionist movement, although two of these responses were only mentioned in passing, e.g., “Concord led the way with slavery, education reform, literary history...” Another said, in terms of social action, the museum needs to “give more voice and detail to the stories of African American and Native people.”
- ◆ **General:** Several generally agreed that the statement rang true with what they knew about Concord historically. A few of these added a caveat that they do not see modern Concord as a “hotbed” for protest and social action.

¹⁹ One respondent was “not sure” that the statement rang true, saying “I’m not that familiar with the parts of Concord history that I think would fit into a celebrated protest culture. At least not as protected by the US constitution.”

THOUGHTS ABOUT USING PROTEST/REVOLUTION AS THEME

LIKES

Participants were asked what, if anything, they like about the idea of using “protest” or “revolution” for a theme in the new exhibition. Nearly all showed strong support for this idea, and two showed moderate support or neutral feelings (e.g., “I don’t *dislike* the idea.”). Participants liked the idea of “protest” or “revolution” for the following reasons:

- ◆ **Timely:** Over one-third described the idea as very “timely” considering the current “political climate” and the types of things that are currently “in the headlines.” These participants said the themes are an important reminder that civil engagement through “free speech,” “activism,” and “protest” is important and still very relevant today.
- ◆ **Common thread in Concord’s history:** Several said the idea of protest and revolution has a clear connection in Concord over time, so the theme would “make sense” and provide a strong link to tie together the people and events that are linked to Concord (e.g., the Revolution, transcendentalists, abolitionists, education reform).
- ◆ **Appropriate role for the museum:** A few said they like the idea of the museum using a theme of protest and revolution because it is appropriate for museums to “serve as a place of social conscience” and to inspire conversations. Participants said the Concord Museum is particularly well-suited to this role because protest and revolution are already central to the events the museum presents.
- ◆ **Protest elicits change:** A few said they like this idea because they see protest as a powerful tool that can lead to real change.²⁰
- ◆ **Attract a younger audience:** A few said they thought this theme feels more “modern” and may attract a younger audience to the museum.

²⁰ These participants did not talk about protest related to the current political climate, but more generally throughout time—e.g., “Abolitionist helped end slavery in the US, so that was very important. Protest helped in the Vietnam War, it helped promote gay rights, racial equality, women's rights. You don’t get that without protest.”

CONCERNS

Participants were asked what concerns, if any, they have about the museum using “protest” or “revolution” for a theme in the new exhibition. Concerns about the museum using these themes in the new exhibition include:

- ◆ **Remaining neutral and balanced:** Over one-third of participants emphasized that the museum should not go “too far to the left” or take the exhibition in a “radical” direction. Participants said they want a “balanced” presentation of protest and revolution that shows experiences and ideas from many perspectives. For example, one said, “You'd have to really be conscientious and careful to be inclusive. . . . but I do think it would *not* be helpful if it came across as too liberal in today's climate.”
- ◆ **Losing discussion of daily life:** A few said they like the idea of including protest and revolution, but worry that museum might “lose sight of the everyday life stuff” and “how people lived through all these times” by focusing only on major events.
- ◆ **Too controversial:** A few said these themes are too controversial—particularly “protest.” Some associate the word “protest” with “violence” or “negative” action, while revolution has a more purposeful or positive connotation for change.

PERSONAL CONNECTION

When asked how, if at all, this statement connected to the participant or their life, most found a connection:

- ◆ **Current events and news:** Several said the statement related to their lives because of the current election and political protests they see frequently in the news.
- ◆ **Protest experiences:** Several recalled past protest experiences (e.g., protesting Vietnam or supporting the civil rights movement in the 1960s), or present involvement with activism or protests (e.g., the Women’s March in Washington, D.C.)
- ◆ **Does not connect:** Several said it did not connect with anything in their lives.
- ◆ **Teaching others:** A few said they are teachers and teach their students about protest, revolution, and freedom of speech. They emphasized how they felt teaching these concepts can have a “big impact” on students and “should be celebrated and learned about.”
- ◆ **Place of protest:** A few said the statement connected to their lives because they are from Concord or Massachusetts more broadly, and they are connected to the roots of revolution and protest that are associated with these places.

TECHNOLOGY IN HISTORY MUSEUMS

Participants were asked what they like and dislike about using technology to present and communicate ideas in a history museum, based on what they have experienced at the Concord Museum or other history museums they have visited.

LIKES

When talking about what they like about technology in history museums, participants often talked about more than one idea, so the total proportion exceeds 100 percent.

- ◆ **Audio overlay:** Over one-third said they like when exhibits have sounds that help bring the story to life. For example, one mentioned the audio that accompanies the Emerson study as an example, saying it helped her picture people using the room and the types of conversations that might happen there. Another said that being able to hear the sounds of people activities in a room, or how an object (e.g., an instrument, a piece of machinery, etc.) sounds can enhance the experience.
- ◆ **Touchscreens:** Over one-third mentioned enjoying touchscreens to learn more about an object or event. For example, two talked about the Star Spangled Banner exhibit at the National Museum of American History as a good example of a touchscreen, where visitors can zoom in to get a closer look and learn more about different parts of the flag, while still preserving the object. A few others also mentioned the use of touchscreens to look closely at an object from many angles without damaging it. Participants also like touchscreens because they are “interactive” and allow the visitor to personalize their experience by choosing something they want to know more about.
- ◆ **Video:** Nearly one-third say they enjoy when museums have a video to help contextualize an event or experience. Most of these said an introductory video at the beginning of the museum experience can be very useful to “set the stage” for the rest of the exhibition, and a few talked generally about enjoying short videos (10 minutes or less) in an exhibition.
- ◆ **Immersive or 3D experiences:** A few said they liked when technology is used to create an immersive experience. Two suggested the use of holograms or projected images in the period rooms. Another mentioned an exhibition at the Constitution Museum in Philadelphia that used 360 degree screens to create an immersive experience.

CONCERNS

- ◆ **Too much technology:** Several cautioned that technology should be used in moderation. If there is too much, or it is too “flashy,” it can detract from the overall experience. A few also said there should not be too much of the same type of technology (e.g., a lot of videos), because this becomes too repetitious.
- ◆ **Technology that doesn’t enhance experience:** Several said they do not like technology if it is poorly executed and does not “add to the experience.” Technology should help “make things come more alive” or create new learning opportunities that would not be possible otherwise (e.g. simulating touching an object, zooming in, or providing additional information for objects on display that do not have labels).
- ◆ **Dislike a specific medium:** Several mentioned specific types of technology they dislike—primarily headset audio tours (2), phone apps (2), and videos (1).
- ◆ **Technology should not replace objects:** A few worry that technology will distract visitors from the physical objects on display, or supersede physical objects completely—for example, one said, “I don't go to a museum or an aquarium to scroll through different screens. I go to see material objects and rooms and to physically interact with them.”

TECHNOLOGY SHOULD NOT DISTRACT

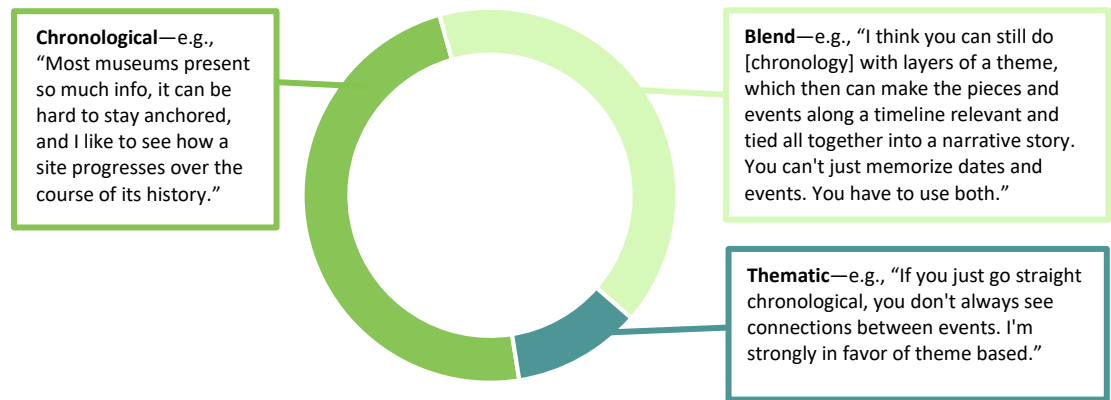
“I do like [technology], if it is done carefully... I would want to see the relationship between historical objects and technology to be done in such a way that it really respects the history and the quietness of the objects. To have objects become cartoons would really be a loss... There is such an intimacy in just being with an object, so if you can, preserve some of that. Do not turn Emerson's study into a laser light show [laughs].

—Female, 58

CHRONOLOGICAL VERSUS THEMATIC PRESENTATION

Participants were asked about their preference for information is presented in a history museum—whether they prefer the museum to present information in chronological order or organized by a theme (e.g., “protest” as in the above example).

Most prefer information presented in chronological order or a blend of chronological and thematic organization for a history exhibition.



APPENDIX

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