

Chapter 14: A Front-End Evaluation Conducted to Facilitate Planning the Royal Ontario Museum's European Galleries

**Eileen Walker
Royal Ontario Museum
Toronto, Ontario**

Introduction

With the undertaking in 1978 of a major project to renovate all of its galleries, the Royal Ontario Museum formalized a method for developing galleries using a team approach and which included the use of evaluation throughout the process (Royal Ontario Museum, 1976; 1979; 1982a)

Although the application of formal evaluation research to exhibit design, recommended in the late 1960's and early 1970's by Screven (1969; 1974; 1975; 1976) and Shettel (1968; 1973; 1976) has increased over recent years in North America and in Great Britain, most of the research that is published continues to be audience surveys (Loomis, 1973) or summative evaluation studies determining the effectiveness of completed exhibits. Only recently have front-end and formative evaluation begun to be accepted as extremely useful and efficient aids to the practice of developing exhibits (e.g., Griggs, 1982; Hewett, 1987). More and more institutions are conducting formative evaluation and a few of these studies have made it into print (Eason & Linn, 1976; Freidman, Eason, & Sneider, 1979; Griggs, 1982). Yet as recently as 1984, Steven Griggs could lament that few museums carry out front-end evaluation let alone publish the results. In fact, his chapter on "Evaluating Exhibitions" in the *Manual of Curatorship* relied on one of his front-end studies at the British Museum of Natural History (BMNH) as its only example. At the BMNH a number of front-end studies have been conducted for various exhibitions: "British Natural History" (1981); "Mammal Diversity" (1982b); "More About Chromosomes" (1982a); "Visitors' Plans, Expectations, Interests, Hopes and Fears for an Insect Gallery" (1982c).

Some front-end evaluation has also been carried out at the Royal Ontario Museum over the past few years of the Gallery Development Program, but these also have not been published. These evaluations include: "Ancient Near East" (1983); "European" (1982b); and "Birds" (1984).

Only in the past year have a few articles appeared that indicate other institutions have begun to conduct this type of research. For example, Taylor (1987) for the Carnegie Museum of Natural History; Jennings and Hansen (1987) at the Brookfield Zoo; and Hewett (1987) at the Strong Museum.

Prior to initiating the planning of the Royal Ontario Museum's new European Galleries some front-end research was undertaken. The team wanted to determine visitors' interests, prior knowledge, activities, and preferences in areas related to European Decorative Arts and to the display of such objects. This research was to provide data which would inform and facilitate decision-making in the early stages of the gallery development project.

Method

One hundred and forty systematically selected visitors were interviewed regarding their interests, hobbies, and activities. These visitors were also asked to rank in order of preference, poster mock-ups of European objects presented in formats representing four typical exhibit techniques. A set of four posters showed:

- The object alone with its artifact label.
- A range of similar objects, each with its own artifact label.
- The object in the context of a room setting or vignette with a brief general description.
- The object within a storyline or thematic presentation which included levelled text, graphics, and artifact labels.

Each of these display techniques is different enough from one another to provide data that would give a clear indication of preferences.

A set of posters was developed for a piece of furniture, a smaller decorative object, and a piece of sculpture, in order to test if visitors had different display preferences for different classes of objects.

In producing the mock-up posters great care was taken to standardize them as much as possible and to control extraneous variables. Some of the factors considered were:

- The communication intent of each display technique.
- Scale relationships between and within each display technique.
- The presentation of real objects versus support materials.
- Text placement.

Results

The sample compared well to other larger samples obtained in Royal Ontario Museum studies. The data revealed that the sample visitors are well informed and participate in a number of activities related to European Art and/or History. Many of them participated in fine art, textile, or craft-related hobbies and had taken courses in Art History, Medieval History, the Renaissance, or the Industrial Revolution. Many of them visit historic buildings and antique shows or shops.

The major difference in visitor ranking of displays was a large split between the two types of posters that presented a context for the objects and the two that did not. Informational contexts, such as storylines, and physical contexts such as the room setting or vignette were ranked in first or second place, while the individual objects and the series of objects were ranked third and fourth. This was a consistent result for all three examples, i.e., the furniture, the smaller decorative object and the sculpture.

The data suggest that visitors are not interested in looking at cases with rows of objects arranged taxonomically.

Of note, is the fact that even for the sculpture the thematic approach was preferred overall. Most museums and art galleries have traditionally displayed sculpture using a visual approach rather than an informative one. The data may indicate that the public regards sculpture as esoteric and suggests that they would like to increase their understanding of it. Even sample visitors who had fine art-related hobbies clearly ranked the thematic poster first.

None of the variables such as place of residence, level of education, number of hobbies, number of courses, or number of collections, affected the observed split in the data.

These observations suggest that the traditional assumption that informed visitors do not require as much information in exhibits as uninformed visitors may be a false one.

Significance

Recognizing our visitors' preferences for exhibits that provide a context for the objects, but realizing that physical contexts alone may be visually appealing yet communicate very little, the European Team is developing communication plans in which visitors will be cued in their viewing of a group of room settings -- cued in ways that will allow them to discover and learn about changing life styles and social customs from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century.

Also, a wing on the history of the decorative arts will use objects to inform visitors about important social and political developments. One of the aims will be to provide information about the objects as representatives of the material culture of their time and the relationship of that material culture to broader issues in European history.

The results regarding the importance of providing visitors with a context for objects and the lack of interest in taxonomically arranged exhibits support similar results obtained in front-end evaluation projects at the British Museum of Natural History.

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