

INTRODUCING THE ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Donald Patterson
Jacksonville State University

A summary of a publication by Alt, Michael, & Griggs, Steven /Edited by Leslie Patten (1989). *Evaluating The Mankind Discovering Gallery: Four Studies*. Toronto, Ontario: Royal Ontario Museum. [61 pages]

This publication is one of a series distributed by the Royal Ontario Museum. Publications such as this provide a helpful model for others—both in terms of encouraging exhibit evaluation and in terms of how it might be accomplished. The following is a brief summary; the reader is encouraged to read the entire report.

The Royal Ontario Museum began assessing visitor reactions as part of its renovation and expansion plan first unveiled in 1976. Based on visitor surveys and interviews with curators several areas in need of improvement were identified. Visitors, while reporting satisfaction with their visit, were not as enthusiastic as they could be and consistently asked for more information in the galleries. Curators were concerned that the galleries failed to communicate the active role of the museum in current research and recent findings. This failure reinforced the public view of the museum as a static collection of artifacts rather than the active, concerned and vital institution that was perceived by the staff. Based on this assessment, a centrally located gallery was renovated with exhibits designed to show the public the behind-the-scenes research work going on at the museum. The theme of this exhibit was "Mankind Discovering".

When the work was completed two outside evaluators (the authors) were commissioned to do a comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of the new gallery. Four studies were done to assess the gallery from different perspectives.

Study 1: Staff Evaluation

A questionnaire was developed and circulated to museum staff and volunteers. The questionnaire asked respondents to indicate familiarity with the new gallery, likes and dislikes, and how the finished gallery compared to their expectations. Only 23% of the questionnaires were returned. This was attributed to lack of familiarity, hostility and indifference among different groups of the staff. The responses showed agreement that: (1) the gallery succeeded in giving a behind the scenes view of the ROM, (2) the gallery was in the wrong place, many commented that they missed the old gallery that had been replaced, (3) the new gallery

was thought to be poorly laid out with narrow aisles and inappropriate circulation of visitors from back to front, (4) the function of the courtyard space was unclear and appeared to be unrelated to the rest of the gallery. This evaluation raised questions about the visitors' ability to understand the main themes, the visitors' perceived value and enjoyment of the gallery, the likelihood of the correct traffic flow through the gallery and how much the visitors missed the old gallery that had been replaced.

Study 2: Visitor Reaction

A random selection of 251 visitors was interviewed in this evaluation, half as they were entering and half as they left. Four areas were covered in the interviews, visiting patterns, comprehension of the main themes, attitudes toward the ROM and the new gallery and personal details.

The results showed that 70 percent of the visitors went to the new gallery first and 90 percent were seeing the new gallery for the first time. Comparing visitors who had not seen the new gallery with those who had, those mentioning research as one of the functions of the museum increased from 5 to 19 percent. The role of curators was poorly understood, with visits to the new gallery resulting in an increase from 4 to 14 percent in those who mentioned research in describing curators. The main storyline of the gallery was well communicated, the most commonly mentioned theme was research with a behind the scenes view of the museum second. The public perception of type of staff employed at the museum was also broader after viewing the exhibit with more people mentioning designers, exhibit staff and public relations staff and fewer people mentioning historians and security staff. The overall design, graphics, lighting and organization of the material were appreciated by most visitors. Only 3 percent of visitors reported being dissatisfied, the main complaints were that there was too much on display and the aisles were crowded. There were large increases in the number of people reporting happiness with the job the ROM is doing and an overall preference for the new gallery over the old one it replaced.

Study 3: Observational Study of Visitors

A random selection of visitors was tracked through the exhibit noting where they entered, the sequence of displays they stopped at and approximately how long, how intensely they studied the exhibits, and overall time in the gallery.

The results showed that about 50 percent of the visitors visited the new gallery before going to other galleries. About 8 to 9 minutes on average were spent in the gallery. About a fourth of the exhibits were stopped at for an average of 30 seconds each. Of those exhibits stopped at, one half were

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studied closely. Ninety-one percent of the visitors went through the exhibit in the intended sequence. Most visitors began by viewing a centrally located cluster case as planned.

Study 4: Visitor Understanding and Reaction to Individual Sections

Six sections of the display were studied using in-depth interviews of 20 visitors for each section. A semi-random selection of visitors was approached and asked to view a particular section of the exhibit. They were told ahead of time that they would be asked some questions about the exhibit later. When the visitor finished looking at the exhibit they were interviewed in the presence of the exhibit so that they could refer to it as needed. This type of interview is useful in highlighting areas where the exhibit fails to communicate, but is less helpful in detecting successes since the casual visitor may not attend to the exhibit as closely as the cued viewer.

Part A worked well with visitors viewing the exhibit in the correct order and generally understanding the main theme. The only weakness was in understanding the role of the curator in the research process. This was probably due to the fact that more than half of the viewers missed all or part of the panel on "Research at the ROM". Part B was largely successful although viewers had difficulty distinguishing the main storyline from other messages, resulting in bypassing much of the written copy. Part C was a popular section and produced a clear understanding of the storyline even though respondents often ignored or missed captions. Part D worked well except that some viewers were confused about the order in which the exhibits should be viewed. Part E was viewed in the correct order and all but the "Results" panel were read. The Results panel was described as too difficult. Part F was the most difficult of the sections. Although many of the panels were skimmed over or missed, the main point was communicated, but the finer points were missed.

The gallery was successful in its main objectives. Four weaknesses were identified: (1) The role of curators was poorly communicated resulting in a lack of understanding of some of the displays. Greater emphasis on the curator was recommended because of its key role in relating the exhibits. (2) The synthesis section (part F above) was the least successful of the individual sections studied. A complete redesign was recommended for this part. (3) The relation of the individual sections to the overall story was not always evident. The introductory exhibit needed to be more prominent and signposts indicating where the visitor is in the story needed to be added. And, (4) the organization of textual material failed to distinguish main points from secondary information so that the visitor sometimes overlooked important information.

In conclusion, *Mankind Discovering* is a controversial

and therefore exciting gallery. The goal of informing the public of the Museum activities and thereby enlisting greater support is unique. It is hoped that the recommendations above will result in improving a generally successful new gallery. Perhaps this can serve as a model for similar exhibits and help redefine the public perception of museums.

This publication can be ordered from Publication Services, Royal Ontario Museum, 100 Queen's Park, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5S 2C6, (416) 586-5581.

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