Front-End Evaluation In Art Museums: Is It Effective?

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Front-End Evaluation And Exhibition Development

More and more, evaluation is becoming an integral part of the exhibition development process. Front-end evaluation takes place in the early stages of exhibition development and is generally used to uncover visitor attitudes, knowledge, perceptions, and misconceptions about a topic. Often, visitors may be asked to define key words or talk about the essential ideas that are likely to find their way into the exhibition script. Exhibit developers look to front-end evaluation to gain feedback from their visitors before exhibition concepts and organization are set in stone. This kind of feedback can, in the long run, save a great deal of time as developers find out how their audience thinks about the content of an exhibition. A common misconception about front-end evaluation is that it occurs before any exhibition work has happened. In fact, some museum staff believe that front-end can establish an interpretive direction for an exhibition. Front-end evaluation is much more useful if it takes place after some preliminary work has been done and if it is used as a decision-making tool.

To set the context for this discussion of front-end evaluation, this paper describes the evaluation questions that drove two front-end studies conducted by Randi Korn & Associates that were not in art museums. This paper also addresses issues of exhibition development with significant implications for front-end evaluation in the context of the studies. Then, the discussion returns to exhibition development and evaluation in art museums. Following this more abstract examination of the topic is a discussion of two front-end studies conducted by Randi Korn & Associates at the Detroit Institute of Arts this year, looking at how the process worked there and what benefit the staff is deriving from the final product.

The first project was a study conducted for an exhibition team developing a travelling exhibition about severe storms for science centers and natural history museums. Although the front-end evaluation was

conducted very early in the exhibition's development, some interpretive groundwork had been laid prior to the start of the study. The team determined that it would focus on three types of storms — hurricanes, thunderstorms, and blizzards — and that a key interpretive thread running throughout the exhibition would be protecting oneself from storms. Additionally, the team was eager to know how closely people connected themselves to storms and what their "storm histories" were. Scientists on the planning team — who had a realistic sense of the limited nature of the public's knowledge of storms — wanted to know if visitors could name and define the five basic indicators of weather and if they could identify basic storm tracking imagery. The team started out with some sophisticated questions that went far beyond the basic, "What do people know about storms?" or even "What do people want to know about storms?" That the exhibition team had an interpretive plan greatly facilitated the development of the evaluation methodology and made the findings that much more relevant to their work.

The second project, with a similarly well-developed interpretive plan that drove the research, took place at Colonial Williamsburg and involved a pilot plan to reinterpret the Historic Area, which houses all the period buildings and shops. The planning team was interested in pursuing a storyline approach that would encompass many sites within the Historic Area, rather than continuing to use a building-by-building interpretation. For the front-end evaluation, the team decided to see how much visitors knew about the content of two storylines and find out how difficult it would be for visitors to follow this approach. Additionally, since Colonial Williamsburg was also interested in expanding its African-American interpretation, part of the emphasis in the front-end was to find out if visitors distinguished between white and African-American experiences in the eighteenth century in the context of the two storylines. Again, the evaluation questions went well beyond simply asking visitors how much they know about a subject or what they wanted to know. Colonial Williamsburg had a very clear idea of where it was headed interpretively and was curious at what point visitors would "enter" the content and how to bridge the gap between where visitors were starting and where the planning team wanted to take them.

Looking through the visitor studies literature, it is clear that very little front-end evaluation has been conducted in art museums. Yet we know anecdotally, through colleagues and informal networks, that art museums are beginning to embrace the notion of input from visitors during the exhibition development process and to seek feedback from visitors about their exhibition experience. Part of this interest is due to a demand by funding sources such as the National Endowment for the Humanities and Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund that grant recipients include evaluation in their exhibition plans and budgets. This demand is clearly a positive development in the museum community, as art museums are popular

destinations and continually struggle to be relevant to their audiences. Nearly every museum professional who happens to be wandering through an art museum has overheard at least one visitor say, "Why it that considered to be art" or "What does that mean?" or "I wish they would tell you more about that painting." So the need to make art museums more accessible to the public is clear. Art museum staff, however, in preparing for a front-end evaluation, think of questions like, "What do visitors know about medieval art?" or "What do they know about decorative arts?" In this common scenario, there is little connection between the questions visitors are struggling with as they tour art museums and those museum staff are interested in asking them.

These kinds of questions are not productive because, often, when the question is "How much do visitors know about...," we can imagine the answer being "not much" or even "they have a basic understanding of the topic." How would these findings be helpful to any museum staff, except to lower expectations about the level at which visitors think about the proposed exhibition's content? Findings from questions like these only serve to reinforce an often-held notion of a woefully uninformed public and a need, therefore, to pander to the "lowest common denominator." Obviously the need to scale down language or simplify ideas would be one outcome, and in certain museum circles it could be a ground-breaking discovery. But what about when museums want more in-depth information about their visitors vis-a-vis their proposed exhibition's content to help them move forward in their planning process?

These examples clarify the differences between the exhibition development process in other types of museums and in art museums. Simply put, in art museums, exhibitions are object-driven, while in many other types of museums, they are interpretation-driven. Similarly, history and science museum exhibit planners increasingly seek ways for audiences to find personal connections to the subject matter, to find a piece of their history or experience in the content. Despite art museum labels increasingly incorporating quotes and other "human" touches, personal connection is not generally an emphasis in the planning process. Obviously, there are museums that deviate from this position, but in general, it seems to be true. This basic difference in approach to exhibitions has implications for front-end evaluation.

Front-end evaluation in natural history or history museums begins with more than the question of what people know about a topic. Often some interpretive planning has already taken place — a storyline developed or even specific topics to address in the exhibition — prior to the evaluation. Data from in-depth interviews are closely analyzed to find "hooks" into the content, places where visitors will easily engage with the topic. In art museums, this is not usually the case. There, the object is primary. Although there is considerable information and scholarship to convey, there is generally not a "story" to tell, not in a narrative sense, so what is there to

query visitors about in a front-end evaluation other than specific knowledge about a topic? Additionally, unlike storms, American history, or other aspects of science or history, visitors generally lack not only a basic understanding of art history, but also enough of a grounding to even *have* attitudes, perceptions or misconceptions about art history. They do, however, have definite ideas about what they like and dislike in individual works of art. What can staff at art museums do to prepare themselves for conducting front-end evaluation so results will be helpful? What kinds of questions should be asked of visitors so their input becomes useful to staff? How can feedback from visitors be combined with scholarship so evaluation at early stages of exhibition planning is useful to art museums? The answer seems to lie with art museum staff utilizing some of the interpretive strategies of their colleagues in other museum disciplines. Art museum staff will not need to lose the primacy of the object to take on some of the interpretive processes of their colleagues. Rather, before undertaking front-end evaluation, they will need to think carefully about what they want to communicate to their visitors and decide on interpretive paths to follow before a single visitor is approached.

Studies At The Detroit Institute Of Arts
The French Art Galleries Evaluation

Sarah Hufford, assistant curator in the Department of Education, the Detroit Institute of Arts, came to Randi Korn & Associates with two projects for which a front-end evaluation was appropriate. The first was to support the interpretative program for the reinstallation of the museum's French sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century art galleries.

The decision by Ms. Hufford to hire a consultant to conduct front-end evaluation for the French collection came as a result of her research for the museum's interpretative label program. Upon receiving a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the Education Department initiated a collaboration with the curatorial departments to develop a system of interpretative labels for the permanent collection. Since relatively few of the galleries have labels which incorporate explanatory text, this is a major undertaking for an art museum with approximately one hundred galleries displaying objects which represent all areas of the world and cultural periods from prehistory to the present day. Ms. Hufford's goals for this front-end evaluation were two-fold: to use the process of evaluation to aid her collaboration with the curatorial departments in developing interpretive themes and to determine whether or not the staff's sample labels were accessible to the museum's visitors. Ms. Hufford's next step was to enlist the cooperation of her colleagues from the two European art departments in planning a front-end evaluation for the upcoming reinstallation of the French art galleries. Evaluation of this type was familiar to only one of the

four collections curators who would be involved in this project. The museum was preparing an NEA grant application to support the reinstallation of the French galleries. On the recommendation of the Education Department, the application stipulated that public education (especially in the form of explanatory labels) would be given a priority in this reinstallation. Although not specifically required for the NEA grant, a commitment to using evaluation to test interpretative ideas was also included.

Working on an interpretative program at an early stage in a reinstallation was also new for most of the curatorial staff. Interpretative labels in art museums are usually not addressed until late in the planning stage of an installation or exhibition after the placement of the objects has been determined. Ms. Hufford pointed out that a reinstallation, like a special exhibition, provides the ideal opportunity to develop an interpretative program concurrently with the disposition of the gallery spaces and the art objects. Her collaboration with one of the European curators on a recent exhibition convinced the curator that determining interpretative ideas at an earlier stage in planning would actually facilitate the grouping of objects. The argument that the evaluation could aid the reinstallation planning process, the grant application, and the availability of funds from the interpretative label grant persuaded all staff involved to try front-end evaluation.

The European curators and Ms. Hufford decided that their general goal for the French study was to gather information which would assist in the development of interpretative labels for this area of the collection. At this early stage of the reinstallation project, only general ideas about the organization of the collection had been discussed. The team hoped that the process of evaluation would help determine more specific interpretative directions. Learning more about the visitors' knowledge of terminology was requested by the curator who had some knowledge of evaluation.

To prepare for the first meeting, the consultant, Randi Korn & Associates, sent all staff members a list of questions about their expectations for the evaluation and about their interpretative ideas for the French art collection. During the meeting with the consultant, general evaluation questions such as "What information can we get from visitors to help us plan a better installation?" and "What interests visitors about the artworks in the collection?" were posed. Curators in charge of different collection areas had varied ideas. Broad interpretative themes related to techniques and cultural context were suggested.

An important part of Randi Korn & Associates' work was to encourage the curators to progress from general themes to ones that could ultimately provide an interpretive framework for the reinstallation of the galleries. The European curators explained that the preliminary concept for the French galleries was to reinstall the objects chronologically and stylistically. Since not only the French, but many other galleries, will be, or already are,

installed according to art historical styles, the consultant and the staff agreed to test visitors' abilities to distinguish between two art historical styles. The consultant recommended that one part of the study compare two styles in painting and another part compare two styles in the decorative arts. The third part of the study would assess visitors' comprehension of innovations in the design and construction of eighteenth-century furniture. The curator who was already somewhat familiar with evaluation suggested this very specific theme.

For the development of the evaluation instrument, the consultant asked the museum staff to select objects appropriate to the stylistic and innovative furniture design themes and to write labels about these objects. For the comparison of styles in painting, the curators first planned to use Rococo and Neoclassical examples. The consultant felt that the objects representing the two different styles should be in the same gallery. Because the quintessential Rococo works were not near the major Neoclassical painting, *Berenice Reproaching Ptolemy* by Jean-Joseph Taillasson, a comparison was made between a late Baroque painting, *The Adoration of the Shepherds* by Jean-Baptiste Marie Pierre, and the Taillasson. For the decorative arts stylistic study, a Rococo gilt bronze *Mantel Clock* by Jean-Joseph de St. Germain was contrasted with a pair of Sevres porcelain Neoclassical *Vases*. The subjects of the innovative furniture design study were a *Commode* by Jean-Henri Riesener and a *Jewel Coffer* by Martin Carlin which also serves as a writing table (see Figure 1).

The European curators wrote the evaluation labels, Ms. Hufford edited them, then everyone (including the consultant) agreed on the final version. These labels had to incorporate information that in the actual gallery reinstallation might be distributed among an introductory panel about the style and one or more individual object labels. The test labels were relatively difficult to write, were truly hypothetical, and therefore were unlike the type of labels that might be tested in a formative evaluation. Terminology to be tested among visitors was drawn from the labels and from lists compiled by the museum staff.

Once this work was done, the consultant completed the evaluation instrument and determined the sample size. For each of the three areas of the French collection chosen for this study (paintings, furniture and other decorative arts), approximately 30 visitors were interviewed. Visitors were asked to read test labels that explained the stylistic characteristics of Rococo, late Baroque, and Neoclassical; look at predetermined objects representing those styles; and then distinguish among those styles in reproductions of other works of art in the collection. Other visitors were asked to read labels about innovations in the design of eighteenth-century furniture. All visitors were asked to identify words or phrases that needed further definition and to rate their interest in five interpretive topics, among which were the central themes treated in the labels they read. The front-end evaluation took on some characteristics of formative evaluation by testing how well visitors

understood the typical language of an interpretative label at the museum.

A few salient findings emerged. The first was that visitors could indeed distinguish among styles in works of art after reading the labels. For example, more than two-thirds of visitors correctly identified a Rococo and a Neoclassical object from a group of stylistically varied decorative arts objects. A second finding was that visitors often expressed low interest in the topic of style in favor of more basic information about the cultural function of an artwork or why it is considered important by the museum. Visitors wanted their basic curiosity about works of art satisfied before they would be willing to absorb more in-depth, or, to them, esoteric information. For example, visitors did not understand the concept of innovative furniture forms in the eighteenth century — the subject of the label they read — yet they expressed great interest in the function of the furniture pieces. In short, they did not understand the point of the label — innovation. Finally, visitors wanted very simple language used in label text and asked for definitions of many of the words they encountered (Korn, 1995). This finding, that visitors want simple, jargon-free label text, has been clear to evaluators and educators, but it was a surprising and thought-provoking result for the curators who had written the mock labels.

In a follow-up meeting with the consultant, the curators initially expressed their uncertainty about how to write an appropriate label. One concern was that the labels would become too simple, that they would not really convey any significant information or ideas. Since one might have to use more words to make the label understandable, another concern was that the labels would become too long and thereby discourage visitors from reading them. The necessity of satisfying the visitor's first questions, for example, "What is the subject matter?," might also contribute to a label that is too lengthy. This latter problem could be mitigated by having gallery text panels provide some of the information. To clarify the subject of furniture design innovations, labels with photo illustrations could help the visitor compare seventeenth- and eighteenth-century furniture forms. Since art historical styles were not the most interesting subject for the visitor, one staff member wondered whether or not art museums would cease to treat aesthetic topics and would become museums of cultural history.

To address some of these issues in a more formal way, a label-writing policy committee of curatorial, education and publications staff has been formed. The committee intends to develop general guidelines about the audience for whom the labels are written, for the content and format of the labels, and for the label development process. For example, as the evaluation indicated, the content of labels would try to satisfy the visitor's need for basic information before going on to discuss other interpretative themes. This concept has already been put into practice for labels that were written for a temporary installation of photographs from our permanent collection. Staff in the European Paintings Department, who are currently preparing labels for Dutch paintings, feel that the evaluation has definitely

helped with their writing styles. Since the French galleries reinstallation is still one to two years away, the specific effects of the evaluation for this area of the collection have yet to be determined.

Gothic Ivories Exhibition Evaluation

The museum's second evaluation project was related to a planned exhibition on Gothic ivory sculpture. This front-end evaluation was undertaken because the museum had applied for a National Endowment for the Humanities grant which required some type of evaluation. From discussions with the exhibition coordinator and Ms. Hufford, the organizing curator of this exhibition became very enthusiastic about trying front-end evaluation. After hearing the proposal for the French galleries study, he asked Ms. Hufford to engage the consultant to conduct evaluations for both projects.

For the exhibition evaluation, the museum staff's overall goal was to gather information which would help make a highly-specialized, scholarly subject interesting and accessible to the general public. The information gained would also help develop interpretive labels for the museum's permanent collection of medieval art. The organizing curator and his advisory committee had already established the major interpretive themes of the exhibition. The exhibition will establish that ivory became a major vehicle for artistic expression in the Gothic era of the mid-thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries. It will explore the interrelationships between the development of the Gothic style in ivory sculpture and the simultaneous emergence of an urban aristocracy and changes in patterns of religious devotion. Approximately one hundred religious and secular ivories will be in the exhibition. Mirrors, combs, and boxes, decorated with images derived from literary romances, and religious objects, decorated with themes from the Bible, will be included (see Figure 2). Because ivory was carved into objects for personal use and for private religious purposes, the visitor will be introduced to the private lives of the men and women of the period.

For this project, the consultant also sent a series of questions for the museum staff to answer individually and discuss with her. During the meetings with the consultant, the staff expressed concern about the obscurity of the subject matter and about whether or not visitors would be concerned about the medieval ivories in relation to the current elephant conservation issue. Because the interpretative themes already developed for the exhibition were directly related to its scholarly premises, the consultant was told by the curator that the themes would not be changed as a result of the evaluation. No decisions had been made, however, on the final interpretive direction of the exhibition. The curator and the marketing and public relations department also wanted visitor preferences to help guide the selection of an appropriate and meaningful title for the exhibition.

Because the curator was intensely interested in visitors' baseline

knowledge about Gothic ivories and what questions they might have about objects, the consultant found it difficult to dissuade him from taking this approach. Ultimately these questions were incorporated into the final interview instrument. Since a large group of interpretive themes had been articulated for the study, visitor response to the themes would be elicited in an effort to merge curatorial purpose with visitors' interests.

Visitors were queried on their associations with the terms "Gothic" and "Gothic ivories" to ascertain their overall understanding of medieval art and life and religion in the Middle Ages. A card or Q-sort methodology was employed to find where, of many interpretive themes all under consideration for treatment in the exhibition, visitor preferences lay. Although used by Margaret Menninger in a study for the J. Paul Getty Museum, card sorts are more commonly used in psychological, not art historical, arenas. For those who are unfamiliar with card sorts, they consist of showing visitors many statements or questions and asking them to sort them into different piles based on their level of agreement or interest in them.

After determining the methodology, the consultant asked the museum staff to prepare a possible list of titles, a description of the exhibition, and a list of interpretative themes for the card sort. Given the results of the French galleries project, a special effort was made to state the information in a direct manner without use of art historical or technical terms unless the terms were defined. Nevertheless, informal pre-testing of the instrument on a subject who matches the museum's visitor profile, (i.e., someone who has a considerable interest in art but no formal art historical training) caused the description and the list of themes to be refined at least twice. Just before the evaluation began, one of the title choices was eliminated because the curator realized that he really would never use that particular title.

For the card sort section of this study, visitors were shown twenty-four cards with various questions such as "How do I 'read' the sequence of images on the ivories?" and "Why was ivory sculpting first centered around Paris in the Gothic period?" Visitors ultimately sorted the questions into six piles, ranging from most to least interesting. Through progressive sorting, visitors were asked to select the two most interesting and the two least interesting questions. In essence, their choices create a bell curve from most to least interesting. Because their knowledge of an exhibition topic is usually limited, visitors often do not know what they want to know. Asking visitors what they want to know about a topic or a piece of art generally yields basic information that often does not help exhibition developers make decisions about interpretation. By using a card sort and forcing visitors to make decisions about interpretive ideas, their interest in the range of topics to be addressed in the exhibition can be ranked.

Although data collection has just been completed and analysis has not begun, the consultant anticipates some useful findings. Instead of using visitor choices to dictate the topics treated in the exhibition — a common curatorial fear of an evaluation's outcome — those topics that emerge as

having the highest appeal will be used as "hooks" into the exhibition's content. Visitor interests can serve as entry points into the content and help pave the way for the exhibition organizers to then address other topics of keen importance to the overall subject of Gothic ivories. In this way, the card sort data will enable the museum's exhibition curator to incorporate visitors' preferences into the exhibition without compromising the scholarly integrity of the content.

The museum staff are also optimistic about the results of this evaluation. Although some visitors have little concept of what "Gothic" or "Gothic ivories" might mean, the staff are encouraged to find that a good number of the visitors do understand what these terms signify. Visitors also seem to have definite preferences for some of the titles. Even if the curator's title preference is not one of these, he will probably decide to use one of the audience's top choices. The full effect of this evaluation on the exhibition and its interpretative materials will not be determined for months. Formative evaluation of this exhibition is also planned.

In considering the museum's first experience with front-end evaluation, Ms. Hufford feels that her goals and those of the curators have been met. They have learned that the process can help to focus their interpretive ideas and that the results in both cases can and will affect their decisions about interpretation. However, in comparing the French and Gothic ivories projects, Ms. Hufford feels that there are some things that might be done differently in the future. In regard to the development of interpretative themes, Ms. Hufford feels that the Gothic evaluation will prove to be the more successful one. This is partly due to the differences in planning an exhibition and a permanent collection reinstallation. A special exhibition such as Gothic ivories is often organized on the basis of a scholarly premise that is supported by research. The interpretative themes naturally arise from this process. The reinstallation of a portion of the permanent collection deals with a broader art historical context which does not always have one or two specific messages to communicate. For future permanent collection front-end evaluations, Ms. Hufford would suggest that more time be devoted to museum staff meetings on interpretive strategy before the consultant arrives. She would also recommend at least one full day or more of working with the consultant to explore and determine interpretive ideas. The more specific the interpretive themes are, the more useful the evaluation will be. For permanent collection studies, perhaps more attention should be devoted to developing and testing themes for discreet areas of the collection, that is, themes analogous to the innovative furniture designs theme. In the case of the French galleries, themes related to topic preferences indicated in the study could be developed. Overall museum staff have been pleased with the process and results of these evaluations. Education staff intend to make evaluation a regular part of the interpretative development process.

Reference

Korn, Randi (1995). "A Front-End Evaluation of the French Art Galleries." Unpublished manuscript for the Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI.

Figure 1

Commode, 1783, Jean-Henri Riesener (German, active in France, 1734-1806). Oak veneered with kingwood, amaranth, ebony, holly, and tulipwood, gilt bronze, marble. H 37" x W 58" x D 24". The Detroit Institute of Arts, bequest of Mrs. Horace E. Dodge in memory of her husband (71.194). Used in the French galleries evaluation.

Figure 2

Virgin and Child Enthroned, fourteenth-century, French, artist unknown, ivory. H 10" x W 4" x D 1 1/2". The Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, General Membership Fund (64.71). Used in the Gothic ivories exhibition evaluation.