

# **Evaluation Methods and Findings Shape a Junior Gallery**

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## **Introduction**

Front-end and formative evaluation procedures were used to help create and perfect interactive components for a junior gallery in the Allentown Art Museum in Pennsylvania. Front-end evaluation, a procedure that invites audience involvement during the planning stages of a project, was conducted to assist the museum in identifying specific activities and ideas that visitors would find appealing, stimulating, and approachable. Formative evaluation, which is conducted during a project's design stage, provided staff members with immediate feedback about the content and design of each activity. Using prototype displays, the quality and value of each activity was tested by observing visitors and, when appropriate, questioning them about their behaviors. Such information provided the basis for altering the components in an effort to improve them. Visitors' reactions to those changes suggested yet more changes, all of which worked towards perfecting the initial ideas.

## **Front-End Evaluation**

The activities in the existing Junior Gallery were somewhat dissatisfying to staff members. While young visitors were having fun, the activities with which they were engaging were not shaped by the Museum's collection. In other words, visitors' experiences in the Junior Gallery were isolated experiences that were not reinforced by other parts of the Museum. In addition, staff members were also aware that the gallery was perceived as a space for only the very young. It was hoped that the new activities would appeal to visitors of all ages.

The goal for this Junior Gallery was to invite all visitors to engage in participatory activities whereby their experience could result in fun, increased appreciation, and/or learning about ideas that are represented in some of the works of art in the Museum's collection. Since the activities in the Junior Gallery were to use reproductions and not actual works of art, another goal of the Junior Gallery was to entice and encourage visitors to look at the real works of art in the Museum's other galleries.

Art museums are relatively new to the arena of interactive exhibits. To better understand visitors' behaviors and thoughts in this new context, a front-end evaluation was conducted using three specific, pre-determined works of art and hypothetical interactive exhibit ideas. The three works represented the extremities of the Museum's collection and they also provided a framework for developing activities. They were *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine* by Giovanni del Biondo, *Portrait of Ann Penn Allen* by Gilbert Stuart, and *Paper Carrier* by Dana Van Horn, a local artist (see Figures 1, 2, and 3).

Staff members had some ideas of the kinds of activities they wanted to include in the Gallery, but they had no idea how visitors would react to the activities—that is, if they would feel comfortable doing them. Staff members also had no idea how visitors thought about these works of art. What did they think about when viewing them? What did they see when looking at them? What was most meaningful? What was least meaningful?

Such questions are not easy for visitors to answer. The research tool would have to be one that would allow visitors to be alone with their thoughts and feelings, understand them, and then verbalize them—while they were still alone. Asking visitors to view works of art in a relatively empty gallery and to record their thoughts into a small hand-held tape recorder seemed like an appropriate strategy. This technique of asking visitors to tape-record their thoughts and conversations has been used in museum audience research to better understand visitors' experiences with objects (Silverman, 1990). In this case, visitors' remarks would provide insight into how visitors experience specific works of art. Their thoughts, it was believed, would suggest an interpretive approach, a context in which to place the paintings, and ideas for activities that visitors would enjoy and in which they would participate.

Half of the front-end evaluation focused on collecting descriptive information about visitors' reactions to the works of art and the other half focused on asking visitors about their interest in specific activities and whether or not they thought they would engage in them. This second half of the front-end evaluation was standardized so that every respondent was asked the same questions.

The first few questions had to do with the work of art. Visitors were asked to recall some of the things they thought about as they looked at the work of art. They were also asked some probing questions to help the museum staff better understand their line of thinking and some questions specifically about the work of art and the artist (for example, "Did the painting remind you of anything?" and "Is there anything in particular that you want to know?").

These questions were followed by ones about activities the Museum was considering having in the Junior Gallery. First there was a generic question about having participatory activities in an art museum, followed by a list of some possible activities about which visitors were asked to

comment from these perspectives: "Do you imagine yourself ignoring the activity, or interacting with it?" and, "What is unappealing (or appealing) about this activity?"

The list of activities were as follows:

1. Draw a self-portrait or another kind of drawing;
2. Put on period clothes like the ones in the painting;
3. Pretend you are the subject of the painting and take on their pose;
4. Write comments about a work of art on a bulletin board;
5. Participate in a learning activity where you try to match a particular art style to a time period;
6. Read quotes from the artist or other information about the work of art.

All visitors were randomly chosen from those entering the Museum. A total of 30 visitors was interviewed: 10 visitors talked about each painting and all 30 visitors were asked questions about the activities.

After a visitor agreed to participate in the study, the interviewer said,

"The first thing we are asking visitors to do is to look at one of the paintings in this gallery (and we would point to the painting). I would like for you to spend as much time with it as you like. Here is a tape recorder. I would like for you to speak into it and say what you are thinking about when you look at the painting. You can talk about anything that comes into your mind. There are not right or wrong things to say—we just want to know what our visitors think about when they look at it."

## Findings

As one might expect, the three paintings evoked different responses from visitors. However, visitors' remarks about two of the paintings followed certain paths that were quite distinguishable. Those trends were identified and are briefly described below.

*The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine:* The meaning of this painting caused confusion among visitors. While visitors knew it was a religious painting, they lacked the background knowledge that might have informed them about the painting and the symbolism behind each of the elements and figures. Visitors comments were objective—that is, personal reflections about what they were seeing were not visible in the data. Rather, visitors were trying to understand the story depicted in the painting and the symbolism of each of the figures and the objects associated with them.

Visitors frequently talked about the donor figure, although they did not call her by that title. In fact, they had no idea who she was or why she was so small. For example:

“I can’t figure out what that small creature symbolizes, but I think there is a great deal of symbolism in this little painting.”

“I wish I did know a little bit more about the story because I find it very interesting that the person in the foreground is so small in relation to the people in the back. I was wondering if this was done on purpose.”

Visitors were also unable to decipher the symbolism behind the wheel and the crown and had many questions about them.

“They look like a king and a queen and they look like they are getting married... and the wheel seems to signify something like life or death or something and it makes me feel like people in this picture are superior like the king and queen... the wheel... looked like he was going to kill her or something ’cause it had those spikes on it.”

Many visitors felt ignorant about the subject matter. For example, “I really don’t know this period of art...” and “I’m not a religious person, I don’t identify too much with the theme.” This painting, more than the other two, provoked visitors to ask many more questions. Why did he draw the lady so small? Why is she kneeling? Does the crown mean anything? Which is the bride? Who is the woman with the crown?

*Paper Carrier:* Visitors’ reactions to this painting were very personal. Visitors frequently commented on the relationship between the two girls and what they imagined it to be.

“I start having this conversation with myself as to whether they know... each other or not and I concluded that they did. I think they know each other, but I am not sure... I tend to look at the subjects in the painting and... play on them like a little story like what are they talking about, how they met, if they know each other—that interaction between the subjects is the most intriguing thing... and their faces too are the most intriguing thing in the painting.”

Visitors also started to reminisce while looking at the painting.

“It sort of... invokes an emotion, makes me think about my childhood, which I really don’t know why. There’s nothing in the painting that does per se, but it just has a feeling about it that looks so real but it makes me think back to when I was that age.”

“I can also remember the mailman coming into the hallways of apartment houses with rows of boxes with the flip top lids and the worn steps and the brick walls which are memories of some of the earlier days and simpler times...”

*Portrait of Ann Penn Allen:* This painting did not stir any particular emotion in visitors. While there was a distinct pattern in visitors’ thoughts about the other two paintings, such was not the case with this work of art. In fact, patterns were difficult to detect. The colors of the painting were mentioned more frequently than any other aspect.

“Her skin is so natural. Her cheek color is beautiful. I could stand here all day looking at it.”

The color of the background was also specifically mentioned as was the frame. The clothing intrigued a few visitors as well.

“I like her clothing, the way it just drapes at the side and it just gives me an idea of how it was back then when they wore ballroom dresses...”

Visitors’ responses to the activities followed a general trend. Visitors did not respond favorably to the idea of putting on period clothes or to pretending to be the subject of a painting. In other words, activities that required a performance of some sort were not well received by interviewees, especially adults. The drawing a self-portrait activity was fairly popular with adults and children with more than half saying they would likely engage in such an activity. But the most popular activities were those that were more passive. Visitors really liked the idea of a matching game and nearly all said they would like to read quotes by the artist or other information about the work of art.

Visitors’ comments about the three works of art and the list of activities were used as the centerpiece during a brainstorming session. The brainstorming session was attended by school art teachers, local architects, and museum staff members. Visitors’ comments about the works of art provided the framework for many of the activity ideas that were developed during that meeting. The ideas were finalized during a second meeting, and specific projects were delegated for building mock-ups for the formative evaluation. Within three weeks, the mock-ups were in place and the second phase of research began.

## Formative Evaluation

All the components in the Junior Gallery were produced in mock-up form to conduct the formative evaluation. It took place during a weekend to capitalize on high visitation. In addition, to attract as many visitors as possible, the Museum advertised that a special, one-time event was taking place at the Junior Gallery.

The formative evaluation process was very useful for staff members. They witnessed visitors' behaviors, realized the shortcomings of the activities, and conceived changes that would improve them. Those changes were fabricated immediately and installed in the gallery. Continual visitor feedback provided more information that would eventually lead to a final design for the Junior Gallery. Below are descriptions of a few of the activities and how they changed after visitors were observed interacting with them.

The introduction to the Junior Gallery included the actual painting *Paper Carrier*. Adjacent to it was a brief explanation about the difference between a real work of art and a reproduction. People were attracted to the large painting and then drawn into the space, so no changes were needed there.

During earlier interviews, when visitors looked at *Paper Carrier* they often reminisced and projected themselves into the work of art. These reactions were the basis for an activity which invited visitors to study a series of images on the wall. The images included reproductions of works of art as well as photographic magazine advertisements. The heading on the wall read, "Can you put yourself in these pictures?" A few short, one-sentence labels posed simple questions to visitors, and another label suggested that visitors write down any memories that the images provoked. If visitors wanted to, they could then post their memories on the wall. Visitors had little interest in this activity—observations showed that visitors would glance at the wall without stopping. The staff realized that the heading was not communicating the idea and that visitors felt overwhelmed because there were so many images. The heading was changed to "Can You See Yourself In These Pictures?" and the images were reorganized and their number reduced. While these changes were minor, visitors nevertheless began approaching the wall and studying the images. This simple activity was popular with adults who were with very young children.

Adjacent to the "Can You See Yourself" activity was another activity that encouraged cognitive interaction combined with looking. Reproductions of *Paper Carrier* were displayed on the wall along with printed comments about the painting from various art critics. The artist's thoughts were also placed on the wall. The heading on the wall read, "Here are some thoughts about this painting. What do you think?" A large piece of blank paper was placed beneath the images, along with words to invite

visitors to write their own opinion. While visitors were interested in what others thought about the painting, no one was sharing their thoughts.

The blank piece of paper (which was actually newspaper layout paper) was not very inviting to visitors. It was low, which was good for children, but it was too difficult for them to write on a horizontal surface. This problem was easily remedied by placing an already-existing long table with a slanted surface in front of the wall. This new arrangement drew more visitors than before as the table indicated that there was an activity waiting for visitors' participation. Clipboards with paper were placed on the table's surface so visitors could take one anywhere in the room to write their thoughts. Some visitors sat at the table to write their thoughts, while others took the clipboards and sat in nearby chairs. There was space on the wall for visitors to tack their thoughts next to the artist's thoughts, and many did so.

During the front-end evaluation it became clear that some of the visitors did not understand the meaning of the elements that composed *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine*. Visitors' comments and questions suggested to the staff that this work of art might be used to create a lesson about the symbolism in this painting to help them understand art of the time period. The lesson included two reproductions of the painting: one was intact, and the other was cut into pieces that fit together like a puzzle. Each element in the painting (the wheel on the lower right corner and the small donor figure, for example) was a piece of the puzzle. Each piece could be lifted up like a flip door and under the flip was a brief explanation of the meaning or symbolism of the object or person. This part of the activity worked well, but something seemed to be missing from the visitors' experience and general understanding.

While visitors were learning the meaning of the painting and the meaning of each individual element in the painting, they were not clear on the definition of symbol. Thus, a new activity was developed. It consisted of drawings of eight common symbols that people see everyday (a question mark, heart, and arrow, for example) along with matching words that visitors could attach beneath each picture. The whole display was placed on an easel and Velcro was used to adhere the words to their proper images. Above the activity, which was on the lower half of a board, was a simple statement defining the word *symbol*. Since this word is so conceptually difficult to explain to children, the children's librarian at the local library was called in to consult on the matter. The addition of this simple activity to the didactic lesson on *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine* improved the overall educational quality of the visitor experience.

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## Conclusions

The front-end research that was conducted for this project introduced the visitor's voice into the planning of the Junior Gallery so that there was a shared authority. Traditionally the interpretation of art objects is generated solely by staff members. In this case, the interpretive scheme in the Gallery supported visitors' natural way of thinking about each work of art. Staff members were energized and used visitors' thoughts and opinions to create meaningful activities that also responded to their need to produce stimulating and educationally significant activities. The strategy of letting visitors suggest the interpretive path is not common. This project illustrates that visitors' natural way of thinking about objects can be used advantageously so that both visitors and museum staff are accommodated.

## Reference

- Silverman, L. H. (1990). Of us and other "things": The content and function of talk by adult visitor pairs in an art and a history museum. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 51(08A), 2565.



**Figure 1**

**Giovanni del Biondo**

**Florentine School, active 1356-1392**

*The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine, ca. 1379*

Allentown Art Museum, Samuel H. Kress Memorial  
Collection, 1961. (61.40)



**Figure 2**

**Gilbert Stuart**

**USA, 1755-1828**

*Portrait of Ann Penn Allen, 1795*

**Allentown Art Museum, Purchase: Gift of John and Fannie  
Saeger, 1978. (78.13)**



**Figure 3**

**Dana Van Horn**

**USA, 1950**

*Paper Carrier, 1985*

**Allentown Art Museum, Purchase: Allentown Art Museum  
Auxilliary Gift, 1986. (86.15)**

