

Three Methods for Understanding Museum Audiences

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Museum professionals are increasingly looking to research as a means of uncovering answers to some fundamental questions about their audiences, exhibits, and programs. The first step in addressing such questions requires a clear understanding of various research tools. This paper looks at the characteristics of three different interview tools used in a study of museum visitors at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston and explores the relative utility of the three types of data. Each tool reflects a distinct method for assessing specific audience experiences and learning. Each tool defines the parameters of the information gathered, yielding a particular portrait of the museum audience. Demographic studies focus on numbers. Attitudinal studies identify preferences. Developmental studies reveal logic, comprehension, motivation. Each has distinct implications for museum programming.

A pilot study was designed to assess the audience at the ICA's "Currents" exhibit, focusing particular attention on educational needs. The study was done in late spring 1984, at a time when the ICA had instituted a new, thematic exhibit program consisting of parallel and interlocking exhibitions. This cross-section of the current art world exhibited several programs simultaneously in the areas of painting, sculpture, photography, video, film, and performance. One outcome of the study was to propose a means of enhancing the understanding of a broad range of visitors as to diverse contemporary art issues, styles, and media. Some of the work on display during the study was that of photographer Karl Baden, painters Elizabeth Murray and Susan Rothenberg, installation artist Jannis Kounellis, and video artist Dara Birnbaum, as well as movie publicity photographs organized by Diane Keaton and Marvin Heiferman.

Methodology

The pilot study incorporated three information-gathering procedures: demographic, attitudinal, and developmental. The demographic questions asked the viewer about age, sex, education, and museum attendance. These questions are the more traditional ones that museums often collect and perhaps must rely on for programming and policy decisions. Responses to such questions, however, may leave the museum policy maker without direction. Can knowing about a viewer's age or sex tell the museum educator or policy maker about the viewer, the exhibit, or the exhibit's impact on the viewer?

In view of these questions, the questionnaire was supplemented by a structured attitudinal interview. The interviewer asked the viewer open-ended questions tailored to ongoing exhibits at the ICA. To hold open-ended dialogues with the viewer about his response to an exhibit, museum program, or museum experience in general is not an uncommon interview practice. Interpretation of the findings may prove difficult when the responses are brief, vague, or contradictory. Often such findings generate a new set of questions rather than the hoped-for answers. One is reminded of the conversation in *Alice in*

Wonderland, where Alice says, “I can’t explain myself, I’m afraid, sir, because I’m not myself, you see.’ ‘I don’t see,’ said the caterpillar.”

Finally, information on the viewer’s level of aesthetic understanding constitutes the developmental data. Through the scoring of the aesthetic responses, the interviewer is able to analyze the viewer’s responses in terms of a framework of aesthetic understanding. Stage frameworks allow educational planners to design material according to the particular needs and interests of viewers at different stages (Table 1, Aesthetic Development Stages).

Table 1: Aesthetic Development Stages

Stage I, The Accountive Stage

The mode of viewing is by making random observations. The viewer notices the more concrete and obvious aspects of the content, subject matter or color in the painting (for example, “It’s a dog.” or “It’s brown.”) The viewer is guided by personal and idiosyncratic associations. For example, if the person likes dogs, the painting of a dog will be judged good. The viewers preferences, beliefs, and past history form the basis for making evaluations.

Stage II, The Constructive Stage

The viewer tries to build a framework for looking at works of art. With little exposure to art, the viewer matches the work to his own set of experiences and compares the painting to the world he sees and knows around him. This interest in realism is paralleled by a practical outlook. A work of art must serve a functional purpose. The function may vary from the moral and didactic to the mundane and worldly. A painting may reflect the good and joyous life or it may be worth a huge amount of money. In either case, the work is measured by its “worth.”

Stage III, The Classifying Stage

The viewer classifies the work of art. He decodes the artist’s intentions and historical influences by analyzing the clues left by the artist on the canvas. Those clues, the formal elements of line, color, and composition, form the criteria by which he perceives, decodes, and judges a work of art. For the first time the viewer confronts the work of art directly and objectively. His personal history and affect are suppressed. His detective work results in the correct placement of a work of art in terms of a period, school, style, or particular place within the artist’s oeuvre.

Stage IV, The Interpretive Stage

The viewer responds to a work of art in an individualized and immediate way. Fully able to decode, analyze and classify works of art, he now seeks less literal and objective goals than at the previous stage. he searches for a more meaningful message from the work of art and this time decodes symbols, not dots of color. he is aware of the role affect-laden memories play in his interpretation of those symbols and gives license to his thoughts and feelings. He may say, for example, “The art work gives me feelings of being in New York with my father when I was young.” Every fresh encounter with the work of art becomes a catalyst for the viewer, occasioning a new consciousness of both self and work.

Stage V, The Creative Reconstructive Stage

The viewer, suspending disbelief, treats the object as if it had a life of its own, with its own lawful properties and rules. While the viewer knows that the sailboat in the painting is not going to sail away, he may respond to the boat as if it could. The painting becomes semblant of reality. the viewer approaches the painting as a “friend,” a phrase he often mentions. The work I looked at from many different perspectives, with each new encounter colored by past insights. Everything in the painting’s history is considered: formal elements as well as museum acquisition dates warrant acknowledgment, since each detail reflects an intricate facet of the work as a whole. The encounter with the work demands that the viewer make equal use of all his faculties: perceptual, analytical, emotional. In the end, based on what he sees, what he knows, and what he feels, the viewer reconstructs the work of art for himself, again and anew.

The pilot study was based on a small but representative sample of the ICA’s audience. Interviews were conducted over a one-month period, from 11 April 1984 to 9 May 1984, during peak traffic hours of each day of the week. A trained interviewer started interviewing at a particular hour each day and then waited five minutes before selecting the next person leaving the museum exhibit. This “exit selection” technique proved highly effective and yielded different interview rates each day, depending on traffic. Because this was a pilot study, the sample was closed when thirty-six interviews were completed.

Each interview consisted of two parts: an open-ended aesthetic interview and a structured questionnaire. The aesthetic interview asked a respondent to talk out loud in a stream-of-consciousness fashion about a reproduction of the “Bathers” (1918) by Picasso.ⁱ This method traces in a detailed way what goes on in the viewer’s mind, eliciting rather than burying responses. In a totally unstructured, free-response situation, the interviewer tape records the viewer’s responses, prompting the respondent to continue until he has no more to say. A typical session averages around fifteen minutes.

The tape-recorded responses are transcribed and clinically coded independently by two expert coders in the following way: First an overall classification is given to each complete interview by a trained expert; then this rating is confirmed independently by coding individual responses. The interviews are broken down into thought units, some merely a few words, which are analyzed and scored using a scoring manual of aesthetic responses. The Aesthetic Development Scoring Manual classifies a viewer at an aesthetic stage, based on a profile of ratings of fifteen thought units randomly selected from the stream-of-consciousness interview.ⁱⁱ Each thought unit is a brief but complete idea uttered by the viewer. These can be phrases or sentences such as the following from several different viewers:

“It looks like a marshmallow.”

“The lighthouse is kind of stable.”

“There’s like this cool, clean, white space, compared to that jumble on the left, where there are hot colors, all busy.”

Each thought unit is scored by matching it to a category in the scoring manual. There are seventy-one categories in twelve domains. Each domain characterizes a different genre of remark such as Association, Interpretation, or Evaluation. Each category is formed to embody a remark empirically most likely to be uttered by a viewer at a particular stage. By matching a remark to domain and category, one can accumulate a small piece of statistical evidence about the probable stage of the viewer who uttered the thought. A variety of thought units can be classified from the Aesthetic Development Scoring Manual as follow (Table 2):

Table 2
Excerpt from Aesthetic Development Scoring Manual

Thought Units	Domain	Category	Stage Rating
“It looks like a marshmallow.”	Association	Looks like	I
“The lighthouse is kind of stable.”	Observation	General description	II
I wonder what kind of artist did that.”	Questioning	Rhetorical question about authorship	III
“There’s like this cool, clean white space, compared to that jumble on the left where there are hot colors, all busy.”	Comparison	Contrasting formal properties	IV

When fifteen thought units from one viewer are each given a stage rating, the resulting profile of ratings is highly predictive of an overall stage classification of the viewer. When profile derived stage ratings match the clinical estimate based on the whole interview, a final stage rating is assigned. This measurement theory and method was based on the work of Loevinger, a psychometrician who applied the method for the creation of other open-ended developmental measures. Agreement among raters of the same interview was high (85.2% agreement within a half stage; 97% within a full stage).ⁱⁱⁱ

After completing the aesthetic interview, respondents were asked a number of structured questions with the interviewer noting the answers. These responses were coded so that they could be easily cross-tabulated. Of the thirty-six respondents, thirty-five answered the questionnaire, twenty-nine completed the aesthetic interview, and twenty-eight completed both.

Demographic Data

What did the demographic questionnaire uncover about the ICA audience? Data from the questionnaire showed that the sample of visitors was comprised of young adults,

highly concentrated between twenty and forty years of age, with over 68 percent of the visitors female (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3		
<i>Distribution by Age</i>		
Age Category	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
15-20	2.9	2.9
21-30	54.2	57.1
31-40	22.9	80.0
41-50	14.3	94.3
51-60	00.0	94.3
60-over	5.7	100.0

Table 4	
<i>Sample by Sex and Occupation</i>	
Sample	Percent
Sex	
Female	68.6
Male	31.4
Occupation	
Artist, Art Student	68.6
Other	31.4

Occupation was highly concentrated in the job categories of artists or art students (Table 4). While a large percentage of the visitors had college degrees (85.7%), and even larger percentage had some art training (88.6%) (Table 5). Finally, museum attendance was frequent.

Table 5	
<i>Educational Profile</i>	
Sample	Percent
Education	
College Degree	83.7
Less	14.3
Art Training	
Some Art Courses	88.6
None	11.4
Degree in Arts	
Candidate or Received Degree	57.1
None	42.9

BFA/MFA Degree	
Candidate or Received Degree	48.6
None	51.4

Ninety-seven percent of the visitors in the sample visited a museum more than three times a year. In spite of this high attendance record, these visitors were not ICA members. In part, this may be due to the fact that roughly one-half of them were from out-of-state, yet 38 percent of the visitors claimed that they visited the museum frequently. Moreover, 85 percent said they were unconditionally interested in returning to the museum. In sum, the ICA audience sampled was composed of young, well-educated, predominantly female, serious museum-goers (Table 6).

Table 6	
Museum Attendance Profile	
Sample	Percent
Museum Attendance	
More than 3 times/yr.	97.1
Less	2.9
More than 10 times/yr.	85.7
Less	14.3
ICA Membership	
ICA Membership	2.9
Not a member	97.1
Frequency of ICA Visits	
First visit to ICA	41.2
Infrequent visits	20.6
Frequent visits	38.2
Residence	
In Massachusetts	54.3
Out of State	45.7
Length of Stay	
20 minutes	15.0
30 minutes	75.0
45 minutes	5.0
2 hours	5.0
Interest in Returning	
Unconditional	85.7
Conditional	14.3

This information is interesting and potentially useful for museum planners with specific questions. With no additional information to supplement it, however, the demographic data is exceedingly hard to interpret and may even be misleading. For example, one might assume that this group of young museum-goers would spend a longer than average time at the ICA. Instead, the questionnaire revealed that three-quarters of these viewers spent thirty minutes at the museum (Table 6). If the average museum visitor spends roughly two hours in a museum, with only one-quarter of this time attending to exhibits, the ICA visitor, even given the small size of the ICA, is not spending a longer than average amount of time in the galleries.^{iv} One is left puzzling about the meaning of the ICA visitor's visit. Does this mean that the visitors were disenchanted by the exhibits, came only for a cursory viewing, or were they sophisticated viewers who came just for a quick respite? This audience's training and education might lead one to conclude the latter, that the subjects were highly trained viewers. If so, why do not such apparent art-lovers and museum-goers, whether students or not, become members of the museum with all of the various benefits and discounts that such membership brings?

Attitudinal Data

The attitudinal questionnaire was able to shed some light on these concerns. The visitors were for the most part not superficial viewers idling their time away. First, almost half of the visitors (42.9%) spontaneously mentioned liking the informational pamphlets about the artists that were placed in the galleries. Second, 80 percent said they would use a resource center where they could go browse or look up additional information on the exhibits. This is quite a high response to educational aids since over three-quarters of the viewers had said that they generally do not use museum educational aids (Table 7).

Attitudes Toward Museum Education	
Sample	Percent
Use Museum Education Aids	
Yes	23.8
No	76.2
Spontaneous Attitude Toward ICA Pamphlets	
Spontaneously Mentioned Liking Them	42.9
No Mention	57.1
Would Use ICA Resource Center	
Yes	80.0
No	20.0
Want More Educational Direction	
Spontaneously Mentioned Wanting	51.4
No Mention	48.6

When these subjects were asked to comment on the exhibit, the responses were almost as varied as the number of subjects, with each aspect of the exhibition acclaimed by some and deplored by others. It is surprising that such a seemingly homogeneous sample came up with so many diverse responses, even given the cross-section of works involved in the exhibit. While this pattern is interesting, its real meaning remains elusive. Moreover, there is no clear information to guide the museum curator who wants to know what the viewer's experience of the exhibit was really like, the museum educator who wishes to know what kind of materials should be put in a resource center, the audience developer who wants to know why these visitors stay in the museum such a short time and are not museum members, and the public relations expert who wants to know how to formulate the next media campaign. Rather, these museum professionals have gathered a lot of conflicting and inconclusive pieces of information: the sample is comprised of avid museum-goers who are not members of this particular museum, of art-oriented viewers who stay a relatively brief time, of subjects marked by a homogeneity of characteristics but who strongly disagree over what they like about the museum itself. The museum professionals do not know what kind of information, either in terms of content or format, to offer these visitors, since some like the photographs, others the paintings, and still others like everything, including the printed materials that many failed to mention.

Developmental Data

It was not until the demographic and attitudinal responses were analyzed in relation to the Aesthetic Interviews that useful patterns began to emerge. These interviews, which were analyzed and coded using the Aesthetic Development Scoring Manual, allowed the researcher to look at the viewers in terms of levels of aesthetic development. These stages constitute distinct and coherent systems for interpreting and reacting to objects of art. Each stage is one of five major steps in a progression from naive to complex responses in viewing an art object. Each stage represents a fundamental shift in the way in which a person perceives the art object, reasons about it, and constructs his experience of it (see Table 1, Aesthetic Development Stages). Stages of aesthetic development have been shown to relate to a variety of behaviors of museum-goers, ranging from motives for going to the museum and the duration and frequency of visits to the actual way in which viewers walk through galleries and peruse pictures.^v Stages have been shown to correlate highly with age, education, and exposure to art and to shape in a fundamental way how museum-goers approach a museum visit.^{vi}

What light can this model shed on some of the patterns gathered from the questionnaires? Can these patterns be examined in terms of stages of aesthetic development? First the developmental trends are intriguing. The ICA seems to be attracting an audience highly focused at particular stages. Not only is nearly half the sample at a particular half-stage (one of a nine-stage continuum), but more than two-thirds of the sample are at stages involving a significant component of Stage IV thinking: 44.9 percent of the viewers are at Stage II/IV, 13.8 percent at Stage III/IV, and 10.3 percent at Stage IV. Second, there is a comparative absence of low-stage respondents, as well as an absence of high-stage respondents. This is an unusual distribution that is not occurring by chance. The ICA appears to be attracting a visitor with a particular mindset (Table 8).

Table 8

Distribution of Aesthetic Stages

	Stage							
	I	II	II/III	II/IV	III	III/IV	IV	V
Percentage	0	13.8	6.9	44.9	10.3	13.8	10.3	0
	0	13.8	20.7	65.6	75.9	89.7	100	100

Once an investigator knows the aesthetic level of the audience, what sense can be made of the demographic information, and what gains are made in understanding the needs and interest of that audience? It is possible to put contradictory information about the museum audience into perspective. Why do these art lovers spend an average of thirty minutes in the museum? And why to these viewers say they would like to use a resource room when they also say that they seldom use education supports in museums?

A close look at the viewers at Stage II/IV, who make up 44.9 percent of the audience sampled helps to clarify the question about length of visit. Stage II/IV is an empirically derived stage that represents one of the dual pathways observed from Stage II to III. This stage is characterized by certain imbalances, as traits from Stages II and IV are combined. Viewers at this stage enjoy sharing their thoughts and feelings about works of art. This group is characterized by viewers who have significant exposure to aesthetic objects, as both makes of art objects and appreciators. The aesthetic interviews, however, reflect an absence of a critical or analytical framework. The short amount of time spent in the galleries is most likely explained by this absence. Lengthy visits often presuppose thinking that draws upon analytical skills, such as the ability to interpret aesthetic symbols and a critical context.

The developmental data help further to clarify the mixed messages about education programming. A close look at the characteristics of Stage IV viewers shows that these viewers are interested in a personal, immediate, and spontaneous encounter with the work of art. While able to call upon a more formal analysis of the work of art, the viewer prefers to use intuition, current interests, and affect-laden memories as guides to the work of art. Information, critical skill, and training are in the service of emotions. The goal for this viewer is an encounter with the art work, which brings forth new distinctions, new subtleties, hidden comparisons and paradoxes, and, in the end, a new consciousness about the art object.

A majority of these viewers would not readily take advantage of more structured and traditional program offerings. Still, the concept of a resource center that allows the individual to hunt and peruse material at his own pace and in his own fashion would be appealing.

Implications

While there are not enough subjects in the pilot study to lead to conclusive findings, several trends are interesting. While the ICA is primarily attracting viewers who share

the characteristics of Stage IV, there is a split amongst those viewers. The II/IV viewers, 44.9 percent of the sample, need guidelines for understanding and interpreting contemporary art. In fact, more than one-half of the respondents at this stage spontaneously mentioned interest in having more educational support. These viewers, as well as additional target audiences, would benefit from an extended educational program. A clear overview of the exhibit in the context of modern art is needed to offer support and guidance for an understanding of contemporary art.

Almost one-quarter of the visitors are at Stages III/IV and IV. This group of visitors seeks a more personal encounter with a work of art, enjoying programs or materials that involve choice and challenge. These viewers are, in fact, coming to the ICA because of the new exhibit program. Even this group responded favorable to the idea of a resource area.

With these factors in mind, one suggestion was an exhibition orientation area that could be designed to be used either before or after the viewing of the exhibits. The aesthetic development model could guide the selection of written as well as visual materials. An informal setting, which allows the visitor to structure his own learning, follow her own interests, would meet the needs of the Stage IV visitor. This area could be filled with carefully selected documentaries, slides, tapes, video presentations, and written materials that could change with each exhibit. Orientation material could also be included in this area to meet the needs of the naive viewer. Simple slide presentations or portfolios of current exhibits, as well as commentary on modern art, could extend the gallery experience both in scope and time for both first-time visitors as well as new converts to contemporary art.

With these thoughts in mind, the ICA extended its orientation area to include journals and books. With the needs of the naive audience in mind, the ICA expanded its outreach program. In the past year, the study became a guideline for the development of evaluation procedures and for the development of two new outreach programs, "Access Contemporary" and "Facing History and Facing Ourselves," a curriculum on the holocaust. Both programs are for high school audiences.

Conclusion

The fallacy that museum visitors display uniform needs, interest, and understanding defies daily experience as well as common sense. Individual differences abound in museums as elsewhere. Consequently, researchers must devise measurement tools that will elicit the types of differences relevant to the understanding of art in museum settings. Appropriate methods are needed to discover the unique forms of learning that take place in museums and to provide a source of information to guide educational policy and practice. In this study, by combining three types of interview tools, it was possible to draw a sharper picture of the ICA audience than if one measure alone were used.

Demographic measures gave the needed statistics about sex, age, occupation, education, and museum attendance. This information reflects the necessary but more apparent data that investigators often can observe, collect inexpensively, and process quickly.

Attitudinal data reflect the often deeper, less apparent self-reports about preferences and beliefs. Attitudinal measures allow the researcher to tailor questions to particular exhibits, settings, and individuals.

Finally, developmental data represent a type of deeper information that people cannot report about themselves because it is so difficult to grasp how one's own pattern of thinking differs from another's. Developmental data identify thought types, encompassing what an individual comprehends, reason about, or finds compelling and motivating in a particular domain. These data reveal the person behind the statistics. Developmental models can serve as a source of insight, direction, and confirmation in the planning of museum programs. Taken together, the three methods offer guidelines to the museum planner in the design of programs and policy.

ⁱ 1. Abigail Housen, "The Eye of the Beholder: Measuring Aesthetic Development" (Ed.D.diss., Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1983).

ⁱⁱ Ibid., 226-318.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jane Loevinger, "The Meaning and Measuring of Ego Development," *American Psychologist* (1966): 193-206.

^{iv} John Falk, "The Use of Time as a Measure of Visitor Behavior and Exhibit Effectiveness," in *Museum Education Anthology, 1973-1983: Perspectives on Informal Learning, A Decade of Roundtable Reports*, ed. Susan K. Nichols (Washington, DC: Museum Education Roundtable, 1984), 183-190.

^v Abigail Housen, "Levels of Aesthetic Development: A Study of the Museum Visitor" (Unpub. paper, 1977), 140-171. See also A. Housen, "Institute of Contemporary Art Audience Study: Evaluation and Development of Gallery Oriented Programs" (Unpub. report, 1984)

^{vi} Housen, "Eye of the Beholder."