



What Do Visitors Mean by “Meaning”?

by Beverly Serrell, Matt Sikora, and Marianna Adams

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The mission of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) is to create experiences that help each visitor find personal meaning in art. As part of the summative evaluation of the DIA’s museum-wide reinstallation project, a team of evaluators investigated how visitors find personal meaning in the galleries.¹ Rather than impose a definition of personal meaning from the outset, the study was designed to explore the concept in visitors’ own terms. Participants were asked to photograph places in the galleries where they found personal meaning and were then interviewed about their selections. Analysis identified how frequently individual participants appeared to use labels and other interpretives, the types of meaning they found, and patterns across different works of art and gallery suites. Thus, the study turned the question from what do we mean by “meaning” to what do *visitors* mean by “meaning,” and explored the implications for how and where to offer interpretation that will help visitors find it.

Background

From 2002 to 2007 the DIA undertook a major reinstallation project. It included a new approach to interpreting the collections for visitors that would emphasize experiences with art rather than give lessons in art history. The objectives of the interpretive strategies in the permanent galleries were to support visitors’ efforts to engage with the art by telling stories and making connections with universal human concerns. Labels would encourage looking closely, seeing details, making discoveries, and gaining new understanding—with the goal to help all visitors feel informed and empowered.²

The DIA educators and curators developed a variety of interpretive devices, ranging from wall texts, introductory panels, and extended object labels, to low-tech interactives with flaps to flip, or pages to turn, to unusual video projections.³ They employed visitor studies every step of the way to ensure that the museum would meet its goal of being “visitor-centered.” Front-end studies were conducted with visitor panels to test the common human-experience themes. Formative evaluation prototyped every type of interpretive strategy, and staff members participated in a few of the studies to become more aware of and committed to the process of evaluation and to understand its benefits. The summative studies have included extensive investigations of the actual behavior of visitors in the galleries. This rare combination of having institution-wide interpretation, targeting it for novice visitors, and guiding its development by evaluation makes the DIA unusual and exceptional in its efforts to understand and improve the quality of visitors’ experiences with art.⁴

Methods

One aspect of the summative evaluations of the interpretive strategies focused on how visitors found personal meaning in the art at the DIA. For this, the Finding Personal Meaning (FPM) study, subjects were shown a copy of the DIA’s mission statement—“The DIA creates experiences that help each visitor find personal meaning in art”—and were given a digital camera and instructed to take six to nine photographs of places in an assigned gallery where the DIA helped them find personal meaning. This approach maximized the contextual and experiential aspects of the open-ended research question—How do visitors find

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meaning in art?—and placed visitors in a situated experience in which to discuss their encounters with the art.⁵

Participants were recruited by one of the DIA’s in-house evaluators, Ken Morris. Almost all had been to the DIA in the last 12 months, and most had no special training in art. The gender and age mix paralleled the overall demographic of the DIA (favoring females, favoring older adults). These characteristics also matched the target audience for the interpretive materials: infrequent, non-member visitors who were art novices.

The DIA staff selected three areas of the permanent collection for the FPM study. These areas showcase dissimilar types of art—Renaissance, Contemporary, and African—and include a variety of interpretive strategies. Each recruit went through one of the three galleries on his or her own, spending up to 20 minutes, which was the advised amount of time. Afterward, an evaluator escorted the person to a quiet room where he or she could sit, look at the photos downloaded onto a laptop computer, and talk about them. As the visitor discussed the photos, the conversation was video recorded with VoiceThread software for later reference and transcription.

Study participants took as few as three and as many as 16 photos. Images included individual artworks, groups of art, interpretive devices, and spaces (e.g., areas of the gallery). For each photo, the participant was asked, “In what ways did this have meaning for you?” or “What about this had personal meaning to you?” If the person did not make any reference to the interpretives, the evaluator probed,

“Do you remember seeing any written information? Did you read anything about this?” Although the visitors experienced the art alone and did not benefit from the typical social aspects of a museum visit, the conversations with the evaluators encouraged the kind of self-reflective thoughts that might emerge during a visit with family or friends.

The final count was 56 complete and usable datasets (photos, narrative, transcription), 18 to 20 respondents for each gallery.

Findings

We’ve summarized the findings here in three ways: 1) the ways in which visitors found meaning while looking at the art, 2) examples of the artworks that inspired the most people to have meaningful encounters, and 3) the frequency with which participants in the FPM study referred to the interpretations while discussing their meaning-making.

Ways of Finding Meaning

In the early stages of the data analysis the evaluators agreed that there were three main “ways of finding meaning” that emerged from visitors’ narratives of their photos: Familiarity & Connections, Learning & Understanding, and Preferences & Properties.

Familiarity & Connections

When visitors talked about what made something personally meaningful to them, they commented most often about finding something familiar in or making a connection with the subject of the art. They saw themselves or were reminded of something personal. For example:

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“I knew immediately it was a Jewish challah, which has meaning to me because of my own Jewish heritage, and so I was attracted to that.” Visitor comment.

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My father passed away in July and the label made me think that, not that he was still here, but that his spirit made a transition to a better place. It made me feel better about it, not so sad.

I knew immediately it was a Jewish challah, which has meaning to me because of my own Jewish heritage, and so I was attracted to that.

Learning & Understanding

Also frequent were reflections about discovering something new or how learning enhanced the meaning of the art. Learning & Understanding sound like this:

I read the label and then it had even greater meaning. It all of a sudden became something very powerful.

These are commoners that are celebrating a wedding. This artist wanted to raise that awareness among the rich and famous, and I thought he did a great job at it. And I thought the booklet was really very helpful in putting all that together.

When you read the booklet that's in the front it gives you a different appreciation for something as simple as the ground you walk on. The irregularities of each stone. And how each one is unique but it still makes a straight and narrow path.

Preferences & Properties

Less frequent but still a strong trend were comments about the properties of the art or a preference for the subject or medium. Examples were:

There was no color and everything was monotone. It allowed me to pay attention to the shapes and the patterns and the sequence of the patterns.

I really liked it because, first of all, it's beautiful.

There's a lot of detail in that picture. A lot of work in that picture which would make you stand there for a few minutes and look at it.

Considering all 56 subjects' comments together, the three ways of finding meaning varied in frequency somewhat across the galleries. In the Renaissance and Contemporary galleries, visitors' comments about finding meaning through Familiarity & Connections and Learning & Understanding were about equal in number. In the African art galleries, visitors made relatively more comments about finding meaning through Familiarity & Connections. In all three galleries, Preferences & Properties were cited less frequently than the other two categories.

Examples of Art Where Many Visitors Found Meaning

A few of the artworks in each gallery attracted far more attention than the others in the FPM study. In these “hot spots” it was not uncommon to hear people use a combination of the ways of finding meaning, often starting with the physical or visual properties of the art or a prior connection or familiarity, then moving to thoughts about the information and feelings they got from the interpretation. Below are three examples of artworks and their interpretive devices that were among the most “popular”



Oil painting of “Saint Ives of Treguier, Patron of Lawyers, Defender of Widows and Orphans,” by Peter Paul Rubens. The graphic interpretive panel below calls out features of the artwork that invite viewers to connect with St. Ives’ compassion. Photo by Matt Sikora.

pieces, that is, those in which the most participants found personal meaning. Regardless of the topic or content in these cases, the ways of finding meaning were remarkably similar.

In the Renaissance gallery—“St. Ives” and a freestanding graphic panel

People were drawn to the art largely by St. Ives’ bright red cape and by the emotional facial expressions. The information on the panel gave visitors a more interesting and inspiring experience with the art by explaining how the artist used details to elicit an emotional connection between

viewers and the subject.

I really like the way it was explained. And not just a general explanation but a very definite explanation pinpointing, okay this little area, this is what you’re to gain from that, here’s why this is important. I really like that. It made it interesting.

Sometimes you don’t know what the artist really meant. That’s why you need tools to inspire your own definition. You need tools to inspire your own creative thoughts.

The most common way visitors found personal meaning was first to relate to the visual aspects of the art and their own experiences and then to go beyond that, using the interpretation to explore those aspects and new ones further.



“Das Geviert” (The Square), by Anselm Kiefer, who used emulsion, acrylic, shellac, burnt clay, clay, wire, and sand on canvas, basing it on a photo of a brick factory in India. Photo by Matt Sikora.

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The graphics and text gave visitors a way to connect meaningfully with the story by putting themselves into the picture:

I’m a product of a single parent mother. And we would go to churches asking for help when we were young.

This one speaks to my personal passion of reaching out and helping those who are disadvantaged and disenfranchised. Since I am a social worker it just speaks to my heart.

A lot of the work that I do is with mothers and babies in poverty. It’s depicted there with the look on her face, and the look on his face, his compassion.

Other comments from visitors who went to the Renaissance Galleries were often about how the art and the interpretation put them in touch with virtues and religious stories.

In the Contemporary gallery—“The Square” and a book label on a pedestal More people included “The Square” in their photo essay than any other artwork in the Contemporary galleries. Visitors were drawn to this painting by its size, and they wondered about its meanings. They were struck by the visual properties and searched for how to understand it:

It’s very overwhelming. It’s gigantic. I didn’t know where to start.

I didn’t know what it was. In fact I

“I read the information that went along with this one. It told you that it was a royal and that she was nursing her baby as a symbol of carrying the royal dynasty on through her lineage. I am a mom, so I really like this one. All mothers should be treated and looked upon as royalty because they do so much.” Visitor comment

even took my cellphone out and tried to Google ‘Das Geviert,’ because I wondered what that meant.

Many people found and used the flip-book label, which helped them get new perspectives on the artwork by explaining the symbolism and historical references found in the work.

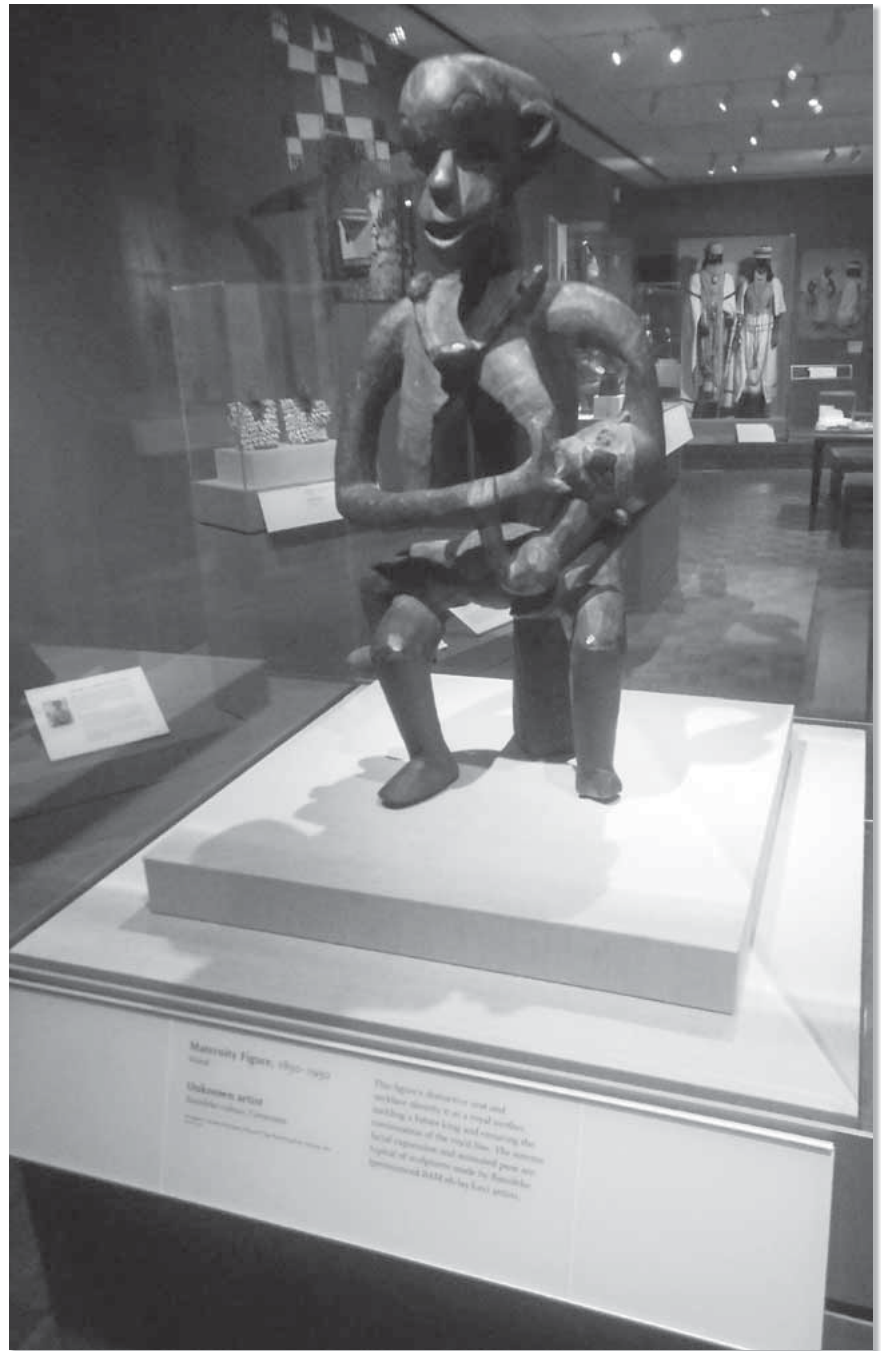
They found personal connections and felt appreciation for the design and the artist’s intent. Comments at other places in the Contemporary galleries often suggested that the interpretation had rescued them from hesitation or puzzlement with contemporary art.

In the African gallery—“Maternity Figure” and an extended object label
The nursing mother caught people’s attention, and they related to personal maternal care and health issues. The object label, located below the case, was helpful because it reinforced existing knowledge and feelings and added new understanding:

We’ve got babies so it was kind of interesting to see. You know like other cultures valuing that kind of natural nourishment.

I know this one said how that particular statue depicting a baby breastfeeding with the mom is to insure the health of the baby and the mother. Because I know back then I’m sure the death rate was high during childbirth so I really like that. And I like the closeness of the mom.

They quoted and expanded on the label that talked about how the royal mother



Carved wood “Maternity Figure” from Cameroon by an unknown artist, with the extended object label.
Photo by Matt Sikora.

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When planning exhibitions and interpretation, we can ask ourselves, What kinds of experiences in these displays will help visitors say, “I was drawn to it, and when I read about it, I felt connected, and when I know more about it, it makes me feel important”?

was raising a future king:

This one I liked because the caption said that she was feeding a future king. She is nurturing something that is about to rule an empire. Mothers need to cherish and protect and nurture the children that they have. You don't know what you have, you know, like you can have the next president.

I read the information that went along with this one. It told you that it was a royal and that she was nursing her baby as a symbol of carrying the royal dynasty on through her lineage. I am a mom, so I really like this one. All mothers should be treated and looked upon as royalty because they do so much.

Other labels in the African art gallery helped visitors recognize themselves in the unfamiliar objects that dealt with shared values of motherhood, marriage, death, and spirituality.

The Frequency of Using Interpretives

Counting the number of comments made by individuals, a majority of the subjects reported making high use of a variety of written interpretation strategies available to them in all the galleries.⁶ That is, many people's comments and/or photos contained references to the labels or interactive texts. Approximately one third referred to the interpretation about half the time. About 9 of the 56 participants made infrequent reference to the interpretive strategies. Thus, the most common way visitors found personal meaning was first to relate to the visual aspects of the art and their own experiences and then to go beyond that, using the interpretation to explore those aspects and new ones further.

Visitors who made little or no reference to the interpretation included both those who were somewhat art savvy and those who were not. They found meaning through their own preferences and familiarities, experiences they brought with them rather than gained by reading and discovering new things that were afforded by the DIA's interpretation. We were curious to know, if they didn't use it, who did they think the interpretation was for? Their answers varied: The interpretation was for people who are *not* familiar with art; for people who already *did* know about art; for those who wanted more information; or for kids or students.

Conclusions and Implications

Most people in the DIA's Finding Personal Meaning study included references to the interpretation in their photos and comments, how it had helped them see new details, understand the story or content of the art, and make connections with their experiences. Listening to what they said in all three galleries, we heard that meaning is often the “Oh!”:

They were drawn to it visually. “I went, Oh wow!”

They were reminded of something. “Oh, look at this.”

They saw themselves or made connections to the story. “Oh, they look just like me.”

They knew about it already. “Oh, there it is!”

They felt confirmed and validated. “Oh, yeah, I see that.”

They learned something new. “Oh look, it's down there.”

The findings from this study are valuable to curators, interpreters, educators, designers, and evaluators because the visitors' feedback reminds us that their visit is about their experience with the art, not just getting more information.

Knowing more, understanding, and making sense was meaningful. "Oh, okay, that makes sense."

They wondered and questioned. "Oh, maybe it's in the flip book?"

From this feedback, we saw evidence for what visitors mean by "meaningful" and indications that the DIA interpretives played an important role in making those discoveries.

The findings from this study are valuable to curators, interpreters, educators, designers, and evaluators because the visitors' feedback reminds us that their visit is about their experience with the art, not just getting more information. It's about surprise, connecting, and understanding. When planning

exhibitions and interpretation, we can ask ourselves, What kinds of experiences in these displays will help visitors say, "I was drawn to it, and when I read about it, I felt connected, and when I know more about it, it makes me feel important"?

The findings are valuable to evaluators because we now have more authentic, experiential questions to use in our summative evaluations that go beyond "What did you like?" Exit interview prompts or probes that will resonate with visitors' meaning-making thoughts might include, What would you like to remember from your visit today? Something that you saw...or made a connection with... or discovered that was new? Something that made you say, "Oh!?" ✨

End Notes:

1. The team of evaluators included the authors and Ken Morris, evaluator at the DIA.
2. For a more complete description of the renovations, see the *Curator* articles listed in the references.
3. For a complete description and summative evaluation of the types of labels and interactives, see the Phase 1 report available from the DIA's evaluation department.
4. The summative evaluations were made possible by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services.
5. A complete description of the methods and findings is in the Phase 2 final report available from the DIA's evaluation department.
6. These numbers are found in Marianna Adams' analysis in the Phase 2 report.

References:

- Penney, D. (2009). Reinventing the Detroit Institute of Arts: The reinstallation project 2002-2007. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 52(1), 35-44.
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