

Entrance Icons: Visual Meaning-Making in Museum Entrance Galleries

by Darcie MacMahon

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All great natural history museums (and many other museums) have a central “icon” that welcomes visitors as they walk through the front doors. Let’s call them “entrance icons,” singular or grouped specimens, models, or sculptures that form a central island in entrance galleries or “Great Hall” spaces. Typically large and old (and preferably dangerous), they are frequently dinosaurs but can be other large organisms such as sharks, whales, or elephants, or large cultural objects such as canoes or totem poles. Entrance icons ornament the architectural spaces of museum Great Halls and are a focal point for visitor gatherings, while also indicating the nature of the institution. They may attain the “good friend” status of iconic exhibits for repeat visitors. Rarely, however, do they go beyond that, and may be a missed opportunity to conceptually

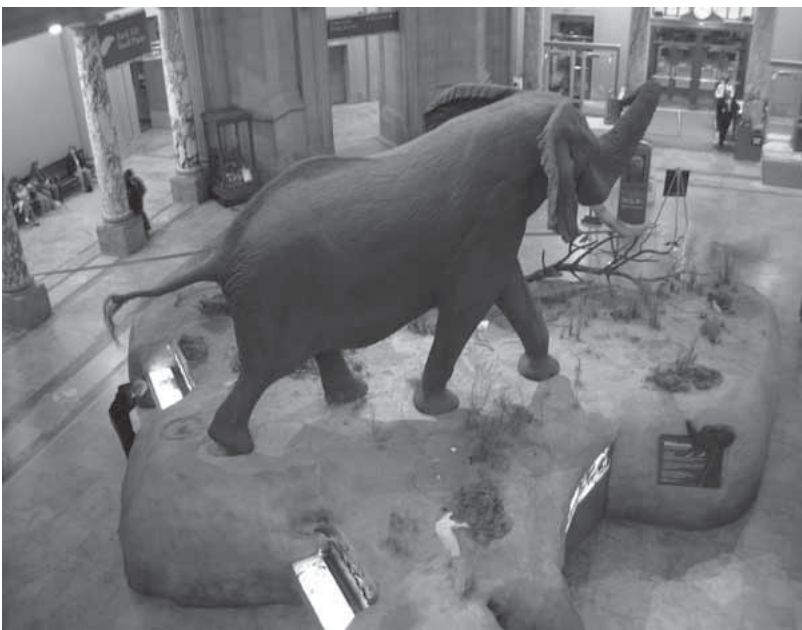
orient museum visitors to the museum experience. In fact, entrance icons may give visitors ideas that reinforce dreaded museum stereotypes.

This article recounts a visitor study conducted at the Florida Museum of Natural History, comparing our entrance icon (mammoth and mastodon skeletons) with a proposed redesign. By asking questions such as “What does this make you think of?” we discovered that visual meanings can and do occur at a glance. Couched in meaning-making research, this information is a tantalizing foundation for further exploration of how we communicate meaning visually, and how we can better position our entrance galleries to frame the museum visit.

Genesis of the Florida Museum Study

We fell into our entrance icon study backwards. We’d been designing a new expansion, and designer Tim Ventimiglia (of Ralph Appelbaum Associates) couldn’t resist offering a concept for our Great Hall. Due to vagaries of funding and planning, this was the only space in the museum that had never been thoughtfully designed. Frankly, it was ugly, and gave a false impression of what visitors would find in the exhibitions. The mammoth and mastodon served as the only bright spot in the space, otherwise festooned with little more than exposed ducts and trusses.

The new concept, titled “Panorama of Life,” offered a big change. Utilizing the Great Hall’s volume, the Panorama is anchored by the mammoth but explodes into a swirling array of Florida flora and fauna. We had no funding and were in the midst of an expansion, but I kept the rendering handy to show around in hopes



The iconic elephant in the entrance gallery of the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution. Courtesy of Darcie MacMahon.



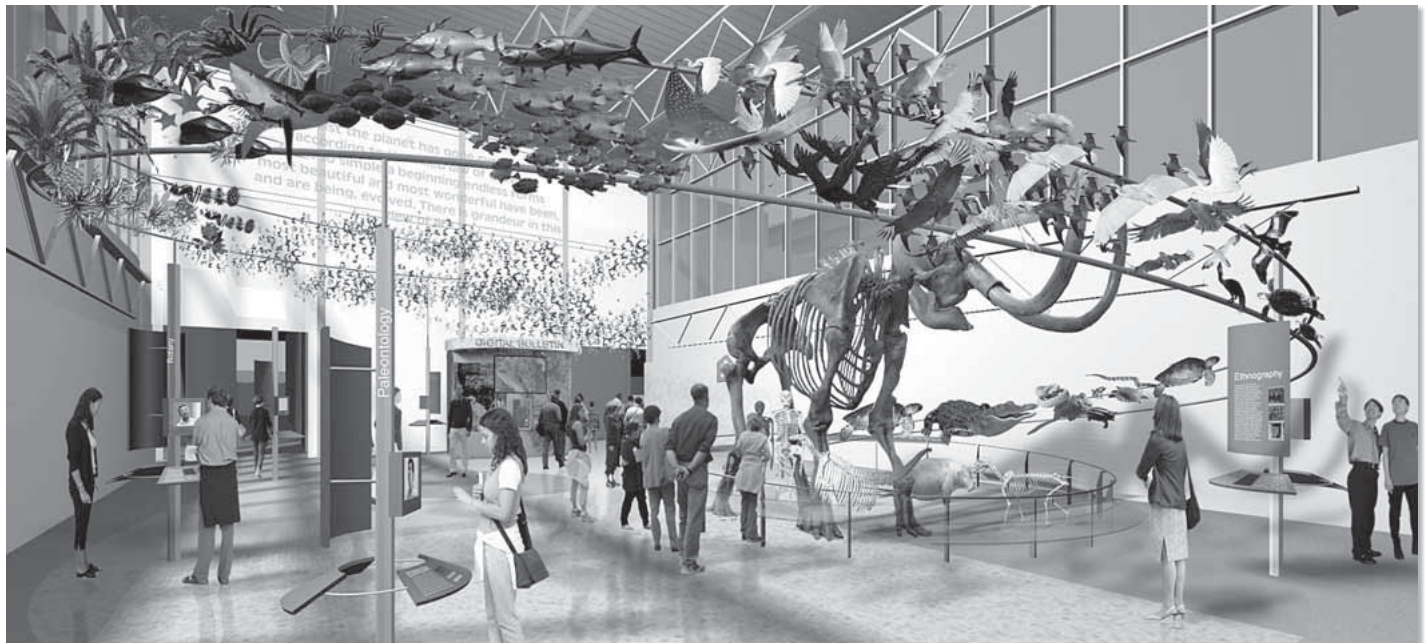
The Florida Museum of Natural History's Great Hall, 2005, with the mammoth and mastodon entrance icon. Courtesy of Florida Museum of Natural History.

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of generating interest and funds. Strong positive responses intrigued me. Obviously it hugely improved our sterile Great Hall! But its appeal seemed somehow more profound, potentially offering a way to shape visitor experience. I tasked a graduate student with a visitor study, comparing the current Great Hall to the new concept.

The Study

In 2005, we tackled a small but interesting study (LeGrand, 2005). We asked how people felt when they came into the space and what the mammoth and mastodon made them think about. We then showed the “Panorama” rendering, asked people to imagine being in that space, and then asked the



THE GREAT HALL - A PANORAMA OF LIFE

The “Panorama of Life”—a proposed redesign of the Florida Museum’s Great Hall (by Tim Ventimiglia, Ralph Appelbaum Associates). Courtesy of Florida Museum of Natural History.

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same questions. We also observed and documented visitor Great Hall behavior.

During observation, we found that half of our visitors were drawn immediately to the mammoth and mastodon. When surveyed, visitors reported the space as feeling “sterile” or “empty,” though also “comfortable” and “open.” When asked what the mammoth and mastodon made them think about, the largest percentage (41%) answered “prehistory” or “history,” while 17% focused on specifics of the fossil skeletons. Miscellaneous responses included “evolution,” “elephants,” and other museums with fossils. One said “dead things on display.”

In contrast, the new icon concept felt “more exciting,” “more interesting,” “more welcoming.” Many noted design features such as color, “fullness,” object diversity, and beauty. People’s thoughts contrasted markedly from those evoked by the mammoth and mastodon. They included “plants and animals (28%),” sometimes specifying Florida, along with multiple responses for “natural history,” “diversity,” “nature/the natural environment,” “evolution.” One specified “the spectrum of life” and five stated specifically that the proposed design gave them a better idea of what they might experience in the rest of the museum.

This modest study demonstrated that visitors do make meaning visually, at a glance, and have both affective (feeling) and cognitive (thought) responses. The mammoth and mastodon evoked consistent thoughts of prehistory and fossils, while the new concept elicited thoughts of diversity and nature. Also intriguing were comments that

it represented “what the whole museum is going to be about,” thus suggesting conceptual orientation for the museum experience.

Background for Understanding the Study

With data in hand, I sought out other work on visual learning, entrance galleries, and “icons.” I was surprised to find that we know little about exhibit design’s potential to visually convey concepts. We also know little about how people “feel” inside Great Hall spaces and how that affects overall museum experience. And while conceptual orientation is known to be important to visitor experience, using entrance icons for this purpose was unexplored. Here are some things I gleaned.

Architecture and Physical Space

How do architectural spaces, particularly entrance galleries or “Great Halls,” shape visitor experience? They create powerful first impressions. Museums have been cited as modern “cathedrals” that inspire visitors and sanctify their contents, often announced by grand entrances and voluminous lobbies. Falk and Dierking identified the physical context of museum visits (along with social and personal contexts) as primary in affecting visitor experience. One family’s year-later museum memories were almost exclusively about physical context: the front staircase, brick façade, gift shop, beautiful entrance gallery and dinosaur (or elephant, depending on informant) near the entry (Falk & Dierking, 1992). Clearly museum architecture can leave lasting impressions, and entrance galleries may be remembered for their beauty and entrance icon.

A Need for Conceptual Orientation

We know that when visitors enter a museum, they need orientation. Many studies cite logistical orientation needs as critical to visitor satisfaction, including the nitty-gritty of wayfinding signage, circulation, facilities, staffing, and visitor guides. But conceptual orientation is recognized as equally or more critical—it helps people organize their knowledge, see exhibitions in the context of major messages, and have a richer learning experience. Some studies note entrance galleries as ideal locations for conceptual orientation, but most stop there or simply suggest brief overviews in visitor guides or kiosks.

Related research explores “advance organizers”—conceptual information provided before visitors enter an exhibition to direct attention and focus learning, helping people feel more comfortable and able to engage and learn. In theory, advance organizers for the whole museum experience, presented in the Great Hall, would provide needed conceptual orientation. Could it be done with entrance icons?

What About “Icons”?

Museums are themselves iconic in our cultural psyche, and museum architecture reflects this status. It makes sense that museums choose grand iconic objects to ornament Great Halls and wow visitors. They can even inspire careers (Stephen Jay Gould, cited in Weil, 2003). Research on large iconic objects reveals they serve as magnets—drawing visitors, focusing attention, and piquing curiosity (Korn et al. 2003). Related research on “landmark exhibits” (large, vivid elements within exhibitions) shows they command

visitor attention and strongly influence circulation. Say Bitgood and Lankford: “Place a large, attractive object in the middle of a gallery, and people tend to walk toward it” (1995, p. 5).

Also relevant are studies of “iconic exhibits.” Imbued with strong symbolic meaning (Giusti, 2003), iconic exhibits are “of special importance to visitors or the institution. Visitors often go out of their way...to visit icons,” such as the coal mine at Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry. Say Anderson and Roe (1993): Museums “can use icons...as anchor exhibits, as recognizable emblems of the institution and as vehicles to establish a link to visitor affect and learning.”

Certainly entrance icons can attain iconic exhibit status. They have the power to draw visitors, focus attention, involve emotions, elevate curiosity and inspire lives. They can also convey concepts. But museums have not investigated entrance icons as vehicles to orient visitors to major messages. Why not?

Research on Visual Meaning-Making

Research on how visitors make meaning is vast. We know that people enter a museum with a host of expectations, knowledge and interests, shaping meanings they derive along with the nature of their visit and content the museum provides. Clearly, people make meaning in very personal and complex ways, sometimes unrelated to meanings the museum intends.

At the heart of the entrance icon quandary is the specific question of how people process visual information and make meaning of it. Most visual learning

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research is not terribly relevant, either concerned with helping people understand fine arts, improving marketing through strategic graphic and web design, or designing science center interactives for optimal use and understanding.

In our society, we value vision highly among the senses and often see it as objective. Yet meanings made of things we see are fluid, and there is no single interpretation. In her beautifully detailed study of visual culture, Hooper-Greenhill explores the ways we interpret objects visually, using both “tacit knowledge” (of the senses) and “verbal knowledge” (what a person knows and what others know) (2000, p. 116). A museum’s task is to provide a platform that encourages people to make meaning, using these ways of knowing, in dialogue with the museum.

Our study asked people what they “thought” when they looked at the entrance icons, without museum input. Just by simple visual examination, people made instant meaning. Imagine what we could do to further the dialogue.

Summary

In 2005, a modest visitor study launched my journey to better understand how visitors made meaning of two different entrance icons. A literature study helped me to understand how important our entrance galleries are, how little we understand visual learning, and how much

potential we have for shaping experience when visitors first walk through our front doors. Our study results clearly illustrated that visitors made meanings of entrance icons at-a-glance and that these installations can dramatically affect conceptual orientation. We didn’t have the funding to execute the new “icon,” and are now planning an expansion that will substantially change our front entrance. But what we learned will no doubt influence the decisions we make when deciding what will ornament our Great Hall.

Still, many questions remain. What do other museum entrance icons evoke? Can we craft entrance icons to provide a visual “gestalt” of museum mission, conceptually orienting the visitor experience to main messages a museum hopes to convey? We know that dinosaurs and other large scary creatures have “wow” appeal and are beloved, perhaps even expected, by many visitors. But do they reinforce an image we hope to shed—that we are repositories for “dead things on display”? Do they suggest that our mission is limited and potentially irrelevant in today’s world? I don’t think we should give up our dinosaurs. But I do think entrance icons have a lot more potential than we utilize. If we want to position ourselves as players in global conversations, we need more exploration of how we use entrance galleries and the iconic objects that greet people when they walk through our doors. ✨

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(Note that many of these references are summarized in the article but not specifically called out in the text.)

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