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Changing Permanent Exhibitions: An Exercise in Hindsight, Foresight, and Insight¹

ABSTRACT

Traditions associated with conservatism, scholarly content, and durability inform the ideology of the permanent exhibition. Once installed it is usually considered complete, and will remain unchanged until its content is questioned or considered outdated, or its physical deterioration becomes embarrassing. Museum curators work on very few, if any, permanent exhibitions during their career, and when they do their primary focus is on the scholarly content. It has only been in the past few years that museums, and curators, have looked to the discipline of visitor studies as being integral to process of exhibition development and the accessibility of content. A permanent exhibition constructed prior to this collaboration is revisited by its curator who applied five visitor studies' methodologies to the gallery to ascertain whether the curatorial/design concept was accessible to the visitor. This paper presents some ideas and findings from that study.

INTRODUCTION

In "The Politics of Exhibiting Culture: Legacies and Possibilities," Shelley Ruth Butler refers to "a problematic dichotomy that exists in museum literature between critical and optimistic perspectives on exhibiting culture" (2000:74). Critical museology, she says, questions the relationship between existing museum practice and the history of a "politics of domination" that has underpinned how western museums exhibit non-western cultures, the "other." This has resulted in the re-evaluation of motivations that have driven the collecting, classifying, and displaying of material culture (Ames 1992; Clifford 1991). Optimistic museology, on the other hand, focuses "on the role of museums in public education and in facilitating conversation between diverse and multi-cultural citizens" (Butler 2000:74). The intent of this paper is to share some thoughts and findings associated with the curating and evaluating a permanent exhibition of European ceramics, installed in 1990 at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology. The research and installation of this exhibition took place in the late 1980s and the evaluation was completed in 1994. This was an important period for the practice of curatorship, a time when controversial exhibitions motivated communities and visitors to question museum practices.² Curators were operating in a highly politicized setting that

View of ceramics gallery, UBC Museum of Anthropology.
Photo © UBC Museum of Anthropology.

encouraged many to re-evaluate their own practices and ask the questions posed by critical museology. It was during this reflective climate that I started to think about evaluating the new permanent exhibition. I knew I would be functioning within certain limitations: I work in a university-based teaching museum where the emphasis at the time of this project was on critical rather than optimistic museology. My research concentrated on theories associated with museum practice and the inter-relationships of the people involved with that practice. Such research might be useful to our primary audience of students, indigenous peoples and researchers, but less so to our general audience of tourists and visitors from the surrounding “settler” community. I recognized from the beginning that my critical perspective and curatorial bias would provide much to comment on by practitioners of visitor studies. Even with this caveat in mind, in the spirit of inquiry, my intent was to conduct an evaluation that focused on the visitors’ interaction with the exhibition. From this I hoped to identify a research model that might be beneficial to those who curate exhibitions. Perhaps it could be developed further by those who practice visitor studies.

The Museum of Anthropology’s worldwide collection was housed in various parts of the university library from 1927 to 1976. When the museum gained its own building in 1976, three permanent exhibitions were prepared for the opening. Two of these three inaugural installations

honored the primacy of the object (the totems of the Great Hall and the sculptural pieces in the Masterpiece Gallery); the third (Visible Storage) combined object and information as a unit of investigation that endeavored to “democratize and demystify the museum enterprise by striving to display all of its collections . . .” (Ames 1977:73).³ The hegemony of the architecture that housed the totem poles in the Great Hall-towering glass windows and crossbeam construction-ensured that the visitor would pause in wonder. The intimacy of the Masterpiece Gallery that displayed Northwest coast objects within the tenets of connoisseurship-singular, implied value and minimal labeling-left the visitor to intuit meaning. Visible Storage housed the worldwide collections, and it was here that the visitor encountered historic and contemporary works created by indigenous peoples not of European descent; the general pattern was for Europeans to study the “other,” not vice versa. The new gallery however, would display ceramics created by cultures of Europe. European material, for many museum professionals, does not qualify as “other;” it is perceived as “self” and as such is not found traditionally in an anthropology museum. The museum’s “Professional Guidelines” document states: “As an anthropology museum it [Museum of Anthropology] has always been concerned with the study and portrayal of human achievements *from around the world* as a means of furthering understanding of other cultures.” (September 1993, unpublished paper, italics added). The Museum of Anthropology has a collection of European Classics material and examples of folk costumes and textiles, so the addition of European ceramics was not startling, but it did raise questions about how we define the relationship between anthropology and our collecting parameters, and gave us the opportunity to look forward to some lively debate.⁴ Again, these questions fell within the parameters of critical museology and the debate was between colleagues or with students and researchers, not with the visiting public.

At the time of the installation of the new gallery (1990), many museum workers did not view visitor studies as being an essential constituent of exhibition development.⁵ This was true of my experience, and even today many of my colleagues still consider a review in a professional journal to be the appropriate forum for evaluation. Visitor studies had experienced an explosion in the 1970s and 80s, and by the early 1990s research methods, audience surveys, behavioral studies, experimental studies and theories associated with exhibition development had been developed, and visitor studies emerged as a key area within museums (Kelly 1996:3). Yet, in 1990 the Museum of Anthropology had never incorporated formal evaluation as part of the exhibition process; there were no funds to hire a visitor studies specialist and none of the staff had any related training. This was not uncommon and most studies were initiated through the persistence of individuals rather than through institutional directives (Williams 1994). I attended visitor studies workshops and conferences where I was introduced to the theory, research, and practice of a discipline that asked probing questions about the visitor experience and long-term learning. I learned, for example, that evaluation after installation might be accepted philosophically but not seen as practical when viewed in light of other more pressing matters-“the roof leaks, the guards are on strike, and some benefactor just turned them down for a big sum of money” (Shettel in Hicks 1986:37). This was an opportunity for the Museum of

Anthropology to be responsive to criticism, even at the cost of other pressing matters. It was also an opportunity to explore the possibility of creating interdisciplinary linkages between the fields of visitor studies and museum anthropology.⁶ I begin with some thoughts about the “generic” permanent exhibition that are informed by the “ways of seeing” of a museum curator trained in anthropology.

When objects are displayed in a permanent exhibition they are accessible to all visitors all the time. This cannot be said for other forms of communication practiced by the museum: performances, special events, films, and temporary exhibitions. The objects in a permanent exhibition are usually organized and interpreted according to formalized objectives recognized by the museum as being appropriate and enduring. Together they create an artificial “reality” of a particular past—an idealized landscape (Cannizzo 1987) constructed because, to quote Wittgenstein, “we see the world the way we do, not because that is the way it is but because we have these ways of seeing” (in McGrane 1989:ix). Exhibitions that do not provide accessible “ways of seeing” leave the visitor with the task of constructing meanings that may or may not run in conjunction with the “ways of seeing” of the creator of the object, the collector of the object, or the curator of the object.

Traditions associated with conservatism, scholarly content, and durability inform the ideology of the permanent exhibition. These traditions ensure that museums “steer clear of the hot topics and big controversies, opting for safer passages through our turbulent times” (Ames 1992:7). The permanent exhibition continues to demonstrate what Duncan Cameron, a museologist, has referred to as an “inherent human resistance to change” (1971:11–23). It is not until the temporal chasm widens—which begins the day a new gallery opens—that it becomes difficult to bridge or defend (and/or physical deterioration is apparent) that any change will be initiated. It was the arrival of a new collection, and the construction of a new wing to house it, that gave the staff of the Museum of Anthropology a place where ideas stemming from critiques of the existing exhibitions could be addressed. At that time I believed that no exhibition could be fully understood or even effectively critiqued without the knowledge of the workings of the organization from which it emerged. As Karp and Lavine (1991:1) have noted “. . . every museum exhibition. . . inevitably draws on the cultural assumptions and resources of the people who make it.” Museum staff believe themselves to be both singular individuals with a psychological contract associated with personal objectives, and at the same time members of a sub-culture with collective objectives. Each of these beliefs is associated with varying levels of power and influence dictated by their perceived place within the larger culture. Within this internal culture the creation of an exhibition can challenge the relationship between a curator’s psychological contract (shaped by the authenticity of artifacts, specimens and materials) and that of the designer (shaped by the expectations of a commercially conditioned public). No exhibition involving the products of human endeavor can be totally unbiased; the very production of the original object was riddled with biases.

Ceramic gallery: Display of faience dinnerware (French, 18th century) and tapestry by Ruth Jones (Vancouver, 1990). *Photo ©UBC Museum of Anthropology.*

The new collection consisted of approximately 600 European ceramics spanning a 400-year period collected by one man, Dr. Walter Koerner. Before the building was constructed and before the collection arrived, two tasks had to be achieved: first, a compilation of data on other recently installed galleries of ceramics – what did they do right? What did they do wrong? What can we learn? Second, the need to develop synergistic relationships and create a shared conceptual framework that effectuated a blending of form and content.⁷ At that time, 1988, the designer and curator were considered to be the key people in the development of the exhibition, and there was an underlying assumption that the exhibition created from this collaboration would contain and reflect all the objectives identified during the research and planning stages. These included addressing criticisms voiced about existing exhibitions situated elsewhere in the

museum: lack of information in the Great Hall and Masterpiece Gallery, and confusion about the purpose of Visible Storage. If the new gallery did address these concerns, how could it be measured? And, when measured, how would we respond to the data? Were we willing/able to make changes?

Museum staff are isolated from the public and often do not know who they are. Exhibitions are subject to at least two different perceptions: the traditional curator's perception which sees the exhibition as a place to impart knowledge through the delivery of facts, and the public perception which sees the exhibition as a place of curiosity, enjoyment and social interaction.⁸ Harris Shettel, a psychologist and independent museum evaluation consultant, has noted "there is no doubt in my mind, though, that the effort to convey only factual, detailed knowledge is a blind alley" (in Hicks 1986:34). Another museum evaluator, Chandler Screven, agrees that the Curatorial/design preoccupation with scholarly, aesthetic and physical aspects of exhibitions has precluded discussion of what he considers to be the lesser understood "motivations, preconceptions, attitudes and learning capabilities of visitors-specially unguided visitors, the main audience, who view exhibits without the benefit of teachers, docents or others to explain or interpret what they see" (Screven 1993b:34). It is an axiom of visitor studies research that the only way to find out whether visitors are "adequately conceptually oriented is to obtain systematic input from a visitor study" (Bitgood 1992:15).

The major challenge when evaluating the Koerner gallery was defining what was important to know and then selecting a repertoire of research methods and techniques which would generate generalizations which could be supported with some methodological rigor.⁹ The research objective was to see the gallery through the eyes of the visitors, to ascertain whether their experience in the gallery mirrored the imagined constituents in the curator/designer conceptual framework. Five methods were identified: secondary data analysis, unobtrusive tracking, visitor book analysis, delivery of interview questionnaire, and focus group interviews. By using different methods I hoped to triangulate results. That is, the same result would arise from several different sources, meaning that they could have a widespread applicability since replication is the foundation upon which truth in science is judged.

Each of the methods was examined for incongruities, which may or may not have affected the qualitative nature of the analysis. First, the evaluations did not all take place during the same time period: media-related secondary data were collected over a six-month period (August 1990-January 1991),¹⁰ tracking was completed over a four day period in September 1993, the questionnaire was delivered during a period of two months (March-April) in 1993, the visitor books covered a two-year period (January 1991-December 1992), and the focus groups were conducted in August 1993. Second, the people involved in delivering the surveys had different levels of experience: students gathered tracking and questionnaire data and a trained moderator led the focus group. Third, there was variation in the number of responses obtained from each methodology—20 from the secondary data, 48 from the questionnaire, 52 from the tracking, 965 from the visitor books, and 24 from the two focus groups. There is some ambiguity concerning the adequate number of people to ensure fair representation and it would seem that

much depends on the method chosen, 6–12 people is considered appropriate for a focus group study, 100–2,000 people can be asked to complete a hand-out questionnaire depending on the scale of the study. It should also be noted that the museum was a passive recipient of information for two of the methodologies (visitor books and secondary data). The importance of the number of samples becomes apparent when it is used as a quantitative statistic in support of a hypothesis. The objective of the Koerner gallery evaluation was not guided by hypotheses but by “questions, issues, and a search for patterns” (Patton 1987:15). No correlation was attempted between age/gender because the largest sample was gathered from the visitor books, which did not consistently record either variable. All these qualifications were not seen as limitations but rather as factors influencing the assessment of the effectiveness of the methodology. Given the experimental nature of this endeavor I decided that the validity of the qualitative data collected from each of these methods would have to be supported with similar data from at least two of the other methods giving a 3/5 ratio. This would eliminate the bias that a small sampling might introduce and add support to findings of non-interactive methods.

SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS

Secondary data were compiled from three sources of printed material: museum generated print material, media coverage of the new gallery and unsolicited written public response. Museum generated material included a Calendar of Events, a museum brochure, a gallery catalogue.¹¹ The museum had control over content and the focus was on the gallery content and the gallery as an addition to the museum. Articles, reviews, and other media coverage on the Koerner Ceramics Gallery were published during the opening period. There is no accurate formula to evaluate the public response to either of these methods but it was considered possible to gain access to the reporter’s *intended* message, and audience, by examining the language and content of the published material. What reporters choose to write about is a reflection of what they think their audience would want to know. The question was whether any correlation could be identified between what the reporter chose for the public to know and what the curator wanted the public to know. The media reports news, and news is made by people or events, not objects – objects are only interesting in their relationship to either of these.¹² All the articles produced included references to people: the collector, the curator, the designer, the architect. The collector was well-known, wealthy, powerful, and elusive – this made him newsworthy. He seldom granted interviews and only one persistent reporter, Douglas Sagi of the *Vancouver Sun*, could persuade him to have his photo taken in the gallery. “What we are trying to illustrate, Mr. Koerner, is a collection of art that illustrates a man’s passion – the photographer wants to take a picture of passion” (Sagi 1990, *Vancouver Sun*, December 8, p. D9). The headline read “The Koerner Passion for Crockery.” Other examples include “Giant Store (sic) Dominates New Museum Wing” (*Western News*, December 23, 1990, pp. 1, 15), “Exhibit Transcends Peasant Pottery.” (*Vancouver Courier*; December 12, 1990. p. 29). The language used in the body of the articles was constructed with “knowing” words that would be used with caution, if at all, in an anthropology museum, i.e., words that implied the personal opinion of the writer: “one of a

kind,” “earliest,” “best,” “vivacious,” “elegant,” “giant,” “wonderful.” What do these mean? They are generally positive and principally emotive.

Tiled stove, German?, ca. Late 16th century, Lead-glazed tiles, height 200 cm. Cat # Ch 267.
Photo © UBC Museum of Anthropology.

The opening of a new gallery of European objects would seem to be charged with controversy – in 1990, exhibitions featuring the collections of Europeans were being viewed as colonialist and racist, and yet neither the press or any representatives of First Nations criticized this exhibition. Here was a collection of Europeans in an anthropology museum famous for its support of First Nations issues and yet only two reporters looked at the gallery in terms of its relationship with the rest of the museum: “The connections. Wood and clay. Carvers and Potters. The Old World and the New. The rest, as they say is history. Or is it anthropology?” (Laurence 1991:16). The question was left unanswered. In response to his own question “Why European Ceramics?” Eugene Horvath, collector and writer, proposes “It (Museum of Anthropology) is rich in West Coast Indian art and it has some good examples of Oriental decorative art, but it is sadly lacking European material. Until now, that is” (1990:13). Neither of these articles was in the popular press so the general public received information about the collector, the quality of the

collection, people-related stories about the collection (persecution of the Anabaptists being a favorite), and the ambiance of the gallery: “Immediately, you are surrounded by consoling good taste. Panels of walnut (sic) and marble. Subdued lighting. Hushed ambiance. Baroque music playing” (Laurence 1991:14).

The political climate was not hostile to the media coverage of the new gallery.¹³ Written comments reflected a willingness to take the time to communicate information associated with a critical examination of the gallery.¹⁴ This can be positive: “*I think the exhibition is very well designed showing both chronological and geographical connections between different styles. I was especially interested in the tiled stove since I have often described them to my students as one of Central Europe’s many contributions to civilization.*” Other comments could be organized into two categories: questioning the information and criticizing the lack of signage: “*Are you sure the Venus von Willendorf was made in 23,000 BC?*” “*Kindly adjust your maps in the Ceramic exhibition to historic reality. Czechoslovakia did not exist until 1918*”¹⁵ “*There are two errors – Ch208 and 209. Eger, Czechoslovakia should say Hungary,*”¹⁶ “*... it is very difficult for the first comers to identify and be aware of the Koerner Ceramics Gallery which is not clearly indicated when you enter the museum.*” These critiques were compared with the basically positive-affective information sent out to the public. The unsolicited information coming in from the public was challenging-cognitive. Although such a small sample was not statistically useful, these were the first indication that people did read labels and perhaps the lack of signage did reflect a political agenda.

UNOBTRUSIVE TRACKING

Initially tracking and interviewing were to be coordinated on the premise that insights could be gained into the observer/participant question “does observation – the interviewer describing what people are doing – correlate with participation – what people say they are doing?” This did not prove workable: some visitors did not agree to be interviewed, so matching was inconsistent; the need to remain committed to the chosen person or group led to missed opportunities with other visitors while tracking some who may then refuse an interview; tracking was supposed to be inconspicuous whereas interviewing is interactive. It was decided to separate tracking and interviewing and to rethink the question. Tracking was used to both record circulation patterns in the gallery and measure the attracting and holding power of the exhibition and recording the reading of labels as “stops.” The question here was whether the curator and designer’s intellectual/sensual conceptual framework could be detected by tracking procedures. Fifty-two people were tracked over a four-day period (the museum is closed on Mondays) between 12:30 and 3:30 p.m. This is a quiet time in the museum (lunch time) and the number of visitors is low, making tracking easier in the large gallery space.

Two hundred and sixty “stops” were recorded, and average of 5.2 stops per person. The tracker was positioned on a seat, which gave him full vision of the gallery. He recorded the gender and approximate age of the visitor,¹⁷ the directions taken and where they stopped to read labels. The study recorded six main variables associated with directions taken by visitors: Those

who entered through the entrance and exited through the exit, those who entered and exited through the entrance, those who entered through the exit and exited through the entrance, and those who entered and exited through the exit, those who turned right upon entering and those who turned left. The objective was to determine what stimuli influenced visitor circulation patterns. The patterns were compared to Steven Bitgood's proposed principles related to stimuli (1992:15-16):

- *People tend to approach large objects-landmarks.* The landmarks, the large central marble cases in the gallery accounted for 24 percent of the total stops (63/260). So the majority of visitors did not corroborate this principle, yet the stove had been designed to be a focal point and it could not be visually avoided in the gallery so the majority would have at least noticed it, or looked at it from a distance.
- *Visitors tend to turn in the direction of the closest visible exhibit.* The visitor to the Koerner gallery was given two choices upon entering, ten of those entering through the entrance turned left and twenty-three turned right, nine of those entering through the exit turned right and ten turned left. The tracking indicated that a larger number of people turned right upon entering but overall more attention was paid to the displays to the left than the right (145 to 115). Given that 3 percent of the visitors observed read the introductory label, this clearly was not a significant factor in directing the traffic flow. Therefore other attracting powers were considered. The stove could be seen through the entrance case but it did not pull a majority of people around the case to the center of the gallery. People *had* to turn either left or right in order to access the rest of the gallery and, even though most turned right, only 43 percent stopped at the first case (Italy), 90 percent of those that turned to the left stopped at the first case (technology). A total of 66 stops were made at these two cases, this is 20 percent of the total number of stops and both cases attracted more stops than any other. Of these stops 62 percent (41) were at the technology case and 38 percent (25) were at the Italian case. This small sample is significant in that it does support the theory that most people will turn to the right if there is an absence of explicit or implicit cues but even though those observed initially followed the "right-turn bias" they actually paid as much if not a little more attention to the left-hand display case. Based on the hypothesis that the first interaction a visitor has with a gallery is emotive it is presumed that there must be a difference in the look of the technology case that gave it attracting power. Certainly the technology case contains more objects, their shapes vary significantly from figurines to tiles to vessels to dishes, their technology ranges from hand-built to wheel-thrown, from burnished to glazed, from earthenware to porcelain – all this produces a richness in texture and form not enjoyed by the Italian case. The question is "does this matter?" Certainly the choice of direction being made visually rather than intellectually was not the curatorial intent and this small study indicates that work needs to be done on the introduction labels if it is still considered important that people make an intellectual rather than emotive decision. The gallery is not organized sequentially, so initial direction is not vital. The

question yet to be answered is “if the choice were made more accessible would this alter the traffic pattern?”

- *Exhibit islands create pockets of low attention* “apparently because the traffic flow does not place each object within the visitor’s line of sight or because of no systematic way to see all of the exhibit objects in the space.” During the tracking 13 percent of visitors stopped at one or more of the feature cases (34/260).¹⁸ Two feature cases received more attention than any of the others, the contemporary case containing Laura Wee Lay Laq’s pot and the case containing the Holitsch parrot and salts. Visitors heading to and from the technology (the most popular) case had to pass Wee Lay Laq’s pot and so it was within the visitor’s line of sight. However, visitors heading to and from the Italian (the second most popular) case also had to pass the tankard but it attracted significantly fewer stops (13/2). Was it because the Wee Lay Laq pot “looked” different to everything else in the gallery? Was it because it had “an inner content, whereas another, very similar, is only decorative?” (Caiger Smith 1973:80).

“Hawk Olla” in ceramics gallery, **1990**. Hand built and burnished, height 26.7 cm. Artist: Laura Wee Lay Laq. Photo ©UBC Museum of Anthropology.

- *Exhibits on the periphery are less likely to be viewed than those in the center:* The tracking patterns showed clearly that the majority of visitors clung to the periphery of the gallery and 72 percent (187) of them stopped to read labels. These figures indicate that the holding power of this visible storage aspect of the gallery is greater than the rest of the gallery. This could be because visible storage cases are *full* of ceramics – there’s lots to see and there’s comfort in numbers. The wall cases have rails to lean against and comers offer private

“safe” spaces – the island cases are situated in a public “vulnerable” space and accessed across a stretch of empty floor. So, given the choice most visitors cling to the safety of the edge before they negotiate the center.

- *People will tend to walk in a straight line unless some force pulls them in another direction:* When visitors left the wall cases they headed for one target and then another. This was the intent of the curator and designer, and has been termed the hunt-and-peck approach to museum visiting. It was not clear from this observation why some cases had more attracting power than others.
- *Displays located along the shortest route between the entrance and exit receive the greatest amount of viewing:* The sample did not totally support this. Certainly most attention was paid to the cases closest to the entrance (technology and Italian) but instead of heading straight for the stove which aligned with the exit, the majority of visitors proceeded around the wall edges of the gallery.

Tracking in the gallery demonstrated that most visitors entered and left by the entrance doors. Studies have documented that people need to know where they are and where they’re going; the exit door to the Koerner gallery is dark glass and all that can be viewed through it is a cement wall. There is no signage inviting or permitting the visitor to adventure further. The tracking patterns indicated that the exit door, and its sign, were often missed altogether as they occurred, for most, midway through the visit and most visitors observed went back to the entrance which lead to a “known” place. Those who entered through the exit had no orientation at all and yet the majority circled the gallery before either returning to the exit or continuing on through the entrance. Each case had been designed and curated as an independent unit so the gallery visit was not one where information was needed in one area in order to make sense of another.

Tracking also provided data on the attracting power of different parts of the gallery and the holding power of individual cases. However, the unobtrusive nature of the methodology made it difficult to pinpoint which labels were being read. Trying to explain why people are attracted in one direction rather than another poses more questions than answers and perhaps has more to do with making connections between the visitors’ and the museum’s “ways of seeing.”

VISITOR BOOK ANALYSIS

The Museum of Anthropology has been using visitor books to actively invite comments from visitors for the past five years. Once these books are filled they are deposited in the archives where they are accessible to researchers. Comments in visitor books are supplied voluntarily and they reflect many perspectives. The books are a safe place for public disclosures-safety being assured by the chosen anonymity of the writer. They are a place to record a name which will remain in the archives-assured of immortality.¹⁹ They can be a place to express the forbidden, to declare anger, to create poetry, to hate, to draw, to philosophize: “the mirror image of one painted soul is the reflection of another in his own life.” They are also a place to ask questions

without having to cope with the answers “What about translations to French? I thought Canada was a bilingual country. Or is it?” They are fragments of mindsets. How useful are they as an analytical tool? They provide a sanctioned place for visitors to speak their mind and therefore, it is hypothesized, the language used is less guarded and the message written can provide insights to the visitors’ ways of seeing.

Books dated from January 1992 to December 1993 were available. The books were situated in the Koerner Gallery adjacent to one of the large central cases with a label reading “We Invite Your Comments.” The statistics gathered included all legible comments that ventured beyond a name and address. Profanities, the majority of children’s comments,²⁰ and unknown languages were also eliminated from the study. After eliminating these, approximately one-third (965) of the legible comments were eligible. These were divided into “generally positive,” “specifically positive,” and “critical.” Thirty-one (3 percent) critical comments were recorded and thirteen (42 percent) of these were critical of the lack of French text,²¹ other criticisms focused either on content: “what about Poland?” “what about Sardinia?” “I would like to see Middle Eastern wares,” or the environment: “more light please,” “the music hinders appreciation.” From this small sample it was surmised that the collector-defined parameters of the collection were not articulated clearly enough in the gallery and the illusion created by light was dependent on the reality associated with the life expectancy of light bulbs.

The positive responses were given the designation of 100 percent and divided into “generally positive” and “specific positives.” “Generally positive” responses were couched in language similar to that used by the media: “beautiful,” “restful,” “charming,” “remarkable,” “magnificent” etc., or by comments: “it’s finally time to give pottery the limelight it deserves – thank you,” “Quite interesting even for me as a European tourist!” Although these were certainly positive and statistically useful (67 percent of the total positive responses were “generally positive” responses), they were too general to offer any insights into *why* the visitor was responding positively. The language used could suggest ambiance as possibly the prime affective component.

The reasons recorded by those who gave “specifically positive responses” were divided again, by language. The language used for “positive responses” referred to the collection, the music, the information, the organization, the light, the stove, and the contemporary works. Comments included: “*Gorgeous collection of ceramics – and very interesting to trace the history of technique and influences. I’ve never seen it explained this way in a museum before, and it’s very effective. And the music is wonderful,*” “*I really like the descriptions that go along with each display. I would like to see more of this in the other parts of the museum, like the research collection.*” “*I have at last joined up the faience / delft wares. Thank you for the history and comments.*” The “specifically positive” comments were transferred to their own pie chart in order to gain a better visual idea of the areas of concentration. It was clear that the collection received the most attention: “*As a Greek (and true philhelleniste) I must say that I was unaware of the beauty and grace of other ceramic creations besides Greece. What a lovely surprise!*” “*As someone who has extensively studied Anabaptist, Mennonite and Hutterite history I find your*

Hutterite collection simply stunning, ” “ I have come from Czechoslovakia (Moravia) and I’m surprised how high quality (sic) collection I found in this museum. ”

The text (information) in the gallery also received significant attention, 22 percent of specifically positive comments: *“Good interpretive labels – interesting and easy to read. ” “The ceramics display is excellent because of the progression of the detailed explanations. ” “I’m a docent at the ROM in Toronto. Have been studying ceramics for many years especially in our far Eastern Section. Your labels have explained different types of ware better than I’ve ever seen. ”* This attention to the collection and the associated information was significant enough, 63 percent of specifically positive comments,²² to suggest that the curatorial/design objective to ensure the primacy of the object and the accessibility of information about it had been reached. The question was, “is this supported by other visitor studies research?” And if it is not, is this still a valid assumption? The other “specifically positive comments” referred to organization, music, and light (37 percent). Comments included: “The objects are sensitively displayed, no feeling of clutter,” “Beautiful display-ceramics and textiles sparkle and compliment each other.” It has already been noted that the language of the “generally positive” comments suggest an affective rather than cognitive reaction and if this were supported with data from other studies it could be hypothesized that the gallery’s main message is an affective one. However, given the specificity of the sample that can be supported with data, it stands that the gallery has achieved both curatorial/design objectives: that it be both affective and cognitive. The general conclusion from this methodology was that the gallery had succeeded in mirroring “the constituents of the curator/designer conceptual framework.”

INTERVIEWS

The interview is a survey tool that complements other methods of obtaining information. The interviewer, however, will only receive answers to questions asked which may be seen as preconceived and contrived. For this methodology it was important to determine what type of question needs to be asked to generate data that meets the objective of the research. This was the only methodology that was both interactive and specifically designed for the Koerner gallery. Its objective was to use a series of gradually focusing questions to ascertain whether the curator/designer conceptual framework was accessible to the visitor. If the type of question asked invited a “yes,” “no,” “maybe” answer, then the more idiosyncratic details of the informant’s experiences would be missed. Yet, as has already been discussed, language screens the transmission between sender and listener and, in the current climate of deconstructivism, there is little use for the validity of the language of the interpreter as a conveyor of truth. It was therefore important, as with the visitor books, that the words of the original speaker be used to support or reject the concepts of the interpreter. The qualitative nature of this methodology has both positive and negative aspects: it can provide insights missed by observation alone and yet it is the product of the interaction between two strangers, and as such carries with it all the variables possible in such a meeting. Herein lies some of the concern with the quality of methodology used in the discipline of visitor studies.

Forty-eight visitors to the gallery were interviewed during March and April 1993, Tuesday to Friday, between 1:00–3:00 pm. It was intended that visitors be randomly selected for interview, *random* being based on the concept of using a rigid methods to choose visitors so that the interviewer could not interject his or her own bias in the choice, and therefore the people interviewed would represent a random rather than contrived sample. The traffic flow in the gallery made this problematic – the interviewer had to position himself in the gallery because he could not predict whether visitors entering would leave by the exit or indeed, enter at the entrance. If he had positioned himself at the exit he would have missed the majority of visitors and if visitors left through the door opposite his position he could not always reach them before they were well into the Great Hall or close to the museum exit. After some discussion it was decided that the randomness of the sample could be secured if the interviewer positioned himself as unobtrusively as possible in the middle area of the gallery and approach the first visitor that exited through either door. Each interview took five to ten minutes; the interviewer then positioned himself back in the center of the gallery and again approached the first visitor that exited through either door. Given the systematic nature of this process and my confidence that the interviewer followed the process, I surmised that the sample could be considered random. It is explained at some length here to portray it as a still-developing method, open to further discussion.

The interview protocol contained a few questions about demographics, such as where the visitors interviewed were from (20 from Vancouver, 10 from Canada, 10 from the U.S., 8 from overseas), and whether their intent was to visit the Museum of Anthropology or the Koerner Gallery (35 intended to visit the Museum of Anthropology, 3 the Koerner Gallery, 6 the campus). The rest of the questions progressed from general to specific and were designed to elicit qualitative responses. Responses to the general question *what impressions did you leave the Koerner gallery with?* ranged from “liking” the gallery to being “overwhelmed by the environment.” Most were impressed with both the objects and the setting: “*It is well displayed and well written.*” Comments were made on the breadth and age and quality of the collection: “*I learned a lot about how ceramics came to Czechoslovakia,*” “*This is the finest collection in North America,*” the music and lighting were noted: “*This space feels good, intimate.*” At this general level all the comments were positive about one or more aspect of the gallery, their initial comments being emotive.

When asked more specifically what part of the gallery was of special interest all of the respondents referred to objects: 40 percent (19) cited the stove and the stove tiles and, when asked why, the responses included: *Just interested, I don’t know why,* “*I liked the artistic detail.*” “*Because of the social history.*” “*I have seen these in Yugoslavia where they still feed them with wood.*” Twenty-one percent (10) chose the cases with contemporary weavings or the Laura Wee Lay Laq pot, not because the objects were contemporary but because of their emotive power “*I enjoyed the way it (the tapestry) was displayed.*” 31 percent (15) people singled out different wall cases and, when asked why, those visitors who went beyond affective comments pointed to European connections: “*My family is from Hungary.*” “*I’ve never seen German steins*

here.” The questioning then focused on the amount and presentation of text. This was chosen to see whether there was any correlation between quantity and clarity. Visitors were asked to rate

Lion Jug, Nuremberg, ca. 1550. Lead-glazed ware, height 25.4 cm. Cat # Cg 70.
Photo © UBC Museum of Anthropology

each of these on a scale of 1–5. For the amount of information #1 indicated *too much* and #5 *not enough* – #3 was the medium of *enough*. For the presentation of the information #1 indicated *very clear* and #5 *not clear* – #3 was the medium of *clear*.

Visitors were not inclined to comment specifically, and most went for the midpoint both for the amount of information and the presentation of information. This could indicate that the labels demonstrate a degree of success in their accessibility or that the visitors deferred to the authority of the museum and presumed the information was appropriate in length and presentation. The interviewer did note a reluctance to criticize content. The most supportable statement about the labels would perhaps be that this group of respondents found them to be neither excellent nor poor.

One criticism did arise in later questions, which is appropriate to mention here – there was some difficulty in matching all tombstone labels with objects. This not a criticism of the presentation of information but rather of the relationship between label and object. The designer and curator had decided not to use a numbering system in the cases and used language to make the connections between viewer, object and text: *top left, front right, wall-top* and so on. Some of these worked and some obviously did not. This was very important because it was the first criticism of the organization of the case interiors and profiled the difference between the information the curator and designer thought they were projecting and the information “seen” by the visitor.²³

Visitors were then asked whether they could detect specific curatorial themes: the history of tin-glaze in Europe, technology, social history, inspiration for contemporary art. This proved to be the most difficult question because again, people appeared to lack conviction in their ability to interpret, deferring to the higher learning of the museum. If they did not perceive something, they saw it as their fault or associated their “ignorance” with the lack of time spent viewing. If they did pick out themes they sought approval: *“I only spent 15 minutes in the gallery and I could pick out three themes – so that is good?”* The results indicated that the most commonly recognized theme was social history. Those who spent more than 15 minutes tended to also recognize the history of tin-glaze and technology themes. The contemporary art was more elusive and not perceived as a theme – more an interesting idea. The specificity of this question was also avoided: *“You have covered enough areas conceptually, so different people can take away what they want or are interested in.” “I think that those who want to see a theme will do so, since we came to it prepared in our own way.”*

The responses were not intended to quantify as usable statistics but they demonstrated some of the ways of seeing as expressed by visitors. One of these echoes a continuing subject of discussion in the museum world—that of ownership of information. It would seem that some visitors still expect information in a museum to be the “right” information. At the same time some visitors recognize that they construct personal mosaics regardless of the curatorial intent. Also, a few specific responses did agree that the affective/cognitive paradigm was successful.

The final question was: *Anthropology museums traditionally do not exhibit European*

material. We have. What do you think of that? Two visitors from Europe (Athens and London) disagreed with the premise of this question stating that in their experience Europe museums did not create a dichotomy between historic and cultural museums.²⁴ The rest of the visitors interviewed thought the presence of the gallery was generally “fine,” “important,” “exciting,” “relevant,” but perhaps not totally expected: *“I’m not surprised but I could see how some might be.” “It’s surprising but OK.”* The Koerner gallery “provided relief from the Northwest Coast art and craft.” Some responses revealed underlying perceptions, “ways of seeing,” of what an anthropology museum represents: *“It’s all old stuff so that’s fitting,” “It’s OK, tribes [should not] be isolated.” “It’s good – culture is not exclusive to pre-literates.”*

Others compared it to the rest of the museum: *“Nice relief from the rest of the museum.” “It does seem out of place with the rest of the museum.”* And more specifically: *“The European collection is set too much apart, with no conscious or explicit recognition of the sharp contrast. [You] should have some exhibits explaining contrasts and contexts, if this is the point, or explain its existence and placement.”* At the end of the questioning the visitors were asked whether they had *any comments, ideas, observations or information that would help us to improve this gallery, and/or better serve the public.* Comments associated with inside the gallery included a request for more information on the collector and a desire *“to see this kind of information and presentation in the rest of the museum.”* Fifty percent of visitors interviewed said the gallery was too difficult to find-some were seeking an exit and some thought they were not allowed to open the doors because *“the dark doors make people think that the lights are turned off inside the gallery.”*

FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are a qualitative method of social science research widely used in consumer research for product testing. They take the form of in-depth discussions, are led by an experienced moderator. They usually consist of six to twelve participants and last about two hours. The moderator follows a pre-planned guide that is based on the objectives of the research and lets the participants express their feelings about what they think are the issues. At the Museum of Anthropology three focus groups were organized: university students, West-side publics, and East-side publics. The purpose was “to discover whether there were any changeable reasons why some communities do not visit the Museum of Anthropology” and “whether they would become supporters if they simply came once . . .” The methodology included unguided visits to the museum’s galleries by the participants. These would include the Koerner Gallery and even though this study was not focused specifically on the Koerner Gallery, data relating to it could be separated from the larger study for comparison with the other evaluation methods. One main theme emerged from the comments – lack of visibility of the gallery: *“There was nothing, not much information to make you go in...” “They should have a sign at the end of the hall that says Ceramics Gallery,” “I thought it was closed because it looked so dark.”* Those who did find the gallery commented *“I like the little story captions that I saw-because I had got to the point where I was frustrated [with] the museum,” “. . . it’s a shame too, because the*

people who saw it – they really liked it.” Only one person commented on the presence of the gallery in the Museum of Anthropology: “... it didn’t seem anthropological – it seemed more like art, which I like, but it wasn’t what I was expecting.”

From these five methodologies information that was corroborated in three or more methodologies produced patterns which were considered qualitatively viable (Table 1). It is noted that the table includes observations as well as solicited and unsolicited comments of what people thought important enough to respond to, physically, emotionally and/or intellectually. Statements stemming from these responses are both broad and specific. The gallery’s ambiance was responsible for the attracting power of the contents of display cases, the presentation of the information was responsible for the holding power of the labels, the curator and designer’s intellectual/sensual construct was well-balanced but not perfect: the introduction did not have sufficient attracting power and some tombstone labels did not have holding power. The message received or constructed by visitors was not short and clear – two attributes considered essential by some for an ideal visit (Alt 1984:33).

Table 1. A comparison of the information clustering found in the five methodologies used to evaluate visitor reaction to the Koerner Gallery.

Secondary Information Clustering	Data Analysis	Tracking	Visitor Book	Interview	Focus Group
Collector	X		X	X	
Collection	X	X	X	X	
Affective	X		X	X	
Cognitive	X	X	X	X	X
Gallery Location	X		X	X	X
Signage	X		X	X	X
Presence in the museum	X		X	X	X

Cognitive information was more difficult to be certain about: visitors did comment positively on the information in the gallery, their actions did demonstrate the labels’ holding power and there were few complaints about the quality of the information. Some of those responding to the interview did recognize themes and others “liked” the labels. Given these thoughts and the individual responses it can be generalized that the information, when read, was well received-with the already noted exceptions of some of the tombstones and the introductory label.

Visitors also confirmed what had been observable but not officially recognized – that the gallery was not as accessible as the rest of the museum. Part of this is an architectural problem – the new addition confused the traffic flow and the “old” traffic flow is simpler to negotiate. Signage at the museum has always been subtle, aluminum panels on gray concrete walls, and the

entrance to the new gallery was virtually invisible. To rectify this a banner was mounted at the entrance of the gallery and two display cases containing large ceramics and introductory text were installed at the entrance and exit to the gallery. As well, small temporary exhibitions of ceramics are mounted in the lobby, and a contemporary ceramic installation work by Canadian artist Sally Michener was installed in the lower lobby adjacent to the gallery; these totemic pieces attract visitors to venture into this once uninviting space. The museum designers are now working on an overall signage concept that will eventually address this problem of access both within and outside the museum.²⁵ Had I applied some visitor studies theory at the beginning, and during the development of the exhibition I would have seen beyond the curatorial/design preoccupation with scholarly, aesthetic and physical aspects. For example it was believed that programming did not need to be planned for a permanent gallery until after the opening, when programs could respond to the space. Education was marginalized and no school or public programs were developed for visitors.²⁶ It was the volunteers who, although initially confused by the inclusion of a European gallery, responded to requests from visitors and voted to include the gallery in their guided tours. Orientation training sessions were organized by the curator of education and myself, and together we worked with the volunteers to construct a series of five- and ten-minute tours of the gallery. We also worked together on a two-year program with a local high schools' career preparation curriculum. Students were introduced to the relationship of the gallery and its contents with the skills and training associated with different aspects of museum work. They worked with staff to produce an exhibition that demonstrated the skills they had acquired in education, design, ceramic techniques, conservation, and marketing. I mention this single program because it serves as an example of the closer collaboration between curator and educator that is the norm in the community-based team approach that we now take to exhibitions.

Visitor studies would have enabled me to have the foresight to really think through the philosophical and physical consequences of adding a new wing that confused the traffic flow, and exhibited objects that, for many, were contrary to the museum's mandate. When we teach museum anthropology we talk about the need for museums to be reflexive and responsive to criticism and the value of a more community-based team approach to exhibitions. However, I still question whether we understand the diversity of our visitors beyond those students, researchers and indigenous peoples with whom we work so closely. We treat our students et al. as clients, those beyond we treat as guests and sometimes strangers (Doering 1999). We have conducted enough studies to know where they are from, and we know some of the multifaceted reasons why they come, but we are still learning what they gain from their visits. Visitor studies has certainly given us the insight and the tools to understand that audiences are varied and learn differently, and that there is some debate around the meanings of education and entertainment in museums. As a curator I now work with a sense of a broader constituency and I believe that we have reached a place where visitor studies has intersected with some success with exhibition planning. This was not the case when I was working on the new ceramics gallery, even though the research model did indicate that the curatorial/design objectives were achieved along with

some measurable visitor satisfaction. I suggest that this was not accidental; experienced curators and designers bring much knowledge, some of it intuitive, some of it learned, about visitors to the planning process. The research on the ceramic gallery provided information that continues to inform our process. I have since learned that those who study audience also bring knowledge to this process, as do members of the community “on display.” Perhaps once we fully understand these different types of knowledge, the way of the future can be found at the place they intersect.

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NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was read at the annual conference of the Visitor Studies Association, Raleigh, North Carolina, July 17-20, 1994.
2. In Canada, exhibitions such as *The Spirit Sings* (1987) and *Into the Heart of Africa* (1990) placed curators and museums in more in more politicized settings and subjected them to intense public criticism. Local communities questioned the motivations of the museums and demanded closure. *Into the Heart of Africa* was closed and never traveled. *The Spirit Sings* remained open.
3. These three installations, particularly Visible Storage, have been vigorously criticized by numerous students participating in anthropology courses taught at the museum.
4. This debate and other questions pertaining to programming at the Museum of Anthropology are discussed in Mayer et al. (1989) "What is That Stuff Doing in a Museum of Anthropology" in *MUSE*: 1989:22-41.
5. The Visitor Studies Association was incorporated as a professional organization in 1992. < <http://museum.cl.msu.edu/vsa/> >
6. In Dogan and Pahre's *Creative Marginality* (1990), they argue that true innovation can be found at the intersections of social sciences. Cyril Belshaw, an anthropologist, agrees that "interdisciplinary connections are essential corpuscles in the lifeblood of anthropology..." (op. cit. P. 89).
7. The exhibition was organized within a general/specific framework constructed to accommodate curatorial/design intent, collector's rationale and philosophical requirements. The general organizing principle was based on a technological/geographical historical matrix because these were attributes shared by all the collection.

Within this framework the ceramics that shared cultural affinity were grouped together, as were groups that shared iconography as cultural reflectors.

8. The opposition between the dualism of the curator/visitor expectations was proposed within a more complex model by Deborah Perry at the Visitor Studies Conference, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1993. She proposed a triangular model containing three elements: participation, outcome and visitor needs. She proposed that curators and visitors put differing emphasis on these triangles resulting in dissatisfaction both within the museum and the visitor population.
9. I found the quality of the methodology associated with visitor research in the late 1980s to be uneven and not yet grounded in a body of critical literature. For this study I also recognized that whatever my methodology choices were, they would be either constructed and/or examined in terms of their ability to answer questions considered important by a curator.
10. As is common with new exhibitions, media attention is clustered around the time of the opening-starting with advance news (gallery soon to be open). Media attention was maintained for two months after the opening. The only article written by a recognized museum critic (Robin Laurence) was included in this secondary data not so much as an example of media attention but rather as a considered reaction to the exhibition, with similarities to those contained in written material received from the public.
11. The museum demonstrated a financial commitment to the new gallery by producing 110,000 new calendars at \$15,000.00, 200,000 brochures at \$3,000.00, 2,000 gallery catalogues at \$2,500.00. (All amounts in Canadian dollars.)
12. The importance of an object being owned, lost, destroyed, found, valued and so on is seen in terms of its effect on people. Even objects in institutions are attached to a person when reported in the media – the museum may have gained or lost an artifact but the fact of gain or loss is reported through the medium of a person in the institution.
13. The marketing director of the MOA attributed the 12 percent increase in attendance (1991) in part to the Koerner Gallery. It is not possible to attribute this to media coverage as no surveys were done during the opening period.
14. The written comments included letters mailed in and the Query form available for public comment.
15. The MOA uses current political boundaries for all its maps, situating the objects in this time and place. As boundaries change so the names change. Most people viewing a map of eighteenth-century Europe would not relate parts of the Austro- Hungarian Empire as being current day Slovakia. (Czechoslovakia at the time of installation). Historic overlays are not used elsewhere in the museum so it was decided to experiment with not using them in the Koerner Gallery.
16. This was the most common complaint. A city in Czechoslovakia is known both as Eger and Cheb (Eger being the older name). There is also a city called Eger in Hungary.

17. Because gender and age were not recorded consistently elsewhere, these data were disregarded.
18. “Feature” cases was the name given to the island style display cases which exhibited one or two objects, intended for close inspection.
19. People donate objects to museums to as metaphors of themselves – once they have gone the metaphor remains and so, within their frame of reference, do they.
20. This is not to indicate that children are to be ignored. However, most come through with school groups and the visitor books are usually treated as palettes for graffiti. When a child individually made a comment, it was included.
21. Canada is a bilingual country and all federally funded exhibitions must have bilingual text. The Koerner gallery was not federally funded.
22. The 5 percent designated to the stove and 4 percent designated to contemporary pieces are included in this calculation because they are both considered comments about the collection, albeit pieces singled out for special attention.
23. Further research on the effectiveness of these labels has shown that this difficulty has been expressed by other visitors. The relationship between the tombstone labels and the objects is now being reconsidered.
24. This is debatable – all cultures may be represented in many European museums but the separation between European and non-European is clearly demarcated.
25. Signage is part of a long-range plan that will include expansion of the building. Overall signage will therefore not become a reality for a few years.
26. There was a change in staff after the opening of the new gallery when an educator, with appropriate degrees, joined the museum. Previous staff did not have specific training in education