

Visitor Panels

A Handbook for Improving Interpretive Materials
through Audience Input

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, museums have seen the benefits of using team approaches to exhibit design. Each museum develops its own mix of staff members to collaborate in planning exhibits. At the Denver Art Museum, exhibition planning hinges on long-term relationships between curators and educators who focus on the same areas of the collection. In evaluating two recently reinstalled permanent collection galleries of the museum's, Denver Art Museum staff brought another stakeholder to the table--the visitor. "**Visitor panels**" were developed to solicit visitors' responses to specific questions about how interpretive devices were functioning in the galleries.

From 1991 to 1993, with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, and an \$8.5 million bond issue passed by residents of the City and County of Denver, the Denver Art Museum reinstalled two areas of its collection. The first of these, the Asian collection, includes works from Japan, Korea, China, Tibet, Nepal, India and Southeast and Southwest Asia. The second collection was of Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial art from the U.S. and Central and South America. Designing new galleries to display these collections provided opportunities for staff to apply what they had learned in a previous visitor study supported by the Getty Grant Program and the National Endowment for the Arts. This ambitious study included experimental prototypes for a wide variety of interactive labels, learning games, and other interpretive devices. Some of these prototypes were refined and employed in both reinstallations. When the new galleries opened to the public in the fall of 1993, the Denver Art Museum used a range of evaluation techniques to assess the prototypes' effectiveness and further refine them.

Through unobtrusive observation studies, staff determined which objects and materials captured visitors' attention, the average amount of time visitors spent attending to objects or reading labels, and the pathways visitors traveled through the exhibitions. Exit interviews examined whether visitors had used interpretive devices and found them to be helpful. Focus groups gave museum staff the opportunity to hear group discussions about general aspects of the exhibition space. Added to these conventional audience studies were **visitor panels**, carefully planned panel discussions about specific aspects of the interpretive program. This handbook outlines the visitor panel process so that other museums can tailor it to their own needs. The Denver Art Museum found method to be effective, but it's important to preface this handbook by emphasizing that many types of evaluative techniques are useful in studying the visitor's experience. Because each method builds on insights gained through other kinds of evaluation, a combination of evaluative techniques provides the most complete information about visitors!

See Appendix for a summary of the evaluation techniques used to gather visitor response to the new reinstallations.

In visitor panels, the moderator solicits concrete, "actionable" advice from visitor panelists who are treated as consultants and experts in their role as visitors. And, like consultants, the panelists return to advise the museum on several occasions. Each panelist offers opinions informed by his or her own interests and reading level, but discussions are structured around staff questions and interpretive goals. The purpose of the Denver Art Museum's visitor panels was not to determine interpretive goals, but to learn about the specifics of how interpretive materials, especially extended labels, were working. Visitor panels might well be used to explore many other aspects of the visitor's experience.

Staff members find this type of discussion tangible and concrete. Over the course of several sessions, the staff becomes acquainted with panelists, coming to appreciate their viewpoints and trust their opinions. Direct, action-oriented input from a reliable source makes it easier for staff to determine the best ways of acting on the responses of visitor panelists. The panel process is facilitated by a practiced moderator, a staff member familiar with the museum's goals but not directly involved in planning that particular exhibition.

The Denver Art Museum's reinstalled galleries of Asian art and Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial art had just opened to the public when the first visitor panel discussions were scheduled. But "opened" did not mean "finished." Construction and the installation of objects in the gallery spaces was complete, but only twenty percent of the Asian and sixty percent of the Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial interpretive materials had been installed. This stage of relative completion allowed visitor panelists to use and then discuss actual examples of interpretive materials in the gallery setting, while allowing staff the opportunity to make adjustments reflecting the panel's recommendations in the yet-to-be-written interpretive components.

Because the evaluation takes place when the galleries are open to the public, this approach would traditionally be defined as "remedial." In this case, however, staff time and the exhibition budget were reserved to implement the findings of visitor panel evaluations in the remaining interpretive materials. Consequently, the process became a method of formative evaluation. The information gained in the visitor panels was used to make labels and other interpretive materials more accessible to visitors and more reflective of what they wanted to know about the objects displayed. The visitor panel process suggests that an exhibition is never really finished until it is removed from the galleries.

2. STAFF INVOLVEMENT IN VISITOR PANELS

Once some interpretive materials were installed and staff had begun informal observations of their use, curators, educators and other staff began identifying issues for visitor evaluation. The Education Department served as coordinators of these studies, but the process also involved administrative, curatorial, graphic and exhibition design, and public relations staff members, as well as volunteers and community advisors who helped identify issues for exploration. Then, with help from consultant Dr. Ross Loomis (professor of psychology at Colorado State University and expert in visitor research), educators identified which questions could best be explored in visitor panels.² Curators and educators who had developed interpretive materials for the two reinstallations were asked to observe the visitor panel discussions. Bringing varied staff specializations together to both plan and observe the evaluation process increased its effectiveness. Key players became familiar with the intentions of the study and the visitor panelists' responses.

The Education staff moderator took the questions identified for panel discussions, with advice from Loomis, wrote a discussion guide draft, developed a panel agenda, and arranged for facilities for the panel meeting. Other staff members had opportunities to review the discussion draft. Because only a limited number of observers can be in the room with the panels without creating too much self-consciousness on the part of panelists, only curators and educators attended the panels as observers.

This type of inter-departmental staff involvement was not new to the Denver Art Museum. The Education Department is structured around Master Teachers who are assigned long-term interpretive responsibilities for a particular curatorial collection? Curators and educators work together closely in planning interpretive materials for selected temporary exhibitions and permanent installations. The collegiality that developed among curators and educators in the course the reinstallation prepared them to jointly engage in the evaluation procedure and consider the panelists' recommendations. This structure also gave interpretive team members experience in group decision-making and the allocating of tasks. Long-term relationships helped team members understand each other's roles and make the most of each person's strengths and interests. With these pieces in place, the team was prepared to hear the new perspective brought by visitor panelists and to integrate their recommendations into existing strategies for creating interpretive materials.

The following pages outline the processes and materials the museum used to conduct visitor panels on the two reinstalled galleries. Examples of staff memos, working drafts, materials given to panelists, and internal progress reports are included, set off with a change of font and horizontal lines.

² For other issues explored using other methods, see Appendix.

³ The Denver Art Museum's permanent collection exhibits are divided into the following areas: African and Oceanic Art; American Indian Art; Architecture, Design, and Graphics; Asian Art; Modern and Contemporary Art; Northwest Coast Indian Art; Pre-Columbian Art; Spanish Colonial Art; Western and American Art.

3. IDENTIFYING THEMES TO EXPLORE

To begin the planning process, a memo was sent to curators and educators who served on the reinstallation teams. The memo requested a written list of questions each person would like to have addressed in visitor panels and asked for recommendations of additional staff and community members to contact for input.

M E M O R A N D U M

To: Curators
From: Dean of Education
Date: May 28, 1993
Subject: Evaluation Project for Asian, Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial floors

This memo is a request for you to pull together, in writing, questions you have about how visitors are using, experiencing, and feeling about the new galleries you worked on for the reinstallation. I need your written questions by June 18th at the latest.

I've met with Master Teachers in your areas and we are in agreement that we need to conduct this evaluation in a timely manner, before we have completely spent our budgets and energy on the interpretive materials and other aspects of installation for the floors. Once we complete the evaluation, we may be able to make adjustments that will make the floors work better for visitors.

The process will begin with the gathering of questions from those of you to whom this memo is addressed and from anyone else on your staff with whom you would like to share this memo.

Please feel free to ask others on your staff, or to tell me about other people in the museum and/or community, that you would also like to submit questions by June 18.

Our plan will be to solicit questions from the people listed below and any others you suggest we include. Once we gather all the questions, we'll meet with you to make some decisions about which ones will be the focus of studies. The studies will be designed with help from a local consultant, an expert in visitor studies, who has helped us in the past. Call if you have questions!

People we plan to consult for questions:

Director	Public Relations staff
Assistant Directors	Conservators
Curators	Docents
Educators	Community Representatives
Preparators	Others?

A separate memo was sent to other staff members briefly identifying the project and the staff organizing it. The memo alerted them that someone from the Education Department would be contacting them to arrange a short appointment to collect their questions about the reinstalled galleries.

MEMORANDUM

To: Staff
From: Dean of Education
Date: June 16, 1993
Subject: Collecting feedback from museum visitors about the Asian, Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial floors

Two people from the Education staff will be calling you next week to set up appointments, only 15 minutes, to see if you have any questions about how visitors are experiencing the two new installations.

The Education staff will be working on this project and have already done some work with the curators of these collections to solicit questions from them. Please help us out!

We will let you know how things work out and what kind of studies we do, along with the results. We will be working with a research consultant on this project.

cc: Education staff

4. ANNOUNCING THE VISITOR PANELS

A memo from the museum's director requested that staff members who served on exhibition teams for the reinstalled galleries attend the visitor panels.⁴

M E M O R A N D U M

To: Education and curatorial staff members of Asian, Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial reinstallation teams
From: Director
Date: July 23, 1993
Subject: Panel discussions about reinstallation interpretive materials

There will be in-depth discussions with museum visitors about reinstallations according to the schedule below. Because of the importance of these projects, I ask that you each make every effort to attend the sessions about your floors. Please RSVP as soon as possible to the Education Department at XXX-XXXX.

Saturday, August 21	11:00am - 12:30pm	Pre-Columbian Study Gallery (names of staff members)
	2:00pm - 4:00pm	Same
Saturday, August 28	11:00am - 12:30pm	Asian Choice Labels (names of staff members)
	2:00pm - 4:00pm	Spanish Colonial Transition Room and Reader Stanchion

You'll be observing these discussions in the A-level meeting room. Thank you for giving up weekend time for this project. cc:

Education project coordinators

⁴This memo was unpopular with some staff members, who said they would have come even if the director had not required their attendance. Depending on staff size, organization, and interest in the evaluation process, this step may be accomplished in a less formal way.

5. RECRUITING VISITOR PANELISTS

Past visitor studies conducted at the Denver Art Museum had identified two groups of visitors that constitute the museum's primary audience: "art novices" and "advanced amateurs." Art novices are visitors who describe themselves as having a moderate to high interest in art, but low to moderate knowledge of art history, aesthetics, and the artist's materials and techniques. They visit the museum to enjoy the works of art they find pleasant, preferring realistic styles and easily understandable subject matter. Art novices have a deep need to make personal connections with works of art. Their judgment of a work often revolves around whether they like or dislike it. Advanced amateurs, on the other hand, describe themselves as having moderate to high knowledge of art and having chosen to pursue it as an avocation, not a profession. Their experience has taught them that a work of art can be approached and appreciated in several different ways. If they find one approach unrewarding, they will take a second look at the work using another method. Their interest in a work of art is often a composite of feelings and ideas. Members of these two groups are likely to return as frequent visitors if the museum experience is rewarding.⁵

To locate art novices and advanced amateurs in the community who might be interested in serving as visitor panelists, the Denver Art Museum used their own telemarketing staff, who sell museum memberships. The benefits of using these experts to contact and screen potential panelists far outweighed the monetary costs. For a modest hourly fee, the telemarketers offered experience in developing and administering a screening questionnaire. Their training in phone techniques allowed them to generate enthusiasm from prospective panelists and to hear what they needed in order to select the best candidates. The telephone screening was completed in only sixteen hours, so in a matter of a few days the museum had a list of candidates, and the project moved ahead.

To reach community members who were qualified and interested in participating in the study, each telemarketer used lists from several sources:

- Ø people who had attended one event at the museum
- Ø people being solicited for museum memberships, including those who had visited on free days
- Ø people with demonstrated interest in other cultural events

The screening questionnaire developed by the museum and used by the telemarketer posed a series of questions designed to select people fitting the art novice and advanced amateur criteria. The final sample was to be diverse by sex, age, and ethnic background. Depending on people's responses to questions 1 and 2 (see following), the telemarketer moved to questions 3-7 for novice visitors or questions 3-5 for advanced amateur visitors. If the candidate fit the criteria for either group, the phone interview ended with some basic information about the visitor panel study and an inquiry about their willingness to be contacted to participate.

⁵ A complete description of art novices and advanced amateurs is **available** in the [Denver Art Museum Interpretive Project](#). Call the Denver Art Museum's Education Department to order — 303-640-7577.

TELEMARKETERS' SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE

Good afternoon/evening, my name is _____ from the Denver Art Museum and we're conducting a brief survey to find out how we can better serve our visitors. Do you have three or four minutes to answer a few questions? Thank you.

1. How often in the last year did you visit any art museum?

- 0 times
- 1-2 times
- 3-5 times
- 6+ times

2. In general, how would you rate your *knowledge* of art?

- low (go to novice questions)
- moderate (go to novice questions)
- high (go to advanced amateur questions)
- very high (go to advanced amateur questions)

NOVICE QUESTIONS

3. In general, how would you rate your *interest* in art?

- low (assign 0 points)
- moderate (assign 0 points)
- high (assign 0 points)
- very high (assign 1 point)

TOTAL POINTS:

4. Please answer YES or NO to the following questions.

During the last year have you...		
attended an art lecture	Yes	No
read an art book or magazine	Yes	No
purchased an art work	Yes	No
watched a television show on art or on a particular artist	Yes	No
taken an art class or created art work on your own	Yes	No

IF RESPONDENT ANSWERS YES TO ONE OR MORE OF THE ABOVE, ASSIGN 1 POINT

5. Please tell me which of the following statements describe you:

- | | |
|---|------------------|
| I go to art museums to do something with my family or friends | _ YES = 0 points |
| I go to the art museum to see a few of my favorite objects | YES =1 point _ |
| I go to the art museum to see the changing exhibitions | YES = 1 point _ |
| I go to the art museum for special events like jazz concerts | YES = 0 points |
| I go to art museums to look around and have a good time | YES = 0 points |
| I go to art museums to learn something about art | YES =1 point |

TOTAL POINTS:

Total all points:

0-2 = Terminate Interview 3-
5 = Art Novice

6. Into which of the following categories does your age fall?

Under 25

25-35

36-45

46-55

— 56 or over

7. What levels of schooling have you completed?

— junior high school [7th thru 9th]

some high school

— graduated from high school

_____ some college

— graduated from college

— post-graduate or professional degree work

8. Indicate sex: Male Female

We will be inviting a panel of visitors to come in and discuss with us their reaction to some of the written material that we provide for visitors in the galleries. You will receive five free passes, as well as other incentives (including a cash incentive) as compensation for your time.

Would you be willing to be called to participate in this study once we have the exact dates, time, and incentives?

Name and address:

ADVANCED AMATEUR QUESTIONS

3. In general, how would you rate your *interest* in art? low

(terminate after a few questions)

moderate (terminate after a few questions)

high

very high

4. Please answer YES or NO to the following questions.

During the last year have you...

attended an art lecture _ Yes _ No

read an art book or magazine _ Yes _ No

purchased an art work _ Yes _ No

watched a television show on art or
on a particular artist _ Yes No

taken an art class or created art work
on your own _ Yes _ No

TERMINATE IF RESPONDENT ANSWERS NO MORE THAN FOUR TIMES.

5. Is your work art-related?

Yes TERMINATE No

6. Into which of the following categories does your age fall?

- Under 25
- 25-35
- 36-45
- 46-55
- 56 or over

7. What levels of schooling have you completed?

- junior high school [7th thru 9th]
- some high school
- graduated from high school
- some college
- graduated from college
- post-graduate or professional degree work

8. Indicate sex: Male Female

We will be inviting a panel of visitors to come in and discuss with us their reaction to some of the written material that we provide for visitors in the galleries. You will receive five free passes, as well as other incentives (including a cash incentive) as compensation for your time. Would you be willing to be called to participate in this study once we have the exact dates, time, and incentives?

Name and address:

The Denver Art Museum invited fourteen people to serve on the initial visitor panel. Four were members of the museum. Nine were females, five males. The ethnic background of the group included five Caucasians, five African Americans, two Latinos, an American Indian, and an Asian American. One person later declined to participate in the visitor panels, and three did not return for the second day of sessions, leaving a core group of ten panelists. This proved to be a good group size, allowing for active participation from all panelists. Anticipating this level of attrition, the museum will continue to recruit fourteen participants for visitor panels to arrive at a group of eight to ten panelists who will remain active for a twelve- to eighteen-month period. During this time, panelists will participate in four to six different visitor panels. An adequate panel can be convened with as few as six participants or as many as ten.

Prospective panelists were sent a letter from the Dean of Education and the evaluation project manager (a paid intern) inviting them to participate in the visitor panels. The letter contained information about the program's objectives, specific details about session dates, times, and locations, and an abbreviated schedule of the day. The letter also outlined the procedure of reimbursement for the participants' time and lunch expenses. Panelists were paid \$25 for each discussion session in which they participated. Directions to the museum and an area parking map were enclosed. The letter was followed up with a phone call from an Education staff member to answer any logistical questions and to encourage participation.

LETTER TO PROSPECTIVE PANELISTS

Dear Panel Discussion Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in our visitor discussion group. Below you will find information necessary for getting to the museum and a general introduction to what you will be participating in. We are very excited about this project and are looking forward to seeing you on the 21st or the 28th of August!

The purpose of this research approach is to create a group discussion atmosphere where visitors express, reflect, and exchange their reactions and feelings to certain issues regarding the museum galleries. A moderator will ask questions about these issues. In addition to the moderator and participants, several museum staff members will observe the discussion. There are a total of four panel discussion sessions. Participants will be paid \$25 for each session they take part in, for a maximum total of \$100. Please sign in when you enter for each session. This will ensure payment of your incentive.

Dates, Times, Location and Other Information

- Saturday, 21 August, 10am-4pm
Saturday, 28 August, 10am-4pm
Denver Art Museum
100 W. 14th Avenue Parkway
Denver, CO 80204

Enter the front door of the museum and turn left. Locate the sculpture of a red horse. The moderator will meet you there and will distribute instructions and a floor map of the gallery you are to visit, as well as information on where to return and at what time, prior to each session (10:00am and 1:30pm).

You may come with family or a friend to the museum (we'll provide free admission for them); however, you will be the only one attending the discussion group.

No substitutions are allowed. Please call if you are unable to attend (Name of staff member, Education Department: XXX-XXXX).

Punctuality is expected and very important for the success of the panel discussions. Please remember to wear a watch.

Schedule of payment: \$25 per discussion session you participate in. One cumulative check will be sent after 28 August. Lunch will be reimbursed with receipt.

Getting to the Museum

Enclosed is a map to help you get to the museum, and another highlighting parking areas nearby. There is no reimbursement for parking, as it is inexpensive. Construction at the Denver Public Library may cause some inconvenience on Broadway and 13th Avenue. In addition, Acoma Street between 13th and 14th is no longer in use.

Schedule for the 21st and 28th of August Panel Discussion Groups

10:00am	Participants arrive, sign in on attendance sheet, and meet by the sculpture to the left of the front door. Instructions and map passed out, participants to gallery.
11:00am	Participants return from gallery and fill out questionnaire.
11:15am	Panel discussion session.
12:30pm	Discussion session ends; break for lunch.
1:30pm	Participants return, sign in on attendance sheet, and meet by the sculpture to the left of the front door. Instructions and map passed out, participants to gallery.
2:30pm	Participants return from gallery and fill out questionnaire.
2:45pm	Panel discussion session.
4:00pm	Discussion session ends.

Thank you again for your time. We look forward to seeing you on the 21st or 28th! 11

Sincerely,

Project Manager

Dean of Education

Since each visitor panel session lasted a-half day, panelists could take part in a morning and an afternoon session scheduled on a single Saturday. In each half-day session, panelists spent an hour in the gallery completing the assignment before going to the discussion room, where they spent fifteen minutes completing the pre-discussion questionnaire. This allowed an hour and fifteen minutes for the actual panel discussion.

Over the course of a year, a total of six visitor panel sessions were held, each lasting a half day. This included the initial four panels and two others. Individual sessions focused on the following issues:

- Ø the Study Gallery of Pre-Columbian art (first and second sessions)
- Ø labels and gallery themes in the Asian reinstallation (third session)
- Ø the Spanish Colonial galleries and the Transition Room (fourth session)
- Ø the Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial gallery orientation area (fifth session) - scheduled as a follow-up to the fourth session
- Ø the museum's African/Oceanic gallery (sixth session) - scheduled at the instigation of another staff team considering a future reinstallation

After the first four sessions, which were held on two days, museum staff and visitor panelists agreed that conducting two half-day sessions on a single day was draining and stressful. Consequently, the fifth and sixth sessions were scheduled on separate days. Another modification was made in the sixth session, when the staff asked panelists to come to the museum at their convenience and spend as much time as they needed exploring the designated gallery before reporting for the panel discussion at an appointed time. This discussion was also formatted differently, beginning in the conference room like the others, but ending with the entire group going to the galleries under discussion.

Reconvening visitor panelists for input on multiple issues raised their interest and investment in the project. Beyond the monetary incentive the museum offered for their participation, panelists began to identify with the museum and, as a result, they looked and listened more closely. Staff noticed that the panelists became more confident in their opinions and offered thoughtful answers more freely. With their increased involvement and understanding, visitor panelists became advocates for the museum within their own communities, but visitor panels were not intended as a means of audience development or community support. Eventually, the panels reached a point of diminishing returns: The panelists had come to identify so strongly with the museum and its goals that they were no longer able to function as representatives of average visitors. Serving on six visitor panels seems optimum, as it allows for repeated exchange between panelists and museum staff while avoiding the ramifications of panelists becoming overly identified with the museum.

6. COMPILING THE DISCUSSION GUIDES

The Education Department gathered ideas and concerns from the staff into a long and diverse list of questions about visitors' perceptions of the reinstallations. The questions were sifted through and grouped into categories according to the methods of audience evaluation that could best address specific issues. Options included unobtrusive observation, exit interviews, focus groups, and visitor panels. Some questions were eliminated due to the amount of time and money it would have taken to explore them or because change was impossible at that stage. Staff determined that visitor panels would be most useful in focusing on the content and format of written interpretive materials in the reinstalled galleries. Other concerns suggested other evaluative measures:

- Ø How can we find out how visitors feel about the color, lighting, noise and lack of seating? (focus group)
- Ø Do those in wheelchairs have problems with the carpet in the browsing area? (exit interviews)
- Ø How long are visitors spending with the scrapbooks? (unobtrusive observation)

Selecting Topics for Panel Discussions

The goal for the visitor panels was to answer a variety of specific questions about the interpretive devices in two reinstallations in just a few half-day sessions. Therefore, it was necessary to carefully select the issues to be discussed. Each discussion had to focus on a few concrete issues to allow visitor panelists enough time to explore the interpretive devices thoroughly and discuss their reactions precisely. In drafting the discussion guide, the Education staff looked for general concerns about the interpretive materials, then focused on specific questions about particular titles, section labels, or extended object labels. Some questions raised regarding one gallery reflected issues in other galleries, while some were quite specific to a single group of objects.

The discussion guide for the Asian reinstallation focused on two thematic galleries with wall quotes and explored the use and format of interactive labels called "Choice Labels." Questions were narrowed down to focus on two concerns:

- Ø clarity of gallery themes
- Ø effectiveness of extended label content and formats

The Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial discussion guides explored specific interpretive components which were very different in form and content, and the Transition Room that was designed to show the connections between these two collections. Questions fell into three areas:

- Ø use of the Pre-Columbian Study Gallery interpretive components
- Ø effectiveness of the Transition Room
- Ø reactions to interpretive materials in the Spanish Colonial galleries

Initially, a total of four visitor panel discussions were scheduled, one focusing on the Asian galleries, two on the Pre-Columbian Study Gallery, and one on the Transition Room. The Pre-Columbian Study Gallery provides a good example of the issues addressed at this stage. The permanent collection of Pre-Columbian art consists of more than 4,000 objects, the majority of which had previously been in storage at any given time. To show visitors the breadth of the collection, the entire collection was reinstalled in an open storage format. In exploring ways to present this quantity of material, Denver Art

Museum staff considered libraries as a model. They were interested in the resources libraries offer and the type of experiences they provide to their patrons, who come to study a specific topic and then return to explore another area, or to pursue their topic in greater depth.

The Study Gallery exhibits each object with a small number on a plexi cube that guides visitors to a basic identification of that object in a booklet adjacent to the case in which the object is displayed. The cases are arranged geographically with large explanation panels on the walls, and also according to cultural designations such as Greater Nicoya and Olmec. Extended labels within the cases discuss each of these cultural areas. Since this style of installation is unfamiliar to most museum visitors, staff needed to know if the interpretive system was effective. In the center of the gallery is the Seminar Room, occasionally used for events but generally open as a reading room with a small library on display. The Study Gallery also includes a video viewing area and two reading areas (one for adults and one for children). Museum staff sought answers to the following questions:

- Ø Do visitors understand that the entire collection is on display?
- Ø Do they feel invited to explore specific objects according to their own interests and desires?
- Ø Do they understand the system by which information is arranged?
- Ø Do they find the information accessible or confusing?
- Ø Do they feel comfortable using other resources in the Study Gallery, such as the booklets, cubes, extended labels, and the Seminar Room?

Because the museum's concerns about this reinstallation ranged from visitors' general orientation to their impressions of the interpretation of specific objects, two sessions were dedicated to this area. The morning session sought panelists' overall impressions of the Study Gallery, reactions to the different areas within the gallery, and use of orientation materials. The afternoon session focused on the interpretive components of the gallery--the object and culture area labels.

Drafting Discussion Guides

Once the topics for the various visitor panel discussions were defined, the Education staff began drafting the discussion guide. Staff questions were not stated verbatim in the discussion guide draft, but rephrased to help visitor panelists respond to staff concerns. This wording is very important: Questions must be concise enough to focus the discussion, but general enough that they do not lead panelists toward a certain response. Professional jargon must be replaced by common parlance. For example, one staff question was,

"When visitors are in an Asian gallery, are they aware of what the theme of the gallery is?"

To begin with, this question does not address the preliminary issue of whether visitors are aware that the galleries are arranged according to themes. It also fails to provide panelists with a specific experience or reference on which to ground their responses. It asks panelists to draw a conclusion without exploring the factors that contribute to their reaction. In the discussion guide for the Asian reinstallation, this single staff question evolved into a five-part discussion question for the panelists. Applied to two thematic galleries, the discussion focused on one gallery at a time, so panelists could provide concrete opinions grounded in specific objects and themes. When the moderator referred to quotations or extended labels displayed in the galleries, panelists were provided with mock-ups of the text to refresh their memories and keep the discussion specific.

The extended labels discussed here (called "Choice Labels") are pull-out labels that fit into pockets installed in baseboards as part of the gallery architecture:

EXCERPTS FROM
THE ASIAN DISCUSSION GUIDE

II. THEME GALLERIES

A. "Everyday Traditions" Gallery

1. What did you think this space was about? Was there something about all of these objects that pulled them together?
2. What did you find in this space to help you understand what it was all about? (Probe for noticing title of the gallery up high on the wall, and its meaning.)
3. What about the quotation on the wall?
 - a. What did it do for you in terms of helping you understand or enjoy this space?
4. What about the two pull-outbings? (Show example of the Choice Labels.)
 - a. What were they about?
 - b. Did they help in understanding this room?
5. What could we do in this gallery to make it more understandable and exciting to visitors?

B. "Scholar's Tradition" Gallery

1. What did this space appear to be about? Why were these objects pulled together?
2. What did you make use of in this room?
 - a. Probe for use of two quotes on the wall, title up high on the wall, and two Choice Labels on Yixing ware and scholar's tools.
 - b. Probe for whether they notice any relationship between this gallery and the three galleries that surround it (China, Korea, and Japan).
3. Zero in on quotes on the wall. (Hand out copies.)
 - a. What do these quotes tell you about the objects in the room?
 - b. What do these objects tell you about the scholar?
 - c. Were they clear, understandable? Why, why not?
4. What about pull-out things? (Show example of Choice Labels.)
 - a. Did you use, notice them?
 - b. How did they help in understanding the room?

These questions explore visitor panelists' awareness and understanding of gallery themes in a multi-dimensional way. Beginning with general inquiries and moving to examinations of specific interpretative devices, they zero in on questions that lead to increased understanding. The questions in the above example were followed by a more detailed examination of the layout, text, and images used in these particular Choice Labels. Most questions are open-ended, inviting differing responses and encouraging discussion of how interpretive devices like Choice Labels, gallery titles, and quotations on the walls serve the visitor. But the questions are specific in the sense that they direct panelists to frame their replies around concrete interpretive devices. This specificity helps panelists explain and defend their viewpoints while giving museum staff a more exact understanding of visitor reactions.

Writing the Final Discussion Guide

After the discussion guide drafts were prepared by the Education staff, they were circulated among the exhibition team members for comments. Drafts were also reviewed by project consultant Ross Loomis. All of these stakeholders' comments were considered in creating a final draft of the discussion guide. Examples of two complete discussion guides follow.

THE PRE-COLUMBIAN DISCUSSION GUIDE STUDY GALLERY/ORIENTATION COMPONENTS

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Collect assignments (See p. 13)

B. Moderator to introduce self

1. Emphasize no role in these particular projects.
2. Moderator defines role, to go through a list of questions that the museum wants to have discussed, did not create materials.

C. Guidelines for panelists

1. Session is to be recorded. There are guests in the room to listen to the discussion. Recordings can be reviewed later so that notes don't need to be taken.
2. Only one person speaking at a time. Reduce side conversations among neighbors--share what you have to say with the group.
3. Encourage everyone to participate and be frank. Emphasize that feelings will not be hurt if there are negative comments. The museum needs to know in order to make things better.

D. Participants introduce themselves

1. Include experience with art museums, including the Denver Art Museum.
2. Include experience with Pre-Columbian art and whether they have visited the DAM Study Gallery before.
3. Do they typically use gallery information a lot, a little, usually, never (why, why not)?

II. OVERALL EXPERIENCE

- A. Overall reaction to the gallery/first impressions. How would you describe this gallery space to someone else?
- B. Reaction to the number of objects. (Probe for awareness that total collection is shown.)
- C. Reaction to titles of "Study Gallery" and "Seminar Room." (Probe for other possible titles.)

III. ORIENTATION PANEL (IN GLASS CASE)

A. Use of orientation panel

1. Was it useful? (How, what aspects?)
2. After you read it, what did you do?
3. Did it help? Would it help other visitors?

B. Hand out xeroxes and ask panelists to circle words or phrases that were unclear or confusing.

1. Map of the floor
2. Letter identification system for cases
3. Cube-shaped object label. (acquisition number)
4. Object label booklets

5. Culture labels (written materials) and culture markers in the cases
 6. List at the end including video area, archeology game, and reading areas
- C. What could be better about the orientation panel? Are there changes or additions?
1. Explore the way it is laid out and organized with numbers 1 through 6 on the left and verbal descriptions and those same items illustrated on the right
 2. Type size
 3. Was it "user friendly"?
- D. When you went into the gallery to use the components described in the panel, what happened?
1. Booklets and cubes--would you need an orientation panel to understand how to use them?
 2. Letters identifying the cases
 3. Culture labels and culture markers
 - a. Could you find them?
 - b. Did the orientation panel let you know what to expect?
 - c. Did the orientation panel entice you to use them?
 - d. Could you understand what they were going to be?
 - e. How clear was the physical layout of the floor in general and what you could do there?
 1. Cases in geographic areas
 2. Video area
 3. Reading areas (children and adult)
 4. Seminar Room
 5. Seating
 - f. Did they use signs hanging from the ceiling, or titles above the doors as they entered?
 4. In general, how can we help visitors more to learn what their options are and to orient them to the Study Gallery?

PRE-COLUMBIAN DISCUSSION GUIDE
STUDY GALLERY/EDUCATIONAL COMPONENTS

I. INTRODUCTION (same as above)

- A. Role of this visitor panel in the overall visitor feedback project
- B. Guideline for panelists (same as above)

II. CULTURE AREA LABELS

- A. General comments on the three culture area labels read in the gallery. (Wari, Olmec, Greater Nicoya)
 1. Initial reactions/what were these labels about? How would you describe them to someone else?
 2. How did the labels enhance or detract from your experience of the objects?
 3. Was there anything you wanted to know that the labels didn't give you?
 4. How likely is it that you would have read this label if you had been visiting the gallery on your own rather than in a project like this?
- B. Specific comments on the culture area labels. (Hand out copies of the labels to each panelist)
 1. Let's talk about the maps. Were they helpful? clear? Do you have any suggestions for making them better?
 2. What about the print size? When they were in the cases, do you recall whether labels were easy or hard to read in terms of print size?
 3. Did you notice the labels were in English and Spanish? When did you discover that first?
 4. Ask the visitors to take the labels and briefly review them and mark the following. Please circle words or phrases that you didn't understand or that you think other visitors like yourself might not understand
 5. In general, was this material written in a way that made it understandable to visitors? Should it have been easier or more challenging?
 6. Was the information interesting? If so, how was the material interesting to you? If not, why not?
 7. Was there something in the materials that surprised you, anything new that you learned?

8. What about the length of the labels?

III. WRAP UP

- A. In general, do you have any recommendations you'd like to give to us?
 - B. When museums are trying to present information about the things on view, what are the formats that you think are more useful or less useful? Such as printed materials to read in the galleries, perhaps laminated; or printed materials to take home; or printed things in cases such as on this floor, or resting; other ideas for presenting information?
 - C. Was the kind of information you read worth reading once you had read it, from your point of view, in terms of your interests? Which of the three different kinds of information did you find most interesting?
 - D. If the museum's goal is to have people return and use the museum a bit more the way people use a library for repeat visits, every month, do you have any suggestions to us for how to make that happen?
-
-

7. ORGANIZING VISITOR PANELISTS' ASSIGNMENTS

Panelist Instructions

Organizing panelist assignments included three steps: first, giving visitors instructions for their gallery visit; second, giving a pre-discussion questionnaire; and third, preparing mock-ups of interpretive materials to use in the discussion.

In evaluating the interpretive devices in a single gallery, visitor panelists participated in three different activities. When they entered the museum, they were met by an Education staff member who handed them a gallery map and a written assignment. The assignments gave panelists concrete tasks to familiarize them with the exhibition layout and interpretive components. Panelists were directed to specific areas of the galleries and then to particular objects and labels about which the museum sought feedback. Panelists worked at their own pace to complete this initial assignment on their own, and the activity lasted up to one hour. Two examples of instructions for panelists follow.

Panelist Instructions for Pre-Columbian Study Gallery Orientation and General Gallery Discussion

August 21, 1993, AM Session

n Please read all the instructions before beginning the exercise. This exercise will take one hour to complete and ends promptly at 11:00am. The entire exercise takes place on the fourth floor in the Study Gallery. We urge you to do this exercise independently and not to discuss it with others, since you will have a chance to do this in the panel discussion.

n First find, read, and use the Orientation Panel for the Study Gallery (see attached map). The information concerning the Culture Area Labels may be disregarded. After reading the Orientation Panel, please find and explore the following in any order.

1. Choose six objects (two from each geographical area: Mesoamerica, Central America, and South America). Find and explore them using the Booklets and Cubes.
2. Find and explore the components listed below. Get to know them well enough so you could come back and use them.
 - a) Video Area
 - b) Children's Reading Area
 - c) Adult Reading Area
 - d) Seminar Room
 - e) Archeology Game

n After the exercise, please return to where you started in the lobby. A museum staff member will tell you what to do next.

Panelist Instructions for Pre-Columbian Study Gallery Interpretive Materials Discussion

August 21, 1993, PM Session

- n Please read all the instructions before beginning the exercise. This exercise will take one hour to complete and ends promptly at 2:30pm. The entire exercise takes place on the fourth floor in the Study Gallery. We urge you to do this exercise independently and not to discuss it with others, since you will have a chance to do this in the panel discussion.
- n You'll be reading five separate items. Each is marked on the map attached.

- n Find and read the three Culture Area Labels listed below, and explore the related objects.
 - a) Wari
 - b) Greater Nicoya
 - c) Olmec

- n Find, read, and explore the labels listed below.
 - a) Pottery Window
 - b) Maya Ceramics

- n After the exercise, please return to the third floor. A museum staff member will tell you what to do next.

Pre-Discussion Questionnaire

After completing the gallery assignment, panelists were given a Pre-Discussion Questionnaire, a short written assignment to help them gather their thoughts before joining fellow panelists and the moderator for the panel discussion (see example on pages 15, 16). Exercises like this encouraged them to:

- Ø think generally about the interpretive materials they'd seen in the galleries
- Ø register their opinions for themselves before the general discussion began. This step helps reduce the tendency for reserved panelists to echo the opinions of more outspoken ones.

THE PRE-COLUMBIAN STUDY GALLERY

Pre-Discussion Questionnaire August 21, 1993, AM Session

Please allow 10-15 minutes to complete this questionnaire. Read each question carefully and mark the answer which best describes how YOU feel. We are interested in your honest opinions--both good and bad. Candid responses provide the most valuable information.

Check one appropriate response:

1. Finding your way around the Study Gallery was:
 - difficult
 - somewhat difficult
 - just right
 - somewhat easy
 - easy

2. Using the Orientation Panel behind the glass case was:

- difficult
- somewhat difficult
- just right
- somewhat easy
- easy

3. The Booklets were:

- difficult
- somewhat difficult
- just right
- somewhat easy
- easy

4. The Cubes were:

- difficult
- somewhat difficult
- just right
- somewhat easy
- easy

5. I thought the seminar room was used for: (check all that are applicable)

- sitting
- studying
- viewing objects in cases
- lectures
- resting
- other -- please list:

6. What I liked most about the Study Gallery was:

7. What I liked least about the Study Gallery was:

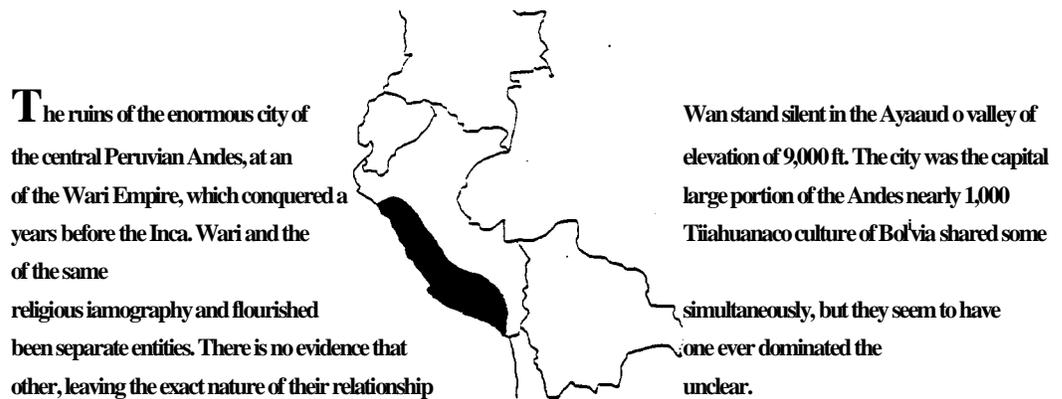
8. The most confusing thing about the Study Gallery was:

9. The most helpful thing about the Study Gallery was:

Preparing Mock-Ups

During the group discussion that followed, visitor panelists needed concrete references to interpretive materials they'd seen in the galleries so they could articulate precise reactions to specific labels, titles, and quotations. Education staff collected materials like mock-ups of extended labels and copies of the wall quotes to hand out to the panelists when these interpretive devices were addressed in the discussion guide. These materials helped keep the discussion specific and focused. Examples of actual labels brought to discussions are illustrated below (in reduced size).

WARI



The site of Wari was first occupied around 200 B.C. Between A.D. 500 and 900, the site grew very rapidly from a small settlement into one of the largest urban centers in South America. Ultimately a city of 5 square kilometers, it supported a population ranging between 35,000 to 70,000 people.

Wari artisans worked in many media, including stone, bone, shell, wood, and textiles, but most surviving Wari artifacts are pottery. Wari pots were made of good quality clay and were well fired. Wari polychrome pots were prestige items throughout the empire and were widely imitated in the provinces. Vessels were produced in a wide variety of shapes that were often highly decorated with religious motifs. The Wari people sometimes sacrificed huge quantities of elaborate, oversized religious pottery,

FRONT

SUIT OF ARMOR



*Suit of Armor
Japan
1700's
Iron, silver, lacquer
leather, silk*

Warriors in a **time of peace**. The samurai owner of armor like this lived in the middle of a 250 year period of peace that may have often seemed calm compared to the bloody warfare of earlier times when his ancestors fought in the civil wars that swept Japan. His elegant armor, with its glossy lacquered plates and silk corded skirt, meant more as a symbol of his privileged status in the top 5% of Japanese society than as practical fighting equipment.

Armor by rank and pocketbook. Samurai bought armor according to their rank and pocketbook. This suit, made up of nearly 740,000

handmade pieces, would have been well worth its price when worn in ceremonial processions or displayed in its owner's home. The intricate chain mail arms and cleverly hammered iron dragon

emerging from clouds on testify to the skill of the the wealth of the samurai

Reenactments, in full armor, still attract enthusiasts in Japan. Note the straw sandals, luxurious overcoats and wide trousers that were worn with armor.



From Samurai Warlords

they still espoused a code of honor expressed in the advice "Practice the arts of peace on the left hand and the arts of war on the right. Mastery of both is required." Among the arts of peace, the high ranking samurai would have included flower arranging; knowledge of fine swords, armor and rare tea bowls, and the ability to recite and compose poetry.

the chest plate armor makers and who wore it.

18th century samurai might have led humdrum lives as

government bureaucrats or high ranking policemen, but

BACK

SUIT OF ARMOR



*Suit of Armor
Japan
1700's
Iron, silver, lacquer
leather, silk*

The life of a samurai warrior. When this armor was worn, its samurai owner led a privileged but rigidly supervised existence. Only men of the samurai class, or military aristocracy, were permitted family names in addition to their first names and the right to walk the streets wearing two swords thrust through the sash around their waist. Samurai studied the history of armor and reconfirmed pride in their warrior ancestry by

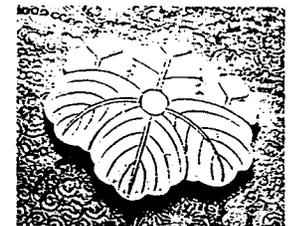
owning elaborate suits of armor that would never see battle. The owner of this suit was from a privileged class but he might have spent his days writing government reports or supervising the repair of castle walls.

Government rules gave him the right to cut down a commoner who insulted him but also controlled the size of his house, the amount of his pay and what clothes and armor he had a right to wear. For example, dress codes recommended that on a war mask "a moveable nose-piece is recommended, whiskers are not particularly necessary, but it is desirable to have mustaches."



On parade this 18th century samurai wore a face mask with detachable nose and cheek piece, a stiff mustache (probably made of badger hair), and a hole under the chin so sweat could run out. Like a piece of jewelry, this mask is ornamented with tendrils and flowers on its cheeks and the mon or badge of a warrior clan on the chin. Note the same clan symbol on the turned back wings of the helmet and on the ear covers.

Inside surfaces of the iron mask, and the helmet visor, are lacquered brilliant red. Red lacquer protects the metal from corroding in the damp Japanese climate, provides a smooth inner surface for contact with the lace and casts a red shadow on the samurai's face giving him a fierce look.



Mon or badge of a samurai clan in the form of a paulownia leaf.

8. COORDINATING VISITOR PANELS

Visitor panels were conducted in a conference room at the museum, which afforded several benefits:

- Ø panelists could move back and forth from the galleries to the conference room
- Ø the museum saved the costs of renting a specially equipped room at a marketing facility
- Ø panelists felt more like stakeholders by meeting in the museum environment

The only requirement for the conference room is that it be large enough to seat the panelists, a moderator, and the observing staff. In Denver, staff chose to use a medium-size conference room rather than a larger multipurpose room in order to create an intimate, relaxing atmosphere. No special equipment was needed, other than in-house tape-recording equipment, which was operated by museum staff. The moderator and panelists were seated around the conference table so their voices could be picked up by the audio-recording equipment. Name plaques on the table identified the moderator and panelists. Staff observers sat behind the panelists along the walls of the room.

Communication with other staff members was critical throughout the process. Once the dates and times were established, Education staff sent memos confirming plans and logistical arrangements to all affected staff, including:

- Ø security staff
- Ø information volunteers
- Ø docents conducting tours in affected areas
- Ø staff observers

M E M O R A N D U M

To: Security Supervisor
From: Education staff
Date: August 5, 1993
Subject: Panel Evaluations on August 21 and 28

On August 21 and 28 (Saturdays) we will be holding Panel Evaluations at the museum for the two new floors. There will be approximately 10 people per session and each session will be moderated by either XXXX or XXXX. The discussion part of the panel will take place in the A-Level Conference Room. The day will begin at 10:00am with the participants meeting on the main floor near the Orion sculpture. During the day they will either be on the fourth and fifth floors or in the Conference room. At approximately 4:00pm the panel discussion will end and people will be leaving. The week of the 16th we will be able to provide you with a complete list of the panel participants so that the front door guards will know to let them back in if they decide to eat lunch away from the museum. If you have any questions give XXXX a call at XXX-XXXX. Thanks for your help!

9. CONDUCTING THE PANELS

Each panel discussion was moderated by an Education staff member who was not a member of the exhibition team for the reinstalled galleries under discussion. The moderator's role was to move the discussion forward, addressing all the issues on the discussion guide, posing questions, and probing for clarification when necessary. The moderator also encouraged all panelists to contribute, sometimes calling on quiet panelists by name. Moderators established the policy that only one person would talk at a time and explained the reason for this. "I've listened to these tapes," explained one, "and when you hear a little smattering of something interesting happening in one corner while someone else is talking, it's really frustrating because you know good stuff is going on. So, if you're dying to say something, just hold on to it for a second, if you would."

The moderators assured the panelists that the museum needed their honest opinions and encouraged them to speak frankly, even in voicing negative reactions. They appeared neutral to the opinions offered by the panelists, but interested in discovering what led them to their conclusions. "I'm not responsible for the materials you looked at," said one. "My job is just to moderate a discussion. If you have something negative to say about what you've experienced or what you've looked at this morning, it's not going to hurt my feelings." The moderators refrained from explaining the museum's goals for interpreting the objects exhibited in order to elicit panelists' unbiased responses about their reactions to the interpretive components.

To facilitate visitor panel discussions, moderators needed to be well informed of the museum's general goals for visitors, as well as the exhibition team's specific objectives for the reinstalled galleries. To prepare for a session, they explored the galleries under consideration and interviewed the exhibition team to learn the breadth and depth of their concerns. This helped them know when to probe panelists for more detailed explanations of their perceptions and when to move on to the next set of questions. The moderators thoroughly familiarized themselves with the discussion guide so they had a clear sense of where the discussion would lead, allowing them to follow panelists' comments when they were interesting and re-channel the discussion when appropriate. They did not read the guides verbatim; the questions served as signposts rather than as a rigid script, reminding them of key issues the exhibition teams were concerned about. The moderators reviewed the panelists' instructions and collected the pre-discussion questionnaires to refer to when necessary. Well versed in visitor studies and experienced in leading group discussions, the moderators also reviewed past visitor studies conducted in the reinstalled galleries and in other areas of the Denver Art Museum.

10. INTERPRETING THE PANELS

Staff members began interpreting the evaluation as they listened to the live panel discussions. In observing the discussions, they listened for common concerns and repeated themes. They recorded their initial responses to the discussion so they could revisit these early reactions after the tapes were transcribed. To make the most of this opportunity, those observing the discussion had to be prepared to hear criticism of a project they had dedicated many long hours to creating. Staff reminded themselves and each other that visitor panelists' comments were not personally directed.

By observing the panel discussion live, exhibition team members had a chance to associate the opinions collected in the evaluation with real visitors. The staff became familiar with the panelists and their backgrounds and mannerisms, as well as their perceptions of the reinstallations. Hearing panelists' inflections, observing their gestures, and seeing the group dynamics enhanced staff members' understanding of the panelists' words. This provided them with a more complete understanding of what panelists said and an appreciation of their thoughtfulness and sincerity. This kind of communication between staff and visitors does not happen through reading a transcript alone.

Observing the discussion live provided immediate feedback from visitor panels. This helped create a sense of anticipation and build enthusiasm for using the data to improve interpretive devices in the newly reinstalled galleries. But for all they offer in the way of immediacy, live observations did not preclude the need to record and transcribe the panel. The tapes were usually transcribed in a timely manner, so staff could reflect on the comments in written format and determine the best ways to incorporate the data. Written reports of findings and action plans were also vital in keeping the process moving forward. The staffs work was just beginning when the visitor panels were over.

Before reading the transcripts, it was helpful to review the goals for the visitor panels and the issues staff identified. The discussion guide, panelists' assignments, and statements of interpretive objectives all helped staff sift through the perceptions and opinions recorded in the transcript. To separate idiosyncratic responses from reactions that most likely reflected the majority of visitors, staff looked for repetition and multiple voices. If a certain opinion is expressed over and over by several panelists, it is likely to represent the reactions of a wider audience.

Some staff, usually the educators, spent more time reviewing transcripts and were, in effect, charged with greater responsibility for this analysis stage. Museum staff certainly cannot perceive an exhibition in the same way visitors do, but their perspective is also important to add to the mix of reactions. Just as visitor panelists brought insights based on their unique perceptions of their gallery experiences, staff provided insights collected from years of experience considering visitor reactions to past exhibitions, programs, and evaluations. It's valuable for seasoned museum staff to consider these experiences as they respond to panelists' comments, noting experiences that confirm or challenge what panelists say.

11. IMPROVING INTERPRETIVE DEVICES

The next step was to look for ways in which the panelists' suggestions could be implemented in the galleries. With transcripts available to all team members, educators and curators began planning and prioritizing changes to the galleries. In reflecting on the data, they asked several questions:

- Ø What were the primary needs identified in the panels?
- Ø What are our options for addressing them?
- Ø Which of these are feasible, given the real constraints of staff time and budget?
- Ø What changes will make the biggest impact on the visitor experience?

To continue the discussion and create an action plan, members of the reinstallation teams circulated their recommendations for fine tuning the gallery spaces and interpretive devices. A sample of one team member's recommendations follows.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRE-COLUMBIAN AND SPANISH COLONIAL GALLERIES

Orientation to the floor - Visitors need to be oriented as soon as they get off the elevator.

- Ø Visitors felt confused about the layout of the galleries. We need an explanation of the 3 areas of the floor:
 1. Pre-Columbian Selected Works
 2. Pre-Columbian Study Gallery
 3. Transition Room and Spanish Colonial Galleries

We need to explain enough so that people can plan their visit. In Pre-Columbian Selected Works, we need a brief explanation of the layout by media: stone, Central American ceramics, wood and textiles, gold and jade, Andean ceramics, Ecuador and Columbia, Maya and Mesoamerican ceramics.

- Ø Visitors did not understand the concept of the Study Gallery.

We need a statement that this is 100% of the collection and that it is set up for independent adult learning (like a library). We also need to point out that the collection is arranged to reflect three geographic areas and tell them how to use the interpretive devices.

1. Use the orientation window first.
2. Read the window "What makes good pottery."
3. Read the geographic wall panels.
4. Read the Culture Area labels.
5. Use the booklets for reference.
6. Read "Maya Ceramics" for in-depth object information.
7. Use the books in the reading areas for further research.
8. Watch a video.
9. Play the children's game.

- Ø We need to explain that the Transition Room is an orientation to the Spanish Colonial galleries. There also needs to be an explanation for each gallery. What are the Hispanic missions? What makes the art of Mexico, Ecuador, and Peru different?

- Ø We also need to add signage to the Study Gallery and Seminar Room to make them more user-friendly.

The plan of action resulting from a visitor panel may not always lead to immediate changes in the galleries. The panelists' remarks may suggest new questions and bring previously unidentified problems

to the surface. Consequently, the action plan may involve taking a closer look at how certain interpretive components do or do not function, re-focusing and conducting further evaluations.

The evaluation report of *the* Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial galleries presented *such a* situation. The exhibition team learned from the panelists' remarks that visitors did not understand the overall layout of *the* galleries or *how to use* their *various* components. *Visitors needed more* assistance to orient themselves to the entire collection. As a result, the team decided to create mock-up orientation materials and signage to provide visitors with more detailed information about the galleries on that floor and how to use the interpretive components. Then they invited panelists to return for another half-day session to give their feedback on these mock-ups. Instead of using their best judgment about what might help visitors orient themselves in the space, staff looked to their visitor consultants for input and guidance to fine-tune *the* final product. *The* following *report* demonstrates *the* level of detail and *specificity* of recommendations gathered from visitor panelists in the follow-up session.

SUMMARY OF VISITOR RESEARCH

PRE-COLUMBIAN AND SPANISH COLONIAL GALLERIES ORIENTATION PROJECT

GOAL

As a result of our August research we were interested in testing an "orientation stanchion" to the galleries and a "welcome panel" to the Study Gallery and Seminar Room. In addition, we wanted input on how to make the Information Desk more useful and noticeable.

Six of our ten original panelists came to the museum on February 12, 1994, to discuss our proposed interpretive devices.

RESULTS

Orientation Stanchion

We used a physical mock-up of the proposed orientation stanchion to get input on content, wording, design, and usefulness. In general, the panel was very positive about the device. They liked the simplicity and the use of color photographs and visuals. The following changes were suggested:

1. Open the wings of the stanchion so more visitors could use it at the same time.
2. Put "Study Gallery" at the end of the sentence so it was introduced in the same order as the stanchion explained it.
3. Add "Look for information on special exhibitions at the Information Desk behind you" to the first paragraph.
4. Add the word "display" when describing the Gold and Jade case.
5. Add the sentence, "Floor maps are available for your use at the information desk behind you."
6. Under the Encounter section, change the wording "enter a space" to "you will find yourself in a space."
7. Change the word "represented" to "symbolized."
8. Add the wording "a sculpture of King Ferdinand facing portraits of the Inca dynasty."
9. Add the word "Art" to the sentence "examples of."
10. Use "room within a room" instead of the word "alcove."
11. Add captions to the photographs.

Welcome Panel for the Study Gallery and Seminar Room

Panelists felt the placement and size of the panel were correct. They recommend that:

1. The word "all" should be removed, and instead of "special areas" we should use the words "The Study Gallery" and "The Seminar Room."
2. The word "arrangement" should be changed to "environment."
3. The word "adjacent" should be added before the word "Seminar" in the last sentence.

Information Desk

The panel felt that moving the desk out into the pathway off the elevator would make the path too narrow because of the new orientation stanchion. They suggested adding text about the desk to the orientation stanchion and also adding a hanging sign.

CONCLUSION

Education and curatorial staff, as well as designers, felt the formative testing was well worth the time, money, and effort. The panel was extremely useful and very cooperative. They were pleased that their input was taken seriously and were interested in working on further projects.

Communication was a high priority for education staff coordinating the visitor panel process. In the initial memo soliciting questions from staff, the project's goals were clearly stated. Circulation of the discussion guide drafts served as an update of progress. Subsequent memos informed staff of plans for visitor panels, as well as specific methods for the study and recommendations gathered in the panel discussions. Updated reports, such as the following, detailed changes and actions taking place as a result of the evaluation and demonstrated the usefulness of the information gathered in the discussions.

M E M O R A N D U M

TO: Dean of Education

FROM: Master Teacher, Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial Art

DATE: Feb. 22, 1994

RE: Progress report on Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial Interpretive Program

In reviewing my notes from our meeting with the director and the Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial reinstallation team on December 20th, I would like to update you on our progress.

Pre-Columbian Galleries:

1. Orientation Stanchion and Wall Panel

Visitor research was conducted on Saturday Feb. 5th to look at a mock-up of the Orientation Stanchion located in the elevator lobby area and a wall panel inviting visitors to use the Study Gallery and Seminar Room. We learned a great deal and made some modifications to the text and design. Production of this stanchion is in progress and should be complete in approximately 3 weeks. We hope to have the Orientation Stanchion and the wall panel installed by the end of March.

2. Six reader stanchions for the Selected Works Gallery

I am doing research on the first two stanchions, one on textiles and one on a Maya object. Because we are in the process of reinstalling the textiles in the next two weeks, my progress has been slow due to the uncertainty about exactly which textiles were going up. Now that we have made that determination I can move ahead. New textile rotation is scheduled for late next week, which will be in time for the Andean Textile Art Stop training.

3. Production of ten Culture Area Labels (Mesoamerica)

Two labels for Ecuador have been written and translated. They now have to be formatted and produced by the associate curator with the new computer program.

4. Production of remaining cubes

The Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial department has purchased the new computer program and the associate curator has taken a two-day course on how to use this program. She will begin to produce the cubes in the near future.

12. CONCLUSION

To sum up, visitor panels provided a concrete and useful means of soliciting visitors' opinions of labels and other interpretive materials presented in the reinstalled galleries. They helped museum staff to understand and identify with the needs of the visitor.

As described here, visitor panels have several advantages:

- ◆ They are modest in cost (between \$500 - \$800 per session, including contract project coordinators).
- ◆ They provide concrete and actionable advice.
- ◆ They stimulated staff to make positive changes in interpretive materials.

They also have disadvantages:

- ◆ They sample only a limited number of visitors.
- ◆ They are interpreted subjectively by staff rather than by an "outsider."

Visitor panels are an excellent addition to a range of visitor study methods and are especially effective in fine-tuning interpretive materials.

APPENDIX

OTHER VISITOR STUDIES CONDUCTED IN THE ASIAN AND SPANISH COLONIAL/PRE-COLUMBIAN GALLERIES

I. Unobtrusive Observations

- A. An initial study of 33 visitors gathered information on traffic density and flow pattern in the gallery and the ratio of visitors using an extended label to total number of visitors.
- B. A study of 211 visitors measured traffic flow at a particular extended label and determined the ratio of visitors using extended labels to total number of visitors.
- C. A study of 34 visitors used track maps to measure flow pattern, use, and timing of educational components in the Pre-Columbian Study Gallery.
- D. A study of 41 visitors determined the order in which visitors use educational components in the Transition Room and whether they engaged with a particular object and label.

II. Unobtrusive Observations with Exit Interviews

- A. After visitors were observed using a Choice Label in the Asian gallery, they were asked five open-ended questions and four forced-choice questions regarding their reactions to the label. Those visitors who did not use a Choice Label were asked two open-ended questions and four forced-choice questions, and were asked to give their suggestions.
- B. After visitors were observed actively attending two or more Culture Area Labels in the Pre-Columbian Study Gallery, they were asked two open-ended questions and eight forced-choice questions, and were asked to give their suggestions.
- C. After visitors were observed attending two or more booklets and cubes in the Pre-Columbian Study Gallery, they were asked three open-ended questions and six forced-choice questions, and were asked to give their suggestions.
- D. After visitors were observed attending two or more wall panel in the Pre-Columbian Study Gallery, they were asked two open-ended questions and nine forced-choice questions, and were asked to give their suggestions.