

What does the transformation to a visitor-centered approach do for a museum? How are museums made relevant to a broad range of visitors of varying ages, identities, and social classes? Does appealing to a larger audience force museums to "dumb down" their work? What internal changes are required? Based on a multi-year, Kress Foundation-sponsored study of ten innovative American and European collections-based museums reorganized by their peers to be visitor centered, Peter Samis and Mimi Michaelson answer these key questions for the field. The book

- describes key institutions that have opened the doors to a wider range of visitors;
- addresses the internal struggles to reorganize and democratize these institutions;
- uses case studies, interviews of key personnel, Key Takeaways, and additional resources to help museum professionals implement a visitor-centered approach in collections-based institutions.

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Creating the Visitor-Centered Museum

Peter Samis and Mimi Michaelson

"Only connect"

Key Takeaways

1. The museum prioritizes visitor engagement over the showcasing of collections.
2. At the heart of each MNHS exhibition is a "destination experience," a moment designed to turn visitors from viewers to participants. Breaking the fourth wall turns the museum into a site of serious play, and it adds to visitor engagement.
3. The MNHS does not use the word "curator." Subject matter experts work as equals on collaborative teams alongside project managers, designers, media producers, and educators. A level playing field leads to more innovative and impactful work.

Moving on, we consider three traditional collection-based museums, each recently remodeled and reinvented. Located in non-tourist-destination cities (Detroit, Oakland, and Columbus), only one of them, the DIA, is widely renowned for its collection. As a result of their out-of-the-way locations, these museums share two important features: (1) the need to reimagine the museum and the need to continually recruit local young visitors, and (2) the pressure to innovate in order to attract outside-the-market audiences (in Detroit, New York City, for example, where audience attendance is plummeting but powerful boards and avid critical attention might thwart experimentation). In these centers of innovation, we see three radically changed museums with strong leadership. By connecting to community, all three are dedicated to making real the mission of a visitor-oriented institution. While the particulars—of leadership style, audience research, in-gallery interpretive approaches, or team configurations—may vary, all three have made visits to research a new norm and created workflows to integrate this data into the exhibition development process. Additionally, with strong and seasoned directors at the helm, all three have stuck to their mission in the face of challenges of one kind or another.

These collection-rich museums embrace the notion of the museum as treasure house, but with an important contemporary revision: in the end, each prioritizes community in ways that convey: "This museum is your treasure house."

8 Detroit Institute of Arts Reinventing a Landmark Museum with and for Visitors

The Detroit Institute of Arts, an encyclopedic art museum with a world-class collection, had to unlearn many of its time-honored practices in order to become more accessible. Staff responded to the leadership of their director, Graham Beal, who called for change. They also responded to the community around them, which had been radically impacted by economic challenges since the 1960s.

Beal takes seriously the notions of both deskilling and reskilling. Assuming the authority required to make change, he has not been afraid to take a firm stand, trumping curatorial authority and practicing "The buck stops here" when needed.

Ultimately, his institution rose to the challenge of connecting to community by transforming its galleries, programs, and overall approach to its visitors. In the process, while some disenchanted staff departed, the curators and interpretive specialists who stayed learned to take on new roles and listen to each other in new ways. They accepted guidance from internal and external teams. They developed new ways of telling stories, and they institutionalized feedback systems to gauge their success or make way for further improvements.

Everyone knows that decorative arts galleries from centuries past are a bore: the cases of porcelain and silver, the tapestries and furnished rooms that visitors walk by on their way to the Van Goghs and Monets. Yet at the Detroit Institute of Arts, we find something different: as we enter an upper level gallery, we are confronted by a periwigged portrait on a sign, placed at waist height. It reads:

Much of the art in this suite was made before the French Revolution for European aristocrats who lived grandly, luxuriously, fashionably. The works of art help reveal how the privileged few wiled away their days and how they perceived others in the world.

This is a decisive departure from the normal Museum Voice of unreserved praise. We look around with new eyes. The world of privilege has been



Figure 8.1 Detroit Institute of Arts: *Splendor by the Hour* in the European decorative arts galleries.

named, challenged, and therefore relativized. We see luxurious works of art cast against their human cost. Permission has been granted to reconsider their value. Museumgoers are freed from the classic stance of unquestioning admiration. Reality has been rendered more complex—and inclusive.

That chased silver tureen with the hare, mushrooms, and wild boar is magnificent. That other silver lid sculpted with game birds, fish, and flowers. Each piece is more extravagant than the last. How could people have the means or the desire to surround themselves with so much bling? Another text cues us:

This was a time of sumptuous living for aristocratic men and women. They enjoyed lavish lifestyles and developed elaborate rituals for their daily activities, from getting dressed to drinking a glass of wine. For even the most mundane tasks, only the finest luxury objects could touch their fingertips.

As visitors, we don't have to like it; we're just fascinated by all this evidence of decadence, knowing the end is going to come with a slice of the falling blade:

Ultimately, this level of extravagance could not be sustained. As the upper classes grew more self-indulgent, the lower classes grew poorer

and more oppressed. Finally, on July 14, 1789, the citizens of Paris triggered a revolution that would transform the political systems of France, Europe, and beyond.

We know the outcome. Lessons of income inequality ring as true today as they did in the late eighteenth century, especially in a city that has fallen on hard times, and was but recently a bastion of automotive wealth. In the early to mid-twentieth century, the labor of Detroit's factory workers enabled the titans of the city to live like kings—and to acquire these objects that had once been owned by European royalty. Wealthy collectors with names like Ford and Dodge became founding patrons of the DIA we see today. Indeed, it is the objects they accumulated that comprise many of these exhibits.

In each of the subsequent galleries, part of an exhibit dubbed *Splendor by the Hour*, the story unfolds like a novel; we are invited to “step back in time . . . and experience some of the luxuries that made moving through the morning, afternoon, and evening a continuous delight for the aristocracy.” Visitors now get to share in the circadian splendor of this decadent and doomed life. Room by room, moment by moment, we move through an aristocrat's day. We are even invited to take a seat as a banquet is laid out before us, a video projected onto the table surface using . . . the very same silver and porcelain that surrounds us in the display cases. The patter of French voices—first the servants, then the gentry arriving and taking their



Figure 8.2 Detroit Institute of Arts: *Splendor by the Hour* video banquet.

seats—invite us on a virtual culinary adventure, embedding us in the lives of these objects and inserting these objects into our lives.

Course by course, the meal is vividly evoked, offered to us in all its color, extravagance, and refinement. Our senses are bathed by the sights and by the sounds of the guests' conversations and the clinking of silver on fine china as virtual gloved hands serve each new dish and others—our surrogates—eat those presently before us. Alongside, the wall panel announces:

Dinner culminates with dessert—the most sumptuous part of the meal. Pyramids of candied fruits and sweets and coolers of ice cream transform the table into a sugarcoated tablescape, reviving the appetites of the guests.

Transforming the table into a sugarcoated tablescape: the richness of metaphor is so far removed from the standard museum label that it bears repeating. These novelistic wall texts and the immersive, inviting video installation are exemplars for bringing distant times—and the objects that survive from them—back to life.

Visitor-Centered Interpretation Techniques

The DIA staff fundamentally reinvented the model for European decorative arts galleries when they designed and developed *Splendor by the Hour*. In fact, therein hangs a tale of an institution bent on reinventing itself—and a director convinced that no real innovation could happen without first changing the traditional process for developing exhibitions.

During the complete reinstallation of the DIA's galleries in 2002–05, with no need to look for outside loans, the museum looked instead for fresh perspectives on how to connect its world-class collection with an expanded and far more diverse public. In the process, they tested and changed not only received ideas but the museum's voice and the ways in which it communicated with its visitors.

Research revealed that many of the people they hoped to attract saw themselves as outsiders to the institution. Director Graham Beal tells the story:

People [would] start the conversation by saying, "The museum is elitist; it's like a private club. I don't feel comfortable there." And when you say, "Well, okay, do you think the museum should be more like a shopping mall? I mean, you feel comfortable there." The answer is, "Oh no, no, no. The museum is special." So they want the museum to be special, but they want to belong.

In order to overcome this gulf, this outsider intimidation, Beal assembled teams from the DIA's own in-house staff—some trained, but importantly, many unschooled in art history. It was the latter group, staff members from

departments like Marketing, Finance, and Operations—who, in the words of Director of Marketing Pam Marcil "obviously loved the museum"—that Beal was particularly depending on. Over a period of eighteen months, the teams collaborated with the curators; they provided feedback on which stories about the artworks interested them and therefore might qualify for selection as a "Big Idea" around which a gallery presentation could be built.¹ In this initial stage of the exhibition development process, staff stood in for those outsiders who avoided visiting the museum for fear of feeling excluded.

The radical departure here was that for the first time, it was no longer the sole province of the curators to decide the most important things to say about an artwork or gallery. In the words of the DIA's curator of contemporary art, Becky Hart:

M. would ask questions that on one level, could seem very simplistic; and maybe at another time, we would've thought of them as naïve. But M. was typical, too, of a lot of people who come to the museum, who are intelligent people. Because of the questions that M. would ask . . . we couldn't take for granted that everybody gets this.

I think a lot of times with museums, we've been more interested in what our colleagues, especially other art historians [think], and how we were perceived in the field—as opposed to always [focusing on] what our audience thought of us. We figured they'd come along anyway.

Curators and educators have a metanarrative . . . the canon of art history . . . and having to explain that to other people, we learned that there were other stories. And so I thought that that was really a big advantage of the process.

In this re-visioned process, the curators had a new role: as resource people, experts who could tell innumerable stories about the artworks in their area. For its part, the museum team voted the stories up or down, and then sent the ones with the most resonance on to the director and his steering committee for final approval. In the words of curator of African American Art Valerie Mercer: "He basically didn't want the same old think . . . Mainly, I felt Graham did not want us to deal with the collection in the traditional, typical way."

Once a "Big Idea" was approved, interpretive educators developed questionnaires for the curators in order to draw out relevant stories and information about the artworks under consideration. The curators researched and wrote extensive responses, but—in an interesting and highly controversial twist—did not get to write the actual object labels or wall texts. Beal felt it was absolutely essential to wean the institution from its established emphasis on art historical verities and its tendency towards an academic, even pedantic, tone. And yet, perhaps cognizant of the radical reversal of power dynamics he had launched, rather than give the educators the label-writing task, he outsourced it completely. The sequence went like this: based on a

gallery's big idea, educators prepared questions designed to elicit learning outcomes; curators then wrote extensive responses based on their research and knowledge of the objects; and finally, the whole package was sent out to one of a dozen freelance label writers scattered around the country. Laurel Paterson, the DIA's Director of Development, notes:

We were very consistent in our message to the community that the museum was not any longer, or could not be perceived any longer, as an enclave of curatorial perspective; that we were really there to serve the visitors; that we were welcoming to novice visitors.

Once the big ideas had been developed by the in-house teams and interpretive materials had been prepared, the next step was to test them with visitor panels: carefully selected groups of community members representing target audiences the museum hoped to welcome when it reopened. These panels were comprised entirely of local residents whom the museum recruited through a market research firm and effectively "hired" as consultants. The panel process represented an ongoing engagement on the part of both the panelists—who were paid to attend periodically and advise—and the museum. More importantly, since the museum leaders hoped to broaden visitorship beyond their existing audience, it was essential to include open-minded non-visitors in the mix as well. (See Appendix C: Make-up of DIA Visitor Panels.)

Visitor panels are both like and unlike focus groups. Both are recruited to match target audience profiles, but in the museum world, focus groups typically only meet once, with museum observers hidden behind a one-way mirror. In contrast, the DIA's visitor panels met periodically, and the curators and interpretive staff sat around the periphery of the room, within view. Over time, visitors, prospective visitors, and staff became familiar with each other. The staff came to know these specific members of their community, listen to them, and rely on them—even as the panelists become increasingly invested in the success of the museum's efforts to communicate with people like themselves.²

Each three-hour session was structured down to the minute. Some segments were devoted to previewing gallery designs—in actual physical space when possible; if not, via a PowerPoint presentation. Panelists were asked to rate their first impression of a gallery and how it made them feel on a Likert scale from Comfortable to Uncomfortable, Inspired to Uninspired. At another point, they might be asked to compare different object label treatments, both for graphic appeal and for tone of voice. Presented with an array of six or eight different label approaches, visitor panels helped teams select the angle most likely to connect with viewers. In the words of Daryl Fischer, the consultant who organized and conducted these sessions in tandem with DIA staff, "Roles shift as visitor panelists assume the role of experts in the visitor experience; staff assume the role of listeners."

Copious data emerged from each session; each panelist filled out a questionnaire cued to the evening's activities; these answers were subsequently tallied, analyzed, and—along with a transcript of the entire session—were discussed in depth by museum staff.

Evaluator Matt Sikora described the staff commitment necessary to make the most of this process. First, the periodic, deadline-driven, cross-departmental production crunch that preceded each convening of a visitor panel and included content research, development of interpretive resources, and graphic design mockups. Next, sitting in on the panel session itself and absorbing the visitors' feelings and comments firsthand in real time. Finally, studying and discussing the data generated at each session:

and then they had to read all of the transcripts. There was no report that was generated for visitor panels; they read the transcripts. They were given a set of filters, you know, four or five questions with which to read the transcripts . . .

- SURPRISES: comments that made you think differently about something
- BRIGHT IDEAS: comments that led you to new ideas that you'd like to consider, explore, experiment with
- VISITOR VALUES: basic needs and expectations that helped you understand what they want out of their museum experience
- CONNECTIONS: ways people connect personally with the works, and between artworks across the collection

And then the teams would actually then meet with Daryl for about half a day, four hours, and go through and put up on sticky notes, what their responses to those were, and do affinity diagrams.

These methods of gathering visitor input were the beginning of empathic learning: training staff to listen closely to, and identify with, the predispositions of their public. At the same time, staff members were learning to work interdepartmentally in a far less hierarchical way than they ever had before. The museum was reinventing itself and its processes at the same time. Not surprisingly, some curators got onboard, others let themselves be dragged along, and still others got out. For curators who felt that asking visitors what they wanted was a fundamental betrayal of their scholarly responsibility, amounting to nothing more than pandering to the public, the DIA was no longer a comfortable place to work; for those who felt scholarly attention to collections could be matched with empathic attention to audience—the better to achieve the DIA's mission of helping each visitor find personal meaning in the artworks—this was an exciting if occasionally overwhelming adventure.

New Forms of Gallery Interpretation

Visitor panels proved useful in testing big ideas, museum voice, and new ways of providing interpretive support for looking at artworks just in time, right in the galleries. They helped the DIA prototype and develop a number of interpretive techniques, including two which are rarely seen in other museums: “pull-out panels” and “layered labels.”

Pull-out panels are freestanding didactic signs floating above Plexiglas stands at waist height with each panel reproducing a specific artwork. The image includes circled highlights, each keyed to a short call-out commentary. The panels are perfectly adapted to iconographic analysis, fostering close attention to both the whole and its parts. An analog version of hotspots on



Figure 8.3 Detroit Institute of Arts: “pull-out panel.” The darker ovals each connect to a short commentary.

a computer touchscreen, these signs silently perform the role of a gallery guide—or for that matter, an art historian with a laser pointer—permanently placed directly in front of the work. In educator Jennifer Czajkowski’s words:

What I like about those is it slows you down, and it models for visitors how to look at a work of art. You know, look at some of the details and then pull together the story. And I think that works really well, in not only slowing people down and getting them to look, but helping them understand that there are often stories, that there are things that they can figure out, puzzle through.

Layered labels are laminated magazine-style booklets in 8 1/2 x 11” format that visitors can flip through, also in the presence of an artwork. Positioned low enough to be legible to children or the wheelchair bound, they are set in a typeface large enough to read from standing height. Each booklet provides a short sequence of page spreads designed to rapidly scaffold the visitor into the complexity of a work through a combination of image and text. Like pull-out panels, layered labels are a way of overcoming the limitations inherent in a standard object label; they can present more information, comparison images, and context than a label can bear.



Figure 8.4a–c Detroit Institute of Arts: Richard Long’s sculpture *Stone Line* with “layered label.” In 8.4b, booklet is positioned on the Plexiglas stand to the right of the sculpture in the rear.

While clearly visible and easy-to-read from head-on, thanks to the transparent Plexiglas base, this didactic tool disappears when seen from across the room and does not distract from the viewing of the artwork.

What's more, neither of these interpretive tools requires an electrical plug. It's important to emphasize the value of just-in-time information provided to visitors at the point of their maximum curiosity, regardless of whether the information is analog or digital!

After so many innovations—ranging from the process for conceiving gallery themes to methods for delivering interpretive messages—the DIA understood there was yet another set of visitor-centered innovations that would prove essential: summative evaluations to get a sense of which approaches worked best, which less well, and how the DIA could continue to improve upon them. Museum consultant and evaluator Randi Korn calls this “living on the wheel of intentional practice,” and the DIA had committed itself to “life on the wheel.” With the funding they had received and their two in-house evaluators taking the lead, they brought in outside experts to perform a full battery of evaluations, both quantitative and qualitative.

Evaluation

The quantitative tests included extensive tracking and timing of visitors in twelve different sections of the museum. The results revealed the power of the approach taken with *Splendor by the Hour* and specifically, with its interactive video banquet. (Second only to the mummies in the Egyptian galleries, this exhibit exerted extraordinary holding power over DIA visitors.) Tracking and timing also proved the value of the “pullout panels,” which encouraged attention to individual artworks and increased “dwell time.”

Equally important and perhaps more revealing were the DIA's innovative qualitative evaluations. In the effort to test their success at fulfilling the museum's mission of “helping people find personal meaning in art,” the museum recruited non-specialist visitors to walk through a specific set of galleries for twenty minutes and take pictures of objects or interpretive messages they found meaningful. Using what social scientists call a PhotoVoice method, staff then escorted these visitors to a computer station where their pictures were downloaded. Subjects were asked to share what about each image held personal meaning for them. Their comments were recorded using VoiceThread, a simple verbal annotation software, then transcribed and analyzed. While perhaps not as candid as an uncued “think-aloud,”³ this technique came pretty close by catching visitors' internal monologues while they were still fresh.

As summarized by lead researchers Beverly Serrell and Marianna Adams, the results of the study point out three common meaning-making strategies—the sources of “Velcro” connecting people to specific artworks:⁴

Personal connection: the artwork reminds them of something in their own lives. The hooks go into memory, association, and personal story.⁵

New discoveries: interpretive materials “add hooks to the hookless,” drawing the viewer into the world of the artist and artwork through new insights.

Visual attraction: the artwork itself is enough of a “whammy” to draw viewers in and reward their gaze, without need for additional information or a personal story.

Interestingly enough, of these three strategies, only the second depends on interpretive material. Adams and Serrell put it this way: “the frequency [of] interpretation use in the galleries does not indicate anything about the quality of the experience the subjects had with art.”⁶

The Community Responds

Thanks to director Beal's unwavering commitment to privileging actual visitor experience over traditional conventions of museum presentation and interpretation, and in spite of tremendous internal resistance and institutional inertia, the DIA found a way to fuse rigorous scholarship and empathic communication. As Beal told us, looking back and by implication, looking ahead:

It's a lot of work—and you get a lot of resistance . . . But you have to do an enormous amount to get the individual to the art on their own terms, rather than your terms.

By extension, you have to do even more work to get a community as diverse as metropolitan Detroit to the art on their many and varied terms. In a testament to the DIA's efforts to listen to and build good will within this broad catchment of ethnicities, classes, and educational backgrounds, in 2012 the surrounding counties actually passed a tax to guarantee the institution's solvency. Subsequently, in the face of the city's much-publicized bankruptcy, the state, private foundations, and DIA patrons also stepped in to negotiate a “Grand Bargain” and help underwrite the city's waning pension funds rather than sell the treasures of a collection that they had, indeed, come to see as their own.

Key Takeaways

1. Unlearning time-honored practices is often necessary before a museum can more fully connect with its visitors. This process takes time and requires strong leadership.
2. Develop a culture of audience research: evaluation can involve both in-house staff and outside audiences. It's an iterative process.
3. Experiment with multiple modes of interpretive delivery—both analog and digital—in the galleries. As with DIA's decorative arts display, experimentation leads to teamwork and innovation.