

FOCUS GROUP STUDY

THE MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ARTS

Requested by The Interdivisional Committee on Interpretation
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Spring 1992

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INTRODUCTION

In preparation for the planning of a major reorganization of collections, and the redesigning of galleries/displays, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts Interdivisional Committee on Interpretation sought input and ideas from visitors. Input regarding both the visitors' expectations and impressions was of interest. The Committee was also interested in determining if there would be a difference in impressions between active visitors, passive visitors and inactive visitors. It was determined that the best format for obtaining this type of data would be a focus group study.

Focus group research is a qualitative method of collecting and analyzing data. It is intended to be used to study and understand the complex subtle aspects of the relationship between consumers and products (in this case, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts). The focus group research method had been successfully utilized in a similar study involving eleven museums, conducted by the Getty Center for Education in the Arts and the J. Paul Getty Museum. It is a particularly useful method to explore questions such as general expectations and impressions. The synergism of the group while collecting information combines to produce a wider range of information, insight and ideas than other research methods might yield.

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA) study utilized a typical focus group methodology. Six focus groups were selected following the guidelines listed below. Only the two focus groups who represented Inactive visitors met twice — once before their MIA visit, and once following their visit. The two Active visitor groups and the two Passive visitor groups each met one time following an outlined visit to the MIA. Discussion in all groups followed an identical set of questions.

1. Focus groups participant selection:

Type A: Active visitors — visited MIA at least once in last year, member or non-member;

Type B: Passive visitors — visited MIA at least once in last ten years, but not each year;

Type C: Inactive visitors — non-members, never visited the MIA.

Two groups of six to eight participants were selected for each visitor type. Attempts were made to have equal representation from the following demographic groups:

- art (20 minutes)
- labels/didactics (20 minutes)
- suggestions (10 minutes)

Discussion questions are outlined in Appendix A. Questions for the demographic/interest survey were also revised and approved by the Committee. The questionnaire may be found in Appendix B.

more historical background information and more information of the period, culture, or time.

All also wanted better signage of galleries. The Inactive and Passive visitors both found it hard to find their way around the museum. They were frequently confused as to which gallery they were in, and where one gallery ended and another started. The Active visitor knew the galleries but still recognized the need for more prominently displayed signs.

All types of visitors recommended greater continuity between galleries.

The visitors generally were seeking greater continuity/flow between galleries. All felt abrupt changes at some places in the museum and were looking for a smoother transition between periods and styles.

It is very important for the Institute to be involved in more advertising and promotion.

The visitors generally felt a strong need for more advertising/promotion. Many felt people did not know what was available at the MIA. They felt strongly that promotions and advertising should be used to draw the non-visitor into the MIA for the first time. They also recommended reminder advertising as a primary means of changing the Passive visitor into an Active visitor.

Across the board, the visitor of the MIA felt everyone was doing a wonderful job. They thought the galleries were well done, the employees helpful and they intended to go back for further visits.

Differences between groups

Active visitors

The Active visitor truly brought into the system; they displayed more of a "true ownership" type evaluation. They felt like "part of the family" and were familiar with the Institute, its holdings and its operations.

This group would like a lot more social history information available. They are not sure that the information should all be in the form of labels, however. They suggested making the information available in other formats, i.e. *Arts* magazine, lending library pieces, etc.

This group, while not disappointed in the information they received, wanted a lot more specifics. They wanted labels and all other types of information. Additionally, they wanted more benches and other means of facilitating their visit, allowing them to spend more time enjoying and learning about the art.

They wanted continued variety in exhibits. A certain sense of excitement about this new experience they had participated in seemed to be evident, and they wanted anything that would keep that stimulation alive.

Many of the Inactive visitors had fairly unstructured expectations; they really didn't quite know what to expect from the Institute. Taking this group of visitors as a whole, there were really no unmet expectations. Generally, their visits far exceeded their basic expectations. Many were excited about becoming more active visitors.

2. Specific Impressions

This Active visitor group also displayed more agreement than any other group regarding their satisfaction level with the museum, its setting and its services.

Generally, the group felt that the emphasis on bringing more people in (free admission) was good. There was a great deal of nostalgia for the 24th Street entrance in this group. They liked the grandeur of the experience. They were the only group to talk about and voice their like for the "back side" with the big open doors.

The Active visitors consistently liked the free parking, the friendly guards, the museum shop, the coffee shop and the restaurant. They felt that the Institute is working hard lately to be more accessible, i.e. Sunday programs for families, etc.

VISIT EXPERIENCE

Almost all Active visitors thought the visit experience to be "quite satisfactory."

They generally thought that no major changes in the collection or layout were necessary.

Overall, the Active visitors spent a lot more time than other groups discussing the specifics of what they liked best/least — now and in the past.

A great diversity of items were mentioned: African masks and tapes involving kids; 20,000 B.C. carved Venus; mummy; brass quintet; flowers; Faberge egg collection ("Bring it back!"); jade collection; Period Rooms; Rembrandt; French Impressionists; Egyptian; ancient pottery in Asian gallery; little bronze vessel; candy exhibit; Monet collection; American women artists; suits of armor; good music; and wacky things, i.e. guy piling up books.

The Active visitor thought bringing children to the Institute was a normal part of visiting.

This was the only group of visitors that felt this way. Other groups spoke very little about bringing children, or felt insecure in doing so. The Active visitor spoke of visiting special exhibits, of visiting at the same time they attend Children's Theatre, and of visiting with their own as well as other children.

One visitor talked about bringing her children and not being sure she was getting thought to them at the time — only to find in later years how the exposure had paid off, and the children were going on their own. They discussed how children learn to develop

It is important that the museum offer additional learning experiences to stress the importance of continual learning for adults, and to have exhibits that create an enormous amount of enthusiasm. Specific suggestions were: more books, films, handouts; video tapes of exhibits to rent, buy, take home for viewing, with information about the artist, the exhibition, people's impressions of the exhibit, the artist's feelings, why and how the artists did what they did, etc.

One participant stated: "We need some way of sharing different feelings with others viewing the exhibit." Many others in the groups agreed. She suggested a box for people to put their names in if they are interested in participating in a discussion group on a particular exhibit.

This group also felt that the MIA needed to more specifically address the "graying of America" with its programs. This population has more leisure time, and they want a broadening of life experiences.

They wanted the art exhibition program expanded, and suggested the Institute offer more of that type of program.

The MIA should reach out for more special interest groups and develop special programs to meet their needs, i.e. a tour of a specific gallery with both a museum guide and the special interest group representative leading and providing tour information/discussion. The joint leaders would concentrate the discussion on specifically relating the exhibit pieces to meaningful associations of that particular group — symbolism, religion, etc.

The group also wanted more ties to the Black, Asian, and Native American communities — programs with the schools, more advertising, promotion, and special programs for these groups.

More programs specifically aimed at children were suggested — classes, films, etc. Programs that tie to the special exhibits were of particular interest.

Across the board, the Active group suggested more discussion groups, music, demonstrations, etc. They wanted the Institute to make more connections to today in their programs.

The Active group also suggested recruiting new visitors by offering more special programs. Suggestions included featuring a different gallery each month with special

PASSIVE VISITOR REPORT

Reactions

MUSEUM

1. Overall Impressions

The Passive visitors reached a general consensus that the museum was very much to their liking.

They thought that, overall, the museum was very well done. Comments: "The quality of what is there, the atmosphere, is most impressive"; "It far exceeds expectations in this size city"; "The art is displayed more creatively than in a lot of other museums"; and "The presentation is generally well done."

2. Specific Impressions

There was considerably more discussion regarding the building entrances in both the Passive and Active visitor groups.

A number of people disagreed on the entrance. Many missed the old entrance. One found the contrast of the old and new entrances hard to deal with in the same museum — "interesting, but hard to deal with."

Some liked walking up the stairs, the sense of community, the activity and the sense of art as a part of everyday life. They also liked the friendly seating near the door, encouraging one to stay.

Some thought the Children's Theatre was "distracting — not a direct focus on art." Some did not like the drive up. One person said: "Get rid of the white box!"

VISIT EXPERIENCE

This group spent more time than other groups talking about the physical facilities, services and people when they discussed their visit.

The major reason cited for leaving was getting tired; more benches would aid this situation.

Most wanted a lot more information, but not necessarily for the same reasons. Comments: They typically want to "be educated," but feel they cannot take a class each time they visit the museum. "If in a rush, one can always ignore (the information) — one can choose to use or not"; "...would like an unfolding of information as one moves through the room."

Suggestions

General

The Passive visitors were very vocal about wanting more benches throughout the museum. They also mentioned more strollers and more handicapped access.

The Passive visitors stated they would like more exhibits related to special interest groups.

This group suggested: "Utilize the garden more — sculptures/an eating area." Another suggested: "Bring back the Black Tie Gala of 1977, and that type of event where you are with the art."

Asian gallery

The Passive visitors would like a map to carry with as they visit the gallery. They also suggested supplemental displays with maps/photographs including seasons, landscapes, images of people, etc.

Labels/didactics

This group wanted more information throughout the museum. The types of information suggested included: symbolism; culture; context; techniques; why the artwork is important; how the artwork is tied to the rest of the exhibit; the background of the art piece; the value of the piece; the composition; and the significance of the work.

Suggestions for other materials: computers in each gallery; postings for tours so the visitor does not have to return to the Information Desk; a separate Information Desk on each floor; information phones throughout the museum; computers with different levels of information on them, so that the visitor might select desired amount of information; and headphones and cassettes for special exhibits.

INACTIVE VISITOR REPORT

Expectations

People participated in the study for a variety of reasons.

Typical comments: "It sounded interesting"; "I thought it might be an interesting fun experience"; "I was curious"; "It was an opportunity to get out"; "I just wanted to see the MIA"; "It was an opportunity to make a little money"; "I am unemployed, and it is \$75.00"; "I did it to have fun!"

The participants also voiced numerous reasons for not visiting the MIA previously.

Most often mentioned were reasons such as:

- "It is out of the way"; "I go to what is close";
- "It's not a regular part of my life or routine"; "It's hard to work into my schedule";
- "There are no season tickets";
- "I'm too busy";
- "I didn't go as a child";
- "My friends are not interested. It therefore, is a low priority for me";
- "I go to museums on vacation"
- "There's not enough information about the MIA available. It needs more advertising"
- "I want things to do with my hands";
- "I don't have any background in art"; "It's at a level I can't appreciate"; "Art fails to draw the average person in"; "You need a trained eye to appreciate it"
- "I tried it once. The lines were too long."

Most Inactive visitors thought the MIA would be "dark, old, quiet, respectful, with a lot of traditional paintings and sculptures."

Even though the majority thought the Institute might be quite traditional, there were also those in this Inactive visitor group who really were not sure what to expect: "Really don't know." Some said: "A lot of different rooms with different themes."

The word "Institute" was thought to be foreboding by some. The outside of the building, for those who had previously seen it, was primarily confusing. They either didn't understand or didn't like the combination of old and new, and therefore weren't quite sure what to expect inside.

- "Knowing what you will see";
- "Hours, admission costs. Is there a restaurant?"

One group addressed the question of what type of information they would like once they are at the MIA. Comments included:

- "Blurbs [labels] by each painting";
- "Background information to help you understand what you are looking at";
- "Why was the piece painted? What's the meaning?";
- "For modern art, I don't want to be told the meaning. [Interpretation] should be left to your imagination";
- "Are there any famous paintings there?"

Some anticipated information in addition to labels. They mentioned: headphones; tapes; museum maps; videos; stories about how the MIA got the art, or interesting histories of the paintings. There were a number of questions about whether there might be films there to explain the art, whether there were tours, etc. They did not want a film that was too long.

The Inactive visitor group also displayed mixed feelings regarding computerized information. Most thought it would be O.K., while a few said they would rather talk to a person. Suggested: a multi-media presentation "to provide more information." Then, one person said, "Perhaps more information than they wanted." Another person did not want to stand in line and wait to use it.

The Inactive visitor did not perceive the MIA as a good place to bring children.

Most did not think of the MIA as a "kids place." Some said it "could be." A few questions were raised regarding summer programs. They suggested the museum might need different things (activities) to keep kids occupied because of their short attention span.

A number of the Inactive visitors mentioned that they just thought of the Science Museum for kids. Some also said that they thought of children visiting the MIA only as part of a visit to the Children's Theatre, or as a school field trip.

The majority of participants had not themselves visited places like museums as a child. If they had made such visits as a child, they mentioned: the Denver Museum, the Science Museum and the Zoo.

2. Specific Impressions

This Inactive visitor group displayed mixed feelings on the museum, its setting and its services.

Overall, they felt welcome. They thought the building was "impressive and nice," even if it was a bit crowded at the entrance. They felt the floral displays were beautiful, almost a greeting to the visitor.

There was some disagreement on the computerized screens at the entrance; some liked the computerized source of information, while some preferred to use the Information Desk.

Items they either disliked or found distracting: the restaurant food; three different information stops in the entrance area; the flowers; the expense of the museum gift shop items; and a lack of "art items that would appeal to the less expensive good taste."

VISIT EXPERIENCE

The Inactive visitor talked mostly about their enjoyment, not the learning experience.

When they discussed what they learned, it often related to the history of a period, or an ability to compare periods in history. They were surprised by all the old books. Surprise over the lack of "local artist's work" was also expressed.

This was the only group to voice a concern for occasionally becoming "overwhelmed."

The Inactive visitor was consistently intrigued by the number of new things they found to explore at the Institute, but they also mentioned that some of the exhibits were a bit "overwhelming!" These feelings might be explained because of the sheer volume of items they were viewing, and their lack of background or unfamiliarity with the Institute.

This group of visitors displayed a very large amount of diversity in the specific art works and galleries that they liked/disliked throughout the museum.

When discussing their likes/dislikes, the Inactive visitor was more likely to describe the item physically or by location in the museum, rather than by title or artist's name. Descriptors for items they particularly liked included: "Temptation"; "the realness of the Italian artists' work"; "Daniel with St. Peter"; "the Boys in the Wood"; "Rembrandt"; "Picasso"; "the modern squares on canvas"; "the fishing boats"; and "St. Mark's pigeons." They did not understand Picasso and whether places in the pictures were real or fictional.

Most felt that getting the visitor to the MIA for the first time was the most difficult task. Once that was achieved, getting the visitor to return should be easier. To draw the new visitor and to keep them coming back, they suggested: special events; special exhibits; and changing the exhibits regularly. Some members of this group suggested such items as tours for children and more art for the "common people" as means to draw new visitors.

A number of the group mentioned, and others agreed, "there is a need for more promotion/advertising." It may simply be reminder type advertising, or calendars of events.

The Inactive visitor group generally wanted more background information throughout the museum. They mentioned the story of Calypso.

A few of this group suggested "one big display rather than so many small ones." They felt one display taking over the majority of the Institute "would create more excitement for the visitor."

Numerous Inactive visitors suggested more special exhibits. The comments typically were "the special exhibits would motivate people to go."

This group unanimously wanted more explanation as they go through the museum.

Asian gallery

The group consistently suggested more and better labeling. All wanted more information throughout, primarily historical. One person recommended that the museum provide the visitor a suggested path through the gallery.

Italian gallery

Suggestions for the Italian gallery by this group primarily related to the Institute providing a better map so that the visitor might find the gallery, or placing the gallery in a more prominent place in the museum. They also recommended that labels similar to some used in the Italian gallery be used in other parts of the museum.

All three groups generally agreed that "everyday art objects" could be, but did not necessarily have to, exhibited at the MIA.

All groups had similar feelings on this subject. While there were mixed feelings on liking everyday art objects, they generally agreed that they didn't necessarily have to be a part of the MIA exhibits. One person felt very strongly that these everyday art objects should be a more major part of the exhibits, but most felt that they come to the Institute to look at different cultures and different periods, and normal objects should not be included unless they are "really interesting or special."

One person stated, and many agreed: "The major function of the MIA is the preservation of antiquity, not present day or futuristic anything. I like the older pieces and the more cultural materials."

All groups generally agreed with the idea of taxes partially supporting the museum.

Suggestions

French decorative arts gallery

There appeared to be two major suggestions regarding arrangement of the art in this gallery. Many suggested that all pieces be placed in period room settings, rather than gallery style settings. Others suggested the Institute might be better off to remove these items to a "house setting." A few did feel that the gallery style setting was quite sufficient.

All groups voiced similar suggestions when asked: "What would you change about the museum if you could?"

These were common types of comments heard. They are not exhaustive, but they represent the general direction of the visitors' thoughts. There appeared to be general agreement throughout the suggestions:

- "a better gallery guide"; "guides in the gallery rooms";
- "one entire floor for one exhibit only"; "more depth of exhibits";
- "more signs between galleries";
- "more information throughout museum";
- "relating exhibits to the familiar, everyday life";
- "museum open longer hours";
- "museum more user friendly";

APPENDIX A - Focus Group Discussion Questions

Group C (1 hour)

Expectations

1. Why do you think you have not been to The Minneapolis Institute of Arts before?
 - Did you not know it existed?
 - Do you think it is a place you wouldn't like? Why not?
 - Do you think it won't be convenient? To what — to get there? To park? To find your way around?
 - Do you think it's a place for others, but not for you?
 - Do you know people who go?
2. What pre-conceptions do you have about the MIA?
 - What do you think the MIA is really like?
3. What kind of experience do you think you will have at the MIA?
 - A lot of work to "figure things out"?
 - Or will it be restful and refreshing?
4. What do you think you will see?
 - What kinds of art? All? Just modern? Don't know?
 - What artists? From what countries?
 - Do you think you are supposed to see everything?
 - How long are you supposed to spend there?
 - What else do you think you might see there besides art (films, lectures, classes, concerts in the galleries)?

6. What about:

- Front computer directory?
- Front Information Desks?
- Guards?
- Other employees?

Art (20 min.)

1. Were there some particular works of art that you found especially interesting or appealing?
 - What were they?
 - What was it about them that interested you?
 - Meaning for you?
 - What did you learn?
2. Was there any kind of art you didn't get?
 - What would have helped to better understand what you were seeing?
3. Some people think museums should show more objects used by people like you and me?
What do you think?
4. Hennepin County property taxes help partially support the museum. How much ownership do you feel?
5. What did you want to know about the art that you couldn't find out?

Labels/Didactics (20 min.)

1. What materials in the museum helped you the most to learn about the works of art?
(What materials in the museum were most useful in learning about the works of art?)
 - Labels, brochures, tours, audiovisual (photography exhibit)?
2. How useful were the wall labels next to the works of art?
 - Asian Gallery?
 - Italian 15th- and 16th-Century Gallery?
 - French Decorative Arts Gallery?
 - German Early 20th-Century Gallery?
3. What kinds of information did you find yourself looking for?

APPENDIX B - Survey Questionnaire

1. For the following items, please circle the category which best describes you and fill in the blanks provided:

Gender:	Female	Male		
Age group:	Under 30	31-49	50+	
Marital status:	Single	Married	Divorced	Widowed
Children living with you:	Yes	No		
Total annual family income:	<\$19,999	\$20,000- \$49,999	\$50,000- \$99,999	\$100,000+
Education completed:	High School	Some College	College Degree	Advanced Degree

Occupation: _____

Hours per week you are currently working: _____

City of Residence: _____

2. Please circle the word corresponding to the frequency of your participation in the visual arts:

Making Artworks:	Never	Rarely	Yearly	Monthly	Weekly/Daily
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Studying Art:	Never	Rarely	Yearly	Monthly	Weekly/Daily
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Collecting Art:	Never	Rarely	Yearly	Monthly	Weekly/Daily
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4. In which of the following leisure activities do you participate regularly?
(Please check as many as apply.)

Going to the movies	_____	Reading	_____
Attending sports events	_____	Shopping	_____
Visiting friends/relatives	_____	Exercising	_____
Taking nature excursions	_____	Gardening	_____
Attending performing arts	_____	Watching TV	_____
Listening to or playing music	_____	Pursuing a Hobby	_____
Attending lectures/workshops	_____	Other (Describe)	_____

5. How important are each of the following items to you in choosing a leisure experience? (Please circle your rating on the scale: 1 = not important, 2 = somewhat important, 3 = important, 4 = very important, 5 = extremely important)

	Not Important			Extremely Important	
	1	2	3	4	5
Doing something worthwhile	1	2	3	4	5
Having a new experience	1	2	3	4	5
Feeling comfortable in one's surroundings	1	2	3	4	5
Having an opportunity to learn	1	2	3	4	5
Social interaction	1	2	3	4	5
Physical activity	1	2	3	4	5
Intellectual activity	1	2	3	4	5
Emotional experience	1	2	3	4	5

Involvement

The greatest number of participants in all groups visited the MIA somewhat less often than they visited museums in general. Most participants visited museums in general and the MIA primarily with friends and family. In this study, the Passive visitor spent slightly more time than either the Active or Inactive visitor, particularly at the MIA.

The Active visitor gave predominantly "Yes" answers to all of the involvement questions. Their answers were positive, but not quite as strong in the categories usually visit the museum restaurant and visit museums often as a child.

The Passive visitor gave predominantly "Yes" answers to questions regarding reading labels, attending special events, visiting the gift shop and visiting museums as a child. Their answers were more mixed (no definite direction) on questions regarding use of the information desk, educational programs and museum restaurants.

Interestingly, the Inactive visitor responded somewhat differently to the involvement questions for museums in general and the MIA. For museums in general, the inactive visitors responded primarily with "Yes" answers to questions regarding reading labels, using the Information desk and visiting the gift shop. They were the only group to answer predominantly "No" to questions regarding attending educational programs, special events and using the museum restaurant. For most involvement questions, the Inactive visitor primarily answered "No" in relation to the MIA.

Leisure activities

There were some differences between groups in the types of leisure activities in which they participated. In order of participation:

- Active visitors: reading, TV, nature, performing arts, music (tie: visiting, movies, hobby);
- Passive visitors: music, reading (tie: friends, exercise), (tie: TV, performing arts, hobby, shopping);
- Inactive visitors: visiting, music, TV, sports, (tie: movies, reading), (Tie: shopping, exercise).

Types of importance in selecting a leisure activity

No significant differences were found in the responses of all visitor groups. They predominantly thought all items were important in choosing a leisure experience.

