
An Evaluation of Existing MIA Object Labels in Preparation for Reinstallation and Relabeling

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Education Division**

I. Introduction

In preparation for the reinstallation of the MIA's permanent collection, the Education Division evaluated existing object labels in sixteen separate areas of the permanent collection. We wanted to determine how effectively the current labels were functioning and discover what improvements could be made when new labels are written for the reinstalled galleries. The surveys were carried out from winter 1990 through the spring of 1992. The results of the surveys and recommendations for the reinstalled galleries follow this introduction. A tabulation of survey responses and an example of each instrument are also included at the end of the document.

The two earliest surveys, for the AOA and Photography galleries, used small samples (28 and 10 adult visitors, respectively) and specialized, somewhat idiosyncratic questions. Because of this, and because these two areas have already been reinstalled, the results of these surveys are not included in the general tabulations that follow the summaries and recommendations.

The next group of surveys encompassed the Ancient, Medieval, 20th Century European, Post World War II, American, and Asian galleries. This group is distinguished in the tabulation as survey group one. The instruments used for this group were all fairly similar and standardized. Unfortunately, some of the questions (ie "was there a specific work or art or label that you found puzzling?") were not mutually exclusive, which caused some problems interpreting the data.

The final group of surveys encompassed all the remaining areas of the museum: Italian 1500-1700, Northern European, 18th and 19th century Europe, Impressionism, Decorative Arts, Period Rooms, Prints and Drawings, and Textiles. The instruments used for this group, designated as survey group two, were further refined and almost completely standardized. All questions were mutually exclusive.

II. Summaries of results and recommendations

ANCIENT

Summary

Every visitor claimed to know at least something about ancient art, with nearly one-quarter saying they knew a lot. However, nearly 30% found contradictions between what they already knew and what they saw or read in the galleries. This is probably because they are somewhat familiar with the ancient world (basic Greek and Roman history), not necessarily with ancient art. Many visitors were surprised by the quality of the objects and by the highly developed societies that produced them. They were also surprised by the range of objects (sculpture, metalwork, mosaics) produced by ancient cultures.

Respondents were most interested in learning what the objects meant to the people who produced them (ie "were sculptures decorative or religious?") and how they were made and used (ie "where were frescos and mosaics used?"). They had a lot of difficulty understanding terminology (slip, boss, balsamarium, Attic, Ptolemaic, Tiber, Magna Graecia, etc). Over half of the visitors left the gallery with unanswered questions -- more than any other gallery in the museum.

Recommendations

- provide an overview of relevant religion and mythology
- explain art historical jargon or substitute more common terms
- explain or show how objects were used to help visitors place them in context
- use text, images, and/or diagrams to explain how objects were made
- explain the relationships between ancient Greece, ancient Rome, and later cultures -- some visitors thought that "copy" means a modern copy
- retain maps and timelines; several visitors remarked that they are useful

ITALIAN 1500-1700

Summary

Nearly every visitor (94%) claimed some awareness of this type of art. However, over half said they knew only a little, which is probably why one-third were puzzled by an art work. Also, one-fifth were puzzled by a label -- the highest percentage of those asked this question. Nearly half of the visitors left the gallery with unanswered questions (about iconography, style, historical context, artists' motivation, etc). Most visitors wanted to know more about the meaning of the works to those who made them (80%), the culture in which the works were created (72%), and the artists (68%). A surprisingly high number (64%) wanted information about related works. Visitors were least interested in explanations of the works' significance, perhaps because they feel that Italian or Renaissance art is, by definition, important.

Recommendations

- provide an introductory panel that explains the term "Renaissance"
- explain religious iconography, since many visitors may not be familiar with Christian or Catholic doctrine
- explain the purpose for which works were commissioned
- provide information about specific artists and about the changing role of artists during the Renaissance
- illustrate related works in handouts, brochures, interactive multimedias, etc rather than describing them in labels

18TH AND 19TH CENTURY EUROPEAN

Summary

About four-fifths of visitors had some prior knowledge about 18th and 19th century art, but only 2% said they knew a lot. Therefore, nearly 15% saw things that contradicted their ideas -- and nearly all of these were surprised by the "clarity", "quality", "brilliance", and "lifelike" aspects of the works, such as Gérôme's *Carpet Merchant* and Monti's *Veiled Lady*. Only 18% of visitors were puzzled by an artwork (the second lowest number museum-wide), probably because 19th century works of art are so clearly narrative. Over 80% of visitors wanted information about the artists and about the cultures in which they lived. They also wanted more explanation of iconography (ie *Kiss of Victory*, *Ganymede and the Eagle*, *Temptation*, *Telemachus and Eucharis*), especially since so many works make allusions to classical or mythological characters or events.

Recommendations

- provide a higher percentage of extended labels, perhaps a ratio of 1:4
- explain iconography
- provide more context through artist's quotes, descriptions of important contemporary events (such as the French Salons), other arts from the period such as music, etc
- explain processes and techniques (visitors are dazzled by detailed paintings and sculptures and curious about how they were created) and discuss why such virtuosity was valued at this time

20TH CENTURY EUROPEAN

Summary

Visitors to this gallery had some prior knowledge: slightly more than one-quarter said they knew a lot, while the rest said they knew little or nothing. Still, 40% were puzzled by a label or art work and the same percentage had unanswered questions. Nearly three-quarters wanted information about the artists and their philosophies, and 60% wanted to know about the cultures in which the works were produced so they would have an historical perspective.

Recommendations

- background about the different aims and programs of art movements
- artist's quotes about their philosophies, iconography, etc.
- acknowledgement that modern art can be confusing (ie Dada is about not making sense) or difficult (ie Beckmann's iconography, Tanguy's title)

AMERICAN

Summary

Every visitor to this gallery claimed to have some familiarity with American art. However, over 15% of them had their ideas contradicted by what they actually saw (ie surprised that O'Keeffe painted more than flowers, or that Impressionist works of art were created in America). This is likely because most visitors (60%) know "just a little," and (as with the Ancient gallery) their knowledge is probably based on American history rather than American art. Almost one-third were puzzled by specific labels or works of art, especially Coleman's *Bronze Horses of San Marco, Venice*, Read's *Portrait of a Boy*, the Pottier + Stymus *Cabinet*, and the O'Keeffes.

When asked what kinds of information would be helpful, over three-quarters said they wanted to know what the works meant to the people who made them. Also, visitors to the American gallery were fairly interested (38%) in learning about related works of art.

Recommendations

People are very interested in placing American art in a cultural context. This could be done through:

- providing several brief overviews about pertinent phases in American history and culture for different eras and areas (ie Colonial, 19th century, western)
- using timelines to relate developments in American art and history to events in other cultures (ie French Impressionism and its translation in America)
- showing related works in photographs, handouts, interactive multimedia, etc

AOA

Summary

This evaluation was done much earlier than all the others, and it was completed in a hurry before the old galleries were deinstalled. Therefore, 28 people were casually questioned rather than given a formal survey. Their comments were taken into consideration, along with the more substantial comments of the advisory committee, during the recent reinstallation.

Of those who addressed the quantity of information, more than half (10 of 18) wanted more, both about specific objects and about the broader context (cultures, geography). Over 20 of the 28 respondents wanted background information about the specific peoples. A majority of visitors also wanted information about how objects were used and what they meant to the cultures that produced them.

Recommendations

Most of the needs of visitors were echoed by the advisory committee and are addressed in the current temporary installation (and will be in the new Art of the Americas, African, and Oceanic installations). Maps, contextual photographs, artists' portraits and quotes, explanations of culture and geography, and installations that address aesthetic issues all contribute to an understanding of non-EuroAmerican cultures as vibrant, capable of positive change, and yet protective of cultural traditions.

PERIOD ROOMS

Summary

Three-quarters of visitors claimed some prior knowledge, but since only one person knew a lot about period rooms, one-quarter said they saw something that contradicted their ideas -- the highest percentage museum-wide. However, only 16% claimed to be puzzled by a room -- the lowest percentage museum-wide. Several people were puzzled by the sparseness (Connecticut) or fanciness (McFarlane) of rooms, or changing tastes in decoration (the "clashing" carpet and Chinese wallpaper in the McFarlane room). Nearly one-quarter left the period rooms with unanswered questions.

Visitors were more interested (64%) in the significance of the period rooms than the significance of art in any other gallery, probably because they have a harder time judging the value of a room than an object. They were also interested (60%) in learning more about the culture that produced the room and the specific people who used it. Several people were confused by terms used in labels (caster, pole screen secondary wood, wall pocket).

Recommendations

- discuss the rationale for period rooms and why they are considered significant
- provide more tours (audio cassette, docent) that give visitors a path through rooms, first providing overall information and then focusing on specific objects in context
- explain unfamiliar terms

PHOTOGRAPHY

Summary

Since this survey was one of the first done, the sample size ($N = 10$) is probably too small to generalize the results to the entire photography collection. Only 3 of the 10 wanted more information, mainly about photographic processes and terms. A few visitors also wanted more information about the history of photography and specific artists' intentions.

Recommendations

Most of the visitors' needs have been addressed by the interactive multimedia program (history of photography, individual artists, photographic processes). If the program is augmented, it could address historic processes and terminology, as well as expand on the contemporary means of making photographs.

III. Tabulation of data

A. SURVEY GROUP ONE

Questions

1. Did you already know something about this type of art before you visited this gallery?
2. Did you see or read anything that contradicted what you already knew?
3. Was there a specific label or work of art that you found puzzling?
4. Did you have any questions for which there was no information?

	Medieval	20th C. European	Post WWII	American	Ancient	Asian
Previous knowledge	4/30 13%	20/25 80%	18/27 67%	50/50 100%	51/51 100%	27/40 67%
See/read anything contradic- tory	4/30 13%	1/25 4%	0/27 0%	8/50 16%	15/51 29%	1/40 2%
Label/art puzzling	9/30 30%	10/25 40%	18/27 67%	15/50 30%	14/51 27%	6/40 15%
Questions not answered	14/30 47%	10/25 40%	10/27 37%	12/50 24%	27/51 53%	11/40 27%

B. SURVEY GROUP TWO

Questions

1. Did you already know something about this type of art before you visited this gallery?
2. Did you see anything that contradicted what you already knew?
3. Did you read anything that contradicted what you already knew?
4. Was there a specific work of art that you found puzzling?
5. Was there a specific label that you found puzzling?
6. Did you have any questions for which there was no information?

	Impres- sionism	Dec arts	18-19 C. Europe	North. Europe	Italian 1500 - 1700	Period Rooms	P - D §	Textile §
Already knew about	47/50 94%	42/50 84%	40/50 80%	32/50 64%	23/25 92%	18/25 72%	86%	72%
See any- thing contra- dictory	6/50 12%	2/50 4%	7/50 14%	4/50 8%	0/25 0%	6/25 24%	10%	16%
Read any- thing contra- dictory	3/50 6%	0/50 0%	0/50 0%	1/50 1%	1/25 4%	0/25 0%	2%	6%
Art work puzzling	13/50 26%	10/50 20%	9/50 18%	10/50 20%	8/25 32%	4/25 16% (room) 5/25 20% (art work)	34%	30%
Label puzzling	2/50 4%	3/50 6%	4/50 8%	4/50 8%	5/25 20%	2/25 8%	0%	12%
Ques- tions not ans- wered	14/50 28%	5/50 10%	6/50 12%	12/50 24%	11/25 44%	7/25 28%	52%	24%

§ 25 visitors surveyed for each of two exhibitions.

IV. Examples of instruments

Date _____

Gallery Survey: Ancient Art

1. Did you already know something about ancient art before you visited this gallery?

If so, would you say that you knew

a lot _____

some _____

a little _____

2. Did you read or see anything during your visit that contradicted your ideas about ancient art?

3. Was there a specific work of art or label that you found puzzling?

4. Did you have any questions for which there was no information?

5. What kinds of information would be helpful in the ancient galleries?
(Check as many as you wish)

_____ a) explanation of terms used on labels

_____ b) background about the culture(s) of the time

_____ c) explanation of how the object was made

_____ d) explanation of how the object was used

_____ e) explanation of the object's meaning to the culture in which it was made

_____ f) information about related works of art, here and/or in other museums

_____ g) explanation of why the object is considered good enough to be in a museum

_____ h) other _____

Date _____

Gallery Survey: Italian Art 1500 to 1700

1. Did you already know something about Italian art from 1500 to 1700 before you visited these galleries?

If so, would you say that you knew a lot _____
 some _____
 a little _____

2. Did you see anything that contradicted your ideas about Italian art?

3. Did you read anything that contradicted your ideas about Italian art?

4. Was there a specific work of art that you found puzzling?

5. Was there a specific label that you found puzzling?

6. Did you have any questions for which there was no information?

7. What kinds of information would be helpful? (Check as many as you wish)

_____ a) explanation of why an object is good enough to be in a museum

_____ b) explanation of terms used on labels

_____ c) explanation of how an object was made

_____ d) explanation of how an object was used

_____ e) background about the artists

_____ f) background about the culture of the time

_____ g) explanation of an object's meaning to the people who made it

_____ h) information about related works of art, here &/or in other museums

_____ i) other _____

1/21/92

Date _____

Gallery Survey: 18th and 19th Century European Art

1. Did you already know something about 18th and 19th century European art before you visited these galleries?

If so, would you say that you knew a lot _____
 some _____
 a little _____

2. Did you see anything that contradicted your ideas about 18th/19th C. art?

3. Did you read anything that contradicted your ideas about 18th/19th C. art?

4. Was there a specific work of art that you found puzzling?

5. Was there a specific label that you found puzzling?

6. Did you have any questions for which there was no information?

7. What kinds of information would be helpful? (Check as many as you wish)

_____ a) explanation of terms used on labels

_____ b) explanation of how an object was made

_____ c) explanation of how an object was used

_____ d) background about the cultures of the time

_____ e) explanation of an object's meaning to the people who made it

_____ f) information about related works of art, here &/or in other museums

_____ g) explanation of why an object is significant enough to be in a museum

_____ h) other _____

_____ i) background about the artists

10/16/91

Date: February and March 1991

Formative Survey: 20th Century Galleries
N=25

1. Did you know anything about early 20th-century European painting and sculpture before touring this gallery today?
Yes 20 No 5

If so, would you say you knew

a lot 7
a smattering 13
nothing 5

2. Was there anything that you already knew that was contradicted by what you saw or read during your visit?
Yes 1 No 22

3. Was there a specific work of art or label which you found puzzling?
Blindman's Buff 1 No 15
Through Birds ... 2 Some 3

4. Were you able to find answers to your questions while you were in the gallery?
Yes 16 No 2 Some 1

5. What questions did you have for which there was no information?
About specific works 1 About artists 1 *why they paint*
None 7 About symbolism and subject matter 1 *what they did*

6. Which of the following kinds of information would have been helpful?

- a) explanation of terms used on labels 7
b) information about the artists 18 *and their philosophies*
c) information about the various styles seen in this gallery (how works of art look) 12
d) information about the culture of the time 15 *historical perspective*

3/14/91

Date _____

Gallery Survey: American Art

1. Did you already know something about American art before you visited this gallery?

If so, would you say that you knew

a lot _____

some _____

a little _____

2. Did you read or see anything during your visit that contradicted your ideas about American art? If so, what was it?

3. Was there a specific work of art or label that you found puzzling?

4. Did you have any questions for which there was no information?

5. What kinds of information would be helpful in the American galleries?
(Check as many as you wish)

_____ a) explanation of terms used on labels

_____ b) background about American history

_____ c) explanation of how the object was made

_____ d) explanation of how the object was used

_____ e) explanation of the object's meaning to Americans at the time it was made

_____ f) information about related works of art, here and/or in other museums

_____ g) explanation of why the object is considered good enough to be in a museum

_____ h) other _____

8/13/91

AOA

Winter 1990: Survey Instrument

Date _____ Observed time spent in gallery 5 10 15 20 25 +

Have you been in this gallery before? yes no

Did you already know something about this type of art before your visit today?

Did you find there was enough information provided concerning the objects, or do you feel more information would have been helpful?

Which of the following kinds of information would have been helpful?

- a) explanation of term(s) used on labels
- b) clearer definition of the four cultural areas presented
- c) background information on specific tribe(s)
- d) explanation of how the object was used
- e) geographical information
- f) explanation of object's meaning to the culture in which it was made

How do you feel about the following modes or forms of receiving additional information? (positively or negatively)

printed hand-outs
audiocassettes with headphones
video centers
more descriptive labels
docent tours
other _____

While going through the gallery was there any one object you found puzzling or had wished more information had been provided?

Date _____

Gallery Survey: Period Rooms

1. Did you already know something about period rooms before you visited these galleries?

If so, would you say that you knew a lot _____
 some _____
 a little _____

2. Did you see anything that contradicted your ideas about period rooms?

3. Did you read anything that contradicted your ideas about period rooms?

4. Was there a specific room that you found puzzling?

4. Was there a specific work of art in a room that you found puzzling?

5. Was there a specific label that you found puzzling?

6. Did you have any questions for which there was no information?

7. What kinds of information would be helpful? (Check as many as you wish)

_____ a) explanation of why a room is good enough to be in a museum

_____ b) explanation of terms used on labels

_____ c) background about the cultures of the time

_____ d) explanation of what a room was used for

_____ e) explanation of how a room was transported here

_____ f) information about related rooms in other museums/sites

_____ g) other _____

Date _____

Gallery Survey: Prints and Drawings (*Cubism and La Section D'Or*)

1. Did you already know something about prints and drawings before you visited this gallery?

If so, would you say that you knew a lot _____
some _____
a little _____

2. Did you see anything that contradicted your ideas about prints/drawings?

3. Did you read anything that contradicted your ideas about prints/drawings?

4. Was there a specific work of art that you found puzzling?

5. Was there a specific label that you found puzzling?

6. Did you have any questions for which there was no information?

7. What kinds of information would be helpful? (Check as many as you wish)

_____ a) explanation of terms used on labels

_____ b) explanation of how an object was made

_____ c) explanation of how an object was used

_____ d) background about the culture of the time

_____ e) explanation of an object's meaning to the people who made it

_____ f) information about related works of art, here &/or in other museums

_____ g) explanation of why an object is significant enough to be in a museum

h) other

— i) background about the artists

10/16/91

Survey of The Designer's Eye:
Mary McFadden Selects
Textiles From the Permanent
Collection

Date _____

Gallery Survey: Textiles

1. Did you already know something about textiles before you visited this gallery?

If so, would you say that you knew a lot _____
 some _____
 a little _____

2. Did you see anything that contradicted your ideas about textiles?

3. Did you read anything that contradicted your ideas about textiles?

4. Was there a specific work of art that you found puzzling?

5. Was there a specific label that you found puzzling?

6. Did you have any questions for which there was no information?

7. What kinds of information would be helpful? (Check as many as you wish)

_____ a) explanation of terms used on labels

_____ b) explanation of how the object was made

_____ c) explanation of how the object was used

_____ d) background about the culture(s) of the time

_____ e) explanation of the object's meaning to the people who made it

_____ f) information about related works of art, here &/or in other museums

_____ g) explanation of why the object is good enough to be in a museum

_____ h) other _____

8/29/91