



Museum Visitor Studies, Evaluation & Audience Research
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Exhibition Evaluation

Front-end Evaluation of the Ancient Latin America Hall

Prepared for the
**Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County
Los Angeles, California**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings from a front-end evaluation of Ancient Latin America Hall conducted by Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (RK&A) for the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County (NHMLAC) in Los Angeles, California. Data were collected in May 2008. RK&A conducted in-depth interviews with 40 visitor groups in the existing Ancient Latin America Hall in order to inform both the temporary Visible Vault installation and the final renovation.

**Selected highlights of the study are included in this summary.
Please consult the body of the report for a detailed account of the findings.**

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

RK&A conducted interviews with visitors after they exited the Ancient Latin America Hall. Interviews were conducted with 40 groups of visitors; 20 were with English speakers and 20 were with Spanish speakers.

VISITOR RESPONSE TO THE EXHIBITION

- ◆ More than one-half of interviewees responded favorably and described the exhibition as “educational” or “interesting.”
- ◆ For many interviewees, their own Latin American heritage was the driving force for their interest in the objects; while a few saw it as a teaching opportunity for their children, others explicitly said they viewed it as a means of connecting with their “roots” or “ancestry.”

HIGH POINTS

- ◆ About one-quarter of interviewees mentioned the organizational layout of the exhibition, indicating that the chronological and regional divisions facilitated their understanding of the exhibition content.
- ◆ Several interviewees referenced specific objects or groups of objects as high points (e.g., the jewelry or pottery). A few others, who had noted their cultural connection to the objects earlier in the interview, said the opportunity to learn about their own heritage was their favorite aspect of the exhibition.

LOW POINTS

- ◆ Many interviewees discussed what did not work well for them in the Ancient Latin America Hall. Among their remarks, most predominant was a desire for a more energized and interactive exhibition space. A few interviewees suggested enlivening the exhibition with programs or videos about specific objects, while others expressed an interest in having in-depth information about the objects available.
- ◆ For a few interviewees, enlivening the Latin American exhibition was linked to their desire to see updated galleries (e.g., new photographs).

GENERAL USE OF EXHIBITION

- ◆ Nearly one-half of visitors recounted that they had visited all areas of the exhibition. Many of these interviewees seemed satisfied with the exhibition's modest size, which allowed them to see it in its entirety. A couple others expressed that they would prefer a more expansive exhibition.
- ◆ One-quarter of interviewees, all of whom were Spanish-speaking, noted that they had intentionally visited the entire exhibition to connect with their Latin American ancestry.
- ◆ Several interviewees recounted that they had visited specific sections, motivated by an interest in artifacts from particular regions or objects of particular media.

OBJECT-BASED DISCUSSIONS

- ◆ The Aztec calendar was the most frequently cited singular object. Its appeal is due to its large size, detail, and visitors' familiarity with the object.
- ◆ Interviewees often referred to specific groups of objects by region or by media rather than pinpointing one object as their favorite. For example, interviewees noted the Peruvian tools and Aztec figurines, and more generally, the objects from Colima and Veracruz. Those who sought out objects from specific regions were either from the area or had family from there.
- ◆ Others referred to their favorite objects in terms of the media, such as the pottery, jewelry, and sculptures. Aesthetic appeal and craftsmanship were often cited as reasons for liking specific objects. A few interviewees said that certain objects had resonated with them because they demonstrated the idea that ancient Latin American culture was advanced.
- ◆ Interviewees asked a range of questions during the object discussions, with a few core questions emerging more frequently than others. "How" questions figured most prominently in the responses, amounting to one-half of interviewees.

PREFERRED MEDIA

- ◆ Interviewees were asked how they prefer to receive information—print, computers, audio, video, hands-on activities, a knowledgeable person, or other ways. A person was the most frequently mentioned preference; over one-quarter of interviewees expressed interest in having a staff person or tour guide in the Latin American galleries. These responses were equally split between English speakers and Spanish speakers.
- ◆ Several interviewees communicated that they prefer a form of print, either through descriptions in object labels or a handout or brochure that they could take home.
- ◆ Video and computers were each mentioned by several interviewees. Reasons for video preference included a desire to find out more about the historical context of the objects and a sense that videos would appeal to their children, while reasons cited for computer preference included a familiarity and comfort with computers and an interest in interactive features.

VISITOR SUGGESTIONS: FOSTERING CONVERSATIONS

- ◆ When interviewees were asked what the new exhibition should include to foster conversations among visitors, many of the responses mirrored their statements about preferred media. More than one-quarter of interviewees reiterated their interest in having a knowledgeable person present to guide them through the Latin American collection.
- ◆ Responses encompassed the full spectrum of learning preferences. While some interviewees mentioned a didactic model such as a lecture or guided tour, others suggested having a facilitator initiate inquiry-based discussions.

OVERALL MEANING: MEMORABLE ASPECTS OF THE EXHIBITION

- ◆ Consistent with interviewees' overall thoughts about the exhibition, many responses reflected an interest in the objects' historical and cultural meaning and context, often due to their own family heritage. Several of these interviewees conceptualized the objects as tools for learning about life in Ancient Latin America, and interviewees wanted more information than the current labels or exhibition format could afford.
- ◆ Many interviewees were either specifically interested in learning more about the region their ancestors were from, or wanted to use the collection to teach their children about their familial heritage.
- ◆ For others, specific objects or types of objects had resonated with them and incited their curiosity. One-quarter of interviewees mentioned the Aztec calendar.

OVERALL MEANING: PERCEPTIONS

- ◆ When interviewees were asked to define what, if anything, they found meaningful about the objects and information presented in the exhibition, many further described their personal connections to Latin American culture; the majority of these interviewees were Spanish-speaking. A few interviewees expressed their pride and appreciation that the Museum cares to display objects from their culture, and a sense that doing so fosters positive inter-cultural connections.
- ◆ Similar to this group of responses, English-speaking interviewees identified the objects as keys or pathways to understanding another culture's past. They expressed a desire to understand the meaning beneath and behind the objects on view in order to garner historical knowledge. One interviewee's comments echo those of the above Spanish-speaking interviewee. He discussed the Latin American collection's potential role as a platform for promoting cross-cultural appreciation and understanding.

DISCUSSION

The Natural History Museum of LA County has successfully selected objects that engage visitors of diverse interests and ethnic backgrounds. For visitors of Latin American heritage, personal connections are the driving force for their interest in the objects. About one-quarter of visitors who participated in this study were pleased with the organizational layout of the exhibition, as the regional and chronological structure facilitated their experience and understanding of the exhibition.

The museum experience is the co-mingling of what visitors bring with them to a museum and what a museum offers. Visitors' in-depth interest in the Latin American collection and the collection's relevance to their ancestry indicate an opportunity for the Museum to build strong alliances with the Latin American community in Los Angeles. While the exhibition at times was the impetus for dynamic conversation about the collection, there was a discrepancy between visitors' positive feelings about the objects and the educational outcome of their experience. Overall, interviewees thought the exhibition lacked depth and needed to be energized and updated. While this study informs the Museum about its visitors to the Latin American Hall, the Museum's voice is equally important. Creating a solid interpretive approach is one way to strengthen the Museum's voice.

INTERPRETIVE CONTENT

Perhaps the most common remark heard in museum evaluation studies is that visitors want more information. In this study, visitors consistently stated their need for "more" information and "more" detail. Sometimes such remarks are difficult to believe because they conflict with observation studies that show visitors do not engage with the content that exhibitions provide. So when visitors say they want more information or more details, what do they actually mean? Why do visitors move quickly through spaces that are information and text rich? Careful analysis of the data in this study suggest that what visitors actually mean is that they want the "right" information—that is, information that is personally meaningful.

As an example, in an evaluation of plans for an American Indian exhibition, visitors similarly requested vast interpretive resources, including a timeline, information about the artists, materials and techniques, geography, and American Indian traditions and culture. Visitors did not really want all that information; rather, they were searching for key ideas that allowed them to engage with the content at varying depths and in a personal manner (RK&A, 2003). Therefore, while interviewees in this study said they want more detailed information, they probably mean they want information that would provide insight, answer a question they have about an object, or convey context about ancient Latin Americans. While the objects resonated with visitors, the content, or the way in which it was presented, did not. The silver lining is that there are enormous opportunities to present content that bring visitors to a new understanding of an object while deepening the pride they feel for the Museum that is displaying objects they adore.

Visitors' questions and comments about the objects ranged in depth, from simple questions such as how objects were made and used and where they were from, to more complex questions such as how to decipher the symbols on the Aztec calendar and questions about the historical and cultural context of objects. Interviewees continually emphasized a desire to metaphorically excavate the objects on view and to develop a holistic sense of the meanings behind them. In other words, visitors want to know what the objects say about the people and ancient Latin American cultures. Underlying visitors' questions was a desire to know an object's deeper meaning, but visitors were not sure how to go about

exploring an object's meaning. Similar to findings in the Cenozoic concept testing report, visitors to the Latin American Hall do not know how to read or understand objects. Helping visitors read objects is not a new idea to museums, but art museums usually take on such work. Material culture is everywhere. There is a great opportunity for the Museum to take a leadership role among natural history museums and develop strategies for teaching object and specimen literacy.

The tension among providing specific content that visitors say they want, the Museum offering its knowledge and expertise, and helping visitors decipher meanings inherent in objects presents an interesting challenge, but also a strategy for interpretation. While visitors seem to want to know certain things and the Museum wants to respect visitors' information needs, the Museum should also determine what it can offer that would bring visitors to a new understanding. That is, simply addressing visitors' burning questions may *meet* their expectations, but offering them new, perhaps unfamiliar ideas may bring them to a deeper and more meaningful understanding and *exceed* their expectations.

Another important point is this: other visitor studies show that visitors' questions sometimes connect to ideas visitors already know (Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson, 1996; Garibay, C. & Perry, 1999; RK&A, 2001). Thus, when people are asked what they want to know, they respond with a familiar idea. The Museum may want to use visitors' questions as a platform or point of departure for presenting deeper content that connects with visitors' familiar ideas (e.g., how an object was used), as it intends to do in the Dinosaur Gallery. The interpretive strategy in the Visible Vault and ultimate reinstallation should be deliberate; it can support visitors' ways of knowing *and* one of the Museum's greatest assets—its curatorial expertise. The Museum can meet visitor needs and enhance the visitor experience by presenting a unique idea about an object that connects to a visitor's familiar idea. For example, visitors expressed delight and interest in the Aztec calendar—an object familiar to them from past schooling or other experiences. Although visitors said they are interested in deciphering the symbols, it is likely they would be overwhelmed if presented with a chart doing just that. While visitors' requests should be respected, the Museum needs to respond intelligently by carefully selecting a few symbols to decipher. Interpretive decisions must reflect a balance between accommodating visitors and imparting the Museum's accumulated knowledge and expertise. Both the visitor *and* the Museum should have a voice.

INTERPRETATION STRATEGIES

Contemporary communication theory suggests that messages are not received, *per se*, but that they are constructed (Silverman, 1990). RK&A believes that exhibition messages and experiences are *co*-constructed. The constructors are the visitors—all they bring to an experience, and the institution—and all the scholarship and expertise it presents to visitors. Exhibition messages are also co-constructed between two or more visitors. The exhibition becomes the point of departure for visitors as they discuss, process, and share their associations and experiences through conversation. There is significant museum literature that demonstrates that visitors use conversations to explore, test, and construct meanings together (Leinhardt and Knutson, 2004; Leinhardt et. al., 2002).

Interview data indicate that the medium through which visitors want to learn about the Latin American collection varies, although learning from a knowledgeable person was mentioned more than any other medium. Other museum studies that explore how people prefer to learn or receive information also show that different people have different preferences, as there is not one medium that will work for everyone. Thus, many museums offer a range of options and visitors choose the ones that fit with their way of learning and experiencing a museum. Dialogue and interaction, though, are vital elements to consider in whatever interpretive mediums the Museum designs, as it is clear that visitors to NHM LAC value both experiences. Thus, the Museum may wish to consider using inquiry, a powerful teaching and

learning tool, as its interpretative strategy in the Visible Vault and subsequent reinstallation. The primary concern should be *how* inquiry is used and presented throughout the Hall—not the delivery mechanism (e.g., facilitated tours, object labels, computers, or interactive exhibits). A strong inquiry framework will provide guideposts for staff and generate the “right” information and learning experiences for visitors.

An inquiry framework might include three levels of questions. Level I might include “what is it?” kinds of questions. Level II might be “how do we know?” questions. Level III might include “looking for evidence” questions, which could invite visitors to begin constructing their own knowledge by engaging with the object and information. Interviews indicate that visitors are personally moved by the Latin American collection. Thus, an object label, knowledgeable person, or a computer kiosk with digital images could carefully present one question to direct visitors’ attention to the object and then present pertinent information that will make sense, given what was asked and what visitors may have discovered by looking at the object. If desired, the visitor could move to the next question level. Presenting visitors with a lot of content, all at once, can be overwhelming; however, allowing visitors to control their learning and come to an understanding through directed experiences will inspire them to want to know more.

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INTRODUCTION

This report presents findings from a formative evaluation of Ancient Latin America Hall in the Natural History Museum of LA County in Los Angeles, California. Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (RK&A) was contracted to examine visitors' experiences in the existing exhibition to inform both the temporary Visible Vault installation and the final renovation of Ancient Latin America Hall. RK&A used in-depth exit interviews to understand the varying qualities and range of visitors' experiences. Interviews were conducted with 40 groups of visitors; 20 were English speakers and 20 were Spanish speakers. Data collection took place during May 2008.

The summative evaluation was conducted to inform both the temporary Visible Vault installation and the final renovation. RK&A designed the study to provide NHMLAC staff with concrete information about aspects of the current Ancient Latin America Hall that work well for visitors and suggestions for improvements. The evaluation examined visitors':

- ◆ Experiences in the current exhibition (e.g., aspects that work well and aspects that should be changed in the reinstallation);
- ◆ Experiences with the objects (e.g., aesthetic, cultural connections);
- ◆ Self-reported behavior (e.g., amount of exhibition viewed, level of conversation); and
- ◆ Needs and preferences for interpretation—both content and media.

METHODOLOGY

RK&A conducted in-depth interviews with visitors before exiting the existing Ancient Latin America Hall. Interviews produce data rich in information because interviewees are encouraged and motivated to describe their experiences, express their opinions and feelings, and share with the interviewer the meaning they constructed during a visit. In particular, in-depth interviews allow participants to respond in their own words and to explain why they think or feel a certain way.

The target audience for the study included English- and Spanish-speaking, drop-in visitors 9 years and older. The bilingual interviewer intercepted eligible visitors before exiting the Ancient Latin America Hall following a quota sampling method to ensure that the sample included equal numbers of English- and Spanish-speaking visitors. In accordance with this method, the interviewer approached the first eligible visitor to enter a designated area and asked him/her to participate in the study. If the visitor agreed to participate, interviewees were asked whether they would like to be interviewed in English or Spanish and were then asked a series of questions. When the interview was complete, the interviewer thanked the participant and waited for the next eligible visitor. Because the NHM audience has a larger percentage of English-speaking visitors, once the quota for English-speaking visitors was met, the interviewer began using a screening question to select only Spanish-speaking visitors.

The interviewer asked visitors several questions about their experiences in Ancient Latin America Hall (see the Appendix for the interview guide). The interview guide was intentionally open-ended to allow interviewees to discuss what they felt was meaningful. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and transcribed to facilitate analysis. The Spanish interviews were transcribed and then translated into English for analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS AND REPORTING METHOD

Interview data are qualitative, meaning that results are descriptive, following from the interviews' conversational nature. In analyzing the data, the evaluator studies responses for meaningful patterns, and, as patterns emerge, groups similar responses. To illustrate interviewees' ideas as fully as possible, verbatim quotations (edited for clarity) are included.

The interview data are presented in narrative. The interviewer's remarks appear in parentheses, and for visitors, an asterisk (*) signifies the start of a different speaker's comments. At the end of each quotation, the interviewees' gender and age are indicated in brackets. Trends and themes in the data are presented from most-to least-frequently occurring.

The remainder of this report presents findings from the front-end evaluation organized around the following seven areas:

SECTIONS OF THE REPORT:

1. Visitor Demographic
2. Visitor Response to the Exhibition
3. General Use of the Exhibition
4. Experience with Collection Objects
5. Preferred Media
6. Overall Meaning
7. Final Comments

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

RK&A conducted interviews with English-speaking and Spanish-speaking, drop-in visitors as they exited Ancient Latin America Hall. Data were collected in May 2008. Interviews were conducted with 40 groups of visitors, including 43 adults and 42 children. 20 of the visitor groups were English-speaking and 20 were Spanish-speaking. Of visitors approached and asked to participate in the study, 28 declined to do so, for a 41 percent refusal rate. The refusal rate is somewhat high but similar to other museums during peak visitation periods.

VISITOR DEMOGRAPHICS

Overall, male interviewees (54 percent) outnumbered female interviewees (46 percent). Adults ranged in age from 19 to 64 years, with a median age of 34 years. Children accompanying adults ranged in age from 3 to 17 years, with a median age of 11 years.

Sixty-eight percent of visitors were visiting the Natural History Museum of LA County for the first time, and 32 percent were repeat visitors. Of repeat visitors, several had visited twice in the past 12 months, a few had visited once, and a few had not visited in the past 12 months. Of repeat visitors, there was an even split between English- and Spanish-speakers. Three interviewees were museum members.

One-half of the interviews were conducted in English, and one-half were conducted in Spanish. When interviewees were asked what languages are spoken in their households, 52 percent said Spanish and English, 28 percent said English, and 20 percent said Spanish.

VISITOR RESPONSE TO THE EXHIBITION

OVERALL THOUGHTS

When asked their overall thoughts about the exhibition, more than one-half responded favorably and used words such as “educational” and “interesting” to describe their experience. In a few cases, there was a notable difference in the way English-speaking interviewees and Spanish-speaking interviewees described the exhibition; while the former often used the word “interesting,” the latter often used words such as, “necessary” or “educational” (see the two quotations below).

(How many times do you think you’ve visited it?) I don’t know, maybe half a dozen; I work next door. (Overall, what were your thoughts about this exhibition?) Sort of interesting—I don’t really know much about South American or Native American [artifacts], so it’s interesting. [female, 34]

It’s good for education. . . . (How do you think it is good for education?) So that the kids do not lose sight of their roots, so that new generations learn where they are from [and] about each country. [male, 35; translated from Spanish]

Many interviewees expanded on their initial comments, adding that learning about history and culture was a high point. For many of these interviewees, their own connection to Latin American heritage was the driving force for their interest in the objects. While a few saw the Hall as a teaching tool for their children, others explicitly said they viewed it as a means of connecting with their “roots” or “ancestry” (see the first quotation below).

I'm very happy with [the exhibition]. First off, I brought my daughter so she can begin to learn about Mexico's history and about past civilizations from all the countries in Central and South America. [male, 47; translated from Spanish]

In contrast, many interviewees expressed negative opinions or made suggestions for improvements. Most of these interviewees said they wanted more in-depth information, interpretation, and explanation about the objects in the Latin American collection, as well as the cultural context of the objects (see the first and second quotations below).

I wanted to know a little more about the history—what one Indian culture was like compared to others, history of the architecture, and how canals were formed—a little more about their cultural sciences. [male, 60; translated from Spanish]

I would have liked more information and explanation or more demonstration of the particular places. [female, 38; translated from Spanish]

HIGH POINTS OF THE VISIT

Interviewees were then asked what about the exhibition worked well for them and their families. About one-quarter of interviewees responded that the organizational layout of the exhibition worked well for them, noting that the chronological and regional divisions facilitated their understanding of the exhibition content (see the two quotations below).

I like the way the layout is; it goes through and then each thing is separated . . . by region and [they] explain everything. It's easy to follow. [female, 46]

(What about it worked well for you?) That it was played out chronologically from North to South as far as Mexico and South America. [female, 34]

Several interviewees, on the other hand, referenced specific objects or groups of objects as high points (e.g., the jewelry). A few others, who had noted their cultural connection to the objects earlier in the interview, said having the ability to learn about their own heritage was a highlight (see the quotation below).

I think it's really great because I'm able to learn about all the cultures in the different countries. There are many things that one doesn't know about their own country even though they may live there. Yes, I enjoyed it very much. (What about it worked well for you and your family?) Mainly for my daughters, I wanted them to learn about our country; they are able to come here and learn about our ancestors, how they lived, and how they made the culture we have. [male, 32]

LOW POINTS OF THE VISIT

Conversely, when interviewees discussed aspects of the exhibition that did not work well for them, many referred to the overall tone of the exhibition space. Although there was a range of responses in this vein, the predominant theme that emerged was an underlying desire for a more energized and interactive exhibition space. A few interviewees suggested enlivening the exhibition with programs or videos about specific objects, while others expressed an interest in more in-depth information about the objects, whether through maps that indicated the objects' origin or through more detailed object labels (see the first and second quotations).

(What about it did not work so well for you and your family?) I would have liked more. . . . There are photos and displays and things of that kind but in each department . . . [but there should be] someone that can be motivating and talking to people about what they're looking at—what it represents. For example, I assume this is the Aztec calendar and that is Chitzen Itza, Yucatán, but that's it, so [there should be] more historical information [that is] better synthesized. [male, 47; translated from Spanish]

[There could be a] little bit more footage on things . . . maybe a talk or something . . . more details. [male, 22]

For a few interviewees, enlivening the Latin American exhibition was linked to a need for updating the galleries (see the two quotations below).

The pictures and videos are a bit old; if they were in color, they'd be better. [female, 23; translated from Spanish]

I think they need to show more stuff. Update those videos, too. It's way too old; that's when I was a teenager and that's a long time ago. [female, 36]

A couple interviewees, on the other hand, had read the object label for the Aztec calendar and referred to the object being a replica rather than a “real” artifact. The wording of the label prompted these interviewees to question the authenticity of other objects in the Latin American collection; as a result, they wanted clarification as to whether the other objects were “real” (see the quotation below).

I like the fact that [the exhibition] had different kinds of detailed pottery and stuff, but we didn't know whether they were real or not. Are some real? . . . (What about it did not work so well?) The fact that I didn't know which ones were real or not. [female, 17]

A few other interviewees, all of whom were Spanish speakers, suggested that they would like Spanish translations of the object labels and text in the Latin American galleries.

(What about it did not work so well for you and your family?) I haven't yet seen anything that hasn't functioned, but I do notice that there are no descriptions in Spanish. [female, 38; translated from Spanish]

GENERAL USE OF EXHIBITION

Interviewees were asked which areas of the exhibition they visited as well as what their reasons were for choosing to visit those particular sections.

SECTIONS VISITED

Nearly one-half of visitors recounted that they had visited all areas of the exhibition. Many of these interviewees seemed to be satisfied that the size of the exhibition allowed them to see it in its entirety, while a couple others expressed that they would prefer a more expansive exhibition.

One-quarter of interviewees, all of whom were Spanish-speaking, noted that they had intentionally visited the entire exhibition to connect with their Latin American ancestry. It is unclear whether these individuals had visited the museum with the purpose of seeing the collection, as some may have happened upon it during their visit. However, regardless of the impetus for the visits, these interviewees

cited their honed interest in the Latin American collection, often using possessive adjectives such as “our” culture, or “our” ancestors (see the first and second quotations below). A few of these visitors said they had purposefully visited the exhibition with their children in order to use the collection as an informal teaching tool (see the third quotation).

(Which areas of the exhibition did you visit?) All of them. (What were some of your reasons for choosing to visit this area?) Maybe because of our ancestors’ culture. [male, 34; translated from Spanish]

I visited all the areas but with particular attention to those in Mexico because it’s part of my roots. (What were some of your reasons for choosing to visit those areas, aside from your roots?) Just because I want to know more about Mexico, because that’s where I was born. [female, 23; translated from Spanish]

To show my daughter . . . how people looked and about the cultures and everything about our past descendants from different cultures. [female, 30; translated from Spanish]

Several interviewees recounted that they had visited specific sections, motivated by an interest in artifacts from particular regions or objects of particular media, while others were more broadly interested in learning more about the artifacts on view. For example, while one interviewee was especially interested in the jewelry, another had never seen the collection and described his general interest in the history of Latin America (see the two quotations below).

(Which areas of the exhibition did you visit?) I visited the jewelry. (What were some of the reasons for choosing to visit that area?) I’m really into material things and the meaning behind them . . . what jewelry means to people. [female, 23]

I visited the whole portion of it, actually. (What were some of your reasons for choosing to visit those particular areas?) Interest. (Can you provide a little more information on that?) I’ve been reading about these cultures and I’m interested in history and ethnography in general and natural history. [male, 55]

However, whether describing the specific areas they had visited or the entire exhibition, very few interviewees referred to the overall layout and organization of the exhibition in terms of how the sections inter-relate. Although some had perceived an organizational layout based on region and chronology, they did not necessarily express an understanding of the larger contextual framework (e.g., how the sections are linked).

In discussing their visit, several interviewees said they had happened upon the exhibition rather than purposefully visited it. Many of these interviewees mentioned that the placement of the exhibition had prompted them to enter; one interviewee said it was “the first one that was in front of us.”

EXPERIENCE WITH COLLECTION OBJECTS

In order to gauge how visitors perceive, think about, and connect with the objects in the Latin American collection, interviewees were asked to choose one favorite object and talk about their experience with it. After identifying an object or group of objects, interviewees were invited to walk over to the identified object(s). They were asked to articulate what it prompted them to think about and to identify questions that they had about the object. They were then probed with a series of questions to further clarify the

uniqueness of that experience as well as aspects of the current exhibition that may have enhanced that experience. Lastly, interviewees were asked to reflect on what might further enhance their appreciation and experience with the selected object.

OBJECT-BASED DISCUSSIONS

The Aztec calendar was the most frequently cited singular object. Its appeal is due to its large size, detail, and visitor's familiarity with the object (see the quotation below). A few interviewees noted that they would appreciate "a more detailed guide about the calendar's symbols."

(Of all the objects you looked at, which was your favorite?) The sun. (The Aztec calendar?) Yes, basically because I have heard about it and read about it, and I know it's not the real one but it is still very impressive. *It is very impressive and I don't know if it's a duplicate or not, but it looks real to have made it like that. [female, 32 and male, 33; translated from Spanish]

However, interviewees more typically referred to specific groups of objects by region rather than pinpointing one object as their favorite. This included, for example, the Peruvian tools and Aztec figurines, and more generally, the objects from Colima and Veracruz. Often, those who sought out objects from specific regions mentioned that their families had originated in that particular place (see the quotation below).

(What areas did you visit here?) We just started looking around (What were some of your reasons for choosing to visit this area?) We came to look at all the areas but basically so they [referring to his kids] could learn about our culture. (What in this exhibition was most memorable to you?) To me, the part on the city I grew up in. (Which city is that?) Veracruz. . . Because it represents something that we were . . . what we were and what our ancestors did. [male, 32; translated from Spanish]

Others referred to their favorite objects in terms of the media, such as pottery, jewelry, and sculptures. Aesthetic appeal and craftsmanship were often cited as reasons for choosing specific objects. A few interviewees described that certain objects had resonated with them because they demonstrated the idea that ancient Latin American culture was advanced (see the quotation below).

(Of all the objects you looked at, which was your favorite?) The Aztec calendar. (Why is that?) It's hard to believe that it weighed 27 tons. (When looking at this object, what does it prompt you to think about?) How advanced these people were. (What questions, if any, does it provoke?) Why it ended, like why [the calendars] stopped recording time in 2012 and what made them know that this thing works. [female, 17]

Interviewees asked a range of questions during the object discussions, with a few core questions emerging more frequently than others. "How" questions figured most prominently from one-half of interviewees.

"HOW" QUESTIONS

About one-quarter of interviewees were interested in finding out how their selected object(s) were made or used; that is, they were asking process-oriented questions (see the quotation below).

(Of all the objects you looked at, which was your favorite? Why is that?) There is a cup made of silver, because of the way in which it was made and the material that they used and how they used it so perfectly. (Can you please show it to me? Ah, the silver cup, Chimú Culture, north coast of Peru. . . . When looking at these objects, what do they prompt you to think about?)

How was it that they made it, that's what I ask myself—how they used what they used to make it. [female, 38; translated from Spanish]

Several interviewees asked “how” questions about the objects’ historical and cultural context. Again, what continually emerged in these interviewees’ comments was a desire to metaphorically excavate the objects on view, and to develop a holistic sense of the meaning behind them; in other words, what do the objects say about the people in ancient Latin America and how they lived? Underlying the questions articulated by this set of interviews were “how” questions that went further than simply garnering how an object was made or how it was used (see the first quotation below). Often, these interviewees were interested in deciphering the meaning of the objects, but were not sure how to go about doing so (see the second quotation).

What is that beneath there? (The Mescala.) This stuff looks like it's some sort of ceremonial [object] or from the temple or something, and that [over there] looks like something a kid might have. (When looking at this object, what does it prompt you to think about?) That it was used for more than just a public building. (What questions, if any, do you have about this object?) Who made it, and is it something that's really common . . . because everything seems a little bit out of context. (What information, if any, do you think would enhance your appreciation for this object?) Maybe if things were grouped by households and like what's the government or temple [it belonged to], because [now] it's just sort of ‘This is from wherever that is, from whatever’ time period. (Generally speaking, what information would further enhance your appreciation and experience?) A little bit more about the actual culture behind all this stuff. [female, 34]

(The Museum hopes that visitors will talk with each other about the objects. What do you think would foster conversations among visitors?). . . . If we had more guidance, [that] would help you because it's really . . . [you] get up close, look at things, and then you get puzzled and there's no one to help you out. I think having more people there to answer questions, so [getting a better] understanding of the object that you're looking at. [male, 24]

“WHERE” AND “WHAT” QUESTIONS

Several interviewees were curious about where particular objects were found. Their comments are consistent with earlier suggestions to incorporate maps more thoroughly into the exhibition, either with object labels or on section panels. Furthermore, this desire to know details about where objects were from was sometimes linked to visitors’ ancestry; interviewees of Latin American descent often wanted to seek out objects from their families’ locale or region, looking to forge a personal identification with objects from their homeland (see the quotation below).

(When looking at the objects from Colima what does it prompt you to think about?) I begin to think about how I play soccer over there, I live about an hour from Colima and I am immediately reminded of how beautiful it is and how they are now exhibiting its beauty in this museum. [male, 64]

A couple of interviewees wanted further information about the identity of a group of objects, referring to a set of figural sculptures. They were interested in knowing their function. These couple of responses are intrinsically linked with the “how” questions they had asked, but seem to reflect a need to label or identify objects for the simple purpose of understanding what they are categorically rather than delving deeper into cultural context.

SUGGESTIONS: ENHANCING THE OBJECT EXPERIENCE

Interviewees were asked what information, if any, had enhanced their appreciation of their favorite object(s) as well as what information would further enhance their appreciation and experience. Interviewees did not discuss elements in the current exhibition in great detail; instead, they discussed ways to improve visitors' experience with the objects.

CURRENT OBJECT LABELS

In discussing what information had enhanced their appreciation of their favorite object(s), a few interviewees explained that they had not read or had read very little while in the exhibition. A couple of interviewees referenced details in object labels; one recalled that the Aztec calendar is a replica, and that the face in the center has a dagger on its tongue, representing its thirst for more blood. The other interviewee remembered that a silver cup had been made with the use of a chisel.

For the most part, however, interviewees did not find that information provided in the exhibition answered the questions they had about the objects; their responses reflect an interest in learning in-depth information about the collection, but most interviewees either did not refer to the exhibition text or were not satisfied with the details provided. A few interviewees specifically commented that they would like more detail in the object labels.

SUGGESTIONS: SUPPLEMENTARY MEDIA

Interviewees had extensive suggestions for how to further enhance visitor appreciation and experience with the objects. More than one-quarter of interviewees suggested including more detail and more in-depth information, and seemed to be referring both to object labels and larger exhibition panels. Several interviewees expressed that they would like more historical and cultural context; for some, this meant a clarified vision of what the physical context would have looked like, including anything from environmental surroundings to photographs or videos. One interviewee was particularly interested in gleaned a deeper understanding of the details and context of the Meso-American ball game objects (see the first quotation below). Others referred to a more general historical context (see the second quotation).

(When looking at this object, what does it prompt you to think about?) How they would play it? . . . the people interacting during the game, you know, playing into sports in this time and age . . . if there are scorekeepers, is there a time limit of the rules?—just how they would interact during the game. (What questions, if any, do you have about this object?) Is there an example of the ball, is there an example of the uniforms worn during it, what do the winners get, what do the losers get; how does it apply to their culture? Why do they play this game? (What information, if any, do you think enhanced your appreciation for this particular display, this object?) The photographs. (What about the photographs?) It just shows the playing field. (Generally speaking, what information would further enhance your appreciation of this display?) Maybe a video [of] a re-enactment of it being played. [male, 30]

Well, obviously all of the objects at the Museum transmit to us more knowledge and more information on all the countries, and of all Latin American cultures. And so, [I'd like] to know a little more about that. [male, 45; translated from Spanish]

PREFERRED MEDIA

Interviewees were asked how they prefer to receive information—print, computers, audio, video, hands-on activities, a live person, or other ways. Probes were asked to discover what about that particular media was appealing to visitors.

Having a knowledgeable person available in the exhibition was the most frequently mentioned preference; over one-quarter of interviewees expressed their interest in having a staff person or tour guide in the Latin American galleries. These responses were equally split between English speakers and Spanish speakers. Several of them specified that they would like to have someone available to answer questions that might surface during their visit, while others said they would like for there to be a guided tour by someone who had in-depth knowledge of the subject matter (see the first quotation below). One interviewee said her preference for a person stemmed from her learning disability (see the second quotation).

(How do you prefer to receive information—print, computers, audio, video, hands-on activities, a live person, or any other ways? Why is that?) Are you saying in terms of what is already here, or when someone comes here? (Yes, when you come to any exhibition.) With a tour guide. (With another person, with a tour guide; why?) Because they have more information and they know more about these things than anyone else. They can tell us things that aren't written here and they know about history. [male, 60; translated from Spanish]

I like live people; print is good if . . . I can read sentences [so] that's good for me, [but] not for a lot of people . . . otherwise, maps are good . . . general basic graphics [that are] not too cluttered. (And why is that?) I think I may have learning disabilities, I don't know, but I'm blind in this eye, so I have depth problems, so I hear better than I see [and] I prefer a live person. [female, 48]

Several interviewees communicated that they prefer a form of print, either through descriptions in object labels or a handout or brochure. A few interviewees suggested including a take-home handout or brochure (see the two quotations below) or improving the appeal of the entrance of the Hall.

(What else should be included to help visitors interact with the objects?) Hand-out flyers that explain exactly what . . . so that people can take them home and study them. [male, 32; translated from Spanish]

I think it would be good to have flyers when you come in or bulletins with drawings; that would call peoples' attention to come in here because I realize that people just pass this area and this is the first area I visited. I want them to learn about their culture, but many just pass through and if they had something in front . . . I see that they have the butterfly exhibit or this or that, but really here there's nothing and we're leaving it behind a bit. [female, 38]

Video and computers were each mentioned by one-eighth of interviewees. Reasons for video preference included a desire to find out more about the historical context of the objects and a sense that their kids would be attracted to videos, while reasons cited for computer preference included a familiarity and comfort with computers and an interest in interactive features. A few interviewees said that in some cases, they prefer a video, and in other cases, a live person (see the two quotations below).

(Generally speaking, what information would further enhance your appreciation and experience?) Just what it was used for, more details and description of what it is and what it was

used for, which mediums [were] used, and how they got the color. (How do you prefer to receive information—something in print, computer, audio, video, hands-on activities, a live person, or any other ways?) Probably with this object, probably in print, but if it were a case of objects, a video. [female, 19]

You could put [in] videos, too; I remember you used to [have] videos before, I don't know if they took them out . . . something that could actually explain more to you and that you could understand more. *Like a narrator or something. *[With a video], you read a lot less and you know what this is, but a person could explain more than what's written up there. [2 males, ages unknown]

A few interviewees described hands-on activities as a desirable form of receiving information, noting that they prefer using hands-on activities rather than simply looking at the objects or listening to audio or a tour. One interviewee said she'd like activities akin to the ones in the Discovery Room, and she also suggested how to provide better context for the objects (see the quotation below).

[I like] stuff you can handle yourself, like in the *Discovery Room*; there are all the things you can play with. (What else should be included to help visitors interact with the objects?) Murals, or maybe replicas of what the rooms would look like or something like that. [female, 34]

A few others said audio was the preferred source of information, mentioning, for example, that learning through listening is preferable to taking the time to read text. One Spanish-speaking interviewee expressed interest in a Spanish audio guide (see the quotation below).

(How do you prefer to receive information—print, computers, audio, video, hands-on activities, a live person, or any other ways?) In Spanish—the other day I went to the Getty and they give visitors [Spanish] headphones . . . and they explain exactly what you're looking at and where it comes from. They have numbers that correspond to . . . (Yes with numbers. Why do you think that works?) Because it gave me more information and although I did live there, I don't know exactly what each object means . . . all the different meanings behind every object. [male, 32; translated from Spanish]

VISITOR SUGGESTIONS: FOSTERING CONVERSATION

Interestingly, when interviewees were asked what the new exhibition should include to foster conversations among visitors, many of the responses mirrored their statements about preferred media. Considering that the media question was asked immediately before the question about media preference, visitors naturally thought in terms of the categorical structure that had been previously introduced by the interviewer: print, computers, audio, video, hands-on activities, or a knowledgeable person.

More than one-quarter of interviewees reiterated their interest in having a person guide their understanding of the Latin American collection. Responses encompassed the full spectrum of learning preferences. While some interviewees mentioned a didactic model such as a lecture or guided tour, others suggested having a facilitator initiate inquiry-based discussions (see the first and second quotations below). One interviewee specified that it is important that guides or facilitators also speak Spanish (see the second quotation).

Have a tour, so that way you could have interactions. The print is a waste of money. All they do is shovel it or throw it out; there's no reason that the Museum needs to do that. If they have somebody here and have a tour, maybe one every two hours, [that person could] walk around and say, 'Do you have any questions?'. . . . (The Museum hopes that visitors will talk with each

other about the objects. What do you think would help foster this type of conversations amongst visitors?) I don't think so . . . we didn't want to get with anybody else, but again, if you have a docent walk around with them and ask questions, that prompts the other person to ask another question. . . . I'm sure that the person who's going to be going around discussing what [the objects] were used for, he [or she] could try to get people to ask questions. [female, 36]

Have people that speak Spanish as well as other languages and have people that want to learn. [male, 32; translated from Spanish]

The remaining responses were spread fairly evenly across several modes of media that might foster conversation: hands-on components, audio guides, computer terminals, and object labels or text panels written with the goal of inciting curiosity. While a couple interviewees noted their preference for an introspective, contemplative experience, a few others discussed the potential for family or social interaction in the Latin American galleries.

VISITOR SUGGESTIONS: INTERACTION WITH OBJECTS

Interviewees were then asked what else should be included to facilitate visitor interaction with the objects. Again, one-quarter of interviewees, seven of whom were Spanish speakers, expressed their desire for a tour guide or facilitator. The responses demonstrate an interest in gathering and discovering information about the objects on view, and point to many individuals' sense that their questions would be best answered by a live person. A few interviewees suggested having Spanish-speaking tour guides.

OVERALL MEANING

Interviewers asked two questions that were directed at visitors' sense of the overall meaning of the objects and their personal connection to the objects: what in the exhibition was most memorable to them, and what, if anything, they found meaningful about the objects and information presented. Visitors' responses explore *how* the Latin American collection objects resonate with visitors.

MEMORABLE ASPECTS OF THE EXHIBITION

Consistent with interviewees' overall thoughts about the exhibition, many responses were related to an interest in the objects' historical and cultural meaning and context, often in reference to their own family heritage. Several of these interviewees expressed how the objects had resonated with them due to their sense that they presented opportunities for learning about life in Ancient Latin America, and it seems they wanted more information than the current labels or exhibition format could afford (see the first quotation below). For one interviewee, the collection offers an opportunity to explore how objects from different regions are connected and how they are distinct (see the second quotation).

(What in this exhibition was most memorable to you? Why do you think that is?) What they don't have—the architect's science and [more] about the calendar, for example, and how people lived, and how governments were formed; they were among the first to form governments . . . how they communicated with different cities and other localities. [female, 32]

Looking at so many detailed pieces and how they showcase the different cultures of different Indians like Peru[vians], the Aztecs . . . comparing them; they are very distinct. [female, 32; translated from Spanish]

Many interviewees were either specifically interested in learning about the region their ancestors were from, or wanted to be able to use the collection to teach their children about their familial heritage. A

couple interviewees expressed satisfaction and pride that beautiful objects from their culture were on view, and one interviewee expressed his belief that it is instrumental that the Natural History Museum maintain and preserve the Latin American collection (see the quotation below).

I think that it is a beautiful thing, to keep preserving history of all Latin American countries. I think it is beautiful to maintain it forever, because this has stood for so many years, and yet the people continue enjoying everything that our past peoples had done. . . . There are a lot of things here that we had never seen before . . . there are a lot of things that one might not imagine that our past peoples had done; it's a beautiful thing. [male, 45]

For others, specific objects or types of objects had resonated with them, incited their curiosity, and functioned as a vehicle through which they constructed overall meaning. One-quarter of interviewees mentioned the Aztec calendar. As in earlier responses, interviewees reflected on the monumentality of the object and their familiarity with it, in addition to their interest in deciphering the symbols and details in order to reach a better understanding of its full meaning (see the quotation below).

(What in this exhibition was most memorable to you?) The Aztec calendar. (Why do you think that is?) I'd like to know what's its function, how to read it and understand it, that's what I'd like. The beginning and the end—this is something of an enigma for me [and] I would like to be able to decipher it. (What questions, if any, do you have about this object?) I would like to be able to read it; how does it work? When does it start? When does it end? How we can decipher it? For example, which piece would pertain to what we know as January or December? [female, 42]

Other objects mentioned include figural sculptures, gold pieces, jewelry, textiles, and the objects associated with the Mayan ball game.

PERCEPTION OF OVERALL MEANING

When interviewees were asked to define what, if anything, they found meaningful about the objects and information presented in the exhibition, many further described their personal connections to Latin American culture. For many, learning about their own past and ancestry was a personal and exciting experience, whether it was a means to discovering more about their origins and where they are from, or to feeling an overall sense of pride in the “richness” and depth of their cultural roots (see the first quotation below). For a few interviewees, pride also entailed an appreciation that the Museum cares to display their culture, and a sense that doing so fosters positive inter-cultural connections (see the second quotation). For a few of these interviewees, specific objects resonated with them as a result of this connection; one woman recalled her grandmother's use of a metate, while another reflected on the impact of experiencing authentic objects from her own culture (see the third quotation).

(What, if anything, did you find meaningful about the objects and information presented in this exhibition?). . . . That we have a very rich culture—rich in value. Our culture is very intelligent and being able to see such impressive things makes us value ourselves more because we know we have to learn from them. [female, 38]

Everything is magnificent; they made it conducive so people can take with them a good impression of what we are able to see through our own eyes—things that we have not seen. We are able to see that there are people who have an interest in showing other cultures, [that] Anglo-Saxon and American cultures [have an interest in] countries they may not know about. They are able to admire and see the beauty that the one from above sends us. [male, 64; translated from Spanish]

I am able to see the [authentic] objects. I learn about them, but that can only take me so far and being able to see them helps me learn more. (About ancient Latin American art and culture, in general?) It has such a rich culture and there are a lot of things that people don't know about Latin American culture. [female, 23; translated from Spanish]

Similar to this group of responses, English-speaking interviewees identified the objects as keys or pathways to understanding another culture's past. They expressed a desire to excavate the meaning beneath and behind the objects on view to garner historical knowledge. Their interest ranged from learning about the daily lives of the people who created and used the objects, to utilizing the objects as a source of understanding the cultural heritage of Latin American people. One interviewee's comments echo those of the above Spanish-speaking interviewee; namely, he discusses the Latin American collection's potential as a platform for promoting cross-cultural appreciation and understanding.

(What, if anything, did you find meaningful about the objects and information presented in this exhibition?) Well, I got more on the knowledge about the culture, and I think the collection is actually very, very nice; I think the museum should continue to display it. I think considering the area's cultural ties to the country where these cultures are [from], you should continue to do so. (What have you found meaningful about Latin American art and culture, in general?) It's part of the heritage of the area, and it shapes the attitudes and people living in the area . . . still have their traditions and it's best for me, not [having] come from the area, [to] help me understand people coming from these areas—what their cultures and backgrounds were. [male, 55]

Another several interviewees generated overall meaning through their experiences with the objects, reflecting on how the objects might have been used, the aesthetic design and detail of the objects, and the depth of meaning that can be uncovered through study of the objects. One interviewee was particularly interested in the way Latin American cultures conceptualize of death and the afterlife (see the quotation below).

(What else should be included to help visitors interact with the objects?) Maybe replicas of certain things so they can see how things were used and what they were used for. I've noticed [that] back there, [there are] a few utensils and ceremonial stuff as well as just everyday utensils . . . even some of the weaponry —things that some of the kids can play with and get a feel of what the culture was like at the time. (What, if anything, did you find meaningful about the objects and information presented in this exhibition?) I've seen a lot of the death heads. I know [that in] the Aztec culture, well [in] the Latin native culture, death was a major aspect and . . . even the way you died meant something. It's like you either died with honor or you died in disgrace, and one completely outweighed the other and kind of dictated what your afterlife was going to be. (And about Latin American art and culture, what did you find meaningful in terms of that?) Just the fact that they tossed a lot of meaning into every image, everyday objects, artwork that that they added to it has specific significance to it. [male, 23]

FINAL COMMENTS

Interviewees were given a final chance to voice suggestions for the new exhibition. A few of the interviewees made comments about creating a child-friendly exhibition, whether through hands-on activities or inviting schools to use it as a resource (see the two quotations below). Another interviewee suggested playing regional music in the exhibition space.

(Your input has been really helpful. Any other suggestions for the new exhibition?) More activities that convey information towards kids—more focused towards youth. As an adult, at least [I] already have a little more information stored, but it would be more important to have it focused towards youth. [male, 48; translated from Spanish]

I think it's very important to promote [this exhibition] to the schools. It's fundamental [that it] go to the schools and also the Latino neighborhoods because in reality, they don't realize these things exist—these wonders. [male, 47]

The theme of deepening the context emerged from interviewees who expressed the need to update and improve the Ancient Latin America Hall. One interviewee emphasized the need to improve the display and explication of objects that are not as immediately aesthetically appealing, and suggested having display cases in which visitors can access a full, 360 degree view of the objects. She also discussed the need for modern, eye-catching, and engaging presentations. Another interviewee reiterated the need for labels to include Spanish translations, and suggested enlivening the museum space by including visual, environmental details pertaining to Latin America's climate (see the second quotation).

(Generally speaking, what information do you think would further enhance your appreciation and experience in this exhibit in general?) Put [the objects] more at eye level. Cause right now [it's hard to] come up and read like that. *Yeah. . . . I've seen [the display] quite a few times, and it still looks the same. I've lived in L.A. since I was five; I'm 36 now and I used to come to the Museum when it was closed on Saturdays and they would have special programs for children . . . for inner city kids and go on field trips and stuff like that. We never actually did any work in here or looked at the stuff, but . . . I think you need to make it a little bit more modern to catch [visitors'] attention, because what's catching their attention is the shiny pieces. You've got beautiful artifacts and pieces that they're not enjoying because it's not being displayed or it's not being . . . I know they can't touch it, but at least change them around, change the way they display them—make them more animated, instead of just being so stagnant. They can't see the [objects'] back side[s], and I know there's probably nothing on the back side, but make those mobile so they can see the back side, the front side, like 3D. [female, 36]

Right now I am noticing that people usually don't look up, so if they could put more things [up on the walls] to make people see that there are more things above. [Also], there are a lot of people that do not speak English . . . I also [would] like it if there were things from the jungle because usually temples are in other places. . . if they could put habitats of every state, or put something relative, it would be much better. [male, 33]

APPENDICES

REMOVED FOR PROPRIETARY PURPOSES