Interpreting the Unfamiliar:
Object-Based Front-End Evaluation

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This paper describes a front-end evaluation carried out as part of the planning for the *Early China* galleries at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto, Ontario. The evaluation examined visitors' "reading" of – the interpretations drawn from personal knowledge and a lifetime's experience. Insight into the way visitors interpreted typical artifacts for themselves gave guidance in determining the extent and kind of interpretation we should provide in the gallery. Furthermore, information about the extent to which visitors can already link artifacts to categories and concepts provides a "baseline" for judging the success of our interpretive efforts.

The Gallery Project

The gallery design team's task was to complete a series of permanent galleries featuring the ROM's extensive collection of Chinese artifacts. The overall framework or organizing principle for the galleries had already been established; there was to be an introductory gallery followed by a series of galleries, each of which would present a chronological period.

The first of these chronological galleries presents the culture of the Bronze Age. Concerns about how to interpret the Bronze Age collection provoked this evaluation.

The Collection

The ROM owns a large and important collection of Bronze Age Chinese material. The collection is much admired by scholars and connoisseurs; it also illustrates a number of aspects of Bronze Age Chinese culture. However, the Bronze Age got its name for good reason: much of the collection consists of bronze objects which have been buried for several thousand years. The results could be described by the uncharitably minded as "those lumpy green things."

The largest and most impressive of "those lumpy green things" are the ritual vessels; these objects visually dominate the collection. Because one of our aims in gallery design is to ensure that artifacts are not overpowered by their surroundings, we expected the ritual bronzes to be the most powerful sight in the gallery. Therefore, the ritual bronzes would be one of

the major sources of that important "first impression," the quick initial reading of the space, contents, and degree of interest.

To the expert, these vessels are impressive for many reasons: for the level of craftsmanship and technological skill; for the artistry of the designs; for what they reveal about the structure of society, about religious practice, about trade . . .; we were not sure, however, how they would strike the non-expert.

Reasons for the Evaluation

As we progressed with gallery planning, we began to wonder whether these objects would be visually familiar to visitors. We assumed (without audience research) that virtually all of our audience would be familiar with the idea of "China" as a place and have some mental image, however limited or stereotyped, of "people and things Chinese." We also knew that a proportion of our audience would have considerable knowledge about China, whether based on travel, heritage, interest, or formal study. What we were not sure about was visitors' ability to connect the sight of "those lumpy green things" with what they already knew.

This question of *visual familiarity* – of the extent to which visitors can recognize objects, identify them, and link the sight to existing knowledge – obviously has important implications for planning the interpretive elements in an exhibit.

If, for example, we had been planning a gallery of automobiles for a North American audience, we could assume a high degree of visual familiarity. Visitors would be able to put a name on the class of object and to provide extensive and largely accurate interpretation about function, materials, mode of use, and cultural meaning, all from their own experience. The designers of such an exhibit can then concentrate on providing more detailed information; they can reinforce, but do not need to establish, the basics.

If, on the other hand, the primary artifacts are not visually familiar to many visitors, if they cannot be understood at a glance, the task facing the gallery design team is much more complex. Before the artifacts can be used to demonstrate aspects of the culture which produced them, visitors must first understand such fundamentals as "What is it?" "How was it used?" "Who used it?"

We suspected that the bronze ritual vessels, the visually dominant artifacts in the first major gallery, were in fact unfamiliar to some of our visitors. This raised a further question: "If some visitors don't recognize these artifacts, how will they perceive them? How will visitors interpret these unfamiliar objects for themselves?"

This point, too, has important implications for gallery planning. For some time, museums have tended to regard their visitors almost as some species of sponge, which soaks up what is presented without distortion.

Increasingly, we have come to realize that, for each visitor, interpretation comes not only from *without*, from the material provided by the museum, but also from *within*, from the visitor's own view of how the world is structured.

Conclusions based on previous experience can lead visitors astray when they view the unfamiliar. For example, visitors at the ROM often audibly identify a Chinese statue with a glass "jewel" in its forehead as "an Indian idol," despite its position under a large title panel announcing "Temple Art from North China." Similarly, the Hebrew scrolls have more than once provoked the comment, "Oh, look! Chinese scrolls!", despite their location in the middle of a series of galleries devoted exclusively to cultures of the Mediterranean. In both these examples, visitors have, on the basis of previous experience, linked the idea of a particular physical form exclusive to one culture, when it is produced by several.

If any common misreadings of physical form can be identified through front-end evaluation, then they can be addressed through exhibit design. The Chinese statue mentioned above, for example, could have been set in a context of physical elements that *do* suggest China.

Our front-end evaluation was therefore designed to get information about these two questions: For what proportion of our visitors were "those lumpy green things" a familiar and comprehensible sight? How do those visitors who do not recognize Chinese bronze ritual vessels interpret these vessels on the basis of appearance?

Methodology

We picked out five shapes of Bronze Age ritual vessels which we felt would provide a good cross-section of shapes, sizes, and decoration. These vessels were arranged, without labels or any other interpretive elements, in a case in the *From the Collections* gallery, a gallery which features a variety of objects without any linking theme or context. This location reduced the possibility of visitors reading "clues" from the surrounding gallery and nearby artifacts.

We selected visitor groups systematically as they approached the case, excepting organized tour and school groups, groups composed entirely of children, and groups speaking a language other than English. Since we hoped to preserve some of the social dynamics of a gallery visit, with visitors discussing their impressions, we spoke with the entire visitor group.

After introducing ourselves, we asked visitors if they could "guess" what the objects in the case were. If visitors gave a brief answer, such as "They're all vessels of some kind," we would probe for ideas about the use, material, culture, and time period. We kept our questions completely open-ended.

Our original intention was to speak to 100 groups. After speaking to 50 groups, we felt that we had already answered our initial questions to our own satisfaction, and therefore stopped.

Results

Since this was a project-specific evaluation, most of the information gathered is useful only to those struggling to design exhibits of Chinese ritual bronzes – a small (though, no doubt, select) audience. Therefore, rather than present the results in detail, I will give a few examples of the kinds of information this study produced, and the way the results fed into the gallery planning.

First, we discovered that Bronze Age Chinese ritual vessels are unfamiliar objects indeed. Out of 106 individuals in our groups, only 3 people could identify the objects.

> "Oh, well, they're Chinese and bronze, so ritual and wine has to enter into it somewhere."

Two more individuals could remember seeing similar objects and recall something of the circumstances, but could not remember what the objects were. They recognized the faces, so to speak, but forgot the names.

> "I've seen something like them before (pause) when I was traveling (pause), but I can't remember where."
> Companion: "But you've been mostly in the Far East – did you see them there?"
> "Maybe (pause), but these do look Central American."

Three visitors singled out one particular vessel, the *gu* or wine cup, as an example of something which they had seen during their current museum visit. All of these individuals remembered where they had seen the object, in the *Mankind Discovering* gallery, where several *gu* appear in an exhibit about identifying fakes. Two of these three individuals remembered what the object was; none of them connected the cup with the rest of the vessels.

> "Oh! (pointing) That one's a cup (pause). I saw it in the exhibit downstairs about fakes (pause), but I don't know what the others are."

Clearly, the gallery needs to be designed from the premise that virtually all visitors (over 97% of the sample) will find the vessels visually unfamiliar. Visitors may be able to deduce something about the artifacts, or learn something from the interpretive material provided by the museum, but they cannot be expected to recognize and identify the artifacts at a glance, in

the way that most of us can say with a reasonable degree of confidence "That is a 20th-century American automobile" or "That is a medieval European suit of armour" or "That is an ancient Egyptian mummy case."

We also gained a useful understanding of how visitors "read" these unfamiliar objects. For example, the appearance of the bronzes did not strongly suggest a Chinese origin. Visitors saw the objects as old, but the readings of origin were, literally, all over the map of ancient civilizations. Egypt was the most frequently mentioned culture of origin (22 citations), followed by China (18), Central & South American cultures (7), Mediterranean cultures other than Egypt (6), and Asian cultures other than China (5).

The aesthetic of Bronze Age China does not fit with most of our visitors' idea of "things Chinese." The artifacts themselves will not contribute much to communicating that this gallery is about China; this will have to be done primarily through the design of the environment. In other words, providing a physical context that suggests "Chineseness" is not, for this particular gallery, an optional "frill"; it is part of the first-line orientation, helping visitors grasp the content of the gallery as they enter.

We also discovered that almost all adults in our sample could tell that the vessels were made of metal (44 out of 66 citations), although there were 8 suggestions of stone, and a few rather wild suggestions (such as cement and plastic) from children, who were usually immediately corrected by their companions. However, there were more identifications of the material as copper (23) than bronze (19).

The discovery of this propensity to read the vessels as copper confirmed our intention to include an exhibit about bronze itself, explaining how bronze is made from copper and why bronze was such a widely-used material during the Bronze Age.

Object-based Evaluation as a Research Tool

Although this study was planned to get specific information to aid gallery design, it also worked (somewhat to our surprise) much like a preliminary survey in a grounded research project. Because we asked open-ended questions and noted the responses, we found interesting patterns of visitor behavior emerging from the data. In the tradition of most research projects, our results include just as many (if not more) questions than answers.

For example, *all* the visitors who identified any objects or even had a feeling of recognition, volunteered information about where they were when they had seen such objects before. **Recognition and identification seemed to be closely linked in some way with very specific memories of the physical surroundings in which this information had been received.** Some visitors seemed to be retrieving

their previous viewing of such objects by a piece-by-piece reconstruction of place:

> "I've seen these before (pause); Museum (pause); Boston (pause); They're Asian."
> Companion: "Not Egyptian?"
> "No. Asian. (pause) And they held something (pause); They find them in ruins or in the ground."

Is this a common phenomenon? Do people associate objects which are comparatively unfamiliar primarily with their own personal circumstances and experiences when first viewing such objects? Does more frequent viewing lead to a blurring of this effect, an ability to associate the objects less with personal experience, but perhaps more with categories, concepts, and abstract ideas?

Further more, *all* the visitors who identified or recognized a bronze not only mentioned a previous encounter, but voluntarily described a previous *museum experience.* No one claimed to recognize the objects on the basis of a TV program, a magazine article, or a course.

Again, we wonder whether this is a peculiar characteristic of our small sample, or a more widespread phenomenon. And if it is common for identification of 3-D objects to be based on memories of encounters with "the real thing," why? Is this evidence of organization of memories by personal experience and place, so that to identify something seen in a museum, one first combs memories of other things seen in museums? Or is it an effect of the human memory's ability to remember concrete three-dimensional objects for longer than two-dimensional representations?

We also noticed that in exactly half of our groups, the first comment made indicated that the speaker perceived the bronzes as a related group of objects. But in the other half of the visitor groups, the first speaker defined the problem not as identification of a *group* of objects, but as identification of five separate and unrelated objects. Each vessel was tackled as a new and different problem; some visitors suggested a different culture of origin for each vessel.

Why did some visitors immediately group the objects, while others treated them as separate and distinct? Is this a reflection of personal preference, perhaps related to learning styles? In other words, when confronted with a collection of new data, do some people naturally tend to "lump", while others tend to "split"? And if so, how does this affect the way these two groups learn from exhibits? Or, as an alternative possibility, is the ability to see underlying similarities, to see a "group," the result of greater visual experience? In our sample, the visitors who identified the objects at a glance always perceived them as a group; children always saw the objects as separate and unrelated.

Furthermore, we noticed that when some visitors "read" the objects, they tended to rely heavily on only one type of "clue," where people with more experience might have drawn on a broader range of observations. For example, color seemed to be the main clue to material. It was the reason given for citing copper and bronze; it was also the reason for answers such as "jade." In determining the provenance, most of the visitors who mentioned a reason for their answer had looked at the flora and fauna of the decoration and tried to associate it with some part of the world.

> "It has a lotus on it, so it must be Egyptian (pause). This is Chinese, because of the dragons (pause). It looks Mayan but it's got a camel and an elephant on it – maybe it's Indian."

Is this reliance on a limited set of characteristics typical of the way "novice" visitors read artifacts? Are there generalizable strategies that visitors use to extract certain kinds of information from objects?

Conclusion

The way in which people extract meaning from objects, and reapply those meanings to new and unfamiliar objects, lies, I suspect, at the heart of museum-based learning. Looking at this relationship between visitor and object in a front-end evaluation can provide information about the connections which visitors can already make between objects and concepts. It can indicate where visitors need help to make connections, and where they will need help to overturn erroneous perceptions.

Note