



Museum Visitor Studies, Evaluation & Audience Research

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**Summative Evaluation:
*Art of the American Indians:
The Thaw Collection* Exhibition**

Prepared for the
**New York State Historical Association
Cooperstown, NY**

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SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

INTRODUCTION

Art of the American Indians: The Thaw Collection was a tremendously successful exhibition, since visitors left the exhibition with the messages that the New York State Historical Association (NYSHA) intended. Most visitors awed at the artistry and craftsmanship of the objects, understood the diversity of American Indians and American Indian art, associated the exhibition with the Thaw collection and the Fenimore Art Museum, and recognized that American Indian art is a living tradition. This is a remarkable feat for an exhibition. The following discussion will dissect the exhibition's success and identify those components that RK&A considers essential for the exhibition's continued success as it travels to other venues.

The findings presented here are among the most salient. Please read the body of the report for a more comprehensive presentation of findings.

SUCCESSES OF THE EXHIBITION

HIGHLIGHTING THE ARTISTRY AND CRAFTSMANSHIP OF THE OBJECTS

Visitors' appreciation for the artistry and craftsmanship of American Indian art emerged immediately in the interview process, indicating that the idea was most top-of-mind as well as inspiring. When asked about their initial thoughts about the exhibition—an icebreaker question that usually elicits little useful data—one-half of visitors instantly began to talk about the beauty and aesthetic appeal of the artworks. Over the course of the interview, many visitors marveled at the artworks, and a few said that the artworks in the Thaw collection rival any Western art. Clearly, visitors came away from the exhibition with the idea that “the aesthetic power of American Indian art is equivalent to that from any culture,” a desire of the Thaws (Fenimore Art Museum, 2010). The tone of visitors' responses was interesting when compared to concerns expressed by scholars (as recent as two decades ago) that exhibitions of art by American Indians and other cultural groups tend to present the art as “primitive,” “other,” or in a one-sided way (Fisher, 1992; Jones, 1993; Mullin, 1992). Visitors' responses did not contain such judgments or disbelief at the art's beauty; rather, visitors expressed appreciation for the beauty of the artworks and that American Indians were being recognized as artists.

Moreover, NYSHA and the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA) made design and content decisions to emphasize the artistry in the exhibition. First, the exhibition design encouraged visitors to look at individual artworks. Each artwork was spaced apart from the next, and rarely did two or more artworks share a display case; several were displayed in cases or on pedestals in the middle of the gallery, allowing visitors to view the works in the round. Second, the exhibition was visually amazing. The colors in each gallery were rich and the lighting illuminated individual works. Third, some visitors said that the quotations added to their aesthetic enjoyment of the exhibition, with one visitor noting that the quotations emulated a “poetic feeling” appropriate for an “artistic environment.” Finally, the exhibition provided cultural context in its text rather than overtly through its design. For instance, instead of displaying clothing on life-like mannequins, as is often done in a natural history museum, the artworks were displayed on barely visible wire frames to provide a visual cue for the visitor to focus on the artwork.

RK&A commends the designers for balancing the exhibition's cultural context with its design. The exhibition's primary goal was to demonstrate the beauty of American Indian art, yet research shows that visitors often desire greater cultural context for artworks, such as how cultural groups used an object (Doering, DiGiacomo, Pekarik, 1999; RK&A, 2010). In this exhibition, the designers ably wowed visitors with the aesthetic presentation of materials while still providing the cultural context other visitors may desire.

DEMONSTRATING THE DIVERSITY OF AMERICAN INDIAN ART BY REGION

The exhibition also strove to convey the message that American Indian arts of the various regions are different from one another. Not only did more than one-half of interviewees articulate this message during interviews, some also demonstrated a concrete understanding of how the arts differed, by, for example, pointing out that American Indians used available materials to create things they needed to survive. For instance, one interviewee described the resourcefulness of the Seal-Gut Parka in the Arctic and Sub-arctic section; the American Indians needed to stay dry, and so they used seal intestines to create waterproof clothing.

Through visual cues, the exhibition successfully conveyed the diversity of American Indians. Each region was displayed in its own gallery space, and each gallery space was painted a color from the palette of the region—the Great Plains section was the color of maize, and the Arctic and Sub-arctic section was an icy, gray-blue. Further, the section panels identified each region by superimposing the text onto a photograph of the region and its vegetation, such as redwoods in the California and the Great Basin section and deciduous trees in the Northeast Woodlands section.

ACKNOWLEDGING AMERICAN INDIAN ART AS A LIVING TRADITION

The exhibition more subtly conveyed the message that American Indian art is a living tradition. Only a few visitors articulated a clear understanding that it was a primary message of the exhibition. However, the majority of visitors referenced American Indian art as a living tradition during some point in their interview, often when prompted to talk about the contemporary artworks, such as Nancy Youngblood's 1994 Carved Vessel (collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art). Some of the quotations and text also prompted connections with the living tradition message, although to a much lesser extent than did the contemporary artworks.

Many art museums are trying to integrate contemporary artworks from cultural groups into exhibitions to show that the cultural groups are still artistically active (RK&A, 2003; 2010). While this practice has been fairly successful, as demonstrated in this evaluation, it is sometimes met with uncertainty—visitors understand that cultural groups continue to make artwork, but struggle with how the group's contemporary art fits with their ideas about or desire to see "traditional" cultural art (RK&A, 2003; 2010). Furthermore, American Indian art has a long-running association with the past since American Indians may be considered the "original" Americans; as such, Mullin (1992) describes how Americans in the early 1900s looked to American Indian art to connect to an American past rather than a European past. Additionally, interest in connecting to the past was a theme that arose from a background study for the National Museum of the American Indian (Doering et al., 1999).

CONNECTING THE EXHIBITION WITH THE FENIMORE ART MUSEUM

The majority of visitors knew that the exhibition was associated with the Fenimore Art Museum, the Thaw Collection, Cooperstown, or upstate New York. It is impressive for visitors to walk away with this kind of "behind-the-scenes" knowledge and it demonstrates a savvy understanding of how museums operate.

The best examples of the connection between the Fenimore Art Museum and the exhibition were the exhibition's object labels, which included tombstone information and interpretation or context, and in the exhibition's introduction. To more clearly establish this connection, consider drawing more attention to Eugene and Clare Thaw in the introduction by detailing their art collecting philosophy and their donation to the Fenimore Art Museum.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE VENUES

Visual cues were essential to the exhibition's successes. Thus, we recommend that future venues allocate the greatest effort to highlighting the artworks' beauty and craftsmanship in the way the CMA did—through the wall color choices and display of objects.

Additionally, distinct gallery spaces with unique wall colors and section labels with photographs of the regions were highly effective in helping visitors recognize the diversity of American Indian art. We understand that displaying each section in a separate gallery is a luxury for a traveling exhibition, but we highly recommend that venues use wall colors, partitions, and section labels similar to those at CMA to create a visual cohesiveness and regional distinctions.

While programming can effectively reach niche audiences, the exhibition has proven it can stand alone. None of the visitors interviewed had attended the CMA's programs associated with the exhibition, yet the majority left with sophisticated ideas about American Indian art. We suggest that traveling venues strive to display the exhibition in a manner similar to that of the CMA and use programming where exhibition design may be lacking. For instance, if the venue cannot display each section in a distinct gallery space, it may use programming to acknowledge the diversity of American Indian art. Additionally, future exhibition venues could bring in contemporary American Indian artists to help more visitors recognize that American Indian art is a living tradition.

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INTRODUCTION

The New York State Historical Association (NYSHA) contracted Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (RK&A) to evaluate the exhibition *Art of the American Indians: The Thaw Collection*. The *Thaw* exhibition is a traveling exhibition of artworks collected by Eugene and Clare Thaw, which were donated to the Fenimore Art Museum in 1995. The exhibition highlights art from a variety of tribes and geographic regions.

The objectives of the evaluation were to explore:

- ◆ The general meaning visitors create from the exhibition;
- ◆ How visitors connect with the works of art;
- ◆ Whether visitors connect the exhibition with the Fenimore Art Museum (Thaw Collection);
- ◆ To what extent visitors recognize the diversity of American Indian arts;
- ◆ To what extent visitors see the aesthetic value of American Indian arts;
- ◆ To what extent visitors recognize that American Indian arts are a living tradition—they continue to be created today; and,
- ◆ To what extent programming affected visitors' exhibition experiences.

METHODOLOGY

All data were collected at the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA) during one weekend in April 2010. RK&A interviewed 34 visitor groups¹ to the *Thaw* exhibition. Using a continuous random sampling method, RK&A intercepted adult visitors (18 years or older) exiting the exhibition from the gift shop and asked them to participate in the interview. If the visitor declined, RK&A logged the visitor's gender, estimated age, description of the visit group, and reason for refusal; the refusal rate was 15 percent. If the visitor agreed, the interview was conducted using a structured interview guide (see Appendix A). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to facilitate analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS AND REPORTING METHOD

All data were analyzed qualitatively. That is, the evaluator studied the data for meaningful patterns and, as patterns and trends emerged, grouped similar responses.

Findings are organized according to the interview questions asked. Within each section, trends and themes in the interview data are presented from most- to least-frequently occurring. Exemplary quotations are presented to elucidate these trends. In brackets after each quotation, interviewees' genders and ages are included.

¹ RK&A interviewed visitor groups, which may include one to four visitors.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

INTRODUCTION

Art of the American Indians: The Thaw Collection was exhibited at the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA) from March to May 2010. The exhibition was divided into six distinct sections based on the region the artwork was from: The Northwest Coast, The Arctic and Sub-arctic, The Southwest, California and the Great Basin, The Great Plains, and The Northeast Woodlands. Each section was exhibited in its own gallery space, which was also distinguished by wall color. The exhibition included extensive interpretation, including a timeline at the introduction, quotations painted on the wall in each section, object labels, and section panels.

DESCRIPTION OF INTERVIEWEES

Most interviewees were visiting the exhibition in groups, and a few with children. Slightly more than one-half of interviewees are male, and interviewees' median age is 47.

Overall, interviewees are frequent art museum visitors; three-quarters of interviewees were repeat visitors to the CMA, and interviewees reported a median number of five art museum visits per year. Additionally, interviewees reported a median number of two visits to natural history or cultural museums each year.

Further, interviewees were fairly familiar with American Indian art. Many said they have seen other exhibitions of American Indian art, with several interviewees mentioning the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., a couple mentioning the Detroit Institute of Arts, and one each mentioning the Cleveland Museum of Natural History and the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Additionally, some said they had seen works of American Indian art displayed on reservations or at American Indian art shows or festivals. While the CMA offered programs in conjunction with the exhibition, none of the interviewees had attended the programs.

VISIT REASON

More than one-half of interviewees said they came to the Museum specifically to see the *Thaw* exhibition; a few of these interviewees talked about their personal interest in American Indian² art and culture, and a few said that this was their second visit to the exhibition (see the first quotation, next page). About one-third of interviewees said they were visiting from out of town or were bringing an out of town visitor to the Museum (see the second quotation). Almost one-third provided general reasons for visiting the Museum, such as spending time with family and friends, doing other things in the area, wanting to partake in a cultural activity, or having the day off.

² Throughout the narrative sections of the report, RK&A will use the term "American Indian" to broadly include "Indian" and "Native American." Note that interviewees often referred to American Indians by multiple terms throughout the interview. About two-thirds of interviewees used the term "Native American" at least once in the interview, more than one-half of interviewees used the term "Indian" at least once, and about one-quarter used the term "American Indian" at least once. A few used other terms such as "native Indians" and "indigenous people."

(What were your reasons for coming to the Museum and to the exhibition today?) Well, my husband and I came last week, and we really liked it because we've always had an interest in the Southwest. We came today to bring our two children to show them. [3 males & 1 female, 44, 42, 12, & 9]

We didn't know the exhibition was even going to be here today, but we have an out-of-town guest, and we just thought he would enjoy the best of Cleveland, especially on a cloudy day. [3 males & 1 female, 61, 60, 28, & 25]

EXHIBITION EXPERIENCES

This section describes visitors' experiences in the exhibition including their initial thoughts, most compelling or interesting aspects, least interesting aspects, surprising aspects, artworks of interest, and experiences with the exhibition text.

INITIAL THOUGHTS ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

When asked what thoughts they had as they went through the exhibition, all interviewees remarked positively. While several commented generally about the exhibition, saying it was "interesting," "nice," or that they learned something new, many interviewees talked about specific aspects of the exhibition.

One-half of interviewees talked about the aesthetic quality of the objects. Interviewees marveled at the beauty of the artworks, specifically the weaving and beading, using words like "gorgeous," "breathtaking," and "mind-blowing" (see the first and second quotations below). Several talked about the skill and creativity of the American Indians and explicitly credited the artist or creator (see the third and fourth quotations). Additionally, a couple interviewees said that it was one of, if not the, finest collection of American Indian art that they had ever seen (see the fifth quotation).

(Overall, what thoughts did you have as you walked through this exhibition?) It's beautiful. It's beautiful stuff; I mean, each example is gorgeous—very, very, very fine work. All the weavings are really tiny and the beading is perfect. [2 females, 56 & 23]

(Overall, what were your thoughts about this exhibition?) Wonderful. It was just breathtaking really. The craftsmanship, the artistry—it's mind-blowing. [male & female, 70 & 70]

I'm impressed [by] the amount of time it must have taken for those people [American Indians] to complete those projects. That one waterproof [jacket] made of the intestines of a seal or something was very, very interesting. Just the amount of skill it took to make these things—the creativity, the creativity to figure out that the guts and the intestines would end up making a raincoat. Very, very impressive. Very fine, fantastic work. [male & female, 46 & 45]

It's just extraordinary, the artistry of a people. People with basic means of survival, and yet, the creative aspect is so strong in them, that any material they touch, they make glorious, and that's very inspiring. [2 males, 60 & 60]

(Overall, what thoughts did you have as you walked through this exhibition?) Very fine quality. I've seen a lot of Native American artwork, but this was the largest amount of the finest quality. The baskets were awesome. If you've never done any basket weaving or any wrapping, it's not as easy as it looks. [female, 57]

About one-third of interviewees talked about the exhibition's organization. These interviewees said they liked seeing art from a variety of geographic regions, and a few said that they had not seen an exhibition of American Indian art presented in this way (see the quotations below).

We liked the organization by the areas. It [the exhibition] was a little smaller than we were picturing in terms of quantity of things, but it was a nice sampling of the different things. . . . (What was it that you liked about that?) You could tell what you're looking at a little more; it gave a little more frame of reference rather than just a big room full of stuff that we don't know anything about. [male & female, 83 & 70]

(Overall, what thoughts did you have as you walked through this exhibition?) It was good. . . . You have stuff from all the different regions. It was an interesting way to break it up. I hadn't seen a Native American exhibit separated that way before, so it was cool. [female, 26]

A few interviewees remarked specifically on the exhibition's design, commenting on its beauty, wall colors, quotations, and music. One interviewee described the space as reverent (see the quotation below).

(Overall, what thoughts did you have as you walked through this exhibition?) I thought it was done very well. There's a certain reverence and a sacred feeling that I got upon entering. The use of colors, the muted music—that was totally appropriate. I also thought that the amount of text was not overwhelming. [female, 59]

MOST COMPELLING OR INTERESTING ASPECTS

When asked about the most compelling or interesting aspects of the exhibition, about one-half of interviewees talked about the aesthetics of the objects.³ These interviewees often talked about the sheer beauty of the artworks, followed by their appreciation for the skill and craft required to create such artworks (see the first quotation below). Some interviewees talked about specific artworks; for instance, one recalled robes from the Great Plains section, and another mentioned the expressiveness of the masks in the Arctic and Subarctic section (see the second and third quotations).

The artistry in the baskets was just amazing, but it really permeated the whole exhibition. The baskets were really, for me, just amazing to see the repetitive patterns. And, putting the beads in, you just know [it took] . . . time and creativity. That was just amazing. [2 males, 60 & 60]

Actually I'd seen the ceremonial robes, but just the robes—that they were art, especially the two hides that were representational. One was the sort of battle robe telling the story of one man's battle with Lakota, and then one was sort of a spiritual robe that someone wore. (What was it that you liked about those pieces?) I don't know; they just sort of pulled me in. [male, 44]

I love the masks. The masks were just for me; they stood out. . . . (What is it about the masks that interested you?) They're so dramatic. They're just expressive, dramatic. [female, 61]

About one-half of interviewees talked about cultural facts or ideas from the exhibition that they found compelling or interesting. Several said they were attracted to tribes of certain regions, such as the Southwest or the Northwest; some said they were familiar with the American Indians of the regions they mentioned, while some others said they were not (see the first and second quotations, next page).

³ The majority of these interviewees were the same interviewees whose initial thoughts about the exhibition were aesthetic in nature.

Additionally, a few talked about information they became aware of, such as the number of American Indian tribes and the diversity of the American Indians (see the third and fourth quotations).

(Was there anything you found most interesting in the exhibition?) For me, it's always the Southwest because [of] . . . the Southwest pottery. There's this one vase and squash blossom necklace that's in the Southwest room [that] was great. I still go back to that area every year for a couple of weeks, so I'm always interested in that art. [3 males & 1 female, 61, 60, 28, & 25]

(What parts did you find most interesting in the exhibition?) Well, I think the Northwest area, mainly because—well, actually, all of them, especially the Eastern tribes because you don't really hear much about [them]. And the Northwest, I'm personally not that familiar with [tribes from that area]. The Southwest, we tend to hear a lot [about], and the Plains are a popular [representation] of the Native Americans. . . . [I was most interested in] the stuff that I hadn't really been that familiar with, which would have been mostly the Eastern tribes and the Northwest. [male, 48]

(What did you find most interesting about the exhibition?) We didn't realize how many Indians there are [in] Alaska, Canada, New Mexico, so it was a learning lesson for us. [male & female, 77 & 68]

I think just the diversity . . . just how different the different tribes [are] and the reasons for their art. . . . You learned a lot about why there was so much diversity. [male, 30]

LEAST INTERESTING ASPECTS

Most interviewees said that there was nothing that they found least interesting about the exhibition. On the other hand, a few mentioned objects they were not personally interested in, such as bowls, purses, jewelry, and beadwork (see the first quotation below). Additionally, a couple interviewees said they were least interested in the contemporary artworks; these interviewees said they had hoped to see the “original design” or “early samples” (see the second quotation).

(Was there anything that you didn't find interesting or that you kind of passed by?) We just passed by the bowls. A lot of bowls. [male & female, 27 & 26]

(Was there anything in the exhibition that you didn't find interesting or that you skipped over?) I suppose the contemporary pieces. (Can you give me an example?) There's a pot that's engraved with lines, and it's a gorgeous piece of pottery, but I didn't come to see modern Indian art. I came to see classic or early samples. [female, 57]

SURPRISING ASPECTS

While about one-quarter of interviewees said that there was not anything surprising about the exhibition, another three-quarter found a variety of things surprising. Some interviewees said they were surprised by the fine artistry of the artworks, while a few others were surprised by the symbolism, and specifically, the American Indian's use of the American flag in their art (see the first quotation, next page). Additionally, a few each said they were surprised by the dates of the artworks (some noting the contemporary pieces and one noting the older artworks), facts that they learned including that men made artwork (see the second quotation), and the similarities between American Indians and other cultures (see the third and fourth quotations). Still, a couple said they were surprised by the materials used, such as copper and intestines.

(Did anything about this exhibition surprise you?) Their [American Indians'] use of the American flag in their designs, I thought that was interesting. [And,] what some of the possible explanations for it [are]. (Can you tell me more about that?) Well, they said some of the possible explanations were the color, the geometry of it [the flag], and maybe again, even a political retaliation—we'll bring you into our culture, and we'll assimilate, but we'll do it on our terms. [female, 59]

I didn't realize that there is so much men's handiwork. A lot of times historically, most of what we read about is the Plains, and mostly, you see women creating things. So, it was interesting to see purses that guys carried . . . there was a whetstone case and the little fire bags that carried all the fire stuff too. [male & female, 24 & 22]

Like I said, the similarity of cultures. The hats looked very much like an Asian coolie hat, although it was Native American. There were many masks that reminded me of African masks in my home; they're very similar, so I did find that surprising. [male & female, 68 & 68]

One piece could have been an Egyptian piece; it was a big spoon, a ceremonial spoon with an eagle on top, and again, you see patterns and designs that you know from the date that it had nothing to do with Egypt, but how similar the design was. [female, 57]

ARTWORK OF INTEREST

When asked to describe a particular artwork that interested them, interviewees named a variety of objects. Several talked about the clothing, and several described the baskets. A few each mentioned the buffalo hide painting, the knives and other weapons, and pottery. A couple each mentioned the masks, jewelry, and woodcarving, while one interviewee mentioned artwork with the porcupine quills.

When asked what about the artwork interested them, two-thirds of interviewees said the artwork showed them about American Indian life and culture, such as how American Indians raise their children (see the first quotation below). About one-third spoke about the craftsmanship, technique, and materials used in the artwork, and a few of these interviewees commented that the objects were utilitarian, everyday objects but also art (see the second quotation). A few provided idiosyncratic responses.

(Can you tell me about one work of art that interested you?) The cradles because I was mentioning to him the way that they papoose their children to them and keep them a part of the family and with each other constantly. The kids were never out of their sight. . . . Just actually seeing those boards and the detail that went into just the board that the child would lay on all day was amazing. [male & female, 28 & 25]

(Can you tell me about the pieces that you liked?) Oh, mostly the woodcarving; I enjoyed [that] most. No specific piece, but there were bowls and war clubs and a number of things, ladles. . . . (What was it about the woodcarving that you liked?) The way the artist was able to incorporate certain symbols and animals into the utilitarian piece that was being used. [male, 76]

EXHIBITION TEXT

GENERAL RESPONSE

Most interviewees said they read the exhibition text: the majority of these interviewees recalled a variety of facts that they had read, while a few said the text was generally helpful. Many recalled information from the object labels and section panels, including cultural information, such as how the octopus bag was used, the materials used to make the artworks, or the dates of the artworks (see the first and second

quotations below). About one-third talked about the quotations (unprompted), and a few of these interviewees said they liked the perspective they presented or “tone” they set (see the third and fourth quotations). A few said they liked the timeline at the beginning of the exhibition because it provided historical context for the American Indians and how they were affected by settlers (see the fifth quotation).

(Did you read much of the text in the exhibition?) Some of it; things that sort of drew me, sort of caught my eye, and I wanted to learn a little bit more about it. (Can you tell me what those things were?) The battle robes and the one with the hands—the representation of family. . . . Those pieces really drew me in. . . . One of the things that I was sort of interested in is just the different materials that were used in all those [artworks], beyond like just the normal hide, [there were] those silicone beads and other things that were used to create the pieces. [male, 44]

(Did you stop and read anything in the exhibition?) Everything. Read everything. (Can you tell me about one interesting thing that you read?) . . . The cultural facts were new and interesting to me. Many of the things about Native Americans—Alaskan Indians I know very little about so it was new information, and [I didn’t realize] how many of the pieces were done by women too. (What about that interested you?) That just surprised me because there were beautiful, almost masculine-looking pieces. I never would have thought that could be a piece artistically done by a woman. [male & female, 68 & 68]

(You mentioned the quotes earlier, so can you tell me your thoughts about those?) I just like them. I’m kind of a quote person anyway, so it’s something that I’m drawn to. Probably, in setting up the exhibit, [they] picked those [quotations] for a specific reason and they were tied to regions or those artists or something. So, it’s kind of like personalized to each portion of the country. . . . I feel like a lot of them set the tone and gave you a feeling for what was in that space. [female, 26]

There was a quotation on the wall by the first Indian PhD in Anthropology, and I read how if you are going to destroy a tree—to respect life and respect the tree and you’ll respect the forest. He was essentially saying it in a much better way than I’m saying it, and I can’t remember how it read, but I did remember that part. (What, if anything, did they add to your experience in the exhibition?) Well, this is an artistic environment, so you get a kind of poetic feeling that enhances the environment. [male & female, 68 & 68]

(Can you me tell about one interesting thing that you read?) The very first—as soon as you enter the [exhibition]—the part that gives the timeline of the history of when the settlers arrived until today and what has happened in that time in history—that was pretty interesting. (What about that interested you?) The main facts that happened over time. . . . They had two or three references to smallpox that pretty much wiped out entire tribes of Indians, and I was not aware of that fact, so that came as a surprise. And also . . . there’s a lot of significance to [knowing when] events happened in time as opposed to just learning about the history. You know that in the past settlers came and settled here, and they took over the land and reservations and all that. [male & female, 34 & 32]

RESPONSE TO THE QUOTATIONS

Interviewees were also specifically asked whether they read the quotations painted on the wall and on the various text panels. Overall, more than two-thirds of interviewees said they did so, with more than one-third talking about the quotations upon prompting and about one-third without prompting. More than one-third couldn’t remember details about the quotations they read, while about one-third did. A

few interviewees each referred to the basket or “basket is a song” quotation⁴ and the “potatoes sizzling” quotation⁵ (see the first and second quotations below). A couple recalled the quotation about American Indian works in museums,⁶ while one each recalled the “forest” quotation⁷, “dance” quotation,⁸ and the quotation about the three “parts of culture”⁹ (see the third and fourth quotations).

The quotes were very meaningful [and] add to appreciation, I think, of the artwork. I’ll never forget the quote, ‘A basket is a song made visible.’ I mean, try to ponder that—what that means. But it explained how the woman teaching basketry said, . . . ‘You don’t just do it; you have to open with a respect for whatever you’re working with and recognize this is what nature provides. That’s what we’re trying to get to in environmental concerns today, but that was natural to them. It was at the heart of everything they did. They didn’t just do it; they respected the materials that came from the earth. [2 males, 60 & 60]

I like the part about making art, and what’s going on even while the potatoes were sizzling in the pan. I thought that was... I liked that a lot. [female, 61]

(Did you read any of the quotations on the wall or on the labels?) There was one about . . . I don’t know if [it] was an Indian possibly that said he was glad that some museums actually have some of those or was displaying some of that specific art from—and I can’t tell you what kind of Indian it was because it was very strange Indian name that I had no clue about. [male & female, 28 & 25]

(You mentioned the quotations. Can you tell me how they played a role in your experience?) I think they put in context what they were talking about, [like that] there’s three parts of culture; you’ve got religion, you’ve got art, [and] there’s one other part. . . . I read that and I thought, ‘Oh, that’s really true!’ It was art, religion, and something else. It said that each of those things, if you lost any one of them, you lost a significant part of the culture and so you see . . . how each of those things played a part in their daily lives. . . . I mean this, to us, looks like some incredible art piece and yet they were doing it while potatoes were sizzling in the pan. [2 females, 56 & 23]

⁴ “A basket is a song made visible,” or “So many Pomo baskets...have stories, songs, and genealogies. They have helped us on our travels and told us who we are as people. They have healed the sick and forecast momentous events...And the baskets keep talking.”

⁵ “Making art was a part of daily life, it happened while fried potatoes sizzled in iron skillet in the kitchen...a tangible force, a force that lived.”

⁶ “I consider it fortunate that so many well-regarded museums have fine collections of Yup’ik materials...[T]hese items demonstrate that we may be different, but we have not vanished.”

⁷ “The murmur of the trees when the wind passes through is but the voices of our grandparents. Often a whole forest hums with talk, and the trees can be heard at a distance. They have joys and trials like us. . . . Hence one should be careful not to hurt their feelings. That is why it is meet [fitting] to offer a tree tobacco when one is about to cut it down; that is why it is good not to fell trees wantonly.”

⁸ “We will dance when our laws command us to dance, and we will feast when our hearts desire to feast. Do we ask the White man, ‘Do as the Indian does?’ It is a strict law that bids us dance. It is a strict law that bids us distribute our property among our friends and neighbors. It is a good law. Let the White man observe his law; we shall observe ours. And now, if you come to forbid us dance, be gone. If not, you will be welcome to us,” or “Dancing is not only a right and a privilege for us. It is an obligation. As the chiefs said to Franz Boas when he first came to see their ceremonies[.]... ‘It is a strict law that bids us to dance.’ Performing our dances is not just a chance to show off. It is one of the ways we carry on our responsibilities as Kwakwaka’wakw.”

⁹ “It is important to preserve the culture. There are three things that maintain a culture—language, religion, and art. You lose those three, and you lose the culture completely.”

MESSAGES VISITORS TOOK AWAY

This section describes the messages visitors took away from the exhibition and meaning they created.

GENERAL RESPONSE

When asked what the exhibition was trying to show or tell visitors, interviewees provided a variety of responses that were, overall, detailed and sophisticated. Most interviewees said or implied that the exhibition celebrated American Indians, their art, and their culture and that they garnered appreciation for American Indians. More than one-half said the exhibition intended to show the beauty of American Indian art and the ingenuity of American Indian artists, with some explicitly celebrating the objects as high quality artworks (see the first three quotations below). Additionally, several said the exhibition showed the history and culture of American Indians, and a few of these interviewees also lamented American Indians' treatment and the stereotypes surrounding them (see the fourth and fifth quotations). Several said the exhibition showed the diversity of American Indians by region (see the sixth quotation). A few also said the exhibition showed that American Indian art is still being made and the culture is alive today.

(After your experience today with the exhibition, what do you think it is trying to show visitors?) I'm not sure what it's trying to show. I mean, I guess just to broaden people's awareness, but that's the function of museums in general. So I guess this would be just specifically our own past, and probably, when you think of art, you think of European influenced art and the grandness of that, and . . . I think it was the curator or the collector, Thaw, who was saying that these works are similar [in] stature [to] European works. And, that's probably something that, as a society, we don't necessarily recognize. [male, 48]

(After visiting the exhibition, what would you say it's trying to show or tell visitors?) I think the fact that all this Native American work is art. It's in an art museum. It's not a craft, and it's not a hobby. It's actual works of art. [female, 66]

(What is the exhibition, what do you think it's trying to show or tell visitors?) Just to learn about the art and what they used. But then, I came out, and I realized that this is very sincere art. They're not doing [it to] sell. . . . They wear it, they use it, and they're doing it for pleasing themselves. They express themselves in very sophisticated ways, and I take it, it's very sincere because, like I said, it's not for sale, it's not for somebody else. [2 males, 48 & 36]

(After everything that you saw and you read in the exhibition, what do you think it is trying to show visitors?) I think it's showing that the Native Indians had culture, their own culture, and it's all various fine art. It's generally looked on as the sign of a civilized society having art, so having it just shows that they had their own culture, and . . . their own civilizations. [male & female, 47 & 47]

(After all that you did in the exhibition, what do you think it is trying to show visitors?) I think we under-appreciate the Native Americans. That's my perspective. I think we forget that they're a culture, and they're still viable. I think we kind of brush them aside . . . Even though it [their culture] may not be what we would term modern, . . . it's equally deep. [3 males & female, 44, 42, 12, & 9]

(After all that you saw, read, and did in the exhibition, what do you think it is trying to show or tell visitors?) What hit me when you said that is . . . the ubiquitous Indian symbol is feathers, feather headdresses, and for a lot of people, that's all they're ever going to hear about American

Indians. I mean they're literally not going to know that as you went across the country there's this whole range of things that you were going to see. . . . It's just important to show something like this and to show like how diverse it [American Indian culture] really is. . . . In one section [of the exhibition] . . . they had points on their bags, and it [the exhibition] said that was only found in that area because [the points] represented the snakes that they had. Something like that, that's really cool. You don't think about that. They used what they had available to them, that was right in their every day environment. [2 females, 56 & 23]

Several interviewees also said the exhibition demonstrated broad trends in art history. That is, a few interviewees said the exhibition showed examples of utilitarian art (see the first quotation below). A couple said the exhibition showed the history of American art. A couple talked about the inherent human desire to create and art as a product of all cultures, while another talked about the universality of beauty (see the second quotation).

(After everything you saw in the exhibition, what do you think it is trying to tell visitors?) I don't know if there's, you know, a tradition of art [like this, but] basically their art was more functional; it was used, and it was part of their life experience. But a lot of it's actually functional. [male, 44]

(What do you think the exhibition is trying to show or tell visitors?) Well, the beauty of what man creates, that's always at the source of being human. The desire to create [is in all humans]. Even in concentration camps people created. Black American slaves created songs, spirituals in the dial of ways in which they lived. The desire to create is just universal, and this show just opens an aspect of it through the Native Americans. [2 males, 60 & 60]

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN AMERICAN INDIAN ART BY REGION

Interviewees were asked to talk about the similarities and differences between art of the different regions. About two-thirds replied with detailed responses, while a few gave vague responses, and a few said they did not notice any similarities and differences.

Interviewees spoke mostly about the differences among American Indian art of different regions rather than their similarities. More than one-third of interviewees talked about the different materials used, from clay in the Southwest to seal intestines in the Arctic and Subarctic (see the first and second quotations below). A few talked about the different designs used in the artworks, while a few referred to the role of varying outside cultural influences, and a couple gave idiosyncratic responses (see the third and fourth quotations). One said the differences between American Indians were evident *because* the art of the different regions were displayed in separate gallery spaces (see the fifth quotation).

(The exhibition displays American Indian arts by region. Can you tell me about any similarities and differences between the arts of different regions?) . . . Well the Alaskan [Indians], I liked the way they'd used the materials, the intestines . . . and made waterproof material out of it. The Seminoles, I grew up in Florida so I was always intrigued by the Seminoles nation, and the really bright colors that they use. [male, 62]

(The exhibition displays American Indian arts by region. Did you notice any similarities or differences between the objects of different regions?) . . . The Southwest was way more, seems more like containers rather than clothing; there's much more focus on the baskets and you can see the different materials that they used, whether they used tree bark or clay or hides . . . specific to the area. (You said specific to the area?) Yes, the Plains seem to have a lot more leather, and [in] the South [they use] . . . a lot more baskets and clay. [male & female, 24 & 22]

(Did you notice any similarities and differences between the arts of different regions?) Oh, I thought they were very different. I always find the Tlingit having oriental overtones, and it's very geometric compared to, say, the Plains Indians. . . . I'm not sure with the Southwest, how much influence is Spanish and how much is . . . I'm under the impression that the Spanish brought silver for making jewelry, and I don't know about weaving. [female, 57]

I was particularly struck in the first couple rooms with the Pacific Northwest by the similarity to African art in ways of representing and in materials. We know that in the case of the Seminoles, they were heavily influenced by people from Africa and African art, but it's something [in] the representation, particularly of the wooden figure [that] is very, very similar to some of the masks. [male & female, 68 & 68]

You had it divided by room as to each different group, which is really neat because you saw that they used what was available to them. . . . They used what they had available to them that was right in their everyday environment, and you would lose that if you didn't see that it was separated by room. [2 females, 56 & 23]

A few interviewees talked about the similarities between American Indian art of different regions. A couple said that spirituality and ideas about nature were pervasive among all the regions (see the quotation below). Additionally, a couple interviewees noticed similar designs among regions, and a couple gave idiosyncratic responses.

There was a lot of commonality of names and appreciation of nature and celebration of nature—celebration, joy, life, and the seasons. . . . I think there was more commonality than differences; maybe difference in material, but not focus, I would say. [2 males, 60 & 60]

TIME PERIOD

Most interviewees said that the artworks were mostly from the 1800s to the 1900s. Several also recalled seeing contemporary artworks from the 1960s or later. A few recalled some older artworks dating from 300 AD, 1200, 1600, and 1700.

Interviewees were asked whether they recalled seeing contemporary works of art in the exhibition. Many said that they had, with several talking about them unprompted, and more than one-half talked about them after being prompted. When asked why they thought the Museum included them, more than one-half said it was to show the continuing traditions of American Indians (see the first three quotations below and next page). A few said they did not know why contemporary artworks were included, while a few gave idiosyncratic responses. A few expressed some uncertainty about including the contemporary artworks in the exhibition because they were more interested in “historical works” (see the fourth quotation).

(Did you happen to notice the time period that most of these works of art are from?) Yeah, well, later than I expected actually. (Later as in?) I mean, there's some from 1900 to the early and middle part of the 20th century, and I didn't expect that. I thought it would be older. (They intentionally incorporated a few contemporary pieces. So, just in your opinion, why do you think they chose to do that?) They're looking to illustrate the continuity of design, and how things are passed down. People try to keep it alive. [male & female, 24 & 22]

(Why do you think the Museum decided to put those [contemporary] pieces in with the other works?) I don't know entirely, [but] I think it's . . . that they want to show that Native American

art is still being made. It's alluding to some sort historical relic, but it's an on-going cultural, artistic phenomena. [male, 30]

I guess maybe to show that their culture existed for a quite a while and [is] still existing. . . . It's not gone in a sense. It's still here. [male & female, 33 & 31]

Well, I think the positive thing would be that it shows you that either those old traditions are being either rediscovered or perpetuated, . . . but the negative thing was I was here really drawn to see the historical works. [male, 48]

ART COLLECTION OF THE FENIMORE ART MUSEUM

When asked whether they noticed that the exhibition was not created by the Cleveland Museum of Art, most said they did. Almost one-quarter recalled that the collection was from New York, and a few of these interviewees recalled Cooperstown specifically (see the first quotation below). Several recalled that the exhibition is that of the Thaw Collection, and several recalled that it is the collection of the Fenimore Art Museum (see the second quotation). Several interviewees said they knew it was a traveling or special exhibition, although they did not know from where.

(Were you aware that the art in this exhibition is from another museum—not from the Cleveland Museum of Art's collection?) Well, [it's] from New York. (From New York, okay. Where did you see that or what told you that?) Actually, it was on the little plaque with a lot of information, dates and everything, and I noticed that it's from Cooperstown. [2 females, 23 & 22]

(Were you aware that the exhibition is not from the Cleveland Museum collection?) Yes, it was T-H-A-W—Thaw? The Thaw Collection . . . from upstate New York, isn't it? [And it's] augmented by some of our [CMA] pieces, and I think they highlighted some of the ones that were our pieces, which I think is nice. And, I've noticed that in past exhibits when they say, 'But, this one's ours.' [male & female, 83 & 70]

SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS

When asked whether anything could be done to enhance their experiences with the exhibition, many said there was not (see the first and second quotations below). A few interviewees commented on the exhibit design: one interviewee suggested larger print, one better lighting, and one lighter paint on the walls. A couple interviewees suggested placing the objects in greater cultural context either by exhibiting photographs to show how the objects are used or with mannequins showing how clothing was worn (see the third quotation). A couple interviewees suggested expanding the exhibition. One interviewee suggested changing the title to indicate "indigenous people" instead of "American Indians," and one interviewee sought more indication of the geographic regions.

(Do you have any suggestions based on your experiences today, for what the Museum may want to do to improve this exhibition?) No, honestly, it flowed nicely. It was pleasant; everything was displayed well, and the literature was nice. Everything was fine. I don't know that I'd make any improvements. [male, 50]

(There is an opportunity to change the exhibition slightly before it travels to other museums across the country. From your experiences here today, is there anything that could be done to enhance your experiences with the exhibition?) Oh, no. I really liked the way it was set up. . . . It

was just a good amount that [gave you] a comprehensive view, and it would be very, I would think, very enjoyable to everyone—different ages. There was the little boy [who liked the] swords and clubs, horses, [and] the saddle...and then there's beautiful beadwork and the basket things that would appeal to anyone that was trying to do any kind of art. [2 females, 56 & 23]

(Based on your experiences here today, do you have suggestions for things they may want to change or do to the exhibition before the next venue?) I thought it would be really cool if you guys had some men dressed up in the textile things as if they were cohesive outfits. [There] were just sort of pieces around but nothing that was very cohesive, so you really didn't know how it went together. Like there was a belt and a jacket that were next to each other, but you couldn't tell if the belt went with the jacket. It didn't really look like it; I'm not really sure how it was supposed to be worn. [female, 21]

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

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