

Editorial Comment

Conventional wisdom among those interested in visitor research is that art museums do not look at their audiences. It is true, that art museums are often quite conservative in matters of exhibit design and gallery interpretation. That conservativeness can be understood, however, given the nature of art objects and the need to be concerned about environmental aesthetics. In fact, however, art museums have looked at their visitors and this issue of *Visitor Behavior* is devoted to some examples of art museum audience research.

Historically, milestone visitor research efforts have taken place in art museums. For example, the Pennsylvania Museum of Art was the setting for one of the earliest visitor survey efforts as was reported in a 1930 issue of *Museum News*. Even earlier, Kathrine Gibson did her pioneering study on measuring results of a school visit in a museum of art. Her work appeared in a May, 1925, edition of *School and Society*. And, of course, most are aware of Arthur Melton's major contribution on evaluation of visitor behavior and gallery design in his 1935 monograph "Problems of Installation in Museums of Art" published by the American Association of Museums.

Contributions to this issue have been planned to be representative of visitor-related research and evaluation going on at art museums.

We begin with Jerome Dagostino's summary of three examples of survey research conducted about art museums. In contrast to survey research, Andrej Birjulin describes how a leading art museum educator, Patterson Williams, sees the development of art museum interpretation as needing to emphasize human interest and cultural context. Her thinking is guided, in part, by visitor research supported by the J. Paul Getty Trust and the National Endowment for the Arts and undertaken at the Denver Art Museum. Current interest by funding agencies in art education and visitor learning is a major development in Art Museum visitor research. The Denver work involves developing theory about how expert and novice visitors experience art and also completing some gallery interpretation experiments. Donna McElroy describes two of these gallery experiments.

Distinguishing between expert and novice art visitors and doing gallery experiments are also part of the work reported by Roxane Gudeman and Kate Johnson at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. We have provided a more in-depth look at their study and also use it as an example of the kinds of collaboration that can occur between museums and academic institutions.

If visitor research and evaluation are to have any lasting impact on what happens to visitors they must be incorporated into the institutional life of museums. Douglas Worts reports from the Art Gallery of Ontario on systematic research that integrates testing different interpretive formats and techniques with art installations. Worts also reports on another interesting development through the creation of an audience research consortium between the museums in Ontario.

Finally, Beverly Serrell sent us a contribution to lighten up a bit. It seems that at least one artist may be on to us visitor watchers! These various contributions are only a sample of visitor research that is going on in art museums. Hopefully, they reflect a growing trend and opportunity.

Ross Loomis, Guest Editor

Harris Shettel is *Visitor Behavior's* "Person of the Year"

For the second year in a row, *Visitor Behavior* has selected a "Person of the Year" in visitor studies. We are pleased to announce that Harris Shettel is our selection for 1988. He is deserving of this distinction for several reasons. First, he was one of the pioneers of visitor evaluation in the late 1960's when such work was uncommon. His classic evaluations while at the American Institutes for Research have been widely disseminated and frequently cited. His early publications in *Curator* and *Museum News* have also attracted considerable attention. More recently Harris took over the Chair of the Evaluation and Research Committee of the American Association of Museums (AAM) and has been instrumental in steering this Committee toward the status as a regular AAM Committee. His behind-the-scenes work in the International Laboratory for Visitor Studies including serving as co-Editor of the first issue of *ILVS Review*, his support of others engaged in visitor studies, his willingness to participate in various professional activities, his thoughtful ideas and comments on evaluation, and his sound judgment on all issues make him an exemplary model for the rest of us. We salute Harris for his inspiration, his leadership, his patience, and his openness to those of us who more recently became involved with visitor studies.

Steve Bitgood, Editor

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