Voices and images: Making connections between identity and art

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Art museums are environments that offer visitors both a challenge and an opportunity that other kinds of museums do not: the occasion to engage deeply with works of art that have been selected and presented according to particular standards and motives. Through the very act of going to visit galleries with curated displays, visitors are challenged to develop or refine a sense of meaning for themselves that is connected to particular kinds of artwork. Curators enter a tacit dialogue with the visitor that shapes this experience by presenting exhibitions that carry multiple messages. These messages are determined both by the particular goals of the curators, be they political, educational or historical, and by the constraints imposed by the material to be displayed. Museum visitors come to view these exhibitions with their own "entrance narrative" that allows them to make meaning from exhibitions as they look through the lens of their own personal experiences and identity (Doering & Pekarik, 1996; Falk, Moussouri & Coulson, 1998; Silverman, 1995). What visitors bring with them adds to their experience in the museum and helps to supply their side of the tacit dialogue.

Although curators may be experts in their field or competent at the business of putting on successful shows, museums have little information about what visitors are experiencing while they tour. There are solid descriptions of general visitor experience to museums of various types (Falk & Dierking, 1992; Gennaro, 1981), and other studies have focused on more tightly defined issues. Visitor studies, designed and implemented by museum staffs to answer specific queries or resolve particular "local" issues, often take by necessity a narrow, problem-driven approach to understand what visitors experience. Some studies have timed the seconds visitors pause in front of an exhibit as a way of inferring their engagement with it (Serrell, 1992). Others rely on pre- and post-tests of exhibition fact retention to rate how much visitors "learned" from their experience. While timing and testing are important components of research that are indicative that some kind of learning has occurred, these methods do not tell the entire story of visitor interaction with museum exhibitions. Although these and other approaches supply very useful information about general visitor behavior it is incumbent on the field to engage deeply by asking questions and conducting research that takes on the larger issue of what and how visitors learn in art museums.

The extant research on issues of visitor experience and learning specifically related to art museums is similarly uneven in its focus. Studies that focus on the cognitive aspects of learning about art hold that learning is facilitated by a pre-existing knowledge base, appropriate search strategies, a disposition toward wanting to learn, and verbal cues to set learning in motion by helping a person looking at art make connections (Koroscik, 1992; 1997). Considerable work has been done to develop stage theories of aesthetic appreciation which characterize the responses of people looking at art according to their developing intellectual levels and experience (Housen, 1996; Parsons, 1987). By definition, stage theories look at only one side of an issue, which they define using a single metric. Our approach is to consider visitors to be in dialogue with each other and with the museum and through that process to be developing a sense of meaning about their experiences of objects they are viewing.

This study takes a sociocultural approach toward defining and determining what learning in a museum might encompass (Leinhardt & Crowley, 1998; Schauble, Leinhardt, & Martin, 1996). Seeing a museum through a sociocultural lens considers the visitors as people who are in conversation, literally and figuratively, with the artwork on display and with the curatorial intent (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Worts, 1991), not as the "uninitiated" who come to the museum to have curatorial information inserted into their heads, a view of the visitor held by some art museums (Eisner & Dobbs, 1986a, b; Ripley, 1969). We consider one key to understanding visitors' experience as being their conversation as it unfolds, rather than in constructing a checklist or quiz to determine what they may have noticed. Capturing the conversational construction of meaning by visitors with respect to aspects or features of the artwork gives the researcher critical insights about the visitor experience as it happens. Collecting an after-the-fact summary from the visitor is certainly useful, but we must recognize that such a distillation of a visit may be very different from knowing about the particular aspects or features of artwork s/he noticed or other associations made while in the gallery.

Museums are learning environments that raise different challenges than school or other formal settings; they are "free" environments in that visitors choose what they engage with (Birney, 1988; Ramey-Gassert, Walberg, & Walberg, 1994; Schauble, Beane, Coates, Martin, & Sterling, 1996; Scribner & Cole, 1973). The combination of curatorial interpretation of exhibition content, visitor experience, and their prior knowledge generates very complex conversational meanings. Using an art museum as a setting for trying to determine what learning means, we must thus define learning more broadly than as a set of facts that could be captured by a checklist. In this chapter, as in the other chapters in this volume, we thus consider the meaning-making that comes through visitors' conversational elaboration to be a form of learning. We are interested in examining *what* visitors talk about as well as *how* they structure their comments and explanation to each other. We believe these analyses may reveal more completely how learning occurs when people engage with art in a museum setting.

This study investigated 26 visitors' interactions with messages of curatorial intent by examining their conversations about an exhibition of African art called *Soul of Africa*; these conversations were recorded on-line in the galleries of Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum of Art (CMA) during the summer of 1999. We were particularly interested in understanding which elements of the curatorial intent behind the exhibition visitors noticed and resonated with, as well as the other kinds of connections they made with the art they were viewing. In addition, we wondered how visitors' identities influenced their meaning-making[1]. Further, we considered the sociocultural context of an art museum as

[1] While tackling the issue of the relationship between visitors' entrance narratives--their identity-- and curatorial intent, this study also sought to work on three methodological issues we felt would be useful to the museum research field. First, we collected data from two kinds of visitors, people known to us and visitors who happened to show up to see the exhibition. Second, we used two conditions for the pre- and post interviews. The third issue we explored was how to effectively capture visitor conversation and tour routes without overly interfering with the visit.

a useful place to see how visitors are in dialogue with museums. Thus, we chose several objects from the exhibition and compared what they had to "say" to visitors in terms of appearance, available information, and placement in the exhibition, with what visitors had to say about the objects.

Background of the Exhibition and Visitors

The *Soul of Africa* exhibition, a travelling show that originated in Zurich, consisted of 200 pieces of 19th and 20th century African art: wooden masks and figurative sculpture, chairs and stools, jewelry, textiles, ivory carvings, and musical instruments. The pieces were amassed between 1916 and 1928 by a Swiss collector, Han Coray, and they represent the work of various West and Central African tribes. Coray, interested in Dada and Surrealism, was attracted to the exoticism of Africa and the objects' abstraction and bought over 2000 pieces in a milieu of artistic and intellectual rejection of the tenets of western art. The original premise of the collection was to inform a new kind of artistic expression. By western standards, the body parts of the figures are elongated and distorted, their facial expressions peculiar. Some figures are assemblages of many different materials and others are studded with nails. Coray never visited Africa; he bought the pieces because of their striking aesthetic qualities, not because of any particular anthropological interest.

As Rice (1988) notes, looking at art contemplatively and analytically can be difficult, particularly for people who are untrained in aesthetics, art history, or the process of making art themselves. We chose to focus on *Soul of Africa* in part because the aesthetics of this artwork are uniquely challenging for the average American to grasp. Compared to other artistic traditions, the newness of Western museums' interest in exhibiting African art means that many people are unfamiliar with it (Vogel, 1991). In addition, particularly for white Americans, knowledge of African history and culture is cursory and often based solely on media accounts of wars and humanitarian disasters, or impressions from popular culture rather than from academically elaborated sources. Although the museum-going population tends to be better educated than non-visitors (Falk, 1993), we still assumed that the general knowledge of Africa and its anthropology possessed by the people in our study would be fairly incomplete. Capitalizing on this unfamiliarity, we believed that the *Soul of Africa* would be a challenging exhibition along several dimensions and that the process of seeing it would thus prompt visitors to display a wide range of reactions and meaning-making activities, more so, perhaps, than would seeing a more familiar genre such as Impressionist painting.[2] Visitors viewing unexpected, unfamiliar art will have a very different experience from that of visitors for whom the art is familiar and comfortable. We also believed that this show might possibly attract more than the usual number of African American visitors and thus offer us an

[2] Indeed, a museum director notes that all the highly attended, "blockbuster" museum shows in this country are of 19th century European painting/antiquities (J. H. Dobrznski, "Blockbuster shows lure record crowds into U.S. museums," New York Times, 2/3/00, page B5.)

opportunity to add to the limited amount of scholarship on this visitor population (Falk, 1993).

Another compelling reason to study *Soul of Africa* had to do with this art museum's own process of mounting the show. The CMA sought to serve the Pittsburgh community by offering what they viewed as a valuable show that might interest members of the African American community, a population that seldom utilizes this institution, as well as its regular core visitors. While the museum made special efforts to advertise the exhibition and make African American visitors feel welcome, they did not presume that all African Americans would necessarily be interested in it. During the curation and design process, the museum was faced with the same issues and dilemmas encountered by other museums when presenting a collection as both art and artifact (Karp, 1991; Riegel, 1996; Vogel, 1991). The issues of exoticising non-Western cultures and presenting their effects out of context are extremely problematic; even terminology can provoke strong criticism of museum exhibitions (cf. Rubin, 1984). In this case, the museum decided on an approach that combines both strands: it chose to display the artwork in such a way that its aesthetic qualities could be appreciated while at the same time presenting it with supports and materials[3] that would support visitors who have little or no background knowledge of African art, all without "dumbing it down" for knowledgeable visitors. In many instances, there was not a clear delineation in label copy and wall text between the messages of curatorial intent devoted to aesthetics and those of anthropology, a conflict of sorts that the curators freely admit. The CMA's curatorial decisions were driven by their view of the visitor as closer to intellectual sparring partner than empty vessel to be filled by curators' expertise. Even though the objects that comprised the show were pre-assembled and the explanatory text was developed elsewhere the CMA continued the tone of accessibility in the exhibition's design. Because of the complexities involved for both museum and visitor, we felt that studying a show like this would thus be particularly valuable.

We defined the two over-arching messages of the show as aesthetic and anthropological.[4] These messages were sometimes supported in different ways. The objects were displayed in typical art museum-manner in that they were arranged both thematically and in a visually exciting way on stands and walls, spot lit with boutique lighting. Several visually striking pieces were "show cased" by being placed by themselves on enormous walls or by having a lot of empty space around them. Others were placed so that they were framed by doorways as the visitor surveyed the galleries. Vitrines were used sparingly; visitors were able to see most of the artwork at close range without the interference of plastic. There were no railings. Labels were unobtrusive and low so as not to overwhelm the eye. The walls had been painted saturated shades of

[3] The CMA chose to use the exhibition themes and label copy that had been developed by the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute in Utica, NY, one of *Soul of Africa's* prior venues.

[4] To establish the curatorial intent of the exhibition we conducted interviews with exhibition curators and designers, examined the catalogue, docent training tapes and tours, and wall and label copy. From these sources, a set of core messages was developed. A curator indicated that our set was compatible with what she viewed as the CMA's curatorial intent for this show.

cool colors (not the browns and reds Westerners often associate with Africa) while African music played in the background. There was a wall panel devoted to "African Art Aesthetics."[5] A resource table provided an array of books on African art as well as a comment book for visitors to record their impressions. These exhibition design decisions helped convey the museum's aesthetic intent to show these objects as examples of high art, worthy of space in an art museum, not as natural history objects. The anthropological intent was expressed through the arrangement of the objects within themes: "Art and Leadership," "Rank and Prestige," "Life Transitions," "Communication with the Supernatural World," "Remembering the Dead," and "Music in the Service of Spirits and Kings." Wall text and label copy supported the themes. Maps on the wall and on each label showed where in Africa the artwork had originated. Some exhibits had small color photographs, placed next to the label copy, showing similar objects in use by modern Africans. These photos gave visitors a cultural context in which to view objects with which they may have been completely unfamiliar.

But much of this two-stranded curatorial intent was tightly entwined. A portion of the wall and label content contained aesthetic ideas as well as the useful and culturally-sensitive anthropological information and are recognizable as "standard" museum copy. The color photographs also gave a sense of the aesthetic as well as cultural tradition shared by the object in the photo and the similar object in the exhibition. In short, the CMA curators intended the aesthetic and anthropological ideas about the art work on display to support and complement each other; they would disagree with the usefulness or even possibility of considering them separately. Our decision to pull apart these two strands is in the service of better understanding exactly what visitors resonate with as they engage in the often difficult task of looking at and making meaning about unfamiliar art.

The two broad categories that comprise the central curatorial intentions of the exhibition—aesthetics and anthropology—are defined in specific ways for the purposes of this study. Aesthetics refers to the art objects' appearance (including features such as materials, form, construction, design, patina, detail, balance, pattern, beauty) without reference to situating the objects in the larger context of other African art. Anthropology refers to the information provided by curators that describes the art objects' practical and symbolic functions in the particular culture that produced it.

Model of a Visit to the *Soul of Africa*

One way of thinking socioculturally about what is involved in a visit to an art museum involves consideration of the curators' voice as providing one side of a conversation about a work of art and the visitors as providing the other side (see Figure 1). The objects themselves become the focus of activities—judgement, interpretation,

[5] The CMA's highly trained docent staff gave regular gallery tours that emphasized the aesthetics of the artwork by giving visitors features to look for throughout the exhibition. There was also a videotape and a CD Rom station on African art and culture for visitors. We did not include these affordances in our study.

appreciation, and meaning-making. The wide end of the top angle represents the full breadth of scholarship that informs wall and label copy, thoughts about exhibition design and object placement, and the specific ideas about what could be told about the artwork that curators draw upon. As their thinking and the work of putting on the exhibition progresses, the range of all possibilities is distilled into the final plan of the exhibition (the narrow point of the top angle). The wide end of the bottom angle represents visitors' background knowledge, life experiences, and identity characteristics they bring with them to the museum. Visitors employ relevant ideas from this repertoire as they focus on the art in order to make meaning of it (represented as the narrow point of the bottom angle). The curatorial intent and visitor experience come together when the art work is viewed in the context of the museum-provided supports, the point of intersection represented by the African mask at the center of the figure. The art objects act as catalysts for the "conversation" between visitor and curator. We imagine this model might also apply to other museum exhibits whose curatorial approach is similarly organic (i.e., takes the visitor into account), as opposed to didactic (represents the authority of the museum).

Insert Figure 1 here--Model of Visit to *Soul of Africa*

The physical or environmental supports for this conversation lie in the way the gallery space is utilized and in the design of the exhibition. The open plan for movement through the gallery allowed multiple pathways and a kind of "free range" access to the artwork (see Figure 2). As shown in the exhibition floor plan, visitors entered through the main door and found themselves in the exhibition's central room, which featured a broad expanse of empty central floor space, several large masks, and a long wall. The sound of African music could be heard from behind the wall. In general, visitors started their tour by reading the exhibition's introductory wall text and then they proceeded toward an area on their left, right, or behind the wall according to their own preference, not by any curatorial (or researcher) directive. In each area, after approaching an object visitors would typically read the label copy, identify it, make additional remarks about its appearance, function, or meaning, and then move on (see Fienberg & Leinhardt, this volume).

Insert Figure 2 here—Plan of the gallery

In order to describe and understand visitors' experience of *Soul of Africa* and the influence of visitors' identity on that experience we examined their conversations both for the curatorial messages being reflected there and for visitors' personal perspectives on the art work. We wanted to know how visitor conversations in an art museum were reflective of the multiple, entwined messages of curatorial intent being conveyed—in this case both aesthetic and anthropological strands. Within the aesthetic and anthropological thematic tension of this exhibition of African art, how much of the visitor conversation seems to reflect curatorial messages directly and how much seem to reflect visitors' own personal "take" on the curatorial messages based on their identity—their background and experience with respect to Africa, art, and museums in general? To explore these issues

we examined visitor conversations as they toured through the exhibition, compared reactions at specific pieces of art, and examined two particular visitor groups.

Methodology

Visitors, Selected and On-site

Data were collected from two kinds of visitors, "selected" and "on-site" (cf methodology in Fienberg & Leinhardt, this volume). Six groups of selected visitors (totaling 13 people) were personally known to the researchers. All already had a personal relationship with the other member(s) in their group. We invited them to participate in the study because they had a background that pertained to one or more aspects of visitor background in which we were interested; that is, they each had some particular and high level of art, Africa, or museum experience. These experiences included collecting African and other kinds of art; making, teaching, and writing about art; living in Africa; having close friends and co-workers with a high level of knowledge about Africa; and working in museums. We viewed these visitors as being special informants who could add a great deal to our understanding of what *Soul of Africa* had to say to visitors who are not necessarily well represented in the Pittsburgh museum-going population. Thus, inviting these visitors who had a known competence to converse thoughtfully within these three dimensions allowed us to have a basis of comparison for analyzing the conversations of a potentially very different population, on-site visitors who were not known to us. The on-site visitors are representative of the "random" museum-goer.

The six groups of on-site visitors (also totaling 13 people) who participated were recruited for the study as they approached the door to the *Soul of Africa* galleries. Their backgrounds in art, Africa, and museum experience were initially unknown to us. Criteria used in considering visitors for the study included an indication (by word or deed) of their intention to see the exhibition, expressed before researchers revealed that they were conducting research; and their membership in a visiting group that contained between two and four people, including families with children of pre-school age or older. We did not include those who were willing to participate but expressed a worry about time pressures, or those who turned out to be subsets of a large group tour. Visitors were not excluded from the study if they had visited the exhibition before.

All potential on-site visitors were invited to participate; the acceptance rate was approximately 33%.[6] Recruitment of on-site visitors and data collection for all twelve groups of visitors were generally conducted during times of the day when the galleries were not scheduled for regular docent-led tours or tours by school groups. This was done to avoid congestion and high noise levels that might have compromised our participants' ability to move about the galleries freely and be heard on tape. None of the participants were given any compensation for being in the study.

[6] Those who declined cited time pressures or a preference for not sharing their museum visit with strangers. The researchers involved in this study are all European American; acceptance rates for both European American and African American visitors were comparable.

Data Collection: Pre- and Post Interviews, Gallery Tour

After agreeing to participate, all visitors signed consent forms that described the research and promised confidentiality. Researchers attached small cordless microphones to one or two members of each group and then conducted a pre-interview with the group or handed them a set of pre-tour questions on cards and asked the group to respond to the questions together without the researcher. The pre-interview questions and those printed on the pre-tour cards were identical, except that the card "questions" were phrased in "Talk about __" form rather than question form as a way of fostering a more natural conversation[7]. Both instruments queried visitors about their museum visiting habits, what they expected to see that day, connections they may have had to Africa and its art, and whether they made art themselves. During this activity, regardless of interview format, visitors sat outside the gallery; when using cards, researchers stood apart from the visitors, taping and monitoring the conversation through headphones.

After completing the pre-interview, visitors toured the exhibition at their own pace, following their own route. They were told they could talk about anything they cared to and could stop to rest whenever necessary. Two researchers followed at a distance, making notes and recording visitors' movements on maps while audiotaping and monitoring the conversation through headphones. By annotating each "stop" with opening and closing dialogue, researchers were able to later match the recorded conversation to the corresponding stations of artwork in the galleries. The wireless microphones allowed researchers to hear and observe at long distances without undue intrusion on subjects' personal space.

Although every visitor did not necessarily examine every piece of artwork in the exhibition, all the visitor groups toured some portion of all five of the gallery spaces. The tour lengths ranged from 28 minutes to 77 minutes, with the average being 43 minutes.[8]

When visitors indicated they had completed their tour of the exhibition they were asked to participate in a post-interview, using the same type of methodology as they experienced for pre-interview. The post-tour questions or prompts asked visitors to describe anything that had surprised them, what they had noticed about the artwork, what the exhibition had caused them to think about in terms of their own culture, and what they would tell others about the exhibition. For this activity, visitors were invited to sit either in the galleries or just outside the door. The audiotapes of the pre- and post-interviews and the tours were transcribed; pseudonyms were assigned to all participants.

Coding Visitor Identity

[7] These two techniques allowed us to explore any difference in talk between visitors who were interviewed and those who conducted their own conversation about the same topics.

We believe visitors' interests and background knowledge influence what they engage with as they tour. To narrow down the myriad aspects of life experience for the context of understanding this art exhibition we chose visitors' degree of experience with the three dimensions of Africa, art, and museums as the aspects of their identity we felt were pertinent for this study. Some of our visitors were rated high on all three, others low, and many had differing amounts of experience with these dimensions. Information from the pre- and post-interviews (which was occasionally supplemented from comments made during the tours) was used to rate the visitors as having high, medium, or low experience with Africa, art, and museums. The criteria for rating visitors is shown in Table 1. Children were rated according to the same criteria as adults and could thus be considered "high" in a proportional sense.

Rating	Africa	Art	Museums
High	Growing up/living in Africa and/or expressing a keen interest or high knowledge of Africa	Being an artist; making/looking at art frequently; collecting art as a hobby; or having a degree in art	Frequently visiting museums (several times a year) and/or working in a museum
Medium	Visiting Africa; having close friends or relatives who are African or who live there; or studying Africa in school	Making art occasionally and/or expressing an enjoyment of art	Visiting museums occasionally but expressing enjoyment
Low	Never visiting Africa and expressing no interest in or knowledge of Africa	Never making art and/or expressing no particular interest in art	Seldom visiting museums

Table 1: Criteria for Rating Visitors' Africa, Art, and Museum Identity Dimensions.

Coding the Conversations

We were interested in understanding which aspects of the curatorial intent were included in conversation as well as what visitors themselves supplied to their discussions of the artwork. The visitor tour transcripts were segmented and coded for the content of the talk mentioned while they toured the exhibition. A segment of talk was an idea unit that consisted of at least one line of transcript; breaks to the next segment coincided with conversational shifts to either a new curatorial topic, or a shift from "museum" to "visitor" talk about a curatorial topic, or both. Table 2 defines the seven distinct categories used in the first level of coding of the transcripts. For all categories, talk was

[8] Not surprisingly, the average length of the selected visitor tours (51 minutes) was slightly longer than the on-site visitors' average (36 minutes). We attribute this difference to the selected pool's agreeing to participate ahead of time, and their level of comfort with the researchers.

prompted by three actions: visitors looking at the artwork, reading wall or label copy, or reacting to other visitor conversation. This coding scheme allowed us to account for all visitor vocalization, except for sneezing, coughing, laughing, and any accompanying "Bless you's."

Category of Talk	Definition
Aesthetic	Talk that pertained to aesthetic ideas supplied by label copy or prompted by visible features of the artwork.
Anthropological	Talk that pertained to anthropological ideas supplied by label copy or prompted by visible features of the artwork.
Visitor/Aesthetic	Talk that contained visitors' own "take" on the aesthetic ideas or features.
Visitor/Anthropological	Talk that contained visitors' own "take" on the anthropological ideas or features.
Visitor Management	Talk that referred to spatial orientation on the visit, feeling tired, having trouble reading labels, interactions with guards and other visitors, and any other talk pertaining to the museum as an institution.
Visitor Personal	Talk not pertaining to the above five categories of African art, anthropology, or the museum.
Other	Talk that was inaudible, unintelligible, or too fragmented to assign a meaning.

Table 2. Coding Categories of Visitor Talk and Definitions

Figure 3 shows the second level of the coding of visitor conversation; this coding pertained to the segments of visitor conversation that fell into the first four categories of talk described in Table 2; there was no further coding of the Personal, Management, and Other talk. Figure 3 shows that, for each segment of visitor conversation that was prompted either by museum affordances or by the visitor's personal take (the ovals), the content could be either about aesthetics or anthropology (the top row of four boxes).

Below these two curatorial strands for each kind of talk are boxes in which are listed the curatorial sub-messages that pertain to aesthetics and anthropology. Coding for the sub-messages allowed us to see which and to what extent specific curatorial ideas and messages within the aesthetic and anthropology strands were discussed by visitors.

Insert Figure 3 here—Diagram of Coding Scheme

The sub-messages for aesthetics and anthropology are listed and defined below in Table 3.

Aesthetic Sub-messages	**Anthropological Sub-messages**
Abstract concepts—African art is created according to ideas and concepts; Objects are semi-abstract representations of abstract concepts, such as fertility, ancestry, life transitions, power.	**Functional**--Objects are functional, designed to be an active part of daily, ceremonial, and political life, not admired from afar.
Beauty--Objects are well-crafted, classical and formal; they continue a corpus of established, elegant, traditional designs	**Cultural group**--Objects represent 48 cultural groups from specific geographical locations.
Appearance—Objects range from jewelry to sculpture to masks and are planned, simple, elegant, patterned, contained, balanced, proportioned, geometric, figurative. Iincludes mentions of/attempts to articulate features of a piece (e.g., figures, animals, carving, materials)]	**Ancestor/spirit connection**--Objects allow the living to remain connected to spirits and ancestors by maintaining their memory; spirits and the dead participate in the lives of the living by blessing, protecting, and influencing them.
Masterworks--Objects are masterworks made by talented artists	**Life changes**--Objects facilitate the marking of life changes with ceremonies, secret societies, initiations, funerals, weddings.
	Complex societies--Objects reflect highly organized, stratified, complex societies by indicating rank, status, social and moral values, aesthetic achievement.
	Collection--Objects were collected by Han Coray in the context of European avant garde/Dada rejection of western art.
	Communication--Objects show the importance of music and art as a means of communication in African societies.
	Dating--Dating of these objects is imprecise.

Table 3. Aesthetic and Anthropological Sub-Messages With Definitions.

Although the coding of "aesthetic," "visitor/aesthetic," "anthropological," and "visitor/anthropological" remarks by visitors was based on the same sets of curatorial ideas, they are actually quite distinctive because they represent very different kinds of talk. The following two examples of the sub-message of "function" illustrate this difference in the origin (whether it is museum or visitor prompted) of a segment's content. The following remark was coded as "anthropological/functional" because the visitor talked about an object's function with museum-derived information gleaned from the label copy:

> Elaine: Cosmetic boxes and bark boxes. I wonder if it says what they put in them. Oh, held personal ornaments, the bark boxes. Special clothing. They used at home or while traveling. (Selected 01, tour, lines 124-127)

A different piece of conversation about a large wooden mask was coded as "visitor/anthropological/functional" because this visitor used some personally-derived information from her own experiences living in Africa when commenting to her touring companion.

> Isoke: It's funny that a lot people don't realize that those {masks}were made to be worn, and when they're worn they really come to life. Have you ever seen anybody with them on?
> Vera: No.
> Isoke: In Ife I've seen them actually in, you know, daily rituals and the dancers, even the picture doesn't portray it because the dancer moves, you know, to go along with the [--]. And they have to be totally covered. You can't see any part of the body of the dancer. (Selected-04, tour, lines 39-49)

Similarly, this difference between museum-inspired talk and visitor-take is evident in the following exchange about a wooden neck rest. Elaine's comment was considered to be "aesthetic/appearance" because she described the visible features of the piece with a phrase from the label copy (shown below in italics). Lorna's response represents a shift to "visitor/aesthetic/appearance" because, from looking at the object she makes a comment that expresses her own feeling; in essence, she makes a personal value judgment based on the visual attributes of the decorative carving on the neck rest:

> Elaine: It's a *full-bodied woman with her hands on her hips*.
> Lorna: I relate much more to the African women than to [--] when you think of the American, they've got these skinny mini models! (laughs) These are real people. (Selected-03, tour, lines 204-209)

After coding the transcripts, the number of lines of talk in each category and each sub-message were summed and the percentage each represented of the total talk was computed for each visitor group and for the selected and on-site visitors. The latter two totals were then combined to describe the conversation among all groups with respect to each category and sub-message.

Use of the Pre- and Post-Interviews

The pre- and post-interviews were used as reference points to supply information needed to give the on-site visitors a rating on the identity dimensions of Africa, art, and museum. We assessed the tour conversations of the low and high visitor groups using the interviews as benchmarks of meaning making. The interviews were used to supplement our understanding of the ideas visitors expressed during their tour about specific pieces or about their overall impressions of the exhibitions. We compared the pre- and post-interviews carefully for evidence, as expressed by visitors, of learning.

Data Analysis

After coding the conversations for the curatorial messages they reflected we were able to show the varying amounts of talk devoted to each category and each sub-message. We then juxtaposed the amount of talk about each sub-message with the identity characteristics of our visitors. To further examine the nature of the talk we selected specific pieces from the exhibition and considered each of them from three perspectives: the museum support provided for each, the direct message the object imparts, and what visitors had to say about the pieces through their museum-prompted and visitor-take comments.

Results and Discussion

Results of Coding Visitor Identity

Visitor responses to the questions in the pre-interview pertaining to the Africa, art, and museum identity dimensions allowed us to have a way of knowing a bit about the identities of our on-site visitors and to form a basis for comparing them to the selected visitors who were already known to the researchers. Additional information gleaned from the pre- and post-interviews and researcher observation during the tours was used to form more complete portraits of the visitors. This sometimes anecdotal additional information included visitors' ethnicity, relationship, education, and sometimes occupation. Table 4 below shows the visitors' pseudonyms, personal within-group relationships, ethnicity, residence, identity dimension rating, and education. Of the 26 visitors in the 12 groups, 12 (46%) were African American and 14 (54%) were European

American. One group was rated high on all dimensions, one was rated low, and most others were a mixture of ratings. All the selected and half of the on-site visitor groups lived in Pittsburgh; the others were visiting the museum from elsewhere in the United States (Florida, Texas, and Las Vegas).[9]

Selected visitors	**Relationship**	**Age**	**Ethnicity**	**Identity dimension rating (Africa, Art, Museum)**	**Education**
01 Elaine & Bella	friends	70s, 60s	AA[10], AA	H, M, H/H, H, M	MA, Ph.D.,
02 James, Bonnie, Jake	family	40s, 40s, 9	EA, EA, EA	M, L, L/M, H, M/M, H, M	Ph.D., BA, grade 3
03 Elaine &Lorna	co-workers	70s, 40s	AA, EA	H, M, H/H, M, H	MA, BA
04 Isoke & Vera	advisor, mentee	40s, 20s	AA, AA	H, M, L/M, L, L	Ph.D., MA
05 Bunny & Jared	co-workers	70s, 70s	EA, EA	H, M, H/M, H, H	MA, MA
06 Tobias & Donald	friends	70s, 70s	AA, AA	H, H, H/H, H, H	BA, MA

On-site visitors	**Relationship**	**Age**	**Ethnicity**	**Identity dimension rating (Africa, Art, Museum)**	**Education**
01 Tina & Chrissie	mother/daughter	30s, 9	AA, AA	M, L, L/M, L, L	Unknown, grade
02 Jennie & Doug	couple	50s, 60s	EA, EA	L, L, L/L, L, L	HS, BA
03 Harold & Camilla	couple	50s, 50s	AA, AA	M, M, L/M, M, H	MA, BA
04 Janice & Kenneth	friends	50s, 40s	EA, AA	M, M, H/L, L, L	MA, HS
05 Bliss & Dinah	mother/daughter	50s, 20s	EA, EA	L, M, M/L, M, M	BA, BA
06 Nora, Alfie, Randie	mother/daughters	30s, 7, 9	EA, EA, EA	M, H, H/M, H, H/M, H, H	MA, grade 1 & 3

Table 4: Pseudonyms, Personal Relationships Within Group, Age, Ethnicity, Identity Dimension Rating, and Education of Selected Visitors.

In order to compare the backgrounds of selected to on-site visitors on the three identity dimensions we assigned point values to the identity dimension ratings (high = 3, medium = 2, and low = 1) and computed the means. Figure 4 shows a set of parallel lines that display the means and ranges for both kinds of visitors for each dimension. For the Africa dimension, the first two lines of the figure show that the selected group were entirely between the medium-high rating of 2 and 3, while the on-site group was rated low-medium, between 2 and 1. The medians (2.6 and 1.6) are a full rank apart.

[9] Experimenting with methodology was rewarding: the card condition was less intrusive than was the interview (particularly for the on-site visitors who did not know the researcher interviewers) and in most cases rewarded us with reasonable conversation under the rather forced circumstances of a research study. Visitors said they liked having the questions visible on the cards to refer to as they formulated their answers. Collecting data using remote microphones permitted sufficient privacy for visitors while they toured, but also permitted researchers to hear their conversation. Visitors tended to ignore the researchers and were not encumbered by the microphone. These techniques worked well, but the down side of producing a set of protocols suitable for coding for this degree of richness is that the time/labor factor is prohibitive for anything but a small study. Finally, having the opportunity to compare the conversations of selected vs. on-site visitors revealed the limitations of interpreting the comments of complete strangers.

[10] AA means African American, EA means European American.

This represents the biggest difference in the backgrounds of the two kinds of visitors. The 3rd through 6th lines, representing the art and museum dimensions, indicate that both groups of visitors had members with ratings that ranged from low to high. The medians show that the selected visitors in general were rated higher on art (2.4) and museum (2.3) than were the on-site visitors (1.8 and 1.9); however, the difference between the medians are not as great as in the Africa dimension. While we expected that the selected visitors would come to the museum with more knowledge about and experience of these topics than visitors chosen randomly, we believe the gaps between the two groups are small enough to feel comfortable combining their conversations into one data set.

Insert Figure 4 here—Line Graph of Identity Ratings of Selected and On-site Visitors

Results of Content Coding—Level 1

Figure 5 shows the results of the first level of content coding of visitor conversation for the broad categories of aesthetics, anthropology, management, personal, and other.

Insert Figure 5 here—Graph of Aesthetic, Anthropological, Management, Personal, and Other Talk for Both Kinds of Visitors

The first two bars of Figure 5 show the combined percentage of both museum-inspired and visitor-inspired talk devoted to aesthetics and anthropological aspects of the artwork (i.e., "aesthetic" and "visitor/aesthetic" have been combined, as has "anthropological" and "visitor/anthropological"). As can be seen in the figure, for most visitors there were slightly more aesthetic comments than anthropological ones. Although the exhibition provided a two-stranded curatorial message, visitors' talk reflected more resonance with the aesthetic messages; and although the museum strongly supported the aesthetics of the exhibition, this finding is somewhat surprising for two reasons. First, the label copy was primarily anthropological in content and supported anthropological talk because it supplied the vocabulary and ideas for visitors to use as they conversed. Supports for the aesthetic strand of curatorial intent were, by comparison, much more abstract—signage did not support language, for example. Further, while the lighting, wall color, background music, and the arrangement of art objects may have prompted strong reactions, they did not supply words to visitors. Evidently, the aesthetic aspects of the art objects in the exhibition had much to say to visitors, and prompted slightly more talk than did the anthropological aspects.

Bars three and four of Figure 5 show the percentage of talk devoted to visitor management and the extraneous, museum-content-free visitor personal comments. The consistently low number of personal comments across groups suggests that both kinds of visitors mostly attended to the activities of looking at and reading about the artwork without socializing by engaging in tangential discussion. It is possible that visitors unconsciously considered the visitor-take side of their museum conversation as a vehicle that carried the social, recreational side of their museum visit. Or, it may be that

recruitment into a research study influenced these visitors to perceive their task as one that promoted a particular pattern and flavor of conversation.

There were larger variations in the management category that resulted from differing group circumstances. The highest (for on-site group 4, 39%[11]) was due to an unfortunate, personal intrusion by a guard during the tour; the next highest (for on-site group 6, 26%) represented a parent's efforts to keep her two young daughters focussed on the artwork. Excluding these two highest numbers, the average of the remaining visitor groups' management talk is 8.2% devoted to issues like orientation and label legibility. This number indicates the importance of museum navigation issues to our visitors; possibly the "random plan" (McLean, 1993) of the exhibition prompted more talk about routing and what to look at next than might have occurred in a "direct"-planned exhibition. There were small variations across visitor groups in the amount of talk coded as "other" (i.e., the conversation that was inaudible or fragmented). These variations were due to fluctuating noise conditions in the galleries and visitor mumbling during the taping.

These results are regrouped in Figure 6 in order to show the percentages of talk prompted by the museum's voice as opposed to visitor-take talk.

Insert Figure 6 here--Percent of Museum-prompted and Visitor-prompted Talk

In Figure 6's third bar, management, personal, and other talk has been merged. (The means of these combined percentages for both selected and on-site visitors is similar [20.5/21.5%].) The first bar shows the percentage of all groups' conversation that reflected the anthropological and aesthetic messages from museum-supplied label and wall copy and visually-obtained features of the artwork. The second bar shows the percentage of talk about the same anthropological and aesthetic messages that reflected the visitors' take on them. This graph shows that about half the discussion is a direct reflection of the museum's message while half reflects the influence of a larger social history.

Results of the Coding—Level 2, Curatorial Sub-messages

Figure 7 shows the results of the coding of the curatorial sub-messages for the aesthetics and anthropology strands.

Insert Figure 7 here--Graph of Percent of Talk About Sub-messages for All Visitors

For this graph all the sub-message talk was considered as being 100% (i.e., personal, management, and other talk was thrown out). Only the sub-messages for which there was 4% or more talk were included on the graph. The bars show that visitor talk

[11] This group also had the smallest number of codable lines of all the transcripts which had the effect of enlarging the percentage of talk that included the guard incident and other orienting talk.

about the different sub-messages was very concentrated into just a few categories, with 14 categories having less than 3% of the talk for both kinds of visitors. For all visitors, the consistent pattern of talk, whether museum-based or visitor take, was a concentrated focus on two sub-messages: Aesthetic/appearance and Anthropological/function. (See the "appearance" and "function" bars in both part of Figure 7.) Visitors were more likely to talk about the appearance and function of the pieces of artwork than about any other of the sub-messages. This pattern of concentration recalls the curators' contention that aesthetics and anthropology are inextricably linked. The appearance and function sub-messages evidently supported each other in terms being reflected in visitor conversation and provided a basis for attachment of the other sub-messages.

Relationship between Visitor Identity and Content Coding Results

Based on the results of the coding and from the qualitative perspective with which we considered each conversation as a whole, we believe that visitors' identities influenced their conversation about African art in two ways. The first way was through visitors taking on the challenge of viewing the artwork and making meaning of it by drawing in part on their own background knowledge and experience. This was revealed by different people mentioning in their conversation different curatorial sub-messages than other people did; not all messages resonated conversationally with all visitors. Since the talk about the sub-messages was taking place in the sociocultural context of an informal, recreational event, it may be that, for certain visitors, certain curatorial messages leant themselves to conversational integration more readily than did others. (Although every visitor did not read every label, the sub-category messages were distributed throughout the exhibition and we believe that even visitors who may have only "sampled" label copy most likely encountered all the messages.)

The second way that identity and meaning-making are related is in the finding that visitors did such a large amount of meaning-making through their own personal comments about the aesthetic and anthropological sub-messages about the artwork. As indicated previously (see Figure 6), about half of the talk was visitor-prompted; the other half, museum-prompted. Identity is thus a fertile source for supplying ideas about unfamiliar art and the idea that these visitors of different ethnic and experiential backgrounds conversed in a similar way is compelling. (cf diarists' seeing what they cared to see in a museum exhibition and using what they saw in their meaning making, not the museum's messages of curatorial intent in Leinhardt, Tittle, & Knutson, this volume.)

Analyses of Visitor Conversations

The results of the coding for the kinds of talk our visitors engaged in and the curatorial messages that were reflected in these conversations allowed us some quantitative, structural understanding of visitors' experience of the *Soul of Africa*. However, counts and percentages have more meaning in human terms when the conversations they represent are analyzed in a more socio-cultural light. To this end, we

undertook several comparative analyses: examining multiple perspectives on single objects; considering visitors' tours in terms of the visitors' levels of experience with Africa, art, and museums; and exploring the implications of visitors' ethnicities on their conversations.

Discussion of Visitor Conversation About Specific Objects

As a different, qualitative way of understanding the richness of the interplay of museum-prompted and visitor's personal take comments we analyzed the array of conversations visitors had in front of several pieces from the exhibition that, judging from the attention they received, attracted and particularly interested visitors. The array of different conversations about the same object allowed us to consider the influence of visitor identity. These pieces of art were chosen as sites for examination also because of their strongly aesthetic or anthropological message. Each object will be discussed as a way of presenting what occurs, conversationally, when visitors encounter a piece of artwork and go about interpreting it and the messages of curatorial intent associated with it. (See Figure 2 for the gallery placement of the specific objects.)

Nailman. A photograph of this "Oath-taking figure" and its accompanying label copy and label map is shown in Figure 8.

Insert Figure 8 here—Nailman

The piece, nicknamed "Nailman" by curators, researchers, and some visitors, is a striking wooden figurative sculpture that stands approximately 3 feet high. The features of the carved face are well-developed in comparison to the body; its expression and the posture of the crudely defined torso and limbs impart a sense of urgency and tension (although this is a 21st century interpretation). The body is studded with an assortment of several hundred iron nails and blades that bristle at all angles.

The exhibition curators displayed the piece in a way that highlighted its arresting aesthetic qualities by placing it alone on a tall stand against its own wall and by spot lighting it; further, the curators indicated that the aesthetics of this figure are important by framing it within the doorway between the room it occupied and the central, entrance gallery. Thus, the piece was both showcased and used as aesthetic bait to attract visitors to the next room and to give them a starting focus for considering the other pieces that were grouped under the "Communication with the Supernatural World" theme. The label copy indicated Nailman's geographic/cultural origins and provided some information about how it functioned: as an object that officiated over oaths, contracts and legal decisions, as well as acting as a healing force. The act of driving in the nails activated the supernatural power it represented and served to change the appearance and ultimately to "finish" the piece.

All the visitor groups commented on Nailman; the tenor of many comments indicated that its appearance shocked most of them, prompting a range of reactions:

Whew!

Oh, this guy must be in pain.

Oh, my goodness! Incredible.

I wonder what made them do that?

He had to be *dead* though!

What they should have done to Clinton.

This is the result of the first Home Depot in Africa.

Talk about "Ow!"

Why did they put nails in him?

God!

These exclamations show the personal, visitor-take in operation. Likewise, these reactions are considered aesthetic because they are responses to the physicality of the piece itself.

Though not shocked themselves, one pair of selected visitors who are natural history museum docents and who also collect African art, recalled similar reactions to a similar piece in another museum:[12]

> Elaine: We used to have a piece like this on display downstairs. When the school children would pass by, it just kinda blew their minds that somebody would actually make something like that.
>
> Lorna: Well I had a kid, we were walking through Sculpture Hall, and she looked up and saw the statues and she said, "Why do you have them there if children are walking through?" (chuckles) (Selected 03)

Nailman's provocative appearance prompted visitors to seek information from the label copy to help them understand it. Despite the straightforward, unemotional, largely anthropological explanation given by the label, visitors nevertheless had difficulty rationalizing the figure's function with their own emotional reactions to its appearance. Visitors used a lot of "text echo" (McManus, 1989) (shown below in italics), to annotate

[12] The Carnegie Museum of Natural History.

their reactions and subsequent personal comments as a way of making sense of the object, as did this visitor (Tina) and her 9-year-old daughter:

Tina: Wow! Look at that! What's this one?

Chrissie: That's a figure with nails.

Tina: *Oath-taking figure*. Look at all those nails! (Gasp) Ooooh. Wow! This is from the Republic of Congo.

Chrissie: Congo!

Tina: Mm-hm. …It's a *power figure in which iron nails and blades have been driven. This process calls the attention of the supernatural…* It looks like a Voodoo doll too.

Chrissie: Mm-hm.

Tina: *…It calls the attention of the supernatural power. It represents and arouses it to action to witness oaths, contracts, and legal decisions.* So, whenever they make a really, really big decision…

Chrissie: Mm-hm.

Tina: …then they would bring this doll out. Or this figure out. Okay? *It is therefore an agent of justice, but also of punishment and revenge.* Okay? But it also has the power to heal. *The large number of nails and blades in this figure attest to its efficacy*.

Chrissie: What's efficacy?

Tina Its effect. It's very effective. So it must have gotten a lot of powerful things done around this figure. (On-site 01, tour, 149-175)

In addition to using text-echo, this exchange shows visitors using their self-generated idea about Voodoo to explain the figure's appearance and perhaps, function. Voodoo was salient to the visitors in three other groups who mentioned it, even though the label copy did not. Visitors had difficulty getting over the idea that this figure was not an example of a Voodoo artifact and that Nailman was not meant to represent a person being persecuted. The visitor-take notion of Voodoo seemed to represent the most plausible explanation to visitors for impaling a figure with nails, possibly their best African referent for explaining an alternate scenario to the St. Sebastian-like predicament of the Nailman figure.

The references to Voodoo are indicative of a general trend we noticed about visitor-take comments, that of making associations between the aesthetics or anthropology of the objects on display and ideas from their own background. After noticing many such comparisons within visitor-take talk we termed them "cross-cultural

comparisons." These kinds of comments occurred when visitors were reminded of something similar (in appearance or function) to the piece that came from another culture. For example, Donald and Tobias[13] each made different cross-cultural comments on Nailman's function and appearance:

> Donald: Now, what's fascinating about this is that, people would drive these nails in when they were suffering from something, like a sore foot or something like that. And in Greece they still do the same thing with statues there…
>
> Tobias: And the amazing thing about the head, it's almost Aztec or Oriental, sort of…
>
> Donald: And what's marvelous is the difference in the nails…
>
> Tobias: Makes you think of our friend Wolf! (laughs)
>
> Donald: It does! It makes me think-- I was just thinking about Wolf.
>
> Tobias: Yeah. (laughs) Started to think of his [--]. (Selected 06, 253-284)

Donald talked about a functionally parallel statue in Greece; Tobias noticed what he interpreted to be Aztec and Oriental qualities of the face. Both of these are cross-cultural associations. Their final association, between this piece and pieces of nail-studded wooden sculpture made by mutual friend, we termed "cross-personal association." We noticed that other visitors made similar personal associations as they looked at the artwork, such as comparing a piece in the exhibition to one in theirs or a friend's collection, or being reminded of friends or other personal memories.

Neck Rests. On display were several wooden neck rests, grouped on a stand that were located in the exhibition's "Rank and Prestige" thematic section (see Figures 9 and 10).

Insert Figures 9 and 10 here—Neck rests

All these pieces were identified in the label copy as serving the same function (providing a neck support to protect an elaborate hairdo during sleep). Each was carved

[13] These visitors represent the high end of our visitors' connections to art and Africa, based on researchers' knowledge of their many achievements regarding the study's identity dimensions. A relevant sampling of these includes: Exhibiting their own artwork, having it in museum permanent collections, curating shows, collecting different genres of art, writing books about art and artists, teaching students in the art center to university setting, and receiving numerous awards and recognition for their accomplishments.

in the shape of an animal or human figure and was designed so that the parts of the body (whether horns, tail, or arms) did the supporting work. The appearance (including patina, carving, and beadwork) of the figures themselves reflected the societies' high standards of beauty (e.g., glossy skin, scarification, bead ornamentation, hair design) that the objects sought to help the user to attain and maintain for themselves. Each neck rest uses symmetrical elements to achieve a sense of aesthetic, as well as structural balance.

While conversing about the neck rests visitors attended less to the aesthetic features than to the anthropological ones. Many attended to the complex society sub-message of high social status that was afforded by the idea of someone needing and owning such an object. But the majority of visitors, including those with high knowledge of Africa, were more intrigued by how neck rests were used and were skeptical of the comfort they could provide. Representative comments of this general consensus from two different groups are shown below.

> Isoke: I can't imagine how those neck rests actually were ever used. They don't seem very comfortable. But they must be, they use them a lot. (Selected 04)
>
> ---
>
> Nora: That looks really uncomfortable. (On-site 06)

Visitors made a lot of cross-cultural comparisons in their neck rest conversations referring to Japanese and Egyptian cultures, who also use wooden pillows, as well as Westerners who use feather pillows; these cross-cultural comments may have helped visitors imagine how neck rests might actually be more comfortable than they appear.

From the tenor of the visitor conversation, the *Soul of Africa* was a particularly challenging collection for most viewers. We focused on visitors' conversations about Nailman and the neck rests because these were objects that represent extremes of the aesthetic and anthropology strands of this exhibition. From our examination of visitor meaning-making here, we see that differences in visitor identity can explain some difference in conversation, but clearly not all. There are compelling aspects of the ideas available in the exhibition that affected everyone, regardless of background.

Poro Mask. We chose to examine two visitors' comments about this piece as a way of illustrating more about how visitor identity and conversation are related. The *Poro* mask (pictured in Figure 1) is a simple but elegantly abstract mask that served as a vehicle for the spirit world to communicate with the living. It was one of an array of masks hung on a wall, and did not receive the "universal" visitor attention that Nailman and the neckrests did. The almond-shaped face is long (approximately 2 feet) and mostly smooth-textured, with parallel lines carved across the top. Tiny eyes look down from the overhanging forehead over the huge nose. The mask imparts a lot of expression given the economy of the design.

This mask prompted interesting responses from two visitors with different backgrounds. On the basis of its simplicity and aesthetic vocabulary, Donald called it, "The great one" and, in the post-interview said it was among his picks for the exhibition's three best pieces. Bonnie and Jake, a mother and son subset of a selected family group, also noticed the mask. Bonnie observed to Jake that the mask looked like Jay Leno. Herein lies the crux of the identity and sociocultural issues. Donald had a firm basis from his life-long interest in Africa, art, and museums to make an informed judgement on this mask's aesthetic efficacy. Bonnie, with a BA in studio art and an on-going interest in aesthetic issues, was certainly poised to comment in a more sophisticated way. However, unlike the other parents in the study who relied heavily on the information in label copy, Bonnie made this Jay Leno comment in the service of placating her hungry and disgruntled 9-year-old touring with her. Using her visitor-take comment to compare the artwork to a figure from popular culture was a device to help Jake engage and, potentially, see other aspects of the exhibition. In fact, recognizing Jake's bad mood, this family framed most of their tour conversation around Jake's identification of aesthetic features of the artwork that reminded him of *Star Wars* characters, one of his passions. The legitimacy of comparing an African mask to Jabba the Hutt may strike some as a stretch, but we believe that a visitor's ability to view art of a completely alien genre in terms of characters that typify archetypal narrative forms (Campbell, 1999) shows an idiocyncratic but deep appreciation of curatorial effort.

The African American vs. European American Visitors' Experience

Thus far, we have considered the visitors in this study as a single population without making any distinctions between the comments of the 12 African Americans and 14 European Americans. In terms of the identity rating of Africa, art, and museum experience we assigned to all visitors, the European American and African American visitors had similar levels of familiarity and association with Africa. Both kinds of visitors made comments indicating personal connections to the curatorial messages. One European American, Lorna, commented, "Most of the things that I saw I related to my culture; the initiation rites, my son just had his Bar Mitzvah this week and it was a rite of passage. But I just, to me, it shows how similar everybody is**"** (Selected 03, post interview, 117-124). What was different about most African American visitors' tours was not revealed by coding but by our examination of the tone and personal content of their comments. While all visitors of both ethnicities who toured with their children (whose ages ranged from 6 to early 20s) made explicit efforts to engage and teach them about African art and culture, several African American visitors expressed, through their visitor-take comments, a sense of pride in sharing the heritage that the artwork represented. For example, as an African American parent, Tina made comments that further connected the anthropological information and artwork to the particulars of her and her daughter's African American culture, such as comparing a mask's cowrie shellwork to shells brought from Africa by Chrissie's great-great grandmother. Tina also related the funerary pieces of the "Remembering the Dead" section of the exhibition to their family's Kwaanza ritual of toasting the ancestors:

> Tina: So that's a tradition that came from Africa—that you always, always hold very, in high esteem, your ancestors, because those are the people who came before you and made it possible for YOU to be here. So it's still very, very, very important. Our grandmas, and grandpas, and uncles and aunts [are] very important to us. (On-site 1, 539-545)

But being an African American did not guarantee a connection necessarily. For example, in the post interview, Kenneth criticized what he described as the exhibition's lack of background information and summarized his experience with, "I didn't get much out of it." Although the European American visitors indicated their admiration of the aesthetic achievement and cultural sophistication represented by the artwork, these comments were made from the perspective of being the "other."

The Effect of Identity on Conversational Elaboration

Selecting half of our visitor groups based on our knowledge of their often high level of experience with the study's identity dimensions allowed us to have a contrast case for visitors with considerably less such experience in terms of their conversational elaboration. Comparing portraits of two visitor groups, one "low" and one "high," gives a sense of the range of experience and differing elaboration that took place during *Soul of Africa's* tenure.

Low group. Jennie and Doug, a pair of European American on-site visitors from Florida, were rated low on all dimensions. According to their pre-interview, both had "No clue" as to what they expected from the exhibition. They conducted their tour as a team effort: thinking she would not need her reading glasses for her visit to the museum, Jennie had to rely on Doug for help reading the label copy. Doug did a lot of text echo for her benefit, and their museum-prompted talk (65%) outweighed their visitor-take talk (35%). These visitors relied heavily on the museum's supports for a way in to looking at the artwork, and talked a bit more about anthropological issues (48%) than aesthetics (39%). They made efforts to discover how the pieces functioned in a practical way (e.g., how masks were worn, how the wearer saw through them, what scale the bow harps were tuned to) and limited their aesthetic comments to admiring the carving detail and matching the materials identified in the label copy to the pieces.

From comments made during the tour and in the post interview, Jennie and Doug entered the exhibition as visitors who were profoundly uninformed about African art and culture. When looking at some carved ivory pendants they commented:

> Jennie I just can't get over this detail on their sculpture and stuff.
> Doug Yeah, y'know, it's all by hand.
> Jennie I know! But it's beautiful! And I mean, they couldn't have had, y'know, like, tools per se. (On-site 2, tour 150-154)

Later, at a display of raffia cloth textiles, they commented:

> JennieCan you imagine the time it took them to sit down and make something though?
> Doug Well, they didn't have to go to work.
> JennieWell, that's true.
> Doug They didn't have an 8:00 to 5:00 job, you know… They just did what had to be done. (On-site 2, tour 396-403)

These were two of several tour instances where it is evident that the art work and label copy challenged Jennie and Doug's paradigm of African society as primitive and unstructured. Their responses in the post-interview revealed that they had noticed several messages from the anthropological strand, such as the centrality of religion, the frequent use of initiation rituals, and the importance of motherhood and childbirth for continuing society. They also noticed the curators' message that the art work was produced by complex, hierarchical societies:

> Doug African culture, more organization, than I…
>
> Researcher In what way?
>
> Doug Uh, as, as far as the status and, and, and the government, and the, uh… Well, I, y'know, I probably always just thought before, "Well, they all just did their thing, they went out and killed whenever they needed to eat, and they all brought it in here and ate it." But there was definitely a hierarchy in there, that, and a government, and, and, uh, crime and punishment. (chuckles) …Which probably parallels every soc-, civilization that there ever has been. (On-site 2, post-interview, 108-121)

In terms of the exhibition's usefulness to students, Doug suggested,

> That they need to see it to, to see how other cultures and other civilizations lived, and probably how their ancestors at one time lived, even though they may not have been on the same continent… They may have very well, and probably did, live very much the same way… It's just that some civilizations advanced faster than others did. (On-site 2, post-interview, 196-200)

These glimpses into visitor reasoning about unfamiliar aesthetics and anthropology are quite revealing. They show the power of the conceptualization of 19th and 20th century Africans as uncivilized and backward to prompt a visitor to make some misinformed statements. It is certainly disheartening that these visitors in their 50s, with a high school and five-year bachelor's degree background, could hold such deep misconceptions about an entire continent. Nevertheless, the hour they spent in *Soul of Africa* was entertaining for them and the exhibition clearly affected their thinking by

expanding their knowledge of anthropological specifics and by making them reconsider some of their beliefs. The tone of their tour and interview conversation was not defensive. Given their lack of experience with art and museums, their inability to articulate much about the aesthetic messages of the artwork is not surprising. They cited "National Geo" as being their closest exposure to African art and also said that their own social culture was not receptive to it anyway:

Jennie I--, Well, I'd just definitely tell him he missed something-- or that they missed something—'cause it is very, very--

Doug Yeah.

Jennie It's beautiful!

Doug We're going to see friends tonight and they'll say, 'I'm not going to go see that!' (chuckle)

Jennie (chuckles) Yeah. They probably wouldn't want to.

Doug (chuckles)

Jennie I don't think, unless you came in and seen it (*sic*), if you just heard about it, that's one thing you would say: 'No-'

Doug Yeah.

Jennie 'I don't want to go see that.' But once you get in, it's--, I really enjoyed it.

Researcher Got your attention.

Jennie Yes.

Given the misinformation these visitors were touring with it seems very probable that the authority of the museum played a part in impressing them that African art has merit and thus gave them permission to engage with it in a way that was not threatening. These visitors seem to have gotten a lot out of the show, in spite of the impediments they carried into the museum.

High group. By contrast, Tobias and Donald were African Americans who both felt deeply-rooted connections to African art and culture. As we noted earlier, both were artists and teachers who had received recognition for their artistic accomplishments. Both were avid museum goers who traveled regularly to see art that interested them. Touring the exhibition with this immersed perspective permitted these visitors to transcend conversationally the need to "figure out" what each piece was in terms of the anthropological messages (19%) about it and concentrate on their main interest, aesthetic issues (70%). Neither relied much on the label copy, as reflected by the

difference in the amount of their museum-prompted talk (15%) and their visitor-take talk (82%).

Tobias and Donald's tour conversation reflected their high degrees of experience in art, Africa, and museum in terms of the abstract ideas they expressed about the exhibition as a whole, and their culturally and aesthetically-based observations about individual pieces. They roamed the exhibition, pointing out particular features and favorite pieces (both had seen the show previously but not with each other). As old friends who knew each other extremely well they often spoke in a kind of short hand, using short phrases that had iconic meaning to both of them (see Ellenbogen, this volume, for a discussion of similar talk in family context).

> Tobias This I thought was very sculptural.
> DonaldYeah. It's amazing.
> Tobias It's a pipe.
> DonaldLook at that vocabulary. It's amazing.
> Tobias Yeah.
> DonaldWow.
> Tobias Yeah, that is—
> DonaldThat's something, isn't it.
> Tobias Chokwe.
> DonaldAngola again. (Selected 06, tour, 223-232)

These visitors were familiar with African geography and were able to fluidly connect different locations, cultural groups, and aesthetic features. Since *Soul of Africa* was arranged thematically, not geographically, these visitors had an enhanced ability to view the art work as it stood in dialogue with a theme because so much other information was already in place. They referred often to the pieces' cultural affiliation, echoing this curatorial message more than any of the other visitor groups.

They also made a lot of cross-personal connections between the exhibition's pieces and those of their own and friends' collections by comparing the aesthetic features of each (cf Nailman discussion).

> Tobias Well now, is your Luba stool larger than that?
> DonaldIt's different, because it's bigger in the body.
> Tobias Yeah.
> DonaldIt's about the same height. And the legs are bent back just like that
> but they're tucked in [--] much bigger body.
> Tobias And the seat part is wider too, isn't it?
> DonaldYeah. But I think they varied from village to village.
> Tobias Um-hum. Yeah, that's a great stool. (Selected 06, tour, 311-322)

At times they were literally in dialogue with Han Coray ("He's got a lot of things from right next door to where the um, the Luba…). Intimate familiarity with looking at

African art (in and out of the museum context) moved Donald to comment on the aesthetic taste of the collector.

> I see the hand of a single collector here. Somebody who has a consistent understanding of {aesthetic} language. We all have language…And this person had a language too, I mean, within himself, whoever put this thing together. And that remains consistent all the way…So you can go from one object to the other object to the other object and you can see the consistency of the person who put it all together, besides seeing the individual objects. That's what struck me about this. It wasn't like other museums where, you know, they've collected this, they've got that, they've got that, one's a bequest, one's an auction sale, one's something else. And here, it's one person who's guided it all the way through. (Selected 06, post-interview, 79-95)

This comment echoes the curator's message about the aesthetic premise that prompted Coray to assemble the collection. Tobias and Donald also understood the historical context of the aesthetic ideas that had so excited Coray:

> Tobias But, like I tell students, one of the most important things about African tribal art you have to remember, that it changed what we think of as western art…that's the significance of tribal artists to me. When all the artists at the turn of the century like Picasso and all these people that were forerunners of contemporary art, this changed their [view], changed our attitude about art and I think this the significance. And when you're looking at, at, some of the tap root, if you will, of the contemporary art, modern art, and looking at this and turning around the corner, and going to the contemporary wing of the museum, and say, "Well, this is a springboard for a lot of what I'm seeing now." And understanding that idea, I think, is a very important idea. (Selected 06, post-interview, 184-199)

Selected and On-site Visitors' Learning in *Soul of Africa*

So what did visitors learn? Returning to our definition of learning as being conversational elaboration, in this case between curatorial ideas about African art and culture and visitors, . The finding that most of what visitors talked about was related to the objects and ideas in the exhibition suggests a high level of engagement with the exhibition. Further, visitors worked hard to make connections by exchanging curatorially-supplied information they thought interesting or worthwhile and through their cross-cultural and cross personal connections.

Our analysis of visitors' responses to the questions in the pre-and post-interview indicate that what visitors took away with them can be summarized into five general kinds of learning:

1. The ability to mention and refer to specific ideas and themes regarding anthropology that are derived from label copy.

Most of the visitors in this study made extensive use of the label copy in order to understand the exhibition. Their comments explicitly recalled the curatorial intent regarding a number of anthropological ideas they had read and thought about.

Janice:

2. The ability to mention and refer to specific ideas and themes regarding aesthetic features that they noticed.

3. Evidence that visitors were actively engaged in considering their role of being in dialogue with the curatorship and learning environment of the museum itself.

4. The ability to mention and refer to examples they had seen in the exhibition of new, different, or finer examples of objects or ideas already familiar to them.

Camilla: Ancestral worship was extremely important and I had known that but in looking at some of the artifacts that we saw today, it just reinforced how important ancestral worship was and how they felt the ancestors controlled their destiny and what was going on. Even today our ancestors still continue to control part of our destiny but not to the extent we find in the African culture.

5. Connection of aesthetic and anthropological ideas to their personal lives.

It is illuminating to compare what was said in the on-line tours to the summative responses to questions in the post-interview because visitors sometime describe pieces or ideas as particularly meaningful that they barely mentioned while in the gallery. While looking at the ceremonial weapons, Bliss commented, "Oh. I love those weapons. Gosh!" (On-site 5, tour, 423) without the further elaboration she had given about other pieces. When asked in the post-interview what she particularly enjoyed, she said, "I liked the weapons the best, I guess. I guess that's cause we're from a hunting family" (On-site 5, post-interview, 26-28). This example shows the schism in visitor thinking and talking that can occur between viewing and after the fact questioning. However, this is not to say that a lack of talk about a piece or idea during the tour meant that visitors were unable later to make thoughtful and sophisticated syntheses.

As we described earlier, several of the curatorial messages barely received a conversational nod in terms of the percentage of talk they represented. Possibly, these messages had no particular meaning to the visitors in our study. What is likely, however, is that visitors internalized some of these messages without indicating so in their talking. Certainly, the composition of the tour groups influenced the conversations. A family's conversation sounded considerably different from that of two old friends'. Further, touring the exhibition with a different person might open up or close down a visitor's potential for discussing different ideas or noticing different features.

The African American visitors' conversations revealed an added dimension of identity at work. Even among those who considered themselves to be art and museum neophytes said they were not surprised by what they saw in *Soul of Africa*. Nevertheless, the exhibition was deeply meaningful to most of the African Americans because it gave them an opportunity to engage with objects of their shared culture and heritage, writ large ("I felt a kinship…"). The post-interviews revealed two sides to this engagement. Some African American visitors, whose relatives had an active interest in African art and culture, used their tour as an opportunity to compare the ideas and objects of the show with past discussions with family members ("Grandaddy had a cane like that "). Others mentioned having relatives who had refused to talk about their African heritage because its loss to them was so painful. These visitors found the exhibit very meaningful because it gave them a non-familial, more neutral forum to view, talk, and learn about a part of themselves that could be difficult to discuss elsewhere.

None of the African American visitors expressed any discomfort with seeing this collection of objects, some of which had played extremely important, sacred, and secret roles, out of the African tribal context from which they had been produced and functioned. The collection and display of some of the objects, arguably, could have struck certain visitors as offensive (eg., the *minganji* mask which in Pende society was so secret that women and children were forbidden to look at it; or the hourglass drum, that was supposed to be destroyed upon a chief's death because it represented his voice, and thus his power). Several visitors said they were grateful to be able to see these objects directly, as opposed to in books or on television, and without having to travel to Africa. The high visitor pair applauded Coray's removal of the artwork "from the flies and the mud" because it could be shared around the world in a state of excellent preservation. But other comments gave a subtle sense that the African American visitors' view of themselves was as the other in terms of the ostensibly European American museum presentation.

Conclusions

Results of the first level of content coding have given us an empirically-based sense of the different subjects that these museum visitors talk about as they tour an art exhibition. In this case of *Soul of Africa*, the majority of talk concerned exhibition content, but a consistent amount of management talk showed that visitors with all levels of museum experience were concerned with issues of orientation and were always aware that they stood in dialogue with museum issues.

Whether or not visitors resonated with all the curators' sub-messages about *Soul of Africa*, their conversations reflected the influence of their own knowledge and experience that served to help them in making connections between the information and meanings that were museum-supplied or visitor-supplied.

Some art museum curators who labor long and hard to create thoughtful and informative label copy and sensitive exhibit design might feel dismayed and misunderstood if they were to hear the large amount and seemingly tangential nature of visitor-take talk going on in their galleries. We believe that this result should actually be seen as very encouraging for curators. Because of the paucity of talk that was completely off subject (personal talk) and the finding that visitors used so much of their personal take to make meaning shows that *Soul of Africa's* curatorial supports created a rich art environment in which people felt sufficiently comfortable to make many different associations. Their visit could be informative as well as personally meaningful, not solely an occasion to absorb new knowledge about unfamiliar aesthetics and anthropology. In addition, that visitors were so interested in the aesthetics of the artwork showed that they were not distracted or overwhelmed by the anthropological affordances. The curators seemed to have balanced the strands nicely: Visitors appreciated the anthropology but did not forget that they were in an art museum.

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