Asian Art Museum
CHONG-MOON LEE CENTER

Baseline Visitor Experience Study
Summary of Key Findings

2015
This project was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (Grant #: MA-10-14-0497-14).
Introduction
The vision of the Asian Art Museum is to use art as a conduit to spark connections for visitors across cultures and through time. These connections invite and ignite curiosity, conversation, and creativity. What drives these connections is the museum’s approach to interpreting the art and cultures of Asia. It goes beyond simply “showing” or “telling.” It requires engaging people in ways that are relevant and meaningful to them.

With these goals in mind, the Asian Art Museum is undertaking a process to examine and rethink its interpretive approaches in the galleries. In order to make more informed decisions about the ways in which we engage visitors with art, the museum commissioned a Baseline Visitor Experience Study. This study was designed to help the museum understand and learn from how visitors experience the museum. It included their perceptions from before they step in the door, to how they navigate the space, to how they react to and interact with the art and the interpretive tools offered.

The museum staff worked with Audience Viewpoints Consulting to design and conduct the study, which took place over the course of four months in 2013.

Research Questions

The study identified research questions focused on three aspects of the visitor experience:

**PRE-VISIT AND START OF VISIT**

What are visitors’ pre-visit and early visit experiences? What motivates them to visit? How do they learn about the museum? Are visitors’ wayfinding needs being met?

**VISITOR BEHAVIOR AND DESIGN ELEMENTS**

How are visitors currently using the museum? What visitor behaviors do we see? How effective are the museum’s interpretive and design elements at helping visitors engage with the artworks?

**COGNITIVE AND AFFECTIVE OUTCOMES**

What cognitive and affective outcomes are seen as a result of visiting the museum?
Study Overview
Methods

WHOLE VISIT STUDY

The Whole Visit Study examined the visitor experience through the entire visit to the museum. Participants were tracked throughout their visit, recording their path through the museum, time spent, and which floors and galleries were visited. Following the visit, participants completed a survey and about half participated in interviews to allow for a deeper conversation about the visit, focusing on understanding the visitor perspective and how the visit might be improved. The sample for the Whole Visit Study including the following:

- Timing and tracking (150 visitors)
- Surveys (144 visitors)
- Interviews (82 visitors)

FOCUSED EXHIBIT STUDIES

A series of four focused exhibit studies were utilized to focus on specific interpretive approaches, how they are working, and how they might be modified to better meet visitors’ expectations and needs. The specific studies included:

- **Orientation Study** (30 visitors): This study examined how visitors were using the orientation area in Gallery 1, and how it helped them think about and experience the artworks in the 3rd floor galleries.
- **Themes and Stories Study** (20 visitors): This study examined the extent to which visitors were noticing and understanding what artworks in the galleries had in common.
- **Label Study** (68 visitors): This study examined visitors’ label use and reactions to the current interpretive labels.
- **Technology Study** (20 visitors): This study examined attitudes toward the inclusion of technology and how it might complement visits to special exhibitions or the collections galleries.
Whole Visit Study Sample

Data for the Whole Visit Study was collected on 60 days from April through August 2013, a span intended to give a broader picture across seasonal changes to the museum’s attendance patterns and linked to the special exhibition content. A breakdown of when the data was collected follows:

No Special Exhibition
(May 30–June 27, 2013)

China’s Terracotta Warriors:
The First Emperor’s Legacy
(April 25–May 26, 2013)

In the Moment:
Japanese Art
from the Larry Ellison
Collection*
(June 28–August 28, 2013)

The Cyrus Cylinder
and Ancient Persia:
A New Beginning*
(August 9–27, 2013)

*Note that the exhibition periods for In the Moment and Cyrus Cylinder overlapped. As a result, all participants during Cyrus Cylinder are also counted as participants during In the Moment.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

A stratified random sampling approach was used to ensure representation from four specific groups: locals, tourists, groups visiting with children, and members. Note that some groups overlap.

60% Bay Area locals
40% Tourists

52% First-time visitors
48% Repeat visitors

26% Families
74% Adult-only groups

19% Members
81% Non-members
Comparison to Overall Visitorship

The charts below provide demographic information about the study population, as compared to exit survey data collected about our overall visiting audience during the same time periods (May and August 2013). While the sampling resulted in some variations, the sample for this study was similar to the overall visiting audience in many ways.

AUDIENCE SEGMENTS

Audience segments are based on audience segmentation work completed in 2006.

- **Reflective/Spiritualists** (want to be inspired by art and recharge)
  - Visitor Experience Study: 23%
  - Exit Surveys: 25%

- **Family Fun Time** (seek an entertaining, family-friendly environment)
  - Visitor Experience Study: 21%
  - Exit Surveys: 9%

- **Art Lovers** (have a deep emotional connection to and knowledge of art)
  - Visitor Experience Study: 19%
  - Exit Surveys: 25%

- **Family Learning Time** (seek an educational, family-friendly environment)
  - Visitor Experience Study: 17%
  - Exit Surveys: 19%

- **Art Thrill Seekers** (want to be stimulated by art and to learn, like to see things that are important or timely)
  - Visitor Experience Study: 17%
  - Exit Surveys: 18%

- **Nightlifers** (seek a high-energy, social environment)
  - Visitor Experience Study: 3%
  - Exit Surveys: 4%

GENDER

- **Male**
  - Visitor Experience Study: 27%
  - Exit Surveys: 36%

- **Female**
  - Visitor Experience Study: 71%
  - Exit Surveys: 64%

- **Transgender**
  - Visitor Experience Study: 1%
  - Exit Surveys: 0%
### AGE OF RESPONDENTS

- **18 to 24**: 13% | 8%
- **25 to 44**: 33% | 29%
- **45 to 64**: 28% | 36%
- **65 and older**: 26% | 28%

### ETHNICITY

- **White/Caucasian**: 51% | 67%
- **Asian**: 29% | 20%
- **Multi-racial**: 11% | 7%
- **Hispanic/Latino**: 6% | 3%
- **African American**: 1% | 3%
- **Other**: 2% | 1%
**VISITOR ORIGIN**

- **Bay Area Locals**: 60% | 59%
- **Other California**: 9% | 12%
- **Other U.S. State**: 15% | 18%
- **International**: 17% | 11%

**FAMILIARITY WITH ASIAN ART**

- **Unfamiliar**: 21% | 17%
- **Somewhat familiar**: 47% | 42%
- **Pretty familiar**: 26% | 31%
- **Very familiar**: 7% | 10%
Key Findings & Implications
Pre-Visit and Start of Visit

**FINDING #1**

The museum’s publicity and advertising efforts are effective at making visitors aware of the experiences and programs available at the museum.

The most common way visitors learned about what to see or do at the museum was through some form of publicity or advertising (e.g. newspaper or magazine article, museum publication, advertisement, brochure, museum e-communication). This percentage was much greater than the percentage who mentioned word of mouth, typically the most common source of information about a museum.

![Pie chart showing the percentage of visitors who learned about the museum through different sources.](chart)

*Note:* Some visitors mentioned more than one source of information. As a result, percentages do not total 100%.

**IMPLICATIONS**

- Because the museum has control over some of these resources, the museum can think more strategically about how to use these media to help visitors plan their visits.
- Consider ways to increase word-of-mouth information sharing.
FINDING #2

Wayfinding is somewhat confusing for visitors; however, these issues are typically seen as minor rather than major issues.

Issues with wayfinding included the discontinuity of special-exhibition galleries, difficulty finding galleries or knowing which collections gallery they were in on the 2nd and 3rd floors, confusing or not obvious signage, and difficulty using the map. Visitors generally considered these issues to be minor and indicated that overall they did not have major issues with wayfinding.

IMPLICATIONS

- Additional directional signage has been developed for the ground floor. Wayfinding signage is refined as part of the ongoing planning of each year’s program.
- Consider the best order for directing visitors through the special-exhibition galleries to reduce confusion.
Visitor Behavior and Design Elements

**FINDING #3**

Most visitors spend between 1.5 and 2.5 hours at the museum and half see both a special exhibition and at least some of the collections galleries.

Visitors typically spend between 1.5 and 2.5 hours at the museum. Just over half of visitors visited both a special exhibition and some of the collections galleries; however, the remainder viewed only one or the other. Members, repeat visitors, and locals were more likely than non-members, first-time visitors, and tourists to visit only the 1st floor special-exhibition galleries.

- **Special Exhibition & Collections Galleries:** 51%
- **Collections Galleries:** 24%
- **Special Exhibition Only:** 25%

**IMPLICATIONS**

- Think about ways to create more connections between special exhibitions and the collections galleries to inspire more visitors who come for a special exhibition to also visit the collections galleries.

**Visitors who saw ONLY the special exhibition:**
- 61% members
- 44% repeat visitors
- 35% local visitors
- 16% non-members
- 8% first-time visitors
- 11% tourists
FINDING #4

Special exhibitions are an essential component of the visitor experience.

Special exhibitions are most frequently mentioned as the specific thing that visitors were looking forward to seeing (especially for members, locals, and repeat visitors) and are the primary driver of where visitors start their visit. Special exhibitions are also most frequently mentioned as the highlight of the visit.

64% of visitors said they were specifically looking forward to seeing a special exhibition.

43% of visitors said wanting to see the special exhibition was the driver for where they started their visit.

42% describe the special exhibition as the highlight of their visit.

IMPLICATIONS

- Given the importance of the special exhibitions to the visitor experience, try to minimize dark periods when there is no special exhibition and/or plan other special experiences for these time periods.
FINDING #5

Visitors do not follow the museum’s recommended path for viewing the exhibitions and collections and miss many museum highlights.

Most visitors start their visit on the 1st floor, with less than a quarter starting their visit on the 3rd floor (the recommended starting place for a visit). Even for just the collections galleries, visitors are more likely to start viewing the collections on the 2nd floor than the 3rd floor. (This may have been impacted by the Cyrus Cylinder exhibition, which was on the 2nd floor and was an attendance driver). If they visit the collections galleries, visitors go through most of the galleries on the floor(s) they visit (with the exception of the galleries off the main path), spending around 1-3 minutes in each of the collections galleries.

Where do visitors start their visit to the galleries?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Floor</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where do visitors start viewing the permanent collection?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Floor</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the seven objects identified as museum highlights were viewed by between 35-46% of visitors who entered the gallery where the object was located. The least viewed was the Jade Small Container (viewed by 22% of visitors who entered the gallery). The most viewed was the Simhavaktra Dakini (viewed by 67% of visitors who entered the gallery).

IMPLICATIONS

- Consider ways to support visitors using a more free-choice, as opposed to a prescribed, visitor path through the museum.
- Place museum highlights in more prominent locations and identify them more clearly as important objects to call attention to them. (Efforts to enhance the visibility of museum highlights are already underway.)
- Offer more opportunities to orient visitors regardless of where they start their visit or enter a particular gallery.
FINDING #6

Looking at artwork, reading labels, and talking to others occur frequently in gallery stops during the visit.

The 150 observed visitors made 3,323 stops in galleries with artworks in them. The most commonly observed visitor behaviors during gallery stops included looking at artwork, reading labels, and talking to others in their groups. Other behaviors, such as taking a picture, watching a video (very few galleries have videos in them), or talking to a museum docent, volunteer, or staff member (access to these individuals is not consistently offered) were seen fairly infrequently. Many of the behaviors were seen more often in special-exhibition galleries than in the collections galleries.

What percent of gallery stops included the following behaviors?

- Looking at an artwork: 83%
- Reading a label: 62%
- Talking to others in their group: 60%
- Taking a picture: 11%
- Watching a video: 10%
- Talking to a docent, volunteer, or staff member: 2%

IMPLICATIONS

- Consider ways to increase opportunities for visitors to engage with artworks in ways other than looking or reading.
- Given how often label-reading behavior occurred, examine how labels can be used to encourage visitors to notice certain aspects of the artwork or engage in specific behaviors.
Visitors are fairly aware of the overall organization of the galleries (by geographic area and chronology), but awareness of key themes identified by the museum are not necessarily standing out for visitors.

A large number of visitors identified the overall organization of the galleries as a geographic and/or chronological organization.

How do visitors perceive the museum is organized?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronology</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not see collection</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of art</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Some visitors mentioned more than one organizational structure. As a result, percentages do not total 100%.
However, visitors in the Orientation Study (one of the focused exhibit studies where visitors were interviewed about a particular aspect of the visit) had difficulty remembering the specific themes called out in the orientation panels (Spread of Buddhism, Trade and Exchange, Local Beliefs and Practices), even immediately after viewing the panel. Following their visit to the 3rd floor galleries, most visitors in this study also did not recall explicitly seeing these themes in the galleries (the one exception to this was the Spread of Buddhism).

**HALF**

of interviewed visitors did not notice the themes in the orientation panels, even immediately after engaging with the panels.

Within two specific galleries studied for the Themes and Stories Study, awareness of overarching themes was mixed. In Gallery 26: Japanese Buddhist Art, most visitors identified the gallery as having a theme related to Japanese Buddhism. In Gallery 15: China 221 BCE–906 CE, however, visitors did not seem to identify an overarching theme and instead tended to describe the gallery by its contents.

Visitors who read labels were more likely to have an awareness of themes and stories. Although they did not necessarily notice the specific overarching themes identified by the museum, visitors were able to identify other stories or main messages they saw in the museum, such as stories about the history of Asia, religions of Asia, and the lives of people.

**91%**

of visitors identified at least one story or main message.

**IMPLICATIONS**

- Make themes and stories more noticeable and accessible in the galleries, highlight and repeat important themes and stories in multiple places, use multiple modes of communication to present themes and stories.
- Break up larger galleries into smaller discrete areas where sub-themes can be made more obvious by the objects themselves.
FINDING #8

Visitors report satisfaction with the labels, however they “forage” for information that interests them, rather than reading all labels thoroughly.

Almost all visitors reported reading at least some labels. However, observations revealed visitors read only a small portion of the labels, typically when they were curious or interested in a specific work of art. In the Label Study the median number of labels read was 4-6 labels per gallery, with visitors spending a total of about 1 minute reading labels in a specific gallery. Visitors reported that labels are an appropriate length and complexity and answer their questions. The Label Study revealed that labels with photos were particularly appealing to visitors, and several visitors also commented positively on the “staff picks” labels, which feature a museum staff member highlighting an object that interests them personally. Visitors are open to the idea of including the curator’s voice and opinion on labels, although they caution that it should be in addition to, not instead of, the current label approach of providing neutral factual information.

96% of visitors reported reading some labels.

83% of visitors thought the length of labels was “just right.”

61% said they were able to get answers to questions they had about the art.

IMPLICATIONS

- Consider adding additional elements to labels, such as photographs, the curator’s voice, and more informal language, to increase the attractiveness.
- Include big ideas in object labels, so visitors can quickly grasp the idea without reading an entire label.
FINDING #9

Visitors enjoyed the use of technology in the special exhibitions and were open to the inclusion of technology throughout the museum, provided there was a choice about whether to engage with it and it did not interfere with appreciation of the artworks.

Visitors in the Technology Study had a positive reaction to the technology used in In the Moment. Visitors felt the technology provided context and information about the art and enabled them to look at the art in a different way. Some technology was used more than others; notably the QR codes were not used by any of the visitors in the technology study. Visitors generally felt that it was okay to include technology as long as it did not distract from appreciating the art and indicated that they preferred using technology for the interpretation of specific works of art rather than to provide a general overview.

IMPLICATIONS

- Look into and test more ways to engage the use of technology, particularly uses of technology that provide new ways to view the artwork.
- Consider incorporating more of these technologies in the collections galleries.
Cognitive and Affective Outcomes

FINDING #10

Visitors report learning new things, making personal connections with the works of art, seeing connections with the contemporary world, and being inspired to think or do something differently after their visit.

Visitors commented that they learned about the permanent collection (about specific types of art, the amount of art, and the variety of art), about the museum building and the museum’s presence in San Francisco, about content related to special exhibitions, and about the diversity of Asian cultures. Visitors also felt that they made personal connections to the works of art, describing art that they enjoyed, that reminded them of their family, friends, or Asian heritage, or that connected to their studies or hobbies. Visitors also saw the art as connected to the contemporary world, primarily because it reflected current global issues (e.g. war, world politics, religion, globalization, and the growth of China) or because it increased their awareness of Asian art and culture. Visitors also described themselves as inspired to learn more about Asian art or Asian cultures, create art, change their homes to emulate the art they saw, travel to Asia, or visit the museum again.

99% of visitors were able to describe something they learned from the visit.

81% report making a personal connection to the artworks.

81% of visitors made connections to the contemporary world.

87% of visitors indicated they were inspired to think or do something differently.

IMPLICATIONS

- Think about ways to further assist visitors in making connections: by making contemporary connections explicit, using technology to allow visitors to share and repurpose the collection and its ideas for their own creative purposes, offering visitors suggestions for how to act on their inspirations, and providing opportunities and links to learn about Asian art and culture and practice art.
- Gather more information about the kinds of connections people are making and better understand which ones have implications for outside or after the visit.
Overall, visitors are satisfied with their experience, but offered suggestions for ways the experience could be made more meaningful.

A majority of visitors described their experience at the museum as excellent (rating of 9-10 on a 10-point scale). Suggestions for improving the museum and making it more meaningful for visitors included more interpretation (e.g., more technology, interactivity, information, available staff, languages used in interpretation), gallery improvements (e.g., improved labels and gallery lighting, seating), making the museum more family- and kid-friendly, improved wayfinding, more special events, and more variety and breadth of art displayed.

Overall Satisfaction Ratings

**Excellent** 63%  **Good** 31%  **Fair (6%)**

**Poor (1%)**

**IMPLICATIONS**

- Consider visitor suggestions for improvement in the development of new interpretive plans or in any gallery redesigns.
Conclusion
As the Asian Art Museum explores new interpretive approaches, the findings from the Baseline Visitor Experience Study provide an important picture of how the current visitor experience has been successful for visitors and how it can be improved. In many ways, the museum is already seeing positive outcomes:

- Museum publicity efforts are successful at making visitors aware of the experiences available at the museum.
- Visitors spend extended periods of time at the museum and engage in looking at artworks, reading labels, and talking to others during the majority of their gallery stops.
- Visitors report high levels of satisfaction with their experience and report learning new things, making personal and societal connections, and being inspired to think or do things differently after their visit.

However, there is clearly room for incorporating new interpretive approaches to help visitors engage more deeply with the works of art. These include:

- More prominently identifying the museum highlights
- Calling more attention to the important themes and stories represented in the museum’s collection
- Utilizing technology to allow visitors to engage with the art in new ways
- Creating stronger connections between the special exhibitions and collections galleries
- Experimenting with new approaches to label writing
- Allowing for a more free-choice path for exploring the collections galleries
- Improving wayfinding

The museum is a dynamic entity, constantly improving to offer a better experience. Visitor actions and feedback will continue to drive that work.

**Resources**

Find this report and links to the museum’s other education research here:
http://education.asianart.org/professional-development/educational-research