Whose Museum Is It Anyway?

Towards More Authentic Community-Centered Practices in Creating Exhibitions

Alison Jean, Swarupa Anila

Introduction

On November 4, 2018, the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) opened its Asian galleries after three years of planning – and more than 15 years of innovative visitor-centered exhibition development. The 6,900-square-foot Asian reinstallation features 140 works from the DIA's permanent collection of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Indian art (fig. 1).[1] These new galleries dynamically integrate contemporary objects with traditional ones alongside interactive, hands-on, and digital interpretation that engages visitors in meaningful discovery of the artworks and cultural contexts.

The new Asian galleries mark the completion of a full reinstallation of the DIA's collections that began with new approaches developed in the early 2000s. Spurred by declining

visitation and an impending building renovation, the DIA made an institutional commitment to put the visitor at the center of all we do through interpretive planning, exhibition design, and audience research techniques.[2] In 2007, when the museum opened the majority of its new, visitor-centered galleries, attendance and participation increased, and summative evaluations showed strong evidence of meaningful visitor experiences in the galleries.[3]

Since the 2007 reinstallation, we have expanded our practices, bringing visitors and potential audiences into the process of exhibition interpretive planning through focus groups, advisory panels, and

1   The DIA's encyclopedic collection includes more than 65,000 objects. Of these, more than 7,000 comprise the Asian collection, most of which come from China, Japan, Korea, and India.

2   David Penney, "Reinventing the Detroit Institute of Arts: The Reinstallation Project 2002–2007," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 52, no. 1 (2009): 35–44; Jennifer Czajkowski, "Changing the Rules: Making Space for Interactive Learning in the Galleries of the Detroit Institute of Arts," *Journal for Museum Education* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 171–78.

3   Beverly Serrell, Matt Sikora, and Marianna Adams, "What do *Visitors* Mean by 'Meaning'?" *Exhibitionist*, vol. 31 no. 1 (Spring 2013): 8–15.

fig. 1. A view of the new Indian and Southeast Asian gallery.

in-community consultations.[4] Knowing that any single audience engagement technique can address some issues of representation and simultaneously fall short of others, we often combined them in multilayered approaches.

This experiment in co-creation expanded the DIA's foundation of visitor-centeredness towards community-centeredness.

For the Asian galleries reinstallation, we built upon this work – and went even farther. We decided to pilot a new, more robust way to involve community through co-creation. We brought 11 community consultants on as team members to work alongside DIA curators, interpreters, and exhibition managers as we developed concepts for the new galleries (the first step in overall planning).[5]

It was a procedural and ideological first for the DIA. While co-creation goes by different definitions and practices at museums,[6] we decided to define it through a number of goals. We strove for the following:

- integration of community members as team members from the outset of the concept phase,
- alignment of museum and community members' goals through jointly developed visitor outcomes,
- significant ideation between members of communities and staff,
- high levels of engagement and relationship-building between museum staff and community members,
- shared pride in and ownership of final installation.

This experiment in co-creation expanded the DIA's foundation of visitor-centeredness towards *community*-centeredness. We sought to restructure traditional museum practices that centralize institutional authority by reframing where and from whom we think ideas and knowledge can be generated. We wanted to empower community members to directly conceptualize and shape themes for the new Asian galleries.

At the DIA, developing visitor experiences for an exhibition of this scope and scale involves a broad array of expertise from curators, interpreters, designers, digital experience developers, and others. While advocacy for the co-creation initiative came from interpretation, senior museum leadership needed to make practical changes and reshape institutional processes, frameworks, and expectations to support and make space for community members as co-creators.[7]

For this project, Alison Jean facilitated concept development meetings with the

4   For further definition of in-community consultations, focus groups, and advisory panels at the DIA, see Swarupa Anila, "Polyvocality and Representation: What We Need Now," *Museum Education Roundtable* (July 2017), www.museumedu.org/polyvocality-representation-need-now/.

5   In addition to the 11 community consultants, the DIA ultimately engaged more than 150 people from outside the museum – most but not all from Asian communities – to create the Asian galleries. If we include participants in formative evaluation that number rises to 400. To date, this is the most extensive work an art museum of the DIA's type and scale has done to engage community for a permanent collection installation.

6   For analysis of varying definitions and approaches to co-creation, see Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010), www.participatorymuseum.org/chapter8/; Alexandra Rogers and Jenny Rock, "Community co-creation of exhibitions within a museum setting," *Tauhere Connections*, Issue 2 (December 2016): 69–72.

7   For more about the DIA's institutional shifts to support co-creation, see Swarupa Anila, Amy Foley, Nii Quarcopoome, "Systems Thinking for Visitor-centered, Community-engaged Interpretive Planning," in *Systems Thinking for Museum Management*, eds. Yuha Jung and Ann Rowson Love(Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 161.

fig. 2. Some of the community consultants and DIA staff pose together in our project room.

community consultants and developed the visitor experience plans, and Swarupa Anila structured audience inclusion strategies, including the co-creation, across the project timeline. In this article, we reflect on the project's co-creative phase to share some challenges encountered, lessons learned, and recommendations for future projects with communities.

Selection Process

Overview

In November 2015, seven core Asian reinstallation staff from DIA's interpretation, curatorial, and exhibition departments began preparations to include community members. We developed and posted a short-term job position for community consultants who would join the project team, explore the Asian collection, and develop potential themes and object groupings for the new galleries. In addition to providing a description of the job and desired qualifications, the posting noted that participants would be compensated with a stipend of $60/hour. We advertised this employment opportunity on the museum's website and shared it with local professional and cultural organizations with largely Asian memberships. We received a total of 33 applications and

invited approximately half the applicants to interview at the museum with members of the project team. In the end, we hired 11 community consultants (fig. 2).

Group makeup

During the hiring process, we strove for diverse Asian cultural representation. Of the 11 participants, 10 identified as being of Asian heritage: Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, and Thai. Six were born in Asia and five in the United States. We also took other aspects into consideration, such as age: five community consultants were millennials, five were Generation X, and one was a boomer. We sought candidates who had a strong interest in lifelong learning and who enjoyed open discussion and collaborative work. The community consultants were professionals in a range of fields, including engineering, education, medicine, and media. English fluency was required.

Reflection

In selecting the consultants, our intent was to give voice and power to members of Asian communities who have historically been both under- and misrepresented by museums in the West (like the DIA). We also emphasized qualifications such as creative thinking and

excellent interpersonal skills alongside the main objective of attracting participants from a range of local Asian communities.

We later learned through indirect feedback that two candidates who were not chosen felt slighted – that perhaps they were "not Asian enough." Furthermore, two who were selected and participated in the concept phase said there were moments when they felt they had to perform their identity. Their experiences point to elements of tokenism that we sought to avoid and also underscore the complexity and delicacy of identity-based community engagement.[8]

Recommendations

- Be vigilant about caring for community members' experiences that may arise regardless of the museum's intentions.
- Create open and effective systems of communication that encourage community members to express their concerns.

Structuring the Collaboration

The underlying purpose of working with community was to co-create culturally meaningful and broadly relevant stories for the new galleries. Over the course of 18 sessions, the consultants met and worked with DIA staff for nearly 50 hours. Because sessions generally took place in the early evening, the DIA provided parking as well as snacks and occasional meals to remove barriers to participation.

Our work fell into two phases: object review followed by big idea development.[9] Object review focused on providing content about the DIA's Asian collection in order for all team members to share a basic familiarity of the artworks' art historical and cultural contexts that could inform potential big ideas. Curators, including scholars from other museums, delivered presentations on roughly 300 objects, which they preselected as the most important from the DIA's more than 7,000 Asian objects.

Because this phase was lecture heavy, interpretive staff developed activities and reflection exercises to scaffold learning and nurture opportunities for meaning making. A particularly effective exercise empowered community consultants and staff to express their reactions to the artworks through voting. We designed this activity to demonstrate that objects can provoke multiple interpretations. Using colored stickers, we each voted on images of the artworks according to which objects were visually striking to us, which ones made us want to learn more, and which ones felt confusing or unappealing. The activity was fun, generated enthusiasm, and revealed interesting patterns – similarities and differences – in people's reactions. It also served as a gateway to deeper follow-up discussions.

We found that written reflections helped encourage the consultants to develop their own connections to – and interpretations of – certain artworks. One successful take-home assignment focused on a slow-looking exercise with an artwork of their choosing followed by a written exploration of their visual, intellectual, and emotional reactions

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8   See Helen Kim Ho, "8 Ways People of Color are Tokenized in Nonprofits," *Revolution*, September 18, 2017, https://medium.com/the-nonprofit-revolution/8-ways-people-of-color-are-tokenized-in-nonprofits-32138d086oc1.

9   For more about the big idea as the DIA uses it, see Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 7–18.

to it. To facilitate a sense of immediacy and intimacy with the objects, we provided everyone with high-resolution images. At times, consultants would share parts of their reflections with the larger group. Doing so reinforced the importance, especially for DIA staff, of remaining open to new ways of looking at and understanding the objects – and fostered a sense of connection among team members.

After object review, we moved into phase two, called concept development. This stage was facilitated by DIA interpretive staff and designed to be far more open-ended than the object review portion. Our aim was twofold: to co-create compelling big ideas for potential use in the galleries as well as to offer the community consultants experiences they would find enriching and memorable. To do the latter, we organized in-house field trips, such as a visit to the museum's conservation lab to share the often-unknown challenges of preserving objects. The DIA's curator of African art also toured the group through the African galleries to show them how big ideas manifest from words on a page to rooms filled with objects and interpretive elements.

We spent the bulk of our time, however, identifying and exploring connections among objects, such as through materiality, visual imagery, original context, or artistic intention. These served as thematic starting points for stories to develop into big ideas. In particular, a "So What?" exercise helped tease out why these stories would matter to future visitors to the Asian galleries (figs. 3 & 4). During this period, we generated about 24 potential big ideas.

Our co-creation efforts culminated with a formal presentation to the Exhibition Gallery Strategies (EGS) team, a seven-person

fig. 3. A community consultant looks through his notes.

fig. 4. Playing with potential object groupings.

fig. 5. One of our community consultants presents a big idea to the Exhibition Galleries Strategies team.

committee of museum leadership that oversees the DIA's exhibitions and gallery projects in alignment with institutional goals.[10] This followed the DIA's existing exhibition development process, during which certain project outputs – such as big ideas and object groupings – are vetted and approved by EGS.

Each of the community consultants, curators, and interpreters presented one big idea, explained its meaning and significance, and showed key objects that conveyed the story (fig. 5). EGS members offered their feedback on the ideas, noting what they found compelling or concerning. While their feedback holds weight, the DIA's system empowers teams to filter EGS feedback in the same way that we apply results from other consultations or evaluations.

This EGS checkpoint marked the transition to the next phase of the Asian reinstallation and tapered off formal involvement by the community consultants. They completed a survey ranking the big ideas in order of preference which informed the next phase of development. On three later occasions, we invited the community consultants back for project updates and prototype testing for a digital interactive.

Reflection

In the next phase of work, the project curators and interpreters refined big ideas. We often found ourselves wrestling with the desire to preserve the co-created big ideas while negotiating their gaps and limitations based on space constraints, rotation requirements, and donor requests.

10 Exhibitions Gallery Strategies is comprised of the director of the museum, chief of finance and operations, director of interpretive engagement, director of exhibitions, co-chief curators, and the vice president of collections and information strategies.

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After more research into the collection and further audience testing, we refined certain concepts so that they became more focused. Our work was also influenced by new institutional priorities to organize most of the galleries by culture in support of donor cultivation strategies. Four – or 17 percent – of the 24 community generated ideas followed this trajectory, shifting from cross-cultural stories to ones that were culturally specific.

For example, one co-created big idea read: *Text in Asian paintings forms an integral part of the composition that helps build a sense of community and communion.* This concept grew out of attention to the presence of seals and calligraphy in many East Asian paintings as well as poetic verses written in some Indian paintings. We were especially interested in this idea because it overturned Westernist assumptions that the text is secondary to the visual imagery when, in fact, it is equally important to the viewer's experience. As the reinstallation curators and interpreters revisited this big idea, we realized that our Indian painting collection would not support a sufficient number of rotations. However, our Chinese painting collection could, and so we refined the storyline to focus on these artworks. The resulting big idea now reads: *The layers of meaning in these Chinese paintings record dynamic and ongoing exchanges between generations of artists and viewers.*

Our reflection on the process has also revealed some problematic aspects to how we structured the co-creation.

More commonly, we found that labels and other interpretive elements became better places to locate the stories co-created with our community consultants. For example, we drew inspiration from the "so what" in the original big idea about communion – the act of sharing or exchanging thoughts and feelings – for an interactive handscroll we developed for the Chinese paintings gallery. Visitors roll a cylinder that advances the image on a screen, thereby scrolling their way through a digitized version of a 16th-century painting (fig. 6). Just as original viewers in China left their personal seal stamps on paintings, DIA visitors are able to digitally "stamp" the scroll, adding their mark alongside the seals of others.

Through interactives like this – as well as labels and wall quotes – aspects of 83% of the original big ideas appear in some fashion in the new Asian galleries. This finding demonstrates that our community consultants made important and enduring contributions to the galleries, even though we were often not able to preserve intact versions of the co-created ideas.

Our reflection on the process has also revealed some problematic aspects to how we structured the co-creation. For one, the volume of information caused intellectual fatigue. The community consultants spent 40 percent of their time learning *from* curators and academics rather than working *with* them. In comparison, we spent 30 percent of the sessions on collaborative big idea development. The remaining 30 percent was eaten up by general housekeeping, breaks, and team-building activities.

This unequal emphasis likely reinforced the traditionalist hierarchy of "experts" versus "nonexperts" – the same power dynamic we sought to disrupt by bringing the diverse perspectives of both community members and DIA staff into the process in a sustained and meaningful way. We also speculate that our strict adherence to the schedule may have limited people's creativity and intrinsic motivation to pursue out-of-the-box ideas and areas of interest.

We wonder whether big ideas should have been the end goal of the co-creation phase. A better use of our time with the community consultants may have been to focus more on generating key themes, memorable stories, and other personal resonances that could feed later big idea and interpretive development by interpreters and curators. We have also grappled with how to structure the co-creation so that the community consultants could be actively involved throughout the project rather than concentrating their participation in a single phase. More sustained involvement of community, however, would have ripple effects and require a revised project timeline and budget.

Recommendations

- It's good to have a plan but don't squeeze it too tightly; embrace detours if there's lots of energy around outlier ideas.
- Pad your schedule generously with extra time – you'll need more than you think.

fig. 7. The response station highlights a multiplicity of perspectives and experiences.

Pervasive and Systemic Challenges

One of our community consultants frequently voiced concern about the absence of Philippine cultural material in the DIA's collection. Apparently, this erasure is pervasive in American art museums, despite the fact that the United States is home to the largest overseas population of Filipinos in the world.[11] He pushed us to be proactive about acquiring a piece of Philippine art in time for the opening of the new galleries. His concerns surfaced new awareness among DIA colleagues of deep-seated systemic barriers. Reflecting on her own training, our curator of Asian art realized – and has now raised the issue among her colleagues in the field – that art history programs in the U.S. typically pay little attention to researching and teaching art from the Philippines. However, we allowed practical issues – such as lengthy institutional processes for art acquisitions and project deadlines – to be easy barriers to focusing time and resources on finding solutions.

Similar issues of representation arose during conversations and feedback sessions we had with other community groups later in the project. Over and over, we heard individuals express how important it was to see themselves and their cultures represented in the galleries. Their desires and expectations underscored the major challenge that the DIA's collection is not – and never will be – representative of the full diversity of Asian arts and cultures. To help make our galleries feel more inclusive, we identified opportunities where interpretation could fill in some of these gaps. For example, a dynamic digital map – in both English and major national languages – names every county in Asia and features images of diverse art-making practices from across the continent. Multilingual wall graphics translate key concepts from Hindu and Buddhist traditions into dozens of languages that represent more cultures than we can show through objects alone.

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Another way we used interpretation to address collection gaps is through a response station, placed at a major intersection in the new Asian galleries. At the DIA, response stations are gathering spaces for social interactivity and potential dialogue between visitors. For the Asian response station, we invite visitors to reflect on how their stories relate to objects and ideas in the galleries by writing or drawing on blank cards, designed in the shape of lotus flowers, and hanging their responses on a collective wall. Also on the wall are seven large frames; each features the perspective and portrait of a different community consultant or focus group participant. These are meant to serve as a visual legacy of the significant role that community played in the making of these galleries (fig. 7).

Since the November 2018 opening, hundreds of visitors have added their stories to the wall. While many responses suggest meaningful connection and appreciation, we have noticed a number of comments that draw attention to the lack of representation

11 In 2017, the Asian Art Museum (AAM) of San Francisco mounted the first-ever exhibition of Philippine art in the United States. See "Philippine Art: Collecting Art, Collecting Memories," *Asian Art Museum*, www.asianart.org/press_releases/81.

through the objects. Visitors who identify as Filipino, Hmong, and Vietnamese, for example, have made specific requests for the DIA to display artwork from their own culture.

This response pattern was echoed at a reception, where our community consultants and other collaborators saw the galleries for the first time. We heard powerful reflections:

"As an Asian American, I'm so proud to see my culture honored."

"I remember so much from our sessions. Everything has come to life."

"I see how you listened to us. It's here. I see it!"

But we also heard, with vivid urgency,

"As a Filipino, I am happy to see these wonderful Asian galleries – and I want to see *our* art."

Comments like these serve as potent calls to action. While museums can lean on purposeful interpretation to bring more equitable representation into our galleries, a multilateral approach that includes overturning traditional collecting priorities, achieving diversity in hiring practices and leadership, and implementing other inclusion strategies is the industry standard we should strive for.

Recommendations

- Be transparent with community participants that the museum will falter and may move slowly even when it is listening to those it seeks to better serve.

- Leverage opportunities to create more inclusive spaces through interpretation and programming – but remember these are stopgaps, not long-term solutions.

Evolving Practice

Reinstalling the Detroit Institute of Art's Asian galleries was and will continue to be a learning experience. Though we can see that most of our initial goals for co-creation were met, new challenges arose. While grounded in good intentions and strong approaches for community engagement, the project revealed ways that we must push ourselves to develop and iterate more inclusive, equitable, and empowering practices. Summative evaluations will deepen our understanding of how visitors interact in the galleries and gauge how members of various communities perceive the work.

Would we do it again? Will we continue and sustain community-engaged work in exhibition processes?

Doing community inclusive work in this way can make an exhibition development process more complicated, time-consuming, and expensive. It requires that staff expand and develop new competencies and skills, including critical 1) understandings of identity, culture, place, and issues relevant to communities and 2) self-awareness and transparency on the part of the museum, including outlets for ongoing reflection.

To achieve the highest level of co-creative engagement, partner participants would have the power to change any aspect of a project in its progression.[12] While the DIA was not ready to embrace co-creation at

this level back in 2015 at the outset of Asian reinstallation planning, it might be more of a possibility now. Aspects of high-level co-creation have already taken root in programming, development, and other projects at the DIA, demonstrating that it's not about a one-size-fits-all or a single replicable model. Rather, sustainable community engagement is about adaptability, customization, and above all, a commitment to community empowerment through inclusion.

As museums globally, like the DIA, turn their focus to issues of inclusion and representation, we need to continue doing the hard work of making space for the presence, voices, and actions of our communities.

It is, after all, their museum.

Alison Jean is Interpretive Planner at the Detroit Institute of Arts in Detroit, Michigan. AJean@dia.org

Swarupa Anila is Director of Interpretive Engagement at the Detroit Institute of Arts. sanila@dia.org

12 See Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, 2010, www.participatorymuseum.org/reviews-of-the-participatory-museum/.