

Men and Women: Do They Experience Exhibits Differently?

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Introduction

Last year at the National Museum of American History, two evaluations were conducted for two prototype exhibits: *Commerce and Conflict: The English in Virginia, 1625 and Kiva, Cross, and Crown at Pecos Pueblo* (Korn, 1989a; Korn, 1989b). Each exhibit was an experimental archaeological exhibit and was a prototype for a larger exhibit, *American Encounters 1492-1992*. *American Encounters* will open in 1992 in commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Columbus' voyages to the Americas. The evaluations were designed to provide planning team members with information about visitor behavior and reactions to specific exhibition techniques, concepts, and components. The team wanted to use the results so they could better understand the best way to display archaeological objects and present abstract historical concepts. The evaluations can be viewed as both formative and summative. They are summative in that they were conducted after the exhibits were installed, and they are formative in that the findings of each evaluation will feed into the design and planning of the larger exhibition. This paper focuses on two details of the data. The data imply objects have power, and that the power of the objects is created by those who look at them. I discuss the power of the objects from a male and female perspective. First, a brief description of the exhibit evaluation methods is provided.

Methods

The evaluation methods used for both exhibits are similar in that both included observations and face-to-face interviews. The observations were designed to collect behavior details and demographic characteristics of those who stopped to view the exhibits. The following information was recorded: sex, age (these were accessed by sight after the interview was completed), number of people in the visiting group, the stations at which the visitor stopped, if the visitors took or looked at the brochure, time spent at the case, and their ethnicity. Only those visitors who approached the exhibit case and stayed for five seconds became part of the observation sample. In *Commerce and Conflict* 100 visitors were observed, and in *Pecos* 122 visitors were observed.

The interview questions were designed to provide behavior details that were difficult to discern by observing, and information that can be collected only through conversation, such as what initially attracted visitors to the exhibit, and what meaning did the exhibit have for them. In *Commerce and Conflict*, only those visitors who visited the exhibit for 45 seconds or more (referred to as long-time visitors) became part of the interview sample. A total of 31 visitors were interviewed. This small sample was dictated by time and budgetary restraints. In *Pecos*, all visitors (long and short time) who viewed *Pecos* during data collection times were asked to participate in the interview. A total of 99 interviews were conducted. Also in *Pecos* there was a control group of 100 people who had not seen the exhibit. They were queried about the title, *Kiva, Cross, and Crown at Pecos Pueblo*. All the interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed to facilitate analysis.

Description of Exhibits

Both exhibits were single case displays housed in a rectangular case that was 15' 10" long. Both exhibits included archaeological artifacts, text, object labels, and graphics. The artifacts were displayed on a series of stanchions that ran the length of the case. Graphics, photos and some text labels were displayed on the back wall of the case, and other text labels were directly on the stanchions in *Commerce and Conflict*, and on posts, at an angle in *Pecos*. There were four levels of text in each exhibit.

Results and Discussion

Who Stopped at Each Exhibit?

To keep this presentation focused, only part of the data is reported: the part that focuses on gender and the power of objects. The observations indicated that more men (76%) approached *Commerce and Conflict* than women (24%). Though many of the men were accompanied by women, the men tended to lead their companion(s) to the case. The person who approached the case first was the one who became part of the sample. By examining the contents of the case, one can hypothesize why more males than females were attracted to the exhibit. Cannonballs, a breast plate, sword and carpenter tools are some of the objects one sees as they approach the case. While these objects are important to the story of the exhibit, and they are interesting objects, they are masculine in nature, and apparently have less attraction power for women than men. The objects in *Pecos*, however, attracted a nearly equal proportion of men to women: 46% were men, and 54% were women. The contents of this case included several large southwestern pots.

What Attracts Visitors To Archaeological Displays?

As part of each interview, visitors were asked what had originally attracted them to the exhibit. The analysis of the transcript was conducted

in this manner. First the researcher studied the responses to each question in an effort to identify response patterns. As patterns started to emerge, similar responses were grouped together, and descriptive names or categories were applied to each group. The categories and the number of times they appear in the data are summarized in Table 1. Some individuals were attracted to several things in the exhibit, so the "frequency" total exceeds the number of those in the sample.

In some respects, the categories that emerged in the *Pecos* data are different than those that emerged in *Commerce and Conflict*, but some comparisons can be made. In *Pecos*, nearly half of the visitors mentioned an appropriate content area as influential in attracting visitors to the exhibit. A content area category includes Indians and/or history (21%), the Southwest and/or New Mexico (16%), and archeology (2%). Content areas are identified by an asterisk (*) on Table 1. Artifacts, including pottery (25%), specific artifacts including the bell, shield, arrowheads, carved wood, and brass castings (10%), and unspecified artifacts (6%) were also mentioned by visitors as influential in attracting visitors to the exhibit. In contrast, the signs, text or map (8%) generated little interest among visitors. Responses that were not dependent on the content or design of the exhibit (convenient or wandering 12%, and curious 8%) were moderately low attraction features at 20%. These data suggest that the artifactual and conceptual content of *Pecos* motivated visitors to visit the exhibit. The content, from the perspective of the visitor, might be "Indian history," "pottery," and "New Mexico/Southwest."

Commerce and Conflict visitors mentioned an appropriate content area (interest in archeology 10%, and interest in Indians and history 6%) as influential in attracting them to the exhibit less frequently than *Pecos* visitors (39%). About one third of the visitors mentioned the artifacts (interest in unspecified "artifacts" 16%, and interest in specific objects including the cannonballs, sword, carpenter tools and armor 16%) as influential in attracting visitors to the exhibit. The signs, text and map (26%) were mentioned by slightly more than one quarter of the visitors (see Note 1). Responses that were not dependent on the content or design of the exhibit, such as "convenient or wandering" (19%), and "nothing in particular" (10%) were mentioned more frequently by *Commerce and Conflict* visitors than by *Pecos* (20%) visitors. One thing the data suggest is that the artifacts in *Commerce and Conflict* were not visually distinguishable to the layperson, and they were not easily associated with a specific region or culture. The objects in *Commerce and Conflict* were powerful in their own right, and they attracted men because they were "artifacts," or because there was a bell, a sword, and arrowheads (see Note 2). In *Pecos*, visitors were able to associate the artifacts with the Southwest, probably because the imagery is more characteristic and widely known.

Table 1
Attraction to Archaeological Exhibits
Commerce and Conflict, N=31; *Pecos*, N=99

Descriptive Category	<i>Commerce</i> N=31	<i>Pecos</i> N=99
Pottery	-	25%
*Interest in Indians or History	6%	21%
*Lived/visited New Mexico	-	10%
*Interest in Southwest	-	6%
*Interest in Archeology	10%	2%
Interest in specific object	16%	10%
Interest in artifacts	16%	6%
Sign, title, map or label	26%	8%
Convenient or wandering	19%	12%
Nothing in Particular	10%	-
Curious	-	8%
Miscellaneous	6%	8%

*Identified as a content area

The visitor's ability to identify objects, and to place them in a conceptual context can play a role in attracting them to the display. If they are able to sense an exhibit is about Indian history, for example (visitors to both exhibits mentioned this as influential in attracting them to the exhibit – *Pecos*, 21%; *Commerce and Conflict*, 6%), and if visitors are in fact interested in Indian history, they will visit the exhibit. While both exhibits were about Indian history, more *Pecos* visitors, however, mentioned, and possibly realized this. The objects in an exhibit do impact visitors, and they can, at a glance, communicate a basic idea (conceptual theme) and motivate people to visit an exhibit. Thus, objects should be carefully chosen, and the public consulted during the selection process. It is important to understand public response to objects if they play a role in attracting visitors to exhibits and in communicating the content of an exhibit (Pankowski, 1990).

Why Are Males, More So Than Females, Able To Correctly Identify The Theme Of *Pecos*?

In the *Pecos* study, a chi-square was calculated to determine if there was a relationship between gender and correctly describing the exhibit's theme. In fact, there was a significant relationship. Forty-five percent of the men and 24% of the women were able to correctly describe the theme ($p = .022$). Do the interests females have in an archaeological exhibit differ from those

of males, and what do those differences mean in terms of the visitor experience? Is it possible that this exhibit has a gender perspective? In order to answer these questions, visitor responses from the interview question "What initially attracted you to this exhibit?" were analyzed to understand if initial reasons for visiting the exhibit impacted the perspective from which it was viewed. Female and male responses were examined separately. The largest discrepancy between male and female responses is found in the "Pottery" category, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Attraction to *Pecos*: Female and Male Responses
N=99

Descriptive Category	Female N=55	Male N=44
Pottery	36%	11%
Interest in Indians or History	18%	25%
Lived/visited New Mexico	9%	11%
Interest in Southwest	4%	9%
Interest in Archeology	4%	-
Interest in specific object	9%	11%
Interest in artifacts	-	14%
Sign, title, map or label	5%	11%
Convenient or wandering	13%	11%
Curious	9%	7%
Miscellaneous	4%	7%

Thirty six percent of the female interviewees, compared to 11% of the males, said the pottery attracted them to the exhibit. Of those women, 10% were able to correctly identify the theme of the exhibit. Of the female interviewees who mentioned that other things attracted them to the exhibit, 31% were able to correctly identify the theme of the exhibit (see note 3).

To examine this emerging pattern further, the second most frequently chosen category, "interest in Indians and history," was analyzed. This category was mentioned by 18% of the females. Of those, 40% were able to correctly identify the theme of *Pecos*. This percentage is close to the percentage of males (45%) who were able to correctly identify the theme. Table 3 summarizes this information.

Table 3
Female and Male Responses and Ability to Identify *Pecos* Theme

	Female N=55	Male N=44
Pottery	10% (2/20)	60% (3/5)
Indians or History	40% (4/10)	55% (6/11)
All categories	24% (13/55)	45% (20/44)

Asking visitors what initially attracted them to an exhibit provides a clue as to the perspective from which they have viewed the exhibit. This analysis indicates that those who were attracted to the pottery had difficulty moving from that initial attraction to the theme of the exhibit. When visitors were asked what they thought the exhibit was about, some of the females who said "pottery" responded in this way:

"I really did not look at it too much. I guess different places and maybe different kinds of pottery they made . . ."

"About Indians, their history, what they used, what was important to them at that time of life."

"History of the pottery that originated in New Mexico."

"The Indian potter, that kind of thing, the people at Pecos."

Conclusions

Differences between men and women, and what they like in museums are not new findings (Munley, 1983; Silverman, 1988). Women, in this case, like pottery, and this preference was strong enough to overpower their receiving the intended message of the exhibit. Men, however, held a different perspective, and they saw the exhibit in much the same way as did the exhibit developers. Visitors, both men and women, bring with them prior knowledge and interests. Meaning for visitors is generated from what the museum offers and from what they offer. Uncovering the multitude of visitor perspectives introduces the visitor voice. Exhibit planners need to realize that visitors play an important role in defining their museum experience, and they need to understand this phenomenon as they continue to try to communicate specific exhibit themes. They also need to realize that objects remain the single most influential component in museum exhibits. People come to museums to see the "stuff" – not necessarily to see

conceptual themes and stories. The power of the object, from the visitor perspective, cannot be ignored.

References

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Notes

1. For *Commerce and Conflict*, the *American Encounters* sign was above the exhibit case, and for *Pecos* it was removed (*Pecos*, 8%; *Commerce and Conflict*, 26%). This could account for some of the response differences between *Pecos* and *Commerce and Conflict* visitors.
2. The word "artifacts" was used only by men, and not the women in the sample. Women named the artifacts by name, as did some of the men. Gender and differences in language are not examined in this study, but it is worthwhile to note this detail, as the language men and women use to express themselves may have implications in the analysis of qualitative data.
3. While these percentages indicate a pattern, the relationship between correctly describing the theme of the exhibit, and being attracted to pottery versus being attracted to other things failed to reach statistical significance ($p=.10$ two-tailed) and therefore should be considered tentative until a larger sample can be tested.