

# The National Gallery of Canada's Theme Rooms: Exploring the Educational Exhibition

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national gallery of canada

In addition to their functions of collecting, preserving, studying, and exhibiting, museums have an educational role. In 1983, *A Building Programme for the New National Gallery of Canada* proposed the development of designated didactic areas within the new building as places of learning to complement the visitor's experience of viewing art. This article discusses the concept of a didactic space and traces the development of four such areas in the Gallery's Canadian collection. Examining constraints and objectives, it details the planning process, the approaches selected, and the content of the four different spaces. Each of the areas, called Theme Rooms, stands physically and conceptually distinct from the others. An evaluation plan designed to inform the improvement and design of future Rooms is described, leading back to the fundamental question of how best to enhance the visitor's chosen aesthetic experience.

En plus de collectionner, de conserver, d'étudier et d'exposer des oeuvres, les musées ont un rôle éducatif. En 1983, il a été proposé dans un document intitulé *A Building Programme for the New National Gallery of Canada* que des aires à vocation didactique soient prévues dans le nouveau bâtiment afin de servir de complément aux salles d'exposition. L'auteure de cet article discute du concept d'aire didactique et décrit comment ont été aménagées quatre aires de ce genre au Musée des beaux-arts du Canada. Analysant les contraintes et les objectifs, elle explique le processus de planification, les approches retenues et le contenu des quatre aires. Désignées sous le nom de "salles thématiques," elles sont toutes, du double point de vue de l'aménagement et de la conception, distinctes les unes des autres. Présentant en outre un plan d'évaluation élaboré en vue d'améliorer la conception des prochaines salles thématiques du Musée, l'auteure nous ramène à la question fondamentale des moyens à prendre pour bonifier l'expérience esthétique choisie par le visiteur.

Together with collecting, preserving, and studying that which is collected, museums have long had an educational role. As far as the National Gallery of Canada is concerned, this educational function is emphasized in *A National Museums Policy for the 80's* (National Museums of Canada, 1981), where the museum's responsibility to share "both the collection and knowledge derived therefrom for the instruction and self-enlightenment of an audience" is firmly stated on the first page. Although the definition of

education and the methods appropriate to it in an art museum setting continue to be hotly debated, it is generally agreed that:

Works of art, no matter how grand, how glorious, how great, are without consequence unless encountered by a seeing eye, a thoughtful mind, and a feeling heart. Works of art live by virtue of their capacity to shape human experience. A viewer's experience becomes artistically significant when he or she is able to treat the work in a manner relevant to its artistically important features. People must be able to "read" the artistic content of images to have artistic experience. The mere presence of works, even in fine museums, is insufficient. (Eisner & Dobbs, 1986, p. 1)

Acknowledging that works of art merely accompanied by identification labels are not necessarily accessible or meaningful to the majority of art museum visitors, education departments have made it their task to bridge the gap between art and the public. The ways in which these bridges are built are as varied as the art collections and the audiences that visit them. Traditionally, guided tours, extended labels, panel texts, and brochures have been offered in a myriad of formats to meet the requirements of diverse audiences. Occasionally education departments themselves mount exhibitions with educational objectives. At the Art Gallery of Ontario, for example, there have been exhibitions such as *Attitudes: The Nude in Art* (1983) and *Viewpoints: Approaches to Contemporary Art* (1988). These exhibitions explored their publics' reaction to certain imagery and forms of art, and evaluated different types of learning tools. Such studies are usually isolated in designated "education" galleries outside the principal circulation areas.

#### DIDACTIC AREAS

What exactly constitutes learning in the informal setting of the art museum is a subject of study unto itself. For the purposes of this article:

Learning . . . refers to any measurable changes taking place within the visitor which can be directly attributable to the exhibit experience. These changes could include the acquisition of new knowledge, concepts, perceptual skills, or attitudes. (Lakota, 1976, p. 249)

*A Building Programme for the New National Gallery of Canada* (Canadian Museum Construction Corporation, 1983) proposed the creation of didactic areas to give the visitor an opportunity to "learn":

didactic areas in conjunction with certain galleries will contain displays giving information about, and interpretations of, the art exhibited in nearby galleries. Although the visitor should be able to see the didactic display in close proximity to the associated gallery, he should also be able to bypass it . . . [so as not to have it interfere] with the contemplative nature of the examination of works of art. (p. 33)

From the Gallery's point of view, the foremost place of learning was to remain the galleries themselves. Here the visitor would first and to the greatest extent encounter works of art. The experience of looking at and appreciating art could be complemented in "the related but not obtrusive didactic areas" (Canadian Museum Construction Corporation, 1983, p. 20).

This decision to develop didactic spaces within a permanent collection came at a time when special exhibitions were, as they continue to be, increasingly expensive to mount. This expense forces museums to animate and enhance their permanent collections to keep attracting visitors. The Gallery's permanent collections are vast and varied, and the didactic areas could help visitors focus on particular aspects of the collection. Originally all areas of the collection—Canadian, European, Prints, Drawings and Photographs, Contemporary, and Inuit—were to address "learning" in didactic areas. To date only in the Canadian collection have these areas, called Theme Rooms, been developed.

#### THE CANADIAN GALLERIES

In the Canadian galleries, the didactic areas took the form of four regular side-galleries flanking the array of larger main galleries. In keeping with the specifications of the *Building Programme* they were unobtrusive (at first glance they could be taken for regular exhibition spaces), optional (you could enter or pass by), and did not interfere with the contemplation of art in the main galleries (because their activities were restricted spatially). Yet they responded to the challenge to explore new methods for encouraging a dialogue between visitors and works of art acknowledged as the primary obligation of the Gallery in the *Building Programme*.

Late in 1985, a team composed of a curator (Denise Leclerc, Assistant Curator of Later Canadian Art), a designer (Craig Laberge, Head of Design), and an educator (myself) was struck to propose a scheme for developing the Theme Rooms. We represented the museum's essential functions: collection and subject expertise, graphic and technical means for packaging and conveying our objectives, and knowledge of the audience and methods of communication. This kind of collaboration, with its obvious benefits of sharing different points of view, is often recommended but rarely implemented. Together we researched and discussed the physical and conceptual needs of visitors in the new National Gallery and proposed an approach to the didactic areas differing from other methods of interpretation like guided tours, information labels, and publications.

Before determining the actual content of the four Rooms, we investigated different ways visitors might learn in a museum environment and which techniques (written texts, reproductions, audios, and videos) were most effective for presenting information to a plurality of audiences (Johnstone, 1980; Lakota, 1976, pp. 249-279; Landay, 1982; Miles, Alt, Gosling, Lewis, & Tout, 1982, pp. 78-101; Screven, 1975). "The public is, however, a

diversified group and so the development of museum education is also the story of diversification” (Ott, 1981, p. 9). We thought the needs of young students were met by school tours, and those of groups of adults by daily public tours. We defined our audience as the general adult public, individuals alone and in small groups, willing to spend time reading, listening to, or looking at supplementary material. For adults preferring a more personal, in-depth experience this was an opportunity to try another approach.

Many decisions made in 1986 were taken when we were anticipating the move to the new building and preparing for its opening. The creative pressure of this situation was complicated by the fact that we knew few art museum models for permanent installation didactic galleries and had little time and few resources for formative evaluation to test our assumptions and proposals.

The objectives we developed for the Theme Rooms were based on our notions of what constituted the ideal visitor experience. We wanted visitors to feel both physically and conceptually comfortable in their visit to the Canadian collection. If we were going to enhance the visitor’s dialogue with works of art, we felt strongly that we should not limit their own creative perceptions, which could conceivably be undermined by our proposing particular ways of looking or feeling. We sought to keep the visitor’s experience of the work of art as open-ended as possible, yet to provide material to make the Canadian collection accessible. Based on the frequently articulated assumption that most people feel uncomfortable in art museums because they lack background knowledge about the artists and their work, we decided to explain a variety of historical contexts related to a Theme Room’s position within the Canadian galleries. Given that the works of art in the galleries would be complemented only by identification labels, we hoped provision of this material in the Theme Rooms would enhance the visitor’s appreciation of works of art.

We considered the initiatory aspect of gallery visiting and the needs of first-time visitors: we wanted the content of the Rooms to be understandable at a glance. To encourage repeat visits, both to the galleries and to the Theme Rooms, we wanted to make evident the possibility of obtaining more in-depth information. Ultimately we aimed to develop a system where the information was layered—either by varying type sizes (titles, sub-titles, and so on) or by accumulating texts and pictures in binder-books for visitors to peruse. While the scope of this article does not permit discussion of the innovative design solutions, they are in fact central to the overall impact (the attraction and holding power) of the Rooms. Two related objectives touched on both content and design: we sought to make specific connections with, and references to, works installed in the galleries, and we insisted on a variety of presentational formats to respond to the needs of diverse audiences.

## THE CONTENT OF THE ROOMS

In determining the themes, we tried to put ourselves in the shoes of first-time visitors to the Canadian collection and to anticipate their questions. In the early Canadian galleries, for example, why are religious works, portraiture, and genre painting in such close proximity? It was decided that each Room would emphasize a different theme according to its specific location in the galleries and that each would stand alone thematically from the other Rooms. Each Room would begin with an idea or theme and use the works in the collection (where possible) to support it. The Rooms would also use auxiliary images and artifacts to expand upon the diverse contexts of works in the collection. Each Room would use slightly different methods of installation and technology to meet these objectives.

*Room I: Patronage of the Arts in Early Canada.* We proposed the theme of patronage for the first Room because it answered our hypothetical visitor's question about the variety of subject matter in the early Canadian galleries and permitted exploration of the varied forces behind development of the arts in early Canada. The Room is installed with works from the collection that represent specific case studies of particular kinds of patronage. The works of art are supplemented with photographs and replicas of documentary material about a variety of artist-patron relations. By installing actual art objects with which to explore the theme, we achieved two things: the circumstances behind a particular market (or environment) for a particular object can be explored, and the Room itself blends visually with the adjacent main gallery.

The first wall displays religious sculpture, painting, and silver vessels, and acknowledges the primary importance of the Roman Catholic Church in pre-Confederation Quebec. The second wall demonstrates indirect military patronage and features British topographical artists who produced art both for documentary (military) and for personal (aesthetic) purposes. The third wall shows selected examples of private patronage: portraits of ships, portraits of individuals, presentation silver, and genre painting. The fourth wall points to official patronage, with examples of a portrait of a Chief Justice and a painting by Paul Kane witnessing early Government support of the arts.

*Room II: Academic Training of Canadian Artists Abroad.* This theme was chosen to complement the emphasis on figure painting in the surrounding galleries and to emphasize the educational isolation and the importance of academic training abroad for young Canadian artists in the late 19th century. Like Room I, this Room includes an art installation. Distributed over three walls, a selection of works illustrate the basic steps in classical academic training: drawing from the plaster cast, drawing from the model, copying from the old masters, and the development of the study and the painted sketch. The installation is complemented by an audio tape of material culled from Canadian artists' letters, diaries, and articles. The tape

articulates the values and intent of training abroad and voices the artists' personal ambitions and their reactions to and disappointments with such a training.

*Room III: Modern Art in Canada—The Beginnings.* In contrast to the two previous Rooms, which used art objects, this one, in keeping with its 20th-century subject, offers a video exploring the European avant-garde's influence on Canadian painters from 1900 through the 1930s. Modernity was chosen as a theme because it so aptly encompassed the acceleration of stylistic change and the variety in the galleries nearby. Beginning with James Wilson Morrice, the video deals not only with important international influences on the artists of this period but also with the artists' personal creative responses. This Room is complemented by a small reading area providing a selection of monographs about the artists and ideas featured in the video.

*Room IV: The Painter Speaks—Canadian Abstract Painters.* Here a video composed of archival radio, film, and TV footage presents some Canadian artists discussing the roots of their interest in abstraction and their individual approaches to it. Once again, video technology was seen as the most appropriate medium for bringing artists' words to life and for presenting a modern concept. The theme of abstraction was chosen because we had observed that the general public has difficulty with non-objective art. We also know that when artists speak for themselves about why they paint as they do, people are fascinated and listen intently.

#### EVALUATION

It is not sufficient to equate effectiveness with popularity (visitor count). The mere fact of attendance says nothing about the value of the experience to the visitor. (Lakota, 1976, p. 18)

Evaluation was always seen as an integral part of the development of the Theme Rooms. It offers the most important key to assessing the value of a Theme Room experience for the visitor. Designed with a life-span of two to three years, the Rooms are viewed as laboratories in which to explore effective means for enhancing the visitor's experience of the Canadian collection. Our objectives for evaluation are to assess the effectiveness of the existing Rooms, to increase our understanding of how visitors use the Rooms, to design new Rooms better, and to provide better tools for enhancing visitors' appreciation of art.

*Phase I.* After the Rooms opened in May 1989, we launched Phase I of the evaluation programme. From June to August, helped by two summer interns, we tracked visitors unobtrusively and interviewed them to find out if the content was being clearly conveyed, if the design was effective, and if a Theme Room experience increased their appreciation of the Canadian collection. At the same time, we administered an orientation questionnaire to see if visitors were entering the Rooms by accident (happening upon

them) or by design (informed by the floorplan). This inquiry stemmed from our feeling that the signage for the Rooms was inadequate. If visitors were not aware of the existence of the Rooms, then they obviously could not take advantage of these resources. Furthermore, visitors would likely carry away the unfavourable impression that no effort had been made to make the Canadian collection more accessible. Past and present evaluations indicate the need for specific (promotional and directional) Theme Room signage, even at the expense of keeping the galleries as free of signs as possible.

Because the content and technical methods used in the four Rooms differ, we also designed four Room-specific interview questionnaires. These questionnaires inquired about visitors' awareness of a particular theme in a Room, whether they had read the introductory column (which explained the Theme), and to what extent they had read the supplementary material, listened to the audio-tape, or watched the videos in the Room. We asked which form of information they most enjoyed and whether they felt the experience had taught them something or had increased their appreciation of the Canadian collection. We also asked about their comfort in reading, listening to, or watching the supplementary information (type-size, text or audio-tape or video length, and language level). Thus most questions stemmed from the Gallery's concerns about content and design decisions: were the Theme Rooms meaningful, and were they affecting our visitors as we intended?

Because of the sampling strategy and the design of the questionnaire, the summer evaluation for all its ambitious intentions gave us less feedback than we anticipated. Of almost 1,000 visitors tracked, only 112 stayed one minute or more in a Room and were interviewed. Nevertheless, we learned a lot about the circulation patterns in each Room and about which Rooms and features attracted people. We learned that our attempt to graphically layer written information was not very effective and that few visitors read the introductory columns (the keys) in each Room. Because so few people read them, we were not able to get much criticism of the texts or their modes of presentation. The poor response to the audio-tape in Room 2 confirmed our apprehensions about the rather stark nature of the installation: most visitors did not connect the text panel (the audio-tape programme) on the wall with the headphones on the nearby benches. Lack of visuals in this area may also have limited their attraction to the audio-tapes.

*Phase II.* Recognizing that the Gallery's audience has seasonal fluctuations and characteristics, we decided to embark on a Phase II evaluation plan to compare responses of summer and winter audiences to the Rooms. In contrast to the in-house evaluation project conducted in the summer, for the winter we hired a professional museologist skilled in evaluation to assist us in collecting more scientific data based on standard, professionally accepted measures of exhibit effectiveness.

Conducted in March 1990, the winter evaluation was designed to complement, not duplicate, the findings of the previous summer. While it probed

again the meaningfulness of the content and the effectiveness of the design of the Rooms, it used a different sampling strategy (see below). It also inquired about visitors' background knowledge and their interest in Canadian art, and the kinds of questions they had about looking at Canadian art. Beyond attempting to draw inferences from visitors' evaluations of the existing Rooms, a deliberate effort was made to solicit their questions.

The sampling strategy required interviewing anyone who *exited* from a Theme Room, thus more completely testing each Room's attracting and holding power. Once attracted to a Room, 205 of the 365 visitors interviewed (56%) stopped and used aspects of a particular Room. The use per Room decreased as visitors got closer to the exit from the Canadian galleries: Room 1 was used by 84% of visitors, Room 2 by 57%, Room 3 by 45%, and Room 4 by 32%. This use does not equate with understanding or impact, since the theme of Room 2 was misunderstood by 38% of visitors and, while the visits to Rooms 3 and 4 were fewest, the use and appreciation of the videos was very high, with visitors staying for all or most of their 17-minute duration. Obviously fragments of information such as these beg questions about the effectiveness of certain kinds of installations and the relevance to the visitor of particular themes. These issues cannot be debated here but will form the base of future research on the Rooms and the methods to be used.

The winter evaluation was also significant in that it provided some long-awaited demographics about visitors to the Canadian collection. Most visitors (60%) were university graduates with no special knowledge of or background in Canadian art, and 72% were first-time visitors to the Gallery. This fact puts into question one of our initial objectives, to attract returning visitors to the Rooms, and will have a bearing on the target audience in the future.

When asked to select and rate potential future Theme Room topics, visitors showed most interest in "why artists made particular works of art." This was followed by three equally rated topics: "information about a specific work of art," "how to look at or analyze a work of art," and "background about the artist's life." Curiosity about "artists' materials and techniques" ranked below these but above "what critics had to say about artists' work," which ranked last.

Despite the fact that the sampling strategies for winter and summer were different, visitors' use of particular Theme Room features was found to be very similar. Visitors reported having read "some" of the text material in Rooms 1 and 2 but having seen "most" or "all of" the videos in Rooms 3 and 4, suggesting that the video format was more popular than the panel texts, extended labels, or binder books. This in turn raises all kinds of questions: if indeed the videos are more popular, is it because they are a more passive form of obtaining information or because they are more complete and dynamic in their explanations? Did the location of the videos, just over halfway through the Canadian galleries, make them an attractive

stop, offering seating and a break in the pattern of looking at works of art? (While the opportunity to pause may have been valued, it should be noted that the video seating was rated as very uncomfortable!) Last, but not least, why do the texts not encourage reading, and is there a way to make text presentations more interesting in order to increase their use? While the actual graphics used may have discouraged reading of the texts, it is possible that (relatively) text-heavy approaches are not appropriate for Theme Rooms located near the beginning of most peoples' visits.

#### THE CHALLENGE

The exciting aspect of research and experimentation in the Theme Rooms is that it continues the inquiry about what methods most enhance visitors' dialogues with works of art. Do visitors need the background information collected by experts in the field to appreciate a work of art? What kind of learning tools and approaches best serve this "discretionary leisure-time activity" (Kelly, 1984)? Educators elsewhere are exploring these issues. Important research and experimentation continues at the Art Gallery of Ontario, where installations in the J.S. McLean Group of Seven galleries have introduced interactive computers right into the art installations in an effort to develop visitors' critical looking skills and personal appreciation of works of art. At the Denver Art Museum in Colorado, the education department has participated in an experiment to produce label texts that introduce the novice to the appreciation of the expert in a personalized way. Although their methods are quite different, both these examples represent visitor-focussed enhancements. Opposed to the "hypodermic" approach, where the visitor passively receives information, the educators behind these endeavours are trying to get visitors to discover for themselves what kind of personal rapport they might have with a work of art.

Thus the research with its shifting parameters continues; and the solutions, even for permanent didactic galleries, remain temporary. But while we labour away in the art museum, experimenting with ways to enhance the art museum visitor's experience:

We should not overrate the impact upon the visitors, of all those aspects of gallery design and presentation that cause professionals and academics to get so hot under the collar. The way non-professionals approach and experience objects in museums is much more dependent on the conceptual baggage they bring into the museum than anything the display can accomplish on its own. (Kemp, 1990, p. 1435)

Nevertheless, the challenge to make something meaningful of these unobtrusive didactic areas, to encourage a dialogue between art and the public, continues to thrive.

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