

Non-Expert Adults' Art-Viewing Experiences: Conjugating Substance With Struggle

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For many decades now, I have taken to jogging several times a week. However, I've never run a marathon—or any kind of race, for that matter. I'm just not interested in the competitive aspect of the sport. I would never dare to compare myself to an elite runner, neither in terms of my abilities, nor in terms of my potential to develop as a runner. Yet I enjoy running immensely and almost always look forward to doing it. It is clear to me that running provides several benefits: more peace of mind, weight control, and other health-related advantages. If I were to submit to rigorous testing based on some standard of "expertise" to evaluate my performance in running, the outcome would no doubt be discouraging. I could never measure up to a Donovan Bailey or a Maurice Greene.

Comparing such disparate levels of performance in running seems absurd and misplaced. Yet, in the art museum community, we apply such inappropriate standards regularly and prejudicially to a large segment of the museum-going public. Art historians and museum curators sometimes refer disparagingly to attempts to reach out and connect meaningfully with non-expert publics as "dumbing down." In itself, use of this expression in describing the museum audience reveals a bias that wrongly assumes that art historical and philosophical approaches are the only ways to respond intelligently to a work of art. I contend that nothing could be further from the truth. In the course of my many years of research with museum visitors, I have often marveled at the intelligence and imagination that many non-expert viewers demonstrate in formulating interpretations of works of art that are adept, creative, and appropriate to the content addressed by the work itself. It is my position that the study of non-expert viewers should focus on identifying the strengths as well as the weaknesses of non-expert responses to works of art. It should take into consideration what these responses really are: the attempts of intelligent viewers

to engage with, to understand, and to appreciate works of art. Non-expert viewers' responses often have substance. Yet, as most museum educators know from experience, non-experts often struggle when they try to respond to more challenging works of art. The ultimate objective of research into non-expert museum visitors is to provide a reliable basis on which museum educators can prepare and provide assistance that is both welcomed and considered useful.

This chapter, then, discusses selected aspects of the aesthetic experiences of a specific category of art museum visitor: the non-expert viewer. This is not intended as an exhaustive survey of all the promising avenues explored on this research topic in the past decade or so. Rather, it focuses on a few key issues: research findings relating to expertise, bodies of knowledge, cognitive flexibility, cursory viewing, and tacit knowledge.

The Non-Expert Viewer

The terms "non-expert viewers" or "non-expert visitors" are used here to designate members of the art museum public who have no university-level training in the fine arts. This definition does not preclude the possibility that non-experts may have attended museums previously, at varying levels of frequency, or that they may have received studio art or other fine art training, either at the secondary school level or on

a recreational basis. However, this definition deliberately excludes from consideration all professionally trained artists or fine art scholars including those in the performing and other, non-visual, creative arts: dancers, musicians, art educators, art historians, studio artists, poets, and so on. Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge that many non-expert viewers are well educated and may have university-level training in a non-fine-art discipline (Lachapelle & Douesnard, 2006).

Non-expert art museum visitors, as a group, are very heterogeneous and demonstrate a wide range of art-viewing skills and museum experience. Whereas some members of this group are indeed true neophytes when it comes to responding to works of art, others can be highly skilled. Previous museum attendance and the extent of previous art viewing experience account for these differences (Housen, 1983; McDermott-Lewis, 1990).

Conceptions of Expertise

Research into the notion of expertise, or its absence thereof, has a short but interesting trajectory. Initially, expertise was seen mainly as one of the two poles that define the transmission learning process. In this model, learning is understood as a one-way trajectory where knowledge originating from an expert (the teacher) is transferred to a novice (the student). Although this understanding of expertise is still quite prevalent, it is not the definition of expertise that I intend to explore in this chapter.

In the last two decades, educators have used various approaches for studying art-related expertise. Some researchers, for example Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson (1990), have conducted studies focusing exclusively on experts (i.e., museum professionals). Other researchers, such as Koroscik (1996), have focused on the study of novices as they engaged in art-related tasks. Still others, such as Gromko (1993) and Lachapelle (1994, 1999), have conducted comparative studies in which both experts and non-experts engaged in similar activities. In undertaking such studies, these researchers have attempted to identify what it is that experts do well that novices need to learn in order to improve their performance.

Knowing How, But With What?

It was once thought that we would eventually find significant differences in the psychological processes that experts and novice viewers use to structure their art viewing experience. However, so far, research results do not support this idea. Overall, the psychological functioning that is the basic orientation of different adults' approaches to exploring and understanding museum exhibitions appears to be remarkably similar among all types of adult viewers regardless of levels of education or expertise. Dufresne-Tassé and Lefebvre (1995) found that all of the 45 adult visitors in their study adopted essentially a cognitive approach during their museum visits. Mental operations with a cognitive orientation accounted for 63.3% of the total production of operations, while 21.3% of operations had an imaginative orientation, and only 15.4% were

affect-laden operations. When the two researchers examined sociocultural factors including educational level, age, and gender, they were surprised to find no significant differences among subgroups according to these determinants. The researchers had expected to obtain a more cognitive-oriented response from the more educated subjects and an overall affective-oriented reaction in subjects with less education. Neither of these expectations was found to be true (Dufresne-Tassé & Lefebvre, 1995; Hein, 1998). In a smaller study using multiple case studies, I obtained similar results: my expert and non-expert informants approached the works of art largely using a cognitive orientation. However, other differences did surface between the two groups of informants: imagination was more prevalent in the expert group's use of mental operations, and, as a group, the expert informants also formulated more hypotheses about the work of art (Lachapelle, 1999). Upon closer examination of the comments made by the informants in my study, I concluded that there were noticeable differences in the types of information that the expert and non-expert participants used to construct an understanding of the work of art. Non-expert informants relied on their everyday, experience-based knowledge whereas expert informants used more disciplinary knowledge such as art history, criticism, and production (Lachapelle, 1994).

It appears that there are differences in the types of knowledge that non-experts refer to in order to formulate interpretations of works of art. When their knowledge of art is limited, non-expert informants may have little choice but to resort to personal, everyday experience as a way of informing

their interpretations. At times, this may work well as an interpretation strategy and, at other times, it may prove less than satisfactory. For example, in a recent study, one non-expert informant—an engineering technician—did an outstanding job in identifying and deconstructing the industrial processes used in the fabrication of a large, structurally complex, steel sculpture. However, at the same time, he was unable to formulate an overall understanding of what the sculpture might be about (Lachapelle, 2005).

Koroscik (1993, 1996) reported that novice learners differ from experts in terms of the amount of knowledge that they have about art. Also, she found that the strategies novices use to acquire knowledge are also different from those used by experts. Koroscik identified some of the misconceptions and problems that hinder novices' learning. In regard to knowledge, novices may hold prior beliefs that, as concepts, are poorly considered, poorly differentiated, compartmentalized, and distorted. They may be further challenged by a use of cognitive strategies that are too narrowly focused, lack direction, and remain inflexible. As regards their dispositions, novice learners often experience problems with perseverance; they may seek only to confirm their preconceived notions, and they tend to be performance oriented instead of self-motivated (Efland, 2002; Koroscik, 1996).

Experts, on the other hand, have more strategies for acquiring new knowledge (Efland, 2002) and, therefore, are probably better able to adapt their learning approaches to the specific demands of a particular work of art. According to Efland, "Expertise shows up in the organization of the knowledge

base. Access to prior knowledge is an important factor in determining the ways that new learning is acquired. Knowledge that is clearly organized and categorized is easier to retrieve than knowledge organized in a haphazard way" (p. 108).

In sum, we now believe that non-expert viewers are no different from expert viewers in terms of their cognitive functioning (i.e. the use of cognitive operations); however, differences have emerged about the knowledge base that non-expert viewers work with to formulate their responses to works of art. Non-experts generally have less knowledge about art, and, to compound the challenges that presents, what they do know is often poorly organized and, therefore, difficult to retrieve when needed (Koroscik, 1993). Perkins and Salomon (1988) and Koroscik (1996) have made strong arguments for the importance of transfer in the educational process. Transfer is also an important factor in art interpretation. Koroscik defined transfer as "the ability to recycle knowledge acquired in one context for constructing new understandings in another context. Cognitive learning theorists agree that transfer is the hallmark of intellectual development and the ultimate goal of education" (p. 11).

Cognitive Flexibility and Fluidity

To make effective use of transfer in constructing new knowledge about works of art, learners need to be able to identify when particular transfers are appropriate. Learners also need to remain open to the new possibilities for learning offered by novel circumstances, such as those encountered in many

art exhibitions. Expert viewers may experience less difficulty in regard to transfer since they already dispose of a range of different strategies for interpreting the work of art. Selecting the right strategies may very well be an essential first step in facilitating the transfer process. However, Efland (2002) reported that novices most often resort to using learning strategies that are "unidimensional" (p. 116). He argued that students need to learn to "generate cognitive representations of knowledge in ways that capture real-world complexities" (p. 83): "Cognitive flexibility is a quality of mind that enables learners to use their knowledge in relevant ways in real-world situations. It involves a capacity on the part of the learner to represent knowledge (concepts, ideas) in multiple ways. Cognitive flexible students take learning to be multidirectional, involving the formation of multiple perspectives" (p. 82).

Research into a related concept, one that describes cognitive functioning in terms of crystallized and fluid intelligence, may explain why cognitive flexibility might be such an elusive and challenging goal for many adult learners. Psychologist Raymond Cattell (1963) proposed this conception of intelligence, which he supported with additional research during the next several decades. Basically, his theory proposes that a distinction needs to be made between two principal factors of intelligence that evolve and change over the human lifespan. These are known as *crystallized intelligence* and *fluid intelligence*. Crystallized intelligence is the product of our previous

learning and experience; we solicit this type of intelligence when we need to work on a cognitive task that we have completed before. In contrast, Horn and Cattell (1966) defined fluid intelligence as “the processes of reasoning [used] in the immediate situation in tasks requiring abstracting, concept formation and attainment, and the perception and education of relations” (p. 255). We solicit our fluid intelligence when a learning situation is new and unfamiliar, and in cases where our experiential knowledge is no longer sufficient. The challenge that adult learners face is that the abilities of fluid intelligence decline with age, starting in the early 20s: “During the adult years there is a general pattern of change in which crystallized abilities continue to increase with experience, while fluid intelligence tends to decay. The older the adult, then, the greater the likelihood of relatively high crystallized intelligence and relatively low fluid intelligence” (Hayslip, 1993, p. 249).

Cattell's work may provide an explanation for the difficulties of adaptation that many non-expert viewers experience when they encounter new and enigmatic artworks, such as contemporary art (Lachapelle, 2005). It is certainly plausible that novel and challenging works of art require a response that depends at least in part on cognitive flexibility and fluid intelligence. Since non-expert viewers have previously acquired little domain-specific knowledge, they cannot depend on their crystallized abilities to understand such works. To compound the situation, the older the viewer, the less likely he or she is to be able to call upon fluid intelligence to compensate for a lack of art-related

knowledge. Yet, these are precisely the types of situations in which fluid intelligence should play a greater role. There is, however, promising research into improving fluid intelligence by training older adults in the use of problem-solving techniques (Hayslip, 1993).

Finally, an aesthetic experience begins with a choice. Having the opportunity to make choices about one's learning usually leads to increased motivation (Paris, 1998). When viewers select a work of art that closely matches their viewing abilities, they enhance the likelihood of a successful viewing experience (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990). However, if the selection also provides a reasonable challenge, then viewers can maximize as well the potential that their choices may have on their personal aesthetic growth (Lachapelle, 2003a). Ideally, viewers should seek out viewing opportunities that balance the extent to which their crystallized and fluid cognitive abilities are challenged. Research into the viewing choices of non-expert viewers may well lead to a better understanding of choice as a determining factor in the outcome of aesthetic experiences (Lachapelle, 2003b).

Time Is on Our Side

Related to the point above is the fact that non-expert viewers sometimes experience difficulty in making choices about works of art to view. Non-expert viewers often have less museum experience and, therefore, may feel compelled to give equal consideration to every work encountered in the gallery. This behavior certainly indicates a high degree of openness on

the viewer's part but, as a viewing strategy, it may also be self-defeating if, as a result, less time can be devoted to each exhibit.

There is considerable evidence to support the conclusion that satisfactory viewing experiences require a significant investment in time (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990; Hein, 1998; Henry, 2000; Perkins, 1994). Herein lies a major problem: Museum visitors, particularly non-expert visitors, spend very little time actually looking at each work of art. In a recent study, I gave volunteer non-expert viewers the freedom to select works of art and to spend as much time with them as they wished. In many cases, participants devoted less than 10 seconds to some works and only rarely exceeded a total viewing time of 2 or 3 minutes per work (Lachapelle, 2005).

Examining every object in a large exhibition can be a considerable drain on the amount of total time and energy any viewer can spend before museum fatigue sets in. Furthermore, hurried viewing can lead to only superficial and partial appreciation of works of art. As a viewing strategy, cursory viewing is a major obstacle to satisfactory aesthetic experiences: one that all viewers should avoid. Museums, however, often compound the problem of cursory viewing when they present large blockbuster exhibitions as a strategy to entice people to visit.

Perkins (1994) identified hasty viewing as one of four “intelligence traps” that viewers frequently and inadvertently fall into. The other three are looking and thinking that

are narrow, fuzzy, and sprawling. However, he also proposed four opposite dispositions that can favor more successful and critical aesthetic experiences: looking and thinking that are unhurried, broad and adventurous, clear and deep, and organized.

In my most recent study (Lachapelle, 2005), my research assistants and I recruited 51 non-expert viewers to respond to works of public contemporary art installed in a parkland sculpture garden. We asked our volunteers to engage in two different art-viewing activities. The first activity was intended to simulate a self-directed visit to a museum. For this reason, we asked our informants to select and view as many or as few sculptures as they wished during a 15-minute, uninterrupted, viewing period. In the second activity, we hoped to verify the optimal performance of our informants by asking them to select a single work of art, look at it carefully (in silence) for 5 minutes and, then, respond to it out loud for at least 5 minutes. In terms of aesthetic dispositions, the second activity was structured in such a way as to encourage unhurried looking and thinking (Perkins, 1994). We used two different methods to analyze our data.¹ A team of three judges assigned each participant's various overall responses to operationalized categories corresponding to Perkins' cognitive traps and dispositions. In addition, the team of judges examined the transcripts of each informant's verbal responses for the presence of hypotheses. This second analytic procedure assumes that, in order to meaningfully interpret a work of art, viewers need to formulate hypotheses

about the possible meaning of a work. Finally, we compared the results of the first activity with the results for the second. During the second activity, in which informants were encouraged to adopt an unhurried disposition, we witnessed a noticeable decrease in cognitive traps and a corresponding increase in affirmative dispositions. As regards the informants' production of hypotheses, we noticed a dramatic increase in the production of the type of hypothesis that points to new insights about the overall meaning of the work of art. These findings led us to conclude that, for our non-expert informants, a simple change in viewing strategy (i.e., taking a less hurried approach) resulted in dramatic improvements in overall responses to works of art. We also remarked that, in many instances, when left to their own devices—that is during the self-directed activity—our informants did not perform to the full extent of their abilities. Quite the contrary, they underperformed. However, it should be understood that an unhurried disposition was not a panacea for every challenge encountered by our non-expert informants. They still encountered problems that they were unable to resolve. Nonetheless, an unhurried approach helped them to better organize their cognitive strategies, and, as a result, their responses improved considerably.

In Conclusion: The Problem With Tacit Knowledge

Most non-expert viewers and possibly many expert viewers learn art viewing and understanding strategies on their own through repeated museum or gallery visits. This is a good example of a situation where "know-how" is put to use. Wagner (2000), in

discussing his team work with fellow psychologist Robert Sternberg, reported that practical intelligence can be defined as a "facility for acquiring tacit knowledge, a practical know-how that is required to succeed in daily life including most career pursuits *yet is rarely taught directly*" [emphasis added] (p. 267). Herein lies the problem with relying on such a haphazard approach to learning about art appreciation strategies. When learners are left entirely to their own devices, opportunities abound for the acquisition of misconceptions about art. Such misunderstandings can persist and interfere with art learning for several years. What we now know about non-expert viewers should prompt us to the realization that strategies for understanding art can indeed be taught and, more importantly, *they should be taught*. Museum educators need to move away from an over-reliance on one-shot educational activities (e.g., talks, tours, workshops) and instead commit to developing a longer-term educational relationship with their adult audiences. No one wants museums to become like schools. However, notwithstanding this reservation, short courses designed to teach art viewing strategies—offered perhaps over a period of several weeks—could go a long way in helping many non-expert viewers to advance in their use of art appreciation strategies. We have seen in this chapter that the notion of the non-expert viewer, as a defining category for a segment of the art museum audience, is a complex one. It is a heterogeneous category that encompasses a range of skill levels. It identifies a class of adult museum visitors whose art-viewing experiences can be characterized as often having substance yet are, at times, tinged with struggle.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Results presented here are based on the analysis of 34 of the total of 51 research sessions.