

Beyond the Horizon: Visitor Meaning-Making and the Vatican Frescoes

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During the summer of 2002, thirty-one medieval frescoes went on display at the Museum of Texas Tech University, the only venue in the world for this extraordinary exhibition. This paper summarizes a qualitative research study that focused on the experiences of three visitors to the Medieval Frescoes from the Vatican Museums Collection exhibition. The study applied Gadamer's (1993) idea of horizons to both the visitor-participants and the frescoes to illuminate the interpretive event, the meeting of horizons, and to uncover any obstacles that might hinder the fusion of horizons. The findings of the study are presented in a readers theatre format as an alternative to traditional reporting methods so that the voices of the participants, frescoes, and researcher can be portrayed more clearly. Key words: Horizons, Visitor Meaning-Making, Vatican Frescoes, Museum, and Art Interpretation

“Awesome.” “Excellent in every way.” and “Wonderful, wonderful” are some of the comments made by visitors about an exhibition of treasured art pieces on loan from the Vatican to the Museum of Texas Tech University in the summer of 2002. June 1st to September 15th 2002 provided a rare opportunity to view a set of thirty-one frescoes dating back to the late 13th and early 14th centuries from the Vatican Museums Collection, as well as 17th and 18th century religious artifacts on loan from the Museo Franz Mayer in Mexico City and the Comision Nacional de Art Sacro of Mexico, and 16th and 17th century works from the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation in Houston, Texas.

To have artifacts on loan from the Vatican Museums Collection was unprecedented for the Museum of TTU, which was the only venue in the world for this exhibition. More than one hundred and twenty thousand people were expected to view the frescoes during the summer months. With such a large volume of people to process, it might be easy to overlook the individual visitor, which prompted the following questions: How would the visitor connect with something from such a different time period and culture? What happens during the interpretive event, that time when the horizon of the visitor meets the horizon of the fresco?

This paper attempts to answer those two questions by summarizing the research conducted with three participant interpreters, or visitors, during their tour of the frescoes. Through separate conversations with each interpreter, I sought to identify and illuminate horizons, and to determine what gaps might exist between the visitors and the frescoes (between our modern western culture and the medieval Italian culture of the frescoes) that hinder an interpretation of the artworks. I wanted to explore the visitors' experiences

during the interpretive event as they encountered the frescoes, and how they bridged the gaps between their horizon and that of the frescoes.

Prior to presenting the research findings, a brief summary of the mechanics of visiting the exhibition is provided as background, since touring the exhibition was a common experience for all three interpreters. All would have had at least a rudimentary understanding of the art of fresco making prior to their visit, and would have learned more as they toured the exhibition.

Visiting the Exhibition

Although tickets were free, reservations to guarantee entrance into the exhibition were required; drop-in visitors were accommodated if tickets were available. Visitors were allowed in at the top of each hour. The size of each tour was kept at 200 in order to prevent over-crowding, and to maintain security. The tour began in the auditorium with a brief five-minute introductory video explaining how the frescoes came to be in Lubbock, Texas. Besides introducing visitors to the frescoes, the purpose of the video was to focus attention on the frescoes while quieting people's conversations prior to entering the gallery, and to manage the traffic flow into the gallery. Upon exiting the auditorium visitors could either rent audio headsets with information about the frescoes, interviews, and background music, or move along to the gallery.

At the entrance to the gallery was a large reproduction wall map of the ancient city of Rome indicating the locations of Sant' Agnese and San Nicola churches. Labels accompanied all of the frescoes and provided some background information about the churches where the frescoes were originally painted, as well as the technique of fresco painting. The lighting was subdued, as was required by contract, and each of the frescoes in the front part of the gallery were recessed in small alcoves constructed especially for them. The walls were painted a tangerine peach color. A video room separated the front from the back of the gallery, where visitors could sit to watch a continuously playing 15 minute video about the art of fresco making, and the restoration of the frescoes on display. Next to the video room was a short hall connecting the two parts of the gallery, with a large reproduction of a street scene depicting one of the churches.

Along the east wall of the front gallery hung three frescoes, which were the prophets Haggai, Jeremiah, and Amos. The remainder of the east wall, and across on the west wall, held ten fragments of frescoes portraying animals, birds and plants from San Nicola Church, images that held symbolic meanings in Christian teaching. Also included in this grouping was a fragment depicting a mask. Dolphins were a symbolic representation of resurrection, a winged dragon was a traditional symbol for evil, a peacock represented heaven or the Kingdom of God, a pheasant represented spiritual vigilance and resurrection, and the mask represented the good and evil sides of human nature. Birds represented the soul or Holy Spirit soaring up to heaven. Bright colors were used for plants and animals to convey fresh life and energy, symbolic of baptism and rebirth.

At the entrance to the back gallery was a photomural of Sant' Agnese Church, built in 342 CE. The frescoes in this gallery were larger than the fragments in the front gallery, and the images told stories rather than being symbolic representations. One set of vivid images highlighted the major events in the life of St. Catherine of Alexandria, one

of the major themes portrayed in the church. The story is played out in the frescoes; Catherine pleads with the Roman emperor Maxentius to end his persecution of the Christians, his response by calling upon the scholars of law to dispute with her, Catherine's prayer to God for help before the debate, the debate, her torture and imprisonment by the emperor as a result of winning the debate, the conversion and baptism of the emperor's wife and general, Catherine's condemnation to death on the wheel, and her final martyrdom.

Frescoes in the back gallery depicted a cycle of scenes in the life of St. Benedict of Nursia, including a story called *The Wayward Monk and the Dragon*. In this story, a monk, tired of the strict rules of the Benedictine Order, stands at the arch of a doorway, ready to run away. When he gets outside, he is met by a ferocious dragon, causing him in fear to call out to the other monks. They do not see the dragon, but they escort their terrified and trembling brother monk back inside, where he kneels at the feet of St. Benedict in an attitude of penitence. After being forgiven by St. Benedict, the wayward monk returns to the order. As well as the story pictured in the frescoes, symbolism is evident in the geometric architecture representing the rules of the order, the fellowship of belief represented by the other monks, and the evil and temptations in the world outside the monastery represented by the dragon.

Other frescoes included a nearly life-size portrait of a holy princess, and other saints including St. Laurenzius, St. Peter, three male saints and two smaller female saints, and the heads of two figures that might have been a bishop and a saint. It is unknown who the original artists of the frescoes were.

Methodology

This research study involved the collection and interpretation of data via ethnographic interviews with research participants and a content analysis of texts. A variety of sources offered textual data – literature relevant to the topic under study, e-mail correspondence with two of the research participants, text panels that accompanied the exhibition, and the text version of the audio taped tour of the frescoes. Audio taped interviews were conducted with research participants during their visit with the frescoes.

Three research participants were recruited for the study, and all three provided written consent to participate. The first, an elderly gentleman retired from the military, was an art enthusiast and part-time wood sculptor. He clearly stated he was not religious; his interest in the frescoes was for their artistic value. He was recruited through his daughter, who is a professional acquaintance and was a member of the education committee that I chaired for the development of programs to accompany the exhibition. The second interpreter was a middle-aged woman whose interest in the frescoes was religious and historical rather than artistic. She volunteered to be a research participant in response to a general recruitment call from my church. The third was a middle-aged woman who had signed on as a volunteer for the duration of the exhibition. She had post-secondary training in art history and appreciation; her travels to Europe included visits to art museums and the Vatican. She was approached and recruited as a research participant because of her interest in the frescoes. Only three research participants were recruited because the duration of the exhibition was so short (3 1/2 months). Any data generated by three participants would have given insights into their meaning-making experiences that

could potentially impact future exhibitions, but could not have permitted modifications to this exhibition. The Office of Research Studies at Texas Tech University approved the research study; participants signed written consent forms for their participation in the study and approved all interview transcriptions.

My conversations with the first two participant-interpreters occurred at their first visit to the exhibition; the third participant-interpreter had been through the exhibit several times as a volunteer, and our conversation followed many visits with the frescoes. Since the focus of the research was the interpretive event, that time when visitors interact with and make meaning of the artwork they are viewing, the timeframe of the research was brief. A structured set of interview questions focused on participants' first impressions of the frescoes and their prior knowledge of frescoes; subsequent questions sought to uncover potential artistic, historical and spiritual connections with the frescoes to determine the process of interpretation. Periodic checks were conducted by asking the same question stated differently, and by asking for clarification on certain points. E-mail questions with two participants sought to establish prior knowledge of the frescoes and fresco-making, as well as to establish any historical, spiritual, or artistic reasons for visiting the exhibition; these were verified in the interviews.

Interpreting artifacts is an individual and unique activity; no two visitors will have the same experience and there is no "correct" interpretation. Therefore, validity in this study focused on the descriptions and explanations placed on the interpretation of the frescoes by the research participants. Their explanations were deemed credible (Janesick, 2000). Research participants reviewed, revised, and approved the interview transcriptions as a method of member checking; and outsider also checked transcriptions and field notes as a secondary member check.

Presentation of Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate the interpretive event, or the fusion of horizons between the visitors and the frescoes. The findings of the study are presented below in a readers theatre format that integrates a review of selected relevant literature with the information about the frescoes and a composite of participants' conversations. Readers theatre was chosen for presenting or displaying the findings of the data because it allows for more of the data, or the conversations, to be communicated. For example, most research reports state a finding then support it with a sentence or two from the research participant. Readers theatre allows for the words of the participants to carry the text. It also allows inanimate objects, such as artifacts, to have a "voice." The artifacts were more than pretty old pictures hanging on the wall; they were historical, artistic, and religious expressions with a story to tell. Readers theatre is one way of presenting the artifacts' story in a dialogue that includes visitors' experiences and researcher's insights.

Readers theatre is an alternative format for presenting data that permits the various voices to be heard (Brodie & Wiebe, 1999; Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995). True readers theatre incorporates few, if any props and is typically used in a verbal staged presentation of findings. The dialogues are spoken interpretively, with emotion and inflection (Dixon, Davies, & Politano, 1996). Readers theatre is not a research methodology; rather it is a form for textualizing participant interviews, literature reviews, and other significant information so that it "speaks" to the audience. It is used here as a

method of script construction for linking texts thematically to present important information about the researched and the research context (Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995). Readers theatre as a writing style is an alternative to narrative and is an “artistic data display” (Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995, p. 408) as well as a data presentation.

The readers theatre script includes three voices which are used to present the findings of this study. One is the voice of the Artifacts; another is that of the Researcher, the composite voice of many authors who have spoken through articles on the topics of horizons and museology, as well as my observations and conclusions as a researcher; the third is the composite of the three visitors who became the research participants, called Interpreters. The Interpreters’ composites include all that was said by the three about a theme or horizon in an amalgamation or grouping of data; the words used in the script are exact quotations taken from participants’ interview transcriptions.

Data used in the Interpreter’s conversations was generated from semi-structured interviews conducted during the participants’ visits to the exhibition as well as some e-mail correspondence. Once the interview transcriptions had been approved and signed off by the participants, each transcription was read and its contents analyzed for themes or horizons that addressed temporal, cultural, religious, and artistic subjects. In scripting the data into the Interpreter composite, those statements from all three participants that addressed the horizon were grouped together into one voice.

The information for the voice of Artifacts was gathered from research conducted about frescoes as an art form, text panels, and from the audio guide tour produced for the exhibition. Similarly, temporal, cultural, religious and artistic horizons were identified and assigned to Artifacts in order to contrast those areas described by the voice of the Interpreter. Finally, my voice as Researcher is a combination literature review, field notes, and interview questions.

Researcher: For the purpose of this study, both visitors and frescoes were seen to have horizons. A horizon means the essence of the thing, its intrinsic nature, its story, or all that makes it what it is. The horizon of the fresco encompasses its age, materials, and function as well as its history and message. The horizon of the interpreter includes but is not limited to a “collection of beliefs, hopes, fears” that influences the interpretation (Barnard, 2001, p. 31).

Gadamer (1993) provides an additional description of horizon, which he defines as a “range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (p. 302). While Gadamer writes about the fusion of horizons between a reader and a text, this study modifies “readers” to become visitors and “text” to become artifacts (frescoes). In viewing the frescoes, the visitors’ vantage point or horizon includes prior knowledge of fresco as an art form, life experiences, education, their collection of spiritual and other beliefs, and their personal reasons for touring the exhibition.

Another way to conceptualize the horizon of the visitor is by context, as identified by Falk and Dierking (1992), who claim that the museum visit is an individually constructed interaction among the personal context, social context, and physical context. The personal context is unique to the individual, and includes knowledge and experiences, as well as “the visitor’s interests, motivations, and concerns” (Falk & Dierking, 1992, p. 2). The social context is the relationship between visitors attending the museum at the same time. Many of the visitors to the Vatican exhibition came in family

groups or with tour groups, which influences the individual's interaction with the artworks. While some visitors came alone, they were still part of the group of 200 that was allowed in to tour each hour. The physical context refers to the physical setting of the museum, including the building's architecture, artworks, and artifacts. The physical setting for the frescoes governed how and when the visitors entered and moved through the galleries.

At the moment a visitor makes sensory contact with an artwork, an interpretive event or fusing of horizons begins to take place. At that initial moment of contact, the senses are used to process and interpret information about the artwork. In a previous study, I (Brodie, 2001) likened this to philological hermeneutics, a process of interpreting classical texts. Rather than interpreting a text, principles of interpretation are applied to artifacts and artworks. Philological hermeneutics seeks to interpret the artwork's form by digging out its literal or exact meaning based on factual information obtained in part by sensory exploration. For example, while looking at the fresco of the prophet Amos, a visitor might take inventory, noting that the artist has used the colors red, grey and yellow, that there is a tilt of the prophet's head, that there are letters spelling out his name, and that he seems to be holding a ribbon of Latin inscription.

Theological hermeneutics, used for the interpretation of Biblical texts, can also be applied to artifacts and artworks (Brodie, 2001). It focuses on the content of the artwork rather than its form. The interpreter seeks to understand the message of the artwork, and is affected or changed by it. In viewing the Amos fresco, the interpreter looks beyond the colors of the paint to discover what the artist was trying to communicate in the work. Since many fourteenth century churchgoers were illiterate, pictures such as the frescoes were used to tell a story. As theological hermeneutists, interpreters visiting the frescoes today look for the message in the frescoes. While the pictures of St. Catherine tell her story of martyrdom, they also tell another story about life in fourteenth century Italy; the interpreter of today wants to illuminate all of the stories told by the frescoes.

Barnard (2001) has a slightly different way of defining the understanding of artwork as visual culture by stating that there is a weak sense and a strong sense of distinguishing visual culture. The weak sense stresses the visual aspect of the artwork, which he would use as an inclusive term for all types of artworks (painting, drawing, graphic design, tattooing, etc.). This weak sense could be seen in a similar way to philological hermeneutics, which focuses on the form of the artwork. The strong sense stresses the cultural over the visual, or the "values and identities that are constructed in and communicated by" the artwork (Barnard, 2001, p.1). The purpose of the artwork is to communicate cultural identity, thus it has a message to tell the viewer. This mirrors the theological interpretation of the artwork because in both cases there is a message to be communicated.

This encounter of interpreter and fresco is the meeting of two horizons. In this study, the interpreters were not illiterate medieval European churchgoers who were the intended first audience; rather, they were literate, well-educated Westerners living in the twenty-first century. My role as researcher was to illuminate the two horizons (the medieval artworks and the modern interpreters) as they intersected during the interpretive event by identifying characteristics (i.e., time, culture) and bracketing them for closer scrutiny. Data collected via text sources and interview transcriptions were studied for

ways in which they addressed components within visitor and artifact horizons, then interpreted and categorized or clustered for comparison.

Gadamer (1993) argues that in order to approach the past, we need to have a horizon. In his interpretation of Gadamer, Teigas (1995) states that in having a horizon as interpreters, we are aware of our own position, especially our boundaries. Understanding is achieved by placing ourselves in the horizon of the past while maintaining our own horizon. Although referring to text, the suggestion that to understand text and its truth we need to apply it to the present (Teigas, 1995) can be referred to the interpretation of artwork. In other words, the frescoes need to be applied to present circumstances, which are accomplished by the exhibition design that determines which message the artifacts will communicate.

Artifacts: We can tell many stories. “Animating” (giving life to) an artifact means that museum personnel determine which story will be communicated to visitors. Typically, a storyline is created that drives the design of the exhibition (Dean, 1994). More than a short sentence describing what the exhibition is about, the storyline is a blueprint for the development of an exhibition idea to its fruition that includes its interpretive thrust, goals, targeted audience(s), methods of communication (i.e., titles and text panels), selection and placement of artifacts, production, and evaluation (Dean, 1994).

Eight hundred year old frescoes also have many stories to tell – history, art, culture and religion are only a few of the big ideas that were available for development into the theme of this exhibition. The worldview of the team selecting the final storyline influences the message that will be communicated in the exhibition as well as the method of communication. A positivist worldview is evidenced in didactic displays where visitors move from artifact to artifact reading informative labels or listening to tour guides. Knowledge is attainable rather than socially constructed. An interpretive worldview leads to the creation of interactive displays where visitors construct their own knowledge. An emancipatory worldview plans for social action. For example, the frescoes would become vehicles for raising issues of gender, class, and race. The martyrdom of St. Catherine for her religious beliefs at the hands of the emperor raises questions about religious freedom while the frescoes of male church leaders raises questions of women’s roles within religious institutions. This exhibition favored a positivist approach of communication; the story was fresco as an ancient art form.

Researcher: Frescoes are insentient yet still contain a horizon. While they do not have hopes, desires, beliefs and dreams, their horizons are art, history, and culture.

Artifacts: The art horizon of the fresco is its meaning as an art form. Fresco, meaning fresh, is one of the oldest art forms known to humans. True fresco art, as exemplified by the 31 frescoes in the exhibition, is the use of ground-up earth or mineral pigments, mixed with a limewater solution, painted on wet plaster. When the plaster dries, a chemical reaction occurs that bonds the pigments to the surface of the plaster. It is a difficult art form, since only a small area can be painted at one time before the plaster dries. There is no room for error, as the artist could neither erase a mistake nor paint over it. Prior to painting, an artist begins by first sketching out an idea of the picture to be painted, then transfers this to a cartoon or full-scale picture. This is placed on the painting surface; pricking dots through the cartoon using a graphite instrument (such as a pencil) creates the outline. The artist then joins the dots to form the pattern, and paint is added.

With the frescoes on display at the Museum of TTU, the artist or designer and the assistants who painted the frescoes were unknown. A patron usually commissioned an artwork; in this case the church commissioned the painting of the frescoes. The human subjects of the frescoes looked much alike, since the same cartoon was used for several of the faces.

Groups such as the Minoans in 1500 BCE used this true fresco technique, but fresco has been used by many cultures all over the world. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the art form made its revival in Europe. The frescoes on display at the Museum, taken from the walls of Sant' Agnese fuori le Mura (St. Agnes outside the Wall Church) and San Nicola in Carcere (St. Nicholas in Prison Church) in Rome, were painted between 1120 and 1310. They originally functioned as visual teaching aids, to educate illiterate churchgoers about saints and prophets.

In 1850, the frescoes were removed from their original locations and stored until they were relocated in 1930 to the Vatican Museums in Vatican City. Some were in disrepair, and have recently been partially restored by a team of four restorers using the most advanced techniques available, which has included mounting the thin frescoes with acrylic glue onto lightweight foam board backings.

Sometimes damage or deterioration has erased parts of the frescoes' story. "Because frescoes are a portion of the wall on which they are painted, they suffer the same fate as their supporting structure. In 1620, the opening of Sant' Agnese church was widened. By then, the frescoes were three hundred years old, and probably already damaged. During the renovation, the frescoes were painted over with a coat of whitewash, and forgotten. They remained hidden until the 1850's, when a dramatic event led to their rediscovery" (Stop 209, recorded by Antenna Audio Inc., 2002)

Researcher: In my conversations with the visitor interpreters, the horizons they identified were of a personal nature. Their horizons included prior knowledge of the art and history of frescoes with particular reference to those on display; cultural and spiritual beliefs; reasons for visiting the exhibition; and personal interpretations of the frescoes based on their encounters with them. All three Interpreters were exposed to a great deal of media coverage about the frescoes coming to Lubbock, and the local newspaper provided additional inserts and articles about fresco-making, and the frescoes on display. Media coverage of the exhibition was extensive in the months leading up to the exhibition (the Vatican Exhibition was named by two of the local television stations as the top news story of 2002; the local newspaper rated it as the second ranked news story of the year). Prior to entering the gallery, all three participants viewed the same video presentation that summarized how the frescoes were restored and came to Lubbock. Each of the Interpreters' horizons included some prior knowledge of fresco-making and the journey of the frescoes to the Museum as a result of the preview video presentation and exposure to media coverage. While two of the Interpreters did not know exactly what the 31 frescoes looked like prior to our interview, they had general knowledge of frescoes and the time period in which these were painted. The third Interpreter had seen the frescoes on previous occasions, particularly during her work as a volunteer for the exhibition. Her training as a volunteer included in-depth information about the selection of frescoes for the exhibition, their preservation and conservation, and installation.

Interpreter: To be able to radiate that theme of ancient art I think is just marvelous. I think from the standpoint of this exhibition it should be approached that it is

very ancient pieces, artistic pieces that needed to be restored. In order to help with that restoration we were able to bring those to the public to make the public aware that there are many very beautiful old things that if we don't help with restoration they will be gone and we will lose the history of the people. That's how I saw this exhibit. And in looking at these frescoes, I looked for multiple layers where they different times would add different things to them and what I'm seeing is fortunately they don't have that much. They are what they are; they're honest works of art. It's a link to the past. I had a lot of people asking me questions that some I drew more on my art history background.... especially about the various costuming.

[The frescoes] are constrained by the necessities of their medium and construction. They were necessarily painted on damp plaster and rapidly. They must have been done sequentially for they could not do all in one effort. Note the similarity among the faces, both male and female. They repeat patterns, heads are all turned the same way and the women all look like sisters. The artist is using the same forms over and over. These murals are stiff and highly repetitious.

I have been interested in creating art since I was a child. Asking why do you like art is like asking why do you like living. Art is a part of life in any sentient human.

Researcher: The snippet of conversation above demonstrates the Interpreter's horizon of prior knowledge about the art of fresco, particularly the ones displayed.

Artifacts: "The frescoes of San Nicola in Carcere are a rare example of the revival of early Christian figurative art that took place in Rome in the first half of the twelfth century. We have very few examples of this period, which makes these frescoes exceptionally priceless" (Audio tour stop 104, interview with Dr. Francesco Buranelli, recorded by Antenna Audio Inc., 2002).

"The paintings represent an important sample of studio painting, often of a very high level. They were largely inspired by the 'modern' examples of great artists such as Cavallini, Torriti and Giotto. But they also show the inspiration of older pictorial traditions" (Stop 213, interview with Dr. Francesco Buranelli, recorded by Antenna Audio Inc., 2002).

Researcher: As a state institution, the Museum de-emphasized the spiritual nature of the frescoes; however it could not be ignored because the frescoes are held in trust by the Vatican. Therefore, I was interested in uncovering the Interpreters' potential spiritual horizons evidenced in our conversations. One unexpected indicator of spiritual horizons was their view on the sacredness of the artifacts.

Interpreter: The power of the mind can do wonderful things, but it's more what you believe internally than the object itself. It's what the object transfers to you. So as far as seeing them as sacred art, I saw them as a carrier of a culture and interesting mythologies that were not necessarily true. The bones of St. Peter, if there really are bones now that to me would be an (sacred) object. There are some chains that are supposed to have been used when he was incarcerated. If those really are the chains that he was wrapped in when he was imprisoned, I'd say those were sacred objects. Because I'm not Catholic the wonderful artifacts that were brought from Mexico that were so beautifully done, the relics and the crosses, etc. to some would probably be very sacred objects if they were used in a Mass, and if they were in a Mass I would probably see them as a sacred object, but seeing them in a case I approached them more from the way they were made, the beauty of the detail, the design, then I did as a sacred object. They say

they're sacred. I don't find them to be sacred. I don't attach any great sacred power to them other than the power of education. In that respect I think they have a special gift to all of the people. But I've noticed that the Roman Catholic people who have come through, they have been trained from childhood that these images have power. Well they have power to inform. I personally don't see how frescoes can be considered sacred objects. I think they tell a biblical story. But for them to be sacred themselves, I don't see that that's possible.

I think they [frescoes] have great spiritual value to anybody who buys into the Christian religion. All of these murals are evidence of hope and fear. The assumption is made that there is a life after death or a so-called hereafter. After death an individual is either going to a heaven or hell or limbo in between, waiting to go to one or the other. So if you are convinced that there is a life after death you should live your life by Christian principles so you come out on the good side after death. There is much religious significance to the murals provided you believe in life after death. Their implied hope and fear will condition the individual to live according to Christ's teaching. What we see in these murals are graphic attempts to show illiterate people the drama and significance of Christ's teaching. You see in the murals an appeal to the individual's belief that there is an afterlife conditioned by his hope and fear. The masses were illiterate so the messages had to be symbolic. The murals are flat pictures without use of perspective that have symbolic religious appeal to believers. To the Christian convert of the time the murals were tangible expression of a creed and faith that were not expressed by any other visual means. They were the bible, television, email, motion pictures and news medium of the time. And they still hold significance to present Christians.

Artifacts: "In a world that knew far fewer images than the world we know today, those images acquired a tremendous significance, and sometimes were seen as almost miraculous" (Stop 208, interview with Susanna Le Pera, recorded by Antenna Audio Inc., 2002)

Researcher: Falk and Dierking (1992) recount that people visit museums for social-recreational, educational, and cultural-reverential reasons. Education is the most frequent reason cited by visitors, who come to a museum to learn more about a particular item of interest. Social-recreational encompasses activities that are leisure oriented, such as being with families, to see something new and interesting, or to participate in a fun activity. Cultural-reverential visitors seek to experience a unique exhibit or museum in an almost spiritual way that is neither educational nor entertaining. Some visitors may have had such an experience with the frescoes. As identified above, the interpreter participants fall within the educational category.

Perhaps a "miscellaneous" category needs to be added; to stick the other reasons for visiting a museum that do not comfortably fit those named by Falk and Dierking (1992). For example, I previously identified convenience as a category in a study determining that some visitors came to the museum to use the rest rooms, only to discover the existence of interesting exhibits (Brodie, 2001). A miscellaneous category might include the following comments:

Interpreter: This exhibit is something really special. This is something that I really thought was a once in a lifetime experience. I think it is a fantastic opportunity. Really a great honor. To be chosen [as the exhibition venue] is one of the reasons to see this. Very few other people in the world have had the chance to see [the frescoes].

Researcher: During an interpretive event, or fusion of horizons, obstacles or barriers exist to hinder both the philological (form) and theological (content) interpretation. In this study, the obstacles to interpretation that were identified include space, time, culture, literacy and a lack of knowledge. Space and time refer to the disparity of geography and epoch between the medieval frescoes of Rome and Western twenty-first century visitors.

Interpreter: I have a hard time trying to imagine what it was like to live in the 1200's and go to a church and see those frescoes on the wall. I think their era was a much more intensely religious era than we are living in right now. I think it must have been a very exciting time to live whether they realized it was exciting or not. But I think it must have been, because religion at that time was so much more intense, good and bad. We sometimes forget the trials and tribulations that everybody went through during that era. So I'm sure the impact of seeing something like that when you walk into your church was probably phenomenal. Like you were living your religion because it was all around you. Sometimes we forget that.

One thing I would have done if I had designed the exhibit – I probably would have done some photographs of the interior of the churches where the frescoes could actually have been used, where they might have been on the walls, to give you a sense of where they really came from. I think it would have been a wonderful charm to know what the inside of St. Agnese and the inside of St. Nicholas was like. It would give more of a sense of place to them. If you don't hear the heels clicking on the tile floors, if you don't feel the cool, and hear the bit of echoes in the sound of an old, old building, you don't get it.

Researcher: A lack of knowledge was also an obstacle to interpreting both form and content, or fresco-making as an art form and the message communicated by the artwork.

Interpreter: In the beginning I didn't even know what a fresco was. But the basic elements of art, the principles of art were probably unknown at that time, as tools. The only thing they had were physical symbols, like the birds, and the dolphins, and the fruit. Maybe the fruit and flowers even had meaning, I don't know.

Researcher: The interpreters identified the obstacle of literacy between the two horizons. Literacy in this context refers to the symbols we use to convey ideas. In today's world, we have the written word, and pictures. However, many medieval folk were illiterate, thus relying on picture stories such as frescoes as communicative devices. Not only was there a gap between how ideas are symbolized, but speaking the symbol language of medieval times proved an additional obstacle.

Interpreter: I think there is a difference for us too because more of us now are literate. We can pick up the Bible and read it. Whereas in those times, there wasn't as much literacy. People learned by the pictures on the wall. That's why those pictures and symbols were so important. I'm wondering if it was common knowledge that people knew the peacock was a symbol of heaven. I always thought the dolphins were very peaceful, obviously intelligent animals, as we understand now. But obviously they thought of them in a very spiritual aspect back then. We transformed them into a different animal now.

We don't put our stories on the walls that much anymore, since the age of photography. I don't know whether we've gained or we've lost. But it goes in a box now,

or winds up on videotape, or it shows up on a singing disk. So basically a fresco is a CD of early times which is large scale.

In the present we are constantly barraged with visual information. People now observe television several hours a day, read books and publications including visual recordings. The murals were done prior to all these methods of communication to the general public. The frescoes are graphic art appealing to illiterate individuals accustomed to using symbols of good and evil. For example, the pictures of the dolphin, bird and dragon had special significance to an illiterate population. Individuals then had no access to the great sources of written, oral and visual images we see today. Consequently the murals filled a void of information regarding religion and history. As for significance at this time, the frescoes are historical examples of communication prior to our present excesses. They let us feel to some degree the differences between what people knew then and what they do now.

Researcher: Obstacles outline the differences between artifacts and visitors that hinder the fusion of horizons between the two. However, there are points of commonality that facilitate the interpretive event by bridging the past and the present. One of these bridges identified by an interpreter was the characteristics common to all humans:

Interpreter: One of the most significant aspects of the human is what they think of themselves and what they think of their environment. When you look at that ancient fresco, what it represented to the person who first put it there and to the person who first viewed it are echoed in what people feel today of what life was then and what it is now. For me, I realize that as a modern human my reaction is far different because of my more detailed and wider view of the world. But as for art, it permits you to interpret existence more fully. It gives another view of what it is to be alive, to exist, what it is to pass through the seven stages of man. That is my attitude toward art.

I could see struggle. I could see an individual struggle in depicting a spiritual state. I was amused by the halos and the way that they tried to put the radiance of the mind. That to me is what a saint historically is supposed to depict – the radiance of the mind.

However, the same personal concerns are present in individuals now as they were when the frescoes were new. We can hope that we now have a little better understanding of ourselves. One of the more significant aspects of the human is what they think of themselves and what they think they should be and will become. However, art and appreciation of it also seeks to answer what are essentially the same questions, what human actions produce truth, beauty and integrity?

Researcher: Although literacy and the use of symbolic representations used in medieval times that seem foreign to us now appeared to be an obstacle, it was also a bridge.

Interpreter: Being from the northeast originally, I've seen a lot of large cathedrals with beautiful rose windows, stained glass pictures of what religious life is like, and symbols.

Researcher: This interpreter was bridging, by connecting the frescoes of the past to a similar use of stained glass windows as a method of pictorial communication today. Another bridged the past and present differently:

Interpreter: Iconography. Understanding the symbols. Still being able to read it after all those hundreds of years. The frescoes represent a different transition of faith.

Transition of understanding. They're also a transition in teaching tools for the Christian religion especially, because we don't go into a church today and see much detail. Everything is so modern. Other than having a cross at the altar you might not even know you're in a church. And in the ancient buildings that were created they were teaching tools. It was like walking into a visual book.

Researcher: Sometimes a third party or mediator is required to assist the visitors in overcoming the obstacles to facilitate a meaningful fusion of horizons.

In text, language in the form of the written word assumes the role of mediator, which is to communicate the ideas and concepts held by the author to the reader/interpreter. This is the process attributed to the Greek god Hermes, after which hermeneutics is named. In Greek mythology, Hermes was the mediator between the gods and humans, and he is credited with inventing language and writing. In his classic work, Palmer (1969) defines the Hermes process thus:

.... something foreign, strange, separated in time, space, or experience is made familiar, present, comprehensible; something requiring representation, explanation, or translation is somehow 'brought to understanding' – is 'interpreted.' (p. 14)

Gadamer (1993) does not suggest putting aside the present for a naïve transplantation into the past; rather, the interpreter mediates between the ideas of the past and his or her own. Therefore, the fusion of the horizon of the frescoes with the horizon of the visitor creates the acquisition of a new horizon of interpretation.

Between the visitor and the fresco, a common language was needed so that in the fusion of the horizons, the visitor could take ownership of what the frescoes were communicating. In the interpretive event, the message expressed by the artist in the fresco was not only his, but the visitors' also; it is something held in common.

With the fresco exhibition, it was the Museum's task to act as mediator between the horizon of the artwork and the horizon of the visitor. This was accomplished through the presentation of the works, videos, text (labels, print materials such as catalogs), and audio guides. One major method of mediation was the atmosphere or ambiance of the display.

As noted above, the visitors were introduced to the exhibition via a short video briefly outlining preservation and conservation techniques after the frescoes had been removed from their original locations. Longer explanations were available in the gallery by way of an optional fifteen-minute instructional video. In the gallery, the smaller fragments of frescoes were mounted in specially built "alcoves" rather than merely being hung on the walls. The soft peach color of the painted walls accentuated the colors in the artworks. Special track lighting added a soft, muted atmosphere. Usually it was quiet in the gallery, despite the fact that 200 people were spread out in a small, enclosed area. This was partly due to the fact that most visitors opted to rent the audio guides, which had headphones for personalized listening that kept the din of conversation to a minimum. No tour guides were engaged to conduct tours; all tours were self-guided. Text panels accompanied each fresco, and visitors could purchase a catalog of all the artworks. The audio guide provided music, information about each fresco, and interviews with the conservator and the directors of the Museum of Texas Tech University and the Vatican

Museums. A combination of the presentation of the display (lighting, paint, alcove effect), audio headsets, videos, and various text sources enabled the Hermes process to overcome the obstacles of culture, language, and geography.

Through the lighting, color of paint on the walls, special “alcove” encasements, and wall murals, the Museum tried to put the frescoes into an artistic and historical context. Dean (1994) contends that contexts significantly aid visitors’ learning and retention of the information presented in an exhibition.

The interpreters overcame obstacles of space, time, culture, geography and literacy through their own preferred media.

Interpreter: The audio guide. The audio guide with the music in the background because it had enough echo to it that you could get the feeling if you were very quiet that you were standing in one of the chapels and looking at the works.

What helped me wasn’t even the frescoes. It was the music [on the audio guide]. It was that chant that was behind it. And I had another laugh that I thoroughly enjoyed in the audio guide itself; it broke the seriousness of what I was seeing and hearing. I came up to the little fresco that had the dolphins and you could hear the dolphins talking in the background and the splash of water. I think in that respect for children, for them to pick up on little things like the dragons and the birds and the various sounds and the way the music changes with the time I thought was very good. It set the mood for the exhibit.

I remember the stories as any child would. I remember the explanation of removing the frescoes and the way they want to preserve them.

Conclusion

Very little qualitative research exists in the museum field about what occurs during an interpretive event, that time when a visitor interacts with an artifact or artwork. This study sought to initiate dialogue about the interpretive event by illuminating the experiences of three visitors as they toured a rare exhibition of medieval frescoes. It sought to explore the horizons of both the participants and the frescoes, then to illuminate the fusion of those horizons during the interpretive event. While more obvious gaps in horizons were anticipated (space, time, culture), others such as literacy and a lack of knowledge were not. In the initial stages of the research, I was able to identify concepts such as space and time that were sure to be obstacles to interpretation (Palmer, 1969), but literacy was one unexpected concept that emerged from the data. The participants had to “read” and “translate” the frescoes in order to understand them; for example they read dragon as the “word” for evil, dolphins for resurrection, and bright colors for life and energy. A language existed within the frescoes that needed to be translated in order to obtain the full meaning of the art piece.

The research explored beyond the horizons to gaps or obstacles to visitors’ meaning-making, concluding that the participant-interpreters bridged gaps or obstacles with the use of the audio guides, prior knowledge, and connections that they made between the use of frescoes as communication devices and those characteristics common to all humans despite our place in time. Connections become the common language that facilitates meaning-making between the visitor and the artifact.

One of the results of the research that is helpful to me as a museum educator is the need to identify a common language between the artifact and the visitor. If objects are to

tell a story, or “speak”, then they must do so in the language of our time and culture. Our role as museum personnel is that of Hermes, who translated the message of the gods to be appropriated by humans (Palmer, 1969). We must translate the message of the artifacts for appropriation by visitors. In the Vatican exhibition, the audio guides and text labels provided a common language for communicating the message of the frescoes to the visitors. Context is another part of that common language.

An artifact within an exhibition is like a word within a sentence. The setting for the exhibition becomes a context that provides clues to the visitor for “reading” the artifacts. While this was not a new discovery for me it supported previous research (Brodie, 2001). However, what I found interesting was that one of the participants identified the significance of context when she stated that photographs from the interior of the churches, and hearing the clicking of heels on the tile floors and the sounds of echoes typical of old buildings would have added contextually to the exhibition. Also, in our discourse about the sacredness of the artifacts, the participants de-emphasized the objects as sacred in part because of the manner or context in which they were exhibited. If the objects had been placed within a religious context, perhaps recreating a sanctuary, then they would likely have been “read” sacredly. However, the sacred context was removed by placing the objects randomly with other unassociated objects that emphasized an artistic context.

In this study, the artifacts (frescoes) were treated as research participants, since their role was integral. However, this raised the problems of giving voice to an inanimate object that was created in a time, culture, and place very distant from my own. There was no way of knowing who some of the original artists were, what they were thinking as they painted, and what their lives were like. Some of the subjects of the paintings are lost also. For example, we suspect one painting might have been about St. Peter, but that cannot be confirmed. As in the presentation of any research findings, the author of the report makes final decisions about what to include or exclude from the presentation of data. This decision had to be carefully considered when presenting information about the artifacts in order to animate them as important parts of the research.

The results of this research are useful to future museum professionals for considering the following questions when creating storylines and developing exhibitions: What common language can be developed in an exhibition between artifacts and visitors? What are the possible horizons of the visitors and artifacts/artworks? What potential obstacles exist to hinder the visitors’ understanding of the artifact/artwork? Since different people learn differently, what aids (audio guides, tour guides, text labels, catalogs) can be made available to facilitate understanding?

This study prompts further research in the interpretive event and beyond. While the focus of this study was limited to that mystical moment of encounter with the artwork, questions emerged about if and how visitors’ horizons were transformed as a result of the initial fusing of horizons during the interpretive event. More research needs also to be conducted on the development and use of a common language between artifacts or artwork and visitors. Future research should explore the idea of horizons, particularly gaps that might impede interpretation. Since the frescoes were hundreds of years old and from another culture, the potential gaps of culture, time, and space were obvious. However, if the objects had been modern abstract artworks, other gaps and horizons may have emerged for study; therefore, research needs to expand into other

realms of visual and performing arts horizons. The results of these research projects will yield valuable information in facilitating optimum learning experiences for audiences.

One of the limitations of this study was that the short exhibition time (3 1/2 months) prevented a more in-depth examination with many more participant-interpreters. The time limitations also precluded following participants on repeated visits to discover subsequent meaning-making experiences that might have been affected by their first encounter with the artifacts. Limiting the study to the interpretive event prevented further discoveries of how participants' horizons were shaped and changed by the interpretive experience. Another limitation of the study was the exhibition itself, which was atypical for the Museum in its heightened security screening, added audio and video features, extraordinary media coverage, and structured tour times. Participant-interpreters had a heightened sense of the significance of the exhibition that might have colored their expectations. This limitation was addressed through questioning about their horizons, particularly their prior knowledge and their reasons for visiting the exhibition.

As a result of the findings of this study, the Museum's educators have embarked on a project to assist visitors in understanding some of the permanent collections. A gallery guide is being developed which identifies a common language for viewing the artworks. Family-oriented activities in the booklet help visitors "read" the exhibition so that the message of the artifacts can be understood and appropriated. Most visitors (including the research participants) identified the audio guides as being extremely helpful in giving background information about the frescoes, therefore future "blockbuster" exhibitions at the Museum like the medieval artworks from the Vatican Museums collection will attempt to provide audio head sets for communicating the story of the artifacts.

To summarize, this research was a good pilot study of visitor meaning-making during an interpretive event. The concept of horizons provided a framework for analyzing participants' experiences and observing both obstacles and bridges during artifact interpretation. More research can and should be conducted on visitor and artifact horizons, as well as bridges and obstacles to the fusing of horizons. Results of such research provide important information that museum personnel can employ in developing exhibitions to facilitate interpretation through common language and contexts. The results of the study suggest that while visitors share attributes such as prior knowledge and reasons for attending an exhibition, horizons remain uniquely individual and are worthy of intensive research. Research results confirm the importance of context in exhibitions, and the metaphor of word/sentence for artifact/exhibition as outlined by Brodie (2001).

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