
## THE MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ARTS

# A Focus Group Study of Visitor Reaction to Small-Scale Interpretive Video Displays in the Galleries

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# INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

This report summarizes the results of a focus group study conducted by Cincinnatus, an independent research and planning firm, for The Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA) in May 2003. The purpose of this study was to understand how MIA visitors respond to various applications of small video monitor technology in the galleries. General questions to be answered were:

- Does the video technology enhance the visitor's experience, and if so, how?
- Does the video distract people from their experience of the art object itself?

In addition to gauging overall visitor satisfaction with the videos, their reactions to issues such as sound, types of art, location, duration, interactivity, and text were also explored.

Cincinnatus conducted three visitor focus groups, consisting of gallery visits and discussion breaks, at the MIA during regular museum hours. Each group included 7 or 8 visitors and lasted approximately 2 1/2 hours. Participants were recruited at random from member and nonmember visitor lists supplied by the MIA. One group included participants who tended to frequently visit the Museum as well as other museums and could be viewed as "art savvy." The other two groups included more mainstream visitors. A total of 23 individuals participated in the focus groups, and each received a $50 honorarium for his or her participation.

After arriving at the museum entrance, participants were escorted into a room for a few minutes of orientation. Initially they were not told that the subject of the study would be the video screens; instead, they were asked to visit the galleries as they normally would and make note of their general impressions. Cincinnatus facilitators then took the visitors in groups of 3 or 4 to view three galleries with small video monitors. Afterward the two subgroups came together for a discussion of the experience, at which time the purpose of the study was explained. They then visited three additional examples, followed by a second joint discussion, for a total of six video monitors visited during the 2 1/2 hour session. Each session concluded with a general discussion of the visitors' overall impressions of the technology.

It is important to point out that this is a *qualitative* study. Focus groups are a widely used research tool and are particularly helpful in understanding the complex, subtle relationship between individuals and a particular product, service, or organization. Unlike *quantitative* research such as surveys, focus group results are not statistically projectable to a larger population. For example, it is not valid to say that *all* visitors to MIA hold the same opinions as those expressed in these focus groups. On the other hand, these in-depth discussions provide a rich source of information about how individuals who are served by the Institute can benefit from small video monitor technology in the museum and how they will likely respond to such technology.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

• The presence of small video displays in the galleries can enhance the visitor's understanding and appreciation of the works of art. Respondents in these focus groups described numerous ways that the videos contributed to their understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of their gallery experience.

• Importantly, the video displays, as developed for this study, did not detract from the visitor's experience of the works of art. Only a small number of visitors noticed the video screens upon entering their first gallery. They tended to come upon the screens in the normal course of visiting the room or failed to notice them entirely until prompted by the focus group moderator. When asked whether the videos detracted from their gallery experience, very few said they were distracted, and only in one of the galleries.

• In some cases, the video displays filled what visitors described as a gap between the more general information provided by wall panels (e.g., Art of Japan) and the labels for specific works of art, creating a mid-level contextual piece that greatly enhanced the visitor's understanding of the works of art in the room.

• Though the number of respondents is small, it appears, based on these focus groups, that the "art savvy" visitors feel they are equally as likely to benefit from the videos as the mainstream visitors.

• In terms of execution, no one formula for the video displays emerged as the single best approach. Six different variations were tested, and all were deemed appropriate and desirable uses of the technology. Variables such as sound, text, size, placement and content must be evaluated and uniquely designed for each specific application and work or works of art.

• The use of sound can be particularly effective as a way to create context. Most respondents agreed that soft, culturally appropriate music, when played in some galleries, greatly enhanced their experience in the gallery and contributed to their interest in spending time there. On the other hand, visitors also said they would not want sound present in every gallery. In general, broadcast sound was preferred over headsets because it allows the visitor to move freely within the gallery and allows for a shared experience.

• Although the duration of the videos varied significantly, from 45 seconds (Transformation Mask) to 4 minutes (Immaculate Conception), visitors reported that all seemed appropriate for the specific application. Longer videos seemed particularly appropriate when they told a story.

• The respondents felt that the amount of text in the videos and the speed at which it moved was appropriate. They encouraged consideration of font size and clarity to ensure readability for all museum visitors.

• Screen size will vary somewhat, depending on the specific application and clarity of the video; however, in general, the 6-inch size was viewed as too small. The 10-inch size used in one example (Taking Tea) was not considered too large for that application.

• Placement of the videos was an important consideration for several of the visitors. Several respondents did not notice the first few displays and advocated for more visibility of the videos. On the other hand, they felt strongly that the videos should not visually compete with the art objects.

• Continuous play was preferred over the "touch here to begin" format. The visitors said they might be reluctant to touch-start a screen for fear that the video would be too long, or because they were mindful that it would be a shared experience. In addition, they advised against a blank screen, which may go unnoticed by visitors or cause them to think it may be broken.

• The respondents offered several suggestions for improving the video displays, including ensuring visual clarity and appropriate sound, placement, and labeling. A restart button was recommended for longer videos, and signage that noted subject and sequence length was recommended for all videos.

• The question of density of small video displays in the museum is an open one based on these focus groups. Respondents strongly endorsed the video concept for situations that lend themselves to this form of interpretation as demonstrated in the six examples shown to them. On the other hand, they urged some measure of restraint in the use of videos and sound, so as to not overwhelm the museum with technology. Videos should be an *option* for visitors to the museum, they said, and decisions about when to include them should be made on an individual basis with that in mind.

## DETAILED FINDINGS

### PART I: NOH ROBES, MANDALA, AND AFRICAN MASKS

Two groups of three or four focus group participants separately toured three gallery areas of the museum, each with an accompanying small video display:

**Noh Robes** in the Japanese Galleries (Gallery 219). A 6" video screen was situated on a pedestal in the middle of the room. The continuously running video (2:25 min.), with instrumental music quietly audible in the gallery, showed actors in a Noh performance wearing robes similar to those on display.

**Yamantaka Mandala** in the Asian Galleries (Himalayan Gallery 212); created in 1991 by the monks of the Gyuto Tantric University. A 6" video screen was situated on a pedestal to the lower left of the wall-mounted Mandala. The continuously running video (0:48 min.) showed the process of making the Mandala. A pair of headphones was attached to the pedestal, allowing the listener to hear Tibetan chanting while viewing the video as an option.

**African Masks** in the African Gallery (Gallery 250). A 6" video screen was situated on a pedestal near a group of masks on display. The continuously running video (1:18 min.), which had no sound, showed rare footage of mask-wearing African tribal dancers.

After touring these areas, the groups convened in the Noh Robes room for discussion.

## Attraction

To begin this discussion, the facilitator asked the participants to describe how they approached the video screen in the first gallery they visited (Noh Robes or Mandala). Of the 23 visitors, only 2 said they went directly to the screen; one person was drawn to the music coming from the video in the Noh Robes room, and the other was drawn to the large Mandala on the wall and noticed the video with headphones next to it. Another 12 said they went to the screen eventually, either because they did not notice it right away, or they wanted to survey the gallery ("set the context") first. The remaining 9 visitors, who did not go to the video without prompting, cited the following reasons:

–Didn't see it (4)

–Time concerns (4). "I was thinking I wanted to get to it…But you had told us we had a certain period of time, so I wanted to do the overview before I went back."

–Not interested (1). "I was thinking I see enough TV at home, and it wasn't the medium I was here to enjoy."

Several people looked at the Mandala video but did not put the headset on until prompted to do so. Their reasons for holding back included:

- I had seen the Mandala before, and I could hear the music through the [resting] headphones anyway.
- I thought, "Okay, this is good, but I don't have enough time to listen to the narration." Of course, it turned out it wasn't a narration.

The facilitator then asked, "Did anyone see the video monitor and feel uncomfortable about it being there?" None of the participants expressed discomfort about the presence of these video monitors in the galleries. Similarly, participants were not bothered by the audio portion. Many liked the soft background music in the Noh Robes room. "When I came in, the mood in this room was such that I was drawn to it," one person noted. "I heard a little bit of the music, the Noh dancing, and it made this room extra special because of it…It drew everything together."

## First Impressions

Participants were asked to describe their overall reaction to the three small video monitors—What were their thoughts about the screens as they toured the galleries? Were they surprised? Did the screens seem out of place?

Overall reactions to the first three examples were positive, with participants in general agreement that the videos were informative and enhancing. One visitor commented on the effectiveness of the African Masks video: "As I got around the room, there was the video, showing exactly what I wanted to see. It made tremendous sense to me. I think it's a wonderful idea." For another visitor, the monitor in the Noh Robes room was the deciding factor in her decision to linger there. "If I were to walk in this gallery without the video monitor, I wouldn't have stayed," she said. "I wouldn't know what I was looking at." Many of the visitors had even stronger feelings about the accompanying music—in the background in the Noh Robes gallery, or heard through the headset in the Mandala exhibit—and, in turn, to the *absence* of music in the African Masks video as well. Comments included:

- The sound [in the headset] was magnificent.
- I appreciated the music coming out of the video more than the video. And I was disappointed when the African Mask one didn't have music.
- I didn't actually notice either of the videos in the first two galleries. The music and the dancing definitely drew me.

Other first impressions took the form of helpful suggestions to make visitors more aware of the screens and their role in the exhibits. Some respondents said they would have preferred larger screens. Others voiced a preference for more labeling in the galleries, particularly on the video displays themselves, since they are a new feature to many visitors. As one person

commented, “It was kind of a *learned* experience for me… I like the suggestion of some kind of signage for those of us who aren’t used to it.” Other comments included:

- I liked the African one, the movement in the video…I wonder how valuable it would be to have some text—the date, what they’re doing.
- It would make sense if there’s some kind of written description next to the video telling you why it’s there.

## Sound

The facilitator noted that the small video displays were all somewhat different in terms of sound—one had continuous sound (Noh Robes), one had no sound (African Masks), and one had a headset for individual use (Mandala). She asked the visitors, “How do you feel about the presence or absence of sound?” and also probed on the subject of headsets.

**Continuous sound.** The visitors unanimously agreed that the soft background music, which originated from the video monitor but could be heard throughout the room, was an enhancement to the Noh Robes exhibit. “It creates the mood and culture,” one participant stated. Some even thought it should have been louder. Comments included:

- The sound had a great deal to do with the feeling in this room.
- I think the sound like in this room would have worked well in all three. It makes everything come alive.
- It seems like you can serve more people if you [broadcast music] in a room.

Although they loved the background music in the Noh Robes gallery and could easily envision music enhancing other galleries, these visitors were somewhat cautious in their approach to the concept of broadcast sound in museums. It must be used appropriately and with restraint, they said. Some wrestled with the issue:

- I get overrun with sound sometimes. But when music is very much a part of the culture you’re observing, that really enhances it.
- And because it’s a part of a different culture, it’s not the kind of sound that we get inundated with generally, so it adds to it.
- There *is* something about silence in the museum that is very healing. For me, that’s part of the experience I like to have, outside the din. If you have competing sounds in each of the galleries, that might detract from it, too. It’s a tough one.
- I can’t see sound in every single one of these galleries. Where it has meaning, yes.

**No sound.** Having acknowledged that sound can enhance a gallery when used appropriately, the visitors were quick to point out that the absence of sound in the African Mask video actually diminished their experience of it. Nearly everyone expressed regret that sound was not included with this video, which showed rare footage of masked African tribal dancers in motion. Comments included:

- I missed having sound in the Mask room. The drumbeat was an important part of the ritual, and it wasn't there.
- There was just something missing by not having sound in the African exhibit. The movement looked very bizarre. If you had heard the drumbeat, it would have made a lot more sense.
- It was verging, for me, on absurd—watching this little teeny screen without hearing anything.

**Headset.** The visitors had mixed feelings about the use of a headset for the Mandala video. One person expected to hear a narration of the video, which showed how the Mandala was made, and instead heard chanting, which had a more atmospheric effect. Most people appreciated this unique audio enhancement. One visitor was especially mesmerized by what she heard:

> I was drawn to the Mandala, and I listened, and it made the entire experience—well, it sent chills literally. The canting was wonderful, and it enclosed the room in the sound, and it made the exhibit that much more meaningful.

Each group talked in a more general way about headsets in museums. Contrasting the headset option with continuous sound, some people saw a real advantage to headsets. "It gives you more control over whether or not you want to listen to it," one visitor said. Another person said she was very enthusiastic about headsets and has come to expect that option when visiting museums: "If they have them, I want them." (It should be noted that she was referring to wireless, portable headsets.) However, several participants expressed concerns about headset comfort and freedom of movement. With a cord connecting the headset to the video pedestal, some people found the setup at the Mandala display physically restrictive. Comments included:

- I did not like the headphone because it required me to stand right there and not look away or be able to walk away. You were captive to this little screen.
- It almost dictates how you're going to experience this—how far you can walk away from the pylon, the angle at which you're going to look at the rest of the room.
- I can't stand headsets. I would not put one on unless somebody said, "You've got to listen to this." I don't like to stand in front of a screen.

- I would like to have been able to sit down and just listen [to the chanting], and just experience the room with the sound.

Headset etiquette was a concern for some participants. Several people said they felt rushed when using it, since only one person at a time could use the headset, and they did not want to monopolize it. "It limits the number of people you can serve," one person noted. However, the suggestion of providing three or four headsets per for each small video monitor was quickly dismissed. "People aren't comfortable getting that close if they don't know each other," one visitor explained. Another person wondered if hygiene considerations about shared headsets would trouble some museum visitors.

**When and how should sound be used?** Throughout the discussion, participants occasionally voiced opinions on when and how sound should be delivered. Chief among them were:

–Sound can be a powerful enhancement to an exhibit, so it should be used when appropriate. "Without the music, I wouldn't have stayed [in the gallery]….The music helped to create an ambience."

–There are distinct advantages to having continuous music in one or more rooms, as long as it is kept at an undisruptive level.

–Some videos (such as in the African Mask exhibit) would benefit from sound.

–Headsets should always be used for narrative recordings, so as to avoid disturbing other visitors. "If somebody else is talking, that interferes with your own thoughts," noted one of the participants. However, freedom of movement while wearing headsets is important.

–Audio enhancements are one way of meeting the needs of non-readers or visually impaired visitors. As one person said, "If someone doesn't read, for whatever reason, or can't see, you may need audio kinds of things. A museum has to serve many needs."

–Decisions about when and how to use sound should be made on a case-by-case basis. "It really depends on what we're looking at," one visitor stated.

## Object-Specific vs. "Generic" Videos

The facilitator then mentioned another way in which the videos differed: one pertained to a specific work of art (the Mandala), and the other two related to a whole room full of art objects (African Masks and the Noh Robes). She asked the participants, "What are the strengths of each approach? Limitations? If you worked here, which type of video would you try to develop?"

The visitors' overall opinion was that the context choices made by those who designed the video displays were fitting and appropriate. They recognized that viewers will have varied levels of interest in any given video, and they resisted the notion of having to choose one approach over another. Comments included:

- Do we have to pick either way? I thought seeing how the Mandala was done was appropriate, and I think seeing the [African] dancing is. I think they picked the right way to do each one.
- I think the variety is good…If you walk up to a screen and don't know what function it's going to have for the art work, that's part of the stimulation.
- Everyone brings with them a different level of interest in a subject. There are some subjects where you just walk in, look and nod, and walk on. There are other things where you're more interested—you want that video, you want that sound, you want more text. The objective should be to allow those different levels of interest to be served.

In the process of responding to the facilitator's question, the visitors not only offered insights about each approach but also identified a new, "transitional" role for videos in setting context in a gallery.

**Object-specific videos.** Participants identified several strengths of the object-specific approach as exemplified by the Mandala video, which showed the process of making the object. These strengths included:

--Offers an in-depth view of the object. "Having the "how-to" certainly illuminated that piece. Otherwise, it was sand pasted on wood. The "how-to" is often marvelous."

--Holds the viewer's attention. "With the Mandala video, I found myself wanting to see what the next step was, since I clearly understood what they were creating, whereas with the Noh Robes video, I felt a little more complacent—to kind of look at it, get the general idea, and then walk away."

--Provides an emotional and aesthetic focus. "The Mandala video was kind of an atmospheric one, with the chanting going on, which matches what the didactic panel said about creating these being an emotional act. I had an overwhelming sense of that with the video."

--Provides a point of entry to other objects in the room. "It worked, even though it was focused toward one thing. I never had the feeling it was focused only toward the Mandala. It brought the whole room together for me."

**"Generic" videos** (those that relate to a group of objects). These videos, in the Noh Robes and African Masks rooms, had a powerful effect on several visitors because they provided a real-life context for viewing the objects in the galleries. In the Noh Robes gallery, for instance, several people noted that they did not at first understand the purpose of the robes or how they were used. Once they saw the video of actors wearing the robes in a dramatic performance, however, the pieces of the puzzle came together. Comments included:

- When I came in this room, I didn't understand that I was looking at all these robes that had to do with the theater. I walked right past the screen… I guess I was drawn to the robes and didn't really look at the [screen] until I was prompted. I wrote down, "It would be nice to see these robes in action; how do you wear these?"—and there it was.
- I didn't know what I was looking at. If I wasn't told to be in here, I would have gone on to something else, because I didn't know what it was—quilts? And then I went and looked at the video, it made sense, and it made it interesting, only because that let me know what it was.

Similarly, participants said that the African mask video brought the objects they were viewing to life. Information from a wall panel made some visitors excited about seeing the masks worn by dancers. "[The text] indicated that people would only use these masks as they moved rather than standing still," noted one person. "I thought, 'Oh, good—now I get to see what it *really* looks like as opposed to having it static." Another participant contrasted the viewing of masks on a wall with seeing them worn. "When you see the masks on the wall," she said, "you sort of imagine what it would look like on somebody…Seeing them in photograph or video helped me bring it into reality." Some commented that it was because of their desire to see the masks fully come to life that the absence of sound—at least a drumbeat—was so noticeable.

**Bridging broad and specific contexts.** Several participants mentioned their need to understand the context of an exhibit before they can fully appreciate it. Traditionally, many have relied on wall panels and object labeling to grasp the context and make sense of what they were seeing, but they often felt a disconnect in the information—the "middle" level of the context was missing. As one person noted, the Art of Japan wall panels set the broad context for the Noh Robes exhibit, and the objects had their specific labels, but the "in between" piece specific to the gallery was missing. The video, however, was a start in providing that transitional piece. Therefore, the discussion of the merits of an object-specific versus generic focus allowed the groups to explore the role of videos as a link between the broad historical context and the work of art itself. Comments included:

- I've always felt that the labeling here occurred on two levels. There's the general, historical, thematic stuff that nowhere relates to the specific objects. It gives you a conceptual path to follow in looking at the objects. Then there's these incredibly detailed descriptions, which are excellent—but neither one of them gives us a handle on how the history relates to this thing we're doing. There's no transitional piece. And I think the videos can be a means of making that happen.
- I thought [the Noh Robes and Mandala videos] set the context in a way the didactic panels didn't…That's what I'm missing here...to see people wearing the robes, and to hear the music.
- I'm more comfortable with my knowledge of European art, so when I get into a situation like [the Noh Robes exhibit], where I don't understand it as well, I need the pictures, I need the music, to understand how it fits.
- This one [Noh Robes video] gave the context we've been speaking to—the actors.

Some thought that because the videos contained vital contextual information, they should be more visible and easily located within the room. For this reason, one visitor described the Noh Robes video as "a little bit *too* tasteful." He continued, "I understand why it was that way…but it could be handled in a way that someone is drawn to the *option* of it right away." Another participant agreed: "Because it's small and tastefully done, it wasn't noticed by *this* museum-goer until the very end!"

## PART II: IMMACULATE CONCEPTION, TAKING TEA, AND THE TRANSFORMATION MASK

The group again divided into two smaller groups and toured three more gallery rooms, each with an accompanying video program:

**The Immaculate Conception with Saint Francis and Anthony of Padua**
by Il Grechetto (Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione), about 1650; in the N. Bud and Beverly Grossman Gallery (Gallery 330). A 6" video screen was situated on a pedestal to the lower left of the painting. The viewer was required to touch-activate the video (4:10 min.), which contained text but no sound and showed the process of restoring the painting.


**Decorative Arts Objects** in the Bell Family Decorative Arts Court (Gallery 380). Between two display cases containing tea sets, a 10" screen on a pedestal showed the video entitled "Taking Tea" (from the Victoria and Albert Museum, London). The viewer was required to touch-start the video (2:42 min.), which contained text but no sound. Using a cartoon-like line drawing format, the video illustrated the history and customs of drinking tea in England.

**Transformation Mask,** by Richard Hunt, 1993; in the Americas Galleries (Gallery 369). A 6" video screen was situated on a pedestal to the left of the Transformation Mask, a stylized raven's head. The video (0:45 min.) showed footage of a person wearing the mask and performing a dance of the repetitive, bowing motions of the raven. At the end of the video, the beak of the mask opened up to reveal a human image underneath.

The groups then gathered near the Americas Galleries for discussion.

## Content

To begin this discussion, the facilitator asked, "How did you feel about the content of the videos?" and probed on which videos were most memorable to the visitors. Responses varied, depending on the personal interests of each participant, but as a whole they addressed the information and entertainment value of the videos, as well as the "surprise" factor.

**Information value.** The Immaculate Conception video, which showed the process of its restoration, was a favorite of many participants because it presented information that was new to most of the visitors and applicable to paintings beyond the Immaculate Conception. Comments included:

- I was just here less than a month ago, and my friend and I were wondering how they restored that painting…It helps for someone like me, who doesn't know a lot about art.
- It was appropriate to focus on the restoration there, because I think religious-themed paintings can alienate a lot of people—even old paintings. The restoration process is fascinating.
- I have an innate curiosity about how in the world they keep these things preserved. So it was interesting for me to see that.

"Taking Tea" was also appreciated because it provided new information on an unfamiliar subject. Comments included:

- The one on the tea held my attention the most—maybe because it was a subject I wasn't interested in, and I found it was interesting.
- I thought it was an excellent use of that medium. When I look at those cupboards [in the gallery], I see dishes. That put into perspective what those dishes were about. It made me more interested in looking at the pieces.
- It actually enhanced the entire exhibit. I agree that it's just dishes, but…all of a sudden I was thinking of those little spoon caddies and all those things, thinking that if there was a video for all of them, then they have a meaning and a history behind it.

The short Transformation Mask video contained an important piece of information about the mask on display—that the "transformation" occurs when its large beak opens up to reveal a human face underneath. Without the video showing footage of the mask opening up, participants said, they would have completely missed the point.

**Entertainment value.** The "Taking Tea" video was extremely well received by the visitors, who found it an entertaining way to learn about English tea customs and make a connection with the tea sets on display in the room. They liked its humor and whimsical quality in contrast to the formal atmosphere in the gallery. Comments included:

- It was a great way of looking at the history.  It was witty and fun.

- It's just so formal when you look at those dishes…But the video was humorous, and with the blushing, and doing something proper—I thought the blushing was great.
- It was the only way I could interact with the art in that gallery. I like the dichotomy of the stuffy exhibit and the very fun video.
- There can be an infinite amount of content, but context is the key thing—to go from that object, just that teacup sitting there, to the period in which it was created and how it was used. I thought it was kind of creative against the sketches and cartoon-like approach to it. I just think it's wonderful.

**"Surprise" factor.** For some people, the sudden, unexpected opening-up of the Transformation Mask at the end of the video was what made it memorable to them, as did the unexpected humor in the "Taking Tea" video. In this part of the discussion and elsewhere, the visitors from time to time mentioned their delight in not knowing what to expect from the video presentation.

## Duration of Video

The facilitator noted that the videos varied in length—that the Immaculate Conception was 4:10 minutes; "Taking Tea," 2:42 minutes; and the Transformation Mask, 45 seconds. Participants were then asked for their opinions about the lengths of the videos: "Did it seem the right amount of time for each? What length of time would be optimal for you in most cases?"

Many people were surprised to learn that the restoration video, which most people thought was an appropriate length, was in fact longer than "Taking Tea." They attributed this perception to their level of absorption in the respective videos. Although the tea video was popular for its entertainment value, several people thought it should have been shorter; others thought the length was fine. Comments included:

- I was surprised to hear the restoration one was four minutes. It didn't seem that long.
- I got impatient with the tea one. I thought it was too long. It may have been the subject matter. I was more intrigued by the subject of the restoration video, so I didn't seem to mind the length.
- It depends on what knowledge you bring to something. If you already know about the tea and the ceremony, you could find it long. But if you never know much about it, you don't get tired of it.

The 45-second Transformation Mask video, according to most participants, was the right duration, though the pivotal moment in the video was easy to miss if the viewer was inattentive.

There was no consensus on an optimal video length. A couple of people suggested one or two minutes for videos without a beginning and an end ("If there isn't a story, I'd keep them short."). The majority of participants, however, felt that the length of a video should be determined on an individual basis—"as long as it needs to be," as one person put it. Sensitivity to various reading speeds was advised for videos that contained changing text.

## Continuous Play

Two of the videos, the Immaculate Conception and "Taking Tea," required the visitor to touch the screens to start them. The facilitator asked participants two questions. First, were they were inclined to press screens to start them, or not? Second, since the museum has the option of running the videos continuously, which would be a better approach for the visitor—touch-start screens or those that run continuously?

Because these visitors favored a variety of museum experiences, they saw advantages to both the touch-start and continuous play formats. Several said they were accustomed to touch-activating screens, so inexperience was not an issue. However, if they had to choose only one way, the majority indicated that they would opt for continuous play. They cited two reasons for this. First, without the video running, a blank screen might go unnoticed or unused. "People will walk right by," commented one visitor. "That's how it was for me with the tea video," said another. "If you see a blank screen, you might think it's broken." Second, though they were comfortable activating video screens, they might not be inclined to do so during a museum visit because of time considerations. As one person noted, "If you have to touch a screen, it makes me think, 'Oh, is this going to be really long?' whereas if it's running, you can come up and see a couple of things."

The participants recommended that if a touch-start screen is used, the running time of the video should be indicated at the start of the video or on related signage. Comments included:

- The blank screen should indicate that you can start something. But "Touch Here to Begin" suggests a major investment of time.
- It would be really nice if it said somewhere, "This video lasts a minute," or whatever. Otherwise, you have no idea where you are, or how long you have to stay if you want to watch the whole thing.

Almost everyone responded favorably to the idea of a restart button, which would give the visitor some degree of control over viewing time. "If it had a restart button," said one participant, "you wouldn't wait that extra two minutes if it was halfway through, if your concern is time."

One visitor argued that the aesthetics of the room should be a primary consideration when deciding whether to run a video continuously or not. She noted that the choices for the

"Taking Tea" and Transformation Mask videos were aesthetically appropriate for their respective rooms:

- From an aesthetic point of view, when we walked into the place that had the beautiful tea things in it, it was nice that it was quiet. If you wanted to go deeper into it, you could touch the screen. Whereas with [the Transformation Mask], the aesthetics of the room are just as nice because the screen is going.

## Screen Size

The facilitator explained that the screen sizes varied—from 6 inches for most of the videos to 10 inches for "Taking Tea." She asked the groups, "How do you feel about the sizes of the screens? Were the smaller ones too small? The larger one too large? What factors should be considered in choosing screen size?"

More than half the visitors preferred the larger screen used for the "Taking Tea" video; many said 10 inches was just the right size. The larger screen, they reasoned, is easier to see and can accommodate multiple viewers, including those with visual impairments. As one visitor stated, "Larger makes it more inclusive." In addition, the interaction among viewers changes the dynamics of the gallery. Comments included:

- [With the larger screen], other people can view it from a distance, and they can be drawn into it. I noticed with "Taking Tea" there were several of us standing around, and you're kind of interacting and listening, and people were laughing. I like that. The small screen is confining. You have to go closer, and you don't have space for people around you.
- Whatever tools a museum can bring, it helps them to be more appealing to a greater audience. If I were charged with that job of buying for the museum the larger or smaller screen, I think we'd have to try to get what would serve the most—and I'd say the larger screen.

Another person mentioned that the size of the larger screen more closely resembles that of the screens people use at home and work, so they may be more drawn to them: "When you get to 3" x 5", like a little miniature TV, that's too small."

The small number of people who preferred the smaller screens did so primarily for aesthetic reasons, or out of concern about technology saturation:

- I don't agree [that larger screens are better]. We're becoming a video sound world, just this barrage of electronics…If it needs to be small to be tasteful, let it be that way.
- I really like the small ones. They're less offensive, and there's the curiosity factor. None were too small for me.

A visitor who was equally concerned about being overwhelmed by technology still advocated for a larger screen size: "There's a point where it could really be obtrusive, and it could overwhelm the objects, and it's more of a video arcade than a museum," he said. "I don't think you're anywhere close to that. I think the screens could be a good deal bigger—at least twice as big as the little ones."

Content was also mentioned as a factor to consider when choosing screen size. A couple of people thought it was odd that the restoration video, which had as its subject a huge, centerpiece-like painting, had such a tiny screen, whereas the tea video, with its whimsical line drawing animations, had the largest screen. Other comments included:

- A little screen is just perfect [for a narrow subject matter]. But there are other things you'd want to present—I'm thinking of the African Masks—in a larger format. I think content will be a factor in how large the screen should be.
- The restoration video was very dark and very small, and I was getting some kind of glare from the skylights. If the screen was larger, I think I'd have wanted to watch it longer.

In addition to screen size, screen *placement* was identified as an important consideration. One wheelchair-bound participant commented that a more upright angle to the screens would help reduce glare and increase visibility for her. Others suggested that the Transformation Mask video be away from the line of vision of the object on display so as to not compete with it.

## Text

To begin this discussion, the facilitator noted that the Immaculate Conception and "Taking Tea" videos had text, whereas others did not. She then asked the participants, "How did you feel about the text? Is it readable? Is it the right amount of text? Does it move too fast or too slow?"

The majority of participants felt that the videos had the right amount of text and that the speed was about right. However, one participant encouraged sensitivity to non-English speaking and visually impaired museum visitors, who may need a slower speed and sharper visual definition. Several participants suggested running text against a white stripe at the bottom of the screen to ensure readability.

The group then reconvened in the Whittier Room for a final discussion.

## PART III: OVERALL IMPRESSIONS

### Effect of Small Video Monitors on the Experience of the Art

The facilitator asked the participants, "Now that you've seen a number of examples, what effect did the small video monitors have on how you experienced the various works of art?"

The majority of participants said that, to varying degrees, the videos enhanced their experience of the works of art. Comments included:

- They're wonderful. They really enhanced every room. They helped me in every room.
- I think they're wonderful. I think it's *possible* to go too far and be obtrusive with too much noise and too much video, but I don't think you're anywhere near that…I'm really excited about it.
- It helped my experience. Maybe I'm from the MTV age, I'm from the media [culture], I *have* been spoon-fed. To me, it's like, "A video—wow!"…I like it. I'm used to it. It enhanced it for me to see it applied to those robes, or the restoration. I liked it a *lot*.
- I thought the tea video really enhanced [my experience], helped me understand the context of when those things were used, and how they were used. I would have been happy to see more, and more in depth.
- With the Japanese clothing, it showed how it was used, how it was worn. With the very last one, it showed how that mask opened up. I would never have picked up on what was going on with that if I hadn't seen the video. I wouldn't have been interested in the tea thing at all if it hadn't been for the video.
- I think the cultural pieces helped me understand what was going on.
- It definitely enhanced my experience, especially in certain settings. I have to go back to the African Masks setting. You walked into that setting, and it hit you. That was a *neat* display. It was really, really well done. It wasn't trying to go through 1,500 years of history. It was *these* masks, and *this* is what happens here, and that was nice. … It enhanced my enjoyment of all the different galleries we went into.
- The little 45-second video really enhanced my viewing of that mask, because I would not have known that you can close the beak—and that opening of the beak was that surprise element. The two things together enhanced my experience of that.
- The little one on the mask and the African one that showed the dancers with the masks on that showed literally what they were doing with them—those, to me, are enhancing. You can do two things at once. You can look at the video, look at the object, put the two together, and make an experience, which I think is important. It brings to life that object, which you appreciate.

Some who had reservations about one or more of the videos still agreed in theory that videos are capable of enhancing the experience of art:

- When you go to a museum, you go because, number one, you go to appreciate, but number two, you're going to learn. So whenever the videos enhance or empower that learning, I think that gives them credibility.
- The videos educate, they enhance the experience of putting art in its context, as we discussed earlier—that bridge between the history panel on the wall and the actual art object, where the video could come in and enhance the experience. I'm an educator and I see the value that videos have as educational tools, to draw people in and have a deeper experience, and also for those who just want to learn more about that area….Because I'm an auditory person, I remember being at one of the museums in the Smithsonian…They had this piano exhibit; just punch a button and hear the piano play from that era. That sort of thing really enhances the museum experience. So I applaud what you're doing here.
- The content of the video, the placement of it, the size—if it enhances my immediate experience of looking at that piece of art, I'm going to be happy. I felt that was the case in several of the installations, but not all.

## Most Memorable Videos

The participants were then asked, "Which of the videos were most memorable?" Responses varied according to individual interests. For some, the haunting music and images of the Noh Robes video made that experience memorable. Many people thought "Taking Tea" was the most memorable one, perhaps because it differed from the others with its lighthearted, humorous tone and cartoon-like format. The African Masks video, with its rare and authentic footage, was mentioned by several people, as was the restoration video for its instructive content. One participant, however, remembered the Immaculate Conception video for more than its information. "I found the drama of that video to be quite extraordinary," she said. "I was holding my breath, hoping that no one was going to slip or bounce the painting, so I felt there was a lot of inherent drama in it."

## Do Small Video Monitors Detract from the Gallery Experience?

The facilitator asked, "Did the presence of the videos *detract* in any way from your experience in the gallery?" With a few exceptions, nearly everyone responded that the videos did not detract from their gallery experience. The visitors regarded the videos as *options* in their gallery experience. The fact that some participants did not pay much attention to the videos before prompting indicated the screens had a low level of visibility and intrusiveness. As one person commented, "Many of us never even looked at the first one, so obviously it didn't detract. We didn't even *see* it." Another said, "What was nice about the way it was done today was that it was not obtrusive on an audio level and certainly was not on a visual

level, either." The one exception was the restoration video that accompanied the Immaculate Conception painting, which a few people found distracting to their experience of the work of art. "It took my attention away from the painting," said one visitor. Placement of the video screen may have been part of the distraction, as another person noted. "I liked the information and the content," she said, "but having it *right there* was what distracted me. I kept wanting to look up at the painting. I didn't want to see them meshed together." Two others saw the content of the video as very different from their experience of the painting itself:

- I felt the restoration was an experience in and of itself, almost separate from looking at that giant piece of art.
- Here was this wonderful, large piece of art. It was the centerpiece of the entire room. And I thought they were going to tell me something fabulous about it, or something that I wouldn't know. Don't get me wrong—the restoration was extremely interesting, but it wasn't what I was expecting.

## Opportunities for Improvement

The groups were then asked, "What, if anything, would have made the video experience better in terms of understanding the works of art?" Overall, their responses focused on issues of visual clarity, appropriate sound, functionality, and placement.

**Visual clarity.** Better resolution, where possible, and a bigger screen size were recommended. Participants acknowledged that historical footage would likely have less definition; however, as one person said, "Some of these [videos] are being made about things today, and there's no reason why they couldn't have higher quality." Better resolution was cited as especially important for the smaller screens, and a larger screen size should be considered for videos with text. Efforts should be made, they said, to reduce the amount of glare on the screen.

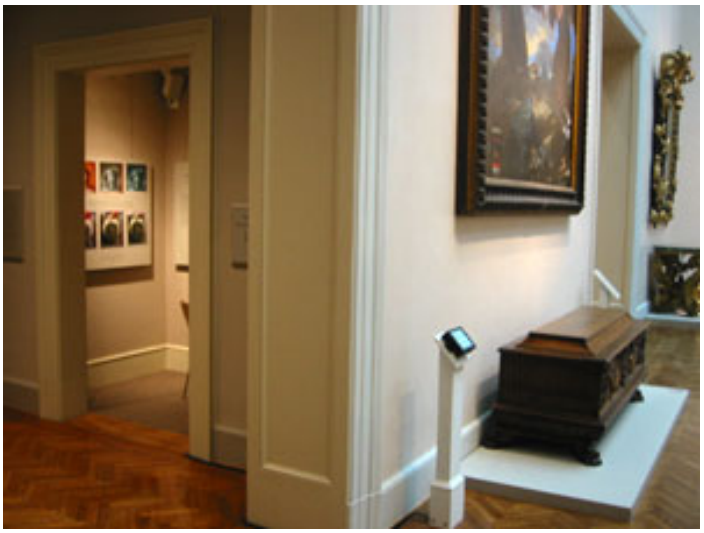
**Appropriate sound.** The visitors agreed that where it makes sense to include music or background sound, such as with the African Masks video, then it should be added. However, they urged caution with respect to audio enhancements. They thought the use of sound in the Noh Robes and Mandala exhibits was appropriate. "If each one of these [exhibits] had had a loud audio component," one person observed, "our response would have been entirely different." Another described the kind of music she wanted as "important and appropriate—that gives you the feel of the place."

**Functionality.** The concept of a restart button, so that the viewer could set the video to the beginning if desired, was again mentioned by the participants as a potential improvement.

**Labeling and placement.** As some noted earlier in the discussion, labeling of the video program itself would be helpful to visitors in understanding the role of a particular video in a gallery, particularly for those that ran continuously. "It would have been helpful to have a written description next to the screen to tell you what's on the screen," one person commented. More consideration about the placement of the video screen was also encouraged. Several visitors favored repositioning the Transformation Mask video to avoid visual competition with the art object and to make room for more viewers. One person, who was alone in advocating more physical separation between the video screens and the art objects, suggested integrating each screen into the wall, "with baffles around it, so people on either side don't necessarily have to look at it." A few visitors wanted places to sit while watching the videos. It was also suggested that the angle of the screens be adjusted to a more upright position so that people with physical limitations could view them more easily.

## Comparison of Small Video Monitors and Computer Learning Stations

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts has 17 Learning Stations placed throughout the museum, including one just around the corner from the Immaculate Conception video (at left, photo below). The facilitator asked, "How many of you have ever used the Learning Stations in the galleries? If so, how would you compare the two experiences?"



Of the 23 participants, nine said they had used a Learning Station. "With the Learning Stations, you have the option of starting, stopping, or going to the piece you're interested in," one person said. "You can tailor it to your own interests." Six participants said they had used the Learning Station during their stop at the Immaculate Conception video. They compared the two experiences, with some preferring the depth and user control the Learning Stations offered. Comments included:

- The Learning Station was fun because I got to go on and see a major work of art, zoom in on all different aspects of that work of art, and see it "up close and personal." It was a totally different experience—both of them good.
- The Learning Station seems a little bit longer; you really have to take the time to do it.

- I was done with the front part, the video, in 30 seconds. I'd had enough of that. But I could have spent probably a half hour in the [Learning Station] room.
- I happened upon it. I'd have preferred some direction there instead of having to just discover it. I started watching the video while it was going, and I didn't know till the end what I was watching.

These discussions demonstrate that the small video monitors provide a different experience from the Learning Stations, and that the two technologies can complement each other.

## Density

To begin this discussion, the facilitator asked, "How interested would you be in seeing more videos? How many small video monitors should we be thinking about?" For the most part, though they clearly favored the concept of videos in the museum, the participants wrestled with the question of *how many*. It depends, they said, on a number of things—for example, does the video enhance the experience? Would the video stay the same, or change periodically? The majority of participants fell into the "it depends" camp. They felt that the number of videos to include in the museum should be decided on a case-by-case basis. Comments included:

- I think [how many] is totally the wrong question. The question should be, "Does this piece of video enhance the viewer's experience of the gallery or this particular piece?" …If it doesn't enhance it, don't bring it in.
- If there's a reason for one, fine. You could have one in each place where it's reasonable. But you'd have to have a good reason.

When pressed, a few people initially suggested some limits:

- I think it would be nice to have not more than one per style—like for the Asian art. Or, if it were more specific, maybe two. No more than one per type.
- One per gallery would be the upper limit if the enhancement is there.
- I'd like some galleries without a screen.
- Personally, I wouldn't want to see more than two or three per gallery, maybe two per room. That's not overloading the gallery. It's yet another entry point to the art, and I'd be comfortable seeing that many consoles, regardless of who determined what the content was.

A number of people discussed possibilities for periodically changing the content, or rotating the monitors among galleries, to keep the videos fresh. Comments included:

- That would open up some lovely possibilities. You could have that in the middle of the robes room, and then if you wanted to change that video in the room, you could do something different. So people who visited could learn one thing, then they could come back a few months later.

- I hope the videos are changed periodically, as the works of art are changed, so that the next time I come I'd see something different—maybe a rolling schedule. The potential is endless.

A couple of people saw videos as a way for the museum to draw a younger crowd and families with children:

- If you want to attract new members, I think the younger crowd will really like it.
- With people dragging their kids to museums, it might get the kids interested. Kids might find this appealing.

## Comments to Other Museum Visitors

To wrap up the discussion, the facilitator asked, "What would you say about the videos to other museum visitors, or to your friends?" They gave a number of varied responses, many of which contained valuable insights about the enhancing effect of videos in the gallery. They included the following:

- I'd say, "Try 'em!" If you see a video, look at it, so we can talk about it,
- Come here quickly before they take them down! [Participants were told that the video monitors had been temporarily installed for the study.]
- I'd say they have these really cool things you can look at. Just like when they got the earphones; everybody complained when they first got those. Now they have earphones everywhere.
- I think it makes people interested in art who might not normally be. It's going to be great for younger kids—make them want to look at things they wouldn't want to look at. I would not have looked at those robes. I would not have stopped.
- I enjoyed it…and now I'm all about the videos…I know people who come here regularly, and it's just another bridge, another draw, another way in.
- I'd tell them that besides the traditional museum viewing, they've enhanced it in many ways with some modern technology, and some of it's good and some of it isn't—you have to decide for yourself—but that in certain circumstances I felt it enhanced. I might tell them, for example, that the Transformation Mask video showed the mask opening up, and I might not have visualized how that worked without the video. Or, where there was music in the Japanese room, how the whole room came alive because I could hear the music, and I could look at some of the things on the video. I would encourage them to try it, just for the experience.

## Impressions of "Art Savvy" Visitors

One of the goals of the focus group study was to determine whether the videos detracted in any way from the visitor's gallery experience. Of particular concern was the reaction of members of the MIA's core audience. For that reason, one of the three focus groups was comprised of "art savvy" visitors, characterized by more frequent visits to the MIA as well as other art museums in the Twin Cities and elsewhere. Although participants in the "art savvy" group were clearly more seasoned as museum visitors, they were equally positive about their experience with the video programs. Similar to the participants in the other two groups, they felt that the videos added to, rather than detracted from, the gallery experience. For example, the background music with the Noh Robes video "made everything come alive," one visitor said; the African Masks video caused another person to be "much more interested [in African masks] than I was before." The majority of "art savvy" visitors were receptive to the idea of seeing more video programs in the galleries. As one experienced gallery visitor said, "I would have been happy to see more [videos], and more in depth."