



## Making Meaning in Art Museums 1:

# Visitors' Interpretive Strategies at Wolverhampton Art Gallery



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This is a collaborative research project which involved a university research centre, an art museum, and an area museum council.

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# Visitors' Interpretive Strategies at Wolverhampton Art Gallery

## Summary

### 1.0 The project

Museums and galleries are challenged today to demonstrate their social relevance, to become more socially inclusive and to provide evidence of their educational value. This demands a greater sensitivity towards actual and potential visitors and, in particular, a better understanding of the ways in which people understand museums or galleries. This research aimed to explore the ways in which visitors to Wolverhampton Art Gallery (WAG) talked about their experience, both of the art works that they looked at and of the museum itself. We wanted to find out how visitors made their experiences meaningful to themselves, and what interpretive strategies they used to do so. We also wanted to assess, in a preliminary way, whether these meaning-making strategies indicated that the gallery visitors might make up an 'interpretive community' (might share ways of making meaning), and whether this might be similar or different to internal art museum interpretive communities.

The research project was a joint venture between the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) at the University of Leicester, the West Midlands Regional Museums Council, and Wolverhampton Art Gallery and Museum. The three bodies worked together to fund the project, develop the research plan, carry out the research and interpret the results.

### 2.0 The objectives of the research

The objectives combined both professional and academic issues. In exploring the ways that visitors spoke about their experience and integrated this into their existing ways of thinking and talking, we wanted to examine their 'interpretive repertoires'. What sets of ideas, ranges of vocabulary, and personal associations did visitors use when discussing the paintings, and how did the information given by the gallery, for example in text panels and labels, enable these discussions to develop? Wolverhampton Art Gallery has a detailed and well-established access policy which provides visitors with varied routes to the appreciation and understanding of its collections. At the time of the research, the permanent gallery of historic artworks, the interactive gallery *Ways of Seeing*, and a temporary exhibition *A Winter's Tale* were all open.

### **3.0 Methodology**

The research is an ethnographic study, using qualitative methods. Eighteen single adult visitors were accompanied on their visits around the art museum; they were asked to 'think aloud' and to talk about what they saw, thought and felt about the artworks and the exhibitions as a whole. The researcher's role was limited to prompting visitors to expand their thoughts. The narrative was taped and analysed using QSR NU.DIST. The accompanied visits were complemented by a questionnaire, completed immediately following the walk through the galleries, which asked basic demographic information as well as information about level of knowledge about art, museums and related matters.

The qualitative data was placed within the context of existing quantitative data from two previous marketing reports. This enabled us to ascertain that our interviewees made up a surprisingly representative sample of the visitors to WAG.

### **4.0 The visitors**

As the research focused on what visitors thought and said (their interpretive strategies and repertoires), it was decided to interview single adults. Wolverhampton Art Gallery is extremely unusual in its very high proportion of single adult visitors. During 1999, 70% of the visitors came on their own to the gallery.

Eleven men and seven women were interviewed. They were spread fairly evenly throughout the age range, and the majority came from social classes C1/2. Most were white European. Less than half had a qualification related to art, but most had a general knowledge and interest in art. Half of the interviewees had completed minimum levels of schooling.

More than two-thirds of the visitors visited WAG and other art galleries at least twice per year. The people we talked to, therefore, were largely committed and experienced museum visitors. Most of them lived locally and, apart from WAG, visited other local venues. Motivations for visiting were related to place, education/enculturation and entertainment but also related to practical issues. Hence, visiting WAG met a number of needs, motivations and expectations that these visitors had. Depending on how frequently they visited WAG, how experienced they were as art gallery visitors and what was on offer on the day of the visit, visitors' plans for the visit could be either open, flexible or fixed. Some of the visitors also engaged in art-related activities such as painting and reading about art.

### **5.0 Themes from the conversations**

Visitors were encouraged to talk about how they were interpreting the artworks and the visit in general as they walked through the galleries. After analysis, it was clear that several broad themes had emerged.

Almost all of the visitors (16 out of 18) commented on the subject matter and the visual qualities of the works of art. Some discussion focused around the relative value of representational and abstract art, with 7 visitors expressing a strong preference for representational art, but 10 people pointing out that they could relate to both representational and abstract art.

The value of art and art museums in everyday life was discussed by 11 out of the 18 visitors. They described the visit to a museum or an art gallery in multiple ways - as an educational experience, but also potentially an identity-based, aesthetic, challenging and participatory experience.

The interactive exhibits in the *Ways of Seeing* display (and in other galleries) was commented upon by 6 visitors. They found the exhibits accessible and intriguing, but as experienced art museum visitors, tended to not find them personally relevant.

Visitors to WAG had developed an interest in art by participating in the practices of different communities of people and institutions. Given that half of the interviewees had only completed the minimum educational level, a large part of their interest and knowledge was developed beyond school. Participating in practices and communities of art gave them many of the strategies they needed to understand and evaluate artworks. The development of this understanding was a slow process involving many transformations which were both conceptual and identity-based. Hence, although the people we spoke to were not full members of interpretive communities concerned with art, they were familiar to some degree with the interpretive strategies available to these communities. As a result, they held shared views about the value and significance of art and art museums in their lives.



## **6.0 Visitors' interpretive strategies for the works of art**

Being able to both feel and talk about the characteristics of a work of art is important for understanding its qualities and for enhancing visitors' experience and learning. The selection of which interpretive strategies were deployed was defined by who those visitors were (their biographical profile, prior knowledge, experience, interests, learning style, expectations and plans for the visit). The interpretive strategies were developed and refined by employing them as meaning-making tools during this visit; the same strategies would seem to be also used during previous visits or when involved in other art-related activities.

In their effort to make sense of the exhibits and their experience, visitors reacted to what they saw in one of two ways; either interpreting their visual experience directly (asking questions and making statements) or seeking additional information (reading labels, panels, gallery titles and other support material available to them). The majority of visitors' comments focused on the following three themes: the visual qualities of the works of art; the socio-cultural context of the works of art; and the process of art making. Most visitors used at least some of the support material provided by the Gallery.

The visual analysis of visitors used ideas connected to the formal characteristics of paintings and sculpture - colour, tone, composition, form and space. However, these ideas were frequently used in a tentative way, with visitors searching for words to describe what they saw, and for methods to assess the works. Many visitors tried to contextualise the art works using broad socio-cultural ideas connected to subject-matter, the artists, personal associations and the work as an object. Subject-matter was identified, described, turned into a story, or scrutinised for meaning or message; the artist and his/her intentions was discussed; associations with places, personal experiences, people, and other exhibits were made. Visitors were also interested in the size, date, value, condition of the works (and the frames of the paintings). The technical processes of art making, focusing on materials and their use, and technique and style were frequently discussed. The texts provided in the galleries are written for easy reading, using simple straightforward language. They were used in a number of different ways.

From the range of interpretive strategies available to them, visitors chose to use those that would help them interpret the particular works of art they saw during their visit. The visitors felt comfortable and empowered in the galleries and took ownership of their experience, using the visit in an intentional fashion for their own purposes.

From the research, it seems clear that, as cultural theorists have suggested in relation to other fields of inquiry, that meaning-making strategies cannot be mapped onto socio-economic positions or demographic groupings. Specific class or gendered positions do not determine how meaning is made, although level of education did seem to influence the sophistication of the language and concepts visitors were able to use.

## **7.0 Discussion**

Unlike most visitor research, this investigation focused on the cognitive categories through which visitors described their visit to WAG. The study was exploratory in nature. It did not try to impose the researchers' preconceived ideas about what these interpretive strategies were. Instead, this study explored the ways through which visitors made sense of their experiences, how these related to other aspects of their visit and to the role WAG - or other art galleries - is perceived to play in the social life of these visitors.

Many of the people we spoke to were either elderly people or still students; half had left formal education after completing the compulsory level only; and few had formal qualifications in art. However, the majority of them had a strong interest in art which they had developed over the years by engaging in a range of activities including visiting art galleries. They all were very familiar with the space and 'language' of an art gallery even if they were first time visitors to WAG as they had been to many museums and art galleries before. In fact, many of them were frequent art gallery visitors. Many were life-long learners and had educated themselves beyond school by utilising a variety of resources and educational institutions that represented different practices and communities, one of which was, of course, the museum. The people we spoke to were familiar with finding their own way of accessing those practices and communities through building on the reservoir of practices, experiences and knowledge they already had.

This report highlights how different interpretive strategies were used by visitors to make sense of their experience in an art museum. Where visitors had a repertoire of strategies available to them, they were able to peel away the layers of meaning that lay beneath the surface of the works of art they saw. The ability to combine a number of different strategies helped visitors most in making meaning. However, many people found specific types of work difficult - in particular those artworks without an immediately recognisable subject, and those artworks that

approached their subject in an abstract way. Visitors did not know how to go about interpreting these works, lacking both a framework for analysis and a useful vocabulary. The interpretive aids, especially the written texts, were important at this time. Even where the subjects of the artworks were immediately recognisable and where visitors felt confident with their interpretive approach, they frequently did not have a very well developed vocabulary when it came to discussing visual qualities.

This research suggests that, considerable opportunities exist to develop the art museum as a learning environment. Visitors to WAG were enthusiastic and willing to work hard to understand what they saw. They wanted to enter, at least to some degree, the interpretive communities represented by WAG, but they did not possess all the skills they needed to grasp the meanings and values of the artworks they encountered. Even at WAG, where a great deal of help is provided for visitor, it would appear that more could be offered. And it seems that more sophisticated strategies for dealing with the challenges of artwork that is more difficult to understand need to be developed.

This research also suggests that where no special provision is made for visitors unfamiliar with art galleries and their cultural repertoires, there will be little to attract or engage new audiences, and even existing visitors may feel at a loss to produce meaningful interpretations at times. In addition, art museums run the risk of being perceived as completely irrelevant in relation to current government agendas, especially in relation to the social inclusion agenda.

More research is needed to explore the range of interpretive strategies that different communities of visitors use in order to understand how they are developed, used and refined. This would help art galleries plan and develop exhibits and programmes that would provide the resources and tools that different communities of visitors need in order to understand and evaluate art. As the interpretive strategies different visitors use may not be the same as those used by the interpretive community that represents museum professionals (and all those who are professionally involved in art), further research could highlight whether there are gaps between the interpretive strategies used by visitors and those used by museum staff.

With this study, the work into the interpretive strategies of visitors to art museums has only just begun. The methodology is time-consuming and slow, but has provided data in which we have confidence. The methodology can be repeated in other research sites with no major modification.

This project was the first of two six-month projects that were planned to investigate the idea of art museums and interpretive communities. The second project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board, took place between July and December 2000. The methodology has been repeated as exactly as possible to see how the findings compare. The research site is Nottingham Castle Museum in the East Midlands, which offers an excellent comparative site. A further report will be produced at the conclusion of this second study. There are further opportunities to explore the research questions behind this study both in other art museums, in museums of other disciplines, and with other kinds of visitors.

# 1.0 The Project

## 1.1 The initial research proposition

Museums and galleries today are challenged to demonstrate their social relevance and to provide evidence of their community value. Both local and central government policies emphasise the need for museums and galleries to play their part in contributing to a high quality of life for the many, not the few<sup>1</sup>, and in improving educational standards and in alleviating social exclusion through access policies and strategies<sup>2</sup>. *Best Value* at the local authority level emphasises the need to evaluate and understand the effects of cultural provision.

In the light of this, museums and galleries are reviewing their relationships to their visitors. Most museums today have a clear view of who their own visitors are, and can relate this pattern of visits to more general patterns of museum and gallery visiting<sup>3</sup>. Many museums also have a generalised view of barriers to museum visiting<sup>4</sup>. However, there is a pressing need to know more about the actual experience that museum visitors have. This includes the amount of time spent, the use of this time, but, most importantly, the meaning that is attributed to the visit by visitors.

Museums and galleries are concerned with heritage and culture, but can also be seen as part of the mass media. Concepts and research methodologies from media, communication and cultural studies can be fruitfully used in museum and gallery research. The making of meaning, or interpretation, is a dynamic research theme at present<sup>5</sup>. Meaning in museums is developed through interactive and dialogic processes; meaning develops in the spaces between the interpretive intentions of the curator (or exhibition developer), and the interpretive experiences of the visitor. Both constructivist learning theory and hermeneutic (interpretive) philosophy tell us that people actively construct sense and make meaning for themselves through deploying their existing knowledge in interpreting new experiences<sup>6</sup>. Meaning-making therefore integrates both immediate events and past experience; what happens during the museum visit, the event itself, will be understood on the basis of prior knowledge and experience.

Meaning is made through the use of interpretive strategies. We can understand interpretive strategies as interpretive repertoires<sup>7</sup> - recurrently used systems of terms to characterise and evaluate actions and events. In the museum, this means those words or expressions that are used about the collections and the museum itself. The research project discussed in this report was intended as an investigation into the interpretive strategies used by art museum visitors. We wanted to explore how visitors made meaning within the museum or gallery, how they responded to the things they saw, how they valued the visit, and how they placed the visit within their lives in general.

A second element of the research was a preliminary assessment of how far art museum visitors might make up an 'interpretive community'. Cultural theory suggests that the meanings constructed by individuals are not uniquely personal, but are developed and sustained within 'interpretive communities'<sup>8/9</sup>. Members of interpretive communities share categories of understanding, use similar concepts and deploy the same systems of intelligibility, based on shared knowledge. Data about existing museum visiting patterns would suggest that, as highly educated white professionals<sup>10</sup>, art museum visitors share to some extent the same interpretive community as that of art museum curators. But these visitor studies present generalised patterns across whole populations. What happens when individual institutions are used as case-studies? Case-studies of interpretive communities have been carried out in relation to reading groups, journalists and users of the world-wide-web, but to date there have been no empirical studies of museums and interpretive communities<sup>11</sup>.

With a view to beginning to find a way to researching and exploring these issues a small research study was initiated in October 1999. This was a joint venture between the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) in the Department of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, West Midlands Regional Museums Council (WMRMC) and Wolverhampton Art Gallery (WAG).

# 2.0 The Objectives of The Research

## 2.1 The objectives

The objectives of the research combined both professional and academic issues:

- \* To investigate and document the range of interpretive strategies used by adults in one art museum.
- \* To train one member of staff from the research site and one from WMRMC to collect data, in association with the Research Team, through interviews and observations.
- \* To analyse the relationship between the interpretive repertoires used by visitors, and specialist knowledge of the arts on the one hand and everyday experience on the other.
- \* To review the variation and extent of the interpretive strategies used in relation to different styles of display. This needed to be carried out in an art museum that uses a range of display styles, such as Wolverhampton Museum and Art Gallery.
- \* To assess, as far as possible, the interpretive communities to which visitors might belong, and to consider the 'fit' between these communities and those of art museum staff.
- \* To assess the value of the concept of 'the interpretive community', and to place it in the context of other explanatory models used in the analysis of museum visitor behaviour.
- \* To work towards the establishment and potential 'transferability' of effective strategies to be recommended to the wider museum community.

## 2.2 The research site: Wolverhampton Art Gallery

Wolverhampton Art Gallery and Museum was selected as the research site. This was partly because the staff were interested in the research questions, and were willing to both become part of the research team, and to share the costs of the research. However, it was also important to find a site where visitors were considered in a serious and professional manner, and consequently a range of interpretive strategies might be expected to be found in action. We were interested in how visitors to an art museum might think as their visit progressed. We wanted to know what mental resources they had, what trains of thought they followed, and what of their existing knowledge they used to make sense of the artworks and the visit as a whole. It was important, therefore, for this first study, to work in an art museum where many different ways of thinking were encouraged. Wolverhampton Art Gallery was also within the remit of the West Midlands Regional Museums Council, who were also part-funding the research, and who recommended this as an ideal research site.

The mission of Wolverhampton Art Gallery (WAG) is 'to offer a service that is distinctive and popular within and beyond the arts in the region'. In order to achieve this, WAG develops and runs exhibitions, programmes, interpretive work and activities that aim to promote 'creativity, artistic excellence and accessibility'. It also aims to improve 'the visitors' and participants' enjoyment and experience through a better quality of service and a friendly, welcoming and attractive environment'<sup>12</sup>. WAG is located in the city centre of Wolverhampton in the West Midlands. Wolverhampton has a long history and tradition in developing art exhibitions and a general interest in art. The first exhibition was organized by George Wallis at the Mechanics Institute in 1839 and was dedicated to art and industry. Many exhibitions followed until the first Art Gallery opened in 1884. Since then the service has grown. The Arts and Museums Service as a whole now consists of three art galleries and museums including Wolverhampton Art Gallery and Museum. WAG has a strong commitment to purchasing contemporary British and American work.

### **2.3 Access policy at the research site**

At Wolverhampton Art Gallery access is the core policy of the service. It directs all areas from curatorial practice and collecting to marketing. 'Access' means that all the collections and exhibitions should be meaningfully interpreted for the widest possible audience, in ways that reach across to people whatever their sensory abilities or disabilities, educational background or learning styles. To this end, a *First Impressions* policy for family audiences who are newcomers to the fine arts has been introduced. Over 60% of exhibitions are targeted for these uninformed visitors, and 40% for developing understanding for those with more experience with art. In practice, 'stepping stones' for 'first impressions' audiences are also provided as part of the more sophisticated exhibitions.

Exhibitions are organised using sensory and experiential approaches to understanding, with themes, activities, hands-on objects and costumes, music, audio and additional texts. In *Mountain* for example, artworks, mountaineering equipment, scale models, a dramatic music and words soundscape on tape, and written quotes from mountaineers as well as from artists were provided. The style and depth of curatorial interpretation is varied across the exhibition programme, in tune with the themes and the audiences. Text is in large print and written to be lively and immediate in simple language, with more complex ideas presented in a different format. Curators develop the skills of the journalist, novelist or poet in writing them.

At the time when the research was being carried out, the permanent galleries of historic artworks were open on the first floor, as was the interactive gallery *Ways of Seeing*, and a temporary exhibition, *A Winter's Tale*, was open on the ground floor. Art works were also hung on the stairs.

### **2.4 A Winter's Tale**

This was a small mixed exhibition of artworks and craft on the theme of winter. It included both historic and contemporary works, ranging from milking scenes to a freezer containing a large ice eternity ring, and a Christmas decoration made of hospital drip feeds. The intended audience was the family 'first impressions'.

The theme of the exhibition was reminiscence and association. The style was lyrical with some challenging notes from the artworks. It was felt that the works themselves were colourful, sensory and emotionally varied so that there was little need for further 3D interpretation of this kind. Therefore the interactive devices were reflective: a book with illustrated borders to write your winter memories in; a gift box to open containing winter poems. Who wrote in the book seemed to depend on who wrote the page before - so there were runs of children's memories and then of adults'. These included some moving accounts.

The labels and other texts included quotes and poems on the walls, interspersed with the artworks, and statements from and about why artists had made those works. The large texts were on wavy edged panels, with script suggestive of fine stone carving but open, wide, slightly angular or runic. The interactives were patterned silver. The room was white.

## 3.0 Methodology

The research can be seen as an ethnographic study. It is an in-depth study of one site, where 18 visitors were accompanied on their visits around the art museum. We chose to use a qualitative methodology as this enables exploration of the meaningful characteristics of holistic events within a real-life context<sup>13</sup>. The data collected is qualitative, as we were interested in thoughts, perceptions and feelings<sup>14</sup>. This qualitative data is placed within the context of existing quantitative data from previous marketing reports. The research interviews were carried out at WAG over a three week period in 1999. The research process was managed by Professor Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (EHG) (RCMG). Interviews were carried out by Dr. Theano Moussouri (TM) (RCMG), who also trained Emma Hawthorne (EH) (WMRMC) who completed 4 interviews. The project team also included Rowena Riley (WAG). Several research methods were utilised during this data collection period.

Lone adult visitors were approached as they were entering WAG. In an effort to randomise the sample, every third visitor was selected on busy days. In total, thirty-two adult visitors were asked permission to be accompanied by either TM or EH. Of those thirteen who refused, ten visitors mentioned that they were either visiting the Gallery shop, or meeting friends at the café or collecting an artwork that they had purchased. The other three visitors said that they did not have much time available as they were on a very brief visit. That gives us an acceptance rate of 86.4%. Eighteen completed accompanied visits were analysed and are presented in this report. Visitors were asked to 'think aloud'<sup>15</sup> as they went around the galleries and to talk about what they saw, thought and felt about the artworks and the exhibitions as a whole. Although we realised that the interviewer would be bound to have an effect on the visit, we considered that this effect would not change the interpretive repertoires that visitors carried with them. They might perhaps use the repertoires more extensively than usual, that is, make a longer visit and talk more than they would if they were visiting on their own, but as the object of the study was to identify thought patterns this extension would be a positive aspect, and would produce more data.

The researcher's role was limited to prompting visitors to expand on any points when needed. Responses were recorded using a tape recorder and a microphone attached to the visitors' clothes to minimise the background noise. Visitors' pathways were determined by the visitors themselves. They were free to pick and choose the exhibits and exhibitions they wanted to visit, to determine the pace of the visit and time they wanted to spend at each individual exhibit as well as the overall time they planned to spend in the Gallery. This approach permitted the visitor, rather than the researcher, to initiate and direct conversation. That produced data with a high level of reliability and validity. Reliability was also accomplished by having the data reviewed by two researchers.

Visitors were asked a series of questions, or were prompted at appropriate points during their visit, to determine a number of factors. These included their agenda for the visit; their interests; their pattern of use of the exhibitions in relation to the entire building; their awareness of other exhibitions in the West Midlands; and their knowledge of other similar destinations in the UK and abroad. These moments for prompting included occasions where the visitors themselves touched on a relevant issue or at transitional points such as going up the stairs or moving from one gallery to the next one. Demographic patterns as well as general interest, special training and/or involvement in art or art-related activities, were determined by completing a questionnaire asking the questions that still remained immediately after the visit (Appendix A).

After the accompanied visit, the researchers gathered field notes related to the visit. These included information on the behaviour and movements of the visitors; date and time; length of the visit; route followed and stops made; the total time spent in the Gallery as well as the researchers' general impressions of each accompanied visit. This additional information put the visitors' reactions to the exhibitions in the wider context of the visit. For analysis purposes the data for each individual visit was transcribed to separate files and was analysed using QSR NUD.IST, a computer software for qualitative data analysis. The data was analysed to identify content and themes. Data included the types of interpretations made; the additional information gathered; topics to emerge from the interpretations; and information about the extent of interest and knowledge. Based on all this information, each visitor was categorised with regards to his or her strategies of interpretation and information gathering, and his or her interest in the themes of the art exhibitions visited. The results include qualitative descriptions of the data as well as the relative proportion of the visitors who responded in particular ways.

Where appropriate the data from this study has been related to that of two market research studies carried out at WAG<sup>16</sup>. A discussion of a range of visitor studies has also been consulted<sup>17</sup>. The following abbreviations and transcription symbols have been used: m = man; w = woman; i = interviewer; (r) = reads; (?) = words missing or indecipherable on the tape; (/) = interruption.

# 4. The Visitors

## 4.1 The visitor profile

Nineteen lone adults were accompanied and their reactions were tape recorded. Due to poor quality of sound in one interview, eighteen of these are included in the analysis. In total, there were 11 men and 7 women (table 1). The Market Research study conducted by Morris and Hargreaves on behalf of WAG also showed that there were more male than female visitors (55% male and 45% female in 1998)<sup>18</sup>.

Men	11
Women	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>

*Table 1*  
**GENDER AND NUMBER OF THE VISITORS.**

In terms of visitors' age, there is almost an even spread (table 2). Although it is hard to use this kind of data as a basis for comparison, the age profile of the visitors in this study corresponds with the age profile of the 1999 Market Research report. However, if we compare it with the number of adults visiting museum and art galleries in the UK<sup>19</sup> we find that more 65+ visit WAG than visit museums and galleries as a whole.

19-24	4
25-34	2
35-44	3
45-54	2
55-64	1
65-74	4
75-84	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>

*Table 2*  
**NUMBER OF THE VISITORS BY AGE.**

It has been recognised that the distribution of museum and art gallery visitors by class is more evenly spread than it was thought<sup>20</sup>. It has also been acknowledged that there are variations between individual institutions. If we look at the socio-economic background of the visitors in this study (table 3) we can see that a large number of the visitors come from C1 and C2 groups. This roughly corresponds to the 1999 market research report and suggests that over half of the visitors are from social class C1/C2 and over 40% from Grades AB<sup>21</sup>.

Status	Men	Women
B	1	2
C1	7	4
C2	3	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>7</b>

*Table 3*  
**NUMBER OF THE VISITORS BY SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS.**

As table 4 shows, half of the visitors left full-time education after completing the compulsory level. Only 3 visitors had a university education (first degree) and just one had a postgraduate degree. Two more people were undergraduate students and another one was working on her doctorate thesis at the time of the visit.

Educational background	
Minimum	9
Stayed on at school	2
Undergraduate degree	3
Postgraduate degree	1
Still in full-time education	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>

*Table 4*  
**EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND OF THE VISITORS.**

The vast majority of the visitors in this study described themselves as being white European. One visitor said that he was 'half-English half-Jamaican' while another one said that she was Chinese (a postgraduate student at the University). The 1999 market research study also found that white British people are over-represented as compared to the population of Wolverhampton.

A large number of the visitors were Christian by faith (table 5). In fact, all but one of the visitors who stated that they did not belong to any religious group said that they had been raised as Christians.

Faith	
Church of England	8
Catholic	3
None	5
Methodist	1
United Reformed Church	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>

*Table 5*  
**NUMBER OF THE VISITORS BY FAITH.**

Slightly less than half of the visitors had acquired some qualification on art subjects (table 6). It seems that slightly more women than men had an art qualification. One of these women said that she had studied art as part of her undergraduate course. The other two women were enrolled in a series of adult courses offered by universities. Although these courses did not lead to a formal degree we think that it shows a special interest in, and commitment to, learning about art. One visitor mentioned that he had always wanted to study art at school but his mother persuaded him not to. It was something that he greatly regretted and he wanted to learn more about art in his leisure time. Finally, another visitor said that at some point in the past she had thought of changing careers and becoming professionally involved in art.

Qualification	Men	Women
'O' level	1	2
'A' level	1	0
Course/degree	1	3
None	8	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>7</b>

*Table 6*  
**LEVEL OF INTEREST IN ART: i) QUALIFICATION**



A large number of visitors (table 7) pursued their interest in art by using informal learning resources or by participating in art-related leisure activities. Most of those who were involved in some kind of art-related activity did so regularly. Among those, the most common activity was watching television programmes (*Antiques Roadshow* and *Sister Wendy* were often mentioned) followed by reading art magazines. Many visitors who said that they watched an art programme on the television either occasionally or never added that they would have liked to but commented that there were no regular art programmes.

Hence, it seems that only a small number of people had a specialist knowledge of art while the majority had a general or little knowledge of art. This finding corresponds with the 1999 market research<sup>22</sup> where 13% had a specialist knowledge, 56% had a general knowledge and 31% had little or no knowledge of art.

Art-related activities	Reg.	Occ.	Never	Total
Magazines	4	2	12	<b>18</b>
TV programmes	11	2	5	<b>18</b>
Club	3	1	14	<b>18</b>
Volunteer	1	-	17	<b>18</b>

Table 7

**LEVEL OF INTEREST IN ART: II) ART-RELATED LEISURE ACTIVITIES**

In this study, there were slightly more men than women, the spread between the age groups was almost even, most visitors fell into the category C1, followed by C2 and, finally, B groups. There was also a large number of visitors who had had the minimum education as compared to those who stayed on school or had a university degree. The vast majority of the visitors were white European and were brought up as Christians. A large number of visitors were interested in art as expressed by their participation in art-related activities (including visiting art galleries, reading about art and watching art programmes on the television or having a qualification in art).

Comparing the group of people that we spoke to with the visitor profile as a whole, the group was remarkably representative (see section 7.)

**4.2 Art gallery and museum participation**

A series of questions were asked during the visit to determine the following: 1) frequency of visiting WAG, 2) time spent in WAG, 3) museum and art gallery participation in general, 4) motivation for visiting and 5) visit plans.

**4.2.1 Frequency of visiting WAG**

As seen in table 8, 3 visitors were visiting WAG for the first time. One of them lived in London and travelled on business very often. Another one was a student who had only moved to Wolverhampton a couple of months before this study was carried out. Two visitors had visited WAG at least once at some point in the past. Another 5 visitors said that they visited at least once during the last year while 8 visitors had visited more than once during the same period<sup>23</sup>. In fact, all 8 regular visitors had visited WAG 8 times on average during the last year. The last three types of visitors (rare, occasional and frequent) lived locally.

All 18 visitors mentioned that they visited art galleries regularly. Some of them also visited museums and other places.

Number of visits	Number of visitors
First visit	3
Rarely	2
Occasionally	5
Regularly	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>

Table 8

**FREQUENCY OF VISITING TO WAG IN THIS STUDY**

#### 4.2.2 Time spent at WAG

The average time spent at WAG was 45 minutes with a maximum of 90 and a minimum of 10 minutes (table 9). Eight visitors spent less than 30 minutes, 5 visitors spent from 31 to 60 minutes and another 5 visitors spent more than 60 minutes at WAG.

Minutes	Number of visitors
<30	8
31-60	5
>61	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>

Table 9  
**TIME SPENT AT WAG**

Ten visitors particularly came to see the temporary exhibition on the ground floor called *A Winter's Tale*. The average time they spent was 36.5 minutes with a maximum of 80 and a minimum of 15 minutes. Another two visitors visited the exhibitions on the first floor only. The average time these visitors spent was 22.5 minutes. The remaining 6 visitors visited the exhibition on both the ground and the first floor. The average time they spent in WAG was 65 minutes with a maximum of 90 and a minimum of 15 minutes.

#### 4.2.3 Museum and art gallery participation in general

One of the things we were interested in exploring was whether WAG visitors also visited other museums and art galleries and how much overlap there was between museum and art gallery visitors. There is some evidence that around half of art gallery visitors do not visit museums regularly<sup>24</sup>. We suggest that this seems to be the case in this study as well.

More than half of the visitors said that they preferred art exhibitions. The rest said that they visit both museums and art galleries. Frequency of participation varied a lot and it was very hard to determine, as most visitors were not sure how often they visited. A lot of them said that they visited 'as often as possible'. Museum and gallery participation seemed to relate to the role museums and galleries played in the social life of the visitors<sup>25</sup> but also to be affected by changing conditions in their personal and professional life and by the institutions themselves. For example, 5 visitors started going to museums and/or art galleries more often for various reasons: 3 of them retired, one became professionally interested in photography and another one accompanied his girlfriend who was an art student. On the other hand, three more visitors visited less regularly than before. There were 2 students<sup>26</sup> from overseas who had recently moved to Wolverhampton. Another visitor had changed her job, moved outside Wolverhampton and had children.

The institutions could also affect frequency of visiting by having temporary exhibitions and by introducing a club membership. Three visitors visited museums and/or art galleries in the area they lived every time there was a new exhibition. Another three said that they would visit the new exhibitions only 'if there was something of interest'. Finally, two more visitors were club members (National Trust and Royal Birmingham Society of Artists) and followed the activities of their club on a regular basis. We should also add here that 6 people<sup>27</sup> said that they were attracted to particular WAG exhibitions which exhibited works by local artists. They particularly referred to *A Winter's Tale* and the Wolverhampton Society of Artists exhibitions. One visitor also said that he was particularly interested in finding out about the workshops WAG offered. An interesting point is that slightly more than two-thirds of the visitors lived locally and also visited museums, art galleries and other places in the area<sup>28</sup>.

Apart from museums and art galleries, 8 visitors also visited other places where they could find works of art. These included: churches, archaeological sites, historic buildings and sculptures in public places.

#### **4.2.4 Motivation for visiting**

This and the following section present information regarding the visitor agendas: motivation for visiting and plans for the visit. The analytical categories used in these sections were developed in previous studies<sup>29</sup>. This allows us to see the visit at two levels: how it relates to the wider socio-cultural framework<sup>30</sup> and how it is planned at an individual/visitor level.

Three categories of motivations were identified in this study. These were, according to frequency of occurrence: place, education/enculturation and entertainment. Visitors also had to consider the practical aspects of their visit which affected but did not determine their motivation. These motivations were not mutually exclusive. The co-occurrence of different motivations shows that the Gallery caters for different aspects of the visitors' social life<sup>31</sup>.

##### **4.2.4.1. Place (11 visitors)**

Visiting WAG was associated with the place, Wolverhampton or the West Midlands. The place motivation had a strong local dimension for 7 of the visitors at WAG. The Gallery building and its collections have been part of the history of Wolverhampton for a long time as some local visitors mentioned. WAG was also a place to visit for out of town visitors to Wolverhampton. Hence, WAG was perceived as an appropriate representation of the city of Wolverhampton:

I: Do you go to art galleries often?

W: When I'm visiting places yes I do. So having just visited Wolverhampton, I'm interested in seeing what they've got here. (I.10, 61-62)

Place was mentioned as a motivation by 8 (3 of them also referred to WAG) visitors when they talked about their participation in other museums and art galleries in the UK and abroad.

M: (...) I mean you've got Redditch for the needles and fishing hooks, and you go to Worcester for the lace and you go to Walsall down the road for the wonderful saddlery, still even the last (?) that was crowned or there's the harnesses and the leather for the horses and everything came from Walsall, great you know traditions and Stourbridge and places, they made the first needles, all from steel and all from (?) the smelting the melting and the forming, that was what it was about. (I.1, 118-119)

Hence, visiting WAG or other museums and art galleries seemed to be 'on one's list of things to do' when one visits a place. Local visitors to WAG seemed not only to associate it with their city but also saw it as playing an important part in their identity. These visitors were more likely to be occasional and frequent visitors. Hence, WAG played various roles in visitors' social life. Depending on the occasion, they used it for its collections, for its restaurant/café and for its shop.

##### **4.2.4.2. Education/enculturation (10 visitors)**

One of the main reason for visiting WAG - and other museums and art galleries for that matter - was to learn more about art. Visitors in this category had a strong interest in art.

This category can be divided into two parts. The first refers to either a specific interest (to see 'some late Victorian English stuff') or a general interest<sup>32</sup> in art or an interest in educating one's self through art.

The second part of this category refers to those visitors who explicitly stated that they used the WAG resources as a way to participate in the practices of a different community (e.g. that of the artists or the gallery professionals) through participating in activities designed by those communities. This sometimes related to visitors' professional background. There was a photographer who said that he visited WAG to pick up ideas and new techniques for his own work. Two more visitors mentioned that they had been thinking of changing careers and becoming professionally involved in art. This was a slow process which involved being a 'peripheral' member of a community of practice until becoming a full member. They spent their free time trying to explore this interest further before deciding whether they would stay 'peripheral' or they would become full members. Here is what one of them said:

W: My course is computer graphics and virtual reality but I think that's maybe not relevant for you, but I had several about three years work experience, when I were in China a computer administrator for a year, but because I like art and art design, so I had part time job in some advertisement company for design something for them for the leaflet, and a simple book, yes so I can use some software to do some 3D graphic design, for advertisements, for the animations. But now maybe I will give up them because I'm studying for the computer science, you know because my first degree my Masters degree and now I'm studying for my PhD degree, all of them are for computer science not for art, but my hobby is art. At the beginning of my career I want to change, I want to change my career from the science to the art design, but I can't because maybe I haven't got the work chance to change my work career. (...) Because just my hobby made me want to change, but you know life maybe they can't give me the chance, because you know everyone need to make living, yes. I don't think every one can get a job that combines their hobby. Maybe I think maybe it's a big regret in my life, but I try to do my best to not be far away from the art design, so I like visit art gallery where open and I pay attention to everything designed very good. (l.18, 222-224)

#### **4.2.4.3. Entertainment (2 visitors)**

Two visitors said that one of their motivations for visiting WAG - and other art galleries - was that they had a nice, relaxing time. It was a special treat to themselves on their free time. Both visitors said that they visited to learn as well. The fact the visitors do not distinguish between learning and entertainment has also been supported by previous studies<sup>33</sup>.

#### **4.2.4.4. Practical considerations**

Visitors needed to plan the practical side of their visit as well. Among the things they had to consider were external factors such as: time availability, weather conditions and the entrance fee. Hence, visitors were likely to visit WAG when they had time available and when the weather was bad. The fact that WAG has a free entrance policy encouraged visitors to use it more often.

#### **4.2.5. Visit plans**

This refers to how visitors planned their movements through the exhibition space. Three categories were identified: open, flexible and fixed plans.

- a) Open plans: This category includes 3 first time visitors to WAG who wanted to 'see it all'. Although they arrived with certain expectations about what they might find there (they were all frequent art gallery visitors) and with their own preferences, they were relatively open to what the Gallery had to offer. They were making their plans as they went along.
- b) Flexible plans: This category includes 7 visitors who had been to WAG at least once in the past and were familiar with the place. Although they had a more specific idea about what they may see and do, their plans were quite flexible. For example, they would revise them during the visit if there was a new exhibit that attracted their interest.
- c) Fixed plans: This category includes 9 visitors (one occasional and 8 regular visitors) who knew the Gallery well. They had all planned their visit in advance. Most of them only came to see the temporary exhibition - which is what they usually did. A couple of them planned to see the first floor exhibition only. Another one said that he planned to visit all exhibitions as he had plenty of time available. However, he wanted to see specific works of art: his favourite ones.

### 4.3 Other leisure activities

It was important to examine how participation in WAG and other museums and art galleries fitted into the wider picture of leisure and the other activities visitors were involved in. Hence, we asked visitors what other activities they did in their free time. Here is what they said:

Physical activities:	7 visitors
Reading (including reading about art):	5 visitors
Painting:	4 visitors
Art-related:	4 visitors
Cultural (opera, theatre):	4 visitors
Socialising:	4 visitors
TV & the press:	2 visitors
Visiting the library:	2 visitors
Attending adult course:	2 visitors
Hobby:	2 visitors (one of them has a mug collection)

### 4.4 Summary

More than two-thirds of the visitors visited WAG and other art galleries at least twice per year. The people we talked to, therefore, were largely committed and experienced museum visitors. Most of them lived locally and, apart from WAG, visited other local venues. Motivations for visiting were related to place, education/enculturation and entertainment but also related to practical issues. Hence, visiting WAG met a number of needs, motivations and expectations that these visitors had. Depending on how frequently they visited WAG, how experienced they were as art gallery visitors and what was on offer on the day of the visit, visitors' plans for the visit could be either open, flexible or fixed. Some of the visitors also engaged in art-related activities such as painting and reading about art.

# 5.0 Themes from The Conversations

Visitors were encouraged to talk about how they were interpreting the works of art and the visit in general as they walked through the galleries. The interviewer limited her own comments to prompts or repetitions of what had just been said. The discussions were tape-recorded, transcribed and analysed.

From the analysis of all the speech data three major themes emerged: these focused on 1) representational and abstract art, 2) the value of art and art museums in everyday life, and 3) the interactive art exhibits. The following sections present how these were expressed by visitors.

## 5.1 Representational and abstract art (16 out of 18 visitors)

Visitors often made strong comments about the representational or the abstract works of art they looked at. These comments referred to both the subject matter and the visual qualities<sup>34</sup> of the works. A large number of visitors (7 visitors) expressed a strong preference for representational art:

M: {*Victorian Art: 'The Shipwreck'*} I mean as far as I'm concerned that's painting that is, that's art history.

I: Why do you find it more appealing, more interesting?

M: Well you can see what they're painting can't you, with the other things these abstracts, you haven't got a clue what they're trying to portray I don't think. (...) You know that is incredible that is, and you look at the figures fighting with their lives you know and that's a rainbow it is, you wouldn't expect to see a rainbow in those conditions would you? (I.4, 110-112)

I: Anything else that comes to mind when you look at this {*A Winter's Tale: 'Xmas in a Bin'*}?

W: Dark and light, darkness and light.

I: This contrast again.

W: Mmmm. Which really doesn't really represent a Christmas tree I don't think. Mind this modern art, give me something like this {*'First Fall'*} I don't like modern art, I think it's terrible. (I.11, 44-48)

The most common reasons provided for that preference was that representational art was more accessible to them as it resembles the physical world as they see it. Representational art was described as 'realistic' because it depicts 'real things' or it is painting 'from real life' and the emphasis is on detail. Abstract art, on the other hand, was difficult to understand, it did not seem to involve any skill or thought on the artist's part - or variations on this: it 'doesn't have 'depth', it is a 'mess'. A couple of elderly visitors added that they are more used to seeing representational works of art and, thus, have developed a preference for it. It also reminded them of how things used to be, the 'old world', when things were not as easy as today and still people were 'far better'. However, they could appreciate that other people - younger people in particular - may well prefer modern art as it deals with contemporary issues.

Apart from one visitor who expressed a strong preference and connection to modern art, the remaining 10 visitors mentioned that they could appreciate both representational and abstract art. Their comments were either neutral or in favour of modern art. In the former case, 4 visitors referred to the representational and/or the abstract qualities or subject matter of a work of art as a means of describing and making sense of it. For example:

M: I don't always look for representational things, if it's abstract it's nicely balanced and nicely coloured, it'll stand on it's own, whether it represents anything or not. (I.15, 133)

The following quote is a typical example of the comments made by those visitors who, although they said they could appreciate both types of art, they stated that they were in favour of modern art. The visitor whose quote is presented below also seems to be familiar with the idea that artists use the visual language of their own time:

W: Moving on. I mean I think they're great, but you know I'm not sort of, I'm not challenged by them artistically.

I: Why do you think that is?

W: Because at least in that {*A Winter's Tale: 'My Fair Lady'*}, although I don't think for me it's, at least I can think about what the artist is trying to say, that it's not ... but that's depiction of a scene, I mean I can look at it and I know I could never paint anything like that and it's fantastic (...) you know he's a good painter, but it's depicting a scene that's quite simply sort of you know ...

I: So you think that's it's too obvious.

W: No, I mean I think it's of the time and of the period, but I quite enjoy being challenged. (I.16, 45-49)

An interesting point is that the vast majority of visitors - whether they preferred representational or modern art - criticised specific examples of abstract works of art and the artists who create them. Most of the comments focused on the lack of a subject matter and detail, and also the materials used:

M: {after reading the label} I just do not think it looks nothing like a piece of land.

I: What does it look like to you?

M: A mess really honest to God it does. (I.12, 100-102)

M: (r) '*Millennium Brink*' which I don't like at all. That just looks somebody's pulled off, off the street that does, paper. (I.14, 33-33)

Artists were also criticised for their lack of effort to communicate with their audience or lack of skill. Visitors thought that the work of some artists was 'cryptic', 'superficial' and so 'amateurish' that even a child could have made it.

There were no differences in preference for representational or abstract works of art in relation to gender, socio-economic background, education, ethnicity or religion. However, it was more likely for visitors belonging to the 66+ age group to show a preference for representational qualities as opposed to abstract ones. As a male visitor said referring to a representational painting: 'being seventy, that's what I would call a really good painting'. The exact opposite was true for those below the age of 45 although visitors in these age groups also express their appreciation for representational works of art. Being able to appreciate both kinds of work seemed to be closely related to having a strong and active interest in art.

## 5.2 The value of art and art museums in everyday life (11 out of 18 visitors)

Visitors' experience with the works of art in the Gallery generated comments about the significance of making and looking at art. Eleven visitors shared their thoughts and insights about their experiences with art both during the visit and on previous occasions. Although all of them seemed to agree that a museum or gallery visit is an educational experience, they also believed it was a great deal more. It could also be an identity-based, an aesthetic, a challenging, and a participatory experience. Individuals made multiple responses.

Six visitors referred to challenging experiences they had had with art. The encounter with some of the works of art in the Gallery challenged visitors' preconceptions about art. Some seemed to be more open to such experiences than others. Take the following examples:

W: I mean that's another thing, you know there's certain things like coming in today, I won't forget about, that's probably one of them and the freezer's {'*Aspirations*'} another, '*The {Family} Gathering*', although I don't like it, I just think it's amazing someone would want to do it. (I.8, 63)

M: {*A Winters Tale: '4.45 pm*} No, I like pictures or paintings that are drawn properly and clearly, so you can see all the proper detail, and you can't see any detail to that, it's just all rushed and probably just painted this picture, just put the paint on it. I mean people call that art but I want to see what the detail is. I just look at pictures and look at the detail, more closely. (I.12, 108)

Five people approached art as an identity-based experience. Art is a cultural activity that both produces and reflects culture. Art helps us find out and reminds us of who we are both personally and socially and it is created in a cultural context. Art is relevant to and has the power to transform our lives.

M: I suppose in essence like folk music and drawing and that is the media of the downtrodden, the people who are suppressed and without it their culture would be lost. (I.1, 41)

W: Yes, I think you learn new things, good experiences and it makes me feel alive when I look at art and things. Because I feel like I'm a working, functioning human being, even though I don't like a lot of what's downstairs, I will have learned something, it will have enriched my life in some way and I'll have used my brain more this afternoon than I did yesterday, for instance. Even the things I don't like about it or the things that I think are

shallow, feed into how I think about my own life or you know, I thought that that exhibition about the Millennium {*A Winter's Tale: 'Millennial Brink'*} was shallow, partly because it focused on the things about this particular time of year that I can't bear, that I don't like in my life and wish didn't exist, so I look at that and I think, and although that's sort of, I mean it just enriches your life in some way. (...) I think you spend most of your life living from one day to the next, thinking about bills, thinking about going to work, driving up and down the motorway or something, you go to an art gallery and you are living and experiencing art, it's a higher form of living, it's living in your head and it's challenging and it's what keeps the human race evolving I think, it stops it from going mad and all sorts of things, but you can't be there every day, I mean unfortunately, but that's what I like about it, and it's sort of keeps you ticking over. (l.16, 68-70)

The above approach overlaps with the idea expressed by five visitors that participating in art-related activities gives them the opportunity not only to learn but also to participate in the practices of other communities of interpretation<sup>35</sup>. Visitors referred - implicitly or explicitly - to the communities of artists, of museum professionals and those of other visitors. The first quote is from a visitor, a photographer by profession, who visited the Gallery to pick up ideas for his work:

M: This is also fascinating how something so delicate can get all the engravings on the sides, it's an amazing piece of art. Something just made from sand and bit of powder turned into gravel. (...) How it stays solid form until you engrave on it and get another piece of art out of it, and also I like the way it's back lighted as well. I try that in my photography doing glass but I couldn't get the hang of it. (l.6, 64)

The following quote is from an undergraduate student of journalism, a regular art gallery and WAG visitor, who - among other reasons for visiting - wanted to write an essay on the *A Winter's Tale* exhibition for an assignment. This is his account of how he can 'meet' members of communities of visitors and vice versa:

M: All people are not going to feel the same as you do, it's about one picture, and some people might think this picture's rubbish, I just got a picture by itself, if you look around through my eyes for the whole collection of Winter themes, they would understand what I felt, and put my feelings on paper, people would begin to understand it, and hopefully more people would come and see the exhibition. I mean I write about what the exhibition is and where it is at, so people can come and see themselves, I mean like according to the teacher at my college, if it's a good one, all the class would go and see the picture, so I will make it really good as possible, so that the whole class will come here and feel the same thing, make them feel the way I do about it. In my mind most people probably won't but other people will, so I can do it for the people who feel the same. Because if they come through here, say I win the competition, they come through here and rush up to that picture, then people will have an experience about it, but if I tell them about the exhibition itself people will walk round and look at every picture and see the same I did, and understand it that way. (l.12, 5)

One visitor talked about his encounter with an artist at another exhibition he had been to and the way the artist helped him approach modern art. He also talked about the educational and social role art galleries and museums should play in society by opening their doors to all people and by making their collections accessible. On the other hand, another visitor seemed to believe that it was his fault that he could not engage with works of art:

M: I feel annoyed sometimes I think, because some of the, if an artist is trying put something across and it's just lost on me, it's just like I want to know but I can't see it, it's a little bit infuriating sometimes.

I: So what do you think would help you to see something?

M: (...) I don't know, an education.

Finally, another visitor described her encounter with both the community of artists and the community of art gallery professionals at the Tate where she used an audio guide: 'well what was fascinating was that you learned so much more about what the artist put into it, which makes you look at the picture differently' (l.16, 177). An interesting point is that three of the above visitors talked about their first or early experiences with art. They said that those experiences were crucial for developing and pursuing their interest in art.



### 5.3 The interactive art exhibits (6 visitors out of 18)

A number of visitors commented on the interactive gallery, *Ways of Seeing*, and on some of the interactive exhibits in different galleries. On the whole, they found them accessible, inviting and they were intrigued to find out what they were about. Visitors were more likely to notice and comment on the *Ways of Seeing* exhibition rather than the interactive exhibits found in the rest of the Gallery. In fact, no one interacted with those exhibits. However, four visitors spent some time interacting with the exhibits at the *Ways of Seeing* exhibition while the rest just walked past. All visitors thought that it was a good idea to have interactive exhibits in an art gallery. Four of them said that they were for children. One of them added that he visits *Ways of Seeing* whenever he brings his grandchildren to the Gallery. Only two visitors thought it was for them and found it an interesting approach to learning about art. One added that she would visit again to spend more time there. There was one elderly visitor who did not like the *Ways of Seeing* exhibition. He said that it seemed very 'commercial' and reminded him of 'Disneyland', 'a gambling arcade' and 'MacDonald's'. However, he did like the interactive elements in the exhibition *A Winter's Tale*.

Given that the interactive exhibits are targeted more at the 'first impressions' visitors, these comments do not suggest that these exhibits are unsuccessful. Our respondents were mostly competent and experienced art museum visitors who felt that they knew how to interpret artworks.

### 5.4 Summary

Visitors to WAG had developed an interest in art by participating in the practices of different communities of people and institutions. Given that half of the interviewees had only completed the minimum educational level, a large part of their interest and knowledge was developed beyond school. Participating in practices and communities of art gave them many of the strategies they needed to understand and evaluate artworks. The development of this understanding was a slow process involving many transformations which were both conceptual and identity-based. Hence, although the people we spoke to were not full members of interpretive communities concerned with art, they were familiar to some degree with the interpretive strategies available to these communities. As a result, they held shared views about the value and significance of art and art museums in their lives.

# 6.0 Visitors' Interpretive Strategies for The Works of Art

This section discusses the specific interpretive strategies visitors used during their visit to interpret the works of art they chose to view at WAG. In their effort to make sense of the exhibits and their experience, visitors reacted to what they saw in one of two ways; either interpreting their visual experience directly (asking questions and making statements) or seeking additional information (reading labels, panels, gallery titles and other support material available to them). The vast majority of visitors' comments focused on the following three themes: the visual qualities of the works of art; the socio-cultural context of the works of art; and the process of art making. The vast majority of the visitors used at least some of the support material provided by the Gallery.

Each of the three themes that arose from visitors' comments consisted of a number of topics around which visitors' ideas, thoughts and feelings about what they saw and experienced revolved. The categories of both themes and topics constitute the interpretive strategies visitors used to make sense of their experience. They represent visitors' attempts to put their visual experience into words and to make sense of it by capitalising on the visual 'clues' available and on their prior knowledge and experiences. It is significant that visitors' conversations can be categorised by using the classic interpretive strategies of formalist art appreciation (colour, tone, composition, form and space) even though the visitors themselves did not always have the specific vocabulary. This suggests a generalised cultural basis for the interpretations, and a readiness on the part of these particular visitors to learn more about accepted interpretive strategies.

Being able to both feel and talk about the characteristics of a work of art is important for understanding its qualities and for enhancing visitors' experience and learning. The selection of which interpretive strategies were deployed was defined by who those visitors were (their biographical profile, prior knowledge, experience, interests, learning style, expectations and plans for the visit). The interpretive strategies were developed and refined by employing them as meaning-making tools during this visit; the same strategies would seem to also be used during previous visits or when involved in other art-related activities.

## 6.1 Visual Analysis

This theme consisted of 5 topics that related to the analysis of the pictorial and the plastic (as far as sculptures are concerned) qualities of the works of art exhibited at WAG. Allowing for multiple responses, the topics were: colour, tone, composition, form and space. The following sections explore these topics according to frequency of occurrence.

### 6.1.1 Colour (16 out of 18 visitors)

A large number of visitors showed an interest in colour as a form of visual language. Furthermore, colour was one of the most commonly mentioned categories they used to talk about paintings. Visitors talked about the colours of 5 paintings on average (minimum 1 and maximum 22 paintings). Visitors seemed to be aware of the use of colour as an aid to express and communicate ideas and feelings. All 16 visitors referred to and identified specific colours they could see in paintings. Also the vast majority of them talked about colours in terms of contrast, including the degree of brightness and the intensity of colour.

M: This is a very dull picture. (...) Like the chair stands out to me the most in this one, like that one like he could have just lost the bloke who's painted the picture of the chair for me in that one. (...) Like the brightness of the chair and little studs on the side where it's got the light catching them as well, like sort of stands out. (I.9, 95-99)

As seen in the above example, talking about colours seemed, in some visitors, to stimulate ideas regarding the way colours are used as an expressive medium and the resulting effect they can have on the experience of the spectator. This relationship seemed to enhance visitors' understanding of the paintings. Six visitors were able to go beyond the initial reaction to colours. Allowing for multiple responses, 3 of them referred to the use of colour for emotional expression:

M: Now we're coming to (r) '*Snowscape with Cows and Figures, 1960, Jack Simcock, oil on canvas*'. A very dour sort of picture, tone set by the black mountain side, rather sombre goldish frame, the picture itself is white and grey with deep grey and browns, trees painted in great detail, the twigs against the grey sky. In the front a dark figure muffled up, cows against a wall, farm buildings, again it can raise the feeling of coldness doesn't it, a winter, sombreness of winter. It could be rather depressing, it doesn't depress me though, which is surprising isn't it (...) it's interesting isn't it, there's a touch of warmth in the greys isn't there, and the arrangement is pleasant, a good balance to the picture I think. That's interesting. (l.15, 123-127)

Another 4 visitors referred to the power of colours to suggest ideas, to be used as symbols:

M: She looks completely discompassionate, although maybe that's the point of it, maybe she actually isn't, and the slightly funereal, maybe she's getting over a love affair or something like that, because of the red sort of chest, where her heart is, maybe she's actually had passion which doused in some terrible way. I mean she looks you know, you could either say she's putting on a brave face for kind of being alone or whatever if the black does represent some kind of bereavement, whether it's actual or just split up with somebody, or maybe she's somebody with a secret. (l.7, 51)

Other categories that emerged were the use of colour to create atmosphere and mood, to create form, to engage the spectator by creating an environment which he or she can enter and to convey the sensation of movement. Finally, another visitor related colour to the condition of a painting in his effort to determine whether the 'overall brownness' was caused by the varnish having discoloured or whether it was intended to look like that in order to create a certain kind of mood.

There were no differences in general interest in colour in relation to gender, socio-economic background, education, ethnicity, religion or interest in art. However, the ability to talk about and understand how colour can be used to express ideas and feelings seemed to relate to education, socio-economic background (B and C1 groups), and interest in art.

### **6.1.2 Tone (12 out of 18 visitors)**

Twelve visitors talked about the contrast between light and shade in some of the paintings they looked at. They all seemed to enjoy looking at and talking about paintings where the use of tone was marked. One of them commented on the way objects can be transformed by the use of light.

The majority of the visitors made only a brief remark regarding light or shade. Three visitors, however, used it as a basis for their interpretation of a painting. According to them, tone could be used to express emotions, to achieve balance and harmony by aiding composition, to add realism to a painting, and for the realisation of form. On one occasion, although the visitor did not make any immediate comment following his remark about tone, he very methodically made observations regarding the visual elements of a painting which he then used as a framework for his interpretation of it. It is interesting to follow his interpretive process:

M: The one on the right is quite a contrast, it's an abstract isn't it by, it's called (r) '*Four forty five pm 1998, Susan Tracey born 1948*', that would make her what fifty-one now. 'Oil and mixed media on paper, not for sale'. She says, 'my work derives mostly from landscape and in particular walking over it. I'm drawn to the marks and traces on the land, records of the passage of people and animals. We change the land and are changed by it, yet we are as ephemeral as a clad shadow. Walking at dawn, following the dawn as it changes through the year, my experience is reflected in the work that I make. Current preoccupations include another boundary, that between water and air'. Just step pretty well back I think. It's interesting isn't it? (...) Predominantly high tone really, some bluey grey clouds in the background by the look of it, looks as if there's a hedgerow running two thirds of the way up, running horizontally and then dipping downwards and sweeping down to the left and towards us, sort of an ochreish foreground with a blob of light red just to the bottom left there, warms it up, quite an interesting painting yes. I like the sky the upper part I like better than the lower part, and the lower part's quite interesting, it's the middle bit I'm not so grabbed by, that smudge of white, I can't quite see what that is, perhaps it's snow, but that's quite interesting, yes. (l.15, 131)

The ability to appreciate the different uses of tone seemed to be affected by socio-economic background (B and C1 groups) and an interest in art. Furthermore, all visitors who referred to tone were frequent art gallery visitors.

### 6.1.3 Composition (9 out of 18 visitors)

A number of visitors commented on the overall conception of the paintings they viewed and how the composition worked visually. They usually made a brief comment which did not include all the factors involved in making an effective composition or different types of composition.

M: {*A Winter's Tale: '4.45 pm'*} OK the next one it's coming up. It's like an (?) land. You got the sky, I take it those are trees moving, trees blowing in the wind, that's the ground, that's the sky, that's summing up a winter, ice.

I: You can see movement.

M: Well the angle, you think, if you saw a tree at an angle you'd think the wind's blown that over, if somebody asked you what's wrong with that tree, I mean (?) stiffness vertical you see it's flat {*A Winter's Tale: 'Snowscape with Cows and Figures'*}, that's falling over compared to cold scene the wind's blowing, now it's ice this is summing up ice this colour, could be two frozen figures, (?) the head, the little one, they're pointing out across the lake, could be a frozen lake, ice. (I.2, 132-134)

However, in more than half of the cases visitors referred to the artist's role in organising his or her subject. The following example represents a different approach to analysing the composition of the same painting discussed above:

M: {*A Winter's Tale: '4.45 pm'*} I just do not think it looks nothing like a piece of land.

I: What does it look like to you?

M: A mess really honest to God it does. I suppose she probably thinks it's the land because like the blue on there, I mean if you take there, that line there, say that's the mark on the land and that's the sky and that, but drawing footprints and that at her age I mean, some of the things she's drew, I mean you wouldn't get footprints (?) that's what people think, because they can see the mark in there and think that's the sky, and stuff like that. (I.12, 102)

Only one visitor used the word composition and engaged in a detailed analysis of the organisation of many of the paintings he looked at. He is among the few visitors who was able not only to appreciate but also to talk about all of the characteristics of most of the works of art he viewed. Furthermore, he often viewed the works of art both from close up and from a distance to appreciate them better. In one case, he used his hand to cover up parts of the painting to see what effect that would have on its composition.

The ability to talk generally about the composition of a painting did not seem to be related to gender, age or education. However, visitors from B and C1 groups were more likely to be interested in this theme. Furthermore, all of them had a general or specific interest in art and the majority of them were frequent art gallery visitors.

### 6.1.4 Form (6 out of 18 visitors)

This theme relates to the ability of specific works of art to convey a real (in the case of sculptures) or illusionary (in the case of paintings) sense of solidity. Visitors talked about the sense of reality and physicality of the images painted. Their understanding of form was expressed in one of two ways: either feeling the solidity ('being alive and part of the scenery') or feeling the tactile quality ('as if you can handle them') of the forms.

M: {*Victorian Art: 'The Warning before Flodden'*} Realistic, the knight there and like the helmet that he's got on, I rather like the way he's got the light shining on to it. So even the people, like sort of the detail he's gone into with the people. (...) Especially that little monk there. It's a bit like him, he looks so real, he looks like he is there. Like these up here, they look like photographs. (I.9, 247)

M: {*A Winter's Tale: 'Milking in Winter'*} Well the cow in the foreground, you can see that its coat is furry can't you, you can almost reach out and touch the fur there, almost feel the you know tactile quality of the coat there, I think it's marvellous that, the face and also the dog, you can almost feel the coat of the dog and the cat sitting by the fire, whereas the human figures are rather stylised in a way aren't they, a nice flow to them but rather stylised really, seems to me. (I.15, 89)

Being able to appreciate the creation of form in works of art was not related to gender, age or education but it seemed to be related to socio-economic background (B and C1 groups), religion<sup>36</sup>, and an interest and frequency of participation in art galleries.

### 6.1.5 Space (5 out of 18 visitors)

A small number of visitors referred to the creation of a sense of a three-dimensional space in paintings and photographs.

M: {*A Winter's Tale: 'Christmas Tree'*} It's festive isn't it, yes. Very bright, it's x-ray yes, the fact that it's like an x-ray, you've got the chest cavity yes. That sort of, that is attractive particularly because of the, basically because of the depth, and the fact that you've got the curvature. (I.17, 4)

M: {*Georgian Room: 'At the Cottage Gate'*} Country family or something, I like the way they've got like sort of the trees and the trees in the background (...) The way like you've got the view and like whatever those are, looks like there's little houses or something down the road. (I.9, 262)

Once again an understanding of how space is created in paintings does not seem to be affected by gender, age or education but it is suggested that it is related to socio-economic background (B and C1 groups), and an interest and frequency of participation in art galleries.

The desire to assess art works through discussing their formal qualities, combined with the relative lack of knowledge of specific terms and their use, suggests that art museums have the opportunity to be much more overt about strategies for assessing paintings, sculptures and other art forms. Many of the people we talked to had no formal art training, and had left school at an early stage; they were searching for words to use to describe what they observed in the paintings.

## 6.2 Socio-Cultural Context

Placing the works of art into the wider socio-cultural context of the period within which they were produced greatly enhanced visitors' ability to interpret and appreciate them. This theme includes four topics: subject-matter; the artist; personal associations; and context. Some of these topics can be broken down into further sub-topics which will be presented in more detail below.

### 6.2.1 Subject-matter

Visitors saw the subject of the works of art they viewed as being an important aspect of their meaning together with the more purely visual qualities. It has to be stressed that visitors did not see the subject and the visual qualities - or the technical process of art making for that matter - as separate entities. They saw all three of them as a whole where each one of them enhanced the other while all of them together enhanced visitors' understanding and experience. The more a visitor was able to explore and talk about the different characteristics of a work of art the more layers of meaning he or she was able to discover.

Visitors used different approaches to explore the subject-matter which did not necessarily correspond to the type of scenes depicted or to how an art historian, for example, would approach the same issue. Only six visitors used specialised terms to refer to the subject of some of the works of art. These subjects, all of which happened to be 'narrative' ones, were: 'religious', 'mythological' or 'fantasy' and 'historical'. Whether they used more abstract categories or not, all visitors referred to the subject of the works of art using one or more of the following techniques: identification of the scene; description of the scene; the telling of a story about what they saw; reading the message they thought the works of art were trying to communicate. Two-thirds of the visitors used strategies of identification and/or description as a first step to help them make up a story or interpret what the underlying message was. All four techniques required a certain level of interpretation and utilisation of the prior knowledge and experiences (especially, but not exclusively, visual experiences) of the visitors.

Although no clear trends seem to emerge, there is some evidence that the ability to use a combination of strategies - especially a combination that included telling a story and interpreting the message - may be related to religion and, to a lesser degree, socio-economic background. It also seemed to be related to having an interest in art and to being a frequent art gallery visitor. The following sections present these strategies in more detail.

### 6.2.1.1. Identification (13 out of 18 visitors)

The identification technique involves naming various elements or figures shown in the works of art. This represents visitors' own interpretations which in many cases was aided by the support material provided. The following quotes are typical examples of the use of this technique:

M: {*A Winter's Tale: 'Christmas Tree III'*} That's a nice tree, nice Christmas tree. (I.5, 33)

M: We did yes, we passed those and they're very kind of English, they're all sporting, all you know I would (...) that {*Victorian Art Room: 'Stacking the Oak Bark'*} would be Portugal I think.

TM: (r) By 'David Bates'. Why do you think it's Portugal?

M: Because it's one of the few parts of the world where the cork oak grows ... so they are stripping the cork from the trees. (I.1, 156-158)

W: {*Foyer: 'Likeness Guaranteed'*} That's rather nice isn't it and I like him, this pin man or whatever he is, I would have a quicker look at that one. Oh it's coat hangers, oh that's very amusing. (I.8, 152)

### 6.2.1.2. Description (11 out of 18 visitors)

The describing technique involves explaining what the scene consists of or, at least, visitors' interpretation of it:

W: {*Georgian Art: 'The Fall of Niagara'*} (...) You need to really look don't you, and there's loads and loads of things you see if you look very closely at every bit of it. With this painting you'd probably need to, well all the little trees in the foreground and sort of somebody with an umbrella sort of on the edge, and the group of people there and lots of little trees and I'm sure you could spend hours looking at that and still find other things you hadn't seen, which is a lovely picture but for me personally it would be too big. But it's a nice one to come and look carefully at in an art gallery. (I.8, 9)

M: {*A Winter's Tale: 'Infused with Christmas Spirit'*} (...) so yes, they are actually bottles aren't they. You know drip feeds. Very good. ... It's good that, yes. I like the ways the things are on there, kind of pressed out like the vegetables and things, it's supposed to be their Christmas dinner, turkey and yes, could have followed it through and had Christmas pudding on another one, I don't know what you'd have had on the third. (I.14, 110)

### 6.2.1.3 Story-making (10 out of 18 visitors)

A number of patterns seemed to emerge with this technique. Visitors made up stories that involved the characters in the works of art through projecting intentions and feelings into the picture; they analysed the history behind the subject presented; and analysed the scene or guessed what would happen next. In many cases, visitors used a combination of the above possibilities. As seen in the above sections, visitors used their prior knowledge and experiences as well as elements in the works of art to make up and support the stories they told. Another important factor for the kind of stories visitors told seemed to be the expectations some of them had of what they would find in the Gallery. Most of these stories are relatively long.

The vast majority of these visitors told a story about the thoughts, feelings, attitude or motives of the human figures presented in the works of art. A large number of visitors also analysed the subject in terms of 'what happens now' and 'what will happen next'. Time was an important parameter in the latter case. The following quote combines both strategies:

M: {*A Winter's Tale: 'Family Gathering'*} This one here it does symbolise what Christmas is (...) You've all had your tea, dinner, and now you've got all the cakes and mince pies you have to eat, everybody's got hats on, apart from him, because in every family there's usually a miserable person in every family, which there is, usually a person that don't want to put the hat on or have any fun, like my Dad says.

I: So you think that he doesn't have any fun.

M: No you can tell by his face, how miserable he looks, he don't look cheerful at all. One of them old men that just sit there, and moan about the price of the heating, because it's cold outside and they've put the heating on. Where these lot having their pudding, they've got their hats on, these lot look more cheerful, apart from her which I think is probably his wife, she's probably in a mood because he won't smile at her, and these two look really happy so they're probably just friends of the family, and the drinks, just sitting down there after they've had their

meal with cakes and that, they've opened some crackers, like what every Christmas family does, they have their dinner and they go back and open crackers and have cakes, and we usually watch television, but they're more, they probably want to talk or laugh or something like that. But I think it would be good as well if the artist had put a television there. Because every Christmas everybody just sits round and watches television, they don't talk to each other do they? (...) They've had too much to eat, too much to drink, they've talked on the Christmas table, they have a laugh at the Christmas table, they can't keep on talking because they've got nothing else to talk about, so they like, what should we do now. I mean they've opened their crackers, told the jokes what's in there, got the hats out, put the hats on apart from him, they all like they're settling down now to watch television. I mean it's (?) just a picture of the dining table and that, I mean I would have the television over there, that's what they're going to do, watch the television, say three o'clock the Queen's speech, and they all look ready to watch it, with the cakes and that. (l.12, 156-164)

Knowledge of the historical and cultural context where works of art were created as well as personal experiences greatly enhanced visitors' ability to tell stories about them. This was particularly evident in the case of three visitors. Take the following examples:

M: {*Victorian Art Room: 'The Despatch' by O'Neil*} It seems to me like it's, would be the despatch perhaps of a message which has been written in there, I think that's a scene that looks to me like a scene from the English Civil War in 1645 when the King of England was executed (?) of this country, that would be Charles I wasn't it, yes, he would look like a Roundhead or Cromwellian soldier and he would be probably taking messages from the different houses that supported the King.

I: Oh I see.

M: So he would be waiting, he would be talking to the children, they'd be asking him about his fighting ability, the young lads, the crossbow in his hand, I think he'd be waiting for the despatch for to take it, I think. (l.1, 49-52)

M: {*Portraits: 'Camp Barber'*} The contrasts, the clothing, the form of cutting here I remember that quite well, this kind of scene, you could you know stand and watch people having their hair cut was a great entertainment when you were young, you could stand there and watch somebody having their hair cut and nobody took any kind of notice, the usual conversation between the barber and the client was usually about football or cricket or something like that, they were all experts in sport and horses, and fellows who were going to win the races and general kind of encyclopaedia of knowledge, the barber had everything, he picked it up and he passed it on (...) (l1, 168)

This visitor mentioned that he had expected to find works of art that deal with the Industrial Revolution as it is closely connected with the history of Wolverhampton and the West Midlands in general. This was such a strong agenda that he did analyse a large number of the works of art he saw in those terms. Another interesting point about the way he approached the galleries was that he tried to find out how the works of art were themed by the Gallery staff. He also tended to review and redefine these categories whenever he saw a work that did not fit neatly under one of them.

#### **6.2.1.4. Finding the message (13 out of 18 visitors)**

Visitors using this technique spent a considerable amount of time during their visit trying to decipher the underlying meaning of some of the works of art they viewed. Some visitors read labels and panels - or parts of them - in their effort to understand what the message was. The labels that offered the artists' interpretation of their work often added new insights to visitors' interpretation of the subject.

Visitors implicitly or explicitly said that it should be obvious what an artist was trying to communicate through his or her work. However, they did acknowledge the fact that a work of art may be perceived differently by the artists who created it and by different viewers. It was also suggested that artists who make an effort to communicate with their audience show that they respect them.

The categories of messages identified were: 1) didactic, 2) religious, 3) no message, 4) political and 5) environmental. Age was significant only in the case of the environmental category. There was no difference in preference for the rest of the categories relating to gender, age, education, socio-economic group and religion. Before presenting the specific strategies visitors used in relation to searching for the message of a work of art, we should stress that the following categories represent the meaning visitors themselves gave to the works of art. Allowing for multiple responses, five major categories seemed to emerge:

#### 6.2.1.4a Didactic message (6 out of 13 visitors)

This included works of art that aim to show or teach you something:

M: {*A Winter's Tale: 'January, Christmas in a Bin 1998'*} {He looked at the work of art and read label} He's trying to say not everybody's got festive decorations, 'cause Christmas in the bin (?), that's like trying to say being like that kind of thing, people on the streets, not everybody's got a lot of Christmas decorations like this and that, they've not got all this leaves there, most people are homeless on Christmas day. That's what the artist is trying to tell you, there are homeless people at Christmas time. It's like, look at that picture (?) what people see, you know if people see this picture every day of their life, Christmas is really a sad moment, and the artist is trying to capture that and say, have feelings for people who are on the street. (I.12, 11)

#### 6.2.1.4b Religious message (5 out of 13 visitors)

This refers to works of art with a religious content or those interpreted as such. Works of art in this category caused some controversy. One visitor said that she did not like religious subjects and added that she found anything to do with religion oppressive. She mentioned that she had been raised as Catholic but she was not a Catholic herself. On the other hand, there was one visitor who felt deeply offended by a work of art. Let us see why he reacted the way he did:

M: {*A Winter's Tale: 'Millennial Brink'*} Well you shouldn't turn a cross upside down for one should you, and the angel wouldn't be pointing down, it's your fallen angel. (...) The cross hanging down, it's a cross with all things, no I'm not so keen on that one, what's it supposed to say, I'll walk over.

I: Do you want to read aloud the bits of the label that you've just read?

M: (r) OK, 'Millennial Brink' relates to this year and the forthcoming new millennium. We are confronted by twisted icicles of pure crystal (...). No, no, not things portraying crosses. (I.5, 39-43)

Irrespective of their reaction to the religious subjects, being able to read religious symbols provided visitors from a Christian background with the tools to interpret them. This is further supported by the experience of one Chinese visitor who found it hard to understand works of art with a religious subject as it was not part of her culture:

W: {*A Winter's Tale: 'Picking Apples (Towards Spring)'*} (...) Maybe I think it's, this topic is related to the religion, just this, because I'm not really familiar with the bible because I'm eastern girl so I'm not very familiar with bible, I can't think deeply about that. I just know some typical story about the bible, so I just think this painting wants to tell the story of the Eva and many children, maybe they're all of them are angels and all of them pick up the apple, want to enjoy the life, and this painting is just for get happy atmosphere for the Christmas, I think. (I.18, 92)

#### 6.2.1.4c Lack of message (5 out of 13 visitors)

In this case visitors either could not understand what the artist was trying to communicate or thought that some works of art are not created to make a specific meaning out of them. The latter case includes, according to visitors, works of art that lack intellectual depth or those that do not have an immediately recognisable subject (abstract ones).

W: {*A Winter's Tale: 'Christmas Painting'*} (...) I mean I don't think that that's a picture to think about, I think it's something to look at for the colours, and because the more you think about that the more you think, why? (...) No, I know, but it's not about that I don't think intellectual enough to be about that, I just think that that's a painting that was painted for this exhibition with a Christmas theme. So that's why. (I.16, 114-118)

W: {*A Winter's Tale: '4.45 pm'*} I don't know what this one is. I don't think she does either.

I: Why do you say that?

W: It doesn't say what it is, it just says (r) 'NFS', what does that mean?

I: Oh right, I'm not really sure.

W: (r) 'Oil and mixed media on paper'.

I: So were you looking for the title of (//)

W: (//) Yes, I just wondered if it was called anything. I mean she's scrubbed something out. (I.8, 63-69)

In the latter case, not only did she have problems making sense of the painting itself but also of the support material provided.



#### 6.2.1.4d Political message (4 out of 13 visitors)

Visitors in this category saw some of the works of art as making a statement about the period of time they were created. This often related to knowledge of the historical context of the period:

M: {*Georgian Art: 'Mrs Pearce'*} The other thing about here of course is that these kinds of paintings, people always look very mature, and looking at that face it would be difficult to put an age on it, it could be any age, eighteen to eighty ... very sincere and the dress very severe, would be Victorian I would think is it. Can you see better than I can there.

I: (r) '1786'.

M: Oh a bit earlier, a bit earlier, but again very severe. They were very dominated you know I mean the emancipation and the vote and even this country didn't come in until the twentieth century was well aired, so women were very much, they weren't as liberated as they are now, you saw the first instance of that, the painting over there {*Portraits: 'Lady in Red Velvet'*} with the young woman in the red dress, after the war there were so many been killed in the war, and women played such a part in that, driving vehicles and ambulances and all that, they came back and they said what the hell you know we're as good as, we've made our contribution, there's not that many of them there now anyway, we're going to have to do something, and of course that was manifested in all the kind of wonderful wild dances and the short clothes that came out in the 1920s, complete depart from Victoriana and of the sombre kind of thing so. (l.1, 10-15)

#### 6.2.1.4e Environmental message (3 out of 13 visitors)

This involves works of art that related to environmental issues. It should be mentioned that all visitors who offered this kind of interpretation were men, belonged to the 18-24 age group and C1 socio-economic group. Another interesting point is that one of these visitors seemed to have strong feelings about paintings that depicted hunting scenes.

#### 6.2.2 The artist (12 out of 18 visitors)

The style of the artist and the way he or she chose to communicate with the spectators was often mentioned by visitors. Interest regarding the artists was expressed in different ways: looking for his or her name and gender, the period of time they lived and worked, commenting on his or her style, subjects and possible sources of inspiration. Understanding what the artist had tried to communicate was a major concern for visitors. To do that, they used different interpretive strategies as mentioned in previous sections. These strategies, however, were not only visual. Many visitors read all or most of the information provided regarding the artists or the artists' interpretation of their work. This was particularly evident in *A Winter's Tale* and the *Portraits* gallery where this information was provided. Another important point about the labels in these exhibitions was that they drew attention to the artist either by talking about them or by including the artist's view of his/her work. Take this example:

M: Well it says here, (r) 'My work derives mostly from landscape and in particular walking over it. I am drawn to the marks and traces of the land, which records the passage of people and animals. We change the land and are changed by it yet we are ephemeral as a clad shadow. *'Walking at Dawn'*, following the dawn as it changes through the year, my experience is reflected in the work that I make. Current preoccupations include another boundary that between water and air'. And that's by 'Susan Tracey born 1948'. It's like oil and it's made on paper, so what she's trying to get is the land, where people have walked over it, see all these marks here like, she's tried to make out that that is land and marks that people have made, which is good as well because they're like (?) makes it look like a snow colour, because you can see the marks more clearly, so this dirty black stuff that's probably something like people riding on their bikes and all that, and all the rest is just marks of people walking past like animals and that. (l.12, 96)

This suggests that the exhibitions mentioned above provided the resources and encouraged the use of specific interpretive strategies. Gathering all this information helped visitors analyse the characteristics of the works of art, place them in a historical and cultural context and discover different layers of meaning.

### **6.2.3 Personal Associations (15 out of 18 visitors)**

The vast majority of the visitors made statements which involved personal connection with the works of art. However, the fact that we can find certain categories in what visitors said suggests that there is considerable cultural influence on the associations visitors made. The colours, the figures, the subject, the style and other elements of the works of art generated many images, ideas, thoughts, recollections from visitors' prior experiences. These elements represented different things which had a personal meaning for the visitors. They related to certain periods of year, to certain places, experiences, people and other exhibits.

There were no differences in preference for the different categories of personal association that related to gender, education, socio-economic background, religion or an interest and participation in art. However, almost half of the visitors making personal references were above 65+ age group.

A number of categories occurred in visitors' personal associations. Allowing for multiple responses the categories were:

#### **6.2.3.1. Iconic images (13 out of 15 visitors)**

M: {*A Winter's Tale: 'Holly and Ivy Wreath 1999'*} This piece of work here (r) '*Holly and Ivy Wreath*' 1999, is just symbolic of Christmas itself, every door you go to, most doors you go to have this wreath on the door. (I.12, 34)

#### **6.2.3.2. Reminiscence (10 out of 15 visitors)**

M: {*A Winter's Tale: Family Gathering*} Well this is one I like the best, this piece here, sums up the tradition of a family Christmas, come to Christmas day, Mum and Grandad always there first, that sums up the spirit of Christmas, without even having a title, just look at the table, you think oh Christmas, without having a title at all, or a Sunday afternoon, Sunday dinner, they've all had dinner all sit there in front of the telly, Gran doesn't want to go home, have to force her, after another cup of tea. That's one I like best. (I.2, 18)

#### **6.2.3.3. Other works of art/exhibits (7 out of 15 visitors)**

W: {*A Winter's Tale: '4.45 pm'*} It's the combination of the colours, and I suppose if you take the combination of colours on the bottom left hand side here, I mean this combination of colours there is almost like Turner and the Fighting Temeraire and with the reds and the greys and the yellows which sort of relate quite nicely. (I.6, 78)

#### **6.2.3.4. Affective (7 out of 15 visitors)**

W: {*A Winter's Tale: 'Millennial Brink'*} And that's (?) it looks like the morning after the night before, do you understand that? I don't want to be reminded of that. (...) there's everything sort of higgledy piggledy and topsy turvy (...) and it's purely a personal thing I think. It's how I feel in the morning. (I.8, 50-54)

#### **6.2.3.5. Constructing an image (5 out of 15 visitors)**

M: {*A Winter's Tale: 'Family Gathering'*} Well their faces, but they'd all be sitting around a television set wouldn't they, don't you think, I mean something's missing there isn't it. That's brilliant that. Bodies are stuffed. That's fantastic. They're really true to life I think (...) and so's the table (...) but I don't think they'll have a very happy time.

I: You don't think they look very happy?

M: Well they look like this, but I mean he look a bit too happy to be where he is doesn't he, I think they'd be watching the television as I say. It was very good that was. (I.14, 156-159)

### 6.2.3.6. Popular culture (2 out of 15 visitors)

M: {*A Winter's Tale: panel* & '*The Supper V*} (r) 'Many human beings say they enjoy winter, but what they really enjoy is the feeling of proof against it. (From *Watership Down* by Richard Adams)'. I remember watching that on TV programme, they did a film about *Watership Down*, little rabbits and stuff, I remember watching that. Why (?) it does seem to (?) the people inside looking all warm and happy and this person outside looking fairly cold. It's got like sort of the bright oranges, like the colour of people like yellow wearing bright colours feel warm. (l.9, 39)

### 6.2.4 Context (16 out of 18 visitors)

Some of the things that visitors implicitly or explicitly considered when they looked at the works of art in the Gallery were their size, period, value, condition and frame (in the case of paintings). This was information that they could either gain by looking at the exhibits or by reading the support material. They often compared works of art according to their size, the period in which they were made and their value. These were the number of visitors (out of the 16) who mentioned those categories:

**6.2.4.1 Period (11 out of 16 visitors):** this refers to statements made or information gathered regarding the date a work of art was made, the period of time its subject represents, the period a particular artist lived and worked or the period that covers a whole generation of artists (for example, Impressionism).

**6.2.4.2 Size (9 out of 16 visitors):** this refers to comments visitors made about the size, scale and position of a work of art in relation to the position of the visitor.

**6.2.4.3 Value (7 out of 16 visitors):** in this case, visitors commented on the financial value of the works of art in the temporary exhibition (*A Winter's Tale*). Only one visitor mentioned that he thought some of the artists were very commercial as they were charging too much. Another visitor stated that she visited because she wanted to buy a painting for her house and, thus, looking at the price tag was an important part of her visit.

**6.2.4.4 Frame (4 out of 16 visitors):** a small number of visitors referred to the frame of paintings. Only two of them commented on how the frame affects the appearance of a painting.

**6.2.4.5 Condition (2 out of 16 visitors):** this refers to the comments 2 visitors made on the current condition of a sculpture (about it being cracked) and a painting (regarding the use of varnish and its effect on the colours).

There was no difference in preference for these categories that related to age, education or socio-economic background. However, men seemed to be slightly more likely to talk about them, especially about value and condition.

## 6.3 The Technical Process of Art Making

This theme includes two topics: firstly, materials and their use and secondly, technique and style. Both of them refer to the technical aspect of art making.

### 6.3.1. Materials and their use (10 out of 18 visitors)

A large number of visitors made remarks or sought information related to the material the works of art were made of. In some cases, visitors (4 visitors) either made a hypothesis or posed questions regarding the material which they then tried to confirm by reading the label. This indicated that visitors knew what the materials used were - or at least they thought they knew. Hence, they seemed reasonably confident about what they knew but they also wanted their knowledge verified by the Gallery. These visitors tended to be the ones most interested in reading the labels and finding out more about the works of art they looked at.

W: {*Stairs: 'Mother and Child'*} I like the colour, I like the shape, I like the way the sort of texture, I wonder if I dare touch it. I don't know if it's bronze or wood (...) I've been down to have a look, and it's called (r) 'Wood Lime', but it looks a bronze colour. But if somebody's carved that from a piece of wood, well that (...) I'd quite like that. That would sort of stand nicely in the corner of my house. They haven't got this big statue that I always used to see in here. It isn't here any more. (l.8, 41)

The material and their use triggered many reactions among visitors. This tended to increase the time spent at the works of art and visitors' engagement with them. As a result, they were able to connect with the artist and process of producing art.

M: I mean the sculpture in the foyer {*'Likeness Guaranteed'*} that appeals to me, I don't know why because I've just said about the other things and here, but that, it's probably purely because of the fact of what it's actually made out of, he's used his mind, he must have sort of been playing around with coat hangers and then he's decided well I can make something out of that. I mean when you first see it you think of the first thing that springs to my mind is The Grand Canyon and the way that the figures have been cut out of the stone. And then you look at it (...) (l.17, 100)

W: {*Portraits: 'Mother and Child'*} Yes and also because I think there's something very moving about the fact that that started off as a block of stone and somebody actually had to envisage something coming out of it, sculpture is born out of something and I think that's always, I always find that very moving. There's real labour involved in that. (l.16, 221)

Visitors' reactions to the materials bring us closer to understanding how visitors made sense of their visual experience in the Gallery. It seems that men and those with an active interest in art (those who said they participated in art-related activities) were more likely to comment on the materials and their use in the works they saw.

### 6.3.2 Technique/style (10 out of 18 visitors)

This theme refers to the technique an artist uses to make a work of art or to his or her personal style. The following quotes are typical examples:

W: {*Portraits: 'At the Window'*} The direct method of painting, simple brush strokes.

I: How do you mean direct, in what sense?

W: Well, simple brush strokes, without blending it in, each one making a separate statement. (l.10, 43-45)

W: {*Victorian Art: 'Farm near Brocklehurst'*} I suppose you're not supposed to go close up to these paintings, but whoever this is, their trees aren't as good as their people. You know it's funny when you look at it the sky is good, the houses are good, but the trees are definitely not the strong point of that artist. Whereas I would have said with this artist, looking closer, the trees are good.

I: Is it because there's more detail.

W: No, it's because if you look at this guy's style of painting, the trees are less believable and less successful, particularly these big ones here, you know the actual brush strokes, he loses the lines a little bit, it just looks messy, compared to the clarity of the people's faces, or the detail he's brought out and the detail round here and I mean the houses, and even the colours in the sky, the trees are very weak. (l.16, 32-34)

As was the case with all of the above topics, an awareness and interest in the artist's technique and/or style does not seem to be related to gender, age or education<sup>37</sup>. There is a strong suggestion that it is influenced by socio-economic background (B and C1 groups) and an interest in art. It was also affected by frequency of visiting art galleries. It is possible that people who are interested in technical matters might themselves be active makers or doers, but this would need further research to ascertain.

#### **6.4 The use of support material supplied by the curators (16 out of 18 visitors)**

The texts provided in the galleries are all written in simple straightforward language and have been for several years. They were much appreciated by visitors and were used in many different ways.

The vast majority of the visitors read either the labels or the text panels or both. This means that each visitor read on average 7.25 labels (minimum 1 and maximum 28) and 2 panels (zero to 6 maximum). The amount of text available on each label or panel and the amount of text visitors read varied considerably. A small number of visitors read the labels of all the works of art they looked at. One visitor mentioned that he only read the text for modern works of art as he usually did not understand them.

Reading the support material seemed to aid visitors' understanding of the exhibits and to be part of the Gallery experience as a whole. The labels in particular were used in many different ways: to answer questions visitors posed or to confirm a hypothesis they made (9 visitors); to understand what a work of art is about (7 visitors) and to work an interactive exhibit (3 visitors in *Ways of Seeing*). In three cases, the labels encouraged visitors to spend more time looking at an exhibit as they provided new insights. This was more evident in the *A Winter's Tale* exhibition where a wide range of information was provided. Five visitors looked at some of the exhibits briefly and then read the label. One of them used that strategy consistently. The time availability seemed to be an important factor determining how much text was read and how long visitors would spend reading. However, we do not have an independent measure of time spent.

Reading the material related to a number of visitor characteristics. All of the women who took part in this study read at least some of the support material provided. Education also seemed to relate to reading the material. However, frequency of participation in museums and art galleries or other related activities did not seem to affect reading behaviour considerably.

#### **6.5 Summary**

From the interpretive strategies available to them, visitors chose to use those that would help them interpret the particular works of art they saw during their visit. This involved analysing and evaluating different aspects of the works and expressing this verbally as they went around. The themes of the conversations were: the visual qualities, the socio-cultural context of the period within which these works of art were created and the technical process of art making. Their analysis was enriched and filtered through personal associations, knowledge and experiences and also assisted by WAG through the support material provided. The visitors felt comfortable and empowered in the galleries and took ownership of their experience, using the visit in an intentional fashion for their own purposes.

From the research, it seems clear that, as cultural theorists have suggested in relation to other fields of inquiry, that meaning-making desires and strategies cannot be mapped onto socio-economic positions or demographic groupings<sup>38</sup>. Specific class or gendered positions do not determine how meaning is made, although level of education did seem to influence the sophistication of the language and concepts visitors were able to use<sup>39</sup>.

# 7.0 Discussion

## 7.1 The significance and use of the findings

This report has discussed the interpretive strategies available to, and used by, visitors to an art gallery. Our intention was to explore the frameworks through which visitors analysed, evaluated and responded to the exhibitions at WAG.

It should be stressed that we focused on a particular group of visitors, those attending alone. The percentage of single visitors to WAG was unusually high in 1999 at 70%. (It is suggested by the Visual Arts Research Digest that generally around 21% of visitors to exhibitions are likely to be single attenders<sup>40</sup>). The percentage of lone visitors at WAG had increased from 46% in 1997 to 70% in 1999, pointing to the success of the access policy of the Gallery in encouraging people to pop in as part of their regular cultural and leisure routine. The high rate of lone attenders at WAG, while being unusual within a national pattern, does add to the generalisability of our findings in relation to WAG visitors as a whole. The comparison of the demographic profile of members of the research group with the visitor profile in the 1999 Market Research study shows that the members of the research group were very typical of all visitors to WAG. However, as seen in the analysis, the demographic characteristics of the visitors could not be used to explain why visitors chose to use some interpretive strategies and not to use others.

It is of course important to acknowledge that single visitors use interpretive strategies that are of significance to themselves only during the visit. Had they been visiting with children or in a group, they might well have modified their interpretations to take account of the needs of their companions. We chose to work with visitors who came to the gallery on their own as we wanted to explore the cognitive systems they used for making sense of their visit. Anticipating that this would be seen at its most pure form by visitors who were, to all intents and purposes, talking to themselves, these were the ones most suited to our purpose.

Many of the people we spoke to were either elderly people or still students; half had left formal education after completing the compulsory level only; and few had formal qualifications in art. However, the majority of them had a strong interest in art which they had developed over the years by engaging in a range of activities including visiting art galleries. Moreover, they all were very familiar with the space and 'language' of an art gallery even if they were first time visitors to WAG as they had been to many museums and art galleries before. In fact, many of them were frequent art gallery visitors.

The information we acquired from the follow-up interviews after the gallery visit (see Appendix A) regarding visitor interest and engagement in art both in formal and informal environments, gave us helpful insights and helped us to interpret the data collected on the visit itself. Many of our visitors were life-long learners and had educated themselves beyond school by utilising a variety of resources and educational institutions that represented different practices and communities, one of which was, of course, the museum. The people we spoke to were familiar with finding their own way of accessing those practices and communities through building on the reservoir of practices, experiences and knowledge they already had.

Conclusions can be drawn based on this report which have more general significance not only for WAG but also for other art galleries. This is especially the case for those art galleries which are located in the West Midlands as they are more likely to share the same visitors or at least visitors from similar backgrounds. This study can - and we hope that it will - be used as a basis for follow-up studies in other contexts.

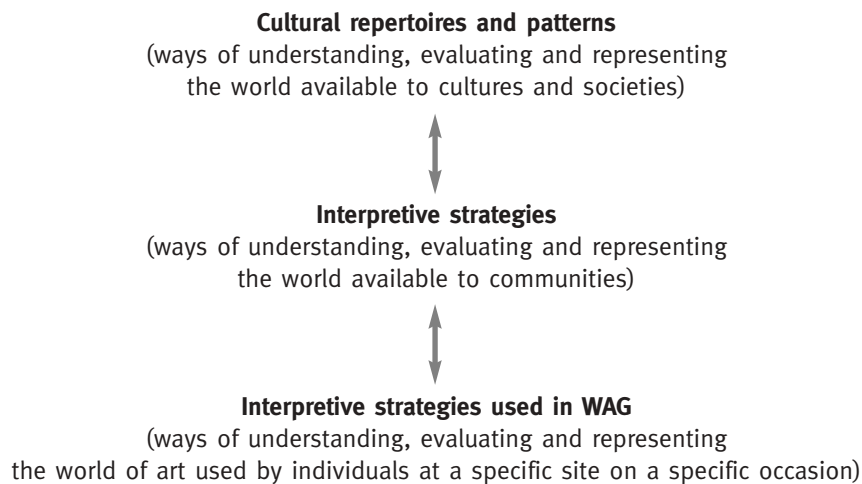
## 7.2 The value of the methodological approach

The methodological approach used in this study provided very rich material. The methods used are not commonly used in studying visitors as they entail, among other things, a greater input of time and labour both for data collection and for analysis.

Using prompts instead of questions permitted visitors to initiate and direct conversation. This was also aided by the fact that the conversation was occurring naturally as they moved around and looked at the works of art and other elements of the exhibitions. It would have been interesting to have gathered data on other aspects of the interpretive strategies such as what the general range of interpretive strategies available to those visitors is and

how they are developed and refined on a more day-to-day basis. That would have involved visiting them at home or following them in other art-related and other leisure activities. This was not possible to do in this study for practical reasons related to the design and time-scale of the research.

Based on the analysis of the data, we have developed a better idea about the use of interpretive strategies in an art gallery. In particular, the specific strategies visitors used on the day of the visit seem to be drawn from a range of pre-existing cognitive categories available to them through prior participation in communities of people and institutions. This participation had brought them into contact with a range of cultural repertoires and patterns of representation, and a variety of different ways of understanding and evaluating the world available to the culture they live in.



### 7.3 Cultural repertoires, patterns of representation and interpretive strategies and communities

Unlike most visitor research, this investigation focused on the cognitive categories through which visitors described their visit to WAG. The study was exploratory in nature. It did not try to impose the researchers' preconceived ideas about what these interpretive strategies were. Instead, this study explored the ways through which visitors made sense of their experiences, how these related to other aspects of their visit and to the role WAG - or other art galleries - is perceived to play in the social life of these visitors.

Art galleries can bring people who are not formally trained as artists in touch with the cultural practices of art-based communities and also with members of the communities themselves. For example, visitors at WAG used specific interpretive strategies: visual interpretation, interpretation of the content, the context and technique/style of the works of art. They also came into contact with the communities of artists, art gallery professionals and other visitors.

Developing an interest in art involves spending free time pursuing one's interest or hobby. This means an investment in terms of time and effort. This could go some way to explaining why there were a large number of students and elderly retired visitors to WAG.

The interpretive strategies available to visitors were developed slowly and refined with practice. The strategies each visitor developed depended on who they were as learning is closely related to identity. Participation in art-related activities gave the visitors we spoke to the opportunity to interact with resources, people and communities that helped them find their own path to learning and self-development by solving the conceptual and identity struggles that occurred. For example, two of the visitors accompanied during their visit shared their desire to change careers and become artists. One of them had decided to keep art as a hobby while the other one was struggling to find a way forward. He visited WAG to find out more about the art workshops which would bring him closer to the practices of the art community before deciding whether he would become a member or not. Another visitor used the WAG resources as a means of entering a different interpretive community, that of journalists. Finally, one visitor referred to the contact he had had with an artist in an art gallery in Manchester and how this contact helped him appreciate modern art by introducing him to appropriate strategies of interpretation. However, as the report shows, the struggles visitors were engaged in were not always solved - we found that many visitors did not seem to have the strategies they needed to interpret modern art, for example.

Participating in the practices of a community as a peripheral member gives people the opportunity to be involved without having to become full members. It also prepares them to become full members, if they choose to, and to participate in the core activities of the community. The experience of art galleries or museums, as the visit to WAG demonstrated, acted as an opening into new commitments, the opportunity to 'test the water' in an anonymous way before declaring an interest or making the commitment.

The adult visitors who took part in this study were highly motivated, with clear and often quite specific expectations about what their visit would hold and with a strong and active interest in art. The majority of them were driven by a desire to learn about art, a desire they had developed beyond school. Many of them pursued a number of leisure time activities that related to art. In many cases, their motivation and interest were even stronger after the museum visit. This was mainly due to the fact that WAG met a number of their needs and expectations. WAG offered them the opportunity not only to learn in an environment rich in resources but also to participate in communities of people and of practices that related to their identity (who they were or who they wanted to become). This made the whole experience rewarding and motivated them to return.

It is also interesting that the most popular art-related activities in which the people we spoke to participated involved first hand experience with art communities, or as close to this as was practically possible (for example watching television programmes). They had found their own way to access art and, thus, communicating with the art community was not a problem. The visit to WAG was an opportunity to practice their interpretive strategies and refine them through first-hand experience with works of art.

The confidence felt about approaching art could go some way towards explaining why many of the people we spoke to thought that the interactive exhibits were not for them. One woman said that they did not offer anything new or challenging as it was dealing with questions that she asked herself when she was new to art. Most visitors thought it would be a good experience for young children. In fact, a couple of them had it on their itinerary of things to do at WAG when they visited with their children or grandchildren. It could also be the case that, as most of them were frequent art gallery visitors, they were trained to expect specific things. Finding interactive exhibits in an art gallery did not seem to be one of them.

This report has highlighted how different interpretive strategies were used by visitors to make sense of their experience in an art museum. Where visitors had a repertoire of strategies available to them, they were able to peel away the layers of meaning that lay beneath the surface of the works of art they saw. The ability to combine a number of different strategies helped visitors most in making meaning.

However, many people found specific types of work difficult - in particular those artworks without an immediately recognisable subject, and those artworks that approached their subject in an abstract way. Visitors did not know how to go about interpreting these works, lacking both a framework for analysis and a useful vocabulary. The interpretive aids, especially the written texts, were important at this time. Even where the subjects of the artworks were immediately recognisable and where visitors felt confident with their interpretive approach, they frequently did not have a very well developed vocabulary when it came to discussing visual qualities.

Given that the people we spoke to were committed and experienced art museum users, many of these findings are surprising. On the one hand, visitors had confidently decided how and why to use the gallery, but on the other, they were not well equipped to cope with the more demanding types of work, or the more formal elements of artworks.

#### **7.4 Implications for professional practice**

This small study just begins to touch the surface of a complex area of research. It raises many questions that need to be investigated further, but it also suggests some matters for consideration in relation to professional practice in art museums.

Art museum professionals share similar values, attitudes and specialist knowledge and as such can be seen as an interpretive community. The ways in which art curators talk about artworks amongst themselves are a reflection of the strategies for intelligibility and the frameworks for making meaning that they habitually use. This research has shown that even experienced and committed visitors who have already decided that they have at least some interest in art and its communities, and who want to take this further, do not always share the interpretive strategies used by art museum professionals.



The visitors we spoke to at WAG had the benefit of visiting an art museum which cares deeply about its visitors, has carried out detailed market research, and has a long-standing and clearly articulated access policy. The people we spoke to felt comfortable visiting, and knew what they wanted from the gallery. They found the support materials, and especially the texts, supplied by the gallery invaluable in supporting their search for meaning. But even in this case, they would have benefited from more help in developing interpretive strategies, especially in relation to the more abstract work itself, and to more abstract concepts (e.g. visual and formal qualities such as composition and tone). Here they needed help in developing relevant ways of thinking, and in the specific vocabulary that could carry the concepts they needed.

Where art museums do not think in detail about who their visitors are and what learning and interpretive needs they might have, and where no access policy is in place, it is likely that many potential visitors are deterred from entering. At WAG, we found that most of the visitors we spoke to did not come from the same interpretive community as the gallery staff; the great majority of the visitors had no or very limited qualifications in art, and half had the minimum level of education. For these visitors to feel competent and comfortable at WAG, it is clear that WAG staff are providing opportunities to use strategies of understanding that go beyond their own familiar professional ways of thinking. Where art museum staff do not provide strategies of intelligibility that are broader than those they use themselves, they run the risk of attracting only those visitors who are like themselves.

This research suggests that considerable opportunities exist to develop the art museum as a learning environment. Visitors to WAG were enthusiastic and willing to work hard to understand what they saw. They wanted to enter, at least to some degree, the interpretive communities represented by WAG, but they did not possess all the skills they needed to grasp the meanings and values of the artworks they encountered. Even at WAG, where a great deal of help is provided for visitor, it would appear that more could be offered. And it seems that more sophisticated strategies for dealing with the challenges of artwork that is more difficult to understand need to be developed.

This research also suggests that where no special provision is made for visitors unfamiliar with art galleries and their cultural repertoires, there will be little to attract or engage new audiences, and even existing visitors may feel at a loss to produce meaningful interpretations at times. In addition, art museums run the risk of being perceived as completely irrelevant in relation to current government agendas, especially in relation to the social inclusion agenda<sup>41</sup>.

More research is needed to explore the range of interpretive strategies that different communities of visitors use in order to understand how they are developed, used and refined. This would help art galleries plan and develop exhibits and programmes that would provide the resources and tools that different communities of visitors need in order to understand and evaluate art. As the interpretive strategies different visitors use may not be the same as those used by the interpretive community that represents museum professionals (and all those who are professionally involved in art), further research could highlight whether there are gaps between the interpretive strategies used by visitors and staff. This work should involve all museum staff in an effort to define what the institution tries to achieve within the context of visitors. For many art museums, a development of this kind would require a major change of professional culture, but none-the-less, this is what is required<sup>42</sup>.

Further questions arise as to whether it is people who think best in visual terms that enjoy galleries, and whether the traditional art museum text with its rational, linear and logical approach, frequently based on art historical information, is the only way to give information, or even to open up a dialogue with visitors.

Given the new cross-sectoral agenda that is being developed by Re:source: the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, the concept of interpretive communities has a particular resonance. The seminal work by Radway into reading groups<sup>43</sup> has no parallel within the museum or art gallery field. Indeed, in comparison with the research into libraries and their use, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, comparable research within the museum world remains undeveloped.

## **7.5 Evaluation of the project and further work**

With this study, the work into the interpretive strategies of visitors to art museums has only just begun. We are satisfied that the methodology used in this study is robust and useful, yielding rich findings which are susceptible to intelligible analysis. The methodology is time-consuming and slow, but has provided data in which we have confidence. The methodology can be repeated in other research sites with no major modification.

This report represents the findings of the research study. We are satisfied that we have identified and discussed some of the diverse strategies of interpretation used by a small group of visitors to Wolverhampton Art Gallery in the West Midlands. The findings have benefited from discussion between the research team and additional members of the West Midlands Regional Museums Council.

The concept of interpretive strategies is revealed as a useful one, with a broad application. One of the original questions concerned the relationship between the personal meaning-making strategies deployed by individuals and the social framework that partly generates these strategies. We have found considerable evidence for this social and cultural evidence, but need to work further at the conceptual level to understand the relationship between the personal and the social. It is possible that concepts from communication theory, learning theory and sociology will be helpful here. The question of the value of the concept of 'interpretive communities' was also raised as one of our objectives. We have found considerable and very interesting evidence of the existence of a number of overlapping interpretive communities that revolve around the practices of art-making and viewing. This needs further work and thought, as the findings of the research are digested and explored further in terms of both the academic and professional implications.

This project was the first of two six-month projects that were planned to investigate the idea of art museums and interpretive communities. The second project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board, took place between July and December 2000. We repeated the methodology as exactly as possible in order to see how the findings compared. The research site was Nottingham Castle Museum in the East Midlands, which offers an excellent comparative site. A further report will be produced at the conclusion of this second study.

There are further opportunities to explore the research questions behind this study both in other art museums, in museums of other disciplines, and with other kinds of visitors.

# Notes

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- 1 Smith, C. (1999) Arts for the many, not the few; Who goes to the arts? *The Independent Special Report*, March 30th 1999, 2-3.
- 2 Department for Culture, Media and Sport (1998) *A new cultural framework*, DCMS, London.
- 3 Museums and Galleries Commission, (1999), *Visitors to UK museums and galleries*, MGC, London.
- 4 Desai, P. and Thomas, A. (1998) *Cultural diversity: attitudes of ethnic minority populations towards museums and galleries*, Museums and Galleries Commission, London; and Harris Qualitative, (1997) *Children as an audience for museums and galleries*, Museums and Galleries Commission, London.
- 5 Hooper-Greenhill, E. (2000), *Museums and the interpretation of visual culture*, Routledge, explores this theme in depth.
- 6 Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1999), Education, communication and interpretation: towards a critical pedagogy in museums, in Hooper-Greenhill, E. (ed) *The educational role of the museum*, second edition, Routledge, London, 3-27.
- 7 Potter, J. and Wetherell, M. (1987) *Discourse and social psychology: beyond attitudes and behaviour*. Chapter 7: From representations to repertoires. Sage Publications, London.
- 8 Fish, S. (1980) *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London.
- 9 Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1999) op.cit. 13-15; and (2000), chapter five.
- 10 While museum visitor statistics are not as well developed as they should be, an international review of studies of art museum visiting patterns suggests that art museum visitors are more likely to be highly educated and drawn from higher socio-economic groups than the public at large. See Schuster, J. M. D. (1995) The public interest in the art museum's public, in Pearce, S. (ed) *Art in museums; new research in museum studies 5*, Athlone, 109-142.
- 11 These studies are fully discussed in Hooper-Greenhill 2000, chapter five.
- 12 Quoted from internal document.
- 13 Yin, R. (1994) *Case-study research: design and methods*, Sage, London, 1-3.
- 14 Glesne, C. and Peshkin, A. (1992) *Becoming qualitative researchers*, Longman, London.
- 15 The 'think-aloud' technique was originally developed and applied by researchers in information-processing theory in order to assess learners' problem-solving process: see Roschelle, J. 1995, Learning in interactive environments: prior knowledge and new experience, in Falk, J. and Dierking, L. (eds) *Public institutions for personal learning*, American Association of Museums. However, we did not use a protocol or train visitors how to 'think aloud'. Furthermore, prompts were used.
- 16 Morris & Hargreaves 1997, *Market research report, Wolverhampton Art Gallery marketing strategy*; Morris, Hargreaves, McIntyre, 1999, *Wolverhampton Art Gallery Market Research*, Spring 1999:8.
- 17 Davies, S. 1994, *By popular demand: a strategic analysis of the market potential for museums and art galleries in the UK*, Museums and Galleries Commission, London.
- 18 Morris, Hargreaves, McIntyre, 1999:8.
- 19 Davies, 1994.

- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Morris, Hargreaves and McIntyre, 1999:1
- 22 Morris, Hargreaves and McIntyre, 1999:17
- 23 Similar findings were reported by Morris & Hargreaves 1997, - low first time and rare attendance at WAG and high frequent attendance.
- 24 Davis 1994.
- 25 This will be further discussed in the section on the motivation for visiting below.
- 26 Both of them said that they did not have free time available and that they did not know the area very well. In their country, they used to visit as often as once per month.
- 27 Two of them visited museums and art galleries rarely or occasionally.
- 28 In two studies carried out at WAG (Davies 1994, Morris & Hargreaves 1997) showed that more than two thirds of respondents lived locally (in Wolverhampton or in the surrounding area and from the cities close by such as Birmingham and Walsall). Also there was a significant cross-over of attendance with other museums and art galleries in that part of West Midlands (Morris & Hargreaves 1997).
- 29 Macdonald, S., 1993, *Museum Visiting*, Sociology and Social Anthropology Working Papers, No.1, Series: Representations: Places and Identities, Keele University., Moussouri, T., 1997, *Family Agendas and Family Learning in Hands-On Museums*, unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester.
- 30 This refers to the place museums and art galleries are perceived to have in the social life of the visitors.
- 31 Motivations are, however, affected by whether visitors come alone or in social groups. See Moussouri, 1997.
- 32 The majority of the visitors said that they had a general interest in art.
- 33 Moussouri 1997; Falk, J., Moussouri, T., and Coulson, D. 1998. The effect of visitors' agendas on museum learning, *Curator*, 41 (2), 106-120.
- 34 Both the subject and the visual qualities are further discussed in the following part of this report.
- 35 This was explicitly mentioned as a motivation for visiting by 3 of these visitors. See section on motivations for visiting above.
- 36 In fact, half of the visitors referring to form were brought up as Catholic.
- 37 Although half of the visitors in the group had a postgraduate degree the other half left full-time education just before or right after completing the compulsory level.
- 38 See for example Schroder, K., 1994, Audience semiotics, interpretive communities and the 'ethnographic turn' in media research, *Media, Culture and Society*, 16, 337-347.
- 39 See Morley, D., 1992, *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London and New York, 70 40 Morris, Hargreaves and McIntyre, 1999:17.
- 41 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2000, *Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All*. See also *Museums and Social Inclusion*, a report of a research study carried out by RCMG for GLLAM (Group for Large Local Authority Museums). Some of the work that WAG has carried out with groups at risk of social exclusion is discussed in this report, as are a great number of other initiatives, and the major issues that museums and galleries need to consider when reviewing their position on the social inclusion agenda.
- 42 Hooper-Greenhill, E. 2000, Changing values in the art museum: rethinking communication and learning, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 6 (1), 9-31.
- 43 Radway, J., 1984, Interpretive communities and variable literacies: the functions of romance reading, *Daedalus*, 113 (3), 49-73.

# Appendix A

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*The proforma for the accompanied visit, and the questionnaire which followed*

## **Accompanied Visit**

Hello, my name is .... and I'm from Leicester University. I'm doing a research project in this Gallery and I'm interested in what your experience is like during your visit.

Would you mind if I visit the Gallery with you today? (Yes/No)

(If yes)

I would like you to visit whatever parts of the Gallery you would like and record your reactions as you go around. You can say anything that comes to mind. There are no right or wrong answers. Anything you say will be useful for this research. I will come with you and ask you questions from time to time if you don't mind. If you've been here before, I'd like you to take me to your favourite exhibit or an exhibit you've seen here before.

You can use this tape recorder to say anything you want about what you see and what you think about this place.

*Suggested prompts:*

*What is the first thing that comes to mind when you enter the Gallery or this room?*

*What comes to mind when you look at that painting/sculpture/exhibit?*

*Why do you think that?*

*Could you tell me more about it?*

# Questionnaire

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*You can ask these questions at some point during the visit. If any of these questions have been covered by the visitor before please remember not to ask them again.*

Do you live in Wolverhampton? Where do you live?

Have you been here before?

(if yes)

How many times - including this one - have you been in the last year?

Do you usually visit alone? Why?

Why did you come to this particular Gallery?

Do you plan to see something in particular (an exhibition/an object/visit the café or the Gallery shop) or see it all?

Is an art exhibition the type of exhibition you like?

What kind of exhibitions do you like?

Do you visit other museums or art galleries often? Do you remember which ones you have visited in the last year?

Do you visit other places where you can see works of art (prompt: churches, parks, public buildings)?

How does your experience here differ to the experience you have when you visit other museums etc? (only ask if they've been before or towards the end of the visit)

What other sorts of things do you like to do in your free time (visiting friends, reading, gardening, sports, going to the cinema/theatre)?

Is there anything else about your experience here today or in the past (*if they've visited before*) which you think is important but which we haven't touched on?

# Questions About Yourself

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I would like to ask you a few questions about yourself which will help me analyse my study.

1. Can I ask how old you are?
2. What is or was your occupation? Please be as precise as possible. If you manage or used to manage people before you retired please note the number of people you managed.
3. When did you complete formal education?  
At what age you left school, college or whatever?
4. Which ethnic group do you belong to?
5. Which religious group do you belong to?
6. Have you passed any exams or got any qualification in an art subject?  
If yes, which art subject?
7. Do you read any art magazine?  
If yes, which one(s) and how often (e.g. regularly, occasionally)?
8. Do you watch any TV programmes on art?  
If yes, which one(s) and how often (e.g. regularly, occasionally)?
9. Are you a member of an art club or any other club?  
If yes, which one(s)?
10. Have you ever worked or volunteered in an art gallery or a museum?  
If yes, which one?

# Appendix B

## List of exhibits in A Winter's Tale

### Temporary exhibits

Artist	Work
Greig Burgoyne	January, Xmas in a Binbag
Ruth Charlton	Family Gathering
Steve Clark	Vase from 'Broken' range (peach colour)
Steve Clark	Vase from 'Broken' range (lime colour)
Tim Clark	Christmas painting + substitute painting, Snow and Rievaulx Abbey, Twice
Angela Corbyn	Infused with the Christmas Spirit
Sarah Greenwood	knitted holly and ivy wreath
Julie Held	The Supper V
Julie Held	Picking Apples (towards spring)
Emily Jackson	The Vase
Emily Jackson	The Nest
Emily Jackson	Woven Vessel
Ann Kenyon	Hanging 1
Ann Kenyon	Hanging II
Peter Lamb	My Fare Lady
Lynn Miller	Napkin Rings (x6)
Lynn Miller	Jackfrost Plate
Lynn Miller	Twinkle Star Plate
Lynn Miller	Robin Bowl
Lynn Miller	Robin Spoon
Michaeol Powell	Tundra 1
Carol Saunderson	Heavy frost on the Beacon
Janette Sedgebeer	Millennial Brink 1999
Rachel Setford	Winter
Rachel Setford	First Fall
Rachel Setford	Jack Frost
Becky Shaw	Aspiration
Lindsay Simons	Fragment: Madonna and Child, Botticelli
Paul Tecklenberg	Christmas Tree III
Susan Tracey	4.45pm
Gwyneth Thurgood	Frosty Night
Victoria White	Collage I and II
Victoria White	Paper & Textile Wall-hanging

### Permanent exhibits

Edouard Frere	Winter Scene
F D Hardy	Christmas visitors
G H Boughton	Returning from Mass, Brittany
J van Gool	Milking in Winter
Jack Simcock	Snowscape with cows and figures
Kingston	Winter
Marianne Stokes	Madonna and Child
Mary Gibson	Angel
T S Cooper	Cows and Sheep in Snowscape
Wm Jas Muller	Lowering Day in Winter



