



Lila Wallace-  
Reader's Digest Fund

# Opening the Door to the Entire Community:

*How Museums are Using Permanent  
Collections to Engage Audiences*

A New Way of Seeing  
*The Art Institute of Chicago*

Connecting the Past to the Present  
*Heard Museum, Phoenix, Arizona*

Finding Excitement in an Ancient World  
*Worcester Art Museum*

Laying Groundwork  
*Baltimore Museum of Art*

Rethinking Decorative Arts  
*The Newark Museum*

Dimensions of Change:  
A Roundtable Discussion with  
Museum Leaders



### **Mission Statement**

The mission of the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund is to invest in programs that enhance the cultural life of communities and encourage people to make the arts and culture an active part of their everyday lives.

# Opening the Door to the Entire Community:

*How Museums are Using Permanent Collections to Engage Audiences*

## **Creating a Museum that Serves the Community Starts with Research and Planning**

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**This work touches everyone in museums—from their boards and education departments to curatorial and security staffs.**

## Introduction

Across the country, a shift is taking place in fine arts museums of all sizes and scope. Spurred by a desire to serve their entire community and make the arts a more meaningful presence in people’s daily lives, a number of museums are taking steps to attract and engage a more diverse mix of visitors by using their permanent collections more creatively. Since 1991, the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund has been supporting this work through its *Museum Collections Accessibility Initiative*. Over the past seven years, Fund grants totaling \$32 million have enabled 29 museums to take a fresh look at themselves and expand the roles they play in their communities.

For those participating in the initiative, this effort has meant asking new questions about what makes people connect to museums. The museums have used the answers to these questions to reorganize collections, launch innovative programming and craft effective strategies to attract new visitors and deepen the engagement of all their audiences. This work has touched everyone within their institutions—from their boards and education departments to curatorial and security staffs—resulting in well-planned, carefully implemented audience-building initiatives that are attracting new people and permanently changing the way museums conduct business.

The purpose of ***Opening the Door to the Entire Community: How Museums are Using Permanent Collections to Engage Audiences*** is to share the lessons being learned from those doing this exciting and challenging work. In this report, the first of two, we examine the role of research and planning—key steps in developing successful audience-building initiatives. Articles explore the thinking behind changes at The Art Institute of Chicago, Heard Museum in Phoenix, Worcester Art

Museum, The Baltimore Museum of Art, and The Newark Museum. We also invite you to listen to the directors of six participating museums discuss the importance of leadership in planning, implementing and sustaining this work.

We hope this report gives you a sense of the changes taking place—and indication that this work is being done without compromising the artistic quality of any museum’s collection or the standards with which it is presented. As you’ll see in these pages, those leading this effort are convinced that this new way of using permanent collections to more meaningfully serve people is critical to the long-term health of their institutions. Many of the strategies are applicable to cultural institutions of all types. We hope you’ll find this report—and its forthcoming companion piece—stimulating and useful documents.

M. Christine DeVita  
President, Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund  
November 1998

# The Art Institute of Chicago

## *A New Way of Seeing*

### Lessons Learned:

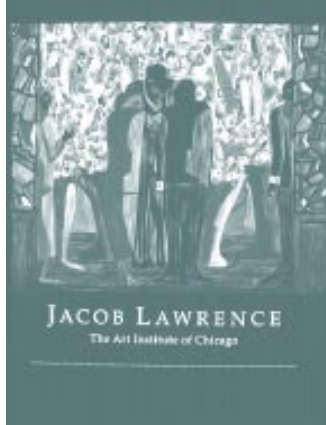
- **Never assume you know people's likes and dislikes – ask them.**
- **Use works of art people are familiar with to draw them in but don't miss the opportunity to show them something new.**
- **A well-trained volunteer force can help museums make new connections with community members.**

As part of its research to find ways to attract more African American visitors, the Art Institute of Chicago conducted a focus group for single black males in their twenties. To find out what they liked, what works they connected with and areas of general interest, the participants were shown various slides of paintings from the museum's permanent collection and asked to comment. Focus group members showed little enthusiasm for paintings that featured themes or depicted scenes that had no direct connection to their experience as African Americans. When asked for reactions to a sampling of works from the museum's collection of 19th century landscape paintings, however, the men showed great interest. In discussions that followed, they explained the landscapes stirred deep emotions associated with their rural Southern roots—a connection the museum never would have made had it not asked.



Helmet Mask. The Art Institute of Chicago.

These findings strongly influenced the exhibition strategy that the Art Institute of Chicago subsequently adopted as it began to reach out to the African American community. While prominently featuring its rich holdings of African and African American art in a series of shows such as *Since the Harlem Renaissance: 60 Years of African American Art* (1995-96) and *African Abstraction: Dogon Figurative Sculpture* (1996-97), the museum has also experimented with theme-based exhibitions of other works from its permanent collection.



Poster of "The Wedding" by Jacob Lawrence, centerpiece of *Spiritual Expressions*.

**Every show should challenge new and traditional audiences.**

For example, *Spiritual Expressions* (1995-96), an exhibition featuring works of a liturgical or spiritual nature, proved to be one of the museum's most successful theme-based shows. "It drew from across departments and cultures and had an incredible range of objects—from a page of the Egyptian Book of the Dead to a sculpture of the Indian god Shiva and a German woodcut of Christ," said James Wood, the museum's director.

Spirituality, it turns out, is a theme that consistently interested African American focus groups. *The Wedding*, a painting by famed African American artist Jacob Lawrence, became the centerpiece of *Spiritual Expressions* and was featured on an exhibition poster because of its likely appeal to African American audiences. According to Wood, that show succeeded in attracting a large and diverse audience; nearly 10 percent of whom were African American. Even more impressive was attendance at four sold-out programs related to *Spiritual Expressions*, which attracted audiences that ranged from 45 to 95 percent African American.



Brochures used to promote *Spiritual Expressions*.



Frederick Douglass, daguerreotype, c. 1895. The Art Institute of Chicago.

**Since efforts to diversify audiences began, the number of new African American members has more than doubled.**

“We designed that show so everyone would start by seeing something familiar and leave seeing something new,” said Wood. “Every show should challenge both new and traditional audiences.”

As another approach, the museum explored portraiture through three overlapping exhibitions whose combined appeal was sure to attract a diverse group of visitors. In Fall 1997, the museum opened *In Their Own Right*, an exhibit of African American portraits from its collection. Among the featured works was a recent acquisition of a rare 1852 daguerreotype of abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Running concurrently were two other shows: *Irving Penn, A Career in Photography* and *Renoir's Portraits*. The exhibitions were arranged so visitors to one had to walk by the others. As a result, the 500,000 visitors to the Impressionist blockbuster became aware of *In Their Own Right*. In conjunction with the three exhibits, the museum convened a two-day public symposium, *The Portrait in Modern Times*, featuring nationally prominent scholars and curators.

Enthusiastically received by African Americans, *In Their Own Right* brought “a new community of visitors to the museum,” according to Wood. Noting the crossover of African American visitors to the Penn show, he added “the proof of our success will be if we can boost attendance at a broad range of shows.” Although African Americans still account for fewer than 10 percent of all visitors, the number of African Americans becoming members of the Art Institute is increasing dramatically—up more than 100 percent since the initiative began.

At the same time the museum is working to attract new visitors, it is also offering opportunities to deepen people’s engagement. In 1995, the museum formed the Urban Professional Partners Corps (UPPC), a group of 30 African American volunteers who serve as ambassadors to the black community. The group receives formal training on the permanent collection with an emphasis on African American art—and then organizes lecture-tours or slide-show presentations for their churches,



**Although attendance is up for special exhibitions, success will occur if attendance remains high for a broad range of shows.**

professional associations or other community members. The UPPC's preparation for the three portrait shows, for example, included seven classes on portraiture. Because of the attention the program is attracting, professionals of other ethnic and cultural backgrounds have expressed interest in joining the group.

An intensified public relations effort to cultivate relationships with media outlets that traditionally have not covered the museum's activities has brought results as well. *The Chicago Defender*, the city's primary newspaper targeted toward the African American community, now regularly reports on the museum's exhibitions and special events. This relationship has led to increased coverage in the *Defender* about a variety of Art Institute exhibitions such as Japanese screens and Van Eyck's *Annunciation*.

"The combined effect of our efforts to reach out to wider audiences has brought expected and unexpected results—most of which are positive," said Wood. "Such success could not have occurred, though, had we not found out early what matters to the people whom we were hoping to attract."

# Heard Museum

## *Connecting the Past to the Present: Native Americans Tell Their Own Stories*

### Lessons Learned:

- **Commitment to mission drives change.**
- **Including audiences in museum activities builds trust and credibility—and new roles for the museum in the community.**
- **Even when the audience’s voice is consistently reflected in collections and exhibitions, change in audience behavior can be slow.**

In 1991, the Heard Museum’s board of trustees formally adopted a new mission: “To promote respect for Native American people and appreciation for their culture and heritage.” With this focus, came a pledge to ensure an Indian perspective and voice in the museum’s exhibitions and programs—something that had been absent for more than half a century.



Contemporary pot depicts water animals: frogs, butterflies and water serpents. Heard Museum.

Since the time of its founding in the 1920s, the museum’s centerpiece has been an extensive collection of American Indian art and artifacts. For 70 years, however, Native Americans didn’t have a presence at the museum. Although the Heard is located in Phoenix, Arizona, a region with one of the country’s largest populations of Indians, they accounted for only two percent of the museum’s visitors. Nor was the museum’s core audience local; it was overwhelmingly made up of tourists.

In late 1992, with help from the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund, the Heard launched an initiative to attract Native Americans and local families. “To connect with these new audiences,” said Martin Sullivan, the museum’s director, “we were forced to ask ourselves, ‘What meaning does our collection have for new and traditional audiences? Why are we holding these objects? What stories can they tell?’”

The museum discovered that its collection had many stories to tell — about how Indians live today as well as how they lived in the past, and about the natural, spiritual, social and political forces that shape their lives.

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One of the museum's first challenges was to dispel the notion that Indian cultures are a relic of the past. "So many first-time visitors come with the impression that Indian life was more genuine in the past," said Sullivan. "Living cultures all take from the old and integrate the new."

The Heard Museum created a family orientation gallery called *Old Ways, New Ways* that recreates home settings to reveal how three tribal groups blend traditional and contemporary culture. There is, for instance, a replica of an old-style Zuni adobe with a display of traditional pottery from the museum's collection. Visitors then pass into a replica of a present-day concrete-block apartment that showcases contemporary Zuni jewelry. Hands-on and computerized activities allow visitors to create their own pottery and jewelry designs.

The most important change at the Heard, according to Sullivan, is its embrace of an exhibition philosophy that emphasizes the first-person voice of Native Americans. "Their experience is the starting point for our programs," he said. "Getting the story directly from Native Americans means communicating it accurately for everyone else."

The first-person approach has shaped several major permanent collection exhibitions at the Heard:

- For an exhibition on the meanings of rain and its representation in the art of several Southwestern Indian cultures, the museum invited eight Native American guest curators to select and interpret objects.
- Hopi voices and experiences were used in *Following the Sun and Moon* to explain essential elements of Hopi culture, such as the tribe's ceremonial calendar and how Hopi Katsina dolls are used to teach children about their religion.
- *Watchful Eyes*, similarly, used first-hand accounts to examine the role of women artists in Native American cultures.



Visitors to the Heard Museum explore the museum's interactive exhibit about rain.

In 1999, the Heard plans to open an exhibition about the Indian boarding-school experience, which has touched the lives of most Native American families in the United States. Beginning in the mid-1800s, many Indian children were forced to attend boarding schools, which separated them from their families and tribal cultures. “The story is about the break-up of families, but it’s also about how new families formed through intertribal relationships that began at the schools,” said Sullivan.

The centerpiece of the exhibition will be works from the museum’s permanent collection, some of which were made by artists who attended the boarding schools. Works will rotate over the five-year life of the show to give maximum exposure to the Heard’s collection. In addition, ancillary exhibitions in adjoining galleries will trace the influence of individual Native American artists who taught at the schools or received



From *Following the Sun and Moon: Hopi Katsina Dolls* on exhibit at The Heard Museum.

**New relationships  
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the museum by  
people throughout  
the community.**

their early training there. Included will be historical documentation and first-person accounts of the boarding-school experience that have been recorded by the Heard. While the show is on view, the museum will continue taping accounts of Native American visitors who wish to share their experiences.

In spite of the Heard's efforts, change—as expected—has been slow. “While Native American attendance has increased from 2 to 8 percent, we still have a long way to go,” said Sullivan. “We’re learning that much of what is in the museum’s collection can be found in many Native American homes – so our challenge is to find a way to bring something new and relevant to make the museum meaningful to these people.”

He continued, “The relationships we are building are helping to establish common ground—and leading to some surprising and nontraditional uses of the museum.” Native American artists and scholars frequently use the museum’s archives to conduct research. Indian organizations use space at the museum for meetings, ceremonies and other social events. Hopi language classes are also held there. When negotiating gaming rights, tribal leaders in Arizona asked the Governor to meet with them at the museum to sign the compact. And President Clinton held his national dialogue on race issues with tribal leaders at the Heard.

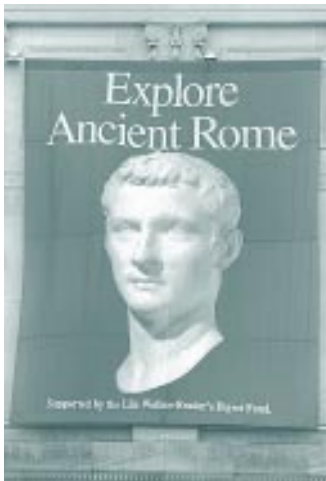
“We’re learning that in Native American cultures, reciprocity is the basis for all relations,” said Sullivan. “The museum is working to provide a place that honors the traditions and artifacts of Native American cultures—where people can come to celebrate and discuss their history and their future. In return, Native Americans are beginning to support the museum by sharing their art and expertise as well as their time and financial support. This reciprocity is essential to our success.”

# Worcester Art Museum

## *Finding Excitement in an Ancient World*

### Lessons Learned:

- **Audiences can help museums better understand and appreciate their collections.**
- **Making the museum’s “behind the scenes” activity visible effectively engages visitors.**
- **When donors see more audience engagement, they give more generously.**



Sign welcoming visitors to the Worcester Art Museum.

Drawing new audiences to a museum to see Greek and Roman art that’s been there for 50 years might seem like a hard sell—but the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts has done just that. It has so intrigued the community with ancient art that area high school students are clamoring to learn Latin.

To make the museum’s collection more compelling, Worcester has completed a reinstallation and reinterpretation that represents a major departure from past approaches. “The previous installation of the collection assumed visitors had a background in art history,” said James Welu, the museum’s director. “We shifted the emphasis from aesthetics and connoisseurship to providing a social and economic context for the objects. This allows many more people to appreciate the collection.”

As a result, over the past five years the museum has expanded and diversified its audiences through programs that showcase its 408-piece permanent collection of Greek and Roman art. The Greek holdings encompass small and life-size sculpture ranging from Archaic to Hellenistic as well as pottery that traces the development of Greek vase painting. The Roman world is represented by marble and bronze busts and figures, a selection of glass and one of the country’s finest collections of Roman mosaics. These mosaics, which date from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, came to the museum from its participation in the first major archeological dig at Antioch in the 1930s.



Roman Gallery at the Worcester Art Museum.

**New possibilities opened for the museum once it began inviting audience members to ask questions about its displays, activities and plans.**

Welu credits visitors and focus group participants with providing the museum a new perspective on the Greek and Roman collections. When the museum’s staff began planning the reinstallation in 1995, it learned from talking to docents, visitors and local teachers that the collection would be easier to understand if the two collections appeared separately. The museum listened: the Greek works now are in a gallery separate from the Roman works. To provide additional opportunity for the community to get involved with the reinstallation, photo exhibitions of the works toured targeted neighborhoods and visitors were asked to submit questions and share their thoughts about the objects.

“I was fascinated by the questions people asked,” Welu said. “They didn’t know what we meant by installation, but they wanted to know how these objects came to Worcester. They were interested in materials used and the differences between marbles. Their questions helped us rethink our approach to the exhibit—to make it more interesting to people.”

He continued, “When you begin a conversation with the audience, sometimes staff feel threatened because we might not know all the answers to the questions people ask. Actually, their questions open up new possibilities. It’s a challenge that’s taken us in a whole new direction.”

Along with the reinstallation, the museum is also working to conserve, assess and catalogue each of the objects in the Greek and Roman collections. Many of the objects—some of which were purchased by the museum in 1905 from a participant in an early excavation at Troy and others from the Antioch dig more than 60 years ago—had never been catalogued. The museum has hired a curator of Greek and Roman art to assess the collection, marking the first time in the museum’s history that a person with such expertise—rather than a paintings expert—has served as chief conservator. “This collection is one of the museum’s strongpoints; we need to treat it as such,” said Welu.



During conservation of objects in these collections, the museum set up a temporary studio in a gallery on the main floor. By giving visitors a view of the conservation in process, the museum hoped to deepen people's interest in the collection. This contact with the public provides valuable insights to what's important to visitors and what they want to know. For example, when the sculpture of Hygeia, the Roman goddess of health, was placed in the public conservation studio, staff members were surprised by how many visitors, especially medical professionals, sought it out there. Museum staff previously had no idea of the sculpture's importance to the public.



Greek Art Odyssey, a workshop for families at the Worcester Art Museum.

Since this work started, the Worcester Art Museum has watched its audiences grow dramatically. In 1996-97, the museum reported that the number of visitors from Marlborough and Northborough, two of its targeted communities, had quadrupled and tripled respectively over a two-year period. Memberships from those communities rose 49 percent, and registration for classes at the museum increased 100 percent. More





**Donors respond  
when they can see  
the value of reaching  
out to new  
audiences.**

than 3,000 adults and young people are now enrolled in studio and art history classes at the museum. At Marlborough High School, teachers and administrators credit the school's partnership with the museum for a 50 percent increase in the number of Latin students over the previous year. "The students' semi-monthly visits to the museum have provided a link between the past and the present," said Welu. "Through sustained exposure, these young people realize that our collection, although ancient, has relevance today".

Because of the success of the museum's efforts to attract audiences that were always "in their backyard," but never an active part of museum life, Welu has become a believer in the value of research—and getting to know audiences by talking to them directly. "This initiative has allowed us to create a successful model for expanding our audience while improving the presentation of our collection," he noted. "As we reinstall and reinterpret our permanent collection portion by portion, I'd like each curator to get a first-hand understanding of the importance of focus groups and visitor input."

Enthusiastic response from a variety of audiences has deepened the museum's commitment to audience outreach. "Museum staff and target audiences are not the only ones who have responded positively to the changes at the museum," said Welu. "Donors see the value of the changes as well – and their contributions are helping to establish a \$4 million endowment fund that will help us engage audiences far into the future."

# The Baltimore Museum of Art

## *Laying Groundwork through Research and Testing*

### Lessons Learned:

- Early planning paves the way for bringing new people to the museum.
- Research can explain why people don't come to the museum.
- Advisory committees provide a critical link to the people museums are trying to reach.

**S**trong vision is vital to an organization's commitment to building audiences. But to successfully act on that vision requires solid research, tireless outreach, innovative programming, and willingness to test new strategies.

None of these is in short supply at the Baltimore Museum of Art, where—after a year of careful planning—an ambitious initiative called *Visualize A Future: Empowering Baltimore's Families* has launched. During the planning year, staff were busy making introductions, establishing contacts in target neighborhoods, organizing advisory committees, conducting audience research, and planning and testing new programs.



Viewing a sculpture in the West Wing for Contemporary Art at the Baltimore Museum of Art.

**Places people frequent regularly—churches, schools, community centers—are important venues for getting the word out about what’s happening at the museum.**



Children’s educational art activities, Baltimore Museum of Art.

Designed to increase African American visitors, particularly youth and families from East and West Baltimore, the museum’s initiative will involve residents of these communities in using the arts to help revitalize their neighborhoods. At the heart of this effort is a strategy to introduce residents to the museum’s permanent collection and other offerings by bringing programs to their communities as well as facilitating visits to the museum.

One of the museum’s first moves was to create a Community Advisory Committee, whose members include representatives from the target neighborhoods of East and West Baltimore as well as selected churches, schools, social service agencies and community organizations. This group has linked the museum to more than 70 community organizations, provided feedback on programming ideas and suggested strategies for effective outreach. The committee is also helping to generate word-of-mouth “buzz” about the museum.

The museum considers this group pivotal to bringing in a larger, more diverse group of visitors. “The successful museum is not one that stands alone,” said Doreen Bolger, the museum’s director. “Museums that flourish in the future will be those willing to collaborate with community partners.”

While these community connections are setting the initiative’s tone, audience research is providing its direction. As a first step, the museum gathered demographic information from visitors and asked them how well their needs were being met. Also, the museum learned through focus groups comprising residents from targeted neighborhoods that although half of the participants had visited the museum, they have very little awareness about its programs. This process also helped clarify how people get information, including the media outlets they rely on.

“We learned the importance of grassroots marketing—how to be visible in neighborhoods,” said Brigid Globensky, the museum’s education

director. “Churches, schools, community centers, grocery stores and beauty salons — places that people frequent most regularly—are important sources of information in many communities.”



Young people participating in a *BMA ArtStops* Workshop.

Armed with this new information, for its next exhibition, the *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, the museum augmented its usual marketing strategy of mostly newspaper and radio advertising and invested in posters promoting the exhibition and a free, museum-sponsored Caribbean Festival. More than 7,000 posters were distributed throughout the targeted communities and displayed in a variety of neighborhood outlets. “The kick-off festival brought nearly 6,000 people—most of whom had never been to the museum before,” said Globensky.

Other findings that are shaping strategies to help the museum better serve the people it wants to attract and turn into regular visitors include:

- Getting to the museum can be difficult due to a lack of primary public transportation drop-off or pick-up points near the museum. The museum is lobbying the city to establish more direct bus routes.
- Many people like to attend cultural events as part of a group, indicating the importance of marketing to and working with community organizations.
- A large part of people’s leisure time is spent at home or in their neighborhoods. The museum is developing family-focused board or card games—as ways to introduce people to the museum.

Pilot programs in East and West Baltimore show that the museum is off to a strong start. An example is *BMA ArtStops*. Museum staff make scheduled and spontaneous stops at street corners, block parties and community centers with a station wagon loaded with art supplies to involve young people in hands-on art projects. During these visits, museum staff conduct impromptu focus groups to learn what appeals to young people. “We hope that making young people familiar with the

**Programming that meets the needs of targeted groups often makes the museum a more welcoming place for others as well.**

museum will pave the way for a visit,” Globensky explained. Programs have also been introduced in local schools, including one where museum educators visit schools to introduce the visual arts and encourage students and teachers to explore art as a means of communication. These sessions are followed by visits to the museum.

Changes inside the museum also reflect its commitment to attracting target audiences. The museum’s African collection will be reinstalled in a larger area, expanding opportunities for public viewing. And it has acquired a significant number of works by African American artists to add to its outstanding collection of modern art. “Because many of these works are abstract, the artist’s ethnic background is not always immediately identifiable,” Globensky explained. To increase awareness for these works, the museum has highlighted them through merchandising opportunities on note cards and posters in a series entitled *African American Artists at BMA*.

Although the Baltimore Museum of Art is targeting residents of two specific inner-city communities, the museum expects that its efforts will also draw African Americans from all over the city and throughout the region. “In targeting families from specific neighborhoods and offering programming that is responsive to their interests, we’re hoping that the museum is a more welcoming place for families from all economic brackets,” said Globensky.



# The Newark Museum

## *Rethinking Decorative Arts*

### Lessons Learned:

- Curatorial vision expands and exhibition quality improves when new audiences – inside and outside the museum – are given a voice.
- Reaching out to new audiences can also help strengthen relationships with traditional visitors.
- Audience engagement brings returns for museum collections as well as museum attendance.



*Do Things Make a Family?*, an exhibit at the Ballantine House, part of the Newark Museum.

In 1992, the Newark Museum undertook a three-year project to restore and upgrade the Ballantine House, a landmark Victorian mansion it acquired in 1937 that now is a full part of the museum. With the restoration, the museum opened more of the house to visitors and displays a far greater portion of its 15,000-piece decorative arts collection. The process permanently altered the museum's approach to organizing exhibitions.

Before reinstalling the collection, the museum surveyed the audiences it hoped to reach. In focus groups conducted during 1992 and 1993, the museum discovered that most people did not fully understand the term *decorative arts*. "Respondents associated decorative arts with things that were old, expensive and in museums, not with anything they might have in their own homes," said Ulysses Grant Dietz, curator of the museum's decorative arts collection.

Discussions with focus group participants helped the museum broaden its goals for the reinstallation. In addition to highlighting the breadth and beauty of the collection, the installation would stimulate thinking about how people transform houses into homes through their choices of home furnishings.

Among the findings of the focus groups was the revelation that the Ballantine House and its wealthy Victorian-era furnishings did not have immediate appeal for the city's African Americans and Latinos, primary

**To ensure the installation would have broad appeal, the museum relied on a team drawn from many departments along with community advisors.**

target audiences for the museum. This was compounded by a misperception among these groups that the Ballantine House had been maintained by African American servants—or even slaves. To dispel this impression, planners were determined to demonstrate that Ballantine House could speak to the experiences of many groups—and demonstrate different notions of home across racial, ethnic and class lines.

“Even though our curator had a clear vision of the installation, reinterpretation required a collaborative approach to ensure it would accomplish these broader goals,” said Mary Sue Sweeney Price, director of the Newark Museum. An exhibition team was formed, which included the decorative arts curator and exhibition designer as well as members of the museum’s education and administrative staffs. They were joined by a group of outside advisors, including social historians, curators of material culture and experts in video and interactive media.

“The team process enhanced the curatorial vision,” said Price. Project supervisor Ward Mintz, deputy director of programs and collections, added: “There were differences of opinion, but as those were aired and resolved the exhibition was strengthened.” The resulting reinstallation, called *House and Home*, uses the history and circumstances of the Ballantine family and its successful brewing company as an opportunity to revisit late-19<sup>th</sup>-century Newark, with its large immigrant population, growing commercial power and increasing racial, ethnic and economic diversity.

The new interpretation developed by the group has translated into marked improvements. Visitors can now enter rooms they previously could only peer into from the house’s main floor hallway, including the sitting room, parlor, billiards room, library and dining room. Labels, whose content was shaped by input from focus group participants, provide information about the use of each room, Victorian aesthetics and social customs, and the function of various objects.



Visitors to the Newark Museum's Ballantine House can now enter the Billiard Room.

However, the most important additions to the updated interpretation are a new orientation gallery and a presentation guide that tells a story about the house. Called *The Ideal Home*, the gallery illustrates how the concept and function of home changed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century as American society became more industrialized and work increasingly took place away from home and family. It explores how the vision of the ideal home has varied according to time, place and economic bracket.

The presentation guide, presented in storybook form on label rails, portrays a typical day in the house, placing the family and its home in a broader context to engage more audiences. It features illustrated scenes that include people with whom the Ballantine family would have interacted. The story of Bridget, the Irish maid, chronicles the life, duties and aspirations of immigrant domestics. Separate panels that describe



**While the primary goal of reinterpreting and reinstalling the Ballantine House was to attract new visitors, traditional audiences also have responded favorably.**

visits by the Plauts, a Jewish couple, and Mr. Baxter, an African American soliciting a donation for his church, illustrate the social protocols of the Ballantine household and the growing diversity of the middle class in Victorian Newark.

On the second floor, several bedrooms and Mrs. Ballantine's personal sitting room are decorated according to the period. The family's music room has become an interactive gallery with period costumes, games, toys and publications that visitors can use. A computer game called *Make Room* allows visitors to select objects from the decorative arts collection to design a room. *Home is in the Heart*, an nine-minute video in English and Spanish, presents current Newark residents talking about the meaning of home. In addition, several rooms serve as galleries for thematic exhibitions. Objects from earlier and later periods are showcased here, giving the museum the opportunity to juxtapose different aesthetic styles in the decorative arts and rotate pieces from its extensive collection.

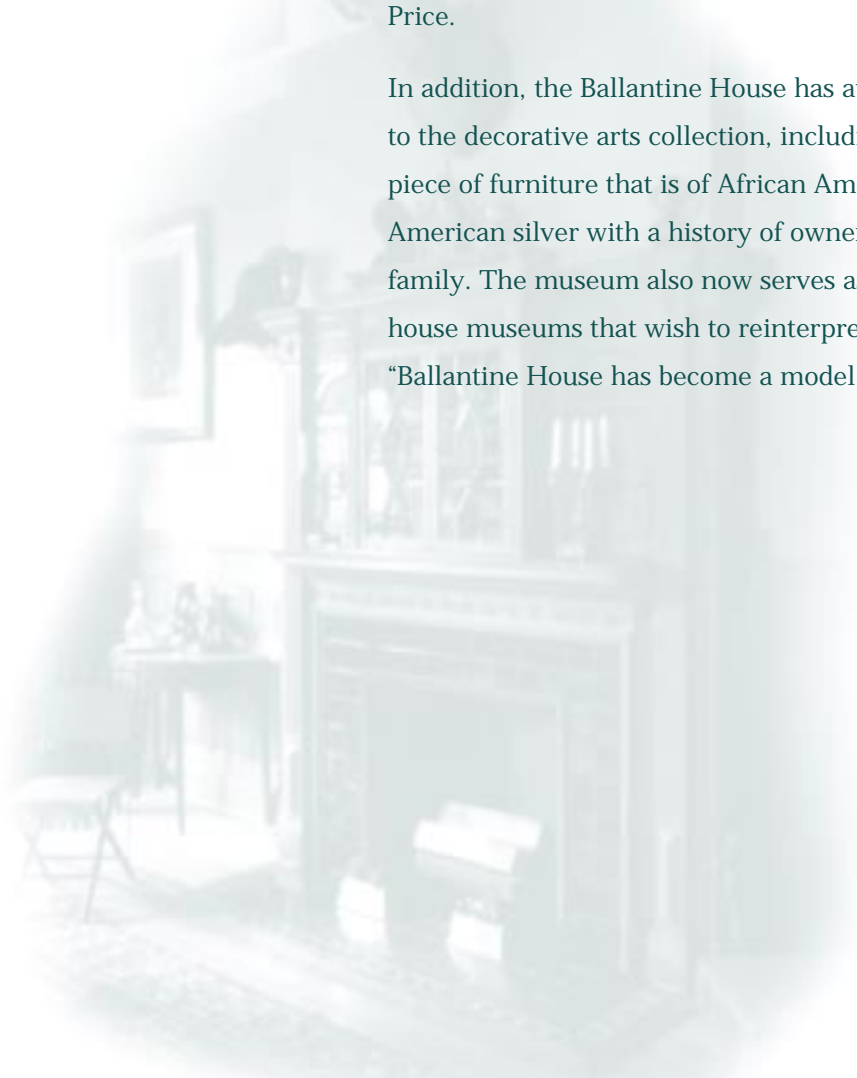
Audience surveys and attendance have confirmed the success of the Ballantine House reinterpretation and the decorative arts collection, which reopened to the public in late 1994. African American and Latino audiences, now a large presence at the museum, are more likely to visit the house than before the initiative. So, too, are groups from schools, senior centers and other organizations, for whom the house has become a popular destination. "We were concerned about the response of our traditional audience, which always loved the Ballantine House," Mintz said. "They expressed concern during the reinstallation that their relationship with the house would be altered. Happily, they say it's been enhanced."

The reinstallation has yielded other positive outcomes for the museum. "We discovered the decorative arts collection can tell a variety of stories in a number of ways," he continued. "Whether collecting or organizing

exhibitions, the decorative arts curator now consistently thinks across periods about style and use of objects.” In 1997, for example, the museum featured *The Glitter and the Gold*, a popular exhibition of jewelry from its decorative arts collection that traced Newark’s ascent to international importance as a center of jewelry manufacturing from the mid-1800s until the 1940s.

Other curators have also been influenced by the reinstallation of the Ballantine House. As the museum prepares to reinstall its American painting and sculpture galleries and its natural history collection, audience research and a team approach — the hallmarks of the Ballantine House’s reinterpretation — are guiding the way. “While audience research may be considered a luxury, many of our curators now recognize its value and want to use it for their exhibitions,” said Price.

In addition, the Ballantine House has attracted important new donations to the decorative arts collection, including the Newark Museum’s first piece of furniture that is of African American origin and its first pieces of American silver with a history of ownership by an African American family. The museum also now serves as a resource to other Victorian house museums that wish to reinterpret their houses and collections. “Ballantine House has become a model of accessibility,” Price remarked.



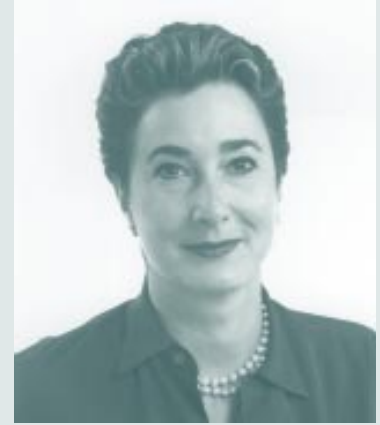
## *A roundtable discussion with museum leaders*



**Bob Bergman**, director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, which is using the reinstallation of its Armor Court and Egyptian collection to expand audiences in nine of the city's working- and middle-class neighborhoods.



**Hugh Davies**, The David C. Copley Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, which is working to attract middle-income Latinos to the museum through exhibitions and programs related to its permanent collection.



**Kathy Halbreich**, director of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, where its multidisciplinary collection of modern art is being reinterpreted while the museum reaches out to previously underserved audiences, including teenagers, low-income families, African Americans, Native Americans and Asians.



**Anne Hawley**, director of Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, which comprises the late Mrs. Gardner's home and renowned art collection. The museum, one of the initiative's original grantees in 1991, created a successful collaborative program with contemporary artists to bring new perspectives to the collection and help attract urban audiences with little experience of the visual arts.



**Susana Torruella Leval**, director of El Museo del Barrio in New York City. Serving predominantly Puerto Rican East Harlem since the 1960s, the museum recently launched an initiative to more broadly interpret its permanent collection to a wider spectrum of Latinos and general audiences.



**Peter Marzio**, director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, which is successfully engaging non-traditional audiences from three racially diverse urban neighborhoods.

## The Dimensions of Change

Charting a new course for audience development can't just be the passion of a museum's director or its marketing or education department. It requires the commitment of the entire institution to conduct business in new ways that reach far beyond the walls of the museum.

Recently, the Fund invited six museum directors to participate in a discussion about the Museum Collections Accessibility Initiative. In particular, questions focused on the complexity of the changes they've undertaken in their institutions and communities, and how they've led the way.

**Q: Given that expanding audiences is such challenging work, what have been the rewards—expected and unexpected—that make it worthwhile?**

A: PETER MARZIO: Our museum has become a community made up of wonderful parts, bringing people together in ways I've never before experienced. For each of the last two years, we've served more than a million people; nearly 40 percent of whom are minorities. Ten years ago, if anyone had told me that a Robert Rauschenberg retrospective would attract large numbers of African American and Hispanic families, I wouldn't have believed it. Now, as word has spread about the museum's community programs and people have begun using the museum in so many new ways, we've reaped more than I can possibly communicate—in terms of audience, fundraising and overall participation.

KATHY HALBREICH: It's very exciting to see things taking place within our walls that are not happening in the larger society—people using the museum as a safe place to debate what matters to them, discovering their similarities and making room for their differences.

BOB BERGMAN: Much of this initiative entails forming allegiances and fostering collaborations. The pleasure is in the endless new contacts and opportunities stimulated by people from different segments of the



Participating in *Inspired by Africa*, a community workshop at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

community. People sit up and notice when they see the museum working with the library or the police department or the department of transportation—and finding out how to better serve people in the community. Now when I meet with corporate and foundation leaders, government officials or individual donors, I see heads nodding in approval as we extend the reach of the museum.

**Can you give examples of how your efforts to reach out to broader audiences are moving your museums forward?**

ANNE HAWLEY: We've been working to make the Gardner's rich collection more accessible to surrounding neighborhoods, several of which are more ethnically diverse than the museum's core audience. One of our board of trustees' newest members, a judge who is African American, has added a perspective previously lacking at the museum—and has been tremendously helpful in finding new ways to reach out to adjacent communities. His efforts have not only resulted in attracting large numbers of area residents who had never visited the museum, but also in the museum's linking with a nearby elder arts program. To me, that's an example of an ever-widening circle of involvement found more and more in this work.

HUGH DAVIES: Institutions gain credibility when they invite somebody with authority in the community to help create a program. Not too long ago, Quincy Troupe, a writer and professor at the University of California, San Diego, helped us develop *Artists on the Cutting Edge*, a series featuring writers and musicians of color. Almost instantly, an audience of color was created, something the museum had never had before. It's a simple, basic approach, but we had to learn it.

MARZIO: We have broadened our audiences by forming meaningful partnerships with libraries, churches, community centers and schools—always asking our partners to share costs, but never making that a requirement for working together. As a result, groups from all over the

state are now asking us to lead them to a more populist participation in this traditionally stuffy world of fine arts.

**How can museums function as leaders in the community—and serve their communities better by doing so?**

BERGMAN: There is real value in getting into the community—bringing the museum to where people are rather than always expecting them to come to us. Through our community-based activities, we're able to influence other organizations and institutions in the city. For example, Cleveland hosts a variety of neighborhood and ethnic festivals that we recently began participating in. So far, we've been the only cultural institution to do so, but others are beginning to recognize the value in participating and it looks as though they'll be joining us. Over the next few years, I'm certain the festivals will be crowded with cultural institutions that have moved into the community.

DAVIES: I agree. Museums have to make a conscious effort to climb down from the ivory tower and go to the audiences. Our museum used to be perceived as an elite La Jolla institution. We've helped people see us differently by opening a downtown space, changing our name and diversifying our membership and board of trustees. And we're considering a third site—at a shopping mall—which will give us access to new audiences altogether.



Creating art at the Walker Art Center's *Showers and Flowers*.

SUSANA LEVAL: Participation in arts and non-arts community activities helps you think about your community holistically—and you begin to understand the benefits of working with such organizations as hospitals and housing groups. If large segments of a community are not healthy or don't have access to proper housing, they will not be able to participate even marginally in cultural activities. Being part of the conversation on a community level helps everyone see the value of working together.

**There is value in getting into the community—bringing the museum to where people are rather than always expecting them to come to the museum.**

**What kinds of things have you done to get others in the community involved?**

MARZIO: We have taken the lead in establishing a museum district in Houston that's made up of 11 institutions—all within walking distance of each other. We're hoping to develop crossover programs to maximize outreach efforts. We're also encouraging the establishment of an African American museum of history and culture in the district.

LEVAL: Through participation on the local community board, we are working with the city to create bus routes and a visitor center to extend New York City's "cultural corridor" beyond its better known boundaries so that residents and tourists are more aware of and have greater access to the cultural opportunities that abound in our neighborhood.

HALBREICH: As our successes become better known, other attempts are bred. The accomplishments of our teen programs have influenced children's theater and public television in the Twin Cities and we are beginning to work with some of these organizations.

**What else is required to successfully lead this work?**

HAWLEY: An enormous amount of confidence in the outcome helps drive the process forward. This is necessary to make believers of trustees, curators and staff at all levels of the organization—because it requires a new way of thinking about how to share the museum and its treasures. Getting a Fund grant for this work validated this approach and secured support internally.

DAVIES: The institution as a whole must be willing to share the premises, invite others in and disperse the power. It's natural for staff, who are accustomed to making the curatorial decisions, to worry initially that including others in the process might compromise quality. After working together for a while, however, they realize that most people have a tremendous respect for the museum's professionalism and high



standards. And they learn that community partners really don't want to control the process or usurp the museum's expertise—but provide input that might help us do a better job of speaking to the community. Once that happened at our museum, new confidence in our mission developed and a new attitude emerged.

HALBREICH: That's why it's so important for staff to go into the community and for the community to be invited into the museum. By hearing firsthand what issues are shaping neighborhoods and working to create a bridge between those issues and artistic interests, the entire staff is involved in responding. It changes the speed at which you work, the language you use, the artistic programs you give priority and the materials you develop to promote them.

**When there is internal resistance, what can institutions do to bring everybody on board?**

HALBREICH: Change can occur only when the commitment to do so pulses throughout the entire organization—from board to staff to committees. It's important for leaders to listen undefensively, be open-minded and willing to challenge some of the traditional definitions of expertise to get the work done.

LEVAL: Ideally, full agreement should be reached before work like this actually begins. To be fair to everyone, I felt I couldn't impose this type of initiative on the organization—essentially asking for several years of exceptionally hard work—unless there was consensus throughout. There is no one at El Muséo who doesn't want more of our permanent collection to be used and appreciated by a broader audience, which is, ultimately, the goal of this effort.

BERGMAN: Something that's helped express the seriousness of the museum's commitment to serving audiences is tying the performance of our staff to visitor services. The performance review of every staff



Exploring artistic interests at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.





The Cleveland Museum of Art reaches out with special events for specific communities. This youngster participated in *East Cleveland Day*.

**Audience building is as important as fundraising, acquiring new works and the other business of running a museum.**

member—from curators to security guards—includes an assessment of their work with the public. And the entire staff participates regularly in visitor-centered training.

MARZIO: We've taken steps to provide Spanish language classes for staff members who are not bilingual. When the institution is willing to provide the training and support needed, it's apparent to everyone that it pays to get on board.

**As you continue to move forward, how will this new approach to doing business be integrated into your museum on a long-term basis?**

HALBREICH: Integrating new programs and practices into the everyday business of the museum—and not treating them as add-ons—is one way to assure their longevity.

BERGMAN: The work will be driven by commitment to the audience combined with the conviction that art has the power to communicate important ideas and affect people in meaningful ways—and to integrate that into the museum's strategic plan. Of course, it also depends on available resources and managing them properly.

MARZIO: Audience building is only one piece of a large picture. It's as important—but not more so—than fundraising, acquiring new works and the other business of running a museum. Figuring out the balance is what leads to building trust—inside and outside the institution—as well as the means and the energy to sustain the work.

**Can you share any recent successes or lessons learned that indicate where your work might be heading?**

HAWLEY: I see us continuing to reach out to work directly with community groups. These collaborations are proving time and time

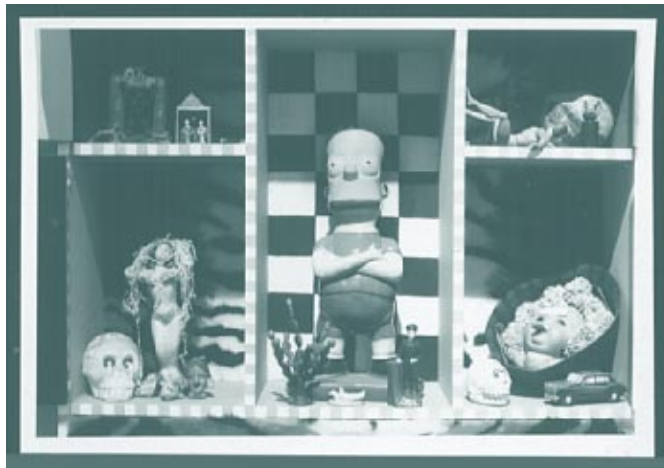
**Liking a work of art  
or an exhibition is  
no longer the sole  
criterion for people  
attending or  
supporting the  
institution.**

again to be very effective in engaging groups of people more deeply in the purpose of the museum and its collection. In fact, we made a decision recently to discontinue participation in an annual regional flower show—where potentially thousands of visitors could be exposed to our horticultural exhibit—because the focus of the show has become commercially, rather than artistically, driven. Those resources will be spent instead on a gardening program at a local high school.

LEVAL: We're getting smarter about using the resources right under our nose. As we've gotten to know the other tenants in our building, for example, we are recognizing the enormous potential that exists through collaborating with our immediate neighbors—including a library and a youth services organization. Their resources, music programs, academy of performing arts and Latino music archive complement perfectly not only our theater programs and curatorial archive, but our mission as well. The crossover possibilities—for stage and theatercraft training and internships, master classes and research facility for visiting scholars—are endless. These opportunities only extend and enrich our work. There is no reason our building cannot become a major destination, not only for people visiting East Harlem, but for tourists to New York City.

HALBREICH: In light of the positive changes that have taken place at our museum, I don't think we could turn back even if we wanted to. I see change happening among people who use our museum; we're getting to a point where liking a work of art or an exhibition is no longer the sole criterion for people attending or supporting the institution. As our constituency presents a more diverse palette of values, people realize that there are various definitions of quality based on different cultures. It's exciting that cultural institutions have an opportunity to be at the forefront of this change in attitude.

DAVIES: Recently, on a free-admission Sunday I was touring our downtown San Diego location and watched two Latina teenagers going around giggling at Felipe Almada's *Altar of Live News/Altarde las Noticias Vivas*. It was one of the silliest things they'd ever seen. It was a terrific, joyful moment in an environment where they felt free to be themselves. No one was disciplining them or telling them they were being disrespectful—as might happen in a traditional museum setting. If we can continue to introduce people to our collection in places where they are comfortable, maybe their interest will be piqued enough to return.



*The Altar of Live News* by Felipe Almada, 1992. Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego.

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## Appendix

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