

Interpretive Planners and Institutional Change in Art Museums

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

University of Washington

2015

Committee:

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Program authorized to offer degree:

Museology

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**Abstract**

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As art museums adapt to changing times and audiences, new positions such as the interpretive planner – an advocate for visitor-centered approaches to exhibit design and a facilitator of team-based museum planning and multiple exhibition narratives – are emerging. The purpose of this research was to explore how and why art museums have incorporated interpretive planning into their institutional practices, specifically how the emergence of the interpretive planner has impacted organizational culture, the exhibit design process, and staff perceptions of visitor experience. Interpretive planners are given an equal voice to curators in the design of interpretive products, and are working in institutions that appreciate the importance of learning as well as education. Art museums with interpretive planners on staff are leaders in museums trends, serving as examples of the future of art museums as engaging and empowering places of learning for all audiences.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would first like to thank my committee members, Nick Visscher and Dr. Jessica Luke of the University of Washington Museology Graduate Program, for their advice, guidance, and support in this process. Thank you to my study participants at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Chrysler Museum of Art, the Denver Art Museum, and the Detroit Institute of Arts for both providing me with the information necessary for writing this thesis and also for being inspiring examples of the amazing work interpretive planners are doing in art museums. Thank you to my Museology cohort, the Class of 2015, and to Mo for being an amazing Seattle support system and group of people. To Sarah, Susanna, Emily, Megan, and Scott, thank you for being encouraging, caring, and loving friends despite the three-hour time difference. And finally, thank you to my parents for believing in me and teaching me from an early age the value of learning.

## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Literature Review</b>	<b>9</b>
Interpretive Origins	9
Exhibition Design, Visitor Experiences, and Learning	11
The Interpretive Planner and Interpretive Planning in Art Museums	16
Conclusions	19
<b>Chapter 3: Methodology</b>	<b>20</b>
Participant Selection and Data Collection	20
Data Analysis	21
Limitations	22
<b>Chapter 4: Results and Discussion</b>	<b>23</b>
Introduction	23
Case Study Museums	23
Denver Art Museum	23
Art Gallery of Ontario	24
Detroit Institute of Arts	24
Chrysler Museum of Art	25
Research Question 1: What elements of institutional culture foster the emergence of interpretive planning in art museums?	25
Compensating with Tradition	26
Keeping Pace and Setting Trends	27
Research Question 2: Who are art museum interpretive planners and what do their jobs entail?	28
Job and Department Titles	29
The Origin, Evolution, and Longevity of the Interpretive Planner	31
Career Motivations and Skills	34
Research Question 3: What role do interpretive planners play in gallery installation, exhibition design, and visitor experiences?	35
When Art Museum Redesign	36
Undertaking and Completing Gallery Reinstallation	37
Audience Research and Evaluation	40
Serving Visitors and the Community	43
Public Perceptions and Museum Tone	45
Research Question 4: To what extent has art museum culture changed to accommodate interpretive planners and to encourage a stronger interpretive voice?	46
Defining Interpretation	47
Interpretive Plans	48
Mission Statements	50
The Interpretive Voice and Institutional Culture	52
Organizational Structures and Teams	54
Resource Allocation	57

**Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications**

**59**

Conclusions

59

Implications

61

Final Thoughts

62

**References**

**64**

**Appendix: Interview Guide**

**68**

## Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2013, Center for the Future of Museums Director Elizabeth Merritt wrote the blog post “Museum Jobs That Didn’t Exist in 2003,” highlighting ongoing conversation about the changing landscape of museum professions (2013). Merritt argued that once standard and occasionally stagnant positions in museums such as educators and curators are evolving or dissolving, and new jobs designed to take innovative and modish approaches to the rapidly changing museum field are emerging to “reflect deeper changes in organizational focus and culture” (2013).

The interpretive planner is one such evolving position in the museum field. Following up on Merritt’s 2013 blog post, the Center for the Future of Museums Blog facilitated discussion amongst Judith Koke, Heather Nielsen, Jennifer Czajkowski, and Julia Forbes, leaders in interpretive planning at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), the Denver Art Museum (DAM), the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), and the High Museum of Art, respectively. Unlike many of the jobs highlighted by Merritt’s blog that are isolated to particular institutions, they identified the interpretive planner as one of the newest repeating positions in museums, first appearing in science and natural history museums, and now finding its place into approximately thirty art museums (Koke, Nielsen, Czajkowski, and Forbes, 2014). While the exact title and responsibilities of interpretive planners differ among art museums, there is an agreed upon understanding that the interpretive planner is finally emerging in art museums as a result of an assemblage of forces, including changing demographics, ideas about the cultural value of art, and concerns over reaching more audiences (Koke, et al., 2014).

*Interpretive Planning for Museums* (2013) by Marcella Wells, Barbara Butler, and Judith Koke, includes various past attempts to define interpretive planning for museums and similar institutions. Building upon these predecessors, they define interpretive planning as,

a deliberate and systematic process for thinking about, deciding on, and recording in a written format or plan educational and interpretive initiatives for the purpose of facilitating meaningful and effective experiences for visitors, learning institutions, and communities (p. 37)

Interpretive planners are the museum professionals tasked with this facilitation and the efforts that enable interpretation. As more art museums adopt interpretive planners, the field lacks surety in the characteristic roles and responsibilities of the job, the training necessary or typical for interpretive planners, the effects of the new position on staff dynamics, “the impact on organizational structures and resource allocation”, and the formation of interpretive plans as guiding institutional documents (Koke, et al., 2014). This study will address these gaps, and create a more complete picture of the relationships between interpretive planners and institutional choices.

The purpose of this research is to explore how and why art museums have incorporated interpretive planning into their institutional practices, specifically how the emergence of the interpretive planner has impacted organizational culture, the exhibit design process, and staff perceptions of visitor experience. To expand the field’s understanding of art museum interpretive planning, the following questions will guide this research:

1. What elements of institutional culture foster the emergence of interpretive planning in art museums?
2. Who are art museum interpretive planners and what do their jobs entail?
3. What role do interpretive planners play in gallery installation, exhibition design, and visitor experiences?

4. To what extent has art museum culture changed to accommodate interpretive planners and to encourage a stronger interpretive voice?

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In recent decades, museums of all kinds have embraced and expanded informal education agendas through, in part, the formation of interpretive planning positions. Art museums fall into the last type of museums to adopt these theories (Fritsch, 2011). To conceptualize this trend it is necessary to review the emergence of interpretive planners in tangential disciplines. This chapter reviews three bodies of relevant literature. It first looks to the origins of interpretation in informal learning environments before its late emergence in art museums. It then examines theories of exhibit design, visitor experiences, and learning. Finally, the recent history of interpretive planning in art museums is presented. Upon observing how interpretive planning has found its way to art museums, it is then easy to see what is known about its development, as well as what remains unidentified in light of the infancy of art museum interpretive planning. This wide range of sources reveal what little is known about the correlations between the emergence of the interpretive planner as art museum staff and additional institutional changes at those museums.

### Interpretive Origins

Interpretation, as both a concept and a contributor to society, has developed slowly as a discipline. Fritsch (2011) identified the birth, or at least the ancestor, of interpretive theory with Freeman Tilden (1957). Tilden's *Interpreting Our Heritage* remains an essential guidebook for employees of the National Park Service, laying the groundwork for interpretive practices in a range of cultural institutions. In the book, Tilden is quick to include his definition of interpretation, noting from the first paragraph that the word lacked a universal understanding. To Tilden, interpretation was "an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and

relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information” (page 33). Tilden goes on to articulate six principles of interpretation:

- 1) Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
- 2) Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
- 3) Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.
- 4) The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.
- 5) Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.
- 6) Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentations to adults but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program (p. 34-35).

While elements of his principles do not resonate perfectly with current cultural and museological viewpoints, according to R. Bruce Craig in his introduction to the Fiftieth Anniversary edition of Tilden’s book, a significant portion of Tilden’s standards ring true even today (Tilden, 1957). Tilden’s principles center around the concepts that interpretation must resonate with the visitor and that interpretation is more about facilitating learning than providing an education.

Since the publication of *Interpreting Our Heritage*, other branches of informal learning organizations have adopted and adapted his theories. *Interpretive Master Planning: The Essential Planning Guide for Interpretive Centers, Parks, Self-Guided Trails, Historic Sites, Zoos, Exhibits and Programs* (Veverka, 1994) expands Tilden’s ideas for a wider variety of learning spaces, although it still excludes most kinds of museums. Nevertheless, it became important for the museum field and the American Association of Museums (AAM), now the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), which discussed interpretive planning at a National Interpretive Planning Colloquium in 2005 (Wells, Butler, and Koke, 2013). Articles tackling the

topic, including a 2008 issue of the *Journal of Museum Education* followed, but there was no published framework on interpretive planning in museums until *Interpretive Planning for Museums: Integrating Visitor Perspectives in Decision Making* (Wells, Butler, and Koke, 2013). While the scope of their book is large, the authors' primary goal in publication was "to change how museums think about planning visitor experiences" (p. 20). They present a definition of interpretation, a history of interpretive planning and informal learning theories, the types of interpretive plans applicable to museums, how interpretive planning can function in museums, and The Outcomes Hierarchy to weigh "potential outcomes commonly considered in museum education" (p. 54). It is a guide for effectively establishing interpretive practices in a museum. This publication is the most thorough, relevant, and recent book on interpretive planning for informal learning environments, and establishes a level on which to expand knowledge of the topic through additional research.

### **Exhibit Design, Visitor Experiences, and Learning**

Interpretation in museums grew from ideas about education and learning in museums. Alma Wittlin described early educational efforts in museums as "social responsibility of the newly emerging secular political agencies" (Wittlin, 1949, p. 133). Around this time, Theodore Low published *The Museum as Social Instrument*. First printed in 1942 with support from the American Association of Museums (AAM), it was groundbreaking for the field both for its subject matter and for establishing the AAM as an organization capable of setting best practices. Low, who was at the Metropolitan Museum of Art during World War II but later became the head of the Walters Art Museum's education department, centered the "provocative" book around three themes justifying the purpose of all museums: "that museums are primarily and

foremost educational institutions, that they should address their responsibility for promoting democracy and social justice and that they should embrace new technology” (Hein in Fritsch, 2011, p. 13). Juliette Fritsch argued that while art museums are gradually adapting the interpretive and team-based design approaches of other types of museums, the reasoning is twofold: to improve visitor experiences and to improve the exhibition design process (2011).

For interpretation, in the modern understanding of the word, to be welcomed in museums, museums had to also reach a consensus on exhibition design and how visitors should view and interact with the objects in those exhibitions. Before being able to discuss interpretive changes in art museums, it is important to review the traditional theories behind art placement and the role of the visitor in art museums, and how some professionals began to call these standards into question. Art display theory is the idea of how art should be viewed, typically in reference to its exhibition in a museum, in order to educate or inspire the viewer. Theories about art display often change, and continue to be debated today. In the introduction of *The Power of Display: a History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Staniszewski (1998) echoed the cautionary advice of many museologists: that all narratives are biased, and therefore neglect additional narratives that are often equally valid. Building from this point, Staniszewski looked at how opinions over the display of art at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) have evolved, and how they have catered to the standard of the single narrative. She also voiced her concerns of the common error made by many museum professionals: the assumption that art, and Modern Art in particular, can speak for itself and is exempt from interpretation (1998).

Chambers (2006) cast additional warnings in regard to traditional art interpretation. Saying that, “It is not easy to relinquish the claim to sovereignty” (p. 399), she cautioned against “elitism that arises from possession...of objects or knowledge” and “the alienation from real life

that artworks suffer when confined to the context of the museum box” (p. 398), referring to concepts previously articulated by art critic Brian O’Doherty. In *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, O’Doherty (1999) described experiencing art in a museum as entering a white eternal void, a “limbolike status” where “one has to have died already to be there. Indeed the presence of that odd piece of furniture, your own body, seems superfluous, an intrusion” (1999, p. 14-15). This exhibition design intends to keep the viewer solely focused on the enshrined art, but in reality the museum has alienated the art from its historical and cultural contexts, in turn isolating the visitor and making it difficult to make meaning of the object.

The majority of Chambers’ article is an analysis of two books by Victoria Newhouse. Chambers found fault with one of the modern standards of art display theory literature, Victoria Newhouse’s *Art and the Power of Placement* (2005). Chambers disregarded the publication, calling it rigid in imagination of what museum professionals can and should convey about art, and a step backwards from the strides made with Newhouse’s 1998 publication *Towards a New Museum*. In this earlier book, Newhouse recognized the role architecture plays on the visitor experience, ranging from the admirer and worshipper at the cultural temple, to the active participant in modern museum buildings (Newhouse, 1998). Chambers’ article ended with an important realization as more art museums adjust their presentation of objects to visitors: interpretive planning does not eliminate an authoritative voice dominating art displayed in a museum gallery. Instead, it makes the lesson more approachable, and allows the visitors to reach the conclusions, still chosen by the museum, on their own terms.

There are a number of works on best practices in exhibit design, visitor experience, and interpretive planning in museums. Maria Mortati’s *Exhibitionist* article “Design Intentionality and the Art Museum” highlighted examples of art museums embracing the “emerging discipline”

of intentional exhibition design, willing to brave the opportunities beyond strict observance of the curatorial voice (2014). Leslie Bedford also discussed the importance of conscientious exhibition design as a way of facilitating learning in *The Art of Museum Exhibitions: How story and imagination create aesthetic experiences* (2014). Bedford encouraged museum professionals to consider “exhibitions more as art than as education” (p. 16). By doing this, exhibition designers can turn exhibitions into objects, for like objects they will be able to inspire creative thinking, meaning making, and imagination, which “is the catalyst for thinking and learning” (p. 16). Essentially, designing exhibitions in such an aesthetic and nontraditional way facilitates learning. But written largely as a guide for exhibition designers and teams, Bedford’s book lends little attention to the ideal institutional practices for creating innovative, interpretive exhibitions.

Elizabeth Wood and Kiersten F. Latham’s *The Objects of Experience: Transforming visitor-object encounters in museums* (2013), Stephen Bitgood’s *Attention and Value: Keys to understanding museum visitors* (2013), and the 2010 *Ignite the power of art: advancing visitor engagement in museums* seek to find a correlation between exhibit design and visitor experiences. Wood and Latham remind readers that, “the human experience with objects is so ubiquitous that people often take it for granted”, and that,

In the museum setting, greater attention to the visitor’s experience with objects can reinvigorate the meaning, value, and relevance of the museum as a whole. We who work in museums need to acknowledge that experience and meaning making in the museum do not occur without objects. Rather, objects are the *basis of the visitor experience* (p. 13).

They attributed the shift in addressing the experiences of visitors and debating the definition of ‘museum’ itself, to originate among changing audiences and societal expectations. With the rise of the internet and new technologies, “the revolution of social connection and interactivity gave people the ability to more easily build interconnected systems of information and relationships”,

and in museums just as everywhere else, “Visitors began demanding more control of their own experiences” (p. 17). The book provides solutions to this demand for personal experiences with objects in the way exhibitions are designed. In response to this alteration, Elaine Gurian proposed in 1999 that museums could now claim “the ownership of the story, rather than the object itself” (p. 35). The debate continues on whether or not this is truly beneficial to museum professionals, and if so, how it can be empowering for museums (Wood and Latham, 2013).

Many of the aforementioned authors refer to theories of informal and free-choice learning, as the focus on the value of learning in museums and related institutions increases. John Falk’s *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (2009), and in particular his motivational identities, drive much of the recent discourse about how to best design museums in relation to visitor expectations and experiences. Falk says there are five predominate motivation-driven identities of museum visitors, that can change depending on various factors. They are the “explorer”, the “facilitator”, the “experience seeker”, the “professional/hobbyist”, and the “recharger” (p. 158). When labels are written in a strictly curatorial voice, they appeal and reach predominately the professional/hobbyist category containing the academic peers of museum curators. Falk’s research can help interpretive planners and all those involved in exhibition design to improve the visitor experiences for all museum visitors by creating strategies designed for additional identities.

While Falk’s motivational identities chart visitor experiences, categories of how audiences participate in various situations have also arisen. Nina Simon in *The Participatory Museum* (2010) provides a succinct report of “social technographics,” a categorization tool for measuring participation with social media. The framework determines that participants can fall into one or more of the following categories: “creators”, “critics”, “collectors”, “joiners”,

“spectators”, and “inactives” (2010, p. 8). Simon used this information to assert that a significant, although not unanimous, percentage of the population would appreciate and benefit from participatory museums. The challenge lies in creating content and an environment that transcends the reasoning of “visitors will like it” (p. 17) and avoids the “blank slate for participation” (p.25).

### **The Interpretive Planner and Interpretive Planning in Art Museums**

In addition to *Interpretive Planning for Museums* (Wells, Butler, and Koke, 2013), Christopher Whitehead’s book *Interpreting Art in Museums and Galleries* is among the most thorough of the recent publications on interpretive planning (2012). It is also one of the first publications to exclusively pertain to art museum interpretation. It looks at interpretive processes and results in the form of exhibition design and reinstallations at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, and the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art. While many sources about art museum interpretation look at either traditional or contemporary institutions, Whitehead addresses both while acknowledging that approaches to interpretation are different in these two types of art museums. He also provides insight into how museums interpret art and the learning theories behind them, using evaluative tools such as Falk’s Motivational Identities, as well as detailed examples of how interpretive planners and other museum professionals can interpretive art for their audiences, through considerations of multiple viewpoints, narratives, and evolution of styles in art (2012).

The Oakland Museum of California is an institution making a name for itself as an interpretive leader among art museums. Publishing their story as a case study, *How we visitors changed our museum: Transforming the Gallery of California Art at the Oakland Museum of*

*California* lends a detailed account of the reinstallation process, centered around the goal of making the museum a welcoming, engaging, cultural center. A large portion of the book examines the extensive audience research undertaken at the museum, occurring before, during, and following the reinstallation of the galleries.

“Between authority and autonomy: Critically engaged interpretation in the art museum” (2005), by Cheryl Ann Meszaros was an early look at the roots of interpretation in art museums. She advocated for the release of art from limited access by art experts to the masses through the means of encompassing interpretation. In other words, she examined the struggle of art museums to maintain the authoritative voice while giving visitors autonomy in making meaning of art. When it was published in 2005, her topic was groundbreaking in its suggestions for where art museums should be, and was visionary in predicting in what ways art museums would change in the next decade.

Several of Juliette Fritsch’s publications are also closely linked to this research project. Searching for “the nature of the relationship between interpretation and learning, as understood by those who work on exhibition development and design” (p. 234) propelled her 2010 dissertation, “Exhibition Development and Object Display In An Art and Design Museum: The Integration of Learning Expertise Into Interpretive Communities.” To begin this investigation, she interviewed twelve museum professionals, including curators, designers, and project managers, who work on exhibition design teams in art museums, asking them questions such as, “Would you describe museums as learning environments?” and “Do you make a distinction between education and interpretation in exhibitions?” (p. 235-236). Her results show that when pressed to consider the differences between ‘education’ and ‘interpretation’, museum professionals consider the former more passive and the latter more active, but they overall

acknowledge that museums do not clearly understand the differences and that it can lead to confusion in museum goals and visions. However, there was a shared understanding among museum professionals that education is a separate entity from exhibitions, while interpretation is more closely tied to visual elements and written materials in galleries.

Alongside Fritsch's research, Kathryn Erickson's 2011 thesis "The State of Comprehensive Interpretive Planning in North American Art Museums," is among the most recent, and most acute work dealing with questions similar to those I will attempt to answer. It was among the earliest studies on the impact of interpretive planning in art museums, as its inception into the field is relatively new. It focuses on the formation of interpretive plans in art museums, but less so on the new jobs emerging from this trend, or the overall effects on museum culture. The Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), has been at the forefront of these innovations, being discussed in Erickson's work as well as Kari Cwynar's 2010 "Exhibiting Dual(ing) Narratives of Canadian Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario." Cwynar's thesis presented the leading role modern interpretive planning ideas played in the reinstallation of the AGO's galleries. Specifically, it examines the interpretive decisions made for presenting two collections of Canadian Art at the AGO, and how those decisions create different narratives for the understanding of the art.

Sources that outline gaps in the understanding of art museum interpretive planning such as blog posts by Judith Koke, Heather Nielsen, Jennifer Czajkowski, and Julia Forbes ("Interpreting the Future of Art Museums", 2014) and Mike Murawski ("Towards an even more participatory culture in art museums", 2013) stressed the importance and timely nature of furthering the knowledge of interpretive planners for the museum field. *Interpretive Planning for Museums: Integrating Visitor Perspectives in Decision Making* by Marcella Wells, Barbara

Butler, and Judith Koke (2013), discussed earlier, is an essential resource for understanding and implementing interpretive planning throughout the field, but as such, does not limit itself to discussion of interpretive planning's place in art museums. Furthermore, it does not deeply address the effects on institutions as a result of fostered interpretive planning.

## **Conclusions**

Interpretive planning, in addition to the topics of visitor engagement, informal learning, and exhibition design theories, is overall well documented and studied. Even though interpretive planning as a term is now just emerging, many museum professionals are discussing it, as it promises an exciting new chapter in the history of art museums. But despite the wealth of literature, there is no concise grasp on how institutions may be altered by the presence of interpretive planners on staff.

This research seeks to expand on the literature by looking more closely at art museums with full-time interpretive planners that have also recently undergone reinstallations of their galleries, a sign of institutional shifts in thought and approach. Specifically, it looks at how these institutions foster interpretive planning, and how interpretive planners might shape the institutions at a deeper level than designing powerful exhibitions. Understanding this shift in museum culture will help to make interpretive planning more attainable for art museums still considering how to open their doors to wider audiences.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

The purpose of this research is to explore how and why art museums have incorporated interpretive planning into their institutional practices, specifically how the emergence of the interpretive planner has impacted organizational culture, the exhibit design process, and staff perceptions of visitor experience. The study was driven by four research questions: 1) What elements of institutional culture foster the emergence of interpretive planning in art museums? 2) Who are art museum interpretive planners and what do their jobs entail? 3) What role do interpretive planners play in gallery installation, exhibition design, and visitor experiences? 4) To what extent has art museum culture changed to accommodate interpretive planners and to encourage a stronger interpretive voice?

To answer these questions, a descriptive case study approach was used, with data collected through semi-structured interviews with museum professionals. While position titles vary, for the purposes of this study I will use “interpretive planner” as the standard term, except when referring to specific job titles at institutions.

#### **Participant Selection and Data Collection**

To determine participants, a list of art museums with interpretive planners was compiled by consulting museum websites and professional connections in the field. From this list, options were narrowed to only art museums that had completed a major reinstallation of at least a significant portion of their galleries since 2005. Institutions that were in the process of reinstallations or were planning reinstallations were not considered, as part of the study was examining interpretive planners in relation to extensive institutional change at multiple levels, and a completed reinstallation coincides with such changes. Of this limited list of six institutions,

museum professionals at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), the Chrysler Museum of Art, the Denver Art Museum (DAM), the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) agreed to participate in this study. A manager of interpretive planning at each of these sites was contacted in an email, asking for participation in a phone or Skype interview. Chosen participants were also asked to recommend a curator or another staff member in a department other than their own who could speak to how interpretive planning had impacted their positions, and to provide alternative viewpoints on changing museum culture and tone. All four initial participants recommended other museum staff to interview, and emails were sent to those individuals. Half of those recommendations were willing to speak, and so interviews with a curator at the DIA and the former director of the Chrysler were also completed.

Four interviews took place via phone, and two took place via Skype. Each interview lasted between thirty and sixty minutes, and was recorded and transcribed. Discussion was guided by a set of questions that were often expanded or restated depending on the direction of each conversation. The interview guide is included in the Appendix. Adding to the conversations was information about institutional initiatives, programs, and documents gleaned from museum websites, as well as from publications on interpretive planning included in the literature review.

### **Data Analysis**

Following the completion of the six interviews, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed. The transcripts were coded into themes, which were then grouped under the original research questions. These themes reveal commonalities as well as variances in the role of interpretive planners in institutional change, and direct the findings included in Chapter 4.

**Limitations**

As a result of the methodology used to request interviews, there is an uneven sampling, with only half of the museums in this study represented by both an interpretive planning expert and an alternative viewpoint. In order to still make use of the insightful data from the DIA's curator and the former director of the Chrysler Museum of Art, information from those interviews was not used to make any assumptions about museum culture, but simply to fill gaps in information not supplied by the primary interviewees.

The sample size of four art museums cannot definitively suggest trends, but can serve as a blueprint for other art museums going through these changes. There are many other art museums with interpretive planners, some of which are beginning or in the process of a major reinstallation of museum galleries. It will be important to follow the strengths of interpretive voices at these institutions as museum professionals continue to chart interpretive planning's integration into art museums.

## **Chapter 4: Results and Discussion**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this research is to explore how and why art museums have incorporated interpretive planning into their institutional practices, specifically how the emergence of the interpretive planner has impacted organizational culture, the exhibit design process, and staff perceptions of visitor experience. Four case study institutions, introduced below, were chosen for this study: the Denver Art Museum, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Detroit Institute of Arts, and the Chrysler Museum of Art. A total of six participants from these four sites spoke about the roles of interpretive planners at these museums. From these interviews, themes emerged that guided the presentation of results within the boundaries of the four research questions. Most of these themes address information from all four art museums, but some are representative of activities and situations at only some of the case study institutions. The results presented in this chapter reveal the conditions that welcome interpretive planning, the role of interpretive planners in art museums, the relationship between interpretive planning, exhibit design, and visitor experiences, and the ways in which institutional practices and interpretive planning are redefining each other.

### **Case Study Descriptions**

#### ***Denver Art Museum***

From its modest beginnings in 1893, the Denver Art Museum has grown to house a global collection of over 70,000 works (<http://denverartmuseum.org/about/mission-history>). The position of the Master Teacher, begun by Patterson Williams in the 1980s, was groundbreaking in terms of art museum approaches to education, learning, and visitor experiences. Continuing to

be on the forefront of these topics, the museum makes available on its website numerous related reports, having orchestrated or cooperated with studies examining visitor creativity, engagement with young audiences, and institutional interpretive planning (<http://denverartmuseum.org/about/research-reports>). In 2006, the footprint of the museum nearly doubled, as a new wing opened, allowing for groundbreaking ways to interpret and present art to the public (<http://denverartmuseum.org/about/mission-history>).

### ***Art Gallery of Ontario***

The Art Gallery of Ontario, originally founded as the Art Museum of Toronto in 1900, now houses over 80,000 works in its striking Frank Gehry-designed building. The AGO owns important Canadian art, and over half of the museum's collection is photographs. Transformation AGO, an elaborate expansion and reinstallation project, culminated in November 2008, bringing the Art Gallery of Ontario to the forefront of art museum excellence (<http://www.ago.net/fact-sheet>). The interpretive planning ingrained in the new AGO made it an obvious candidate for this study.

### ***Detroit Institute of Arts***

Claiming its collections to be “among the top six in the United States”, the Detroit Institute of Arts goes beyond the simple presentation of its art (<http://www.dia.org/about/history.aspx>). Serving the Detroit metropolitan community since 1885, the DIA strives to remain relevant to a city undergoing drastic change since the 2008 Economic Recession. Aiding this is the museum's expansion and reinstallation, completed in 2007 (<http://www.dia.org/about/history.aspx>).

### *Chrysler Museum of Art*

The Chrysler Museum of Art, named for its founder Walter Chrysler, Jr., the son of the Detroit automobile company founder, opened in 1971 in Norfolk, Virginia. Compared to the other art museums participating in this study, it is the only one to identify as “mid-sized” (<http://www.chrysler.org/about-the-museum/newsroom/press-release-archive/museum-director-to-retire-in-october-2014/>). It boasts a growing collection of over 30,000 objects originating from various times and places across the globe, with a special focus on its impressive glass collection. In 2011, the museum opened a glass studio to increase its ability to teach glassmaking and improve the relevance of its collection to the community. After closing for eighteen months for renovations and gallery reinstallations, during which time an interpretation manager was added to the staff, the museum reopened in May 2014. Today the Chrysler Museum of Art is known as a cultural gem of the Hampton Roads region of Virginia, offering free admission and a progressive band of Gallery Hosts, a program that has eliminated the security guard and replaced the art museum standard with welcoming guides (<http://www.chrysler.org/about-the-museum/newsroom/press-release-archive/museum-director-to-retire-in-october-2014/>).

### **Research Question 1: What elements of institutional culture foster the emergence of interpretive planning in art museums?**

Interview participants were asked to speak about their museum’s motivations to encourage interpretive planning, examining what museum practices and principles were in place before the position’s emergence. They spoke of deliberate choices by these museums to battle traditional ways of thinking or solving problems, to keep pace with the progressive decisions of

other museums, or to become known as trendsetters in the realm of art museum interpretive planning.

### *Compensating with Tradition*

All four primary interviewees reflected on the institutional challenges of welcoming interpretation, specifically in reference to historical tensions between education and curatorial departments. They spoke of the challenge of making room for interpretation, of the struggle “with perceived shifts of power” (Director of Interpretive Engagement, DIA). In the words of the Chrysler Museum of Art’s Interpretation Manager, curators “have a very particular style of thinking about the approach, to thinking about their style of writing. And the educators were kind of on the other extreme of that”. This appears to be consistent regardless of the tenure of curators, for the Chrysler has many new curators with recently earned doctorates, while the other institutions spoke of more seasoned curators with long histories at the museums and in the art historical community.

At the Denver Art Museum, however, the interviewee spoke also of the history of the Master Teacher position, saying, “there's really been a longstanding tradition and focus on the need for someone who was in the education department who really...understood the collections but who was challenged to really think about the collections from the visitor perspective.” This tradition of visitor-centered awareness predates the expansion and reinstallation. Strengthening this tradition became a catalyst for interpretive planning. This institutional commitment to education, and tangentially to interpretive planning, minimizes the struggle to advocate for the importance of interpretation. The Denver Art Museum functions under a tradition of support

rather than a tradition of shifting authority, as have been prevalent at the other three art museums.

### *Keeping Pace and Setting Trends*

In addition to weighing traditional standards in art museums, some participants also spoke of motivations for interpretive planning stemming from departmental or institutional desires to keep pace with other museums and to be recognized as a trendsetting institution. In the formation of interpretive planners, and in naming them as such, the DIA was partially motivated by the actions of other museums. Echoing evidence from the history of interpretive planning, the Director of Interpretive Engagement at the DIA reaffirmed, “It’s a title that exists in other museum disciplines but there has been little parallel in art museums until fairly recently. The title aligns with the broader museum field but also establishes a footing for the work that should be happening at the DIA and other art museums.” Due to the nature of the field, art museums participating in and fostering these changes are aware of each other. For example, she spoke of looking to the AGO to benchmark the DIA’s progress in interpretation.

It is interesting to observe how the institutions in this study consider both themselves, and at different times other museums, as trendsetters in the emergence of art museum interpretive planning. The interviewee at the Detroit Institute of Arts referred to an earlier state of their education department, now called the Department of Learning and Interpretation. In this earlier division, she stressed the encouragement of interdisciplinary skills among the Education staff, “in order to tease...out the greatest potential to reach the broadest audiences” and to keep the department from defaulting to repetitive programs and solutions. In creating the protocol for inter-departmental exhibition design teams, the DIA’s then-new director saw the team approach

as the future and strongly advocated for it both for the reinstallation and for projects after the reopening.

For the Denver Art Museum, they were “one of the first art museums in the country to have...someone who was really focused on interpretation.” Today they build upon “a history of visitor-centered exhibitions...that have just offered a few more opportunities for visitors to make personal connections to the collections and to the objects.” Much of this is thanks to the Master Teachers, which have evolved into interpretive planners because, while “very progressive and visionary”, the museum has expanded its understanding of relating objects to visitors, and maintains interpretive planners who “think about the collections from the visitor perspective.”

### **Research Question 2: Who are art museum interpretive planners and what do their jobs entail?**

In response to the conditions in place for interpretive planning at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Denver Art Museum, the Chrysler Museum of Art, and the Detroit Institute of Arts, it then becomes interesting to compare the job titles, job responsibilities, and futures of interpretive planners at these museums. The language chosen to designate interpretive planners, as well as the departments that house them, suggest broader institution philosophies about the roles of education and learning. The history and longevity of interpretive planners at these four art museums also speak to the time these museums have had to adjust to interpretive strategies as a concrete part of institutional culture.

***Job and Department Titles***

The four interpretive planning interviewees were asked about their titles, the titles of other interpretive planners at their museum, if there were any, and the department title under which they work in order to study institutional trends at these museums in line with additional trends in museums in regards to education, interpretation, and visitor experiences. The interpretive planning interviewees were all managers of interpretive planning at their institutions. The Interpretation Manager at the Chrysler Museum of Art is the sole interpretive planner at that organization. The other museums have multiple interpretive planners on staff. Among the management of interpretation initiatives at these other museums, and the primary interviewees at these museums, was the Chief of Public Programming and Learning at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Director of Interpretive Engagement at the Detroit Institute of Arts, and the Associate Director of Learning and Engagement at the Denver Art Museum. The AGO uses the standard term of Interpretive Planners, while the DIA has Interpretive Specialists and the Denver Art Museum has Experience and Interpretation Specialists. There is a general consistency among all four art museums in the terms used to define interpretive planners, with museums either using “interpretive” or “interpretation”. The Chrysler Museum of Art is also unique in being the only institution in the study to still refer to the Department of Education as such. All other museums have instead adopted “learning” as a key word in their education department titles, as seen in the AGO’s Department of Public Programming and Learning, DAM’s Department of Learning and Engagement, and the DIA’s Department of Learning and Interpretation, the only museum of the four in this study to adopt “interpretation” in a department title.

Until two weeks prior to our interview, the interviewee at the Denver Art Museum was titled the Associate Director of Education and Master Teacher, Native Arts and New World. By the time our interview took place in March 2015, the titles of the department and of positions in that department had officially changed. The interviewee is now the Associate Director of Learning and Engagement and the Experience and Interpretation Specialist for Native Arts and New World in the Department of Learning and Engagement, previously the Department of Education. This shift was largely to reflect the terminology the department was more commonly using to describe their actions; specifically they felt “the word ‘education’ was inadequate to describe what we do as a department” and that “we’re not Master Teachers, we’re Master Learners.” This realization comes from a careful examination of how they serve their visitors. The Denver Art Museum is also, of the three included in this study with multiple interpretive planners, the only institution to designate its Experience and Interpretation Specialists to specific collections, such as “Native Arts and New World” and “Asian Art”. This carried over from the Master Teacher titles of the same categories. It represents a consistent connection between specific curators and interpretive planners more than at the AGO and DIA.

The Art Gallery of Ontario and the Detroit Institute of Arts have also renamed their education departments, and the titles within them, to reflect changing visions, goals, and expectations. Interpretive planning is one piece of a substantial shift in how education departments in art museums approach their responsibilities and how they want to be perceived by the public. Instead of DAM’s Department of Learning and Engagement, the AGO has the Department of Public Programming and Learning, of which one of the four divisions is Interpretation, which includes interpretive planners and visitor researchers. The interviewee in that department is the head of the department, titled the Chief of Public Programming and

Learning. At the DIA, the interpretive planner interview was conducted with the Director of Interpretive Engagement, a managerial position in the Department of Learning and Interpretation. The DIA, like the AGO and the Denver Art Museum, has replaced the traditional 'Education' with the broader 'Learning'. The latter terminology implies a greater capacity for visitors to experience art rather than be told a singular narrative. The Chrysler Museum of Art still maintains a Department of Education, of which the Interpretation Manager is a key position but not the head of the department.

### *The Origin, Evolution, and Longevity of the Interpretive Planner*

The interpretive planning managers were also asked about the emergence of interpretive planning at their institutions in relation and in response to institutional and museological motivations, as well as how the positions have evolved since their emergence. They also gave opinions on the future of interpretive planners at their museums, both in reference to shifting job expectations and larger opinions of their work. Interviewees spoke of various catalysts for the interpretive planning origins at their museums, including a director's vision, restructuring of education departments, and the blank slates made available by reinstallation projects. At the AGO and the Chrysler, the interpretation interviewees were hired specifically to cement interpretive products into the institutional practices and galleries. The interviewee at the AGO was tasked with overseeing a large-scale staffing and internal cultural change to incorporate these initiatives, while the Chrysler's Interpretation Manager found permanence at the museum more gradually. Interpretive planners at the Denver Art Museum, in comparison, evolved from pre-existing positions.

As for the longevity of interpretive planners at these four museums, interviewees believed their impact on museum practices, specifically in relation to visitor experiences and exhibit design, had proven their worth amidst many art museums that do not even have staff fulfilling the responsibilities of interpretive planners. One simple example of institutional commitments is the scale of interpretation at the DIA, AGO, and DAM, where multiple interpretive planners work full time as permanent members of staff.

While the Experience and Interpretation Specialists have only existed by that name at the Denver Art Museum since the beginning of March 2015, the jobs have existed in some format under the guise of “Master Teachers” since Patterson Williams instituted the positions over thirty years ago. Williams recognized the value of having staff in education who also “understood the collections but who was challenged to really think about the collections from the visitor perspective.” Since then, the Associate Director of Learning and Engagement believes the role has become more nuanced in understanding the relationship between objects in exhibitions and visitors, existing “to connect people to objects and to create experiences for them around objects.” The recent renaming and restructuring of the department is a testament to this evolution. Furthermore, the size of the department, containing five Experience and Interpretation Specialists responsible for specific areas of the permanent collections as well as work on special exhibitions, speaks to the security of interpretive planning at DAM for years to come.

The AGO did not have the traditions in place like DAM had with the Master Teachers. The AGO’s Chief of Public Programming and Learning was hired to develop a department that could support and drive the reinstallation of the Art Gallery of Ontario’s 110 permanent galleries. The organization “had a building full of people with art expertise and...not with

current trends in...experience design and...interpretive planning, or visitor research.” There was always the expectation that she was creating permanent positions that would last beyond the reinstallation because the institution was ready to adopt a “team approach to experience design.”

The DIA’s interpretive specialists grew organically from changing ideas about job titles and roles, but originated as Assistant Educators and later as Interpretive Educators in a Department of Education. The reinstall and trends in other art museums were the final push in restructuring and renaming the department and its staff. Graham Beal, the current director, arrived in 1999 and encouraged team-based exhibition designing, for which the position of interpretive specialist followed suit. He and other leaders at the DIA held an interest in fostering new and innovative ways to train staff “to work differently and think differently” about art and art museums, and the head of the education department at the time specifically wanted to hire people with diverse academic and professional backgrounds. In working with curators both during and since the reinstall, interpretive specialists continue to be the advocates for visitor learning, while keeping up to date with best practices and completing “facilitation training” to maximize interpretive goals at the DIA.

The Interpretation Manager position at the Chrysler Museum of Art was initiated about two and a half years ago, as museum leaders were considering reinstallation and interpretation options. The museum had originally hired a consulting interpretive planner to facilitate talks between departments, but soon decided that a full-time employee, who better understood the needs of the museum, was necessary. Still, the position was only supposed to last for six months. Upon the Interpretation Manager’s arrival, however, staff in all departments realized that the task at hand went far beyond rewriting labels or coming up with themes for gallery hangs, although that was and still is a significant portion of his job. Alongside this, the new

Director of Education was restructuring the department, and wanted someone in interpretation as a permanent member of the staff within education, not as its own entity as it had been for the reinstallation process. Since the reopening the Interpretation Manager now develops interpretative products beyond labels and gallery design, initiating galley guides and other supplementary materials, in addition to creating interpretive strategies with exhibitions and curatorial for special exhibitions. He also has a considerably wider range of responsibilities and tasks than the interpretive planners at the DAM, DIA, and AGO, simply because of the size of the Chrysler and its staff in comparison to those larger institutions. The position is still evolving, with no clear job description in place for the Interpretation Manager. As the Chrysler settles from its reopening, so to is the place and future of interpretive planning at the museum.

### *Career Motivations and Skills*

All four interpretive planning professionals interviewed came into the field from different academic and professional paths that led to serving the interpretive needs of an art museum. Furthermore, no one expected to end up in their current position, and several explicitly expressed that they had no concept of interpretive planners early in their careers, and never expected to work in any museum, let alone an art museum. The Interpretation Manager at the Chrysler probably has the most traditional museum background, with degrees in art history and American studies. He has previous experience in history museum education and museum research. The AGO's Chief of Public Programming and Learning also had extensive museum experience, including formulating interpretive planning at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in between her two periods at the AGO. As a seasoned evaluator and researcher of audience engagement in exhibitions, she had never expected to work in art museums because of her lack of art knowledge

and the slow pace at which most art museums were adopting visitor-centric agendas and engaging in institutional change.

The interpretive planning interviewees at DAM and the DIA came to museums less traditionally. The interviewee at the Denver Art Museum, while having degrees in anthropology, turned to a career in museums because of her desire to link people to objects. She admits that she started in museums through an internship in an education department, without being totally aware of the jobs in museums other than that of the curator. The DIA's Director of Interpretive Engagement has an academic background in literature, and originally came to the DIA as someone who could write labels, but she never expected it to be more than a temporary job until she became enamored with the concept that one could "change the discourse and have an impact on people's perspectives." She arrived when the plans for reinstallation were commencing,

a powerful moment to look at these collections with new eyes, to try something new and make stories out of them. At a time when it was in its most incipient phases at the DIA, the visitor-centered approach also aligned with my own interests in what you do with information and think about how knowledge is constructed and how people make meaning.

### **Research Question 3: What role do interpretive planners play in gallery installation, exhibition design, and visitor experiences?**

All museums included in this study completed major reinstallations of their galleries, coinciding with renovations or expansions, since 2006. Motivations to undergo these massive projects ranged from practical answers of available funding and an insufficient building or facilities, to deeper reasons such as a desire to be innovative with permanent gallery spaces as well as special exhibitions, and a desire to better serve the community and prove the museum's relevance. It appears that, for the most part, interpretive planning was not a direct result of reinstallation efforts, but reinstallation was certainly a catalyst for the current scale of

interpretive planning at these museums. The reinstallations were unveiled in 2006 at DAM, in 2007 at the DIA, in 2008 at the AGO, and in 2014 at the Chrysler.

Interpretive planners are also playing important roles in leading, facilitating, or encouraging audience research at their museums to further success of exhibition design. Included in this is both an awareness of community needs and interests, as well as formal studies within the museum's walls to evaluate learning and experiences. In return, all four of these museums have noticed an improvement in public opinions of their museums in relevance and community value.

### ***When Art Museums Redesign***

Whether because of a renovation, expansion, or both, reinstalling galleries takes dedicated effort from the staff of any museum and a considerable amount of funding. As such, these massive visible changes do not happen often. The institutions in this study found incentives for reinstallation from a variety of sources, but they all stemmed from a desire to better serve their community and were all completed successfully because of the efforts of the interpretive planners on staff.

For the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), the interviewee noted that, "the practices of an elite institution for an elite audience...were not working well for the city of Detroit." Since the building needed repairs and updates, the circumstances supported a holistic renovation, "a philosophical shift" timed with the arrival of a new director, Graham Bell, to guide the museum through the makeover and envision what the museum could look like on multiple platforms.

At the Art Gallery of Ontario, their expansion and reinstallation campaign, Transformation AGO, began when the existing structure became inadequate for displaying

contemporary art, maximizing approachability for visitors, and housing a considerable new collection, the Ken Thompson collections of European and Canadian Art. The decisions and the timing of Transformation AGO was simultaneously “about audiences and presentation,” words that apply to the majority of reinstalled museums. The Denver Art Museum also felt that it had outgrown its previous space, and the awarding of funds meant it was right time to expand. The Chrysler Museum of Art, like the AGO, sought to increase accessibility for its visitors, making changes to the flow of the galleries and the location of resources such as the café. The opening of the Glass Studio and the formation of the Gallery Host program also spurred the reinstallation, recognized by museum leadership as steps towards evolving the institution into a more welcoming and inclusive space.

### ***Undertaking and Completing Gallery Reinstallation***

All interviewees were asked about their role in the reinstallation of their museum’s galleries. It revealed the expected and actual effects of interpretive planners in this process, both in terms of institutional practices before, during, and since the reinstallations, but also in the physical appearance of the redesigned and reimagined galleries.

For a museum to reinstall any or all of its galleries, whether in line with a renovation or an expansion, is a tremendous undertaking of time and resources, often requiring the museum to close for months or years before reopening. The Denver Art Museum completed its major reinstallation plans from 2002 to 2006, with its overall expansion project lasting from 2000 to 2006. The DIA started plans for reinstallation in 1999, when its current director assumed his position. Discussions concerning reinstallation and the formation of interpretive teams began around 2002, and the museum finished the project in 2007. Transformation AGO, the expansion

and reinstallation initiative for the Art Gallery of Ontario, was first discussed in 2000, with the actual project spanning from 2002 to 2008. The Chrysler is by far the newest reinstalled museum in the study, having reopened in May 2014 after an efficient eighteen-month closure.

Special exhibitions offered room for experimentation before the reinstallations, and allowed interpretive planners and museum educators to cultivate interpretive strategies. The interpretive planning professionals at the DAM and DIA were able to speak about this experimentation because they have been at their respective museums since before the recent reinstallation of galleries. The Master Teacher position had ensured that DAM's special exhibitions, at the very least, were not only visitor-centric and rejecting chronology as the sole hang solution, but were also created by more voices than just a curator's. The interviewee expressed how this is different than what is still typical at many art museums today, where exhibitions, from big idea to artwork selections to exhibition text, is orchestrated by curators, "and then educators [are] coming in at the last minute and figuring out how their programs are going to relate to the content." Despite the innovations explored by Denver Art Museum staff, there was always the struggle of bringing resonance and relevance to the exhibitions as interpretive planning is a continual learning process.

Before the DIA's renovation and reinstallation, special exhibitions were the then-educators' first chances to abandon chronology in exhibitions, and explore thematic groupings, "because temporary exhibitions were constantly changing and provided opportunities to experiment." The lessons learned were a driving force in the choices made in the permanent galleries during the reinstall. In fact, a common factor among these institutions is the move away from traditional exhibition structure, which uses chronology as a basis for art placement, and shifting to thematic hangs. At the Denver Art Museum, thematically arranged special and

permanent exhibitions have been the norm for long enough that the idea no longer needs to be sold to curators. At the Chrysler Museum of Art, a walk through the permanent galleries no longer feels like an “‘ism’ tour”, as the Interpretation Manager phrased it. Instead, galleries center around themes such as “The Rise of Humanism” and “The Rise of the Church”, which still place visitors in a defined time and place in history, but that also allow the visitor to consider the cultural environments of the art, as well as the stylistic traits from room to room.

The Detroit Institute of Arts has adopted a variety of approaches to thematic gallery interpretation. Similar to the Chrysler’s method is what the DIA has done in galleries such as those with seventeenth-century Dutch art. The art remains very specific to its origins, and without looking at interpretive elements may look largely unchanged from before the reinstall. However, specific Dutch galleries work from themes such as the role of patron values on artistic style and the impact of Dutch colonization on material culture. The latter gallery includes art from parts of the world involved in the vast Dutch trading network.

For the eighteenth-century French decorative arts collection, the DIA sought not to create a worldview, but rather to immerse the visitor in a typical day of the French nobility, through the “Splendor by the Hour” suite of galleries. Rather than the objects educating visitors on why they are important, they are employed to teach a larger narrative of a very foreign lifestyle, of experiencing “the rituals and the objects that were necessary for these highly elaborate rituals of getting through your leisure day.”

Before the reinstallation, non-Western collections like the DIA’s African galleries were interpreted as “purely aesthetic objects in a...white box.” But according to the Director of Interpretive Engagement, most visitors did not have “the visual codes, the cultural codes to unpack that material,” to appreciate what the aesthetics were, and how they were supposed to

feel about the imagery. During the renovation, the decision was made to reinterpret the objects as they relate to important phases of life: birth, puberty, marriage, and death. The objects are now more relatable to all visitors.

Gallery changes since the reinstallations in these four museums go beyond thematic art narratives. Products of interpretive strategies, to use the AGO's terminology, are of equal importance to the choices of art. During the reinstallation planning the Denver Art Museum agreed, "twenty percent of every reinstallation would...have educational components" marking the first time "there was really dedicated space to some kind of hands-on...creativity moment or learning moment" in direct relation and proximity to exhibition highlights. This has further pushed Experience and Interpretation Specialists to design increasingly enhanced visitor experiences, expanding beyond the twenty percent requirement for interpretive products. For the interviewee, the reinstallation helped her to quantify that her job was "to connect people to objects and to create experiences for them around objects" and then for her department to realize they were not so much responsible for, "giving people content about artists or objects or cultures where these objects came from, but rather how could these objects be catalysts for imagination, creativity, a broader understanding of the world."

### ***Audience Research and Evaluation***

The endeavors of interpretive planners at these four museums have created new avenues by which to explore museum collections. Interpretive planners designed these spaces to enable visitors to make meaning of the art, and to look at subjects and themes beyond basic chronology, increasing potential accessibility. However, in order to truly know how visitors engage with and learn as a result of these reinstallations, these art museums also conducted visitor research. The

interpretive planner participants were asked about changes in visitor experiences since the completion of the reinstallations, and whether these were formally studied, institutionally perceived, or both.

One way to measure the success of gallery reinstallations and interpretive planning in art museums is through formal audience research to evaluate exhibitions and visitor experiences. This goes beyond visitor demographics collected at all four museums in this study, although this information is always valuable and an important baseline for interpretive goals. Since the reinstall, DAM has seen growth in attendance in sought-after audiences such as families and young adults. The DIA gets basic information about visitor experiences from comment cards, but the effort put into designing those instruments is minimal and therefore the analysis of the comments is of little value for the Department of Learning and Interpretation in relation to other evaluations taking place at the museum. The Chrysler orchestrates similar surveys about visitor experiences, facilitated by the Gallery Hosts. The AGO is the most systematic about demographic and visitor sample studies, and has been since the interviewee first arrived at the museum. Since her arrival, two hundred randomly selected visitor information questionnaires are collected every month and the format of the questionnaire has remained largely unchanged since the reopening in 2008. Both the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Chrysler Museum of Art pay close attention to their Net Promoter Scores, a system of rating customer satisfaction, as a way of tracking visitor experiences.

The DIA recently designed an exhibition funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and as is the requirement with most grants of this nature, completed a summative evaluation of the show. In a similar vein, the Denver Art Museum published the report *Part of Something Bigger*, stemming from an Institute of Museum and Library Services

(IMLS) grant project “looking at these more interactive moments, changes to our galleries, and the kind of impact this was having on people’s individual, personal lives around creativity” (Interview with the Associate Director of Learning and Engagement, Denver Art Museum, 2015).

In preparation for its renovation, the Chrysler contracted evaluators to determine visitor opinions about the pre-renovated museum and their expectations for the new museum, but since reopening no summative visitor research apart from the Net Promoter score and general experience questionnaires has taken place. According to the Interpretation Manager, the special exhibitions since the reopening have been atypical for the museum, and “we don’t know what...our standard is yet” as they are experimenting with new ways to reach diverse audiences. He does, however, host focus groups with community members to gauge responses to both special exhibitions and permanent galleries.

The AGO and the DIA have committed to implementing extensive evaluation schedules to improve their interpretive strategies. Both of these museums have in-house evaluators designing these studies, and the AGO has the additional aid of Museum Studies students from the University of Toronto. At the Art Gallery of Ontario, the majority of special exhibition evaluations are summative, but they are working to incorporate more front-end evaluations into the process. From all summative evaluations, AGO’s interpretive planners gain information about sweep rates through the galleries and additional quantitative statistics that are employed to improve future exhibitions through an ever-expanding pool of data about successful, and not so successful, interpretive products and themes. The front-end studies, conducted less consistently, help the AGO learn about their visitors and visitor expectations to prepare for upcoming exhibitions.

The opposite is true of the DIA's evaluation efforts; while they conduct consistent evaluations of the success of their permanent gallery spaces, within the last three years they have conducted extensive front-end evaluation to aid interpretive planning, including focus groups for special exhibitions as well as the soon-to-be-reinstalled galleries of Middle Eastern Art. Each exhibition has multiple focus groups stemming from audiences ranging from typical DIA visitors to culturally specific representatives and experts for the particular subjects. These focus groups help with the exhibition design at two stages: the first time they are shown only sample art from the upcoming exhibition, and the second time they are shown the same art but now alongside drafts of labels. Thanks to this rigorous process, the end result of exhibitions is always unique and accessible for multiple audiences.

From the DIA's perspective, evaluations during the exhibit design process do much more than inform interpretative strategies and demonstrate the success of interpretive planners. The constructive connections made with communities are essential for the execution of the DIA's mission and goals. For the AGO, audience research and evaluation provides proof that elements put in place to increase visitor comfort and experience are beneficial to the museum as well as its audience. As explained by the Chief of Public Programming and Learning,

when stakeholders, teachers, even the media... find out there is someone on the [exhibition planning] team who understands learning...and knows the visitor research and brings that to the table, they're very interested in the story...in the process, and...they understand the AGO in a new light.

Despite these reactions that help with adjusting the museum's culture, institutional change remains a complicated and ongoing process at the AGO.

### ***Serving Visitors and the Community***

Going beyond creating visitor-centered exhibitions and studying their effectiveness

through front-end and summative evaluations, these museums have acute insights into of the responses and reactions from visitors and the effect of the changing museum culture on the wider communities. In turn, they are also keenly aware of community needs, expectations, and development. The Associate Director of Learning and Engagement sees DAM improving at serving its visitors, and looks at the improvements as a part of a great trend in art museums as they become “more sophisticated and nuanced in how we think of our visitors.” She sees the issue spreading beyond education departments and into other facets of museum culture, relishing that “everybody is tacking that idea of serving the visitor”. She added,

when you do these kinds of things that open up your collections to multiple perspectives, to personal insights, I think that's what makes them relevant...and when things are relevant, people connect...and when people connect, they come more than once, they become members.

Through fostering guided visitor learning in their galleries, alongside programming for various audiences, they have solidified their relevance to the changing and expanding Denver population.

In fact, all four institutions included in this study are constantly attempting to relate to their community, who represent an overwhelming percentage of their visitation compared to tourists. The cities of Denver and Toronto, as well as the region of Hampton Roads served by the Chrysler Museum of Art, are experiencing steady rises in population, which means shifting demographics that are not always comprised of typical museum visitors. Less than twenty percent of the AGO’s annual visitors are considered tourists. This means that the AGO needs to foster a culture of repeat visitation from among residents of Toronto and the surrounding area, specifically young adults, families, racial minorities, and the LGBTQ community. Through interpretive strategies in special exhibitions, the AGO is making these audiences active participants.

The introduction of the Gallery Hosts program and the opening of the Glass Studio had

already accelerated the Chrysler's goals of reaching new audiences and building community loyalty to the museum. Museum renovations focused on visitor comforts, knowing that visitors often felt disoriented and overwhelmed amongst the permanent galleries. Additionally, the museum improved amenities like its café to ensure that visitors were not only welcomed to the museum, but were relaxed during their visit.

While the other museums in this study are adapting to growing populations, the Detroit Institute of Arts has faced the opposite challenge. From 2000 to 2013, Detroit's population decreased by nearly thirty percent (U.S. Census Reports), and when the city recently declared bankruptcy, it nearly brought the DIA down with it. According to both interviewees at the museum, community loyalty to the DIA, fostered from the museum's message that visitors can have meaningful experiences inside the museum relevant to the diverse Detroit communities, helped to save the museum and its collection for future generations. The reinstallation was completed at an opportune time; before the shift to the visitor-centered approach, the museum was largely unsuccessful at arguing for its relevance in the community. The DIA has gone from being an "elite institution...[that was] not working well of the City of Detroit" to a place that presents its collections in a way that "is helping people make meaning" (Interview with Director of Interpretive Engagement).

### ***Public Perceptions and Museum Tone***

Changing agendas with exhibition planning and audience development in line with interpretive planning alter the way museums are perceived by the public, as well as the internal opinions held by staff. These four art museums have seen positive shifts in tone and public appearance, which allows them to be increasingly receptive to interpretive planning. At the

AGO, the interviewee sees the greatest shifts in institutional trust in the visitor-centered approach as well as visitor attendance, especially concerning the higher rate of repeat visitations since Transformation AGO was completed. DAM has had similar success in community loyalty, as it keeps pace with a changing Denver, and reflects on doing more than just “giving people content about artists or objects or cultures where these objects came from, but rather how could these objects be catalysts for imagination, creativity, a broader understanding of the world.”

Within the DIA during and immediately following the reinstallation, some doubted the plausibility and feasibility of the undertaking, and critiqued the drastic interpretive changes being mandated as “untested.” Since 2007, with the public supporting the museum and insisting on its cultural and educational significance in the region, the interpretive strategies have been declared successes and have cultivated a more inspired and cohesive museum tone.

For the Chrysler Museum of Art, the staff feels rejuvenated from the reinstallation, and is excited to see where the museum is headed next with its new director. The Interpretation Manager expressed his concerns however, that in light of substantial restructuring of departments and new talent coming to the museum, the Chrysler may be “losing its institutional memory”. For now, the changes seem to be only positive, but as the museum moves forward in its goal to be more team-based and visitor-centric, he wonders if a museum becoming unrecognizable from what it was a decade ago has any consequences.

**Research Question 4: To what extent has art museum culture changed to accommodate interpretive planners and to encourage a stronger interpretive voice?**

Finally, this study looks at how the institutional practices at these four art museums have evolved to serve the needs of interpretive planners who, in serving visitor needs, affect how

museums implement various practices. This section looks at how, if at all, these museums define interpretation, how they view and use interpretive plans, how their mission statements address or look over interpretive efforts, how they encourage the interpretive voice in institutional practices, how interpretive planners work inside of museum organizational charts, and how resource allocations shift to fund interpretive goals. Results from these inquiries varied widely among the four organizations, but it was clear that all of the institutions function remarkably different than before interpretive planners helped to facilitate the reinstallations.

### *Defining Interpretation*

As referenced in Chapter 2, ‘interpretation’ has always been a difficult concept to quantify and eloquently define even among leading museum and informal learning professionals. In “Interpreting the Future of Art Museums” (2014), the authors wondered, “Is this a moment in art museum history when interpretive planning is really getting defined and codified? (While retaining flexibility, of course!)” (Koke, et al., 2014). In order to do that, does there need to be a standardized definition of interpretation, or at least definitions held as true within particular art museums?

The Denver Art Museum does not have an institutional definition of interpretation, to which the interviewee admitted that, “sometimes we struggle because of it.” Her opinion was echoed by the Interpretation Manager at the Chrysler Museum of Art, who said that no definition “leads to a lot of confusion and...lack of clarity” as well as uncertainty of what “the limits of interpretation” are at the museum, specifically in regards to its place in, or apart from, the education department. He accredited the very recent of the emergence of the position, and the institutional changes that come with it, to this uncertainty.

The interviewee at the AGO was not concerned by the museum's lack of a definition of interpretation, stating that a clear definition and job description of the institution's interpretive planners, which are in place, is of greater importance. The DIA has a document in place called *Interpretation as a Means of Communication*, written to "reflect AAM Standards in Education" and define the relationship between the museum and its visitors as a co-dependent relationship for learning and growing.

### *Interpretive Plans*

Alongside the presence of interpretive planners in other types of museums, there is often a master interpretive plan, a document that guides both interpretive planners and other staff in the interpretive policies set in place by museum leadership, and reminds staff of the importance of interpretive planning to visitor experiences and institutional success. However, despite the committed presence of full-time, permanent interpretive planners, none of the museums in this study have master interpretive plans in place. The DIA and the AGO create interpretive plans for each exhibition project, and the Denver Art Museum creates similar documents they call Experience Plans.

As to whether museum-wide interpretive plans should be written and implemented, there were mixed responses in light of current interpretive culture at each museum. The DIA and the AGO have the closest formats to comprehensive interpretive plans. At the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Director of Interpretive Engagement believes that the mission statement, "Creating experiences that help each visitor find personal meaning in art", and institutional visitor outcomes supplement the project-based interpretive plans. These visitor outcomes, grouped under the subcategories of "Learning," "Engagement," and "Social," guide all interpretive work

in exhibition design. As such, she does not see the need for a master interpretive plan.

The Chief of Public Programming and Learning at the AGO felt differently, stating that “we should have an institutional interpretive plan” even though the exhibit-specific plans appear to be very detailed and effective, functioning as “a singular document that guides the development of the experience that...lives with a schedule and a budget.” This document includes the main message of the exhibition, the interpretive strategies, and how the art and its arrangement support the narrative, all of which are agreed upon by the exhibition team of project manager, exhibition designer, curator, and interpretive planner. She felt that these interpretive plans allow the team to stay focused on a greater purpose of the exhibition than simply educating the public about particular art; there are opportunities to connect art to communities and allow visitors to make these connections.

The Experience Plans created for exhibit design projects at the Denver Art Museum used to be text documents, but have recently switched to the more visual method of mood boards. The interviewee was not an advocate of a master interpretive plan, saying that “for some reason we find them a little binding”, and that “even if we did have a template, I don’t know how long we would stick with it” because, “we tend to just iterate constantly and try new formats for things.” She does however, acknowledge that without an interpretive plan for the museum, “sometimes we have to renegotiate what our role is on various projects” especially with changes in staff.

The Interpretation Manager at the Chrysler Museum of Art does think an institutional interpretive plan would be beneficial, but so far one does not exist. During the reinstallation and renovation project, he wrote, “a label-writing guide which effectively serves as our interpretive plan, but it doesn’t project in the future.” This was created by conversing with staff and

stakeholders to gather their opinions on where the museum should go with interpretation, and from consulting best practices in the field. It is now an essential tool used at the museum for both writing labels and also familiarizing all new staff with the museum's interpretive goals and strategies. He thinks that as the Chrysler continues to distance itself from archaic rhetoric and increases in visitor-centered engagement, he will have the opportunity to write an interpretive plan to serve the Chrysler Museum of Art in the years to come.

### *Mission Statements*

How does interpretive planning play into mission statements? Do organizational change and interpretive voice alter mission statements in equal force to mission statements driving institutional practices? For the DIA, the current mission statement is an essential document in the absence of an interpretive plan. Previously following the traditional rhetoric for mission statements, the DIA adopted the new mission statement in 2007 just before the reinstatement was unveiled. "Creating experiences that help each visitor find personal meaning in art" grew from "the work and the understandings that were coming out of the reinstatement process," but also echoes definitions of interpretation. Reflecting the new terminology in the museum's Department of Learning and Interpretation, the word 'education' is absent. Instead, the DIA puts learning at the center of its activities.

The AGO is currently using its second mission statement since the completion of Transformation AGO. From 2008 at the conclusion of Transformation AGO to 2012, the mission was "We bring people and art together and boldly declare that Art Matters", evoking institutional goals of catering to and reaching vast audiences and communities and stressing the value of art to all audiences. This mission statement, according to the Chief of Public

Programming and Learning, was adopted largely in light of the AGO's lack of tourist visitation. The museum acknowledged the need for repeat visitations from its regional community, and to therefore "create... a sense of engagement, participation, and relevance." In 2012 with a new strategic plan, this mission statement was abandoned, as museum leaders came to the conclusion that the AGO could not articulate why art mattered. Instead, they wrote a new mission statement: "We bring people together with art to see, experience, and understand the world in new ways." This will be in effect until at least 2017, at the close of the current strategic plan.

Like the DIA's mission, the mission statement of the AGO's focus is not on a singular narrative presented by the museum, but on the physical presence of the AGO serving visitor experiences and free-choice learning. It is not about telling visitors why art matters, it is about allowing visitors to find that meaning for themselves. The museum's role, therefore, is "to articulate our belief that art has to be...relevant to this time and...connect to this place...to demonstrate both contemporary and Toronto relevance." The AGO and the DIA essentially declare as their mission statements a commitment to interpretation, proving that interpretation is of paramount institutional importance. Furthermore, by insisting that the mission statement be reexamined every three years with a new strategic plan, the AGO establishes the mission statement as a short-term, ephemeral guiding document. Without much resistance, the museum can evolve and grow out of the mission statement once it achieves its goals.

The mission statement for the Chrysler Museum of Art does not appear on the museum's website, and there is confusion over the current mission statement in place. The Interpretation Manager was unsure of the mission statement, but in speaking with the recently retired director, however, it came out that the current mission statement is actually quite refined. It reads: "The Chrysler Museum of Art exists is to enrich and transform lives, by bringing original works of art

and people together for experiences that delight, inform, and inspire.” The lack of clarity over the mission statement among interviewees and its notable absence from the website speak to the amount of flux the Chrysler is still handling in its first year since the reopening.

The Denver Art Museum’s mission statement has remained typical. In the words of the Associate Director of Learning and Engagement and the Experience and Interpretation Specialist for Native Arts and New World,

museums still have...the traditional boxes they exist in, and even though we fundamentally know that museums and objects can be just places of total inspiration...I still think that is emblematic of we still all have a lot of work to do, and sometimes it’s not only because of how maybe internally people still struggle with defining what we are as institutions, but I think externally...even the public sometimes can be more traditional in their expectations of art museums than we even want to be perceived.

This is an important reminder that museums cater to visitor expectations, and that a mission statement, as one of the more public and recognizable elements of a museum on paper, is very much in service of public expectations as centering staff. To compensate for this, the museum is more fluid with its vision statement because of the minimal external judgment on that statement, according to the interviewee. For DAM, the mission is a traditional document serving the public, while the vision is in service of the institution itself.

### ***The Interpretive Voice and Institutional Culture***

By incorporating interpretive planners into the staff of these institutions, museum leaders at the Chrysler, DAM, DIA, and AGO have already demonstrated their openness to a strong interpretive voice. In previous sections the correlations between interpretive planning and exhibition design and visitor experiences have been explored. Mission statements and attempts to formalize interpretation have worked alongside these initiatives. There is still the question of how interpretive planners and the strategies they advocate impact institutional culture on a daily

basis. All interpretive planner interviewees discussed proving the necessity of their work as central to ensuring the interpretive voice at their museums. Some participants also spoke of compensating with losses of efficiency and institutional memory, suggesting that incorporating interpretive planners into the long-term practices of an art museum does carry challenges as well as benefits.

Despite years of evidence of DAM supporting visitor-centered and interpretation-driven exhibitions, there is always the nagging concern, and the conversations that arise from it, about whether the quality of the information is suffering, is “being dumbed down” for the sake of reaching more audiences. The interviewee said that while these conversations sporadically occur, eventually exhibition teams have always resolved concerns. Furthermore, the interpretive voice remains strong because of the large size of the department; five Experience and Interpretation Specialists make for a compelling argument as to the place of interpretation in art museum culture.

A similar philosophical transition is still being played out at the DIA. Because the museum cultural shift is essentially “a break from tradition,” staff members have “to negotiate new ways of working and to reconsider ideas of authority.” When “expertise and skills are in flux,” interpretive goals are not always seen to completion, but the struggle is part of attempting to respect the changing balance between educational and curatorial opinions. This is not to say that the DIA’s curators do not see the value of these shifting agendas; many have embraced the changes within the museum’s culture. However, now that the reinstallation is over and the staff is back to working more exclusively on special exhibitions, it has become a realization that curators are still not in the practice of visitor-centered strategies, because unlike interpretive planners who research, reflect, and act on interpretive planning theories on a daily basis, curators

typically do a major special exhibition once every three to six years. This requires interpretive planners to essentially guide curators through the process anew for every project, a less than ideal situation for both parties.

When he joined the staff in 2012, the Interpretation Manager at the Chrysler Museum of Art was tasked with facilitating solutions to this very problem of philosophical disconnect between educators and curators. This reveals that interpretive planners, by the definition of their responsibilities, often fill the somewhat uncomfortable role of facilitator between two schools of thought and approaches to writing exhibition text. He expressed there was actually a surprising sense of relief when he joined the Chrysler's reinstallation team, because curators knew it was time to think differently about interpretation and label writing, but needed a guide to explain the issues with traditional labels and to provide possible solutions.

A number of the AGO's curators share this opinion, according to the study participant. They appreciate the new ways their collections are being accessed and the opportunities to work closely with community groups "to invite participation in a way that doesn't suggest decision-making and therefore results in disappointment." Similarly, the changing institutional culture lends itself to greater trust from visitors and potential visitors, since no one wants to attend an art museum "to feel like they're excluded from a conversation" because of lack of knowledge of shared worldviews and experiences with art experts. Instead, now that interpretive planners write all the labels at the AGO, visitor responses in terms of creating meaning from the art is just as important in the museum's culture as "the aesthetic and art historical qualities of the show."

### ***Organizational Structures and Teams***

All four museums included in this study maintain traditional, hierarchical organizational

structures, although, as discussed previously, the titles and job responsibilities within departments have changed. However, the interpretive planners at these art museums continuously work with museum staff from other departments, bypassing the typical hierarchy of communication. At the DIA and AGO, interpretive planners work in exhibition design teams with interdepartmental representation. DAM does this to a lesser extent, with the focus being much more on the partnership between curator and interpretive planner. At the Chrysler Museum of Art the sole interpretive planner works with curators and other staff in a more fluid capacity than at the other three museums.

As mentioned elsewhere in this study, the Denver Art Museum has only very recently renamed its Department of Education, now the Department of Learning and Engagement. This department includes, among other positions like public programmers, five Experience and Interpretation Specialists, each designated with certain art history time periods and cultures to match with specialized curators. These have replaced the Master Teachers, who for years worked in a partnership with their equivalent curator to design exhibitions and interpretive strategies. It has since become “tremendously more complex,” with a team approach involving not only an Experience and Interpretation Specialist and a curator but also representatives from exhibit design and communications, as well as other departments as needed. With so much cross-departmental collaboration, one might expect DAM’s organizational chart to deviate from the traditional museum hierarchy model. In reality, it is extremely predictable, with departments and divisions branching off from the director and department heads. In the opinion of the interviewee, there has been no need to orchestrate an overhaul of the museum’s organizational chart because of the trust the director holds for each of the department heads, who are strong leaders in their own right and who have worked at DAM for many of years. Cooperation

between departments is not a concern, but “having multiple dynamic visions of the institution and what it can be” poses potential challenges. Of greater concern to the interviewee, however, was the recent or upcoming retirements and other departures of some senior curators. She wonders what challenges will face the team approach working so efficiently, in addition to the success of the interpretive planners, once curators unfamiliar with DAM’s institutional culture arrive.

There are four divisions within the AGO’s Department of Public Programming and Learning: Public Programming for Adult Audiences, Public Programming for Youth Audiences, Special Projects/New Audience Development, and Interpretive Planning and Visitor Research. The three full-time interpretive planners and the part-time interpretive planner exist within one half of that last division. Like the other institutions in this study, the Art Gallery of Ontario has maintained a hierarchical organizational structure. To compensate, the AGO also has very clearly defined core teams for exhibition development, comprising of a curator, an interpretive planner, a 3D designer from the Exhibitions Department, and a project manager, also from Exhibitions. These team members work together on an equal level to define the main messages of an exhibition, and then later the narrative and finally the hang of the artworks for the show. While these core teams develop powerful and relevant exhibitions, they also result in institutional losses beyond curatorial concerns over art historical integrity. As explained by the Chief of Public Programming and Learning: “A team approach to anything, although in my opinion it gets you a far superior project, is also takes more time...Efficiency is another loss associated with the change to this team approach.”

This side effect is clearly also at play at the DIA, where a very similar team approach to exhibition design regulates exhibition design. In design teams at the DIA are voices from

education or interpretation, curatorial, exhibition design, and scholarship. This team dynamic was originally developed during the reinstallation process, and has continued in the same setup, even though the Department of Learning and Interpretation just became its only department, separate from the Department of Education Programming about three years ago.

The last of the institutions in this study, the Chrysler also works in a version of team exhibition design, but because of the size of departments and staff the Chrysler, specifically that only one staff member is responsible for interpretation, it is less about consistent teams and more about consistent cross-departmental cooperation between exhibitions and curatorial departments, facilitated by the Interpretation Manager from the Education Department. At the Chrysler Museum of Art, another traditional organizational chart is in place, although there has been a lot of restructuring within departments in the last few years. In the Department of Education, there used to be multiple staff members handling school tours and other basic programming efforts. Now the Director of Education, who reports to the museum's director, leads a team of four: the Interpretation Manager, the Docent Coordinator, the Program Coordinator, and the Technology Programming Coordinator. This restructuring took place just before the Interpretation Manager position was conceived for the reinstallation.

### ***Resource Allocation***

Lastly, participants were asked about resource allocation as yet another potential sign of how their art museums have become more accommodating to interpretive planning. Within museum budgets, the dedicated allocation of funds towards interpretation signifies a commitment on the part of the museums towards visitor-centered exhibitions. The interpretive planning managers interviewed discussed resources in the form of both exhibition budget elements as well

as salary considerations as changing in light of greater emphasis on interpretive strategies. At the Denver Art Museum and the Art Gallery of Ontario, project budgets place resources for interpretive elements in a separate category from other needs for exhibition design. DAM also felt the value and expectations relegated to the Department of Experiences and Interpretation with the funding for five specialists. Along with the most recent renaming of interpretive planning positions at the DIA came salary increases for the department. However, the department does not receive enough financial resources for hiring interpretive planners and specialists to work on every exhibition at the DIA. At the Chrysler Museum of Art, the Interpretation Manager salary originally came from the budget for the capital campaign, but has since shifted since being made a permanent position. Overall, however, the interpretation budget at the Chrysler is still in a state of change with the arrival of the new director and the continually shifting responsibilities of its Interpretation Manager.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications

### *Conclusions*

With no previously outlined understanding of the role and effect of interpretive planners in art museums, this research sought to determine the extent to which interpretive planners impact institutional practices and traditions. Thanks to the participation of four art museums with interpretive planners on staff, the findings suggest possible relationships, or lack thereof, between interpretive planning, gallery reinstallation, perceptions of visitors, and organizational practices.

Various factors relegate the emergence of the interpretive planner in art museums, but many point to significant trends in the field. Visitor-centered exhibition development grew in these museums alongside thoughts of gallery reinstallation and reinterpretation. However, the desire to create exhibitions using cross-departmental teams did result from a desire to change the physical spaces of the museum, and did facilitate the emergence of the interpretive planner. When it occurs in conjunction with a major renovation or expansion, gallery reinstallation is a rare opportunity to create from a blank slate, allowing museum professionals to completely reinvent, if they so desire, the interpretive strategies at play in the galleries.

Data from this study suggest that interpretive planners are part of essential teams whose efforts bring wider audiences and increased attendance to their museums. Interviewees constantly reinforced that in their institutions, exhibition design is a committed team effort between curatorial, exhibitions, and interpretive planning. Despite the team approach, the curatorial expertise is not diminished, but rather the content is made more accessible to visitors. There is often friction with curatorial but it is usually about opposing viewpoints within a theme, as they too see the overwhelming benefits interpretive planning and team exhibition design have

brought to these museums.

After the reinstallation of galleries, whether permanent or special, the team approach often chooses thematic hangs rather than the traditional chronological display of art. Despite this, the interpretive strategies designed by museum staff do not disregard the history of the art. Those visitors that want to study style and form and “isms” are still able to, but the art has been reunited with narratives of its origins. Visitor research demonstrates that communities and audiences see value in the art and make meaning thanks to interpretive planning efforts in exhibition design. The significance of these exhibitions and museums for visitors and particular communities, and how those visitors and communities in turn help to shape interpretive success, is a testament to the longevity and importance of interpretive planning.

Apart from job responsibilities, the interpretive planners at these museums have very little in common, at least on paper. Their academic and professional experiences vary greatly. This suggests that, despite the specialized Museum Studies graduate degrees offered by a growing number of universities, the field is still highly interdisciplinary and diverse. What is consistent among all the interpretive planners interviewed is a passion for aiding visitor learning.

The slow pace of institutional change is evident in looking at the organizational charts of the DIA, AGO, DAM, and Chrysler; all have traditional hierarchical structures. But two trends are forming cracks in the departmental columns: interpretive planners prefer to work, and work best, interdepartmentally, and departments such as education are being dramatically restructured and renamed. With art museums abandoning the term ‘education’ for ‘engagement’ and ‘learning,’ and the predominate value of these departments shifting from programming to interpretation, departmental alterations foreshadow greater institutional and field-wide change. The same organizational charts may look very different even ten years from now; they have

already changed more in the last decade than in the better part of the twentieth century (Merritt, 2013). For now, the consideration of job and department titles at most of these art museums demonstrates the power of titles to represent institutional practices, goals, and visions.

The existence of interpretive plans does not necessarily coincide with the presence of interpretive planners. None of the museum professionals I spoke with said there was an institutional interpretive plan; all but the Chrysler create interpretive plans for individual exhibitions, but there is no overarching document, and some confessed that there should be; this was one of the more surprising elements of the findings, but speaks to what Freeman Tilden was trying to say in almost sixty years ago: it is very difficult to articulate what interpretation is in the abstract sense (1957). Instead, it is at work in museum exhibitions, with art museums finally making space for interpretation.

### ***Implications***

*Interpretive Planning for Museums* (Wells, Butler, and Koke, 2013) is an essential resource containing the history of interpretation, current definitions of interpretation, frameworks to implement interpretive planning, and explanations of interpretive plans. The results and conclusions of this study look specifically at art museum interpretive planning, and explore the previously unknown relationships between interpretive planners and institutional practices. Building upon basics of interpretive planning and the tools for implementation in *Interpretive Planning for Museums*, this thesis looks at the causes and effects of that implementation on the field. This research also reveals when best practices and standards are not compatible or easily achievable at individual museums, as is the case with the existence of master interpretive plans.

By a 2014 estimate, there are about thirty art museums with interpretive planners on staff

(Koke, et al.). The relationships between interpretive planners and other museum professionals, examined in this study, represent the institutional culture at all museums with interpretive planners. This is especially valid for analyzing the effectiveness of team-based exhibition design and how it is received across departments. Furthermore, for art museums considering or in the process of a reinstallation with the aid of interpretive planners, or even for art museums debating how to become more visitor-centric, this research can hopefully serve as a guide of what to expect and what to plan for in light of shifting traditions and museum practices. This includes redefining education departments, moving to team-based exhibition design, becoming more aware of visitor expectations and needs, and accommodating the work of interpretive planners through institutional documents and policies.

### ***Final Thoughts***

There is room for expanded research on many of the relationships examined in this study. The initial investigation into resource allocation and budgetary priorities of interpretive planning determined there was a significant effect; from this point a detailed analysis of budgets from several years from these institutions, and other art museums with interpretive planners, would be a worthwhile endeavor. Several art museums with interpretive planners are currently planning or in the process of major reinstallations of their galleries; the impact of interpretive planners at those museums now have the opportunity to adapt the findings of this study and continue to advance the field's understanding of art museum interpretation and museum culture.

When speaking with the a curator at the Detroit Institute of Arts, she mentioned that the week prior to our interview she had spoken with the head of interpretive planning at the Denver Art Museum, who is also currently also looking at the relationships between interpretive planners

and curators and the effects on museum culture. As art museums continue to evolve, understanding the interpreter-curator dynamic is extremely relevant. This is a relationship that will continue to evolve alongside shifting institutional practices. As further inquiries are made into organizational culture and institutional changes in art museums, the research completed for this study will hopefully serve as a foundation for understanding these complicated institutional relationships.

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**Appendix: Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

Interpretive Planners and Institutional Change in Reinstalled Art Museums  
University of Washington  
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Email: [REDACTED]

## Interview Protocol Form

I am asking you to participate in a semi-structured interview that is part of my Master's Thesis work at the University of Washington. The purpose of this research is to explore how and why art museums have incorporated interpretive planning into their institutional practices, specifically how the position of the interpretive planner has impacted organizational structure, the exhibit design process, and perceptions of visitor experience. Your participation is voluntary, refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits, and you may discontinue participation at any time. As a reminder, the identities of both you and your museum will be revealed in the final results of this study. This interview will be recorded, and I may quote you in my final paper. I will give you the opportunity to review any direct quotes before publication. If you have any questions at any time, you may contact either me or my advisor using the contact information provided above. Do you have any questions? Do you agree to participate in this interview?

Research: The Effects of Interpretive Planners on Institutional Practices in Redesigned Art Museums

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Verbal Consent Received? Y / N

Notes to Interviewees:

Thank you for your participation. I believe your input will be valuable to my research and to growing all of our professional best practices.

This interview should last approximately 30-60 minutes

Interview Questions:

*I would like to start by asking you to say...*

1. What is your job title?
2. [What are your primary job responsibilities?]
3. How long you have worked at this museum?
4. What motivated you to seek the position you are currently holding?

*Next I would like to talk about the reinstallation/renovation/expansion at your museum.*

1. What prompted the museum's decision to renovate and/or reinstall its galleries? What was the timeline of this reinstallation/renovation process?
2. How have the galleries changed?
3. [What changes in visitor experiences have been visible since reopening? Have these been formally studied?]
4. I see that your current mission statement is “\_\_\_\_\_”. Has it recently changed? If so, what was it before, and why did it change?

*Now to discussing interpretive planning...*

1. [When was the position of interpretive planner first created at your museum?]
2. [What were the motivations behind this addition/renaming?]
3. [How does your museum define interpretation? Has this definition changed? Does it differ from your personal opinion?]
4. [What policies exist that address interpretation? Does your museum have an interpretation plan?]
5. Do you think that your museum's tone has changed since the emergence of interpretive planning? Where do you see evidence of this?
6. Where does the interpretive planner exist on your organization chart? What was the reasoning behind that organizational structure? Are there particular strengths or challenges associated with the position's place within in the organization?
7. What have been the impacts of having an interpretive planner on staff? What have been the strengths and challenges of the position and the implementation of the position into your museum's culture? How have budgetary priorities shifted?

\* Questions appearing in brackets were only asked to a portion of participants, some questions being considered unnecessary or redundant if posed to more than one participant per museum.