

ENHANCING THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE THROUGH AN INTERPRETIVE PLAN: DAVID OWSLEY MUSEUM OF ART AT BALL STATE

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1. Overview

The David Owsley Museum of Art (DOMA) at Ball State University's deep and high-quality collection represents most of the world's great cultures, both modern and historical, enabling faculty and students from many disciplines to utilize original works of art in a variety of learning situations. DOMA is also a community resource. Over its history, it has served in that dual role well, helping to create a vibrant campus and enhancing quality of life in Muncie, Indiana. As part of a recent expansion, the Museum considered how to better serve its visitors and support learning.

The Interpretive Plan reflects a reconsideration of the Museum as both an intellectual and physical campus destination. The Plan is the result of meetings with multiple stakeholders, benchmarking visits to other museums, extensive dialogue within the project team, and review of evolving drafts. The process considered the Museum holistically, recognizing that every aspect of the visitor's experience impacts what and how they learn, appreciate, and take away from their visit. The Plan assesses the Museum's current offerings and strategizes about the future, including the museum's relationship to faculty and students for both teaching and learning; ways in which the different types of visitors will experience the museum on their own; physical access to the Museum; interpretation in the galleries; community connections; interpretation online, and the physical spaces for interpretive programs.

2. Background on interpretive planning at DOMA

The David Owsley Museum of Art (DOMA) at Ball State University (BSU) is expanding its exhibition gallery space as a result of generous gifts to fund the expansion and to strengthen the collection. Springuel Consulting was retained to develop an Interpretive Plan.

Interpretation considers first and foremost the visitor's experience and includes

- Programs and activities through which a museum carries out its mission and educational role, including – in a university-affiliated museum – the museum's relationship to the academic community
- Communication between the museum and its audience;
- The means by which the museum delivers its content;
- Special and permanent exhibitions and programs.

Extensive stakeholder meetings involved faculty; student and community docents and museum workers; University administrators; members of the Alliance and Friends of the Museum; P-12th grade teachers, administrators and after-school collaborators; parents; and representatives from other community cultural organizations.

The project team undertook three benchmarking trips to visit seven museums.

During an expansion, a museum makes hundreds if not thousands of decisions as galleries are installed, programs developed, and collaborations with stakeholders strengthened. Each of these decisions influences how visitors experience the museum. The Interpretive Plan provides a framework for making those decisions.

The Interpretive Plan was conceived as a living document – it is intended to be refined as the museum evolves and learns from its visitors, evaluating their experiences in the existing and new galleries, and during programs. The Plan is thus a summary of aspirations in Fall 2012 and will serve to guide the work of the Museum as it expands.

The Interpretive Plan is grounded in the Museum's Mission and Vision.

3. Key aspects of the interpretive plan at DOMA

The interpretive planning process recognized that every aspect of the visitor's experience impacts what and how they learn, appreciate, and take away from their visit. Developing the Plan included assessing the Museum's current offerings and determining resources needed to enhance offerings or create new ones in the future.

3.A. Interpretive Vision – The Museum is committed to supporting visitor learning and engagement with original works of art that exemplify excellence and represent many of the world's ancient and modern cultures. This includes

- Valuing what the visitor brings to the experience
- Helping visitors understand there are multiple ways of viewing works of art
- Recognizing and respecting the diversity of life experiences among visitors
- Providing a range of scholarly and academic experiences
- Providing a range of enjoyable and entertaining experiences
- Encouraging people who do not traditionally visit art museums to visit
- Providing an array of expected experiences for frequent visitors to art museums
- Ensuring that programs promote the point of view that each participant brings value to, contributes to, and enriches their museum ex-

perience

- Sharing why the Museum and its staff make particular decisions about ways in which works of art are displayed

As a result, the Museum hopes its visitors will

- Want to learn more about the collection
- Want to visit again
- Want to visit other art museums
- Understand the value of learning through the visual arts

3.B. Guiding Principles for Interpretation – The Museum provides many different “connectors” for visitors to engage with works of art. They are all grounded in the same guiding principles:

Guiding Principle	Implications for in-gallery interpretation
DOMA encourages visitors to visually explore a work of art to understand it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide self-discovery and self-guided “connectors” to help visitors develop skills to visually explore and understand works of art. • Interpretive information that does not refer to what is visible is posted online, rather than on labels in the gallery.
Interpretation engages visitors in conversation about works of art.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversation means an exchange of information and ideas based on the work of art – and what can be seen (i.e. the work of art is the starting point for this conversation). • Interpretive tools or “connectors” offered by the museum should facilitate conversations. • Conversations take place in the many ways in which visitors are encouraged to respond to works of art.
Visitors should leave believing this collection is “mine” to come back and explore on their own.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple ways of looking. • Multiple points of view. • Layered interpretation encourages visitors to come back because there is always more to discover about works of art. • Spending time with works of art from different civilizations and different time-periods enriches one’s understanding of the global world in which we live.
Many visitors, including BSU students, are visiting an art museum for the first time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpretation is accessible to first-time museum visitors. • The interpretive tone is friendly.

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3.C. “Connectors” between Visitors and Works of Art – A variety of interpretive tools or “connectors” will help visitors engage with the works of art throughout the Museum. Availability of specific “connectors” in each gallery will depend on funding, design considerations, and staff to develop and support the “connectors,” as well as appropriate ways to layer interpretation in that particular gallery. “Connectors” include

- Labels on the walls

- Printed gallery guides

- Docent and staff-led tours

- Response stations

- Magnifying glasses

- Tablet or smart phone app to access information online, including text, visuals, audio or video

- Computer terminals and study desks to access information online

- Demonstrations (at specified times)

- Social events (at specified times; sometimes by invitation, sometimes open to all)

3.D. Content of the Interpretive “Connectors” – At DOMA, interpretation will be a two-way process, encouraging self-directed inquiry in which the visitor seeks meaning. To help visitors find meaning, the museum provides ways to encourage visitors to “own” the learning process such as:

- Visual analysis (How do I look at this?)
- Aesthetic appeal to me (Why do I like it? Dislike it?)
- Personal meaning (What does it mean today? To me? What does this work of art tell me about myself? How do I talk about this? How do I learn from this? What can I learn from this work of art; from the fact that someone decided it was worthy of keeping in a museum?)
 - Context to help the visitor find meaning, such as:
 - The artist (Who was the maker? What were their intentions? What forces shaped the artist’s experience?)
 - Technique and Process (How was it made?)
 - History (What is this? Why was it made? How was it used? How was it valued? Where has it been? Who has owned it? Why did they decide it was worth preserving? Has it ever been repaired? Was everything repaired or only certain parts? Why? What does it tell us about the past, about today?)
 - Story depicted (What is the narrative? If none, what is it about?)
 - Style (When was it made? What influenced its making? What else was being made at the time?)
 - Aesthetics (Why is it considered beautiful?)
 - Collectors/Museology (Who decides it is art? How is it chosen or collected? Why is it in this museum?)
 - Value (Artistic, aesthetic, historic)

4. Implementing and evaluating the interpretive plan at DOMA

Developing the Interpretive Plan included multiple evaluative steps. The most critical were feedback on the evolving draft plan by stakeholders, and input gathered during the project team’s benchmarking visits to major art museums and university art museums.

The Plan itself recognizes that all the ideas and recommendations will be implemented over time and refined, as staff better understand visitor experiences in the newly installed galleries. A fundamental assumption of Plan implementation is to continually test and evaluate, with improvements made on an on-going basis.

The parameters for guiding and the criteria for assessing the development of all interpretation over the coming years is embedded in the Interpretive Plan, which now serves as a foundational document for the David Owsley Museum of Art at Ball State University.

Resumé

La très riche collection du David Owsley Museum of Art (DOMA) sur le campus de Ball State University couvre la plupart des grandes cultures du monde, à la fois modernes et anciennes, permettant aux professeurs et aux étudiants de différentes disciplines d'avoir accès à des œuvres d'art originales dans divers programmes d'études. DOMA est aussi une ressource communautaire. Au cours de son histoire, il a joué ce double rôle en aidant à créer un campus dynamique et en améliorant la qualité de vie à Muncie, Indiana. Dans le cadre d'un récent agrandissement, le musée a étudié les moyens d'améliorer ses services aux visiteurs et aux étudiants.

Le plan d'interprétation considère le musée comme une destination intellectuelle et physique du campus. Le plan est le résultat de réunions avec les différentes parties concernées, de visites comparatives dans d'autres musées, de discussions approfondies au sein de l'équipe du projet et de l'examen d'ébauches successives. Le musée est conçu de manière holistique, en considérant que tous les aspects de l'expérience du visiteur ont un impact sur ce qu'il apprend et emporte avec lui et comment il apprécie sa visite. Le plan évalue les propositions actuelles du musée et élabore des stratégies pour l'avenir, y compris la relation du musée avec les professeurs et les étudiants pour l'enseignement et la formation; la façon dont les différentes catégories de visiteurs auront leur propre expérience du musée; l'accès physique au musée; l'interprétation dans les galeries; les liens avec la communauté; l'interprétation en ligne; et les espaces physiques pour les programmes d'interprétation.

Resumen

La profunda y excelente colección del David Owsley Museum of Art (DOMA) en Ball State University representa la mayor parte de las grandes culturas del mundo, tanto modernas como históricas, lo cual permite a profesores y estudiantes de un gran número de disciplinas utilizar obras de arte originales en diversas situaciones de aprendizaje. Además, DOMA es un recurso comunitario. A lo largo de su historia, ha sabido ejercer esta doble función, ayudando a crear un campus estimulante y mejorar la calidad de vida en Muncie, Indiana. Como parte de una reciente ampliación, el museo se planteó cómo ofrecer un servicio mejor a sus visitantes y promover el aprendizaje.

El Plan Interpretativo refleja el replanteamiento del museo como un destino universitario intelectual y físico. El plan es el fruto de las reuniones con múltiples accionistas, las visitas comparativas otros museos, el intenso diálogo del equipo del proyecto, así como la revisión de borradores de proyectos en desarrollo. El proceso ha considerado al museo holística-

mente, reconociendo que cada aspecto de la experiencia del visitante influye en qué y cómo aprende, aprecia y aprovecha su visita. El plan evalúa las ofertas actuales del museo y plantea estrategias para el futuro, incluyendo la relación del museo con profesores y estudiantes en la enseñanza y el aprendizaje, el modo en que los diferentes tipos de visitantes viven el museo personalmente, el acceso físico al museo, la interpretación en las galerías, las relaciones comunitarias, la interpretación en línea, además de los espacios físicos para los programas interpretativos.