Making Meaning in Art Museums 2:

Visitors' Interpretive Strategies at Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery

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1.0 The project

This is the second of two pilot projects on the theme of art museums and interpretive communities. The first pilot project has been published as *Making Meaning in Art Museums 1: Visitors' Interpretive Strategies at Wolverhampton Art Gallery* (RCMG 2001). The Long Gallery at Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery (hence forward NCM) was selected as the research site for this second study. Both studies have explored the ways in which visitors talked about their experience of a visit to the art museum – both what they said about the paintings and of the visit as a whole.

The research questions on which this project is based are:

- What interpretive strategies and repertoires are deployed by art museum visitors?
- Can distinct interpretive communities be identified?
- What are the implications for communication policies within art museums?

2.0 The methodology

The same approach to the research was used at NCM as at Wolverhampton Art Gallery (WAG). Data was collected over a seven-day period in July 2000. The methodology used was qualitative consisting of a mixture of research methods. Single adult visitors were approached as they were entering the Long Gallery at NCM. In an effort to randomise the sample, every third visitor was selected on busy days. In total, seventeen adult visitors were asked permission to be accompanied during their visit by the RCMG researcher. Fifteen completed accompanied visits are included in the analysis. That gives us an acceptance rate of 88.2%.

Visitors were asked to 'think aloud' as they went around the galleries and to report what they saw, thought and felt about the artworks and the exhibitions as a whole. The researcher's role was limited to prompting visitors to expand on any points when needed. Responses were recorded using a tape recorder and a microphone attached to the visitors' clothes to minimise the background noise. Visitors' pathways were determined by visitors themselves.

They were free to pick and choose the exhibits they wanted to visit, to determine the pace of the visit and time they wanted to spend at each individual exhibit as well as the overall time they planned to spend in the Gallery. This approach permitted the visitor, rather than the researcher, to initiate and direct conversation. In addition, two questionnaires probed demographic and other related matters, and field notes were gathered. Data was produced with a high level of reliability and validity. For analysis purposes data for each individual visit was transcribed to separate files and was analysed using QSR NUD.IST, a computer software programme for qualitative data analysis. Data was analysed for content and themes including the types of interpretations made and information (supporting material) gathered, the topics of the interpretations and information and the extent of interest and knowledge. Based on all this information, each visitor was categorised with regards to his or her strategies of interpreting and information gathering, and his or her interest in themes relating to visiting art museums. The results include qualitative descriptions of the data as well as the relative proportion of the visitors who responded in particular ways.

3.0 The visitors

In the sample of visitors we spoke to there were slightly more men than women and slightly more people aged 25-34. Most could be categorised as from social classes B and C1. A large number of visitors had acquired a university degree. However, one-third of the visitors had only had minimum education. The vast majority of the visitors were white European and a large number of them were brought up as Christians. Many visitors were interested in art as expressed by their participation in art-related activities (including visiting art galleries, watching art programmes on the television, reading art magazines or having a qualification in art). Roughly one-third of our sample had specialist art knowledge acquired through formal training. In two cases, these training courses led to a formal degree in art. The others had a general or little art knowledge. It is difficult to judge how representative this group of visitors was in relation to the visitors to NCM as a whole, and in relation to visitors to the Long Gallery as there is not sufficient contextual data, such as marketing reports or visitor surveys.

NCM attracted many first time visitors from out of town. Slightly less than one-third of the visitors we spoke to visited regularly. All of them lived locally. All visitors (first time, 'rare', occasional and regular NCM visitors) said that they visited other venues as well, but slightly more than two-thirds of the sample preferred art exhibitions to museum exhibitions. Motivation for visiting was related to place, education/enculturation and 'flow' but also related to practical issues. Hence, visiting NCM seemed to meet a number of visitors' needs, motivations and expectations. Depending on how frequently they visited NCM, how 'experienced' they were as art gallery visitors and what was on offer on the day of the visit, visitors' plans for the visit could be either open, flexible or fixed. Some of the visitors also engaged in art-related activities such as painting, reading about art and collecting paintings.

Comparing this group of visitors with the WAG group, it was of a higher social class and more highly educated, but roughly comparable in relation to gender, ethnicity, religion and interest and participation in art and art-related activities. Their motivation for visiting was also very similar, but the idea of visiting the art museum in order to have a 'flow' experience was not found in the WAG study.

4.0 Themes from the conversations

The themes that have emerged from the analysis of the data reinforce the results of the WAG study. Nottingham Castle Museum visitors also talked about the value of art and art museum visiting in their social lives and about representational and abstract art. Most of them saw art gallery visiting as a way for them to participate in the practices of art-related communities as peripheral members. A small number of the visitors were artists or wanted to pursue a career as artists. Although there are some variations in the types of strategies they used to interpret the works of art in the Long Gallery, NCM visitors used similar strategies to the ones used by WAG visitors. Hence, they focused on the visual qualities of the works of art; the socio-cultural context of the works of art; and the process of art making. The vast majority of them used the support material provided by the museum to support their views and to make better sense of the exhibits.

5.0 Visitors' interpretive strategies for the works of art

Visitors utilised a wide range of interpretive strategies available to them. In some cases, they used the classic interpretive strategies of formalist art appreciation together with accepted terminology. This helped them analyse and evaluate different elements in the paintings. However, visitors did not always have the specific vocabulary of formalist art appreciation such as tone, composition, form and space.

There are many similarities between this study and the former study at Wolverhampton Art Gallery. However, on the whole, visitors at NCM were more explicit about their ideas and were able to demonstrate a deeper understanding of the artworks when compared with visitors at WAG. As seen from the analysis, this relates to who those visitors were (their biographical profile, prior knowledge, experience, interests, learning style, expectations and plans for the visit). It also relates to whether they chose to be core or peripheral members of the art communities; and whether (and how often) they had access to the tools and institutions of these communities.

6.0 Discussion

This study confirms many of the findings from the first study at Wolverhampton. Similar themes emerged in the conversations and similar interpretive repertoires and strategies were used to make meaning in relation to the art works seen and the visit itself. However, the 15 people we spoke to were, on the whole, of a higher social group and more highly educated than those we spoke to at Wolverhampton. Possibly as result, they had a greater degree of ease in using specialist art vocabulary and a few of them described the experience as going beyond the world of the everyday, as a 'flow' experience. In spite of this, a large number of visitors looked for help from the museum in responding to the art works, and would have liked more help than they found. This research suggests that art museum visitors would welcome increased information about art and artists, and would enjoy discovering multiple ways to respond to art works. This research study opens up the need for increased research work in art museums in Britain.

1.0 The Research Project

1.1 The objectives

This is the second of two pilot projects on the theme of art museums and interpretive communities. The first pilot project has been published as *Making Meaning in Art Museums 1: Visitors' Interpretive Strategies at Wolverhampton Art Gallery* (RCMG 2001). This second project has been funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board, and was carried out in partnership with Nottingham City Museums. The two pilot projects are based on the same theoretical framework which is outlined here, and discussed more fully in the report above[1].

The research questions on which this project is based are:

- What interpretive strategies and repertoires are deployed by art museum visitors?
- Can distinct interpretive communities be identified?
- What are the implications for communication policies within art museums?

The concept of 'interpretive communities' [2], or communities of meaning-making, is influential in media/communication studies and visual culture theory. There are overlaps at a theoretical level with hermeneutics and with constructivist learning theory[3]. References to 'interpretive communities' are emerging in Museum Studies literature[4], but the references remain at an abstract level. No substantive research has been carried out to examine the lived character of the visitor's experience of the art museum. What prior knowledge (of art, art history, museums, or personal experience) do visitors use? Are individual visitors susceptible to being grouped into specific meaning-making communities, and if so, of what kind?

1.2 The research site: Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery

The Long Gallery at Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery (hence forward NCM) was selected as the research site for several reasons. NCM is located in the English East Midlands close to where the first interpretive communities project was carried out (at Wolverhampton Art Gallery in the West Midlands). Hence, it is likely that visitors with similar demographic characteristics might be found in both institutions, thus facilitating comparisons. Nottingham Castle Museum and Wolverhampton Art Gallery have very similar art collections within a broader museum service. Both institutions are located in the city centres and share a strong commitment to accessibility. They both employ a range of means of interpreting art to people of different abilities and background, which includes thematic displays, text, activities and hands-on exhibits. These approaches encourage visitors to utilise a wide range of interpretive strategies.

The building that houses Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery was originally a seventeenth century mansion built to demonstrate the wealth of William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle. It was opened as a municipal museum in 1878. Located at the top of a hill in a large park close to the city centre, the museum houses an art collection of approximately 5,800 contemporary and historic works of art together with collections of decorative art and archaeology. The Castle Museum and Art Gallery is one of the Nottingham City Museums.

1.3 The Long Gallery

The Long Gallery is a Victorian style art gallery located on the first floor of NCM. It displays around eighty 19th and early 20th century paintings as well as contemporary paintings. It has some sculptures and, occasionally, photography and sculptural textiles. Apart from the artwork, there are two touch-screen computer terminals (running the 'A Closer Look' software). This provides additional information about some of the paintings in the Long Gallery and shows work in the collection which is not currently displayed. There is also a designated place for drawing activities.

The Gallery is divided into two sections. The first section focuses around ideas and issues related to the representation of different cultures. The second one is organised around the themes of romantic love, landscapes, myths and legends and famous characters. Although some galleries within NCM are highly innovative in their approach to the content and styles of display, the display style in the Long Gallery is rather more traditional.

The period of the research in the museum (July 2000) was characterised by building works which, following a cliff fall at one side of the museum, necessitated using one of the doors at the back of the building as the main entrance. Visitors were then directed around the building using free-standing directional panels. The overall atmosphere was busy and a bit confused, which may have inhibited some from entering the building from the park, and once having entered, from proceeding to the first floor, where the research project was sited.

2.0 **Methodology**

The methodology used in this study was piloted at Wolverhampton Art Gallery (WAG) in November 1999[5]. Data was collected at Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery over a seven-day period in July 2000. A qualitative approach was taken employing a combination of research methods, including accompanied visits with visitors 'thinking aloud', questionnaires, observation and field notes. In order to analyse and interpret the data, we used a mixture of ideas from the grounded theory methodology[6] and the Miles and Huberman[7] approach. We used computer analysis and team discussion[8] of the data and its significance. We chose an approach that is flexible and takes into account the needs of this particular study and the research setting (the museum).

Single adult visitors were approached as they were entering the Long Gallery at Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery (NCM). In an effort to randomise the sample, every third visitor was selected on busy days. In total, seventeen adult visitors were asked permission to be accompanied during their visit by the RCMG researcher (TM). Fifteen of these accepted. That gives us an acceptance rate of 88.2%. Fifteen completed accompanied visits are included in the analysis.

Visitors were asked to 'think aloud' [9] as they walked around the Long Gallery and to report what they saw, thought and felt about the artworks and the exhibition as a whole. The researcher's role was limited to prompting visitors for further explanation where needed (see Appendix A). This was a pragmatic response to the difficulties of researching the way visitors were thinking, and an approach that took account of our ontological and epistemological positions[10]. Visitors' responses were recorded using a tape recorder and a microphone attached to the visitors' clothes to minimise the background noise. Visitors' pathways through the Long Gallery were determined by visitors themselves. They were free to pick and choose the exhibits and exhibitions they wanted to visit, to determine the pace of the visit and time they wanted to spend at each individual exhibit, as well as the overall time they planned to spend in the Long Gallery. This approach permitted the visitor, rather than the researcher, to initiate and direct conversation.

Two semi-structured questionnaires were used to determine additional information about the visitors; one probed the visitor's agenda for the visit (see Appendix B), and the second addressed issues of demographics and the visitor's level of interest in art (see Appendix C). Questions were either integrated into the visit, or asked at the end of the visit. Questions were asked, for example, on occasions where the visitors themselves touched on a relevant issue or at transitional points such as going up the stairs or moving from one gallery to the next one. These questions enabled the determination of visitors' agendas for the visit, and helped to place their visit to the Long Gallery in relation to their use of the rest of the museum, other exhibitions in the East Midlands area, and other destinations in the UK and abroad.

After the accompanied visit, the researchers gathered field notes related to the visit which included information on the behaviour and movements of the visitors, date and time, length of the visit, route followed and stops made, as well as the researchers' general impressions of each accompanied visit. This type of information placed visitors' verbal reactions to the exhibition in the wider context of the visit. The tape-recordings of the speech data were transcribed to separate files and were imported for analysis into QSR NUD.IST, computer software for qualitative data analysis. Data was analysed for content and themes including the types of interpretations made and information (supporting material) gathered, the topics of the interpretations and information and the extent of interest and knowledge. Based on the above information, each visit was categorized with regards to the interpretive strategies used, the level of experience of art and art institutions, and other information which had been gathered. One significant point to note in relation to this kind of research and data analysis is the amount of time required to process, analyse and display the speech data. This can be up to four or five times longer than the time required to generate the data in the first place. This is a significant factor in planning and costing research projects of this kind, and one of the main reasons why these kinds of projects are unusual.

Where possible the data from this study has been related to that of a small market research study[11] and an evaluation study carried out by NCM staff[12], although the amount of contextual information is limited. A number of more general visitor studies are also referred to. Links have been made, where it is significant, to the first pilot study conducted at Wolverhampton Art Gallery.

The following abbreviations and transcription symbols have been used: M = man, W = woman, I = interviewer, OTHER W = other woman, (r) = reads, (?) = words missing or indecipherable on the tape, (//) =interruption, {word} = researchers' comments. The numbers and letters in parenthesis at the end of visitors' quotes refer to the number of the interview and text number.

3.0 **The Visitors**

3.1 The visitor profile[13]

Our visitor sample consisted of 9 men and 6 women (table 1). This is not a representative sample of the visitors to the Long Gallery at NCM. The Nottingham Galleries Profile of Attenders study showed that Nottingham gallery visitors as a whole have a much stronger female bias than the UK average, and, specifically, that more women than men usually attend Nottingham Castle Museum & Art Gallery (67% female in this study) [14]. An evaluation study carried out in the Long Gallery by NCM staff [15], which showed that 56% of visitors to the exhibition 'Diary of a Victorian Dandy' were female, confirms this female bias. More general data suggests that more women visit museums (and especially art galleries) than men[16].

The sample for this study compares well with that of the previous pilot study, where 11 men and 7 women were accompanied on their visits to Wolverhampton Art Gallery[17].

Men	9
Women	6
Total	15

Table 1
Gender and number of the visitors.

In terms of visitors' age, there were slightly more visitors aged 25-34 and no visitors over 75. There is almost an even spread in the 19-24, 45-54 and 65-74 age groups (table 2). Visitor numbers drop with the 35-44 and 55-64 age groups. The age profile of the visitors in the Nottingham Galleries Profile of Attenders study shows that NCM, in general, attracts more people aged 35-44. General data suggests that there is a peak of museum visitors within this cohort[18]. However, if we look at the Long Gallery study of visitor figures to the 'Diary' exhibition we can see that our sample was not dissimilar. The age breakdown for this exhibition was 22% of visitors aged 20-24, 21% aged 25-34, 14% aged 35-44, 17% aged 45-54, 9% aged 55-64 and 11% over 65.

Comparing this group of visitors to the group in the WAG study, in this previous study there were higher numbers of both older and younger visitors – a much less even spread across the age range than in the NCM group.

19-24	3
25-34	5
35-44	1
45-54	3
55-64	1
65-74	2
75-84	0
Total	15

Table 2
Number of the visitors by age.

In relation to socio-economic group, as Table 3 shows, the vast majority of the visitors who answered this question in our study came from B and C1 groups[19]. There is no detailed comparative data regarding visitor socio-economic profile in the Nottingham Galleries Profile of Attenders study, which refers to employment status only. According to this data, 41% of the NCM visitors are in employment, a large number of NCM visitors are retired (23%) and are students (21%)[20].

It should be noted that the number of visitors in this study is not big enough to draw any general conclusions about the socio-economic background of the Long Gallery visitors. However, this information is useful for the analysis of the interpretive strategies used by these particular visitors that will follow.

Comparing the group at NCM to the visitors we spoke to at WAG, the NCM group as a whole is of a higher socio-economic status. At WAG, there were a greater number of our sample in the C2 group and fewer in the B group.

Status	*Men*	*Women*
B	3	1
C1	4	4
C2	1	0
N/A	1	1
Total	9	6

Table 3
Number of the visitors by socio-economic status.

As table 4 shows, almost half of the visitors had had some type of university education (first or post-graduate degree). To this figure, we should add another two people who were undergraduate students at the time of the interview. One-third of the visitors left full-time education after completing the minimum compulsory level. This sample is more highly educated than the visitors we spoke to at WAG.

The MORI report suggests that the main determinant of museum and gallery visiting seems to be an inquisitive mind and a desire to continue learning. This tends to be linked (but not limited) to levels of education, with those with higher levels of education more likely to visit a decorative/applied and fine art gallery as compared to people with GCSE, 'O' level/CSE or with no formal education[21].

Educational background	
Minimum	5
Stayed on at school	1
Undergraduate degree	4
Postgraduate degree	3
Still in full-time education	2
Total	15

Table 4
Educational background of the visitors.

The vast majority of the visitors in this study described themselves as being white European. One visitor said that she was 'African-Caribbean' (visiting family in the UK) while another one said that she was Asian. The Nottingham Galleries Profile of Attenders study found that white people are over-represented as gallery visitors (92%) compared to the population of Nottingham as a whole. The percentage of white visitors to the Long Gallery 'Diary' exhibition was 78%, with Black visitors[22] at 10% of the total. The NCM sample was similar to the WAG sample in this respect.

Half of the visitors were Christian by faith (table 5). Moreover, all visitors who stated that they did not belong to any religious group said that they had been raised as Christians. There was also a woman who said that she was half Catholic, half Buddhist. Finally, the person who was Muslim was a regular art gallery visitor and was married to a Christian. This means that the vast majority of the respondents were familiar with Christian faith and its symbols. This was also the case at WAG.

Faith	
Church of England	3
Catholic	3
None	5
Born Again Christian	1
Muslim	1
Other	2
Total	15

Table 5
Number of the visitors by faith.

Only one-third of the visitors had acquired a qualification in an art subject (table 6). One of the men was an artist while another one said that he was thinking seriously of becoming professionally involved in art. The woman was doing her first degree in art and had also completed an 'O' level art, GCSE Art and GNVQ Advanced Art Design. The sample at WAG had a greater number of art-related qualifications.

Qualification	*Men*	*Women*
'O' level	1	0
GCSE	1	0
Course/degree	1	1
None	6	5
Total	9	6

Table 6
Level of interest in art: i) qualification

A large number of visitors (table 7) pursued their interest in art by using informal learning resources or by participating in art-related leisure activities. The most common activity was watching television programmes (11 visitors) followed by reading art magazines (3 visitors). A few visitors mentioned the names of the art-related programmes they watched. 'Sister Wendy' and Open University programmes were specifically mentioned. Some visitors who said that they watched an art programme on the television occasionally added that they would have liked to watch more but that there are not any regular art programmes.

One visitor used to be a member of the National Trust and the Historic Houses Association. This particular visitor said that he had a very strong interest in architecture and history. Visiting art galleries, museums and other places was a way to pursue his interest. Another one volunteered regularly at the Brewhouse Yard Museum in Nottingham (and was involved with Victorian past time events and games) and was a member of a women's history group. It was their special passion for history that linked these activities they pursued. Finally, one of the artists said that he occasionally volunteers to install other people's work in art galleries.

Art-related activities	*Reg.*	*Occ.*	*Used to*	*Never*	Total
Magazines	2	-	-	13	15
TV programmes	4	7		4	15
Club	1	-	1	13	15
Volunteer	1	1	-	13	15

Table 7
Level of interest in art: ii) art-related leisure activities

To sum up, in the sample of visitors we spoke to there were slightly more men than women and slightly more people aged 25-34. Most could be categorised as from social classes B and C1. A large number of visitors had acquired a university degree. However, one-third of the visitors had only had minimum education. The vast majority of the visitors were white European and a large number of them were brought up as Christians. Many visitors were interested in art as expressed by their participation in art-related activities (including visiting art galleries, watching art programmes on the television, reading art magazines or having a qualification in art). Roughly one-third of our sample had specialist art knowledge acquired through formal training. In two cases, these training courses led to formal degree in art. The others had a general or little art knowledge.

It is difficult to judge how representative this group of visitors was in relation to the visitors to NCM as a whole, and in relation to visitors to the Long Gallery as there is not sufficient contextual data.

Comparing this group of visitors with the WAG group, it was of a higher social class and more highly educated, but roughly comparable in relation to gender, ethnicity, religion and interest and participation in art and art-related activities.

3.2 Art gallery and museum participation

A series of questions were asked during the visit to determine the following: 1) frequency of visiting NCM, 2) time spent at NCM, 3) museum and art gallery participation in general, 4) motivation for visiting, 5) visit plans and 6) who they visited with.

3.2.1 Frequency of visiting NCM

Regarding the frequency of visit, seven visitors were first-time visitors. Two visitors had visited NCM at least once at some point in the past. A further two visitors said that they had visited occasionally but at least once during the last year. Four visitors had visited regularly, that is more than once during the same period. Three of the regular visitors had visited NCM at least 4 times on average during the last year. The remaining regular visitor visited twice per month (table 8).

The rare, occasional and frequent visitors lived locally while six of the seven first-time visitors[23] lived abroad and one lived in a different area of the UK. Furthermore, two of the regular visitors mentioned that they used to visit the Museum more often in the past when they worked close by. Another one said that he would visit the Long Gallery more regularly if they changed the exhibits periodically. All those who visited rarely or occasionally said they wished they could come more regularly. Also, one of the visitors who visited rarely said that he usually visits NCM gardens during his lunch hour.

Number of visits	*Number of visitors*
First visit	7
Rarely	2
Occasionally	2
Regularly	4

Table 8
Frequency of visiting to NCM in this study

3.2.2 Time spent at the Long Gallery

The average time visitors spent in the exhibition was 43 minutes with a maximum of 75 and a minimum of 15 minutes (table 9). Five visitors spent less than 30 minutes, 7 visitors spent from 31 to 60 minutes and another 3 visitors spent more than 60 minutes at the Long Gallery during their visit to NCM.

Minutes	*Number of visitors*
‹30	5
31-60	7
›61	3

Table 9
Time spent at NCM

3.2.3 Museum and art gallery participation

The visitors we spoke to were, on the whole, visitors to art museums in particular rather than general museum visitors. Slightly more than two-thirds of the visitors said that they preferred art exhibitions to museum exhibitions. Only two visitors said that they visited a large range of heritage venues (including museums, art galleries, stately homes, parks, churches). These two visitors mentioned that their interest in architecture and social history, respectively, motivated them to visit and defined their interpretation of the exhibits. The remaining two visitors said that they visited both museums and art galleries, depending on what is available.

Frequency of participation varied a lot among visitors. Eight visitors said that they visited art galleries between 2-5 times per year, two visited 12 times, another two visited 20 times and one visited up to 60 times per year. The remaining two visitors could not provide an estimate but said that they did not visit as often as they would have liked.

Museum and gallery participation seems to relate to the role museums and galleries played in the social life of the visitors but also to be affected by changing conditions in their personal and professional life, frequency of travel and by the institutions themselves. For instance, some visitors had visited less often lately: for two people this was due to health problems, while another had stopped visiting as often when her children grew older. On the other hand, some visitors had started going to museums and/or art galleries more often for a variety of reasons: one had retired, and another was accompanying her new husband who had a special interest in art. One visitor said that he does not visit art exhibitions as often as he would like because his wife and children were not particularly interested in the subject matter. Hence, as a group they would only visit places that offer different types of exhibitions, such that all family group members could find something of relevance (such as NCM). He would do it on his own when he travels on business. In many cases, the frequency of visiting museums and art galleries seemed to be directly affected by the frequency of travelling in the UK or abroad. The institutions themselves also affected frequency of visiting by having changing temporary exhibitions (five visitors) or iconic exhibits (two visitors). In a couple of cases, seeing a mixture of both new and old exhibitions or exhibits increased the frequency of visiting. An interesting point is that almost two-thirds of the visitors lived locally and also visited museums, art galleries and other places in the area[24]. Furthermore, seven visitors said that they would visit museums and art galleries when they travelled abroad. In fact, three[25] of them mentioned that they had travelled abroad specifically to see an art museum or exhibition.

Apart from art galleries, nine visitors also visited other places where they could find works of art such as churches, sculpture gardens and historic buildings. One visitor said that he often goes to industrial mills while another one mentioned that he visits street artists.

3.2.4 Motivation for visiting

This and the following section present information regarding visitor agendas: motivation for visiting and plans for the visit. The analytical categories used in these sections were developed in previous studies[26]. They enable an analysis of individual visits at two levels: the relationship of the visit to the social life of the visitor and how therefore museum visiting relates to wider socio-cultural frameworks, and how the visit is planned at the level of the individual visitor.

Three categories of motivations were identified in this study. According to frequency of occurrence, these were: place, education/enculturation, and 'flow'. The practical aspects of the visit influenced visitors' decisions to visit but did not determine it. These motivations were not exclusive. The co-occurrence of different motivations shows that the Gallery caters for different aspects of the visitors' social lives[27].

3.2.4.1 Place (14 visitors)

Visiting NCM was on many visitors' 'to do' list when visiting Nottingham. It was perceived as an appropriate representation of the place[28]. Hence, NCM was a place to visit for out-of-town visitors to Nottingham. Twelve visitors also mentioned that they would always visit a museum or an art gallery when they go on a field trip or when they travel abroad. Three of them added that they sometimes go abroad especially to see an art exhibition.

M: It depends where I am you see. It's a case of, if I'm on my own in a different city then I'll go off and actually visit the museum.
I: So that's what you would normally do if you go to a different city?
M: Oh yes.
I: Do you live in Nottingham?
M: No, at the moment I live at Cranwell, it's near Lincoln, but I'm in the forces you see, so I travel round all over the place. And so no matter where I am I'll pop into a museum if I've got the time. (I.11, 164-171)

M: When I went to the States, to Los Angeles, I went on my own to see those galleries actually, particularly.
I: Oh, right, that's quite nice to be able to do that.
M: But in Austria I just happened to, we were in Vienna so we went to the Kunschhistoria, is it.
I: Do you usually do that when you go abroad, try to see art galleries?
M Yes. I go to London quite regularly, I go to London about once every three weeks, go to all the exhibitions, I was at the RA last week. (I.7, 273-281)

The place motivation had a strong local dimension for one visitor. The museum building and its collections have been part of the history of Nottingham. Moreover, many of the paintings depicted Nottingham and its surrounding area.

3.2.4.2 Education/participation (9 visitors)

One of the main reasons for visiting NCM was to learn[29]. Visitors in this category were interested to either learn something specific or to learn in general, or to educate themselves through participating in the practices of the art community.

Visitors with a specific interest in art explicitly stated that they used the resources of NCM as a way to participate in the practices of a different community (e.g. that of the artists or the art museum professionals) through participating in activities produced by those communities. In a couple of cases, this related to visitors' background in art. There was, for example, an artist who was particularly interested in the work of a specific artist[30] exhibited in the Long Gallery. Another one, a woman who was an art student, had a special interest in montage and photography but was also generally interested in art and art history.

W: Well I'm just going to university now, so I'm going into fine art, print-making. So a lot of the stuff in there is kind of interesting because there's some etching in there and litho printing and stuff. So kind of like interested a bit in that, it's not my style but I kind of appreciate it, because it's history of what I'm doing so I find it interesting. But I like this kind of stuff because it's, I like montage and lettering in artwork and … (I.3, 23-29).

One more visitor mentioned that he had been thinking of becoming professionally involved in art. He visited NCM regularly and used the paintings as a reference for his own work. He was involved in a slow process which involved being a 'peripheral' member of the community of artists until becoming a full member, and the museum visit was part of this process.

M: Yes that's right. I mean it's, well it's interesting. I try to actually look at the painting itself as well, so I am forever looking at well improving my own techniques really, and if I look at other people's work I can try and figure out from there how things were done. Like in this painting here, the tones, the lighting and basically how it's done using different hues and things. (I.6, 29-34)

NCM with its diverse collections also attracted people who had a specific or general interest in history, social history and architecture.

M: Well, I tend to look around that side of things, you know, because I'm interested in history, so I tend to see that more so, and any pictures maybe got views and buildings, you know architecturally speaking and that, have a look at those, but usually it's very quick. (I.8, 36-40)

Another woman, referring to the time when she had first come to England from Malaysia when her children were young, said that visiting art galleries – especially on a guided tour – was a way for the children and herself to learn English and to learn about the culture.

3.2.4.3 'Flow' (3 visitors)

This is a category used to describe a type of motivation similar to the 'flow experience' as defined by Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1991), and Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson (1995)[31]. According to them (Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson 1995:69), a 'flow experience' is 'a common experiential state [which] characterizes situations in which people are willing to invest psychic energy in tasks for which extrinsic rewards are absent'. In 'flow experience' people are motivated by the activity itself. The key to 'flow' activities is the growth of the self. When an individual is in 'flow', he or she loses the sense of time and sense of self. Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson (1995) have distinguished four general characteristics of activities that produce 'flow': having 'clear goals and appropriate rules', 'immediate and unambiguous feedback' and 'challenges and skills [that] are well matched'.

Three visitors said that one of the reasons for visiting was the fact that going to an art exhibition is an experience that puts you in a completely different state of mind. 'It takes you away from the city', it enables you 'to relax', 'to lose yourself'. It 's 'in complete contrast' to all everyday activities. All three visitors were frequent art gallery visitors.

3.2.4.4 Practical considerations (4 visitors)

Visitors needed to plan the practical side of their visit as well. Among the things they had to consider were external factors such as weather conditions, entrance fee, transportation, finding the place and time availability. Visitors were more likely to visit NCM when they had time available and when the weather was bad.

3.2.5 Visit plans

This refers to how visitors planned their movements through the exhibition space and relates to visitors' pre-visit agenda. Three categories were identified: open, flexible and fixed plans. The same categories of visit plans were identified at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery study as well. The idea that visitors make specific plans for their visit was originally suggested by Moussouri (1997) in her doctoral research on family agendas in hands-on museums. Visit plans are affected by frequency of visiting a specific museum or museums and galleries in general and by the site itself. A follow-up study (Falk, Moussouri and Coulson 1998) showed that visitors with fixed plans (or 'focused strategy') demonstrated significant gains in their overall understanding of a topic and spent more time in the exhibition as compared to visitors with open or flexible plans[32].

3.2.5.1 Open plans (5 visitors)

This category included four first time visitors and another one who had visited NCM once in the past. They all wanted to 'see it all'[33]. Although they had arrived with certain expectations about what they might find there (most of them were frequent art gallery visitors) and had their own preferences, they were relatively open to what NCM had to offer. They were making their plans as they went along. Hence, the subject-matter and the lay-out of the exhibitions affected these visitors' plans. All five visitors in this category referred to the fact the Long Gallery was particularly inviting as it was spacious and bright. Another visitor referred to the size and shape of the paintings in the Long Gallery as being particularly inviting.

3.2.5.2 Flexible plans (5 visitors)

This category included five visitors who had been to NCM at least once in the past and who were familiar with the place. Although they had more specific ideas about what they might see and do, their plans were quite flexible. Hence, they would revise them during the visit if there were any new exhibits that attracted their interest. A couple of visitors in this category mentioned that part of their visit plans was to see the temporary exhibition on carnival which was situated next to the Long Gallery.

3.2.5.3 Fixed plans (5 visitors)

This category included five visitors (four regular visitors to NCM and a 'rare' visitor who none-the-less visited other art galleries in general frequently) who knew the museum well. They had all planned their visit in advance. Some of them had planned to see the carnival exhibition as well. However, they would change their plans to see a new exhibition/exhibit if available. One visitor said that he can be eclectic about what he sees because he has been many times before and knows the place. However, he thought that when one visits for the first time one may spend more time in the NCM.

3.2.6 Who they visited with

Seven visitors mentioned that they enjoy visiting art galleries alone. Some of them added that, even when they visit with family and friends, they do it at their own pace and they meet up later. All of them were frequent art gallery visitors and were not willing to negotiate their personal agenda for the visit. However, being with others seemed to affect the pace of the visit, the way the exhibition was navigated, the visit plans[34], the time spent at individual exhibits and the total time spent in the gallery.

It seems that participating in the art community was perceived as something one does on one's own. This was particularly the case for those visitors with a deeper (or expert-like) understanding of art. Of particular interest here is the comment made by the art student when she was asked to 'think aloud'. She thought it would be hard to do as she always visits art galleries on her own and is not used to 'speaking out loud'. Although she had no problem doing that eventually, it was interesting to hear that coming from a person who was being trained to understand, evaluate and talk about art[35]. Another visitor said that, although sharing the experience with her husband was an important part of the visit, it was something they did after the visit. Hence, even when they visited together, they preferred to go to different galleries and share their thoughts and feelings later when they had a break or at home.

3.3 Other leisure activities

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

Reading (including reading about art):	5 visitors
Painting:	5 visitors
Cultural (opera, theatre):	2 visitors
TV & the press:	2 visitors
Physical activities:	2 visitors
Visiting the library:	1 visitor
Attending adult course:	1 visitor
Collecting paintings:	1 visitor

3.4 Summary

With reference to our sample, NCM attracted many first time visitors from out of town. Slightly less than one-third of the visitors we spoke to visited regularly. All of them lived locally. All visitors (first time, 'rare', occasional and regular NCM visitors) said that they visited other venues as well, but slightly more than two-thirds of the sample preferred art exhibitions to museum exhibitions. Motivation for visiting was related to place, education/enculturation and 'flow' but also related to practical issues. Hence, visiting NCM seemed to meet a number of visitors' needs, motivations and expectations. Depending on how frequently they visited NCM, how 'experienced' they were as art gallery visitors and what was on offer on the day of the visit, visitors' plans for the visit could be either open, flexible or fixed. Some of the visitors also engaged in art-related activities such as painting, reading about art and collecting paintings.

4.0 Themes from the Conversations

Visitors talked not only about specific works of art but also about their ideas about art in general. These comments were triggered by specific art works and arose spontaneously during the visit.

From the analysis of the speech data two major themes emerged:
1) representational and abstract art and 2) the value of art in visitors' lives.

4.1. Representational and abstract art (12 out of 15 visitors)

A large number of visitors expressed their preference for representational and/or abstract art[36]. In some cases, particularly strong feelings were expressed. Comments referred to the subject matter (or lack of it in the case of abstract art) and the visual qualities of the works.

Four visitors expressed a very strong preference for representational art and pointed out that they disliked abstract art.

W: As I say a lot of these beautiful paintings, I like paintings so you can relate to exactly what they are without getting all confused and feeling like an idiot because you haven't quite caught on, you know what I mean. … I've not quite come up to the modern art. (l.5, 98-101, 144)

M: That painting, well it doesn't tell me anything.
I: Why do you think that is?
M: Well I think it's, where can we start. It's messy. It doesn't show what the artist wanted to put in the work to show you the real detail of the message he's telling you or of the picture he wants to show you. It is called (r) *The Moorish Wall*, I did see something like a wall here, but this is all colour and dark. It only leaves you to speculate about what it's about, and I hate that, when people tell you only half the message and then say well figure it out. So come on.
I: So you're not very much into modern art.
M: No. I'm more into detail. (l.14, 207-233)

Visitors saw representational art as being more accessible to them for two reasons. It presents the world as they see it, with all its detail and, hence, the story or the message it communicates is very clear. Visitors said that they found it easier to understand representational works of art as they are 'realistic', 'like a photograph' and that involves 'more skill' and 'talent' to produce. Abstract art, on the other hand, is hard to relate to and decipher as 'there's no story to it', 'it means nothing, it's just blodges'. A couple of visitors said that 'even a child could do it'. Another visitor (a communication graduate) said that it should be clear what the artist wants to communicate. He does not like it when the artist 'leaves you to speculate about what it is about'. Finally, one visitor took it a step further and said that some abstract art does not justify being in a museum.

An interesting point is that lack of a clear subject-matter bothered visitors the most about abstract art. A couple of them mentioned that they would look at abstract works of art under certain conditions: when the painting has a subject to which they can relate and when the colours are bright and vibrant.

M: (r) *Requiem for Barbara I-IV*. It doesn't really appeal to me, because this is actually going into the realms of abstract although it's actually not.
I: What makes you say that it's abstract but not quite.
M: Well the thing is you can actually definitely tell that there are figurines there, and it's like there you can tell that there are three ravens or blackbirds, but when it goes into the abstract side, you can't see what it's about, it's just a case of it's a face and then with, I don't know, scribbles round the outside, so what the point of the picture is, you can't see.
I: So although you can see that it's about some kind of figures, you cannot actually tell what they are.
M: There's no story to it. There's like that one is actually red there, this one's three blackbirds, that one looks like a bird having a sleep, and that one, well it's just, I don't know. Unless this is supposed to mean something I don't know. (l.11, 374-389)

Visitors seemed to respond to abstract art using criteria relevant to the representational art that they found more familiar. In their effort to understand modern painting, visitors used the texts provided by the staff. In the vast majority of the cases, labels were very short and only provided the name of the artist, the title of the work, and the year it was made. This was not the type of information that would help this category of visitors to gain an understanding of the work.

Three visitors expressed a strong preference for abstract art. However, two of them said that they could also appreciate the skill put into representational art.

W: This {*'Jewish Refugee'*} is strange as well. It looks like a photograph.
I: Why do you think it looks like a photograph?
W: The details are very well reproduced, each fold on her scarf is well produced. Even the texture of her scarf. I think it's well done but I don't like it. It attracted my attention. I just wouldn't put it in my living room.
I: What kind of paintings would you put in your living room.
W: I like abstract painting as well, I don't like very much portraits and figurative paintings. (I.15, 55-66)

Later during the visit she added:

W: Yes I don't like this kind of painting very much.
I: You don't like the older kind of paintings. Why is that?
W: It's like they're all the same, all the colours are always the same, the frames are always the same, the scenes which are described are usually the same, you know, portraits or hunting scenes, or landscapes. I don't deny the skill it requires, the details, I mean it's amazing, I can't imagine how the time it takes to reproduce the difference of colours the details, yes. Especially when you remember how man used to paint in the middle ages, where all things were dis-proportioned and you see this and it's a big step. Because when I see all these paintings, I feel like all the women and all men look the same, like they have a face which is particular to this period, which actually is the way they're painted I think, which is more particular rather than their faces, like they're all white, they all have these you know red cheeks and pinkish lips. (I.15, 129-145)

One-third of the visitors said that they could appreciate both representational and abstract art for different reasons. They seemed to be able to evaluate each work of art and appreciate it for what it is.

M: Well it's {*'Hercules'*} almost like a photograph isn't it.
I: Do you like paintings like that that look almost like a photograph?
M: Yes but I like what do you call it, impressionists and things like that.
I: So not just this type of painting?
M: I either like a painting or I don't.
I: Right so you don't like any particular type of painting.
M: I like a lot of Salvador Dali, that type of painting. (I.12, 90-103)

M: I appreciate it for different reasons. I appreciate that sort of painting {*'Jewish Refugee'*} more for the skill than what it actually perhaps says to me. I just like the fact that it's just you know an immaculate painting, and it's captured an emotion and expression, but I could take more from modern art, because I think you can read more things into modern art, you know.
I: Oh right, like what kind of things.
M: Probably a lot more about society now, I mean because you can only sort of relate to where you're living at this moment in time, you know you don't really know what that artist was thinking about at the time or what was happening that day to him, or what inspired him or what things you know. But with an artist that's still alive and is producing work you know you come from a similar environment and you know what stimulates you and you know you can sort of perhaps get more into it. The sort of paintings you know where they're long gone the artist, you just sort of think, you just appreciate it for what it is, more. Not necessarily as a product of the time. You don't really place it in a moment of time. (I.4, 88-109)

There were no differences in preference for representational or abstract art in relation to gender, socio-economic background[37], ethnicity or religion. However, it was more likely for people with minimum education to show a preference for representational art. It was also more likely for people of the 18-24 and 25-34 age groups to express a preference for abstract art or an appreciation for both types of works of art. Being able to appreciate both types of work also seemed to be related to having a strong and active interest in art.

4.2 The value of art in everyday life (12 out of 15 visitors)

Many visitors commented on the significance of producing art and experiencing it. Their comments referred to particular works exhibited in the Long Gallery or to previous encounters with art. Visiting an art exhibition was described as a multi-faceted experience. It can be educational or participatory; an identity-based or community-based experience; and an aesthetic, challenging and inspirational experience. Visitors made multiple responses.

Participating in art-related activities gave five visitors the opportunity to participate in the practices of the art community either as core members or peripheral members. There were two artists (a painter and an art student) who were renewing their membership and further developing their mastery of participation in the community of artists. One of them was also thinking of becoming a member of the community of museum professionals since he had recently applied for a museum job. The other one mentioned that that her prior experience of art through visiting art galleries had inspired her to become an artist:

W: … because they {artworks} inspire you. Even just looking at other people's artwork in books, it's inspiring, it gives you the urge to go and do something yourself. (I.3, 272-274)

Another two visitors mentioned that they drew as a hobby. Further, one of them was seriously considering becoming an artist. Visiting art galleries was a way to participate in the practices and the institutions of the art-based communities and to use the Gallery resources for further developing his skills and knowledge.

Art relates to who we are both individually and collectively. Five visitors referred to art as an identity-based experience:

W: Mmm, *God*, that is (r) *God of the Byways*, Shanti Panchal.
I: Is it the name of the artist that you're interested in?
W: I read that *God of the Byways*, then I want to know who drew it isn't it, it's quite normal, it's like an introduction, it's silly to know that and you don't know who because this is done by an Indian man, because this must be an Indian God, I knew it is Indian God, it's in Malaysia because look they've got Indians you know, so this is done by an Indian man, *God of the Byways*, and it also shows that not only the West can only draw. Everybody in the world, every race can draw, might be because I'm a different race, so I'm happy if I see a different name isn't it. (I.2, 19-29)

Art was seen by 2 visitors as relating to their everyday life and to the society that produces it:

M: … there was this picture in the paper the other day, the Myra Hindley, did you see it in the paper, someone's done, it's the classic picture of Myra Hindley when she was first arrested in the sixties, and it's got childrens' handprints on it, and it's obviously just done to shock, but it does shock a lot of people I suppose, from the very nature of it. But, then again at the end of the day you see that image time after time, and I mean what's the difference between that image being on a wall in an art gallery, not an image being in the paper, you know it's not like I suppose they call it exploiting, but it's not really. Again it's just reflecting back into society isn't it, what's been going on and things like that, so I don't understand how people can get really shocked by it. The shock should come from what has actually happened not the fact that someone's representing that person. (I.4, 136-148)

Three visitors said that art is an aesthetic experience which related to their idea of beauty. This also links to comments made by another three visitors who described visiting art museums as a 'flow' experience, as something that mentally takes you in a different time and space. Finally, two visitors referred to art (contemporary art, in particular) as a challenging or thought-provoking experience. They talked about the ability of artwork to raise and deal with contemporary issues and to challenge people's views.

Slightly under half of the visitors talked about their first or early experiences with art and how they had developed an interest in art. In the vast majority of the cases, visitors' early art experiences included visits to art galleries.

4.3 Summary

A large number of NCM visitors had developed a special interest and knowledge in art as a result of participating in art institutions or art-based communities. Some had enrolled in courses in formal educational institutions. Others had been involved in less formal activities such as visiting art galleries, watching art programmes on the TV or reading about art. They had all found different ways of developing their skills and knowledge in art. At the same time, going through these other learning processes provided them with ways of thinking and talking about, understanding and evaluating artworks, which they could use during the museum visit. This process also transformed their membership in the communities of art. As a result, some of them became artists (full members) while some others opted to stay peripheral members. However, they were all able to use 'tools' or interpretive strategies available to these communities. Although some of these strategies were individual, the fact that visitors expressed common views about their understanding of different types of art and the value of art in their lives demonstrates that there are also shared interpretive strategies.

This is in agreement with findings in the WAG study where a large number of visitors had also developed a special interest in art and in the practices of art-related communities. However, in the WAG study half of the visitors had developed their interest in art beyond school as they had only completed the compulsory level. Both in the NCM and in the WAG study visitors compared representational to abstract art. Four visitors in this study expressed a very strong preference for representational art and pointed out that they disliked abstract art. The WAG visitors in the same category also had a similarly strong reaction. In both studies, visitors saw representational art as being more accessible to them for two reasons. Representational art presents the world 'as we see it' and the message it communicates is very clear to non-specialists. However, it was more likely for people with minimum education to show a preference for representational art. It was also more likely for people of the 18-24 and 25-34 age groups to express a preference for abstract art or an appreciation for both types of works of art. Being able to appreciate both types of work also seemed to be related to having a strong and active interest in art. In the WAG study, a preference for representational art seemed to be related to age (66+ group) while the ability to appreciate both kinds of work seemed to be related to having an active interest in art.

5.0 Visitors' Interpretive Strategies for the Works of Art

This section discusses the specific interpretive strategies visitors used during their visit to the Long Gallery. It should be noted that all visitors but one also visited the North Hall (the stair-case next to the Long Gallery). However, he was not interested in seeing any of the paintings exhibited there. Furthermore, all visitors looked at the paintings only at the Long Gallery, and not at the few sculptures. No one used – or even looked at - the computer interactive or the drawing area. Hence, the interpretive strategies visitors used refer to paintings only.

Visitors to the Long Gallery reacted to the visual experience of the Long Gallery in one of two ways: either interpreting their visual experience directly through asking questions and making statements, or seeking additional information through reading labels, interpretive panels, gallery titles and other support material available to them. The vast majority of visitors' comments focused on the following three themes: the visual qualities of the works of art; the socio-cultural context of the works of art; and the processes of art making. The vast majority of the visitors used at least some of the support material provided by the Gallery. These same strategies were observed in the WAG study.

Each of the above three themes that arose from visitors' comments consisted of a number of topics around which visitors' ideas, thoughts and feelings about what they saw and experienced revolved. The categories of both themes and topics constitute the interpretive strategies visitors used to make sense of their experience. They represent visitors' attempt to put their visual experience into words and to make sense of it by capitalising on the visual 'clues' available and by using their prior knowledge and experiences. Visitors did not always have the specific vocabulary of formalist art appreciation such as tone, composition, form and space. However, visitors' efforts to discuss paintings in these terms is significant as it suggests a readiness on the part of the visitors to learn more about those accepted interpretive strategies that are generally used by art experts. This expert discourse is itself culturally inflected.

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

5.1 Visual analysis

This theme consists of five topics that relate to the analysis of the pictorial qualities of the paintings exhibited in the Long Gallery. Allowing for multiple responses, the topics were: colour, composition, space, tone and form.

5.1.1 Colour (11 out of 15 visitors)

Over two-thirds of the visitors made specific comments about the colours in the paintings they saw. The visitors in this study made only brief comments about the colours. It was just one of the categories they referred to in their interpretation of a painting. The vast majority of the comments visitors made referred to specific qualities of colour such as contrast, the degree of brightness and hue:

M: {*'African Girl No 2*'} I just like the colours, I think the colours are great on the skin, the skin tones. It's interesting, the background, it looks like an actual artist's studio rather than, not put her in a setting. … The woman's face, it's very human, yes it's good I like that. It's quite vibrant as well, although it's not like especially bright, I mean the green's about the brightest bit, but it's still sort of vibrant even though it's dullish colours, sort of browns and greys and things like that. (I.4, 162-179)

M: … like in this painting here {*'Love's Oracle*'}, the tones, the lighting and basically how it's done using different hues and things. (I.6, 33-34)

M: {*'The Israelites Led by the Pillar of Light'*} It's a nice picture isn't it.
I: So what do you like about it in particular?
M: It's the contrast between very dark colour there, where you've obviously got the sunset going down or coming up, one of the two, and then you've got there where there's very bright and there's a lot of detail. So it's a case of there you've got the sky, you've got the atmosphere of the sun going down or up, and then there you've got that brilliant light and then you can see all the detail. I suppose that always reminds me of one of the first pictures that I ever bought. (I.11, 2-10)

The latter quote is also a good example of visitors' effort to describe how different colours are made to work together in order to portray an image. This enabled them to explore the artwork more fully and make sense of it. In total, four visitors talked about the ability of colours to convey certain feelings or to make one feel part of the atmosphere.

Another four visitors talked about the symbolic use of colours and how it is used in paintings:

W: {*'Requiem for Barbara IV'*} Except for that one, it's red. Yes there's a lot of red and black which suggests to me a bit of anger or perhaps fear, because they look fearful, they look scary, with the red writing as well on the black. (I.3, 177-180)

W: Perhaps the character is kind of out of place, because the background seems to belong to a western culture, whereas he represents a rather eastern culture.
I: So what is it about the background that represents a western culture?
W: The colours, you know the red and the golden colours as well as you know. (I.15, 25-30)

On average each visitor talked about the colours in six paintings (minimum 1 and maximum 12 paintings).

There were no differences in those who expressed a general interest in colour in relation to gender, age, socio-economic background, education, ethnicity, religion or interest in art. However, the ability to talk about and understand how colour can be used to represent and communicate ideas and feelings, and the use of a formal vocabulary to discuss colour seemed to relate to education, socio-economic background (B and C1 groups) and interest in art.

Similar demographic findings were reported in the WAG study. However, where many of the visitors to WAG mentioned colour in a descriptive way ('There are red and green colours in the painting' or 'I like the colours in this painting'), the comments made by visitors to NCM focused more on the qualities of colour (contrast, brightness, hue).

5.1.2 Composition (8 out of 15 visitors)

Eight visitors commented on how the subject of a painting is organised to make it an effective picture. Their comments did not provide a detailed analysis of all the factors involved in making an effective composition.

W: I like that. (r) *Tam O'Shanter*. Yes I have the feeling that it's something like action you know moving, that's what is on the picture. It's maybe also the you know, the horse you can see how he is running or jumping or something.
I: Which part of the horse tells you that it's (//)
W: (//) Oh right, you can see it's not jumping, the horse is like going forwards, and you can see the arrow through his (?). And also the sky is like something is going on you know, that is not empty sky or something, there is cloud. He has some mission I think important, quick, or escaping, who knows. (I.1, 121-132)

M: {'*View of Nottingham*'} Yes I like the texturing on that, it's very well done and I also like the way the clouds have been done in the sky, it's not too bold, but it stands out at the same time. Again with the tones. I think it's a piece that's very well done. So even on, it's got the perspective right here, because where we've got the cloud, the sun's obviously shining on this side, because we've got a shadow cast on the ground over such a great area here. (I.6, 138-146)

The latter quote is a good example of the way the visitor uses his understanding of form, tone and the arrangement of space to describe how all of them create an effective composition.

Three visitors referred to the artist's role in organising his or her subject. Two of them particularly mentioned techniques that are used by artists in different periods in order to achieve more effective compositions. Here is what they said:

M: There is a painting, a very well known painting by Millais, the pre-Raphaelite painter which is of a rainbow like that, it's in the Tate actually. I forget the title, but it's the idea of a beautiful rainbow like that, and there's a blind girl in that position there and of course the point of the painting is that the blind girl can't see the rainbow, can't see the beauties of nature, and this contrast between, she's looking up at the rainbow you see, but she can't see it, and I mean that's what that brings to mind to me, that this painter is using the same motif of the rainbow, and little children presumably enjoying the rainbow, enjoying nature. They can see it. I don't know, but it's very much in this pre-Raphaelite style, but a good deal, '62. (l.7, 213-222)

M: {'*Golden Prospects*'} It hasn't really got a special message I guess. It's more that it's, if you look at it, it's quite magnificently painted, a lot of detail, you can see it's very nice, that the main object, the children sitting on the rock, are very detailed and sharp, but if you go right behind it, it's out of focus, that's a very beautiful technique used to blur the less important parts of the painting. ... When I study we had a part called imagery in communication, and they told you about how certain elements make our brain think it sees certain things.
I: Right, so did you look at paintings.
M: Paintings and images, icons, simple figures, anything just to show you how things that are next to each other, are usually perceived as forming one element, one line, it's just like the blurring, if it's blurred you're brain thinks well then it's farther away, because it's not sharp, so that's (?) it's quite funny if you see that. That's quite difficult because that is closer to us than the part of there, and what he does there he makes it even lighter, so there's even more fog so that makes you think that's even further away, but if you choose the wrong colour I guess, if you make it too light or a little bit too colourful, then you bring, it gets conflicting because it says well if that connects to that, why is that lighter than that, and then the trick fails and then you think oh that's not beautiful. That's a possibility. (l.14, 155-178)

Visitors' ability to talk about the composition of a painting did not seem to be related to age, gender and religion. However, visitors from B and C1 groups, with a university degree and an art qualification were more likely to be interested in the composition of a painting.

5.1.3 Space (6 out of 15 visitors)

Slightly more than one-third of the visitors talked about the creation of a sense of three-dimensional space in some of the paintings they looked at. What is particularly interesting is that all of them used formal terms to describe it such as 'proportions', 'scale', 'middle distance', 'three-dimensions' and 'panoramic'. The following examples look at how two visitors described the creation of space in the same painting:

M: {'*The Rainbow*'} I suppose it's got a lot of depth hasn't it. Quite panoramic. (l.12, 237)

M: {'*The Rainbow*'} It's a case of I haven't been on the hills and done a lot of hill walking. You look at the background and where it's got this, there's no-one near the mountains, that looks very realistic, when you look at the hills in the middle distance, they don't really look realistic. It's a case of it seems to be lost from one to the other. And then as it gets closer, as it gets to more fine detail, I think it's actually lost again, but when you get to that bit there, the figurines, that is actually nice, it seems to be focused on that bit there that the snow-tipped mountains, and then the brook there.
I: Oh I see, so you think that the emphasis is to the right side?
M: Yes there seems to be more on that bit. And it's like the trees there, that's all in very clear detail, and it seems to be the focus is actually is that bit there, or when you look across that way, well there's nothing. All your attention is actually drawn in that one area.
I: What makes you focus there?
M: Well the colours for one and when you look everywhere else it's really a very bland picture, if you took the figurines out you'd walk straight past it. So it's the figurines that draw your attention in and the colour on the figurines itself. And then from there your eyes actually drift on to the sheep, and then from there it doesn't really go anywhere, except you start searching around in the picture for what else is there, and the only thing that draws your attention is the mountains.

I: Yes on the left and the right.
M: Yes and everything else in the middle is sort of very sort of, I wouldn't say bland, but there's not a lot going on there. (I.11, 57-83)

This is also a good example of how the visitor thinks colour and the way the painting is composed can create a three-dimensional space.

Once again an understanding of how space is created in paintings does not seem to be affected by gender or religion. However, there is some evidence that it could be affected by age[38], socio-economic background (B and C1 groups), education (university degree) and, in particular, art qualifications or a strong interest in art.

5.1.4 Tone (5 out of 15 visitors)

Five visitors talked about the contrast between light and shade in a small number of the paintings they looked at. Only one of them used the term 'tone'. However, all of them made brief comments:

M: But those paintings really are incredible to behold, they really are marvellous. Especially with light and shade and darkness and that, you know he seemed to be a master of getting you know light. (I.8, 144-145)

M: {'*Homer*'} Oh this is very nice too.
I: What is it that you like about it in particular?
M: Use of lighting, they are sitting around Homer and he's singing and because they are, yes well in the place where the action is happening of course, there's all the sun and the light is centred around it, the rest is quite darker. He is singing the Iliad and I think he is writing it down probably. Because there's light there too. So he's singing the words and the story, yes I think it's connected very much. And it's of course a beautiful view of Athens with the Acropolis. Details as well. Just look at the loosely discarded twig and small lizard over there, somebody's sitting over there as well. (I.14, 429-238)

According to visitors, tone could be used to express emotions, to show what is important in a painting (what the main message is), to show spiritual tension and to create an atmosphere.

The ability to appreciate the different uses of tone seemed to be affected by socio-economic background, age and an interest in art.

5.1.5 Form (4 out of 15 visitors)

This theme related to the ability of specific paintings to convey an illusionary sense of solidity. Visitors talked about the sense of reality and physicality of the images produced:

W: {'*African Girl*'} Yes I like this black woman, she looks like she's made of wood. On her knees and, yes. (I.15, 103-104)

M: {'*Industrial Panorama*'} It's like the brushwork isn't it, it's a case of you can see it's got texture to it. (I.11, 522-423)

Although they did not use the term 'form', their understanding of the concept seemed to be quite deep.

Being able to appreciate the creation of form in paintings did not seem to relate to age, gender, education, religion or ethnic background. There is some evidence that it is related to socio-economic background and a strong interest in art.

5.1.6 Discussion

During their visit, visitors had the opportunity to make use of the resources provided by the art museum, and to choose to use their own combinations of the interpretive strategies available to them. This choice was affected by who those visitors were, their identity and background.

It seems that visitors in this study were better able to use formalist art terms as part of a visual analysis than were the visitors in the WAG study, who appeared to demonstrate a less developed ability to combine and manage formalist art terms. The NCM visitors showed a deeper understanding of how the visual qualities of a painting are combined to convey feelings, thoughts, attitudes, beliefs and meanings, and this was especially clear in relation to colour. This understanding enhanced the experience of visitors and enabled their increased participation in the communities of practice that are represented by NCM.

However, a close look at the speech data shows that only a small number of visitors were able to employ all or most of the formal qualities in their visual analysis of the paintings. This ability seemed to be closely related to a strong and active interest in art which had been (and, through the visit to the art museum, continued to be) developed through formal and/or informal participation in different practices and communities related to art and its institutions. These visitors could be described as being part of the same interpretive communities as are represented by art museums. But there were also many visitors who lacked the strategies they needed to assess and respond to the paintings. These visitors were in search of ways of obtaining access to the practices and strategies of the interpretive communities represented by NCM.

5.2 Socio-cultural context

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

5.2.1. Subject-matter

In addition to the visual qualities of the paintings, visitors' interpretations also focused on the subject. This strategy was important in the meaning-making process as it allowed visitors to get to know the paintings in a deeper way. It has to be stressed that visitors did not see the subject and the visual qualities – or the technical process of art making for that matter – as separate entities. They saw all three of them as a whole where each one of them enhanced the other while all of them together enhanced visitors' understanding and experience. The more a visitor was able to explore and talk about the different characteristics of a work of art the more layers of meaning he or she was able to discover.

Visitors used different approaches to explore the subject-matter which did not necessarily correspond to the type of scenes depicted or to how an art historian, for example, would approach the same issue. However, more than two-thirds of the visitors used specialised terms to refer to the subject of some of the paintings. These subjects, all of which happened to be 'narrative' ones, were: 'religious' (8 visitors), 'historical' or 'epic' (7 visitors) and 'mythological' or 'fantasy' (3 visitors). Another four visitors used the term 'abstract' to refer to the subject (or the lack of it) of some of the paintings. Slightly less than two-thirds of the visitors used classic interpretive strategies of formalist art appreciation to refer to the subject of specific paintings:

W: {'*The Israelites*'} Well it's quite, it's kind of like a thought of like fantasy or beliefs, someone's belief rather than being the real thing, like whoever's painted this, they've not painted it because it's actually happened, but it's probably something they've wanted to like happen, or that's their belief, they're religious, and they've done it out of that thought or that feeling, not that it's actually happened. Because some artists around other classical artists, there were some that did like, I should know all the words really, this like classicalism and romanticism and like some did like romanticism where it was all romantic and fantasy and you know it was all like that, like the cupids with the bows and arrows, like flying in the sky, it was all you know like that, and then some did the real stuff, where they painted ambassadors and you know queens and kings. (l.3, 415-427)

M: {*'Bosnian Harvest'*} Well it's sort of neo-realist, a bit like Lucien Freud, but it isn't one is it, I don't know who he is, but it's ... Well looking at it you think of painters like Lucien Freud, it's the same sort of tradition, very sort of realist, it's not abstract, it's telling a story, in this case a very brutal story and people like Bacon and Freud and (?)bach, they're sort of working in that tradition, very sort of, very strong brush strokes and very sort of, you can see the brush strokes. Which is probably appropriate for the subject, isn't it. (l.7, 55-69)

Being able to use these specific strategies seemed to be related to education (university degree), socio-economic background but, above all, formal or informal art training and having a special interest in art.

Whether they used formalist art terminology or not, all visitors referred to the subject-matter of the works of art using one or more of the following strategies: the telling of a story about what they saw; the description of a scene; the identification of figures in a scene; the depiction of movement in a scene; and reading the message they thought the paintings were trying to communicate. A large number of the Long Gallery visitors either made up a story or/and interpreted what the underlying message was. All five strategies used required a certain level of interpretation and utilisation of the prior knowledge and experiences (especially but not exclusively visual experiences) of the visitors.

Although no clear trends seem to emerge, there is some evidence that the ability to use a combination of strategies seemed to be related to religion. This was especially the case where a combination of strategies were used that included telling a story based on historical or cultural information, interpreting the message and interpreting the message of themed displays. The ability to use a combination of strategies also seemed to be related to having a strong interest in art and art training as well as to being a frequent art gallery visitor.

Visitors in the WAG study also focused on the same narrative subjects and used the same interpretive strategies, with the exception of the depiction of movement. However, the visitors to NCM seemed more adept at finding a story and a message in the paintings.

The following sections present the strategies used by the NCM visitors in more detail.

5.2.1.1 Story-making (13 out of 15 visitors)

A number of patterns seemed to emerge in this category. Visitors made up stories that involved the characters in the works of art through projecting intentions and feelings into the picture; they analysed or tried to imagine the history behind the subject presented; and analysed the scene or guessed what would happen next. In many cases, visitors used a combination of the above possibilities in the analysis of different paintings or of the same painting. Visitors used their prior knowledge, prior experiences and personal interests as well as elements in the paintings (such as the use of symbols) to make up and support the stories they told. Another important factor for the kind of stories visitors told seemed to be the expectations some of them had of what they would find in the Long Gallery. Most of these stories were relatively long.

Eight visitors constructed stories about the thoughts, feelings, attitude or motives of the human figures presented in the paintings. A large number of visitors also analysed the subject in terms of 'what happens now' and 'what will happen next', turning the painting into a narrative. The vast majority of visitors in this category consistently applied this strategy to interpret the paintings they saw. The following quote combines both strategies:

M: {*'Mary, Queen of Scots'*} Well seeing the picture at first, you see this person, he's just seen a ghost, jumping out very much as well being led somewhere, and if you look at the label, she's of course being led to her execution. It's quite clear. It's a very strong image of her and what's happening to her. She's looking at the (?) just looking at the other side and not looking directly, so that's quite strong, making her come out of the picture. Moving on to her face at the last moment of course. With the cross, wearing the cross. (l.14, 6-13)

W: {*'Portrait of Eleanor Francis Dixie'*} Look at this how it's dressed, yes.
I: So the first thing you notice is her dress, the way she's dressed?
W: No, no the way it looks, it might be summery or something, she might be, isn't it, don't you think. The clouds and she's wearing like the long, clouds yes. Might be a picture isn't it to show long time ago, you have to have a picture to show somebody somewhere that they might want to marry, isn't it.
I: Oh right so you think that she's not married yet and perhaps she's (//)
W: (//) I think that she looks quite young isn't it. She looks quite young really, even her breast you see, it's like femininity to cover it up, that is how it make me think that she's not married yet, to show she's a virgin or

something isn't it. But remember I have a lot of time, I'm just, my husband is giving me time to look at all the photographs so I can admire and think what is in my head isn't it. Don't you think if you look at her, the way, is covered up her breast, compared to this, showing off, I think she's not married yet, (r) Portrait *of Eleanor*. Because that's what happens isn't it if, not me, a long time ago, even now if people want to marry somewhere, see I'm relation, I got a daughter, if I want to ask somebody in Malaysia, I will show a nice photograph of my daughter, to show that she's, you know this looks like feminine, graceful isn't it you know, good stock. (laughs) The way she's dressed, you see. And she's not fat, so I think. (I.2, 293-315)

Knowledge of the historical and cultural context of the subject matter of works of art as well as personal experiences and associations greatly enhanced visitors' ability to tell stories about them. This was evident not only in the cases of visitors (four visitors) who knew about the context but also in the cases of those visitors (five visitors) who did not know about the context. The former visitors seemed to be more likely to base their interpretation on what they already knew of the history behind the subject of the paintings. Further, they were less likely to tell a story about the thoughts, feelings or intentions of the human figures depicted. Instead, they consistently used the historical context as a main interpretive strategy. This was particularly prominent in the case of two visitors who had a special interest in history. Both of them said that seeing paintings with a historical subject was a main motivation for visiting. This is how one of them interpreted the painting called '*Mary Queen of Scots':*

M: I suppose the Tudors and Stuarts are probably my favourite period in history, therefore to come and see something like that, it's just more of a reminder how tragic history can be.
I: So what does it remind you of?
M It's very difficult. I think in many ways, unless they told you it was Mary Queen of Scots, you may not actually know that connection, although you've got the tapestries (?) you've got the (?) I have actually visited Fotheringay Castle, Fotheringay the village.
I: Oh you visit other places as well?
M: Well Fotheringay was actually where she was executed and there was a castle on the site and you can still see part of the masonry, but obviously it's demolished, very much like Nottingham here, where there used to be a castle and now, there is very little you can actually see of the castle now, even the gatehouse there is very much heavily restored, if you look at it from that side, but you try to use your imagination I suppose, you see (?) all that side of things, so Fotheringay, you know visiting that sort of connections and that, and the film, there's a film made of it, and Mary Queen of Scots was a tragic figure really in many ways. How silly people can be in history regarding making a stand for things like that but eventually she was executed by Elizabeth, for so called plotting, but nothing was actually proved against her, and they actually had to make an Act of Parliament in order to actually execute her. All for nothing basically, because when Elizabeth died in 1603, Mary Queen of Scots' son actually came on to the British throne anyway as James I, so it was almost meaningless anyway. But I tend to sort of you know look at, this one especially, as for a painting it doesn't really inspire me somehow not really.
I: Oh right, why do you think that is?
M: It's very difficult to say. She's being led there down, I suppose it's just one small scene of a larger scene in the great hall. It suggests almost as though she was alone and that's why perhaps, but it's just a reminder what history is all about. Most history is about tragedy and death and all these things rather than anything great and you know, something you can be happy about, you know like kings and queens of this country. It's all about battles and things like that, and that's all part of it, but I suppose it is (?) look around anyway. … It doesn't really tell you very much really regarding the times does it, why she ended up in that state really. A very large painting.
I: Do you think you need to know the story to understand it properly?
M: I think if you don't know about Mary Queen of Scots all you would see is a painting there, and it wouldn't really tell you much would it. I mean if you didn't see that you wouldn't know even know she was going to her death really would you, although you obviously see from her expression that she's not too happy, which is understandable. It's always one of those paintings I sort of remember around here. (I.8, 72-123)

Where the specific historical or cultural knowledge is lacking, personal associations and experiences were used to invent a story, and frequently a specific historical moment is imagined. Here is an example:

M: {*'Lear & Cordelia'*} It's just reminds me really, I can just imagine that being some sort of you know religious moment. I don't actually know the story behind this painting, but it just reminds me of like a situation you know that I probably heard about from the bible or something like that. This is definite story there you know, something's happening.
I: So what do you imagine it could be about?
M: I'm just thinking, because that guy in the middle with a beard is obviously a king of some description, sat on a big throne, but he's actually handing away his crown and there's a girl stood there looking quite sullen. I don't really know to be honest. I don't know if he's sort of abdicating or something like that and perhaps she's going to be the queen.
I: You mean the one on the right?
M: Yes I mean she's definitely the focus of the painting, because the others are sort of turned away and he seems to be glaring at her as well. I'm not really sure, there's a lot of people like waiting on his reaction, all sort of, or whether she's done something wrong I don't really know to be honest. It sort of throws up a few things doesn't it? What do you think about it?
I: Yes, I can see how you sort of make these links, it does make sense.
M: Yes, I mean I've got no idea what it's about, but I'm sure it means something important. His face is quite scary really, look of scorn on his face. (pause) (I.4, 214-237)

It is particularly interesting to see how this visitor utilised alternative strategies, including prior knowledge and experience, and personal associations as well as symbols and other clues provided in the painting in order to interpret it.

Three visitors showed a particular interest other than in the interpretation of the subject as conceived by the painter. They were also interested in the way another interpretive community, that of museum professionals, imposed an extra layer of meaning on the paintings by creating thematic displays. This is a particularly explicit example:

M: {'*Snowdon from Llyn Nantle*'} Oh yes, I mean I think they put these together because in a way, I mean I haven't really much thought about this. This is a Wilson, Richard Wilson who was an eighteenth century follower of Claude the French painter, and one of the things he did..... This is a Welsh, yes (r) *Snowdon from Llyn Nantle*, that's this lake, that's one of these circular lake, and the interesting thing is they've put this next to that, and I think that's deliberate, because that again is probably a Welsh lake like one of these circular lakes that you get in the Snowdon range. Llyn is Welsh for lake you see, Llyn Nantle. I think they're volcanic in origin. You get them in Italy don't you. I'm not sure about that but certainly Winifred Nicholson tended, I think a lot of these are these sort of Welsh lakes. But that's quite a different traditional vista. ... I mean he's taking over this formula really from Claude and about a hundred years later I think, but sort of giving it a muted version, sort of English version, well he's Welsh. (I.7, 126-150)

And a bit later he added:

M: That's Bomberg, David Bomberg. I would say it's the first time I've been here for a long time, but they're obviously making an attempt to put paintings together from different times too, on the same subject. I think, I mean I don't know, you'd have to ask the curator, but I mean I think it's a deliberate attempt to contrast, you see that, I
mean as I said that Winifred Nicholson and the Wilson, they're both pictures of volcanic type lakes you know, but completely different. There's 150 years between them I think, and this is the same. (I.7, 168-175)

The tendency to use this kind of interpretive strategy seems to be related to a special and very active interest in art. It also relates to education (formal or informal art training, in particular) and socio-economic background.

5.2.1.2 Description (9 out of 15 visitors)

Here visitors tried to explain what the scene in the painting consists of:

W: {*'Conversation Piece'*} The dress, the costumes or whatever. I like how he did the horse and the, yes with his picture. I think he looks very serene, you know. (l.13, 13-15)

M: (r) *African Girl No. 2*. Well with other images around a naked girl with a skeleton next to her and obviously a ghostly image behind her, I don't know what it's referring to. I imagine the painter's Carel Weight. The woman herself looks like she's in no pain and no fear, but everything that surrounds her suggests ominous tones. It's interesting. I'll skip that. (l.9, 80-85)

5.2.1.3 Identifying (3 out of 15 visitors)

This involves naming various elements or figures depicted in the paintings. This strategy was used in combination with other ones or when a visitor could not understand what the subject was (abstract paintings). Here are some typical examples:

M: Well the thing is you can actually definitely tell that there are figurines there, and it's like there you can tell that there are three ravens or blackbirds, but when it goes into the abstract side, you can't see what it's about, it's just a case of it's a face and then with, I don't know, scribbles round the outside, so what the point of the picture is, you can't see. (l.11, 378-380)

W: {'*Hibiscus*'} I would look round and I would see the prince there, a picture of the prince ... (l.5, 17-18)

5.2.1.4 Depicting movement (3 out of 15 visitors)

A small number of visitors mentioned that some paintings give the sensation of movement or of some kind of tension. Although they were not able to explain how the artist composed the picture to achieve that effect, they were able to feel and dive into the emotional atmosphere the artist had created.

W: {'*Tam O'Shanter*'} Oh this is beautiful, I like this one.
I: Why is that?
W: I like the (?) with the horse and I like the whole, it's moving, to me it's saying something, I don't know what, but to me it's moving you know what I mean. (?) I don't know. (l.13, 45-49)

W: {*'The Israelites Led by the Pillar of Light'*} Wow, that's great.
I: What do you like about this one?
W: Oh it seems to me like some connection you know, some gas connection or something from the skies, some energy here or something. (l.1, 201-202)

All three visitors in this category were raised as Christians (Catholic and Church of England).

5.2.1.5 Finding the message (11 out of 15 visitors)

Visitors using this strategy spent a considerable amount of time during their visit trying to decipher the underlying meaning of some of the paintings they viewed. Some visitors read the labels in their effort to understand what the message was.

The categories of messages identified were: 1) religious, 2) political 3) didactic, 4) affective, 5) no message, and 6) environmental message. There was no difference in preference for any of the categories of messages relating to gender, age, education, socio-economic group and religion. Before presenting the specific strategies visitors used, we should stress that the following categories represent the meaning visitors gave to the works of art. Visitors made multiple responses.

In the WAG study, apart from the 'affective' category, the same categories of message were identified overall, but they were chosen in a different order of priority (where 'priority' relates to the numbers of visitors using the specific category).

5.2.1.5a Religious (7 out of 11 visitors)

This category included paintings which aimed to teach spectators something about religion. Some visitors felt that one has to have read the bible in order to understand the subject of religious paintings. Hence, being a Christian or being able to interpret the symbols embedded in the paintings provided visitors with the tools needed. The following examples show different interpretations of religious paintings depending on visitors' familiarity with the story behind them.

W: {'*The Rainbow*'} And of course this one of *The Rainbow*. I love rainbows. I'm a Christian so of course that always represents hope to me, like it does in the Bible. When God said he wouldn't flood the world again, and he's proved that he would put this pledge in the rainbow and the colours of the rainbow are something fantastic. (l.5, 364-368)

M: {'*Susannah and the Elders*'} Well the story, you know the story of Susannah and the Elders. No. It's from the Apokrypha, you know, not from the main part of the bible, but one of the sort of, I ought to know this, but she (//)
I: (//) Do you read the bible?
M: Not really, but when you've been to galleries as much as I have, you know immediately that that's Susannah, it's a standard story you know, I mean, and I think the reason why you get so many pictures, the reason is, it's a sort of, a patron could acquire that, it's a sort of salacious subject. You know if you want a nude or something, a sort of semi-pornographic, you've got to look through the bible and find (laughs) and this is one; Lot and his daughters is another.
I: So you have a good excuse?
M: Exactly, I think there's no more to it than that. This is a story of, I've probably got this wrong, but these old men, the elders, sort of the elders of the church, dirty old men really, and they sort of fancy Susannah, and they see her bathing, and they sort of say well you'd better, they threaten her, say you sleep with us, if you don't, we'll report you to the authorities. You see, they blackmail her, and somehow or other she tells, no, somehow or other the truth is found out and I think they're executed, but it's a sort of an image of a sort of virtuous woman defending her chastity in the face of these dirty old men really, so it's a sort of funny story really, but slightly odd, as I say it's not in the main bible, it's in the Apokrypha. (l.7, 370-393)

M: {'*Apotheosis of Charles II*'} Well, I guess it has several messages, because the man in the picture, the man is a different message than the man, the fallen angel, although they might be a holy event being linked to something in the real world, real living person, I'm not really sure what it says.
I: So what kind of message do these two different figures communicate? You said that they are different?
M: Well, looking at the Madonna figure, the Maria figure, it's something like judgment. Because if you look at the angel, if you look at the eyes it's much of an acceptance of fate that something has been decided, it's passive.
I: The figure there, the virgin figure?
M: Yes the higher being with light all round it. And it's got something to do with medicine as well yes, because there's a little, the figure there, which the small angel is holding there, it's the - what's it called, it's what doctors have on their car in Holland to show that they are a doctor, the two snakes. It's something to do with, well there's judgment over there, because there's two scales, so they are weighing a judgment. So what would it be? I'm not really sure, the tree over there is very funny as well, they are lifting the tree up, and it's very confusing. Yes, it's various elements and well there's nothing really, you would say that the middle axis would be the main message. (l.14, 60-81)

5.2.1.5b Political (6 out of 11 visitors)

This refers to paintings where artists made a political statement related to the society and the period of time in which they were painting. Knowing the historical and cultural background of the time greatly enhanced people's interpretation.

M: That's a nice painting {*'The Viceroy's 'Orderly'*}.
I: So what do you like about it?
M: It brings back the era of the Raj and it's a case of with him all in his splendour of his uniform.
I: So is it something you can relate to, because of the era?
M: Oh yes. It brings back actually, I don't know, a pride of the people in those days.
I: Do you think that he's very proud to be (//)
M: (//) Oh yes you can see it, he's actually proud to be Indian or Pakistani or whatever he is, where he's from. But the uniform sets it all off, it's actually pride in themselves and the stance, you can see it's. But it's nice. Don't know why the chicken though. (I.11, 339-350)

It should be noted that this visitor was a member of the Royal Air Force and an instructor at the RAF College.

The following quote is a good example of how an art gallery is a crossroads of a variety of interpretive communities. In this case, the encounter is with another visitor and the result is a contribution to each other's interpretive strategies:

W: This is unusual, (r) *Bosnian Harvest*.
I: What do you find unusual about this one?
W: Look, this is different from everybody else isn't it. Look at the way it's done, I mean surely straight away you see all these are the same style, old style, and this one you pass and must see don't you. But it says *The Bosnian Harvest* and yet it's all bodies isn't it, yes, it's quite sad, mmm. You see it shows poverty or war in everything, even if we didn't know there was a war yes, it shows because of the bodies. Oh it's quite recent as well, 1994.
OTHER W: Reality comes now doesn't it, this is war, its been glorified in the past hasn't it.
W: Yes that's right, and it's very very sad, what are they collecting, all the dead.
OTHER W: Yes it's awful.
W: It's a terrible picture.
OTHER W: It's not a terrible picture but it's (//)
W: (//) The subject you know, but people, you have to show this type of picture because it's reality, and (//)
OTHER W: (//) I prefer things like this actually. I know it's an awful scene really, but I prefer things like this, reality.
W: It's not beautiful, you might even have nightmares.
OTHER W: They've done it in a way that it's not like gruesome, it's not too, well you can see what it is but it's not like frightening, it is frightening but ...(I.2, 435-460)

5.2.1.5c Didactic (5 out of 11 visitors)

This refers to paintings which are perceived by visitors as intending to teach the spectator something:

M: {'*The Willow Tree*'} Well, you know when you read Thomas Hardy, you know Tess of the D' Urbervilles, and places, you sort of visualise how things used to be I suppose in this case maybe two hundred years ago, how life was so simple wasn't it really.
I: So it reminds you of the book?
M: It reminds me of a better time.
I: So you think this was better?
M: Well to a certain degree, I mean it's always a matter of contrast, regarding life then and life now. But when you look at life now, people are rushing around, even me you know rushing about. People had more time to do much because well they didn't have television or they didn't have cars, so therefore they were stuck in one locality weren't they. They didn't get around, but to me those people, the idea is that most of them they were satisfied with their life. Now people have got all these benefits and what have you, got mobile phones, and yet are people really satisfied with life? I sometimes wonder that they're not really. You know they're always after more and more materialistic things, when that sort of lifestyle, why not, what's wrong with it.
I: So is it countryside that attracts you?
M: Yes I guess so, something you know which in my view, it shows a better life. (I.8, 378-399)

5.2.1.5d Affective (3 out of 11 visitors)

This category included paintings with an emotional message. It refers to both the artists' attempt to communicate certain feelings and to the emotional response of the visitors.

W: {*'Requiem for Barbara I-IV'*} Yes these look a bit frightening. And I'm not into things that frighten me. But it's interesting, because it makes me think what the artist was thinking when he did them. He could have been, they look really emotional, this looks like a bird, that being an eye, because if you stand back you can see more in it can't you? It's all related to birds look. I wonder if someone's kind of got a superstition of birds, because there's people that have superstitions with birds aren't there, like blackbirds and magpies and things like that, that looks like a blackbird to me. (I.3, 165-175)

5.2.1.5e Lack of message (2 out of 11 visitors)

This refers to paintings where visitors were not clear what the artist wanted to communicate, paintings that, according to visitors, did not have any particular message and paintings that portrayed something from history (which visitors did not know about). This occurred both with representational and with abstract paintings. In a few cases, visitors mentioned that it was very important to them to know what the artist wanted to communicate. One visitor thought that artists should always make it clear what the message is.

5.2.1.5f Environmental (2 out of 11 visitors)

Two visitors made comments related to environmental issues in response to certain paintings. One visitor commented on air pollution after looking at a Lowry painting, '*Industrial Panorama*'. The other one expressed strong feelings regarding mistreating animals after looking at '*Hercules Vanquishing Diomedes*' where Hercules is portrayed standing on a horse's head.

5.2.2 The artist (15 visitors)

All visitors showed a special interest in the artists whose work was exhibited at the Long Gallery. Visitors were particularly interested in the artists' names; technique and style of painting; biographical details (gender, period of time they lived, country of origin, if they are still alive); thoughts, feelings and messages they wanted to communicate through their work; the period of time in which they lived; favourite subjects and sources of inspiration and influence. In a few cases, visitors compared the style of two or more artists and how they chose to interpret their subjects. A couple of visitors mentioned that a painting represents an artist's interpretation of the world. The following quotes provide some examples:

W: {'*Condition*'} I don't know if it's the same artist, because it doesn't belong to the same series. (I.15, 43-44)

M: {*'Hibiscus Flower'*} Well that one definitely is stage-managed, it's just a portrait, but it's a case of the subject-matter. If it was a female that painted it then fair enough; if it's a male that's painted you'd actually start querying why he actually wanted to paint it. It's a case of what the relationship is between that person and the painter themselves. (I.11, 319-323)

W: {*'Industrial Panorama'*} But some of these with the factories, as I say, pretty much like a Lowry painting. … The factories, because that's the sort of thing he would paint from Yorkshire with matchstick men and matchstick women. I don't know if you've heard the song. No, well there is a song that talks about Lowry's paintings with the matchstick men and matchstick women and of course of his theme, which was the industrial past. (I.5, 421-429)

M: {*'Lear & Cordelia'*} Yes, I mean you know they deal with such sort of heavy things as, say, Jesus on the cross or something like that. You know it's a really weighty subject that every single person's got a different picture of it in their head but they've actually gone and put it on to a massive canvas and they've said that's what I believe it looks like, or that's my interpretation of it, and I think to do that it takes quite a lot of courage really, because it's easy just to paint a bowl of fruit, so it doesn't really mean things to many people. (I.4, 205-212)

The vast majority of the visitors looked to NCM to provide information that would enable an insight into these kinds of issues, even though the texts provided were limited to the name of the artist, the title of the painting, the date and the technique. Only four visitors who had a specialist art knowledge used the text provided to reconfirm this information. As seen in the WAG study, understanding what the artist was trying to communicate was a major concern of the visitors. As none of the visitors used the computer interactive system provided, they were left on their own devices in their effort to interpret the paintings. Information about the artist seems to be a subject of great importance to visitors. It is also a subject that most visitors cannot access through the interpretive strategies available to them.

5.2.3 Personal associations (14 out of 15 visitors)

Making personal associations with the paintings or the scenes depicted in them seemed to be a very important strategy used by the vast majority of the visitors. The only visitor who did not use this strategy was the male artist who instead used interpretive strategies accepted by the community of artists.

Although these associations were very personal, with each visitor drawing on his or her prior experience and knowledge, there is a lot of cultural influence. This allows us to see particular patterns emerging from the data.

There were no differences in preference for the different categories of personal associations that related to age, gender, socio-economic background, religion or an interest and participation in art. However, half of the visitors who made a reference to popular culture had had minimum education.

A number of categories occurred in visitors' personal associations. Visitors made multiple responses.

5.2.3.1 Reminiscence (11 out of 14 visitors)

M: {'*Golden Prospects*'} Let's see. That's very interesting actually. Yes it's, oh it's Lands End. It reminded me of my holiday last year, because I've been to the Isle of Wight and they have two of those small rocks as well, in the sea yes, they're special. (l.14, 152-155)

5.2.3.2 Other works of art/exhibits (9 out of 14 visitors)

W: {*'Apotheosis of Charles II'*} But I mean this sort of thing and the top here, that always reminds me of some of the cathedrals you know sort of like the paintings that you get on ceilings … where you know it's sort of like heaven and the angels coming down, you know coming down to earth. (l.5, 247-256)

5.2.3.3 Popular culture (8 out of 14 visitors)

M: {'*Jewish Refugee*'} This is a very dramatic, almost Gone with the Wind type of look, the way she's looking, (r*) Jewish Refugee*, but to me it looks like Vivienne Leigh in Gone with the Wind. (l.9, 71-73)

5.2.3.4 Personal experience (6 out of 14 visitors)

I: {*'The Chess Players'*} On to the next one. What do you think about it?
W: Oh, for me, boring.
I: It's boring?
W: It's something happening, not interesting for me, just chess, so that's something I don't, mm, I'm not interested. It's nicely painted.
I: So it's nicely painted but you're not interested in the subject?
W: Chess, oh you know why, my boyfriend and my brother they used to play a lot you know, so it's something like I want to do something else and they are playing chess, so boring, so they always say another match you know. (l.1, 289-300)

5.2.3.5 Affective (4 out of 14 visitors)

M: {*'Requiem for Barbara'*} … I don't know, I suppose this appeals more my darker side really. It's quite large, I do tend to like things like this and I do have prints of things very similar to this. I think although it's not like too much, there's a lot of black but it's contrasted well by the red and the white. Again this looks like this has been done in charcoals or pastels actually. There's a lot of emotion in it, I think at first glance, looking at them, when she was drawing these, she could have been under a great deal of emotional stress. (I.6, 172-179)

5.2.3.6 Constructing an image (4 out of 14 visitors)

M: {*'Lear & Cordelia'*} I just like them because they're pure make-believe, but the way they're painted is so realistic that you could actually picture it, it's just a clash between something that you know you'd never see, but something that looks really believable, looks like it could quite happen sort of thing. I quite like when they interpret famous moments like in the bible or something like that, when they do a painting of a special event or something like that, and then you can actually imagine it you know, although it's just one person's interpretation of it. It's still like a great picture. (I.4, 189-197)

5.2.4 Context (13 out of 15 visitors)

Awareness of the period, size, value, frame and condition of the paintings seemed to be an important interpretive strategy. Many visitors commented on that aspect of the paintings or sought this type of information by reading the text.

5.2.4.1 Period (10 out of 13 visitors): This refers to statements made or questions asked regarding the date a painting or a group of paintings was produced; the period of time its subject represents and historical information regarding that period; the period an artist lived; and the period of time when paintings of a particular style or theme were made.

5.2.4.2 Size (9 out of 13 visitors): visitors commented on the size, scale and position of a painting in relation to the position of the visitor. A few visitors stepped back to view some of the bigger paintings or the ones positioned high up.

5.2.4.3 Value (3 out of 13 visitors): in this case visitors made general comments regarding the value of works of art. These comments did not directly relate to specific paintings they saw in the Long Gallery but to the idea of buying art as an investment.

5.2.4.4 Frame (3 out of 13 visitors): a small number of visitors made very brief comments about the frame of paintings. One of them said that he often finds them very interesting to look at.

5.2.4.5 Condition (2 out of 13 visitors): in this case, two visitors commented on the current condition of two of the paintings. They were aware of techniques used to clean a painting in order to make the colours look fresh.

There was no difference in preference for these categories as a function of age, ethnicity, religion or interest in art. However, men seemed to be slightly more likely to talk about the value and frame categories. Also people with a university degree and of B and C1 groups were more likely to talk about the 'period' category.

5.3 The technical process of art making

This theme includes two topics: technique and style, and materials and their use. The same topics were also mentioned in the WAG study but they were prioritised differently. Both topics refer to the technical aspect of art making.

5.3.1 Technique and style (12 out of 15 visitors)

Visitors' comments focused on the personal style of a painter or the style used by a group of painters. Comments also revolved around the technique an artist used to make a painting. Comments included both statements and questions. In many cases, visitors looked at the labels trying to find an answer or to reconfirm their ideas. Visitors were more likely to comment on the style or the technique of a painter when his or her work was abstract. Here are some examples:

I: {*'Golden Prospects*'} You're looking at the figure of the boy.
M: Yes I was wondering if it was a cut-out figure, because it would be very easy then to make the boy very short and make the background mistier. I think he did the background first, starting here, then gradually painting over the foreground and the detail. That's very nice. (I.14, 201-204)

W: {'*Condition'* and '*Requiem for Barbara I-IV*} You see these are different kinds of style. See, it's interesting isn't it, all these things are like, look it's just like, at least people are not drawn like all the same, it's quite boring, because everybody's drawn like that, it's nice to see these. (I.2, 516-519)

M: {*'The Moorish Wall, Cyprus*'} Now Bomberg was, he was English, Jewish, from the East End of London I think, and he went through a lot of different styles, but this is a particular style and it's very (?) you know what I said about that expressionistic brush strokes, the same sort of style (//)
I: (//) Like the '*Bosnian Harvest*'?
M: That's right, in many ways it's the same sort of painting. (I.7, 198-203)

W: {*'Requiem for Barbara I-IV'*} Yes and the way his (?) markings are, they are very rash you know, like they're not delicate lines, they're not soft, they're harsh, and the black's really harsh. If I would say, if I like any of them it would be the end one, just for the aesthetic kind of look.
I: The fourth one?
W: Yes because it's not so, even though this is quite aggressive actually, because of the marks.
I: The red one?
W: Yes, but there's a lot of repetition in too, with the words, because I like lettering. (I.3, 182-188)

As was the case in the WAG study, age, gender and education does not seem to relate to having an interest in the technique or style. However, there is a strong suggestion that this is influenced by art qualifications and a strong and active interest in art. People who fit this profile made more explicit comments and showed a deeper understanding of the role technique and style play in the making of a painting. Also socio-economic background and probably religion seemed to be related to having an interest in the technique or style.

5.3.2 Materials and their use (6 out of 15 visitors)

Slightly more than one-third of the visitors expressed an interest in the materials artists used to make the paintings. In some cases, visitors commented on the use of a particular material and the way it has been applied to convey a specific type of message or an atmosphere. As was the case in the previous topic, many visitors looked at the labels trying to find an answer or to reconfirm their ideas regarding the material used to make a painting.

M: {'*Condition*' } {looking closely at the painting} Is that paint? Oh airbrush or something {trying to read the label}.
I: Does it say?
M: Doesn't say. Oh, there (//)
I: (//) (r) Acrylic (//)
M: (//) (r) On board (l.12, 362-367)

W: {'*African Girl*'} Yes I like this black woman, she looks like she's made of wood. On her knees and, yes. Now the painting is weird, the colours are weird so I don't know what was the artist's idea, if he had one. (l. 15, 103-105)

There was no difference in expressing an interest in the material and their use that related to age, education, socio-economic background or ethnicity. However, more men than women talked about this. Also having acquired an art qualification seemed to have affected expressing an interest in the material used.

5.4 The use of support material supplied by the curators (13 out of 15 visitors)

The interpretive text provided in the Long Gallery consisted of labels and the electronic text in the computer interactive exhibit. The visitors in this study used the labels only and did not seem to notice the interactive display. The text on the labels was minimal.

The vast majority of the visitors at the Long Gallery relied on the labels to provide them with information about the paintings. Some of them checked the labels when they needed to reconfirm a hypothesis. Each visitor read on average 6 labels (minimum 2 maximum 22). (This includes the times it became obvious that visitors were reading a label). A couple of visitors who were very frequent NCM visitors seemed to have read the labels many times before. Some of the elderly visitors commented on the size of the font, which they found too small. In these cases, they frequently could not be bothered to use their glasses or they asked the researcher to read it for them.

All the visitors who read the labels were particularly interested in the titles of the paintings. A vast majority of them wanted to know the name of the painter too. A large number of visitors were also interested in the date the work was produced. Some visitors talked about what type of information they were looking for in a label:

I: OK is there anything else you'd like to see in this room?
W: {*Requiem for Barbara I*'} Well not really, perhaps if I was on my own I think I would go and see who is the author. I don't know her. ... I never know them, I mean I don't know any you know artists, but I like to see the date, because sometimes when you see the date you say well it corresponds very well and others it's really striking, to see that it doesn't correspond to what you expect of the period. (l.15, 356-367)

I: Do you usually go for the picture first and then read the label or (//)
M: Picture first, label next, yes it's like looking at the newspaper, you see the picture and then you look at the subscript, the title. (l.14, 19-21)

Visitors also had many other questions which the label could not answer. These included: what the painting was about or what the artist wanted to communicate, more information about the artist (where he/she came from, lived and worked, influences in his/her work) or about the place depicted in the paintings. In addition, given that only a couple of visitors were aware of the fact that the paintings were displayed thematically, this could perhaps usefully have been made explicit so that visitors could benefit. Finally, the labels did not encourage visitors to make any personal associations with the works. As seen from the analysis, making personal associations was an important interpretive strategy consistently used by all visitors.

As was the case in the WAG study, all the women who participated in this study read at least some of the labels in the Long Gallery. Age also seemed to influence reading behaviour as seen above.

5.5 Summary

Visitors utilised a wide range of interpretive strategies available to them. In some cases, they used the classic interpretive strategies of formalist art appreciation together with accepted terminology. This helped them analyse and evaluate different elements in the paintings. However, visitors did not always have the specific vocabulary of formalist art appreciation such as tone, composition, form and space.

There are many similarities between this study and the former study at Wolverhampton Art Gallery. However, on the whole, visitors at NCM were more explicit about their ideas and were able to demonstrate a deeper understanding of the artworks when compared with visitors at WAG. As seen from the analysis, this relates to who those visitors[39] were (their biographical profile, prior knowledge, experience, interests, learning style, expectations and plans for the visit). It also relates to whether they chose to be core or peripheral members of the art communities; and whether (and how often) they had access to the tools and institutions of these communities.

6.0 **Discussion**

6.1 The findings from the research studies at NCM and at WAG.

Interpretive strategies represent ways of understanding, evaluating and talking about the works of art. This report has discussed the interpretive strategies available to visitors and their use in the Long Gallery of Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery.

This section discusses the findings of the study at NCM with respect to the WAG study. In brief, the WAG study showed that:

1. The methodological approach employed is valid and reliable and produces rich material.
2. The development of interpretive strategies comes as a result of active involvement and participation in the practices and institutions of the art-based communities.
3. During the visit, visitors used only some of the interpretive strategies available to them (these were drawn from a repertoire of interpretive strategies available to art-based communities, or more widely culturally available).
4. Practicing interpretive strategies during the visit helped visitors refine them and further develop them.
5. Visiting art exhibitions renewed visitors' membership (core or peripheral) of the communities of practice the art galleries represent. Renewing one's membership and utilising resources available to art-based communities helped visitors develop their own identities further.

More details can be found in the report of the research at Wolverhampton Art Gallery: *Making meaning in art museums 1 – visitors' interpretive strategies at Wolverhampton Art Gallery*. The research carried out at Nottingham Castle Museum reinforced the above results and in what follows we present further similarities and some differences between these studies.

Main findings from NCM study:

- The sample used was relatively small. Because of the lack of visitor research at Nottingham Castle and the consequent absence of detailed marketing reports, it is difficult to gauge how representative of the NCM visitors these visitors were[40]. We are unable to relate the qualitative data generated during this study to quantitative (demographic) information about the nature of all visitors to the museum.

- This lack of comparative material makes it difficult to generalise the findings as we could in the WAG study.

- There is a strong suggestion that people with an active interest in art (acquired through formal and/or informal training) are more likely to use the classic interpretive strategies of formal art appreciation.

- We should also keep in mind that our sample was single visitors. As they mentioned, their agenda for the visit would have been very different had they visited with others. It would affect the pace of the visit, the time spent looking at exhibits or reading labels, their visit plans and, consequently, the interpretive strategies they would use.

Compared to the WAG study we noticed the following similarity:

- all visitors in both studies had a special and active interest in art and they participated in a wide range of art-related activities. Visiting art museums and exhibitions was just one of them. In fact, many of them were frequent art gallery visitors. In some cases, visitors also spent their free time painting, reading about art and watching art programmes. Hence, a large number of visitors in both studies were familiar with and, in many cases, used the 'language' of the communities of practice represented in an art gallery.

Compared to the WAG study we noticed the following differences:

- More NCM Long Gallery visitors had had formal qualifications in art as compared to WAG visitors. This gave the former more access to tools and institutions of the art-based communities.

- Unlike the WAG group where there was an even spread in terms of age groups, at NCM there were slightly more people aged 25-34

- Unlike the WAG group where most visitors fell into the C1 and C2 groups, at NCM visitors fell into B and C1 groups

- Unlike the WAG group where a large number of visitors had had minimum education, at NCM a large number of visitors had acquired a university degree. This could go some way to explaining why NCM visitors were able to use abstract art categories and art terms.

- Another difference between visitors in the NCM and WAG studies is that some NCM visitors seemed to perceive a visit to an art gallery as more of an aesthetic or 'flow' experience. This is an interpretive strategy that was not referred to by the visitors we spoke to at Wolverhampton.

6.2 Some implications for professional practice

Visitors do read labels in their effort to interpret the art works through using abstract art categories and art terms. The use of the texts prepared by the curators enhances the ability of the visitors to understand, describe and relate to the art works. Having a special interest in art, they visited the art museum to learn more about it. Their previous knowledge and experience helped visitors interpret art but, in many cases, it was not sufficient to fully understand it. People often lacked both the subject-related knowledge and the specialised vocabulary they needed to interpret their visual experience. However, many visitors had already developed ways of thinking and talking about art using both their own personal experiences and opinions and also using specific specialist language and interpretive approaches where they felt confident to do so.

Both in this and in the WAG study, visitors found it particularly difficult to interpret and relate to abstract art. They needed help not only with developing their vocabulary but also with ways of approaching and understanding the ideas behind abstract art.

Further, more information about the artists and their interpretation of their own work seemed to contribute to visitors' ability to connect to the art works.

Both studies strongly suggest an apparent readiness on the part of art museum visitors to increase their levels of information about art and artists and also to increase their strategies for understanding and responding to art. This would indicate that visitors would welcome explanations of useful specialist vocabulary such as tone, composition, perspective. Visitors would also be pleased to have the opportunity to try out specific strategies of engagement with artworks (through active problem-solving encouraged by texts – what was the artist thinking about? Was the artist male or female, young or old?); through using interpretive strategies such as comparison between different ways of representing the same subject; and through making relationships with everyday knowledge, artefacts and texts. The use of the art museum as a space separate from the mundane and where a 'flow' experience might be experienced also needs careful thought. To enhance this, colour, music and other mood-enhancing strategies might be considered.

6.3 The need for further visitor research in art museums

Very few art museums have detailed knowledge of the experiences that their visitors have in their galleries. Some museums do not even have accurate information about who those visitors are. Most of the professional decisions about communicative approach and style of art museums are not taken on the basis of information and knowledge about visitors, but are based on instinct, assumption and previous experience of mounting displays. While many of these decisions result in attractive displays which are popular, in some places visitors are few, and in all cases, what actually happens in the mind of the visitor is unknown.

Our research confirms that people search out art museums because they perceive them to offer experiences that satisfy desires connected to their own perceptions of self. Visitors are active in developing their own interpretations of what they see and experience in the museum, and this interpretation is deeply embedded in their prior knowledge and experience. The levels of information about art and artists held by visitors may not be sufficient for a knowledgeable and sophisticated reading of the art work, but personal and individual readings are made none-the-less which appear to be more-or-less satisfactory to the visitor.

Our research also suggests strongly that many visitors struggle to make adequate interpretations, and that frequently, they look for more help from the art museum than they find.

Further information is required about who does visit art museums and what their agendas are for these visits. In addition, further research into the experience of art museum visitors would offer greater knowledge of what visitors want to happen in art museums and would increase professional understanding of the difficulties some visitors face in making fruitful sense of what they see. An increased professional understanding of the experiences of visitors would go some way towards enabling the enhancement of this experience.

In addition, there is a great deal more to explore about how visitors see art museums as helping them reinforce or transform their personal identities. What is it about the worlds of art that visitors perceive to be represented in the art museum that provokes participation? Do visitors see themselves as part of definable interpretive communities? Although our studies suggest that this may be so, there appear to be differing levels of engagement and degrees of commitment that are intriguing. Is it the anonymity of an art museum visit that is attractive?

This research has produced extremely interesting results, results which on the one hand expose the wide gulf of professional ignorance about visitors to art museums, but which on the other hand reveal the amazing potential of art museums to stimulate and transform those who use them. Visitor research is itself rare in art museums in Britain, and qualitative studies such as this and the Wolverhampton study are rarer still. Because of lack of familiarity with the research methods, the potential for misunderstanding of the research is high, especially where willingness to take the time to understand the intentions, methodologies and results is low. We hope, none-the-less, that these studies will stimulate much further work. We thank the Arts and Humanities Research Board for the opportunity to carry out the study at Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery, and thank Wolverhampton Art Gallery and the West Midlands Regional Museums Council for their involvement in and enthusiasm for the former study.

Notes

[1] Hooper-Greenhill, E., Moussouri, T., Hawthorne, E. and Riley, R. (2001) *Making meaning in art museums 1: visitors' interpretive strategies at Wolverhampton Art Gallery,* RCMG, University of Leicester; see also Hooper-Greenhill, E. (2000) *Museums and the interpretation of visual culture*, Routledge, London and New York.

[2] Fish, S. (1980) *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London; Radway, J. (1984) Interpretive communities and variable literacies: the functions of romance reading, *Daedalus*, 113 (3) 49-73.

[3] See, for a discussion, Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1999), Education, communication and interpretation: towards a critical pedagogy in museums, in Hooper-Greenhill, E. (ed*) The educational role of museums*, second edition, Routledge, London, 3-27.

[4] E.g. Appadurai, A. and Breckenridge, C. (1992) Museums are good to think: heritage on view in India, in Karp, I., Kreamer, C. and Levine, S. *Museums and communities: the politics of public cultur*e, Smithsonian Institution, 34-55.

[5] Hooper-Greenhill et al. (2001)

[6] Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1990*) Basics of qualitative research: grounded theory procedures and techniques*, Sage.

[7] Miles, M. B. and Huberman, A. M. (1994) *Qualitative data analysis: an expanded sourcebook*, Sage.

[8] Olesen, V. Droes, N. Hatton, D. Chico, N. and Schatzman, L. (1994) Analysing together: recollections of a team approach, in Bryman, A. and Burgess, B. *Analysing qualitative data*, Routledge, 111 – 128.

[9] We used a method similar to that suggested by Paul Alter and Rita Ward (1994) 'Exhibit evaluation: taking account of human factors', in Hooper-Greenhill, E. *The educational role of the museum*, (first edition): 210. However, our research questions and epistemology were different. The 'thinking aloud' technique has also been used in information-processing theory to assess learners' problem-solving processes; see Roschell, J (1995) 'Learning in interactive environments: prior knowledge and new experience', in Falk, J. and Dierking, L. (eds.) *Public institutions for personal learning*, American Association of Museums, 37-51. This approach has also been used with adult visitors in Canada. See Dufresne-Tasse, C. (2000) 'Introduction', in: Dufresne-Tasse, C. (ed) *Cultural diversity, distance and learning,* ICOM-CECA**.**

[10] See Jennifer Mason (1996) *Qualitative researching,* Sage, for a general discussion of qualitative research methods and page 42 for specific comments in relation to pragmatism.

[11] Midlands Arts Marketing (1997) *Nottingham Galleries Profile of Attenders*. This study focuses on basic demographic information about those people who visited five Nottingham galleries between Spring 1996 and Spring 1997. The aims of the study were to profile the attenders for each gallery, provide an overview of the 'typical' Nottingham gallery visitor, explore and quantify any overlap of art gallery audiences, and suggest collaborative marketing initiatives. Although an interesting and useful study, the information about the visitors to NCM was limited for our purposes in this research. The report did not provide the depth of information that was available in relation to Wolverhampton Art Gallery, where two specific museum audience studies had been carried out in 1997 and 1999.

[12] Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery, (2000)*, 'Diary of a Victorian Dandy' evaluation figures*, Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery.

[13] We made an effort to compare the visitor profile of this study with other studies conducted at NCM and elsewhere. Due to the small number of visitors who participated in this study, however, this should be treated with great caution.

[14] The percentage of women visitors is 67% while the women who live in the Nottingham area are 51% (Midlands Arts Marketing, 1997).

[15] Nottingham Castle Museum & Art Gallery, 2000.

[16] Davis, S. (1994), *By popular demand: strategic analysis of the market potential for museums and art galleries in the UK*, Museums and Galleries Commission, London, 56.

[17] The WAG sample, however, was much more representative of the visitors to WAG as a whole, which (unusually) has more male than female visitors (Hooper-Greenhill, et al. 2000:5).

[18] Davies, 1994: 53.

[19] This finding is consistent with national figures (Davies 1994:56; MORI (1999) *Visitors to museums and galleries in the UK – research findings*, a study conducted for the Museums & Galleries Commission/Re:source: the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, London, 10).

[20] Students are over represented in the museum audience in relation to their proportion of the Nottingham population as a whole; the Nottingham area has only 3.9% students (Midlands Arts Marketing 1997).

[21] MORI, 1999: 8.

[22] This includes Black-African (3%), Black-Caribbean (5%) and Black-Other (2%) (Nottingham Castle Museum & Art Gallery, 2000).

[23] According to Midlands Arts Marketing (1997) 74% are return visitors to the NCM. A large number of those visit only once or twice per year. On the other hand, among the Long Gallery visitors to the 'Diary' exhibition, 47% were first time visitors (Nottingham Castle Museum & Art Gallery, 2000).

[24] The Nottingham Galleries Profile of Attenders study (Midlands Arts Marketing 1997) also showed that the majority of respondents lived in Nottingham.

[25] One of them was an artist.

[26] Macdonald, S., 1993, *Museum Visiting*, Sociology and Social Anthropology Working Papers, No.1, Series: Representations: Places and Identities, Keele University; Moussouri, T., 1997, *Family Agendas and Family Learning in Hands-On Museums*, unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester.

[27] Motivations are, however, affected by whether visitors come alone or in social groups (Moussouri, 1997).

[28] The perceived role of museums and art galleries to 'represent a society's/community's culture' was also highlighted by the MORI study (Museums & Galleries Commission 1999).

[29] Respondents in the MORI study who suggested that museums and galleries play a key 'role in educating the next generation' were also recognising the educational potential of museums and galleries (MORI, 2000: 27).

[30] The Nottingham Galleries Profile of Attenders study (Midlands Arts Marketing 1997) also showed that 27.8% of all visitors to the Castle were interested in seeing the work of a particular artist.

[31] Csikszentmihalyi, M. and Robinson, R. (1991) *The art of seeing: an interpretation of the aesthetic encounter*, J. Paul Getty Museum and the Getty Centre for Education in the Arts, Malibu, California, and Csikszentmihalyi, M. and Hermanson, K. (1995) 'Intrinsic Motivation in Museums: Why Does One Want to Learn?' in Falk, J. and Dierking, L. (eds.) *Public Institutions for Personal Learning: Establishing a Research Agenda*, American Association of Museums and Technical Information Service, Washington, DC, 67-77.

[32] Moussouri, T. (1997) Family agendas and family learning in hands-on museums, unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester; Falk, J., Moussouri, T., and Coulson, D. (1998) 'The effect of visitors' agendas on museum learning', *Curator*, 41 (2), 106-120.

[33] According to the Nottingham Galleries Profile of Attenders study (Midlands Arts Marketing 1997), large numbers of visitors (33.1%) to the Castle were on a 'general visit'. This was related to the Castle's status as a heritage attraction.

[34] Especially when one visits with children or with a spouse. As one visitor said: 'If I take my wife or the kids then they normally just want to get straight in, straight out and they get bored. They don't want to look at anything.' (I.11, 530-532)

[35] We had a similar response from the other artist and an art enthusiast who had a special interest in art (he read about art, went on art trips regularly and visited art galleries about 60 times per year).

[36] 'Abstract art' is a generic term visitors use to categorise art that does not have a subject. Sometimes the term is also used to refer to the visual qualities such as colour, composition, space, form and tone.

[37] However, it should be noted that the majority of the visitors in this study came from C1 group followed by B group.

[38] Visitors of the 18-24 and 25-34 age groups seem to be more likely to talk about this theme.

[39] High number of visitors from B and C1 groups, with art qualifications and of art enthusiasts.

[40] Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery have recently introduced a comprehensive audience evaluation programme, and have appointed an audience advocate.

Appendix A

The proforma for the accompanied visit

Hello, my name is ... and I'm from Leicester University. I'm doing a research project in this Gallery and I'm interested in what your experience is like during your visit. Would you mind if I visit the Long Gallery with you today? (Yes/No)

(If yes)

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

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

Suggested prompts:

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you enter the Long Gallery?
What comes to mind when you look at that painting/sculpture/exhibit?
Why do you think that?
Could you tell me more about it?

Appendix B

Questionnaire: visitor agenda

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

Do you live in Nottingham? Where do you live?

Have you been here before?
[if yes]
How many times – including this one - have you been the last year?

Do you usually visit alone? Why?

Why did you come to this particular museum?

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

Is an art exhibition the type of exhibition you like?
What kind of exhibitions do you like?

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

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

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

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

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

Appendix C

Questionnaire: Demographics and interest in art

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

1. Can I ask how old you are?

2. What is or was your occupation? Please be as precise as possible. If you manage or used to manage people before you retired please note the number of people you managed.

3. When did you complete formal education?
At what age did you leave school, college or whatever?

4. Which ethnic group would you say that you belong to?

5. Which religious group do you belong to?

6. Have you passed any exams or got any qualification in an art subject?
If yes, which art subject?

7. Do you read any art magazine?
If yes, which one(s) and how often (e.g. regularly, occasionally)?

8. Do you watch any TV programme on art?
If yes, which one(s) and how often (e.g. regularly, occasionally)?

9. Are you a member of an art club or any other club?
If yes, which one(s)?

10. Have you ever worked or volunteered in an art gallery or a museum?
If yes, which one?

Appendix D

Works of art on display in the Long Gallery at the time of the research (listed alphabetically by surname of artist)

Tony Bevan: Condition

Eugene Boudin: the Fortifications at Antibes

John Brett: Golden Prospects, St. Catherine's Well, Land's End Cornwall

Charles le Brun: Hercules Vanquishing Diomedes

William Bruce Ellis Rankin: Hibiscus Flower

Vanley Burke: Evolution

James Collinson: For Sale

Eugene Delacroix: Tam O'Shanter

Alfred Elmore: the Origin of the Combing Machine

English School (17^{th} C.) Conversation Piece, Sir Hardolph Wasteneys

William Etty: The Doves

Artemisia Gentileschi (after): Susannah and The Elders

James Hayllar: The Old Master

Guy Head: Juno Borrowing the Girdle of Venus

John Rogers Herbert: Lear and Cordelia

Peter Howson: Bosnian Harvest

David Jagger: Jewish Refugee

Dame Laura Knight: Gypsy Splendour

Sir Thomas Lawrence: Portrait of a Gentleman

Neville Lewis: The Zulu

James Lonsdale: The Chess Players

L.S. Lowry: Industrial Panormama

Daniel Maclise: Robin Hood entertaining Richard the Lionheart in Sherwood Forest

Paul Mason: Landmark

Sir William Nicholson: the Viceroy's Orderly

Winifred Nicholson: Violas in a Window

Ana Maria Pacheco: Requiem for Barbara I-IV

Shanti Panchal: God of the Byways

Richard Parkes Bonington: Transept of the Abbey of St. Bertin, St. Omer, France

Richard Parkes Bonnington: Quentin Durwood at Liege

Mervyn Peake: Head of an Old Man

Henry Pickering: Portrait of Eleanor Francis Dixie

Henry Raeburn: Portrait of John Cockburn Ross

Bruno Romaneeli: Boxed VIII

Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Marigolds

Laslett John Pott: Mary Queen of Scots Being Led to Her Execution

Peter Randall-Page: Clench

Albert Ritzberger: Love's Oracle

Jan Siberechts: View of Nottingham

Marcus Stone: In Love

H.H. la Thangue: A Mission to Seamen

Guillaume Guillon le Thiere: Homer Singing his Iliad at the Gates of Athens

Carel Weight: African Girl no. 2

Adriaan van de Werff: Venus and Cupid

William West: The Israelites Led by the Pillar of Light

Henry Clarence Whaite: the Rainbow

Richard Wilson: Snowdon from Llyn Nantle

John Michael Wright: Magdalen Aston