Ignite the Power of Art

ADVANCING VISITOR ENGAGEMENT IN MUSEUMS

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INTEGRATING THEORY AND PRACTICE

CHAPTER 3

HOW RESEARCH IS CHANGING THE MUSEUM
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HOW RESEARCH IS CHANGING THE MUSEUM
Rigorous audience research at the Dallas Museum of Art yielded solid and compelling data that inspired us to think deeply about our visitors.

With the Framework for Engaging with Art as a tool for continued learning, we are blending a renewed understanding of visitors’ distinctive qualities into the culture and values of the Museum. From the start, we wanted to move away from providing undifferentiated interactions with art and instead design experiences and provide opportunities that fit visitors’ varied and distinct characteristics. But most important, we wanted to become a different kind of art museum.

Our vision for engaging our visitors centers on two values: creativity and collaboration. Today at the Dallas Museum of Art, the artist’s creative process is as visible as the creative product. While works of art are celebrated in interpretation and programs, artists’ voices are evident in multimedia materials and online content. Artists are intensely involved as creators, presenters, and participants (the Museum engaged more than 700 performing, visual, and literary artists in 2009).
We make it clear to visitors that the whole Museum is about creativity. Visitors are invited to explore their own creativity in the Center for Creative Connections, understand it as an innate human quality, and apply insights about creativity as they enjoy works of art in the collection. Each year, the DMA offers dynamic and richly diverse programs that actively engage the four clusters in experiences with art. The mix of programs is a critical characteristic of our efforts to reach new audiences and to achieve our goals. Over the years we have collaborated with a wide range of artists, scholars, and community partners to enhance our programming.

Collaboration at the DMA takes two forms: external and internal. Community partners—including arts and community organizations, universities, and elementary and secondary schools—help us diversify and multiply the experiences the Museum can offer. We could not have implemented ideas based on the Framework for Engaging with Art without these collaborative efforts, and they are essential to the Museum’s continued success. Each partner contributes something different to the visitor experience, from the Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts students who interpret a painting through dance to the nearly 600 North Texas residents who created personal collages that local artist Lesli Robertson wove together to create a community-based work of art.

Within the Museum, cross-divisional collaboration is a vital part of the way we work, from developing exhibitions to designing public programs and providing visitor services. With FEA as our guide, staff members are increasingly comfortable taking risks and seeking unconventional solutions. Naturally, we pursue success, but when formal evaluation or professional instinct show that we have not reached it, we regroup and try another approach. Experimentation is key to our work together, and we willingly accept the potential for failure.

This chapter illustrates the integration of creativity and collaboration into the Dallas Museum of Art with seven stories about processes and programs that exemplify the engaged art museum we have become.
A COLLABORATIVE WORKPLACE
In December 2008, 40 staff members—several of them new to the Museum—spent a day and a half immersed in the FEA findings. Randi Korn & Associates had just completed the second audience research report, which showed that even when the context changed—different exhibitions, different data collection times, different programming—the four audience clusters (Observers, Participants, Independents, and Enthusiasts) remained consistent. At the workshop, the staff reviewed the intent of FEA: to build each audience cluster and give visitors comfortable and meaningful experiences that they choose on their own terms according to their personal qualities and preferences. There were some revelatory moments during the day as brainstorming revealed the applicability of FEA to large- and small-scale ways staff could work together and serve Museum visitors. This intensive workshop was one of several held over seven years of FEA research. Each time we met, we wrestled with the data, questioned our interpretations, and deepened our collective understanding. We operated as a community of learners.

The Framework for Engaging with Art has required a shift in culture for 300 staff members in 26 departments, with the successes and missteps that can be expected in a large institution where attitudes and behaviors are being gently and not-so-gently challenged. Staunch support from the DMA Board and from staff leaders made rigorous research a top priority. Today, our collaborative working style is evident throughout the Museum, in attitudes and approaches as well as in identity, programs, exhibitions, and partnerships with artists and community organizations.

An expanded senior management team, including curatorial affairs, collections and exhibitions, education, development, finance and administration, marketing and communications, and Board relations, better reflects the core functions of the Museum’s mission. Revamped cross-functional teams involve multiple divisions in decision making. A new Leadership Team composed of 26 departmental and divisional representatives actively participates in planning and coordinating key institutional projects and leading innovative thinking across divisions.
Signing on to FEA as a guiding concept was not simple for Museum staff, as institutional change inevitably requires personal change. Not all staff members have wholeheartedly embraced the idea of what they perceive as another layer of meetings and communication. There are very few underworked museum professionals—at the DMA or at any museum—and one more concept can feel intrusive when time is already scarce. But all staff, and now candidates for every professional-level position, know that visitor engagement is an institutional commitment that they are agreeing to pursue.

A working culture supported by the Framework for Engaging with Art has discernible benefits:

**A common language**—When we speak of addressing Observers, Participants, Independents, or Enthusiasts in program and exhibition development, we have a shared understanding of whom we are trying to reach and what we intend to achieve. Museum audiences—whether general visitors, teachers, or online users—are no longer an undifferentiated group.

**Audience-focused**—With a framework that lays out audience characteristics in detail, staff members have a steady reminder of the interests, needs, and capacities of visitors and potential visitors. Across departments and across programs and exhibitions, planning can encompass the different audiences effectively, and staff expectations can be focused and realistic.

**Effective allocation of resources**—When combined with program development, research about audience types is a useful budgetary tool. To maximize the impact of Museum resources, the staff can allocate work efforts and funds to serve and attract a diverse range of visitors in our community.

**Targeted marketing**—Museum staff identify long-term attendance trends or membership behaviors according to cluster and then design audience development or membership marketing to target and attract these audiences.
Integrated evaluation—Program evaluation and audience research are integrated learning and problem-solving tools that draw on FEA as a support and context for institutional effectiveness.

“I cannot say enough about the impact of taking on FEA as an institutional rather than a departmental initiative,” says Gail Davitt. “As we bring on new staff we talk about what this means to us and how we are using it.” Close collaboration and communication among staff in multiple divisions were rare before the shift in culture instigated by the research findings. Planning a year ahead in programming—with special attention to distribution across the four clusters—also marks a change in process. Jeffrey Grove, The Hoffman Family Senior Curator of Contemporary Art, says the FEA-driven approach was one reason he was attracted to the Museum in 2009. “Interpretation is integrated into the display of objects, and educators and curators work together to open up new understandings,” he observes. “I believe the Framework for Engaging with Art has been instrumental in that process at the DMA.”
My relationship with the Dallas Museum of Art goes back more than three decades, as a Board member and as a friend and colleague of its Directors over the years. In the late 1990s, Jack Lane was concerned that the DMA was not connecting with its community, and recruited a leadership team to address these issues.

Within the DMA, people knew that change was necessary. It wasn’t imposed from the outside. I’m a big proponent of listening to your community, and that’s how they approached their challenges. As a member of the National Museum Services Board, I’m exposed to many different kinds of museums from all over the country. I can tell you that what’s happening at the Dallas Museum of Art is remarkable. It’s a quiet revolution.

Fifteen or twenty years ago, the Dallas African American community did not think very highly of the Museum and the other major cultural institutions. They felt they were not welcome. Based on my relationship with the Museum, I didn't believe that was true. But it was the perception, and perception is a big part of reality. Today, this attitude has shifted. People are
“People are beginning to feel that the DMA is their museum. There’s more of a sense of ownership.”
beginning to feel that the DMA is their museum. There’s more of a sense of ownership. At one time, people looked upon the African American Museum as an alternative to the DMA, but that’s no longer the case. They see the two museums as complementary.

Not every community engagement effort is as genuine as it could be. But that’s not the case with the DMA. They’re not just trying to keep the African American community happy, or bring in more visitors from the Hispanic community. They’re making a real effort to bring in the entire community. That’s why the DMA is successful. And you can see the difference as you look around the Museum.

In Big Thought’s Thriving Minds program, they bring every fourth-grader in the Dallas Independent School District into the Museum for a tour led by a docent. With The Art of Romare Bearden, they made a positive statement by adding a piece by the artist to the collection. They held a free outdoor concert by Isaac Hayes as part of a Late Night celebration during the Gordon Parks exhibition, and 18,000 people came out on a summer night to enjoy the music. During evening hours the place is packed, and there’s been a diversification of programming, so there’s more to appeal to families. To celebrate the completion of the Dallas Arts District in September 2009, the DMA took the lead in a collaborative effort among the institutions in the district. The programming was of such high quality, and they did it in such a quiet, easy way, that all you saw were the results.

Over the years, the DMA has been a good partner with my institution. When we were struggling to raise money to open the African American Museum, the Museum’s leaders were side by side
with us, even though they were in two major campaigns of their own at the time. They’ve always been there to give us technical support or consulting services. Today, we’re the only museum in the southwestern United States devoted to African American art, culture, and history. We also have one of the largest African American folk art collections in the nation.

The impressive thing is that innovation, experimentation, and change have not broken the DMA’s budget. They’ve just become part of how the Museum operates. I’m impressed with the competent and committed staff. You don’t see dissension, with staff members pulling in different directions. It’s truly a team approach. All this progress means that the Museum will have to work on some external challenges. The building is not easily accessible to public transportation, for example, so parking or shuttle service will be necessary as the DMA’s popularity continues to grow.

I’m grateful for the opportunity to be a part of the Dallas Museum of Art and to reflect on the quiet revolution that’s making such a difference in the way the Museum engages with its community. It’s been an amazing transformation, and people are excited about what’s still to come.

“The impressive thing is that innovation, experimentation, and change have not broken the DMA’s budget. They’ve just become part of how the Museum operates.”
A NEW ENVIRONMENT FOR EXHIBITIONS AND INTERPRETATION
The Framework for Engaging with Art has driven a gradual shift in thinking about all aspects of gallery installation as Museum curators and their colleagues in Education devise novel uses of the DMA’s collections. “In a way, FEA codifies the thought process that we apply to an exhibition’s interpretive elements, including programming,” explains Kevin W. Tucker, The Margot B. Perot Curator of Decorative Arts and Design. Five exhibition projects—all centered on the Museum’s collection—illustrate the results of a commitment to FEA thinking:

**Fast Forward: Contemporary Collections for the Dallas Museum of Art**

In February 2005, as the Museum was working on the FEA audience studies, its future was transformed by an announcement of a benefaction to its modern and contemporary art collections that was unprecedented in scope and form. Dallas collectors Marguerite and Robert Hoffman, Cindy and Howard Rachofsky, and Deedie and Rusty Rose announced that they had jointly pledged their private collections, which included over 900 works of art, as an irrevocable bequest to the Dallas Museum of Art. Made early in the lives of these individuals, these generous bequests allow the DMA and collectors to work collaboratively to plan and build the Museum’s collection for the future. Offering an important new model of community philanthropy within the museum world, this benefaction makes the Dallas Museum of Art one of the leading public collections of postwar and contemporary art in the nation.

To showcase this dramatic expansion, the DMA presented *Fast Forward: Contemporary Collections for the Dallas Museum of Art*. Organized by María de Corral, then the adjunct Hoffman Family Senior Curator of Contemporary Art, the multiphase exhibition filled the first level of the Museum from November 2006 to May 2007 and included more than 300 works of art.

To address the challenge of making contemporary art accessible and meaningful to audiences who may not
have a comfort level with its media, themes, and content, the exhibition team experimented with FEA-based visitor engagement strategies. Interpretive labels—at that time seldom a part of the Museum’s contemporary art exhibitions—incorporated quotations from the artists about their works and their creative process. Along with the curator’s voice on the audio tour, visitors heard interviews with collectors Marguerite Hoffman, Deedie Rose, Cindy and Howard Rachofsky, Gayle Stoffel, and Tim Hanley, who shared personal thoughts about the objects they had chosen to live with. Collectors’ and artists’ voices carried over into exhibition-related programming, which captured opportunities for all visitor clusters. Conversations and panel discussions, designed for Independents, included an event featuring the Museum Director in dialogue with three pioneers of Dallas collecting and a panel of local media artists reviewing the latest intersections of art and technology. For Observers and Participants, who appreciate having bridges to understanding art, we invited spoken-word artists to perform original poetry about the works of art for a high school symposium, then delivered rhythmic combinations of straightforward insights.

Giuseppe Penone
Italian, born 1947

Skin of Leaves (Pelle di foglie), 1999-2000

Bronze
The Rachofsky Collection

*I feel the forest breathing and hear the slow, inexorable growth of the wood.*
—Giuseppe Penone

Giuseppe Penone often uses the tree as a metaphor for systems of growth and change. He has commented on his use of bronze: "Bronze is the ideal material for fossilizing plant life. In bronze, plant life preserves all of its appearance, and, if placed in the open, it reacts with the climate, oxidizing and thus taking on the same colors as the plants which surround it."

Label for Giuseppe Penone’s Skin of Leaves (opposite) from the exhibition Fast Forward: Contemporary Collections for the Dallas Museum of Art
and poetic responses at Late Nights. The Arts & Letters Live series targeted Participants and Enthusiasts with a multidisciplinary extravaganza of song and poetry created to resonate with works of art in the exhibition.

Fast Forward offered the Museum an opportunity to rethink the interpretation of contemporary art and to introduce new perspectives for visitors. It was a critical step in raising the prominence of contemporary art and planning for interpretation and visitor engagement in the future.

Summer Spotlight

The intent of the 2009 FEA-based collections project Summer Spotlight was for visitors to look at art through a cinematic lens and find connections between going to an art museum and going to the movies. The experiment was conceived with Observers, Participants, Enthusiasts, and Independents in mind. Interpretive materials blended the voices of artists and community partners—especially high school and college students—with curatorial voices. Summer Spotlight featured 30 works of art shown throughout the galleries instead of in a dedicated exhibition space. Visitors chose their own paths to explore the spotlighted works. They could take a self-guided tour of all 30, focus on a few, or rely on serendipity to discover them while on a general tour of the galleries. A pedestal in front of each work of art held a special label telling a story that connected the work to a movie genre: action and adventure (Orpheus Taming Wild Animals, a Roman mosaic from A.D. 204), love and romance (John Singleton Copley’s pair of portraits from 1767, Woodbury Langdon and Sarah Sherburne Langdon), horror and mystery (a head of the rain god Tlaloc from the ancient American Mixtec culture of Mexico), and drama (Frederic Edwin Church’s The Icebergs of 1861). Each object was accompanied by questions phrased to evoke linkages to movies and by a short list of related films.

For Jackson Pollock’s abstract expressionist “drip painting” Cathedral (1947) and his later Portrait and a Dream (1953) exhibited nearby, the label text read:
Action! Imagine the artist standing over a long length of canvas. He lets paint flow from the end of a brush or stick as he moves around the canvas, carefully layering drips and splatters. He stops to consider his next move before adding the next layer of paint.

In Cathedral, Jackson Pollock’s carefully choreographed dance with paint and canvas results in a completely abstract web of lines that intersect, swoop, break, and overlap. This is one of the first paintings in which Pollock perfected this drip technique, referred to as “action painting.”

In the later painting Portrait and a Dream, featured in the movie Pollock, the artist returns to the figure, incorporating his personal portrait, covered by a mask. On the left, a reclining figure might reflect the “dream” of the painting’s title.

Movie Connection: Have you seen movies about artists? Ed Harris played Jackson Pollock in the movie Pollock. Is that who you would have cast?

Check Out: Pollock, Vincent and Theo, Girl with a Pearl Earring
With *Summer Spotlight* we experimented with Web browsing-enabled mobile technology as an online and onsite interpretive tool. Visitors could check out an iPod Touch or use their own smartphones. Multimedia Bonus Features (named to reflect the movies theme) were designed for various clusters and included videos, audio clips, and sound interpretations produced by faculty and students from the Arts and Technology program at the University of Texas at Dallas. Most of the content came from the Museum’s growing digital content repository, part of the Arts Network (see pages 200-07).

Bonus Features at the Pollock stop included an excerpt from Hans Namuth’s 1950 film of the artist talking and painting, several short clips of a Museum curator discussing Pollock’s early life and his work as a response to postwar America, a sound interpretation of *Cathedral*, and a video response by students from the Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. We expected that Participants would enjoy the sound and video responses and that Independents would gravitate toward primary sources, such as the Namuth film.
Summative evaluation of *Summer Spotlight* yielded information for improvement and further experimentation. We learned that visitors need more explicit guidance when encountering new interpretive formats or materials. Though the pedestal labels were large, with dramatic lighting and graphics, they were less successful than expected. Some visitors did not even notice them. Many said they were not aware of the Bonus Features, and we experienced some functionality issues that complicated visitor use. Based on what we learned, we refined the mobile tour prototype and added a short, step-by-step tutorial available at [http://www.DallasMuseumofArt.mobi](http://www.DallasMuseumofArt.mobi). We also trained visitor services staff and gallery attendants to help visitors use the mobile devices and access the mobile tours.

The latest generation of interactive multimedia tours—called smARTphone tours—made their debut in February 2010 in the Wendy and Emery Reves Collection and in the exhibition *Lens of Impressionism*, and have been markedly more successful.

Targeted program initiatives developed for *Summer Spotlight* yielded positive results. Extending the typical Sketching in the Galleries format to involve anime artists and costume designers was intended to attract Observers to a program that may usually appeal to Participants and Enthusiasts. In the C3 Tech Lab, we hoped Enthusiasts and Independents would enjoy documentary filmmaking while Participants would create their own three-minute interpretations of art in the collections. As part of a Family Celebration, professional actors stepped into character, encouraging parents and children to create costumes and props and then act out stories from works of art. Late Nights featured programs like film-focused collection tours, movie music performances, and Soundtrack Karaoke, which was so popular that karaoke is now a regular Late Night item. *Summer Spotlight* also deepened the Museum’s relationship with the Dallas Film Society, which has led to an ongoing collaboration. *Summer Spotlight* turned out to be a marketing success, because it showed that promoting a collection concept instead of a traditional exhibition could draw visitors to the Museum.
All the World’s a Stage: Celebrating Performance in the Visual Arts

In August 2009, the exhibition *All the World’s a Stage: Celebrating Performance in the Visual Arts*—which honored the opening of the AT&T Performing Arts Center and the completion of the Dallas Arts District—introduced a thematic exhibition concept and installation that integrated theory and practice and fulfilled much of the intent behind FEA.

Many ingredients merged in this innovative presentation: the rich variety of the Museum’s collection, the active involvement of artists, a high level of community partnership, and the creativity of the staff. *All the World’s a Stage* was a shared effort by all the Museum’s curators—unusual in conventional art museum practice. Working in collaboration with the education and exhibition staff, they creatively mined the collection, identifying over 125 paintings, sculpture, photographs, and other objects from every area to illustrate the exhibition themes. “No other museum in the area could offer such a diverse overview, or put an 11th-century Chola bronze of a dancing Shiva with Degas’ ballerinas and a Nigerian Egungun costume,” reviewer Gaile Robinson wrote in the Fort Worth *Star-Telegram*. “The result of putting an Art Deco radio with a Greek mosaic of Orpheus and watercolors of a twirling Isadora Duncan is one of the most powerful statements [the curators] have collectively ever made.”

Strong interpretive components joined with these carefully chosen works of art to create an immersive environment. Visitors could step up to the Music Bar and listen to a selection that related to a favorite work of art. Watching video on small monitors placed near specific works, they could understand the performance context of an African masquerade or a Guatemalan textile. Or they could read some of the 20 community response labels, by people such as directors and actors, that accompanied curatorial labels.

Other perspectives of artists, actors, musicians, priests, and dancers filled the galleries with the energy and spirit of performance in the community. In The Stage, a central area that served as a town square for the arts, local artists
Trumpet
Peru: south coast, Paracas culture, c. 300–200 B.C.
Ceramic and resin-suspended paint
Anonymous gift in honor of John Lunsford, 1986.23

Paracas musical instruments are rare, yet music was almost certainly a part of special events in this early South American culture. The undocumented sounds of ceramic trumpets such as this one probably accompanied those celebrations. The remarkable length of this example must have required either an extra person or a brace to support it when it was played.

The humanlike form that decorates the bell of the trumpet represents a mythical or religious figure called the Oculate Being (after the prominent concentric circles of the eyes). The unusually large head may represent a mask of the supernatural. Whether a depiction of an Oculate Being or of a human being costumed as one, the presence of a supernatural image on the trumpet elevates the function of the instrument to a ritual realm.

Response to Trumpet
Historically, mankind has relied on the trumpet for military and religious purposes. In the DMA’s recent Tutankhamun exhibition, there were trumpets dating back to 1500 B.C. In medieval times, trumpet playing was a guarded craft; trumpeters were often among the most heavily guarded members of a troop, as they were relied upon to relay instructions to the army. Today the modern bugle continues this signaling tradition. (Boy Scouts can earn a merit badge by mastering bugle calls: “First Call,” “Reveille,” “Assembly,” “Taps.”)

In the spring of 1972, I was asked to fill in for a VFW bugler who was ill. I vividly remember standing a good distance from the interment ceremony and playing “Taps.” As I played everyone started to sob; the emotions from that gathering haunt me to this day as I dutifully carry out my mission of “Trumpeter.”

Luis E. Martinez
Dallas Wind Symphony
Coordinator, Music Cluster
Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts

Curatorial and community response labels for the Paracas trumpet from the exhibition All the World’s a Stage: Celebrating Performance in the Visual Arts
presented more than 200 performances. Learning from visitors’ interest in similar spaces in two earlier exhibitions, we created The Stage as a much larger, more versatile area with increased seating and a greater variety of programs, including theater, music, dance, film, and informal discussions. When programs were not being presented, visitors could watch a looped video of interviews with performing artists in conjunction with a slideshow of related works in the collection. The interviewees included Thomas Riccio, a multimedia artist and professor of performance and aesthetic studies at the University of Texas at Dallas, who described performance as a vital point of reference for a culture, and choreographer Michelle Hanlon and dancer Jennifer Manus, who expressed the joys and challenges of their piece *The Guitarist/Outside-In*, created in response to Pablo Picasso’s *The Guitarist* of 1943.

Performances also complemented public lectures. After Larry Coben’s presentation on the Incas’ use of ritualized performance, spectacles, and theatricality, an Inca folk group performed music from Peru. We hoped this experimental format would entice Independents to attend a performance—not their natural preference—and encourage Participants, who do appreciate performances in the galleries, to attend both the performance and the lecture. Feedback from visitors and art critics, as well as healthy attendance, indicated that the experiment was a success.

Throughout the Museum, the themes of *All the World’s a Stage* translated into film screenings, conversations with artists, performances, poetry readings, discussions about the state of the Dallas arts community, Late Nights and family programs, and complementary programs in the Center for Creative Connections. The staff thought about every visitor cluster. They wanted Independents to appreciate the artist’s voice, Participants and Enthusiasts to enjoy interactive experiences, and Observers to respond to daily films, jazz concerts, and changing Late Nights program menus.

The tight schedule and conservative budget for *All the World’s a Stage* were a sign of the economic times. But these conditions turned out to be advantages, not limitations. The exhibition celebrated the vitality of the community’s artistic
resources, the assets available in the DMA’s encyclopedic
collection, and the drive to test the possibilities presented by
the Framework for Engaging with Art.

An Evolving Environment
The DMA’s environment for engaging with art through
exhibitions and interpretation continues to take shape. The
2010 exhibition Coastlines: Images of Land and Sea featured
thematic arrangements of paintings, photographs, and works
on paper, novel interpretive concepts, and programs created
for every visitor cluster. Through some 60 selections from
the Museum’s collection (with a few from local collectors),
the exhibition considered coastal landscapes as a source of
inspiration, metaphor, and mystery for visual artists from 1850
to the present. Unexpected combinations of artists, media,
and artistic traditions in five thematic groupings “offered
visitors an array of artistic lenses,” says Heather MacDonald,
The Lillian and James H. Clark Associate Curator of European
Art. Each work of art was accompanied by a label consisting
of a literary quote that evoked the coastal theme, rather than
a traditional curatorial label.
In their most ambitious collaboration with the Museum so far, faculty and graduate students in the Arts and Technology program at the University of Texas at Dallas built on their *Summer Spotlight* experiments to compose an interpretive soundscape for the exhibition space. MacDonald calls the sound installation an “immersive corporeal experience.” “It’s certainly a risk that some people might find the sound intrusive,” she says, “but there’s a freedom to experiment at the DMA. I think this is an experiment worth trying.”

Again, Museum staff planned exhibition-related programs for Observers, Participants, Independents, and Enthusiasts, as well as for combinations of clusters. Film screenings during *Coastlines* featured movies set on the beach or at sea and were followed by commentary from critics, filmmakers, and curators about the inspiration of coastal landscapes. A concert by surf guitar legend Dick Dale headlined a Late Nights Summer Block Party. Lectures, concerts, tours, and family activities all used the coastal theme.
Drawing on the Museum’s extensive resources—this time, the growing collection of African masks and recent scholarship published in the DMA’s collection catalogue *The Arts of Africa*—the fall 2010 exhibition *African Masks: The Art of Disguise* explores the dual purpose of a mask: to conceal the identity of the wearer and to reveal the identity of the spirit the mask personifies. Some masks are presented as sculpture, and some are shown in a complete masquerade as they were intended to be seen. Creative partnerships with the Dallas Zoo and Dallas Black Dance Theatre enhance the exhibition with programs and performances. *African Masks* has a strong multimedia component, inspired by the positive impact of similar content in *All the World’s a Stage*. An extensive smARTphone tour highlighting 19 of the masks accompanies the exhibition.
There is more to come. Roslyn Walker, Chair of Curatorial Affairs and The Margaret McDermott Curator of African Art, believes that this exhibition "provides deeper and more extensive learning that we can apply to the upcoming reinstallation of our African collection." That approach applies across the Museum's collections. Experiments with exhibition themes, content, and interpretive format at the DMA build on one another, as evaluation and reflective practice show what works for different audience clusters, what has promise but needs refinement, and what is not effective. Conversations about digital content, public programs, teacher programs, and community partnerships take place simultaneously. With the focus solidly on the art, the aim is a multifaceted visitor experience that stimulates curiosity, reflection, and deeper looking.
CENTER FOR CREATIVE CONNECTIONS
As a concept and as a space, the Center for Creative Connections embodies the Dallas Museum of Art’s response to what research has shown about visitors’ engagement with art. This innovative learning environment, which opened on the first floor of the Museum in 2008, introduces multiple options for visitors of all ages, in every audience cluster, to observe and experience the creative impulse. C3, as it is called within the Museum, is a studio, laboratory, exhibition space, theater, classroom, and gathering place.
rolled into one. It invites exploration of creativity from two perspectives: that of the artist and that of the participant. Visitors learn about the artist’s creative process as they view and learn about real works of art and interact with artists. They test and refine their own creativity by exercising curiosity, reflecting on the artistic process, and making art.

At the entrance, visitors read this “user’s guide”:

**Center:** Experience a place that opens up possibilities for seeing art in new ways

**Creative:** Explore the creative process by interacting with art and artists, and creating your own responses

**Connections:** Connect with artists, works of art, and the community through close looking, new technologies, and exciting programs

The whole experience is self-directed, with visitors moving through the 12,000-square-foot space on their own or with companions or family members. They explore the works of art from the collection that are on view in the current interactive exhibition, taking 360-degree turns around some objects and sitting quietly next to others. They pause to write, touch, read, and create. Personal responses flow freely, as thoughts scribbled on Post-it Notes or as phrases, poems, and lists formed from magnetic words. People talk with a visiting artist about an imaginative community response work of art, or choose among a variety of free, multigenerational programs, from family workshops to adult classes. Staff members are always on hand for guidance and conversation. Visitor numbers have exceeded expectations: Almost one in every three visitors who come to the Museum uses the Center.

Unlike some interactive museum environments, C3 is not a separate space with its own program offerings, but a hub for experiences that involve gallery-based components designed for teachers, students, and the general public—all ages, many goals and interests, and every audience cluster. Consider this program sampling from a typical week: A group of teenagers spent Saturday afternoon with visiting artist John Grandits, exploring the collection and then creating their own art-inspired concrete poems in the Tech Lab. Young families enjoyed a toddler-paced art program
Center
Experience a place that opens up possibilities for seeing art in new ways

Creative
Explore the creative process by interacting with art and artists, and creating your own responses

Connections
Connect with artists, works of art, and the community through close looking, new technologies, and exciting programs
that began as they looked at a painting in the galleries and continued with art activities in the kid-friendly Arturo’s Nest. During Thursday Night Live, a group of friends listened to jazz in the Atrium and then moved up to the Center for a drop-in art-making session in the Art Studio.

Grandits’s workshop was a remarkable demonstration of the convergence of the artist’s and the visitor’s creative impulses. The artist began the afternoon with an introduction to concrete poetry, which incorporates words, shapes, colors, and textures in a composition with both visual and poetic meaning. He then led the teenaged participants on a walk through the galleries to find inspiration for the writing they would do back in the C3 Tech Lab. One workshop member, captivated by a Morris Louis painting, composed a concrete poem using Grandits’s words and echoing Louis’s abstract expressionist lines. The DMA, Grandits wrote later on his Web site, “is a fabulous place that gets patrons to look and talk and draw and paint and build and write”—just what the Center aims for in its mission statement, which calls C3 “a bridge between the everyday experience of looking and
the transformational experiences of seeing, creating, and connecting deeply with works of art.”

At the heart of C3 is a changing exhibition series that focuses on works of art chosen from the collections. *Materials & Meanings*, the inaugural exhibition that was on view from 2008 to 2010, included eight works spanning nearly 5,000 years and a variety of cultures, ranging from a Greek wreath made of gold from the 4th century B.C. to an oil paint and light on linen piece made in 2004 by the American artist Donald Moffett. Getting close to the real thing, as visitors can do in C3 exhibitions, represents a change of pace from more traditional, hands-off art museum environments. One visitor described the feeling as “a little closer, less standoffish—[In the exhibitions you’re] not just an observer of the artwork, but . . . exploring a little bit about how it’s made, what it might mean, and how you might do the same thing.” People say that the Center is “a stimulating [atmosphere] with creative energies” that carry over into their experience with works of art elsewhere in the Museum.
The exhibition *Encountering Space*, which opened in fall 2010, invites visitors to think about their physical and emotional reactions to space in works of art and how those reactions affect their experience. How does an artist give you a vantage point within a painting? Where are you? How can you actually become a part of the space of a work of art? How does the story of a sculpture unfold as you walk around it? How can culture influence how space is depicted and perceived in a work of art?

Using 11 works of art from the Museum’s collection, *Encountering Space* was created by cross-divisional teams that represented the DMA’s collaborative working culture. A large team including education, curatorial, and exhibitions staff chose the theme of physical space after extensive dialogue about how to reach and involve multiple audiences. A smaller content team strengthened and refined the exhibition development process by inviting closer communication with Museum staff.

*Encountering Space* also involved deepening external collaboration. The staff initiated conversations with
colleagues in science and children’s museums, who shared their knowledge of building interactive spaces with integrated programming. Alumni and faculty from the Meadows School of the Arts at Southern Methodist University partnered with Museum staff on an immersive environment that responds to the space-related concepts of the exhibition. *Encountering Space* also includes several areas for visitor participation.

Since it opened, the Center has hosted 370 artists, from painters, storytellers, and poets to filmmakers, sound designers, and photographers. Some are visiting artists who collaborate with staff to develop and implement Thursday evening interactive programs for adults, and some work with docents and school programs. Others bring together community members and visitors to create response components in the space. “Artists are a part of what we do,” Susan Diachisin, The Kelli and Allen Questrom Director of the Center for Creative Connections, explains. “They are our best guides for exploring the creative process and supporting that process in our visitors.” Fiber artist Lesli Robertson (see pages 164–67) was one of several artists to respond to *Materials & Meanings*. Her textile-based installation *Woven Records* was a collaboration with 581 people from 16 community groups, along with Museum visitors, who made small collages that Robertson incorporated into the larger work. The choices that the community artists made, Robertson observed, revealed the meaning of materials as a form of artistic expression.

Community collaborations arising in C3 are often significant, long-term relationships based on shared aims, and many result in community response installations. Architecture and interior design students from the University of Texas at Arlington, for example, devised an innovative construction that drew attention to the ways they work with materials in their individual disciplines. Visitors could touch hard, curving walls that looked soft and run their fingers over curtains made of household materials like rubber bands and binder clips. Thirty-three students from a printmaking class at the Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts spent two semesters working on large-scale multi-plate prints in response to Janine Antoni’s *Lick and Lather* in the
Materials & Meanings exhibition. The printing plates made from industrial, nontraditional materials were incorporated into tables as part of the installation. In another community response exhibition, 11 students from the University of North Texas explored new media and visitors as materials in their interactive installation. These engaging works kept visitors laughing and playing as they became aware of themselves as part of a work of art.

Evaluation studies of the Center for Creative Connections reveal that it provides both a social and a personal experience that inspires creativity and self-confidence in visitors and affects how they relate to works of art. One young boy was so enthusiastic about the cardboard replica of a Frank Gehry chair in Materials & Meanings that he made his own version at the Materials Bar and then continued making chairs out of different materials at home. A man who hadn’t practiced his own art for years left C3 determined to begin again. A square of silver on the Materials Wall stimulated Post-it “conversations” among visitors about personal associations it evoked: “The silver reminds me of the turkey on the silver platter at Thanksgiving.” Touching a stone “is like walking barefoot on my grandmother’s patio in the summer.” Interviews reveal that visitors appreciate the chance to have their voices heard and sense the Museum’s validation of their ideas. Less effective is the Learning Links area with computer terminals and other resources, which promotes a more traditional investigation of themes and artworks. Evaluation and observation have shown that visitors are not drawn to this area as much as to other features that promote active looking, learning, and creative response.

The Center for Creative Connections generates a sense of community response and ownership of creativity, and communicates that the whole Museum is about creative connections. As visitors move from C3 into the galleries to connect with works of art, on their own or with artist- or staff-led programs, they take this ownership with them for a deeper and more rewarding experience.

More information on C3 and its current exhibition, Encountering Space, can be found at http://DallasMuseumofArt.org/CenterforCreativeConnections.