Up close and personal

Engaging visitors with *Michelangelo Drawings: closer to the master*, formative evaluation

October 2005

This is an online version of a report prepared by MHM for the British Museum. Commercially sensitive information has been removed.

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Up close and personal

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Visitors are **fascinated** by
Michelangelo, and hope that *Michelangelo Drawings: closer to the master* will give them **insight** into his drawings through rich, contextual displays.

The exhibition has the capacity to surprise and **delight** both specialist and general visitors alike, and to challenge misconceptions.

This report looks at what the exhibition needs to do in order to deeply **engage** visitors with the drawings.
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1 What we were asked to do

1.1 Brief

The British Museum commissioned Morris Hargreaves McIntyre to carry out a formative evaluation of plans for a temporary exhibition: *Michelangelo Drawings: closer to the master*.

The British Museum has one of the greatest collections of Michelangelo’s drawings in the world, and this exhibition will also include items loaned from The Teyler Museum in Haarlem and the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford: 90 drawings in total will be displayed.

*Michelangelo Drawings: closer to the master* aims to ‘offer insight into the creative genius of Michelangelo through his drawings’. Because the exhibition is still in development, the museum wanted to test visitors’ reactions to ideas and concepts for the exhibition, rather than finished plans. Different options for marketing materials were also tested.

1.2 Research methods

In order to meet the needs of the brief, we moderated two focus groups at the British Museum. These allowed us to explore the views of visitors in depth and identify what visitors to *Michelangelo Drawings: closer to the master* need to engage with the exhibition.

Respondent criteria

The groups were segmented using the following criteria:

**Current visitors**

People who had visited the British Museum in the last two years and intended to visit in the future. Half of the group had paid to visit a temporary exhibition, and half had not.

This group included a curator of visual art, an art historian and a friend of a museum. This is representative of the British Museum’s visitor profile (19% of visitors have a professional/academic involvement with museums, 16% have specialist knowledge of subject areas covered by the museum").

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1 Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (August 2005), *The British Museum rolling research August 05*, The British Museum
Potential visitors
People who had not visited the British Museum in the last two years but had been to an art gallery in the last 12 months. These respondents had previously paid to see an exhibition in London.

Group format
Respondents were shown three possible approaches for the exhibition. The groups were shown mood boards, images and sample labels and text panels to illustrate these three options. A copy of the stimulus booklet is appended.

Option 1: Michelangelo the draughtsman
Drawings only.
Minimal interpretation, concentrating on Michelangelo’s technical skills and methods and based on individual pictures rather than overarching themes.

Option 2: Michelangelo the artist
Drawings plus images of finished work.
Interpretation explains Michelangelo’s artistic practice by looking at whole projects (e.g. Sistine chapel) from start to finish, including some context about why Michelangelo was commissioned and information on technique.

Option 3: Michelangelo the man
Drawings, images of finished work and contextual material (e.g. painting of Pope Julius II by Raphael, poetry, manuscripts, contemporary writings). Contextual interpretation about Michelangelo’s world and character.

Respondents were also shown three prototypes for promotional print:

Option a: eye
Option b: head
Option c: body

We also showed respondents a prototype interactive, which would allow visitors to select drawings and compare them to the finished images in the Sistine chapel.

By examining respondents’ reactions to these options and to the concept of Michelangelo Drawings: closer to the master, we are able to make recommendations on how the British Museum can engage visitors through this temporary exhibition.
2 Perceptions of the British Museum

Visitors’ views about the British Museum as a whole will inevitably affect their opinions about *Michelangelo Drawings*. By understanding these underlying feelings and assumptions about the museum, we can contextualise the comments of respondents about the exhibition.

2.1 Museum visitors have high expectations

All respondents were able to clearly articulate the benefits they seek from a museum/gallery visit, suggesting that they had already had deeply engaging experiences at other museum and galleries.

*Interest, curiosity and knowledge. Potential visitor*

*some things make you think, something that you haven't come across before Potential visitor*

*It can give you a somewhat different perspective on everyday things in your life Potential visitor*

The quotes above show that many potential visitors expect to be surprised, challenged and delighted by contemporary exhibitions. Visitors have sophisticated motivations and expectations which go beyond simply wanting a day out: even non-specialist visitors are expecting to be stimulated intellectually, emotionally and possibly even spiritually by museum exhibitions.

Morris Hargreaves McIntyre has identified the range of motivations that people have for visiting museums. The model below, the *Hierarchy of engagement*, is a useful way of segmenting visitors by the type of engagement they need and seek from a visit.
### Hierarchy of engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visitors who see museum as a...</th>
<th>Have this driver...</th>
<th>And they seek this from a visit...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHURCH</td>
<td>SPIRITUAL</td>
<td>Creative stimulation and quite contemplation, they see museums as an opportunity to escape and recharge their batteries, food for the soul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPA</td>
<td>EMOTIONAL</td>
<td>May have a personal connection to the subject matter, want to see fascinating objects in an inspiring setting, seek ambience, deep sensory and intellectual experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARCHIVE</td>
<td>INTELLECTUAL</td>
<td>Keen to encourage their children’s or their own interest and knowledge, may have professional interest in the subject, seek a journey of discovery, to find out new things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATTRACTION</td>
<td>SOCIAL</td>
<td>See museums as an enjoyable place to spend time with friends and family, seek ease of access and orientation, good facilities and services, welcoming staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These drivers are hierarchical. In moving up the hierarchy, from Social to Spiritual motivators, visitors experience increasing levels of engagement with the museum and its contents. The further up the hierarchy visitors move, the more fulfilling and rewarding their visit. At each point on the hierarchy visitors have different needs, they are only able to move up the hierarchy if their needs at the lower end are met.

Meeting these needs is visitors’ primary motivation for visiting and is also, therefore, their minimum expectation of a visit.

We know from previous research for the British Museum\(^2\) that main motivations for visiting are as follows: 38% of social visitors, 41% intellectual visitors, 18% emotional visitors, 3% spiritual visitors.

For a recent temporary exhibition Views from Africa, main motivations tended to shift up the hierarchy, with more spiritually, emotionally and intellectually motivated visitors: 23% social, 47% intellectual, 17% emotional, 14% spiritual.

### 2.2 Potential visitors don’t think the British Museum will meet their needs

Some potential visitors acknowledged the British Museum as a national treasure.

*I think it’s wonderful Potential visitor*

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\(^2\) Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (August 2005), *The British Museum rolling research August 05*, The British Museum
However, many of these visitors had not been to the British Museum for a few years: its status as a national treasure does not necessarily motivate these people to visit. These visitors were simply not sure that a visit to the British Museum could live up to their expectations and give them what they wanted: a stimulating, surprising and informative experience.

2.3 Current visitors feel the British Museum should try harder

Many of the visitors we spoke to had a deep sense of affection for the British museum. Unsurprisingly, current visitors were the most enthusiastic:

_the wonderful thing about the British Museum is its very open and it has no boundaries and no limits Current visitor_

However, the specialist current visitors were also the most critical of the British Museum. In particular, the art historian, curator and friend of the museum felt that the museum should go further in embracing recent museum practice innovations. These frequent museum visitors had seen innovative art exhibitions elsewhere, and felt that the British Museum was currently lagging behind:

_I would expect [more] in this day and age of the British Museum which has a high standard to maintain. Current visitor_

Far from being precious about the British Museum’s collections, specialists and current visitors wanted the museum to enthuse the public about their objects by bringing their exhibitions to life with inventive approaches:

_I was in Rome the other day and everything in there talked and moved. You could tell by people’s faces going round [that they were engaged] and I thought “why don’t we have this in London?” Current visitor_
The decision to visit a temporary exhibition

Visitors base their decision to visit any temporary museum exhibition on whether the exhibition will meet their needs. This decision-making process can be influenced by a number of factors.

3.1 Specialists and loyal current visitors will always come along

Obviously, serial British Museum temporary exhibition visitors and people with a specialist interest in the particular topic already know what a temporary exhibition can offer:

*I've studied African art and African philosophy and so I found the African exhibitions are particularly interesting.*

*Current visitor*

*They are all interesting in some special way. Sometimes it is something that I know nothing about whatsoever and it’s fascinating to come along and have a look.*

*Current visitor*

3.2 Potential visitors need to be intrigued

Temporary exhibitions need to appeal to general visitors. The less familiar visitors are with British Museum as a whole, the more persuading they will need. Resonant themes and titles are important:

*I don’t unless it really appeals to me ... it is good that there is a theme or focus to actually attract people and it’s good to specialise in something.*

*Current visitor*

*If I’m flicking through something like the Guide or Time Out ... you don’t think about necessarily coming here first for a special exhibition, but then you might see a title that is quite intriguing that you don’t know anything about.*

*Current visitor*

3.3 Potential visitors want the British Museum to persuade them

All the potential visitors we spoke to were open to persuasion to visiting a temporary exhibition at the British Museum:

*If there is something specific I want to see yes I will.*

*Potential visitor*
Some have noticed recent attempts to reach out to new audiences, and felt that the museum should build on this approach:

*I noticed some more advertising that is designed to appeal to a younger audience.*

**Potential visitor**

### 3.4 Temporary exhibitions can be a portal to the rest of the museum

Visitors felt that attracting new visitors to the British Museum with exciting and fascinating temporary exhibitions would be a good way to develop the museum’s audience. Temporary exhibitions could act as a gateway to the museum:

*Having a focus is good because it pulls people in, and then I can drift off and see other things.*

**Current visitor**
The decision to visit *Michelangelo* ...

We tested visitors’ reactions to the exhibition title, price and marketing materials; all key factors influencing the decision to visit.

### 4.1 Extremely appealing proposition for visitors

All the respondents we spoke to were delighted by the prospect of this exhibition, and felt that it would have wide appeal.

*I think it’s fantastic* **Potential visitor**

*Very interesting to see the sorts of things that he drew.* **Potential visitor**

*I love art I would love to go.* **Current visitor**

*I would be absolutely delighted with the idea.* **Current visitor**

Visitors felt that the title was intriguing and transparent: exactly what was needed to get them to come along:

*Simple* **Potential visitor**

**Visitors are very interested in Michelangelo and the Renaissance**

Many visitors revealed a surprising depth of interest and existing knowledge about Michelangelo. These visitors were happy that the exhibitions would concentrate on his drawings:

*it is not so much his paintings, as you say the drawings were more interesting technologically.* **Potential visitor**

*he is famous for his sculptures, but with the actual drawings you can see if you can actually read his mind and how he worked and how he developed his sculptures, because his drawings are almost like sculptures themselves when you look at them.* **Potential visitor**

Even visitors who would actually be put off by Michelangelo’s art saw massive potential to gain insight into the Renaissance period in general:

*I’m not a fan of Michelangelo ... He’s not my taste ... if it concentrated on the historical side, maybe the social cultural background of Michelangelo rather than just the art, I’d probably be more inclined.* **Current visitor**
4.2 *Michelangelo... can correct misconceptions about the British Museum*

Visitors not already familiar with the British Museum’s drawing collection were very surprised to learn that the British Museum could stage such an art exhibition. The popular perception is of a collection of ancient artefacts rather than fine art:

*I would be surprised, because I just wouldn’t relate Michelangelo to the British Museum.*  
Current visitor

*I thought it was just] a lot of glass cases with objects and I didn’t realise there was artwork.*  
Current visitor

Visitors felt that this exhibition would help change people’s misconceptions of the British Museum and what it can offer a general visitor. Current visitors were in favour of an exhibition which would draw new visitors to the museum:

*I think the British Museum needs these kinds of shows with famous artists.*  
Potential visitor

*It will drag a few more people in who say ‘oh look I didn’t realise they have just done this’ and they will see more of the different wings.*  
Potential visitor

4.3 *Promotional print needs to attract potential visitors*

Print must instantly convey benefits of exhibition to visitors

The promotional print has to communicate to visitors of all levels what the exhibition is about. The head prototype was popular as respondents felt this clearly showed them what they would get in the exhibition, as well as conveying the personal connotations of ‘closer to the master’. The eye image was less successful as respondents felt it didn’t convey enough promise of what the exhibition of drawings could offer:

*[Head] It gives you some idea of what you’re going to get.*  
Current visitor

*[Head] It is full of promise.*  
Potential visitor

*He is full of power Michelangelo and I would expect to see something with muscles.*  
Potential visitor

*I think the second one [head] would have a better chance of selling it.*  
Potential visitor
Many respondents liked the personal touch implied by the signature from the eye option, and wanted this to be included in the final version:

*I liked the signature on the last.* Current visitor

**Print must be eyecatching**

Any promotional print needs to catch the attention of potential visitors.

The eye prototype (option a) was what visitors would typically expect from the British Museum. However, most respondents felt that the head image (option b) was more striking, exciting, and more instantly recognisable as Michelangelo.

*[The eye is] Not enticing. It doesn’t sort of pull you in.* Current visitor

*[Eye] Sort of what I expected. It didn’t surprise me that one, which is fine.* Potential visitor

*[Head] It is a lot better and more dramatic.* Current visitor

However, all respondents felt that the print needed to be even more attention-grabbing:

*[Head] It is not the sort of thing you’ll stick on your fireplace and say you must remember to go to that in a week’s time.* Current visitor

*[Head] If that was on the side of a bus you’d never catch it.* Current visitor

Whilst many visitors liked the image of the body (option c), the background was too dark:

*[Body] Yeah it is quite dramatic and quite striking.* Potential visitor

The [body] image is good but you can’t really see it. Potential visitor

*a pale background and the actual drawing could be emphasised and then the name in a dark colour against a pale background.* Potential visitor

**Colour needs to convey atmosphere of Renaissance era**

Visitors felt there were certain colours that evoked the Renaissance. Visitors felt that the blue of option c (body) was too cold, and wanted opulent colours such as red, purple and gold to contrast with the sepia tones and evoke a rich and sensual period:

*[body] Cold.* Current visitor
Is the brown related to the art of the Medicis? The colours of the Italians in that period ... blues or slightly purple blues or a touch of orange Current visitor

Something that makes you feel of Italy ... feel this is an exhibition relating to a period of time Current visitor

Brown doesn’t go with Italy or the Medici’s. Current visitor
5

How visitors make meaning from exhibits

5.1 How visitors behave in an exhibition

Through our qualitative work into how visitors select and engage with exhibits in the museum environment, we have identified four visitor modes. These modes can be characterised by how the visitor selects exhibits to explore and what kind of interpretation they need to make meaning. The modes of behaviour are set out in the model below.

**Meaning making modes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Object selection</th>
<th>Needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RESEARCHER</td>
<td>Specific objects/ collections</td>
<td>Focused, specialist museum visitors, select objects themselves based on their in-depth knowledge of the subject area, want access to expert information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEARCHER</td>
<td>Classification/ collection</td>
<td>Have good general understanding of the topic, consume all the information available in the museum on that subject, want museum to select and present objects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOLLOWER</td>
<td>Narrative theme</td>
<td>Require a narrative explanation, want the museum to select and present objects which illustrate themes to follow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BROWSER</td>
<td>Random objects</td>
<td>Select objects by browsing the exhibition, will wander until they find a ‘gateway’ object that catches their attention, require explanation of their selected objects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The four modes form a hierarchy, with each level representing an increased level of application in the museum environment. It is possible for visitors to move upwards through the modes of behaviour, from *Browser* to *Researcher*.

Visitors who are continually *browsing* an exhibition can only make fleeting connections with a limited number of objects. *Followers* make connections with a number of related objects and leave with an understanding of key themes. *Searchers* are interested in whole exhibitions. *Followers* and *Searchers* may either enter in these modes or may be encouraged to develop these behaviours as they latch on to successful interpretation. *Researching* behaviour tends to be developed over a long period of time; these visitors have specific and focused sections of interest.

Because of their fleeting engagement, *Browsers* tend to stay at the *Social* level of engagement. However, by moving *Browsers* up to become *Followers* by engaging them with narrative themes (as shown below), they quickly
start to connect with works on an intellectual, emotional and possibly even spiritual level.

5.2 What visitors need to engage with exhibits

Through our extensive work with museum and gallery visitors, we have identified the key needs of visitors in the four modes. These are shown below.

Because the development of *Michelangelo Drawings: closer to the master* is at a relatively early stage, we were looking at how visitors engage with the overall concepts of the exhibition rather than the detailed interpretation of objects. However, many of the principles outlined below can be applied to the macro concepts of the exhibition, as well as the micro construction of interpretation.

In the following sections, the basic concepts of what Browsers, Followers, Searchers and Researchers need to make meaning will be applied to our findings from the discussion groups. This will allow us to understand how the British Museum can maximise visitors' engagement with *Michelangelo Drawings*. 
### Map of visitor needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context: why they engage</th>
<th>Reactive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awe and wonder</td>
<td>Points of connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visually arresting</td>
<td>Promised experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Famous</td>
<td>or outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic appeal</td>
<td>Narrative themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need to be able to locate objects of interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Signposts to contextual information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>As Searcher, plus: Ability to search for particular items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detailed provenance information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Links to academic sources of information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Location of related collections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content: what they engage with</th>
<th>Reactive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Just enough objects to look at</td>
<td>Enough objects to constitute themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headline information to catch attention</td>
<td>(some objects could repeat)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enough information to develop themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All objects in the collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enough information to identify and distinguish objects of interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clear description and explanation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>As Searcher, plus: Links to similar collections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authoritative, scholarly commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical/ technical data</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience: how they engage</th>
<th>Reactive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impact on the senses</td>
<td>Mix of media to involve in themes: low tech and high tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving interactives</td>
<td>User friendly way of accessing information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Glossary for jargon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pictures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Information to take away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Functional way of accessing information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pictures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Information to take away</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2004 MORRIS HARGREAVES McINTYRE
6 Visitors' needs for content - images

The visitors we spoke to were shown three options for the exhibition (see 1.2 for details). This section looks at which artworks, images and other original materials visitors will need to make meaning from Michelangelo Drawings: closer to the master.

As discussed above (section 2), visitors have high expectations of temporary expectations in general. We have therefore made the distinction between minimum requirements (which visitors expect from the British Museum), what respondents would hope for, and what would exceed their expectations.

'Expect' is different from 'hope' Current visitor

6.1 Option 1: visitors expect to see drawings

When they were first told the title of the exhibition, visitors familiar with the British Museum expected an approach similar to option 1; simply drawings, sketches and 3D mock-ups. However even at this level, visitors expected to find out a certain amount of context. Visitors would actually be disappointed with an exhibition which only focuses on the technical aspect of Michelangelo’s drawings.

I would just expect to see examples of his drawings and I would hope to see lots of working drawings for his commissions. Current visitor

Possibly maquette, possibly mini forms of sculpture when he starts off and possibly other works from related artists in a similar timeframe of influence. Current visitor

6.2 Option 2: visitors hope to see contextual images

Visitors were more interested in option 2 – seeing the drawings in context of the completed works. Some visitors spontaneously suggested this before they were even shown the three options:

whether these are finished pieces in their own right or whether they were ideas for something else ... Whether they were various experiments or some other ideas. Potential visitor
Up close and personal

The images showing technical processes (for example, images showing cut lines and black dots) fascinated visitors. These insights into his working process helped visitors to engage more deeply with the drawings, gaining a deeper appreciation of the art:

*It does make you look closely. Current visitor*

*I think you do look at the drawing and 'think yeah that's right because they did that and you will see more into it when you see it again and enjoy it more and also I think that you will appreciate it even more* Potential visitor

This insight into his technique also increased visitors’ feeling of connection with Michelangelo as a person, and consequently a deeper admiration of his talent and drawings as a whole:

*we appreciate the genius he was by seeing how hard a technique he used* Potential visitor

6.3 Option 3: visitors would be delighted to see rich contextual materials

The visitors we spoke to loved the contextual materials and images of option 3 (for example, Raphael's portrait of Pope Julius II, manuscript of poem by Michelangelo). They felt that these images gave them a much deeper understanding of the drawings by understanding their context; both the political and religious circumstances in which the drawings were produced, and Michelangelo's personal interests and experiences which influenced the works.

*It is going to be about the connections, it's things like the context, it's things like whom else and what else was going on, all that sort of thing will make more sense [of the drawings]* Potential visitor

*I think it's good to have quotations like that from him* Potential visitor

*That is the best one* Current visitor
Visitors' needs for interpretation

In section 6, we looked at what kinds of original material visitors needed in order to engage with Michelangelo’s drawings. This section looks at what kind of interpretation visitors need to make meaning from *Michelangelo Drawings: closer to the master*.

As in the above section, we have made the distinction between visitors’ minimum requirements (which they expect from the British Museum), what respondents would hope for, and what would exceed their expectations.

*I would expect it is not as much I would hope for it, but I’d want his period, his circumstances and his background. Current visitor*

7.1 **Option 1: Visitors *disappointed* by technical interpretation alone**

Visitors wanted a more inspirational approach, which draws on the intrinsic excitement and interest that visitors feel about Michelangelo:

*It is just like reading a text book isn’t it. This is exciting stuff.*

*I’m sure something better could be done, because this is just a very straightforward approach. Potential visitors*

**Visitors need enough basic information on each piece**

Although option 1 gives visitors information on each drawing, some visitors were unable to make sense of the images by using the interpretation. The labels, which concentrate on the technical skill described in a fairly specialist tone, lack the basic information that general visitors (Browsers and Follower need): what is it, why was it made, how? who for? And so on:

**Most visitors need themes and points of connection to engage**

Non-specialist visitors also had trouble engaging with the interpretation as it did not explain to them what was special or interesting about the image. The interpretation did not allow visitors to connect with the drawings:

*There is no life to it, there is no envelope of experience to it, and it is just cold. Current visitor*

The lack of obvious themes or narratives linking the drawings together means that non-specialist visitors have little chance of becoming deeply engaged with the exhibition. Once they have looked at one image, there will be no obvious path to follow in order to deepen their interest or build on
the knowledge gained from that interaction: they will have to drift off and start again on another, seemingly unconnected image.

**Visitors need accessible language**

Some visitors felt that the language was too technical and presumed too much of the visitor. This is a barrier to engagement, rather than an aid:

> what are the 'five ancient Greek prophetesses or Sybils', a lot of people wouldn’t understand that ... I think it has got to be relevant to people. Potential visitor

> it makes me look at the text. It's the sort of text that I would have to read. It would be distracting actually. Potential visitor

### 7.2 Option 2: visitors expect some contextual information

Many visitors would expect an interpretative style similar to option 2, and respondents spontaneously described similar interpretation before they were shown the three options; interpretation which would help them look at the drawings as a process and understand the basic context:

> Presumably there will be a background of history that goes with it ... What is going on at the time? What others were doing. Potential visitor

> A collection of drawings with a selection of storyboards explaining what each one or each series is about Potential visitor

**Visitors need engaging, understandable interpretation**

Visitors liked the style of the panel 'Michelangelo and the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel': it gave them just enough context to be able to make sense of the images in front of them, in language that they could understand:

> That was very concise. Current visitor

> that one was far more interesting. Current visitor

> It's better actually because it's simpler [than option 1]. Potential visitor

A lot of people don’t know and you’ve got to keep it simple and informative on the basis of if you're reading it would you want to learn. Potential visitor

**Visitors engage with human scale of Michelangelo’s achievements**

Visitors felt that the subsidiary panel ‘from drawing to ceiling’ helped them to understand the techniques used much better than the labels from option 1. The visitors engaged with the personal struggle and achievement inherent
in Michelangelo’s techniques – the panel enables visitors to connect with Michelangelo on a human level, and therefore to understand the magnitude of his achievements:

*Brilliant yeah. Really interesting. Potential visitor*

*the complexity of starting a project of such scale and taking it to fruition Potential visitor*

*[communications] the passion of it. Potential visitor*

Interestingly, this type of interpretation seemed to be what visitors thought of as ‘technique’ (compared to option 1), and was the sort of information that they thought would be useful for school children as well as people with a specialist interest:

*I think that is very useful for young people cos they’ve got something that they can go and write a little essay at school about. Current visitor*

*It tells you his technique and that is important. Potential visitor*

### 7.3 Option 3: visitors hope for an engaging, contextual display

Visitors were both surprised and delighted by the rich interpretation of option 3. Some visitors had suggested this kind of historical, contextual and personal interpretation as their ideal approach before being shown the options:

*I would like to see what was politically going on at that time and the expectations around him Current visitor*

*‘Expect’ or ‘like’ because I am going down a hard line of the British Museum because I think there is a big difference, the same sort of feelings, his personal life, his expectations and his influences. I would add all that plus his life story from start to end. Current visitors*

**Visitors can connect with the art by connecting with Michelangelo the man**

Visitors were fascinated by the insights into Michelangelo as an individual. This made the exhibition far more exciting and intriguing for non-specialist and specialist visitors alike, and lived up to the subtitle ‘closer to the master’.

*I think it is good to have quotations like that from him. Potential visitor*

*I’d like to find out about him as an artist as well as him as a person Potential visitor*
a rivalry going on and another contemporary. Current visitor

How easy was it for him to do his works, how difficult it was you know the struggles he had within the country, within the crown and with the Popes and all that sort of thing? But then you must bring in his homosexuality Current visitor

Visitors are fascinated by Renaissance life and its impact on Michelangelo

Visitors also felt that this approach brought the Renaissance period alive in the exhibition:

It is fascinating this bit about the turbulent relations with politics, and the cut and thrust ... it was such an exciting time Potential visitors

Visitors have a huge appetite for this type of interpretation

In both groups, respondents felt that the information about Michelangelo's life and times was so fascinating that they wanted more information.

Visitors wanted to know more about Michelangelo's life and what in turn this tells us about society at the time. The exhibition therefore needs to point up ways that visitors can find more information – either directing them to other parts of the museum, or other information resources.

an expansion of that, what was the matter with the times, why was he so ... you know. That's right it begs the question doesn't it. Potential visitors

he did go to an apprenticeship where there were only males accepted in the apprenticeship Current visitor

I think it needs to convey the misogynist society. Current visitor

Some visitors also felt that the interpretation should be even more frank in its discussion of Renaissance society and how this is different from modern British society:

his sexuality is very important and the politics are important. I think it is a mistake to try and see it in our terms and what we think about modern sexuality, because they were much more liberal. Current visitor

I'm not sure about the last one on the sexuality it sounds a bit waffley to me, because it doesn't really say anything really Potential visitor
7.4 Experts want the British museum to engage and inspire the public

Specialists want the general public to be inspired

As mentioned in 2.3, visitors who have a high level of existing knowledge about Michelangelo – far from being precious or exclusive – want the British Museum to educate and enthuse general visitors so that they can experience the same deep, spiritual engagement with the works as experts.

The exhibition therefore needs to be accessible to visitors with any level of existing knowledge, and then be engaging enough to pull visitors quickly up through the engagement and meaning making hierarchies (Social to Spiritual and Browser to Searcher/ Researcher).

everybody is coming with a different agenda if you like and to make it as broad as possible so that you can take away as much as possible I think is a good approach. Potential visitor

I like all the information. I think you take or leave what you want. You absorb as much or as little as you want but it is there to enhance the experience Potential visitor

Specialists are happy to pick and choose information – this flatters them!

Far from being offended by basic information, specialist visitors would be happy to see the exhibition reaching out to non-expert visitors. They are able to sift information for anything of use to them, and find it flattering if the interpretation includes things they already know:

I'll read it if I absorb, I absorb and if I don’t, I don’t and I think 'I know that' and 'I don’t know that' or 'oh really'. It's got to be for both and if somebody is very knowledgeable then they leave the bits they don’t need ... it’s not offensive Potential visitor

Interpretation is also not a problem for people who just want to look at the art – they are happy simply to ignore text panels and do not feel that these interfere with their deep engagement with the art:

I don’t think the traditional [interpretation] takes anything away from the drawings. If you’re not interested in how it all went together then you’re still looking at the drawings. Potential visitor
Other issues about interpretation

Visitors do not engage with hyperbole

The visitors we spoke to wanted the introductory text panels and interpretation to set the tone of the exhibition. For this reason, they disliked the introductory panel for options 1 and 2 as they felt it made unsubstantiated claims, and that the quality of the work speaks for itself:

*That is good for a poster, but it's a bit naff [for interpretation]*

Potential visitor

*it sounds like an advertising script.*

*all that mumbo jumbo like saying 'the greatest, the best', that is a load of ... unless you've got proof again we shouldn't put it in.*

*it stands by its merits.*

Current visitors

*I don't think you need superlatives you just need facts.*

Current visitor

*we all agree stick to the facts because the visual images are much stronger.*

Current visitor

Visitors want facts, not opinions

Similarly, visitors want interpretation to be carefully compiled so that the information presented is fact rather than curatorial opinion:

*you are making a generalisation* Current visitor

*if we don't know that for a fact then it shouldn't go in* Current visitor

Visitors disliked some of the more subjective passages in the interpretation. If contentious points of view are to be included, these need to be couched in a wider debate within the interpretation, in which different points of view could be clearly explained. Visitors wanted subjective opinions from Michelangelo's contemporaries, but not from curators!

*get citations from the people of the time about him and what they thought of him and what was said about him, which would be really interesting* Potential visitor

Interestingly, visitors felt that option 3 was actually the most rigorously factual and least subjective:

*That is the best one* Current visitor

*essential.* Current visitor
Visitors want layered interpretation

Visitors wanted different levels of interpretation to cater for different types of visitors and encourage them to engage more deeply:

> Have you ever considered putting up different ones [panels] geared up to different people like children? Current visitor

Visitors easily engage with themes

Visitors were interested in seeing the exhibition interpreted in a thematic way.

> I was going to ask you if it was going to be linked to a theme. Potential visitor

> undoubtedly it will be a beautiful series of drawings, and historical, political perspective Potential visitor

This would allow them to engage with different aspects and influences on Michelangelo’s drawings. Some visitors suggested that the exhibition should be hung thematically with corresponding interpretation, others wanted themed guides to help them find a narrative through an otherwise chronological hang:

> I think also separate the myth paintings and sort of have a section on the myths and the religion.
> I think you have to have the religious context at the time. Current visitor

> You could also get themes [for example] the sexual politics you could say ‘see the drawings in area blah’ so you could cherry pick the sections. Current visitor

> split up into different sections, I would expect to see the general instructions for those sections was in the booklet. Current visitor
Visitors’ needs for presentation

This section looks at how the drawings, supporting material and interpretation should be presented to maximise visitor engagement with *Michelangelo Drawings: closer to the master*.

As in the above section, we have made the distinction between visitors’ minimum requirements (which they expect from the British Museum), what respondents would hope for, and what would exceed their expectations.

8.1 Visitors would be *disappointed* with just images and labels

Visitors’ minimum expectations for the presentation style of *Michelangelo* ... were not met by option 1:

> not just still pictures like that on a wall, which would be very, very boring.
> 
> *Current visitor*

All the visitors felt that the British Museum should use a combination of innovative presentation styles. Visitors expected the British Museum to engage the general public and encourage learning.

8.2 Visitors *expect* technology to enhance understanding

Visitors have high expectations for use of technology and innovative presentation styles within the exhibition.

Visitors feel that technology is entirely appropriate for Michelangelo

Visitors were happy for technology to be used to enhance engagement with Michelangelo’s drawings. Far from feeling that this would jar with the images, visitors felt that the idea of innovative approaches fitted very well with their impression of Michelangelo, and the explanations in option 2 of Michelangelo’s innovative techniques:

> If Michelangelo was alive now he would be using all sorts of [computer] programmes of design. *Current visitor*

Visitors want the British Museum to be at the forefront of museum practice

As discussed earlier, visitors have high expectations about presentation style from visiting other museums and galleries, and expect the British Museum to be engaged and leading the way in current museum practice:
'the British Museum has a high standard to maintain' Current visitor

'I would also expect in this day and age to see statues that talk and drawings come to life and I would like to see interactive displays' Current visitor

Visitors want the British Museum to engage audiences using technology

Visitors felt that using innovative presentation techniques would help to engage visitors who were not familiar with Michelangelo or many of the issues that influenced his work:

You are trying to come into the present day thinking ... trying to get people of other cultures in, not just for a white group of people of Catholic faith ... so you have to try to find an interrelation there. Current visitor

Visitors felt that the use of immersive, audio visual techniques and engaging interactives could help new or less confident visitors make meaning from the work:

There should be audiovisual to absorb the person – you're really trying to put them in [Renaissance] time Current visitor

Visitors felt very strongly that this approach did not need to displace detailed information or curatorial rigour. In fact, visitors felt that by integrating innovative technology into the exhibition, interactives could actually help make sense of the work, allowing visitors' interest to be aroused to such an extent that they would then want to engage with the more detailed interpretation:

You shouldn't do away with the more studious form.
But you interrelate it ... you're a modern person so you have to bring the two very cleverly together. Current visitor

8.3 All visitors would be delighted by an innovative approach

Current and potential visitors alike felt that the British Museum needs to think laterally to encourage deep engagement with the drawings.

Environment of the gallery has to be evocative of Renaissance

Visitors wanted the rooms of the exhibition to evoke the feel of Michelangelo's period, so that visitors feel semi-immersed as soon as they walk through the door. Visitors felt that the images should be displayed as treasures by picking them out with lighting or layout, rather than just having them all lined up on a white wall:
you could have some Italian sort of colour scheme around the place of that period that people associate mentally with that time Current visitor

I can imagine a nice plush room with spotlights on the individual drawings. Potential visitor

depth red, deep blue or grey ... To make the drawings come out even better, again with a nice delicate light Potential visitor

Innovative use of environment

Visitors wanted the museum to encourage visitors to engage with the drawings imaginatively. Some suggested experiential interactives, for example one respondent suggested that the sections about painting of the Sistine Chapel in option 3 could be accompanied by an activity where visitors could experience this technique for themselves, and see paint (or projections of paint!) dripping:

I think you know a bit of red paint on the floor, let’s play with people. Potential visitor

I think it should be more imaginative and there should be more imagination involved. Potential visitor

Interactive learning

The interactive shown to respondents was extremely popular with everyone. Visitors felt that this would allow a wide range of people to engage with and look at the drawings more closely.

Wow I like that. Excellent, very good. Current visitor

Oh cool.
That is amazing, that is great and this is what the children will like. Oh I like that sort of thing as well. Potential visitor

Visitors felt that this was exactly the sort of thing they wanted in the exhibition, and that – regardless of whether they were an expert or not – it added to their engagement with the exhibition

I think you should go for that whole heartedly. Potential visitor

It is about time the British Museum went there [technology] really We have to move with the times like all art, we have to keep up with modern technology and use it Current visitor
8.4 Visitors must be able to see the works and interpretation!

Crowd control

Respondents felt that Michelangelo would be very popular, and were therefore concerned about how busy the exhibition would be. Not being able to access the works or interpretation would obviously be a major barrier to engagement:

A lot depends on how much space is around them when they’re displayed, because I notice in that prints and drawings room everybody sort of crowding trying to read and you know if they’re well spaced out this would be…. Current visitor

there will be plenty of opportunity to have a proper look. That is always the problem I have with that. Current visitor

it’s fine if you can actually get to see it and the pictures at the same time and it doesn’t mean that everybody is crowding around the script so that you can’t see the pictures. Layout is always important. Current visitor

the ones that you really want to look at the detail, that is where I need to spend more time and so it needs to be set out so you can keep moving, but you can take your time as well without causing a bottleneck, you don’t want people piling up behind you and people missing something because they can’t see. Potential visitor

Visitors suggested that this problem could be alleviated by timed tickets and possibly even 24 hour opening:

don’t let everybody in at the same time. Potential visitor

Visitor flow

We know from evaluations of previous temporary exhibitions at the British Museum\(^1\) that when an exhibition is very busy, visitors are unable to follow the behaviour patterns suggested by the exhibition design (for example, a narrative starting at case 1) as they have to avoid very busy areas.

From this research, we also know that visitors tend to need to spend longer amounts of time looking at objects and interpretation to reach the deepest level of engagement. For visitors to be able to make meaning from the drawings and engage with them on an emotional or spiritual level, they

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\(^1\) Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (August 2005), *Africa in 100 seconds: Visitor responses to the Views from Africa display*, British Museum
therefore need to be able to spend a relatively long time at an object/interactive.

Michelangelo therefore needs to provide visitors with multiple entry points to the exhibition, or freedom for the visitor to cover the exhibition in their own order, rather than a rigid linear narrative to follow.

Visitors also wanted popular areas to be designed for use by several people at the same time, and particularly for interactives:

*Could there be a master projection that is on continuously throughout the day because not everybody can get to a computer when they want to and standing around doing nothing waiting for the next person.* Current visitor

### 8.5 Types of presentation needed to maximise engagement

#### Layered presentation

Visitors need information to be layered, so that visitors can choose which depth of interpretation they need, but are also referred to other, more detailed explanations if they then want to know more:

*I think possibly you can do short labels for people that really just want the quick gist and then the longer ones for people that want the longer information.* Current visitor

To suit different learning styles

Respondents were quick to point out that there should be a variety of different presentations of information, in order to cater for the different learning styles of different users. Visitors also pointed out that a visual presentation of some interpretation might be much more effective than text panels: visitors are already naturally in a visual mode, and visual interpretation styles capitalise on this.

*some people do read every column of every piece of text. Other people work more visually and just ignore the text and look at the pictures.* Current visitor

you could actually have a visual display of how they’re done: there’s the black dots on the fresco and you can actually put that in visual blocks so that kids can actually see ... you can look at that quickly and actually grasp that as much as reading a whole bit. Current visitor

*It becomes more engaging.* Potential visitor
Up close and personal

**Mix of media for interpretation**

Visitors wanted to be able to get information from a variety of sources.

Whilst audio guides were seen as useful for visitors who lacked confidence or basic knowledge, many visitors felt that audio guides actually restricted their engagement with exhibitions and distracted them from looking at the art. Instead, visitors wanted discrete audio sections which they could choose to use.

- *they’re good for people who haven’t got a clue and don’t know what to expect* Potential visitor

- *I find when I go around exhibitions [an audio guide] actually is a distraction and I actually want to concentrate.* Current visitor

- *I think that any audio visual stuff ought to be punctuating it and so you go around one room and then you go to an audio visual display and then that does the work of explaining* Current visitor

- *I never use them ... You are restricted* Potential visitor

Visitors wanted a range of presentation styles: audio, booklets and text panels, as well as interactives for experiential learning and getting more information:

- *you’ve also got a range and you’ve got an audio guide for those that want it and you’ve got probably some booklet that you can take around with you and read and you’ve got on the wall* Current visitor

**Information to take away**

Some visitors also wanted an in-depth booklet guide to the exhibition, although it seemed that this was to safeguard against the problems of engaging in a busy exhibition space:

- *It is easier to read it and not get in peoples way if you carry the information with you.* Current visitor

Visitors also felt it was important to provide fact sheets, images and print outs from interactives (if appropriate) to support students and children using the exhibition for research purposes:

- *source material for school parties to take away.* Potential visitor
Conclusions and recommendations

9.1 Conclusions

Can you offend informed people with too much information?

No. People with existing knowledge about Michelangelo do not mind if you provide information they already know. They simply skim through, picking out what they need – anything they already know simply confirms their existing knowledge. In fact, they welcome this approach, and want other visitors to be given help so that they can get the same pleasure from the works as specialists do.

However, it has to be the right type of information to help visitors engage more deeply with the art (see below).

Can you undermine the quality of Michelangelo’s art with technology and interactives?

No. Current and specialist visitors who we spoke to actually wanted the British Museum to use more innovative technology, not less. They enjoy using it themselves, and want others to be inspired about Michelangelo by using interactives.

As long as interactives facilitate engagement rather than distracting from the art (eg meaningless game) then they are a positive thing for visitors.

Is it possible to provide the wrong information?

Oh yes. Visitors want factual information or an explanation of the debate, rather than hyperbole and subjectivity.

Visitors need rich, contextual information that helps them to understand the wider context of the work.

Visitors need information which connects works together, rather than looking at individual pieces in isolation.

Visitors need information about Michelangelo’s own life and circumstances, so that they can engage with the works on a human level.

And all of this needs to be delivered in an innovative, varied way.
9.2 Specific recommendations

• Provide contextual images and supporting material to help contextualise the drawings.

• Provide enough basic information on each drawing (or group of drawings) to enable users to identify them (what is it, why was it made, for who, how and so on).

• Interpretation needs to be delivered without jargon, with explanation of any unusual terms.

• Interpretation needs to deliver information which is relevant and resonant to visitors: innovations in artistic practice, context about the period, information about Michelangelo the man.

• Interpretation needs to signpost visitors to further sources of information: rest of museum, websites, other museums.

• Provide facts or present different sides of the debate, rather than subjective information.

• Provide information in the form of diverse voices, mixing curatorial content with contemporary comment, direct quotes, letters and writings from the time.

• Provide information in layers, so that visitors only wanting a basic level of information are not daunted, but are then encouraged to use some more detailed interpretation once their interest has been aroused.

• Provide narrative themes which connect images together.

• Use the latest technological innovations to engage visitors with the works.

• Integrate a variety of interpretation styles into the exhibition, to cater for different learning styles.

• Integrate a variety of media into the exhibition.

• Create an atmospheric environment which helps visitors to engage with the Renaissance era.

• Provide interactives to help visitors engage deeply with the drawings.

• Provide visitors with information to take away.
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