Proposing Engagement

Visitor reactions to *Church and Emperor: An Ethiopian crucifixion* in Room 3

June 2008

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Proposing Engagement: Visitor reactions to *Church and Emperor: An Ethiopian Crucifixion* in Room 3

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In this display the exhibition proposal **filtered out** many Museum visitors with the **proposition** of religion and Ethiopia, but successfully engaged those who did visit.

The **interpretation** was very successful in encouraging **engagement** among visitors, though usage and awareness of the information behind the painting was low.

Learning outcomes however were extremely high, perhaps due to an initial limited knowledge of the country itself. Visitors experienced strong learning outcomes about **Ethiopia, religion** and **art**, but more commonly a combination of the three.
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Church and Emperor: An Ethiopian Crucifixion

Painting of the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ and the life of Bishop Selama. From Tigray, Ethiopia, c. AD 1855. © The British Museum

Church and Emperor: An Ethiopian Crucifixion was held in Room 3 of the British Museum from 6 March – 5 May 2008.

The display focussed on a 19th Century painting (above) which was made for the Church of the Saviour of the World at Adwa, and donated to the British Museum in 1893.

By layering historical narratives with messages of Holy Scripture, it communicates complex ideas of faith and history through image rather than word. It provides insight into the complex relationship between church and state and allows a greater understanding of modern Ethiopian history.
2 Scene setting

2.1 Objectives

*Church and Emperor: An Ethiopian Crucifixion* displayed the painting to the public for the first time since its donation to the British Museum in 1893. The interpretation in the exhibition aimed to tell the story of the painting – most importantly the relationship between church and state in Ethiopia.

It was hoped that the painting would provoke a strong aesthetic response among visitors who could then go on to further their own knowledge and understanding of a range of subjects including Ethiopia, religion and art.

The display also explained the restoration and conservation work that has been completed on the picture.

2.2 Presentation and interpretation scheme

The object in focus of this display was the painting itself and was displayed in a central position towards the back of Room 3, where visitors could see it from a distance if walking down the corridor opposite.

Upon entry to the room visitor were greeted by contextual information about the display and background information about the painting itself, including its origins and how it had arrived at the British Museum.

Moving deeper into the room towards the painting there were information panels on the left and right hand side of the room which broke down the painting into smaller segments and offered explanations on their meaning.

On the rear side of the painting was information about the conservation and restoration work that had been done on the painting, which also showed how it would have looked in its original state.
Schematic diagram of Room 3

1. The coronation of Emperor Tewodros II
2. Bishop Selama is expelled from Gonder
3. Understanding the painting
4. Christ’s crucifixion
5. Bishop Selama meets Wube
6. Bishop Selama celebrates Mass
What we did

Morris Hargreaves McIntyre was commissioned by the British Museum to evaluate *Church and Emperor* as part of an on-going evaluation of the Room 3 displays. This report forms the thirteenth report in the series.

The following primary research took place at the British Museum over 6 shifts between 18 - 29 April 2008, covering weekdays and weekends.

**Anatomy of a 3 minute visit**

Our researcher approached visitors who had already completed their visit in the room, and asked the visitor to talk them through their visit, describing their thought process behind every decision and continuously describing their thoughts and feelings at each element of the display.

This methodology provides a wealth of rich, qualitative data and enables us to get inside visitors’ minds.

66 *Anatomy of a visit interviews* were completed

**Non-attender vox pops**

Brief vox pop interviews were also carried out with visitors who had approached the room but, upon seeing its content, decided not to enter. This methodology was used in order to establish reasons for non-attendance to the display.

28 *non-attender vox pops* were completed

**Exit surveys**

A short survey was completed with visitors who had just finished their visit to establish segment information amongst visitors. This is the first occasion that segment data had been collected in Room 3.

127 *exit surveys* were completed

**Rolling research**

A question was added to the British Museum ‘rolling research’ survey to gauge awareness amongst general Museum visitors.
Exhibition overview

Detail from a painting of the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ and the life of Bishop Selama. From Tigray, Ethiopia, c. AD 1855. © The British Museum

There was a high proportion of incidental visiting to Church and Emperor meaning that for many the visit decision was made in the foyer of the Museum. This subsequently divided visitors into two camps – those who had a connection with religion, art or Ethiopia, and those visitors who were just displaying Museum Behaviour in entering a room because there was an object and interpretation inside.

These attractors did not filter the audience by segment, instead a very representative section of the Museum’s audience attended, but it did filter visitors by other more cultural elements.

The proposition of the display was certainly not as resonant as the previous Divine Cat display, and as a result failed to draw in many visitors from the foyer, leading to low visitor figures.

Religion as a theme is extremely divisive, meaning that it proved an attractor for some visitors, but a deterrent for more. At the same time visitors had a limited knowledge of Ethiopia and as a result the proposition was not very resonant.

Once inside the room visitors either went straight to the object in focus itself, and then backtracked to the interpretation to answer any questions they
had, or they systematically read all the available introductory interpretation before engaging with the painting itself.

Whereas *Divine Cat* had a strong proposition that was not matched by the exhibition’s content, *Church and Emperor* was the opposite in that it offered a less resonant proposition but successfully engaged those visitors who made it into the room. Visitors liked being able to look at the interpretation and the painting and compare what they had just learnt to what they could see.

As a result of reading the interpretation visitors experienced strong learning outcomes on religion, art and Ethiopia, but more commonly connections between the three. As well as improving their own knowledge and understanding, visitors were encouraged to change their perspective, often on Christianity or Africa.

The seating in the display was not well used, with many visitors considering it to be for those visitors in need of a rest rather than a chance to sit and contemplate the object in focus. In fact some visitors even commented that the benches were too far from the interpretation to encourage this.

The interpretation on the rear of the painting, whilst extremely popular amongst those visitors that read it, was very poorly used, with many visitors unaware that there was further information to be found there. Some commented that the signage was difficult to see, whilst others suggested that it was extremely unusual to go behind a painting anyway.
5

Who visited?

The average daily footfall for visits to *Church and Emperor* was the second lowest of any Room 3 exhibition so far, just ahead of *The Art of Peace*.

![Detail from a painting of the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ and the life of Bishop Selama. From Tigray, Ethiopia, c. AD 1855. © The British Museum](image)

5.1 First time vs. repeat visitors

45% of visitors to Room 3 were making their first ever visit to the Museum that day. Of the 55% who were repeat attenders, just over a third had previously seen an exhibition in Room 3.

This means that a fifth of all visitors were making a repeat visit to Room 3.
5.2 Segmentation

The table below describes the MHM-devised segments into which current Museum visitors are divided.

**Segment table**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Segment name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Broad needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sightseers</td>
<td>First time visitors making a general visit. Mainly tourists who want to 'do' the museum</td>
<td>Ease of access, comfort, orientation, good facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self developers</td>
<td>Non-specialists wanting to informally improve their general knowledge about subjects covered in the museum</td>
<td>Journey of discovery, layered information, finding out new things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families</td>
<td>Mixed age groups, wanting fun and educational trip for children</td>
<td>Ease of access and movement, child friendly facilities and activities, different levels of service to meet diverse age needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeat Social Visitors</td>
<td>Repeat visitors, meeting up with others at the museum. Use the museum as a sociable space and want to feel a sense of ownership in their surroundings</td>
<td>Ease of access, comfort, orientation, good facilities, warm welcome, accessible exhibitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experts</td>
<td>Specialists wanting to deepen their knowledge further by engaging deeply with the collection</td>
<td>High quality access to collections, critical engagement, access to expert staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art Lovers</td>
<td>Spiritually and emotionally motivated visitors who want to commune with objects in the collection, and use their existing knowledge as a base to go deeper</td>
<td>Ambience, deep sensory engagement, space for contemplation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The diagram below compares the proportion of visitors that fall into each segment at Church and Emperor with the visitor profile at the Museum in April 2008 and from the Museum’s Year 3 rolling research.
This shows us that *Church and Emperor* attracted a very similar audience to that at the Museum as a whole, with self-developers making up the largest segment, and art lovers, sightseers and repeat social visitors all featuring prominently.

Although the exhibition did not filter British Museum by visitors, it did filter them by other more cultural elements – mainly whether they were interested, or interested in religion, or had some sort of personal connection to Africa.

Further analysis at future Room 3 displays will determine to what extent the content of the display affects which segments choose to visit.
Attractor

There was a high proportion of incidental visiting to *Church and Emperor*, meaning that many visitors were making their decision to visit whilst in the foyer of the Museum.

The proposition of the exhibition itself was not a particularly resonant one for most visitors, as prior knowledge of Ethiopia was low, and religion is a very divisive proposition. The exhibition’s title *Church and Emperor* was therefore much less resonant than the previous Room 3 display, *Divine Cat.*

**Church and Emperor attractor model**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trigger</th>
<th>Attractor</th>
<th>Driver</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Room 3 Repeat Visitor</td>
<td>Stimulate Variety</td>
<td>Int</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information (publicity, recommendation, projection screen)</td>
<td>Connection to Christianity</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Connection to Ethiopia</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interest in art</td>
<td>Intellectual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interest in religion</td>
<td>Intellectual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intrigue</td>
<td>Intellectual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View of Object</td>
<td>Aesthetic appeal</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View into Room</td>
<td>Museum Behaviour</td>
<td>Soc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alluring ambience</td>
<td>Soc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Convenience appeal</td>
<td>Soc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Modelling</td>
<td>Int</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The attractor model for *Church and Emperor* has changed slightly from the ones used for *Divine Cat* and *Korean Moon Jar*. At this display visitors were more topics with which they felt a personal connection, notably Ethiopia and Christianity. However, as this was the public’s first viewing of the painting, recognition amongst visitors was low.

As at *Divine Cat* visitors did not question why this object was being given star treatment, or why it deserved a room of its own and were happy to accept the Museum’s decision that it was an important piece.

### 6.1 Room 3 repeat visitor

20% of visitors to *Church and Emperor* were making a repeat visit to Room 3, and their experiences of the displays found in the room before are often enough to attract them back.

Repeat visitors were most likely to have been to the *Divine Cat*, *Korean Moon Jar* and *Rembrandt: The Three crosses* displays.

> The last time I was here I saw a good exhibition in here about moon jars
> 
> Visitor

> I pop in quite often. It’s a good format. I came last time and there was the cat
> 
> Visitor

> I think the exhibitions they have in this room are always interesting
> 
> Visitor

### 6.2 Information (advance knowledge, posters on site, exhibition title)

As at previous displays the posters outside the room were a popular information source when attracting a visit, but visitors also saw publicity in a number of other places.

> I’d seen the poster outside about the special exhibition in this room
> 
> Visitor

> I saw this image there on the poster. The poster’s just before the room. I thought ‘that’s in there’ so I thought I’d have a look
> 
> Visitor

> I checked it out on the internet before I came today
> 
> Visitor

> I saw an article about it in a magazine of Westminster Cathedral and I said ‘I’d love to go to see it’
> 
> Visitor
Connection to Christianity

One of the major attractors for visitors to the display was the theme of Christianity, with some visitors recognising the timing of the display to coincide with Easter.

This one pulled me in as there was some connection. Ethiopians are Christians and I am a Christian too. So I’m interested in what the common thing is Visitor

I’m a Christian. I think that’s the only reason why I went inside Visitor

I saw Christ on it, so I thought because I’m religious I’m going to take a look at it Visitor

As a Roman Catholic it’s very appropriate at this time of year Visitor

I’m Christian myself Visitor

Connection to Ethiopia

Some visitors felt a connection with Ethiopia itself, either through visiting the country or having friends who lived there. This was a theme that developed at the Ikebana display which had a strong Japanese connection.

I’ve got some friends in Ethiopia and I’m going to go home and say to him ‘you know there’s a painting from your country here in Britain’ and see what he thinks about that Visitor

I have been to Ethiopia Visitor

Interest in art

The proposition of African, and more specifically Ethiopian art was enough to attract some visitors into the room.

We came into this gallery because we are most interested in Ethiopian pictures Visitor

I like Ethiopian art Visitor

Interest in religion

Although some visitors did not have a personal connection with Christianity, the subject of religion drew some visitors in.

I think the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was a point of interest Visitor

I guess the religious iconography grabbed my eye Visitor
Intrigue

The picture itself, seen either from a distance or through the publicity material, was an intriguing proposition for some visitors who were keen to find out more about its origins and meaning.

_I happened from a distance to see the picture so I was intrigued so I looked closer_ Visitor

_It was about a culture that I am not very familiar with – I wanted to see what was their picture of_ Visitor

6.3 View of object

The central positioning of the painting ensured visitors had a clear view through the entrance to the room.

Aesthetic appeal

The bright colours and size of the object proved appealing to visitors.

_From a distance I think it was nicely placed. I was walking up the corridor and it stood out quite well, the colours, the shapes, it looked quite interesting_ Visitor

_It’s bright and attractive and seemed symbolic, and I don’t think I’ve seen anything quite like it before so I came in to find out more_ Visitor

Museum behaviour

The object in focus was easily visible from the main Museum entrance, meaning that many visitors went straight to Room 3 as it was the first room they saw that contained an object.

_It was the first room that I saw_ Visitor

_It was closest to the door_ Visitor

6.4 View into room

The lighting and display of Room 3 differed greatly from the last display - _Divine Cat_, which used dark colours and bright lighting to create a mysterious atmosphere and highlight the object in focus. The display of _Church and Emperor_ used much lighter colours to create a calm, peaceful environment not too dissimilar to a church.
Alluring ambience

Visitors were grateful to escape from the business of the main foyer into the calming environment of Room 3.

*Almost like being in a church* Visitor

*The entrance hall is so busy, and then inside it’s quite calming* Visitor

*It is well lit and the colours are quite ... intense* Visitor

Bite-size appeal

Room 3 is of a convenient size and is well positioned for those visitors who do not want to spend long in the Museum or who are pressed for time.

*It was just near the entrance and I have only got a few minutes on lunch really so I am nipping in* Visitor

*It was a small exhibition and I haven’t got much time* Visitor

Modelling

Some visitors said they went into Room 3 as a result of seeing other visitors looking engaged in the space.

*We saw a lot of people staring so we decided to take a look* Visitor
7 Deterrents

British Museum visitors who approached but did not go in to Room 3 gave a range of reasons for deciding not to enter.

The proposition of religion

As much as the theme of religion persuaded some visitors to enter the room, it also acted as a deterrent for others. These visitors were either simply disinterested by religion, or felt that without some religious beliefs they would not engage in the room.

* I didn’t see much that attracted me. It must be religious ~ I don’t believe in Christianity*  
  *Non-attender*

* I’d be more interested in the modern church than the ancient church*  
  *Non-attender*

* I suppose it’s because it’s religious*  
  *Non-attender*

* It was clearly religious which isn’t really my thing*  
  *Non-attender*

* I’m not religious so I don’t really care*  
  *Non-attender*

Paintings

Some visitors do not like looking at paintings and instead come to the British Museum to see objects and artefacts.

* I’m not into paintings*  
  *Non-attender*

Size of the display

The limited size of Room 3 put off some visitors, especially first time visitors who were looking for a major room or gallery in which to continue their visit.

* I went into the room and I thought it was a bigger room than that*  
  *Non-attender*

* It was a lot smaller than we thought it was going to be*  
  *Non-attender*

* I expected something more, a bigger room*  
  *Non-attender*
Proposing Engagement: Visitor reactions to Church and Emperor: An Ethiopian Crucifixion

Looking for something else

Some visitors were simply confused by the layout of the Museum and ended up in or approaching Room 3 by accident.

I am looking for something else Non-attender

I was looking for a different exhibition Non-attender

I came here for the Egyptian stuff and the Romans Non-attender

Fatigue

Visitors who see the room when leaving the Museum may not enter as they are tired at the end of their visit.

I’m now pretty tired Non-attender
Motivation

Hierarchy of motivation

We have identified four key drivers for visiting museums:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>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 quiet 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 motives form a hierarchy: as visitors move up from Social through to Spiritual motivations they become more increasingly engaged with the museum and its collections. The further up the hierarchy they reach, the more fulfilling and rewarding visitors report their visit to be. That doesn’t mean that Social visits should be any less valued, it simply means that they result in lower levels of engagement with the content of the Museum.

At each level of the hierarchy visitors have different needs. The suggestion is not that visitors are forced or even led up this hierarchy, but that they get the opportunity to engage at the deepest level they wish to.

Main motivation

Using a series of statements on the exit survey, we asked visitors to Church and Emperor to identify their main motivation for visiting the British Museum. The chart below shows the main motivation of Room 3 visitors compared to all British Museum visitors in the same period.
Visitor Motivations

Church & Emperor  
BM April '08

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual</th>
<th>Emotional</th>
<th>Intellectual</th>
<th>Social</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual</th>
<th>Emotional</th>
<th>Intellectual</th>
<th>Social</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Church and Emperor attracted a higher proportion of socially motivated visitors than the rest of the Museum, as represented in the sightseers and repeat social visitor segments.

The Room’s position next to the main entrance encourages first time social visits as it is the first room in the Museum that people see, while the constantly changing content of the room encourages quick, drop-in visits from local people, perhaps on their lunch break.

The chart below compares the main motivations for visitors to Church and Emperor with two other previous displays.
This shows that visitors’ motivations can differ greatly depending on the content of the display. *Church and Emperor* attracted the highest proportion of socially motivated visitors to any Room 3 display so far where motivation was tested.
9 Engagement

The previous Room 3 display *Divine Cat* had an extremely strong proposition which ultimately failed to deliver what it suggested. *Church and Emperor* proved to be the opposite of this, as the proposition itself was relatively weak for most Museum visitors, but once inside the room visitors found themselves able to engage deeply with the object and the interpretation.

In some cases this high level of engagement was a result of many visitors already having an interest or connection to one of the themes of the display, but ultimately the exhibition also successfully engaged those visitors who wandered into the room as a result of Museum Behaviour – i.e. it was the first room they saw.

9.1 What did visitors look at?

Object in focus vs. interpretation

The majority of visitors invariably went straight to the painting, with most then backtracking to the introductory text and interpretation panels to backfill their knowledge and make sense of the painting.

*I looked at the painting first and wanted to know more about it so I just read the info* Visitor

*I went straight to the painting to look at the different scenes and displays then I went round the back to look at the conservation information, and then read some more details on the panels* Visitor

*I went straight to the crucifixion – I just went in to look at the object* Visitor

Some visitors read the introductory panels first, whilst others went straight to the interpretation describing the picture. This would be a similar case to *Korean Moon Jar*, where visitors felt they had already seen the object while approaching it from a distance, so by the time they reached it they wanted to look at the interpretation.

*I looked at the information which was the main introductory blurb, had a little look at the painting, then the notes and then had another look at the painting* Visitor

*I read the detailed panels and then looked up at the picture as I was reading them* Visitor
Interpretation panels

Visitors appreciated the text panels which allowed them to read the interpretation and then look up at the main picture, comparing what they had just read to what they could now see.

The way the interpretation broke down the picture into more manageable segments also increased engagement with the painting.

I quite liked the arrangement of the explanations which were close enough for you to be able to look at the painting and then look at the explanation
Visitor

I really liked the idea they showed you a bit of information and then they numbered on a copy of the picture the different scenes and then I knew where I was going Visitor

I think it’s very good, it’s explained section by section with the narrative and it makes it very attractive because you can look at the explanation and then look at the larger picture Visitor

Visitors were pleased with the amount of interpretation in the display, saying that it gave them enough of an insight into the subjects to answer most questions.

I’m quite impressed – it’s got good depth. You can glance over the nice simple text and then just have a look at the picture and move on, or you can dig deeper if you want to Visitor

In terms of the painting it’s really quite comprehensive Visitor

I think it is enough because I don’t think it is a subject that people know enough about and so if you over do the information they are not going to pay any attention Visitor

You didn’t want to be overwhelmed by it because it would take too much time and you have got so much to see – it gave you the main elements and that was exactly what you need Visitor

I read everything that was available ... and it gave a great explanation Visitor

Research at previous displays (apart from Divine Cat) has shown that when visitors become aware of the size and purpose of Room 3 they are happy with the amount of interpretation the Museum provides in the room. repeat visitors to the room have come to trust the Museum to provide a short but insightful snapshot on a particular object.

It’s a good overview for my needs Visitor
I like the general summation and if you want to delve deeper you have the option Visitor

Analysing the painting

As at the Divine Cat display, many visitors did not look at the information at the back of the exhibition, in this case on the rear of the wall that displayed the painting.

Some visitors simply missed the ‘analysing the painting’ signage on the rear wall and were therefore unaware that there was further information to be found there.

There is a bit of white paint on the wall that says ‘Analysing the painting’ but it is very hard to see from the front of the room Visitor

I didn’t know there was anything round there to see Visitor

I didn’t really expect to find something there Visitor

Never thought there was anything on the back Visitor

Visitors also commented that it did not appear welcoming around the back of the painting, and that they did not feel encouraged to see if there was anything at the back of the room.

I didn’t think there was anything there. It’s too close to the wall Visitor

It doesn’t seem welcome to go around Visitor

Several visitors commented that it is very unusual to be allowed around the back of an object in a Museum, especially a painting.

It’s not normal in museums that people go round the back of anything Visitor

I would never think to go to the back of a painting Visitor

9.2 Visitors want more

Research at the previous displays has shown that some visitors always expect a bigger display with more objects. Given the high proportion of first time visitors to the Museum it is hardly surprising that they expect the first room they enter to be bigger and contain more objects. This was also the case with the Church and Emperor display.

A couple more [paintings] would be nice ... to see different things Visitor
I thought it would be bigger, I thought it would be showing more Ethiopian art Visitor

However, even though some first time visitors’ expectations were of a larger exhibition, once inside the room and engaging with the painting they understood the Object in Focus concept and most were happy with the amount of objects and interpretation.

I hadn’t read the advert – I thought there was going to be more. I didn’t realise it was an exhibition based on one picture. I am not in the slightest bit disappointed … absolutely lovely Visitor

More information on Ethiopia

Some visitors professed to having a limited knowledge of Ethiopian history, and therefore found that the display raised their desire to discover more about the country.

It may be interesting to learn something about the recent history of Ethiopia Visitor

I would like a little bit more background on the general Ethiopian history of the time … just to place the painting in the historical context of when it was created Visitor

More information on technique / artist

Visitors’ interest was also piqued in the techniques used to create the painting, and the more human story of the artist himself.

Previous research at other displays and exhibitions at the Museum has shown that visitors are always keen to hear the personal stories behind an object so that they can relate to their own lives.

I was trying to find out what it was exactly painted on and there was no information … that I could find anyway Visitor

I think I would like to know a bit more about the people that were making it and how that became something that was important for them to do Visitor

I think the painting has made me think about the people who created it as much as anything else, of which I knew nothing previously Visitor

More on the person who painted it and what else he’s done Visitor
9.3 Seating

Although some visitors recognised that Room 3 had been designed to look like a church, they seemed to consider the benches to be more of a place to rest than to sit and contemplate the painting. As a result, the benches were not well used.

*I suspect it is supposed to be like a church with pews Visitor*

*I’m not tired enough to sit down Visitor*

*My feet aren’t too sore yet Visitor*

Some visitors chose not to use the benches as they too far away from the interpretation material to be able to read any accompanying material whilst sitting down. Instead, visitors preferred to get very close to the painting itself, or stand by the interpretation and view the painting from there.

*If you sat on the bench, the benches weren’t right in front of the explanatory panels, if you sit on the bench to look at the main picture I prefer to be a bit closer to see it in more detail Visitor*
10 Outcomes: Learning

10.1 Multiple messages

Church and Emperor delivered a wide range of outcomes, especially intellectual outcomes on a variety of subjects. The very nature of the painting itself meant that visitors latched onto one or more particular element and subsequently improved their own knowledge and understanding. This display was very successful in appealing to an accurate cross-section of the British Museum audience as it contained a number or resonant themes.

*It teaches you about the early Christian Church in Ethiopia, but it also gives you a little bit about art history and art restoration and the techniques used in the painting.*

Visitor

The Venn diagram below shows the three major themes about which visitors improved their own knowledge and understanding in the exhibition. It also shows how these themes overlap and cover a whole range of topics. Often once visitors had learnt about something, their outcomes moved on to feelings of insight, empathy, reflection or contemplation. The numbers relate to the most common learning outcomes, with 1 being the most common.

*Improved knowledge and understanding*
10.2 Ethiopia

Visitors gained significant learning outcomes about Ethiopia – a country about which many visitors admitted to having very limited pre-knowledge. Several even went so far as to draw comparisons between Ethiopia and their own lives.

There is a big culture over there that we don’t know much about and it has got a lot of similarities with English culture Visitor

I have learnt a little about Ethiopian culture Visitor

Some visitors talked about improving their understanding of Ethiopian history.

I knew there’d been Jews in Ethiopia, I didn’t know there’d been Christians in Ethiopia. I didn’t realise there was quite a strong Christian community there Visitor

I think I’ve learned a lot from the display because I had no idea about Ethiopia and its 19th Century history Visitor

Finding out more about Ethiopian politics was an important outcome for other visitors.

What I’ve learned is that the Ethiopians have some kind of autonomy because they were selecting their own rulers Visitor

I learned about the bishop etc ... the power amongst the people Visitor

A better feel for mid-19th Century Ethiopian politics and religion, even religious conflict Visitor

10.3 Religion

As mentioned previously, religion was obviously a key attractor for visitors to this exhibition, and in this instance the learning outcomes matched the proposition.

Visitors found out more about the history of the Orthodox Church and its situation today, while some people learnt more about the crucifixion of Christ.

I don’t really know that much about Ethiopia per se, but I think it’s given me a good background about the Orthodox Church Visitor
I’ve learned that Christ was crucified because there was a man who didn’t want to acknowledge that he knew him Visitor

You have to realise that there’s Christianity going back even more than just the Western culture Visitor

It told me that the Church in 19th Century Ethiopia was very militant - it was a divisive church Visitor

I didn’t realise there was an Orthodox Christian Church in Ethiopia Visitor

10.4 Art

Many visitors had expected the painting to be considerably older, and were surprised to find it only dated back to the mid-19th Century.

I was quite surprised at how recent it is – it’s only 1850 that painting, I expected it to be further back Visitor

I was a little shocked, not shocked but surprised that it was so recently made. I was thinking it was something a lot older Visitor

I thought it might have been older Visitor

10.5 Art & Ethiopia

Many visitors had a relatively limited knowledge of Ethiopia art, and as a result felt they had learnt more about this in the exhibition.

I was interested in what it said about the painting, the history of the painting Visitor

What other paintings did they produce? Visitor

I haven’t seen any Ethiopian art before so it was interesting to see another kind of crucifixion Visitor

It has made me more interested in Ethiopian art Visitor

I’ve learnt a little bit about Ethiopian painting in here Visitor

10.6 Art & Religion

That people in Ethiopia were making paintings of Jesus Christ which I was not surprised about, but it wasn’t something that came to my mind about Ethiopia Visitor
The painting also provoked questions in visitors’ minds concerning both the content of the picture and their own knowledge.

One major talking point regarded the depiction of light-skinned people in the painting, and visitors were keen to know more about this. In the absence of any information on this subject, some visitors formed their opinions as to why this was the case.

The only thing that surprised me was that the Ethiopians in the picture look very Western in their features, very light-skinned and I’d always thought about Ethiopians as darker-skinned and it would have been interesting to know why I’ve got that wrong Visitor

It’s made me feel differently about the way the images are, even though it’s Africa, the people are dark-skinned, there’s a shade of light skin. You see that colour wasn’t important to them Visitor

All the people in there, they don’t look African to me and I wondered about it. It made me think about the history of the Christian Church, the Requiem and whether they played down the look of the African people Visitor

10.7 Ethiopia & Religion

As the exhibition attracted many visitors who already had an interest in religion or Ethiopia, it then encouraged visitors to make connections between the two subjects and in some cases try to apply their own prior knowledge to what they had learnt.

Just as the painting itself combined Christianity and Ethiopian history, visitors’ outcomes were formed accordingly.

It shows me all the different aspects of Christ as well as being the history of Ethiopia at the time Visitor

I always think it’s really interesting the Ethiopian Church being one of the oldest Christian communities, I think it’s really interesting ... the idea of where Christianity resides Visitor

It made me reflect a few moments about Christianity in Ethiopia Visitor

A different representation of how Christianity is affecting areas of Africa Visitor

The length of time that Christianity has been in Ethiopia, longer than it’s been in Britain Visitor
The familiar religion, Christianity, contexted in another place, and how it evolved and what effect it had in what would seem a very... different area of the world from that which we normally see. 

Visitor

I learnt about another culture's perception of a religious figure that I have a certain perception of. 

Visitor

A greater appreciation for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and its culture. 

Visitor

It's confirmation I guess of the role of the Christian Church in Ethiopia. I'm kind of interested to learn more of the history behind that and how it was formed within Ethiopia. 

Visitor
11 Other outcomes

11.1 To see beautiful things in an attractive setting

The painting itself provoked a strong immediate response amongst some visitors who engaged with it on a purely aesthetic, emotional level.

*It was quite a pleasurable experience to see a piece of art like this ... such a key work and that it’s been restored* 
Visitor

*A beautiful painting* 
Visitor

11.2 To see fascinating, awe-inspiring things

Some visitors described a feeling of awe at seeing the painting and reading the interpretation.

*I felt a sense of awe- haven’t seen this stuff before, it was really cool* 
Visitor

11.3 Reflection, contemplation

The layout and design of the room helped some visitors feel like they were in a spiritual place.

*It would be sort of meditation for me and prayer* 
Visitor

*I felt a sense of reverence* 
Visitor

Other visitors were encouraged to think differently about the world and perhaps more importantly, their own lives.

*That you can overcome persecution* 
Visitor

11.4 Future behaviour

Most visitors were happy with the display as an introduction to Ethiopian art, but others had their interest piqued in the room and subsequently went off to find out more, either within the Museum or after in their own time.

*It makes me a bit more interested in looking up a bit more Ethiopian history and Christianity in Ethiopia and so on* 
Visitor

*I am going to Room 66 and look at other things you have on* 
Visitor
Conclusions and Recommendations

The proposition

Church and Emperor did not offer as strong an exhibition proposition as previous displays in the room, notably Divine Cat which was an extremely strong proposition. However, whereas the content of Divine Cat failed to match the proposition, Church and Emperor successfully matched its proposition.

All exhibition titles need to be tested to ensure that the proposition is appealing and that the content matches this proposition. This testing can be done in-house but should include the objective views of staff members who are not directly involved with the exhibition.

The exhibition filtered visitors

The segment map for Church and Emperor was very similar to that found in the rest of the Museum at the same time, suggesting that although the proposition did not exclude any particular segment of visitors, it did filter them in terms of more cultural interests. This meant that some visitors who were not interested in religion decided not to enter the room, and these visitors could be found in every segment.

The title was not prominent enough

Visitors passing the room or glancing through the doorway only saw the large crucifixion, and many immediately rejected the room, believing it to be solely about religion. Had the exhibition title, or perhaps more importantly the sub-title An Ethiopian Crucifixion, been more prominent, this may have created more intrigue and, as a result, more incidental visits. Many of the visitors who rejected the room would have gained a lot more from the room and had their perspective altered had they entered the room, but the decision to reject the room was made too early.

Prominent exhibition titles have proved a popular attractor at previous exhibitions such as Divine Cat and Korean Moon Jar, as many visitors like to receive some idea as to the exhibition’s content before entering.

Visitors rewarded for reading interpretation

Once inside the room, the interpretation rewarded visitors with a deep and varied learning experience. The layout of the interpretation encouraged visitors to engage with the painting by looking back and forth between the
images on the text panels and the main painting. This enabled visitors to discover meaning from the painting the more they engaged with it.

The directive text – actively encouraging visitors to look at elements of the painting successfully increased engagement and learning, and visitors liked being pointed towards these outcomes.

**Behind the painting**

Many visitors did not go behind the painting to view the information on restoration and conservation, simply because they did not realise they were allowed or supposed to. The signage on the walls directing people behind the painting were too subtle, combined with the fact that visitors are simply not used to looking at the back of a painting.

Previous research has shown that visitors like being able to walk round an object and see it from all sides as it adds to their engagement with the piece, but this is not the case with a painting.

The visitors who did go round the back enjoyed the information and, as at Divine Cat, felt they were getting a behind the scenes look at how the Museum works. This is an attractive proposition for visitors but one that remains untested in terms of explicitly describing it in the exhibition title.
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