Indifference into Interest

Visitor responses to the *Word into Art* exhibition at the British Museum

October 2006

This is an online version of a report prepared by MHM for the British Museum. Commercially sensitive information has been removed
Indifference to Interest – Visitor responses to the *Word into Art* exhibition at the British Museum

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Word into Art attracted a much younger profile of visitors and challenged the preconceptions of visitors who hadn't anticipated such a contemporary exhibition.

It is clear that the exhibition achieved significant learning outcomes: it surprised visitors with its emotional impact, challenging perceptions of the art of the Middle East and of the Middle East as a region.

However it seems that the exhibition was seen as not in-depth enough for some specialist visitors, who wanted access to more information about the human context, in particular about the contemporary Middle East and the lives of the artists.
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Word into Art

*Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* was a free exhibition held from 18 May until 3 September in Room 35 at the British Museum.

The British Museum has been collecting contemporary Middle Eastern art since the mid-1980s, complementing its collections of ancient and Islamic art. *Word into Art* was based largely on the collection of the British Museum enhanced by a number of loans. It demonstrated the imaginative ways in which artists across the Middle East and North Africa use the power of the written word in their art today.

By focusing on the texts written by or which inspire artists, *Word into Art* aimed to open a window on the rich literary and artistic heritage of this region and show how artists are affected by the complex history of the Middle East.

The exhibition included examples of calligraphy transforming writing into art, books of poetry, and works which reflect current issues facing the Middle East.
What we did

Having carried out the formative evaluation,\(^1\) Morris Hargreaves McIntyre was commissioned by the British Museum to carry out a summative evaluation of *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*.

The objectives of the research were to determine:

- Visitor profile
- Effectiveness of marketing and communications campaigns
- Motivations for visiting
- Behaviour within the exhibition
- Levels of visitor engagement
- Awareness of the accompanying programme
- Use of interpretation and information sources
- Impact of the visit
- Learning outcomes
- Response to the website
- Reaction to the shop

The following research techniques were employed:

1. **Exit surveys**

**Visitor surveys**

A survey was conducted at the exhibition exit to provide a basic profile of visitor demographics, levels of awareness, motivation for visiting and behaviour within the exhibition. 143 *Visitor surveys* were conducted.

**Non-visitor surveys**

Alongside the exhibition survey, a mini-survey was undertaken with visitors who had been to the British Museum but not visited *Word into Art* that day. The aim of this survey was to probe awareness of the exhibition and reasons for not visiting. 83 *Non-visitor surveys* were carried out.

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\(^1\) Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (March 2006) *The Middle East exhibition at the British Museum – Culture, conflict and controversy*
2. Fulfilment maps

On arrival at the *Word into Art* exhibition, visitors were asked to complete a 'mind map' in response to the question 'What do you hope to get from your visit today?' This produced a list of visit expectations. On exiting the exhibition visitors were then asked to annotate their map with details of which of their expectations were met, not met or exceeded, together with any unexpected outcomes and details of what they had learnt. 8 *Fulfilment maps* were completed.

3. Observation studies

*Meaning making maps and Headcounts*

We undertook a series of half-hourly *Headcounts* in the exhibition. This entailed making a quick circuit of the exhibition and noting on a floor plan the number of visitors in each of the themed sections at that time. This reveals the relative popularity of the sections of the exhibition. Taken together with the results of the exhibition dwell time from the exit survey, we are also able to calculate the length of time spent in each of these sections during an average visit to the exhibition.

In addition, visitors' behaviour in each area was observed and classified into three modes: *Browser*, *Follower* and *Searcher/Researcher* dependent on their level of engagement with the exhibition content. This gives a spatial overview of how visitors behaved within the exhibition. The more engaged visitors are, the more rewarding their encounter with objects in the exhibition. Visitor engagement is therefore a valuable measure of success.

The positions of 2090 visitors were recorded via *Headcounts* and their *Meaning making* mode observed.

*Engagement matrices*

Using observation we recorded visitors' levels of engagement with selected exhibits: the *Marsh Eye Series*, Shadi Ghadirian, Further and faster, O Merciful and Heech in a Cage.

Visitor behaviour was marked on a matrix mapping the depth of their engagement against the use of any materials provided. This technique enables us to identify which elements of display and interpretation were most successful at engaging visitors and how that level of engagement was achieved. In total 471 visitors were observed and their behaviour recorded on *Engagement matrices*. 
4. Accompanied visits and focus groups

Two groups were convened to take part in Accompanied visits to the Word into Art exhibition. The respondents were segmented into specialist visitors and non-specialist visitors. The participants were issued with a pencil and a notebook and asked to respond to the displays and interpretation in the exhibition in the notebook. This technique allows us to capture the spontaneous responses of visitors as they move naturally through the space.

We then conducted focus groups with the participants to enable us to discuss their responses in greater depth and explore learning outcomes in more detail. These discussions were recorded and transcribed.
Motivation for visiting

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 and they are only able to move up the hierarchy if their needs at the previous level have been met. 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 the Word into Art exhibition to identify their main motivation for visiting the British Museum. The chart below shows the main motivation of Word into Art visitors compared to all British Museum visitors.
Visitor motivations

As the chart illustrates, exhibition visitors had very similar motivations to all Museum visitors. Nearly the same percentage are visiting for emotional or spiritual reasons, a combined total of 19% for Word into Art compared to 18% for all visitors. Just over one third of visitors to the exhibition were primarily motivated to visit the Museum for social reasons, which is less than all Museum visitors. The largest proportion of Word into Art visitors, 47%, were motivated to attend for intellectual reasons.

Specific motivations

In addition to identifying visitors’ main motivation for visiting, it is also enlightening to look at the proportion of visitors motivated by each of the possible motivators. The chart below gives the proportion of visitors to Word into Art who stated they were influenced by each potential motivator. It shows how these compare with all British Museum visitors.
**Specific motivators**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivator</th>
<th>Word into Art</th>
<th>British Museum</th>
<th>% Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-improvement</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>+1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To see, to do</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>+1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better understanding of other people / cultures</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>+12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal / hobby interest</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>+1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s a major attraction in the region</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>-22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic beauty</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>-8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See fascinating, awe-inspiring things</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>-13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulate creativity</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic / professional interest</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>-12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social interaction</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>-2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape and recharge my batteries</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To gain insight into the artists mind</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peaceful contemplation</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>-8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally moving experience</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>-3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal connection / identity</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I came to visit the shop / café</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To help children learn about art / history / culture</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>-3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This shows that the highest motives are self-improvement, to see or do, for personal hobby / interest and to gain better understanding of other people / cultures, and are very similar to the highest motives for British Museum visitors generally, matching three out of the four highest motivators for all visitors.

The focus groups reflected this diverse range of motivations: whilst some people were driven in by a specific cultural interest, others came to find out more about the Middle East or to immerse themselves in a purely aesthetic experience:

*I was taking around a friend who was here from Pakistan...obviously this exhibition interested me.*  
*General Visitor*

*I’m from Turkey, I am an architect and interested in art, and my parents do calligraphy in Turkey.*  
*Specialist visitor*

*Well my whole life revolves around the Middle East. I was born in the Middle East and I work in the Middle East and lived in the Middle East and...*
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studied in the Middle East and love the Middle East and hate the Middle East
General Visitor

I think there is a big thirst for understanding the Middle East right now
General Visitor

It was a combination of architecture and graphic design, because I really like Middle Eastern art because of the abstract qualities of it
Specialist Visitor

Others had simply gone in as they were passing, attracted by the banners, or been drawn to climb the steps by the sculptures.

Visit expectations

Visitors were asked to articulate what they hoped to get from their visit to Word into Art. Some visitors came seeking insight into a different culture:

Insight into the Middle East Fulfilment map

Others were expecting the exhibition to serve as a taster or introduction into something they hadn’t seen before:

An introduction to Arabic calligraphy Fulfilment map

Visitors wanted to be shown the difference between Middle Eastern art and art from other areas:

I hope to get knowledge of different types of art from different regions Fulfilment map

To see what Middle Eastern art is like. What it brings to the art world, how it differs in style etc Fulfilment map

Find out different impact of different language / culture Fulfilment map

Some came hoping to find out specific information, perhaps related to their specific interests:

Info about Dubai artist’s life Fulfilment map

If / how it might be possible to record visual ‘verbal’ record to communicate an alternative visual message Fulfilment map

And others were on a more general visit, hoping to simply find out more:

I am interested in languages and letters… I am basically just curious Fulfilment map

Some came expecting just to see the works, and were pleasantly surprised to find there was more historical and contextual information than they anticipated:
I was expecting a lot of calligraphy... I didn’t expect there to be the history, culture, politics side of things. 

General Visitor

Visitors were asked to identify out of a series of options which best described their main reason for visiting. The reason most gave, at 36%, was to see calligraphy / beautiful writing. The other reasons given were:

- To see contemporary modern / art 17%
- To find out about the Middle East today 14%
- To find out about the history of the Middle East 6%
- Try and see all British Museum exhibitions 5%

Expectations and their relationship to the British Museum brand

Visitors’ preconceptions of the British Museum were challenged by Word into Art. The focus groups explored how the fact that the exhibition was at the British Museum may have influenced expectations, especially as the British Museum is not usually associated with contemporary objects:

When you think about the British Museum you think that you are going to see the Parthenon. General visitor

I found it different, because I always associate the British Museum with antiquity and objects which are three dimensional. General visitor

The more modern stuff I didn’t expect, mainly because it is the British Museum. Specialist visitor

I think that the British Museum has always been seen as a national museum with artefacts, and I think the fact that they are trying to bridge that gap and explore different contemporary fields is actually good, because it is catering more for different tastes. Specialist visitor

Meaning making

Through our qualitative work into how visitors select and engage with objects in the museum environment, we have identified four modes of visitor behaviour. These modes classify how the visitor selects objects to explore and what kind of interpretation they need to make meaning from objects.
**Hierarchy of Meaning making**

<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 of the hierarchy representing an increased level of engagement with objects. It is possible for visitors to move upwards through the modes of behaviour - the modes can be seen as stages in the development of a visitor’s meaning making skills.

Visitors who are continually browsing an exhibition can only making fleeting connections with a limited number of objects. If the museum is committed to developing visitors’ levels of engagement it should seek to encourage visitors to develop their meaning making skills by selecting objects and offering interpretation that propels visitors up the hierarchy and engages them pro-actively.

Visitors were asked a question on the exit survey to identify their entry mode; that is how they behaved on entry to the *Word into Art* exhibition. The results are illustrated below and compared with all British Museum visitors.
This demonstrates that visitors approached their visit in a slightly more motivated way than all Museum visitors, with slightly higher proportions in follower and searcher / researcher mode.

The Specialist focus group confirmed that visitors conscientiously followed the theme of the exhibition:

*It is one of those exhibitions where you spend a lot of time in each room methodically going from work to work Specialist visitor*

*I think it did impose quite a studious environment on you Specialist visitor*

*I read every label because I am trying to get as much out of it in terms of...informative information Specialist visitor*
Interpretation

What visitors wanted

The formative evaluation established that there was a real interest in an exhibition of contemporary Middle Eastern art, and that whilst contemporary calligraphy does interest people it perhaps doesn’t have immediate or expected aesthetic appeal for everyone. In terms of interpretation, many people needed literal translations, cultural and political context and explanations of the images in order to make meaning from the exhibits.

The evidence in the formative report also showed that visitors would respond to multi-sensory intervention, audio in the form of songs, music and poetry and artists’ voices. Visitors also wanted an education in the politics, religion, people and culture of a vast and complex region.

Overall positive reaction to interpretative approach

Visitors were asked how they felt about the amount and type of information available to them, and most visitors were happy with the overall interpretative approach:

- 81% were either satisfied or very satisfied with the tone of information and language used
- 79% were either satisfied or very satisfied with the themes / narrative of the exhibition
- 76% were either satisfied or very satisfied with the amount of information on the writing styles

Non-specialists seemed to find the exhibition approachable, and felt that having little background knowledge didn’t hinder their enjoyment of the exhibition:

I am so ignorant of this subject, but the exhibit held my attention. I did not get bored
Easy to focus on pieces

Visitors commented on how the interpretation of the works stimulated their thinking:

Made me think about similarities between Christianity and Muslim in the phrases taken from
And many were surprised by the content of the exhibition:

*A revelation that sacred text could and has been fused for art* General visitor notepad

Some felt that the information given in the interpretation was very important due to the nature of the exhibition, and felt it really aided their understanding about a subject many know little about:

*Information about Arabic script and calligraphic fractions is crucial.*
Specialist visitor notepad

*Printed Information – highly important to understanding of the works – more so than in most exhibitions. As deals with a culture that many are unfamiliar with* Specialist visitor notepad

**A wide range of ways to engage**

Visitors commented on what stood out for them in the exhibition, with a range of exhibits mentioned:

*Dictionary definition of philistine* General visitor notepad
*Oxford dictionary* Visitor survey
*Children of war, children of peace my favourite* General visitor notepad
*Child picture different* Visitor survey
*Love the books* General visitor notepad
*Found last section most interesting felt more contemporary e.g. Laila showers print of child in refugee camp* General visitor notepad
*Found quotes on wall interesting* General visitor notepad
*Book with nails - interesting - remarkable* Visitor survey
*Woman with veil - trousers and newspaper* Visitor survey

Visitors liked the personal information provided about the artists:

*Interesting how few artists seem to still live in ME like photos* General visitor notepad

Visitors related to the exhibition in different ways, with a range of responses:

*Turkish Signature reminded me of my trip to Turkey* General visitor notepad
*Alphabet – reminded me of learning when I was young* General visitor notepad
*I read the Qu’ran recently so I found the use of verses in the 1st part quite moving.* Specialist visitor notepad
Art or objects?

In exploring these comments the issue seemed to be that, depending on which way visitors approached it, there was a conflict between whether the exhibition was seen as an art exhibition or a museum exhibition. The problem seemed to be that it was too small to do both and fell somewhere in between.

I think it was trying to do too much... you could have had two exhibitions, because it almost seemed like it was trying to show things both from an art point of view and from a cultural point of view and so you could have had just one about the development of art, and then another about how that was expressed in cultural identity. General Visitor

I think it is attempting to do too many things. It is good that it covers so much ground, but at the same time it would be nice if maybe they explored more of the thematic qualities of it. Specialist visitor

In an exhibition like that you feel you are there to learn and so a sort of educational environment... but at the same time you can just appreciate it as art for arts sake Specialist Visitor

It was also quite interesting seeing the art displayed in that style and you had a lot more information on how to interpret the art next to it, which you don't get in galleries. That was interesting to see it looked at from a more anthropological aspect General visitor

The conclusion seemed to be that the exhibition provided a fascinating overview and introduction; a springboard from which visitors could pursue their areas of further interest:

As a starting point I would say that it was an overview for lots of different things, but then the programme of events, that kind of allows you to go into your area of interest. So it can be seen as a starting point Specialist Visitor

I think it pretty clearly set out to be an introduction and it worked much better as a taster Specialist Visitor

The focus groups identified that while both Specialists and General visitors found a good deal to enjoy and learn from in the exhibition, it nevertheless caused some frustration in that, having whetted their appetites, people wanted more from it:

It felt a bit disjointed at times...you just started getting used to one sort of artist and then all of a sudden it changes completely General visitor

I think I would have liked to have seen more of the history and politics and that section, apart from the calligraphy and deconstructing the word General Visitor
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I think there was a lack around the theory of Word into Art because it is very unlike our artistic culture. General Visitor

Reactions to amount of information available

Visitors were asked how they felt about topics information was provided about, and the results were:

• 65% were either satisfied or very satisfied with the amount of information on contemporary Middle East
• 60% were either satisfied or very satisfied with the amount of information on the lives of artists

Between 12% and 13% of visitors weren’t satisfied with and therefore wanted more of information on contemporary Middle East and on the lives of artists. The other aspects all had a very small percentage of visitors actually stating they were dissatisfied, of between 2% and 3%.

A small number felt there was sometimes too much interpretation, that they were being over directed as to how to view the works, although they could see how this interpretation would aid others:

Found the Arabic alphabet in the foyer a little over explanatory – it seems to demystify the works but on the other hand may be considered as a good educational tool. Specialist visitor notepad
Sometimes say too much in blurb – tell viewer how to interpret General visitor notepad

Specialists desire more detailed information

There was a tendency for specialist visitors to be less satisfied than those who had a general knowledge of the subject area or little or no knowledge; 24% of specialist visitors were not satisfied with the amount of information on contemporary Middle East and on the lives of artists, compared to between 7% and 12% of those who had a general knowledge of the subject area or little or no knowledge.

A number found they were lacking requisite information to provide them with a more full or rounded perspective:

I found that it was still very superficial, and I thought it would be a lot more in depth in terms of looking more into Arabic culture instead of showing a snapshot of it Specialist visitor
I would have definitely preferred it to have had more calligraphic stuff
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over there than contemporary Specialist visitor
I don’t know if it explained enough about why it has become... because Islam forbids pictures of animals and faces... it doesn’t really talk about that... and it doesn’t really explain where the whole art of calligraphy comes from Specialist visitor

Depth of engagement

Using observation, we measured the degree to which visitors became engaged with five different displays in the exhibition. The top line score shown in the chart below is the proportion of visitors who, after approaching the display, became engaged with its content.

Engaged behaviour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Display</th>
<th>Not engaged</th>
<th>Engaged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O Merciful</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faster and Further</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shadi Ghadirian</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marsh Eye Series</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heech in a Cage</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some visitors commented particularly on the ‘Heech in a cage’ exhibit:

Encapsulates the oppression and struggle of sh’a martyrs in Iraq General visitor notepad
Interesting 1st piece, well designed – character in cage very relevant to current perceptions of the middle east General visitor notepad

Usage of interpretation

For each of the elements tested, visitors’ usage of the interpretation provided was noted. ‘Written’ comprises any written interpretation or operating
instructions, ‘Audio’ is those visitors who were using any audio interpretation while ‘Human’ is insight provided by a member of staff or a fellow visitor.

**Interpretation used**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Written</th>
<th>Audio</th>
<th>Human</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O Merciful</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further and Faster</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shadi Ghadirian</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marsh Eye Series</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heech in a Cage</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is also interesting to look at the success rate of the different forms of interpretation. This is the percentage of visitors using that form of interpretation that were drawn into engaged behaviour by it. The most successful forms of each interpretation for element were:

**Most successful interpretation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
<th>Success rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O Merciful</td>
<td>Audio</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further and Faster</td>
<td>Audio</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shadi Ghadirian</td>
<td>Written</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marsh Eye Series</td>
<td>Written</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heech in a Cage</td>
<td>Audio</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The audio guide when used was extremely successful at engaging visitors for 'O Merciful', 'Further and Faster' and 'Heech in a Cage'. As the table illustrates between 92% and 100% of all visitors observed using the audio interpretation for these exhibits engaged at discovery or immersion level.
Display

Entrance

Visitors liked the entrance area, and felt it served as a good introduction to the exhibition:

*Entrance Foyer as a good introduction with text and explanation before you are overwhelmed with visuals*  
Specialist visitor notepad

*1st work in foyer calligraphic print – is good introduction to calligraphic Arabic forms.*  
Specialist visitor notepad

*It had a good foyer with lots of information and it was quite structured, it did impose a structured plan to your viewing*  
Specialist visitor notepad

But some weren’t aware of where the exhibition started:

*Sculptures in entrance are overlooked and may be considered to be “outside” the bulk of exhibited works. Also they don’t strike you as immediately been representative of letter written forms and thus outside the theme of the exhibition.*  
Specialist visitor notepad

*Sculptures interesting but not immediately aware it was start of the exhibit. After website realised.*  
General visitor notepad

Layout and themes

The layout and thematic display was liked by many:

*Good layout and presentation*  
General visitor notepad

*The thematic development of the exhibition (was good)*  
Specialist visitor notepad

*Temporary walls create a sense of space of the exhibition*  
Specialist visitor notepad

Although some commented that they felt some areas were a little overcrowded:

*Room 3 - Left wall too busy, too many pieces and small descriptions.*  
General visitor notepad

In the focus groups comments on the layout tended to reflect preferences for the focus of the exhibition. Whilst some wanted more rooms on calligraphy others wanted the political context to be at the beginning or spread throughout the exhibition:
The last room...I felt really let down coming out and there was no sense of culmination with the last room and how you kind of exit the space...you sort of felt you were turning a corner in an alley and also didn't help to reflect back on anything and I didn't understand why the last few paintings were where they were Specialist visitor
You did feel that the sections were really separate, but the identity issue, I felt that the last section was quite separated to the rest of it.. almost like it was tagged onto the end to make a point, than just the beautiful art, and that could have been spread throughout all the sections just a bit more effectively, so the whole thing was about history and politics General visitor

Use of colour
Visitors had mixed views on the colours used in the exhibition:

*Primary colours are too overwhelming* Specialist visitor notepad
*I loved it with red background* General visitor notepad

Exhibits
Visitors commented on the objects and exhibits that stood out for them:

*Abstract works seem to bring the exhibition to life and make it more tactile.* Specialist visitor notepad
*Yun - Powerful, spent a long time here* Specialist visitor notepad

The focus groups identified the Chinese piece as particularly fascinating because of the surprising links between two seemingly entirely different cultures. This kind of cross-cultural comparison seems to really resonate with visitors, and is a finding that also came through strongly in the recent Warren Cup exhibition evaluation.
## Engagement

### Meaning making

Visitor behaviour was observed in each of the themed sections of the exhibition and their level of engagement with the displays in these sections noted. The chart below illustrates the proportion of visitors displaying Browser, Follower or Searcher / Researcher behaviour in each section:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Searcher / Researcher</th>
<th>Follower</th>
<th>Browser</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sacred Script</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature and Art</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deconstructing the Word</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History, Politics and Identity</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This shows the most engaging section was Literature and Art, which had the highest proportion of engaged behaviour, that is visitors in follower or searcher / researcher mode. The least engaging was Sacred Script, the first section entered.
Time spent

The chart below shows the length of time visitors spent in *Word into Art*. Time spent is a useful indicator of engagement as the more engaged visitors become in an exhibition the longer they are likely to spend in it.

**Time spent**

![Bar chart showing time spent by visitors]

Nearly a quarter of visitors spent over an hour in the exhibition. The majority spent under half an hour, and the average visit length was 38 minutes.

**Time distribution**

Using the information generated via the Headcounts and the average visit length, it is possible to calculate the average length of time spent in each of the sections of the exhibition, as the table below illustrates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Time spent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sacred Script</td>
<td>9 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature and Art</td>
<td>9 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deconstructing the Word</td>
<td>6 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History, Politics and Identity</td>
<td>9 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shop</td>
<td>5 mins</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Visitors spent the same amount of time, 9 minutes, in Sacred Script, Literature and Art and History, Politics and Identity. Deconstructing the Word, the third room entered in the exhibition, had the least amount of time.
spent, at 6 minutes. Visitors spent an average of 5 minutes in the exhibition shop.
Visit Impact

Impact

Visitors were asked to identify a series of statements to say what they had got from visiting the Word into Art exhibition. The profiles below compare visitors’ main motivations of visiting the British Museum against the highest level of engagement they reached with the exhibition. This gives a raw measure of the degree to which their visit expectations were met.

Overall impact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main motivation</th>
<th>Visit impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>Intellectual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results show that the exhibition exceeded visitors’ minimum requirements and was successful in delivering a far more emotional experience than visitors were expecting from their visit. Only 17% of visitors demanded an emotional experience from the exhibition but over half of all visitors came away having experienced this level of engagement.
The chart below shows the end outcome for visitors who came with each motivation:

**Motivation to outcome journey**

The only significant shift downwards was amongst those who went from a spiritual motivation to an intellectual outcome, although this was still a small proportion of visitors overall. The largest shift is from intellectual up to emotional.

Looking at the individual motivational statements, it is possible to measure the impact of a visit according to specific expectations. The chart below compares pre-visit expectations of the exhibition with post-visit outcome:

**Ranked impact on specific motivations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Pre-visit</th>
<th>Post-visit</th>
<th>% Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stimulate creativity</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>+4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>+3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally moving experience</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>+3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I came to visit the shop / café</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>+3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better understanding of other people / cultures</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>+2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To gain insight into the artists mind</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>+1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic / professional interest</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic beauty</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The biggest increase was in visitors who came away with creative stimulation, saw architecture, had an emotionally moving experience and visited the shop or café. The largest decrease was amongst those who felt they had satisfied a personal hobby or interest, which is consistent with feedback from specialist visitors who felt the exhibition served as an introduction or ‘taster’; for these specialists looking to increase their knowledge there wasn’t enough.

Impact on future behaviour

We asked visitors to *Word into Art* if seeing the exhibition had affected the way they would use the British Museum in the future. Visitors said they would:

- See more of the Islamic / Middle Eastern collections 59%
- Visit British Museum special exhibitions 42%
- Find out more about the British Museum 40%
- Find out more about the Middle East season 39%
- Visit the Museum in general 35%
- Use the British Museum / Middle East Now website 31%
- Be inspired to produce their own work 29%
- Practice calligraphy 17%
Exhibition shop

74% of all Word into Art exhibition visitors said they had used the exhibition shop, and out of these 57% had made a purchase. As mentioned previously, an average of 5 minutes per visitor was spent in the shop area.
Learning outcomes

Key messages

We asked *Word into Art* exhibition visitors to tell us if they felt they had learnt anything new about the exhibition’s main themes and key messages:

- 87% learnt something about contemporary Middle Eastern art
- 75% learnt something about contemporary Middle Eastern artists
- 74% learnt something about Arabic scripts
- 71% learnt something about things that inspire or influence Middles Eastern artists
- 64% learnt something about Middle Eastern culture
- 50% learnt something about the British Museum collections

Prior or background knowledge didn’t seem a factor in how much visitors felt they had learnt, with similar proportions of visitors with specialist, general or little or no knowledge saying they had learnt something new.

Unexpected learning

Visitors were asked what surprised or shocked them about the exhibition, and an interesting range of responses were given. Many were surprised by the exhibits they saw, either because they weren’t expecting the range and type of work displayed from the regions covered by the exhibition, or because they were unaware of the use of calligraphy:

*Didn’t expect quality of work from Saudi Arabia* Visitor survey
*Didn’t know about modern use of calligraphy* Visitor survey
*Didn’t know Dubai has so many artistic things* Visitor survey
*Struck by technical beauty, creativity* Visitor survey
*Arabic script is very beautiful* Visitor survey

The modern element was a surprise for many, with visitors expecting a more traditional style:

*Modern painting is very contemporary in the Middle East* Visitor survey
*Thought it would be more traditional* Visitor survey

Having a subject matter such as this covered in a museum generally was felt to be unusual by some:
Surprised about the subject matter - not available in most galleries
Visitor survey
Surprised that there is an exhibition like this
Visitor survey

And many visitors were surprised and interested by the influence of religion on the artwork displayed, and the connections they saw between different religions:

Surprised by influence of religion - more than thought in older section
Visitor survey
The similarities between Christianity and Islam because, in this current climate, it is easy to see the differences
General visitor
The Chinese Muslim connection was surprising and visually interesting
Visitor survey

An emotional experience

The political aspects struck many, with some relating what they saw to war and also to religion:

Becoming injected with ideas that all Muslims are terrorists / realising that not true
Visitor survey
Expected it to do more with Islam but was more about politics
Visitor survey
Learning that the children in the Middle East want to stop the war
Visitor survey
Freedom of expression, expected more repression
Visitor survey

Use of people in the images also surprised many, and visitors were surprised that some artists had gone against the Islamic tradition in this way:

Some pieces were very modern and creative, people were portrayed - thought this was not allowed
Visitor survey
Surprised that some imagery was of people
Visitor survey
Thought ME art would be a bit more traditional - didn't know could play with script
Visitor survey

A personal impact

The focus groups confirmed that visitors emerged having experienced a range of personal impacts and outcomes. The exhibition was both educational and stimulated further interest and enquiry:

A take on the Middle East beyond what is in the media right now, which was something that was creative and beautiful
General visitor
It made me want to go away and find out more... this really did make me
think I would go away and read General visitor
It made me think of things I had not thought of before. It made me aware
of things that I was not aware of before General visitor
It made me change what I thought of the Middle East General visitor
I know some things about calligraphy that I have never seen before
Specialist visitor
I was really fascinated by the explanations of different schools of script
and, having studied Arabic and learnt to write it, to see these other scripts
and have some explanation... I found that really interesting Specialist visitor
I think I learned a hell of a lot from it, because basically I am completely
ignorant on contemporary Middle Eastern artwork Specialist visitor
Conclusions

Exhibition appeal

*Word into Art* attracted a much younger profile of visitors compared to the British Museum as a whole and the majority of special exhibitions. It also attracted a large number of intentional first time visits, or ‘new intenders’, more than recent special exhibitions such as Sudan. Although at 14% pre-awareness of the exhibition was fairly low amongst Museum visitors, the signage and entrance area successfully converted many general museum visits to seeing the exhibition, drawing people in through the promotional banners and sculptures and artwork displayed.

Significant changes in the ethnic profile of attenders is difficult to discern in the quantitative data, due to the dominance of the core British Museum market, although there are some indicators that there were far more visitors to *Word into Art* who could potentially be of Middle Eastern origin than there is for the Museum as a whole. It was also very apparent from the focus groups that specific and personal cultural interest and relevance was an important motivator for new and infrequent attenders, with many expressing links with the Middle East as a prompt for their visit.

Season appeal

The research indicated that the festival programme did not enjoy such high awareness as the exhibition, with far more visitors relating to the exhibition title of *Word into Art* than to the Middle East season. This lack of awareness is something that the Museum could consider exploring through further research, to test if the idea of a wrap-around season appeals to visitors and fulfils its intended objectives.

A successful website

The web-site was a major tool in terms of pre-visit persuasion and planning and post visit pursuit of interest and enquiry stimulated by the exhibition, with significant numbers using the website and 12% citing it as their main source of information for a visit.
A surprising experience

It is clear that the exhibition had a significant emotional impact for attenders with many incidental, social and intellectually-driven visitors experiencing unexpected emotional and spiritual impact.

The exhibition achieved significant learning outcomes: it surprised visitors with modern content; altered perceptions of the Museum; challenged perceptions of the art of the Middle East and of the Middle East as a region. It sparked further interest and gave creative inspiration to many, and really encouraged visitors to make lateral connections between different religions and cultures.

Challenging perceptions

The indications are that *Word Into Art* changed the perceptions of visitors who hadn’t associated the British Museum with contemporary exhibitions and having a contemporary collection. There is clearly enormous scope for further re-positioning of the Museum into playing a more relevant, contemporary role in cultural provision and in altering the profile of attenders.

Art show vs Museum exhibition

It seems that the exhibition was seen by specialist visitors as holding an uneasy position between being an art gallery show and a museum exhibition. Whilst an art gallery show required a more in-depth look at the works of certain artists, a museum show required even more contextual information. The requirement for more information seemed to prevail, with specialist visitors in particular wanting more information on contemporary Middle East and on the lives of artists. The conclusion amongst specialists was that the exhibition served as a taster or springboard from which to pursue further interests.

Increasing engagement

Consideration may be given to experimenting with more listening posts to entice visitors to experience the quality of the audio-guide, and this may encourage greater take-up of the guides.
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