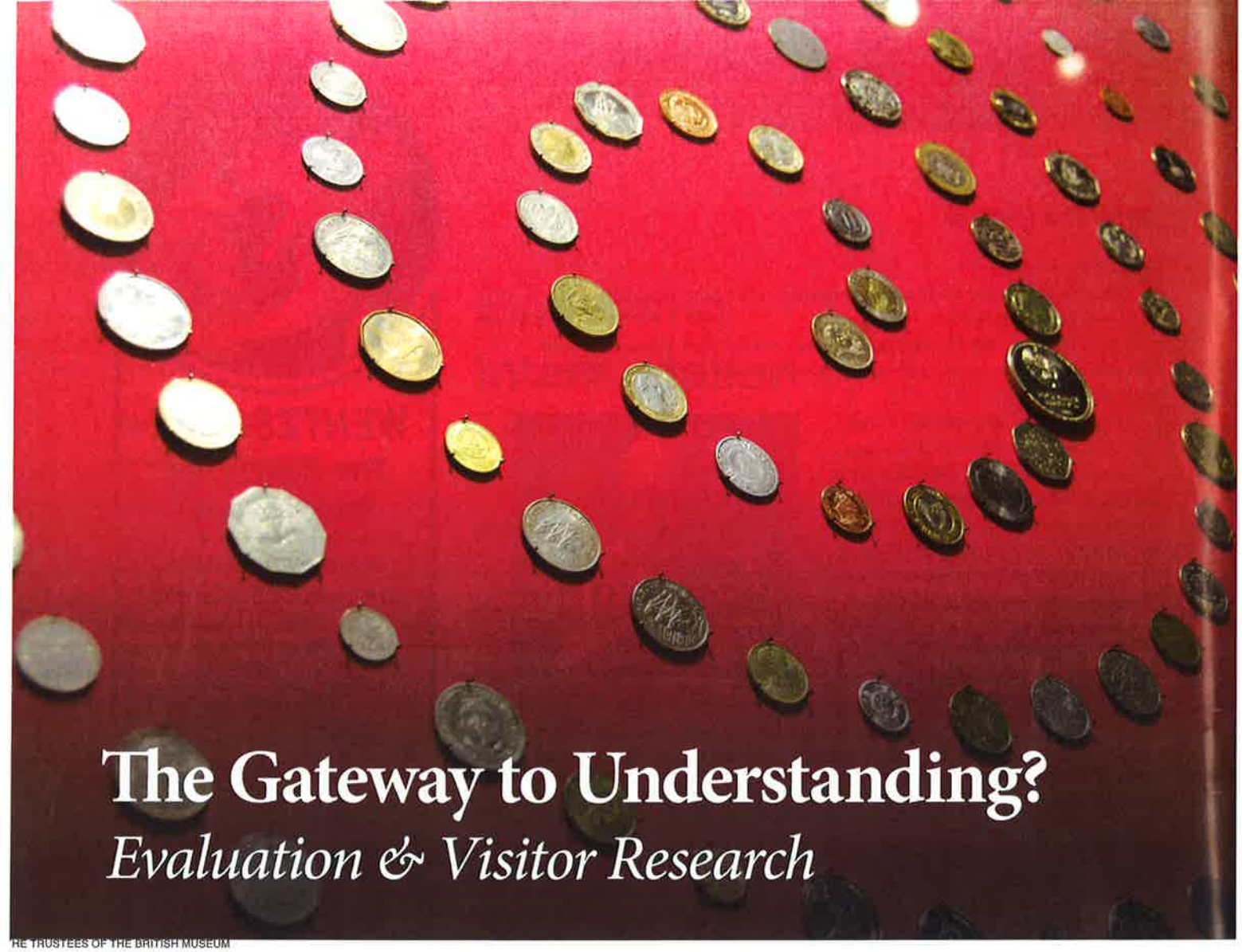

The Gateway to Understanding?

Evaluation & Visitor Research

Coins arranged in a swirl (Room 68). Evaluation demonstrates that this gateway group of objects is one of the most successful at attracting visitors' attention.

STUART FROST

The British Museum received over 6.5 million visits in 2013, making it the most-visited museum in the United Kingdom. Its collection encompasses the world and documents human culture from its origins to the present day. The museum's interpretation team works collaboratively to develop new permanent exhibits and special exhibitions and has undertaken systematic and rigorous evaluation regularly from 2005 onwards. We now have a rich and valuable archive of data about visitor behavior that informs all of our work.

Annual Survey

The museum's first annual visitor survey was commissioned in 2005 and has been undertaken every year subsequently. Before this survey there was a perception that the museum's audience consisted almost entirely of tourists from overseas, socially motivated visitors wanting to tick the museum off their list. However, the survey data revealed that these "sightseers" were only 20 percent of the total audience and only one of seven categories of visitor with varied needs and motivations. The survey quantified a number of fundamental issues about the nature of the museum's audience. Around 59 percent were visiting for the first time; and only 9 percent had specialist knowledge. Needless to say, these findings provided important insight into audience needs that had been overlooked.

Special Exhibitions

The interpretation team regularly commissions external agencies to undertake evaluation. Front-end evaluation is used to establish visitors' prior knowledge, experience, and expectations of the subject proposed for a new exhibit. When plans for exhibitions are more advanced we will test these qualitatively, and visitor feedback obtained through this formative evaluation is used to make iterative improvements. Finally, after an exhibition has opened, we

undertake summative evaluation to establish how successful an individual project has been in meeting its objectives and inform the development of future displays.

Evaluation of special exhibitions with an admission charge has confirmed that they attract a very different audience to the permanent galleries, one that requires different interpretive strategies. For example, the typical dwell time for a major special exhibition is between 75 and 90 minutes, much higher than a free permanent gallery, where the dwell time can be as low as a few minutes. Data indicates that from 2005 onwards, as the museum has become more successful at developing special exhibitions, audiences have become more critical. Evaluation reveals areas where improvements can be made; small details can have a big impact.

Permanent Galleries

Evaluation at the British Museum has transformed the way we develop permanent galleries. A small exhibition space at the museum, Room 3, is used for temporary displays focused on a single object from the collection. Evaluation of these displays revealed several important findings. First, most visitors at the British Museum are drawn to objects first, before looking for the interpretation. Second, visitors tend to ignore wall panels or other interpretive text unless they are in proximity to the object that attracts their attention. Third, in free-admission displays, most visitors exhibit selective browsing behavior, rather than thorough sequential viewing. These observations led to a fundamental rethink of the museum's existing interpretive philosophy.

Gateway Objects

In-house tracking and observation studies undertaken in permanent galleries by the interpretation team revealed that the average dwell time in some of the permanent displays was as low as one minute and 30 seconds. As there are over 90 rooms to visit, and the average length of a visit to the museum as whole is just over two hours, it is not surprising that the dwell time in an individual gallery is often low. Some of the older rooms at the museum contain more objects than any first-time visitor could be realistically expected to deal with in a single visit. As a result, we have developed an approach to structuring object displays built around 15 to 20 particularly important objects. We call these gateway objects and a gateway object should ideally possess for qualities.

1. They should have strong aesthetic appeal or visual impact. The objects should have the capacity to catch visitors' eyes, draw their attention and interest, and have strong attracting power.
2. They should be some of the most important objects in that particular collection, and be something that the visitor should not miss if they have limited time.
3. The objects should act as an introduction (or gateway) into a bigger subject that the visitor can explore in more detail.
4. Ideally the objects should be iconic, something that visitors might know already, and a "don't miss" highlight for someone on a first-time visit to the museum.

The display and interpretation of gateway objects is informed by a number of principles. The objects should be given a design and interpretive treatment that signal their important status to visitors clearly and quickly, through dramatic lighting and bold background colors, for example. The interpretive text must be in a clear and direct relationship with the objects, the text should start with what the visitor can see, and then work out from the objects to tell a bigger story. We have used gateway objects in 10 separate projects since 2006, and the evaluation of each display indicates that the approach deepens engagement. The introduction of gateways in the refurbished Money Gallery (Room 68), for example, contributed to increased dwell time, and an increased median number of stops.

The Ultimate Gateway: A Helmet from Sutton Hoo (Room 41)

The museum recently opened a newly refurbished display, Sutton Hoo and Europe AD 300–1100, the result of almost five years of work to redisplay the early medieval

The new Sutton Hoo and Europe, AD 300–1100, exhibit (Room 41) at the British Museum. Evaluation of this display is underway.

collections. An evaluation of the old display proved to be particularly influential in shaping the current exhibit. The main element of the evaluation was a visitor tracking and observation study. Over 400 visitors were observed in the gallery space and a note was made of each display element they stopped at, and the length of time they engaged with it. Short interviews were conducted with a smaller number of visitors after they left the room.

The results confirmed that the attracting power of the old displays was disappointing, and the few objects that visitors did stop at did not hold their attention for very long. The one exception was a case containing the helmet and shield of an Anglo-Saxon warrior, found in a ship burial at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, England, dating from the early AD 600s. The Sutton Hoo ship burial was one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the 20th century, and the helmet enjoys an iconic status in the UK. The popularity of this single case encouraged the project team to move the Sutton Hoo exhibits to the heart of the new gallery physically and conceptually, and to ensure that all visitors to the new gallery came face-to-face with the helmet.

We took an opportunity to test a simpler version of this proposed arrangement in a temporary display in Room 2. This highlights display ensured that some of the most important objects remained on view whilst essential building work took place to prepare Room 41 for the new display. We undertook another tracking and observation study in this gallery. The result revealed that placing the helmet in the center of the gallery resulted in a significant increase in its attracting power from 38 percent to 60 percent. A simple version of a film also tested positively. These results gave the project team the confidence that the basic approach that was being pursued had the potential to deliver the results we were hoping for.

We have just commenced data collection for a comprehensive evaluation of the new display and are awaiting the results with some anticipation. Will the results confirm what we hope for, that we have made a significant difference to the visitor experience? Or will they indicate that we have simply invested a significant amount of time and money without real demonstrable impact? Experience suggests that no matter how successful a project proves to be, summative evaluation always identifies some lessons that can be applied to future projects.

Gateway objects in the Citi Money Gallery (Room 68) at the British Museum are highlighted with a pink background color.

The Future of Evaluation

The value of evaluation has recently been the focus of intense debate in the United Kingdom, with its real impact and benefit coming under close scrutiny. A comprehensive review of summative evaluation in museums and galleries produced the "Evaluating Evaluation" report, a document with an extremely useful list of recommendations to improve its impact. The "Evaluating Evaluation" review argued that institutions should be doing more to share rigorous and honest evaluations with each other, and this article is intended to make a small contribution towards that end.

Evaluation can appear to be relatively expensive to commission or time consuming to complete, but the reality is that the process is invaluable and reduces the risk of expensive and reputation damaging mistakes. Digital technology offers new opportunities for gaining insight into visitor behavior in fine-grained and cost-effective ways. Whatever the future holds in term of high-tech developments, the need for and value of meaningful evaluation is unlikely to diminish.

Online Resources

The British Museum–Evaluation
A selection of the museum's evaluation reports can be viewed here:
www.britishmuseum.org/research/research_projects/all_current_projects/visitor_research.aspx

The Visitor Studies Group
The Evaluating Evaluation report can be found here:
http://visitors.org.uk

The Visitor Studies Association
The VSA is dedicated to understanding and enhancing informal learning experiences in informal settings through research, evaluation, and dialogue.
www.visitorstudies.org

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