

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**The Immaculate Perception Project:  
Exhibition Creation and Reception in a  
New Zealand Regional Art Museum**

**Thesis presented in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Philosophy in Museum Studies  
Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.**

Paul Hansen  
2003

## **Abstract**

Internationally, museums have increasingly come under review since Bourdieu's (1969) research focused on art gallery visiting patterns and cultural codes. Museums exist within a post-modern milieu that demands a more democratic approach to defining their cultural and educational role within society. Over the last decade in particular, art museums, criticised for being elitist and insular within their communities, have been challenged to be more inclusive, accessible and relevant to their local communities.

The literature suggests that a review of the core mission and the culture of museums is required to provide the catalyst for change. However, there is little evidence or few models offered as to how such re-visioning could be implemented. New Zealand art museums have been slow in responding to the issues, or to conducting research involving either their visitors or their communities. These emergent issues provided the context for this study, which is focused on the creation and reception of a community based exhibition within a contemporary regional art museum.

This exhibition project brought together community participants and established artists, and the study evaluates the responses of the exhibition creators and the exhibition audience. In line with action research methodology, evaluation surveys and observational data were collected during the distinct phases of the project and resulted in a number of findings that have implications for regional art museums.

The findings from this present study indicate that curators working alongside the community with an action research methodology, while developing exhibition projects, can produce positive outcomes for the participants, the audience and the museum. Creative partnerships can be established that enhance life-long-learning opportunities and contribute to the relevance of museums within their communities.

The present study also proposes that museums re-vision their mission to become 'learning organisations' (Senge, 1994, 2000) and provides a model that could be appropriate for museums intent on enriching their organisational culture and enhancing their significance and profile within their community.

## Acknowledgements

*My thanks to the artists and craftspeople who participated so enthusiastically to make this project possible. Their creative energy, cooperation and generosity were instrumental in creating an exhibition that surpassed expectations.*

*And special thanks, to the local craft clubs and guilds associated with this exhibition. It was through their initial openness and invitation to talk with their members that this project ever got off the ground. Their subsequent generous support and dependable organizational networks, were crucial factors in the overall success of the exhibition and this study.*

*Thanks also to the Director of Te Manawa, Julie Catchpole for the opportunity to work within the museum and to the staff at Te Manawa Art for their valued assistance and support throughout the exhibition period.*

*Thanks to my supervisor, Susan Abasa whose belief in the value of this project enabled me to experience, the trials, tribulations and joys associated with exhibition creation, reception and evaluation.*

*Thanks also to David Butts for helpful suggestions and input.*

*The initial support from funding agencies was essential for this project to go ahead and thanks go to The Palmerston North Community Arts Council, through the Creative Communities Scheme (Creative New Zealand) and The Eastern and Central Trust for their generous contributions. Local business also supported this project. Thanks to Desktop Technology Services Limited for the use of a new iMac computer and to Unlimited Realities for their technical assistance in creating the exhibition information website.*

*Many individuals have assisted in significant ways to this thesis, but in particular I would like to acknowledge and thank my mother Daphne; HOD Jill Brandon, for her support; Leanne Robinson, Linda Turau, Tina Sheehan, Claire Forbes and Megan Patterson, for technical assistance in combating computer gremlins; Nic Broomfield for the CD Rom.*

*Finally, thanks to my wife Sally, and family: Polly, Jasmine, Leif, Myah and Ella who provided the best reasons to complete this project.*

## **Foreword**

### **Author's Note**

Museums and art galleries have always been a source of attraction and fascination for me. This began relatively early in life. I was fortunate to live in Wellington, a short bike ride away from the old Dominion Museum and Academy of Fine Arts. I would frequently wander alone among the treasure trove of glass cases filled with amazing collections of ancient artifacts, terrifying weaponry, enormous insects and stuffed animals, frozen in time. They were a mix of the bizarre and the beautiful and a source of endless fascination to a young mind. I loved the huge variety, the orderly jumble and clutter of the glass cabinets and that you could lose yourself within the maze of shiny linoleum, deserted corridors of exhibits and spend time with favourite things.

I have since visited many wonderful museums here in New Zealand and in other parts of the world and have noticed a remarkable change in the presentation, design and layout of museums. Many international museums are highly valued by communities as cultural assets that attract visitors and tourists who contribute to the wider commercial infrastructures of the community. This has contributed to the investment in the re-design and upgrading of the many traditional museum sites. Exhibitions and events, designed to attract large numbers of visitors, are also a characteristic of contemporary museum programmes.

The role of the art museum in this current climate is one that I find particularly interesting. I have been a regular visitor to art museums and galleries, and as a tertiary educator in the visual arts, I consider that museums have a unique contribution to make within communities, with their potential to enrich lives. Art museums privilege the visual experience and provide excellent primary resources and opportunities to complement an education in the visual arts.

However, visiting an art museum or gallery is often a new and sometimes revelatory experience for many tertiary students, even those with some secondary school visual art education. Given the appropriate background and introductions to the exhibitions, they can discover, at first-hand, the wonderful world of visual art in its many forms and genres. However, visual art does not always speak for itself. One concern is that

art museums do relatively very little, with either their collections or their programmes, to be inclusive to, or engage, first-time visitors, their usual audience, or their wider communities within their exhibitions programme. Although the variety of the artworks and the professionalism evident in the presentation of most exhibitions displayed within our public art museums is generally impressive, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is difficult for local artists and craftspeople to have exhibitions of their work in local regional galleries.

There is also a greater variety and number of exhibitions being shown than ever before. However, in my view, too many opportunities are lost in bringing exhibitions and artworks alive and making them accessible, relevant and meaningful to a wider audience. For curators and designers to hang or mount exhibitions, put up the labels and then walk away, thinking the job is done, is questionable practice. The exhibition is only one half of the equation, the visitor experience completes it.

Another concern is that art museums rarely involve their communities in the planning or development of exhibition programmes. Perhaps if the mission and exhibition programmes of public art museums were re-orientated to emphasise the community and audience response and participation, a new journey of discovery could be charted. But are our public art museums ready to reset the compass to a true magnetic reading and set sail? By setting such a course, the significance and role of the art museum within society could be enhanced, along with their contribution to life-long learning opportunities within their communities. Making such an investment would also contribute significantly to the long-term viability of regional art museums in their communities.

# Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	i
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	ii
<b>Foreword</b> .....	iii
<b>Contents</b> .....	v
<b>Appendices</b> .....	x
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	xii
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	xv

## **Introduction**

Introduction.....	1
Motivation for this study.....	1
A brief profile of art museums .....	2
The wider current art museum context in terms of post-modernist challenges...3	
The Current Context.....	3
Related Issues .....	5
Museum Relevance .....	8
The New Zealand art museum context .....	10
The aims of the present study .....	12
Research Questions .....	12
Research Design & Methodology .....	13
Action Research.....	15
Methodology.....	16
Exhibition Creation .....	17
Exhibition Reception Studies .....	17
The Site .....	18
Revised Mission Statement.....	20
Exhibitions Policy .....	20
Limitations of the Study.....	20
Preview of Chapters .....	22

## **Chapter I Literature Review**

Introduction.....	24
Museums and Cultural Context.....	24
Exhibition Reception.....	28
Museum Audiences.....	30
Museum Audiences and Learning.....	31
Personal Context.....	33
Social Context.....	35
Physical Context.....	36
Museum Effectiveness and Outcomes.....	38
Conceptual Frameworks and Meaning-Making.....	39
Museums and Future Challenges.....	43
The New Zealand Context.....	44
Action Research.....	46
Recent Trends in Action Research.....	47
Summary.....	51

## **Chapter II Methodology in the Field**

Introduction.....	54
Phase One: Exhibition Creation.....	55

## **Chapter III Exhibition Concept and Participants**

Exhibition Title.....	58
The Exhibition Brief.....	58
Exhibition Messages.....	58
Justification: The mandala symbol as exhibition theme.....	59
Exhibition Participants.....	60
Community Groups.....	61
International Artists.....	63

## **Chapter IV Exhibition Development: Methodology in Action**

Introduction.....	64
The Presentations .....	64
The Workshops.....	65
Workshop 1.....	65
Workshop 2.....	67
Workshop 1. Felters and Floral Arts.....	67
Installation Artist.....	68
Dialogue with other artists.....	69
Profiles and labels for exhibition.....	70
Evaluations.....	70

## **Chapter V Findings: Exhibition Development**

Introduction.....	71
Phase One: Background.....	71
Survey One: Purpose.....	72
Survey One: Findings.....	73
Participant Prior Knowledge and Response to Presentation.....	73
Participant Involvement: Reasons and Motivation .....	73
Participant Self-Concept.....	74
Participant Visiting Patterns .....	74
Participant Expectations.....	74
Summary: Survey One.....	74
Survey Two: Exhibition Creation.....	75
Purpose of Survey Two.....	75
Validity of Survey Instrument.....	75
Response to Survey Two Statements and Data Analysis.....	76
Personal Agenda Questions.....	80
Participant opinion on the future of the group mandalas.....	83
Tibetan Mandala Event: Influence and Impact.....	84
Summary.....	85

## Chapter VI Exhibition Reception Evaluation: Participants and Visitors

Introduction to Phase Two .....	88
Validity.....	88
<b>Part One:</b> Artists, Craft Groups and Gallery Staff Responses & Analysis .....	88
Survey 3: Purpose.....	88
Survey 3: Response and Emerging Patterns .....	89
Exhibition Evaluation.....	90
Analysis of Cohort Responses as Positive and Negative Indicators .....	91
Evaluation Statements Analysis .....	92
Exhibition Design, Layout, and Concept.....	92
Exhibition Opening .....	93
Visitor Flow .....	93
Mandala Symbol: Knowledge/ Understanding /Aesthetic Appreciation.....	94
Exhibition Concept.....	95
Exhibition Theme: Evaluation of Exhibition Components .....	96
Technical Aspects.....	98
Future Plans and Aspirations.....	99
<b>Part Two:</b> Exhibition Visitors Response .....	103
Introduction.....	103
Rationale for Questionnaires .....	104
Questionnaire 1.....	104
Questionnaire 2.....	104
Questionnaire 3.....	104
Prior Knowledge.....	105
Visitor Evaluation Findings and Analysis .....	106
New and Returning Visitor Ratio.....	108
Visiting Patterns of Returning Visitors.....	109
Visitor Areas.....	110
Finding Out About the Exhibition and Reason for Visiting.....	112
Tibetan Mandala Influence .....	113
Response to the Exhibition .....	114
Exhibition Components: Questionnaire 3.....	117

Evaluation of Exhibition Components.....	117
Evaluation of Information Labels.....	119
Visitor Perceptions of the Exhibition Themes and Messages .....	121
Tracking .....	123
Findings.....	123
Summary .....	124

**Chapter VII Discussion and Conclusion**

Introduction.....	129
Question 1 .....	132
Question 2 .....	134
Question 3 .....	136
Question 4.....	140
Further Implications and Recommendations.....	144

<b>Select Bibliography .....</b>	<b>158</b>
----------------------------------	------------

# Appendices

Appendix 1	Mandala Definitions
Appendix 2	<u>Exhibition Agreement</u>
Appendix 3 a.	Easter & Central Community Trust Funding Letter
Appendix 3 b.	Palmerston North Community Arts Council: Letter
Appendix 4	Letter to Artists
Appendix 5 a.	Participants Information Sheet
Appendix 5 b.	Participants Consent Form.
Appendix 5 c.	Post Work-Shop Questionnaire
Appendix 5 d.	Workshop1 Questionnaire Results
Appendix 6a	Survey Two Statements: Craft group participants.
Appendix 6 b.	Survey Two Results: Craft group participants.
Appendix 6 c.	Survey Three: Participants Exhibition Evaluation.
Appendix 7 a.	Visitor questionnaire: Short version.
Appendix 7 b.	Visitor questionnaire: Long version.
Appendix 8.	How to Look at Mandalas: Gallery sheet.
Appendix 9 a.	Gallery Staff Exhibition Evaluation.
Appendix 9 b.	Extension workshop participant's exhibition evaluation.
Appendix 9 c.	Evaluation of exhibition theme (Statement 13).
Appendix 9 d.	Exhibition evaluation of technical and aesthetic aspects.
Appendix 10 a.	Tracking sheet showing 'cool' spot & visitor movement.
Appendix 10 b.	Tracking sheet showing computer interaction.
Appendix 10 c.	Tracking sheet showing intensive looking , circulatory and zig-zag pattern of visitor movement.
Appendix 11 a.	Dowse Art Museum Mission Statement.
Appendix 11 b.	Dowse Art Museum Core Values Schema.
Appendix 12	Letter to the Editor.
Appendix 13	Letter of thanks to craft group.

## List of Figures

Figure		
1	Craft Mandalas: Doilies .....	xiii
2	The Contextual Model of Learning .....	32
3	The Feed-back Loop .....	40
4	Showing the relationship between individual and group cultural Change, and the domain of action within an organisational structure .....	42
5	Action research as a self-reflective spiral .....	48
6	The generative action research model .....	49
7	Detail of completed <i>Tibetan Sand Mandala</i> .....	56
8	Robyn Parkinson’s mandala: <i>Quilted Journey</i> .....	61
9	Gordon Thompson’s <i>Koru Mandala</i> .....	68
10.1	Statement 1      Graph Result .....	76
10.2	Statement 2      Graph Result .....	76
10.3	Statement 3      Graph Result .....	77
10.4	Statement 4      Graph Result .....	78
10.5	Statement 5      Graph Result .....	78
10.6	Statement 6      Graph Result .....	79
10.7	Statement 7      Graph Result .....	80
10.8	Statement 8      Graph Result .....	80
10.9	Statement 9      Graph Result .....	81
10.10	Statement 10      Graph Result .....	82
10.11	Statement 11      Graph Result .....	82
10.12	Statement 12      Graph Result .....	83
10.13	Statement 13      Graph Result .....	84
10.14	Statement 14      Graph Result .....	85
11	Visitors at desk site responding to exhibition questionnaire .....	86
12.1	Graphs showing total positive and negative responses to evaluation questions .....	91
12.2	Debra Bustin Installation: <i>House of Spirits</i> .....	96
12.3	Graphs for Table 3 .....	97
12.4	Graphs showing the cohort responses to Statement 6 .....	99
12.5	Floral Arts mandala .....	100
12.6	Graphs showing participants’ interest in future projects .....	101
12.7	Craft objects displaying mandala design symmetry.....	102
13	Exhibition Desk Site .....	103
14.1	Graph showing responses to Question 15 .....	107

14.2	Graph showing responses to Question 2 .....	108
14.3	Graph showing responses to Question 3 .....	109
14.4a	Graph showing responses to Question 16a.....	109
14.4b	Graph showing responses to Question 16b .....	110
14.5	Graph showing responses to Question 13 .....	110
14.6	Graph showing occupation of respondents (Question 14).....	111
14.7	Graph showing respondents reason for visiting exhibition (Question 6) .....	112
14.8	Graph showing how visitors found out about the exhibition (Question 7) .....	112
14.9	Graph showing respondents who visited the Tibetan Sand Mandala (Question 4a).....	113
14.10	Graph showing responses to Question 4b .....	113
14.11	Graph showing Table 6 displayed as a bar graph.....	115
14.12	Graph showing respondents enjoyment of the exhibition (Question 9) .....	115
14.13	Graph showing visitor interest in the exhibition Information .....	116
14.14	Graph showing responses to Question 17 .....	117
14.15	Graph showing responses to Question 19 .....	118
15	Visitor reading information panels .....	118
16.1	Graph showing response to Question 23 .....	119
16.2	Graph showing response to Question 24 .....	119
16.3	Graph showing response to Question 25 .....	120
16.4	Graph showing response to Question 21 .....	120
17.1	Graph showing respondent perceptions of the exhibition .....	122
17.2	Tracking Data .....	124
17.3	Graph showing patterns of movement through exhibition space .....	125
17.4	Graph showing degree of visitor interaction with the exhibition components .....	125
18	Peter Roche's light sculpture: <i>Point Blank</i> .....	126
19	Visitor's mandala design display .....	128
20	Felted Mandala: Group work .....	147
21	Rt.Hon. Steve Maharey M.P. engaged with the mandala computer site .....	150
22	Showing the relationship between individual and group cultural change and the domain of action within a museum organisation .....	153
23	<i>The Communicative Spiral</i> showing action research cycles contributing to the core mission of learning.....	155
24	Exhibition visitor with Peter Roach mandala in the background.....	157

## List of Tables

### Table

1	Showing contact and collaboration with craft group participants.....	65
2	Showing contact and collaboration with contributing artists .....	70
3	Showing exhibition evaluation responses .....	90
4	Showing details of questionnaire evaluations .....	104
5	Showing age and gender of visitors to the exhibition.....	106
6	Showing respondent responses to the exhibition (Question 8) .....	114
7	Showing respondents selection of statements relating to the exhibition messages (Question 12) .....	121

### Figure 1

#### Craft Mandalas: Doilies



Mandala :The Immaculate Perception