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**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.**

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## **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.

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# 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.

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### Figure 1

#### Craft Mandalas: Doilies



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