

# Evaluation of the J. Paul Getty Museum's Lecture Program

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## INTRODUCTION

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The role of museums in society has changed as the public's expectations have evolved. As stated in the 2006 American Association of Museums' publication, *Public Trust and Accountability*, museums need to demonstrate "public impact, community value, and service to a diverse and changing population."<sup>1</sup> As a leading arts institution, the J. Paul Getty Museum fulfills this important role through "special exhibitions, publications, (and) educational programs developed for a wide range of audiences."<sup>2</sup> But the Museum goes further by stating a deeper commitment to its audiences by "striving to provide its visitors with access to the most innovative research in the visual arts."<sup>3</sup>

Lecture programs are among the oldest and most traditional forms of public programming in museums. Public program research indicates that museum visitors increasingly want experiences that are challenging, dynamic, and interactive.<sup>4</sup> The Getty's Lecture Program works to meet these expectations by "stimulating new thinking about the Museum collection, exhibitions, and related activities."<sup>5</sup> Thoughtful lecture programs that focus on an institution's mission in addition to addressing audience expectations can create sustainable, deep relationships that facilitate repeat visitation and museum interaction.

With greater accountability, it has become increasingly important to evaluate the relationship between museums and their visitors. Changing definitions of learning, the pressure to justify programs and activities, and larger community-based roles have demanded this need to understand visitor motivations and behavior.<sup>6</sup> This report presents the findings of an extensive project by the Getty Museum to evaluate its Lecture Program. Beginning in the spring of 2007, the Museum's Education Department worked with an evaluation consulting group to develop, implement, and evaluate a broad range of lecture programs. This ambitious project used a variety of research methods to examine the motivations, expectations, and exhibition interactions of Lecture Program participants.

## PROJECT METHODOLOGY

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The methodology developed for this study was based on an initial pilot study conducted in May and June 2007. From these early investigations, a large-scale lecture participant evaluation was developed to specifically gather information on participant

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<sup>1</sup> C. Enseki, *Public Trust and Accountability* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> J. Paul Getty Museum mission statement.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Bonnie Sachatello-Sawyer et al., *Adult Museum Programs: Designing Meaningful Experiences* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> J. Paul Getty Museum Education Department, Program Fact Sheet, January 31, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> George Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (New York: Routledge Press, 1998).

motivation, expectations, exhibition interaction, and frequency of lecture attendance. Lecture programs that represented a diversity of the Museum's collection areas, program format, topic, speaker, and anticipated audience were selected for further study. In addition to surveys and interviews completed at the lectures, survey subjects were asked to participate in an additional post-lecture online survey to further define audience motivation and exhibition visitation.

Based on the pilot study and existing Lecture Program goals, the project was designed to address the following research questions:

- What are visitors' motivations for attending a Museum lecture program?
- What are their expectations?
- Does participation in a Museum lecture impact exhibition visitation, appreciation, and interpretation?

Selected lecture programs:

*The Art of the Armorer in 16<sup>th</sup>-Century Europe*

Sunday, November 11, 2007

Donald J. LaRocca, Curator, Department of Arms and Armor  
Metropolitan Museum of Art

*Chicano Culture in the Arts*

Sunday, January 27, 2008

Luis Rodriguez, Author; Yxta Maya Murray, Author and Professor of Law, Loyola Law School, Los Angeles; Alma Lopez, Artist; and Ernesto de la Loza, Mural Artist and Project Director, Estrada Courts Housing Project

*Building the Getty Collection: A Decade of Acquisitions*

Wednesday March 12, 2008

Lee Hendrix, Curator of Drawings; Thomas Kren, Curator of Manuscripts; and Weston Naef, Curator of Photographs at the J. Paul Getty Museum

*The Face of the Christ*

Thursday, May 8, 2008

Gary Vikan, Director of the Walters Art Museum

*The Nose on Your Face: Faces and Souls in August Sander's Germany*

Thursday, May 29, 2008

Sander L. Gilman, Distinguished Professor of the Liberal Arts and Sciences, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences and Director of the Program in Psychoanalysis and Health Sciences Humanities Initiative, Emory University and Health Sciences Humanities Initiative, Emory University

## CONCLUSIONS

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To fulfill its goal of providing "educational programs developed for a wide range of audiences," the J. Paul Getty Museum must continue to understand its visitors' expectations and the experiences and attitudes they bring. Strategic audience research to determine who is coming to the Museum, who is not, and why will be crucial as the

Museum continues to expand its service to the community. The Lecture Program's goals of "presenting multiple perspectives" and "stimulating new thinking about the Museum collection, exhibitions, and related activities"<sup>7</sup> will be a vital strategy to fulfill the Museum's focus on serving diverse audiences.

### Summary of Findings

- Lecture programs provide unparalleled opportunities for museum visitors to create further meaning from their exhibition experience.
- A large percentage of Lecture Program participants, both new and frequent attendees, visit the related exhibition prior to the lecture program and revisit following the program.
- While "high profile" speakers certainly attract a new audience, general topics complementing an exhibition work equally well.
  
- A large percentage of program participants are frequent visitors who are very familiar with the Museum.
- Programs offered on weekends during Museum hours attract new and infrequent visitors.
- Advertisement of related exhibitions and programming to a newer audience during the Lecture Program encourages repeat visitation.
- Advertisement to university programs and groups specifically interested in a topic (e.g., church groups for *The Face of Christ*) is an extremely effective opportunity to invite people who may not have otherwise chosen to visit the Getty.
- Infrequent and first-time visitors more often participate in leisure activities that are seen as not intimidating, easy to participate in, and offer social opportunities.
  
- Diverse topics and speakers successfully attract new and infrequent visitors to a lecture program.
- Panel discussions are valued forums that present a diversity of expertise and opinions and serve a diverse audience. They also have a greater chance of serving the distinct needs of both the new and the frequent attendee.
- Accurate lecture program descriptions and effective program titles are important to create and meet participant expectations and are crucial to develop and attract specific audiences.
- Program logistics, such as adequate timing, convenient scheduling, and quality audiovisual elements, were reported as being important to the overall lecture experience.

### Project Recommendations

Based on the overall findings of this project, extensive interviews with hundreds of Getty visitors, and the Museum Education Department's Lecture Program goals, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Diversify the Lecture Program format, speakers, and forms (or venues) of advertisement to attract and serve multiple audiences, such as university students, community organizations, and other specific groups.

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<sup>7</sup> J. Paul Getty Museum Education Department, Program Fact Sheet, January 31, 2007.

- Develop accurate program descriptions and clear, effective titles.
- Provide information about upcoming programs at lectures.
- Create advertisement strategies and program topics to encourage repeat visitation by new audiences and to specific target audiences
- Develop and implement a Lecture Program rubric to measure success and outcomes.
- Evaluate Lecture Program scheduling in an effort to reach diverse audiences.