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Investigating the development and reception of an art exhibition on the theme of Early Modern representations of love

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

Funding was generated by JD. AK and JD jointly developed the conceptual and methodological approach and co-wrote the discussion. AK oversaw the ethics, participant recruitment, data collection, developed the literature review, and sketched the shape of the final article. AK undertook the data analysis, which was then checked by JD.

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Abstract

9 Can the modern-day art gallery visitor access the historical emotional meaning of what is viewed?
10 The present investigation explored Love: Art of Emotions, an exhibition curated and shown at the
11 National Gallery of Victoria April-June 2017, which displayed a variety of artworks from the early
12 modern period. The current article aimed to investigate both curator intentions and visitor reception
13 of the exhibition. The project leader and the exhibition curator were interviewed about the aims of the
14 exhibition and the steps implemented to realize its intentions. Materials such as the catalogue and
15 exhibition labels were also subjected to a textual analysis to deepen understanding of the curatorial
16 offerings. Additionally, 80 gallery visitors were asked about their subjective experiences of the
17 exhibition. Thematic analysis of the curatorial team interviews and supporting materials from the
18 exhibition identified how the exhibition was created, including coverage of the presenting the
19 historical meaning of love, the selection of specific artworks to be exhibited, design aesthetics, layout
20 and the additional materials presented to support the viewing experience. Thematic analyses of the
21 impact of the exhibition on visitors highlighted overlap with the curatorial team's intentions,
22 demonstrating that some curatorial choices were apparent to gallery visitors and were also well
23 received. A major exception was appreciation for a historical understanding of love. This was found
24 to be less striking or memorable than the visitors' own visceral and personal emotional response,
25 such as an emotional reaction to the ambience, rather than to the historical meanings the work might
26 have generated. These findings challenge curators to devise strategies that can help elicit historical
27 understandings in exhibited art works as well as visceral emotional responses. This will project an
28 understanding of art galleries as multi-sensorial and also multi-modal sites in which to experience the

29 emotional impact of artworks through both a visceral and historical frame.

30

31 **Keywords:** gallery, early modern art, visitor experience, exhibition, history of emotions

32 **Investigating the development and reception of an art exhibition on the theme of Early Modern**
33 **representations of love**

34

35

Introduction

36 The curator's role is to develop "part spectacle, part socio-historical event, part structuring
37 device...which establish and administer the cultural meanings of art" (Greenberg et al., 1996, p. 2).
38 Gallery visitor experiences are created through visitor-object interaction (Degarrod, 2010) and
39 involve "expressions of feelings, attitudes, and beliefs" far beyond simple descriptions of what was
40 seen and done (Falk & Dierking, 2013, p. 191). Despite research efforts, curatorial practices are little
41 understood (Acord, 2010). Also, "emotion has long been appreciated as an important part of the
42 museum visitor experience, but... it has been poorly understood" (Falk & Dierking, 2013, p.191).
43 Thus, research on curatorial practice, art exhibitions, visitor experience, and the role of emotion in
44 human perception and cognition needs augmentation to offer awareness, appreciation and
45 commitment to the work held within art galleries (Pitman & Hirzy, 2010, p.15). Furthermore, there
46 has been negligible research on when these elements combine. The present research offers a
47 distinctive case study examining the alignment between curatorial decisions made in developing and
48 presenting an early modern art exhibition on the theme of love and visitors' experience of it.
49 Specifically, questions focused on the curatorial team's intentions and practices to convey
50 information about artworks, forefronting depictions of love. It is a particularly compelling study as
51 the history of emotions reveals that love is a notoriously complex and multifaced emotion that has
52 been susceptible to historical changes in meaning (Boddice, 2018).

53 These powerful and little understood phenomena were tantalizing inspirations when
54 considering the curation and presentation of Love: Art of Emotions exhibition. The Love exhibition
55 was presented at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2017 and included more than 200 artworks from
56 the National Gallery of Victoria's permanent collection. The artworks were from the early modern
57 period, with the exhibition including a wide range of sculptures, prints, drawings, and functional
58 objects (e.g., wedding dress, spinet, pieces of jewelry) in addition to paintings. It was supported with

59 an entrance didactic, descriptive labels located close to each artwork, and 234-page, full-color
60 catalogue which represented each artwork and could be purchased, read on-line or viewed within the
61 gallery, located in the center of the exhibition space next to seating to permit easy access.

62 **1.1 Situating Visitor Experiences and Curatorial Practices**

63 Experiences of exhibitions are shaped by different components including the visitor's
64 individual responses based on a range of personal variables including personality, motivation and
65 preference (Smith & Wolf, 1996; see also Taylor, 2010), the gallery context, and the artworks
66 themselves (Falk, 1993; Watson, 2010). People also interpret art within the context of their own
67 everyday life experiences (Foreman-Wernet & Dervin, 2016). Indeed, Dervin's sense-making
68 framework indicates that people will always draw on their own private lives and interpretations of
69 them to situate feeling, understanding and signification (see Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2013). A
70 major publication emanating from the Dallas Museum of Art explored ways to advance visitor
71 engagements with art exhibitions (Pitman & Hirzy, 2010). Working with over 4000 visitors, across
72 studies from 2003-2009, it investigated visitors' prior knowledge, "their emotional responsiveness
73 and comfort in connecting with it", their behaviour and "preferences for types of interpretations and
74 programming" (Pitman & Hirzy, 2010, p. x). This was summarized under three themes: Awareness,
75 Appreciation and Commitment (p. 15), the analysis of out of which enabled the development of a
76 Framework for Engagement with Art (FEA) which went on to shape programming, interpretations,
77 and marketing among other aspects 'to ignite the power of art through engaging experiences' (Pitman
78 & Hirzy, 2010, p. 10). It showed there were strong individual and group proclivities.

79 **1.1.1 Visitors and their Individual and Group Differences**

80 Research has shown that while museum and gallery visitors display strong individual
81 differences in personality and preferences (Falk, 1991; Pitman & Hirzy, 2010), evidence reveals that
82 visitors can be categorized by group, indicating that collective expectations and motivations define
83 visitor experiences to a strong degree (e.g., Doering, 1999; Falk & Dierking, 2013; Ntamkarelou,
84 Bantimaroudis, & Economou, 2017; Pekarik, Doering, & Karns, 1999; Pitman & Hirzy, 2010).
85 Pitman & Hirzy (2010) and Falk & Dierking (2013) defined museum visitors by their motivations
86 related to what the visit affords. For Pitman & Hirzy (2010, pp. 121-123), four categories emerged
87 from their analysis: observers (typically new to art, seeking clear instructions on approach to
88 viewing, tentative in opinions); participants (curious and comfortable about art, enjoy learning, eager

89 to comment, actively use guides, have a strong interest in the story behind a work); independents
 90 (enjoy viewing on their own, feel emotional connection, have a strong background in art, interest in
 91 the materials of the exhibition); and enthusiasts (strongest of all emotional connection, strong
 92 background in art, enjoy discussing art works, seek out information, actively participate in
 93 engagement and outreach). The characterizations made by Falk & Dierking (2013, pp. 47-48)
 94 included: explorers (curious visitors hoping to learn), facilitators (visitors interested in the social
 95 experience of visiting with others), professionals/hobbyists (visitors interested in the museum's
 96 objects in line with their personal interests), experience seekers (visitors who treat the museum as a
 97 destination, or activity to report having done), and rechargers (contemplative visitors pursuing refuge
 98 from daily life). So while there are strong overlaps between these two lots of categories, there are
 99 also some perceived differences between the different cohorts.

100 Doering (1999, p. 82) defined four categories of satisfying museum visits: “object experiences,
 101 cognitive experiences, introspective experiences, and social experiences”, positing that the most
 102 satisfying museum visits are those that confirm and enrich people’s personal narratives and
 103 worldviews. Moreover, “learning something new” is “one of the most important motivational
 104 factors” (quote from Kjeldsen & Jensen 2015 who cite Doering 2007, Black 2012). Thus, people
 105 make sense of museums (and exhibitions) in line with different goals (Drotner, Knudsen, &
 106 Mortenesen, 2017). In this manner, while the museum presents offerings in their exhibitions, the
 107 visitor decides how to consume and interpret the material therein (Pekarik, 2004; J. K. Smith & Wolf,
 108 1996).

109

110 **1.1.2 Gallery Context**

111 Regarding the museum context itself, prior research indicates that atmospherics affect visitor
 112 responses (e.g., Falk, 1993; Kottasz, 2006; McLean, 1995). Atmospheric elements include the
 113 exterior (e.g., the building’s surroundings and parking facilities), the interior (e.g., cleanliness,
 114 temperature, colors and sounds), layout and design (e.g., object placement, traffic flow), decoration
 115 (e.g., displays and signage), and human factors (e.g., employee interactions and crowding) (Kottasz,
 116 2006). Intangible facets of the atmosphere, including novelty, complexity and mystery, which also
 117 influence visitor engagement (Kottasz, 2006).

118 Focusing on the interior context, the influence of spatial arrangement and design (Falk, 1993),
 119 the positioning of works (Melton, 1972), and gallery size and design (Kottasz, 2006) are important.
 120 Moreover, background music can provide visitors with another source of information to enhance

121 their understanding, but can mark time passing (e.g., a repeated song or song cycle can be tiresome to
 122 visitors) and influence visitor mood (Chen & Tsai, 2015).

123 In addition to ambient feel, space and appearance, guiding text can offer a cohesive narrative,
 124 joining together exhibition elements to facilitate viewer interpretation (Gazi, 2018; Kjeldsen &
 125 Jensen, 2015). Research indicates increased aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment when the paintings
 126 are accompanied by written information (Temme & Elvert, 1992). Labels are powerful
 127 communication tools that influence visitor experience (Bitgood, 2000; Fragomeni, 2010). Labels
 128 provide visitors a way of interacting with the curators (McManus, 1989, p. 180), as they interpret the
 129 text such that “someone is talking to them”. However, the labels need to be accessible (Kjeldsen &
 130 Jensen, 2015; Kolliou, 1997), and strike “the right balance between scientific precision and audience
 131 comprehension” (Gazi, 2018, p. 57). Further, information overload is a danger to be avoided – too
 132 much information (and exhibition content) can take time away from viewing works which can
 133 decrease aesthetic appreciation (Bitgood, 2009). Catalogues offer scholarly comprehensive insight
 134 into the works, the theme of the exhibition, and embody an invaluable archival resource (Glover,
 135 2020). This resource has been celebrated by Joyeux-Prunel and Marcel (2016) as a source for social
 136 history. For the past decade, however, Dobrzynski (2010) has been lamenting the production cost of
 137 the physical catalogue, noting that as few as 2% of visitors purchase this hardcopy, cost-heavy item.
 138 She argues the functionality needs to be more utilitarian, and not simply offer a historical record of
 139 an exhibition and its concept. In other words, it must have a practical use for the visitor. She argues a
 140 role for a digital catalogue, which can be used to accompany the gallery visitor through the
 141 exhibition.

143 **1.1.3 Curatorial Decisions**

144 As indicated at the start of this paper, the curator’s work is significant, not only in bringing
 145 artworks to the attention of the public, but by thematizing, informing and arranging them in specific
 146 ways, “the curator plays an important role in the production of artistic meaning through exhibition-
 147 making, acting as a mediator between the artist, the culture in which the work emerged and the public
 148 (Acord, 2010, pp. 447-449). The significance of understanding design and visitor experience are both
 149 clear factors that need to be understood and then used in guiding curatorial decisions. A critically
 150 important study by Acord (2020), which undertook lengthy in-home interviews with curators (of
 151 contemporary art), revealed that while preparation is vital – understanding the history of works, their
 152 scale dimension, color etc. – their actual experience in gallery changes previous understanding. In

153 other words, it is only when they see the works in situ that final decisions can be made. This suggests
154 that curators need to be open to change their minds and diverge from initial plans.

155 Acord (2020, p. 454) found that curators emphasized the installation part of the exhibition,
156 noting how vital situated action was to establish “feeling right” overall, and to include to appropriate
157 relationships with other artworks. Trying to tease out the specifics of this installation process, Acord
158 discussed at length the apparent blurring between the symbolic meaning of artworks and their
159 aesthetic properties. Many of the resulting installation actions were regarded as “happy accidents” or
160 “moments of clarity”. Acord (2020, p. 462) theorized the work of contemporary art curator as a
161 creative form of production, the curators’ relations with the artworks being elaborated through their
162 physical interactions with the objects on site. She also noted the high significance of emotion in these
163 object-human interactions and in the curators’ work together with others in the development of the
164 exhibition. Visitors at exhibitions can experience emotions in response to the artwork, and also, if in
165 a social context, their co-visitor with whom they may express views on the experience (Tan, 2000).

166

167 **1.1.4 Emotions in action**

168 When engaging with an artwork, the interpretation of an emotional expression is dynamic—
169 and heavily mediated by knowledge of context and action and how we respond to all these factors in
170 the moment (Silvia, 2005). The ‘emotional repertoire’ of a time and place is evidenced in the
171 artworks themselves through symbolic representation and use of specific artistic techniques
172 (Boddice, 2018). It has been shown that understanding these emotional expressions portrayed in
173 historical artworks can assist the viewer in experiencing the artwork more fully (Simons, 2017). To
174 develop a ‘period eye’, viewers need to develop familiarity with historical, cultural, and political
175 context (Boddice, 2018; see Baxandall, 1988). These depictions and their meanings are complex,
176 however, as the definitions are subject to historical and cultural shifts, and thus do not remain fixed
177 (Boddice, 2018). Furthermore, positive appraisal of one’s ability to understand art has been shown to
178 make the art seem more interesting (Silvia, 2005b, 2005c). Thus, knowledge and appraisal are
179 correlated and in turn influence emotional experience such as pleasure and liking. It is clear that the
180 curator, as an expert of the works and the periods from which they originate, understands the
181 ‘cultural code’ they then want to translate to the viewer (see Acord, 2010, p. 450).

182 **1.2 Aim**

183 The current paper explored the curators' realization and gallery visitors' subjective experiences
184 of the Love: Art of Emotion exhibition. It considered the aims and objectives of the curatorial team
185 and the visitor experience. In particular, what the curatorial team did to capture and articulate the
186 historical information and nuances of the emotion of love for visitors. Also, the degree to which this
187 curatorial work was understood and/or how it was appraised by the visitors themselves. In sum, the
188 research was undertaken to offer new insights into the relationship between curatorial work and
189 visitor experience when focused around a complex multi-faceted forms of love, which differ
190 according to date of production and impacting socio-cultural change.

191

192

1 Method

193

194

The present study was undertaken considering the Love: Art of Emotions, an art exhibition held
at the National Gallery of Victoria.

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2.1 Participants

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201

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Interviews were conducted with the two leading members of the curatorial team, namely the
project leader who was also the principal editor of the catalogue and the exhibition curator; and, to
capture visitor experience, 80 gallery visitors were interviewed. Demographic data were not
collected; therefore, no sample details can be reported, other than, in compliance with the ethics
permissions, all interviewees were adults and were able to respond verbally to the questions posed.
Participation was entirely voluntary.

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204

2.2 Materials

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Material data sources for the investigation included the exhibition catalogue, text labels and
panels from the exhibition.

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208

2.3 Procedure

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Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with the project leader and curator.
These interviews took place after the exhibition had concluded. During the informed consent
procedure, the interviewees were made aware that they could potentially be identified due to their
role in the exhibition; however, to assist with upholding participant confidentiality, their replies were
merged for analysis as well as for the presentation of the findings. While questions were prepared in
advance, the interviews were conducted in a conversational style, such that the conversation was

215 flexible to probe the individual's experience (Bhattacharya, 2017). Each interview lasted around 60
216 minutes.

217 The key questions included:

- 218 • How did you come up with the theme?

219 (Prompts: Material sources, key discussions, key definitions/ideas, emotions as a broad topic.)

- 220 • How did the exhibition develop?

221 (Prompts: Stages in process from settling on idea to implementing various stages of design
222 through the installation.)

- 223 • Can you comment on the design and execution of the exhibition layout?

224 (Prompts: Realisation, this included looking at the exhibition map and catalogue with the
225 interviewees.)

- 226 • How did you consider presenting the historical information on the emotional meaning
227 of the chosen works?

228 (Prompts: Different options, approaches, final decisions made.)

- 229 • What was the biggest success/failure in your opinion?

230 (Prompts: From conception to realization, practical focus, academic focus, theme of emotion.)

231

232 Gallery visitors were approached in person as they were exiting the exhibition gallery. People
233 who agreed to participate in the short, semi-structured interview (Bhattacharya, 2017) were asked
234 questions relating to their experience of the exhibition:

- 235 • What element of the exhibition was most appealing, and why?

236 (Prompts: Artworks, the theme and its articulation, materials in the exhibition (labels, colours),
237 the space and its design and ambience.)

- 238 • What elements were least appealing, and why?

239 (Prompts: Artworks, the theme and its articulation, materials in the exhibition (labels, colours),
240 the space and its design, the ambience.)

241

242 All responses were made anonymously, but each interview was audio-recorded in order to
243 retain the data. In total, fifty-nine interviews were conducted: 43 of the interviews involved an
244 individual respondent, while 11 of the interviews were conducted with a pair of respondents, and five
245 were conducted with a trio of respondents (total N = 80). Interviews were kept purposely short, and
246 lasted no more than five minutes.

2 Results

2.1 Data Analysis Procedure

For the interview data, three separate thematic analyses were performed to identify patterns within the data responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Two thematic analyses considered the gallery visitors' responses to each of the two key research questions separately. The curator and project leader (hereafter referred to as the curatorial team) interview transcripts were combined and analyzed in the third thematic analysis. Following the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), all of the responses were coded according to topic and then these codes guided the identification of themes.

All written and visual materials referred to in the curatorial interviews were also examined by undertaking a systematic textual/ visual analysis, teasing out themes to assess the use of language and pictures to gain information on how the curators communicated the exhibition. These approaches together were regarded as critical to understanding the ways through which the exhibition may have been processed and understood by the visitors (see Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 1999).

The discussion of the themes that emerged follows, divided in terms of creation, critical reflection of the resulting exhibition and visitor reflections on the impact, meaning and quality of the exhibition.

2.2 Curatorial Team and the Creation of the Exhibition

Analysis of the curatorial team interviews and associated exhibition materials revealed four main themes concerning the creating and developing the exhibition. Each of these four top-level themes had a number of underlying components, and these are discussed in turn below (see Table 1).

-Table 1 about here-

2.2.1 Exhibition theme

The exhibition theme itself was one of the major components of constructing the exhibition. The museum provided broad parameters to the team, such that the theme of "love" was provided, and that the exhibition would consist of European works within a 400-year span from across all of the departments' holdings. The team members expressed how they worked to shape and refine the given remit. As one member of the curatorial team noted:

"Well when I first came into the project, I knew that the exhibition had started life as an

279 *exhibition on the history of emotion and that that focus had been narrowed to love which ...*
280 *was quite helpful because, as it was it was, it was an enormously broad topic ... particularly*
281 *as we had a 400-year span and we were across all the departments at the NGV.”*

282
283 The other team member noted:

284 *“I was concerned to make sure that we showed a wide range of different kinds of love... I was*
285 *concerned to mix them up and stress that you know they are relationships between them.”*

286
287 In particular, there was a strong desire to (a) ensure that different manifestations of love were
288 displayed and that relationships between different types of love were displayed, (b) stress the
289 emotional side of love, and (c) portray the early modern aspect of executing the theme through
290 explaining context and chosen materials.

291 *“One of the things that had occurred to me is you [could] split the exhibition up into*
292 *romantic love, religious devotion, and family. And I thought the problem with that is that it*
293 *doesn't take into account the intersections amongst all those categories. And so, I liked the*
294 *idea of something that was more of an idea of a cycle of love that possibly took place across*
295 *all of those different categories. ... So, it was loosely based on ideas of anticipation,*
296 *realization, and remembrance.”*

297
298 The exhibition catalogue, edited by the curatorial team and an additional NGV curator,
299 comprised seven major essays. The first essay situated the significance of the exhibition in terms of
300 the changing and complex nature of love across the historical period, showing its relationship to
301 desire, passion, ecstasy, affection, comfort, hope, pity, envy, melancholy and longing. It explored
302 how these emotions can relate, overlap and modify from one to the other (Hesson, 2017, p 2). It
303 reproduced 20 of the exhibits to explore the different aspects of love, and drew on academic sources
304 to explain the circulations and understandings of love during the period in focus, namely, Europe
305 1400-1800. Here is one such example (Hesson, 2017, p. 5), which focuses on the symbolism in an
306 Italian 17th century, oil on canvas:

307
308 Cupid is often depicted as blindfolded – as in a seventeenth-century painting after Guido
309 Reni [reproduced in an illustration] - to convey love's arbitrariness. This is articulated
310 directly in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

311

312 Love looks not with the yes, but with the mind.

313 And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind.

314 Nor hath love's mind of any judgement taste;

315 Wings and no eyes figure unheedy haste.

316 And therefore is love said to be a child

317 Because in choice he is so oft beguiled [Act 1, scene 1].

318

319 Subsequent essays went on to show all of the art works in photographic reproductions
 320 or prints, and discussed major themes present in the exhibition. The second essay explored the
 321 classical myths associated with love, and highlighted the use of transformation, both
 322 metaphorical and literal, in representing love, and revealing how it can be both positive and
 323 negative, moving from desire to regret, or longing to hatred etc. (see Dunlop, 2017, p. 24).
 324 Other essays focused on the Space of Love (Simons, 2017); the Bodies of Love (Grantham
 325 Turner, 2017); the Objects of Love (Hesson and Beaven, 2017); the Ritual of Love (Martin,
 326 2017) and a concluding essay focused on the hierarchy of values associated with emotions
 327 across the early modern period (Schwartz, 2017). Thus, it was quite different organization of
 328 the materials from the exhibition itself, forefronting the themes depicted in the artworks in
 329 quite different ways, e.g. comparing them with other artefacts and other art forms. While the
 330 exhibition and the catalogue clearly addressed the same artworks and themes, the different
 331 approach to ordering the thematic content made them read as quite distinct and separate.

332 A print run of only 1000 copies of the catalogue were sold and distributed to gallery visitors,
 333 galley staff and the academics involved in the project. Those catalogues on display in the gallery
 334 were not handled that often. This highlights perhaps the practical challenge of presenting complex
 335 and detailed ideas when visitors may not wish to spend long periods of time to engage with them, or
 336 when they are perhaps not focused on this type of detailed learning experience. This might also
 337 reflect the fact that the catalogue serves more of a historical/archival function, rather than something
 338 directly for public consumption, as alluded to by Dobrzynski (2010). However, the website had
 339 39,434 views and the short advertising video was watched by 48,137, reflecting an emphasis on
 340 digital domestic consumption, and their use in preparing for, interacting with, and reflecting on the
 341 exhibition experience.

342

343 **2.2.2 The works included**

344 The largest component of the exhibition's creation process was selecting the works to be
345 included in the exhibition. In total, the exhibition featured a very large number of works—in excess
346 of 200 artworks. In addition to which works were specifically chosen, the processes of selecting the
347 art and arranging them were very important. An iterative selection process was applied, wherein the
348 collection was perused, notes and photographs were taken, and potential options were discussed by
349 the curatorial team. One team member reflected on how they “spent a lot of time just finding what
350 was there”.

351 While a small number of key works within the museum's collection, such as *The Garden of*
352 *Love*, were identified for inclusion from the very start of the project, the largest task in designing the
353 exhibition revolved around searching for what to include. The team endeavored to explore the
354 museum's collection thoroughly in order to survey what was possible (and available) to include in
355 the exhibition. The team aimed to use a range of media (referencing both materials and the size of
356 selected pieces) to make use of the diverse holdings but to also be sure “*the sections were balanced*”.
357 Keyword searches, expanded through conversations centering on exploring all manifestations of
358 ‘love’ drove searches, via both the digitized catalogue and by physically going through museum
359 holdings. A work's aesthetic quality for display served as a secondary selection consideration.

360 “*But there was a very strong aesthetic component in that too, and if a work is a poor-quality*
361 *work—even if it is exactly on the theme you are looking at—we didn't include them.*”

362 As a result of the thorough exploration of the collection, the exhibition “*showed a lot of stuff that had*
363 *never been shown and that some people didn't even realize was there, and some of it also which*
364 *hadn't been kind of documented or looked at for 30 years or 40 years*”.

365

366 The curatorial team worked collaboratively to arrange the selected works. This included
367 grouping works together, using thumbnail images to explore possible selections and arrangements.

368 “[*We*] *had it all out on tables, and we moved things around, because she had small...images*
369 *of these things, and we kind of moved them around in various ways.*”

370

371 Early in the exhibition's conception, the curator pitched a three-part structure to the layout exhibition.
372 While debated alongside other possibilities, the three-part layout structure was used, such that the
373 exhibition was loosely arranged to display manifestations of love relating to “anticipation,

374 realization and remembrance”. While the tri-part arrangement broadly guided some of the
 375 superordinate arrangement, the team needed to consider how the artworks would be displayed
 376 relative to the theme, space, and each other.

377 *“But that was something else I had to think about in selection ... [If] you’ve got a lot of small*
 378 *works on paper you need to think about how you can group them. You don’t want to have five*
 379 *very large paintings and one little print together in one section even if they do all relate to the*
 380 *same theme really well – that won’t hang. So I was thinking about that all the way, I was*
 381 *thinking about the proportions of it as well.”*

383 2.2.3 Design aesthetics

384 Related to the arrangement, the exhibition’s design aesthetics were discussed and debated
 385 between team members and additional gallery staff. It was obvious that these features were tied to
 386 how the curatorial team wanted to realize the exhibition theme. Features reflected on in the
 387 interviews included the wall color, lighting, and music. In the view of the project curator, the
 388 decision to paint the walls a solid black color assisted with making the group of different artworks
 389 cohesive and stand out against the background. This was further emphasized using muted overhead
 390 lighting in the galleries to focus the visitor on the art works, each with their individual light. One of
 391 the curatorial team wondered if the color of the individual lights had worked, noting that there may
 392 have been perhaps a touch too much ‘yellow’ in the tone. These comments focused on the technical
 393 aspects of the display, though the curatorial team were highly sensitive to how these factors
 394 contributed to the atmospherics/emotional experience of the visitor. These sensitivities were
 395 considered when selecting the music, one of the curatorial team noting that the selected music *“also*
 396 *would provide a particular kind of emotional response and arousal of some sort towards the, towards*
 397 *the objects.”* Other factors related to the music were to make sure it was in the background of the
 398 experience, of a suitable length, and that it should straddle both being somewhat contemporary yet
 399 tied to the theme.

400 *“It’s a difficult thing for exhibition soundtracks, you need something that has a long run time*
 401 *because you don’t want the repetition—you don’t want it cycling five times in the time*
 402 *someone’s in the space. ... I liked the fact that [the lyrics] came from the song of psalms and*
 403 *that it was at once devotional and erotic because that was a big sort of theme of the exhibition*
 404 *and that it drew very much on early music in its structure but that it was a contemporary*
 405 *adaptation of that.”*

406

407 **2.2.4 Navigating and articulating emotional meaning**

408 A major component of creating the exhibition centered on the interplay of historical and
 409 modern emotions—and, in particular, how to articulate the emotional meaning of the works to the
 410 gallery visitors. The team expressed that this was done through the consideration of four exhibition
 411 elements: including the variety of media displayed, the exhibition arrangement (such that different
 412 works were placed together), the music, and the panel information provided. For instance, wedding
 413 chests were arranged so that they were placed with the wedding dresses:

414 *“it was a great idea that together with those cassone- those wedding chests- to have other*
 415 *fabrics there and also a wedding dress ... Probably [with] the wedding chests, you know, they*
 416 *wouldn’t have meant anything, maybe if they had read them, they would mean a bit more, but*
 417 *they would begin to associate them very quickly with the wedding dress.”*

418

419 With regard to the information, the team referenced the didactic panels, the labels, and that
 420 the accompanying exhibition catalogue essays, which provided some of the information to use.
 421 However, the curatorial team expressed that crafting the label content was a difficult task, *“because*
 422 *you have very little space to do this in, and you don’t want to be too didactic”*. With label length
 423 capped at 100 words, the curatorial team and museum editorial staff needed to balance considerations
 424 of language and length as well as historical detail and accuracy. Some existing labels were rewritten
 425 to better suit the exhibition: *“we did change a lot of those, so that we kind of tried to emphasize some*
 426 *of the emotional content for those who read the captions”*.

427 Here are three indicative examples. The first example was at the entrance to the exhibition
 428 and appeared on most of the NVG advertising:

429 ‘Antonio Vivarini (studio of)

430 The Garden of Love

431 c. 1465–70

432 oil, tempera and gold on spruce panel

433 Felton Bequest, 1948

434 1827-4

435 Few works in this exhibition present the number of questions posed by The Garden of Love.
436 Though the iconography of this work indicates that it is intended as a representation of a
437 Renaissance ‘garden of love’ – a garden where men and women would meet to dance, sing and
438 pursue romance – the symbolism of some elements of the composition is not well understood.
439 While the rose arbour, the fountain and the enclosed garden all point to the theme of a pleasure
440 garden, the significance of the syringe and the meaning of the gestures remain elusive. The
441 painting’s complex series of symbols and cyphers offers the potential to imaginatively
442 complete the narrative.’

443 The second example refers to a much less prominent item, placed in a display cabinet:

444 ‘Italy, possibly Urbino manufacturer

445 Sora Maverera, dish

446 1530–50

447 earthenware (maiolica)

448 Bequest of Howard Spensley, 1939

449 4409-D3

450 In sixteenth-century Italy, marriages and romantic unions were often celebrated through the
451 production of glazed maiolica. Plates and bowls depicting the faces of young women were also
452 popular love tokens. An unusual example of this kind of pottery is a tin-glazed earthenware
453 dish featuring the head of a nun with her name, (Sister Maverera), inscribed on a ribbon that curls
454 decoratively around the rim. In the absence of provenance or similar examples with which to
455 compare it, the purpose of this object remains elusive. One possibility is that in mirroring the
456 form of a marriage object, the maker alludes to the union between the nun and Christ.’

457 The third, is an eighteenth century canvas:

458 ‘Jacopo Amigoni

459 Italian c. 1685–1752, worked throughout Europe c. 1715–52

460 Portrait group: The singer Farinelli and friends

461 c. 1750–52 oil on canvas

462 Felton Bequest, 1950

463 2226-4

464 In this intimate self-portrait, the artist Amigoni reaches forward to embrace his friend,
465 renowned castrato Carlo Farinelli. This tender gesture sets the affective tone of the image,
466 symbolising the affection, solidarity and artistic unity shared by the group. Beside Farinelli sits
467 Teresa Castellini, prima donna of the Madrid Opera, and on the far left is Pietro Metastasio,
468 Farinelli's librettist. These artists, employed far from home in the Spanish court, found
469 emotional support in each other's company, and are depicted here as surrogate family. Their
470 collective loyalty is also signified by the dog, a symbol of fidelity, who bears Farinelli's initials
471 on his collar.'

472 As can be seen in the three contrasting examples, which are representative of the style of presentation
473 for the entire exhibition, the story and its significance within the historical context was provided,
474 always noting the emotional meaning.

475 The larger text boards were created to support the labels and providing summative theme
476 information. They also followed the rule of historical context and emotion meaning. While there
477 were panels for the entrance and each section of the exhibition, we reproduce only one here, which
478 explores narcissism and vanity relating to exhibits comprising make-up, jewellery and mirrors.

479 'Rituals of self-adornment were intrinsic to flirtation and seduction throughout the early
480 modern period, but the line between wholesome enhancement of one's charms and dangerous
481 self-obsession was not always clearly defined.

482 The mirror bears ambiguous associations in the Western tradition. 'Know thyself'
483 commanded the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi, and as an instrument of self-contemplation the
484 mirror could represent self-knowledge; it is often found as an attribute of allegories of truth
485 and prudence in Renaissance and Baroque art. In an age, too, when rulers identified

486 themselves with Classical deities, the mirror, an attribute of the goddess Venus, cast flattering
487 light on its aristocratic owner.

488 However, the mirror could also signify vanity, and it increasingly came to be used in this
489 fashion by artists during the Renaissance and after. ‘The role of a pretty woman is much more
490 serious than one might suppose’, French philosopher Montesquieu mockingly observed in
491 1721. ‘There is nothing more important than what happens each morning at her toilette,
492 surrounded by her servants; a general of an army pays no less attention to placing his right
493 flanks or his reserves than she does to the placement of a patch.’

494 The catalogue, labels and boards offered text where the complexity of the historical and modern
495 constructions of the emotion of love could be addressed with nuance and supplemented with
496 examples and additional references. The curatorial team made it very clear in the interviews that
497 articulating the historical emotions and displaying the concepts through the exhibition pieces was a
498 complicated challenge. Given its prominence in the exhibition’s theme and purpose, this constituted a
499 major component of the exhibition—both during the design phase as well as throughout the
500 exhibition run. Navigating this element of exhibition design appeared to play on a juxtaposition of
501 contemporary and period-based visual portrayals, information, and understandings. As one curatorial
502 team member noted:

503 *“A lot of the religious work I think needed, needed historical explanation too. And I think it’s*
504 *something that people can read religious works in quite a one-dimensional way I think. In a*
505 *contemporary context, because we forget that, of course, they hold a lot of these other*
506 *meanings too. You know, an image of Judith and Holofernes for example— it’s also a story*
507 *that’s about female friendship and it’s used in that way, in much of the period we’re looking*
508 *at, much of the renaissance and baroque period. It’s bravery and duty to your community. So*
509 *you these stories, which you know they’re ostensibly religious works, but they’re also*
510 *allegories for all kinds of ... emotional life and we see friendship and images of the holy*
511 *family are as much about a generalized idea of parental love in a way and I think people*
512 *certainly looked at them that way at the time.”*

513
514 In particular, the curatorial team highlighted works where the historical and contemporary emotions
515 aligned and others where a modern interpretation of the historical emotion might need to be aided.

516 Information panels were used to provide historical context to some of the pieces where a modern
517 viewer would not have the same contextual and cultural clues as previous viewers at the time of the
518 artworks' completion (see Discussion).

519

520 **2.3 Visitor Responses**

521 With regard to the most appealing element of the exhibition, five main themes were identified
522 in the visitors' responses (Table 2). As illustrated in Table 2, responses largely concerned the
523 exhibition's atmosphere, which included the walls, music, layout, and overall aesthetic. The rest of
524 the responses were split across themes which pertained to the multi-dimensional nature of love, the
525 diversity of the works included, reference to specific works or aspects of the works included and the
526 wall/panel information. The indicative quotes reveal the strong and clear views expressed. These
527 show strong alignment with the elements highlighted by the curators.

528 However, the eight themes from the thematic analysis of the responses regarding the least
529 appealing exhibition element (Table 3) also touch on matters the curators wished to be communicated
530 in a positive way. For example, as the indicative quotes show while the curators wished to have
531 variety and good coverage of works and the thematic material, some felt there were too many works
532 included, and others did not enjoy the dark environment, the music, or the textual information. These
533 comments by the visitors were relatively small in number, and a response category to this question
534 concerned multiple respondents who had nothing negative to report (e.g., "enjoyed all of it"),
535 demonstrating an overwhelmingly positive response to the exhibition, such that no criticisms were
536 given. The majority of responses pointed to specific works (or a particular type or style of work)—
537 though in multiple instances of this type of response, there was an acknowledgement that this was
538 due to personal preferences.

539

540 -Tables 2 and 3 about here-

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542 By examining the identified themes from both the curatorial team and visitors' interviews in
543 concert, it is clear that gallery visitors perceived the curatorial objectives and decisions. The visitors'
544 responses concerning the most appealing exhibition speak to certain choices particularly highlighted
545 by the curatorial team as important features of the exhibition's creation. These include their
546 interpretation of meaning which was facilitated by particular exhibition elements and the positive and
547 negative response to the aesthetic choices with the additional consideration of personal taste, which

548 are discussed in the Discussion.

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3 Discussion

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Beyond matching up some of the visitors' preferences with those of the curatorial team, the elements of the exhibition praised by the public also help to illuminate how visitors interpreted the emotional meaning of the artworks. Given the curatorial team was particularly concerned with how to present the historical content and meaning of the works, it is essential to dissect the visitors' replies. In particular, the visitors' interpretation of the exhibition, and individual pieces within it, was facilitated by the information boards and panels, as well as the arrangement, selection, and diversity of the works – specific features carefully considered by the curatorial team throughout the exhibition's planning. The exhibition's multi-layered exploration of the theme of love in early modern art for modern-day visitors was a challenging remit. Tackling the complex, historically placed subject matter was not simply achieved by displaying the artworks. It was the additional exhibition design elements that needed to work in harmony to assist in providing historical context and meaning for gallery visitors.

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For the Love exhibition, the provision of helpful text was crucial: regarded as having interactive value, they provided a communicative link between visitors and the curators/exhibition. Perhaps knowing that visitors may not have the 'period eye' and would need assistance in interpreting the artworks, the curatorial team used the available text (labels and boards) and catalogue to provide both historical and cultural context to the emotional content. One piece, which depicted Roman Charity and stuck out to visitors, provides a good example of how our modern-day responses can be disconnected from the artwork's time. It depicted a beautiful, nubile, young woman with an old man sucking on her breast. Rather than immediate responses in appreciation of the charitable act, people were sometimes disgusted. For instance, two visitors remarked that they "*weren't sure what was going on there*" and that it was "a bit odd" with regard to the work's subject and emotional connotations. As one of the curatorial team remarked,

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it does speak to modern squeamishness about breastfeeding. But the thing I think we also have to remember when we're looking at it - it's easy to look at that and say we just sexualize everything today and you know this is a beautiful self-sacrificing act. And it's like, yeah, on one level it is, but you know there's a lot of ways in which mythological and religious subjects get used as excuses for depicting subjects in their period.

580 Indeed, while there might always be an element of titillation in that image, knowing the narrative that
 581 is attached to it, changes its meaning and potentially then the visitor's response and understanding:

582 *“So, if you know the story, you know it's father and daughter. ... There's so much more in the*
 583 *debate of breastfeeding anyway, and, of course, breastfeeding in that period, children are*
 584 *breast fed routinely. You know, you will have a mother who will simultaneously be*
 585 *breastfeeding an infant and older children. So that's not in and of itself a problem, but the*
 586 *heroic kind of reversal of the parenting paradigm—it's there.”*

587
 588 Additionally, discrepancies between modern-day viewing and historical context arise possibly
 589 due to literal versus metaphorical interpretations of works, which can be aided by historical
 590 understanding. For example, one of the curatorial team offers another example:

591 *“Something like the Joseph Bryant Derby - the Synnot children – which is the image of the*
 592 *three little children releasing the dove from the cage. I mean it's a really interesting work,*
 593 *because people looking at it now seem to often think it's very sugary and sentimental. But*
 594 *actually, it's a really political work. It's at the time before child labor laws, this is the*
 595 *beginning of the period they start to reconceptualize the idea of childhood as a separate*
 596 *period of life. Children's emotion is actually taken seriously. And, you know, it's when Locke*
 597 *and Rousseau were writing; and in that way, it's a revolutionary work, because all of that*
 598 *heightened emotion that we read as very sentimental is actually advocating for something.*
 599 *And it's also an interesting work too, because it's the same time that they start thinking about*
 600 *animal rights in a very loose way. So, the idea of freeing the bird from the cage: it's not just a*
 601 *metaphor, there is actually a sense that the bird is having interests, too.”*

602
 603 The fact that visitors pointed to elements like the panel information as what stood out to
 604 them, suggests that their judgement of the most appealing aspect may not be contained to the
 605 exhibition, but could be based on this particular exhibition experience relative to others. While the
 606 visitors may not have remarked on the historical emotions, such comments speak to the curatorial
 607 efforts to convey them. As Acord (2010, p. 461) wrote, it may be that there is “a disjuncture between
 608 people's embodied experiences and their verbalizations of them”. In other words, perhaps people's
 609 responses regarding the role of the boards and panels are, in part, verbalizing their experience of
 610 processing the history of emotions content.

611 Visitor motivations in regard to the Love: Art of Emotions exhibition also indicate that in order

612 for experiences to be satisfying, cognitively motivating experiences are required. Comments for
613 attending included learning something new (which complies with Kjeldsen & Jensen's [2015]
614 findings) and that attendance was curiosity-driven (as found in work by Falk & Dierking [2013]). It
615 is also evident that the visitors used their art viewing as a springboard for contemplation and
616 reflection, as stated by Smith's museum effect model (J. K. Smith, 2014; L. F. Smith, Smith, &
617 Tinio, 2017). Thus, these kinds of motivating factors could be integrated more clearly into exhibition
618 planning. ■

619 The overlap found between the most and least appealing exhibition elements with regard to the
620 design choices also demonstrates that the degree to which visitors perceived (and further understood
621 and appreciated/enjoyed) the curatorial choices varied. This is perhaps most clear with regard to the
622 aesthetic choices, including the lighting, wall color, and music. For those who pointed to a particular
623 element, such as the dim overhead lighting in a negative manner, most acknowledged that personal
624 preferences were driving their responses: in other words, some participants acknowledged that a
625 particular 'dislike' was not to their taste, but that the particular choice (e.g., the darkness) added to
626 the exhibition's overall atmosphere and presentation. For these individuals, it appears then that the
627 curatorial team was successful in presenting a solid, coherent exhibition (even if certain elements
628 were not to an individual's liking). In this way, we see evidence of how the curator acts as a
629 mediator—drawing out for visitors the meaning of artworks and the exhibition, in order for particular
630 properties to become salient (Acord, 2010). Moreover, this implies that the exhibition elements are
631 not only perceived individually, but interact to create an overall experience. As Falk (1993, p. 145)
632 expressed, the implication is that the visitor experience is "synergistic": that is, the arrangement,
633 design, and content are not separate but interact to influence visitor engagement. Thus, curatorial
634 teams must take great care to consider and integrate all of the elements, especially when trying to
635 communicate historical emotions. The task does not simply end with selecting the artworks to a
636 theme, but all of the atmospheric elements (Kottasz, 2006) require attention.

637 Of course, there was evidence of a dissonance between the curatorial team goals and the
638 visitors' experiences. Though, there were far fewer of these instances of dissonance than praise
639 concerning curatorial choices. For example, while the curatorial team worked hard to include various
640 depictions of love, including a religious section within the layout design (with one team member
641 particularly praising this choice), this element was not as well received by some of the visitors. As
642 illustrated by one respondent, some were not "sure how it [the religious section] was related" to the
643 entire exhibition. While there were not many of these comments, their presence many indicate

644 instances where visitors did not connect with the curatorial information or grasp the historical
645 emotional meanings. It is possible the visitor quoted previously did not connect to, or comprehend,
646 the historically placed constructs of religious love (and we do not know whether the visitor engaged
647 with the exhibition texts). These instances of dissonance imply that even with careful curatorial
648 practices, all of the information and meaning may never reach every visitor and each visitor relates
649 and interprets the material relative to themselves. Future work could explore how to shape visitor
650 experience according to their specific interests or how to stimulate interest in parts of the exhibition
651 visitors may initially find difficult to understand or experience.

652 The present study is not without its limitations. Firstly, methodological limitations were
653 imposed on the study in order to minimize research demands on the visitors. Thus, only a small
654 number of the total viewing audience was interviewed about their experiences, also the interview was
655 the sole appraisal tool. More extensive surveys could have been employed, but our aim was to be as
656 minimally disruptive to the visitors. Further to this, tracking the gallery walk-throughs could have
657 supplemented data collection to explore how long visitors spent as specific art works, etc. Again, we
658 and the gallery were keen not to interfere with viewer experience. The present research is an
659 ecologically valid exploration of the link between curatorial decisions and visitors' subjective in-
660 gallery experiences with the Love: Art of Emotions exhibition. Facing the challenge of revealing to
661 the public the emotional intentions of historical artworks, the curatorial team used text, atmosphere,
662 and artworks to provide the visitor with a context from which they could access the thematic
663 exhibition. Visitors' responses showed that the curatorial practices undertaken assisted understanding
664 of the original context of the works.

665 The present findings have implications not only for the execution of public exhibitions, but also
666 for cultural organizations and heritage attractions dealing with content that has an explicit emotional
667 component in order to maximize visitor engagement and understanding. Well-crafted exhibitions can
668 articulate the meaning of historical emotions to modern-day visitors. The present results suggest there
669 needs to be a high degree of depth and specificity in the information presented to visitors. This is in
670 line with Gazi (2018) who indicates a balance needs to be found between the presentation of
671 accurate, historical information and telling an engaging story in a manner that fits the gallery and
672 exhibition style and tone. Any experience interacting with individual artworks and the exhibition
673 overall will include personal reflection (and be influenced by previous knowledge). These reflections
674 would, of course, be rooted in the modern day and related to the visitor's own, personal life – see
675 Dervin's sense-making framework (Foreman-Wernet & Dervin, 2016), which states that people will

676 interpret their experiences with art within the context of their own everyday lives. However, with this
 677 exhibition, the modern-day interplays with the historical contexts. This study has revealed a need to
 678 consider how to leverage the fact that people craft their understanding of the historical elements
 679 relative to their own, present-day emotional understanding and experiences. Given little is known
 680 about actual art viewing experiences, more in-situ, gallery work in concerning exhibition experiences
 681 is to be encouraged.

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Table 1.
 Themes concerning creating the exhibition

Theme	Sub-theme
Exhibition theme	Shaping and refining from given parameters
	Stressing different manifestations of love and emotional content
	Portraying works addressing love from the early modern period
The works included	The overall number of works included
	Which works were chosen
	The process of selecting the works
	Arranging the works

Design aesthetics	Wall color Music
Navigating and articulating emotional meaning to visitors	Information boards/ labels Music Inclusion of different media Placing different works together in the arrangement

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Table 2.

Responses to "What was the most appealing aspect of the exhibition?", giving theme indicative quotes and frequency of this type of response by visitors interviewed (N = 69).

Theme	Example response	Response Frequency
Atmosphere (e.g., walls, music, layout, overall aesthetic)	<p>“very well done – the dim lighting, the flow in terms of paintings into sculpture back into paintings”</p> <p>“blacks, golds, lighting – I have seen these pieces before elsewhere in the gallery, but rearranging the pieces allowed me to appreciate it differently”</p>	36%
Wall/panel information	<p>“the information on the wall - it gives the artwork so much more depth”</p> <p>“the written comments excited me a lot – the people who put it together really know what they’re talking about”</p>	17%
The multi-dimensional 'love' theme	<p>“the theme – a different perspective of love and its different forms”</p> <p>“there’s a real complexity and multi-layers experience of emotions in the exhibition, and I think the first impression of love is fluffy and pink, but to have a sort of cave with dark shadows when you enter, it is ...the complexity and depths of the</p>	20%

experience of the emotion [of love]”

The diversity of the works included in the collection	“the collection was good, varied” “different mediums and styles from different countries”	10%
Specific works (incl. size, scale, specific pieces)	“beautiful furniture”; “the wedding dress”; “the sheer size of the paintings – that’s amazing”	16%

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Table 3.

Responses to "What was the least appealing aspect of the exhibition?" giving theme indicative quotes and frequency of this type of response by visitors interviewed (N = 34).

Theme	Example response	Response Frequency
Specific works (e.g., type, style)	“the English caricatures were a bit grotesque” “personally, not all that interested in the statues” “everybody has their own taste”	35%
The amount of works	“the amount of works, and how to grapple with everything and how to see all of the works”	6%
The religious section	“the religious pieces weren’t bad but I just wasn’t sure how it was related”	12%
Darkness	“did find it dark in the exhibit” “the darkness, but I suppose it all added to it”	15%
Music	“the music”; “the repetition of the music and the type”	6%
Textual information	“all the pictures stuck together, with all the descriptions on the side – it was a bit hard to read”	6%
Random	“I was thinking I’m glad I wasn’t a woman in those days”	6%
Nothing	“enjoyed all of it” “no, I liked everything, it was something new to see”	15%

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