Abstract

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

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

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

Introduction

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

These powerful and little understood phenomena were tantalizing inspirations when considering the curation and presentation of *Love: Art of Emotions* exhibition. The *Love* exhibition was presented at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2017 and included more than 200 artworks from the National Gallery of Victoria's permanent collection. The artworks were from the early modern period, with the exhibition including a wide range of sculptures, prints, drawings, and functional objects (e.g., wedding dress, spinet, pieces of jewelry) in addition to paintings. It was supported with an entrance didactic, descriptive labels located close to each artwork, and 234-page, full-color catalogue which represented each artwork and could be purchased, read on-line or viewed within the gallery, located in the center of the exhibition space next to seating to permit easy access.

1.1 Situating Visitor Experiences and Curatorial Practices

Experiences of exhibitions are shaped by different components including the visitor's individual responses based on a range of personal variables including personality, motivation and preference (Smith & Wolf, 1996; see also Taylor, 2010), the gallery context, and the artworks themselves (Falk, 1993; Watson, 2010). People also interpret art within the context of their own everyday life experiences (Foreman-Wernet & Dervin, 2016). Indeed, Dervin's sense-making framework indicates that people will always draw on their own private lives and interpretations of them to situate feeling, understanding and signification (see Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2013). A major publication emanating from the Dallas Museum of Art explored ways to advance visitor engagements with art exhibitions (Pitman & Hirzy, 2010). Working with over 4000 visitors, across studies from 2003-2009, it investigated visitors' prior knowledge, "their emotional responsiveness and comfort in connecting with it", their behaviour and "preferences for types of interpretations and programming" (Pitman & Hirzy, 2010, p. x). This was summarized under three themes: Awareness,

Appreciation and Commitment (p. 15), the analysis of out of which enabled the development of a Framework for Engagement with Art (FEA) which went on to shape programming, interpretations, and marketing among other aspects 'to ignite the power of art through engaging experiences' (Pitman & Hirzy, 2010, p. 10). It showed there were strong individual and group proclivities.

1.1.1 Visitors and their Individual and Group Differences

Research has shown that while museum and gallery visitors display strong individual differences in personality and preferences (Falk, 1991; Pitman & Hirzy, 2010), evidence reveals that visitors can be categorized by group, indicating that collective expectations and motivations define visitor experiences to a strong degree (e.g., Doering, 1999; Falk & Dierking, 2013; Ntamkarelou, Bantimaroudis, & Economou, 2017; Pekarik, Doering, & Karns, 1999; Pitman & Hirzy, 2010). Pitman & Hirzy (2010) and Falk & Dierking (2013) defined museum visitors by their motivations related to what the visit affords. For Pitman & Hirzy (2010, pp. 121-123), four categories emerged from their analysis: observers (typically new to art, seeking clear instructions on approach to viewing, tentative in opinions); participants (curious and comfortable about art, enjoy learning, eager to comment, actively use guides, have a strong interest in the story behind a work); independents (enjoy viewing on their own, feel emotional connection, have a strong background in art, interest in the materials of the exhibition); and enthusiasts (strongest of all emotional connection, strong background in art, enjoy discussing art works, seek out information, actively participate in engagement and outreach). The characterizations made by Falk & Dierking (2013, pp. 47-48) included: explorers (curious visitors hoping to learn), facilitators (visitors interested in the social experience of visiting with others), professionals/hobbyists (visitors interested in the museum's objects in line with their personal interests), experience seekers (visitors who treat the museum as a destination, or activity to report having done), and rechargers (contemplative visitors pursuing refuge from daily life). So while there are strong overlaps between these two lots of categories, there are also some perceived differences between the different cohorts.

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

1.1.2 Gallery Context

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

Focusing on the interior context, the influence of spatial arrangement and design (Falk, 1993), the positioning of works (Melton, 1972), and gallery size and design (Kottasz, 2006) are important. Moreover, background music can provide visitors with another source of information to enhance their understanding, but can mark time passing (e.g., a repeated song or song cycle can be tiresome to visitors) and influence visitor mood (Chen & Tsai, 2015).

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

1.1.3 Curatorial Decisions

As indicated at the start of this paper, the curator's work is significant, not only in bringing artworks to the attention of the public, but by thematizing, informing and arranging them in specific ways, "the curator plays an important role in the production of artistic meaning through exhibition-making, acting as a mediator between the artist, the culture in which the work emerged and the public (Acord, 2010, pp. 447-449). The significance of understanding design and visitor experience are both clear factors that need to be understood and then used in guiding curatorial decisions. A critically important study by Acord (2010), which undertook lengthy in-home interviews with curators (of contemporary art), revealed that while preparation is vital – understanding the history of works, their scale dimension, color etc. – their actual experience in gallery changes previous understanding. In other words, it is only when they see the works *in situ* that final decisions can be made. This suggests that curators need to be open to change their minds and diverge from initial plans.

Acord (2020, p. 454) found that curators emphasized the installation part of the exhibition, noting how vital situated action was to establish "feeling right" overall, and to include to appropriate relationships with other artworks. Trying to tease out the specifics of this installation process, Acord discussed at length the apparent blurring between the symbolic meaning of artworks and their aesthetic properties. Many of the resulting installation actions were regarded as "happy accidents" or "moments of clarity". Acord (2010, p. 462) theorized the work of contemporary art curator as a creative form of production, the curators' relations with the artworks being elaborated through their physical interactions with the objects on site. She also noted the high significance of emotion in these object-human interactions and in the curators' work together with others in the development of the exhibition. Visitors at exhibitions can experience emotions in response to the artwork, and also, if in a social context, their co-visitor with whom they may express views on the experience (Tan, 2000).

1.1.4 Emotions in action

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

1.2 Aim

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

1 Method

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

2.1 Participants

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.

2.2 Materials

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

2.3 Procedure

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

minutes.

The key questions included:

- How did you come up with the theme?

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

- How did the exhibition develop?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- What elements were *least* appealing, and why?

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

All responses were made anonymously, but each interview was audio-recorded in order to retain the data. In total, fifty-nine interviews were conducted: 43 of the interviews involved an individual respondent, while 11 of the interviews were conducted with a pair of respondents, and five were conducted with a trio of respondents (total $N = 80$). Interviews were kept purposely short, and 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 exhibition on the history of emotion and that that focus had been narrowed to love which … was quite helpful because, as it was it was, it was an enormously broad topic … particularly as we had a 400-year span and we were across all the departments at the NGV."*

The other team member noted:

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

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

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

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

> Cupid is often depicted as blindfolded – as in a seventeenth-century painting after Guido Reni [reproduced in an illustration] - to convey love's arbitrariness. This is articulated

directly in Shakespeare's A *Midsummer Night's Dream*:

> Love looks not with the yes, but with the mind.
> And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind.
> Nor hath love's mind of any judgement taste;
> Wings and no eyes figure unheedy haste.
> And therefore is love said to be a child
> Because in choice he is so oft beguiled [Act 1, scene 1].

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

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

2.2.2 The works included

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

While a small number of key works within the museum's collection, such as *The Garden of Love*, were identified for inclusion from the very start of the project, the largest task in designing the exhibition revolved around searching for what to include. The team endeavored to explore the museum's collection thoroughly in order to survey what was possible (and available) to include in the exhibition. The team aimed to use a range of media (referencing both materials and the size of

selected pieces) to make use of the diverse holdings but to also be sure *"the sections were balanced"*. Keyword searches, expanded through conversations centering on exploring all manifestations of 'love' drove searches, via both the digitized catalogue and by physically going through museum holdings. A work's aesthetic quality for display served as a secondary selection consideration.

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

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

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

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

Early in the exhibition's conception, the curator pitched a three-part structure to the layout exhibition. While debated alongside other possibilities, the three-part layout structure was used, such that the exhibition was loosely arranged to display manifestations of love relating to "*anticipation, realization and remembrance*". While the tri-part arrangement broadly guided some of the superordinate arrangement, the team needed to consider how the artworks would be displayed relative to the theme, space, and each other.

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

2.2.3 Design aesthetics

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

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

adaptation of that."

2.2.4 Navigating and articulating emotional meaning

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

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

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

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

> 'Antonio Vivarini (studio of)
>
> The Garden of Love
>
> c. 1465–70
> oil, tempera and gold on spruce panel
>
> Felton Bequest, 1948
>
> 1827-4
>
> Few works in this exhibition present the number of questions posed by *The Garden of Love*. Though the iconography of this work indicates that it is intended as a representation of a Renaissance 'garden of love' – a garden where men and women would meet to dance, sing and pursue romance – the symbolism of some elements of the composition is not well understood. While the rose arbour, the fountain and the enclosed garden all point to the theme of a pleasure garden, the significance of the syringe and the meaning of the gestures remain elusive. The painting's complex series of symbols and cyphers offers the potential to imaginatively complete the narrative.'

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

‘Italy, possibly Urbino manufacturer

Sora Mavera, dish

1530–50
earthenware (maiolica)

Bequest of Howard Spensley, 1939

4409-D3

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

The third, is an eighteenth century canvas:

‘Jacopo Amigoni

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

Portrait group: The singer Farinelli and friends

c. 1750–52 oil on canvas

Felton Bequest, 1950

2226-4

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

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

The larger text boards were created to support the labels and providing summative theme information. They also followed the rule of historical context and emotion meaning. While there

were panels for the entrance and each section of the exhibition, we reproduce only one here, which explores narcissism and vanity relating to exhibits comprising make-up, jewellery and mirrors.

> 'Rituals of self-adornment were intrinsic to flirtation and seduction throughout the early modern period, but the line between wholesome enhancement of one's charms and dangerous self-obsession was not always clearly defined.
>
> The mirror bears ambiguous associations in the Western tradition. 'Know thyself' commanded the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi, and as an instrument of self-contemplation the mirror could represent self-knowledge; it is often found as an attribute of allegories of truth and prudence in Renaissance and Baroque art. In an age, too, when rulers identified themselves with Classical deities, the mirror, an attribute of the goddess Venus, cast flattering light on its aristocratic owner.
>
> However, the mirror could also signify vanity, and it increasingly came to be used in this fashion by artists during the Renaissance and after. 'The role of a pretty woman is much more serious than one might suppose', French philosopher Montesquieu mockingly observed in 1721. 'There is nothing more important than what happens each morning at her toilette, surrounded by her servants; a general of an army pays no less attention to placing his right flanks or his reserves than she does to the placement of a patch.'

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

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

In particular, the curatorial team highlighted works where the historical and contemporary emotions aligned and others where a modern interpretation of the historical emotion might need to be aided. Information panels were used to provide historical context to some of the pieces where a modern viewer would not have the same contextual and cultural clues as previous viewers at the time of the artworks' completion (see Discussion).

2.3 Visitor Responses

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

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

-Tables 2 and 3 about here-

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

3 Discussion

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.

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,

> *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.*

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

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

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

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

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

Visitor motivations in regard to the *Love: Art of Emotions* exhibition also indicate that in order for experiences to be satisfying, cognitively motivating experiences are required. Comments for attending included learning something new (which complies with Kjeldsen & Jensen's [2015] findings) and that attendance was curiosity-driven (as found in work by Falk & Dierking [2013]). It is also evident that the visitors used their art viewing as a springboard for contemplation and reflection, as stated by Smith's museum effect model (J. K. Smith, 2014; L. F. Smith, Smith, &

Tinio, 2017). Thus, these kinds of motivating factors could be integrated more clearly into exhibition planning.

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

Of course, there was evidence of a dissonance between the curatorial team goals and the visitors' experiences. Though, there were far fewer of these instances of dissonance than praise concerning curatorial choices. For example, while the curatorial team worked hard to include various depictions of love, including a religious section within the layout design (with one team member particularly praising this choice), this element was not as well received by some of the visitors. As illustrated by one respondent, some were not "*sure how it [the religious section] was related*" to the entire exhibition. While there were not many of these comments, their presence many indicate instances where visitors did not connect with the curatorial information or grasp the historical emotional meanings. It is possible the visitor quoted previously did not connect to, or comprehend, the historically placed constructs of religious love (and we do not know whether the visitor engaged with the exhibition texts). These instances of dissonance imply that even with careful curatorial practices, all of the information and meaning may never reach every visitor and each visitor relates and interprets the material relative to themselves. Future work could explore how to shape visitor experience according to their specific interests or how to stimulate interest in parts of the exhibition visitors may initially find difficult to understand or experience.

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

The present findings have implications not only for the execution of public exhibitions, but also

for cultural organizations and heritage attractions dealing with content that has an explicit emotional component in order to maximize visitor engagement and understanding. Well-crafted exhibitions can articulate the meaning of historical emotions to modern-day visitors. The present results suggest there needs to be a high degree of depth and specificity in the information presented to visitors. This is in line with Gazi (2018) who indicates a balance needs to be found between the presentation of accurate, historical information and telling an engaging story in a manner that fits the gallery and exhibition style and tone. Any experience interacting with individual artworks and the exhibition overall will include personal reflection (and be influenced by previous knowledge). These reflections would, of course, be rooted in the modern day and related to the visitor's own, personal life – see Dervin's sense-making framework (Foreman-Wernet & Dervin, 2016), which states that people will interpret their experiences with art within the context of their own everyday lives. However, with this exhibition, the modern-day interplays with the historical contexts. This study has revealed a need to consider how to leverage the fact that people craft their understanding of the historical elements relative to their own, present-day emotional understanding and experiences. Given little is known about actual art viewing experiences, more in-situ, gallery work in concerning exhibition experiences 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

842
843

844

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)	"very well done – the dim lighting, the flow in terms of paintings into sculpture back into paintings"	36%
	"blacks, golds, lighting – I have seen these pieces before elsewhere in the gallery, but rearranging the pieces allowed me to appreciate it differently"	
Wall/panel information	"the information on the wall - it gives the artwork so much more depth"	17%
	"the written comments excited me a lot – the people who put it together really know what they're talking about"	
The multi-dimensional 'love' theme	"the theme – a different perspective of love and its different forms"	20%
	"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 depts of the experience of the emotion [of love]"	
The diversity of the works included in the collection	"the collection was good, varied"	10%
	"different mediums and styles from different countries"	
Specific works (incl. size, scale, specific pieces)	"beautiful furniture"; "the wedding dress";	16%
	"the sheer size of the paintings – that's amazing"	

845

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"	35%
	"personally, not all that interested in the statues"	
	"everybody has their own taste"	
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"	15%
	"the darkness, but I suppose it all added to it"	
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"	15%
	"no, I liked everything, it was something new to see"	