

# **Enjoy the Beauty of Taiwanese Floral Cloth: Theories of Creating an Educational Art Museum Exhibition and Visitors' Responses**

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## **Summary**

An exhibition can have a significant role in museum education and promote cultural values in Taiwan as discovered by the author in creating the exhibition “Enjoy the Beauty of Taiwanese Floral Cloth Exhibition” (Oct. 15<sup>th</sup>, 2011-Oct. 7<sup>th</sup>, 2012), which was commissioned by the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts. “Taiwanese floral cloth” was the motif for the exhibition because of its recent popularity in contemporary artworks, commercial products, and public spaces. Although Taiwanese floral cloth was part of the local cultural aesthetic from the 1960s to the 1980s, it only regained attention when Taiwan began promoting it as part of its cultural identity in 2004.

The key objective for this exhibition of traditional and contemporary uses of Taiwanese floral cloth was to encourage an appreciation for its role in the country's culture past and present. The exhibition would also encourage visitors to interpret and make meaning of the cloth's use in their daily lives or art and design in general by visiting its five sections: (1) A Life Aesthetics Section: a traditional Taiwanese living room and bedroom decorated with floral cloth and contemporary artworks and design, including functional furniture; (2) A Historical Development Section: a documentary film narrating the development of Taiwanese floral cloth and touch panels to convey the symbolic meanings of various designs; (3) A Floral Fabric Shop: a traditional store to recreate the visitors' experience of buying this fabric; (4) A Learn-by-Doing Section: a dressing room for modeling floral clothing and a space for hands-on activities; (5) A Multi-media Interactive Area: two computer learning modules—one enabling visitors to “color”

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virtual sections of the living room, bedroom, and floral cloth store; the other exercising their creative and visual abilities in using the cloth.

In conjunction with the exhibition, the author conducted this study—first, to describe and evaluate her theories for planning and creating it, and, second, to investigate the visitors' responses to it. First, she examined her theories based on (1) the relationship between cultural representation and the visitors' meaning-making, and (2) the exhibition as educational through interactive learning, multi-sensory experience, situated learning, and identity-related museum experience. Second, she assessed the visitors' responses to the exhibition according to their life experiences, cultural identity, aesthetic awareness, and knowledge. The research questions asked (1) What are the visitors' associations with traditional Taiwanese floral cloth? (2) What relationship do they see between this cloth and Taiwanese culture? (3) How do they feel about the design/aesthetics of Taiwanese floral cloth? (4) What did they learn about Taiwanese floral cloth from this exhibition?

The author used a focus-group interview and an open-ended questionnaire to explore and understand the visitors' responses to the exhibition. The interview was to determine their direct response to the exhibition; the questionnaire was to collect the gallery attendants' observations of the visitors' behaviors and responses to the exhibition, as well as their own. Data were collected from 26 museum visitors and 5 gallery attendants.

To examine multiple aspects of the participants' responses, the study included their age, sex, race, residential location, and generation. The following were the findings from the data analysis:

1. Life experiences: Age and place of residence had an impact on the visitors' responses to the exhibition. Those born between 1960 and 1980 responded to the exhibition with nostalgia and affection, associating it with their childhood and family life, usually in rural areas. Those born after 1980 first found the floral cloth unfamiliar, then seemed to like it and its use and development since 2004.
2. Cultural identity: Taiwanese floral cloth represents its people's cultural and ethnic identity. Culturally, it is integral to Taiwanese identity, as well as to some local cultural identities. The only Hakka visitor interviewed and the part-Haklo visitors associated the floral cloth with their particular culture. But some Haklo insisted that the cloth is of cultural value for all Taiwanese people. In the 20th Century, it was everywhere in

Taiwan and was part of the people's daily life. As for its cultural value, they thought the floral cloth represented the people's diligent spirit, passion, and hospitality.

3. Aesthetic awareness: The visitors' aesthetic tastes change with time; thus, creativity will be the key to the future use of Taiwanese floral cloth. The visitors appreciated the bright, rich colors of the cloth as well as the changes in aesthetic taste over time. At first some felt that the traditional application of a large piece of floral cloth in ordinary items was distasteful. But after going through the exhibition, they realized that the cloth can be designed aesthetically and uniquely in contemporary artworks and modern design. Hence, they began to appreciate the new designs for the traditional cloth. Some even thought it could represent Taiwanese culture on the international fashion stage.
4. Knowledge acquired: This exhibition of the many contemporary uses of Taiwanese floral cloth enriched and expanded the visitors' knowledge of this cultural art and tradition. It included the history of the cloth, the techniques for producing it, new visual experiences of it through technology, and its contemporary applications in art and the design industry.

Genuine learning in a museum depends on active participation in an exhibition and appreciation of culture through visitors' construction and transformation of personal meaning. A good educational exhibition, according to Hicks (2004), is like an "endless game" that aims not at the competition but at keeping the game moving. It is meant to expand the museum visitors' thinking and imagination about an exhibition's cultural contents and dimensions. Taiwanese floral cloth is an important element of Taiwanese visual culture, which carries an abundance of memories and feelings of its people. In this exhibition, the author merged the use of Taiwanese floral cloth in traditional clothing, contemporary fashion, and furnishings and decor to bridge the traditional and contemporary cultural contexts of its uses, especially to promote it as a cultural inheritance. The visitors' responses manifested the educational value of the exhibition in three ways: (1) it enhanced their understanding and cultural awareness of Taiwanese floral cloth; (2) it solidified their sense of cultural identity and encouraged their practice of cultural production by using the floral cloth, and (3) it helped them accept the contemporary change in aesthetic taste and to be open to the future uses of Taiwanese floral cloth.

Potentially the educational theories and planning strategies, as well as the visitors' positive responses to this exhibition on Taiwanese floral cloth, can encourage art museum curators and art educators to incorporate local Taiwanese culture into their exhibitions and visual arts.

**Keywords:** educational art museum exhibition, exhibition planning, museum visitors' study, Taiwanese floral cloth