

Behind the Scenes at the Asian Art Museum

Wednesday, June 11, 2003, 1:30-5:00 PM

Asian Art Museum, San Francisco

Program Overview

Moving an institution to a new facility presents great opportunities and challenges. Join us as we explore the new Asian Art Museum. Arrive early and participate in exclusive tours with Asian Art Museum Staff and hear the inside story on how they planned and prepared for expanded facilities and programs at their new site. Forrest McGill (Chief Curator), Brian Hogarth (Director of Education), Deborah Clearwaters (Manager of Public Programs), and Alina Collier (Resource Center Coordinator), will discuss the surprises and insights discovered in the process of opening their new museum location.

Speakers

Forest McGill, Chief Curator, Asian Art Museum

Brian Hogarth, Education, Asian Art Museum

Deb Clearwaters, Manager of Public Programs, Asian Art Museum

I. Moving from Golden Gate Park

- Many supporters wanted museum to stay in Golden Gate Park, but continue to visit in current location.
- Current location offers better access to tourists, via public transportation, and are seeing a more diverse audience since the move
- Separation from DeYoung allows museum to get accurate count of visitors (previously counts were joined with DeYoung's)
- Piazzoni murals removed to open walls and give to DeYoung - much controversy - now visitors don't seem to ask
- Certain architectural plans (such as 3rd floor bridge) were given up due to need for space
- Museum is still raising money to cover costs of move
- In previous building, spaces with broken up to create small offices for staff, now designated areas were designed specifically for office space.
- Move went smoothly, moved small amounts at a time.
- Still planning for theater with a back entrance.
- Only large gathering space will be eliminated when exhibitions are installed.
- Membership has increased to 18k, but expected to drop down in 2nd year.
- Central location is much easier for schools to access.

II. Selecting Displays

- Polled visitors in old building to see what they wanted, many thought they were in the DeYoung without realizing they were actually in the Asian
- Wanted to create thematic displays that have core radial connections - looked for common threads, i.e. trade & exchange, local beliefs and practices.

- Buddhism repeated in all galleries
- Curators reviewed each others labels to ensure continuity between galleries
- Brought in a panel of interdisciplinary experts (funded by NEA) to critique labels in 4-5 sessions.
 - A. Process for Didactic Panels
 - Had an NEH grant.
 - Conducted audience research for over 2 years to grasp their understanding of Asian Art, discovered people knew very little.
 - Several sessions with visiting scholars, reviewed early drafts, curators were able to sit in and take notes.
 - Weekly meetings where curators wrote panels, read and reviewed together.
 - Defined a hierarchy of what to say, wanted a uniform way to explain specific terms

III. How move has affected staff

- Staff size and budget have doubled since move
- Added 2 full-time program assistants, one in art, one in performing arts and one half time family program coordinator who does monthly programs.
- Increased security planning preceded planning of programs
- Education office designed for 5 now holds 9.
- Opening was a little crazy, still dry walling Japan gallery one week before opening, everyone pitched in to vacuum before the Grand ball. Dust got into everything, staff even took to wearing masks for awhile.
- There were competing demands from different departments, security issues with school programs - can't bring kids in early, no programming while cases are being cleaned, each student must have a ticket.
- Museum-wide initiative, working closely with marketing and PR, lots of institutional buy-ins
- Museum attendance has doubled, hope to continue that with the help of repeat visits, serving diverse audiences, niche communities
- Would like to set up an advisory committee for colleagues to come in 1 to 2 times a year for feedback and brainstorming.

IV. Education in the New Asian Art Museum

- Wanted to make a shift from exhibition-driven to ongoing and regular programming
- Created a resource center with a drop-in facility
- Education staff very involved with didactic panels, worked with curators then involved in the editorial process. They tried to balance demands of scholarship and accessibility.
- During closed period, staff continued with outreach programs for schools and adult speaking programs.
- Use educational programs as a carrot to the community, but don't always see funding directly.
- Successful fundraising with Lila Wallace for Asia Alive program, grants for resource center.

A. Volunteers

- Used closed time to work with volunteers
- Brought in instructors from Stanford to discuss communications strategies and conversational styles
- Many sessions to discuss behaviors and how to introduce unfamiliar objects.
- Introduce docents to museum in phases, steps. Begin with stations, docents stay in one location, greet and introduce themes. Second, give tours of familiar areas. Third, thematic cross-cultural tours. Phases needed to get both public and docents oriented to museum.