Encountering the Muse: An exploration of the relationship between inspiration and information in the museum context

K.F. Latham, Bhuva Narayan, Tim Gorichanaz

Abstract
How are information and inspiration connected? Answering this question can help information professionals facilitate the pathways to inspiration. Inspiration has previously been conceptualized as a goal or mode of information seeking, but this says little about the nature of inspiration or how it is experienced. In this study, we explore the connection between information and inspiration through a qualitative approach, using the museum as our setting; specifically, the researchers’ own visits to three separate museums. We use collaborative auto-hermeneutics, a methodology specifically suited to such a reflexive exploration, to document and analyze three individual museum visits. The following research questions were the main driver for this exploratory study: what is inspiration, and how are inspiration and information related? In answer, we present an inductive definition of inspiration as a kind of information, and we discuss how this definition fits in with the information science literature as well as offer some practical applications.

Introduction
By way of introduction, we present three experiences of encountering inspiration in three different museum contexts by the three researchers of this study. These are excerpted from more extensive notes from each researcher. Below, we summarize our experiences, collected from three different museums at different times; by mutual agreement, none of us researched our respective museum choices in advance. Following these narratives, we describe the study, its design, and our results. Finally we discuss our findings in light of other, related work and provide suggestions for future research and application. We purposefully choose this order to the paper, to help the reader start with the experiences before exploring them analytically. The nontraditional structure of this paper exemplifies our methodology, as will be discussed later.

Three Experiences
Gorichanaz: I visited the exhibition Paint the Revolution: Mexican Modernism, 1910–1950, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Except for the title and the Frida Kahlo image adorning the promotional materials, I didn’t know what to expect. When I first walked into the exhibition, a large oil painting (by Saturnino Herrán, I later learned) stood there, and I had the feeling of being part of it—not of the narrative it depicted, but of its material. In this I was most inspired by the technique, color and shapes. Indeed, I was so captured by these aspects of the image that I didn’t even notice what it was of until I read the placard. Even when I learned what was depicted, I was still more interested in the
material aspects of the painting. Other points of inspiration in my visit weren’t a matter of being drawn inward, but of being moved outward. For example, the technique of a pastel piece by David Alfaro Siqueiros reminded me of the work of a friend of mine. Throughout my visit, I thought of: courses I had taken, friends I hadn’t seen in years, my past and imagined future, other artists (such as Botticelli) and artworks, Disney movies, my dissertation research, U.S. politics, philosophy, and more. For me, inspiration immediately sparked a desire to know or do more, which also seems to be a matter of making connections; for instance, I often looked at the placard after feeling inspired, where I read about the piece in a way that forged connections with other things. In other words, inspiration seems to have stirred up some connections autonomously, but it also compelled me to seek out and construct connections for myself.

Latham: I visited the Akron Art Museum, a medium-sized art museum in Akron, Ohio, USA. The whole experience was full of points of inspiration—or sensations of inspiration. For example, the entrance is a bright, airy, vast space that just feels good to be in. It is a glass structure that swoops up multiple stories, giving the visitor a sense of awe. I felt this upon my entry into the museum, and that overall atmosphere was a positive sensation for me. Almost immediately after, I encountered a very (very) large and extremely colorful abstract painting that fills one wall from floor to ceiling. Seeing that painting caused me to get out my phone to take a photo. The second point of inspiration came in a “Please Touch” area, probably aimed at kids, but spoke to me nevertheless. The first sensation of inspiration in this area came when I saw the colorfully painted “cabinet,” a full wall of a case filled with a painted scene and multiple and mysterious doors waiting to be opened. This drew me in, and I spent a long while opening all the doors, discovering what was inside. This cabinet was full of magical creatures (made of felt and other materials) called Horrible Adorables, and each cubby had a set of animals that told a story in both its construction and setup, with a clever poem on the back of each cabinet door. The animals were so well-made and interesting-looking that I wanted to know more. I do not typically read a lot of museum labels—often just skim them—but I was very curious to know more about these animals, where they came from and why they were here, so I read the label (and ultimately purchased one of these animals from the artist online).

Another point of inspiration was triggered by my interest in a very small room, darkly lit and positioned strangely away from everything else. What drew me in was that the walls were covered in paintings done in salon style, a way (some call it old-fashioned) of organizing art on walls that I love. The name of the room was something like “video room” or something similarly forgettable. But the salon style made me come in and I delightfully discovered that it was a room full of “garage sale” paintings overlain with glass, ready with an invitation to participate by drawing on the paintings! Visitors were given colorful glass markers and told to draw on the paintings. This activity was so
enjoyable AND so funny; it made me laugh out loud the entire time. I felt a sense of pride as I thought about the museum staff that created this exhibit.

Narayan: On the flight from Sydney to Wellington for an LIS conference, I watched a documentary about a Maori man who carved and built around twenty of the Wharenuis, or Maori meeting houses, which stand at the centre of a communal and sacred place in every Maori community. I was enchanted by their stories of home and large family get-togethers, since it reminded me of my own family home where my grandparents had lived. I did not know anything about where I would need to go to see one of the Wharenuis and wondered if I would see one on my visit to New Zealand (my first) and assumed I might not, since I was there just for a conference in Wellington. I had one day free before the conference, and I decided to go to the Te Papa Museum. At the museum, there was a large carved Maori wooden entranceway on display that was over six meters tall and was very impressive but did not inspire any awe in me as such. I spent the morning wandering a number of the sections, which were exciting while I was there but not particularly memorable. After lunch, I entered the floor I’d saved for last and—wow! There was an actual Wharenui in the middle of the floor, but hidden from the entryway. I circled it first like a tiger. Then I went in, first taking off my shoes as instructed by a notice at the entrance. There was nobody else inside, so I sat in one of the benches on the periphery and looked at the carvings and the ceiling. A Japanese family with toddlers came in, traipsed around, and left. Then, all at once, a Maori man was sitting on the opposite side from me. I acknowledged him with a nod and a smile and mentioned how gorgeous the wood carvings were. He said, “You can touch it, you know.” I said, “Really?” He said, “These are meant for connecting people in the community, and your first connection is with the building itself. Touch it. Feel it.” I gingerly touched the wooden carving behind me, got up, and started to walk around touching the other carvings, and then sat down again. He came and sat next to me. He had a backpack and had his hat on backwards. He asked me where I was visiting from and then we ended up having a half-hour conversation. He said his name was Ruaumoko and that he was a Maori carver and architect and that he was only one of four living carvers who could carve the old fashioned way, without any modern tools. I assumed he was a docent or guide at the museum, but he said he was just a visitor. He was very knowledgeable about the details on the Wharenui and seemed worldly-wise, and proselytised about peace and unity in the world, and we exchanged worldviews and some personal stories. In short, we had a ‘good yarn’. It was an unforgettable experience, but in hindsight, I would say that it wasn’t really the museum or the objects themselves that touched me, but the people and their stories. I can admire the beauty and aesthetics of the art, but it is the real or imagined stories I envision for them which truly inspire me through information that connects them to my own stories and experience.
Background and the Study
Information science has traditionally focused on providing access to information and addressing problems thereto. However, information is also a part of “the pleasurable and profound” (Kari and Hartel, 2007) aspects of people’s lives; and just as psychology and other social sciences have expanded from a deficit model to one of flourishing (Seligman, 2012), so information science has begun a turn toward aspects of human life beyond information needs, seeking, and use. One such aspect is inspiration.

Inspiration has not been much explored in information science. And when it has been, it is conceptualized as a goal or mode of information seeking (e.g., Mougenot, Bouchard and Aoussat, 2008). In order to better develop tools and systems that support inspiration, we need a more detailed account of how information and inspiration are related. In light of the ongoing (re)convergence of the information professions across libraries, archives and museums, we contend that the museum context is a good place to start with a naturalistic study of inspiration and information: “Museum,” after all, literally means “house of the muses,” which suggests a direct connection with inspiration, and previous work by Latham (2012; Gorichanaz & Latham, 2016) has articulated how museum objects are informative. We, therefore, chose the museum context as the site of our study on inspiration. As we will discuss below, future studies can build on our work by exploring inspiration in other information institutions; in our study, the museum functions simply as a case study and hence we do not delve deep into the literature of museum experiences that do not relate to this connection between information and inspiration. (N.B.: We consider museum studies to be a part of information science, but we recognize that not all share this view.)

In this paper, we present an exploratory investigation of information as inspiration using a novel methodology: collaborative auto-hermeneutics. We discuss our exploration and findings regarding inspiration in museums with respect to information, and reflect on how our chosen methodology afforded these findings and discussion. Above, you found brief snippets of our information experiences. In the following sections, we introduce our methodology and research design and then discuss our exploratory findings and their implications.

Methodology and Research Design
All understanding has a perspective, including supposedly non-perspectival scientific theories (van Fraassen, 2008). Philosopher of science Catherine Elgin (2017) explains this in terms of indexicality, occlusion, and noncommitment: theories and models are indexical in that they represent things from somewhere and towards somewhere; they are occlusive in that they hide some phenomena by representing others; and they are more or less committal in that they represent only certain properties of the universe, ignoring others. Thus, according to Elgin (2017, pp. 206–207), “By adopting a different perspective, we come to see familiar items in new ways. … For example, the shift from
third-person to first-person perspective may be crucial to appreciating the close connection between belief and assertion.” Phenomenological research is a path of inquiry in the human and social sciences that gives other people access to first-person findings (van Manen, 2014).

Being informed is best seen as an experiential state (Tkach, 2017); it may not be outwardly observable or readily articulable. Likewise, it would seem that inspiration is a matter of personal experience. For this reason, to explore the connection between information and inspiration, we conducted a phenomenological study on our experiences of being inspired during museum visits. Specifically, we used the methodology of collaborative auto-hermeneutics. Auto-hermeneutics is a methodological toolkit rooted in hermeneutic phenomenology that allows a researcher to study their own information experiences (Gorichanaz, 2017). This is a mode of inquiry from the first-person perspective, and thus the knowledge it produces can be seen as complementary to that produced through third-person inquiry. Taking a cue from other collaborative automethodologies, such as collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez, 2012; Ellis & Bochner, 2000), Gorichanaz (2017) suggested that collaborative auto-hermeneutics may be fruitful: a group of researchers together analysing and discussing their individual experiences, thereby gaining deeper insight into a phenomenon of shared interest.

In this study, the phenomenon of interest was inspiration. Through our empirical investigation, we sought to address the following research questions: (RQ1) What is inspiration? and (RQ2) How are inspiration and information related?

The collection of empirical material was systematic, designed in advance, and proceeded as follows: First, prior to our museum visits, each of us individually memoed, using freewriting, about the way we define inspiration and information, and how we suspected information and inspiration to be connected. Next, each of us individually visited a museum or exhibition within a museum that we had never been to before and which was of personal interest -- all between December 2016 and April 2017. As we each went through our chosen museum, every time we felt a sense of inspiration, we recorded an answer to the prompt: “What are you feeling, thinking and doing right now?” and noted the context in which we found ourselves. Then each of us set our smartphones to prompt us three times after the museum visit: on the evening after our visit, one week after our visit, and finally one month after our visit, with the questions: “Did you recall any of your moments of inspiration? Did you do something about it?” In writing, we summarized our experiences. As they respond to situational and temporal triggers, these tactics are consistent with the guidelines of systematic self-observation outlined by Rodriguez and Ryave (2002), and discussed by Gorichanaz (2017).

Each of us then analyzed our empirical material individually as follows: We first transcribed our audio recordings, and then thematically coded our transcripts and notes through iterative rounds of open coding, as described by Gorichanaz (2017), who
references Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). During this process, we looked back at our pre-visit memoing and looked in our empirical material for both examples and counterexamples of our preconceptions. From these analyses, we wrote up short summaries of our experiences, excerpts of which were given at the outset of this paper and are analyzed further below.

After each of us performed this individual analysis, we read each other’s findings and drafted discussion points based on the similarities and differences across our accounts, possible implications, etc. Next, the three of us convened on Skype to discuss these activities, looking to deepen our understandings of inspiration and synthesize our conclusions in answer to the research questions articulated above. Throughout the process, the three of us collaborated in a shared Google Drive folder, which allowed us to track tasks and comment on each other’s analyses. Partway through this process, we met in person for further and deeper discussions, then presented our preliminary findings and welcomed discussion at Information: Interactions and Impact (i3) in Aberdeen, Scotland, which informed our subsequent efforts in this paper.

Findings
Meta-Analysis of the Three Inspiration Experiences

Our three different experiences manifested different sets of themes. To summarize:

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<td>Gorichanaz</td>
<td>1) being enveloped, 2) outward connections</td>
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<td>Latham</td>
<td>1) sensory and aesthetic, 2) interest, 3) doing, 4) positive, 5) memory and identity, 6) connecting with creators</td>
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<td>Narayan</td>
<td>1) interest and curiosity, 2) memory, 3) serendipity</td>
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Some of the differences across our experiences may have to do with the nature of the museum we visited and our orientation to it. Despite the differences, there are many points of similarity in our findings. All three of us connected inspiration with doing, memories, and surprise; Latham and Gorichanaz mentioned how inspiration surfaces connections even beyond memory. Latham and Gorichanaz also were inspired by the physical aspects of objects they encountered, including the technique used to make it. Both Narayan and Latham found inspiration to be something positive.

While the what that inspired each of us might be very different, the themes that emerged from our experiences of inspiration with/from information show some very consistent and strong similarities. Probably the most notable is “making connections.” Each of us wrote about this extensively in our analyses, whether the connections were with the past, with people, or with the objects themselves. Gorichanaz put this nicely in
his analysis notes, as connections that “pointed to the world outside itself” (“itself” referring to the object). Narayan, with her love for narrative, felt a strong connection to the stories and people that surrounded her experience, and Latham, a museum scholar, felt connections to the creators of the exhibits (the museum workers), whilst Gorichanaz, an artist, felt a connection to the artists and other people. In all three cases, connections were made through our memories, and ties with our personal pasts came to the surface. These connections were often interlaced with our personal identities.

In addition, interest, curiosity and wonder were all important triggers (or outcomes, depending on how you place them) to inspiration. For Latham, interest was often the first feeling that caused her to even look at something that eventually inspired her. Narayan talked of wonderment that initiated her desire to learn more through seeking more information and to further her knowledge. Related to this are serendipity (Narayan) and surprise (Latham). It’s possible that these are very similar things, but in most cases, something unplanned or unexpected was a trigger to inspiration.

While sensory or aesthetic experience were common to all, Narayan focused on the instantiation of memories, Gorichanaz sometimes felt a part of the object, being drawn in by the technique, color, shapes, and Latham had a somewhat similar experience, although her encounters were more shaped by “pleasing design” that calmed and soothed. In all three cases, we experienced two kinds of inspiration during our visits. Tim wrote this best in his analysis:

I think of inspiration as something that compels action. These can be bigger or smaller actions. For instance, “bigger” actions compelled by inspiration include taking a photo, writing down a note or purchasing something. Of course, much bigger actions could be imagined and can likely be found in other cases of inspiration, but these are the ones that arose in my museum visit. Smaller actions, on the other hand, are much more subtle. Having a feeling, lingering (or not) in front of a piece, imagining something (e.g., myself doing a painting) and making a mental note are all examples of such “smaller” actions.

Answering Our Research Questions
In this study, we sought to arrive at an understanding of what inspiration is and how it is related to information. Recognizing at the start that this link has not yet been explicated in information science, we conducted an inductive exploratory study. This section presents answers to our research questions. In the section following, we discuss these findings in light of previous research-- work on inspiration from outside and inside the information science literature.

RQ1: What Is Inspiration?
In one of our analysis meetings, we came together to negotiate the definition of inspiration, incorporating all of our experiences and analyses. Our individual definitions
of inspiration are strikingly similar. All our definitions, at root, describe inspiration as a feeling that leads to doing (something big or small), and we suggest that inspiration can only be identified after the fact. Moreover, the “doing” connected to the information may only be traceable long afterwards. Concomitantly, after much wrangling to make it work for all three of our encounters, we decided that inspiration is: *The name you give to any information that leads to a special response.*

RQ2: How Are Inspiration and Information Related?

Our second goal in this study was to discern the relationship between inspiration and information. Based on our definition above, we can say that inspiration is a type of information, rather than something separate from (perhaps resulting from) information. Naively, one might suspect that information leads to inspiration, but our experiences suggest that certain kinds of information are in themselves inspiration. Further details responding to this question are explored in the sections below.

A natural next question is: What are those “certain kinds”? Addressing that fully will require further research, but for now, our experiences suggest that many different forms of information can be inspirational, including memories, sensory feelings, aesthetic encounters and social exchanges.

**Connecting our Findings to the Literature**

This research study sought to develop an inductive account of inspiration, conducted in a museum setting, that could be applied to other information settings. The account of inspiration that we have developed thus deepens previous research on inspiration, which has considered the phenomenon only from the third-person perspective. Such a perspective is compatible with and enriching to the other perspectives that can be found in the literature.

In this section we present an overview of relevant work in museum studies on inspiration. Following that, we highlight selected literature around one of the elements that arose in the study -- surprise, discovery, and the unexpected. Finally, we discuss how our findings regarding inspiration and information can be brought to bear in other areas of information science.

**From Museum Studies**

There is very little direct empirical research specifically on inspiration and its phenomenological relationship with information in the museum context. Indeed, research has been done on “museum experience” (cf. Falk & Dierking, 2013), but only in terms of learning experiences (Packer, 2008; Pekarik, 2010) and not from the perspective of lived or holistic experience. Surprisingly, the seminal work by Falk and Dierking (2013), *The
Museum Experience Revisited only has two pages about interest, and none about motivation or inspiration. Where the topic of inspiration is discussed in the museum studies literature, it is often programmatic and a part of wider themes such as engagement, participation, and play (eg. Reading, 2009, Manchester Museum, n.d.). In their book, Creativity in Museum Practice, Norris and Tisdale (2014) raise the inspiration discussion many times. However, the context is from the museum professional’s point of view, often using the word to discuss points of inspiration for the museum worker rather than the nature of inspiration from the museum visitors’ perspective. There is also a recent proliferation of work on health and well-being in museums (eg. Chatterjee & Noble, 2013) where one often finds inspiration as an outcome in many studies (eg. Lackoi, Patsou, & Chatterjee, 2016) but there are limited empirical studies with inspiration as the focus.

While there is little direct empirical work exploring inspiration in museum users, a recent dissertation by Gilson (2015) provides a targeted conceptual investigation of inspiration in museal settings (or, what she calls heritage interpretation sites, or HI). She was interested in exploring inspiration as an alternative to the traditional instrumental knowledge-based approach that is often used in museum (heritage) studies. Her review of the literature revealed nine characteristics of inspiration: contagious, positive, individual, transcendent, unexpected, and holistic; and requires receptivity. Interestingly, Gilson found that the literature dissects inspiration into inspired by and inspired to, something also revealed in our study. In addition to the themes from the literature review, she added four more themes that emerged from her specific study group: agency-related issues, measuring inspiration in HI, the role of provocation, and the overall role of inspiration in HI. One caveat in this study is that Gilson interviewed the interpreters (the professionals) and not the visitors (users) and she often asked them about visitors’ experiences, making descriptions of user experience second-hand. Nevertheless, Gilson’s distillation of the literature on inspiration is more useful in our context than her findings from the participant study. Because her results supported the literature, we will focus on these constructs for our discussion.

Citing the psychological work of Jennings (2012), Gilson (2015) starts by defining inspiration as “a motivational state experienced when self-transcending or other-praising emotions are triggered by a value-congruent stimulus and activate a desire to express or enact and value-congruent goal,” (Jennings, 2012, 33). Gilson (2015) found that people can be inspired by numerous sources, including other people, places, objects and actions, and this inspiration can come from within or without. Inspiration is idiosyncratic, unexpected, contagious, holistic and may be cultivated. A core characteristic of inspiration is transcendence — it involves something out of the ordinary, being in the moment, and finding flow. It is available to all, anyone can experience inspiration but what triggers it for one person may not trigger it for another. It is often
unexpected, accidental or unwilled. It could come in a flash, like an aha moment, or could involve a feeling of being overtaken, as it was for Tim. Inspiration brings both rational and non-rational together, and it engages “the head as well as the heart,” (Thrash and Elliot, 2003, 878). Some have noted that it is transmissible, or contagious. As we were mostly alone in our experiences, we cannot speak to this characteristic. Gilson notes that the literature points out that inspiration requires receptivity, and hence one must be open and willing to receive it. There is some indication that certain personality traits may predispose a person to being receptive to inspiration and that motivational response is an important aspect.

Finally, Gilson discusses at great length the idea of inspiration as two-sided—there is inspired by and inspired to — and that both these sides are required to differentiate inspiration from other emotions such as awe or wonder (Jennings, 2012). Thus people must be both passive and active for inspiration to occur — passive to open inspiration, then active after being inspired (Hart, 1998). At least in the museum setting, inspiration is positive and expansive, and inspired people often feel gratitude.

Related but peripheral work can add some indirect insights around the notion of inspiration in the museum context: aesthetic (cf. Leder, Belke, Oeberst and Augustin, 2004), spiritual (Latham, 2013), flow (Csikszentmihalyi), the “Museum Effect” (Smith, 2014), attention and interest (Rounds, 2004; Bitgood, 2013), attention restoration (Kaplan, Birdwell and Slakter, 1993; Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan, 1983), and profound learning (Perry, 2002). Many of these, however, are models and meant to be instructive rather than exploratory or descriptive.

One of these related-but-peripheral works is that of Bitgood (2013), an educational psychologist, who has conducted a significant amount of research on attention and interest in the museum setting, culminating in his Attention-Value Model. In it, he argues that attention and value are key concepts in understanding museum users’ behaviors. The theory is complex and meant to provide the museum professional with strategies to elicit “engaged attention,” so it will not be fully described here. What is pertinent to the current study is that Bitgood provides a structural way to understand the process of experience in a museum as it relates to a museum user’s stages of attention (capture, focus, engagement), processes of detection, and the cost/benefit ratio (as it relates to motivation) of the experience. In order to “manage” attention, awareness of the three stages of attention is necessary. Simply put, attention = detection + value. Value, Bitgood claims, is the most important motivator when a person’s attention is directed to an exhibit element. Once something of value is perceived (capture), the visitor focuses on it, and becomes engaged (again, this rendition is highly simplified, and Bitgood’s book should be consulted for more detail). This clearly happened in all three of our experiences. Most
of our inspiration came from things that were of value to us personally, whether it was from a memory, an aesthetic appreciation, or a delightful surprise. Once our attention was captured, we then focused on it and became engaged, probably the point at which inspiration was identified. However, while Bitgood’s work might help us understand the processes involved in generating our interest (and hence, potential inspiration) and providing information, he does not tell us much about how interests may manifest overall in the lifeworld of a person.

Other related work worth mentioning in this context is that of Kaplan and colleagues (Kaplan, Birdwell and Slakter, 1993; Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan, 1983), also from psychology, who have been investigating restorative experiences for a number of years, culminating in a theory that suggests a museum experience can be restorative if it involves four components: being away (ie, the museum is a site away from normal daily life), extent (the setting creates a whole new world), fascination (something of high interest), compatibility (supportive of the individual’s goals. It is possible that a restorative visit opens more possibility for inspiration. These aspects of inspiration also surfaced in our study of inspiration experiences. All four of the components of a restorative experience were felt at some point by all three of us. Certainly fascination (something of high interest) was paramount in all three experiences. Additionally, our experiences exhibited many of Jennings’ (2012) elements of inspiration, including the motivational state, self-transcending emotions, and a desire to enact a goal.

On Surprise, Discovery and the Unexpected

It probably is not a surprise (with a slight pun) that seeing something unexpected causes one to pay attention. Looking at a room full of black and white, one’s attention will be drawn to the one red thing on the wall. But the role of surprise in inspiration is not so well-known or at least, has not been extensively connected.

A recently developed theory of experience preference directly addresses the role of surprise in a cultural institution. IPOP (Pekarik, Schreiber, Hanemann, Richmond and Mogel, 2014) is a theory that identifies four dimensions of visitor experience that are particularly relevant in a museum context. IPOP stands for:

Idea – facts, theories, interpretations, and other conceptual expressions
People – emotion, narrative, and other ways of connecting with inner lives of people
Object – aesthetics, visual details, craftsmanship, and other aspects of how things look, are made, and used
Physical – somatic sensations
The theory holds that most individuals have preferences across these four dimensions and those preferences influence their attention, behavior, and responses. In learning about these experience preferences, Pekarik et al. (2014) discovered that experiences tend to have greater impact on visitors when they occur in a non-preference dimension but are linked to something in a preference dimension. In other words, an experience is more meaningful and memorable when it involves a “surprise” or “flip” experience. In all three study experiences, we encountered surprise, possibly “the flip.” Unfortunately, we did not analyze our experience preferences ahead of the study to test if this is what was indeed happening when we felt surprise and subsequent interest. A future study that takes this into account prior to the experience could provide deeper insight.

Conceptualizing surprise another way, a corpus of research has been done in information behavior on serendipity (Agarwal, 2015), which is also related to information encountering (see Erdelez, 2005). After reviewing the literature on serendipity, Agarwal (2015) defines it as “an incident-based, unexpected discovery of information leading to an aha! moment when a naturally alert actor is in a passive, non-purposive state or in an active, purposive state, followed by a period of incubation leading to insight and value.” For serendipity to become inspiration, of course, more is needed than a simple discovery. To be sure, several authors on serendipity discuss the importance of what happens before and after an encounter. Indeed, Agarwal concludes that merely finding information unexpectedly might not be of much value or use. Does utility qualify serendipity? More to the point for our study, is serendipity always inspirational? Is inspirational always serendipitous? The connection between these concepts is not yet well understood, and it should continue to be explored in future studies. Certainly there are areas of overlap, yet we should be careful not to overlook points of divergence. It is notable that, just as with inspiration, most of the research on serendipity has been conducted from the third-person perspective. It would make an interesting study to ask directly about the relationship between inspiration, being inspired, and the structures and effects of serendipity in the first person. Such a study is beyond the scope of this paper, but it would make a worthwhile project.

Inspiration in Other Areas of Information Science
Outside museum studies, the literature on inspiration in information science has been limited to the study of artists’ and architects’ information behaviours. Setting the stage, Teague (1987) described the information needs of designers as expansive, including information which stimulates the generation of visual imagery, or contractive, defining the design parameters of a particular project regardless of whether this information is internally imposed. It is this expansive data, or finding the information to inspire creativity, that drives the need for direct observation of the original objects and the excitement derived from accidental discovery of information/inspiration (Teague, 1987).
Cobbledick (1996: 344) argued that although “artists are seen as self-contained individuals who create via inspiration,” this inspiration has never been defined or detailed in any way. Based on a study of four artists, Cobbledick goes on to argue that inspiration is one of five types of information needs for the artist, and that some of the information they need for their art has nothing to do with art per se but with human experience in general. Hemmig (2009) surveyed 44 artists and found that their main sources of inspiration were forms occurring in nature, their own personal experience, and artworks seen in person, all of which can be construed as information. Medaille (2009) studied 73 theatre artists and found that they seek information for six primary purposes: understanding a work’s historical, cultural, and critical background; finding sources of inspiration; learning about contemporary or historical theatre productions, artists, and events; learning technical or process information; finding performance materials; and furthering career goals; in short, the study demonstrated the critical role that information plays in the creative process. Makri and Warwick (2010), in their study of nine architecture students, found that inspiration was an important driver for and potential outcome of information work. More recently, Lo and Chu (2010) framed information-seeking as inspiration-seeking based on a survey of 327 art and design students where they found that information was a “springboard” for creative inspiration, but that “seemingly anything could be considered art information or inspiration” (Cho and Lu, 2010: 118), and often via serendipitous discovery.

In summary, the research in art practitioners’ inspiration uncovered many of the same themes we found in our study of ourselves as museum visitors, including the unexpected nature of inspiration and the sheer diversity of the forms of information that can be inspirational. By pointing out that inspiration is important not only to artists and designers but also everyday people, we hope to stimulate further research and application on the topic that can lead to more inspiration for more people—what we see as an ethical directive.

**Conclusion and Connecting to Practice**

We acknowledge that there are many museums (and other information environments) that are sites of inspiration and, we know that many of these institutions are intentionally attempting to facilitate inspiration as a result of their programming. What we do not know as much about is how this inspiration comes to be in these settings. Why is one exhibit more inspirational than another? Why is a particular object, document, program, or personality a source of inspiration? What triggers inspiration; what are the components and how might it differ across individuals and cultures? How does inspiration feel? It is at this finely focused point in the whole trajectory of understanding that we conducted our study. If the goal is to stimulate inspiration in the world, the first step is to understand
what inspiration is, considered informationally (viz. phenomenologically). That was our goal here. This study has provided a focus for discussing issues at the intersection of information and inspiration. To conclude, we will consider some opportunities to apply these ideas to practice in museums and other information settings. Although our study was exploratory, it is worthwhile to make some initial suggestions based on our results. Furthermore, we ask: How can we create more opportunities for inspiration in information institutions and scenarios? Is it possible to intentionally stir up inspiration in people by design? Can we cultivate inspiration in cultural institutions?

One of the major findings of Gilson’s (2015) work was that inspiration (in a museum setting) can be cultivated. Hart (1998: 26) noted that it is not logical to “will inspiration into existence” but concedes that we might be able to set up favorable conditions to “woo or invite it.” In fact, investigating the qualitative aspects of experiencing inspiration in an information context is all about finding ways to cultivate inspiration in users. Gilson suggests ways in which people can woo inspiration, including being open to it or seeking it, invoking it through spiritual or meditative methods, letting go and understanding that inspiration exists, viewing objects differently being contemplative, receiving a pep talk, watching an inspirational video, being open to new ideas and being responsive to them, finding flow, combining a wilderness experience with social interaction. Our findings also indicate that there may be “favorable conditions” that can intentionally be prepared as possible scenarios for inspirational encounters.

Many museum exhibition-making procedures involve strict schedules, tight budgets, and predictable and repetitive elements. Thus, one way to open up the potential for visitor inspiration could be through the “making” process itself. If exhibition staff understand that what they are creating is not final but rather an opening, a beginning, a way to start the wonderings of their visitors, the results might also emerge as less rigid, prescriptive and done. For example, simply asking questions in labels rather than telling readers “what they need to know” can go a long way. Finding ways to involve the visitor personally, asking them to reach into their own memories, can also provide openings. And creating “final” exhibits that have changing elements, and a built-in fluidity can also provide possibilities. Using models or theories developed specifically to elicit these kinds of experiences, such as the IPOP Theory, the Attention-Value Model, and even the nine components of inspiration compiled by Gilson in conjunction with the thematic insights from our study could be useful in transforming the way exhibits are made and experienced.

It is straightforward enough to imagine how these techniques could be implemented (and tested and refined) in museums, but what about other information settings? To give an example of a different setting that benefited from our thinking about inspiration, we can
look at Narayan’s experience teaching Design Thinking in the 2017 academic year in Sydney, Australia, soon after this study concluded. She designed a course with longer sessions, meeting for five hours once a fortnight rather than for three hours once a week; the longer sessions allowed for deeper concentration and more possibilities for serendipity and mutual learning. To give one example of how Narayan cultivated inspiration in the classroom, she used a novel icebreaker activity: On the first class, she distributed fortune cookies to the students. She asked the students to introduce themselves, then crack open a cookie, read out their fortune, and talk about it. It was surprising how all the students engaged with this surprise element and participated in a “good old yarn” about their lives and aspirations. She also planned for senior students and alumni to walk into class seemingly unannounced and give lightning talks and tutorials on how they have used the skills they learned in their course in their real-world jobs, and this resulted in hugely successful engagement in the classroom. Narayan calls these techniques “planned serendipity.” The other creative activity she embedded in her class, which was actually inspired by the process of keeping a journal for this very study; she asked students to maintain a hard copy journal for the subject rather than submit a reflective blog or essay electronically. Although reluctant at first, students engaged with this tactile activity in surprising ways. Some did traditional journals, but the majority did very creative scrapbooks that documented their learning week by week with drawings, doodles, photos, diagrams, post-it notes, and other artefacts and evidence from the classroom itself.

Beyond museums and classrooms, many other information contexts such as libraries can certainly be imbued with inspiration. Two examples from the academic library world begin to demonstrate this. Even while some are questioning the role of the physical space of the academic library in today’s technological climate, others are doubling down on investments in physical infrastructure. A recent example is the new central library at Temple University, in Philadelphia, opening in fall 2018. The building boasts countless architectural, infrastructural, pedagogical and technological innovations, all so that the new library “inspires the discovery, creation, preservation, and sharing of knowledge” (Temple University Libraries, 2017). While a full analysis of what will make this project inspiring is beyond the scope of this paper, one can immediately see themes of connection and serendipity emerge. This and other new academic libraries could serve as settings for further research on inspiration in the library. A second example comes from the book Algorithms to Live By (Christian & Griffiths, 2016). The authors point out that a library’s most-borrowed books are often sequestered in caching areas where they await sorting, while libraries sometimes use their valuable atrium space to showcase new acquisitions. Themselves taking inspiration from the Least Recently Used caching algorithm, the authors suggest a strategy for “turning the library inside out” (90) by putting recent acquisitions in the back and recent returns, in order of return, in the lobby,
where they will be “ripe for the browsing” (91). This way, the student body will be able to see its own reading habits, get inspiration from books sorted temporally rather than by subject, “here, the books being read on campus, whatever they happened to be, would become the books most likely to be serendipitously encountered by other students” (Christian & Griffiths, 2016, 92). The authors contend that this arrangement would be not only more socially positive but also more efficient; for us, we see it as a real and simple means for cultivating inspiration.

As we hope we have shown, this is a promising topic for further research and consideration. The cultivation of inspiration can enrich every aspect of human life, working in the background like the brownies of Scottish folklore, making the world a more magical place.

References


