

**Interpreting the Results of Research:  
Is What We Don't Say Significant?**

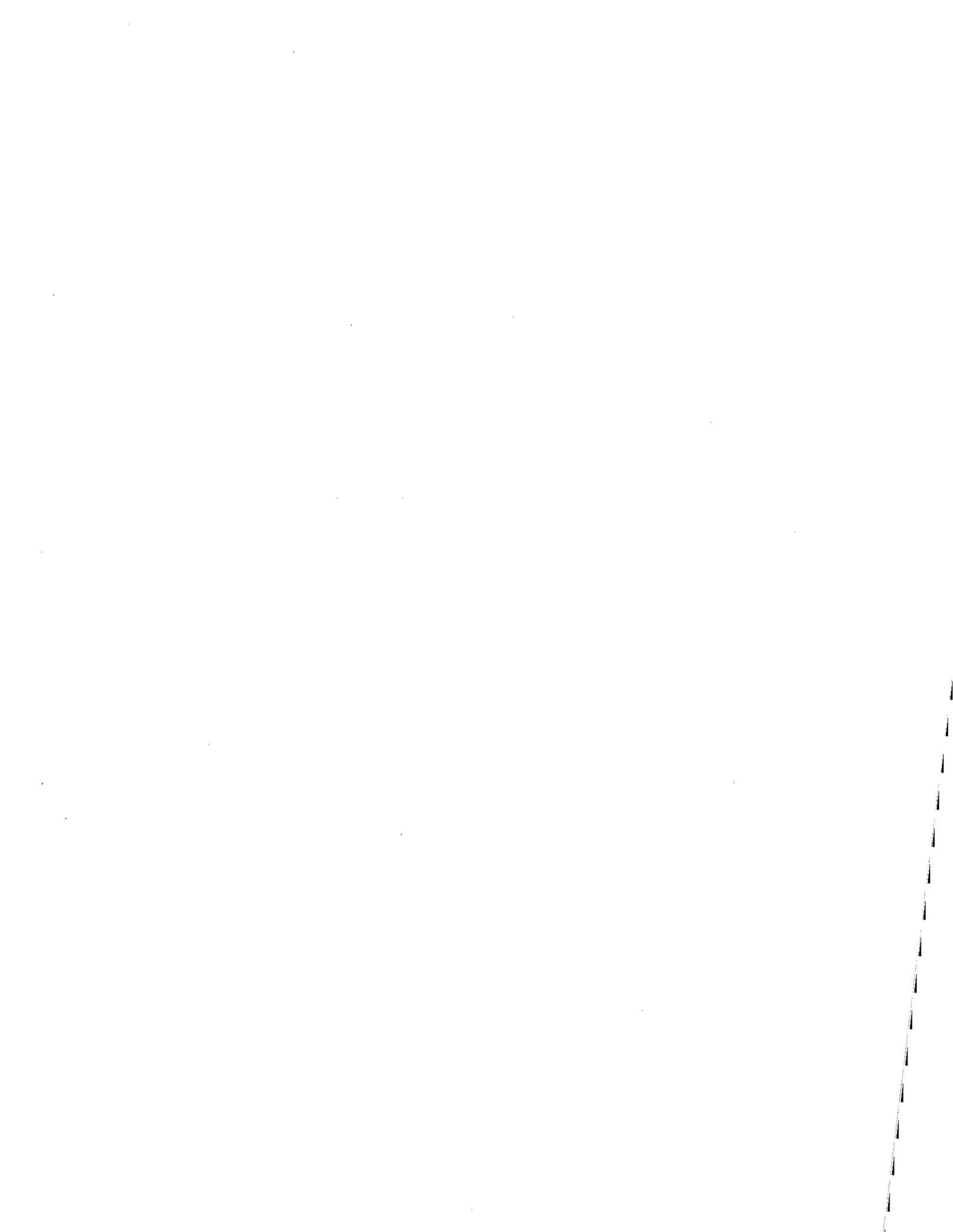
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## Foreword

The Alexandria Archaeology Publications series is composed of papers on various aspects of research conducted under the auspices of Alexandria Archaeology, a division of the Office of Historic Alexandria, City of Alexandria, Virginia. The authors include professional staff members, university students and Alexandria Archaeology volunteers. Editing of the papers has been kept to a minimum. It should be understood that the papers vary in tone and level of technicality, since they were originally directed toward many different audiences.

We are pleased to offer the papers within this series and in so doing are opening our "manuscripts on file" - including professional conference papers, background documentary studies, student course papers, and volunteer research papers - to professionals and public alike.

Pamela J. Cressey, Ph.D.  
City Archaeologist  
1991

Archaeology is drawing a tremendous amount of attention in the United States these days as more and more open land gets swallowed up by development and as the older sections of cities get a 'face-lift' through urban renewal. Many developers are now familiar with the term 'archaeological resources'. The media finds archaeology newsworthy and reports our activities with relish. The public is interested. People are beginning to realize that archaeology is not an enigmatic event that takes place only in exotic lands or in secluded university basements. The public wants to see, experience, discover and understand the mysteries of the past.

As the Museum Education Specialist for Alexandria Archaeology I spend a great deal of time interpreting the results of our current projects as well as how we discover this information. As you know, interpretation in regard to research results is very different from what is eventually distilled down and presented to the public.

Recently I have asked myself not only if the interpretive information Alexandria Archaeology presents is clearly understood, but is there anything we are not saying that could otherwise help the public understand how our research results influence historic interpretation? It is our business to find out what the public wants to know about the past, but we must keep in mind that our audiences perception of the past is frequently viewed through the eyes of the present.

It is also important to realize that our point of view - archaeologist or museum educator - influences interpretation. Occasionally, when I mention to the layman that the "interpretation" of our research results is an important part of my job they want to know what language I translate. This is not as far-fetched as it might seem. We do speak and understand another language - the language of material culture and all of the implications surrounding those artifacts. I think it is important for those of us who work with the public to periodically evaluate if we are speaking a language that enhances our audience's perception and appreciation of the past.

During the last twelve of the twenty-five odd years that archaeology has been a visible and significant component of the Alexandria urban landscape, the scope of our work has expanded to include more complex and broader research questions that are beyond the realm of what the average person recognizes as archaeology. The value of this research is not always apparent to our audience and this can cause some confusion as to what do archaeologists really do. The layman expects archaeologists to look for and retrieve artifacts; however, he does not expect archaeologists to regard church attendance or voting patterns to be an equally valuable resource. It is not always clear to the layman that the artifacts, or material culture, are the catalyst for investigating and understanding the events that contributed to and helped shape history. Gathering broken objects and gluing

them together is only a small component of the investigative process.

For example, pottery manufactories in Alexandria produced quantities of stoneware and earthenware vessels that are found throughout the city. Aside from investigating the technical aspects of production and decoration we want to know : who purchased the pottery and how was it used; who owned the kiln and what was his association with other local and regional potters; who were the employees; were they white or black - slave or free; what were their jobs ; how much were they paid; where did they live? It is a formidable task to have an artifact speak to all the issues of preservation, demographics, economics, sanitation, domestic life, aesthetics as well as technical pottery analysis in a few exhibition labels or in a brief tour. It is a challenge to help our visitors understand the richness of these connections without having their eyes glaze over. Objects are static; life-- present and past-- is not. People often miss the point that the artifacts are a tangible record of daily life in the past, and that endows them with significance.

Everyone thinks and acquires knowledge in different ways. Many people say they prefer to learn by seeing a demonstration or through the opportunity to examine objects. This is the primary way museums educate the public - both in the active and passive sense. Archaeologists, I would say, are visually oriented, however, there are skills acquired and fine tuned that enhance

their visual expertise. Archaeologists have the ability to shift their thinking back and forth from the larger context of a site, to individual artifacts without losing the context of the big picture. To non-archaeologists, looking at an open test pit or at an individual artifact is a different experience - it is a narrow, more directed view of dirt and broken objects. What they see is not necessarily perceived in any historical context or as the result of historical process. (Sugar refining, as discussed by Keith Barr, is a perfect example. Few people know, or think about, how sugar is refined. They expect to find 5 pound bags of granulated sugar at their grocery store. Contemporary Americans do not associate cone-shaped fragments of pottery with the production of 'sugar loaves'. Sugar Loaf is a ski resort.) What speaks volumes to archaeologists is not obvious to the uninitiated. The act of looking at objects is simple, but understanding the context is complex.

The term 'visual literacy' (Rice 1988:13) or 'object knowledge' (Leon 1987:139) is used by museum educators to describe this comprehensive type of expert looking. It has been used primarily by educators in art and history museums, however, it applies equally well to archaeology museums and sites. A simple definition of visual literacy in the context of a museum is to "enhance the visitors ability to understand and appreciate original works of art [artifacts] and to transfer these experiences into other aspects of the visitors lives" (Rice 1988:13). Archaeologists are certainly visually literate in regard to understanding the

subtleties of excavating a site, analyzing artifacts, examining primary documents and understanding it all in the context of history.

Who will be the beneficiary of our knowledge? One of the major tenets of any museum or those who are designing exhibitions or preparing programs for the public is to "know thy audience". As a City agency and museum, the staff of Alexandria Archaeology serves a broad and diverse constituency which includes:

- 1) museum visitors
- 2) our volunteers
- 3) developers and contractors
- 4) City tax payers, including local homeowners
- 5) civic groups
- 6) other archaeologists and museum professionals

Much of what we know about the needs and inclinations of these groups has been gathered through observation and direct association with them in the museum, at sites and through meetings. Each requires a different level of involvement and expertise. This is complicated by the fact that more often than not the individuals we serve belong to more than one group simultaneously. They also represent every age group and educational background. It appears that our audience, the public, is everyone and anybody. (At times it is.)

What does the public know about archaeology and history? What do they expect to learn when they visit our sites and museums? How we can meet their needs? Many archaeologists, historians and museum professionals have been involved in evaluating exhibitions and interpretive programs in the attempt to reach audiences that are not typically museum oriented. Extensive visitor research was conducted at the Museum of American History in 1982 and 1983 in preparation for the exhibition AFTER THE REVOLUTION: LIFE IN AMERICA. One of the surveys Visitors Views of the 18th Century was designed to give the museum staff insight into the "visitors' knowledge, perceptions and misconceptions of the 18th century" (Munley 1983:i).

Aside from the not so surprising revelation that many of those surveyed had a limited grasp of history, the surveyors noted that when "listening to visitors talk about the similarities between today and an era in the past it is fascinating to note the lack of specificity and the absence of items directly related to everyday human activity. There [is] no mention of raising children, going to work or having friends. There is mention of power structures, grand political aims and fears" (Munley 1983:27).

Most adults' concepts and opinions about history have solidified long before they arrive at our museum doors. These are usually conventional views of history which are comprised of a few dates such as battles or great discoveries, learned from dry, fact-

oriented textbooks. It is no wonder that when common objects and everyday experiences are presented in the context of history, the connection is missed. These "everyday human activities" are precisely what archaeologists explore in the search for history. Yet, my observations of our museum visitors are that they respond to seeing artifacts and appear to enjoy learning about what material culture tells us about daily life in the past.

In 1985 the Denver Art Museum initiated a comprehensive evaluation of visitors' experiences in the museum prior to a major renovation of the permanent collections galleries, which included ethnographic and art galleries. The goal of the project was to develop more effective interpretive exhibits "so the non-specialist adult [would] have the opportunity for personally rewarding experiences of the same kind that art experts enjoy" (Denver Art Museum 1986:1). In other words, enhance the non-specialist or **(art) novice** (McDermott 1988:135) experience by helping them develop visual or object literacy.

The information gathered in these surveys has sparked my thinking in regard to our museum. Alexandria Archaeology is located in the Torpedo Factory Art Center, the most popular tourist attraction in Alexandria. The Art Center is visited by approximately 700,000 people annually, and 12% to 15% of these visitors come to our museum on the third floor. Many, if not most, of these people could be identified as art novices, and certainly could be categorized as archaeology novices.

Unlike those who have a specific purpose to visit a museum, we get people with a very different agenda. We have found through surveys that most of our visitors stumble on the museum by chance. A surprising number of these people are tourists who perceive the Art Center as a trendy shopping mall. This shopper's mentality occasionally spills over into our museum and is particularly apparent when someone inquires about purchasing the artifacts. The sheer volume of art (200 artists are represented) and the maze-like design of the Art Center visually overloads some people to the point that when they reach Alexandria Archaeology they do not realize that they are in a museum, let alone an archaeology museum. Many of our visitors do understand that we are an archaeology museum and are enthusiastic. They watch the volunteers at work, ask questions, look at the artifacts and read a label or two. There are even a few people who come to the Torpedo Factory to visit us specifically.

One of the more interesting observations reported about visitors in the Denver study was that "many got up close to the paintings to see 'the hand of the artist', "which was interpreted to mean the novices were "trying to get at the human being behind the painting". This was one of the reasons why the Art Center was created in 1975 and is still the philosophy today---let the public observe the artists at work as well as see the finished art. Alexandria Archaeology's philosophy is to let the public

see the process of our ongoing research as well as the results---  
an insiders view.

This 'insiders view' philosophy was optimized to draw and sustain public support for archaeology in Alexandria. The excavation of the 500 block of King Street in 1977 intrigued scores of nearby office workers and shoppers, and attracted approximately 1,000 volunteers who assisted with both field and laboratory work. The number and nature of the questions that passers-by asked about the process of archaeology was the catalyst for the public laboratory.

I have found that most of these novice archaeology museum visitors' questions are about the process; then they want to know what was found. Very few people ask questions about the broader concepts of our research and that is probably because they do not know what to ask. Mark Leone and his staff drew similar conclusions in Annapolis, Maryland during their first season of public site tours in 1982 (Leone 1983:36).

There appears to be some real interest, and confusion, about the connection of history to archaeology. People want to know how we use primary sources and at the same time want to know how and why archaeology has a role in historical research. "If you have the written information," they ask, "why bother to dig?" This sort of response is not unusual, even from people who are educated and have an interest in archaeology.

People are very curious about the amount of political clout we have to control archaeological resources in the City. In other words can we halt construction or dig on any site as we see fit? Some reporters are particular attuned to presenting an antagonistic relationship between archaeologists and developer. As a result, many people perceive an image of the archaeologist David brandishing a Marshalltown in the path of the developer Goliath's bulldozer. The converse is the eccentric, anti-development fanatic hoarding a treasure-trove of valuable artifacts. Neither image is productive or real, and both must be countered through public education.

This brings us to the bane of archaeology - monetary value. People usually ask about the value of things: "What is the most spectacular artifact?" or "How much are the artifacts worth?" These questions sound terribly naive, but I hear them often. These ideas or misconceptions do not occur through spontaneous generation. Interpretation deals not only with language but with strong symbolic, visual images. The blockbuster exhibitions, the book, magazine or newspaper article that feature the goodies can promote this "how much does it cost" mentality, whether or not it was intended. Many people do not realize that one or two objects are not singled out for appraisal. The value is not monetary, but rather the research potential of the artifact assemblage. Our collections are our most important teaching resource. There are certainly ways to select objects that are visually stimulat-

ing, yet provide a "unified, singular experience that involves its audience through an embodiment of content, objects as well as design elements" (Burnham 1987:107).

One way to find out if we are getting our message across is to get information out quickly to the museum visitor, our volunteers and the community. The next step is to get feedback and assess how effectively we transmit this information. Our more successful interpretive efforts revolve around the Alexandria Archaeology Museum. The museum and laboratory allow the public to see the process of archaeological research first-hand. Visitors have the opportunity to see our volunteers working with the artifacts and talk with staff and volunteers about our work. We have been working to promote visual literacy in archaeology through exhibitions that discuss all aspects of our work. Our current exhibition , Archaeologists At Work: Excavations at the Stabler-Leadbeater Apothecary Shop, explains each stage of archaeological research by using a well-known historic site in the City as a case study. The artifacts are exhibited and interpreted in the context of both history and archaeology.

\*Video of the Apothecary Shop excavation, as well as current sites, allow museum visitors to see an excavation in progress.

\*Interpretive signage that can be easily moved or updated is placed around the museum and above laboratory work stations to describe the various stages of artifact analysis.

\*The Volunteer News, our monthly newsletter, is circulated to over 300 volunteers, city staff, Friends of Alexandria Archaeology and museum visitors.

Some plans for the near future include:

\*Installing plaques in the sidewalks, and up-grading or installing satellite exhibitions in buildings on or near the locations where we have conducted excavations.

\*Distributing information to residents near our current sites.

\*Working with the City Recreation Department to include archaeological resource information in a proposed Nature Center.

\*Sponsor workshops on preservation or related issues.

It is a difficult and challenging task to ferret out in-depth, constructive feedback from museum visitors through written questionnaires alone. The comprehensive and insightful data gathered in the Denver and Smithsonian visitor surveys were the result of both questionnaires and extensive interviewing. It is essential to engage our museum and site visitors in some sort of dialogue to find out what the public wants to know other than the standard, "Did you find any gold?" or "Are you digging to China?"

In interpreting the results of our research do we omit or mis-

communicate issues that might make a difference in the public's understanding of the past? Do we tell people what they really want to know? I think the answer is - yes and no. There are as many questions as there are museum visitors. Therefore it is important to listen to these questions and comments, and note those that are repeated over and over again. The truth of the matter is that these seemingly obtuse questions are usually the key to knowing whether there are some gross misconceptions about the information that is being presented, or if you have hit the mark and have provided the catalyst for further inquiry and understanding.

It is important to be aware of the continuous and exciting research being conducted on audience learning by our colleagues who work in all areas of public interpretation. Our notions on how people develop visual literacy and learn through objects are changing constantly. Archaeology is about people; it truly should be for people.

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