

Making sense of museums

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What WERE museums for?

- Education through knowledge
- Social improvement
- Entertainment
- Advancing civilisation

What happened?

- Curators restricted access and -



The boy who breathed on the glass at the British Museum by H. M. Bateman

What happened?

- made inaccessible displays



Citroen C42 Building, Paris

What happened?

‘Museums to date have tended to collect the hardware, not the software of life, the product, not the purpose.’

Julian Spalding, ‘The Poetic Museum’, 2002

What happened?

- **Information more widely available**
- **Other ways to learn**
- **Entertainment more widely available**

What ARE museums for?

Witnesses to the past

- an emotional experience of the past



What ARE museums for?

Museums are places

‘consecrated to longer term purposes and values’

Marc Pachter

What ARE museums for?

- **Personal meanings**
- **Constructivist learning (George Hein)**
- **Multiple intelligences (Howard Gardner)**
- **Learning styles**

The BIG question –

Is it possible to give each visitor a personal, emotional experience of objects which are authentic and real?

Yes

- **1. Look at your organisation** – what does it say is its main purpose?
- **2. Look at your staff** – who works with visitors?
(Education staff, audience development staff, access staff, stewards)
- **3. Look at your audiences** – how much do you know about them? (and who is NOT visiting?)

Audiences – two examples

Families

Mixed ages, 0-12

Youngest child dominates

Adult needs information

Need self-guided resources

2-6 people

Grandparents may come too

Adult/child ratio very high 1/1

Learning through language

Need good leisure facilities

Often local

Pupils 11-14

Tight age range

Disruptive child dominates

Adults don't teach but supervise

Need serviced activities

Large groups up to 120

Non-specialists also supervise

Adult/child ratio 1/20

Learn independently with peers

Need for large spaces

May have travelled 2+ hours

What are the barriers?

- **Physical** (I can't get there)
- **Sensory** (I can't see / hear)
- **Intellectual** (I can't understand)
- **Cultural** (We don't go to museums)
- **Financial** (I can't afford it)
- **Emotional** (I don't like museums)

Gallery displays – some ideas

- **Space and opportunity for conversation**
- **Free flow route allowing for personal meanings**
- **Labels written by the audience, not the curator**
- **Displays which raise rather than answer questions**

Labels for learning

Portrait of Sultan Mehmet by Giovanni Bellini, 1480

Sultan Mehmet :
cruel or clever;
lonely or aloof?



Services

- **Tours and costumed guides**



- **Meet staff 'behind the scenes'**



Services

- Rôle play and re-enactment



- Handling collections



Gallery displays

- Interactives



The Great Bed of Ware, Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Foam model of the Parthenon

Services

Outreach

- Exhibitions and loans
- Travelling workshops
- Websites



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