

Making sense of museums – Robin Clutterbuck

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Accompanies PowerPoint

1. Main title

The premise of this talk is that museums are places where a society communicates with its past – not just places where we store objects. I'll be looking at the part museums play in today's society, and how this has changed in the two and a half centuries since the first public museums were opened. I'll be considering what these changes tell us about how we view our heritage and the small percentage of objects which we have selected to represent and remind us of the past. I'll propose that our experiences of museums are entirely personal: each of us responds differently depending on our life experiences, our cultural background and even the way we think and learn. The challenge for museums is to make themselves accessible to **every** visitor – certainly no small task! I'll look at what we call our visitors – are they 'users' (suggesting something prosaic, like a bus service), 'customers' (suggesting that there is a transaction somewhere – we're providing a service for them and they're always right or they won't come back again) or are they 'audiences' (suggesting that we're putting on a show for them, as in a theatre). We certainly need to know more about our visitors, and I'll attempt to show some of the ways we can communicate with them, through static displays, interactivity, events, theatre, re-enactment, outreach and the web. Being British, my view of museums is obviously based on my experience of museums in my own country and culture – I celebrate this because my country's attitude to the past and the way we interact with it has led to some of the best museums in the world – in Britain today we're moving towards a museum sector driven by the needs of its visitors, with learning at the core of the whole operation.

2. 19th C museums

In some ways, our view of museums is still rooted in the 19th century, when most of the public museums were established. They were set up at a time when they could achieve great social objectives – improving people's knowledge, even trying to civilise them – and were

also places of entertainment where people could see curiosities from around the world.

3. Curators restricted access

However, things changed. In time, curators became more professional. They began to see their rôle as guardians of civilisation, protecting the objects from visitors by putting them behind glass or even storing them away altogether. Understandably, they didn't want people to get up close in case they damaged the objects, but in reality the only people who were allowed full access to the heritage were other curators and scholars. The general public began to feel excluded. The public image of museums became one of exclusivity rather than access for all and the word 'museum' began to be associated with dusty, unwelcoming, out-of-date places. The British cartoonist H. M. Bateman captured this well in his cartoon of 'The boy who breathed on the glass in the British Museum' – he was caught by the steward and put in prison. He returns to the museum as an old man and defiantly breathes his last breath on the same pane of

4. Inaccessible displays C42

glass. The logical extension of this kind of museum can be seen in some modern galleries – beautiful works of architecture which are actually no more than showcases which enshrine objects. The new Citroen showroom in Paris by Manuel Gautrand is a bit like this. It's an eight floor display of Citroen cars through the ages: look but don't put your greasy fingers

5. Spalding quote

on them! What we all want to do is actually drive one of them! Julian Spalding put this another way in his superb book 'The Poetic Museum': 'Museums to date have tended to collect the hardware, not the software of life, the product, not the purpose.' A tray of coins sorted by a curator into types based on the differences between them means much less to the ordinary visitor than a display showing what each coin could have bought when it was in use. The coins are the 'hardware' and their value is the 'software'.

6. Other changes since 19thc

Another thing has changed since museums were places of entertainment. With TV and the internet there is now much more

competition for entertainment, and with cheaper travel it's now possible for us to actually go to the places where the objects came from. Some museums have responded by trying to compete in the entertainment market, by putting on shows and even removing objects altogether from exhibitions. There are galleries in the Natural History Museum in London where there are no objects; although the displays are highly educational they have lost their original purpose of allowing people to see real things and have become multimedia displays.

So what are museums really for today?

I feel that they are places where people can see the **authentic**, the **real** in world filled with things replicated through mass-production, or through computer generated, digitally enhanced images. With today's technology it would be possible to recreate an almost exact replica of a famous object or painting, but being identical is not the same as being unique.

7. Witness top the past

I think museums are places where you can see things that **witnessed the past** – where the objects become relics. In some ways, you could argue that museums fulfil an almost religious rôle in a secular age. They are places where you can go to get an **emotional experience** of something that happened in the past. Some of the most successful museums opened recently have focussed on events such as the Holocaust or the

8. Pachter quote

bombing of London. In the words of Marc Pachter, Director of the American National Portrait Gallery, museums are places 'consecrated to longer term purposes and values'. It was reported that after the 9/11 attacks in New York, more people visited museums than churches as they tried to come to terms with the tragedy, because museums represented stability in a changing world.

9. Personal meanings

A museum is a place for **personal meanings**. My experience visiting a museum in Turkey is entirely different to your experience, because I have a different view of the cultural context of the objects on display. For instance, I would interpret a display on the medieval Christian Crusades in a very different way to you. I know where the knights came from – their castles still stand in their manors in England and stone sculptures on their tombs in the churches show them lying at peace in their armour. On the other hand you probably view them as boorish barbarian invaders. George Hein has described museum learning as a **constructivist** process: we construct our own personal meanings according to our knowledge and experiences. We even learn in different ways; Howard Gardner called this **multiple intelligences**. Some of us learn best through written words, others through discussion, others through pictures, music or activities.

10. The BIG question

So how can museums meet all these needs – offering each visitor a personal, emotional experience of objects which are authentic and real? I'll spend the rest of my talk looking at ways we can do this.

11. YES: look at 1. Organisation 2. Staff 3. Audiences

Firstly, the museum needs to look at what it says is its main purpose. This may only be a piece of paper but it guides all the big decisions. Does the museum's policy say that the main purpose is 'to give each visitor a personal, emotional experience of objects which are authentic and real?' Or does it say the main purpose is to preserve objects for the future?

This is where I feel trained education staff come in – after all, they (we) are specialists in helping people learn and understand, while curators and conservators are specialists in looking after objects. Things have been changing in the last two decades in the museum community in Britain, but it wasn't long ago that education staff were seen as people who just led school parties around the museum. They had

no influence on how the museum communicated with all of its visitors. Now we have many posts to look after visitors' needs in museums. They are often called 'Access Officer' or 'Audience Development Officer' reflecting their wider rôle in making the museum displays and services more accessible for a wide range of people, not just schools. Of course there are other people concerned with improving visitors' experience in museums, especially in independent museums which depend on visitors for their income. All museums have stewards and these are a major resource – all too often they are given a pure security rôle, patrolling the galleries like the steward in Bateman's cartoon, but they can offer excellent knowledge about the people they meet around the museum and should be involved in all developments for visitors. Publicity officers are also important in keeping museums' eyes on the needs of visitors, although there is a danger of commercial factors spoiling the very character of the things people come to see – sometimes publicity can focus on the objects rather than the things we might be able to do or learn in the museum.

Museums in Britain now almost always refer to their visitors as 'audiences', a term taken from performing arts like theatre, cinema and music. The implication is that the museum is putting on a performance and the visitor is getting an experience on a creative, emotional level. For many museums this is still an aspiration but it is an important term to use as it suggests communication. Another important thing is to use the term 'audiences', not just 'audience'. People fit into many different audiences at the same time, and the same person may act differently when in a different group. A ten year old boy in a family group will not act in the same way as when he is with a group of friends or with his school. A thirty year old woman will get a different experience of the museum when she is looking after her two small

**12.
Audiences –
2 examples**

children from when she visits on her own. Take two types of audiences – families and school pupils aged 11 to 14. They could not be more different.

Families

Mixed ages, from 0 to 12

The youngest child dominates

The adult needs information

They need self-guided resources

They are in groups of 2 to 6 people

Grandparents may come too

The adult/child ratio is very high – 1/1

They learn through discussion with parents
friends

They need facilities like cafes and shops

They are often local

Pupils 11-14

Tight age range

The naughtiest child dominates

The adults don't teach but supervise

They need serviced activities

They may be in large groups, up to 120

Non-specialists also supervise

The adult/child ratio is low – 1/20

They learn independently with their

They need large spaces

They may have travelled 2 hours or more

Audiences are **segmented**. This means that although there may be an overall audience such as 'tourists' or 'schools', we need to split them into smaller groups or segments. 'Tourists' may include families, older people, coach groups, people on short visits or staying in the area for longer. Each segment will have different interests and may stay at the museum for different lengths of time.

Then of course there are those audiences who are not visiting. Is this because they don't want to visit and never will, or is it because they don't think they have time, or perhaps they just haven't heard about what there is to do at the museum.

We need to know about the way different audiences work and the only way is to ask them. We can do this through interviews or by asking them to fill out questionnaires. Often this process helps us to design exhibitions and services which would appeal to them. It can also tell us whether things we have designed are working for a particular audience. In Britain this kind of information is often needed before the museum can get funds for new projects – the funding organisation needs to see some evidence that the museum has asked people for their views on how it should develop. This is

especially important for community museums, where local people want to feel that their museum represents them and their history.

13. Barriers

A good way of approaching the idea of meeting the needs of different audiences is to consider what things are stopping them from getting the most out of their visit. These **barriers** may be simple problems such as a step at the door which makes it difficult for a mother with a child in a pushchair. The text may be too small or the lighting too dim for older people with poor eyesight. There are also intellectual barriers such as not understanding complex words due to a lack of education. Some people learn best through discussion, while others prefer to read on their own; the museum needs to make sure that there are opportunities for all types of learner. There are financial barriers: some people can't visit because they can't afford the transport or the admission fee. There are even cultural barriers: some people haven't been brought up to think that museums might be interesting places to visit.

14. Gallery displays

Once you have identified the barriers then it is possible to suggest how to break them down. Some things can be done in the gallery displays themselves. Write the text so that the main points are clear from the first two lines, but there is more detailed information for people who want to read further. Don't use specialised words in the sections that non-specialists will read. An interesting approach – and one not much liked by curators! – is to ask

15. Labels for learning

questions rather than giving facts in the labels. In the National Gallery in London is Bellini's famous portrait of Mehmet the Conqueror. A typical label might say 'Portrait of Sultan Mehmet by Giovanni Bellini, 1480'. How much more interesting to get people thinking about the man in the painting by using an open-ended question such as 'Sultan Mehmet: cruel or clever; lonely or aloof?' If you think a certain audience may have difficulty understanding an object, invite people from that audience to work with you to write the labels – there are some great examples of children's labelling

done by children for other children (adults like them too). The space itself is important: if you want people to have discussions, put chairs facing each other around the galleries, but if you want people to think on their own, make small intimate spaces with a single seat.

However if we really want to break down barriers, the best way is through **services**. The permanent displays can only go so far in reaching all types of audience. These services are all ways of helping people communicate with the collections. They include tours, interviews, costumed interpreters in rôle as historical characters, events, storytelling and plays. You can give people opportunities to handle objects. You can take things out of the museum into local communities, or use the internet as an arm of the museum, with activities for children and archive information for researchers. Each one of these services could be a talk or workshop in its own right – indeed I will be running a workshop on handling collections tomorrow – so in this talk I’m just going to describe some of them briefly.

16. Tours and behind the scenes

Guided tours are used a great deal in museums, but really a tour is only good if the guide is good, so in some ways the tour guide becomes the main attraction. They need to be good storytellers and to be able to put on a show. If they engage the visitors in conversation they will find out more about their level of knowledge and what things interest them. Like my earlier example about labels, why not use a questioning technique? This works very well with children, who are less inhibited about joining in. All guides should expect to be trained to recognise learning styles and use ways to adapt their tours according to their audience.

For the visitor, the guide is often the way they meet someone who represents your organisation. I set up an education service in a monastery where the monks took people round the church. They were already ‘in costume’ and were part of the reason people came to visit. I suggested that they stopped doing the tours and instead

invited people to ask them about being a monk. These sessions became highly successful and also allowed the monks to take another look at their lives by explaining it to people. In a museum, you could have sessions with curators or conservators where they spoke about their work, perhaps discussing how to display an item or how a particular painting was cleaned. One museum I know operates a live video-link from the conservation laboratory at certain times of the day so that people can see ‘behind the scenes’ and meet the conservator.

I have already talked about how important **stewards** are in museums. Although they don’t normally give guided tours, they are often the main people who represent the museum to its visitors. I feel strongly that they should be given a much higher profile, engaging visitors in conversation and making themselves approachable. They should be trained to be able to relate to visitors on many levels depending on their age or culture. Stewards can be the front line of the museum’s work with its visitors.

Using **costumed interpreters** is another way of making the past more accessible to visitors – this approach normally works better in a historic site (where there’s a ready-made ‘stage’ for them) than in a museum. They can either be actors completely in rôle as a historical character (this is ‘first person’ re-enactment) or people dressed up in costume telling visitors what would have gone on (‘third person re-enactment’). An organisation called IMTAL – the International Museum Theatre Alliance – will tell you much more about this technique, which is well known in the USA and Britain.

Events can be excellent ways of breaking down barriers for people who prefer to learn through activity. A day of craft workshops showing historic techniques such as weaving, metalwork or making flint tools can liven up the museum or historic site and give visitors a much deeper understanding of the objects on display. I’ll never forget a museum in France where someone showed me how to make fire using a bow,

a stick of ash wood and a plank of ivy wood. Workshops work well with families, as they are ideal opportunities for parents and their children to learn together.

17. Rôle play and handling

A lot of my work is to do with designing things for people to get closer to the past. These might be **handling** collections or games and **interactives**. Depending on the target audience, they can be used in the galleries or in separate rooms set aside for the purpose. They are ideal for children because they don't involve reading, but are based around playing and problem solving. Obviously many objects in museums can't be touched but handling a replica while close to the original is an excellent way of improving access. The

18. V&A and Parthenon

famous 16th century 'Bed of Ware' in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London can't be touched, but a display close by has all the materials used to make the bed – horsehair for the mattress, fine tapestry for the curtains around the bed, silk sheets – which visitors can touch. I recently produced a large foam model of the Parthenon (3m by 1m in size), designed so that a group of schoolchildren could build it. The museum itself was modelled on a Greek temple and has a good Ancient Greek collection, so schools often came to it as part of their studies. A simple game with cards showing close-up details of objects around the gallery leads children on to looking carefully not just to find the objects on the cards but then at lots of other things around the gallery. If you give them a magnifying glass or a torch they get a different view of the objects and this makes them think differently about them. In a natural history gallery you can give small children animal masks, and of course child sized costumes go down well in many other settings – even a selection of hats can help them experience other identities. All of these interactive learning ideas are based on the principle that they offer a way for people – especially children – to get a better experience of the original objects through experiencing something through activity.

19. Outreach

An important part of many museums' work involves activities outside the museum. For poorer people who can't afford to visit,

museums can take some of the collections out to them and run small displays near their homes, about things that would interest them. Many museums take objects into nursing homes where they run ‘reminiscence sessions’ for elderly people. This gets them talking to each other and can improve their memory and perhaps even their health.

Websites are also part of a museum’s outreach work. If you accept that some people may use the website without ever being able to visit (perhaps because they live in another country), you can design a service for them, probably involving images and documents for research.

**20. Final
slide -
address**

I’ve only just started to look at the way we can make museums more accessible to our visitors. A famous English novel – ‘The Go-Between’ by L. P. Hartley – opens with the line ‘the past is foreign country: they do things differently there.’ I hope I have been able to show you some of the ways that a museum can help its visitors make that journey.