Museums and Their Visitors: Historic Relationship

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Abstract
The makeup of the museum visitor is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of museum history for historians to uncover. Historians of museums have often noted that before the field of Visitor Studies grew to prominence, museums often envisioned their audiences as nameless, faceless masses. Historians have either painted this public as composed of members of the privileged elite or as those receptive to being shaped by the elite cultural institutions. This entry examines how the museum visitor has been discussed by both museum professionals and historians of museums in the nineteenth and twentieth century United States.

The Victorian museum visitor leaves but ghostly images in photographs and paintings of historic exhibition halls. Natural history museums greet the Victorian audience with objects grouped comparatively by type or geographic location, which form seemingly endless, straight lines within cold, glass cases. Art museums greet the same visitors with top to bottom walls of paintings or paintings along single lines intend to represent the development of art from its “primitive” forms to its highest (read) European incarnations. The Victorian museum visitor would hardly recognize most contemporary museums in either the United States or Europe, save for the seemingly timeless Greco-Roman architectural façade that masks the past century of change protected within the museum’s walls. Museum audiences and visitors, unlike exhibition spaces, collections acquisitions, architectural developments, and institutional changes, leave little documentation of their change over time. Historic visitors to museums have traditionally been treated by scholars in either one of two contradictory terms; they either represented the bourgeoisie elite of a given region or time period, or they have represented the faceless masses subjected to the social control of the elites governing the museums themselves. For more on this contradictory viewpoint related to museum audiences, see Ref. [1]. Other scholars have argued that American museums have, since their origins, been geared more towards educating broader audiences than European museums (see, for example, Ref. [2]). Museums today, unlike their earlier manifestations, make deliberate efforts to empirically understand who their audiences are, how they learn, and what most interests them. This also helped allow modern museums make conscientious efforts to educate wide-ranging audiences, including children and the disadvantaged. Museums also increasingly work to include their visitors in their presentation of knowledge. Computer-based guest books, blogs, touch screen monitors, and other new technology allow visitors to “talk back” to exhibitions and participate in their development. While most recognize these developments as being, on the whole, overwhelmingly positive, others criticize that museums have gone too far to embrace a brand of “edutainment” and long for a return of a museum “golden age” that, in truth, never really existed. In fact, the use of quantitative analysis by museums in efforts to better understand their audiences and how they learn has made museums both more effective and more enjoyable. This entry will attempt to trace the history of museum audiences and their representation in the historical literature. This entry focuses mainly on the history of museums in the United States from the late nineteenth century to the present. This entry does not focus on the growing body of literature focusing on professionalized Visitor Studies, but rather, it examines the nature of the more casual, yet concerted dialogue about museum audiences in which museum professionals engaged throughout the late nineteenth century to the present.

In his study of the intellectual history of American museums, the historian Steven Conn notes that, “Museum audiences are elusive quarry for the historian,” as “They left little trace of themselves and did not register with and specificity in the official records of most museums.”[3] Before the 1920s, many museums understood their visitors in terms of one or two basic categories often limited a dichotomy of either adults or school groups. Many museums associated with universities differentiated between school groups and students from the university, sometimes even noting which courses required students to visit the campus museum. Beyond that, however, historians are left with only the museum professionals’ speculation on their patrons. Museums did not typically record the educational background of adults visiting the museum and their understanding of how to cater to their audiences continued to be limited. Generally, most museum archives are devoted primarily to the maintenance
of a record articulating the development of collections, general institutional policy, and exhibition spaces. Archives are perceived as generally silent on the subject of audiences; however, historians can gain clues to their nature upon close readings of the available sources. The contrast in the available documentation related to collections and exhibitions vis-à-vis the available documentation for museum audiences is perhaps telling. It might be argued that museums considered their collections and exhibitions as a greater priority to the health of the institution, leading directly to the ratio of available archival materials.

By the turn of the last century, museums and museum professionals were seriously contemplating the experience of the visitor to their institutions. Franz Boas, the illustrious cultural anthropologist working at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) engaged in just the sort of intellectual debate that characterized the discourse surrounding the experiences of the museum visitor during this time period in a 1907 exchange in the journal Science. In responding to a review penned by a curator at his former institution, the Field Museum of Natural History (FMNH) in Chicago, Boas chose to broaden the discourse and entitled his response “Some Principles of Museum Administration.” Boas, in comparing two institutions that were well known as significant research institutions vis-à-vis the sleepy American universities at the time, explains, “Museums may serve three objects. They may be institutions designed to furnish healthy entertainment, they may be intended for instruction and they may be intended for the promotion of research.” Boas was perhaps one of the most significant researchers working in the United States at this time and yet he explains in the article that the “value of the museum as a resort for popular entertainment must not be underrated.”

Museums, therefore, should be both entertaining and intellectually stimulating. George Dorsey, the curator from FMNH who initially offered his critique of the exhibits at the AMNH, longed for the good old days of museum exhibitions. Dorsey comments, “Such exhibits as those above [at the AMNH] characterized might with some degree of propriety be found in the lower grades of the public school, but they certainly do not seem worthy of an institution with claims to be foremost of American museums.” Dorsey argues that if the AMNH’s leadership truly desires for objects to serve the purpose of educating the general public, they should simply pack them up and send them off to the public schools around the region. He concludes condescendingly, “thus the ideal of this scheme might be more easily and cheaply realized.”

For many curators at the early part of the past century, however, museum exhibits were intended to be forums for the presentation of the most recent available research. While the tension between creating cutting-edge research and the desire to popularize major ideas existed throughout the course of the twentieth century, several factors forced museums to begin changing. While a significant number of important exceptions exist, many of the top researchers in fields such as anthropology, biology, and geology began taking academic job posts in universities as opposed to curatorial positions in natural history museums. In fields such as ethnology and archaeology, the rise of new cultural patrimony laws governing the international transport of objects of cultural patrimony resulted in the decrease of certain types of collections arriving in museums. This claim is not without its problems. Certain institutions maintained, on the surface, a steady flow of objects into their collections, though, in the case of anthropological collections in museums, it is important to differentiate between archaeological and ethnographic material. The Hearst Museum of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley offers an example of this phenomenon. During the Great Depression and Second World War, when international travel and the purchase of objects from indigenous peoples became increasingly difficult, an increased number of archaeological expeditions allowed the museum to continue to grow at a steady pace in terms of the number of objects accessioned per year.

While the visitor experience was becoming more commonly discussed in various forums utilized by museum professionals, summations of the health of individual museums, or museums as a whole, began not with attendance figures but rather notable collections acquisitions and the development of research programs. Visitors were not left out of documents produced by museums entirely, however, and the visitors experience is hinted at on certain occasions. In a 1908 article summarizing the annual reports of several major institutions, F.A. Lucas notes that the Carnegie Museum’s annual report expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that the museum had been opened to the public before the exhibits were ready to host them. Lucas further notes the troubles of the Brooklyn Museum, which complained of having too many tasks without the necessary resources to address them. Two items that the Brooklyn Museum’s annual report disparages are a lack of labels for objects and disarranged exhibit cases. It does not take a vast leap of the imagination to begin to understand how a visitor might experience the self-described disarranged and unlabeled, exhibits of the Brooklyn Museum during this time period. Attendance figures, though not included in Lucas’ opening remarks on the health of American museums, are included in his commentary later on, presented alongside the attendance figures for several major institutions. Lucas notes that attendance figures, in his estimation, are commonly misunderstood:

We are accustomed to regard the number of visitors to a museum as a measure of its importance and public
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usefulness, but it may more properly be looked upon as an indication of its interest for the public and to some extent the state of the weather. If it is of interest to the public, there is small doubt but what it will prove to be useful.[7]

Lucas also gives an indication of how museums were beginning to understand their audiences. He notes that visitors to the U.S. National Museum (now the Smithsonian Institution) are largely out-of-town tourists, while many of the other major metropolitan museums, such as the FMNH and AMNH, host primarily local and regional residents. Lucas is also quick to point directly to the construction of a new, elevated train station in New York near the AMNH as the direct cause for a spike in attendance. Lucas writes, “Museum attendance, as shown by the report of the U.S. National Museum, is subject to great fluctuation and, like sun-spots, has its maximum and minimum periods.” Lucas utilizes similar experiences from museums in London to conclude his analysis on the topic. Clearly then, museums were coming to a better understanding of their audiences over a quarter of the total number of museum visitors represented the largest number of visitors in the male category. Women (23,000), yet they were outpaced many times over by farmers, who represented the majority of the art students visiting the museum were made up of farmers, who represented the majority of the art students visiting the museum were making up an estimated 6000 visitors, barely outpaced by other types of visitors. The most common suggestion for improvement was given to one thousand of the first million visitors to the museum by private car, though various types of public transportation, when combined, greatly outpaced this number. Over half of the visitors learned about the museum through word of mouth, though over 40% were prompted to go to the museum due to some form of advertisement, many of which were placed on streetcars. Housewives and farmers mostly enjoyed the period rooms, while students and artists appreciated the paintings—as did the factory workers—and architects and engineers appreciated the museum building itself as much as they enjoyed the exhibits. The most common suggestion for improvement was a desire for a greater number of lectures, a desire for a café, and better modes of transportation to and from the institution. The museum report concludes that the institution does not simply represent a small portion of the public, but rather a large cross-section of the population. That said, the museum attracted, “a proportionally large
number of people from those groups whose vocations make them most dependent upon a knowledge and study of works of art.\[^{[10]}\]

In reading the 1929 report on the Pennsylvania Museum’s survey, one is struck by not only the broad cross-section of the population visiting the museum, but also the wide range of reactions to the institution, most of which were positive. The report concludes that it was initiated in an attempt to better the museum’s service to the public. This report complicates the notion that museums in the United States were simply gathering points for the bourgeoisie elite of a given community. The vast number of farmers and factory workers visiting the museum indicate that it was not simply a form of entertainment for the upper class. Additionally, the roughly proportionate female visitors (54.8%) to male visitors (45.2%) indicate that museums were neither sites of male or female domination.\[^{[10]}\]

Though quantitative forms of analysis were becoming increasingly available, broad assumptions related to museum audiences and visitors remained the currency of academicians and museum professionals that attempted to be the authority on the subject. In a 1940 article appearing in *Science*, Marcus S. Goldstein posited a number of questions on museum visitors but then noted, “I am not acquainted with the literature on museum administration, and research based on the above queries may already be available.” Rather than familiarizing himself with this literature, Goldstein believed his assumptions, and the assumptions of those around him, to be interesting enough for publication, “In any case, my own observations (and the response of a number of other individuals with whom the subject has been discussed support these views), point to the following conditions...” While many of Goldstein’s arguments prove to be interesting and valid, (e.g., museum exhibitions should have movement to attract a broader audience) a complete lack of evidence beyond his assumptions prevent the argument from being wholly effective.\[^{[11]}\]

The experience of visiting museums in both the United States and Europe changed swiftly after the close of the Second World War. Museums in the United States began hiring educators who worked directly with visitors, curatorial staff, and perhaps most importantly, the docents who guided tours through museum exhibits. Docents were trained to design tours aimed toward educating specific types of audiences, rather than repeating the same tour for every group. Art museums, specifically, had taken the lead role in working with young children in the field of museum education following the Second World War.\[^{[12]}\] More specifically, art museums in cities like Indianapolis, rather than the major metropolitan museums of Chicago or New York, assumed the lead role in developing children’s art classes or workshops in museums. In addition to developing new exhibition spaces specifically aimed at childhood education, museums were changing the nature of how school groups visited museums. Whereas previously museums would encourage school groups to tour the entire museum in a single day, museums such as the Denver Natural History Museum (now the Denver Museum of Nature and Science) began encouraging teachers to tie visits closely with classroom materials. By the late 1950s, museums were discouraging schools from bringing in groups for general visits, and strongly encouraging these types of classroom-related visits. An example of this type of guideline can be found in Ref. [13]. Attendance in museums in both the United States and in many places in Europe boomed following the Second World War. Long lines awaited newly reopened museums on the coasts or in vulnerable areas including the British Museum in London and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, both of which had been closed or redacted during the course of the war. The Denver Natural History Museum, Art Institute of Chicago, and numerous other American museums broke attendance records as the Second World War came to a close. Americans, as the war waned on, possessed a far greater amount of disposable income than during the latter years of the Great Depression, and one manner in which they spent their new income was at museum turnstiles. Theodora Kroeber, wife of the famed American anthropologist, Alfred Kroeber, describes in her biography of her husband their waiting in line with throngs of Londoners to visit the reopened British Museum of Natural History.\[^{[14]}\] Museum visitors again availed themselves to many of the most prized works of arts possessed by these institutions that were placed in storage or sent inland, to other museums for safekeeping.

By the 1950s, in addition to changing methodologies related to collections, loans and exchanges, the goals of various types of museum exhibitions, were continuing to evolve. In 1957, the *Los Angeles Times* described the development as the museum shifting its gaze from the exhibition cases themselves to those that were supposed to be looking at the cases. The L.A. Times reporter argued that when museums did in fact begin to attempt to understand the museum visitor, it noted that they were generally uninterested in many of the ideas presented to them. “Perhaps,” the *L.A. Times* reported, “it was because the presentation was uninspired.”\[^{[15]}\] Generally, museum curators by this time were taking fewer risks in their exhibitions. By 1954, a pair of museum commentators and curators, Donald Collier and Harry Tschopik, Jr. commented in *American Anthropologist*, “Most importantly, the newer exhibits have not, to date, reflected any systematic or integrated plan, and treatment of many problems of current theoretical interest...” Unlike museums of the first half of the twentieth century, exhibits did not address matters of “current theoretical interest.”\[^{[16]}\] Instead, museums presented basic educational materials and served as introductions to broader topics. Museums had become more analogous to introductory textbooks than scholarly journals. Interestingly, the notion of educating the public via exhibitions and the production of
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top-notch research continued to be somewhat at odds. This was especially true in university-based museums. In 1953, in discussing the continued desire for a new anthropology building, the anthropology department at the University of California, Berkeley circulated a memorandum that noted museum research and the use of collections for exhibition spaces were somewhat at odds. “The use of the collections for undergraduate teaching exhibits frequently conflicts with their use for research, when materials in an exhibition case are needed for a research project, and the reverse situation also arises.”[17]

Popular notions surrounding museums, however, were anything but fully changed by the 1960s. In 1963, another L.A. Times reporter argued that if the word, “museum” came up in a word association game, his response would be “stuffed Indian.” This word association response, the reporter then argues, would have been inaccurate, “Because museums are moving magically these days.”[18]

The postwar period of American history also meant the development of new museum facilities in many parts of the country. This development, in turn, lead to greater pressure for museums to draw larger crowds. Museums began responding to these pressures by hosting a greater number of major, “blockbuster” exhibitions on topics of popular interest, thus changing the visitor experience.

While most museums were essentially developing educational programming without quantitative analysis informing the decision-making process, museum professionals during the 1960s and 1970s worked to better understand their audiences and develop programming specifically attuned to the need of the public. In 1975, an article in the journal Studies in Art Education, estimated that 93% of the art museums in the United States sponsored educational programs. Of those programs, no serious, systematic documentation of the programs’ effectiveness or scope had been attempted. In other words, while museums were attempting to educate their audiences utilizing more refined processes, they possessed little understanding of how well they were working.[19]

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, museums were arriving at a more complex understanding of their audiences. In 1989, a study of several American art museums that corroborated with another study in England demonstrated that those visiting art museums were typically “in the upper educational, occupational and income groups, younger than the population in general (average age is 34) and active in community and leisure-time organizations.”[20]

While natural history and science museums were understood as catering to audiences differently than art museum, the common notion that museums were synonymous with the upper class of western society continued to stick, and arguably with some supporting evidence. One of the authors of the 1989 study, would, 1 year later, argue that the one of the most important factors in turning a nonart museum visitor into a regular patron was not parental encouragement or the entrance into a new tax bracket, but rather, having art lessons as a child. The most important factor however, between visitors and non-visitors, was simply being offered the opportunity to visit the museum in the first place.[21]

In 1999, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History featured an exhibit on the history of sweatshops in the United States. The exhibit, which covered a subject that was challenging for many visitors to the museum, provided a guest book for visitor comments. Mary Alexander, an educator employed by the Smithsonian, published many of her observations related to the visitors’ reactions and comments to the exhibit, which was entitled, “Between a Rock and Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820–Present.” The following year, the results of Alexander’s study were published in the academic journal, The Public Historian. The exhibit is representative of attempts by museums to better understand—and subsequently cater to—their visitors. The process of documenting the audience’s reactions to an exhibition, studying these reactions, and then disseminating the results of the study in an academic journal would have been unheard of throughout most of the twentieth century. As Alexander’s study demonstrated, museum audiences were, by-and-large, understanding many of the complex and challenging themes presented in the displays. Alexander reported the comments of the visitors to museums in a fashion that might surprise some, arguing that their comments were “intelligent, articulate, sophisticated, and sometimes vehement.”

Several years before the Smithsonian exhibition on sweatshops in American history, the American Association of Museums developed a report entitled, “Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums.” The report examines museums and spaces of public education and offers 10 guidelines for improving and maintaining the role for museums well into the future. For the American Association of Museums, the changes occurring related to the professionalization of museum education represented progress. Analysis of this document can be found in Ref. [2]. The changes occurring in museums during the closing decades of the twentieth century did not go undisputed. In 1991, John Terrell, a Curator of Anthropology at the FMNH compared the contemporary museums to Disneyland, calling for a return of, “The Gold Old Days,” when academic departments were responsible for the development of exhibition spaces. The problem with Terrell’s commentary, however, is that “The Good Old Days,” as he envisions them, never really existed. Terrell notes that while museum curators were responsible for exhibitions from the founding of the museum through the 1960s, the museum displayed some of its most popular exhibitions. What Terrell carefully ignores, however, is that some curators were not simply just “mediocre in their exhibit talents”; some curators deliberately misled the public and the press in order to push for greater attendance, including a notable example of Henry Field at Terrell’s own Field Museum in the display of a set of European
human remains from the Magdalenian Period. (Henry Field, upon the occasion of the display of the Field Museum’s Magdalenian Girl.) Field called the display of the specimen a “chance to fire the imagination of Chicago.”[22] In connection with the skeleton, Field purchased an ivory harpoon point he claimed to have been found near the remains. Field began referring to the projectile point as the possible cause of death for the woman, and labeled it in the exhibition space as such. No archaeological evidence exists to make this claim, and it is unclear as to whether or not the projectile point even came from the same site at all. Despite the tenuous nature of the evidence, however, Henry Field, the museum, and the popular media, eagerly ran with the story. The museum and the press further speculated on the story of Magdalenian Girl’s murder as coming at the hands of a jealous lover. By the time the remains arrived in Chicago, the press had latched firmly onto the story, splashing it on the front pages and further speculating on the circumstances of the prehistoric woman’s death, and the public became fascinated. The first Saturday of her display, 22,000 visitors, a record crowd, came to view the skeleton firsthand.[23] Despite the fact that over a decade had gone by since her first appearance in Chicago, lectures on the subject of Magdalenian Girl were still selling out following the Second World War, as long as they included dramatizations of the circumstances of her demise.[24] In other words, possessing a doctorate in an academic discipline (like Henry Field) does not prevent an individual from being disingenuous or an effective communicator. On the other hand, educators with specialized knowledge of communicating ideas on a broad level have, on the whole crafted exhibits in museums which are arguably more interesting and entertaining than those developed by previous generations of scholars. My point here, of course, is not that educators are above the human temptation to exaggerate claims or make mistakes, but rather, than academic credentials does not prevent these types of errors. Like Dorsey before him, Terrell misjudged the modes of crafting the visitor experience in his own day-and-age. In the interest of full disclosure, the author is a former employee of the Field Museum.

Terrell and those still pining for a return to an age before the professionalization of education departments within museums would be wise to heed the words of A.E. Parr, the director of the American Museum of Natural History, who wrote upon the conclusion of the Second World War, “... to see as the goal of reconversion only a reversal to an earlier state of happier memory, and to seek mainly the reestablishment of previous contacts with fellow sufferers rather than attempt to reenter the turbulent main stream which left them on its shores for a while. This is the deepest pitfall across the path of the natural history museums today.”[25]

Museums today understand their visitors and audiences much more effectively than throughout the course of most of their history. Anecdotal assumptions about what makes a museum effective have been replaced in a successful manner with quantitative analysis. While visitor surveys and the hiring museum professionals with backgrounds in education have proven to be a positive development for these institutions, they cannot fully replace the casual observation of exhibition halls on a day-to-day basis. Curators would be well served to spend more time in their own exhibitions, working directly with visitors and observing docent tours rather than assuming they understand their constitution. Additionally, curators should avoid the assumption that their galleries were either more effective or possessed some a greater form of academic rigor in the “Good Old Days.” While museums at the turn of the last century did, in fact, present a more complex exhibition of their subject matter, the over-verbalization and emphasis on theory made many exhibits more pedantic than effective. While the Victorian museum visitor would hardly recognize most of their own cultural institutions, museums, and their audiences, have largely profited from these developments.

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