

## Review article

### Enhancing our understanding of museum audiences: visitor studies in the twenty-first century

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Falk, J. H. and Dierking, L. D., 2013, *The Museum Experience Revisited*, Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, California, paperback, 416pp, \$29.95

Bitgood, S. 2013, *Attention and Value: The Keys to Understanding Museum Visitors*, Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, California, paperback, 213pp, \$29.95

Lundgaard, I. B. and Jensen, J. T. (eds), 2014, *Museums: Knowledge, Democracy, Transformation*, Danish Agency for Culture, Copenhagen, paperback, 256pp, available to download from <http://www.kulturstyrelsen.dk/english/publications/museums-knowledge-democracy-and-transformation/>

Golding, V. and Modest, W. (eds), 2013, *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration*, Bloomsbury, London, New Delhi, New York and Sydney, paperback, 290pp, £19.99

Chatterjee, H. and Noble, G., 2013, *Museums, Health and Wellbeing*, Ashgate, Farnham and Burlington, VT, hardback, 146pp, £45.00

For more than half a century, 'visitor studies' have had a significant influence on how museums understand their audiences. Research into museum audiences has been used to develop museum spaces, exhibitions and programmes, helped to diversify and increase who visits museums, and deepened our collective understanding of why people visit museums and the impact (short-term and long-term) of their experiences. For example, the work carried out by Falk and Dierking (1992;2000), Hein (1998) and Hooper-Greenhill (1994; 2007) into how museum visitors learn has had a profound impact on how museums understand and support visitors' learning experiences in museums. However, the most surprising thing, as Hein (1998) notes, is that visitor studies took a while to become established. One of the earliest visitor studies in the UK can be traced back to Liverpool Museum in 1884 (which organized visitors into Students, Observers and Loungers, revealing an early propensity to categorization which continues to this day) yet it was not until after the Second World War that, for various reasons, visitor studies began to grow (see Hein 1998; Black 2005). There has been little coherence to how visitor studies has developed in the museum sector despite Visitor Studies organizations being established in Canada (1991), US (1992), Australia (1995) and UK (1998) - although there have been attempts such as the former Museum, Library and Archive Council's *Inspiring Learning for All* framework in the UK launched in 2004 (see RCMG 2015) - which has led to great diversity in approach but also fragmentation and, in some areas, a frustrating lack of rigour. There are many reasons for this, including the relatively few dedicated visitor research and evaluation posts in museums and the charge that some museum research is anecdotal in nature and lacks credibility, which is often unfairly levelled at qualitative research due to misunderstanding of its value. Although there is a large body of evidence about the effects of museums on audiences, it is largely dispersed across research designed for other purposes

(Scott, Dodd and Sandell 2014). Without a systematic approach to visitor studies, it is difficult to quantify or get a sense of the field as a whole; clearly there are large gaps in our knowledge, for example, as Scott, Dodd and Sandell 2014 highlight, we know relatively little about how museum audiences value their experiences and how these might impact on their life outside the museum. Indeed, the sector is characterized by long-standing debates about the value of visitor studies; Lynch suggests that museums continue to operate on 'assumptions about the worth of the work they do on behalf of others' (2013:218) and museum professionals are seen as concerned and cautious about collecting thoughts and opinions from the public (Wong 2012). However, if museums are to be serious about their social role, understanding the needs, motivations and expectations of visitors (and non-visitors) is critical to their mission, values and decision-making processes (Fleming 2012).

The most effective visitor studies literature can, then, illuminate how museum audiences experience, value, respond to and perceive museums. However, this literature also tells us a great deal about how museums experience, value, respond to, and perceive their audiences. At first glance, the five books reviewed here appear to take a different approach to the question of who visits museums and why. Falk and Dierking (2013) stress the need for an holistic approach to understanding the museum experience for audiences, whilst Bitgood (2013) focuses on the specific question of how to gain, and retain, visitors' attention. Lundgaard and Jensen (2014) explore the findings of a visitor survey undertaken in over 200 Danish museums and cultural institutions, set against a backdrop of the challenging issues museums are facing in the current global context. Golding and Modest (2013) reflect on the need to open museums up to more diverse audiences, presenting several case studies from around the world of museums collaborating more closely with marginalized, excluded and oppressed communities. Finally, Chatterjee and Noble (2013) explore the potential for museums to enhance health and wellbeing in their communities, and to work more closely with public health and social care sectors to achieve social aims. What can these five books, with their seemingly different approaches, reveal about museum audiences? How do these works enhance our understanding of the role that museums play in contemporary society?

*The Museum Experience Revisited* by Falk and Dierking (2013) reflects, in the author's words, 'seventy years of collective effort by the two of us to try to understand why people go to museums, what they do there, and what, if anything, they take away from their experiences' (13). It stresses the need to view the museum experience in an holistic way, understanding that the museum visitor is not an 'empty vessel, waiting to be filled with our wisdom' (7) but bring their own knowledge, understanding, needs, expectations and motivations into the museum with them. The longevity of social constructivist approaches to understanding the museum experience is testament to their validity as a means of explaining how museum visitors interact and respond within the museum space, and this book is firmly rooted in the social constructivist tradition. More pessimistically, it might suggest that visitor studies has not progressed very much from the 1990s when the first edition of this book was published (1992). However, the Contextual Model of Learning around which the museum experience is framed is still useful for demonstrating how the visitors' personal, sociocultural and physical contexts help to shape their experience within the museum. Whilst the authors admit that museum visits are more nuanced and complex than the linear model represented by the chapters of the book, the model remains an excellent and clear introduction to the concept that visitors have a life outside of the museum. One small criticism of the book is that it gives limited insights into the research and evaluation process; whilst there are extensive accounts from interviews and descriptions of visitor experiences in the museum, how to carry out similar research and use it effectively as part of museum development remains an intriguing subtext.

*Attention and Value: Keys to Understanding Museum Visitors* by Stephen Bitgood (2013) takes a much more focused approach on a specific 'problem' – how to gain, and retain, and 'promote engaged attention' (9) in visitors. Similarly to *The Museum Experience Revisited*, the book is aimed at museum professionals seeking ways in which to improve the experience for their visitors, and it is written in a clear and accessible manner, with key ideas highlighted at the beginning of each chapter. Bitgood uses rigorous evidence from a range of sources to develop his theoretical – conceptual 'attention-value' model, the aim of which is for museums to provide higher quality, more meaningful experiences that minimise 'unwanted outcomes

such as fatigue, satiation, and distractions' (176). Bitgood emphasizes that understanding the impact of 'person-setting variables' (e.g. visitor interest, agenda and exhibit design) on visitor attention is 'what ultimately leads to learning, inquiry, and other inferred outcomes' (72). The way in which the hypothesis is developed and supported through the book is well argued and supported with plenty of evidence. However, as with much of the visitor studies literature, the approach taken (outlining the problem / hypothesis, discussion of the evidence, developing the model, testing the model, conclusions) seems removed from the more 'messy' reality of actual museum visits.

*Museums: Knowledge, Democracy, Transformation* (Lundgaard and Jensen 2014) contextualizes the results of an ambitious User Survey carried out with over 200 Danish museums and cultural institutions in 2013, against four contemporary challenges that museums are facing. These are the promotion and development of citizenship (Identity and Learning Behaviour), intercultural dialogue and understanding (Space for Intercultural Dialogue), the need for greater gender equality (Gender Equality); and the challenge of meeting the needs of increasing numbers of international tourists (Cultural Tourism). The User Survey itself is a short, structured questionnaire that asked visitors to respond to a series of questions about their experience of visiting a museum. For example, visitors are asked to respond to a series of categories which best describes their motivation for visiting such as 'Recharger (I am here to recharge my batteries and to find peace and quiet and time for introspection...)' or 'Explorer (I am curious and interested. I am here today to gain new knowledge and inspiration)'. The analysis of the results of the survey is supported by a series of papers written by museum practitioners and cross-disciplinary thinkers, which reflect on the four challenges facing museums. There are some really thought-provoking papers here, including 'Museums and Human Rights: The *Inside* Exhibition and Forgotten Australians' by Adele Chynoweth (148-163) which explores the tensions over the portrayal of histories in museums that are not part of the official or 'consensus' history, and Gert Biesta explores an 'an-archic view on education, democracy and civic learning' (110-119), which examines and deconstructs what we mean by each of these terms in order to think about how we can use museums to encourage citizenship. What is an intriguing idea, merging visitor research with critical reflection on the role of museums, however does not really fulfil its potential because the visitor research, currently, does not enable the visitor 'voice' to shine through, as though only the experts have something important to say.

Getting away from theoretical models and structured surveys, which reduce the visitor experience to a set of tidily executed procedures, *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration* (Golding and Modest 2013) reflects better the 'messiness' and complexity of museums' attempts to engage with communities. It provides a range of inspiring international case studies from museum professionals, academics and researchers in museum studies, cultural studies and heritage, which, rather than seeking to make broad generalizations, focus on the interaction, relationships and opportunities for dialogue between museums and specific communities, many of which are (or have been) marginalized or excluded from mainstream society. These address the complexities of sharing power and authority in the museum, especially when trying to be more democratic and egalitarian; the constant and complex negotiations that accompany community co-production and co-curation is a common feature. This is, however, a positive movement in museum practice. Golding begins with a powerful examination of the 'Collaborative Museum' (13-31), providing a compelling argument for why it is critical that museums are aware of the power relationships that exist between museums and their communities, and to encourage collaboration 'in non-tokenistic ways that bestow equal respect - on a platform to safeguard the fundamental ethical values surrounding human rights' (3). I found much in this volume to feel encouraged that museums can not only reflect the contemporary world but can help us to think about ways of making that world better, drawing on the experiences of the past. Brekke's chapter 'A Question of Trust: Addressing Historical Injustices with Romani People' (178-192) reflects on attempts by the Norwegian Archive, Library and Museum Authority to establish a dialogue with the Romani/Tater people, a 'national minority that had all but disappeared from the public consciousness due to severe and systematic assimilation measures implemented by the Norwegian state over many years' (179). Attempts to build trust with the Romani people makes for poignant reading, as well as the tension between incorporating the community's chosen narratives

- one of freedom, joys of travelling, their 'resilience and the unbreakable will to survive' (188-189) - against the historical backdrop of oppression and the need for the Norwegian state to reconcile their previous treatment of minorities with a new desire to represent their lives and experiences as part of the national culture. Iervolino (113-129) traces the beginnings of work in Italy to create relationships with migrant communities, promote the importance of intercultural dialogue in generating new ideas and knowledge about collections, as well as encouraging an otherwise marginalized audience into the life of the museum. The value of 'polyvocality', of allowing many voices into the museum and reflecting the complexity of, and tension between, different perspectives, is explored by several authors, including Mason, Whitehead and Graham (163-177) through the redevelopment of galleries at the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Excell (130-142) who analyses the community consultation which underpinned the redevelopment of Manchester Museum's Ancient Egypt Galleries. Most of the case studies reveal an understanding that museums do not need to have all the answers, that they can allow for ambiguity and enable visitors to explore different responses to familiar, and less familiar, subjects. However, the organizational structures and ethos of museums can still continue to create barriers to working with diverse audiences, as Onciul explores in 'Community Engagement, Curatorial Practice, and Museum Ethos in Alberta, Canada' (79-97) where efforts by museums to collaborate with local Indigenous Blackfoot First Nation Communities were limited 'by the context in which it occurs and the extent to which a museum is willing to take on, adapt and indigenize its practice, products and ethos' (94). Perhaps there is something for museums to learn from the ways in which artists work? Taylor's discussion of Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project (48-58), an outdoor art installation in Detroit, Michigan, which uses abandoned houses as the backdrop for an enormous art installation, suggests that dialogue with communities is not only an ongoing process but is more about raising questions than finding answers, creating tensions and conflicts as well as shared perspectives and helping to effect positive change through addressing pressing social issues. As Taylor admits, Guyton's art works because it is about people, rather than about collections. The message seems to be - what might museums be if they had this same freedom? This edited volume is very positive in showing the range of work that museums are undertaking in engaging in dialogue with communities to shape their work, open up their collections and address very real social issues, however it is (like the other books) curiously lacking responses from the communities themselves. Whilst the authority of the museum to speak *for* communities is questioned here, the role of the researcher in speaking for these same communities is not and few writers are reflective about the way in which their work speaks for both community and museum. The book ends with a wide-ranging interview with Susan Pearce which explores her thoughts about greater collaboration in museums but which, for me, does not really get to the bottom of why this work is so important.

Finally, Chatterjee and Noble's *Museums, Health and Well-being* (2013) seeks to define what it calls a new field of study and practice - 'museums in health' - with the clear aim of encouraging 'heritage professionals to promote museums as assets for enhancing health and wellbeing' (2). It is an ambitious book that not only explores the theoretical and practical context from which health and wellbeing work has emerged, but seeks to map and analyze the work that is taking place in museums, provide examples of case studies, and discuss the ways in which the impact of this work can be measured and evidenced in ways that fulfil the needs of the public health and social care sectors, as well as the museum sector. On this point, the book is very clear that museums need to promote their role in health and wellbeing, one of the biggest challenges for museums is '*understanding, demonstrating and articulating* their value (both preventative and remedial) to individual and societal health' (4). Overall, *Museums, Health and Well-being* is an important step towards understanding and developing the museum sector's role in health and wellbeing; it contains a wealth of evidence of the benefits of museum experiences and use of museum collections for a range of audiences (including patients in hospital, older people with dementia, and others who do not regularly visit museums) but also the benefits for public health and social care professionals working with museums. It is not a 'how to' book but seeks to capture what is being done and what evidence is available - it repeatedly notes the need for more substantial and reliable evidence that stands up to the scrutiny of the scientific community (including standardized approaches that measure and capture impact) which reflects some of the wider concerns about research and evaluation in museums. Saying

that, I have some concerns with the book. It is quite dry and technical in tone, which makes it heavy-going in some places, particularly around the theory. The model of health and wellbeing used here is framed by a 'medicalized' approach and places a significant emphasis on the largely 'restorative and curative' (51) or therapeutic benefits of museum experiences. I would have liked to see more about the potential for museums to challenge societal views about health and wellbeing and a greater discussion around the gaps in current museum provision (such as children's wellbeing which is noted in the text). Despite these drawbacks, this book provides a welcome start to a hopefully broader range of literature on this significant topic. As the authors suggest, museums can make a strong contribution to health and wellbeing agendas. Museums can enhance wellbeing through their spaces and design, act as forums of discussion for important issues, promote health and wellbeing through their activities and programmes, keep minds active, provide spaces for social interaction, help us to make sense and meaning of the changes that happen to us over the life course – in short, museums can help us to explore the human condition. It would be good to see more exploration of that from the perspective of museum audiences.

Taken together, these five books reveal that museum audiences can be conceptualized in diverse ways, from understanding them as individuals with a life outside the museum – who bring that context into the museum with them and use it to frame their experiences – to individuals who need to have their attention 'captured' and 'held' in order to support a meaningful experience. Relationships with audiences are messy and complex and cannot be resolved easily, particularly if the power relationships embedded into the museum remain unacknowledged, but museums remain powerful spaces for encouraging learning, and can support positive health and wellbeing outcomes. Yet, what is also revealed is the way in which the museum literature silences and controls the 'voices' of those audiences, even when the focus is turned towards audiences. Visitor voices are limited to examples or extracts from interviews, used to illustrate a point or highlight something of importance to the author(s), or are categorised according to the needs of the author(s). Museums seem to classify and control their audiences in the same way that they classify and control their objects and it comes across as a rather reductive and confining approach. As Scott, Dodd and Sandell (2014) argue, more needs to be done to provide a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of how users experience and 'make sense' of museums, to understand the 'reality' of museums from the users' perspective rather than (as seems to be happening here) fitting the audience perspective into the needs of the author(s).

Visitor studies could, then, do more to address the issue of who 'speaks' for museum audiences in research – as *Museums and Communities* reveals there are lots of discussion about who represents and speaks for communities in the museum but when it comes to writing about those experiences, do we all too readily take for granted the authority of the author? As we see in these five examples, the perceptions of museum audiences towards the themes covered in each of the books is unknown – we know that museums are important for health and wellbeing, for community representation, but where are the voices of the public to support this contention? I would like to see more examination of how we can include visitors' (and non-visitors') voices within these discussions, which will perhaps help to really embed the value of museums within the public consciousness.

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