

Questioning the Entrance Narrative

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Robinson's study for the AAM, *The Behavior of the Museum Visitor* (1928)—museum professionals perceive the field as “young.” Chandler Screven of Screven Associates cited the lack of a theoretical framework as a major impediment to a coherent field of audience research and evaluation. He challenged the colloquists to differentiate between audience research and evaluation and find sound models and methodology for both.

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### **Current Developments**

Despite ever-tightening museum budgets, the prospects for evaluation are bright. Rebecca Danvers of the Institute of Museum and Library Services offered her agency's collaboration with the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Science Foundation as a current development. The collaboration is providing \$1 million for a multi-year project to investigate the nature of museum learning.

Several colloquists mentioned the search for generalizability as a current concern of museum evaluators. Studies such as Beverly Serrell's 51 Percent Solution Research Project have sparked a discussion about the possible merits and pitfalls of generalizing what is known about museum visitors and the way they interact with and learn from exhibitions.

With hindsight about controversial exhibits such as the *Enola Gay* at the National Air and Space Museum, *Science in American Life* at the National Museum of American History, and *Old Glory* at the Phoenix Art Museum, museum professionals can attest to the merits of evaluation but also to its limitations. These controversies, and others like them, have given rise to new questions. How could evaluation have helped to stem such controversy? How might museum directors use evaluation in a kind of institutional censorship? Will sound evaluation practice undermine the kinds of thought-provoking exhibitions that make museums an integral and important part of a democratic society? These questions, and others yet unframed, may be the topics in the next colloquium on the status of audience research and evaluation.

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## **Questioning the Entrance Narrative**

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**ZAHAVA D. DOERING AND  
ANDREW J. PEKARIK**

There has been considerable discussion in the pages of this journal and elsewhere about what we would like to see visitors learn from museums and how we can influence their behavior and responses. Much less attention has been paid to what individuals already know when they enter the museum. Museum visitors are not “blank slates” on which we write. They attend a museum or an exhibition usually because they already have some level of interest in the subject and some knowledge and opinions about it.

The internal story line that visitors enter with, which we can call their “entrance narrative,” has three distinct components:

- a basic framework, i.e., the fundamental way that individuals construe and contemplate the world
- information about the given topic, organized according to that basic framework
- personal experiences, emotions, and memories that verify and support this understanding.

This model suggests that the most satisfying exhibitions for visitors will be those that resonate with their experience and provide information in ways that confirm and enrich their view of the world.

Although we have not attempted in our research to identify differences in the ways that museum visitors think about the world, we have indirect evidence of its importance. Museums do not draw all segments of the population equally. The primary factor in predicting whether an individual is likely to visit a museum of any kind is level of formal education. We hypothesize that this association reflects the influence of formal education on the way that individuals encounter and think about the world and their place in it.

The effect of the second component of the “entrance narrative,” the specific knowledge and opinions visitors bring to the subject, is more easily measured. Depending on the individual, the type of museum, and the exhibition, the level of a visitor's knowledge can range from expert to complete novice. The priority of particular opinions in the minds of visitors depends upon their personal experiences, including their awareness of current events and the climate of public thinking on related issues, par-

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ticularly as discussed in the media. Moreover, not all visitors feel secure either in their knowledge or in their opinions.

When visitors encounter the contents of an exhibition, they necessarily place them within the narrative that they have previously constructed to explain objects and ideas of this type. They may not want to learn much more specific detail than they already know, and they certainly do not intend to have their narratives radically revised. Instead, they want their narratives to be confirmed. In fact, visitors want validation so strongly that if the exhibition story departs in only minor ways from their expectations, they are likely not to notice the areas of difference. If the museum's narrative unexpectedly and explicitly differs in major ways from their own views, adult visitors are likely to be rather upset and may even act upon their feelings by writing long, angry comments in the visitor's book, sending letters to the local press, or canceling their membership in the "misguided" institution. If the museum's narrative supports and encourages their views, however, they leave the museum delighted and confident, with a renewed sense of empowerment and a heightened respect for the importance of the subject and their appreciation of it.

The experience of most museum visitors thus tends to be subtle, incremental, and supportive. Museums, as perceived and used by their current audiences, are instruments of stability, not revolution. In this way, perhaps, they parallel the implicit goals of the formal education system. Whether they intend to or not, successful museums will both reflect and subtly influence the viewpoints of the culture by reinforcing and supporting the views of those both sympathetic to and relatively knowledgeable about a particular subject.

People want to leave museums satisfied with themselves and their beliefs. In this regard, museum visiting, one among many leisure-time options, is seen as a respite from normal life, a time to "recharge" one's perspective on the world. At the same time, audiences also want museum visits to be inspirational and uplifting, emotionally developmental in some way.

Museums have traditionally identified this inspirational aim as a key com-

ponent of their educational missions. One of the founding fathers of museum education, John Cotton Dana, wrote in 1925 that "a good museum *attracts, entertains, arouses curiosity, leads to questionings*—and thus promotes learning."<sup>1</sup> This sequence is closely linked to the emotional component of the visitor's experience. We have come to believe that emotional response plays a central role in the museum experience and are now studying it in greater detail.

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### ***Validation and Education***

For practical reasons, we cannot expect to assess precisely the impact of a museum visit on what takes place outside the museum months or years later. Too many other factors, random and uncontrolled, also become potential motivators. The museum visit is generally one experience among scores or hundreds or thousands that ultimately lead to some action or response that, in turn, reflects the kind of movement we associate with educational impact.

Very often the museum experience plays a supportive role in this dynamic whereby innumerable experiences coalesce into a desire for action or change. When the museum visitor seeks confirmation and validation, a detail in an exhibition resonates in the mind or heart of the visitor because of some prior connection with that idea, image, or object. It, or something like it, was already part of the visitor's entrance narrative. To see it now, perhaps for the first time in person, highlights and underscores that part of the story and the things it represented in the visitor's mind.

Although, as Dana said, the attraction of the object may lead to questioning, the goal of that questioning is usually to place that thing even more firmly within the visitor's established entrance narrative. The mind naturally seeks resolution, consistency, and wholeness in its internal construction of the world. What stands out is investigated primarily so that it can be absorbed into a new, perhaps modestly revised, understanding. Things that don't fit, that cannot be resolved, are usually deeply disturbing and are generally avoided and forgotten or distorted until they do fit.

We must be somewhat cautious in

linking this process of validated understanding that is characteristic of the museum experience to the idea of educational impact. If we decide that we are content to define educational impact as an emotionally powerful confirmation of visitors' entrance narratives, we will find most of our museums to be very effective and held in high social regard as sources of authoritative confirmation.

The issue of how to define educational impact is particularly important for Holocaust museums. More than any other museum type, Holocaust museums portray ideas and events that are fundamentally incomprehensible. In the end, no narrative can fully account for them—neither the entrance narrative of the visitor nor the story line of the museum. Each, though, inevitably gropes for a version that will make sense, that seems reasonable, clear, graspable. The places where those narratives fail are easily ignored, by both the visitor and the museum, because they seem to deny the act of understanding itself.

What exactly happens when the visitor encounters some object in the museum that can be placed within that individual's entrance narrative? One possibility is that in the process of encountering the object, now underlined in the mind, the object may come to stand so strongly for the part of the story in which it figured that the story line itself is not so much enriched as fossilized. James Young writes in *The Texture of Memory* that

remnants of our historical past have long come to stand for the whole of events. . . . Too often, however, these remnants are mistaken for the events from which they have been torn: in coming to stand for the whole, a fragment is confused for it. Authentic historical artifacts are used not only to gesture toward the past, to move us toward its examination, but also to naturalize particular versions of the past. . . . At such moments, we are invited to forget that memory itself is, after all, only a figurative reconstruction of the past, not its literal replication.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, instead of leading us toward questioning that will, in turn, bring about an adjustment in and engagement with what we know, the interesting object can just as easily move us toward a rigid, simplified

understanding that may ultimately be more satisfying precisely because it requires less of us.

As Young goes on to say:

Museums, archives, and ruins may not house our memory-work so much as displace it with claims of material evidence and proof. Memory-work becomes unnecessary as long as the material fragment of events continues to function as witness-memorial. Are we delegating to the archivist the memory-work that is ours alone? Do we allow memorials to relieve us of the memory-burden we should be carrying? The archivists' traditional veneration of the trace is tied directly to their need for proof and evidence of a particular past. But in this they too often confuse proof that something existed with proof that it existed in a particular way, for seemingly self-evident reasons.<sup>3</sup>

When Young uses terms like "memory-work" and "memory-burden" he emphasizes the difficult, unresolved character of all attempts to understand the Holocaust. Museums are not especially well suited to this kind of effort. By the voluntary nature of the visit, the pull toward the validation and confirmation of the entrance narrative, and the implicit desire for an established, authoritative, static resolution, the museum experience tends to move away from the dynamic, tense confrontation of irreconcilables. The museum is generally conceived as a place of settled understanding, not as a place of active conflict.

For that matter, the same desire for a clear, simple answer to even the most difficult question is characteristic of the formal education system as well. Bill Parsons of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in talking to us about his experience teaching the Holocaust in the classroom, pointed out that he always worked to maintain the tension between the particular and the universal, to deliberately keep understanding from reaching stability. But most teachers find this path extremely difficult and want to arrive instead at an agreed truth.

In the minds of many visitors, museums seem to stand for the embodiment of this agreed truth. They present themselves as temples of knowledge, erected and maintained by true experts who embody the state-of-the-art understanding of their subject matter.

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Visitors do not generally expect museums to debate the significance or meaning of their contents or to embody a wide range of conflicting viewpoints. In fact, most people are inclined to go to the other extreme and accept the presumed importance and significance of any object acquired by the museum, even if they themselves cannot see why it matters.

Some museum staff may be tempted to see their educational mission as the communication of this agreed truth to visitors. Would you accept this as educational impact? If visitors enter your museum, adjust their entrance narrative to align it more closely with the museum's story line, and leave it at that, would you be satisfied? Under those circumstances, would you accept the absence of deeper questioning?

How are we to account for the fact that, as Young points out, "the historical meanings we find in museums may not be proven by artifacts, so much as generated by their organization?"<sup>4</sup> Yet visitors give very little attention to who set up an exhibition. They generally tend to receive museum presentations as objective truth rather than as the informed speech of an individual or group of individuals with particular perspectives and intentions. The museum visitor, an educated individual who is normally alert to the special interests of advertisers, the intentions of authors, and the selective sources of all kinds of speech, typically sets all such cautions aside when entering the museum. Only when the museum's story line deviates in radical ways from the visitor's own entrance narrative is that individual likely to become conscious of the fact that exhibitions, too, have

authors, and those authors, in turn, have interests to serve.

Today, most of us consider it an important part of the task of education to teach individuals to question the sources of their understanding. Only in museum education do we still encourage visitors to accept the authority of the institution. No one has yet devised a way for museums to systematically lead their visitors to question their own authority, for even in attempting to do so they seem to propose only a still more authoritative, more up-to-date position. How could museums foster the kind of tension that teachers like Bill Parsons have found so educationally effective?

For example, Edward Linenthal recounts how political pressure affected the discussion of Armenian genocide in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. He concludes, "In the past decade, official memory was receptive to the Holocaust and not to the memory of Armenian genocide, thereby weakening one of the stated virtues of remembering the Holocaust."<sup>5</sup>

Consider this: Which would be a better indication of the educational impact of that museum, the visitor who accepts the museum's presentation of Armenian genocide or the visitor who rejects it as wholly inadequate? Would you prefer education to mean that the visitor accepts everything that your museum says and gives it the same weight and emphasis that the museum does? Or would you prefer that visitors become engaged with the presentation, question it, and struggle with it intellectually and emotionally?

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### Conclusion

Whenever, as researchers, we attempt to address the experience of museum visitors, we, too, begin with a kind of entrance narrative of our own, a pre-existing model of how we believe visitors think and behave. Although we feel most comfortable and confident when our research results confirm this model, real learning takes place only when the model doesn't fit. Increasingly we have focused on those weak points, noting that most of them are concentrated around the ideas and motivations with which visitors enter the museum. We simply don't know enough about how

people view their museum-visiting activity. Until we clarify this question, we will not be in a good position to know what they come away with either. In the meantime we must probably accept that, as long as learning continues, the result is not likely to be an agreed truth but rather a constant state of tension, marked by refined questioning and continuous revision. It is precisely through such apparently hopeless efforts that we come to better comprehend the complexity, the possibilities, the limitations, and the dangers of museum education.

## NOTES

A complete version of this article, "Assessment of Informal Education in Holocaust Museums," which includes specific references to studies, will appear in proceedings of the conference "51 Years Later: Evaluating Holocaust Education," organized by the United Jewish Federation of Metro West and held May 12-15, 1996. We appreciate the insightful comments of William Parsons, executive officer and former director of education at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and Tom L. Freudenheim, executive director, Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, and former assistant secretary for arts and humanities, Smithsonian Institution, on a draft version of the complete paper.

1. John Cotton Dana, "The Museum of Interest and the Museum of Awe," *The Museum* 1, no. 2 (April 1925): cover page. Emphasis added.
2. James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 127.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
5. Edward T. Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (New York: Penguin, 1995), p. 240.

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# Considering Gender in the Pursuit of Excellence and Equity

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SALLY STANTON

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As the public dimension of museums more explicitly drives their exhibits and programs, accurate knowledge about and understanding of the characteristics, needs, and behavior of visitors become increasingly necessary and useful. A long history of museum visitor studies has given museum professionals a significant body of literature about visitors and their characteristics. In developing my dissertation proposal, I surveyed this literature and found that gender has been relatively unexplored. I believe there are many questions we can ask, and should answer, about gender as a variable in the museum context.

Why study gender as a variable in, for example, program planning, research, facility design, and exhibit development? As an anthropologist, I consider gender a powerful, culturally constructed notion that influences behavior (i.e., decision making) in every context of social life. In Western society, gender defines us from the moment we are born: we are identified as one gender or another by our dress, ornamentation, name, and the behavior in which we are expected to engage. Gender identification and gender ideology shape us as social beings and influence our perception and behavior in ways we don't yet completely understand. Visitor studies and other social scientific studies have sometimes underemphasized gender as a possible variable influencing such visitor characteristics as the decision to visit a museum, which exhibits are seen, how the museum as an institution is viewed, why the museum is visited, and so on. In fact, visitor studies have been remarkably lacking in reporting gender differences in visitor responses, and few studies have targeted gender as an influential variable. Gender identity is so deeply and complexly woven into our society that making its presence explicit is often difficult. Yet knowledge about something as essential as gender influences on museum visitors can enhance our understanding of the museum experience and inform museum activities such as membership drives, educational programs, and facility designs. What do we know about gender as it relates to museums, and what are the implications of that knowledge?

Studies specifically examining gender as a variable influencing visitor