

Book Review:

The Museum Experience Revisited

Reviewed by Gretchen Sullivan Sorin

When the first edition of *The Museum Experience* was published by Whalesback Books in 1986, museums were very different institutions than they are today. 1986 was very early in the paradigm shift from inward-looking, museum-centric institutions, to museums that are audience-centric and community-focused. It would be another six years before the American Association of Museums' landmark report, *Excellence and Equity*, affirmed the importance of education as a core function of museums of every discipline.

Despite the growing interest in audience and education in 1986, there was a dearth of information about what a trip to the museum was actually like for visitors, what their expectations were, and what they remembered of the experience after their visits. This lack of audience research was reflected in the original size of *The Museum Experience*, a very slim volume, of only 224 pages. This represented, as the authors note, the inadequate amount of information about what actually happened between the museum and the visitor.

The hefty second edition shows how far we have come as a profession in serving our audiences and how much the authors have learned in the ensuing two decades. Lynne Dierking and John Falk, two of our profession's most well known and respected audience evaluators have spent the last 20 years conducting important audience research, and gathering and seeking to understand the research of others. The authors say that the goal of their second edition is to create a "readable, easily accessible primer for the museum profession, particularly

new museum professionals, [and] a guide for thinking deeply about the complex intersection between people and museums." But this book is certainly a must-read for museum professionals at every stage of their careers from emerging professionals to seasoned educators, interpreters, curators, directors, and board members who care about the effectiveness of museums and want to craft the best possible experiences for visitors.

The Museum Experience Revisited is divided into 12 chapters, each supported by audience research studies. The organizational structure of the book remains the *contextual model of learning*, the theoretical framework of the original volume, but greatly expanded and including examples from a wide variety of visitor experiences. Only by studying the interaction and connection among the three contexts—the personal, physical, and sociocultural contexts of a museum visit, the authors argue, can we understand the visitor's experience. Each chapter raises essential questions, some of which we have intuitively known how to answer, but for which this book provides real data. Why do people choose to go to museums? Why do others choose not to go? Other findings are a bit surprising. "Media is rarely the reason that people say they visit museums." "The limits of the parking meter often determine the limits of the museum visit." The chapters follow visitors from the decision to visit or not to visit the museum to the specific activities and happenings during a visitor's trip to and through the museum. Particularly valuable data come from studies that measure learning in museums and that document the memories recounted years or even decades after the visits. At the

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John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking. 2013. *The Museum Experience Revisited*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press. 416 pages. Paperback.

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(continued from page 91)

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end of each chapter a summary of main points and “Suggestions for Practitioners” offer readers proposals to implement the recommendations.

There is much in this book that can assist those of us who develop and design museum exhibitions to create more accessible, engaging, and visitor-forward experiences. Recent data on visitors’ use of new media and expectations about the role of media in exhibitions suggest both the importance of these features as exhibit components, and the dangers of going overboard with media.

Museums are, at their core, social institutions; understanding the way that visitors behave in museum galleries, how parents interact with their children, and how even strangers interrelate as they share information and personal experiences in museum spaces is food for thought. *The Museum Experience Revisited* looks at differing types of

visitors, considering those who come alone, those with limited museum experience, experienced visitors, family groups, adult groups, and school field trip groups. This approach enables us to open our institutions up to new audiences and challenges us to create exhibitions that serve both those who are frequent museum-goers and those who are learning to be so. For all visitors, we are reminded to create opportunities that facilitate the informal social interactions that are not planned aspects of exhibitions, but that are key to the experience.

As museums seek to “prove” to funders and the public that they are worthy of increasingly scarce resources, as we seek to address weaknesses in our education system, and as we endeavor to provide more meaningful experiences for our visitors, *The Museum Experience Revisited* is not merely a valuable resource. It is essential reading for everyone in the field. ✨