

STUDYING THE OPINION OF THE VISITORS: AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS IN RUSSIA

Maria Kaulen, Olga Cherkaeva, Irina Chuvilova
Russian Institute of Cultural Research – Moscow, Russia

Vladimir Lamin, Olga Shelegina
Institute of History SB RAS – Novosibirsk, Russia

ABSTRACT

One of the most topical problems in museology is the development of adequate forms of work with visitors which consider their needs, both in national regional contexts. Today in the Russian museum world there are new and diverse types of museums offering original “museum products”. The consumer of this “product”, the museum visitor, is also different today compared to the 20th century. The problems of museum communication and the interaction of the museum with new visitors are among the most topical and least studied in our country.

The paper presents the Russian experience in propagating the processes of museum communication, fostering the empowerment of visitors, as well as the projects focused on research of their opinions, identification of progressive and protest forms of visitor behavior, and the development of programs helping visitors to satisfy their socio-cultural requirements, all of which may facilitate solving the problems of the lack of museum communication.

The interdisciplinary project “Integration of museums in the regional socio-cultural environment” realized at present by the Russian Institute of Cultural Research (Moscow) and the Novosibirsk Institute of History (Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences) is a project focused on optimizing the mechanism of interaction between the local community and the museum through multi-faceted research on museum visitors.

RÉSUMÉ

L'étude du visiteur : la formation du sens historique

Elaborer de nouvelles approches à raisonner des formes adéquates de travail avec les visiteurs, en prenant en compte leurs besoins et leurs particularités nationales et régionales, est un des points chauds de la muséologie actuelle. Aujourd'hui, il existe en Russie de nombreux types de nouveaux musées qui offrent des produits muséaux originaux. Les problèmes de la communication du musée et de l'interaction des musées avec ces nouveaux visiteurs font partie des problèmes les moins actuels et étudiés en Russie.

La présentation de l'expérience russe de généralisation des processus de communication muséale contribuant à la position active des visiteurs, ainsi que des projets visant l'étude de leur opinion, la mise en évidence des formes progressives ou le protestations du comportement des visiteurs, la formation des programmes les aidant à satisfaire à leurs besoins socioculturels pourront pallier aux problèmes indiqués ci-dessus.

Dans ce sens, l'Institut russe de recherche sur la culture (Moscou) et l'Institut d'histoire de la Branche sibérienne de l'Académie des sciences de Russie

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(Novossibirsk) ont développé un projet interdisciplinaire de type ouvert intitulé «Intégration des musées dans l'espace régional et socioculturel» qui est très perspectif. C'est un projet innovateur qui vise à étudier l'optimisation de l'interaction des musées et de la communauté locale par l'intermédiaire d'une étude polyvalente du public des musées.

RESUMEN

El estudio del visitante; formación del sentido histórico

Uno de los puntos álgidos de la museología actual es la elaboración de nuevas aproximaciones para desarrollar formas adecuadas de trabajo con los visitantes, teniendo en cuenta sus necesidades y particularidades nacionales y regionales. En el mundo museal ruso, existen hoy numerosos tipos de museos que ofrecen "productos museales" originales. De todos modos, el consumidor de estos "productos", el visitante del museo, es diferente hoy de lo que era en el siglo XX. La problemática de comunicación e interacción entre los museos y sus nuevos visitantes forma parte de los problemas menos actualizados y menos estudiados en Rusia.

La presentación de la experiencia rusa que generaliza los procesos de comunicación museal con el propósito de contribuir a la responsabilidad de los visitantes, así como los proyectos que contemplan el estudio de su opinión, la identificación de formas progresivas y las protestas por el comportamiento de los mismos y el desarrollo de programas para ayudarlos a satisfacer sus necesidades socioculturales, podrán facilitar la solución de los problemas indicados más arriba.

En este sentido, el Instituto Ruso de Investigación de la Cultura (Moscú) y el Instituto de Historia de la Rama Siberiana de la Academia de Ciencias de Rusia (Novossibirsk) han desarrollado un proyecto interdisciplinario, de tipo abierto, titulado "Integración de los museos en el espacio regional y sociocultural". Es un proyecto innovador, cuyo eje es la optimización de la interacción de los museos y de la comunidad local por medio de un estudio polivalente y complejo del público de museos.

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One of the most topical problems in museology is the development of new approaches to understanding the modern museum world. Determining the role and value of the human factor (museum staff and specialists) in understanding of the activities of museum and public for which the museum is intended is fundamental if museums are to achieve their mission.¹ Discussion and solution of these problems may be furthered by presenting the Russian experience and generalizing museum communication practice that is aimed at empowering visitors. This includes projects focusing on investigating their opinions, identifying progressive and protest forms of visitor behavior, and forming programs that help visitors satisfy their socio-cultural needs.

Until the 1990s traditional forms of work with visitors prevailed in Russian museums. The visitors were weakly differentiated, neither gender nor age nor the ethno-cultural specificity of visitors were taken into account. They were assigned the role of passive listeners and contemplators.

During the first decade of the 21st century changes in the socio-economic sphere, expanding international cooperation, and democratization processes in Russia

¹ André Desvallées, Mairesse, François, *Key Concepts of Museology*, Moscow, ICOM of Russia, 2012, p. 19-21.

significantly influenced the development of new forms of museum work with visitors, taking into consideration their educational interests, hobbies and regional identity.

In modern society museums have become a favored means of communication in the curriculum of additional education. From the results of a number of surveys it is apparent that Russian visitors see the museum mostly as a place where they may become familiar with a subject, a collection, or an exhibition, a place where they may continue and deepen their education and, lastly, a place for their leisure time. However there are other opinions as well. The Dutch researcher Frans Schouten believes that contrary to the survey data the visitor comes to the museum not to obtain knowledge but to be entertained (with insignificant cognitive interest) and uses the museum as a means of communication.² The same trend may be found in Russia: according to survey data from several museums 92 % of respondents would like to spend a weekend or holiday in the museum; visitors – apart from contemplation – would like to be involved in creative activities together with their children, to participate in competitions and games and theatricalized festivals.³

Despite different opinions the majority of researchers point out the decreasing public interest in museums as “passive show-cases” displaying masterpieces and rarities. The popularity of the concept of the museum as a place for discussion and active dialogue is mentioned by an increasing number of visitors with different cultural and social backgrounds. According to a number of surveys the reliability of the information in historical museums is rated higher than the information in textbooks and films. For example, in the visitors’ book of comments in the State Historical Museum in Moscow the motivation of the majority of visits is comprehensive information on the history of the country, a desire to see the understandable exhibitions and the readable texts, i.e. the visitor is oriented toward the dialogue for which he or she often has insufficient knowledge or awareness.⁴

However, in our contemporary situation neither the high quality of museum collections nor traditional methods and forms of work guarantee that the museum will become an important and interesting place for a city dweller who has an impressive amount of leisure time and knowledge. According to research by the Public Opinion Foundation for the year 2009 only 16% of Russians visited at least one museum during the last 2-3 years. At that only 1% visited scientific and technical museums, 7% visited museums of arts, and 9% visited the zoo; a slightly better situation is observed only in libraries with 16% visitors from the Russian population.⁵ Most visitors are as usual school children who are taken there and do not necessarily come of their own accord.

That the museum as socio-cultural institution takes one of the foremost places in modern culture is explained by its specific function, i.e. to store and present original objects of the cultural heritage to society. Museums appear to be centers of forming the cultural and social identity of different territories; it forms their cultural environment, introduces people into the entire spectrum of historical and cultural heritage and moral values of their predecessors, thereby increasing the level of civil initiative and responsibility. The objects of historical and cultural heritage included in museums serve today as a resource for strategic development and modernization in the regions as well as for the education of youth in a spirit of patriotism.

² Frans Schouten, “Overcoming the barrier between professionals and visitors”, *Museum*, vo. 50, no. 4, 1998, p. 27-29.

³ E. A. Bogatyrev, «Новый посетитель в музее» [New visitor in museum], in: *Muzei i obschestvo. Materialy mezhdunarodnoy konferentsii*, Krasnoyarsk, Sitall, 2002, p. 23

⁴ Skripkina, L.I. «Музей в современных социокультурных условиях» [Museum in Modern Socio-Cultural Conditions], in: *Muzei v sovremennov mire*, Moscow, Izdat. GIM, 1999, p. 81.

⁵ Концепция Музея науки и техники на базе Политехнического музея [Concept of Science and Technology Museums Based on Polytechnic Museums], Moscow, 2011, Vol. 1, p. 160

Globalization sets in motion adaptive processes in different cultures, in forming nations, states and the entire world system. Migration and urbanization processes as well as social mobility have created a greater need of people for institutes of social stability and requirements for adaptation that are increasing beyond the historical context. As a result of the conditions of social instability we observe growing xenophobia and a lack of mechanisms and practices of “cultural adaptation”, socialization and integration of migrants into the hosting community. Tourists also have to become familiar with the local cultural and historical specificity although their needs do not have the urgency of the local population.

It should be also taken into account that museum as a prestigious institution also serves as public relations for the territory and the means of its promotion; it plays an important role in the formation of the entire image of the region. Museums, performing an informative function in the development of the regional image, may attractively present its nature, geography, history, economic, cultural and administrative development, its structure and population, specific features of its culture and life style. Additionally museums may efficiently perform a communicative (integration) function in the formation of the region’s image and facilitate its inclusion in the intellectual Russian and world community.

In Russian practice there are nine basic models of museum interaction with the local community, grouped into three categories: **1. Museums as a system forming enterprise:** the museum as principal employer, the museum as a point for realizing local products and services; the museum as a measure of standards; **2. Museums and territory development:** the museum as a tool for forming local brands; the museum as a site for cultural initiative; the museum as a creator of new values; **3. Museums as an instrument for improving the quality of life:** the museum as a place of merit; the museum as a means of social protection; and the museum as a place for social gathering.

In this respect it is necessary to identify the forms whereby the museum documents and presents territorial human resources as an aggregation of knowledge on human beings, the experience of the past generations, the intellectual and creative potential of the people, the system of conventional norms and their values and rules. The museum must then develop recommendations on how to introduce the adaptation processes of the life-support culture of the population in the considered region, including its historical dynamics, into the museum’s exhibition, research and educational practices. The increase of people’s adaptability and cultural competence will contribute to their greater self-realization, satisfaction with life, self-tolerance and tolerance of other people, and the growth of self-respect.

The crucial element is developing a strategy to work with local people, using specialists in sociology and psychologists, identifying the target groups, and increasing the attractiveness of museums. The idea of support to different groups of visitors with dissimilar education and motivations has gradually become part of the concept of some museums’ development. The researcher from the USA, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, believes that in general it is necessary to transfer the emphasis from the internal activities to the external ones, i.e. to the visitors. According to this author museums should clearly identify what audience they want to address and strive to set up the necessary connections.⁶

As it was correctly mentioned by museum specialists building communication systems, it is necessary to combine the solutions of conceptual problems of museum development with the need to satisfy the requirements of different categories of visitors, regularly monitoring and responding to the changes in their demands.

⁶ Eilean Hooper Greenhill, *Museums and their Visitors*, Routledge, 1994.

A significant discovery in the research on socio-demographic groups of museum visitors, observed in the west and unfortunately only starting here, is a conscious civil responsibility on the part of museums to attract wider groups of the population. According to observations from the past few years, museums who study their visitors have become centers of attraction for people from different ethnic, demographic and social groups that are ignored by other cultural institutions. However, at present the problem of enquiries based on museum visitors has not deserved due attention from the Russian museum community.

Research on the social status and the educational level of the visitors in Russian museums, their interests and cultural preferences, is an important task that not all museums are ready to tackle. During the last few years sample surveys have been carried out by some central and large-scale regional museums. Recently sociological surveys were carried out in the Russian Federation by the Moscow Kremlin Museum (2009) and the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts (2010); a preliminary evaluation of the visitors was analyzed with a new concept developed by the Polytechnic Museum (2010). The data obtained was often contradictory and definitely insufficient to make a "portrait" of a museum visitor, especially to allow forecasts for the future and to be a basis for the development of an adequate communication system.

At present museum workers do not have a clear idea about the laws and peculiarities of the visitors' perception of exhibitions and expositions, nor are they informed about the influence that different forms of cultural and educational activities may have on the museum audience, which could allow optimizing communicative processes and efficiently carrying out the museum mission. Research in Russia mostly target children as a special audience and practically ignore requirements of other participants of museum communication.

Today in the museum world of Russia there are entirely innovative and diverse types of museums offering new "museum products". Compared with the 20th century the consumer of this "product" – the museum visitor – is also new today.

The search for a new language facilitating dialogue with the visitor is closely related to the museum's ambition to avoid global standardization has two facets: First is an attempt to define the museum's place in modern culture and to place it among the issues of presenting culture to the community. Second, defining the museum's place is bound with the museum's search for a proper and special place in the system of new flows of information.

The Krasnoyarsk "Museum Biennale", a biannual museum exposition with as many as 50 competitors presenting individual small displays often simple but brilliant techniques has become internationally known since its launch in 1995. Its activities are large-scale, and problems are conceptual and original (2001 – Art of memory; 2003 – "Historic fiction"; 2005 – "Shifting values and the value of shifting"; 2007 – "Drawing of Siberia"; 2009 – "Expanse"). The integration of artists and museum staff creates a spatial environment of cultural memory for the visitors and provides an opportunity for broad debates (forums, "museum nights", master-classes, and discussion clubs) on the numerous exhibits participating in the biennale and the development of appropriate creative forms that express the themes of this event.

One well-known initiative in Russia is the cultural and communication center "Surgut at the turn of century" in Surgut Museum of Local History. In addition to the modern exhibition it includes computer classes and several Internet sites covering public events where city initiatives are demonstrated and simulated. The project "The Museum is a Land of Equals: from Dandies to Punks" (2009), focused on describing youth subcultures (from 1960ies to the present) by means of the subculture's art (music, costume, photography, painting and language) is planned as a long-term evolving exhibition. Live current urban culture becomes a part of the museum environment.

The exhibition projects of the Novosibirsk City Museum aim at the empowerment of visitors in terms of their contribution to forming the museum environment, the expression of their attitudes to historic events, their influence on city social life, and the dissemination of creative ideas with information technology. Among them the exhibition “Tags” is related to topical youth problems and devoted to digital art that is popular on the Internet. Young artists and computer designers from many cities of Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia took part in this exhibition.

Every participant in the project “Novosibirsk: Human and City” could contribute with requests, notes and recommendations on the development of the city and the museum in a special album called “If I were the Mayor of Novosibirsk...” that was placed on an especially reconstructed desk of the Mayor. On the site of the Novosibirsk City Museum there are important on-line socio-cultural projects reflecting new attitudes toward the interests of the museum audience and helping visitors to become familiar with their cultural heritage.

The museum today provides a continuity linking the past, the present and the future. The encompassing and attracting forces of museums inevitably involve people with different levels of education, belonging to different social and confessional groups that reflect their interpretation of their history and their intention to find the roots of the world order.

This is evidenced by the existing network of museums of local history and community-museums actively developing in Russia. The initiative to create “houses of memory” and museums of a particular city quarter comes from city and town dwellers concerned with the preservation of their cultural and national identity. The term “living musealisation” reflects the essence of this phenomenon in the best possible way.

The experience of the Bagration Kizlyar Museum of local history (Dagestan) and its collection is especially interesting in this respect. The active participation of city dwellers in museum projects allowed creating the exhibition “Old apartment”. This project became an important element in the cultural life of both the museum and the people of the city: their own creation and their own story.

The interregional traveling exhibition “Germans in Siberian History – Siberia in German destinies”, addressing the interests of Russian Germans, was an opportunity to show documentary and objective evidence of their life and adaptation in these territories. The program of cultural events that accompanied the exhibition included various communicative forms taking into account age and gender as well as the visitors’ ethno-cultural profile. For the older generation of Germans it was planned as “a meeting with their collective memory”; for young Russian Germans it was seen as “participation in maintaining intergenerational continuity and introduction to the cultural values of their people”; and for the representatives of all nationalities the aim was “familiarization with the original ethnic culture of Germans and their participation in intercultural cooperation”. During the exhibition in the Novosibirsk State Museum of Local History there were public lectures in German, folklore music bands, singers and dancers gave performances, and special “master-classes” were held in traditional German handicrafts (lace crocheting and watch production) that had been preserved and developed in Siberian conditions. Competitions, including one for the best national food, and quizzes around the theme of Germans in Siberia, added visitor acitivity to the cultural events.

The problem of the preservation of cultural heritage and cultural values is based on the diverse approaches of the world community to cultural and historical legacy as a national asset. It has been identified in UNESCO documents on cultural diversity, on the development of cultural tourism and on the intangible cultural heritage. The approach to the cultural heritage and the cultural values of Russian citizens is fixed in legal norms and regulations. The character is first of all protective and provides conditions for the preservation of the entire of cultural heritage. At the same time,

understanding the necessity of reconsidering our attitude to cultural heritage, making the transition from the “protective” concept to the concept of a “sustainable development of the territory” where its legacy is considered as a potential resource, is the first step on the way to new paradigm of “integration of the cultural heritage into the contemporary social context”. This change of social attitudes to heritage can in turn allow not only preserving it as a niche of special value in the structural and functional system of culture, but reveal its uniqueness and importance for the organization the historical and cultural environment of the region.

At present, apart from the preservation and revival of elements of national culture, new traditions have been introduced in Russian museum practice. The Ethnographic Museum of Agan village deserves significant attention. Working with non-material examples of the heritage and folklore of the Agan Khanty, the daily life of the ethnos is enriched by forgotten artifacts and traditions: in the museum-studio “Verte kat” of Korliki village ethnic traditions of economy are maintained and transferred to new generations. Thus museums facilitate forming a contemporary image of traditional culture and cultural and national identity, creating signposts for the local community and respectively positioning themselves in a multi-cultural environment.

A special role in bringing heritage to life in local communities is played today by memorial museums. Historical personification and the return of forgotten names are especially important today for the socio-cultural development of the regions, since they help the local community to understand its potential and the people to adapt to the contemporary situation where there seems to be an ideological vacuum and lack of positive ideals and values. Among such projects the ones that help keeping up national identity are particularly important, where personality becomes an important reason for discussing socially significant issues marking the social environment.

A number of memorial museums and projects may well be designated as socio-forming ones, and it is especially noticeable in small villages with their usual set of social, economic and other problems. One of the most efficient and interesting museums is the Chekhov Museum-Reserve in Melikhovo (Moscow Region). In the project “The District Doctor Chekhov” the important component is its social focus. In the territory of the country estate the Doctor’s surgery that was set up at the end of 19th century by A.P. Chekhov was reconstructed; it now combines the memorial and the operating medical center so much needed by the district inhabitants. This project demonstrates how a modern museum can be lively, skilful at developing its potential and needed by the community while keeping sound conservation and mending broken relations between tradition and innovation, between people of the 19th and the 21st centuries.

Several museum projects that foster territory development have been realized in distant Russian regions. The project on the development of the museum of G.I. Choros-Gurkin, the first national artist of Siberian peoples, will restore this village and make the museum into a cultural center of Altai and Siberia, attracting new generations of the cultural and political elite and tourists.

In spite of vast positive experience, a focus on social issues is the weakest point among Russian contemporary museum activities. Museum specialists are not quite prepared to work with visitors; they have difficulties in creating “museum products” and services adapted to the needs of different categories of visitors. When museums draw up plans for a project they have to take into account visitors of the present and future, modern knowledge and museum technologies, and integrate approaches to science, culture, education.

Cooperation between scientific, cultural and educational institutions becomes very important for achieving adequate and far-seeing museum development. The Russian Institute of Cultural Research (Moscow) and the Novosibirsk Institute of History (the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences) have developed an open interdisciplinary project entitled “Integration of museums into the regional socio-cultural

environment”.⁷

It is based on a set of target programs in different fields of studies that are both concrete and historical, theoretical and methodological, aiming at the solution of the problem specified in the project title. Implementing the project will allow: 1) setting up strong connections between museology and practice as well as with museum studies at the national level; 2) up-dating interregional connections (museums – administrative bodies, museums – local communities) for an organic integration of museums into the socio-cultural environment, 3) facilitating improvement of communication and participation technologies in museology and development work with the visitors at a national scale.

The project is based on the notions defined in *The Dictionary of Topical Museum Terms*. For instance we proceed from the fact that in modern society the museum mission is:

- “1) The purpose (overall goal) of museums, determined as generating the culture of present and future periods on the basis of the preservation and actualization of the most valuable part of all types of legacy;
- 2) element of strategic planning of the activities of specific museums...”

The realization of the museum mission is closely bound to the character of the museum audience determined as:

The community towards which the museum is oriented. It is characterized in accordance with appropriate socio-demographic parameters (gender, age, education, residence)..., it is divided into real and potential, constant and unstable, traditional and new (handicapped people, migrants, and youth indifferent to museums). The detailed segmentation of the museum audience, taking into account the particularities of different categories of visitors, and orientation to a larger audience are the sources of quality indicators of the cultural and educational activities of the museum...⁸

This research may significantly change our idea about how museum educational programs and exhibitions should be organized. The necessity for new large-scale research using modern methods has become vital.

Based on the above research we can highlight a number of points:

1. In the museum of our post-industrial society the visitor appears to be not a passive contemplator but an active participator of the communicative process, and even the form of information reception may be determined by the visitor himself – a significant contribution to visitor empowerment. Even when assigning the mission of social education to museums by presenting original evidence of cultural heritage it is necessary to ensure that the museum audience is the primary object of study and to be certain that visitors may competently assimilate museum communication.
2. The development museum audiences shall proceed by: (a) widening the museum’s approach to many segments of the population and attracting new groups to the museum; (b) specific museums creating target audiences which should ensure the success of the majority of museum projects. (c) timely response to the visitors’ needs to ensure formulating their requirements and visitor satisfaction.

⁷ Irina V. Chuvilova, S. B. Orlov S.B & Olga N. Shelegina, «Открытый междисциплинарный проект «Интеграция российских музеев в региональное социокультурное пространство» [Open Interdisciplinary Project “Integration of Russian Museums into Regional Socio-Cultural Environment”], in: *Sovremennye tendentsii v razvitii muzeev I muzeevedeniya. Materialy Vserossiyskoi Nauchno-Prakticheskoi Konferentsii*, Novosibirsk, NSU, 2011, p. 336-339.

⁸ Maria E. Kaulen, A. A. Sundieva, Irina V. Chuvilova, Olga E. Cherkaeva et al. «Словарь актуальных музейных терминов» [Glossary of Museum Terminology], in: *Muzei*, No. 5, 2009, p. 49, 55.

3. In the context of globalization, museums have the task to be the specific places where the past, present and future meet; their role in the regional cultural policy has become indispensable, as it is in the actualization and expedient usage of the natural and historical and cultural heritage, and in the socio-cultural integration of people.

Specific features of this overarching project are as follows:

- The development of the “portrait of the museum visitor” together with the analysis of the contemporary conditions of museum activities and the cultural policy in selected regions. Since cultural preferences may significantly vary depending on local traditions, competitive proposals, climate and other factors, museum programs shall be focused first of all on regional specificity and specific segments of the local community;
- An interdisciplinary approach to the problem of research on museum audiences (at the intersection of museology, sociology, psychology and social adaptation) will open new perspectives for the development of clearer and more accessible exhibitions and the improvement of the working methods of all types of museum institutions, while taking into account different regional and communication approaches aimed at solving different research results.

Practical use of the results of investigation will allow improving the quality of museum work provided to local communities and tourists, and comparing the quality of museum services with the requirements of different segments of the museum audience; additionally it will provide wider accessibility to cultural goods for different social groups (national, confessional, disabled people, etc.) During the research publications will regularly appear on the Internet, on the sites of the Russian Institute of Cultural Research and Institute of History (Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences), as well as on the sites of the museum communities.

Deeper and multilateral studies on the interests, reactions and specific features of visitor perception may be considered as a beginning of new dialogue between museums and communities, whose aim, from the inception of the research projects launched by the Russian institutes to their realization, has been the empowerment of visitors.

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