

Museum Visit Ethnographies
Some things to think about when visiting museums and when writing museum critiques

1. **Prior to entry:** What does the museum say about who belongs inside? What messages does it give the visitor who is thinking about coming in? What does the museum architecture (from the outside) evoke?

Visitors: What are visitors doing outside the museum? Do they seem purposeful? Hesitant? What is their mood?

2. **Entry:** What kind of space are you entering? How do you feel as a visitor? Will all visitors feel equally welcome? Will all visitors be able to use the museum in the same way? Is the expectation that the visitor will know what to do in this space? Is there an admission fee? How much? To what extent is your next step inside the museum obvious? What is the presence of security? What seems to be going on in the entry way?

Visitors: Demographics (age, gender, race, etc.) and number of visitors (i.e., crowded, few, etc.). Can you make any assumptions about the visitor's class/economic status? Educational status? Are visitors alone, in pairs, in larger groups? Is the definition of the larger groups obvious (school kids; etc.)?

3. **Passages through the museum:**

Narrative Structure: What is the overall "narrative structure" of the museum? Is its structure quite evident to you (e.g., in a natural history museum, the structure is movement from simple to complex; from "less developed" to "more developed;" in an art museum, is it basically organized chronologically by art historical period (and who does that privilege)? Or does its narrative only reveal itself with time? Will the casual visitor pick up on its narrative structure, or only the careful museum critic?

The Visitor's Path: Is your path through the museum relatively predetermined or do you make your own way? Are you specifically directed to take a certain path (via arrows, room numbers, etc.), or is the path left to you? In larger museums, is there any message given (or received) about which galleries are more important, which less?

4. **Basic museum design:** Observe the basic design features in the museum's interior: What is the relationship between the architecture and the collection? Think about lighting, wall color, size of passageways, overall design aesthetic, etc.
5. **Museum collections:** What percentage of the museum space is destined to the museum's permanent collection (you can ask at the information desk or ask a guard)? Are the visiting/changing exhibits located in a way to encourage a visit to the entire museum or just to that exhibit? Does the casual visitor have any idea that what is being shown is only a portion of the total collection? Would that change one's perspective on the museum visit? If so, how?

6. **The overall museum space:** To what extent is the museum about its collection, and to what extent has it become a public/social space in which the collection is one feature among many (e.g., museum shops; cafes and restaurants; film showings, public seating, etc.)? Where are shops located? Where are restaurants and other food sources located? Are artifacts (i.e., all exhibited items) limited to formal gallery space or are they found other places (passageways, halls, bathrooms, etc.)? Does this change how you view the artifact?

Visitors: What provisions are made for different types of groups (school groups, elderly, disabled)? Can you easily find your way to these spaces that are designated for these groups? Will the visitors feel comfortable asking for information?

Security Guards: Where are they? Are they obtrusive or less noticeable? Do you have the feeling that they are to make sure *YOU* don't do anything wrong or are they there to help you?

7. **Museum aids:** What kind of help does the museum provide to understand its collection: narratives on the entry to the museum or galleries? Listening guides (audio sticks, tape, CDs, etc.)? Docents? Guide books (free/pay/how much)? Other devices (e.g. heavy plastic sheets of information, maps, etc.). If you use one of the automated guides (oral or written), what do you learn about the person who put the guide together? How is the authority of the museum transferred via the guide to the visitor? Are there any forms of aid that you find particularly useful?

Guides/docents: Are there guides around? Was it clear what you had to do to get on a guided tour? If you go on a guided tour, please comment about the guide and his/her approach (encouraging, definitive – *this* is what this painting is about, etc.)

Visitors: Take some time to look around and observe how the visitors use the various aids which are there for them.

8. **Gallery and exhibition morphology:** What is the narrative structure of the gallery itself (as opposed to the overall museum)? Is there an obvious way to move through the gallery? If so, what is its basic organizing principle? Can you approach the gallery from a different perspective, i.e., take a different path? What does the flow of the museum visitors do to someone who wants to move in a different direction? Are the visitors in that gallery basically observing the sense of direction in the gallery? Does the gallery provide its own entry-way information (text/visual)? To what extent does that information pre-determine how you will “read” that gallery? Think about what Pearce calls depth, rings, and entropy vis-à-vis exhibition morphology.

9. **Galleries and the public:** How is the gallery visitor expected to interact with the exhibits? Visually? Hands-on? Via sound? Textually? In some other way? Which exhibits are more likely to encourage hands-on participation? Which least likely? Who is this gallery for? What expectations have been made about the gender, race, educational level, etc. of the “average” visitor?

Visitors: Observe the visitors as they enter a new gallery space: what do they do first? How do they orient themselves to the new room/space? Do they observe the behaviors of others, or seem determined to strike off on their own?

10. **The exhibit space:** Think about some individual exhibit cases and how they are set up. What are the organizing principles? What are the *assumptions* the exhibit organizer/curator is making about the people who will be viewing the exhibit? Can a case be understood in isolation or do you need to see its surrounding cases? What choices do the curators make by placing items in context/juxtaposition/proximity? Can you find any particular narrative within the case itself? Is the case crowded or spare? If crowded, does it appear that way because of poor museum technique or because the curators are saying something about the artifacts exhibited? To what extent does the number of items in a case lead you to value or ignore the items inside? To what extent does the exhibit tell you that it is about the “canon”? Are there any devices/aids next to specific cases to allow you more insight or interpretation (video screens, audio devices, etc.)?

Labels: Where are they placed? What kind of content is on the labels? What do the labels assume about the museum visitor? Is there too much or too little text? Do the labels seem “standard issue” or is something interesting going on? Do you know who wrote the label?

Visitors: What do they do when they approach each case? How do they orient themselves? If they are with others, is there any kind of discussion that the case evokes?

11. **The artifact:** Are there individual artifact labels or one case label? What information is provided? Is the artifact unique? authentic? real? reproducible? a copy? How do you know this? Why is the artifact there? Aesthetic reasons? Educational reasons? Memory reasons? Emotive reasons? To what extent does its placement in the case answer these questions for you? How is the artifact presented, lighted, hung?

12. **Learning, interpretation, and education in the museum:** Is the educational purpose of the artifact, case, gallery, or museum evident to you? What does it say about how people *learn*? What are the basic educational techniques that it uses to insure that learning will occur? To what extent does the museum, its galleries, cases, and individual artifacts invite the visitor to construct her own knowledge about what she is seeing? To what extent are interpretations provided? To what extent are interpretative narrations delivered as “authoritative”? To what extent are you, the visitor, encouraged to see things in new ways, to come to fresh interpretations? To what extent are you encouraged to make your interpretations available to others (see “Feedback” below)?

13. **More on the visitors:** Are most visitors approaching the exhibits and/or the museum in the same way? Are they talking to each other and, if so, about what? (Don’t be afraid to listen in to their conversations.) Do visitors adopt a “proper” museum-gaze in front of an artifact? Are there people there who seem to be using the museum in a different way? What are they doing? What are young children doing? Can you tell anything at all from observing the visitors about their purposes in coming to the museum? Do the visitors speak to the guards? The docents? Does the museum make any effort to segregate the visitors by age?

14. **Comments and Feedback:** What, if any, are the opportunities by which visitors can provide comments about the exhibits or feedback to the museum: comment cards, notebooks, computers, postcards, etc. Are these located at the exit to the museum? In every gallery? In some galleries? By exhibits? Do you have any feeling that the museum directors/curators

actually care what you think about the exhibits? Is there any indication at all by which you can see that visitor input has had an impact on the museum?

15. **Outside again:** What is your *immediate* feeling on leaving the museum?

16. **Response & reflection:**

If you could sit down with the museum director or the curator of a specific exhibit, (a) what would you ask her/him? (b) what would you recommend should be changed? (c) what do you think worked the best or didn't work at all (explain)?

What did *you* use this museum for? Did you try to get a sense of the overall museum? Did you only visit a few exhibitions or artifacts? What was your purpose in coming? How do you feel the museum is using its space? Who do you think is the intended audience of this museum? Do you think the museum should be attracting different audiences?

Was this a "safe" museum or one that courted controversy and "pushed the envelope"? Why do you say that? If controversial, was it objectionable to you? Was it controversial for the sake of generating an audience or for the sake of learning?

What is being *performed* in this museum (in Bennett's sense of the term)? What are the basic narrative lines that the museum is adopting? How is time spatialized in this museum? How is space temporalized? How are cultural differences made visible? To what extent are gender differences suggested by the museum display?

17. **Final thoughts:** What was the overall *purpose* of the *museum* you just visited? What does the museum director or curator want you to come away with? Who *really* is this museum for? Will you return? Who would you bring with you? Who *wouldn't* you bring with you? Do you have any sense of the outreach activities of this museum? Do you know of any other way to get information about this museum?