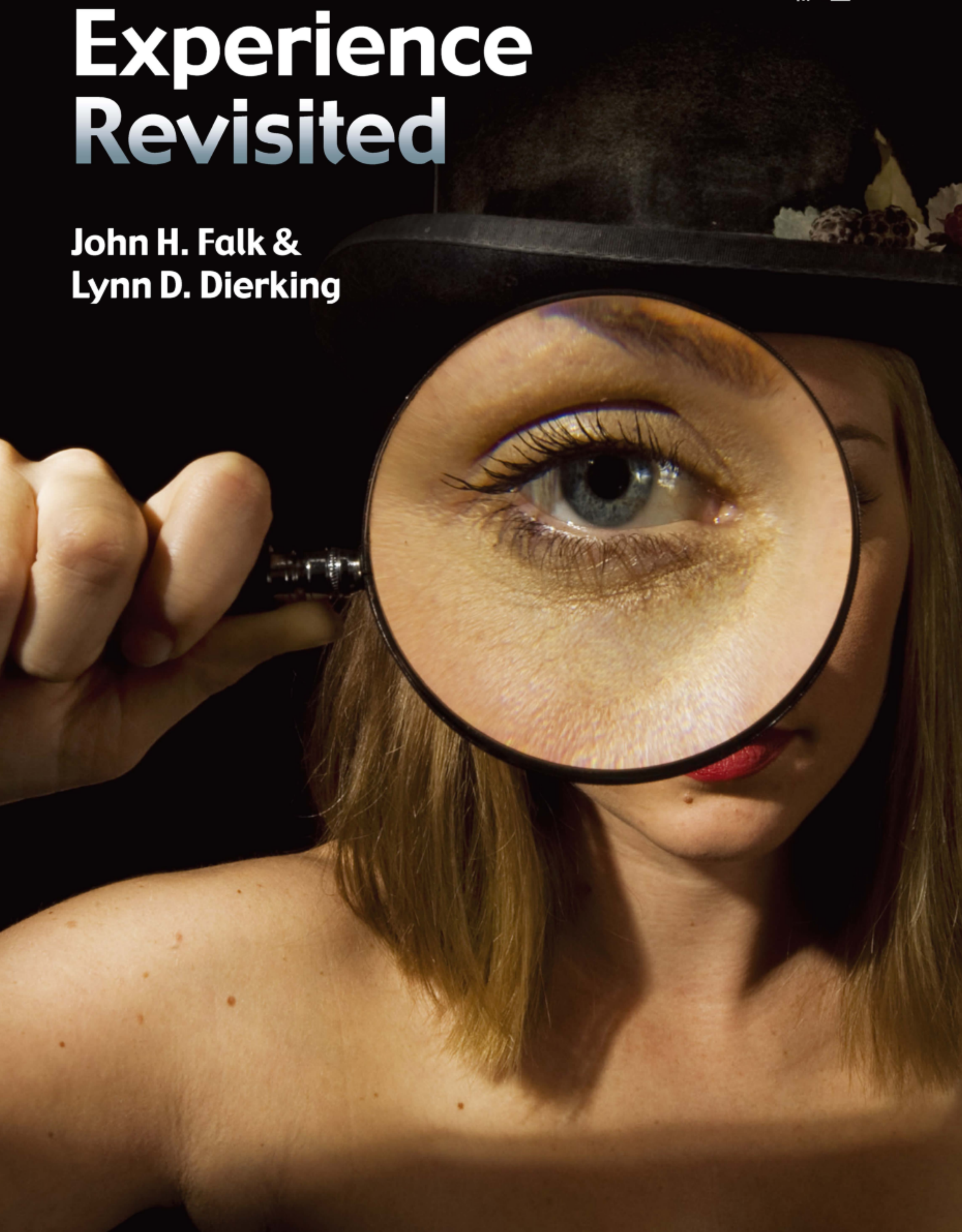
The Museum Experience Revisited

ROUTLEDGE

John H. Falk &
Lynn D. Dierking



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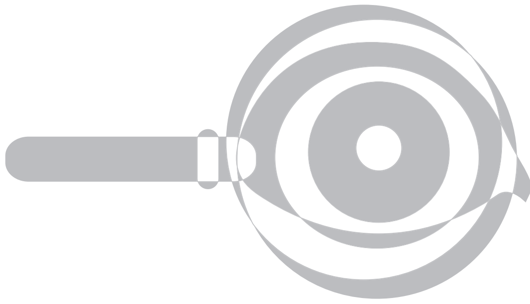
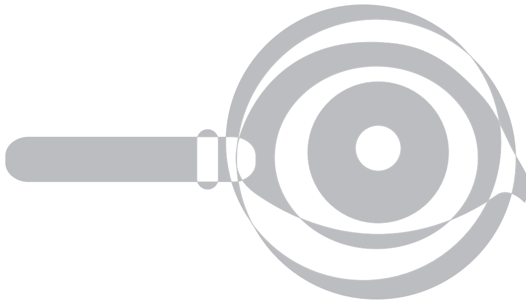


We dedicate this book to the many thoughtful and committed museum professionals whom we have had the pleasure of knowing and collaborating with over our careers. Elizabeth Walton Furlow (1958–2012), a dear friend and long-time curator of history, epitomized just such a practitioner. In paying tribute to Elizabeth and her dedication to the public value of museums we seek to honor all professionals who strive to create and implement quality museum experiences.

The Museum Experience Revisited



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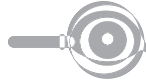

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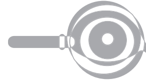
Foreword



The museum visitor is not an empty vessel, waiting to be filled with our wisdom. While this seems obvious, especially as I write this today, until I encountered that truism head-on in the first edition of *The Museum Experience*, I have to admit that I hadn't *really* tried to understand the visitor's perspective in the many museum programs I created in the early years of my career. Before 1992, I had worked in two different museums (one art and one ethnographic), where I had developed exhibitions and programs for many different audiences, including the public, teachers, and students. I had partnered with talented designers, scholars, and curators and been a curator myself. I cared deeply about the content and quality of the museum experiences I was helping to craft.

But did I really think hard about, let alone investigate, what the visitor or prospective visitor already knew or cared to know? Had I considered the various personal, social, and cultural contexts that shaped visitor encounters with the museum, including pre- and post-visit experiences and interests? Passionate and well-meaning, I thought my earnestness, hard work, project research, and content knowledge were the key ingredients to success. *The Museum Experience*, therefore, made a big impression on me and helped guide my post-1992 museum practice. I suspect I was not alone.

Twenty years after its initial publication, in this new edition of *The Museum Experience*, authors John Falk and Lynn Dierking build on the insights of the initial volume and enrich the book with updates that reflect their—and others'—subsequent studies and research findings. During the past two decades, the museum field has paid increased attention to the nature, quality, and impact of museum experiences. Bolstered by *The Museum Experience*, such landmark reports as *Excellence and Equity*, published by the American Association of Museums (1992), and multidisciplinary research on the nature of learning, including learning throughout the lifetime and the power of learning in out-of-school settings—as well as a myriad of individual programmatic evaluations, many museums have rethought and revamped their programs and processes. Within institutions, of course, these changes occur within typically tight operating environments where the museum's mission, programs, and costs need to be kept in balance. Being aware of relevant research, knowing more about potential communities and audiences, and having better ways to ascertain 'what works' can enable a museum to deploy resources in service to mission more effectively and efficiently. Beyond the museum, there have been increased demands from outside stakeholders, including private and public funders, who require logic models, evaluation plans, and measures of audience impact before providing support. Evaluation has become more commonplace and nuanced. We have learned much about our visitors (and non-visitors). Yet we still have miles to go.

In the twelve chapters of this book, Falk and Dierking elaborate on their original contextual model of learning, bolstered by many studies conducted in the last two decades. This model focused on the personal, sociocultural, and physical contexts of the museum and its visitors. The importance of museum practitioners understanding visitors at the confluence of these contexts has not diminished; indeed, I venture that it has increased, although there are undoubtedly many museums who have yet to absorb, let alone adopt, this broader contextual framework.

Each of these contexts—the personal, sociocultural, and physical—has been enriched by new thinking and research. For example,

the personal context is elaborated by Falk's work on "identity-related motivations." Falk describes the various "identity lenses" that characterize personal museum going motivations, noting that these lenses are fluid and dynamic: individuals can and do use them interchangeably based on specific circumstances and motivations. Hence, museum visitors may see themselves as explorers, facilitators, professionals/hobbyists, experience seekers, rechargers, respectful pilgrims, and/or affinity seekers, and these various identities color and characterize their museum experiences.

The discussion of sociocultural context is enriched by the recognition of the broader learning ecosystem that exists in any community and the need for museums to understand and implement their role within these systems. What are the community's learning needs and how can the unique affordances of the museum meet them? How can museums build on their collections of "real things" and their reputations as places of trust and expertise to make a difference? In this section, informed particularly by Dierking's extensive work with youth and families, Falk and Dierking emphasize the importance of museums exploring, articulating, and demonstrating their public value, as the right and necessary thing to do.

The authors' treatment of the physical context includes exhibitions, galleries, and museum buildings (including the parking lots and other amenities that are often important parts of the visitor experience) and also underscores the need to consider the surround of exhibitions, including programs, and the increasing significance of the virtual. The final chapters explore the 'gestalt' that reflects the confluence of these contexts and new research on what we have learned about the interplay between memory and learning. They feature two deep dives into evaluation case studies: Falk's extensive work at the California Science Center and Dierking and McCreedy's longitudinal studies on the impact of out-of-school STEM programs for girls. The volume ends with real-life examples of "the twenty-first-century museum." Each chapter is capped (usefully) with summary points and suggestions for practitioners.

From my perspective, this volume, resonant with many valuable findings and observations, takes its place within a much broader and

increasingly lively conversation about what the National Research Council's *Learning Science in Informal Environments: People, Places and Pursuits* (2009) describes as lifelong, life-wide, and life-deep learning. Like that study, *The Museum Experience Revisited* situates the museum within a broader learning ecology or infrastructure. In my work, which straddles museums, libraries, and a myriad of formal and informal learning venues, there are more voices than ever exploring the powerful dynamic of "connected learning"; the significance of engagement, interest, and curiosity as drivers of learning impact; and the increasing role of new technologies in breaking through previous, environment-constrained learning boundaries. Concepts like "free agent learning," "project-based learning," and "personalized learning environments" have migrated from the informal to formal learning sector and carry new weight and currency. Thus, Falk and Dierking's insights about the power of the social interactions that occur within a museum setting and their significance for effective learning, as well as their nuanced explication about the type of learning that museums do best (helping people learn more about something they already have some curiosity/knowledge about), are important contributions.

Furthermore, in a time of ongoing, fertile, abundant, and occasionally contentious debates about ways to measure and assess the impact of learning in out-of-school settings, Falk and Dierking's examples provide much grist for this lively intellectual mill, especially for the lay person. The authors recognize the challenges (based on "free choice" and "irregular dosage") of measuring the impact of museum learning. Nonetheless, they supply useful examples, including recent data, which present new methodological approaches and are helping us to better understand the learning that occurs in museums. Inroads are being made, bolstered by heightened academic interest and funder mandates. More researchers and practitioners are embarking on complex, mixed-methodological investigations (including longitudinal studies), disseminating findings, creating new collaborations (like the National Science Foundation-funded Center for the Advancement of Informal Science Education, CAISE), and, in general, taking a greater interest in collecting common data, developing shared vocabularies and instruments, and defining a limited number of common measures of impact.

Finally, it is essential to consider any discussion of impact within the larger context of public value. If museums are indeed important community anchor institutions, how are they poised to address the big challenges of twenty-first-century society? These challenges include the crisis of our early learning system, where large percentages of our children are not ready for school, may or may not finish high school, and, without a firm foundation, are unlikely to have the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in college, career, or life. They also include such twenty-first-century topics as environmental, financial, health, and information literacy; global and cross-cultural understanding; and civic engagement and the importance of civil discourse. The urgency of these issues and the lack of progress in addressing them effectively has forged new collaborations, organizational models, and definitions of impact. Foundations, corporations, policy makers, governments, and individual institutions are joining forces in new collective efforts, such as Grad Nation and the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. There is an understanding that the type of isolated impacts we have identified and measured for specific programs and individual organizations are insufficient to "move the needle" on our current societal problems. Organizations like Grantmakers for Education and Grantmakers for Effective Organizations are promoting a networked mindset toward philanthropy that emphasizes developing cross-institutional measures of collective impact and new models of collaboration, investment, leadership, and governance. If museums continue to tout their value as community anchor institutions, they will need to form new authentic, ongoing, and adequately resourced coalitions dedicated to collective public good goals. Moreover, these models—and the core definition of a museum—will need to adapt to accommodate the changing behaviors and 24/7 learning demands of our technology-savvy publics and their expectations of co-creating, mixing and mashing, and riffing on our content and collections.

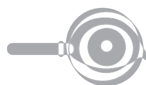
Each of these topics is explored in *The Museum Experience Revisited.* In its sweep and concision, this volume contains important information for new and veteran museum professionals and volunteers, board members, museum funders, and policy makers. It informs us all about the broader societal trends that museums need

to consider, grounded not only in the writers' point of view but also in their deep experience with a variety of museum types around the world. Reminding us all of the enduring wisdom and insight of such museum leaders as Harold K. Skramstad, Jr., and Stephen E. Weil, who wrote about the importance of museums "mattering" with publics beyond ourselves, *The Museum Experience Revisited* advises us to respect the knowledge and motivations of our visitors and to use our many resources (including collections, staff, and sites) to make a difference in the lives of individuals as well as the quality of life in our communities.

Marsha L. Semmel

Marsha L. Semmel is Director, Office of Strategic Partnerships, at the Institute of Museum and Library Services, a federal agency based in Washington, DC. She has been president and CEO of Conner Prairie, a living history museum near Indianapolis, and Women of the West Museum in Denver. She worked at the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) for twelve years; from 1993 to 1996, she directed the NEH Division of Public Programs. This Foreword was written in Ms. Semmel's personal capacity. The views expressed are her own and do not necessarily represent the views of the Institute of Museum and Library Services or the United States Government.

Preface



It's not that I'm so smart. It's just that I stay with problems longer.
Albert Einstein

This revision of *The Museum Experience* represents 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 these experiences. It has been a long journey, one that is nowhere near complete, at least we hope. When we began doing this kind of research and writing, there were but a handful of us; today there are many. The first draft of the original version of *The Museum Experience* was completed in 1986. It took more than five years to find someone willing to publish such a book. Ultimately, we convinced a boutique publisher in Washington, DC, Dean Howells, of Whalesback Books, to do so. We remember assuring him that there was an audience for such a book. A quarter century later, the challenge was not finding a publisher but insuring that we had something worthwhile and new to say.

Certainly the subject of this book remains as important as ever. When the first edition was written, museums had just begun their worldwide explosion in popularity and their significant shift from institutions primarily focused on the collection and preservation

of objects to their current emphasis on the visitor experience. All museums now place an emphasis on education that they never did in the past.[1] These changes in the focus and character of museums are complicated ones, far better explained by historians, and certainly not in the purview of this book, but the significance of the transformation is undisputed. Whereas as recently as a generation ago most museums would have listed "education" as a distant third on their list of institutional priorities, behind collections and research, these same museums would now be inclined to state that they are, first and foremost, centers for public learning—or at the very least, equally concerned about education, research, and collections. Collections and research remain important in the museum world, and in many older, more traditional institutions curators and registrars retain significant clout. Still, in the brief space of our lifetime, institutional priorities have, in many cases, been turned upside down. Associate directors or vice presidents for education and public programming have suddenly appeared in institutions where there was once only a single educator or "education coordinator," often consigned to a basement office. In fact, it is not uncommon today to find museum directors who rose through the ranks of their institutions beginning as educators; this was unheard of a generation ago.

During this same period, most of the growth in museums has been in institutions without collections, institutions like science centers and children's museums established primarily for the purpose of educating the public. The expectation now is that all museum professionals, from directors and educators to exhibition designers and curators, be concerned about communicating with the public and supporting their personal meaning-making (another way of talking about learning). Although no accurate statistics exist, it is probably safe to say that in the twenty years that preceded the first edition of *The Museum Experience* the number of visitors to museums more than doubled, and the number of institutions increased almost as significantly. In the twenty years that have since elapsed the number of visitors to museums worldwide has likely tripled again, and the number of institutions more than doubled; currently, China alone is opening a new museum every three days.[2] Over that same period of time, the number of museum professionals

concerned with understanding visitors and attempting to facilitate quality visitor experiences has easily more than quadrupled. Museums have become a growth industry and have emerged as one of the most important leisure-time venues in the developed and, increasingly, the developing world. Few countries today are without museums, and most have burgeoning professional communities.

With this exponential rise in the perceived value of visiting museums has come a concomitant exponential growth in the professionalization of the field, including the understanding of the museum experience. One might postulate that the reason the first edition of this book was thin was because there was so little research on which to base it. By contrast, our challenge in this revised edition was to keep the book a manageable length, despite having so much research from which to draw. Virtually every aspect of museum practice has seen a quantum increase in scholarship since *The Museum Experience* was first published in 1992. Our revision has benefited tremendously from all of this rich literature with the result that the number of references in this new edition is twice that of the original. It has been a productive twenty years.

As with the original book, the goal of this second edition was to create a readable, easily accessible primer for the museum profession, particularly new museum professionals. We sought to create a brief, yet comprehensive overview of the museum experience, a guide for thinking deeply about the complex intersection between people and museums. Although we have included hundreds of new references, we have not attempted to systematically review this literature nor cite every study conducted in the last twenty years, not even all the good ones. Rather, our desire has been to illustrate what we believe is the fundamental story of how museums fit into their communities and are used by the public to satisfy their needs and interests. We have grounded our narrative in the best and most reliable research we could find. No doubt others can, and likely will, question some of our conclusions and choices. As with the original version of the book, though, we believe that the basic trajectory of the story provides an accurate, realistic, and above all, useful view of the museum visitor experience.

Throughout this rewriting we've done our best to accommodate the wealth of new research in the field, as well as respond to the very different social, economic, and political landscapes within which museums now operate. We will admit it's been challenging; both the wealth of information about the field and the contexts in which these institutions operate are ever- and rapidly changing. Two examples make the point. Digital and online tools represent an increasingly important part of the museum experience, despite the fact that they were both relatively insignificant features in the world of museums when the first edition of this book was written.[3] One doesn't need to be a futurist to know that the digital landscape will continue to change significantly, and that these changes will undoubtedly have profound implications for museums as they have so far, but in what ways it is harder to predict. Equally to the point, we complete this second edition as the world economic order is in tremendous upheaval and most museums in the world face significant challenges.[4] Do these economic challenges currently facing museums represent a continuing threat for the remainder of the twenty-first century, or are they just a momentary blip? It is hard to know. Accordingly and by necessity we accept that the ideas in this volume are frozen in time, a snapshot of current conditions and understandings.

Although the need for a book like this seemed clear to us twenty years ago, one might ask why the field still needs an accessible primer about the museum experience. While virtually all of those working within the museum field today understand that visitors are at the heart of what it means to be a successful museum, we still argue that relatively few entering museum professionals fully understand what that means, and even more importantly, how to hone and refine their practice accordingly. This is not due to a lack of commitment, desire, or interest. Arguably the real problem is that despite considerable progress over recent decades in the professionalization of the museum field, the vast majority of people working in museums enter the field through the back door, arriving from some discipline other than museum studies. Although academic success in the sciences, arts, history, or environment provides a strong foundation for some aspects of museum work, rarely does it prepare someone for understanding

the realities of the museum visitor experience. Understanding visitors requires more of a social science perspective, and in particular an understanding of how to apply that perspective within the context of those unusual settings we call museums. An understanding of the museum visitor experience, then, is the goal of this book.

True to the first book, first and foremost we have endeavored to write a book about the museum visitor experience from a visitor's perspective, as well as to better discuss how our institutions *must* determine ways to become essential parts of the everyday lives of people not currently using our facilities; certainly disenfranchised racial/ethnic and socio-economic groups, but also people with disabilities, youth, young adults, and elders in our communities.

We made a conscious decision to preserve the basic structure of the original book even though the second edition is almost two-thirds new. We did this because of all the useful feedback we've received from readers across the years suggesting that the organization concretely communicated the fact that the museum experience begins long before and continues long after the actual visit. We begin the story from outside the museum, move into the museum, and then out again. However, we now have much more to say about each of these aspects of the experience. In the first edition of the book we introduced a new model, the Interactive Experience Model, a way to think about making sense of the complexity of the museum visitor experience, and we organized the book around this model. We later renamed the model the Contextual Model of Learning and fleshed it out in more detail.[5] It is no longer a new model. In the two decades since its introduction, the Contextual Model of Learning has been a resilient and useful framework for thousands of museum researchers and practitioners. It also continues to guide our work and thinking. For these reasons, we chose to continue to use this framework to guide the organization of this book.

Although we have structured the book using the Contextual Model of Learning and organized our discussion as a timeline—a journey from a person's first thought of visiting a museum, through the actual visit, and then beyond—we implore readers to avoid the urge to think of the museum experience as a linear process, cleanly

divisible into contextual chunks. Above all else and like life itself, the museum experience takes many twists and turns and defies easy pigeon-holing. All of the contexts overlap and merge; in many ways the visitor experience is more circular than linear. Still, our organization seems to remain a convenient and useful way to parse the complexities of the museum experience.

We believe that the first step in understanding the museum visitor's experience is to ask why, of all the possible ways an individual or group could spend their leisure time, do millions of people freely choose to visit museums; and why millions of others choose not to. The first section of this book addresses these issues, exploring the reasons people come to museums, or not, and what they expect to do there. This section benefits from John's recent work exploring identity-related motivations and Lynn's research focused on the sociocultural context and the role of museums within society, as well as a commitment to engaging communities who have not traditionally used museums.

For those who do visit, once inside the museum they are faced with many choices—where to go and what to see. How do people behave inside museums? What is the interplay among the visitor's social and cultural group, the immediate experience (such as exhibition and program design), and factors such as the visitor's prior knowledge, interests, and expectations? The second section of the book addresses what people do from the time they decide to visit the museum and arrive at the front door until the time they exit. We explore myriad factors and situations that influence visitors' in-museum behavior. This section benefits from the pioneering sociocultural and design-based research of the past couple of decades that has greatly influenced the field.

Finally, for most people, a museum visit is just one of many experiences in a day, week, and lifetime of experiences. Yet it appears that virtually everyone who enters a museum and spends any appreciable time there is affected. What do people remember about a museum visit? What do they learn? Important to note, we have not focused on what visitors should do and remember as a consequence of their museum visit, but as much as possible on what they actually do and remember. The third section of the book in particular draws from

several recent research studies and attempts to weave a coherent picture of the long-term effects of a museum experience on a visitor.

In the fourth section of the book, we provide a guide for the museum professional that transitions from the visitor's perspective to the museum's perspective, providing tips and concrete examples for how to support quality visitor experiences. These are research-based recommendations from our own work and that of other researchers, evaluators, and professionals in the field. This chapter recommends ways for museums to accomplish their educational agendas and also enhance the visitor's in-museum experience by extending the visit both back and forward in time and space. Rather than place all of our ideas about practice at the end of the book, though, we have also included at the end of each chapter a summary of the main points and several examples and suggestions for how these ideas might actually be applied. We hope this slight modification will make these ideas more immediately accessible, enabling readers to more quickly apply ideas from theory to their individual practice.

In this edition we've added a new section, a section on the role of the museums in the twenty-first century. This "Beyond the Visit" section provides some thoughts on how museums currently, and ideally, could position themselves within their communities and societies in ways that maximize their impact and public value.

All books, and certainly a book of this nature, arise from the collective ideas of many people. As we wrote in our original preface, we owe a sincere debt to a long list of individuals who read like a Who's Who of the early years of museum visitor studies and thinking. Many, but not all, of these individuals are still active in the field. We continue to be thankful for their contributions. In particular, we'd like to again recognize the contributions of Mac Laetsch, Judy Diamond, Sherman Rosenfeld, Mick Alt, John J. Koran, Jr., Chandler Screven, Michael Templeton, Stephen Bitgood, S. M. Nair, Arthur Lucas, Roger Miles, George Hein, Sam Taylor, Hope Jensen Leichter, Randi Korn, Betty Dunckel, and Paulette McManus. We once again acknowledge the first group of reviewers for the book and thank them for their valuable comments: D. D. Hilke, Judy White, Harris Shettel, Gail Leeds, Ken Yellis, Gloria Gerace, Bonnie Van Dorn, Janet Kamien, Nancy McCoy,

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To these former lists we now add the names of other thoughtful and engaged colleagues who helped shape the ideas in this edition. In alphabetical order: Marianna Adams, Leslie McKelvey Adelman, Phil Aldrich, Sue Allen, David Anderson, Gail Anderson, Doris Ash, Jennifer Bachman, Roy Ballantyne, Maria Marable-Bunch, Jamie Bell, David Bibas, Minda Borun, Lonnie Bunch, David Cheesebrough, Dave Combs, Spencer Crew, Kevin Crowley, Al DeSena, Ben Dickow, Zahava Doering, Sally Duensing, Kirsten Ellenbogen, Dan Falk, Joshua Falk, Kathryn Foat, Susan Foutz, Alan Friedman, Celia Garibay, Katie Gillespie, Des Griffin, Janette Griffin, Josh Gutwill, Kate Haley-Goldman, Joe Heimlich, Dana Holland, Eileen Hooper Greenhill, Nohora Elizabeth Hoyos, Karen Hughes, John Jacobson, Nina Jensen, Julie Johnson, Jeff Kennedy, Robert Kiine, Jim Kisiel, Karen Knutson, Neil Kotler, Judy Koke, Emlyn Koster, Gaia Leinhardt, Chi-Chang (Michael) Liu, Ross Loomis, Jessica Luke, Nanette Maciejunes, Candace Tangorra Matelic, Terry McClafferty, Dale McCreedy, Andrew McIntyre, Kathy McLean, Elizabeth Merritt, Theano Moussouri, Mary Ellen Munley, Jan Packer, Scott Pattison, Deborah Perry, Pelle Persson, Bonnie Pittman, Christine Reich, Leonie Rennie, Laura Roberts, Jay Rounds, Shawn Rowe, Bob Russell, Peter Samis, Carol Saunders, Dave Schaller, Leona Schauble, Jerry Schuble, Carol Scott, Beverly Serrell, Beverly Sheppard, Lois Silverman, Silvia Singer, Michael Spock, Carol Stapp, Nancy Staus, Walter Staveloz, Jill Stein, A.T. Stephens, Mark St. John, Martin Storksdieck, Sonnet Takahisa, Tali Tal, Kate Tinworth, Sue Dale Tunnicliffe, David Ucko, Barry Van Deman, Martin Weiss, Mac West, Cynthia Yao, and last but certainly not least, the late Stephen Weil. In addition, we would like to particularly thank Salvador Acevedo, Lynda Kelly, Kris Morrissey, Dennis Schatz, Marjorie Schwarzer, Nina Simon, Daniel Spock, and Loic Tallon for their reviews and comments. They read the first edition of the book and made invaluable suggestions for what needed to be enhanced in the second edition. We also thank our Left Coast Press, Inc., publisher Mitch Allen for his vision and willingness to assume

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A special thanks to Marsha Semmel for gracing this second edition with a new Foreword. Certainly few people in the field have as broad and refined a perspective on museums as Marsha.

Finally, it is with great pride and humility we acknowledge the long-term success of the first edition of *The Museum Experience*. It clearly filled a niche for many in the profession; we can only hope that this second edition is as useful. As Lao Tzu said, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step." Two and half millennia later this idea still holds true. Every journey does require a first step, but any journey worth taking also requires the hundredth, thousandth, and hundred thousandth step as well. What ultimately is most important, though, is that each step brings new perspectives. Over our journey of many years we've worn out a number of pairs of shoes, but we're still walking and learning. Fortunately, it's been a fascinating journey; we look forward to our next steps.

John H. Falk
Lynn D. Dierking
Corvallis, Oregon

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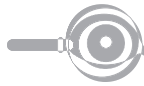
Chapter 1

Introduction

The Contextual Model of Learning



Museums of some kind exist in every developed country, and are becoming increasingly common in less-developed countries as well. Worldwide every year thousands of new museums are created and tens of thousands more are being expanded or enhanced. We estimate that more than a billion people, young and old, alone or in groups, visit a museum of some kind every year. In the latter quarter of the twentieth century, museum attendance grew exponentially. For example, in the United States in 1980, roughly 40 percent of the population visited some kind of museum annually; by 2000 the number had climbed to 60 percent.[1] Although museum attendance has leveled off in recent years, it has not dropped significantly, with the exception in the United States immediately following the events of September 11, 2001, and again at the beginning of the recession of 2008.[2]

This book is about these museum experiences. We consider the totality of the experience, from the moment the thought occurs to someone that visiting a museum might be a good idea, through the visit itself, to the recollection of the experience days, weeks, and even years later. Most significantly, we examine museums through the lens of the people visiting. We accomplish this goal by describing what visitors do in museums and why they do what they do. However, we also consider the thorny issue of why some people do not visit, exploring

this from both an individual perspective and a societal one, since who visits museums or not, and why they make the decision they do, is directly influenced by how the cultural institution "museum" is perceived within a particular society or segment of society.

For those who do use these institutions, the book also considers the consequences of those interactions. What do people take away from these experiences; what benefits, if any, do they derive, both individually and collectively? This is an important question with discussions of public value and accountability in the air. Looking in from the outside, are museums fulfilling their role as trusted social institutions and community stewards? Is their work fully and meaningfully connected to the fabric and true needs of the communities in which they reside? Importantly also, as we better understand the interactive, dialogic nature of these experiences, what resources, motivations, and assets do visitors bring to their museum experiences, and are museums open to sharing authority with, as well as learning from, their visitors?

Our perspective begins outside, examining the museum institution from the vantage point of a potential visitor and society member. It then moves inside the museum, describing how visitors interact with the objects, ideas, and intended goals of the institution. Finally, it moves outside again, looking back at the museum as one institution among many, all situated within a complex community. Importantly, this final vantage point directs us back to the reasons people visit museums in the first place, and the role they play in society; thus our journey is not linear but circular.

Although our journey represents but a brief introduction to the museum experience, we will strive to communicate the remarkable complexity of the interplay between people and institutions. Also since museums are characterized by their unique collections, exhibitions, and programs, our discussion will of course include these aspects of the experience, however only to the degree that they shed light upon the museum visitor's experience. We also will examine the dual reality of museums in the twenty-first century—a reality situated both in the physical bricks and mortar world of tangible objects and buildings and in the virtual world of digital technologies and social media. When this book was first written in the early 1990s it was easy

to focus solely on bricks and mortar museums. Twenty years later one cannot ignore the increasing importance of the virtual world to museums; we recognize this new reality and have tried to address it as much as possible given that this aspect of the museum experience falls by and large outside our area of expertise.

Throughout this book we use the term "museum" to refer to a wide range of free-choice/informal educational institutions, including art, history, children's and natural history museums; zoos, arboretums, botanical gardens, science centers, historic homes, interpretive sites like national parks, visitor centers, archives, and a variety of other exhibitions and collections. As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, the very definition of what constitutes a museum is not only changing, but is being challenged by the creation of a range of new institutions calling themselves museums. Some of these institutions do not have any of the traditional characteristics of museums, such as collections or exhibitions. Given our visitor-centered perspective, though, what constitutes "museum" for potential visitors is more important to us than the content, presentation, or design. Differences between professionals working in museums and the visitors with whom they interact unquestionably exist, and we will discuss these, too. For the most part, though, our focus will be on the similarities and common patterns that make the museum experience such an interesting topic to explore. These patterns are influenced by a number of factors, including how the public perceives museums in general, and a given museum's value in particular, the varying expectations, experiences, and knowledge each visitor brings to bear upon their visit, what the visitor actually sees and does while in the museum, and the social and cultural contexts in which the visitor is immersed before, during, and after the visit.

In an attempt to present a comprehensive yet coherent image of the experience, we created a model designed to help represent the common and unique strands of the museum experience; a framework designed to acknowledge, reveal, and organize its complexity. Like any model, it is an effort to depict reality, but is not real in and of itself. Instead, it is a tool to guide our study and analysis of this complex system. The model we created twenty years ago, the Contextual Model

of Learning,[3] has proven to be just that, a convenient aid in explaining and comprehending the museum experience.

Contextual Model of Learning

Given the multiplicity of visitors and museums and the uniqueness of each, trying to understand why visitors go to museums, what they do there, and how they make meaning from these experiences is a significant challenge. We have conceptualized the museum visit as involving an interaction among three overlapping contexts (Figure 1).

Although we can separate and discuss these contexts as more or less distinct entities, in reality they always interact and connect with each other. The whole that we call the museum experience can only be understood when all the pieces are considered together, because the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. These contexts are:

1. The Personal Context;
2. The Sociocultural Context; and
3. The Physical Context.

All museum visits, as well as the meaning brought to and taken away from them, can be understood as occurring at the intersections of these three contexts. Utilizing this framework to understand the museum experience has proven to be not only an informative way to make sense of the complexities of the museum experience from a

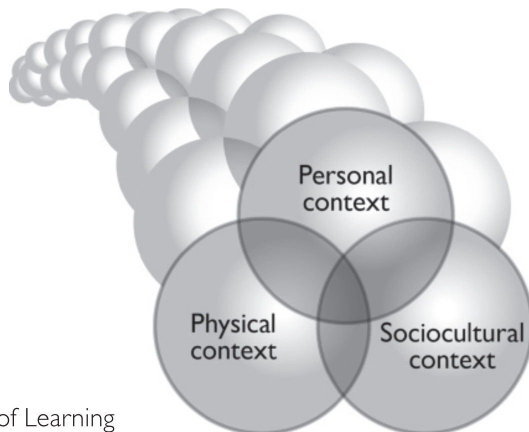


Figure 1.
The Contextual Model of Learning

visitor's perspective, but also a valid way to empirically measure the interaction and relationship of the numerous factors that contribute to museum visitor behavior and learning.[4]

The Personal Context

Each museum visitor's personal context is unique, incorporating a variety of experiences and knowledge. These include varying degrees of experience with the institution of museum generally, as well as experience with, and knowledge of, the content and design of the specific museum being visited. The personal context also includes the visitor's developmental level and preferred modes of learning. Importantly, this context also includes differences in individual interests, attitudes, and motivations for visiting. These characteristics shape what experiences an individual seeks out for self-fulfillment, influences the needs and assets he brings to the visit, and ultimately what he enjoys and appreciates about the experience. These characteristics are embodied in the personal agenda with which each visitor arrives—a pre-defined set of interests, beliefs, needs, and often anticipated expectations for what the visit will be like and result in. Personal context variables enable us to recognize and understand many of the differences we observe in who does and does not visit the museum, as well as how visitors behave and learn when they do. Personal context variables also help us understand how and why individuals develop specific personal visit narratives, narratives that support memories of, and learning from, the visit that typically last weeks, months, and even years.

The Sociocultural Context

Visits to museums occur within a sociocultural context; one aspect of this context arrives with the visitor herself, and another is embodied within the institution itself. In the first case, all people are born into, and develop within, a cultural milieu, a milieu of shared beliefs, customs, values, language, and thought processes. Depending upon one's cultural background (race-ethnicity, socioeconomic status, country of origin), one has different perceptions of museums in society, and if one does visit, one likely experiences the museum diffe ently as a result. Cultural diffe ences among individual visitors

are complicated by the fact that museums themselves are created by people with cultural values and beliefs that shaped their decisions about what they deemed to be valuable, worthy of keeping and caring for, and important to communicate to visitors. The value and belief systems underlying the museum can be consistent with those of its visitors or not. In addition, this aspect of the sociocultural context can also provide insights into who visits museums or not, and why they make the decisions they do.

In addition to cultural factors, every museum visitor is strongly influenced by social interaction factors within the museum. Most people visit museums in a group, and those who visit alone invariably come into contact with other visitors and museum staff. The museum experience differs depending on whether one walks through a museum with an eight-year-old or with an eighty-year-old in tow, whether one is a parent with two small children, or whether or not one's companion is knowledgeable about the exhibits. Whether the museum is crowded or not also strongly influences the museum experience; so do interactions with volunteers and other museum staff. Appreciating the importance of these social context factors allows us to make better sense of variations in behavior, for example, between adults visiting as part of a family group and adults visiting as part of an all-adult group, or between the ways children on school field trips interact with the museum compared to children visiting with their families.

The Physical Context

The museum is a physical setting that visitors, usually freely, *choose* to enter. The physical context includes the architecture and "feel" of the building, as well as the objects and artifacts contained within. These physical context factors strongly influence how visitors move through the museum, what they observe, and what they remember. For example, carpeting the floor of a museum and adding benches can lessen the fatigue that many visitors experience. Architectural and design features can make it easier or harder for individuals with disabilities to utilize the museum. The smell of the elephant house at a zoo may influence how long a time certain visitors will spend watching elephants. Many of the distinctions between an art museum and a

science museum or a historic home and an aquarium derive from elements of the physical context—the architecture, the objects on display, and the ambience—elements that exert significant influence on the visitor. Also included in the physical context are objects and events visitors interact with both prior to and subsequent to the visit, including TV shows, internet sites, books or magazines.

Time

Although it is not a context per se, there is a crucial fourth dimension of this model—time. Looking at the museum experience as a snapshot in time, even a loooong snapshot (for example, the time a visitor spends in the museum) is woefully inadequate. To understand the museum experience, any experience, requires a longer view. One needs to pan the camera back in time and space to view an individual across a larger swath of his life, and the museum within the larger context of the community and society.

The Contextual Model represents a dynamic, situation-specific system. Each of the contexts is continuously constructed by the visitor, and the interaction of these contexts through time becomes, for each visitor, her museum experience. This constructed museum experience is truly unique for each and every individual; no two people ever experience the world in quite the same way. At any given moment, any one of these three contexts can assume major importance in influencing the visitor. The visitor's experience can be thought of as a continually shifting interaction among personal, sociocultural, and physical contexts. A convenient, though admittedly artificial, way to think about this model is to consider experience, of which a key part is learning, as being constructed over time as the individual moves through her sociocultural and physical world; over time meaning is built upon, layer upon layer. However, even this description does not quite capture the true dynamism of the process, since even the layers themselves, once laid down, are not static or necessarily even permanent. All the layers, including and particularly those laid down earliest, interact and directly influence the shape and form of future layers; the individual both shapes and is shaped by her environment. Like any system, there are continuous interactions and feedback loops

between the various parts. For convenience, we have distinguished three separate contexts, but it is important to keep in mind that these contexts are not really separate, or even separable. At its core, this contextual approach to understanding the museum experience allows us to more readily discern and study both the complex details and the intertwined whole, the interactions as well as the resulting outcomes. The Contextual Model constantly reminds us of the inherent complexity of the museum experience. Accordingly, it also reminds us of the necessity to remain humble in our expectations regarding both describing and influencing the museum experience. Like any complex system, the museum experience can be only partially understood and only partially controlled.

Museum professionals painstakingly design exhibitions, develop interpretive materials, and plan programs in the hope that visitors will attend to them, but that does not always happen. When it does, the visitor's context includes these exhibitions, interpretive materials, and programs. When the visitor does not focus on an exhibition, interpretive material or program, they do not become part of the visitor's immediate context—her constructed experience. Whatever the visitor does focus on is filtered through the personal context, mediated by the sociocultural context, and embedded within the physical context. Viewing the process in terms of the interaction of visitor-constructed contexts helps us recognize that the choices visitors make, such as watching a film or listening to a lecture-demonstration, visiting when the museum is crowded or empty, seeing the dinosaurs or the mummies first, walking around the museum a little longer or stopping for lunch, make the difference between a *potential* museum experience and the *actual* one.

Viewing the Museum Experience through a Needs-Based Contextual Lens

It is fair to suggest that the museum experience has not been traditionally viewed from this exceedingly situated, contextual perspective—the lenses of personal, sociocultural, and physical contexts over time. Since we wrote *The Museum Experience* twenty years ago it is gratifying to see that most exhibitions and programs are now designed with

careful attention not only to aspects of the physical context, such as lighting, color, placement of objects, and readability of text, but also with some nod to the visitors' personal and sociocultural contexts, for example, concern about visitors' prior interest in a topic or the social groups within which visitors arrive. However, it still is the rare institution that creates visitor experiences in ways that fully encompass all of the nuance and systemic complexity of the Contextual Model. Museum professionals—administrators, educators, designers, or curators—regularly view the museum experience through some subset of these lenses, and although it is increasingly common for institutions to proclaim that their institution is "audience-focused" or "socially responsible," an examination of behaviors at the level of the gift shop, ticket seller, food service practices, or how school programming decisions are made might suggest otherwise. Though well-intentioned, too often museums operate with an incomplete model of the museum experience, a focus on the interaction of just one or some subset of two contexts, and unfortunately often a disregard for real visitors, as opposed to some idealized and "averaged" visitor. More importantly, these approaches rarely view the museum experience as a complex system, fundamentally driven by a series of need-based phenomena.

Whether alone or in a group, the typical museum visit represents a strategy on the part of the person or group to use the physical context of the museum as a vehicle for satisfying one or more personal and/or sociocultural needs. Though it is not a typical way to think about human behavior, all of us regularly select settings to visit that afford us specific opportunities to satisfy specific needs. If we want to shop we take ourselves to a store or a collection of stores, such as a shopping mall; if we want physical exercise we take ourselves to a gym, jogging path, or ball field; and if we're seeking escapist entertainment we might take ourselves to the local cinema or curl up on our couch and watch a movie at home. The setting selected depends a great deal upon the sociocultural and personal needs to be fulfilled. In the Contextual Model, it is the physical context that provides many of the constants of experience. Although we occasionally find ourselves in situations where totally unexpected things happen, this is the exception in life not the rule. Most of our lives are lived out in settings in which events

are only slightly unpredictable and where we have a general sense of what to expect and how to behave.

Museum settings fall into this category of being reasonably predictable for most visitors, certainly most visitors to most museums in the early part of the twenty-first century. Although each museum is unique, each is designed to provide visitors with a moderately novel but basically predictable set of experiences. For example, visitors go to an aquarium expecting to see live fish in tanks and to find information about the different kinds of fish they are viewing. They don't necessarily know what fish they'll see and in what ways, but they do expect to see fish in tanks. Visitors go to an art museum expecting to see paintings hung on walls or sculptures on the floor or a pedestal, often very specific paintings or sculptures. Visitors go to a children's museum expecting interactive experiences specifically designed for the size, interests, and developmental abilities of young children. Though obvious, this perspective is important. We live our lives at the intersections of myriad physical, sociocultural, and personal contexts; and for many of these, including the confluence of contexts that is the typical museum experience, the intersection comes with a series of often unspoken and even potentially unconscious, but nonetheless clear, expectations.

Based on this premise, one can ask: *What are the expectations associated with museums?* This turns out to be a critical question. Our efforts to answer this question lead us to many of the key insights we will explore in this book. People don't just fall out of the sky and land inside a museum; they come for a reason. Those reasons have to do with their prior experiences and expectations, motivations, knowledge, and interests—factors associated with the personal context. People who visit museums do so because of their sense of the institution and what they presume its value is, both to them and to others—elements associated with the sociocultural context. Appropriately, then, we begin the first step in our effort to understand the museum experience by talking about the public before anyone actually becomes a visitor, by thinking about why someone would even want to set foot within a museum. We also begin by recognizing that the perception of a museum as an institution worthy of visiting represents a particular

culturally developed vantage point. As we'll see, this perspective provides insights into why someone might choose *not* to visit a museum or even acknowledge or understand the role that such an institution could play in meeting needs in their life.

Summary Points

- The Museum Experience begins before the visit to the museum, includes experiences within the museum (interactions with staff and members of one's own group, as well as with other visitors, exhibitions, interpretive materials, and programs), and continues long after the person leaves the museum.
- The Museum Experience can be understood using the Contextual Model of Learning.
    - Personal Context—each museum visitor brings with him a unique background of prior experiences, interests, knowledge, motivations, beliefs, and values, about both the contents of the museum and the notion of the museum as a societal institution.
    - Sociocultural Context—every museum experience is embedded within the macro-sociocultural context of museums as societal institutions and is mediated by micro-sociocultural interactions with others (members of one's own group, other visitors, and staff).
    - Physical Context—the museum, including all of its architecture, exhibitions, objects, and interpretive materials (labels, media, brochures), represents a physical setting that visitors usually freely *choose* to enter and engage with. Even if they have not visited voluntarily, once inside, there is often a high degree of freedom and choice in terms of what to look at, discuss, and do.
    - Time—all museum experiences occur and change over time; understanding the museum experience, any experience, requires taking a long view.
- People visit museums in order to satisfy specific, often highly personal and/or sociocultural needs.

Suggestions for Practitioners

- Museum staff should recognize that visitors arrive at museums with their own personal context, including agendas, interests, expectations, resources, and identities. They use the museum setting, objects, phenomena, and experiences to enact and build upon their personal context. To be effective, museum staff members need to learn how to support visitors' own goals, agendas, and outcomes—that is, their personal contexts—as well as those of the institution.
- Museums are rich physical and sociocultural settings for personal learning. Some visitors are extremely comfortable in them, and others are not. Some know what they can do and accomplish, and others do not. Museum staff should be mindful of the needs of differing types of visitors, offering varied kinds of supports and props to help them accomplish *their* goals, while also ensuring that they have an enjoyable, satisfying experience. In fact, if staff can support the needs and interests of their varying visitors, it is highly likely that their visitors will have an enjoyable, satisfying experience.
- The museum experience begins long before the visitor arrives and continues long after the visit. Museum staff should learn to better support the long-term learning and leisure trajectories of their visitors, tapping into their interests and agendas. The museum experience can be a launching pad or reinforcement for interests, helping visitors develop a working vocabulary, conceptual knowledge, and personal memories on a subject. Relatively deep knowledge can emerge over weeks, months, and years if the experience is relevant and able to be woven through multiple activities outside the museum (for example, in the case of families, visits to other institutions, reading books, watching television, playing).

The Museum Experience Revisited by John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, 23–34.
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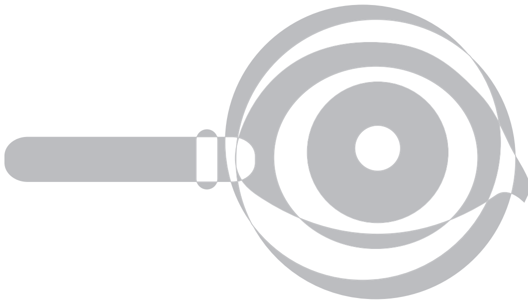
Part I

Before the Visit



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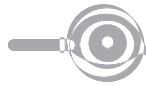
Chapter 2

The Personal Context

Identity-Related Motivations



Q: Tell me about what you enjoy doing.

A: Oh my god, I do so many things. I really enjoy my job, and I also have the hardware store that I help to run (I confess I'm somewhat of a workaholic [laughs]). I used to spend most of my free time dealing with my kids, but now they're both in college so I have more time to myself, though I still spend considerable time dealing with them. So let me see, what else do I do? I like to garden. I like to visit museums. I like to travel. My husband and I like to cook together; we also like to eat out. What else. I like to read. I like to watch movies. I volunteer for the Democratic party and several other non-profits. So much to do, so little time to do it in!

Q: I'm not surprised by your long list. So you mentioned museums. Tell me more about that.

A: Both [husband] I like to go to museums, though not the same ones [laughs]. He likes all these flight and sciency museums, and I prefer art museums. I humor him and go with him, and he humors me, he goes with me.

Q: Hmm, why do you like art museums?

A: Well, I've always liked art, but mainly it's to keep up, see what's new, to make sure that I stay on top of new ideas and trends. I particularly like to see new contemporary art exhibitions and things like that. Since I'm the home design buyer for this hardware store, I'm always looking for new trends and ideas.[1]

Ana is a forty-five-year-old Mexican-American woman living in Omaha, Nebraska.

This is part of a series of interviews John conducted to learn more about how and why people use museums to satisfy their leisure time needs. Ana[2] and her husband are well educated; Ana works for a bank and her husband works for an insurance company. Like so many people living in the twenty-first century, Ana is a very busy person, and when describing the things she likes to do, she doesn't readily distinguish the work-related aspects of her life from those that are purely leisure-related. Jumbled together are activities that are relaxing, like reading; active, like gardening; consumption-oriented, like going out to dinner; and learning-related, like visiting museums. Also mixed together, as in her museum example, are leisure for enjoyment and leisure for work. In contrast to the twentieth century, in which the boundaries between work and leisure were firmly drawn, in the knowledge age of the early twenty-first century, work, consumption, learning, and leisure are all tightly interwoven.[3] All of this has major implications for our understanding of the museum experience as museum-going becomes an increasingly common leisure activity for individuals from all walks of life. Museums are contexts that satisfy many important needs—they are good places for social interaction, to learn, to relax, to discover new things, and to visit when traveling to other cities and countries. In order to begin to understand who does and does not visit museums and why, we need to see museum-going first and foremost as a mechanism for satisfying personal needs.

Though there are large numbers of museum visitors who have limited choice about whether or not to visit, for example the many school children brought on field trips, most visitors to museums freely choose to attend. For these visitors, like Ana above, the choice is made as part of a leisure-time mix of activities; that is, choosing to visit a museum is fundamentally about using one's leisure to satisfy specific

needs. Thus, to begin to understand the museum experience we need to ask two fundamental questions:

1. Why would a person choose to visit a museum during his leisure time as opposed to engaging in some other type of leisure experience?
2. Why would a person make a visit to a museum on this particular day?

To understand these two questions we cannot, and should not, begin by thinking exclusively from the frame of reference of the museum. From that perspective, we think of exhibitions, interpretive materials and programs, objects and experiences that we design and assemble, ostensibly create in order to satisfy the needs and interests of visitors. But just as often, the visitor experiences we create—exhibitions, brochures, media presentations, programs, websites—are designed first and foremost to fulfill our (the museum's) needs and goals, typically the desire by the institution to better support the understanding and appreciation of some topic such as art, history, science, protection of the environment, or whatever. However, most individuals who visit museums come only secondarily to better understand or appreciate art, history, science, the environment, and so forth. Their true goal in visiting is to satisfy *their* own needs and interests, be they intellectual, physical, social, or, most often, some combination of these. If we want to really understand why people visit museums, we need to start from the visitors' frame of reference, the public's use of their leisure time to satisfy personal, identity-related needs.

Museum-Going and Leisure

People typically apportion some part of their life to leisure pursuits. Throughout most of the twentieth century when the world of work often included some level of physical labor, the public primarily used leisure as a mechanism for escaping from the physical and sometimes mental exhaustion of work. Classic pursuits were the escapism fostered by Disney and other theme parks or a week spent on holiday at the beach just relaxing. Although these leisure diversions are still popular, their market share is declining. In the early years of the

twenty-first century these experiences (what some have referred to as "bums on the beach") are being replaced by entirely different forms of leisure experience. Whether through adventure tourism such as whitewater rafting or mountain climbing, or more intellectual pursuits such as visits to historic or natural settings or museums, increasing numbers of people view leisure as an opportunity to expand their understanding of themselves and their world.[4] Although these new tourists may still enjoy spending some of their time vegetating under a palm tree sipping an umbrella drink, an increasing percentage of people are also choosing to use their leisure time as an opportunity to enrich and rejuvenate themselves through immersion in new ideas, spaces, and experiences—the kind of motivation that Ana described for why she goes to museums.

A recent Canadian Tourism Council investigation of American leisure time activities documents this trend.[5] Americans indicated that the number one thing they were seeking on a vacation was beaches (54 percent), but a close second was culture (51 percent), followed in the number three spot by adventures (41 percent). Additionally, 40 percent of the American leisure travelers sampled stated that they travel with the purpose of educating themselves about and visiting their destination's unique attractions. The survey also revealed the growing trend of women traveling alone, more than half (52 percent) of whom said they were traveling in order to experience culture, such as visiting ruins and museums. These statistics certainly suggest that a large percentage of Americans, and by extension others within the developed world as well as those in the growing middle classes of the developing world, view culture, learning, and self-fulfillment as major leisure goals. Although there always were individuals who held such values and could afford such opportunities, for example the eighteenth and nineteenth century's educated European elite's Grand Tour, the fact that so many people now hold these values is historically unprecedented.[6]

One consequence of these major shifts in the quantity and quality of leisure expectations has been a veritable explosion in the number of leisure options available to the public. Quite simply, there are more places, ways, and opportunities for leisure than ever before; all competing for a slice of the individual's limited leisure time. As exemplified

by Ana's interview at the beginning of this chapter, the typical person finds his or her leisure time divided among a myriad of activities, most of which need to be shoehorned into busy lives and schedules. For example, although Americans used to regularly set aside one to two weeks every year for a vacation, now most vacations take the form of three- or four-day getaways as people feel time-crunched.[7] However, now as before, leisure decision-making increasingly comes down to a series of value-related cost-benefit decisions in which time and, to a lesser degree for some, money play a crucial role.[8] Whether it's a short trip downtown to visit the mall or a museum, or a long trip as part of a tourist-type experience that might include a multitude of activities, including museum-going, people are "calculating" the value of the experience; how will an investment of time, effort, and money in this activity maximally benefit me and my loved ones?[9] Individuals perform this calculus through weighing a combination of conscious and unconscious choices—how do my needs match up with the various leisure options and what they afford? Needs are defined in identity-related terms—for example, my desire to be a good parent or partner, to express my identity as an intellectually curious and/or active and healthy person, and/or my identity as the kind of person who goes to these kinds of places and does these kinds of things.[10] Matched against these identity-related needs and roles are a range of leisure activities/settings that afford opportunities to express/satisfy those needs and roles—for example, museums, libraries, bookstores, parks, jogging trails, shopping malls, flea markets.

Although it is possible that museum-going may have peaked in the developed world, in the developing world the number of individuals visiting museums continues to grow exponentially. Worldwide, museums today are unquestionably seen as important leisure venues, but as stated above, so, too, are an ever-growing array of other leisure time options, including shopping, video games, and physical fitness. So why would someone specifically choose to visit a museum?

Why Visit a Museum?

The decision to visit a museum begins with the confluence of two main streams of thought on the part of the prospective visitor: 1) I, or my