

Three Perspectives of Interpretation in different Museum Fields

By Huda Alteneiji, Friederike Eden and Razan Nassreddine

Introduction

As museum-work turns its focus on visitor-needs, interpretation as a tool has become more important. Interpretation in its many forms can be used in most museum-fields. Examining this development, we, Huda Alteneiji (Museum of Islamic Civilization, Sharjah, UAE), Razan Nassreddine (Museum für Islamische Kunst Berlin, Germany) and Friederike Eden (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany) have chosen to write about interpretation in two museum fields, directly involved in our interests, professions and experiences for the SAWA MUSEUM ACADEMY - The Glossary Project.

In our group-work process, we agreed on how our ideas of interpretation meet, and instead of examining the holistic idea which implies all types of interpretation can take place in a museum on different scales, we concentrated on individual topics close to our professions. We talked about current interpretations and what should be considered in or around our personal work.

As interpretation can broadly be understood as construction of content or arranging of - mostly - Information. It is a main tool in museums. Friederike Eden therefore will talk about Interpretation-planning as

tool, and a chance for museums regarding the need to change and adapt to modern topics, society and/or community needs, as well as visitor-needs. Huda Alteneiji will write about interpretation as a factor in research and exhibition creation, as well as in label and catalogue-texts, and general presentation. Razan participated throughout the discussion process and contributed valuable thoughts.

Interpretation Planning as a tool for Museums / Institutions - Friederike Eden

Interpretation is often defined with the subjective construction of content.¹ As this definition is key to the need for interpretation in almost all museum fields, it is also fundamental to the ongoing discourse of power and change facing those museums or cultural institutions. The subjective part of interpretation has, in my opinion, been increasingly examined in museum work in recent years and was previously subordinate.² Especially when interpretation of topics must deal with subjective considerations, transparency is needed to scope these important questions: Who speaks and who remains unheard? What topics / people / problems / works are represented and talked about? And who is the one talking, who is the one talked about? Where does the canon of knowledge come from and how do we question it?

¹ Paddon, Hannah: *Redisplaying Museum Collections - Contemporary Display and Interpretation in British Museums*, Routledge, London, 2014

² Whitehead, Christopher; *Critical Analysis Tool (CAT) 2: how to analyze museum display: script, text, narrative in: Critical Heritages (CoHERE): performing and representing identities in Europe Work Package*, 2016

If done transparently, interpretation can address these issues and contribute to solutions and understanding. But if this subjectivity is not followed by transparency, an abuse of power and knowledge can result.

Knowing this, interpretation can serve museums as a tool in addressing emotional or sensitive topics of any kind, as well as re-modelling key messages, to present the institution and/or their goals in a contemporary way. As rigid institutions, with collections or locations that are often rather inflexible, the reconstruction of their content within a new Interpretation-Plan can help museums evolve. They are constantly facing new challenges, as society and requirements for museums regarding modern topics, society-, community- as well as visitor-needs change.³

Interpretation-planning furthermore can help museums and institutions to re-think their mission-statements, mediation concepts and appearances, in order to focus on their visitors and become visitor-centered and impactful as an essential learning institution of the 21st century.⁴

The mentioned focus on visitors points to the necessity of an enhanced practice of evaluation and the development of interpretive plans. The integration of those visitor studies and evaluations “is also based on the belief that the greater our understanding, tracking, and monitoring of learners, the greater the impact museums will make on public

³ Fischer, Daryl; Levinson, Lisa: Redefining Successful Interpretation in Art Museums, 02 July 2010, in: Curator - The Museum Journal, Vol 53, Issue 3, Pages 299-323.

⁴ Deutscher Museumsbund. Standards für Museen 2006. [museumsbund.de](https://www.museumsbund.de). 03/2017. Last accessed 26th Jan 2022. <https://www.museumsbund.de/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/standards-fuer-museen-2006-1.pdf>

understanding of the science and humanities disciplines.”⁵ Marcella Wells says in her article about “Interpretive Planning for Museums” (2013). The visitor-centered approach, which also relies on the visitor perspectives, is a next step in working with, rather than for, the target communities and visitors.

Visitor-centered Interpretation-Planning requires intensive visitor surveys and the commitment of all employees, as well as an initiated person or team. First, the institution should carefully and systematically decide what to change and how to collect ideas. The process should be intentional and methodical. To confirm the outcome of changes, precisely record the planning and the effort to compare it to visitor surveys and their opinions. Visitor surveys can help to define what visitors would like to know, and what to change about the museum. This should have a decisive influence on the planned changes, in comparison with the wishes of the institution and employees. To determine the content of an exhibition in dialog with others, like with visitors as well as staff or focus-groups, means to reflect, and change the exhibit or the topic/meaning of the exhibit.

Visitor surveys will also be a useful tool afterwards to evaluate whether the goals were achieved. This means surveying visitors after the exhibition or at specific stations can help to evaluate the changes made, or improve the outcome of the knowledge which was provided in the exhibition. The goal could be to hand over the power of interpretation to

⁵ Wells, Marcella; H Butler, Barbara; Koke, Judith: *Interpretive Planning*, in: *Interpretive Planning for Museums: Integrating Visitor Perspectives in Decision Making*, (Left Coast Press, Inc.) Routledge, New York, 2013, p. 37-49.

the visitor in order to let them make their own, less guided decisions or re-examination of a topic by offering facts without direct references or conclusions. In any case, as mentioned at the beginning, there is a need for transparency behind decisions regarding the control of the power of knowledge/institutions.⁶ How changes in topics, designs, labels, exhibition display, education and supporting programs, due to different interpretation-plans, can affect the outreach of museums, will be closely mentioned in the following text contributions of my colleagues.

Interpretation in Exhibition - Text and Display

- Huda Alteneiji

From my perspective, interpretation is the perception of explaining or re-telling, or exhibiting your understanding of something. However, through my work I have recognized interpretation as the story behind the collection: by adding text, labels, videos, illustrations, panels, and even the museum's atmosphere. The gallery itself can play a big role in making the interpretation clear to the visitor. In addition, it can illuminate aspects for viewers, or make the flow of relationships easier to understand. Most of us think that interpretation in the language of the museum is important, much like a person translating one language into another, because it explains what a person is saying to someone who doesn't necessarily understand. The role of Interpretation in the museum consists in conveying an understanding of the collection and the history of the museum to the visitor.

⁶ Ibid., Wells, Marcella; H Butler, Barbara; Koke, Judith, 2013, p. 37-49.

The question of what role interpretation plays varies from one point of view to another, especially when it comes to museums. In museums, the goal is to use interpretation as a tool to outline the museum's vision and goals through plans and practices. Interpretation in a museum is the method that connects the audience with the collection. However, many of the interpretations made by experts focus on providing a visual aspect of the collection. Although another method should be the primary method, which is attaining the visitor's perspective. The role of interpretation is to serve as a medium between what the museum wants to say to their audience and transmitting the history at the same time to the public.⁷

As a researcher who rewrites interpretive text, it's the massive chance to create something outside the box and to bring something unfamiliar to the audience, so we can draw their attention to our object or even highlight it. For our role is to stimulate our audience by our text, and that can be attained by asking for our audience's perspective on certain objects. In one section in Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization we put a panel above the medicine theme asking, "Think with us: what do you think these tools were used for?". I think steps like these can give us a view of what the visitors think about our objects "discover and learn" and not just receive the information. These kinds of labels create an engaging experience between the museum and the visitors.

⁷Dobbin, Claire. *Exhibitions: What exactly is interpretation? Behind the scenes*. Media Majlis. 14th Oct 2019. Last accessed 26th Jan. 2022 <https://mediamajlis.northwestern.edu/en/majlis/majlis360/exhibitions-what-exactly-is-interpretation>.



Fig. 1. “Like me: Our Bond with Brands” Exhibition view, London Design Museum, 2015 ⁸

In an exhibit in London, I remember I found a display with a sweater, and the label posed this question: “How much would you pay for George Clooney’s sweater?” The labels then show the results of a study made on people who would pay different amounts of money taking into account the condition of the sweater. Was it clean or dirty, did he spill anything on it, did he wear it on one of his roles and the study goes on and on. Understandable text and experience play a great role in formulating our text, but the ultimate goal is to provoke curiosity.

⁸Evolution of Brand: A Study of Our Relationship with Brands. Lippincott. 25th Apr 2017. Last accessed 26th Jan 2022. <https://lippincott.com/insight/evolution-of-brand/>

Certain words and associations that occur when the text combines what experts know, with what the visitor would like to know. Furthermore, as museums have the need to create, we have a role, a chance to reform perspective through our labels, so that when writing a label we have multiple interpretations in thought.⁹

The text approach that influences how the exhibition is constructed becomes an important element, because through it we know what to include in the exhibition and how to shape it. The use of interpretive text is not confined to museums, but also fields such as historic sites, art galleries, museums, and libraries. With the idea of interpretation guiding us, some specialists are even creating their own interpretations, which is a good thing because we can be creative by emphasizing where to draw attention. However, this can create a problem if the interpretation is totally different from what other people believe. Unfamiliar interpretive text can lead to confusion and ambiguity. Sometimes the only way to avoid this is for the museum to publicize our interpretations along with others, while other times it is better to be silent and let them find their own ways of interpreting. We can classify interpretation in different ways, it can be separate or associated. This is the way we should also think about interpretation in a museum because we are trying to show an association of ideas, not just one solidified point of view.

⁹Evolution of Brand: A Study of Our Relationship with Brands. Lippincott. 25th Apr 2017. Last accessed 26th Jan 2022. <https://lippincott.com/insight/evolution-of-brand/>

The role of us researchers is to decontextualize and then recontextualize to initiate curiosity and surprise the people who associate with museums.¹⁰

Summary

Interpretation is a constant work-in-progress, embedded within the vivid workflows in the museum. It does not take one form, it's an attribute that is always changing; it tackles what we gain from attracting our audience and what we want our visitors to gain. It equips institutions with the possibilities to engage, to interact, and to react with and for their visitors, to therefore stay flexible in their possibilities as an educational institution.

Interpretation as we understand it, doesn't function as a one-way street but will always affect all concerned with its outcome. It can enable institutions to understand their collection and produce multiple and diverse perspectives on objects, as well as re-tell stories within exhibitions, therefore it keeps the museum in a state of flux.

Interpretation is not only a tool for museums to work with and on themselves, but also to work with and for their visitors and target groups.

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¹⁰ Jones, P. (1992). *Museums and the Meanings of Their Contents* (Vol. 23). The Johns Hopkins University Press.