

IMAG #3.1. InSEA Publications (2016). DOI:  
10.24981/2414-3332-3.1.2016

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**Museums Connecting with Senior Citizens**

DOI: 10.24981/2414-3332-3.1.2016.13

**SINEBRYCHOFF  
ART MUSEUM**

# Museums Connecting with Senior Citizens

## Abstract

Art education used in museum pedagogy is not only for school children. Not going back farther back in history more than necessary, the sixties caused many changes in the society. Senior citizens, as we call the increasing number of retiring people - the 'Baby Boom' generation have found culture services in theatres, concert halls, and now in museum services. Instead of giving a stereotypical image of a heterogenic senior group, we are talking about persons who, after the war, have been changing the society for more human by fighting for social services. From 50's to 60's there existed various genres of a youth culture like the Beatles, the rock and roll generation, and the political pacifistic movements. How can we fill all expectations, understand the motivation and needs of our senior audience, update our skills to use technology, and still collaborate in a human way to collect, preserve and share knowledge? Are we even talking about passive audiences or more active users or choosers?

**Keywords:** senior, museum, education, narrative

I'm working as a Head of Education at the Sinebrychoff Art museum, which is both a historical art museum and a home museum and we have done systematic audience research for about twenty years. The questionnaires don't tell very much

about their experiences and that is why I became curious about their actual experiences of a museum visit. I'm finishing my doctoral thesis on a museum visitor's experience by using narrative method.

Common ideas of museum visits have changed radically. Museums develop ideas to make a visit more entertaining by giving experiences by often using a 'hands-on method'. The idea of a thinking museum today acting as a host or hostess welcoming people to enjoy of art and social life seems real to me. There was a time in museums when everything memorized and personal feelings and "incorrect" answers were forbidden. Education did not belong in the actual museum context though at first, museum education was very positive; opening hours were planned to attract more audiences, and pieces of art were bought to teach people. This educational pattern lived a few hundreds of years until the idea of learning in the museum started to change and shake the museum walls.

In Finland there is a new concept for an adult museum visitors: the Museum Card, which is a common entrance ticket to all Finnish museums, and it is valid for one year after it has first been used. The personal Museum Card gives access to over 200 museums all around Finland. What can we offer for visitors who suddenly are enjoying the convenience to pop in rapidly "to see something" because they can come back later without paying any extra. This brings up the question: "Are people satisfied for their visits?" Instead of staying a longer period in a certain exhibition it be more common to choose other reasons for each visit like coming to the museum shop or meeting a



friend. I have an impression that museums have come closer to ordinary routines of people's everyday life.



To get information of a museum experience of regular senior citizens' museum visits, we need to examine the museum visits more carefully. Audience research is an interesting, but at the same time, a challenging task. Language and cultural

environments are connected to a certain time period and they change rapidly, which makes long-term comparisons of museum visits difficult, but longitudinal studies can produce interesting results. George Hein (1998) has explained that the same consistency of phenomena cannot be applied to data about visitors to museums because of cultural and linguistic changes. With a narrative method it is possible to understand the meanings of actions and phenomena in authentic surroundings and see how people build their stories when telling their experiences and memories to other people. It is a functional method and will be considered as one verbal technique for recapitulating experience. Professor Dan Hutto (2007) supported a natural and listening interaction between the narrator and interviewer. This has been my method at the workshop interviews at the museum. People like to tell stories. The researchers Labov and Waletzky (1997) have developed a radical model for a verbal narrative. They separated the so called "narrative sentence" of which among others they got orientation and evaluation. The order of the story must be in the original form because it influences the context. The model consists of the abstract; subject of the narrative "do you want to hear this"; orientation of "time, place, persons"; complication of action "what happened"; and, the evaluation, results of resolution and code. The most interesting part is usually in the evaluation because the narrator has expectations of what they are willing to tell afterwards. Pauses, nods, sighs and laughs, as well as the stories, are noted in an interview diary. Being aware of the importance of non-verbal codes has helped me to collect



information, which can be reconnected to the interview's natural atmosphere.

A regular senior visitor group has been formed at the Sinebrychoff Art museum since 2004 and it is still active today. I wanted to learn why they enjoy their museum visits so much, and what role does art history play into the concept? By using quantitative questionnaires from the 2003 -2013, and qualitative narrative methods such as interviews and letters, it has been possible to learn about audiences' expectations, experiences and influence on museum practices, which can be connected to art education, museum pedagogy, and museology. In my case study of senior citizens I have used both interviews and a written form: "A letter to my friend –tell about your experiences at senior club". As Senior Researcher, Ph.D. Tuija Saresma pointed out in her lecture (lecture, Jyväskylä December 12, 2014), narratives are always social – stories are told to somebody. Interviews were conducted at the museum's workshop and recorded using a H4 Zoom – recorder. The questions were: What kind of hopes and expectations do you have of your visit at Sinebrychoff Art Museum? What things are



the most important for you during your visit? Would you like to share any specific information about your museum visit? What makes you come to a museum?





I found a difference between the written stories and interviews. In the letters, people wrote more about their past and individual feelings concerning their own life. There was abstract, orientation and evaluation in each letter, but in the complication action the context changed from individual sorrows to a happy reunion with a childhood's friend. Only few persons wrote about art. In the interviews, the situation was different. Some persons said that it is good to be in a company without saying anything. The importance of art education in school was mentioned in several interviews – some of the seniors were still in contact to their art teacher. There were also bad experiences at school in general, which success in drawing had helped to overcome. The art at the museum was mentioned many times. People liked lectures, workshop activities, and dining together. Social aspects arouse important: people mentioned many names and thanked them for their good spirits.

Museum education is a lifelong exhibition process, which examines the personal and individual experience of museum visit and the arts. According to Johnston (1992) through objects, museums can provide unique experiences associated with the collective meaning, sharing, discussion and debate that are the foundations of good citizenry, and can reinforce personal identity and belonging. Objects convey a sense of place and can, therefore, introduce outsiders to the significance of a culture through its material heritage (Johnston 1992). One part of my conceptual



framework lies on Dewey's theory of experience and aesthetics of art. "He posits that the root of aesthetic experience lie in common place experience, that is, in the consummatory experiences that are ubiquitous in the course of human life" (Konlaan, 2001, p. 26). Dewey's (1934) 'experience' here linked art experience and being an active member of a regular visitor group. Only few people talked about art history at the museum.



Back to the Museum Card - it has aroused more but positive comparison between museums. How can we give a customer value and is it ethical to put a price for special programs? The society does not pay any special economic attention to senior people's cultural services or their need to have reunions at a cultural institute – available services depend on museums' own interests. I have a good experience and trust the museums' importance to older people and that is why we work to develop suitable concepts for older people and keep the quality of their museum visit high. There is more demand to give open access to archives, museum buildings, and virtual tours, and I wish there would soon be a connecting 'museum group' with a moderate price for senior citizens in every little village.















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