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# REPORTS OF VISITOR STUDIES IN FOUR COUNTRIES

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by George E. Hein

*Author's Note: A request I placed on the ICOM discussion list (icom-l@home.ease.lsoft.com) a few months ago for information on visitor research resulted in several responses. The detailed reports I received are too long to publish in full in this issue, but I have excerpted them below, so that interested readers can gain some understanding of the work carried out, and can contact the authors for further information.*

## Canada

Ann Davis, from the Nickle Arts Gallery at the University of Calgary reports that they sponsored a rare audience research study at a university museum. Rosalyn Rubenstein conducted the study, with the help of three graduate students, Calvin Burns, Steven Mack and Tina Martel. The project was supported by Museums Alberta, The Calgary Foundation and the University of Calgary. They interviewed 400 visitors. She concludes from their data:

The Nickle's audience is in line with the museum's strategic direction to serve primarily adult learners with a focus on the University of Calgary campus. The museum is an important resource on campus for both formal and informal learning. 72% of visitors are from campus, 68% are students; 48% of visitors describe their reason for visiting as "to learn". There were significant results in visitor satisfaction and customer service. 92% of visitors had their expectations met and 64% were repeat visitors. 80% of visitors had also visited other cultural attractions in the last 12 months. 73% of visitors prefer exhibition information that includes a combination of facts and explanations. 46% were interested in catalogues. The respondents also wanted the museum to do more advertising (16%).

The study has encouraged the museum to expand its research efforts. They view this work as a foundation of collaborative projects with other museums, especially university museums. The goal is to advance the field in two critical areas: (1) the role of the university museum as a resource for both formal and informal learning and (2) to help create valid performance measures for museums so that they may strengthen the management of museums and their impacts in society.

### Ann Davis

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## Finland

Amiika Gronholm reports that the Helsinki City Museum commissioned Taloustutkimus Oy (a Finnish Independent Full-Service Market Research Company) to carry out visitor studies in 9 branches of the Helsinki City Museum in 1998 and 1999. The purpose was to investigate adult visitor satisfaction in the different branches. Museum personnel gave questionnaires to the visitors, who returned the filled out questionnaires to a box reserved for the survey. All the questionnaires were in Finnish and Swedish. In Helsinki City Museum and Sederholm House, English and German questionnaires were also collected.

Results from the 1998 report on branches that included only visitors who are residents in Finland are as follows:

(1) *Visitor Profile*: the largest visitor group is made up of:

- Women (75%)
- College (22%) and university (31%) educated

- Singles (26%) or members of adult households (32%).

(2) *Visitor Satisfaction*: The visitors were in general happy with their visit (the average ranking was 4.3 on a 5-point scale). Reliability of the facts in the exhibitions got high ratings, while exhibitions received ratings of 4-4.5 on the same scale. Also, the museum branches received highest marks in cleanliness. Visitors gave the poorest ratings to opening hours, guides and signs in the museums. The amount of exhibition texts also received lower marks.

### Marjukka Sihvola

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*"The 'human factor' (guided tours and information provided by museum staff) seems to be the most satisfactory way of communication, although it is not a method frequently used"*

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### Italy

Dr. Ludoivo Solima from Secunda Università degli studi di Napoli, Italy, reports that he has conducted two surveys of visitors at Italian museums. One collected 4,000 visitor questionnaires in the summer 1999 from 12 different museums representative of Italian museums with respect to geographic location, the nature of collections and annual visitation. It was sponsored by the Ufficio Studi of the Italian Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali. This survey had questionnaires in Italian, French and English that consisted of multiple-choice questions. The objectives were:

- To evaluate the visitors' enjoyment of the communication systems used by museums;
- To gather information about the visitors' judgements on the effectiveness of the communicative strategies;
- To get guidelines about the ways to improve museums communicative processes.

The survey revealed substantial appreciation of the communicative systems used in the museums studied. The research also highlighted some topics to improve museums' cultural communication:

- Visitors included a large number of non-Italians;
- The sources of information used by visitors to gather information about the museums (books, guidebooks, friends and/or relatives) are different from those usually employed (television and newspapers);
- External visitors expressed some dissatisfaction with signage. Communication based upon signs appears to be particularly important for low-education visitors;
- Among textual tools, captions and information panels present some problems for foreign visitors;
- Maps, guidebooks and handouts appear to be enjoyed by low-education visitors,
- The "human factor" (guided tours and information provided by museum staff) seems to be the most satisfactory way of communication, although it is not a method frequently used by these museums.
- Many elements indicate that improving the social, entertainment and interactive factors of the visit would be the best way to offer effective cultural communication.

Prof. Solima's other study, conducted in Naples in 1997-98, focused on visitors to a temporary exhibition shown in a network of six museums in Naples. The study collected data from over 1,000 visitors at the different museums. The objectives of the research were to identify the social and demographic characteristics of the visitors, the motivations and the visiting styles of the public, the visitors' satisfaction with the exhibition and its services, the visitors' perception of the exhibition, and the relationship between visitors and these museums. The methodology

was to interview Italian and foreigner visitors more than thirteen years old at the end of their visit.

Again, to quote from his conclusions:

The survey has revealed a substantial appreciation of the exhibition. Nonetheless, the research has highlighted some topics that must be kept in mind in order to improve museum performances:

- The social profile of visitors was strongly characterised by a very high education level;
- The public was largely composed of adults whose motivation to visit the exhibition was mainly a cultural one. Young and old people and the ones who visited the exhibition just from general curiosity or looking for fun constitute a marginal portion of the audience;
- Most visitors were from the local area around Naples;
- The innovative formula of a network exhibition was greatly appreciated by visitors who visited more than one exhibition site, but the opportunity to buy an integrated ticket for different sites was exploited by few visitors;
- The informative tools and the signage were criticised by the public;
- The different services offered by the exhibition (guided tours, coffee, bookshop, etc.) were not frequently used by visitors, but those who used greatly appreciated them.

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### Norway

We have just done an extensive visitor study at our museum on a temporary exhibition on Human Evolution. We received 947 completed questionnaires. We have also used comment books where the museum custodians have written 25 pages of questions and comments from visitors. This is a part of a project initiated by Norwegian Museum Authority, our national museum department. Six museums participated, using different methods. The study will be published in a special issue of their journal in a few months. The intention was not to develop new methods but to encourage museums to do more visitor studies. The participants' visitor studies will be used as examples of how it can be done.

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