

AHI article (Autumn 2020)

Reporting Research 8 – visitor perception on the importance of object authenticity in museums

For many visitors, part of the excitement in visiting a museum is to view real-world objects, which represent the culture, heritage, science and achievements of historic peoples and civilisations as well as of the landscape around them. Many museums regard this legacy of objects as part of their distinctive attractiveness and indeed will celebrate these objects as, in some cases, the ‘crown jewels’ of their collection. In recent years, the practice of allowing visitors to touch and/or handle objects has become more widespread and often this personal connection with cultural or natural objects is achieved through the creation of exact copies or replicas which can be handled safely. This has re-ignited debate on whether the authenticity of the object being observed or handled really matters. This short article reports on an interesting study published in 2020 which explores visitor perceptions of the role of authentic objects in museums. To illustrate some of the comments being made in the study, this article also includes direct quotes from museum visitors which have been posted on one of a number of social media platforms.

For museums, providing the visitor with the opportunity to see ‘the real thing’ has always been of great importance in enhancing the telling of a story, but it is known that the use of authentic objects goes well beyond this, by stimulating a much deeper experience and therefore increasing the impact of the story. It is widely accepted that an authentic object can encourage a much greater level of reflection and immersion into the experience being presented, such as: ‘*When I gazed at Tutankhamun’s ebony and ivory chair, I imagined him sitting in front of me*’ (“Fred34”, 2019).

Reisinger & Steiner (2006:69) suggest that authenticity refers to the ‘non-contentious genuineness of an observable thing such as an artefact’, whilst Theobald (2005:88) simply states authenticity as meaning ‘genuine, unadulterated or the real thing’. However, it is not always possible to obtain the authentic object for reasons of fragility, scarcity or value, where it is currently being housed and, in some cases, because the real thing may not exist as it may have been lost in antiquity. In these circumstances, copies or replicas are often used, the level of accuracy of the copy does of course need to be considered, as does the way in which it is presented to the visitors, such as: ‘*I didn’t realise the cup was not the real thing, until I read the label*’ (“Janey69”, 2018). Interestingly, Hampp & Schwan (2014:354) found that only 46% of visitors ‘preferred authentic objects’ whilst 47% were ‘happy to accept copies or replicas’, particularly where they were ‘true to the original’, such as; ‘*The colours on the engraving were wonderful.... even though the sign said it had been touched up*’ (“PondCleaner6”, 2016).

Nine museums in Germany formed the basis for Schwan & Dutz’s study which used six main questions to explore the role of authentic objects in museums. A 5-point Likert scale was used to rate the visitors’ responses from strongly disagree (score=1) to strongly agree (score=5). Whilst their study focused upon the differences in response between visitors visiting science, cultural or natural history museums, for the purposes of this short article the results have been combined. A total of 703 responses were obtained with the average age of the respondent being 43. In terms of gender, 357 (50.8%) were female and 341 (48.5%) were male. Whilst 339 (48.2%) were visiting a museum for the first time, 364 (51.8%) were repeat visitors and 418 (59.5%) of the respondents were visiting the museum in a group.

In preparing for their study, Schwan & Dutz (2020:219) summarised the perceived value of authentic objects as follows: they attracts visitors’ attention; heighten their situational interest; arouse their curiosity; surprise them; touch them emotionally; stimulate their imagination and make them think more intensively about the object and its history’. This is nicely illustrated by “Jock” (2017) who said: *‘I could feel the heat of battle unfolding in front of me as I stared at the painting’*.

Table 1. Response of visitors to the Likert statements about authentic objects in museums (adapted* from Schwan & Dutz, 2020:226 & 228).

*Note: for simplicity, not all of the results obtained in this study are presented in the table below.

**Score is measured here on a Likert scale where 5= Strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree

Question 1: To me, an object is authentic if it ...’	Score**	Question 2 ‘Authentic objects.....’	Score
Truly shows how it was	4.55	Bring a topic closer to me	4.32
Tells stories	4.01	Help me comprehend something	4.25
Has endured	3.87	Make me curious	4.23
Provides important insights for research	3.80	Make me wonder	4.04
Shows many details	3.79	Make me think	3.89
Is of historical importance	3.64	Transport me into a historical period	3.89
Whilst, the least positive scoring responses for these two questions were:			
Is complete	2.96	Stimulate my fantasy	3.70
Is related to a famous person	2.44	Surprise me	3.56
Is beautiful	2.35	Touch me	3.42
Is valuable / Is expensive	2.34 / 1.50	Make my heart beat faster	3.14

In Table 1, the left-hand column presents the results relating to the characteristics of authentic objects, perhaps unsurprisingly ‘truly showing how it was’ scored the highest level of agreement and interestingly, most visitors felt that the monetary value of the object was not a key requirement for it to be authentic. The right-hand column reports on the different psychological effects of viewing authentic objects. The most popular effects being: ‘enhanced comprehension’; ‘brought the story to life’ and ‘encouraging greater curiosity’, as illustrated here: *‘How did they make it? it was so small and delicate’* (“FiremanJoe”, 2016).

Chhabra’s study of 200 museum curators in Iowa, USA recorded similar findings on the role of authentic objects with: ‘representing the past’ (4.49); ‘having a

documented history' (4.24) and 'representing the community' (4.00) as some of the highest responses (2008:436). In that study, the representation of an actual period in history was deemed to be the most important factor by the visitors, illustrated here by a comment from a visitor to the British Museum, London who said: '*Pompeii came to life for me – what a fascinating time it must have been*' ("Chris27", 2013).

In Schwan & Dutz's study, the visitors were also asked about the impact of restoration or conservation activity upon an object and the responses to the statement they posed 'To me an object is authentic even if'.... were as follows: 'it has been conserved' (4.13); 'it has been restored' (4.08) and 'some parts have been supplemented' (3.87), illustrated by "Sukie2" (2019) who said '*the wooden handle was restored, but that was ok*'. However, visitors were less positive in their response where 'many parts had been supplemented' (2.88) and 'It is not obvious what is original and what is not' (2.70) (Schwan & Dutz, 2020:230).

Schwan and Dutz posed two further questions to gauge the visitor's reaction to the use of non-authentic objects and the results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Response of visitors to the Likert statements about non-authentic objects in museums (adapted* from Schwan & Dutz, 2020:230 & 231).

*Note: for simplicity, not all of the results obtained in this study are presented in the table below.

**Score is measured here on a Likert scale where 5= Strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree

Question 4: If I notice an object is not original...'	Score**	Question 5: 'The role of replicas is.....'	Score
I search for explanations	3.13	I would look at a replica if the original does not exist anymore	4.61
It makes no difference to me	3.07	If an object is important for completing an exhibition, then a replica can be shown	4.53
I do look at it more closely	2.95	It should be explicitly indicated if an object is not an original	4.49
I am disappointed	2.43	Only under a few circumstances, do I find it justified to show replicas	3.16
I do not look at it further	2.04	In a museum, I expect to see original objects instead of copies	2.89

There was not a particularly strong response to 'not looking at an object if it was not authentic'. Indeed, most visitors agreed that replicas had a role particularly where the original was very fragile or did not still exist. Replicas were also regarded as a valuable inclusion for completeness in telling the full story associated with an exhibition. Chhabra (2008:443) talks about the object being there to represent the past but equally to create a personalised connection between 'then' and 'now', as illustrated here: '*Glad I saw it, but didn't agree with its use by them, blimey!*' ("Skater6", 2018).

In offering a brief summary of some of the results revealed in this study, it seems reasonable to suggest that:

1. Authentic objects should be used to show 'how it was', to bring the past to life, and connect the visitor to the story being told;
2. Authentic objects undoubtedly help the visitor to greater levels of comprehension, they make them think and stimulate curiosity;
3. Most visitors accept that conservation (and in some cases modification) of original objects is necessary but explanation of which parts are original remains important;
4. The use of copies or replicas was accepted by most visitors providing the object was explicitly marked as such. Indeed, where hands-on experiences or demonstrations were taking place, it was often deemed to be desirable to use copies or replicas.
5. Whilst this study did not specifically focus upon the needs of a younger audience, other studies (such as Bunce, 2016) have done so and seem to have found that children tend to value authentic objects more than replicas and in consequence when exposed to them explore the topic more deeply.

In summary, recent events have perhaps reminded us that for a museum authenticity is only one aspect of a broader set of domains which also include the dilemma of identity and reflection of the current societal climate, its norms and relationships. This indeed recognises the delicate balance that museums face in presenting objects (be they authentic or replicas) and their need to reflect on and consider the values of the original donor (where relevant), the feelings of the local community which may well represent a significant part of their core audience as well as the needs and perspectives of a broader audience who they may be hoping to attract to the exhibition in particular or, the museum in general.

(1,887 words)

References

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