



# ***museums matter:*** **accessing Ireland's heritage** Museum Engagement Sheet

## **WHY DO PEOPLE VISIT MUSEUMS?**



Why do people go? *Interest in history and culture, education and activities for themselves and children, for study/research purposes.*

Why do people not go? *Lack of interest/information; feeling of exclusion- intellectually & psychologically. What is the particular institution you are looking at doing to prevent this?*

When you go to a museum look around you and see what the particular institution is doing to get everyone involved: *art classes, lectures, children's activities, public tours as well as exhibitions. How well are these events publicized?*

Look at the **entrance** to the museum, the entrance often dictates the route people will take through the space and can therefore determine their overall visiting experience.

National Museums tend to have a more imposing, "temple" style of architecture, while local or regional museums are generally smaller and more intimate. Describe in the box below the different reactions people could have to these two types of places.



## DISPLAY TECHNIQUES

### LIGHTING

While walking through a museum you will see a number of different uses of controlled lighting: this is to protect the objects from being damaged by sunlight.

Some objects require more protection than others, for example in areas where archive newspapers or fabric are on display, there is very low, subdued lighting as works these items fade more easily and are more susceptible to damage.

The psychological interpretation of light- think about what kind of effect this can have on a visitor: for example, a darkly lit room can place importance on works and make the visitor feel more subdued. A bright airy space can be welcoming and make a person feel more comfortable.

### LABELS

Labels are important in understanding how museums work.

Museums generally have large labels and panels describing certain periods of time or particular methods and style. These give a framework to the displays, put them in context and allow the visitors to learn about them.

An area that does not give much information about works of art could be assuming that its visitors are already knowledgeable about and familiar with the works on display and therefore be isolating a lot of their audience. But one could also argue that they do not want to create any preconceived notions about what is on display and would prefer visitors to use their imaginations.

### Ask yourself these questions when you are in a museum:

- Do you feel labels are necessary?
- Who should they be aimed at and what reading age?
- Do they encourage lack of thinking or more thinking about a work of art or artefact?
- Do labels distract from or enhance the piece of work?

Pick one label in the museum. What is the key piece of information that you take from it? What do you think is the most important piece of information? Is it clearly written and easy to understand? Does it tell you what you want to know about the object?

Try rewriting the label. What would you say about this object?



---

## **BARRIERS**

Having works behind glass or in a case can lend importance to works. By doing this, curators are letting visitors know these works are perhaps more rare or delicate than other pieces and putting these measures in place protects the works from being damaged.

Many objects in museums are behind glass because they may be quite old and fragile. Certain museums have "handling objects" so that visitors can touch the pieces and become familiar with them. Do you feel this is a good compromise?

Do you feel barriers alienate the viewer or are they a necessary precaution?

~

**ACCESS & LOCATION** Look around the museum you are considering- what are they doing to create access for all? Is there information available on their website? Also study the written information to see what access facilities are available. Everyone deserves to have access to and learn about the collection.

**NOTES ...**

## **REACTIONS TO THE SPACE**

Consider the reactions different visitors can have to particular spaces:

**Personal:** Is there enough room in the exhibition to maintain personal space? If not, it leads to a feeling of general discomfort. Works should be placed in people's eye line so they can engage with the piece.

Are there too many works or artefacts on display? Over stimulation creates a condition known as exhibit fatigue. The average attention span for an adult is thirty minutes.

**Psychological:** How do certain areas make people feel in relation to the works? Too many works in a small space can lead to a cramped feeling and make people uncomfortable.

**NOTES ...**

### SAMPLE QUESTIONS:

Comment on the atmosphere of the museum you have visited and the ways in which it is used and enjoyed by visitors. Do you think any improvements could be made?

Discuss the role of the visit to the museum you have visited in relation to your particular subject or work at school.

- Do you think museums are important? Give reasons for your answer.
- Why is it important to see the real objects?
- Who benefits from museums?
- How will this experience contribute to your work?

The Irish Museums Association is dedicated to supporting and promoting the interests of museums and the museums community throughout Ireland.

**Irish Museums Association; T: +353 1 6633579 E: [office@irishmuseums.org](mailto:office@irishmuseums.org) W: [www.irishmuseums.org](http://www.irishmuseums.org)**