

Suggested Guidelines for Museums

Here are some ideas for museums to consider in order to improve communication with potential visitors. It starts off by asking the museum, *what are your strengths*, and *who is your desired audience*?

What is the focus of your collection?

Now that this discipline (which encompasses fashion, costume, dress, textiles and textile production) is growing at a rapid pace, museums need to be clearer what their intended focus is. Most clothing collections started out as textile/dress collections, and while "fashion" exhibitions are expensive and take up a lot of time and exhibition space, they are certainly more accessible to most visitors.

1. **Textiles** - this category is the easiest to display, since the *objects* are taken at face value. They are often exhibited flat, whether they are flat textiles originally (like fabric yardage, quilts, or embroidered handkerchiefs) or garments that are shown to highlight their construction and not how they were worn (like medieval clerical vestments, lace collars, or beaded tunics). The focus here is on techniques of weaving, dyeing, and surface decorations like lace, quilting, embroidery, or beadwork. Many ecclesiastic vestments and non-western or traditional dress are exhibited in this category.
2. **Dress** - these displays present *garments* to be taken at face value. Mannequins may be dressed with at least a suggestion of undergarments to give a proper shape, but lack heads or legs so getting to see a complete silhouette is not included. Many of these garments are exhibited because of their provenance: made by a famous designer, worn by a king, painter, writer, actor (or any other kind of celebrity), where to be in the very presence of the object is the important part. Little emphasis is placed on construction or how this garment fits into a larger system, more about the life of this particular object.
3. **Fashion** - these displays present *clothing* in a proper context to how it was worn. Mannequins are dressed with proper undergarments, accessories, and hairstyles, possibly placed in a period room or environment with props that suggests the world in which it lived. For historical dress especially, the question to be examined is "what was worn when and how". It often makes a point to include both women and men, and focuses on a particular event, time of day or type of activity. For more contemporary dress, there may be a focus on capturing the essence or evolution of a designer or time period's style.

Who is your audience?

Many museums suffer because it is not clear who they are targeting. Here is a breakdown of where potential visitors are coming from, and ways to encourage their trip to your museum:

1. Where do they come from?

1. **Local Visitors** - these people live in town, and are repeat customers, probably subscribers. They've seen your permanent exhibition multiple times, so you need to engage their interest by rotating new pieces into the display, advertising changing exhibitions that highlight new objects or look at historical/social/cultural issues from a new perspective, holding regular events or

classes that engage the community on a regular basis. Having a social media presence (blog, twitter, facebook, pinterest, tumblr, etc.) is useful to sustain local interest.

2. **Domestic Visitors** - these people have traveled from outside a commuter-range, but they may have been to the museum before. Perhaps they live outside the city, or across the country - but they understand the cultural heritage that you're displaying. Exhibitions may take a more inquisitive approach, encouraging their audience to examine their own beliefs about their shared experiences. Email lists are helpful to let them know what upcoming exhibitions or events are coming up that they may want to make a special trip for.
3. **International Visitors** - these people may be a one-time visitor. This may be the first time they've been in the country. They might only be in town for a brief vacation, and they need to know why to see your museum, when they have plenty of others to choose from. They need a bit more straightforward information about historical figures, events, wars, etc. When mentioning these things, even in passing (like a king), they need to be reminded of their context. For more thematic or challenging exhibitions, more background information should be included to bring these visitors up to speed. Exhibitions should provide translations into other languages. Both general descriptions and highlights of the collection should be clearly exhibited and shown on the website to create interest.

2. What is their background or level of interest?

Sadly, many museum exhibitions tend towards appealing to the middle road, while ignoring both the people who know nothing about fashion/textiles, and those who know a great deal about fashion/textiles in general, if not about a particular object. It is not only possible, but vital to address the needs of each of these three categories of visitors:

1. **The Reluctant Visitor** - these people claim to not care about fashion/textiles. (At the risk of making gross generalizations, these are the straight men dragged along to a fashion exhibition with their wives.) Do not write them off. Engaging this audience is your secret weapon, because it forces curators to ask the most important question of all, the most simple: "so what?" Not addressing this question is the single biggest problem in the way museums display their fashion/textile collection. Say you're going to highlight your collection of coats. So what? Say you have a very old and rare and priest's chasuble. So what? We all need context. Tell us a story. Make us understand why YOU think this is interesting. Tell us how much it cost or who wore it or how uncomfortable it was to wear or how interesting it is that the styles changed so rapidly over a ten-year period. We are smart people, and we care about history, even if we don't *think* we care about clothes. Show us why we should care.
2. **The Interested Visitor** - these people know a bit about fashion. They are familiar with famous fashion icons or designers (like Marie Antoinette or Dior), they love period costume dramas and television shows, they love shopping or maybe Halloween costumes, perhaps they sew. This is your easiest customer. You will dazzle them no matter what you do. They just love to be in the presence of fashion, which is a unique world away from their regular life, and they think you have the best job ever. Do not settle for making this audience happy.
3. **The Expert** - these people know their stuff. They come with the historical lineage and social context already in their minds. They're familiar with large online collections like the Met and the V&A, they have multiple books on fashion. They may know more about your collection than you do. How can you sustain their level of interest? How can you encourage them to visit your museum out of all the museums? What is special about your collection, or unique about the

objects on display? Provide them with as much information about the object as possible, and/or give them avenues for further research.

What information can you include on your website to let people know about your collection:

1. Have the website available in English/multiple languages
2. Have at least one clearly accessible page specifically devoted to the fashion/textile collection, including the following information:
 - Size of fashion/textile collection (usually number of objects)
 - Founding date of fashion/textile collection (including recent renovations)
 - Size, titles and contact information of fashion/textile staff
 - A brief (1-2 sentences) description of the importance of your fashion/textile collection - what is its range (why is it useful/interesting for local visitors?), and what are its special strengths (why would a visitor travel to see your collection?).
 - Mention 1-5 highlights of your collection (can be individual pieces or groups of items).
 - Description of permanent exhibition (if any), as well as temporary exhibitions (frequency, duration, intention, and past examples.)
3. Have photos available of highlights of your collection. This can be anything from a gallery of 10 images to a full, searchable digital collection.

We hope you find these guidelines helpful! Please do share them, and please credit the website.

For a printable version or more individualized feedback about your collection or website, please visit www.fashionandtextilemuseums.com