

Knowing our Visitors: a *Studies on Visitors and Museums. Volume III. Referents and Application Experiences from the Field* Book Review

Ir a versión en español

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ABSTRACT

This book is the third volume in the Estudios sobre Públicos y Museos (Studies in Visitors and Museums) series, coordinated by Leticia Pérez Castellanos, academic of the Postgraduate program in Museology at the Escuela Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museografía of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (ENCRyM-INAH). This is an important contribution towards the existing body of work that demonstrates the significance and usefulness of visitor studies. This work, in addition to providing a variety of case studies from museum institutions that have, for varying reasons, taken on the task of analyzing their audiences, focuses on key debates, dilemmas, and practices that characterize this type of research today.

KEYWORDS

visitor studies; exhibition design; exhibition evaluation; accessibility; social inclusion

Starting in the second half of the 1960s, factors such as the need to achieve new educational goals, changes in ideas surrounding the identity of museums, and even commercial and political interests, favored the adoption and subsequent proliferation of participatory and tactile approaches in museums. While the boundary between traditional and new practices and purposes in museums remains fragile, from that time, exhibitions focused

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on interactive devices and educational technologies began to be seen as the formula that should complement, and in some cases replace, objects and specimens in order to create a more receptive and active audience for exhibitions (Cain & Rader, 2008, 2014; Corral, 2018). These changes in exhibition techniques and the role of the public in museums did not happen overnight: they are the result of a long history of interactions between museums and other exhibition and entertainment spaces, ranging from global exhibitions to department stores to television and even theme parks (Marchand, 1998; Witcomb, 2003; Morris, 2010).

It should not be overlooked that a museum does not exist independently of a country's social, cultural, and political circumstances. Likewise, it is necessary to recognize that the methodologies of visitor studies, which in the United States (us) began to be carried out in a more organized and systematic way since the 1970s (Bitgood & Shettel, 1996; Falk, 2012), have been a fundamental element in shaping new educational objectives in museums. Preliminary, formative, summative and, more recently, corrective evaluations have, in many cases, been the basis for the renovation of galleries and the creation of new exhibitions. The third volume of the series *Estudios sobre Públicos y Museos (Studies in visitors and Museums)*, coordinated by Leticia Pérez Castellanos, from the Postgraduate program in Museology of the Escuela Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museografía of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (ENCRyM-INAH) reflects over a diversity of case studies on Mexico's experiences in the implementation of such research (Figure 1).

Previous work by Mexican museum specialists has addressed the need to know and analyze the characteristics of visitors in order to plan the content, structure and interpretation of exhibitions (Moreno, 2001; Eder, 2006; Sánchez, 2008; Ávalos & Vázquez, 2011; Schmilchuk, 2012). This book is an important contribution to that set of studies on the application of methodologies to study visitors as a preliminary step in the creation of new exhibitions or even the reconfiguration of an entire museum. Through a range of case studies, the volume presents new techniques for this type of research as well as new interpretations on the impact of their results or the ways in which museums can use them.

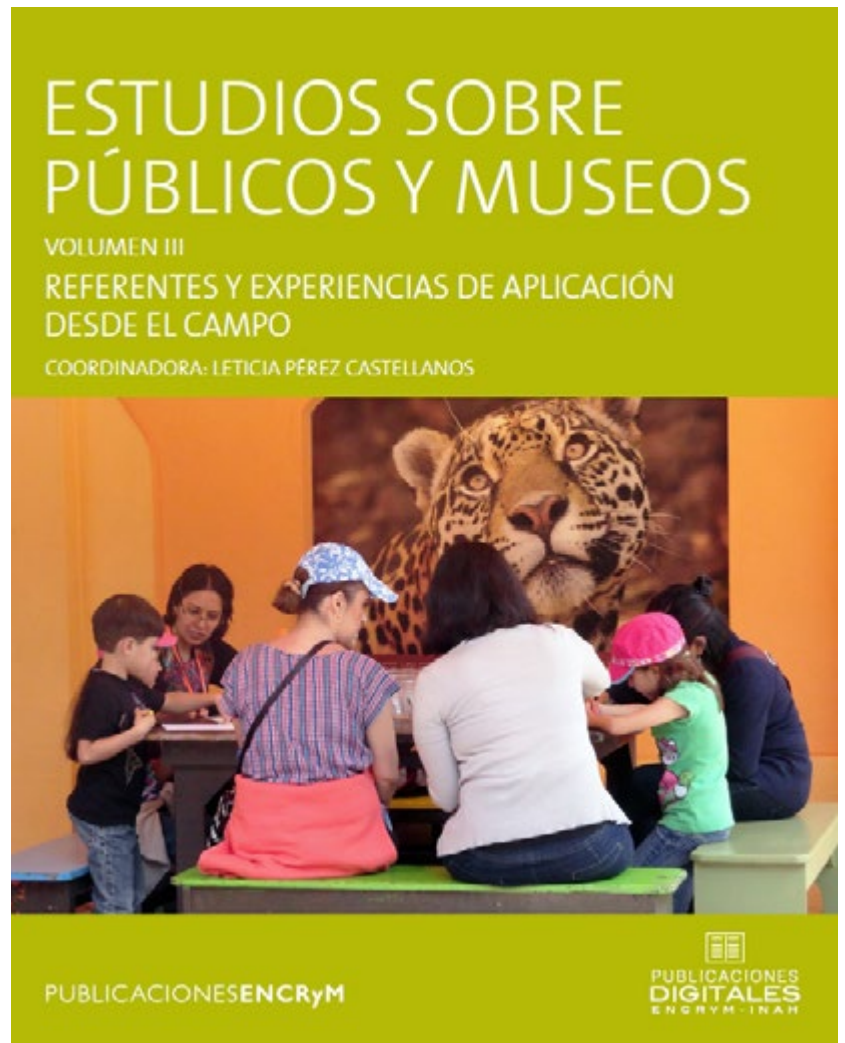
As indicated in the introduction to *Referentes y experiencias de aplicación desde el campo* "Referentes y experiencias de aplicación desde el campo", the selection of contributions sought to "address a greater diversification of spaces, themes, approaches and even institutions of origin of the authors" (Pérez, 2018, p. 14).

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FIGURE 1: Book cover: Pérez, L. (Coord.). (2018) *Estudios sobre públicos y museos. Volumen III. Referentes y experiencias de aplicación desde el campo*. Mexico: Escuela Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museografía (ENCRyM)-Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH). Recuperado de <https://www.repositoriodepublicaciones.encyrm.edu.mx/reproduccion.php?rd=NTkz&lang>



Each chapter, on the one hand, presents a variety of practical and theoretical perspectives on visitor studies and, on the other hand, deals with studies carried out in museums of different disciplines and forms of knowledge, such as art, science, history and archaeology, yet also displays different types and characteristics of museums: a former maritime customs office in Tampico, two science museums in Mexico City and in Jalisco, a small exhibition space inside the Chapultepec forest and an international traveling exhibition by New Zealand and Australia, among others. Stylistically, this breadth and multiplicity of case studies means that the connection between the chapters is not always clear and at some points during reading, the thread is lost. Nevertheless, an effort to build bridges between the thematic sections is appreciated.

The authors of the nine chapters of this volume come from a wide variety of academic backgrounds, which highlights the heterogeneous and collective nature of today's exhibition work. It

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is precisely this heterogeneity that makes the design of new research tools and methodologies for information gathering, analysis and reporting possible from a multidisciplinary perspective. Whilst there is significant prevalence of quantitative methods—necessary to know visitor statistics—with respect to qualitative ones, in this work the reader can find the increased role played by the latter in visitor studies today. It is an independent approach and as important as the quantitative one, since it allows the analysis of a series of social phenomena that are not measurable or quantifiable.

Herein lies the most novel aspect of this book in relation to other existing publications on visitor studies: it presents various ideas on the importance of the socio-cultural context in the process of the public assigning meaning when visiting a museum. While research in this field is usually approached from a psychological or pedagogical perspective and with an emphasis on exhibition production, it invites greater attention to the way in which the public judges and interprets the facts it finds in the exhibitions based on their experiences, empirical knowledge, values, culture and, in short, personal history. Visitors do not become newborns when they enter an exhibition, that is, they are not stripped of their social context as if it were a coat abandoned to hang on a rack at the entrance of the museum: people carry with them a series of experiences, the perspective from their daily lives, even the reasons that lead them to visit the exhibition in the first place.

Of particular interest on this point is the specific methodological proposal described by the authors of chapter eight, which they used to investigate the public's responses to the temporary exhibition "De vuelta a Columbus. En el centenario de la Intervención Norteamericana de 1916" at the Museo Nacional de las Intervenciones. In this proposal, a comments book and a mailbox offered visitors the opportunity to record their perceptions of the figure of Pancho Villa based on the relationship they established between the information received in this and other exhibitions, and their own knowledge and interests about this historical figure. The book would have benefited from more examples of the new methods and sources of research used in museum visitor studies, which complement the use of interview and observation. It would be of great interest to know if more museums in Mexico are, for example, using comment cards, "dialogue walls" (Pedretti & Navas Iannini, 2020), visitor books (Macdonald, 2005) or sensory interaction with objects (Woodall, 2016) to learn about visitors' opinions, experiences and knowledge about the museum and the exhibitions.

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The museums, because of this tendency to consider —at least on paper— the general public in the planning and provision of their services, stopped seeing them as a homogeneous entity and noticed both their plurality and their different needs and desires. From this perspective, an analysis of the experiences shared by the authors is timely in order to construct exhibitions that are physically, mentally and culturally accessible to different sectors of the population. These experiences demonstrate the need to design studies that help to make visible and take advantage of, the particularities of different groups of visitors, especially young people, children, families, tourists and foreigners who come to an exhibition that has travelled from another country. For all the above reasons, the already mentioned title of the volume *Referentes y experiencias de aplicación desde el campo*, is adequate.

The structure of the book and the presentation of the contents were conceived with the aim of making it a useful tool for all those interested in museum spaces in general. The content was grouped into three main parts:

- The first, in chapters one through three, highlights and systematizes some fundamental considerations for the training of professionals in visitor research. It contains a set of best practices that everyone undertaking audience research should follow, as well as a proposal called *Índice de centralidad en los públicos*, which should serve as an initial assessment tool for any museum space that wishes to know the degree of acceptance and appreciation of their institution from its visitors. Finally, this first part deals with sampling, either with probabilistic (random) or non-probabilistic (controlled) variables. Here you will find some elements that identify what makes a study meaningful and that give legitimacy to the data with the hope of finding out “objective facts” that can be measured.
- The second part, which is developed through the fourth and fifth chapters, focuses on strategies for identifying new audiences. Ultimately, increasing the number of visitors is crucial in order to demonstrate that a museum is an institution of public interest. In order to illustrate this concern that dominates the attention of museum directors and professionals, two specific cases are analyzed: the former Maritime Customs Office in Tampico, Mexico, and the way their visitor studies were used to characterize their visitors, and the Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil and its attempt to attract a little studied sector of the public — the youth.

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- The third and final part, compiled of chapters six through to nine, consists of four case studies that “dared to evaluate” and develop field work to analyze the ways in which visitors establish relationships with an exhibition and the ways in which they judge and interpret what they find within it. The reader will see here an amalgamation of concepts that encompass the experiential, emotional and affective dimensions linked to visiting a museum. The knowledge generated from these investigations can serve to have a positive impact on curatorship and exhibition design, by giving us clues on how to best execute the elements that make up an exhibition, such as labels, guides, objects, storylines, etc., with the visitor as the central focus.

The aforementioned makes this work a highly recommendable tool for any museum professional who has a genuine interest in incorporating visitor based information into the preparation of their programs and exhibitions. As specified in the book’s introduction, the purpose of its publication is

to continue contributing to the formation of a broader body of literature on the subject of visitor studies in Mexico and other Spanish-speaking nations, in order to build bridges between professionals dedicated to this task and to continue promoting training in the area, while also contributing to the dissemination of knowledge that is generated daily, and to communicate both classic research strategies and also new approaches to the topic [2018, pp. 22, 23].¹

Without a doubt, that goal has been handsomely reached.

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¹ Editorial translation from the Spanish version.

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Gustavo Corral is Master in Computer Science by the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM, Mexico) and Doctor in History of Science by the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona (UAB, Spain). His lines of research focus on the history of science museums, especially on the transition from a “collection-based” model to an “interactive “ one, and how that relationship affects the popularization of science, as well as the complex relationship between science and the public within museums. The last four years he has worked on collaborative and intercultural projects to learn about different inductive and participatory methodologies that reflect the diversity of the particular knowledge and experiences of all those involved in an investigation.

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