

## I DON'T GO TO MUSEUMS!

### Non-visitors: teenagers at a glance

#### SUMMARY OF THE MAIN EVIDENCE

Kids don't go to museums. This mundane observation led to the idea of looking into the reasons, attitudes and perceptions of young people with regard to the most traditional venue for the consumption of culture: museums. Promoted by Provincia di Modena and carried out by Fondazione Fitzcarraldo – an independent research and training centre in the cultural-policy and management sector – the survey adopted a focus-group technique. It involved five higher-education institutes in Modena, with about 90 young people between the ages of 14 and 19.

The category of “non-visitors” to museums is varied and complex, and teenagers – who have weak motivation but levels of consumption that are anything but negligible – can play a significant role in interpreting the matter, for while they are very “special”, they also epitomise the contemporary non-visitor.

#### Objectives of the survey:

- to clarify the attitudes and behaviour of young people in the way they use their free time
- to establish how they perceive museums and identify the factors that alienate them from the consumption of culture
- to verify the prevalence of generational dominants (young people are a particular fragment of non-visitors, with their own particularities and idiosyncrasies) or category dominants (even though they have their own distinctive characteristics, young people are sensitive to the same factors that alienate other categories of non-visitors)
- to provide guidelines for drafting strategies and projects to get young people involved

#### Free time:

- Young school-goers do not feel they have much free time: more than anything, this time is extremely **fragmented** and squeezed in between their dominant activities of study, sport, and movements
- **Cultural activities** – the cinema and, especially, music – **during free time are viewed as “background” activities by most young people**. This is a “low-intensity” consumption for entertainment purposes rather than for contemplation, and can produce immediate and easily accessible gratification. This means that cultural consumption in the form of “here-and-now” experiences, which provide immediate satisfaction of social and relational needs, thus prove to be the most popular. From the teenager’s standpoint,

cultural consumption and activity are not normally viewed or implemented as a form of “cultural investment”.

- Interviews with all the young people reveal **a communicational and relational tension** which comes out implicitly in many aspects of everyday behaviour – even those which by definition ought to involve greater independence and individuality: even doing homework alone can become a group operation through chat and messenger services. Relationships and the group are often the “extrinsic” reasons that lead young people to decide how to use their free time: priority is given to those experiences and activities that, as a result of their **bonding value**, make possible and facilitate social interaction and meetings, effectively being people together.

### Perception of museums and cultural consumption:

- As regards the way museums are viewed, it generally appears – as might be imagined – that there is **a generally negative consideration of the term**. The adjectives most commonly used refer to their **ancientness**, though unconscious references in particular and an analysis of the related reasons frequently bring out terms that refer to concepts of **closure, regulations, and distance**. The way young people see it, museums appear to represent universes of meaning and areas of experience that are far removed from those of everyday life. This leads to a limited and partial view of them: museums are associated with fossils, archaeology and other such finds. Much less with works of art.
- **Exhibitions** – at least in terms of the way they are perceived – are, on the contrary, viewed as **something active**: they may deal with interesting subjects (should they touch on themes considered close to the teenager) and they seem to use forms of communication and approaches that are more effective and targeted.
- If one looks at the experience of young people, the best-loved museums are those that deal with **photography, recent history, explanations of present-day phenomena** (technological and scientific), or that **come into contact with the personal identity of the individual**, and which are thus most immediately able to bridge the gap between the individual and the exhibit.
- An analysis of unexpressed motives, however, shows that many of the factors that disturb young people have nothing to do with the content and, on the contrary, are much more concerned with the actual **form of the museum. Functional qualities, aspects of the experience as a whole, the way the visit takes place, rules of behaviour and the explicitly educational value**, but also **communicational deficiencies in the information given or inadequate displays** are just as important as the content of the collections, if not more so, in forming the young people’s opinions about their experience in museums.
- It is also **difficult for many of them to separate the idea of museum from that of school**: young people spend their lives learning, so the fundamentally educational approach of museums is seen as an additional workload – and thus as unattractive. As a further accumulation of knowledge, the dimension of explicit learning is quite alien to young people who go to school.

- The liveliest, most positive and persistent memories of museums are those that provide **intense emotions** during a visit (the emotional dimension appears to dominate the cognitive sphere in determining the value of the experience) so what emerges is a need for personal identification with the stories and with the methods adopted in terms of narrative and interaction.
- Museums **require greater interaction**, which involves physical or mental manipulation of tangible and intangible elements (the possibility of acting on the objects) even though **the error must not be made of relying on purely technological means**. However, young people are expert and highly demanding users which means that operations with low levels of technological interaction run the risk of being unsatisfactory and counterproductive.

### Particular “non-visitors”:

- Many teenagers’ motives and perceptions are similar to those of adult non-visitors (perception of exhibitions as opposed to museums, their demand for narrative, and a sense of alienation).
- In more specific terms, young people appear to have a great need for interaction and relationships with others, a socio-relational dominant that influences behaviour, choices, the formation of individual tastes, and the assessment of their experiences.
- The most evident preoccupations of young people are those that concern the development of their sense of personal identity, reinforcing their relationships (for example, by comparing their own point of view with those of others about the experience. Here the museum becomes a means for finding out about others, placing others and themselves within a particular social area).
- While other non-visitors remain removed from museums, at a distance which is also physical – it is a world that is hard to come into contact with, and it is difficult to understand and thus to be involved in – it is worth trying to enter into contact with adolescents.

### Indications from an experiential perspective:

A particularly important part of the way young people assess their experience during a visit appears to consist of environmental, socio-relational, and emotional elements as well as factors that are more closely linked to the process of communication than to its actual content.

An experiential perspective has been adopted to understand what makes a visit positive and meaningful for adolescents, and thus to be able to formulate ideas for greater involvement. On the basis of these parameters, the survey has shown that the values ascribed by young people to cultural experiences mainly concern:

- **extrinsic values**, for which consumption is a way of reaching a particular result, and is rarely an end in itself.
- **multi-referential values**: here meaning is created through interaction with others – in other words, it does not start and end in itself, but is motivated and built up through a relationship
- **active values**: i.e. the attribution of greater value to experiences that involve the manipulation (not necessarily only physical, but also mental) of tangible or intangible elements: in other words, the visitor acts on the object and manipulates it and thereby interprets it. It is not the object itself that communicates to a spectator, who simply reacts as the receiver of the message.

Museums are normally at the other end of the experiential spectrum: the typical adult visitor to a museum – in other words, the museum's ideal target user – attributes a value to the museum (intrinsic dimension), and has a decidedly self-referential experience, in the sense that the experience of the visit is purely individual and is made meaningful by the cognitive and emotional investment of the visitor in himself. These visitors also tend to have a reactive approach towards the exhibits on show.

This means the museum needs to move towards offering experiences and methods of use that put greater emphasis on the possible dimensions of **expression** and **multi-referencing**, which amplify the **active** dimension of the relationship between the visitor and the exhibit.

- **To enhance the extrinsic dimension**, it is necessary to work mainly on *mediation*: what is required from those who work in the sector is that they should think of the museum and its collections as an *instrument* of mediation and not as *ends* in themselves. Adolescents are more interested in ideas than in objects, and obliging them to have an experience based on interest in the object as such may easily produce resistance and refusal.
- **To enhance the multi-referential dimension**, the museum needs to introduce strategies and activities to amplify its potential for *relationships and social interaction*. This means creating tours and areas for sharing and discussion, with activities that involve interaction between the young people, so that they can discover, negotiate and create their own meaning.
- **To develop the active dimension**, museums should focus on *participation*. This means involving teenagers in the design of small exhibitions, creating the communication materials, and devising activities for people of their own age. But, in more commonplace terms, as part of this mediation, it means giving them an active role in the process of creating meaning.