

Stacjonarne Studia Doktoranckie

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***Evaluation and Verification of Contemporary Methods of Translating the
Visual Code of an Art Object and a Historical Object into Descriptive
Language in the Educational Space of a Museum Exhibition***

Contemporary museums are institutions of public trust tasked with the protection and dissemination of a common cultural heritage. More and more often, however, museums are moving away from the idea of being closed sanctuaries of art in favour of more interdisciplinary approaches emphasizing participation and integration. The 2019 Act on Ensuring Accessibility for People with Special Needs was a milestone in this area as it applied a number of specific legal regulations and standards to matters of accessibility and equality of access, which prior to then had been left mostly up to institutions' good intentions. At the same time, though, new conflicts and dilemmas have arisen, as the public activity of museums has become a realm of confrontation between new official requirements and established museum practices and concepts.

Verbal messages, one of the main means by which museums communicate with their audiences, are an example of an area that in recent years has seen dynamic change. Used in exhibitions and educational spaces, verbal messaging can be used for the simplest of purposes (to provide directions, for example) and for much more complex tasks related to crafting the narrative of exhibits and forwarding the mission of the institution as a whole. For this reason, texts presented in museums make for an area of special care and interest when it comes to their form and scope, and are simultaneously a place of tensions and challenges, which arise as the needs and preferences of different groups, including persons with disabilities, are taken into account.

Given the above, between October 2018 and June 2023, a research project entitled "Evaluation and Verification of Contemporary Methods of Translating the Visual Code of an Art Object into Descriptive Language in the Educational Space of a Museum Exhibition" was conducted as part of a course of doctoral studies under the auspices of the second edition of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education "Implementation Doctorate" programme. Most of the research as well as the

implementation of the developed solutions was carried out at the Museum of the City of Łódź. The project's goal was to comprehensively implement a new methodology and accessibility standards in the area of verbal communication systems in exhibition spaces. Furthermore, the project attempted to answer the question of what a universal formula of accessible verbal messaging should look like in order to convey an informative and educational narrative while at the same time promoting social and cultural inclusiveness.

The diploma thesis, the basis for which is a series of thematically related publications, presents the course of research conducted at the Museum of the City of Łódź using the *action research* method as well as its effects, namely the implementation and application of relevant findings in the context of the Museum's permanent and temporary exhibitions. The research aimed to analyze the most common forms of verbal messages in exhibition spaces in terms of their effectiveness (usefulness), their suitability to the preferences and competence of contemporary recipients, and their accessibility for people with special needs (including, above all, audiences with intellectual or visual disabilities). Consequently, the following solutions were assessed: audio description, texts using the rules of simple language and ETR (Easy to Read) formulas, and Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) tools. Special attention was given to the verbal communication system designed for "Łódź in Europe. Europe in Łódź. The Promised Land Then and Now," one of the museum's newest permanent exhibits, which is described and critically analyzed in additional detail. Evaluations are based on both quantitative (survey studies) and qualitative (observations and interviews) research. Three principles applicable to universal verbal communication systems can be derived from the conclusions that flow from this research:

1. A reversal of the established practice according to which specialized texts were a core to be supplemented by simpler alternatives. Clear and simple messages that adhere to the rules of simple Polish should serve as a starting point which can then be enriched with multiple layers or variants of additional content.
2. An integration of word and image in the form of supporting materials (for example captions, tables, or applications) that combine verbal and visual messaging. Here, visual maps and diagrams that translate the physical layout of expositions into thematic mental maps prove particularly useful.
3. The development (preferably through cooperation between employees in various departments of an institution) of standards and solutions that employ the principles of universal design, which will apply to all exhibitions in a given museum. Thanks to this, visitors will find their usage more intuitive and natural.

The above recommendations respond to the common need to reduce the cognitive burden placed on a museum's audience by requiring them to read and understand visual messages related to

their interaction with a museum's exhibits. That being said, the goal is not to completely remove the need for- and challenge of intellectual engagement on the part of museum audiences. The intended aim is to limit contact with supporting resources to only those that are needed for interaction with the works on materials on display so as to not distract or challenge guests with information related to spatial directions or overarching narratives. Moreover, these efforts may help respond to a challenge facing contemporary museums, namely the question of maintaining objectivity and access to historical and artistic content while at the same time conveying some educational value. Messaging prepared with the aid of an appropriate methodological workshop will not only carry an informative value, but may also become a tool by means of which museum audiences acquire additional competencies which are particularly important when it comes to dealing with the challenges brought on by a world dominated by visual culture.

In this context, the results presented as part of the implementation of this project can be an example of one of the first instances of confrontation between official recommendations regarding the accessibility of exhibitions (developed in 2021 by the National Institute for Museums and Public Collections) and museum practice as well as the everyday reality of cultural institutions. The resulting conclusions should serve as a contribution to the ongoing debate regarding the possibility of an objective and scientific presentation of historical and artistic artifacts in a socially responsible museum.

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