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Portrait

of **H**ere it is! The palace of dreams, the home of treasures, the story box—my museum. I have been coming here since I was a small child. The temple-like space with its pompous entrance and its princess staircases has always felt like a place I shouldn't be allowed into; and yet, it is mine to explore. As always, my heart quivers with a defiant giggle when I enter. The familiar smells change from room to room, an invisible—yet intimate—track to follow: the musty dust of the cloakroom, the faint nutty smell of the café, the lingering scent of the creaky wooden floors as I go from one room to the next, the oil and varnish tang of the paintings in my favourite gallery, the rich earthy smell of ceramics in the dusty antiquity gallery. And always in the background, the low buzzing sound of the crowd, bursting with fragments of words and the relentless tip-tapping of

a Museum

Emilie Sitzia

footsteps.

I always like to come early, when the guards are still trying to find the most comfortable position and stand shifting their weight from one foot to the other, when the cloakroom attendant still has lots of free space and a smile, and when the place is so empty that I feel I could run from room to room and no one would stop me. I also like it because I get to enjoy that unique moment when all is quiet, when it is just me and the object, eye to eye, with no one breathing down my neck and not a footstep to be heard; eternity in a marble hand. Only then can I hear how the objects whisper to each other, back and forth. But I also like it because about one hour in, all the children arrive: hardly contained boisterous school groups, dishevelled moms on their day off with their babies securely wrapped to their bodies, grandmothers resolutely leading the way, pointing here and there. And suddenly, it is a riot of excitement, of Oh's and Ah's,

of laughter and
m u r m u r e d
stories, slow
deciphering of
labels for the
treasure hunt,
t o n g u e - s t i c -

king-out colouring pages, hand-holding togetherness.

But the excitement rarely lasts. Little by little, I am too hot, a bit hungry, and I begin to feel like the rooms are all the same. The light is suddenly too bright. Also, where can I sit? Nowhere, and now my back starts to hurt. I can't focus anymore; I can't get lost in the works. The other people are just noise now. And the labels that should be my life-saving buoys are either boring—"born in Moldavia in 1647, the painter blablablablabla"—or too short: what am I supposed to do with "untitled, oil on canvas, 1832, 6 5/8 × 10 1/2 in | 16.8 × 26.7 cm"?!

I start thinking of all the untold stories—of women, of minorities, of the objects stolen by Napoleon and the many colonial French armies after him, about that silly educational touchscreen that does nothing but beep and flash in a corner, about how flat and dull history feels, about how irrelevant this all seems. I get annoyed. My legs feel heavy, I just want to close my eyes and sit in complete silence. I want to go home. I am disappointed, as always.

But today I am going to do something about this little bitter corner in my heart. I am going to write my museum a letter.

I go home, I sit at my desk, take a deep breath, and start writing:

Dear Museum,

I've been coming to visit you for a long time now. We have spent long rainy afternoons together. When I am with you, the world stops and I feel absorbed in your stories and your objects.

But you must understand that the world is changing. You can no longer tell your stories without thinking about what you are saying. You can't keep repeating the same thing, in the same way. You can't let yourself be distracted by meaningless technological gadgets that prevent me from understanding what you are saying. You can't talk to me like I'm an idiot. You can no longer hog the talk and tell me who I am without letting me tell you (at least a little bit) what matters to me. You can't continue to hurt people by ignoring them or by telling them that their stories don't matter.

Well, you can, but then you're talking to yourself. And at your age, that might worry people.

So, I would like to help you. Let's look together at what you want to say. And maybe we could ask the others what stories they would like you to tell? Maybe you could also tell us some difficult stories that we don't all agree on. Maybe we could even talk about them together and all give our points of view? You could start to see us, your audience and your friends, as your intellectual equals and

talk with us—with me—as equals.

Maybe we could also think about how you tell your stories? How about we stop with the big screens and the bombastic soundtracks and try something else instead, like playing, storytelling, a dance, a party, maybe even a dream? Come up with a story we can all tell together?

Well, if you don't believe me, ask the others what they think. I asked them, and they are as tired of your old stories as I am.

We love you, but we want you to grow up with us a little, and we're here to help you.

*Best wishes,
Emilie*

I hope I will get a reply soon.

The core of museology research work is threefold: 1) analysing the space and the way in which the audience's senses are triggered in the space and contribute to meaning-making processes, 2) audience research (this often translates into ethnographic observation of various types of audiences and the way they engage with the material the museum proposes), 3) analysing the museum's discourse ("voice" and content) as well as its relevance to contemporary audiences.

About the author

Emilie holds a special chair at the University of Amsterdam and is Associate Professor of Cultural Education at the University of Maastricht. She specialises in the impact of art on audiences, museology, and word/image interdisciplinary studies. Emilie enjoys writing in trains, eating chocolate, and swimming.