

# AMA

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# ECOLOGICAL





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## POLLUTING VISITORS: MUSEUMS' HEADACHE

As museum attendance soars, museums are increasingly faced with the pollution generated by their visitors. To be greener, will museums have to become “decreasing”?

At a time when museums are increasing their commitment to the ecological transition, eco-design, waste reduction, carbon footprint and energy consumption, they are coming up against one of their main sources of pollution: visitor travel. The vast majority of greenhouse gas emissions in museums come from the public, in a proportion that can reach 90% for the Louvre. This is a paradox at a time when the communication strategy of the major international museums highlights the ever more spectacular increases in their attendance, particularly that of their foreign visitors.

### **New models to be invented**

How can we reconcile the mission of preserving heritage, financial balance, sustainable objectives and transmission to as many people as possible? In January 2022, representatives of French museums met in Lille to reflect on new development models that take all these parameters into account. “We need to totally rethink the model of the last thirty years,” Sylvain Amic, director of the Réunion des musées métropolitains – Rouen Normandie, told France Info. Until now, a successful museum was a museum with infinite growth, which grew richer and larger and had queues of people who came from far away to see paintings that had arrived at great expense from the ends of the earth. Clearly, that model is dying out.

Does this mean that the era of blockbuster exhibitions is over? In Lille, the people in charge of these museums recommend “less spectacular, longer and more intelligent” exhibitions that do not necessarily attract millions of visitors.

In a forthcoming issue on heritage visitors, the social science journal *In Situ* raises the delicate question of the balance between “too much” and “not enough”. And how to evaluate it. For museums to be sustainable, do they necessarily need to regulate or reduce the number of visitors?

“The opening of museums to a large public is at the heart of their cultural redefinition,” wrote Catherine Ballé, honorary director of research at the CNRS and specialist in the sociology of organisations, in the article “Change, museums and sustainable development” published in *Museums and Sustainable Development* in 2011. “Attendance is becoming a criterion and a measure of success, even if success has a price. In this collective work resulting from a collaboration between France and Quebec, she returned to the transformation of museums in the face of the challenges of sustainable development and its economic consequences.” The arrival of a large number of visitors in museums leads to a review of their operation and organisation: exhibitions and events, cultural and commercial services,



Photo Alicia Steels



development and multiplication of spaces. The increase and diversification of activities have led to the expansion of functional services: management, administration, organisation, finance and communication. This evolution reinforces the weight of the economic logic that museums obey, or rather do not escape.”

### Knowing the pollutants, controlling the environment

Faced with a growing number of visitors, the control of the museum environment is an old question. In 1973, Garry Thomson, in his article “How to organise the preservation of our cultural heritage” published in the UNESCO magazine *Museum*, took stock of the pollution linked to museum attendance.

The main enemy of works of art: dust. “Every museum, even if it does not plan to set up a restoration service, must take very seriously the problem of controlling its internal environment, so as to reduce to a minimum, with the means at its disposal, the deterioration of its collections (...). The accession of visitors brings in dusty air, whereas conservation requires the absence of any pollution, of any form of energy (light or heat) that might cause chemical reactions, and of constant conditions.”

For a museum is not a watertight box. Whether through the ventilation systems or through the entrance of visitors, atmospheric pollutants settle in and degrade the works. Michel Dubus, a research engineer at the C2RMF, the French museum research and restoration centre, has taken an interest in the nature and pathways of these pollutants inside the museum. Particles and gases which, combined with humidity, can cause rapid and sometimes irreparable damage. For example, dust promotes the corrosion of metals and the development of fungi on graphic documents, while volatile organic compounds discolor photographs. “In museums, pollutants enter the building with the new air (soot, clays, calcite, quartz, exhaust fumes, pollens, spores, insect eggs, marine aerosols) or with visitors (textile fibres, dander, hair, food debris, viruses, bacteria),” he lists in his 2014 article “How to limit pollutants in museums”. He adds, “The more complex the tour, the greater the number and agitation of visitors, the greater the dusting.”

### A balance to be found

Two main strategies can be implemented: limit them before they enter the museum, or try to control them once they are in. As early as 1995, the Quebec Conservation Centre reviewed the harmful effects of pollutants that can enter museums with the constant comings and goings of the public and recommended a number of preventive measures. Compiled in a *Manual of Preventive Conservation in Museums*, these measures are often common sense. These include: providing a vestibule after the entrance of visitors, especially for those with a high frequency of opening to the outside world, to create an airlock before entering the museum itself; placing carpets in the entrance hall to reduce the amount of soil and other large particles - provided it is made of good quality curly fibres and regularly dusted; or fitting ventilation systems with special filters, for example with activated carbon to limit small particles and gaseous pollutants.

These actions reduce the risks, but do not eliminate all the problems. “How can we control the pollutants, the corrosiveness of the air?” asks Michel Dubus. “We have no power over atmospheric pollution, but we can filter the new air, check that the building’s operation is in line with its initial design, and adapt the visitors’ route to the collections. Inside we have to adapt the decorative materials to the materiality of the collections, filter the return air, control the procedures.” A subtle balance to be found between the layout of the premises, public movement and protection of the collections. Or as the Quebec Conservation Centre summarizes it: “Make sure to use all available means to filter the pollutants generated outside or inside the building itself. Let’s welcome visitors, but let’s get rid of the pollutants!”

To limit pollution without sacrificing attendance, the Sistine Chapel had implemented a radical solution: dusting visitors. “The Sistine Chapel was in danger of becoming a victim of its own success,” lamented Antonio Paolucci, the former director of the Vatican Museums, in *The Guardian*. For 100 metres before the entrance, a carpet cleans shoes. Inside, vents suck dust from clothes. And the temperature has been lowered to reduce the heat and humidity of the bodies. It doesn’t matter how many visitors there are, as long as they are clean.



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