

MAŁGORZATA GŁOWACKA-GRAJPER
University of Warsaw

Objects, Emotions, and Experiencing the Past: Visitors' Perception of the Museum of Warsaw's Main Exhibition

Abstract: In this paper, the author analyzes research results concerning visitors to the Museum of Warsaw. The creation of a new main exhibition at the museum was driven by a turn towards objects, which was a novelty in Poland. The study was conducted using the focus group interview method, with three groups: Polish students from Warsaw universities, Warsaw guides, and students from foreign countries who study at Warsaw universities. The paper presents what different visitors expect from the city museum and how those expectations correspond with the assumptions of the museum's curators. It also analyzes the role of emotions in experiencing a museum exhibition and the issue of the "authenticity" expected by visitors when they are in the museum. In addition, the author presents how visitors' expectations are divided between "knowledge" and "experience" categories and the consequences of this division for thinking about how the past is experienced.

Keywords: audience, authenticity, narration, personal objects, Poland

Introduction

On its website, under the title "Extraordinary Stories of Ordinary Things," the Museum of Warsaw describes its aim:

The Museum of Warsaw collects the things of Warsaw, researches them, and makes them available to the public. The new core exhibition refers to the histories of particular objects to tell about historical events and people who ha[ve] made an impact on the shape and character of contemporary Warsaw.¹

The main exhibition is titled "The Things of Warsaw" and "things" are defined as "witnesses and participants of the town's history."² As the museum states on the website, "They are a starting point for telling the stories of their owners and creators, as well as for presenting the events and processes that formed Warsaw as we know it today."³ Therefore, the museum focuses on objects in order to tell stories through them: stories of people, events, and processes (cf. Dudley 2010).

Such a formatting of the message and the main exhibition at a museum whose aim is to present the city's history was a novelty in Poland and provoked heated discussion after the museum opened in 2017.⁴ This was mainly due to the curating team's decision

¹ <https://muzeumwarszawy.pl/en/> (accessed December 20, 2022).

² <https://muzeumwarszawy.pl/en/the-things-of-warsaw/> (accessed December 20, 2022).

³ <https://muzeumwarszawy.pl/en/the-things-of-warsaw/> (accessed December 20, 2022).

⁴ In 2017, only a few rooms were opened, with a section presenting "Warsaw Data" and the "History of Tenement Houses." The entire museum was opened in 2018.

to have the new main exhibition oppose the dominant museum model in Poland, the narrative museum, which has been very popular, especially after the opening of the highly successful Warsaw Rising Museum in 2004 (Fontana 2020; Kowal and Wolska-Pabian 2019; Kobielska 2020; Ziębińska-Witek 2016, 2021). According to the museum curators, such a method of presenting the collections was intended to avoid imposing a single narrative and interpretation of the history of Warsaw and thus to avoid its ideologizing (Markowska 2018; Wawrzyniak and Bukowiecki 2020; Wróblewska 2017).

As a memory scholar, I am interested in the ways that memory of the past is socially transmitted. In these processes of transmission, museums and other institutions that aim to present the history of cities and the connection between that history and contemporaneity occupy the role of “memory makers.” The visitors are “memory consumers,” who are confronted with the given museum’s ideology but have their own ways of understanding the exhibitions they visit (Kansteiner 2006). Audience studies contain a vast body of research on visitors’ expectations, experiences, and emotions, and on the ways that visitors can become attached to museums (Anderson 2019; Loureiro 2019). Visitors are confronted with museums’ exhibitions in different cultural and social contexts. The case of the Museum of Warsaw is of special interest to me as it was the first Polish museum to abandon the narrational model to which the Polish audience was accustomed.

I am interested in two aspects of memory transmission: memory consumers’ feeling that they have knowledge about the past; and their sense of having experienced it, that is, they feel they can understand people living in the past. This second, emotional aspect of the transmission of the past, together with the feeling of authenticity in contact with the things presented in the museum, is the key issue I wanted to analyze in research on visitors’ experiences.

The team of curators assumed that “Warsaw things” would encourage viewers to delve into the history of the city on their own and to interact with people of the past. Things have been allowed to speak for themselves and for the people they belonged to or who made them. But what do things “say” to the audience? What do museum visitors “hear” from them? In this paper, I analyze the results of research on the impressions and opinions of Poles and foreigners who visited the Museum of Warsaw’s main exhibition. The research revealed that visitors’ expectations from the museum ranged between categories of “knowledge about the past” and “experience of the past.” For both categories, the visitors’ sense of authenticity was crucial.

Research Methodology

This study was conducted using the focus group interview (FGI) method (Barbour 2008; Lisek-Michalska 2013) and was designed by me and my colleagues from the project team, Łukasz Bukowiecki and Joanna Wawrzyniak. I was responsible for analyzing the FGIs and for writing a detailed report, which was presented later to the museum’s research department. In the initial phase, we talked with the curators and the management team of the museum about the ideas behind the design of the exhibition. In addition, we analyzed previous audience studies that were conducted for the museum’s report to the Warsaw

authorities. In October 2019, the research agency Kolektyw Badawczy conducted the study we had designed. Before the FGIs, participants were asked to make individual visits to the museum and were encouraged to search for exhibits that they perceived to be particularly memorable, interesting, or shocking.

The researchers decided that the issues raised in the interviews would be so specific to their research focus that conducting these interviews among randomly selected people could give results that would only be indicative of the participants' low level of interest in the history of the city. Recruiting people interested in such issues provided opportunities for in-depth discussion. When talking in a group, it frequently happens that some group members inspire others to reflect more deeply on the issue being discussed and to present ad hoc opinions.

The study was conducted in three groups: Polish students from Warsaw universities,⁵ Warsaw guides,⁶ and students from foreign countries who study at Warsaw universities.⁷ The recruitment for the study took place in two ways. Students were recruited using Facebook advertisements and, in the case of foreign students, emails sent through the IT systems operated by Warsaw universities. Warsaw guides constantly work with the museum and many of them had already been to various meetings it had organized. They were therefore recruited using the museum's database. This recruitment method made it possible to identify those people who were interested to some extent in the history of Warsaw or in museums in general. The first differentiation criterion was the country of origin—one group was formed of foreigners, and the other two of Poles. The Poles were divided into these two groups on the basis of their level of historical knowledge. The division presented few difficulties because the Warsaw guides, by definition, possessed a very good knowledge of Warsaw's history, while the students, though generally interested in history, did not have specialist knowledge in this field. The selection also made it possible to examine how people with different levels of historical knowledge perceive the exhibition and individual objects. In this way, we obtained three groups of interlocutors who, we could assume, were interested in history but had different levels of knowledge about the history of Warsaw and different types of bonds with the city—from detailed, in-depth knowledge and strong connections (the Warsaw guides), through general and in-depth knowledge with emotional or habitual ties (the Polish students), to people who had little knowledge of the history of the city and who were not connected with it by habitual or emotional ties.

Before the FGIs, the interviewees were asked to make an individual visit to the museum, which they documented in the form of a short photo essay. The essay contained five photos and a description of what had impressed the interviewees at the exhibition (i.e., what had attracted their curiosity or surprise, what they liked). Everyone was also asked to provide a short description for each photo they had taken of an object, explaining why they had

⁵ There were nine people in the group of Polish students: six women and three men. They were all studying either the humanities or social sciences. Three people were studying sociology. The others were students of cultural studies, philosophy, spatial management, American studies, museum studies, and art history.

⁶ There were seven people in the group of Warsaw guides: three women and four men.

⁷ There were ten people in the group of foreign students: five women and five men. Two people were from Russia, two from Italy, and two from Turkey, while the others were from China, Colombia, Germany, and France. They were studying in the following fields: safety engineering, Oriental studies, international relations, economics, architecture, art history, computer science (two persons), cultural studies, and psychology.

chosen the object in question. On the day of the focus interview, the interviewees first listened to a lecture by one of the museum staff about the curator's concept for the exhibition and a brief introduction to the city's history. Each interviewee was then given a map of the museum with several marked areas that they had to examine and read descriptions of. There were five places on the map: the museum basement and an installation titled "Warsaw Data," which presents the demographic and spatial changes that have occurred over the course of Warsaw's history, and the cultural diversity of the city (in the past and present); the Souvenir Room; the Views of Warsaw Room; the Portrait Room; and the Room of Relics, which contains mainly personal items from the period of the partitions and the Second World War.

These parts of the museum exhibition were selected because, on the one hand, they give a general picture of the city's history through the statistical data, and on the other hand, they are rooms that reflect the cultural diversity of the city's inhabitants, and its history as a city in the times of Poland's subjugation, and as a city that was destroyed and rebuilt.⁸ This museum route was designed to provide visitors with different experiences. First, historical information was presented in a form that was closest to the "traditional" way of talking about the past in museums devoted to a given place. Then visitors passed into three rooms filled with objects connected with the general image of the city and with portraits of people living in it. In the end, people were confronted with an exhibition that was designed to provoke emotion, and where objects connected with tragic, personal stories were given a "sacred" status (through the use of the word "relics"). The visitors were free to choose the order of the rooms on their routes but were obliged to see them all. The focus-group interviews took place after the museum visit and lasted about two hours. Each interview was transcribed. In this paper I will analyze only the interviewees' statements and the written comments from their photo essays, because I am especially interested in personal experiences of the main exhibition and the emotions it evokes.

A Museum of Things in a Rebuilt City and the Issue of Authenticity

Warsaw obtained city rights in 1300, and in 1596 it became the royal residence and then the de facto capital of Poland. As a result of the partition of Poland by three neighboring states, Warsaw was initially in the Kingdom of Prussia, but after the Congress of Vienna in 1815, it was incorporated into Tsarist Russia, where it functioned as the westernmost metropolis of the Russian empire for a hundred years. After the First World War, Warsaw became the capital of an independent Polish state again, but during the Second World War it was under German occupation. This was a time of enormous human and material losses. Warsaw had the largest Jewish ghetto in Europe, but almost the entire Jewish population of the city and surrounding towns perished during the Holocaust. After the Ghetto Uprising in 1943, the ghetto area, which accounted for about 12% of the city, was razed. In 1944,

⁸ The vast majority of the objects in the museum come from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that is, from times when Warsaw was part of the Russian Empire and from times when it was the capital of a communist state within the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union. Therefore, these are objects from the periods of subordination but also from the times of the city's greatest ethnic diversity (up to the Second World War) (see also [Wagner, Zwierz, Piechocki 2016](#)).

the Warsaw Uprising erupted. It resulted in the death of about 200,000 inhabitants and the destruction of around 65% of the city's area (almost 85% of the western part of the city and nearly 100% of the city center), including most of the city's monuments, museum collections, archives, and libraries. After the war, the communist authorities decided that the city would remain the capital of the country and would be rebuilt. Only the oldest part of the city was reconstructed in its pre-war shape, and the rest was redesigned.

The museum was founded in 1936 as the Museum of Old Warsaw and was located in three tenement houses on the Old Town square. During the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 and in subsequent devastations, it lost most of its collections. After the war, in 1948, it was reactivated under the name of the "Historical Museum of the Capital City of Warsaw." The tenement houses where it was supposed to be located were rebuilt as part of the reconstruction of the Old Town buildings, and on January 17, 1955 it opened to the public (Popiołek 2016). In 1947, its collection had only 169 items, but it was quickly enlarged and now has over 300,000 exhibits (Sołtan 2006).

In 2014, the Museum was renamed the "Museum of Warsaw," and after several years of working on a new exhibition concept, it opened to the public in 2017 ("Things of Warsaw," 2017). Currently, the main exhibition consists of three parts: "Things of Warsaw"; "Warsaw Data" (presenting graphics with statistical data on various aspects of the city's life and transformations); and "The History of Tenement Houses" (the history of the 11 tenement houses in which the Museum is located). The "Things of Warsaw" exhibition is located in 21 thematic rooms:⁹ the Room of Archaeology, Room of Warsaw Mermaids, Room of Warsaw Monuments, Room of Souvenirs, Room of Postcards, Room of Warsaw Views, Room of Portraits, Room of Silverware and Plated Silverware, Room of Bronzes, Room of Architectural Details, Room of Photographs, Room of Patriotic Items, the Ludwik Gocel Room (Ludwik Gocel was a bibliophile and collector), Room of Medals, Room of Warsaw Packaging, Room of Plans and Maps of Warsaw, Room of Relics, Room of Architectural Drawings, Schiele Room (the Schieles were a family of collectors), Room of Clothing, and Room of Warsaw Clocks ("Things of Warsaw," 2017). With one exception, each room is dedicated to a clearly defined category of material objects. The Room of Relics is supposed to arouse emotion in viewers, even by its very name, which has strong religious and also nationalistic connotations. A darkened room contains a large wooden cabinet with illuminated boxes. Each box presents personal objects connected with traumatic events in Warsaw's history: for instance, the belongings of individuals who died during the Warsaw Uprising, a child's toy monkey from that time, and a table with the advertisements of people looking for their family members in the destroyed city. The rooms can be visited in random order as they do not provide a coherent or chronological narration. There are no planned routes to follow in the museum but staff encourage visitors to start their visit with the "Warsaw Data" exhibit in the basement. Audio guides are available.

⁹ <https://muzeumwarszawy.pl/en/the-things-of-warsaw/> (accessed December 20, 2022).

After its almost total destruction during the war, the historic center of Warsaw was rebuilt in 1945–1955 (the reconstruction of the Royal Castle was finished in 1984) and in 1980 it was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List as "an outstanding example of a near-total reconstruction of a span of history covering the thirteenth to the twentieth century" (UNESCO n.d.).

The renaming of the museum is telling. It is not a “museum of history” anymore but a “museum of the city” in which presenting a narration of past events is not as important as presenting objects from the city (seen as built heritage) and its inhabitants (“*Things of Warsaw*” 2017). However, paradoxically, the history of Warsaw is crucial for the way the museum’s curators think about its heritage. The oldest part of the city, where the museum is based, is a post-war reconstruction. Many places and objects (starting with buildings and ending with the personal belongings of Warsaw residents) simply did not survive the great destruction of the Second World War. Therefore, the museum’s staff view every item that comes from the period before the end of the war as extremely valuable (Wawrzyniak and Bukowiecki 2020: 247). Focusing on the “things” of Warsaw is an important way of showing the authenticity of life in a city that is partially reconstructed and partially a new urban design.

The issue of authenticity is increasingly becoming a subject of consideration in museum institutions, because, as research shows, the sense of authenticity is an important motive for the public to visit museums (Knudsen, Rickly, and Vidon 2016; Loureiro 2019). Cornelius Holtorf, in analyzing the issue of the authenticity of archaeological objects, proposed labeling as “authentic” those objects that possessed a special feature: pastness. “Pastness is the result of a particular perception or experience and as such, it is firmly situated in a given cultural context.” (Holtorf 2013: 431). According to Holtorf, in Western society, pastness requires material clues, correspondence with the expectations of the audience, and a plausible and meaningful narrative relating then to now (Holtorf 2013: 432–435).

Thus, the mere presentation of objects does not mean that they automatically evoke a sense of authenticity in visitors. It is also necessary to present a narrative that connects the object and the time of the object’s creation with the present day of the city, its inhabitants, and the viewers themselves. Descriptions are one element that serves this purpose in the museum. Each room has a guiding text on the wall at the entrance, which explains the idea behind the exhibits, and several objects in each room have received more extensive descriptions. However, the viewer is not presented with a detailed description of the history of each object.

The striving for authenticity is also closely related to the selection of objects in the collection. As indicated by Hede, Garma, Josiassen, and Thyne (2014), the integrity and trustworthiness of a museum are very important for its being perceived as authentic. The Museum of Warsaw tries to emphasize in its messages for viewers (on its website, in its booklets, in its descriptions of objects) that it meticulously selects objects on the basis of their authenticity (and the authenticity of their connection with Warsaw) and that it has one, consistent way of presenting them.

In writing on the understanding of authenticity in contemporary social life, Charles Lindholm (2013: 363) distinguishes two approaches: (1) genealogical or historical (determining the authenticity of the entity or object by studying its origin) and (2) identity or correspondence (the emphasis is put on the expressive content—the sense of intimacy, solidarity, and belonging it evokes). In its message to the public, the museum emphasizes both elements. On the one hand, the website states that none of the museum’s objects are copies and therefore all the objects are “authentic,” but it also says that these objects are on display to convey the stories of the people and events with which they were connected. Materiality

and emotions are closely related in the message, and it is the juxtaposition that is supposed to create the uniqueness of this Warsaw place.

Research by Laurajane Smith (2011, 2016) indicates that the affective aspect is of great importance in determining the different registers of engagement among visitors to the museum. The emotional message that objects carry comes from their contextualization—their proper labelling and placement in an appropriately named room among specially selected objects. Evoking emotions in viewers serves to strengthen the message of the exhibition but also increases the audience's attachment to the museum (Smith 2015). Both the way a museum exhibition is understood and the emotions it evokes are culturally and socially conditioned (Watson 2015; Ziębińska-Witek 2016). Therefore, our research was designed to obtain opinions about the museum from people from different countries and different social groups (students and tourist guides with extended knowledge of the city's history) to see how they understood the objects presented in the museum and what their emotional reactions to them were.

Between Knowledge and Emotional Experience—Visitors' Views

For the Polish students, the nature of the main exhibition was very problematic because of the lack of a single narrative. Students were asked to define the main exhibition using several adjectives, and they said that it was “inspirational,” “diverse,” “evolving,” and “important.” They also used terms such as “eclectic” and “austere” and more negative terms such as “chaotic,” “insufficiently labelled,” and “tiring.” In Poland, many of the most visited museums are narrative museums (Kowal and Wolska-Pabian 2019), in which the visitor receives information about historical events: causes, chronologies, and consequences in a form that evokes emotions. In analyzing how the concept of a “narrative museum” is understood in Poland, Maria Kobielska writes that “A narrative museum is therefore explained as an emotional and engaging museum, which is further linked to interactivity—first understood at a general level as a special communication situation, differing from the simple transmitter-and-receiver scheme of a traditional museum” (Kobielska 2020: 20). The statements of the Polish students show that they are accustomed to this kind of museum and therefore expect such a narrative and the experience connected with it. However, the Museum of Warsaw is completely different, because it focuses on presenting objects and does not propose any coherent, developing narrative (either chronological or thematic). One person said, “I think a lot of people are confused and don't know how to visit it. It [the museum] is not intuitive.”

One student, whose family has lived in Warsaw for generations, also doubted whether the exhibition would be understandable for people not living in Warsaw:

I thought I would receive more guidance on how to visit it. Of course, it's cool that there are so many exhibits, because you can create your own tour to go to those rooms that are more interesting for us. I'm saying that from the perspective of a person who has lived in Warsaw since birth and whose Varsovian roots go back generations...I think that for people from another city, it could be...the number of these exhibits could be overwhelming (...) And the fact that this narrative is missing may, at first glance, discourage visitors from viewing the exhibition.

Moreover, the current nature of the exhibition not only makes it impossible to find a chronologically ordered story about Warsaw but also does not even present any coherent vision of the city. One of the students noticed this while commenting on the Museum's promotional slogans, which emphasize that

Everyone can find their own Warsaw here: I used to like that narrative that everyone could find something for themselves, find his or her Warsaw, and so on. But now I don't think that is happening. I'm from Warsaw, and my family also comes from here, and the visit to this museum somehow doesn't support my sense of identity. These things are fine, you can see a lot of mermaids, postcards, and so on, but somehow it doesn't influence my perception of the city.

According to this interpretation, the museum, rather than being a place to consider the nature of the city and its identity, is nothing more than an organized collection of artefacts and its role is limited to presenting its collection as simply as possible.

The fact that many people regretted that the exhibition does not provide a chronological narrative of the history of the city was also clear from the positive manner in which they assessed the museum basement, where the "Warsaw Data" exhibition is located. The exhibition presents demographic data and the city's spatial development using maps and models. The interviewees emphasized that this is an informative and interesting place for visitors and gives a great deal of information that is not widely available: "I like this information in the basement. I mean, this 'Warsaw Data.' This is an interesting thing. The information people usually don't think about." Curiously, the demographic information was not only assessed as being informative but also stirred visitors' emotions. Seemingly simple factual information on the degree to which the composition and number of Warsaw inhabitants changed after the Second World War (showing the disappearance of the Jewish community and the social void) was described as moving. The implication is that even statistical data can evoke emotions when contextualized or supported by knowledge of a city's history.

There was also a group of people among the interviewees who liked the concept of the main exhibition very much. As one student noted, "There is great diversity here. I know that a lot of people don't like it. Actually, I like it when I have many things to see." In addition, they pointed out that this is the kind of museum that should be visited at least twice because only during the second visit can the visitor knowledgeably interpret the message concealed by the individual items. From the perspective of the students from Polish universities, this is a museum that does not directly provide visitors with factual knowledge of the city's history, with the corollary being that it is worth returning to the exhibition several times to discover other objects. A good summary of this view was given by one of the students:

Basically, the recipient can attribute meaning to this item themselves. On the one hand, this is a disadvantage if someone wants to learn something, but on the other hand, it could be an advantage if someone wants to experience something.

The tension between the vision of a museum as a "provider of historical knowledge" and "a place to experience the past" was very evident not only in the students' opinions but also among the group of "professionals"—the Warsaw tourist guides. One of them indicated that visiting the museum without proper preparation or a guide would result in visitors not learning anything about the history of the city:

This museum does not have a form that leads us through the history of Warsaw. I think that if someone visited the museum alone, after leaving it, no matter how much time they spent there, they would not have become familiar with the history of the city. This is the Museum of Warsaw. I believe that it should fulfil this function.

However, many interviewees drew attention to the museum's role as a kind of chronicler of the city's everyday life. When viewed from this perspective, the shift from following a purely historical narrative to presenting everyday objects and people associated with Warsaw begins to make sense, as it shows a different "historical truth" about Warsaw. It is therefore important for the Warsaw guides that the main exhibition allows visitors to build many different narratives, including those focusing on the everyday life of "ordinary people." However, they believe that this is not a museum that would meet the needs of people who want to learn about the history of Warsaw in a short time.

The foreign students, like the other groups of interviewees, found it difficult to assess the museum exhibition, which they also perceived as lacking any form of historical narrative. According to one of them, it is not a museum that will satisfy visitors after one visit:

I could not enjoy myself and the objects I saw that much, because it was, like, both [chronological and thematic] layers all the time. So, actually, I think that what makes sense is to visit that museum more often because today I saw many other things that attracted my attention.

Even if some students felt disappointed by the lack of historical narrative, they still appreciated the items belonging to "ordinary people":

I think that at some points I was disappointed, but I appreciated a lot of the curators' decisions. I think it's very important to show the small things that are very close to the people, and not only high-class cultural art and objects.

In addition, the interviewees stressed in their statements that they do not know the history of Warsaw well and therefore it is difficult for them to assess the exhibition in detail. However, one person alone noticed some shortcomings in the museum exhibition:

And on the other hand, I had the feeling that not all the stories of Warsaw are told, being told. From... like I think I started from the historical floor on the basement and there was this one chart showing different religions and nationalities, and actually, I didn't find any Jewish relics, like the only Jewish mention I found was a single jar of marmalade. This one was from a Jewish store. And this is quite sad.

None of the Polish students noticed the omission and only one of the Warsaw guides spoke about the lack of information regarding Jews living in Warsaw:

In this museum, I personally miss a small room of this kind related to the history of Polish Jews, although we do have Polin—the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Nevertheless, while we are talking about multiculturalism, we are showing that Russians and Germans were here, so something else related to the Jewish community should appear as well.

When all of the items collected in an exhibition about a city are not supported by a narrative about the history of the city and its changing population, this can lead to the city being perceived as having been homogenous throughout its history in terms of religion and ethnicity (even if such a vision is not explicitly expressed anywhere). Thus, although focusing on objects—primarily those related to everyday life in the city—can

provide visitors with the impression that they are experiencing the lives of people from the past, without an accompanying narrative it is difficult to understand the diversity that was a daily reality for such people.

This diversity may be present in various objects but hidden from the view of the museum audience. Objects cannot tell stories to visitors, and without the information provided by the museum, they cannot tell about the ethnic, religious, and social diversity that they represent either. On display, they are almost all equal (except the highlighted ones), but were their makers and users equal as well? The question of “who produced it” or “to whom it belonged” is not only a question about personal stories but also about social and cultural diversity, that is, about the social history of the city. The question “Whose objects are missing?” might be the starting point for diverse stories about Warsaw’s history. Interestingly, there were only a few remarks from the interviewees on ethnic and religious diversity. One of the guides mentioned the presence of Russians in Warsaw and one foreign student was surprised that she didn’t find Jewish artefacts in the exhibition. The interviewees seemed not to perceive the history of Warsaw as the history of a multicultural city, and this image of the city cannot be derived from the exhibition either.

Generally, representatives of all three groups, when discussing the museum’s main exhibition, drew attention to the lack of a historical narrative or a general vision of the city’s identity. For one group of people, this was a problem, while for others, it provided an interesting contrast to the presentation of museum content in other places they had visited. Many interviewees approved the idea of using objects to portray everyday life and “ordinary people,” but they also pointed out that visitors wishing to benefit from such an approach might need to visit the museum several times and do some preparation in advance. Overall, it can be concluded that the interviewees perceived the Museum of Warsaw as a cultural institution that encouraged visitors to experience and explore the past on an individual basis rather than as contributing to a vision of Warsaw today and in other times (including a vision of Warsaw as a diverse and multicultural city).

Personal Things from the Past—the Room of Relics

The Room of Relics was specially selected for the interviewees to see because it is by definition the place with the most emotional messaging: it shows personal belongings within the frame of national martyrology. Therefore, it can be perceived as a presentation of the often tragic fate of the owners of individual objects.

The Room of Relics aroused much more emotion among the Polish students than any other room. However, once again, the opinion was expressed that the museum was showing things but not providing the stories of the people with whom these things were associated. For the interviewees, the most important thing was the person and his or her story, not the object itself. They saw things as intermediaries in reaching human histories and not as independent actors transmitting messages about the past. The Room of Relics aroused a great deal of emotion among the Warsaw guides as well. The majority of them indicated that the Room of Relics was the most moving and memorable exhibition space, both as a whole and for its elements. As one guide wrote in his photo essay: “For me, the most

moving point of the whole exhibition. The exhibited items enable us to ‘touch’ the surviving scraps of the history of the urban space.” They focused on the emotional potential they noticed in the exhibits and did not think the history of the individuals associated with the objects was needed. This may be because they know the history of Warsaw well and many items had a clear message for them. For one of the women, the most touching exhibit was the toy monkey from the period of the Warsaw Uprising. When asked what was most memorable, she replied:

Firstly, the monkey. Secondly, the remains of a plaque in the neighboring showcase that contains the names of people who were shot in the yard, probably on Puławska Street, and then buried. The plaque was supposed to record their names, or some basic information and dates. It’s simply amazing that on this impermanent material, something so transitory, [buried] somewhere under debris, such tangible history has survived up until our times. It’s amazing to me. It’s like going back in time and just being there in those ruins.

Each of the interviewees found something important in this room:

For example, every time, I am shocked by the cigarette case belonging to the Mayor [of Warsaw] Stefan Starzyński, which shows how fleeting human life is, and how much this man brought to this city, probably most of all.

Given that the guides reacted in such a manner, it is not surprising that they consider “relics” to be the most appropriate term for the collected items:

This whole display cabinet is basically a great reliquary of this kind; it is very accurate [this term]. It stands out from the other rooms because it is very emotional.

It is very important that these items are closely related to the inhabitants of Warsaw, which allows a visitor to empathize with aspects of everyday life in the city:

I also really like the fact that it brings such an element, someone’s personal experience of such a kind, because we have a collection of objects that we see from the perspective of Warsaw’s history, and here we have one specific object whose history gives us such a micro perspective.

The foreign students also paid the most attention to the Room of Relics, which evoked strong emotions in them. As a Columbian student wrote in her photo essay:

The room of relics has the potential to make spectators reflect and rethink the history coming from their emotions. It allows [them] to recognize victims as subjects with individual lives, with families and memories that are narrated by the objects donated to the museum. A relic goes beyond being a simple object developing an intimate relationship with a community with a shared past, which is the city of Warsaw in this case. A museum is a place for the things of Warsaw, whether these objects are excavated, bought, found, or donated, they all played a part in the building of the city and its identity.

For the foreign students, the most important thing in the Room of Relics was the emotional potential of the personal items. As one person expressed it: “It’s like a little story in a big story.”

Generally, all the research participants, regardless of age or origin, interpreted the relics’ message similarly and also liked the room very much. However, many criticized the lack of a deeper individual, human dimension in the presented objects, which could have been provided by a detailed description. However, only the Room of Relics undoubtedly satisfied the need to come into contact with the stories of Warsaw’s “ordinary people.”

Conclusion

In interpreting the assumptions behind the core exhibition, Wawrzyniak and Bukowiecki write that “Things need spokespersons—they are usually silent themselves, and their arrangement in the exhibition may be unreadable for many visitors” (Wawrzyniak and Bukowiecki 2020: 234). The tension between the assumptions and what the exhibition actually presents (that is, what material objects can “say and do”) has been noticed by many commentators. An art historian notes that

This is the peculiar trap of this exhibition—material concreteness is supposed to authenticate the message, and yet unwritten sources—not so many witnesses as participants of the events—do not imply no manipulation due to their hard specificity; if they can talk, they can also lie. In addition, we want to go to the museum rather to learn about the people who used to live here, through the objects that were once created here, and not about the items themselves. Shifting to an interest in things takes training! (Markowska 2018: 225).

Markowska draws attention to another important element that appears in the official statements of the Museum team: objects are inseparably connected with people and their stories. It was people who created and used them, and it is the stories of the inhabitants of Warsaw that are to be told through the things at the exhibition.

The problem of democratic access to the museum also appears in the above-mentioned comments on the main exhibition. Will a person without specialist knowledge of the history of Warsaw be able to read the message of the objects? How will that message be perceived by, for example, people from abroad who not only do not know the history of Poland and its capital in detail but were also brought up in a different cultural context, which means that some objects (symbols and references contained therein) could be completely illegible?

Depending on whether the interviewees came from Poland or other countries and how much they knew about the history of Warsaw, they drew attention to different elements that they liked at the Museum of Warsaw. However, it is possible to distinguish some common opinions shared by all three categories of interviewees. The dominant idea among them was that the museum is unconventional. The interviewees’ primary expectation before visiting the city museum had been that it would provide them with a narrative of the city’s history. Consequently, they were surprised that the museum primarily focuses on the presentation of objects rather than narratives. No one rated this approach negatively, but some thought that the main exhibition should have been supplemented with a historical narrative. When the interviewees’ statements were analyzed, the tension became evident between the two goals attributed to the city museum: “providing knowledge” and providing “experience of the past.” Knowledge is necessary, according to the interviewees, not only to understand Warsaw’s history and its contemporary identity but also to be able to feel a sense of communion with what is most important in the Museum of Warsaw—the things of Warsaw. During the interviews, it was argued that the things whose historical context are not described are largely incomprehensible and the museum is therefore not making use of their potential. This is closely related to the second goal: experiencing the past, which the interviewees valued very highly. It was very important to them to be able to make their own discoveries while exploring exhibition rooms and individual exhibits. Only then do these exhibits evoke the kinds of emotions that help visitors remember the story behind each exhibit. Consequently, they expected the museum to facilitate this kind of “experience” by

providing historical information not only about individual objects and people but also about the context within which they had functioned. Many interviewees were also enthusiastic about the “Warsaw Data” exhibition, which allows visitors to examine the history of Warsaw both from a broad perspective (spatial development, demographic changes) and in terms of individual elements (the evolution of Warsaw’s coat of arms or Warsaw “firsts,” that is, the dates when various kinds of phenomena and inventions first appeared in the city).

Very often the concept of authenticity appeared in the interviewees’ statements. Authenticity, in this sense, not only applies to the exhibits themselves but also to the place where the museum is located. The fact that the exhibition was being shown in old tenements deepened the feeling of being “immersed” in the past. The museum contributes to visitors’ sense of authenticity in regard to experiencing the past by presenting them with many items related to everyday life in the city as well as things belonging to people who experienced dramatic historical events there (such as wars, uprisings, or strikes). The Room of Relics has a special status in this aspect. Most of the interviewees noticed the difference during their first visit. Furthermore, during the FGI, they emphasized the importance of this place and talked about the emotions that were evoked by it.

The Museum of Warsaw is not regarded as an institution that tells a story of social, ethnic, and religious diversity. Instead, it is mainly regarded as a chronicler of the everyday life of the city. Every exhibit is viewed, in the first place, as being Varsovian rather than as the product of life in a socially, ethnically, and religiously diverse city. Any existing information on the internal diversification of the adjective “Varsovian” is hidden and not visible to the audience.

The museum’s team of curators tried to “give a voice to objects” and opposed the model of a narrative museum. However, the viewers of the museum with whom the interviews were conducted had yet another vision. Even if they agreed with the lack of one narrative and one line of interpretation, they did not like the lack of human dimension in the presentation of objects. The emotional layer was very important to them and what triggered emotions were the stories of individual people (or the objects through which a person’s story is told). When describing their visit to the museum, they referred to such categories as identity (in the case of people strongly associated with Warsaw), experiences, and emotions. They also expected the museum to help them interpret objects. For them, the history of the city was first and foremost the history of its inhabitants; the material objects could be tools for transmitting this history but not the main protagonists.

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Biographical Note: Małgorzata Głowacka-Grajper (Ph.D.hab.), is a sociologist and social anthropologist. She works as an associate professor at the Faculty of Sociology at the University of Warsaw. Head of the Department of Social Anthropology and Ethnic and Migration Studies. Her main research interests include the issues of contemporary national and ethnic identity, social memory, especially memory activism, and research on the relationship between the local and national dimensions of memory. She has published over a dozen articles and books on ethnic and national minorities in Poland and Russia, social memory in post-communist countries, and the memory of post-war resettlement. Her last books are *Milieus de mémoire in Late Modernity. Local Communities, Religion, and Historical Politics*, 2019 (with Zuzanna Bogumił), *The Burden of the Past. History, Memory, and Identity in Contemporary Ukraine*, 2020, (edited with Anna Wylegała). Currently, she works on a project on the postcolonial perspective on imperial Russian heritage in Poland.

ORCID iD: [0000-0002-8992-8117](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8992-8117)

E-mail: glowackam@is.uw.edu.pl