

Pérez López, Irene

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STUDIE/ARTICLES

ARE PARTICIPATORY MUSEUMS A DECLARED PRIORITY? A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF INSTITUTIONAL STATEMENTS IN SPANISH MUSEUMS

IRENE PÉREZ LÓPEZ

<https://doi.org/10.5817/MuB2025-2-2>**ABSTRACT/ABSTRAKT:**

Nowadays the museum is more open and democratic than ever; however, is it also participatory? Although the number of initiatives involving visitors in decision-making has increased, these remain anecdotal within the institution's overall activities. Considering this, it is important to ask whether participation is a key element of the 21st-century museum, an expectation for its future, or if it is not as significant as one might assume. This text presents a study on the presence of participation in documents that Spanish museums draft to outline their strategies and objectives, providing them with a theoretical framework and reflecting the values they uphold. The aim of this analysis is to better understand the role that participation plays among the objectives of the contemporary museum.

Jsou participativní muzea deklarovanou prioritou? Kritická analýza institucionálních prohlášení ve španělských muzeích

Dnes je muzeum otevřenější a demokratičtější než kdy dříve. Je však také participativní? Ačkoli množství aktivit zapojujících návštěvníky do rozhodování vzrostlo, představují jen nepatrný zlomek z celkového objemu činnosti muzejní instituce. S ohledem na tuto skutečnost je důležité si

položit otázku, zda je participace skutečně klíčovým prvkem muzea 21. století, který je důležitý pro jeho budoucnost, nebo zda její význam není v současnosti přeceňovaný. Tento článek představuje výsledky studie sledující, v jaké míře se participace objevuje v dokumentech vypracovaných španělskými muzei, které mají nastínit jejich strategie a cíle, definovat jejich teoretický rámec a odrážet hodnoty, které zastávají. Cílem této analýzy je lépe pochopit, jakou roli hraje participace mezi cíli současného muzea.

KEYWORDS/KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA:

*museum – participation – visitor – democratisation – shared authority
muzeum – participace – návštěvník – demokratizace – sdílená autorita*

1. Introduction

Visitor participation is one of the concepts shaping contemporary museology. In a context where cultural institutions are redefining their role in society around values such as inclusion, accessibility, and democratization, participation has emerged as an aspirational ideal.

The growing expectation that museums should not only transmit knowledge but also encourage active public engagement reflects broader transformations in social and cultural dynamics, influenced by the concept of the “participatory

culture”.¹ These expectations have spread across all cultural fields, and in museums, visitor interest and demand for greater participation have increased.²

Theoretically, the participatory museum³ represents a paradigm shift. In this model, visitors are no longer passive recipients of information but active agents in meaning-making within the institution. This shift involves redistributing interpretative authority from the museum to the public, which can be seen as an expression of a commitment to democratization. However, the participatory initiatives implemented in museums do not fully support this vision. There are not many opportunities for visitors to shape their museum experience, contribute to content selection, or co-create exhibits – such initiatives are even less common when they require institutions to share a large amount of authority. This raises a fundamental question: is participation a structural component of the contemporary museum's identity, or does it remain merely an aspiration?

¹ JENKINS, Henry. *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture. Media education for the 21st century*. Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 2009.

² STEIN, Robert. Chiming in on museums and participatory culture. *Curator: The Museum Journal*. 2012, vol. 55, no. 2, p. 217.

³ SIMON, Nina. *The participatory museum*. Santa Cruz, California: Museum 2.0, 2010.

This study investigates the extent to which contemporary museums prioritize participation as part of their institutional identity. By analyzing texts produced by Spanish museums, it examines whether participation is integrated into strategic planning, as well as the definition of institutional values, missions, and objectives. The research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of visitor participation's role in shaping the contemporary museum.

Before proceeding, it is essential to define the concept of participation as used in this study, given that the term can be interpreted in multiple ways within the museum context. This research adopts a perspective rooted in political theory, linking participation to the democratization of decision-making processes.⁴ In this sense, participation is directly related to power distribution within museums. Implementing participatory practices implies recognizing and supporting the visitor's active role in meaning-making. To achieve this, museums must acknowledge that they are no longer the sole creators of narratives surrounding their collections and that visitors play a fundamental role in shaping their own experiences.

2. Sample selection

The sample consists of 61 texts from 58 Spanish museums,⁵ selected from state-run, run by the authorities of provinces and municipalities, and private institutions. The selection was based on the availability of such documents, as not all institutions produce or publish them⁶ (museums

⁴ CARPENTIER, Nico. The concept of participation. If they have access and interact, do they really participate? *Revista Fronteiras*. 2012, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 165.

⁵ The priority of this research is art museums, so the sample corresponds, for the most part, to this type of institution.

⁶ Some absences respond to this reason; for example, most of the museums of the Junta de

and analyzed documents listed in Bibliography).

The texts included in the analysis are recent, dating from 2019 to 2024, with some projected to remain valid until 2026, as strategic planning typically covers multiple years. Documents published on institutional websites have been considered current, as they are assumed to represent the museum's official stance, regardless of their original publication date.

Regarding institutional governance, the sample includes 14 state-run museums (22.95 %), 7 public institutions with special legal status (11.48 %) – such as the Prado Museum and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (MNCARS), 31 autonomous or museums run by the authorities of provinces and municipalities (50.82 %), 5 public-private management museums (8.20 %), and 4 privately managed museums (6.56 %).

The analyzed texts cover a variety of institutional documents, categorized as follows. Mission, vision, objectives, and strategies published on museum websites (40.98 %), general institutional information sections that include information about these aspects (37.70 %) – such as “About Us” or “The Museum”, action plans (8.20 %), strategic plans (8.20 %) and annual reports, documents outlining objectives and strategies, and general planning documents (1.64 % each). As can be deduced from the sample, formal plans are far less common than incorporating this information into website sections.

Due to significant variations in document length, the texts were also classified into five groups

Andalucía or the Junta de Castilla y León – with a similar website – do not have accessible texts on these matters.

based on the number of paragraphs or pages: 1 to 3 paragraphs (29.51 %), 3 to 10 paragraphs (26.23 %), more than 10 paragraphs (21.31 %), 1 to 10 pages (1.64 %) and more than 10 pages (21.31 %).

3. Methodology

This study primarily employs content analysis methodology to detect and categorize references to participation in the selected texts. Content analysis allows for the systematic examination of textual data by coding relevant information to identify patterns or themes. To conduct this study, the qualitative research software ATLAS.ti was used, facilitating the analysis of texts in various formats, the coding of relevant excerpts, and the establishment of relationships between them.

3.1 Coding of participation mentions

The primary objective of this study is to identify mentions of participation in the analyzed texts. Once identified, these mentions have been coded based on the type of reference made to participation. The assigned codes are described below:

Whenever the word “participation” appears, one of the following codes has been applied:

- Yes: Concept – When participation is mentioned, and the context clearly aligns with the definition used in this study: participation as the democratization of decision-making processes. E.g.: *“Enhancing citizen participation in the design and development of museum activities.”*⁷

⁷ “Potenciar la participación ciudadana en el diseño y desarrollo de actuaciones del Museo.” Plan Estratégico 2023–2026. Online. In: *Museo Nacional de Escultura*. Available from: <https://www.cultura.gob.es/mnescultura/conocenos/el museo.html>. [accessed 2024-06-17]. English translation provided by the author.

- Yes: Unclear – When it is impossible to determine which concept of participation is being referred to due to vague wording or lack of contextual clarification. E.g.: *“Expanding and improving relations with audiences to ensure their enjoyment, participation, and appreciation of the institution.”*⁸
- Yes: No, Other Concepts – When participation is mentioned but refers to a type of participation unrelated to the concept examined in this study (such as museum staff participation, institutional participation in external activities, etc.). E.g.: *“Participation in the research and work initiatives of the Ministry of Culture’s Permanent Laboratory for Museum Audiences.”*⁹

Additionally, some concepts related to participation may appear in the texts without explicitly using the term itself. Therefore, a separate code, “No: Yes, Related Concepts”, was assigned to excerpts containing terms such as co-creation, collaboration, democratic engagement, cooperation, co-production, and involvement. E.g.: *“Its mission is to contribute to the understanding of societies through the cultural heritage it preserves, fostering democratic practices in interpreting the world [...]”*¹⁰

8 “Ampliar y mejorar la relación con los públicos para garantizar su disfrute, participación y valoración de la institución.” Plan de Actuación 2022–2025. Online. In: *Museo Nacional del Prado*. Available from: <https://www.museodelprado.es/museo/plan-de-actuacion>. [accessed 2024-06-17]. English translation provided by the author.

9 “Participación en las líneas de trabajo e investigación del Laboratorio Permanente de Públicos de Museos del Ministerio de Cultura.” Plan General de Actuación 2022–2024. Online. In: *Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía*. Available from: <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/museo/plan-general-actuacion>. [accessed 2024-09-17]. English translation provided by the author.

10 “Su misión es la de contribuir al conocimiento de los pueblos a través del patrimonio cultural que conserva, propiciando ejercicios democráticos de lectura del mundo...” Una arquitectura por descubrir. Online. In: *Museo de Albacete*. Available from: <https://cultura.castillalamancha.es/museos/>

3.2 Text classification

Based on the coded mentions of participation in each document, the texts were categorized into groups corresponding to the coding labels described above. This classification allowed for an assessment of the number of documents referencing participation and an evaluation of whether those references align with the concept central to this study.¹¹

If a document does not mention the word “participation,” it was classified as either “No” or “No: Yes, Related Concepts”. If the document does include the word “participation”, it was classified under “Yes: Concept”, “Yes: Unclear”, or “Yes: No, Other Concepts”.

4. Results

The main findings of the study are as follows:

Out of the 61 analyzed documents, 32 (52.46 %) do not contain any mention of participation, either explicitly or through related concepts. Among the remaining 29 documents that include the word “participation”, only 4 documents (6.56 %) explicitly refer to the concept of participation as defined in this research. In 13 cases (21.31 %), the word “participation” appears, but the context does not provide enough clarity to determine its precise meaning. 8 documents (13.11 %) use the term to refer to forms of participation unrelated to visitor engagement. Additionally, 4 documents (6.56 %) do not

nuestros-museos/museo-de-albacete/actividades/una-arquitectura-por-descubrir-el-museo-de-albacete. [accessed 2024-09-25]. English translation provided by the author.

11 The texts have been classified taking into account the citation that comes closest to referring to the concept of participation studied. If one of the quotations referred to the concept of participation investigated, the document has been classified as “Yes: Concept”, independently of the rest of the quotations. The next closest code would be “Yes: Unclear”.

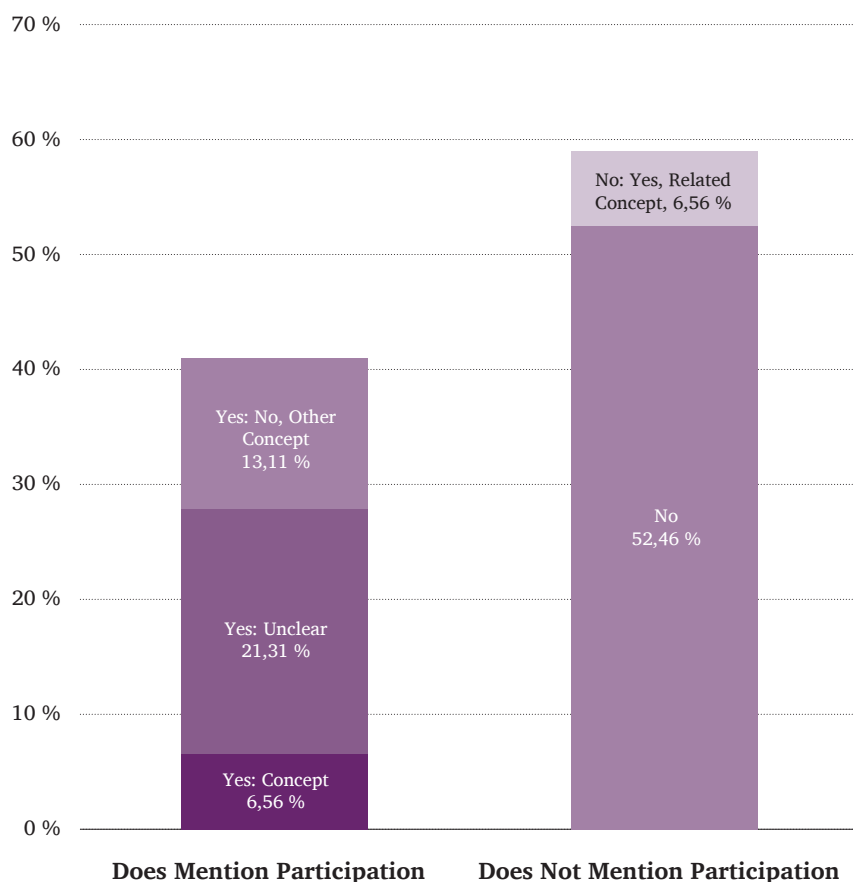
explicitly mention participation but include terms that can be interpreted as related to the participatory approach examined in this study (fig. 1).

When distinguishing between documents that explicitly mention participation and those that do not, the word “participation” appears in 25 (40.98 %) and does not appear in 36 (59.02 %) (fig. 2). While the concept of participation is clearly identified in 4 documents (6.56 %), in 13 documents (21.31 %), it is unclear which concept is being used, in 4 (6.56%), a related concept is referenced. In 40 documents (65.57 %), the concept of participation is definitively not mentioned – either the term does not appear at all (32 documents), or it appears but refers to a different concept (8 documents) (fig. 3).

4.1 Documents that do not mention participation

Focusing only on the documents that do not mention the word “participation” or related concepts – 32 out of 61, accounting for 52.46 % of the sample – we find that they belong to a group of institutions that are a good representation of the overall sample. More than half of them are museums run by the authorities of provinces and municipalities (17, or 53 %), followed by 9 state-run museums (28 %), 4 institutions with public-private or private management (6 % each), and 2 mixed public institutions (6 %).

Regarding the type and length of the documents: 59.38 % (19) consist of general information on institutional websites, while 40.63 % (13) are definitions of the institution’s mission, vision, objectives, etc., also published on websites. Among these web-based texts, 53.13 % (17) are between 1 and 3 paragraphs long,



34.38 % (11) contain between 3 and 10 paragraphs, and 12.50 % (4) exceed 10 paragraphs. None of them are multi-page plans.

Additionally, among the texts that mention the word “participation”, 8 documents (13.11 % of the sample), belonging to 7 institutions, refer to a concept of participation different from the one analyzed in this study. In other words, they do not reference participation as a concept, even though the term appears in the text.

If we consider both groups of documents that definitively do not mention the studied concept of participation – those classified under the “No” category and the “Yes: No, Other Concepts” category – the total amounts to 40 documents, or 65.57 % of the sample. The institutions that produced these documents are primarily (50 %) under provinces and municipalities management, followed by state-run museums, which make up 27.5 % of the total. Additionally, 10 % are public-private

Fig. 1: Mentions of participation in analyzed texts

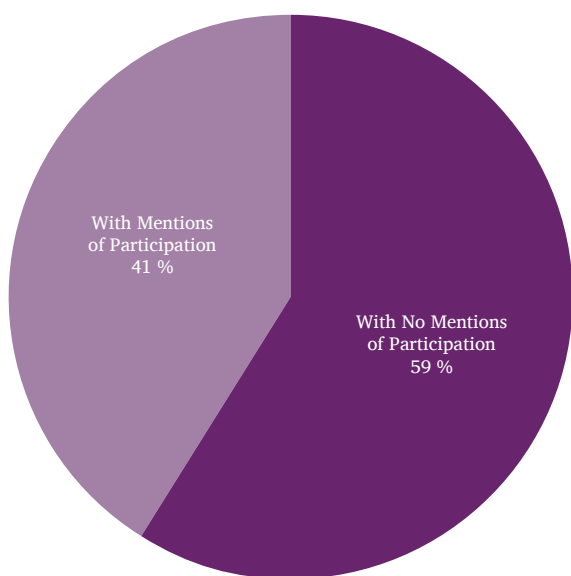


Fig. 2: Mentions of the word “participation”

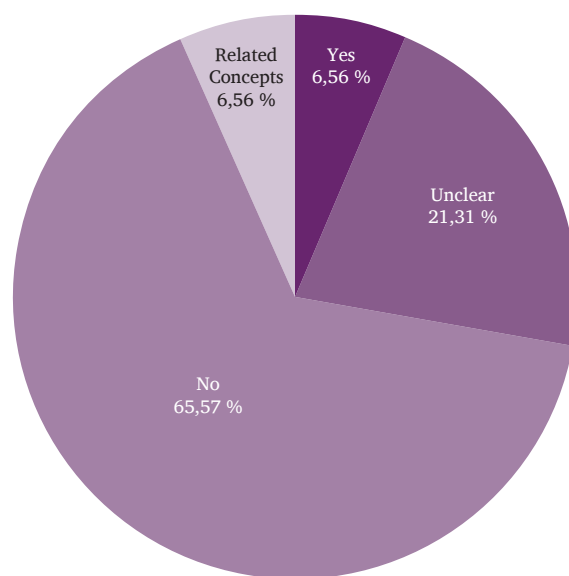


Fig. 3: Mentions of the concept of participation analyzed

institutions, 5 % are private, and 7.5 % are mixed public institutions.

Regarding the type and length of these documents: 50 % consist of general information on institutional websites, while 40 % define the institution's mission, vision, objectives, etc., on the websites too. There are also two action plans (5 %), one report, and one strategic plan (2.5 % each). Considering the length of these texts, 42.5 % are between 1 and 3 paragraphs long, 32.5 % are between 3 and 10 paragraphs, and 17.5 % exceed 10 paragraphs. Additionally, 7.5 % contain more than 10 pages.

4.2 Documents that mention the concept of participation – classification “Yes: Concept”

The concept of participation used in this research appears explicitly in only 4 of the 61 analyzed documents (6.56 %). These documents belong to the following institutions: Museo Lázaro Galdiano (MLG), Museo Nacional de Escultura (MNE), Museo Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (MNAC), and Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA).

The number is so small that presenting percentages does not add much value, but it is worth noting that 3 of the 4 documents are strategic plans, while the fourth is an action plan. All four documents exceed 10 pages. Additionally, they belong to one state-run institution, two public-private institutions, and one mixed public-provincial institution.

4.3 Documents that mention participation without specifying the concept – classification “Yes: Unclear”

There are 13 institutions (21.31 % of the sample) that reference participation in ways that do not allow the specific concept

being used to be determined from the context. These museums are primarily run by the authorities of provinces and municipalities (76.92 %), with 2 state-run institutions (15.38 %) and 1 mixed public institution (7.69 %).

Regarding the type of document, most are institutional website texts discussing mission, values, objectives, etc. (53.85 %). To a lesser extent, general texts also published on museum websites account for 15.38 %. Additionally, there is one general plan, one strategic plan, one action plan, and one document outlining objectives and strategies, each representing 7.69 %.

In terms of length, 38.46 % of these texts exceed 10 paragraphs, while 30.77 % are longer than 10 pages. Together with documents ranging between 1 and 10 pages (7.69 %), extensive documents make up 76.92 % of this category. Conversely, shorter documents – those under 3 paragraphs (7.69 %) and those between 3 and 10 paragraphs (15.38 %) – account for 23.08 %.

4.4 Documents that mention related concepts – classification “No: Yes, Related Concepts”

There are 4 documents that refer to concepts related to participation without explicitly mentioning the word. Other references to these concepts are found in texts that also mention participation and, therefore, have not been classified within this group.

The documents in this category include the *Action Plan 2024* of the Museo Helga de Alvear, the *Mission, Vision, and Objectives* text from MACBA's website, a booklet from the Museo de Albacete and the Action Lines section on the website of Es Baluard – Museu d'Art Contemporani de Palma.

5. Discussion

As mentioned, the sample contained a majority of museums run by the authorities of provinces and municipalities (50.82 %), with approximately half of that number being state-run public museums (22.95 %), mixed public museums making up just over 10 % (11.48 %), and private or mixed-management museums each accounting for less than 10 %. Regarding the management of these institutions, it is observed that the only group resembling the overall sample is that of the documents that do not mention participation, with most institutions being under provinces and municipalities management (50 %) or state (27.5 %) public management. In contrast, it is striking that none of the institutions that explicitly mention the studied concept of participation belong to the largest group in the sample.¹² However, this situation may not necessarily be related to the type of institution in terms of management but rather to the type and length of the document since it is evident (as explained below) that participation is mentioned primarily in longer documents.

It is significant that more than 90 % of the texts that do not mention participation are published on museum websites. These are the least specific types of texts among those analyzed but, at the same time, the most visible. In terms of length, website texts tend to be shorter, with 75 % of the documents that do not mention participation containing fewer than 10 paragraphs. Among these, the largest group consists of texts

¹² Of the four documents that mention the concept of participation studied, only the MNE is under state public management; the MLG has a mixed public-private management, the MNAC has a mixed public management by a consortium composed of the State, the Generalitat de Catalunya and the City Council of Barcelona, and the MACBA operates under a public-private management, managed by the same consortium of the MNAC and the MACBA Foundation.

between 1 and 3 paragraphs (42.5 %). These findings are further supported by the results of the group classified as “Yes: Concept”, which consists of four plans, each exceeding 10 pages. It is no coincidence that none of the texts published on museum websites – the majority in the sample – mention participation in the context of democratizing decision-making.

Regarding the types of documents where participation is mentioned without a clear reference to a specific concept, 53.85 % are definitions of the museum’s mission on its website, most of which exceed 10 paragraphs in length. Two mentions (15.38 %) appear in general information on the web, one between 3 and 10 paragraphs long, and the other exceeding 10 pages. The remaining mentions are found in general plans, action plans, strategic plans, and reports. Once again, these are texts of considerable length.

Examining this data, it is evident that the length of a document is a determining factor in whether participation is mentioned – both as a concept and as a term. Institutions include the concept when they present an extensive outline of their objectives, strategies, or action plans, but they do not mention it when defining their identity, mission, or vision in shorter texts. Another point to consider is that these more detailed documents – such as action plans, strategic plans, etc. – tend to be more common in institutions with mixed public, public-private, or private management.

6. Conclusions

Although very briefly, it is worth beginning the conclusions by mentioning the issue of the lack of consensus regarding the meaning of the word *participation* in the museological context. The

very process of coding this study makes it evident that this is one of the fundamental issues in the analysis of this concept. When we find the word participation in a text written by a museum, it can refer to very different matters, such as attendance, the institution’s involvement in initiatives led by other museums, staff participation in the life of the institution, and so on. For this reason, it has been necessary to differentiate between references that pertain to the studied concept and those that do not. To some extent, this ambiguity is reasonable, as the term is used for all these matters both within and beyond the field of museology. However, even when visitor participation – whether referred to as *user*, *audience*, etc. – is mentioned, it is not always clear whether participation is understood as the redistribution of decision-making power, as defined at the beginning of this text. When the concept of participation loses its connection to power, we find uses of the term that have little to do with its actual meaning – such as considering that visitors participate simply because they can interact with exhibition elements – or vague references to the term.

The type and length of a document have proven to be key variables in shedding light on how institutions handle the concept of participation. The fact that nearly all documents that do not mention participation are texts published on institutional websites supports the idea that participation is not a central element of the contemporary museum. When institutions must define their priorities concisely, they do not mention it. However, these types of texts published online are also the most visible. Reports, action plans, strategic plans, and similar documents are created primarily for internal use, and although they are often

accessible, the public does not typically download and read them. In any case, the information institutions publish on their websites is more accessible and widely consulted, which contradicts the idea that museums employ participation in their rhetoric to project an image of openness and democracy. If that were the case, we would see participation mentioned consistently in highly visible places, but the data from this study does not support that claim. The fact that participation appears in museums’ more extensive documents suggests that it is taken into account but is not a high priority. This explains why it is included in documents that allow for a more in-depth reflection on institutional objectives. On the other hand, it is important to consider that as the length of a document increases, so does the likelihood of including a greater number of museological concepts.

One possible reason for the lack of emphasis on participation is that it presents significant challenges when implemented as an equitable redistribution of power. For this reason, museums that have normalized participatory practices – though they are not many – tend to focus on forms of participation that do not involve substantial transfer of power. Instead, they create experiences in which visitors or online communities feel involved in decision-making while allowing the institution to present itself as participatory and democratic.

Implementing an initiative in which control over the outcome is relinquished is uncomfortable for the institution, but not only for it. The results of an activity in which a group of visitors has control may not be relevant to the rest of the audience, those who do not participate. So, to what extent should an institution promote initiatives that democratize the

museum for a limited group of visitors, who likely already belong to the museum's existing community?

All of this contributes to positioning participation as a concept that is not particularly prominent among the key ideas shaping 21st-century museums. This does not mean that it is irrelevant or ignored, but rather that it is inconvenient enough to be considered one of the many possibilities available when designing a new activity – as long as control over the outcome is maintained – but not a fundamental concept embedded in museums' mission, vision, objectives, strategies, or values, as the data from this study indicates.

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IRENE PÉREZ LÓPEZ

Independent researcher, Spain

irene.pl.22@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1890-2312>

Irene Pérez López is a postdoctoral researcher specialising in museum studies. She has been a recipient of a Margarita Salas postdoctoral fellowship at the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM) in 2023–2024.

She holds a PhD in Art History (UCM), with a dissertation on the turn to the visitor in the museum, funded through an FPU contract (Training Programme for Academic Staff funded by the Spanish Ministry of Universities) in the Department of Art History.

Bachelor's Degree in Art History (UCM, 2014), receiving the Extraordinary Award, and Master's Degree in Advanced Studies in Museum and Historic-Artistic Heritage (UCM, 2016).

Since 2018, she has been a member of the S U+M A Research Group (UCM) and has contributed to R&D projects such as “Atlas Museo: Cultural Coordinates of Contemporary Museology” and “Atlas AV: The Audiovisualization of Art History Between Museums and Universities”.

Throughout her predoctoral and postdoctoral career, she has conducted research stays at Nottingham Trent University, the University of Edinburgh, the University of Zaragoza, and the University of Alcalá.

Among their most significant publications are an entry in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education* titled “Museum Education and the Epistemological Turn”, the chapter “El giro hacia el visitante. Construcción de significados, participación y bienestar en el museo” (The turn to the visitor. Meaning-making, participation and wellbeing in the museum), published by the Prado Museum in the book *Cultural Coordinates of Contemporary Museology*, and a recent paper in the journal *Museums & Social Issues* titled “Visitor Participation: Meaning-Making and Shared Authority in the Museum”.

Irene Pérez López je postdoktorandka se specializací na muzeologii. V letech 2023–2024 získala postdoktorandské stipendium Margarity Salas na madridské univerzitě (UCM).

Má doktorát z dějin umění (UCM) a její disertační práce na Katedře dějin umění, financovaná z prostředků Vzdělávacího programu pro akademické pracovníky (FPU), podpořeného španělským ministerstvem vysokého školství, se

věnovala tématu zacílení pozornosti muzea na návštěvníky.

Za svou bakalářskou práci z dějin umění (UCM, 2014) získala mimořádné studijní ocenění a má magisterský titul z vyšších studií muzejního a historicko-uměleckého dědictví (UCM, 2016).

Od roku 2018 je členkou výzkumné skupiny S U+M A (UCM) a podílela se na výzkumných a vývojových projektech jako „Atlas Museo: Kulturní souřadnice současné muzeologie“ a „Atlas AV: Audiovizualizace dějin umění za účasti muzeí a univerzit“. V období před i po získání doktorského titulu absolvovala výzkumné pobyty na Nottingham Trent University a univerzitách v Edinburghu, Zaragoze a Alcalá.

K jejím nejvýznamnějším publikacím patří heslo v *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education* s názvem „Muzejní edukace a epistemologický zvrát“, kapitola „Zacílení na návštěvníka. Vytváření významu, participace a pocit pohody v muzeu“ v knize *Cultural Coordinates of Contemporary Museology* (Kulturní souřadnice současné muzeologie) publikované Muzeem Prado a nedávný článek v časopise *Museums & Social Issues* s názvem „Participace návštěvníka: Vytváření významu a sdílená autorita v muzeu“.



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