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## The Nature and the Characteristics of Museum Theater

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# The Nature and the Characteristics of Museum Theater: A quality research among Greek specialists

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### Abstract:

**Purpose** - The aim of the research is to investigate the nature and characteristics of museum theater in Greece, as they have been formulated in the opinions of experts related to the specific topic.

**Design / methodology / approach** - To investigate the topic, qualitative research is utilized which is structured in five thematic axes. The data were collected by the method of structured interview which included five main questions (axes) and one or two clarifying questions for each of the main ones.

**Findings** - The essential relationship between museum and theater is highlighted, as well as the importance of museum theater in museum narrative and interpretation of exhibits.

**Originality / value** - The paper presents the views of scientists who have dealt with the subject or approach it theoretically from an educational point of view.

**Index Terms** — Museum Theater, Museum exhibits, museum education activities, Interaction theater-museum in Greece

## I. INTRODUCTION

Theater and museum show similarities between them, since both are linked to the concept of representation. Both theater and museum tell stories, each of them with their own means. They also take advantage of some common practices. For example, the way an exhibition is presented requires a scenographic (or even directing) approach.

In addition to the various forms that museum and theater collaboration can take, there is one that can effectively connect the two institutions, assembling art and science in a process. This is museum theater, a kind of guide tour and educational action at the same time, which can be defined as the application of theatrical techniques in the presentation and interpretation of museum exhibits. Museum theater is an old and rather common activity in many museums globally. Examples from the international museum space show the wide range and the plethora of forms of action, that are included in what is called museum theater. The museum theater promotes as an activity that combines science and art, enlivens the museum narrative

and complements the museum interpretation, serving the educational, interpretive and communication policy of the museum. In the present study, for the investigation of aspects and opinions about museum theater in Greece, qualitative research is used.

## II. MUSEUM THEATER. AN OVERVIEW

### A. Conceptual framework

Museum theater involves the participation of visitors in the desired suspension of disbelief - in pretense or imagination - in order to enhance the educational experience, offered by a museum. Ranges from telling tales and living history, musical and dramatic presentations, creative theater (creative dramatics), to puppet theater, imitation and more. There are many ways to use museum theater and a variety of techniques and approaches, depending on the educational goals and needs of the museum [1]. Initially it was utilized by only a few pioneering institutions, until it developed into a complete movement. Innovative museum professionals around the world have used theater as a successful tool for the education of visitors and the studies evaluation have confirmed its effectiveness. "The popularity of museum theater is growing in science, art and children's museums. Some have special platforms and amphitheatres they use for this purpose" [2].

According to International Museum Theatre Alliance (IMTAL), the official promoter of theater and performing arts as a means of interpreting cultural heritage, museum theater is: "A specific type of interpretation that uses imaginative activity to communicate ideas, events and concepts. In order to entertain and put visitors in a learning process, performers take on the role of a specific character in a specific occasion to help visitors weigh and understand the story in a direct way and, through it, some aspect of museum environment" [1].

Tessa Bridal perceives museum theater as an educational and extroverted action. She defines it as "...content-based educational performances typically shorter than those in theatre venues and frequently interactive, performed in formal and informal theater spaces, both within the museum and as outreach, by trained museum theatre professionals for museum audiences of all ages and school audiences". She refers to the role of the theater as "a catalyst, a motivator, a means of encouraging

audiences to want to encounter and wrestle with ideas. Theatre fosters an imaginative, creative and culturally diverse understanding of the objects we choose to display – and sometimes of those we don't choose to display. It achieves this by adding the personal – a sense of time, a sense of space, and a story" [3].

The Sydney's Museum in Australia promotes the importance of the theater for the experience of a museum visitor: "Theatre can be used to interpret an exhibition beyond the objects on display and give them a context that is not immediately obvious. Theatre can be used to transform the understanding of the viewer with multiple interpretations that prompt questions and provoke debate"[4].

George Buss of the Center for Science and the Arts of Whitaker, distinguish three forms of Museum Theater [3]:

- The exhibition museum theater, based on a demonstration or an experiment to attract the attention of the public and to create an interest in the science or the subject with which it is related
- The character-based museum theater which introduces the audience to a person, imaginary or not, in a way that can evoke emotional reactions
- The based on a plot museum theater, seeking to create an exploratory mood and interest

According to the website of the cultural enterprise Heterotopia, museum theater can "include a performance of a short play or monologue/s (often interactive) related to the museum collection, educational content, or site/location. Museum theatre programming can be designed for family or school groups or the independent visitor. It can take place in the museum itself or serve as "outreach" programming in schools and the local community" [5].

Museum Theater is a body of interpretation of the intangible cultural heritage and based on extensive historical research. It serves the educational, interpretive and communication policy of the museum and harmonizes with its respective ideological, social and political role.

### *B. Chronology*

The first form of museum theater encountered to be "living history". It emerged with the creation of open-air museums as an approach to collection, exhibition and interpretation. The first known case dates back to 1891, when the Skansen Museum opened outside Stockholm, Sweden. The museum's founder, Arthur Hazelius, collected in it the material culture of a pre-industrial era (including buildings and practices) [6]. Seven years later, he added actors and guides dressed in period costumes for a more complete historical representation that was in line with the environment. In 1909, following the example of Hazelius, guides in historical costumes made their appearance at John Ward House, Salem, Massachusetts, USA [7]. Similar objectives have led industrialists to finance the foundation of historic living museums in the US). The Living Museum, also known as the Living History Museum, is a kind of museum that depicts historical environments to simulate a

past period of time, providing visitors with an experiential interpretation of history. So, Henry Ford funded the Greenfield Village in Michigan and John D. Rockefeller the Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia in 1929. The practice of living history gained acceptance in museums such as Plimoth Plantation, Old Sturbridge Village and Colonial Williamsburg during the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s [8].

According to Jay Anderson, there are three main groups of "living historians": a) those who interpret the way people lived, b) those who use living history as a research tool to test theories and explore material culture and c) those that create a personality (persona) for themselves based on a historical person or on a character created of a mixture of characteristics from different people [9].

In 1970 the Forest History Center, founded the "Association for Living Historical Farms and Agricultural Museums" (ALFHAM), in order to make history a valuable experience of museum visitors, which is achieved through exchange ideas and experiences focused on accurate, active, participatory, objective historical interpretation. In fact, "history museums produce history in exactly the same way as teachers in classrooms, writers in their monographs, and directors in their films" without all operating at the same level of authenticity. However, a place that incorporates historical objects, accurate environments and appropriate representations can make the stories of the people who used these objects more multidimensional and effective [8].

In the United States, theater and performance through theatrical performances have been widely used for a long time as educational tools in both museums and historical sites. Museums hire storytellers to tell children stories in costume and to "weave" stories around specific exhibitions for cultural reasons - to share traditions, history, myths, folk tales. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, trying to expand the reach of educational programs, began using storytelling in 1917 with Anna Curtis Chandler, who worked in the photography department of the museum library. The Chandler, continued taking the role of narrator also in other museums (Cleveland Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Art, Worcester Art Museum) and wrote books with museum stories [10]. The Minnesota Museum of Science, which since 1971 has been using theatrical techniques and storytelling [11]. The Pacific Science Center in Seattle uses storytelling with songs and dance to teach the public about Native American culture and heritage. Historically, Colonial Williamsburg, a private living history museum in the US state of Virginia (depicting an area of Williamsburg and representing life in it in the 18th century), has adopted -as well as the Plimouth Plantation in Massachusetts- the use of museum theater techniques since the decades of 1950s and '60s [12].

In art museums, sporadic storytelling and various theatrical endeavors have taken place over the last hundred years, and more recently children's museums have provided participatory performances and frequent activities in which children become the creators of drama<sup>9</sup>. However, the slow but steady increase in the use of theater took place mainly

in science and history institutions. A number of factors may have contributed to this, including the growing need for a better understanding of science and scientific exhibits by the public as well as "the recent application of cultural theory to history and its representation in our cultural institutions, especially museums" [13].

Notable examples of recent theatrical programs in the United States, is the (Monterey Bay Aquarium, the Minnesota Historical Society and the Science Museum (Museum of Science) in Boston. Especially, there was an interesting live representation program at the Minnesota History Center. Characters from Minnesota history roamed the galleries and interacted with visitors, and later the activities expanded to include more formal presentations of small plays. Through these theatrical performances, the Center was able to address controversial and complex issues such as immigration, racism and socio-economic issues [13].

The aforementioned various efforts led in 1990 to the foundation of the International Museum Theater Alliance (IMTAL) by Catherine Hughes an actress of the Boston Science Museum. At the same time, the Museum Theater Professional Interest Council was founded, under the auspices of the American Association of Museums [14].

Today, museum theater can be defined as the use of theater and theatrical techniques, as a means of mediating knowledge and understanding in the context of museum education. Trying to communicate with wider fields of science, history and art, museum theater uses the narrative structure and emotional commitment of the dramatic art pursuing both educational and cognitive goals as well emotional. Can be held in museums (galleries or halls), zoos, aquariums, art galleries and historic sites. Usually presented by professional actors and / or professional interpreters (guides), although they can sometimes be volunteers. May includes the performance of short works or monologues based on historical events or material presented on the website. It can be an interactive event that uses theatrical improvisations (performances) and role-playing games, tailored to the pupils' curriculum, or can be designed for families and / or independent guests. Usually, there is no entrance ticket, the performances are short, they can take place in different places and usually recognize the presence of the public and interact with it. Other museums prefer to limit the interaction with audience and leave question and answers out of the role (i.e., for the end of the performance), believing that a theatrically designed monologue addressed to a concentrated audience, gives much more importance to theme or the objects, they have therefore embraced more traditional, non-interactive methods of performance. The Royal Armory Museum in Leeds, UK, is an example [15].

Probably the most common technique but also the most efficient for both artistic and educational purposes, is the monologue with or without interaction. Certainly, in the museum theater the interpretive means vary: Live interpretation, historical representation, first person interpretation - each with its own peculiarities and supporters. According to IMTAL, the basic forms of museum

theater are: First-person interpretation, Third-person interpretation, Living history, Re-enactment, Role-play, Storytelling.

People with a theatrical background tend to name what they do "theater", while those from other backgrounds tend to be called "interpreters". Whether the goals are the same: to communicate facts, concepts and a sense of time and place as much as possible memorable. The term "theater" tends to be used by trained actors working in this field, often in specially trained rooms in museums and exhibitions (i.e., in non-historical environments). The term "living interpretation" tends to be used by those who come from historical or museological background and often takes place in historical sites (e.g., museums, historic homes) [16].

### III. THE RESEARCH

The quality research analyzes the interviews of two scientists who participated in such activities and two museologists of the academic field with experience in museum-pedagogical activities.

The research had as objective to investigate the nature and characteristics of Spectator Museum part, as they have been formulated in views -in to be presumed - experts associated with this object. The data gathered by the method of structured interview that which included five main questions (axes) and one or two clarifying questions for each axe. The sixth question, appropriate for quantitative research with qualitative characteristics, it is closed- ended and the answers were given based on Likert rating scale. Four ladies with high specificity (theoretical training and practical experience) on museum matters had the kindness to answer the questions. The two of them (no 1 and 3) are skilled in educational exhibition subjects while the other two (no 2 and 4) in museum theater performances.

**First thematic axis:** How would you describe the relationship between the museum and the theater?

*Clarifying question:*

- Do you think that there is common ground between a theatrical performance and a museum exhibition?

Interviewee 1: I consider interesting although in its infancy in Greece the relation between museum and theater "There are definitely commonalities between a theatrical performance and a museum exhibition as they are both a kind of a cultural presentation

Interviewee 2: Although seemingly there is no relationship between theater and museum, in fact the goal of representation brings them closer to. As they use different paths to achieve it, they may, under conditions, have a complementarity relationship. Of course, there are similarities between a theatrical performance and a museum exhibition as they both try to present a theme and narrate it to the audience, activating more or less their emotions.

Interviewee 3: The relationship between theater and museum can be seen as complementary. Museum exhibition and theatrical performance have points of contact but not so many.

interviewee 4: Museum and theater, have too much in common. Both communicate a narrative; they tell a story. Unlike the theater, the museum does not have live actors. This is slowly changing, as the modern museum seeks to use other means of narration (digital, etc.), which contribute to a more vivid narrative. I also notice, more and more in modern museums, the appearance of scenography, for example at the end of 2015, at the Orsay Museum in Paris, where was an exhibition on prostitution in the 19th century, which was undertaken by a distinguish scene designer.

Conclusion: The theater and the museum have (rather many) commonalities and their relationship can be considered complementary. Three of the answers describe in different ways the main common point of theater and museum. I choose to mention it in the wording of the fourth interviewee: "Both communicate a narrative; they tell a story".

**Second thematic axis:** The theater can be become effective mediator for the interpretation of museum exhibits or just an impressive promotion action?

*Clarifying question:*

- Do you think that theatrical mediation presents an interpretive approach to the viewer or on the contrary helps him to adopt a more personal point of view?

Interviewee 1: Certainly, theater can mediate effectively for the interpretation of museum exhibits, as long as it is a structured action, in which the purpose and the connection with the exhibition are clear. every kind of "mediation" involves the approach of the one who suggest it as the curator, the architect, the museologist, etc. However, each visitor shapes his or her personal view, based on the established beliefs. I think this happens in all interpretations, including theater.

Interviewee 2: The theater is certainly a communication action, which can be more effective precisely because it can offer a relatively reliable interpretive approach to the exhibits, The theater can give "voice in museum exhibits. Museum and the theater also is required to give a in the possible correct interpretation but also to offer the viewer the ability / chance of a personal - experiential approach

Interviewee 3: They apply both. The theater is mainly used as a promotion action of the museum exhibition. It can, however, play the role of interpreter of museum exhibits. Theatrical mediation can present an interpretive approach to the viewer, as well as help him to adopt a more personal attitude. Of course, there is a chance that neither will happen. It depends on the transmitter and the receiver.

Interviewee 4: In any case theater is not a panacea, but a tool able to complement the museum interpretation, to show aspects that are not easy to be seen and can make the museum an entertainment and learning space. Of course, a bad result is not ruled out- such examples are observed in America where sometimes museum theater performances have not the proper scientific preparation. We must emphasize that these are not common theatrical performances and should be served by trained professionals

who can answer the questions of the public. Museum theater requires scientific research and its quality depends on it. As a matter of fact, it uses theatrical tools to highlight scientific research in a tangible and understandable way. Therefore, balance is needed to be an effective means of expanding the narrative ability of the museum. In the museum theater the actor gives his/her own interpretation to the museum exhibition, trying to communicate a story not in the sense of theatrical artistic creation and inspiration. Depending on its purpose, it can be a means of educating or showing the many facets of the truth. The museum theater was born in the museum and obviously should be in line with the philosophy of the institution. Therefore, depending on the plans and aims it can work in any direction. Theater is a tool. Depending on how we handle it, we will have the appropriate result.

Conclusion: Theater is a means of promoting the museum and can be a tool for interpreting museum exhibitions. The result depends on the quality and the scientific framework of the project. Depending on planning and targeting, museum theater can function as an educational tool (presenting an interpretive approach) or highlight the many aspects of the truth, pushing the viewer to form an opinion.

**Third thematic axis:** The theatrical script (scenario /ratio) in such the case differs from that of a typical theatrical project?

*Clarifying question:*

- Is it good for the theatrical text to be written for the specific occasion or to use pre-existing exhibit-related information sources (books or archives)?

Interviewee 1: Whether using typical theatrical texts or not I suppose that depends on the approach. Obviously both choices are acceptable. However, in order to achieve the connection between objects and texts, the latter must come from or rely on contemporary with the exhibit's sources of each type.

Interviewee 2: Both cases can be proved appropriate. Original theatrical text can be used, as well as any other that adapts to the theatrical needs (this also happens in the theater). A quality theatrical text written from the beginning is more likely to be associated to a greater extent with the exhibit. The somehow utilization of contemporary with the exhibit sources is rather essential, either we use pre-written text, nor an original (written for the specific occasion). In the first case, the correct (appropriate) choice of a contemporary with the exhibits text is a prerequisite for success.

Interviewee 3: There are various cases. the theatrical structure of the text is not a mandatory option. Depending on the museum, the script may be based on modern views or historical sources, or both.

Interviewee 4: The scenario/ script is not necessarily different from that of a typical theatrical play. there are many acting views, therefore the tools which used by museum theater, coming directly from the theater through a huge range of options. Depending on what you want to communicate and which the goals of this communication

are, we can incorporate different elements. Since there is such a rich theatrical tradition, there is a huge range of theatrical texts that can be utilized. What is essentially different between theater and museum theater is the space/halls and the rules. Museum theater and is that it tries to bring characters related with an exhibition to life. To achieve this, it must be utilized that it survives from the era in which the characters operate. For example, if we want to liven up some period of 19th century for which no official documents exist, we will turn to a variety of sources related to the period such as literary works and newspapers in order to approach, as accurately as possible, the character we will bring to life. In museum theater, is effective to use many and different sources. For a clearer picture we cannot rely solely on something archival for example.

**Conclusion:** Theatrical ratio can be used or not in the museum theater. It depends on the approach but also the case itself. Undoubtedly it will be useful and helpful if the project could be served using a theatrical text. Otherwise, all the available sources should be exploited, which could support the plot and the interpretation of museum objects.

**Forth thematic axis:** How necessary is to present the theatrical act inside the halls of the museum?

*Clarifying questions:*

- *What problems can be created apart from the obvious disturbance in the normal operation of the museum?*
- *Do you think that an amphitheater or an open space of the museum where the performance will take place can produce the same results as the performance in the museum itself?*

**Interviewee 1:** The necessity or not of the use of the exhibition space depends on the purpose of the action. If we consider that the question is the interpretation of the museum objects then the use of the museum space is a necessary condition. Amphitheaters and courtyards are completely different spaces, leading to different results. It is obvious that the intended connection takes place more directly in the museum space itself.

**Interviewee2:** I think that we have to use the real museum. Theatrical action should to be treated as an alternative way of touring. If e.g., the performance is related with an exhibit, it would be better not to separate it of which it is a part. I think that in order for these actions to succeed, they must be seen, without prejudice, as part of the operation of the museum. The exhibition spaces offer the ideal setting for such an action. I think that the use of other, outside the museum spaces set obstacles to a museum theater project. If, for some reason, such a space is chosen (e.g., to accommodate more spectators), then the contact of the public with the museum environment should be provided in some way.

**Interviewee 3:** The use of the museum space maybe is useful but not necessary. There may be problems with coexistence of spectators-visitors-actors can be created. if the project is well prepared in all respects (directing- acting-scenographic-musical-lighting, etc.) its presentation in another space more

suitable for theatrical action, can bring more important results.

**Interviewee 4:** In fact, the performances at museum halls do not cause inconvenience. Definitely the issue of space arrangement must be taken into account Museum theater, can taking place in specific hours per day or may be an actor interacts with the public throughout the visiting hours (this depends typically on the traffic). Museum Theater loses its power when it is played in other places. It is very essential to succeed the connection between the performance and the real object. An auditorium or an open-air space can deliver similar clearly inferior results.

**Conclusion:** Three of the respondents seem to agree that the use of museum space for theatrical performances is a prerequisite for the success of any action aimed at the interpretation of museum exhibits. One of the respondents considers it useful to make use of the museum space, but, under certain conditions, an amphitheater may prove to be a better solution. Theatrical performances practically do not create a problem in the operation of the museum, since they should be treated as an element of its operation.

**Fifth thematic axis:** In what museum theater differs from other types of educational activities?

*Clarifying questions:*

- *Is it possible to be a periodic and steady theatrical activity in the museum?*
- *Is it possible e.g., to adopt theatrical performances in all museum exhibitions?*

**Interviewee 1:** Museum theater offers immediacy, a high level of participation for the spectator. The frequency and stability of all the actions of a museum depends on factors such as funding, targeting or public response. I potentially believe that performances can be adopted in all museum exhibitions, but always in the context of an overall action planning.

**Interviewee 2:** Theater has by its own didactic character. However, it cannot be equated with closely educational activities as it is an autonomous art that is put at the service of the museum to enrich the experience of the public. It is theoretically possible to have periodicity and stability museum in theater activities. But let us not forget that this is a complex activity that is limited by objective conditions and possibilities. From a practical point of view, it would be better to make fewer but quality performances that will contribute to the establishment of the museum theater in our country.

**Interviewee 3:** I don't believe that it offers something different from other kind of educational activities. It is possible to have periodicity insofar as the theatrical activity takes place in the context of well-designed educational activities.

**Interviewee 4:** The museum theater like other educational activities serves learning processes but they differ as to the practices. The museum theater differs also from the "educational drama" which use characters of the past. In Museum theater often, modern characters intertwined with

characters from the past, a fact that does not exist in any other action. Museum theater can be applied to all ages with the exception of preschool children as well as in those of the first grades of primary school.

But even these, although they will not be able to learn what they would learn in an educational program, acquire a nursery memory from the site of the museum, which arouses their interest, their curiosity. It is a matter of the museum's policy to have periodicity and stability in its theatrical activity. There are examples of such museums in Northern Europe, America and Australia. In England for example in some museums the Museum theater is the main way of interpreting their collections. In America it is also considered more effective, as in one hour one can learn something that needed a week of reading.

**Conclusion:** Theater has a didactic character by nature. Thus, both museum theater and other educational activities serve learning processes. However, theater is an autonomous art and uses different techniques. The theater seems to be achieving one more substantial communication between the public and exhibits resulting in effective interpretation of the later. Museum theater aimed at all ages and all social groups, and the periodicity and stability of museum theater performances are related to the goals and policy of the museum.

**Sixth thematic axis.** Based on your experience and / or judgment, rate the expected / possible results, in four areas, of a theatrical event in a museum.  
 Rating scale: 1 (not at all) 2 (little) 3 (moderate) 4 (very) 5 (too much)

	A	B	Γ	Δ
A. View of the museum or exhibition	4	5	4	5
B. Interpretation a of exhibits	5	5	3	5
C. Satisfaction (entertainment) of the public	4	4	3	5
D. Artistic (theatrical) result	4	4	3	5

**Conclusion:** Expectations from a museum theater performance are high in all areas. With the exception of the third respondent who emphasizes the display of the museum, the interpretation of the exhibits is the expected result with the highest score. Two of the interviewees (first and forth) provided an explanatory text with particular attention to the quality of the performances.

IV. LIMITATIONS

The museum theater in Greece is at an early stage and therefore, the research can only be of a general nature. In fact, are recorded the views of a limited number of scientists who naturally see the issue from a different perspective. Also, the influence and acceptance of museum theater actions by the public is not reflected., Quantitative surveys of spectators in various performances would probably be more interesting. But, as a matter of fact, this type of

research was deemed impossible especially in this period of the pandemic

V. CONCLUSIONS

The theater and the museum have (probably many) commonalities and their relationship can be considered complementary. Theater seems to achieve a more substantial communication between the audience and the exhibits resulting in their effective interpretation. In Greece, however, museum theater performances are still a novelty. The relatively recent interest of museums in museum theater activities is related to the drop in traffic that may be related to the economic crisis. The Covid19 pandemic led to the suspension of museums (as well as theaters) and halted the already limited efforts of museum theater. The truth is that several large museums have included in their educational activities, relatively simple forms of museum theater (narratives, role-playing games) from the middle to the end of the first decade of our century. Of course, although these actions brought together the characteristics of the respective forms of museum theater, they were not treated as such. The educational-entertaining role was the dominant one, which was rather expected from the nature of the specific actions. The theater has by its didactic character. Thus, both museum theater and other educational activities serve learning processes.

It may be useful to emphasize that a museum theater performance can be judged on its artistic effect. Its success, however, will depend mainly on its cognitive-interpretive result. A high-quality artistic result that does not offer an equally successful interpretive approach to the exhibits will be considered a failure. Many museums are afraid to try the museum theater for this very reason. It seems that it would be useful to establish methods for evaluating the experience of the spectators, the results of which will be used to improve similar future actions.

The use of museum space /halls for theatrical performances is a prerequisite for the success of any action aimed at the interpretation of museum exhibits. Depending on the case, pre written theatrical texts may or may not be used in museum theater. However, it would be useful and helpful if the performance could be served using a theatrical text.

In summary, it is perhaps useful to note that museum theater is the most essential aspect of museum-theater collaboration. It is a body of interpretation of the intangible cultural heritage, i.e., the cultural practices, perceptions and beliefs that are found in specific socio-cultural contexts. It enlivens the museum narrative and complements the museum interpretation, serving the educational, interpretive and communication policy of the museum.

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