

# CURRENT PRACTICES IN FREE ADMISSION TO MUSEUMS : AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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## INTRODUCTION

Free admission has always been a fundamental value for museums and part of their original ideological base. But as market forces increasingly affected museums in the 1980s, the question of charging admission became the object of a passionate and recurrent debate that contradicted this value. Today, at a time of consensus on the importance of market dynamics in the world of museums, the practice of not charging admission has made a comeback : museums in the United Kingdom dropped admission charges in 2001 ; in France, all national and some municipal museums are free of charge on the first Sunday of every month and the city of Paris has stopped charging admission to its museums ; elsewhere in Europe, in Greece, Italy or Switzerland, assorted free admission schemes have appeared ; finally, in Quebec, the Ministry of Culture has commissioned a report on the question. The paradoxical return to free admission raises to several questions : how important is the practice of free admission to museums which have become « market based cultural organizations » (Tobelem, 2003) ? What role does it play ? How do contemporary museum leaders perceive free admission ?

This communication will try to answer these questions using a research study of free admission practices in museums as well as the results of a larger research study on museum pricing decisions. (Gombault, 2002b). Research methodology was exploratory, qualitative and inductive, based on a study of 22 museums in Canada, the United Kingdom, Italy and Spain. Conducted between October 2000 and October 2001 the study produced triangular data - directed interviews, desk research and direct observation - which were described and interpreted using qualitative content analysis. Analysis reveals that free admission has become a price action like any other used as part of pricing strategies that museums now practice. As a consequence, the historical debate between partisans and opponents of charging admission no longer has reason to exist. Moreover, a longstanding alibi for ideological quarrels about museum identity, the practice of free admission must now focus on the public.

## I – FREE ADMISSION AS A STRATEGIC PRICE ACTION

Whether under the aegis of American philanthropic patronage (Selbach, 2000) or that of a protecting and educational European Nation-State, free admission is associated with the very idea of a museum for several reasons : collections are seen as either collective property, or at least at the disposal of the collective ; the museum is considered first and foremost an art training center for the initiated, and then as a tool of popular education. From the 1920s in France and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, economic reasons compelled museums to charge admission to preserve artwork and/or buildings. Nonetheless, the spirit of free admission prevailed until the 1970s. Most museums opened their doors to the public in exchange for symbolic admission fees, and some charged nothing. Public or private funding largely covered museum needs and price was not considered a pertinent management instrument (Kotler et Kotler, 1998, 264). Admission fees were at the service of a cultural policy. Set up to maintain or enrich collections, entrance fees remained modest and institutions continued to allow the public in at no charge on at least one or several days of the week. (Génermont, 1997). As a collective symbol of democracy, a training center for professionals and amateurs of the discipline on display, a center of public education, and a public service, the museum needed to be open to all. This imperative influenced the admission fees policy that determined admission fees level, discount categories, exemptions, and formulas in relation to various admission categories, be they regular, educational, or social. At the same time, and paradoxically so, the perception of museums and monuments did not center around the general public and the contemporary conception of the public.

Then, over the past thirty years, and with variable speed, museums began to study closely all possible means of increasing revenue through their own resource development, notably through entrance fees to permanent collections, exhibits and special events, the sale of licensed products, and other activities. Faced with the pressure of decreasing public and private funding, cost increases and growing development needs, the desire to gain organizational independence and a policy of audience democratization (Zolberg, 1983), museums turned to market dynamics. The phenomenon started in the United States : « Finally, members of the general public became subscribers and active members of these institutions. Attracted by media campaigns, they came in droves to the first blockbusters of the 1970s such as King Tutankhamen » (Selbach, 2000, 23). The trend continued in the United Kingdom in the 1980s and then spread across Europe as a multitude of independent

museums opened and public financing became incapable of covering museum needs (McLean, 1997, 156). As a consequence, entrance fees multiplied and went up at museums ; the admission fees decision, managed as a price, became more and more sophisticated. With the adoption of the « new public management»<sup>1</sup> (Gombault, 2002a), and the blending of public and private sector management techniques, as well as the development of private museums, the museum world progressively abandoned the concept of fees in favor of that of price, which is defined, according to recent developments in managerial literature (Carricano, 1999) in the economic sense of a value attribute of the exchange relationship, or in a wider sense, as a social link, that is to say as an object of interaction between people (or organizations), between consumer and product, between company and market (Usunier, 1992). Moreover, entrance prices became, among other prices, a strategic variable at the service of museum objectives (Gombault, 2002b), even if the learning degree varies by country : high in the United States, Canada or the United Kingdom ; medium to low in Italy, France or Spain for example. Free admission formulas became a part of this pricing strategy ; free admission is thus a pricing action just like any other aimed at a particular segment of the public. In most countries today, museums charge entrance fees, even if they offer free admission, either occasionally or to specific social groups. On the contrary, admissions to national museums in the United Kingdom are free, but these museums have set up a fee-based peripheral offer, as have several important American museums (such as the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, or the Metropolitan Museum of New York<sup>2</sup>). Facing similar financial pressures but wanting to remain faithful to the original museum ideology<sup>3</sup>, these institutions invented a management model which is viable in proportion to their size : free admission as a marketing strategy. Free admission is financed in part by the active building of a commercial enterprise around the museum, and in return seems to generate a higher volume of peripheral activity than if visitors paid admission fees. With rare exceptions, free admission measures can no longer be considered on their own but in the context of a well-

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<sup>1</sup> New public management, which is particularly appropriate for museums that combine a public service mission while obtaining funding by client services, is defined by the application of three elements : a desire to be an independant organisation, an orientation towards different publics, and an overall performance-based transformation.

<sup>2</sup> Like certain free museums, the Metropolitan Museum asks for a voluntary contribution at the entrance, which brings in revenue. This system has been criticized for its normative aspects, the museum commercial pressure and the in general social pressure causing visitors to make a contribution regardless ; the museum is therefore free in name only. The controversy over this subject was notable when the Victoria and Albert Museum adopted this system in the middle of the 1980s before turning to a mandatory fee system. Nonetheless, voluntary contributions make up only a small part of the revenue of musuems which use this system.

<sup>3</sup> The National Gallery and the British Museum were founded by Parlement for the education of the people through free access to works of art. Rich and poor alike were to be able to enjoy art.

defined economic balance between the prices of the core offer and those of the peripheral offer.

The National Gallery in London : the National Gallery has always been fundamentally attached to the practice of free admission. A museum representative has declared, « Successive generations of administrators have considered that free admission was central to achieving the principal mission for which the Gallery was founded ». (House of Commons, 1989, 1). Whereas free admission to the National Gallery in Washington, founded on the English model, is part of the museum's statutes, the National Gallery in London, like all other national museums, has always had the liberty to charge admission if so desired. The Gallery has always refused to do so, even during the pricing pressure of the eighties and nineties. At that time, museums in the United Kingdom, as in the United States and Canada, faced a drop in funding and government pressure to increase their own revenue base. The National Gallery could readily rely on its own resources, but isn't ready to sacrifice the principle of free admission, or restrict the Museum's offer. The museum takes fundraising to the limit : sponsorships, patronage, museum shops, and restaurants, while justifying the attachment to free admission, not only for ideological reasons, but also in terms of strategy. Neil Mac Gregor (1997), the director, recognizes that charging admission is of course the simplest way of finding money, but he considers this solution unsatisfactory as regards the close relationship the National Gallery cultivates with its visitors and which it intends on preserving. « A museum is like a library » he says, « regular attendance brings benefits - through looking around, and browsing, and exploring an unknown territory. That's also how curiosity can be stimulated. And if curiosity isn't fed, it atrophies. Free admissions attract a lot of spontaneous, almost accidental, visits ». Over a third of visitors to the Gallery are « drop in » visitors, spending less than an hour on site. According to Neil Mac Gregor, this is an ideal amount of time for a visit and British visitors often come several times a year just to have a look at a few works of art at one time. In 1996, 50% of all London visitors came more than nine times a year to the National Gallery. He feels that is how one can truly « take possession » of a collection. This ideal situation, often inspired by a first casual visit, would be threatened by the introduction of admission charges. Spontaneous visits would cease and faithful local visitors would come less often if the museum charged admission, as available studies have confirmed. The majority of National Gallery visitors are British and a third are from London, a unique situation amongst major museums<sup>4</sup>, Mac Gregor explains that « what happens when you charge admission is that you transform a public collection into a tourist attraction. You expropriate the local population and replace it with tourists. If you follow that logic to the extreme, this means the public has a better chance of seeing their own cultural heritage on holiday instead of at home, but the educational role of the gallery is thus transformed and diminished. We are still and must continue to be open educational establishments.» While the museum's permanent collections are free to the public, however, admission is charged for the rest of the museum activities, notably to temporary shows, which, when a certain level of admission sales is reached, finances free admissions. What is more, Neil Mac Gregor claims that free admission generates higher revenue for sideline activities, whether they be sponsorship, museum shops, or cafés and restaurants. « We think that our capacity to attract private funding, especially for buildings, is increased greatly by free admission. It is an ideal of generosity that attracts generosity. » (Mac Gregor, 1997, 3) Moreover, Mac Gregor thinks that not charging admission stimulates foreign donors in particular, who are attracted to the spirit of the British system. He gives the example of Yves Saint Laurent, who gave 1.2 million pounds to the National Gallery because he was impressed by the fact that nowhere else in the world, outside of France, could four million people see so well and free of charge French painting. The National Gallery may be seen as a model of how, by commercializing the majority of sideline activities, a museum can continue to avoid charging admission, while and still managing to develop an attractive offer, and reach large swaths of the public.

At the same time, museums have become more democratic<sup>5</sup> - a cause and consequence of market dynamics (Zolberg, 1983). They have « widened their public » and integrated educational objectives. As Poulot (1998, 66) has written, « Clearly, the public's share in culture has become radically democratized, while the ideal of a « new » visitor, ready to take

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<sup>4</sup> At the Musée du Louvre or the Galleria degli Uffizi, for example, foreign visitors represent 60 to 70% of total attendance.

<sup>5</sup> The democratization of culture is understood to be the placement of the largest number of forms dedicated to learned culture at the disposal of the public.

on interactivity and playful environments, has emerged. This perception of the public is no more 'real' than that of the last century's didactic view of the visitor as a docile pupil ». Nevertheless, this image is a legitimate one and a key to understanding how free admission has become the expression of the will to create democratize cultural; the image serves the museum ideal of access, a vector, even more than that of democratization, of the museums social role. All museums that charge admission offer some sort of free admission scheme to attract low-income visitors or those for whom paying admission would prevent access, including - interestingly enough - the most expensive museums (for example, the *Musei Vaticani* in Rome, the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, or the *Rijksmuseum* in Amsterdam) and private museums (for example the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto or the *Museo Bagatti Valsecchi* in Milan). Below are pricing strategies of the *Museo Poldi Pezzoli* in Milan and the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull.

The Museo Poldi Pezzoli in Milan : this private home and museum, founded in 1871, was initially funded by a private endowment, and from 1984 on, essentially from money raised during an important fundraising drive. The museum welcomes 40,000 visitors a year. The principal mission is public access. Access is at the heart of the museum's development strategy, as well as cultural and artistic diffusion and education. Pricing is part of the museum's strategy : the board of directors has tried to keep prices of admissions and cultural activities as low as possible in relationship to the financial needs of the museum, and prices have remained stable for five years in the name of public access and public service. In 2001, admission fees were 10,000 L (5.16 Euro) for adults, 5,000 L (2.58 Euro) reduced price for 11 to 17 year olds and those 60 and over ; 2,500 L (1.29 Euro) for schoolchildren. There are 21 free admission schemes in practice. Admission fees also represent strategic alliances : visitors may also purchase combined tickets to the *Museo Bagatti Valsecchi* (14,000 L, or 7.23 Euro) or the *Museo Teatrale alla Scala* (10,000 L, or 5.16 Euro). These admission price partnerships go hand in hand with an alliance of small private museums that are faced with competition from free municipal museums. The aim is to increase museum visibility and to facilitate visits. They also serve the goal of accessibility followed by *Poldi Pezzoli*. Other prices are not set up to optimize revenue but to finance temporary activities. Product and communication variables are predominant in the management of peripheral activities.

Canadian Museum of Civilization at Hull : 80% of this federal museum's budget comes from public money. Founded in 1989, it is the most visited museum in Canada, with 1.3 million visitors in 2000. The operating budget is 50 million CAD (34,500,365 Euro). As operating costs outstrip government funding, the museum's development strategy aims at increasing the volume and diversity of public attendance as well as generating higher revenues and avoiding public financing constraints. An additional margin of leeway is therefore one of the strategic objectives. The museum also tries to increase access in accordance with its mandate. Prices are closely linked to the application of museum strategy. Various studies are regularly carried out to guide pricing decisions. These studies are conducted in the spirit of balancing several different aspects : the optimization of museum revenue ; public access ; offer, especially positioning in relationship to competition and the value of the experience ; and finally demand, especially as concerns visitor expectations. For example, reduced admission fees are related to the goal of access : «The museum has to be accessible, as the collections belong to all Canadians ». <sup>6</sup> Examples include : free museum admission on Thursday afternoons; free admission to the IMAX Cinema on Thursday evenings from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m., and half-price admission on Sunday afternoons ; and reduced rental fees for charitable groups renting space at the Museum.

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<sup>6</sup> From an interview with the head of the museum, February 2001.

## II – FEE VERSUS FREE : AN OUTMODED DEBATE

In the 1980s, the contradictory image of the democratic-minded museum charging admission caused a passionate debate (« free versus fee ») between « fundamentalists » and « pragmatists » (Besterman and Bott, 1982). However, it can be suggested here that the debate over free admission versus fee-based admission no longer has any reason to exist. As museums now use a variety of pricing strategies including even permanent free admission, the pragmatic ideology is dominant. A hoary chestnut of the museum world<sup>7</sup> dating from the end of the nineteenth century, the debate over charging admission crystallizes around various political, economic or management questions. The five salient points in the debate are : the economic cost of free admission ; the transformation of museum identity in relation to its original ideology ; the impact of free admission on attendance ; equity or lack thereof ; and the diminished or increased value that free admission brings a museum.

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<sup>7</sup> In France, for example, the first debates about admission fees date from the end of the nineteenth century and a good number of the arguments advanced then are the same as today (Génermont, 1997, 16-18).

Free Admission Fundamentalists	Fee Charging Pragmatists
<p>Admission charges are not economically efficient as additional visitors represent no marginal cost.</p> <p>Charging admission would have the unintended consequence of reducing public grants, patronage, sponsorship and volunteering by giving the (false) impression of sufficient self-financing.</p> <p>Revenue taken from admission fees, after VAT and ticket office operating expenses, would be minimal or even nonexistent after discounts for youth, students and seniors are applied.</p>	<p>The principle of the « zero marginal cost » of additional visitors leading to a « zero admission fee » has been questioned (Bailey, 1995 ; Bailey and Fakoner, 1998).</p> <p>Free admission is too expensive. Admission fees bring in additional revenue to maintain and develop the offer and the quality of products and services, and to cope with resulting rising costs, in a context of budget cuts and freezes. "The 'no-charge' position [...] is entirely convincing if the private or public financial support is sufficient to maintain an appropriate level of museum activity. When funding is inadequate, raising entrance fees is preferable to spending less." (Feldstein, 1991, 4-5).</p>
<p>Admission fees cast the public in commercial or management terms, and take the museum away from main activities such as conservation and education. Museums would have to devote financial, human and organizational resources to managing admissions ; the profession would progressively abandon core missions and the nature of the museum business would change.</p> <p>Admission fees go against the original ideology of heritage institutions.</p>	<p>The museum has changed and its missions have become plural and complementary, centered around cultural heritage on one hand and the public on the other. This new complexity demands that museums embrace management ; Management is at the service of the museum mission.</p> <p>Museums have changed and adapted to their environment and now make pragmatic choices instead of standing on principle.</p>
<p>Free admission would bring in more visitors.</p>	<p>The positive impact of free admission on attendance has not been demonstrated and the relation of cause and effect between admission fees and attendance is complex and diverse. (Bailey et al., 1997a, 1997 b, 1998 ; Dickenson, 1993 ; O'Hare, 1975 ; O'Hagan, 1995).</p>
<p>Admission fees are not equitable because they keep the members of the disadvantaged social groups from coming to the institution.</p>	<p>Free admission is not necessarily equitable, as it mainly benefits regular visitors. Factors which keep the greatest number from visiting museums are not pecuniary, but psychological. (O'Hagan, 1995 ; Bailey et al., 1997b ; Orivel, 1998).</p> <p>Charging admission can, thanks to well-thought out market segmentation, appear more equitable than not charging admission, which underwrites « rich people's leisure » (Orivel, 1998).</p> <p>« Moreover, the fact is that price segmentation of most museums is not equitable - discounts and free admissions are often granted to seniors, educators and other social groups, although nothing indicated that their ability to pay is particularly weak - why should they pay less than laborers, for example ? » (Orivel, 1998).</p>
<p>Free admission raises the symbolic value of museums. Admission fees lower the value of the museum experience.</p>	<p>When admission is free, observers have noted that the public generally underestimates the service offered. The perceived value of the museum experience would appear to drop. (Bagdali, 1998).</p>

Table 1 : « Free versus fee » : arguments of an outmoded museum debate

Far less compelling to the museum world than in the past, the debate over admission fees is closed. Pragmatism rules. Indeed, the apparent contradiction between carrying out the museum mission and the necessity of ensuring museum development has faded away. Museums have assimilated this contradiction through initiatives (that vary according to country or museum status) that fulfill the mission of cultural democratization using free admission practices in the price strategy. For example, the Museum of British Road Transport in Coventry, which charged admission from its opening in 1980, stopped charging admission in 1997 for all activities, including cultural ones. The museum made a strategic choice not to charge admission in partnership with private and public donors, because free admission both increased attendance and contributed positively to the local economy. If this

ideal model remains exceptional, various museums and national cultural policies, when they are independent, have managed to reach a compromise, albeit fragile, between price and access.

*The Museum of British Road Transport in Coventry* : this independent museum, operating as a designated or non-national registered museum, is funded essentially by municipal and national grants and donations. Attendance is almost exclusively national (only 8% of visitors are foreign tourists). The museum has conceived a classic development strategy that was initiated in an unusual manner in 1997 in order to ensure public access and the ultimate survival of the museum. At its opening in 1980, the museum attempted to offset expenses by ticket sales. Visitors, however, were insufficient, causing the City council to progressively lower its financial contribution (although never retiring support completely). Conscious that paying admission penalized local visitors, the museum experimented for one with a nominal fee ; local visits only marginally increased. The introduction of a yearly ticket had positive but insufficient results. In 1997, the Museum hosted the exceptional Thrust SSC, and organized, with the help of the City council, free admission for one day to see the car. The results were spectacular : 15,000 visitors came to the museum in one day (annual attendance was 65,000 visitors at that time). This event served as a catalyst for the introduction of free admission to the museum and all cultural activities. The first year following this decision, attendance rose by 155% to 150,000 annual visitors. Since then, attendance remains high (138,000 visitors in 2000) and the visitor profiles have changed : the number of adult visitors has significantly increased ; the number of children not accompanying school groups has significantly increased ; the number of children in school groups has risen slightly ; the number of special event visitors has dropped significantly ; the number of outside visitors has remained consistent but saw a relative decrease in relation to the total number of visitors. To formulate and validate this decision not to charge admission, the museum hired consultants to compare the benefits available to the city between free versus fee-based admission schemes. It was determined that free admission would generate over 3 million pounds in economic activity, where as charging admission fees would only bring in around 1.4 million pounds. The optimization of museum resources thus determined the free admission policy : free admission brings in more visitors and more resources to the city of Coventry, while respecting the city's cultural policy and assuring important municipal financing. Not charging admission closely fits the museum's triennial marketing plan of extensive product development, re-branding the museum, and re-launching the museum as 2003 approaches. Free admission and its positive effect on attendance are part of the marketing mix and used as a promotional argument.

The recent return to the sacrosanct tradition of not charging admission to British museums, which could be hailed as a small victory for fundamentalists in an increasingly pragmatic museum world, confirms on the contrary the predominance of the pragmatic model. Here is how it works : for over 20 years, museums in the United Kingdom have experimented with the two systems - free admission or admission fees - and going as far as they could with both. The ensuing and sometimes contradictory lessons learned have fueled ideological battles. Between 1999 and 2001, Chris Smith, Labor Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport under Tony Blair, managed to impose the return to free admission to permanent collections at all national museums that had heretofore charged admission. Some of these museums had become, in response to the financial pressure of the 1980s, extremely dynamic cultural enterprises. Smith's measure gave comfort to the national museums that had stayed free, despite the difficulties encountered (notably the British Museum and the National Gallery). The goal was clearly to give the largest access possible to national collections. The government forced several national museums in London (such as the Science Museum, the Natural History Museum, the National Maritime Museum or the Imperial War Museum) to implement and embrace a measure that museums directors felt contradicted the pragmatic



management model they had developed. Museum directors, who were very critical of the measure, indicated they would wait to see the consequences of this policy on their financial equilibrium and museum offer. Nonetheless, they reacted quickly by including the policy in their pricing strategy, by reinforcing the development of their sideline offer which had become the remaining source of revenue, and in fact adopting free admission as a marketing strategy. As a consequence, competition between London museums intensified, adding (among other issues) to the woes of the British Museum in 2002. Faced with a serious financial crisis, London's largest museum called upon the services of the savior of the National Gallery, Neil Mac Gregor, who originally promoted the model of « free admission as a marketing strategy ». Thus, the return to the practice of free admission to national museums only reinforced the pragmatist's doctrine.

Apart from now unavoidable economic imperatives and the context of growing liberalization, pragmatists have ended the debate by asking the central question of whether or not free admission improves access to culture. Several studies (Bailey and Falconer, 1998 ; O'Hagan, 1995 ; Dickenson, 1993 ; O'Hare, 1975 ; Bailey) all confirm that « not charging entrance fees no longer appears to be a pertinent method of bringing in new visitors to the museum ». Equal access to culture, and especially to museums, is less a result of price than of more specifically targeted incentives. These studies equally agree that, when effectively communicated, the introduction of free admission, be it temporary or permanent, increases attendance in a « honeymoon effect » but has no long-term effect on attendance. Entrance fees do not limit museum visits, but other factors do, the most important being (as for other cultural activities) implication or interest (Walshe, 1991, Bailey, 1997a, 1997b), followed by the non-monetary cost of the visit (visiting a museum is never free of either psychological or material cost). To charge or not to charge is therefore « not the problem ». A number of museums seem to have discovered that admission fees and fees for other services can be reconciled with the ideal of access for all groups ( the economically disadvantaged, regular visitors, etc.) via discounts, exemptions, subscription cards or other pricing schemes (Kotler et Kotler, 1998). The Science Museum, one of the most expensive in London, is a textbook case.

The London Science Museum : the museum has always maintained that access doesn't depend on free admission and is not sufficient to increase the democratization of museums. According to Roland Jackson (Jackson, 1999), Head of Education and Programming, access can only be achieved through implementing a museum-specific policy (which doesn't necessarily exclude charging admission). Before being forced to adopt free admission in 2001 by the government, the Science Museum had already set its sights on increasing access to collections, with

several secondary goals : increasing the number of visitors, enlarging and diversifying attendance, increasing intellectual access, and increasing physical access. This approach stresses the visitors over the collections, even if the collections are necessarily the principle resource to which access must be improved. « Each of these objectives clearly adheres to the social mission of the museum », Jackson stresses. « Reaching these goals requires more than just removing perceived entrance barriers.» For example, while the Science Museum has kept several forms of free admission (for the unemployed and for the general public after 4:30 p.m.), this measure was not enough to bring in non-traditional visitors. « Audience development requires both a target-group (or community) approach based on specific social characteristics (ethnicity, culture, geography, demographics, economics, etc...) and a targeted approach to individuals within these groups, given that the monolithic study of a group is not always the best way to attract visitors to the museum. The museum can attract these publics by establishing an active relation with them. That implies marketing, in the broadest sense of the term ». The Science Museum therefore clearly defends relationship marketing as a means of increasing public access to the museum. This argument raises a second question : knowing that free admission is not enough to widen and diversify attendance, how can museums guarantee that the objective of public access is reached ? The answer may lie in the objectives contract that Chris Smith has initiated in collaboration with museums.

### III. REASONS FOR PRACTICING FREE ADMISSION :

#### THE PUBLIC AT THE HEART OF THE DEBATE

Even if « wholesale » free admission has been abandoned, museum and cultural policy makers remain attached to free admission as a museum ideal. A negative image of charging for museum admission remains, especially in Europe. (Runyard and French, 1999). As Bagdali (1998, 122) points out, « no one would think that free admission was a bad thing in public museums as long as no major financial problems existed.» Pragmatists as a group most often see free admission as a «necessary evil ». Sincere or not, these public displays of sentiment often translate the positive connotations attached to not charging admission, especially in terms of the public. Addressing the subject of the pricing policy and « free Sundays » formula at the *Lowre*, Fourteau (2000, 46) asks a crucial question : « Is this ideal of cultural sharing equally supported by the public ? » Nothing is less certain.

Moreover, research coming from Quebec has asked certain provocative yet appropriate questions : aren't free admission measures first and foremost used to create or to consolidate a set of institutions, organizations or cultural enterprises in a double perspective of economic development and national prestige ? Isn't free admission just a way to bring in the public on Sundays to often deserted provincial museums ? Moreover, the cultural policies of free admission are often ambivalent : does free admission help people who for a number of reasons, are marginalized or excluded from culture, to gain access to culture and cultural consumerism ? Or on the contrary, does it rehabilitate neglected forms of cultural expression

? In other words, does free admission aid in the democratization of culture or in cultural democracy ? (Bellavance, *sous la dir.de*, 2000 ; Santerre, 1999). In a similar vein, Delarue (1999) denounces what she terms the « hoax » of the democratization of culture. The author affirms that despite costly cultural programs introduced by successive governments, a majority of French citizens still never set foot in museums, the Opera, theater and public libraries. For Guénette (1999, 5), publicly funded culture mainly benefits politicians and their friends, a few solidly established artists, a number of bureaucrats and a handful of citizens ; the rest of the population (the target population of cultural policies), don't enjoy the elite official culture but pay taxes to finance a series of products that they either don't have access to or simply don't want. Free admission is therefore an alibi for the plans of a small group. Bourdieu's work has followed similar lines. This area of debate highlights the fact that free admission doesn't necessarily always serve public interest.

In the battle between fundamentalists and pragmatists, the public appeared to occupy a central position in the debate about equity, attendance, and access. But caught in the net of an ideological discussion about museum identity, the « public », an abstract entity designated by the museum world as if it were a homogenous category, has been excluded from the discussion about charging admissions. To this day, museum directors have rarely asked themselves how free admission is perceived by museum visitors. Only a few empirical studies have been conducted, including those of Gottesdiener and Godrèche (1996) and Fourteau (2001). However, numerous studies (see Bailey, 1998) on the impact free admission has on attendance, only describe the relationship between free admission and the public in a mechanical way, without considering public perceptions of the phenomenon. The public remains forgotten in this debate. A team of five researchers is currently undertaking a qualitative study about the how French people perceive free admission to museums and monuments (Le Gall-Ely, Urbain, Bourgeon, Gombault & Petr, 2003). It asks the following question : is there a link between the perceptions of free admission on one hand and, on the other hand, the representations of, projected use of, and attendance behavior for these museums and monuments ? If so, what is the nature of this link ? The results of the study are not yet available, but the study raises an interesting and important question. Given that free admission is an eminently political social fact in the basic sense of the term (that is to say, concerning the affairs of the city) and given that the museum and overall cultural context highlights and values the debate around this question, the study postulates that aspects of the powerful institutional ideology greatly influences public perceptions. In other terms, public

perception of this question is inherently linked to the context and rules that govern the debate, that is to say the way of thinking or speaking at the heart of a social group, transmitted by a system of norms, ideas, beliefs and recalled to individuals through education, politics and the media. Institutions rely so heavily on positive public perceptions of free admission that one wonders if they are not in a sort of enormous « self-fulfilling prophesy » (Weick, 1995) towards the public. How does the public truly feel about free admission to museums ? The initial empirical data collected in this study show that perceptions and related behavior are far more complex than the museum world would have it.<sup>8</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Free admission remains a museum ideal, and is now part of the pricing strategy of museums, the product of a henceforth pragmatic museum management approach which guarantees museum survival and development. The ideal is therefore still safe, even if it has had to face reality. The « free versus » fee debate is finished. It remains to understand how museums can best use the practice of free admission in price strategy. Which types of free admission are suitable to certain publics ? What is projected use and what are the types of associated behaviors ? Understanding public use of free admission remains a key to answering these questions.

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<sup>8</sup> The results of this study will be published by the Documentation Française in 2004. For contractual reasons we are unable to present them here.

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