

Interview

Andreas Blühm

In *Fit fürs Museum* [Taking on Museums] you've written a user's manual to museums.

Does anyone need a user's manual for museums?

Many don't, but perhaps some do. And perhaps many people don't even know they need one, and only realise this after they've spent some time in a museum. In that case it would of course be nice to have some kind of user's manual in your pocket.

Who would find your user's manual useful?

Fit fürs Museum is supposed to help people clear the first hurdle and make the business of museum-going a little easier. Museums in Germany are notoriously treated as educational institutions where one is supposed to know who painted which picture and how to pronounce the artist's name. That's getting things fundamentally wrong. My book is also simply a guide to how to enjoy a museum. And one can offer support to help people enjoy things. In rather the same way that when you're standing in front of an individual work of art it can sometimes be useful if an expert reveals to you a bit more about it.

What do you say to people who are completely turned off by museums?

That they're missing out on an awful lot. Of course I don't have to like everything I find in a museum. But everything can be interesting, and with the right help I can still find something for myself in the mustiest of academic tomes. I'm convinced of that.

If my book were ever to fall into the hands of someone who's completely turned off by museums, and who came round to a similar point of view by flicking through or reading it, that would be wonderful.

Can a visit to a museum make you happy?

Absolutely! A visit to a museum can make you happy in the same way that a concert, and opera, or a football game can—though of course the latter depends on who wins. It just depends on the attitude of the visitor.

kind of attitude makes one ready to take on museums?

You need to be uninhibited and open to anything that you might encounter. Some American friends of mine were visiting the Palazzo Pitti in Florence. They had been standing in front of one of the pictures there for a particularly long time when a young girl came up to them and asked, "Excuse me, is this a famous painting?" That of course is very sad. I shouldn't admire a picture because it's famous, but because I like it.

Why did you decide to write this book?

Because I'm a passionate museum-goer. And because the museum interests me as a medium. In the book I have a cautious go at covering all types of museum and generally trying to think of a museum as a place that brings people and objects together and helps them to get something out of these objects. At the end of the day it doesn't matter whether it's a money box, a railway, or a Rembrandt. For example, I like visiting museums of technology or natural history because, as a museum person, I can learn more from them. In a natural history museum I'm also a layman and need a user's manual.

In your book you encourage museum visitors to imagine which picture they'd like to take home with them. Which picture would it be for you?

The problem is that I'm always falling in love with something else. But it's always the smaller, more modest things that fascinate me. When I was the exhibitions director at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam my favourite picture was Cornfield with Larks, which hardly anyone knows. But I wouldn't want to have my favourite pictures at home. As a museum director I would, of course, like everyone to be able to see them.

What was your best museum experience?

I'm afraid that's confidential.

Andreas Blühm, born in Berlin in 1959, grew up in Bremen and studied art history, modern history, and classical archaeology at Tübingen and the Freie Universität in Berlin. He has worked at the Museum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte der Hansestadt Lübeck, the Museum Ostdeutsche Galerie Regensburg and the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. Since 2005 he has been director of the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud in Cologne.