



The exhibition "Meteorites – Stones from the Sky" engages visitors with an element of mystery

Bringing Back Fascination

Interview with Prof. Krzysztof Jakubowski, director of the Museum of the Earth (Polish Academy of Sciences) in Warsaw, chairman of the Geological Education Commission under the Committee on Geological Sciences, and a member of the Council for the Promotion of the Public Understanding of Science (affiliated with the Presidium of the Academy) and the Planet Earth Committee

Academia: How should we go about promoting public awareness of something many people consider uninteresting? For instance, rocks?

Krzysztof Jakubowski: I suspect you're being a bit provocative on purpose. Rocks per se might not be so interesting,

but for instance there is a lot of public interest in collecting beautiful minerals and precious stones. There are associations with many members; mineralogical trade shows bring in big audiences. Besides, not all rocks are the same. Even the inconspicuous grey ones can be fascinating if one finds the key to unlock their secrets. That approach can be exploited by institutions like museums, which have the advantage of exhibiting real objects. In my view, real interest gets sparked by the amazement and delight that can arise from such immediate contact. We try to take advantage of that motif, by consciously striving to spruce up our museum exhibitions. If we manage to draw people in, to impart rudimentary knowledge without being pushy, things get easier from there. I was greatly satisfied to see how top museologists these days, after years of being focused on technological gimmicks treated as a replacement rather

than a supplement, are now stressing the importance of what may be called visitor fascination. The "mystery" motif really speaks to the imagination – maybe even as a factor more intriguing than beauty.

So perhaps we should promote science awareness through play? Is that a good approach?

An excellent one, not only because it is practiced with great success in many countries. But play is just one element, the main one being interactivity, audience participation in experiments. That is what draws people in. If there is an element of play involved, so much the better. In Poland, too, this approach enjoys great popularity, as confirmed in such initiatives as the Science Picnic, the Science Festival, and also the Night of Museums, which we are also involved in. An impressive number of visitors then come to our museum. We recently took a survey showing that a significant percentage of such guests are visiting a museum for the first time ever – not the Museum of the Earth, but any museum at all! I would like to believe that this interest will translate into something deeper, more lasting.

What is it that attracts those people?

The audience for science-related content is very diverse. Here I will misquote a certain Dutch museologist, who wrote that the museum audience can be seen in simplification as consisting of three categories. The first: thrill-seekers most satisfied at electronic gadgets, hands-on experiences, advocates of thematic parks. The second: romantics and dreamers who read books in solitude and do not expect thorough explanations, aficionados of TV documentaries. The third and last group consists of old-school critics of novelties, well educated and well read, who want to learn more and read every caption, buy every catalog, and constantly look things up in the encyclopedia. In my opinion the current majority is from the first group. They are the ones who expect exhibitions to be packed with gadgets, under the philosophy that newer is better. But the problem is that they are in fact not really museum-goers.

So perhaps museums are no longer needed by society?

Science-fiction writer Stanisław Lem said that people nowadays take their kids shopping like they used to take them to museums. As a form of entertainment. Although the entertainment format is attractive, there is a certain thin line. Someone can engage in entertainment and then conclude they know everything. The same thing goes for the Internet: it's a trap producing quasi-educated individuals. They say: why should I learn more, if need be I can always check things. And then in the museum I encounter people

chock-full of so much narrow-focus information that they mix up the bigger picture. Cultural sociologists stress that such fragmentation of knowledge and information is typical for the post-modern epoch. This was recently reflected in the dispute over the list of required school readings in Poland – the proposal for works of literature to be read only in fragments. The notion that museums are a thing of the past is therefore absolutely misleading – popular in Poland, but just look at any highly developed European country to see how much funding is being invested in science museums there.

Why are people averse to fundamental knowledge?

I think this all has its roots in the model of school education, among other factors. At this point, increasing attention is being paid to so-called "practical knowledge." School curricula are being drafted to prioritize this, at the expense of fundamental subjects and deeper meanings. This is a big debate in the UK, in France, and many

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people feel it is a mistake. This February, Newsweek published a survey illustrating that: 35% percent of respondents turned out to have no idea what the Copernican revolution was about, 23% still believed that the Sun goes around the Earth, while 47% saw no link between Darwin and evolution. That shows the triumph of ignorance in a knowledge-based society.

Perhaps it would be a good idea to require doctorate students in Poland to take a course in promoting science awareness?

I support the idea fully. Promoting better public awareness about science is a job for professionals, including research workers, and this cannot be just incidental efforts when some easy opportunity arises. Such courses of study exist in many European countries. But this has to yield some sort of subsequent results, and it has to be something that really counts in our research career model, not treated like something marginal. Of course we do have a handful of outstanding scholars with a talent, an inborn flare for popular-science activity, but there have to be mechanisms in place to provide incentives and to elevate good popular-science efforts to a very important status. At least comparable to that of research work itself.

Interviewed by:
Andrzej Pieńkowski
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