

# Comparative Visitation Patterns in German Museums

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In recent times, contributions to visitor research have concentrated on the psychological perspective of individual behavior, cognition and understanding. This focus benefits both the theoretical/methodological progress of evaluation studies and the practical use of their results for visitor-oriented exhibitions.

While the above is undoubtedly true, we should not neglect the need for an improved general knowledge framework. An important basis of this framework is valid and reliable comparative patterns on visits and visitors, not as case studies, but with an attempt to collect results that have generalizability.

This paper will break down step by step (1) statistics on the number, type and development of museums in Germany as a central European Country, and (2) correlate these structures to their specific visitor patterns and visitor behavior, attitudes and preference. The source of these findings is a three-year survey in Westfalen, a region with 200 museums which resembles a model of the total German museum structure (Figure 1). At about 40 representative facilities more than 50,000 visitors were interviewed by a standardized procedure, so that absolutely comparable samples could be taken at random.

Before starting, let me stress the point that this study is one project out of more than a dozen others on very different visitor research topics which the institution I am working with has done during the last ten years. Our Institute of Sociology at the University of Karlsruhe in Southern Germany cooperates in this field with the German Museum Association, Foundations like "Musee PreuBischer Kulturbesitz" in Berlin, State Museum Organizations and major single museums (like the Deutsches Museum in Munich).

In the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany there are about 3,000 museums (without including zoological or botanic gardens, national parks, historic sites or Disneyland-like amusement areas). The East German states will contribute another 1,000 museums and, together with Switzerland and Austria, there are certainly more than 6,000 museums in the German linguistic area.

During the 1980s it was common in the media to speak of the "museum boom" as evidence for a general social change towards a "society of culture." However, to validate this conclusion, it would be necessary at least, to separate the development of the number of museums from their attractiveness for the population expressed in visits per year. Of course, many other distinctions have to be made if a slogan like "museum boom" is to be justifiable. What are these new museums by size, type of collection or location? Where do people go: to the new or to the old, well-known museums? to famous traditional big institutions or to the myriads of local "midget museums"? Do standing collections or the growing number of spectacular blockbuster exhibitions motivate more people to come? And, who are the additional "visitors": are they members of new target groups which could be reached owing to marketing activities, or did museum fans simply increase their frequencies of visits?

In the case of Germany, these questions may be answered by analyzing structural data for approximately 2,500 museums and figures of their registered annual visitors for the years 1981-87. For this purpose, we combined information taken from a museum guide (facts like type, age, size, entrance fee, etc.) with the annual census data of the *Institut für Museumskunde* in Berlin. Space does not permit discussion here of the many methodological pitfalls of these procedures; instead, I will present some of the most interesting results.

"Museums mushroom up, so that they defy description and statistics. It is no exaggeration to say they are hard to follow and maybe there are already too many of them." This was stated, not recently, but in 1913 by a Bavarian chief curator. Nevertheless, it holds true that 2,600 museums (probably closer to 3,000) in Germany mean that there is one for every 25 inhabitants or one per 100km<sup>2</sup>. In southern Germany, the number of museums is twice as high as in the northern states; urbanized areas show a higher density per km<sup>2</sup>, while rural regions have a higher density of museums per number of inhabitants.

Before discussing the data, it is necessary to make a basic distinction between "gross variation" and "net variation." We shall call the overall change of annual visits the "gross variation". This includes the changes of visits in longer existing plus the visits in newly opened museums. On the other hand, the changing figures of visits at identical museums over several years we shall call the "net variation". Both percentages vary considerably.

The average net growth rate per year during the 1980s in 1,300 German museums totals 1.2%. Compared to this rather modest change, the gross variation, including newly-built or newly-registered museums, in the same period runs up to an annual 3%. In absolute terms this ranges, at the end of the 1980s, around 70 million visits.

Museums in the metropolitan areas show a higher growth both in gross and net terms compared to other locations. In rural areas gross figures also grew over the average, while in middle-sized towns (50 to 200 inhabitants)

the museum audience remained constant. We ascribe these differences mainly to the facts of minimal tourism in many of these middle-sized towns and a sparse cultural policy of the municipal authorities – due to other budget priorities – leading to few spectacular exhibitions and hardly any new establishments of museums.

A second remarkable phenomenon is the pronounced south-north disparity. The economically prospering states in southern Germany (Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, Hessen) present a growth over the average both of museums and visits gross and net, while corresponding values in northern Germany stay the same and in some places even decrease. The annual totals of visitors at Munich museums exceed the number of local inhabitants three times, in Frankfurt even four times, while in the north at the Hamburg museums total visitation is below the state of local population. The reasons for this gap are probably similar to those we gave for the divergences between cities of different size.

Another factor is the attractiveness of differing types of collections. Figure 2 shows that Art Museum exhibitions had the highest growth rates (48% in six years equals 8% per year), while Museums of Cultural History, which have the highest absolute visitation figures, remained constant. Other types with an audience surplus over the average of 21% are Technical Museums and Historic sites (those with collections). As a consequence of these figures we can ascertain a shift in museum preferences or possibly the effects of successful marketing activities to broad target groups.

Another important factor influencing the visiting patterns is the sheer size or magnitude of museums. This can be expressed in number of rooms, area in m<sup>2</sup> or – what we took as a measure – the number of annual visitors. The moving force of the total development are indeed the big museums with more than 300,000 visits per year: 22 million visits (one third of all German museum visits) took place in only 37 facilities (which equals 2% of all museums). The gross variation per year is 5%; the net variation, 4%. On the other hand, the enormous number of very small “midget museums,” as we called them, with less than 20,000 annual visits show a similar gross variation of 5% and a net value of 2%. Between these extremes the variety of middle-sized museums taken together as a group show little variation in visitation figures. The audience decreased in net terms particularly at those with 20,000 to 100,000 annual visits.

One third of all museums in Germany originated before World War II, but these traditional institutions still attract half of the total population of visitors. However, they did not increase their visitation figures during the 1980s, while newly established museums (especially in “gross terms”) absorbed the major part of the visitor surplus. Nevertheless, this is mainly an aggregated result of what we called the “novelty boom effect.” After some years of operation – and at smaller museums, even sooner – the visitation figures tend to diminish to a “normal level,” which given a small

budget is hardly to be influenced through their own means and defines the long-dated conditions of existence.

A last note refers to the entrance fees. Forty-five percent of all museums are free of admission; only 20% request more than two deutsche mark (as of 1985!). But this pattern is misleading. Two thirds of the really important and highly frequented museums charge more than two deutsche mark, so that indeed the majority of visits cost admission, let alone special "blockbuster" exhibitions. Therefore, it is no surprise, but only a half truth, to state that the increase of visits occurred at facilities which charge the highest admission fees.

The volume and complexity of survey results allows us to deal here with a small sample of the findings. This is regrettable especially in the case of visitor behavior and attitudes or preferences for didactic supplies like wall-texts, audio-visual media, room leaflets or interactive computer programs. Generally, it can be stated that there exist fundamental contrasts between the audiences at different types of museums, not all of them having been perceived by museum people in their full consequence until now. (For the interested reader, there is a 400 page book in German with English summary: Klein, Hans J. (1989). *The Transparent Visitor*. [Der gläserne Besucher], Berlin.)

Here is a "small morsel" of selected findings:

### **Age (Figure 3)**

Compared to their share in the population, people older than 50 years are dramatically underrepresented in the general museum audience; this holds especially for women and the working class population. Museums of Natural History have the youngest audience, while Art Museums are highly favored by 20–30 year old academicians, professionals and students. Comment: Museums usually praise themselves to have "reached the youth"; why don't they give more weight to attracting the elderly as a target-group?

### **Gender (Figure 4)**

Another striking contrast is the increasing male prevalence with growing age. This preponderance ranges at different levels from Technology and Science Centers to Art Museums, where younger women visitors prevail. Obviously, this is a consequence of gender-specific socialization. Comment: Is the difference between strata of younger and older visitors a question of generation; or do the personal preferences polarize with growing age? In other words, shall we get the same picture in 10 or 20 years, or will there be a tendency of adjustment?

### **Educational Differences**

It needs no statistics to confirm the overrepresentation of university graduates among the museum audience. The well-known phenomenon is

extremely high at Art Museums, less pronounced in Open Air, Local and Natural History Museums. Obviously, the barriers of access vary between different museum types. Those with low barriers should be aware of their role to function as an "introductory setting" or a kind of "overall advanced organizer" to the museum world as a whole for children and many people with rather moderate aspiration levels.

### **Visitation Figures Over Time (Figure 5)**

Museums have individual high seasons of visits over the year, partly depending on external factors like tourism, partly created internally by the timing of their own special exhibitions, which follow in most cases a fixed schema. Nevertheless, there are typical indicator lines showing a summer peak for rural, especially Local Museums and, at the same time, a trough for urban, typically Art Museums. We could, as well, show that the structure of visitors varies seasonally as it does between weekdays and weekend and in some cases even between morning and afternoon hours. This information can be used directly for marketing strategies. On the other hand, there is no evidence for a general shift of visitor pattern over years, and it will not be possible to prove such a trend unless an analogous follow-up study is done, perhaps around the middle of the 1990s.

### **Visit Frequency (Figure 6)**

Membership plays only a minimal role in German museums. Instead, there are "circles of friends" or sponsors. This makes it even more important for museums to know the shares and patterns of their "true clientele" and of first-time visitors. Because of changing temporary exhibitions, the frequency of repeat visits is very high in Art Museums and Museums of Cultural History. According to this fact and respective expectations in the public, these museums are held captive in a trap of being forced to organize, again and again, attractive special exhibits, which tend to distract attention from the permanent exhibitions. The balance between both activities is one of the most discussed problems of presentations policy.

### **Transportation (Figure 7)**

A sometimes neglected aspect of visitor research is the physical access to museums for different population groups. As a consequence of available historical sites or remodeled former manufactory buildings, these locations can often only be reached with private cars. This discriminates against the non-motorized people like children, elderly or handicapped, and makes them dependent on friends or relatives. On the other hand, we find a central location and concentration of many museums like in Washington, D.C., which has also been established in many German cities during the last decade as an intentional municipal cultural policy. This leads to spill-over

effects and sight-seeing attitudes of tourists trying to make "the whole thing in a compact tour in one day or less."

### **Sociability**

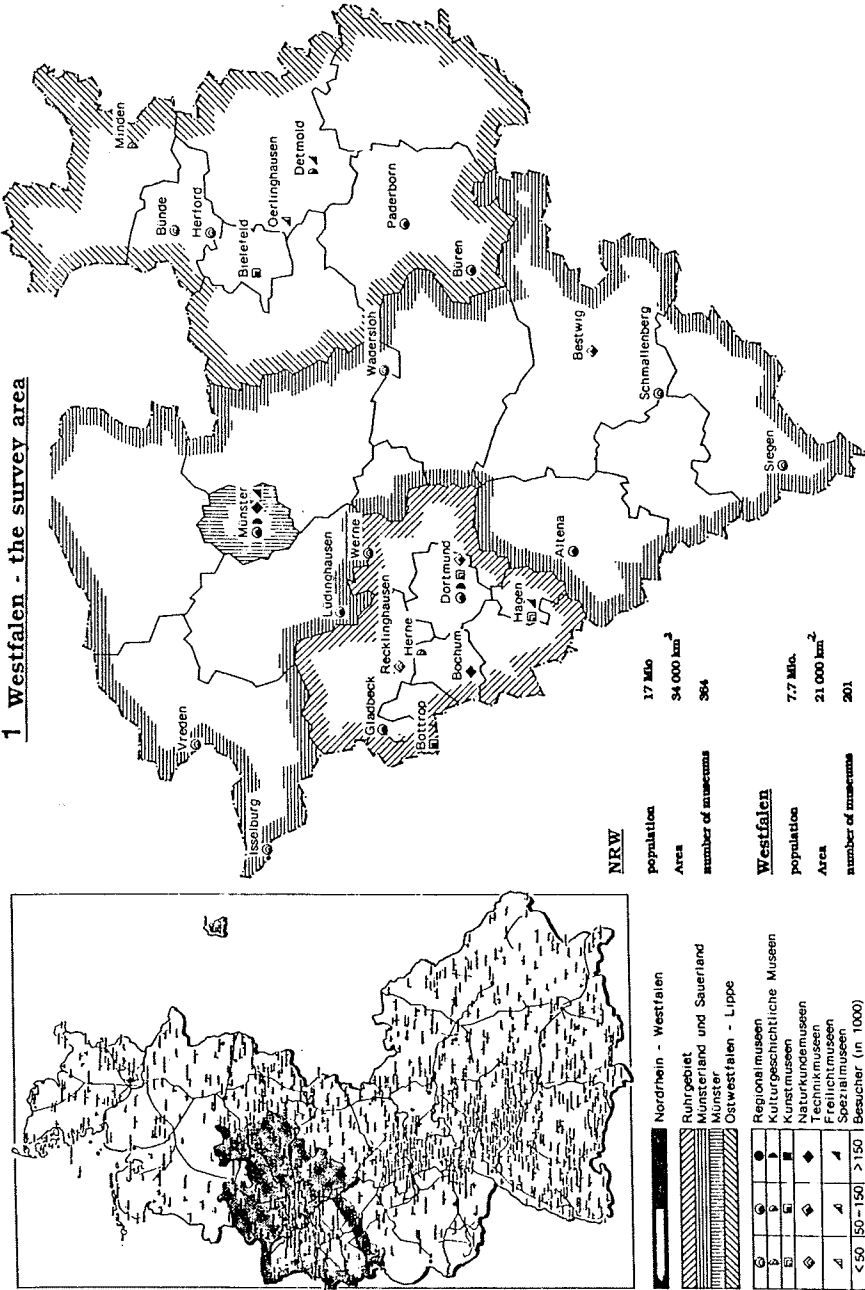
Museum visits are mostly social experiences. Only 40% of Art Galleries non-group visitors and 30% of such visitors to Museums of Cultural History are really coming alone. All other types, especially Outdoor Museums, Technical and Natural History Museums, are typically visited by couples, families or small groups. Despite all that, visitor facilities and didactic supplies in many German museums look as if they are established for hermits only! I suppose American museums have a more social appeal and we have to learn from this whereby we are free to realize our own style.

### **Communications Tools**

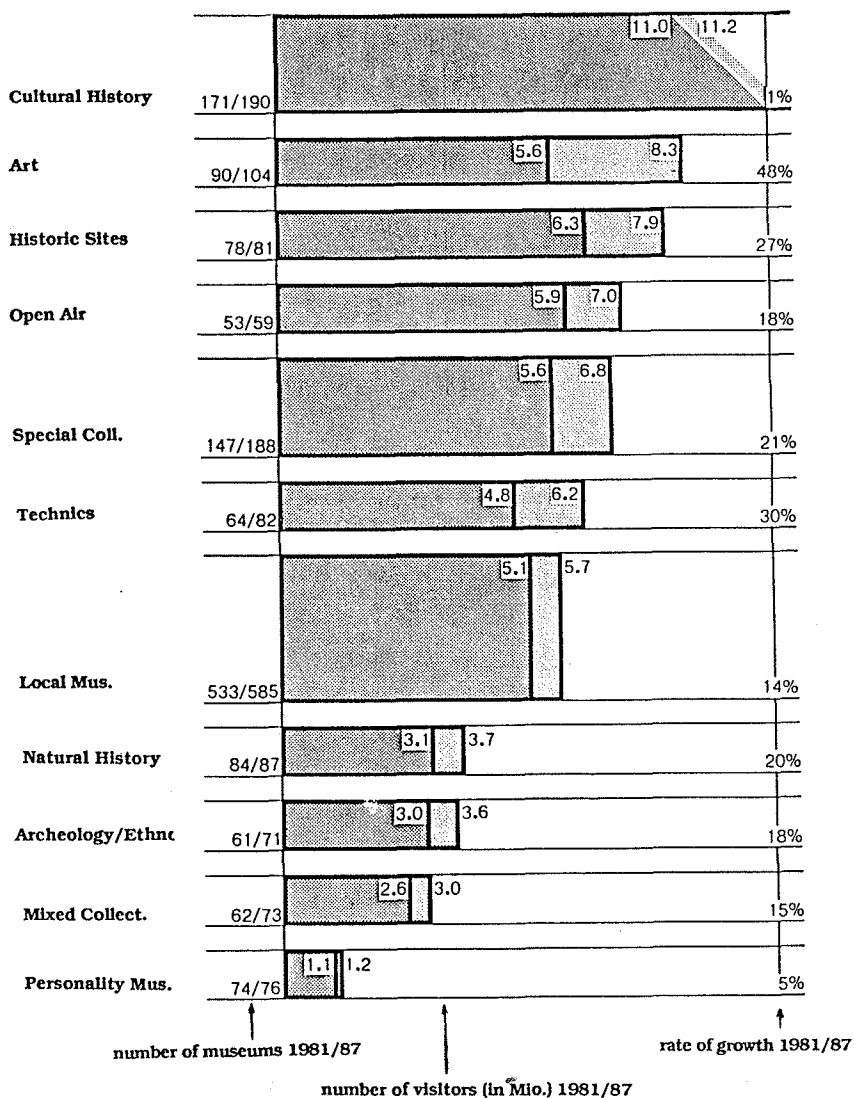
A last key word relates to visitor preferences concerning different communication tools in exhibitions. They vary as well between parts of the audience of a respective museum as between different types of collections. Younger visitors show higher interest in modern media than older ones, educated people give a higher priority to extended written background information instead of brief labels than "plain people" do. Visitors in Science Centers have other cognitive claims than those in Art Galleries or in Open Air Museums. A general trend seems to be presently that interactive computer systems, audio-visual tours, etc. are accepted by the majority more as a supplement than as the basic information offered to understand exhibits.

Many of the reported structures may be different at museums in the United States – and this is a point I would like to emphasize at the end. We will be able to get a better understanding of visitor behavior and experience by reflecting and comparing our own results with those of others. Therefore, I plead for intercultural comparative studies in the field of visitor research for the sake of self-evaluation of research findings and, not least, a better understanding of foreign cultures.

1 Westfalen - the survey area

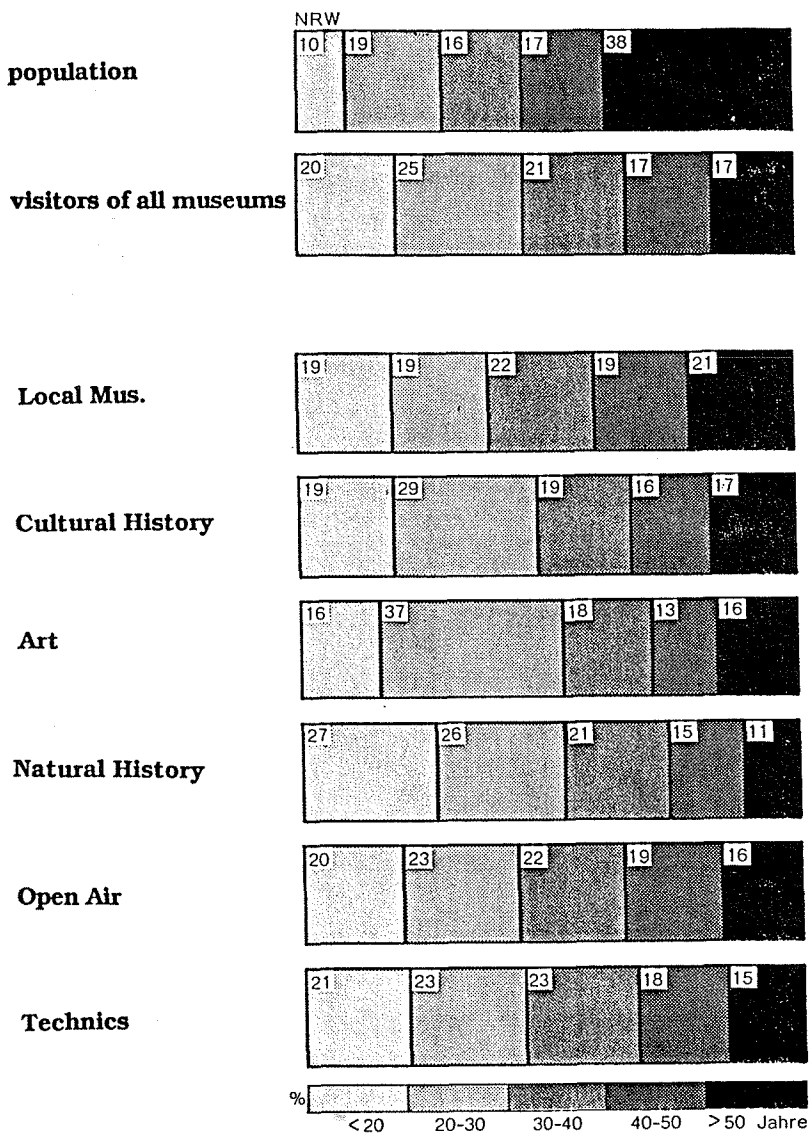


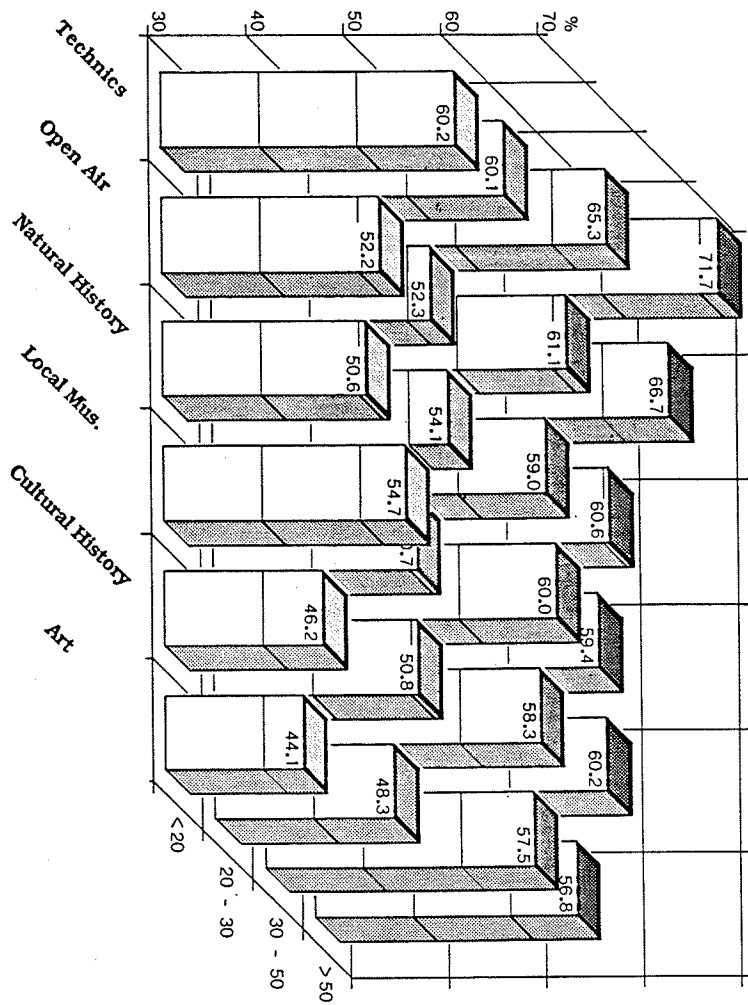
## 2 Audience increase at museums of different type of collections





### 3 Age distribution (over 15 years) of population and different audiences

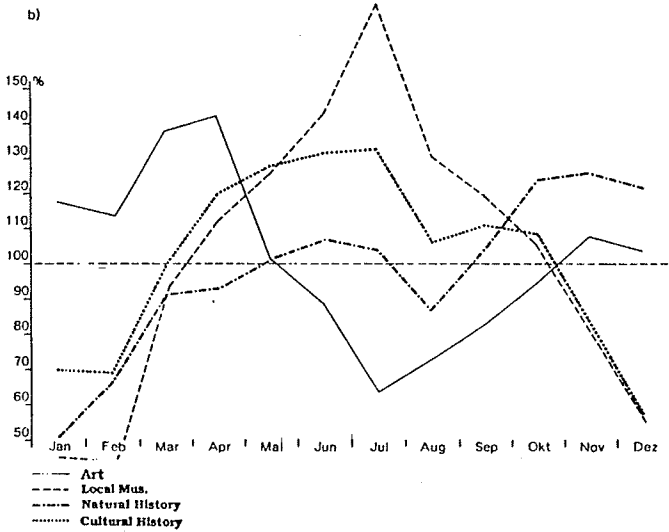
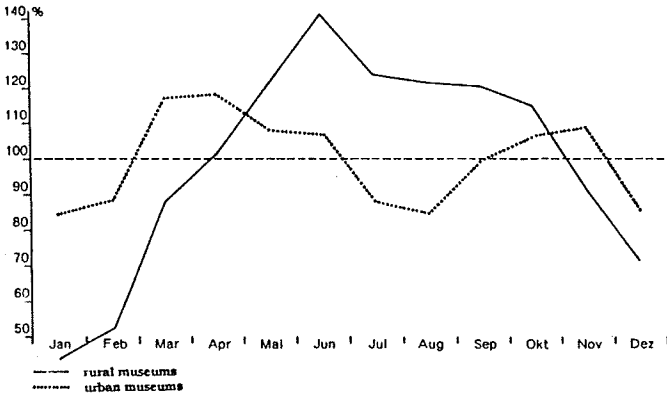




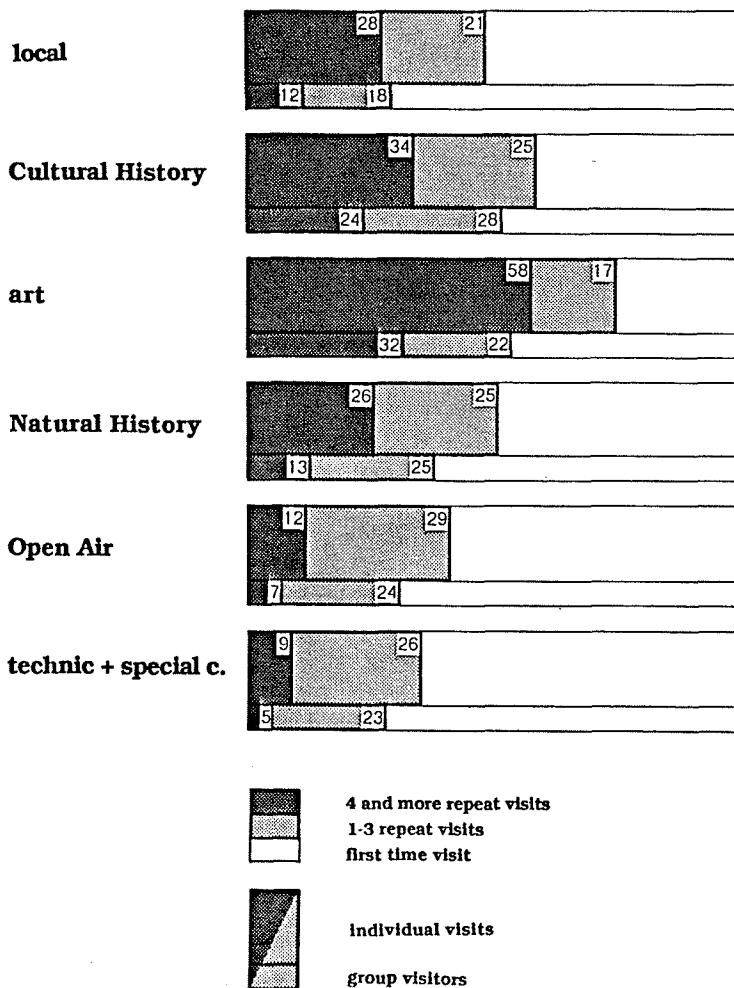
#### 4 Gender proportion in the audience of different museum types

Height of columns = proportion of men

**5 Average monthly number of visits = 100  
(based on data for 1984-86)**

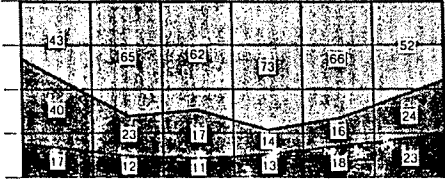


## 6 Share of repeat visitors

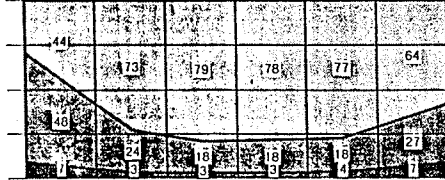


**7 Means of transport to reach the museum**

Ruhrgebiet



Sauerland/Münsterland  
Ostwestfalen



Berlin (West)

