The invisible museum workers

Museum and gallery visitors may be too focused on the works of art and items on display to take much notice of the almost invisible work of the reception and warding staff, but without them these exhibits would be inaccessible. *HesaMag* visited one of the most famous galleries in the world, the Louvre, to meet some of the people who keep it running day to day.

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See the full photo reportage at www.etui.org

Designed by the American architect Leoh Ming Pei, the Louvre Pyramid, unveiled in 1989, very quickly became one of the most striking landmarks in the Parisian landscape.
A floor space of 360,000 square metres, 650,000 works of art in the collections, one visitor every two seconds: the Louvre breaks all the records for museums and galleries. It is both the “biggest museum in the world” and the “most visited”, exceeding the symbolic threshold of 10 million visitors in 2018. By comparison, in the same year, 5.8 million people visited the British Museum in London. Such success poses a challenge for the 1,200 reception and warding staff of the Musée du Louvre, whose daily role is to keep this constant stream of visiting culture vultures happy.

A constant state of emergency

No one in the museum’s management or at the Ministry of Culture ever foresaw this level of popularity. “In 1989, the year when the Pyramid opened, the Louvre’s visitor numbers were between two and three million, and the most optimistic forecasts at the time were expecting a peak of five million visitors,” the Head of Communication tells me. Today, 10 million admissions are taxing the museum’s infrastructure and its staff as well.

At the foot of the Pyramid, we meet the Assistant Director of Visitor Services, 35-year-old Servane. Despite the cold, there is an impressive influx of visitors. It is 8.45 a.m., and the Cour Carrée is already teeming with people. “Normally it’s a 45-minute trip for me to get to the Louvre. And I’ve been doing this journey for 17 years.” When he is not on the journey for 17 years.” When he is not on the

Servane confidently guides us towards the escalators that take us down below the horizon. “Some visitors find this change of level disorientating. We need to understand that, for some of them, it’s their first and maybe even their only visit to a museum. The visitor service staff have to be able to spot these slightly bewildered visitors and point them in the right direction. It’s a proactive job, not like people think.”

Servane, with her friendly, impish face, is dressed in the uniform provided by the museum: a black suit and white shirt. “The thing people really notice is the security badge with the orange lanyard. All the staff wear these around their necks. Well, in Comms it’s blue, it’s less conspicuous,” she says, indicating her colleague’s badge. “In other museums, staff can wear whatever they like, but in the Louvre there’s a real need for a uniform.”

This cheerful young woman has been working in visitor services in the Louvre since 2003. She recalls the time she spent in charge of ticketing, located in the central island below the Pyramid. “It was there!” she exclaims, pointing to a circular arrangement of paving slabs. “A dozen ticket desk staff penned in at the mercy of the visitors. There was constant noise. Often, at the end of the day, I couldn’t go out with my friends, I needed some peace and quiet.”

The arduous nature of this job was recognised by the museum, which has since refurbished the area with the aim of looking after its expert reception staff. Attractive on paper, the central island disappeared in 2017, and the information and ticket counters were shifted to soundproofed recesses at the side.

“The museum’s huge visitor numbers make it tiring for us.” Since the refurbishment, a rest area has been provided exclusively for visitor service staff, accessible through a hidden door under the Pyramid. There is a subdued atmosphere and fittingly hushed voices in this room decorated in muted colours, which has individual rest booths, 10 or so curved recesses where you can lie down. “Just the thing to get away from the constant hustle and bustle of the museum,” whispers Servane.

There’s no time to linger. It is 8.55 a.m., time for the last team briefing at the foot of the pillar of the great Pyramid before the museum opens to the public. “They give you operational information: which rooms are closed, which staff are not in. With all the strikes at the moment, staff are finding it difficult to travel.” A few metres away, we can see the pickets of the Louvre strikers, protesting against pension reform.

No day is the same

Like all the representatives of the inter-union association at the general meeting that morning, Gary is sporting a Christmas jumper with large, brightly coloured motifs. Despite his outfit, the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) union representative and secretary of the Health, Safety and Working Conditions Committee (Comité d’hygiène, de sécurité et des conditions de travail, CHSCT), with his long hair in a ponytail, exudes charisma. We meet him in the Louvre union office next to the management offices in the Pavillon Mollien.

“Normally it’s a 45-minute trip for me to get to the Louvre. And I’ve been doing this journey for 17 years.” When he is not on the CHSCT or at a board meeting, Gary, 43 years old, is a visitor service officer and warder in the Richelieu Wing. “The Louvre is in the centre of the city, but most of us live on the outskirts. At the start of their career, staff earn the SMIC plus 12 euros. At that wage level, it would be difficult to rent somewhere to live in Paris.”
Focus

Gardien Party, by Valérie Mréjen and Mohamed El Khatib

Director Mohamed El Khatib’s shows bring the least visible jobs to the forefront, with people not usually seen on stage: children talking about divorce, football fans or the first one-woman-show featuring a cleaning lady in Moi, Corinne Dadat.

Sensitive to class relations and social questions, his next project, in cooperation with the artist Valérie Mréjen, focuses on the job of a museum gardien (gardien de musée in French).

Valérie Mréjen, 51 years old, welcomes us to the Faidherbe area of Paris to talk about Gardien Party, a theatrical work to be staged inside a museum with a cast of eight professional museum warders. They will reveal their strategies for combating boredom and their day-to-day interactions with increasingly numerous and demanding museum visitors.

“We’ve met museum warders from lots of different countries – Sweden, Russia – all with their regional characteristics. We’ve collected personal accounts in this place devoted to inert objects,” she says in a barely audible, soft voice.

52-year-old Piotr’s knees hurt. He has had enough of standing around all the time and being tired out all day long. These days, he is not keen on the rooms without chairs, where you pace up and down in a small space.

“What I like are the peaceful areas, like the room with Les Chasses de Maximilien. Sometimes there are fewer than 10 visitors a day to that room, and they’re mainly scholars coming to have another look at the tapestries.”

As we pass from room to room with Gary, we are enchanted by the beauty of the surroundings. The suites of rooms and their richly decorated ceilings are as captivating as the perfect profiles of the classical statues. After a few hours in the corridors of the Louvre, the atmosphere envelops us. “It’s magical for the employees as well,” confirms Gary.

For Gary and the others, no two days are alike. The four-weekly schedules change from day to day. It certainly did not occur to any of the three members of staff we met that morning to complain about the monotony of their jobs.

“This relationship with the Louvre is part of the job. We are welcoming members of the public in, so how could we do this properly if we didn’t know the context? Even though, it must be said, most of the questions are about the Mona Lisa...”

80% of visitors come specifically to see the Mona Lisa. Their queries are often piquant and creative. “People regularly attribute the Mona Lisa to Leonardo DiCaprio; we also have people who see La Joconde [the French title for the painting] and then ask where the Mona Lisa is,” he says with a smile.

The other aspect of the job is supervising the public. This task is becoming trickier as public expectations change in a society where everything is becoming a service. Staff tell us about extraordinary situations where parents have taken a corner of an exhibition room to be a children’s toilet: “It’s increasingly difficult to approach a parent, who may be very touchy when it comes to the behaviour of his or her child.”

“Museum warder is the last unqualified job that hasn’t been replaced by a camera or a machine. Installing electronic barriers and alarms is no substitute for human contact.”

The gallery attendant embodies the face of the museum. But he’s at the bottom of the ladder of responsibilities and pay.

“I often go to museums and I’m intrigued by these beings alongside the exhibits, always in my peripheral vision.” A furtive, silent presence that reminds her of her first job as a student: a gallery attendant for a summer season at the Palace of Versailles.

“This experience fed into my writing for this project,” relates Valérie Mréjen, who remembers the sometimes interminable waiting that “makes you obsess about break times”.

Gardien Party will introduce a population of diverse ages and profiles, where the warders are, by turns, skittish creatures, choosing their outfits to match the works of art they are monitoring, and chatterboxes who say they never need a psychologist because they have the sympathetic ear of their colleagues.

So, in the work of Valérie Mréjen and Mohamed El Khatib, the museum will be listening to the voice of its warders, the essential cog in the wheel of the museum institution: literally its protector.

The first showing of Gardien Party in France is scheduled for November 2020 at the Centre Pompidou.

Artists’ bios

Valérie Mréjen
Born in 1969 in Paris, Valérie Mréjen is a French artist and novelist. A graduate of the École des Beaux-Arts in Cergy-Pontoise, she became a fellow of the Villa Medici in 2002. Her work is based on events of daily life, cruel and farcical details of existence, memories, clichés and misunderstandings. Her works are shown in numerous exhibitions in France and abroad. The Jeu de Paume Gallery held a retrospective of her work in 2008.

Mohamed El Khatib
Born in 1980 in Beaugency, Mohamed El Khatib came to theatre after literary studies, a spell at the Institut d’Études Politiques de Rennes (Sciences Po Rennes) and a sociology thesis. A passionate football fan, he was a midfielder for some time. Winner of the 2016 Grand Prize for Dramatic Literature, his work focuses on putting non-professionals on stage with a high degree of authenticity reminiscent of the work of artists such as Milo Rau and Michel Schweitzer.
Technology to support the job

We are surprised to see a member of staff consulting a smartphone with a visitor. In turn, Gary shows us his own. “It used not to be allowed. We didn’t even have an email address; only supervisors had access to email.”

In 2019, there was a change in strategy at the Louvre, which granted all of its staff an email address ending in @louvre.fr.

"Have a look, Comms Info: rooms closed today. Or the bi-monthly news flash: that’s more comprehensive, HR info, info about the collections, like a work of art being returned or something.” It is hard to imagine how information used to circulate beforehand.

Gary takes us back to the area below the Pyramid, where we meet Servane again. She too has been given a smartphone by her employer, the Louvre, and so will all the 1 200 members of staff in the near future.

“Yes, it’s a cost for the public service, but it’s a commitment on the part of the museum,” Servane explains under the watchful eye of the Head of Communication.

Formerly, digital technology was used mainly as a way of enhancing the collections, but now it is spreading into all the museum’s activities, including interactions with the public. It was a challenge to install the WiFi network in all the rooms of the Louvre. “We used to have to use our own 4G. It was impossible to get onto the network in some of the very old parts of the museum.”

Deploying the smartphone expands the Louvre’s opportunities for communicating with its visitors. In visitor services, the staff member creates a link between visitors and the collections, suggests participation in workshops, talks about the day’s activities – it is a job at the forefront of facilitation.

“We have the best knowledge of the building, the best practical know-how,” insists Servane, who has big ambitions for involving her network of staff in the museum’s system. “We’re talking with management about including curating in staff training. Not a history of art module, but the whys and wherefores of a collection, of a department, to explain the reasons for particular set-ups, the mindsets behind exhibitions and the choice of works of art.”

As “category C” public officials (school leaving certificate – brevet – level), the reception and warding staff are not required to have any knowledge of history of art or to speak a foreign language. On the other hand, to improve relationships with the public and reception practices, the museum offers training in a range of new tools that transform the employee’s role and attitude to the public. “At the moment, anyone who wants to can sign up with Studio, a project outside the museum environment that will offer workshops and activities primarily targeted at families, like casting.”

These changes are welcomed, and according to Servane even expected, by staff. This is a trend that is likely to increase with the recruitment wave expected in 2020 and the lowering of the staff age profile. “Smartphones connect staff members with other employees in the Louvre, people involved with the works of art. A human link with the other teams, with the other professions. The aim is to give the job some meaning beyond supervising a room,” concludes Servane.

"It’s magical for the employees as well."