



Institute of
Translation
and Interpreting

TRANSLATION AND... MUSEUMS



Translating texts: essential tips
for museum professionals



How does translation help museums to share their stories?

Professional translation is a powerful communication tool that adds significant value to a museum's ability to engage with its audiences because it breaks down language barriers and helps to foster a deeper connection between visitors and the stories being told by objects and displays. By providing translations of exhibition materials, labels and multimedia presentations, museums can connect with an even more diverse array of visitors from all walks of life who might otherwise be excluded because English is not their native language.

Translation isn't just about words. Sensitively translated texts allow museums to extend their reach beyond their physical boundaries to engage a global audience, which in turn strengthens cross-cultural connections and encourages a shared appreciation for culture and heritage.

Commissioning professional translators and working with translated texts are crucial skills for museum specialists to master. Understanding the translation process and committing to supporting good practice will ensure that exhibitions, signage and information are accessible and engaging for everyone, while respecting the rights of translators and acknowledging their contributions.

Here are some top tips to help you effectively manage translated text in the museum context, whether you're curating an exhibition, writing labels or creating multimedia content.



Useful definitions: source and target

The "source language" is the original language in which a text is written and the "target language" is the language into which it is translated.



Top tips from translators

Understand your audience

Before investing time and resources in professional translation, take care to understand the demographics of your audience. Consider the primary languages spoken by visitors and prioritise translations accordingly. Is your target audience largely international visitors or do you want to attract local minority communities or both? This can help you allocate resources more effectively and ensure that translations have the greatest impact.

Think about the logistics

What is the best way to present the translated content? This will partly depend on how many languages you want to include. If you are just providing one or two, it may be possible to have the translations of wall texts and exhibition labels alongside the English original. If you chose this solution, ensure that the layout accommodates translated text without overwhelming the design or compromising visual appeal. Also, bear in mind that texts are likely to be different lengths in different languages – the translation is rarely a “word for word” match that will fit into a similar sized space.

However, if you want to provide more languages (or where you may add more languages in the future as needs change / budget allows), it may be more practical to provide visitors with a printed version or incorporate the translations into existing mobile or digital provision.

Remember too that translated text is not limited to written words; you will need to think about visual elements such as captions, labels and graphics that include words.

Work with professional translators

While digital translation tools have improved, nothing replaces the expertise of a professional human translator. Prioritise working with translators who are native speakers of the target language. Native speakers will utilise their contextual knowledge and awareness of any potential cultural sensitivities in the target audience. This also helps avoid the unwelcome experience of accidentally producing an amusing but potentially embarrassing or offensive inaccurate translation which could damage your institutional reputation.

Don't rush the process

Commission translations well in advance to allow time for revisions. Agreeing a clear revisions process is also important. If the source text goes through several rounds of revision, then the target text will also need to be amended to make sure any changes are accurately reflected. Ideally any revisions should be tackled by the original translator to ensure consistency.

Consider cultural sensitivities

Translating text goes beyond words—it involves understanding cultural nuances, sensitivities and potential taboos. Avoid content that might be offensive or misinterpreted in the target culture.

Prioritise clarity and simplicity

Museums aim to communicate complex ideas to a diverse audience. Translations should prioritise clarity and simplicity without compromising the depth of the content. Good quality source text will greatly increase the quality of the translation. If you are writing new content ensure that your text avoids jargon, complex sentence structures and idiomatic expressions that might not translate well and may not be easily understood by visitors who are not native speakers of English.

Five reasons to choose a professional translator



Cultural understanding and nuance: Human translators have a deep understanding of the cultural context, connotations, and subtle shades of meaning in both the source and target languages. They can respond appropriately to nuance, tone, humour, and complicated cultural references.



Specialised subject knowledge: Most translators specialise in a chosen subject area. Examples are medical translation, patents, and travel but there are also translators who specialise in culture and museums. Their knowledge of the cultural sector helps to ensure accurate and appropriate translations that are appropriate for a museum context.



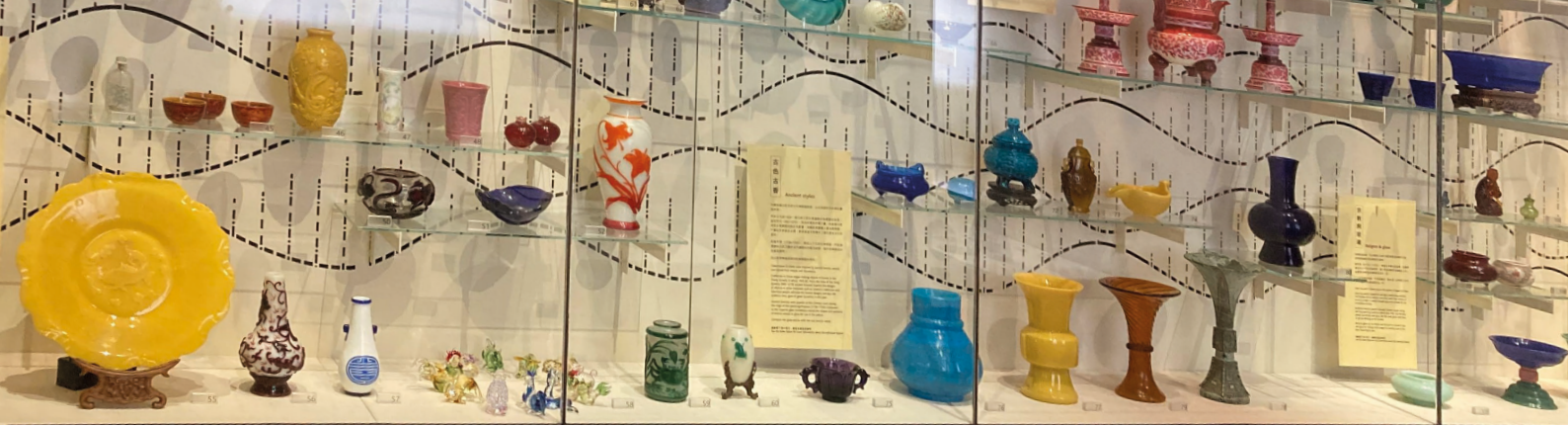
Consistency and coherence: Human translators take pride in maintaining a consistent style, terminology and voice across an entire document or project. Consistency helps to build credibility and trust with your audience and aids comprehension.



Creativity: Sometimes a literal translation is not the best way to convey meaning to a non-English speaker. Idioms are a good example of this. Human translators can find the right way to express an idea in another language. They can also help to solve problems such as space constraints that might limit the available word count.



Quality and accountability: Professional translators will often belong to a professional body such as the Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI). Through an accreditation process, ITI awards qualified member status (MITI or FITI), which is an indication that the translator has attained a recognised professional standard. ITI also has a Code of Conduct that all members must adhere to.



Maintain consistency

Consistency in terminology is crucial, especially if the museum often tackles similar themes across different exhibitions. Create a glossary of key terms and attach this to the project brief to ensure that translations remain consistent and accurate across different displays and media types. If you prefer “oil paint on canvas” over “oil on canvas” then say so!

Provide contextual information

When working with professional translators, offer them comprehensive background information about the exhibition’s themes, historical context, and the specific tone you want to convey. If the project includes labels or descriptive captions, then you should provide access to the object or good quality images of the object so that the translator can fully appreciate what the text refers to. This will ensure that the translations capture the essence and meaning of the original content accurately. Ideally, offer the translator access to the curators and/or original content writers, so that they can raise any queries directly with the experts in the field. Working directly with a translator who specialises in museums work greatly simplifies such discussions.

Test the translation with native speakers

Before finalising translated content, consider testing it with native speakers of the target language who are also familiar with the museum’s mission. Their feedback can provide valuable insights and help identify any potential issues. This may be particularly relevant where you are translating text into a community language. Community languages are languages spoken by members of minority groups or communities within a majority language context e.g. Farsi, Hindi or Mandarin in the UK.

Respect copyright and intellectual property rights

Translators hold the copyright to their translated works and their intellectual property rights should be acknowledged and protected. Clearly define the terms of use, ownership and potential compensation for the translated content when you agree the contract. This ensures a fair and respectful partnership between the museum and the translator.

Acknowledge the translator’s contribution

In your exhibition materials, consider including a section that acknowledges the work of the translator. This shows respect for their professional contribution and also demonstrates that your museum is committed to high quality cross-cultural communication. The translator’s ability to preserve the essence and integrity of the original content deserves recognition as it enhances the accessibility and impact of museum exhibitions.

Review and refresh

Language evolves and so do cultural norms. Periodically review translated content to ensure it remains relevant and accurate. Engage with visitors and local minority communities to gather feedback and insights that can help you refine your translations over time.



In conclusion...

In a world where museums strive to be inclusive and globally accessible, mastering the art of handling translated text is essential. By prioritising quality and consistency, working collaboratively with professional translators, and acknowledging their contributions, museum professionals can create exhibitions that resonate with audiences from all over the world. Through these efforts, museums will be empowered to fulfil their mission of fostering cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

The ITI Directory



The ITI Directory offers a free search facility to help you find the professional translator, interpreter or language service provider that can best help you with your language requirements.

Click/tap to search or scan the QR code:
bit.ly/ITI-Directory



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About us



Institute of Translation and Interpreting

Empowering global conversations by
bridging linguistic and cultural differences

The Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI) is the only UK-based independent professional membership association for practising translators, interpreters and all those involved in the language services sector.

Founded in 1986, we now have over 3,000 members, both in the UK and internationally. Our vision is to contribute to a world where every word is understood, and where language is never a barrier. We achieve this through supporting and developing skilled professional translators and interpreters, and promoting the value of their expertise.

We also seek to promote the needs of the profession and to raise awareness in the business community, and in society more broadly, of the value of professional translation and interpreting.

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