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Visual narratives in museum exhibitions: Principles of formation

Abstract. This study aimed to determine the principles that govern the formation of visual narratives in museum exhibitions. This was achieved through a qualitative comparative and interpretative analysis of open-access scholarly, professional, and museum materials. Empirical material was gathered from four museums in Albania: the National Historical Museum of Albania, Bunk'Art, the House of Leaves/Museum of Secret Surveillance and the Marubi National Museum of Photography. The study found that visual narratives are formed not by the individual expressiveness of exhibits, but by the coordinated interaction of object-based material, space, route, light, colour, graphics, explanatory text, attribution, archival materials, and modes of visitor perception. The main components of visual narratives in exhibitions were identified: exhibits, routes, spatial composition, lighting and colour design, graphic design, explanatory texts, navigation, photographs, archival materials, multimedia, architectural environments and interpretative contexts. Four models of visual storytelling were identified using Albanian museums as examples: national-historical, spatial-memorial, documentary-testimonial and photographic. The first model was based on chronology and historical artefacts, as well as the concept of cultural continuity. The second model was based on the architectural environment, the route, and the emotional impact of enclosed spaces. The third model was based on documents, technical surveillance objects, archival materials, and explanatory context. The fourth model was based on visual series, image attribution, and the representation of social memory. The principles of visual narrative formation were therefore established: thematic integrity, spatial sequence, visual hierarchy, cultural contextualisation, correspondence between form and content, emotional engagement, documentary reliability and interaction between the object-based, textual and visual-spatial levels of the exhibition. The practical significance of these findings lies in the potential application of the proposed models and principles in the analysis, design, and evaluation of museum exhibitions

Keywords: actor; cultural memory; exhibition route; visual hierarchy; museum storytelling; interpretative context; architectural environment; documentary reliability

Introduction

In cultural practice, the museum exhibition functions as both a space for displaying a collection and a system of visual storytelling. In this system, the exhibits, the route, the architectural environment, the light, the graphics and the explanatory text form a sequence through which the museum material is perceived. These elements – the exhibit, the route, the architectural environment, light, graphics, explanatory text, digital elements and the visitor's mode of movement – form a sequence of perception through which cultural material acquires an

interpretative structure. Consequently, the study of visual narrative is connected to the question of how museums translate objects, documents, images, and spatial solutions into coherent messages about memory, identity, historical experience, and artistic tradition.

Studies of museum technologies have examined the influence of digital tools on visitor experience and interaction with museum materials. Using Albanian museums as their case study, R. Dhora & S. Baraku (2022) examined how technologies can enhance the museum

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experience and boost audience engagement. The authors analysed how technological solutions can expand access to information and transform the way visitors interact with exhibitions. More broadly, in the context of the digital transformation of museum exhibitions, J. Li *et al.* (2024) categorised the technologies employed in museums. Their work examined interactive, immersive, and analytical solutions employed to modernise exhibition practices. Particular attention was paid to the ways in which digital technologies change the presentation of objects and the organisation of communication between museums and their audiences. D. Lacet *et al.* (2022) explored the problem of digital storytelling in virtual museums. The authors examined approaches to constructing narratives in virtual museum environments using images, texts, audiovisual materials, and interactive actions. Their review focused on the forms of digital storytelling used in virtual museums and how these organise user interaction.

H. Rosli & N. Kamaruddin (2020) studied the relationship between information visualisation and user experience in museum exhibitions. In their study, they examined digital storytelling through the lens of information visualisation and user perception. The authors proposed a conceptual framework linking museum information to types of visual representation and visitor experience. Interactive storytelling in the field of cultural heritage was analysed using design patterns of mobile augmented reality. A. Nikolarakis & P. Koutsabasis (2024) systematically reviewed solutions for storytelling in cultural heritage using mobile augmented reality. Their work examined methods of overlaying information onto objects, spatial navigation, and expanding context through mobile interfaces. F. Taormina & S. Bonini Baraldi (2022) considered the organisational consequences of the digitalisation of museum activity. In their review, they analysed digital technologies as a factor that transforms museum management, communication, work with collections, and interaction with audiences. The authors demonstrated that digitalisation impacts not only display methods, but also institutional processes within museums.

Studies of public and youth participation in the preservation of cultural memory have explored the Albanian context of cultural heritage. Using the city of Korça as their case study, E. Menkshi *et al.* (2021) examined the involvement of young people in preserving and promoting cultural heritage. They focused on the participation of the younger generation, how heritage is perceived as a social value, and the mechanisms for its popularisation. E. Dharmo & J. Canaj (2024) examined the role of civil society in the preservation and development of Albania's cultural heritage. The authors analysed the influence of civic initiatives on the preservation of cultural values and their inclusion in the country's development. In this study, heritage is presented as a means of public communication, identity, and cultural policy. I. Xheraj-Subashi (2025) examined the artistic and historical layers of Albanian heritage in a study devoted to the

ancient monuments and monumental reinterpretation of Durrës. The author examined the significance of monumental storytelling, and social values of ancient artefacts for the city's cultural heritage. The study documented the relationship between visual artefacts, the historical multi-layered nature of the region, and the local artistic tradition. The memorial dimension of Albanian museum spaces is addressed in the work by F. Gjepali (2025), in which Bunk'Art is considered a space of collective memory and a means of reinterpreting dissonant heritage. The author analyses how spaces from the communist period, originally used as bunkers, acquire new significance as museums. The study focuses on the processes of resemanticisation and aestheticisation, as well as the incorporation of traumatic heritage into the cultural landscape of Albania.

The studies considered reveal several areas related to museum communication and cultural heritage, including digital technologies, virtual museums, augmented reality, user experience, civic participation, the preservation of Albanian heritage, monumental painting, and memorial spaces. However, these works do not adequately systematise the interaction between objects, spaces, routes, light, colour, graphics, text, photography, archives and the architectural environment to form a unified visual narrative. The typology of museum visual storytelling is also not sufficiently explored through specific case studies in which national-historical, spatial-memorial, documentary-testimonial and photographic models can be compared.

The study aimed to reveal the mechanisms by which visual storytelling is formed in museum exhibitions. To this end, the study set out to: clarify the theoretical foundations for understanding visual narrative as a form of museum interpretation; determine the exhibition components through which object-based material, space, route, text, graphics, and the visual environment contribute to museum storytelling; compare museum case studies from Albania as different models of visual narrative; and generalise the principles of its formation in museum exhibitions.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted as a desk-based qualitative comparative and interpretative analysis. The research materials were divided into theoretical-methodological and empirical sources. The theoretical-methodological base consisted of scholarly publications on museology, museum communication, exhibition design, visual culture, cultural memory, heritage interpretation, and visitor experience. These sources were used to clarify the concepts of visual narrative, exhibition route, visual hierarchy, interpretative text, spatial composition, and museum storytelling.

The empirical source base consisted of publicly available official materials from four museums in Albania: the National Historical Museum of Albania, Bunk'Art,

the House of Leaves/Museum of Secret Surveillance and the Marubi National Museum of Photography. The analysis included official museum pages, descriptions of permanent exhibitions and thematic sectors, materials from digital collections, photographs of exhibition halls, and images of individual objects in the museums' collections. For the National Historical Museum of Albania, materials from the Pavilion of Antiquity section were used, including an image of the "Head of Apollo" sculpture. For Bunk'Art, materials from Bunk'Art 1 were analysed, including the image Bunk'Art (n.d.). For the House of Leaves/Museum of Secret Surveillance (n.d.), materials from Sector 01: Bugs and Other Creatures were used. Materials from the Permanent Exhibition were analysed for the Marubi National Museum of Photography (n.d.a; n.d.b). The research logic comprised three consecutive stages.

In the first stage, the concept of visual narrative in museum exhibitions was clarified theoretically and conceptually. The unit of analysis was an individual theoretical proposition related to museum exhibitions, visual culture, cultural memory, representation, and interpretation. At this stage, visual narrative was considered a system of connections between objects, space, text and images through which museums organise the perception of cultural material. The second stage involved conducting a structural-semiotic analysis of the means by which exhibition narrative is formed. The unit of analysis was an individual exhibition component as a carrier of visual or semantic meaning. This covered the exhibition itself, the visitor route, the spatial composition, the lighting and colour design, the graphic design, the explanatory text, the navigation, and how object-based material is related to the interpretative context. Open-access images of museum objects and exhibition spaces were used to analyse exhibit attribution, visual hierarchisation, the relationship between objects and explanatory texts, spatial context, and museum storytelling models. The third stage involved a case analysis of Albanian museum exhibitions. The purposive case sample included the National Historical Museum of Albania, Bunk'Art, the House of Leaves/Museum of Secret Surveillance and the Marubi National Museum of Photography, which were selected as examples of different museum storytelling models: national-historical, spatial-memorial, documentary-testimonial and photographic. The unit of analysis was the museum exhibition as an integral visual-spatial system. The thematic structure, types of exhibits, route, visual organisation, relationship between object-based material and explanatory text, use of photographs, documents, archives, graphics and multimedia, and architectural environment were analysed in each case. Museums for which there were insufficient open-access materials with which to analyse the exhibition structure were excluded from the sample.

A unified analytical matrix was used for the comparison. The main categories of analysis were: the type of visual narrative; the object-based foundation of the

storytelling; spatial organisation; visitor route; visual hierarchy; the role of text, graphics, light and colour; the nature of cultural contextualisation; and the connection of the exhibition to memory, identity or artistic heritage. Thematic coding was then used to group these features into the following principles of visual narrative formation: thematic integrity; spatial sequence; visual hierarchy; cultural contextualisation; correspondence between form and content; emotional engagement; documentary reliability; and interaction between the object-based, textual, and visual-spatial levels. The reliability of the analysis was ensured through repeated review of the materials, comparison of categories across cases, and verification of the stability of the identified features.

Results

Visual narrative as a form of museum interpretation

In a museum exhibition, visual narrative is not determined by the number of objects presented, but by the way in which they are incorporated into a system of semantic connections. An exhibition takes on an interpretative function when the material features, provenance, visual expressiveness, and spatial positioning of its artefacts are aligned with the overarching display logic. An archaeological vessel placed in a showcase as an isolated object is primarily perceived as a material trace of the past. However, the same object included in a sequence with a settlement map, a reconstruction of a dwelling, fragments of ornamentation, and an explanation of everyday practices begins to function as part of a narrative about the way of life of a particular culture. A military uniform in a separate showcase merely signifies a historical period, but when combined with a personal letter, a photograph of the owner, a map of military operations and an excerpt from their memoirs, it becomes part of a biographical and memorial narrative. In this sense, the museum exhibition acts as an organised form of cultural communication in which the sequence of objects, the spatial structure, the explanatory text, the visual accents, and the visitor's movement all contribute to the visitor's experience (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; International Council of Museums, 2022). Visual narrative is constructed through the combination of object-based, spatial and interpretative elements. The object-based line is connected to which objects are included in the exhibition and the cultural information they convey. The spatial line determines the order in which visitors encounter these objects, as well as the halls, transitions, showcases, lighting and scale relationships that establish the logic of perception. The interpretative narrative is formed through the use of texts, captions, graphics, multimedia elements and archival materials, as well as the juxtaposition of exhibits. In a historical museum, for example, the chronological arrangement of documents, weapons, maps and portraits can provide insight into the development of political events over time. In an art museum, juxtaposing works from different periods of an

artist's career creates a narrative of creative evolution. Changes in colour, composition and subject matter become visual evidence of artistic exploration. Therefore, visual narrative does not coincide with simple chronology or the thematic division of galleries; rather, it arises when museum material is organised as a system of cultural interpretation.

An exhibition object is not a self-sufficient source of meaning. Its meaning depends on selection, proximity to other objects, mode of placement, scale of display, and explanatory context. A historical document placed in a showcase without connection to a spatial scenario is perceived as an archival fragment. However, the same document included in a sequence of photographs, personal belongings, maps, testimonies and thematic texts begins to function as an element of a narrative about a particular era, social group or traumatic experience. Similarly, a photograph of a city street may be read as an individual visual document, but as part of a series containing images of craft workshops, family portraits, festive scenes, and architectural fragments, it becomes part of a story about urban culture, social memory, and changes to the everyday environment. Consequently, visual narratives are formed not by the objects themselves, but by systems of exhibition relationships that transform them from material items into cultural testimonies (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Macdonald, 2013). Visual narratives transmit information and establish how it is to be read. Visitors enter exhibitions as participants in the interpretative process, and their perception is shaped by factors such as the route, the rhythm of changing objects, the visual density of the halls, the contrast between open and enclosed spaces, the nature of the lighting, the density of texts, and the degree of emotional impact. In a memorial exhibition, for example, a narrow corridor, subdued lighting and a limited colour scheme, combined with the fragmentary placement of documents, can create a sense of pressure and the impossibility of gaining a complete overview. In a science and technology museum, an open layout, interactive elements, large-scale diagrams and the sequential arrangement of models form a narrative of discovery, experimentation and rational explanation. In a photography museum, series of images set the rhythm of perception: portraits, urban scenes, family groups and documentary frames enable visitors to move from individual faces to a broader picture of society (Falk & Dierking, 2016). Distinguishing between visual narrative and visual design enables to define the function of exhibition form more precisely. Design is connected with the external organisation of the display, including the colour of the walls, the typeface used, the showcases, the lighting and the graphic panels. Visual narrative incorporates these elements but is not reducible to them since its purpose is to facilitate the transition from visual perception to cultural understanding. The dark lighting in a memorial museum is not just a design choice; it creates an

atmosphere of enclosure, pressure and historical trauma. Similarly, a chronological route in a historical museum is not just a navigational tool; it provides an understanding of how the state, society or cultural tradition developed. Similarly, a photographic sequence serves not only an illustrative function; through the succession of images, it can also reconstruct social memory, everyday life, corporeality, and the visual appearance of an era.

The connection between visual narrative and cultural memory is evident in the fact that a museum exhibition selects objects and the manner in which they are to be remembered. The same historical period can be presented as a sequence of political events, a history of everyday life, a traumatic experience, artistic heritage or a process of national identity formation. When the emphasis is placed on national history, chronology, symbolic objects, maps, portraits, documents and state symbols predominate. Conversely, when the focus is on the memory of violence, enclosed spaces, testimonies, personal belongings, archival materials and emotionally charged visual solutions take centre stage. When the focus is on photography as a cultural document, the central element is the visual encounter with images of people, cities, costumes, gestures and social practices, rather than the route through events. A series of portraits may reveal not only how people appeared, but also the structure of the social hierarchy through clothing, posture, background, professional attributes, and family arrangements within the frame (Macdonald, 2013). A visual narrative plays a key role in shaping identity. In a museum exhibition, identity is not stated outright, but emerges through recurring images, symbols, spatial accents and the selection of key artefacts. Identities such as national, urban, social, artistic or professional may be represented through artefacts, documents, photographs, reconstructions, multimedia testimonies and the architectural environment. Connecting archaeological objects, historical documents, images of public figures and contemporary interpretative texts in an exhibition creates an idea of continuity. Conversely, if an exhibition focuses on ruptures, fragments, traces of destruction or testimonies of control, it conveys a different type of identity, based on memories of crisis, violence or loss. In an art museum, identity may be formed through the canon, including the selection of works, the positioning of key artists, highlighting a national school and comparing local and European artistic traditions (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Falk & Dierking, 2016).

A museum exhibition is characterised by the fact that visual narratives can be constructed in different ways. The chronological mode is used when the material is organised as a sequence of historical periods, events, or stages of artistic development. The memorial mode is built around traces of loss, violence, trauma or collective experience; therefore, spatial tension, documentary character and emotional density are intensified within it. The documentary mode relies on archives, testimonies,

photographs, technical objects and textual explanations to confirm the reliability of the presented material. In the photographic mode, visual series are formed, in which the image becomes the main carrier of social, urban, family or national memory. The artistic mode connects works through style, composition, authorial manner, iconography, or affiliation with a particular school. In a museum exhibition, the chronological, memorial, documentary, photographic and artistic modes may be combined. However, one mode usually determines the order in which materials are arranged, the visitor's route, and the method of interpreting the exhibits (Macdonald, 2013). Consequently, the visual narrative of a museum exhibition is defined as the organisation of cultural material,

where objects, space, images, texts and visitor routes form a coherent interpretive system. The outcome is not only the transmission of information about the past, art or heritage, but also the formation of a particular mode of perception: chronological, memorial, documentary, photographic, artistic or a combination of these. Therefore, when analysing a museum exhibition, it is necessary to consider not the expressiveness of individual exhibits, but how they are included in the overall visual, spatial and semantic structure (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; International Council of Museums, 2022). Figure 1 shows how museum material is transformed into a visual narrative through the organisation of exhibitions and interpretative perception.

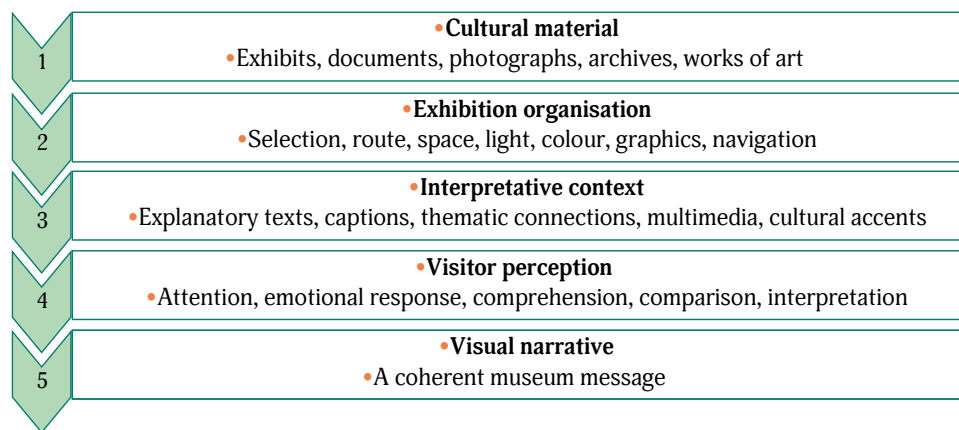


Figure 1. Levels of visual narrative formation in a museum exhibition

Source: compiled by the author on the basis of International Council of E. Hooper-Greenhill (2000), S. Macdonald (2013), J. Falk & L. Dierking (2016), International Council of Museums (2022)

Figure 1 shows that the visual narrative of a museum exhibition is formed through the transition from cultural material to interpretative effect. Exhibits, documents, photographs, archives and works of art do not acquire a narrative function in isolation, but rather through a combination of factors including selection, route, spatial composition, light, colour, graphics, explanatory texts and visitor perception. The diagram shows that a coherent museum message only arises through the coordinated interaction of the object-based, exhibition, interpretative and perceptual levels.

Therefore, visual narrative can be considered a mechanism for transforming museum material into a culturally meaningful message. Its formation depends not only on the content of the exhibits, but also on how they are arranged, juxtaposed and visually emphasised within an interpretative context. According to this understanding, a museum exhibition is not a static display of objects, but rather a system of sequential meaning-making in which objects, spaces, images, texts and visitor routes jointly establish the logic of perception. This enables to analyse the specific exhibition components through which visual narrative acquires a stable structure and becomes accessible to interpretation by visitors.

Exhibition components in the formation of visual narrative

The formation of a visual narrative in a museum exhibition depends on how the individual elements of the display are incorporated into the overall perception of the exhibition. An exhibition's route, space, light, colour, graphics, explanatory text and navigation do not automatically create a narrative; each component acquires a narrative function only when included in a sequential presentation of the material. For instance, an archaeological object in an isolated display case primarily serves to demonstrate the preservation of a material artefact. However, when combined with a settlement map, a reconstruction of a dwelling, fragments of ornamentation, and an explanation of everyday practices, it begins to be perceived as part of a story about daily life. Similarly, a historical photograph placed next to a personal letter, a fragment of clothing and a document acquires illustrative and testimonial significance. Therefore, an exhibition component becomes narrative not by virtue of its form, but by virtue of the function it performs in revealing cultural meaning (Dean, 2002). The exhibition serves as the starting point of the visual narrative, but its meaning depends on the system of connections in which it is presented.

One and the same object may support different types of storytelling. In a historical museum, a military uniform may form part of a narrative about statehood when displayed alongside symbols of power, maps and official documents. However, the same uniform could form part of a biographical narrative if displayed alongside a photograph of its owner, personal letters, information about their fate, and the context of a specific event. Likewise, in an art exhibition, a work is not limited to its own aesthetic form: a painting displayed alongside sketches, later versions of the composition, and archival materials reveals not only the finished result, but also the artistic exploration process. Consequently, the object-based foundation of visual narrative is formed through the correlation of the object with context, rather than through its simple inclusion in the exhibition (Serrell, 2015).

The route determines the order in which the museum's message is revealed. If visitors encounter objects without a clear sequence, their perception becomes fragmented: each exhibit is viewed in isolation, and the general theme breaks down into a series of independent impressions. However, with a carefully designed route, the exhibition begins to function as a story, with each successive room either clarifying or complicating the previous one. In a national history museum, for example, a linear route could take visitors from ancient times to the present, providing an overview of the development of the state, culture, and social institutions. In a memorial museum, however, the route is often constructed differently, not as a calm progression through chronology, but as a gradual intensification of emotional tension. For example, entering through a narrow corridor and progressing to documents, personal testimonies, and finally a zone of reflection provides not only knowledge of an event, but also an experience of its consequences. In this case, the route performs a dramaturgical rather than technical function (Lord & Dexter, 2002). The spatial composition determines exactly how the visitor enters the visual narrative. Open halls allow visitors to compare objects, see connections between themes, and revisit material they have already seen. Conversely, enclosed rooms, narrow passages and sequential transitions create a sense of directed movement, control or limited choice. In an art museum, a large work placed in the centre of a hall or on the visual axis of the entrance acquires the status of a semantic centre, even if the accompanying text does not emphasise this directly. In an ethnographic exhibition, a reconstructed room, workshop, or part of a dwelling changes how objects are perceived; dishes, clothing, tools, and furniture are not seen as individual museum pieces, but as parts of a way of life. In a memorial exhibition, space itself may become a carrier of memory: a basement, cell, bunker or corridor not only contains exhibits, but also reproduces the physical sensation of historical experience. Therefore, space should not be regarded as a neutral shell of the exhibition (Serrell, 2015).

Light and colour serve to regulate semantics and emotions. Directed light draws attention to a specific object, creating a hierarchy; diffused lighting provides an even perception; and dimming intensifies the sense of archival quality, enclosure or loss. In an exhibition on political violence, for example, subdued lighting can reinforce the documentary and commemorative nature of the material, particularly when personal files, surveillance equipment, photographs and testimonies are displayed in close proximity. By contrast, in a science and technology museum, more open lighting, light surfaces and clear diagrams support a narrative of rational explanation. Colour works in a similar way: a dark palette may be associated with memory, trauma, or a closed historical experience; a neutral palette with a documentary character; and a contrasting palette with the division of thematic sections. It is the correspondence of colour and light to the content of the exhibition that creates the narrative effect, not the colours or light themselves. Graphic design translates the structure of the exhibition into a visual system that is easy to understand. Headings, diagrams, maps, timelines, pictograms and colour markers help visitors distinguish between main themes, supplementary information and directions. In a historical exhibition, for example, a timeline helps visitors relate individual documents or objects to a broader sequence of events. In a photography museum, grouping images by author, period, urban space or social type transforms a photographic archive into a visual history of society. In a memorial museum, strict typography, a limited colour scheme and the absence of decorative embellishments reinforce the documentary nature of the material. However, if graphics are merely decorative, they do not strengthen the narrative. However, if they help construct a hierarchy of information, they become part of the narrative (Piehl, 2020).

Explanatory text links visual perception with cultural meaning. A caption for an exhibition piece should not merely state the title, date and material; it should also explain why the piece is included in the exhibition and what role it plays in the overall theme. For instance, an old household object may be perceived as an ethnographic detail without explanation, but a text about how it was used and its connection with family labour or ritual practice would transfer it into a social and cultural context. In an art museum, an explanation may reveal a technique, compositional device or connection with the period, or demonstrate a change in the artist's style. In a memorial exhibition, text often functions as testimony; a short quotation, fragment of a letter or archival document can have a greater impact than a lengthy descriptive passage. Therefore, text must be proportionate to the visual material: excessive explanation can overwhelm the exhibit, while insufficient explanation can leave its meaning unclear (Serrell, 2015). Navigation supports the sequence of museum storytelling. Its function is broader than merely indicating direction. Room numbers, colour

codes, route diagrams and recurring graphic signs help visitors understand the connections between themes. In a chronological exhibition, navigation maintains temporal logic; in a thematic exhibition, it distinguishes semantic blocks; and in a multimedia exhibition, it connects the physical exhibit with its digital supplement. For instance, if a museum section comprises display cases containing documents, an interactive map and video testimonies, the navigation system should demonstrate the semantic connection between these materials as well as the path of movement. Without such connections, even a content-rich exhibition may be perceived as a set of separate information nodes. Consequently, navigation ensures orientation in space and the preservation of narrative integrity (Lord & Dexter, 2002).

Multimedia elements can strengthen a visual narrative, but only when they complement the sequence of objects rather than replace it. Video, sound, projections, digital archives and interactive screens can be used to demonstrate movement, voice, processes and lost contexts, or to present multiple testimonies. In a photography museum, for example, a digital archive can provide greater access to the collection, but physical prints preserve scale, materiality and direct visual contact. Similarly, in a historical exhibition, a multimedia map can illustrate border changes or population movements, but its meaning is only fully realised through its connection with documents, artefacts and explanatory texts. In a memorial space, audio testimony can intensify the personal dimension of history, provided it does not become an independent emotional effect, detached from the exhibits. Therefore, multimedia becomes a narrative component only when it is incorporated into the overall display structure. The interpretative context

unites exhibition components into a coherent semantic framework. The same set of materials can form different narratives, depending on the chosen central logic. For example, photographs from the early twentieth century could reveal the history of photographic technology, urban everyday life, social hierarchy, national memory, or family culture. Similarly, objects of traditional daily life may support narratives of craft, gender roles, regional identity, or changes in the everyday environment. Documents of political control can be presented as archival sources. However, when combined with technical surveillance devices, a darkened space, personal stories and a directed route, they form a narrative of fear, control and loss of privacy. Therefore, the composition of the exhibition and the way its components are connected are both decisive. The interaction between these components demonstrates that visual narratives are not created by the mere accumulation of exhibits, texts and design solutions. Without a route, an exhibit remains a separate object; without semantic accents, a route becomes a movement scheme; without connection to the theme, light is perceived as design; without visual support, text becomes a reference insert. Narrative arises when these components support one another: objects provide material, space organises encounters with them, light and colour highlight semantic centres, graphics and text clarify interpretations, navigation maintains sequences and multimedia expands the boundaries of perception. This structure enables exhibitions to display objects and form sequential cultural histories that can be interpreted visually, spatially and intellectually (Dean, 2002; Piehl, 2020). Table 1 summarises how individual exhibition elements transition from display to forming museum storytelling.

Table 1. Exhibition components and their narrative functions

Exhibition component	Function in the structure of the exhibition	Narrative effect
Exhibit	Provides the object-based foundation of display and fixes the material carrier of cultural meaning	Transforms cultural material into a visible object of storytelling
Exhibition route	Organises the sequence of engagement with themes, rooms and objects	Forms a sense of history unfolding in time or space
Spatial composition	Determines the arrangement of objects, scale, distance and character of movement	Creates the dramaturgy of perception and highlights central semantic zones
Lighting design	Accentuates key objects, regulates visibility and emotional atmosphere	Strengthens the significance of individual fragments and sets the tone of interpretation
Colour design	Divides thematic blocks, supports visual integrity and emotional mode	Helps distinguish semantic zones and links visual form with content
Graphic design	Organises headings, diagrams, maps, timelines, pictograms and visual markers	Makes the structure of the exhibition readable and supports visual hierarchy
Explanatory text	Reveals the provenance, context and meaning of exhibits	Translates visual perception into cultural interpretation
Navigation	Directs the visitor's movement and maintains the logic of transitions between blocks	Preserves the sequence of museum storytelling
Photographs and archival materials	Introduce a documentary, visual or testimonial dimension into the exhibition	Create an effect of historical reliability and connection with memory

Table 1, Continued

Exhibition component	Function in the structure of the exhibition	Narrative effect
Multimedia	Expands the object sequence through sound, video, digital archives and interactive elements	Complements static display with a dynamic or multi-layered mode of perception
Architectural environment	Connects the exhibition with the physical space of the building or historical site	Turns space into an independent carrier of narrative
Interpretative context	Unites objects, texts, images and space within a single semantic framework	Forms a coherent museum message

Source: compiled by the author on the basis of D. Dean (2002), B. Lord & G. Dexter (2002), B. Serrell (2015), J. Piehl (2020)

Table 1 showed that exhibition components perform an organisational function and a narrative function. The exhibition route, space, lighting, colours, graphics, explanatory texts, navigation, archival materials, multimedia and architectural environment all contribute to forming the museum's message, but only when incorporated into the overall perception structure. The most pronounced narrative function is found in components that direct the visitor's attention, establish a reading sequence and connect object-based material with cultural context simultaneously.

Therefore, the visual narrative of a museum exhibition is formed through the coordinated interaction of object-based, spatial, textual, and visual-graphic elements. No single component provides a coherent narrative in isolation: exhibits require context, routes require semantic logic, spaces require interpretative direction and texts and graphics require connection to the object sequence. When used coherently, these elements transform the demonstration of museum material into sequential cultural communication that is accessible to visual, spatial, and intellectual perception. This enables exhibition narrative to be regarded as a structured system, in which each element performs a specific function while supporting the overall logic of museum interpretation.

Models of visual storytelling in museum exhibitions: The case of Albania

Museum exhibitions in Albania demonstrate various approaches to visual storytelling, which differ in terms of the dominant carrier of meaning, spatial organisation, and the nature of the interpretative impact. At the National Historical Museum of Albania, for example, the carrier is the historical artefact, which is incorporated into a chronological and thematic sequence. At Bunk'Art, the narrative is constructed through the bunker's architectural space, where the route, enclosed environment and underground atmosphere become part of the perception of the past. At the House of Leaves/Museum of Secret Surveillance, the narrative is formed through documents, technical surveillance devices, archival materials, and thematic rooms that visualise the system of control. At the Marubi National Museum of Photography, the photographic image forms the basis of the narrative, revealing social history, the urban environment, family culture and visual identity. At the National Historical Museum of Albania, visual narratives

are constructed as national-historical models in which chronology is combined with material evidence of the past. This type of exhibition organises historical material not as a set of separate objects, but as a sequence of cultural and political stages. Archaeological artefacts reveal the antiquity of a cultural layer, while documents and maps connect events to territory. Images of historical figures and symbolic objects provide insight into political and cultural continuity. When an archaeological artefact is displayed alongside a map, an environmental reconstruction or an explanation of social practices, it is no longer perceived solely as an ancient object, but rather as visual evidence of historical origin. This creates a transition from the material object to the image of national history.

The National Historical Museum of Albania's chronological structure determines both the order of movement and the way in which the past is interpreted. Visitors perceive history as a connected line, with each subsequent thematic section building on the previous one. Ancient artefacts provide an insight into origins, while materials from later periods demonstrate the evolution of social and political structures. Documents and symbolic artefacts further reinforce the notion of institutional continuity. In this model, visual hierarchy is formed by highlighting key periods, large artefacts, cartographic materials, and objects connected with statehood. A map placed next to a document translates a historical event from a factual level to a spatial process, while state symbolism connects a specific period to a broader collective memory. The relationship between exhibits and explanatory texts at the National Historical Museum of Albania provides cultural context for historical material. The object itself records a material trace, but the text connects it to an era, event, territory, or social practice. A document takes on a more precise meaning when included in a thematic block relating to political change or cultural transformation. A map becomes more than just a graphic representation of territory; it shows the movement of a historical process. Similarly, a portrait or symbolic object acquires a narrative function when correlated with a specific historical role, social conflict, or stage in the formation of national identity. Therefore, the national-historical model relies on thematic integrity, incorporating individual objects into the broader narrative of historical storytelling. Figure 2 presents an example of the visual interpretation of an ancient object.



Figure 2. “Head of Apollo” in the pavilion of antiquity exhibition of the National Historical Museum of Albania
Source: Pavilion of Antiquity (n.d.)

Figure 2 shows how a single ancient artefact can be incorporated into a national-historical model of storytelling by combining visual expressiveness with dating, provenance, and museum attribution. The visual form of the artefact enables it to be recognised as artistic evidence of an ancient cultural period, while the attributive information links the exhibit to a particular historical era and geographical location. Through this combination, the artefact is not merely an isolated museum item, but becomes part of a broader narrative of historical continuity.

Bunk’Art is a spatial-memorial model of visual narrative in which architecture is the primary means of storytelling. The bunker environment shapes the visitor’s perception even before they analyse documents, photographs or explanatory materials. Its underground location, enclosed corridors, limited visibility, dense sequence of transitions and imposing structures create a physical sense of enclosed space. In such an exhibition, the architecture does not function as a neutral shell since it is connected to the histories of secrecy, defence, political anxiety, and institutional control. The documents, photographs and technical objects within this space are not perceived as separate museum materials, but as elements of an environment that carries a memorial significance. In Bunk’Art, a visual hierarchy is formed through the route taken, the lighting and the spatial pressure experienced. Narrow passages direct movement, while individual rooms provide spaces for reflection. Subdued lighting draws attention to documents and photographs, and limited visibility encourages more focused perception. While an official document or photograph from the political period might be viewed as a historical artefact in an ordinary exhibition hall, inside the bunker it becomes part of the experience of a closed system. Doors, corridors, technical rooms, interior fragments and engineering details become elements of visual storytelling. Here, space does not illustrate the theme, but presents it through its physical form. The emotional impact of Bunk’Art is formed not through the direct description of traumatic experiences, but through the accumulation of spatial and documentary cues. The route inside the

bunker gradually immerses visitors in an environment of political closure. The limited colour scheme, subdued lighting, density of materials and weight of the architectural form all serve to strengthen the sense of isolation. Documents and photographs establish historical reliability, but how they are perceived is determined not only by their content, but also by where they are presented. In this case, therefore, the principle of correspondence between form and content is manifested through the coincidence of theme and environment: the closed nature of the political system is revealed through an enclosed architectural space. Figure 3 shows how the enclosed space of the bunker becomes an independent carrier of the museum’s narrative.

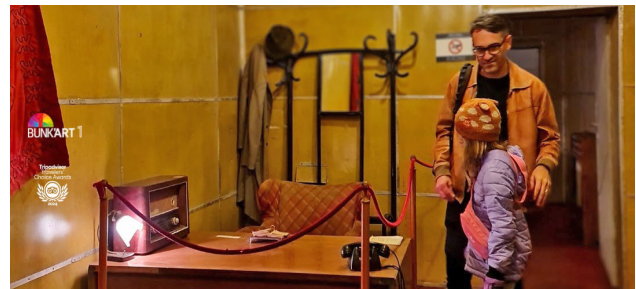


Figure 3. Bunk’Art 1 as an example of the spatial-memorial organisation of museum narrative
Source: Bunk’Art (n.d.)

The architectural environment of Bunk’Art is incorporated into a spatial-memorial storytelling model through features such as the enclosed room, limited visibility and object-based interior details, as well as the directed visitor route. The visual organisation of the space demonstrates that the bunker environment is not merely a neutral backdrop to the exhibits; it is a mode of perceiving historical experience in itself. Objects, lighting, colour restraint and spatial isolation reinforce the link between the physical structure of the room and the concept of political closure.

The House of Leaves/Museum of Secret Surveillance (n.d.) employs a documentary-testimonial model of visual storytelling. Here, the central element is not broad historical chronology, but rather the surveillance mechanism and its impact on private life. Technical devices, archival documents, photographs, thematic materials and explanatory texts present the system of control as a set of material and institutional traces. A surveillance device demonstrates the technical side of monitoring, while a document records the language of power, archival material shows the administrative form of control, and a photograph or personal testimony brings the theme closer to human experience. The narrative of such an exhibition is built through evidentiary force rather than symbolic generalisation. In the House of Leaves/Museum of Secret Surveillance, the exhibition and explanatory text form a unified testimonial structure. Without context, a

technical object could be perceived merely as part of the history of equipment; however, when placed alongside documents, descriptions of surveillance methods and archival materials, it takes on socio-cultural significance. According to this logic, a listening device becomes visual evidence of interference in private communication, not merely a device. If the means of its practical application are presented nearby, a document with administrative wording ceases to be a neutral archival text. The interaction between the text and the object translates the technical material into a narrative about everyday control, fear, and violations of personal boundaries. The House of Leaves/Museum of Secret Surveillance (n.d.) presents control as a system of interconnected practices through thematic organisation. Visitors encounter a sequence of materials showing who carried out surveillance, what means were used, what data was recorded, and how this affected everyday life, rather than a single object. Lighting, documentary graphics, a limited colour palette and the layout of the rooms create an impression of archival reliability. The emotional effect is created through restraint in presentation: fear and control are conveyed not through dramatic embellishment, but through the material traces of surveillance. The guiding principle of this model is documentary reliability, supplemented by precise interpretative connections between objects, texts and spaces. Figure 4 illustrates how technical surveillance methods become part of a documentary-testimonial museum narrative.



Figure 4. Sector 01: Bugs and other tools as an example of documentary-testimonial narrative
Source: House of Leaves/Museum of Secret Surveillance (n.d.)

The documentary-testimonial model of museum narrative incorporates technical means of surveillance by connecting the exhibit to the themes of control and archival reliability. The visual representation of the equipment enables it to be perceived as both a technical object and material evidence of surveillance practices. The exhibition context connects the device with documents, the thematic room, and the broader system of institutional surveillance. Consequently, the technical object assumes a testimonial function, becoming part of a narrative about interference in private communication and everyday life.

The Marubi National Museum of Photography (n.d.a) presents a photographic model of visual narrative in

which images are the main carriers of cultural memory. Here, photography plays a central role in representing faces, gestures, clothing, interiors, urban spaces, social roles and forms of public self-presentation, rather than performing an auxiliary illustrative function. Unlike a historical exhibition, where storytelling is often constructed through a sequence of events, this model operates through series, comparisons, and recurring visual motifs. Portraits, family photographs, urban views and documentary shots do not form a single linear history, but rather a multi-layered image of society. At the Marubi National Museum of Photography, individual photographs and photographic series perform different narrative functions. A single portrait captures a particular person's appearance, including their posture, clothing, facial expression and manner of self-presentation. A series of portraits from different periods reveals changes in social norms, visual status, family structure, gender roles and urban culture. Urban photography may document architectural features, but in a series, it tells a story about the transformation of streets, public spaces, trade, movement and everyday routes. Family photographs not only depict private life, but also demonstrate forms of kinship, generational ties and the visual conventions of social presentation. The Marubi National Museum of Photography's attribution and graphic organisation ensure the transition from visual impression to historical reading. While a photograph possesses visual autonomy, without information such as the date, the name of the author, the place where it was taken and details about the subject or thematic context, it remains an open image. Captions and grouping by author, period, genre, urban motif or social type transform the image into the structure of a cultural archive. When compared with other portraits, a female portrait reveals changes in clothing, posture, accessories and social expectations. Similarly, an urban view, when examined thematically, reveals not only architecture, but also the rhythm of public life. Therefore, photographic narrative is built on the combination of visual expressiveness, historical attribution and cultural contextualisation. Figure 5 presents an example of a photographic portrait, revealing the connection between the image, its attribution and social memory.



Figure 5. A photographic portrait as a form of visual interpretation of social memory
Source: Marubi National Museum of Photography (n.d.b)

Photography takes on a narrative function when visual images are combined with attributive support. A portrait not only records an individual's features, but also elements of their social representation, such as posture, clothing, gestures, facial expressions and modes of self-presentation. In an exhibition context, these features enable the image to be regarded as a testimony to a particular environment, time, and form of public identity. The serial arrangement of photographs strengthens this effect, as an individual photograph is perceived in relation to other images, social types and visual codes of the period.

At the Marubi National Museum of Photography, visual hierarchy is created not through a single central object, but through repetition and seriality. Visitors read meaning through comparisons of faces, costumes, gestures, spaces, objects and social situations. While chronology may be preserved in such an exhibition, it is not the only way of organising the material. The photographic archive enables history to be presented as a series of visual testimonies, in which images of individuals, families, streets or urban landscapes become part of a broader cultural memory. The leading principle of this model is cultural contextualisation through visual series. Comparing the four cases revealed different centres of semantic organisation within visual narratives. At the National Historical Museum of Albania, for example, the centre is the historical artefact incorporated into a chronological and thematic sequence. At Bunk'Art, the centre is the

architectural space, which contains the exhibition and determines how the past is experienced. In the House of Leaves/Museum of Secret Surveillance, documentary and technical evidence takes centre stage, revealing the control system. At the Marubi National Museum of Photography, the photographic image plays a leading role, becoming a form of cultural memory through series and attribution. The visual narrative in these models is determined by which component becomes the main carrier of meaning, and by how the other elements support its function. The differences between these cases highlight several consistent principles in the development of visual storytelling in museums. The national-historical model relies on thematic integrity and historical sequence. The spatial-memorial model is based on the correspondence between architectural form and content, and emotional engagement through the environment. The documentary-testimonial model requires evidentiary value, precise attribution, and a connection between the object and its explanatory context. The photographic model is based on visual series, image comparisons and cultural contextualisation. While these principles can be combined within a single exhibition, in each of the examined museums, one principle becomes dominant and determines the character of visual storytelling. Table 2 summarises the dominant narrative carriers, methods of visual hierarchisation, role of text and attribution, and interpretative effects identified in the Albanian museum cases.

Table 2. Principles of visual narrative formation in museum cases

Museum case	Dominant carrier of narrative	How visual hierarchy is formed	Role of text and attribution	Emotional and interpretative effect	Identified principle
National Historical Museum of Albania	Historical artefact, document, map, symbolic object	Through the highlighting of historical periods, key artefacts and thematic transitions	Connects the object with an era, territory, event and cultural continuity	Forms a perception of history as the sequential development of national culture	Thematic integrity and historical sequence
Bunk'Art	Architectural space of the bunker, documents, photographs, environmental elements	Through an enclosed route, limited visibility, subdued light and spatial pauses	Clarifies the historical context of political closure and institutional control	Creates a sense of pressure, isolation, secrecy and memorial immersion	Correspondence between form and content
House of Leaves/Museum of Secret Surveillance	Document, technical surveillance device, archival testimony	Through thematic rooms and the juxtaposition of technology, documents and personal materials	Transforms the technical object into testimony to the social practice of control	Visualises fear, surveillance, violation of privacy and the everyday operation of dictatorship	Documentary reliability and interpretative precision
Marubi National Museum of Photography	Photographic image, portrait, series, urban view	Through serial arrangement, thematic grouping and comparison of images	Provides dating, authorship, place of shooting and socio-cultural context	Forms a perception of photography as a carrier of social history and visual identity	Cultural contextualisation through the visual series

Source: compiled by the author on the basis of House of Leaves/Museum of Secret Surveillance (n.d.), Marubi National Museum of Photography (n.d.a; n.d.b)

Table 2 showed that visual narratives in the examined museum cases are formed through different dominant carriers of meaning. In one case, the narrative is organised around a historical artefact and a chronological sequence. In another, it is organised through the architectural environment and route. In a third case, it is organised through documentary and technical testimony. In a fourth case, it is organised through a photographic image and a visual series. These differences are not only manifested in the type of museum material, but also in the methods of visual hierarchisation, the role of text and attribution, and the nature of the emotional and interpretative effect.

Thus, analysing museum exhibitions in Albania makes it possible to identify four stable models of visual storytelling: national-historical, spatial-memorial, documentary-testimonial, and photographic. Each model is built around a specific narrative formation principle: thematic integrity, correspondence between form and content, documentary reliability, or cultural contextualisation through visual series. Visual narrative in these exhibitions does not arise through an individual exhibit or design device, but through the coordination of object-based material, space, route, text, attribution and mode of perception. This confirms that museum exhibitions can act as an independent form of cultural interpretation in which visual, spatial, and documentary means transform material into a coherent message about memory, identity, and historical experience.

Discussion

The results showed that the visual narrative of a museum exhibition is formed by coordinating object-based material, the route, the space, text, graphics, light, colour, archival materials, and modes of visitor perception. This logic aligns with the findings of H. Rosli *et al.* (2022), who presented digital storytelling as a process combining content sequence, visual organisation, and user perception. However, the results obtained in this article extend this approach beyond the digital format. Museum storytelling arises not only through the digital presentation of information, but also through the physical route, object-based foundation, spatial composition, and interpretative context of the exhibition. An analysis of how technological elements are incorporated into the overall display structure clarified the connection between visual narrative and visitor experience. A.N. Hijazi & A.H.A. Baharin (2022) examined the influence of digital technologies on museum perception and audience engagement. In the analysed cases, visitor engagement depended not on the mere presence of a digital element, but on its connection with the exhibit, route, explanatory text and spatial logic of the room. Therefore, the technological component acquired narrative significance only when incorporated into the exhibition storytelling system. The results concerning the perceptual and emotional impact of the museum exhibition revealed the mechanisms of

immersion, which cannot be attributed solely to digital or audio means. In their review, A.G. Privitera *et al.* (2025) presented audio as a means of immersive storytelling in cultural heritage. This article traces a similar principle at the level of visual-spatial exhibitions, where the emotional effect is formed through the route, lighting, density of material arrangement, documentary testimonies, and the visitor's bodily experience of movement. In the case of Bunk'Art, this concept was given spatial form, as the bunker architecture itself established a way of perceiving the past. The structuring function of graphics, navigation and explanatory text in the article's results showed that the visual organisation of an exhibition is not limited to museum space design. This approach aligns with the study by O. Yezhova *et al.* (2025), which considered the design of online museums in relation to cultural heritage, art, science and digital representation. This approach was transferred to the physical exhibition in the present article, where graphics, captions, thematic blocks and navigational solutions were examined as means of organising a semantic route and linking individual objects to the general theme.

Analysis of multimedia elements revealed that digital tools cannot form the basis of a museum narrative independently of the object-based and spatial structure of an exhibition. This conclusion corroborates the findings of A. Tham *et al.* (2025), who presented technological and digital innovations as a driving force in the transformation of the museum landscape. In the analysed article, the transformation of the museum display is revealed not merely by the introduction of technologies, but by their function within the exhibition system. Video, sound, digital archives and interactive screens only acquired meaning when they supported the object-based material, the route and the interpretative task of the exhibition. The institutional logic of visual storytelling was evident in the fact that the narrative structure depended on the selection of material, the distribution of information, the organisation of the route, and the modes of communication with visitors. In their study, N.L. Tran & W. Rudolf (2024) examined high-tech museum applications in a managerial context. Their results supplement this line, showing that, to form a visual narrative, technological infrastructure and management of digital solutions are not the only significant factors; curatorial decisions also play a role in determining the semantic centres of the exhibition and the order in which they are included in the overall display. Cultural contextualisation was identified as one of the principles of visual narrative formation since the meaning of a museum object is derived from its connection to historical time, the social environment, visual series, attribution, and explanatory text. This approach is similar to the work of K. Kasemsarn & F. Nickpour (2025), who linked digital storytelling in cultural and heritage tourism with social media and youth engagement. In this article, a similar process took the form of an object-based exhibition

at the Marubi National Museum of Photography, where the photographic image was considered part of cultural memory through portrait series, authorship, dating, captioning, and visual code comparison. The results relating to the relationship between physical objects and digital layers demonstrated the necessity for semantic coordination between exhibits, routes, texts and the spatial logic of displays. This conclusion builds upon the work of A. Ramtohl & K.K. Khedo (2024), who considered augmented reality as a means of enhancing cultural heritage perception. Here, the digital supplement was not presented as a self-sufficient narrative source; its function depended on its ability to reveal the connection between the exhibit and its context, route, and museum interpretation.

The interactivity of the analysed exhibitions was revealed not only as a technological action, but also as a sequential reading of space, objects, documents, images, and textual connections. This complements the study by C. Silva *et al.* (2023), which considered augmented reality as a means of organising participatory cultural heritage activities. This article specifies visitor participation through the museum route, incorporating visitors into the narrative via a digital interface, movement, material comparison and the gradual disclosure of semantic connections. The educational effect of the visual narrative was found to be linked to the way in which the exhibition organised the perception of the cultural material. In their meta-analytical review, Y. Zhou *et al.* (2022) analysed virtual and augmented reality in the context of museum learning. The results obtained supplement this approach, showing that learning in museums is supported not only by technology, but also by the route's sequence, highlighting key objects, the relationship between images and text, visual hierarchy, and explanatory context. Therefore, visual narrative performs not only a representative function, but also interpretative and educational functions. The analysis of the role of multimedia and interactive elements confirmed the need to coordinate the digital layer with the object-based and spatial foundation of the exhibition. This aligns with the review by A. Chatsiopolou & P.D. Michailidis (2025), which examined augmented reality in cultural heritage through design, development, and user experience evaluation. Here, the focus shifted from the user interface to the technological exhibition function: augmented reality only strengthens visual narrative when it reveals the connection between the exhibit, the route, the historical context, and the interpretive display task. The architectural environment in the article's results was defined as an independent carrier of visual storytelling rather than a neutral container for exhibits. This position aligns with the work of M. Denni *et al.* (2026), in which spatial augmented reality was analysed in the context of cultural heritage. A similar logic was revealed in this article at the level of the physical museum environment: scale, enclosure, lighting, corridor structure, and bodily experience

of movement all established conditions for perceiving the past, and were incorporated into the narrative structure.

The results concerning physical and digital forms of museum representation showed that the basic principles of visual narrative remain significant regardless of display format. This logic intersects with the study by H. Cui & J. Wu (2025), in which virtual exhibitions were considered a form of museum representation. In this article, the transition to digital or virtual forms was not considered to cancel out the object-based foundation, the sequence of perception, the visual hierarchy or the interpretative context. The difference lies not in the logic of storytelling itself, but in the means of its implementation. Immersiveness was considered meaningful only in terms of content when connected with cultural material, rather than as an independent visual effect. This conclusion aligns with the bibliometric study by L. Jiang *et al.* (2025), which presented immersive technologies as a tool for heritage preservation and presentation. However, the results obtained introduce an exhibition-related limitation to this tendency: technological impact strengthens the museum message only when connected to the object, space, route, and cultural context. The visitor experience described in the article was linked to route coherence, the visual environment, text, objects, and emotional modes of perception. This position supplements the model of S.E. Lu *et al.* (2023), in which the development of the technological museum experience was considered in stages. In this article, technological experience is incorporated into a broader exhibition structure; it does not form a separate level of communication, but operates as part of the museum's storytelling when connected to the object-based and spatial organisation of the display. The accessibility of the museum message was considered in terms of not only physical or educational access, but also the clarity of the connection between objects, texts, routes and cultural meaning. This result intersects with the study by A.I. González-Herrera *et al.* (2023), in which museums and cultural spaces were examined in terms of education and accessibility. In this article, accessibility was clarified visually and narratively: an exhibition becomes interpretable when visitors can trace the role of objects within the overall narrative structure and their connection to the thematic block.

The technological elements of the obtained results were defined as part of the museum narrative, rather than as its foundation. This approach builds on the work of C. Avlonitou *et al.* (2025), who considered the museum environment through the concept of the smart museum and the use of advanced technologies. In this article, however, the notion of a 'smart' museum environment is not linked to saturation with digital tools, but to semantic coordination between technology, the collection, the space, and interpretation. Technological components only become productive for the narrative when they are included in the structure of the museum message. The pedagogical function of the visual

narrative was evident in the way the exhibition educates visitors through the route, highlighting key objects, connecting images and texts, comparing documents, and transforming visual material into a culturally meaningful message. This approach supplements the systematic review by T. Karakuş Yılmaz *et al.* (2024), which considered technologies in museum learning through their educational roles. This article links educational value not only with interactivity, but also with the perception structure established by exhibition design. The functionality of immersive solutions was examined in terms of their role in visual hierarchy, emotional impact, and connection to the interpretative context. This approach intersects with V. Komianos's (2022) review, in which extended reality in museums was analysed in terms of the functions provided and forms of interaction. The results obtained refine this approach, demonstrating that the narrative significance of a technological solution can vary depending on its position in the exhibition, its relationship to the route, and its ability to facilitate semantic connections between objects. The need to integrate immersive technologies into the overall structure of cultural representation was revealed by connecting the digital layer to the object, route, text, space, and cultural display tasks. This position builds on the work of C. Innocente *et al.* (2023), who proposed a framework for analysing the application of extended reality in cultural heritage studies. From a visual narrative perspective, however, such a framework requires clarification in terms of exhibitions: immersive technologies should not be considered as a separate category of museum renewal, but rather as a means of reinforcing the object-based, spatial and interpretative levels of an exhibition.

The comparison of the results with those of other studies showed that technological, digital and immersive solutions do not negate the fundamental importance of exhibits, routes, spaces, texts, graphics, lighting, archives and architectural environments. The distinction lies in shifting the emphasis from individual means of museum communication to the relationships between exhibition components. In this context, visual narrative acts as an integrative structure in which the object-based, spatial, textual, visual and technological levels combine to form a coherent museum message.

Conclusions

The study showed that the visual narrative of a museum exhibition is not determined by the individual expressiveness of the exhibits themselves, but by how they are incorporated into an object-based, spatial, textual

and interpretative display system. A museum exhibition was found to function as a form of cultural interpretation when the exhibits, route, architectural environment, lighting, colours, graphics, explanatory texts, archival materials, and visitor movement patterns form a coherent, interconnected structure. According to this understanding, visual narrative is not merely a decorative or supplementary element of exhibition design; rather, it is a mechanism that transforms museum material into a coherent message about memory, identity, historical experience, and cultural continuity.

The study determined that the visual narrative of a museum exhibition is formed through the interaction of several interconnected elements, including historical artefacts, the architectural environment, the route of movement, photographic images, documents, archival materials, multimedia tools, light, colour, graphics, navigation, attribution and explanatory text. The significance of these components was found to lie not only in the organisation of the exhibition space, but also in creating a specific model for interpreting historical and cultural experiences. Case analysis of Albanian museums revealed four models of visual storytelling: national-historical, spatial-memorial, documentary-testimonial, and photographic. Comparing these models revealed the following principles of visual narrative formation: thematic integrity, spatial sequence, visual hierarchy, cultural contextualisation, correspondence between form and content, emotional engagement, documentary reliability and interaction between object-based, textual and visual-spatial levels.

The limitation of the study is connected with the fact that the analysis was based on open-access museum materials and four typologically significant cases from Albania, without conducting field observation or studying visitor perception. Further research may be directed towards expanding the corpus of museum cases, comparing Albanian exhibitions with international practices, and studying how different groups of visitors perceive visual narratives in historical, memorial, documentary and photography museums.

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Візуальні розповіді в музейних експозиціях: принципи створення

■ **Анотація.** Метою даного дослідження було визначення принципів, що лежать в основі формування візуальних наративів у музейних експозиціях. Це було досягнуто за допомогою якісного порівняльного та інтерпретативного аналізу наукових, фахових та музейних матеріалів, що знаходяться у відкритому доступі. Емпіричний матеріал було зібрано у чотирьох музеях Албанії: Національному історичному музеї Албанії, «Бунк'Арт», «Будинку листя»/Музеї таємного спостереження та Національному музеї фотографії імені Марубі. Дослідження показало, що візуальні наративи формуються не завдяки індивідуальній виразності експонатів, а завдяки скоординованій взаємодії об'єктного матеріалу, простору, маршруту, світла, кольору, графіки, пояснювального тексту, атрибуції, архівних матеріалів та способів сприйняття відвідувачів. Були визначені основні компоненти візуальних наративів у виставках: експонати, маршрути, просторова композиція, освітлення та колірне оформлення, графічний дизайн, пояснювальні тексти, навігація, фотографії, архівні матеріали, мультимедіа, архітектурне середовище та інтерпретаційні контексти. На прикладі албанських музеїв було визначено чотири моделі візуального сторітелінгу: національно-історичну, просторово-меморіальну, документально-свідчену та фотографічну. Перша модель базувалася на хронології та історичних артефактах, а також на концепції культурної спадкоємності. Друга модель базувалася на архітектурному середовищі, маршруті та емоційному впливі закритих просторів. Третя модель ґрунтувалася на документах, об'єктах технічного спостереження, архівних матеріалах та пояснювальному контексті. Четверта модель базувалася на візуальних серіях, атрибуції зображень та відображенні соціальної пам'яті. Таким чином, було визначено принципи формування візуальної нарації: тематична цілісність, просторова послідовність, візуальна ієрархія, культурна контекстуалізація, відповідність форми та змісту, емоційне залучення, документальна достовірність та взаємодія між об'єктним, текстовим та візуально-просторовим рівнями експозиції. Практичне значення цих висновків полягає у потенційному застосуванні запропонованих моделей та принципів в аналізі, проектуванні та оцінці музейних виставок

■ **Ключові слова:** культурна пам'ять; маршрут виставки; візуальна ієрархія; музейне оповідання; інтерпретаційний контекст; архітектурне середовище; документальна достовірність