



The Journey from Radios to Audio Guides

Museums22
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February 13, 2026

Dear readers,

Happy World Radio Day!

When I was growing up, radio had a special place in my day. I still remember the comfort of a familiar voice and the way a good presenter could make you pause mid-task and think.

World Radio Day is observed on 13 February, and UNESCO's 2026 theme is "Radio and Artificial Intelligence," with a reminder that human voice and judgment still matter most in audio media.

That theme feels relevant to museums too, because so much of radio's joy has now moved into the audio formats we rely on every day: podcasts, audiobooks, and increasingly, audio guides. Edison Research reports 55% of Americans aged 12+ are monthly podcast consumers.

For museums, this is a big opportunity. The "spirit of radio," after all, is not about broadcasting, but connection and trust. A well-designed audio guide can bring that same feeling into galleries, museums, and cultural centers, helping visitors get into the spirit of your collections even when they are visiting on their own.

In this newsletter, we'll briefly cover the history of radio and how it has transitioned into audio guides that can transform your visitor experience if you give it a chance.

With warmth,

Shalini

A Short History: How Radio Became Our Default Story Machine



Radio grew from late 19th-century experiments in wireless signaling into something far more intimate: a voice that could travel across distance and reach people where print could not.

By the early 1900s, pioneers were already pushing beyond coded signals. One of the most famous moments came in 1906, when Reginald Fessenden broadcast music and voice on Christmas Eve, a milestone often cited as an early "program"-style broadcast.

Then radio became mass communication. In the United States, KDKA's 2 November 1920 broadcast of presidential election returns is widely referenced as a starting point for scheduled commercial broadcasting, and it helped kick off rapid growth in stations and home listening.

Did You Know? Portable listening took a huge leap in 1954 when the **Regency TR-1 transistor radio** reached stores, making radio more personal and truly "carryable" for everyday life.

Radio also became a public service tool. **UN Radio** was established on 13 February 1946, which is one reason World Radio Day is anchored to this date.

And here's the museum connection that often surprises people: in 1952, the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam developed what is widely described as the first wireless museum audio tour, using radio transmission concepts, in collaboration with Philips. In other words, museums were already borrowing radio's methods to shape a visitor's listening experience inside galleries.

That's the thread worth holding onto today: Radio taught the world how to listen with attention. **Audio guides and podcasts carry that craft forward, but now the "station" can be an audio guide app, and the moment can be right in front of an object.**

3 Ways Museums Can Bring Radio's Connection Into Their Audio Guides

1) Write Like Radio: For Ears, Not For Labels

Many audio guides fall flat for one simple reason: the script sounds like wall text being read aloud. Radio writing assumes the listener is moving, distracted, and still wants clarity. Your guide should do the same.

Here's a radio-style structure that works for most objects:

- Hook (10 seconds): a question or detail the visitor can spot instantly
- Look (30–40 seconds): direct attention to two specific elements in the object
- Meaning (40–60 seconds): what those elements reveal about the time, maker, or idea
- Close (10 seconds): a line that points to the next stop or a new way to see

While here are some small production choices that can improve listening (we follow these in all our audio guides):

- Record voice cleanly, then add ambience sparingly
- Keep most stops short, and offer optional "extra" clips for visitors who want more depth

This is where customized audio guides shine. You can match the tone to the collection and audience instead of forcing one voice across everything



2) Design Routes the Way Radio Designs Shows

Radio works because it is segmented. Visitors also benefit from clear "episodes," not one long tour that tries to cover everything

Here are some routes that usually work well across museum types:

- Highlights (30–45 minutes) for first-time visitors
- Family route with shorter stops and more prompts
- Deep route for enthusiasts, students, and repeat visitors
- Calm route with fewer stops and slower pacing

When routes are built intentionally, visitors can choose what fits their time and energy and still feel like they completed something meaningful.

3) Make Audio Guides Multilingual and Accessible by Default

The radio-like feeling of connection disappears if visitors can't comfortably follow the guide. Language and accessibility are not "extras" in audio. For many audiences, they are the main pathway in.

Did You Know? Research shared through Museums and the Web on the Met's audio guide reported a clear difference in satisfaction between English and non-English users, a reminder that language experience design needs real attention, not a quick translation step.

Here's a practical checklist museums can act on quickly:

- Transcripts for every stop
- Language options visible at the start
- Stops written in plain-spoken language
- Family-friendly versions that avoid dense naming and dates
- Audio descriptions where the visual carries the meaning

Where We Go From Here

If you want to bring the spirit of radio into your museum this month, you can start with just one small move and take it from there:

- Rewrite one stop using the hook–look–meaning–close structure and record a 90-second pilot
- Publish a short highlights route that finishes in under 45 minutes
- Add transcripts and one additional language to your most-used stops

At Museums22, we work with museums and cultural institutions to build customized audio guides and visitor apps that teams can run over time.

Need to document your collections with gripping narratives? Need an app to host your audio guides and play them locally at your museum? We have got you covered.

 [Book an intro call with us to find out more!](#)