

# MUSEUMS AND WELLBEING, PART 2: THE RESPITE/CHALLENGE TRADEOFF

A 2022 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY



We all need places of respite. And for many, museums are just such places. They provide escapes from everyday lives, where we can marvel at what the human imagination can conjure or be soothed by the wonders of the natural world.

Yet museums are also places that challenge us, force us to consider viewpoints radically different than our own, and educate us on harms humans have inflicted on others.

## And there's the rub.

For virtually all museum-goers, this tension between respite and challenge is a tradeoff. Typically, at some point, there is a line that is drawn in the sand where the challenging nature of content precludes respite.

## Additionally, that point varies widely across frequent museum-goers.

Others have a much higher openness for challenging content, but even for them some content precludes respite (such as a historic site of particular violence). Their responses often articulate how important that challenge is, and respite can be found elsewhere.

Some feel the line is crossed the moment they see content they disagree with. These respondents often express anger or anguish that they were deprived of respite, and they share they would prefer museums to remain "neutral" places for escape.

And many fall somewhere in between.

## Let's pick this apart.

BACK IN 2021, we asked a series of questions about inclusion in museums. The final inclusion question was open-ended, with respondents prompted to tell us more about why they answered as they did.

We hand-coded the responses, and quickly noticed how frequently this tradeoff was articulated.

For those that were less inclusive, comments looked a lot like these examples:

"Our daily life is already consumed with media supplied information and conversations regarding these topics and as a conservative I'm not interested in paying to hear more of the same. A museum is my getaway from such things and a quiet place for reflection?"

"There is enough of that activity going on everywhere, we visit [the museum] to relax and peacefully enjoy it without all the wokeness."

Among more inclusive people, we found support for inclusion, but similar sentiments articulating a tradeoff.

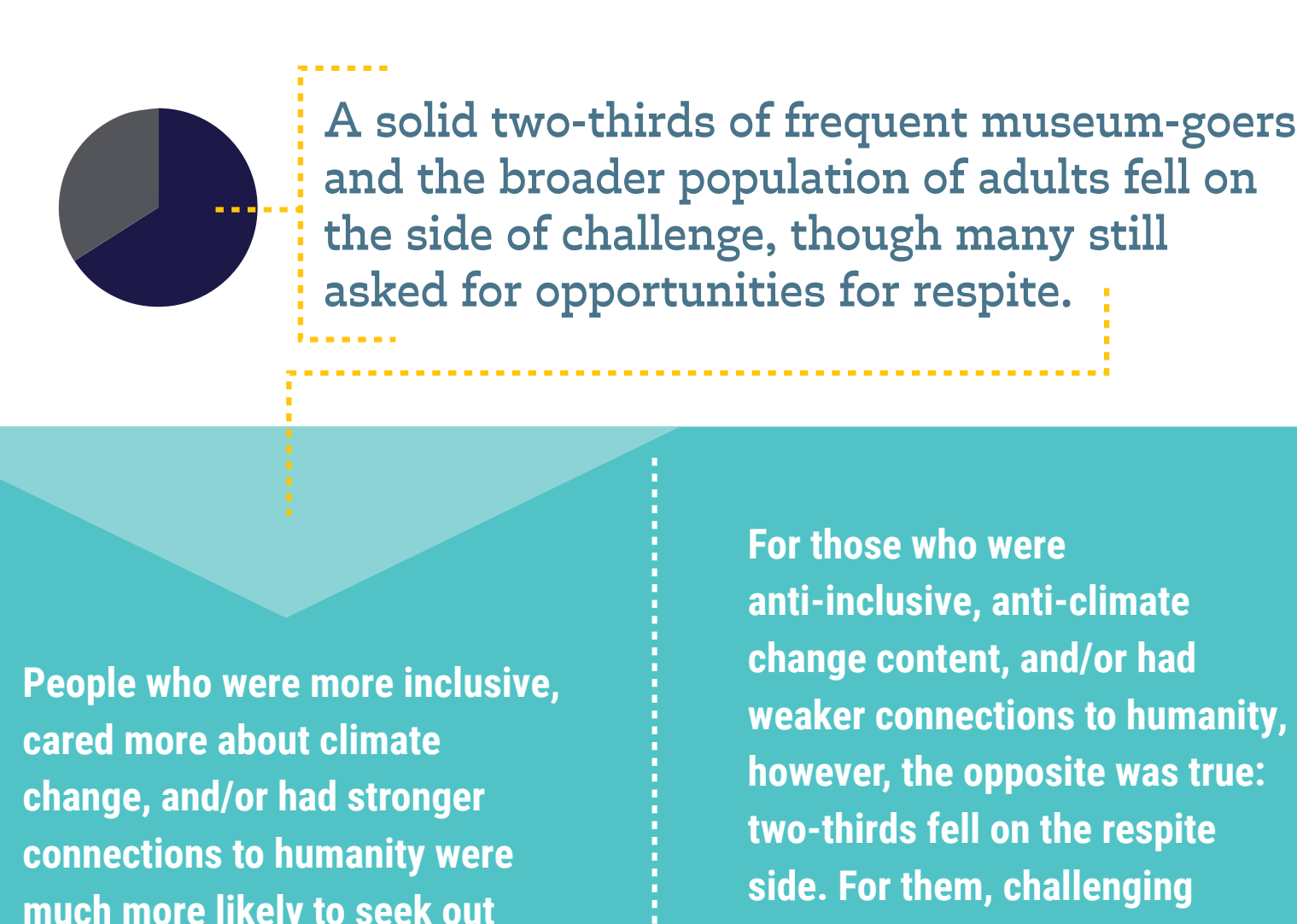
"Museums need to move with the times and be supportive/reflective of evolved social values and inclusiveness. That does not mean museums need to alter their mission and specific content, though, as people go there to escape overt political or societal issues. It should be subtle but clear that museums reflect our highest human values without being preachy. Thank you for this question!"

"It's a very sensitive issue, so it should absolutely be addressed. But it shouldn't be the basis of all conversations. Personally, I use museums as an escape from the madness happening in the world. To just be a kid again and not worry about things."

## We couldn't ignore this perceived tradeoff.

Fast forward to 2022. To learn more, we put this question to frequent museum-goers and a broader population sample of US adults.

## When you think of your ideal museum visit, what do you hope for?



A solid two-thirds of frequent museum-goers and the broader population of adults fell on the side of challenge, though many still asked for opportunities for respite.

People who were more inclusive, cared more about climate change, and/or had stronger connections to humanity were much more likely to seek out challenging content: three-quarters fell on the "challenge" side. They tended to say challenging content was more important than respite (though they appreciated those moments of escape as well).

For those who were anti-inclusive, anti-climate change content, and/or had weaker connections to humanity, however, the opposite was true: two-thirds fell on the respite side. For them, challenging content is often perceived as political and a threat to their worldview, increasing the odds for them to become defensive, angry, and disengage entirely (thus depriving museums of the opportunity to meaningfully reach them).

"If not museums, then who? How do they honestly act as repositories for culture without talking about these things?"

"If you push a political agenda in your organization I will no longer patronize it and will encourage others not to."

## Hence, the tradeoff.

But here's the thing: respite and challenge are both important, and neither should be sacrificed for the other.

As our world becomes a place of more extreme weather, political polarization becomes increasingly entrenched, more people on our planet struggle to thrive, and we continue to emerge from an international public health crisis, we need places of respite and escape more than ever to support our mental health.

We also need to be challenged on those very same topics so that we can become more understanding of our fellow humans and make more informed decisions to address the problems we face.

Which means that every museum has to make their own calculation about when to challenge, and when to support escape and respite. To consider each space and experience discretely, yet also part of a whole experience. This is really a both/and ... not an either/or.

"On any given day, I can identify with several of these options. I want to be challenged, but I also want peace and beauty ... We don't all think alike although some of us may look alike."

"It changes, depending on what is going on in everyday life and current events. When life is stressful and full of turmoil, I look for respite, escape, and comfort. When it is relatively calm, I don't mind being challenged."

"Different visits needs different things. There are many ideal experiences."

Annual Survey of Museum-Goers Data Stories are created by Wilkening Consulting on behalf of the American Alliance of Museums. Sources include: 2022 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, n = 90,747, 186 museums participating; 2022 Broader Population Sampling, n = 1017; 2017-2021 Annual Surveys of Museum-Goers. Data Stories share research about both frequent museum-goers (typically visit multiple museums each year) and the broader population (including casual and non-visitors to museums). See the Purpose and Methodology (Update) Data Story from September 13, 2022 for more information on methodology. More Data Stories can be found at wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories.