

IMAGINE NO MUSEUMS, PART 1: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

A 2023 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY

Imagine no museums ...

"It would be bloody awful without museums."

TAKE A MOMENT, and imagine there were no museums in your community ... or maybe anywhere. Would our society be different? Would you be different?

If you are like us, the idea isn't pleasant. After all, most of us likely entered this field of work because museums, and the impact we want to have as a field, matter to us. But do our visitors have the same reaction?

For the most part, yes. Resoundingly so. In fact, this question is so effective, we've now used it twice with museum-goers to help us understand our impact.

"We absolutely need museums. Full stop."

But let's back up. Why did we even ask the question this way in the first place?

... It all comes down to psychology. For the most part, people hate the idea of losing

things. The idea of loss provokes a visceral response that can help them articulate what matters to them. Including the idea of losing museums.

Why?

Well, when we've asked museum-goers to articulate the impact of museums, they often struggle to provide an answer. When we ask them to imagine a world without museums, however, suddenly those visceral emotions they feel about what they would miss out on makes it much easier to share why museums matter to them. It's a much easier question to answer.

We've now put this question into the field twice: back in 2018 and this year. We were curious to see if the past (rather eventful) five years have changed how people respond.

To find out, we hand-coded responses, looking for the themes we saw in 2018 as well as for new themes emerging in 2023.¹ We then analyzed the results, examining them across different demographic characteristics as well as individual values and attitudes.

Four main themes emerged from the coding:

Museums are vital for lifelong learning

"I am a better person for having access to museums as they have expanded my knowledge and understanding of history or various communities."

Museums add value to our civil society and our individual well-being

"Museums help me connect with my humanity. Without them, our communities lose this connection and are poorer for it."

Museums are crucial to understanding history

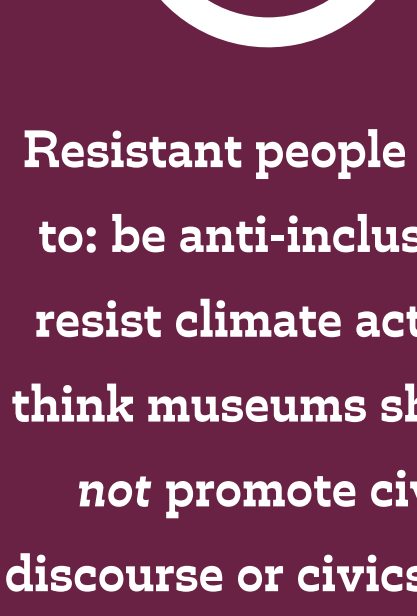
"Museums anchor us to our history and tell us our story. Without them, we would be even more lost than we currently are."

Museums spark inspiration, imagination, creativity, and curiosity

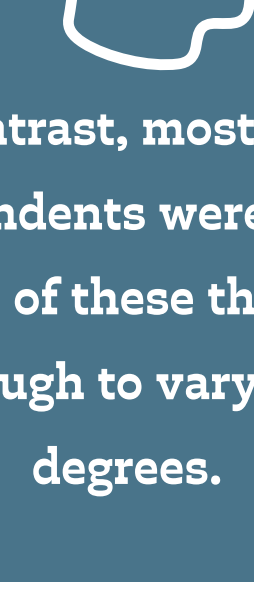
"I believe that the world without museums would be a much less profound, imaginative, creative, beautiful, understanding, curious, tolerant, compassionate, grateful, joyous, peaceful, and loving place."

But here's the thing. More than anything else, people's responses varied by their values, which fell across a broad spectrum. In some things, values and responses split rather dramatically.

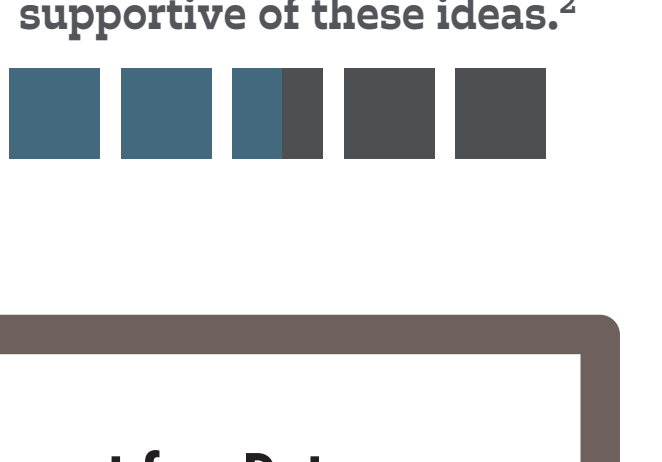
In particular, people who we describe as "Resistant" had rather different responses than those who were more open and exploratory in their attitudes.



Resistant people tend to: be anti-inclusive, resist climate action, think museums should not promote civil discourse or civics, and think it is inappropriate for museum to encourage a connection to humanity.



In contrast, most other respondents were open to all of these things, though to varying degrees.



Over the next few Data Stories, we'll explore the four main themes that emerged from the coding, including how they varied across different value sets and where there have been shifts since 2018. In the meantime, we'll leave you with these thoughts from museum-goers:

"Why would you horrify me with visions of an apocalyptic dystopia?!"

"Museums help people of all walks of life learn, connect, and celebrate those who are different. They inspire and shed light on stories that may or may not have had the opportunity to be told. Museums are a celebration of diversity."

"My perspectives would be more limited, and I would be the worse for that. Every time I enter a museum, I re-engage in a centuries-old debate about what it means to be human; how cruelty and selfishness are constant throughout history; but also why beauty is so important to my life and how the human striving for greater freedom is universal. I leave the museum re-engaged in my efforts to shape a better future for all of us."

Annual Survey of Museum-Goers Data Stories are created by Wilkening Consulting on behalf of the American Alliance of Museums. Sources include:
 * 2023 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, n = 107,187; 228 museums participating
 * 2023 Broader Population Sampling, n = 2,002
 * 2017 - 2022 Annual Surveys of Museum-Goers
¹ See our Data Story "2023 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers: Purpose and Methodology" for more information about how we code; https://www.wilkeningconsulting.com/uploads/8/6/3/2/86329422/methodology_2023_asmg.pdf
² Keep in mind these are general estimates; they vary depending on the topic by a few points here and there. Please consult previous Data Story releases for more precise estimates specifically on inclusion and climate action; upcoming 2023 Data Stories will explore civics/civil discourse and connection to humanity.
 *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 12, 2023 for more information on methodology.
 More Data Stories can be found at [wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories](https://www.wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories).