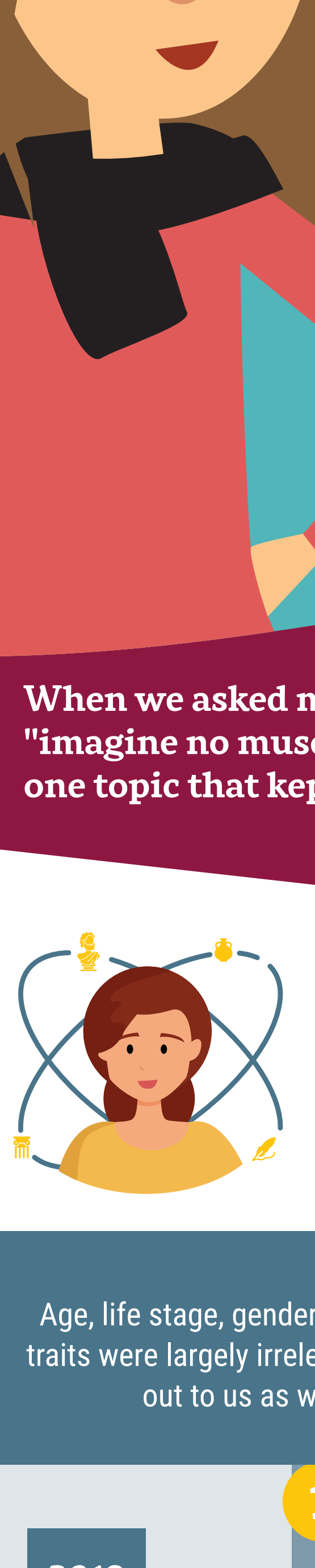


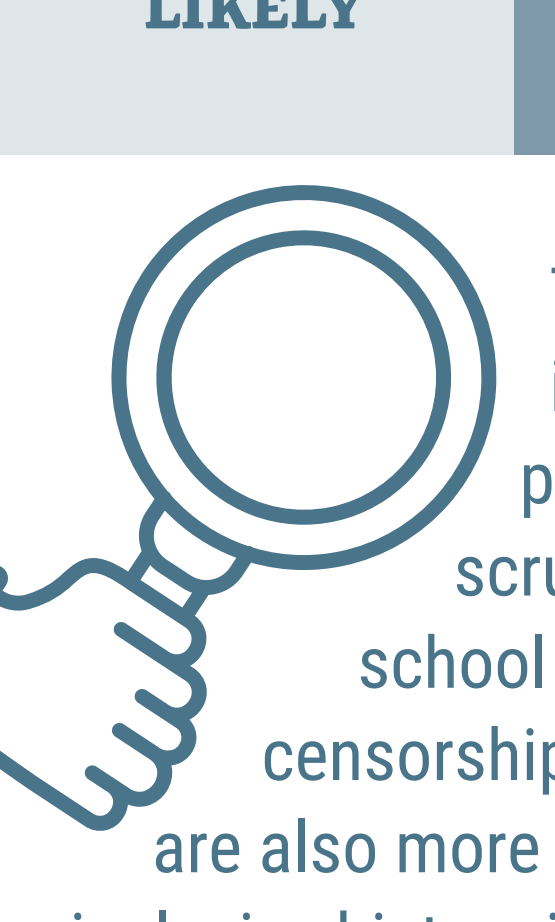
Imagine no museums ...



"We would begin to overlook those important parts of our past and even of ourselves. Where we've come from, what has happened throughout history, it has all come together to make us the people we are today. To lose museums would be to lose a huge connection to our past. We would lose our history, our perspective of ourselves, a sense of empathy with one another, a sense of wonder in the world, a curiosity for more."

When we asked museum-goers to "imagine no museums," there was one topic that kept coming up.

History.



Repeatedly, respondents talked about how important *history* is for all of us. That history is necessary for helping humans understand the current moment, plan for the future, and to feel grounded.

Age, life stage, gender, race and ethnicity, all of these demographic traits were largely irrelevant. But there were two things that did stand out to us as we reviewed *who* talked about history:

2018

-
-
-
-

1 Respondents were 50% more likely to talk about history in 2023 than in 2018, when we last asked this question. A lot has happened in how we think and talk about history in those five years. Many Confederate statues have toppled (while others remain), and at least 18 state legislatures have restricted how history is taught in the classroom.¹ History is on people's minds more now.

2023

2 "Resistant" people are about a third more likely to reference history than those with a more "Open" mindset.²

1/3 MORE LIKELY

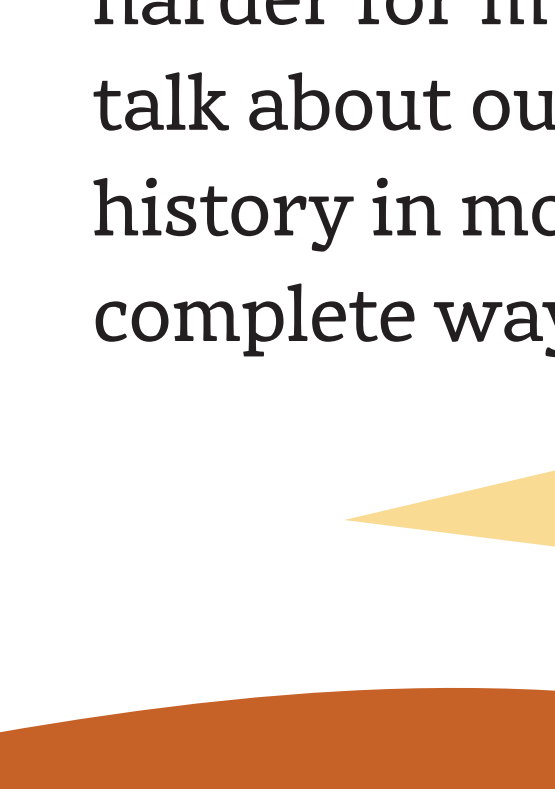


These two things are, of course, interrelated. After all, Resistant people are more likely to scrutinize how history is taught in school and support legislative censorship of classroom instruction. They are also more likely to push back when a more inclusive history is shared in museums.

Which can make it easy to forget that a majority of people want museums to share a more complete understanding of the past, and are thinking about history more thoughtfully.



Let's take a look at what was shared.



For the most part, **Resistant** history responses fell into four main categories:

1 Clichés. In particular, they were more likely to rely on language about repeating mistakes of the past.



"They show the history of how the world was created. Without knowledge of history, past mistakes repeat themselves, and no one would be inspired by proud moments in history."

2 Learning from "bad" history, especially as a way to see our progress.



"It would be like erasing history. We need physical places to go and take our children to show them how things were, so we can all better appreciate how far we have come."

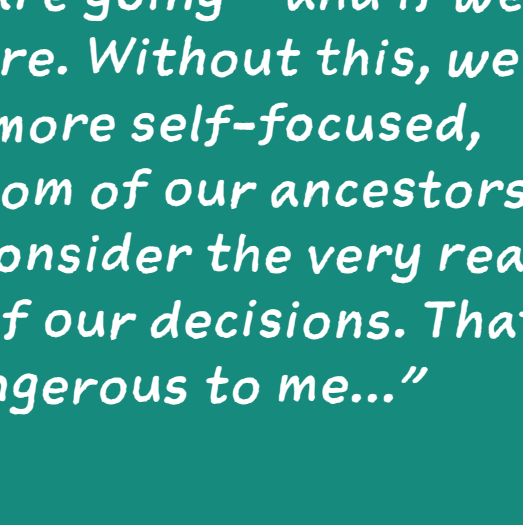
3 Defensive responses that tried to suggest that a more inclusive history isn't actually factual, but biased and/or activist, and therefore inappropriate.



"Museums make the world a better place because they allow people to learn about history. The history should not be slanted or apologetic or presented to minimize the accomplishments of people who have done great things. Museums should preserve history, and not become activist entities."

4 Offensive. There were also a number of comments that were inflammatory, bigoted, or worse. We are choosing not to amplify these thoughts by sharing them.

Overall, we think that more **Resistant** people are elevating and weaponizing history out of anger and fear. This defensiveness, however, can be very loud and potent, making it much harder for museums to talk about our shared history in more complete ways.

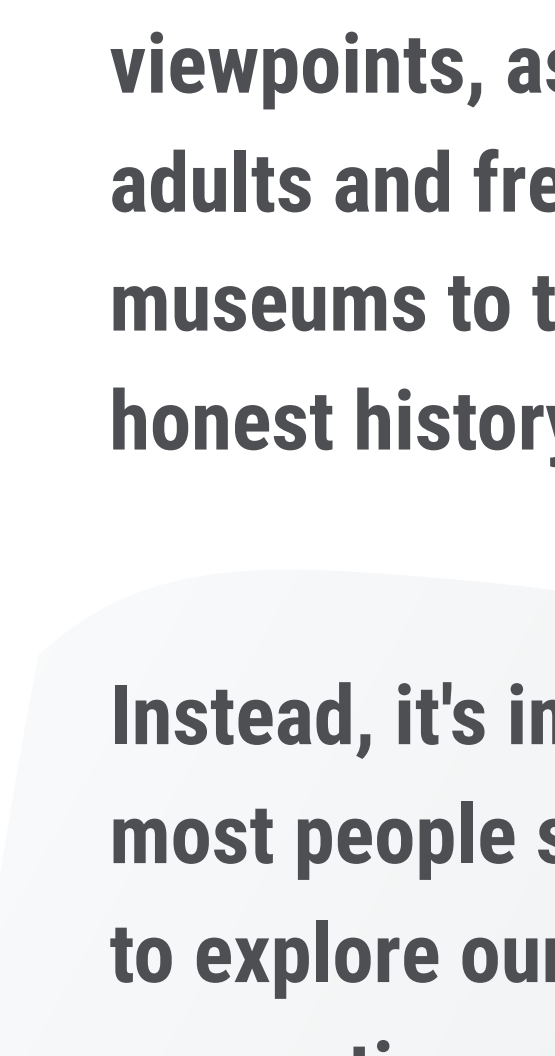


We are always working to develop more tools for effectively sharing evidence-backed content with the public. Check out our publication [Audiences and Inclusion: A Primer for Cultivating More Inclusive Attitudes Among the Public](#) and our Data Story ["Beware! The False Consensus Effect"](#) for tips.

Responses from people who have a more **"Open"** mindset framed history rather differently. There were still certainly some clichéd answers (though fewer of them).



Instead, more Open respondents tended to explore ideas of how history helps us understand what it means to be a part of humanity, to empathize with others, and to be more inclusive. These responses tended to also talk about the future, but through the lens of hope rather than simply not repeating past mistakes.



"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."



"Without museums, people couldn't learn about the world and other places/viewpoints/people without prejudice. People couldn't sit down and appreciate art - to appreciate humanity in its barest form, no matter how it's expressed. To connect with something someone did decades/centuries/even further ago, to understand that we're all the human race. We're HUMAN and we're in this together. Without museums, we don't learn that."

There was also a shared value that crossed the spectrum from **Resistant to Open** mindsets:

That history is vital to anchoring our society, and knowing who we are in this moment in time.

"Museums, like the night sky, offer a time and place to reflect on who and what we are, where we came from, and where we are going--and if we want to go there. Without this, we may become more self-focused, forget the wisdom of our ancestors, and forget to consider the very real consequences of our decisions. That sounds dangerous to me..."

"Museums literally are representations of society--touchstones to where we are in space and time. Communities without museums would be like dry husks! I would be different without museums. I learn so much about the topic at hand and, through this, my place in this society."

As we enter the 2024 election year, as well as the America 250 commemoration, these divided opinions on history will likely become more entrenched. History museums will face many challenges navigating this landscape.

But we don't want to over-amplify more Resistant viewpoints, as we estimate that most U.S. adults and frequent museum-goers want museums to tell a more complete and honest history.

Instead, it's important to remember that most people support the work of museums to explore our shared history and humanity, connecting us to one another, and enriching our visitors and our communities. We'll explore more of these ideas, including shared values that can support this work, in upcoming *Data Stories*.

More Data Stories can be found at wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories.