

MUSEUMS AND NEUTRALITY: TAKING POSITIONS IN A POLARIZED SOCIETY

A 2020 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY



Museums are not neutral.
Or are they? Like in many things, our audiences disagree on neutrality: whether museums are neutral or not, or even if neutrality is a desirable goal.

We asked how audiences *really* felt about neutrality. The overall results showed that a majority of museum-goers *did* think museums can take a position ... though largely with limits.

28%
Museums should always be neutral

7%

Museums can take a position on issues that most people would agree with

54%

Museums can take an evidence-backed, mission-based position

7%

Museums can take positions AND should be more activist on social justice issues

But within these results lies a rather stark divide.

Over half of Traditional audiences thought museums should *always* be neutral, no matter the issue ... a rate over 5x higher than more Neoteric audiences.¹



And 4/5 of Neoteric audiences said a museum can take a position ... vs. only a third of Traditional audiences.

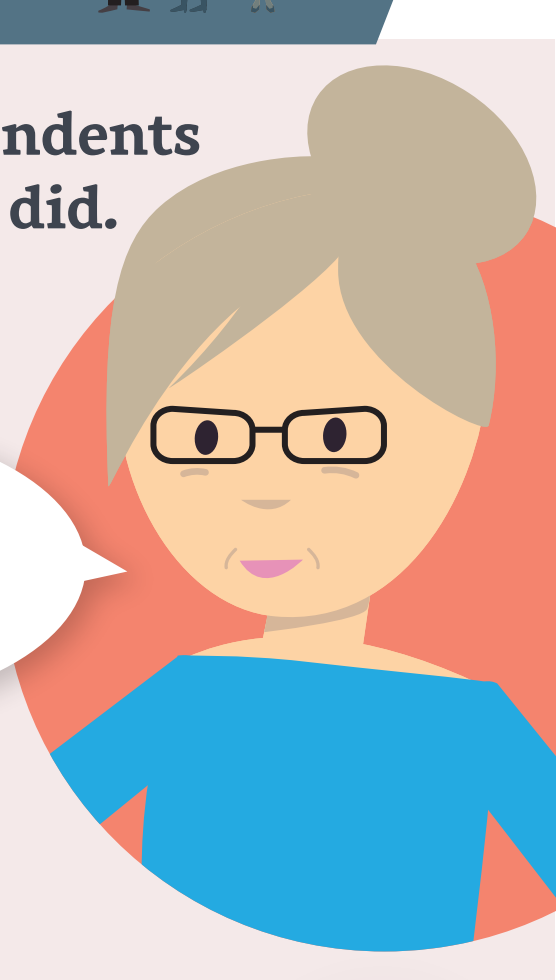


To learn more, we asked respondents why they answered as they did.

For those who said neutrality, the focus was overwhelmingly on facts and self-determination.

Most noticeably, Traditional audiences appeared to want the safety of neutrality in museums ... and not to be challenged: about a third of the "neutral" respondents gave more defensive responses, saying it was *inappropriate* for museums to take a position.

"Present the facts and let us make up our own mind."



"Simple enough...how dare you tell me how to think or what to feel!"

"If I want to be preached to I will go to church."



For those who said museums can take a position, they were not giving museums carte blanche to take positions on just *anything*. There was a strong sense that museums should "stay in your lane."

"I don't believe museums should be involved in political advocacy, but should be able to speak on issues regarding their mission and present facts to the argument."



Additionally, more Neoteric audiences were **5 times** more likely than Traditional audiences to seek mind-expanding experiences ... even if it challenged what they personally believed.

"This may challenge each of us as visitors to evaluate our established views/opinions. Visiting museums provides each of us with critical opportunities for personal growth and development."



They were also **9 times** more likely to say that there is no such thing as neutral.



"There is no such thing as being truly neutral, and there must be action for anti-racist, anti-ableist, etc., work. There is a difference between having information about oppression and doing something about it."



So how do museums navigate this?

While the majority of museum-goers *do* say museums can take a position, *how* we take that position is critical:

- 1 Use evidence (and show your work!)
- 2 Be clear to distinguish that evidence from conclusions or positions
- 3 Make the link to your mission explicit
- 4 Explain why neutrality isn't an option
- 5 Invite audiences to tell you why they agree or disagree
- 6 And be open to their responses, regardless of whether you agree



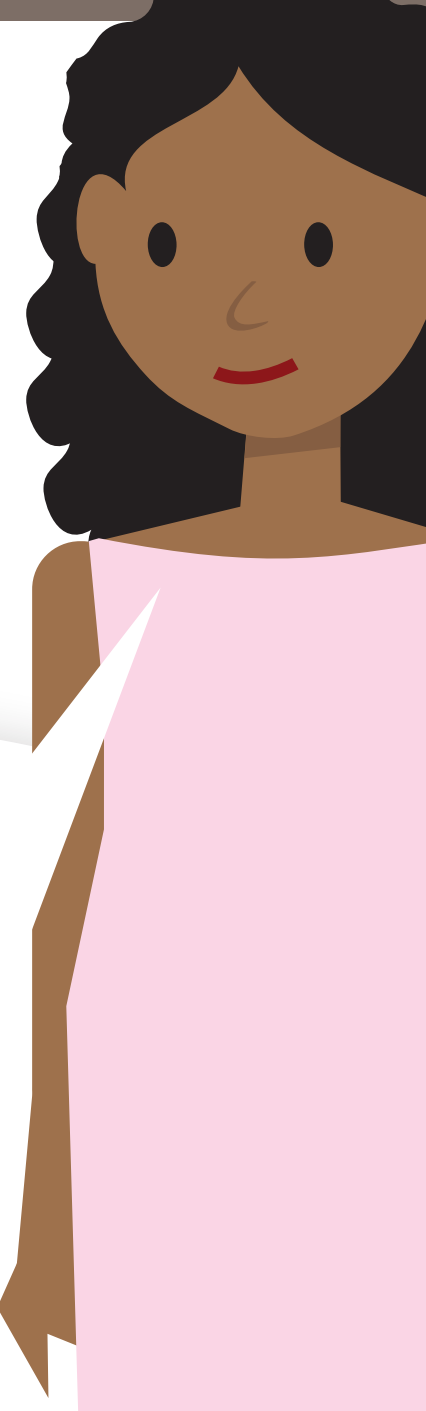
Mutual respect matters.



Because thinking critically, broadening worldviews, promoting inclusion, and improving lives do matter to our society ... and contributes mightily to the impact museums are capable of having.



"It's important to spark educated dialogue. I think when museums serve as simple repositories of information most visitors are left unengaged or unaffected and walk away with little to no change to their lives. I think institutions like museums have an opportunity to put forth well-researched and fact-based concepts that challenge visitors to think more critically and contribute to a more solutions-based dialogue on how to improve society as a whole. These institutions exist to serve and improve society, they are not catacombs of content."



Annual Survey of Museum-Goers Data Stories are created by Wilkening Consulting on behalf of the American Alliance of Museums. Sources include:
 • 2020 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers
 • 2020 Broader Population Sampling
 • 2020 Online Pandemic Panel of Museum-Goers (ongoing)
 • 2017 - 2019 Annual Surveys of Museum-Goers

*Data Stories share research about both museum-goers (who visit multiple museums each year) and the broader population (including casual and non-visitors to museums).

¹See our Data Story "Worldviews, Clusters, and Intuitive Epistemology: An Introduction" that explains these categories

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