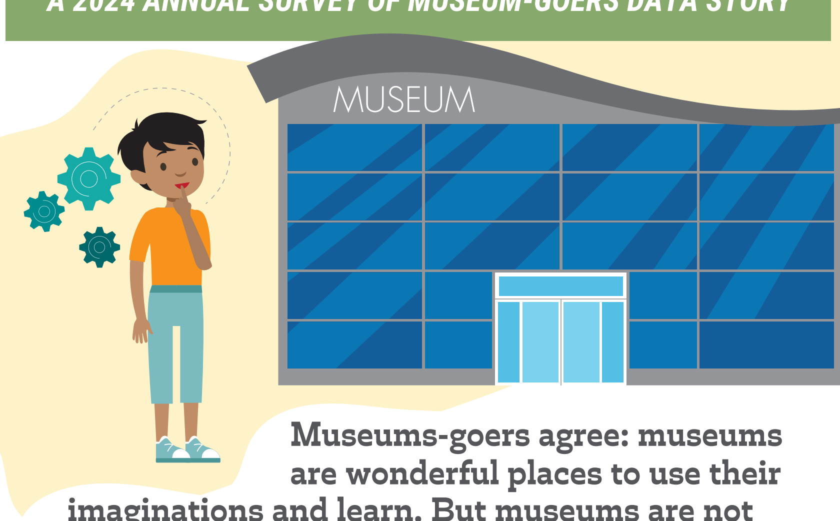
IMAGINATIVE LEARNING IN MUSEUMS, PART 3: IMAGINATION OUTSIDE THE MUSEUM

A 2024 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY



Museums-goers agree: museums are wonderful places to use their imaginations and learn. But museums are not the *only* places that do this. After all, we all use our imaginations in our day-to-day lives in a myriad of ways.

We wanted to learn more about imaginative learning experiences, and asked museum-goers this open-ended question:

? Aside from museums, what other kinds of things or experiences inspire your imagination? This could be from your day-to-day life, when you do something for fun, in your work, on vacation, or any other time. Why do those things inspire your imagination, and why is that type of experience important to you?

Out of our randomly-chosen coding sample, nearly half of respondents (44%) took time to write in a response. We hand-coded those 3,491 responses to see what they shared.

So many things inspire their imaginations!

Respondents were generous in sharing what kinds of activities inspire their imagination ... over 80% shared one or more things, and we ended up coding 15 different categories.

Two things, however, were mentioned far more than anything else:

Reading

"Reading a variety of topics helps inspire my imagination."

Nature

"Being in nature or experiencing nature--fountains, seeing natural light, sounds of birds. It's calming but inspires curiosity and imagination."

Other responses that were popular included:

- Outdoor activities (e.g., walking, recreation)
- Travel, especially international
- Music and concerts
- Arts, crafts, writing, and other creative activities

Overall, the activities shared fall squarely within the missions of museums. They all had art, history, nature, science, culture, and creative expression at their heart.

About a quarter of respondents went on to give **attributes** of their imaginative experiences. These are descriptors that could apply to any number of different activities, but expressed more about what made the experiences compelling.

Three stood out:

Social experiences.

These respondents emphasized that, for them, sharing the experience with others was important. Typically, they mentioned family, but it could also be friends, neighbors, or strangers.

"The most important thing is to do things that connect me more with my family (wife and children), doing things that make us laugh but also teach, that allow us to have a good topic of conversation after the activity, but above all, laugh a lot."

Immersive.

The imaginative experiences needed to take them to a different time and/or place, or were multi-sensory. Younger respondents were more likely to mention this, and respondents over the age of 60 were less likely.

"I play D&D regularly, which sparks my imagination and energizes me, creatively. I love spending time with my friends, imagining another world and spending a few hours a week immersing ourselves in it. It gives us a chance to be people we wish we could be, or imagine entirely different groups of people and cultures."

Facilitation.

For some, having a teacher or guide to lead the experience gave them structure to learn new things, be surprised, or have support to try things on their own.

"I like trying to do an art class, creating something with guidance - I struggle to be inspired or have self-confidence to do it solo, as I know my art is not great, but I enjoy the process of it, especially with others in the room."

Just under a quarter of respondents shared what kinds of **outcomes** they felt from their imaginative learning experiences. But those that did so overwhelmingly had positive things to say. Outcomes included:

Mind-broadening and introspection.

Using their imaginations not only opened up their minds to different ideas and perspectives, but gave them room to be thoughtful and consider (or reconsider) their own ideas.

"Podcasts, documentaries, books, and movies. All these things can show a new perspective or knowledge to me, make me think how to connect to existing knowledge, or sometimes it just broke my perception and built a totally new idea."

Connecting with others.

Most respondents shared they felt more connected to community members or people with different worldviews and life experiences, as well as a general connection to humanity.

"Engaging with my hobbies like writing, painting, and cooking also help to inspire me. I think these inspire me because they connect me to other people and their imaginations which then in turn helps me to better connect to the human condition as a whole, becoming a more compassionate, understanding, and empathetic individual in the process."

Respite, relaxation, and wellbeing.

Finding these outlets of imagination are good for us! These respondents shared how they use their imaginations to relieve stress and feel more fulfilled.

"I enjoy outdoor experiences where I can connect with nature and clear my head. That is really the only time when I can quiet all the stress that is constantly clouding my thoughts and truly relax and think clearly."

Throughout virtually all of the responses, however, was an implied thread: imaginative learning opens people to new things, ideas, or perspectives, and that the activities they shared are catalysts to those experiences. That these experiences are vital to their lives, their wellbeing, and their relationships with others.

Given they already think of museums as places of imaginative learning, those are powerful outcomes that museums can explicitly support and encourage, especially in turbulent times when hope may feel distant or challenging.

Which brings us to the next topic: hope for the future ... and how we can use imagination to envision a more positive future for the humans on this planet.

"[Imaginative experiences] inspire because they evoke emotions, make me wonder, and inspire me to share with my kids. It's important to keep our minds going and growing. I want my kids to have open minds and be loving and caring humans."

Annual Survey of Museum-Goers Data Stories are created by Wilkening Consulting on behalf of the American Alliance of Museums. Sources include:
- *2024 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, n = 90,178; 202 museums participating*
- *2024 Broader Population Sampling, n = 2,154*
- *2017 - 2023 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, sporadic, and non-visitors to museums).

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

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