

# THE PURPOSE OF LEARNING

## A 2020 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY



Museums are about learning. Indeed, 2/3 of museum-goers explicitly visit museums in order "to learn."

But while learning has a broad mandate, there isn't as much agreement about its purpose.



That is, while most people agree that learning should deepen knowledge in areas one is already interested in, there is less agreement about learning as a way to expand worldviews and perspectives.

Of course,

these purposes are not mutually exclusive. In the Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, we wanted to probe deeper than pre-existing interests, and so we asked participants to weigh in specifically on three other ways they might engage with museum content.



This was an open-ended question, and responses were coded to not only understand preferences, but also nuance around their answers.

For the majority of respondents, the response to the knowledge-gaining experiences we asked about were positive.

Creates a deep and personal connection

Exposes us to different customs or perspectives

Challenges our beliefs and views of the world

All three!



*I feel strongly that museums have the potential to forge a connection between ourselves and a life and time beyond ourselves.*

*I like to be exposed to different customs. It's a big world and I am exposed to such a small part of the world. I want a museum to expand my world.*

*I welcome challenges to my current beliefs and perspectives. Without challenges and new information, I would not grow as a person.*

*I would tend to skip facilities where "none of these things happen."*

But as with most things, individual values, attitudes, and beliefs came into play.

Those who are more Traditional<sup>1</sup> in their viewpoints were significantly more likely to skip the question entirely (an indicator that the experiences listed may not have felt as relevant to them).

Traditionals that did answer the question were significantly less likely to choose any of the three types of experiences.

Instead, a significant percentage defaulted to a "just the facts, I'll make up my own mind" response and/or were defensive.



*"Don't go to all the nationalities and blend it to the crisis of the month. This is America ... stay American."*

*"If I want exposure to new and different, I'll get it somewhere else. Not at all interested in my beliefs being challenged. In fact, my participation with museums is for personal grounding and affirmation."*

In contrast,

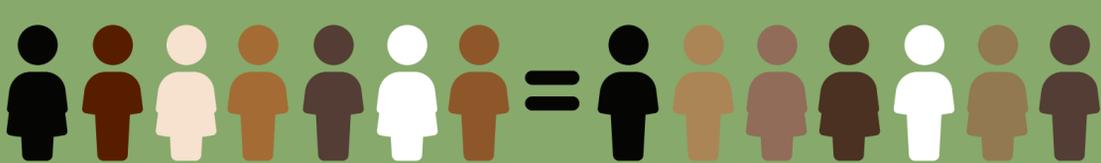
those who were more Neoteric seemed to relish being intellectually challenged. Consistent with their higher levels of eudaemonic curiosity<sup>2</sup>, they exhibited more comfort with discomfort and had a greater willingness to expand their worldviews.

*"We should always be challenged, we should always keep learning. If there is no discomfort, there is no growth."*



*"I always prefer to be exposed to new customs and have my views challenged by other perspectives. Particularly when those perspectives represent a diverse voice. That is the beautiful thing about learning and education -- I don't go to a museum to have my worldview confirmed."*

The difference between these approaches, more Traditional or more Neoteric, matter deeply. It can make the difference between reinforcing preferred worldviews versus a more inclusive approach to others that is necessary to help create a more equitable society.



*"I think challenging beliefs and views is important in this day and time but with a purpose. I think the purpose should be to be of benefit to the local community and to bring people together. In this day and age we need more and more communication across differences. The model of education where 'every man for themselves' is insufficient in this day of climate catastrophe and new political challenges. Just going for personal experiences is insufficient."*

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).  
<sup>1</sup>See our Data Story "Worldviews, Clusters, and Intuitive Epistemology" for definitions of the Traditional and Neoteric clusters  
<sup>2</sup>See our Data Story "Curiosity, A Primer" for more about eudaemonic curiosity

More Data Stories can be found at [wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories](http://wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories)



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