

Respite and Museums



As more people struggle to cope emotionally and mentally with the pandemic, places of respite are increasingly important. Traditionally, as a field, we've often talked about our museums as being just those kinds of places ... and indeed, our pandemic panelists have talked specifically about botanical gardens, art museums, and zoos and aquaria serving that role.



To learn more, we asked a direct question about respite this fall. Interestingly, we received some pushback. Some felt that since museums are places of curiosity, learning, and ideas, they are not go-to places for respite.



"I don't view most museums as a place of respite ... I tend to view museums as places of growth and learning ... going through the exhibits sparks curiosity and engagement, which doesn't feel like respite to me. It's certainly not a negative, and I often leave feeling fulfilled, but I wouldn't associate it with respite."

"I do not usually think of museums as a place of respite in the context of needing a mental health break or a getaway because when I go to museums, my brain is still fully engaged - reading the information, considering why some info was presented over other parts that were omitted, considering the angle in which the info was presented ..."



This suggests that, for some, learning and intellectual growth is perceived as mutually exclusive to respite. This idea has come up in previous Annual Surveys of Museum-Goers research, indicating our panelists are not outliers.



For other panelists, museums were seen as places of respite ... under normal conditions. But they felt that in the age of COVID, their concerns about safety precluded any respite they might gain by visiting a museum now. Given significantly reduced attendance at museums, this is likely a mainstream opinion.¹



"I would normally consider the art museum to be a respite from the world ... [but] I don't want to feel stressed worrying someone will invade my 6-foot space to view a painting."



"I don't think I'd feel comfortable or restive in a museum anymore, not while the pandemic is going on."



Virtual museum options for respite received mixed responses from our panelists. Some were skeptical that virtual museum experiences could provide respite, while others were finding just that:



"At this point, most people are so tired of living life through their screens that it's got to be particularly exceptional to keep them plugged in a moment longer than necessary."

"I am utterly impressed with the creativity, dedication, professionalism, and dynamic energy of these two museums! Being involved with them gives me great joy, relaxation, motivation, and ideas for how I can offer virtual excitement and respite to my own students. They are key to my being able to survive with style, while I continue to maintain quite strict isolation ..."



And then there is inclusion. Does inclusive content make museums more or less of a place of respite? Panelist responses reflected a spectrum of attitudes seen in our deeper research on inclusion in museums.

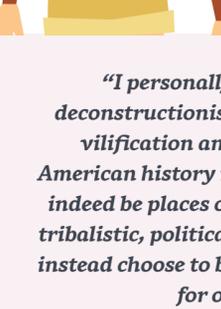
For most white people, inclusive content appears to generally make museums less of a place of escape ... and individual values, attitudes, and beliefs affect whether that is a net positive or negative.

For those with more inclusive Neoteric² perspectives, the growth and challenge that inclusive content brings to white people precludes respite ... but there is general consensus that inclusion is the priority.



"I think there's a privilege in having an escape from today's challenges, but that's what respite feels like for me these days. Not having to hear about politics or COVID allows my mind to take a break so I can feel at peace before having to return to reality ... Museums should be an inclusive place, and diverse perspectives are a key piece of that. To do that means escapism can't also be a focus. Those feel mutually exclusive to me. Maybe they're not, but I feel that growth and discomfort go hand in hand, and respite has to be separate."

For anti-inclusive white people, inclusive content appears to represent the opposite of respite.



"I personally am completely fed up with the postmodernist deconstructionist blaming, fault-finding, name-calling, and general vilification and demonization of western culture generally and American history in particular ... To put it differently, museums should indeed be places of respite where we can get aware from the atomized, tribalistic, political 'discourse' that has infected our society. But if they instead choose to be super-spreaders of that sort of divisive narrative, I for one will darken their doorstep no more."



Yet inclusion is respite for many people of color or those with marginalized identities ... and being inclusive signals that yes, museums are a place for all to be part of the stories shared.



"In respite in present day, I think it's about telling stories with or by the perspective of the marginalized. So many museums favor the narratives of the soldiers or colonists, but don't elevate the voices of enslaved people or indigenous folks. I think museums should acknowledge respite, I don't consider it to be a negative thing. For many folks with marginalized identities, respite is significant to our existence. For every story of triumph and resilience, there is a story of loss or objectification."

"I want the art museum to be a refuge during times like these, but not in the typical sense of the word. I believe when most people hear that term they immediately think of an 'escape' from the weightiness resulting from certain topics or awful things going on in the world. However, I want the museum to be a refuge as in being a place where they acknowledge and don't shy away from what's happening and where discourse is welcomed and encouraged. I want the museum to be a place where their actions align with whatever they've personally pledged to do, for their part, to encourage inclusion."³



So respite and escape isn't a straightforward thing that museums can provide in this moment. The tensions and constraints around learning, safety, virtual engagement, and inclusion complicates our ability to serve our audiences in this way. Understanding these constraints, however, do make it possible for us to consider creative new ways to provide respite and escape more creatively, and more equitably, to the public.

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

¹See AAM's "A Snapshot of US Museums' Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic"
²See our 2020 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers Data Story "Worldviews, Clusters, and Intuitive Epistemology" for definitions of the Traditional and Neoteric clusters
³Mississippi: Art, History, and Civic Engagement (Mississippi Museum of Art)

*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).

The entire series of Museums and the Pandemic Data Stories can be found at wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories.

