



## Relevancy in a Tumultuous 2020

2020 HAS BEEN A YEAR of historic pandemic, economic devastation, and civil and racial unrest. And all of us are grappling with the changes these three things are causing in our communities.

We asked our Pandemic Panelists what they thought museums should be doing to help their communities amidst these three challenges.

For science museums and centers, panelists wanted them to do, well, science

*“I would love to see interactive exhibits explaining how COVID operates, how it spreads, and the ways it impacts our communities. There are so many factors we need to consider before making decisions about anything pandemic-related: the economy, local culture, the health of our community.”*



*“Science museums can continue to be trusted sources of information and lay out the facts. Countering falsities might be a way to combat mistruths about the science and its impacts.”*

And for art museums, botanic gardens, and zoos and aquaria, they emphasized their value for respite and mental health.



*“In many cases, these institutions provide palliative care. I do not damn their offerings with faint praise. On the contrary, if we all felt just a little bit better, many of our more intractable problems would seem less overwhelming. Most of this panel has already enjoyed or currently yearns for the beauty, peace, and contentment that our art museums, gardens, zoos, and other similar institutions provide in abundance.”*



*“Botanical gardens and zoos that are mostly outside are wonderful. We need to make sure they are open ... they bring peace and joy and a sense of normalcy that so many people need.”*

But they reserved the majority of their comments for history museums, indicating that history is their most critical need.

It boiled down to one thing:

# race.

And most of these comments were demands, from both white people and people of color, for a

**more inclusive history.**

**Why?**



*“History museums: finally, I think we may have reached the proverbial tipping point. People who couldn't imagine how bad things are for minorities are realizing it. This could be a time for history museums to produce an unbiased exhibit about the country's history.”*



*“African Americans have been beaten down for four centuries and finally we Caucasians are coming to the realization of that fact as well as the fact we have privilege. So history museums can help take the lead in making exhibits more factual and history organizations can be more critical of 'mainstream' history and acknowledge that much of what we have previously 'honored' should be disposed of as it never should have been honored in the first place.”*

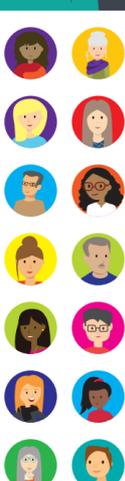
*“Yes! Growing up, I frequently questioned why so many slave owners and imperialists took up so much space in museums and historic sites. Many organizations are starting to address this. The harm that folks have done in the name of Western culture. Acknowledging the harm causes would do so much good and I think bring a more inviting atmosphere for marginalized folks.”*



This doesn't mean that panelists (or the museum-goers they represent) are unanimous on this ... far from it.



*“People need now more than ever to hear the true history of these figures (even if they were white men, God forbid!). Our historical figures may not have been perfect, but some sacrificed greatly for what they believed in ... These are times when we need to bring people together and highlight ideals that we can all believe in - not focus on our differences or things that tear people apart.”*



But in this panel, those more traditional voices were clearly outnumbered by those who are seeking a more complete history to inform how we move forward into a more equitable future.



**Because**

*“... museums need to become part of the discussion on the streets if they are going to have a meaningful role in putting our society back together after all the shattering experiences of this year.”*

We couldn't ignore these comments, and we followed up with an additional, very direct set of questions on museums and race. Those responses will be used to inform and understand results around audience attitudes towards diversity, equity, access, and inclusion from the 2020 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, scheduled for release in fall 2020.



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

\*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](http://wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories).