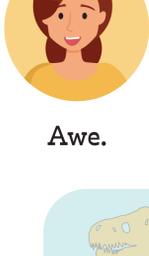
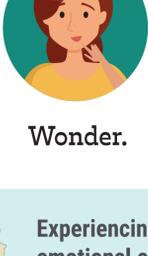


RESPECTING VISITOR VALUES: AUDIENCE PERCEPTIONS

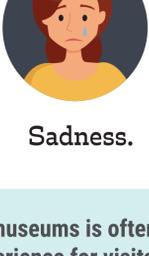
A 2022 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY



Awe.



Wonder.



Sadness.

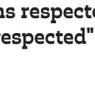


Shock.



Experiencing museums is often an emotional experience for visitors. For the most part, those emotions have a net beneficial effect as we marvel at nature or human creation ... or have our hearts broken by disaster or tragedy others have experienced (and promise "never again").

But sometimes, the emotional response is anger, and it's not the productive kind. Instead, it is a defensive anger when visitors don't feel their values have been respected.

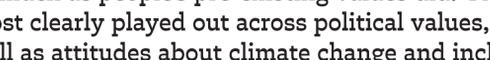


We see this come up in written-in comments frequently enough that we included a set of questions on this in the 2022 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers.



Our first question asked, on a scale of 0 to 10, if museums respected the personal values of respondents. We used the word "respected" deliberately, and not words like validated or reinforced.

Respected.



Overall, frequent museum-goers averaged 8.1.



And over half gave museums a 9 or a 10!

Demographics didn't affect people's responses nearly as much as people's pre-existing values did. This most clearly played out across political values, as well as attitudes about climate change and inclusion (which often correlate strongly with political values).

CLIMATE CHANGE ATTITUDES



ATTITUDES TOWARDS INCLUSION



POLITICAL VALUES



To learn more, respondents received an open-ended follow-up question that asked them to tell us more about their answer. We then hand-coded responses.¹



Three-quarters of frequent-museum goers gave museums an 8 or higher, and we asked them to reflect on their values and feelings in museum settings. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive, and covered a wide variety of topics including:

- Inclusion/DEAI (in favor)
- Educational values
- Being challenged in museums
- Escape and respite
- Inspiration and awe



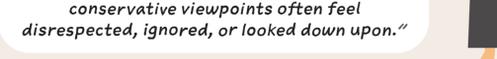
Overall, these responses validated the impact that we hope to engender in our visitors. Responses are generally positive and heart-warming.



"I am queer and simply don't want to feel targeted, insulted, or threatened. My local museums are good about welcoming me as a fellow citizen and human."



"Museums are a deeply important part of preserving, celebrating, and critically examining culture, history, and the world around us."



While only a quarter of frequent museum-goers gave museums a 7 or lower, it's important to pick apart the why of this lower response. So, we asked these respondents why they felt the way they did, and to share examples of when they didn't feel museums had respected their values in the past.

There were three main categories of responses, and they correlated tightly with political values.

Amplifying vs. Over-amplifying Critical Comments

We are human. And that means we tend to obsess about critical comments (while ignoring positive ones). This can lead to over-amplification of criticisms.

In this survey, only a quarter of respondents gave museums a 7 or lower. I in 4. So while we are picking apart the criticisms because it is useful to understand, we don't want you to over-amplify them.

Remember, three-quarters gave museums an 8 or higher!

1 Museums have perpetuated exclusion/not been sensitive to different cultures

These respondents tended to say things about how museums have historically excluded women, people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, and other marginalized groups in their content, and express that museums should do better (sometimes noting that museums are doing better, but more work is to be done). They also expressed that museums have been agents of colonization, exhibit human remains (and that it is inappropriate to do so), or have objects that should be repatriated to the cultures that created them.

"Museums often hold stolen and extracted artifacts."

"Too many museums still tell history from a dominant white male viewpoint."

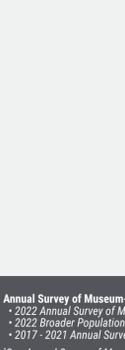


2 Museums have become too woke or liberal/they have succumbed to identity politics and revisionist history

These respondents expressed, well, basically the polar opposite sentiments than the first category. They used word and liberal as pejorative terms, said their "traditional" values were not respected, expressed high degrees of skepticism to science (including climate change, evolution, etc.), or were critical of health and safety precautions museums have taken during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The Great Awokening is wearing us all down, I grow annoyed at the impositions at almost every turn."

"Museums and society in general today seem to cater mostly to those with a progressive world view. Those with differing or more conservative viewpoints often feel disrespected, ignored, or looked down upon."



3 Perplexed (more moderate response)

While we anticipated the first and second categories, this one surprised us a bit. Moderates generally felt more perplexed by the question in the first place, or catering to the wide spectrum of values that exist. Since they felt neither were possible, these respondents gave a lower rating.

"My values cannot be respected if they are not known."

"... personal values for all people span such a wide spectrum ... it is ridiculous to expect a museum to respect everyone's values."



So what does this all come down to? Overall, museums appear to be positively viewed as places that provoke thinking, learning, and emotional responses. That's good! But the responses also reflect a continuing theme: museums are not neutral places.² As many museums strive to be inclusive places for all human beings, there will be some visitors who strongly disagree with that approach. And there will be others who will say we are still not doing enough. Neutrality is thus impossible.

Which reinforces that individual museums need to have a strong sense of what their institutional values are, and share them with their visitors. This more transparent approach helps set expectations of visitors, backs up your work, and provides a more supportive work environment for staff who interact daily with visitors ... of all different values and backgrounds.

Annual Survey of Museum-Goers Data Stories are created by Wilkening Consulting on behalf of the American Alliance of Museums. Sources include:
 • 2022 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, n = 90,747, 166 museums participating
 • 2022 Broader Population Sampling, n = 1,017
 • 2017 - 2021 Annual Surveys of Museum-Goers
¹See Annual Survey of Museum-Goers: Purpose and Methodology (2022 Update) Data Story, released September 13, 2022.
²See Murawski, 2017; Rodriguez, 2017; Sentence, 2018; Autry and Murawski, 2019.
 *Data Stories share research about both frequent museum-goers (typically visit multiple museums each year) and the broader population (including casual and non-visitors to museums). See the Purpose and Methodology (Update) Data Story from September 13, 2022 for more information on methodology.

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



Data Story release date: December 8, 2022

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