



SEA CHANGE

Museums Must Prepare for Demographic Shifts

BY *Betty Farrell and Maria Medvedeva*

How will people use museums in the future? And which people will use them?

Much of the future is unknown and unpredictable. But, as futurists point out, we can imagine potential futures, assess the likelihood of different scenarios and then explore what actions museums might take now to adapt to possible changes.

Broad patterns of demographic change are already transforming the social landscape of the United States, remaking communities and reconfiguring the lives of Americans. Museums of different sizes, types and missions are developing new strategies to engage with more diverse audiences. We need to examine these profound shifts against a backdrop of complex social forces. One particularly important issue is race (or ethnicity) as an inescapable category for examining demographic change. Another is age (or generation) as an indicator of other social changes that may have a larger impact on the way people approach and experience museums.

The most notable U.S. demographic trend over the last three decades has been the growth of the Hispanic population, rising from 6.4 percent to 15.1 percent between 1980 and 2008, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The racial composition of the U.S. also became more diverse during this period,

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with the share of the white population decreasing from 83 percent to 74 percent and the proportion of African Americans, Asian and Pacific Islanders, and those identifying themselves by some other race or multiple races growing as a proportion of the American population.

By 2050, the Hispanic/Latino populations will have doubled again to comprise 30 percent of the U.S. population, with the percentage of Asian Pacific Americans increasing more slowly and the percentage of African Americans holding steady at 12 percent to 13 percent. Sometime between 2040 and 2050, depending on which projection model is employed, the current U.S. minority groups—including those who identify themselves as multi-racial—will collectively become the new majority in the United States. The proportion of non-Hispanic whites will fall below 50 percent for the first time since the country was founded.

The shift to a “majority minority” society in the U.S. portends profound changes; at the very least, the definition of “mainstream” will have to be revised. Will the social gap between racial and ethnic groups widen, leading to increased social segregation and cultural fragmentation? Will the rapidly growing Hispanic population identify more with non-Hispanic whites or with other U.S. minority groups? Or will these boundaries blur altogether and new patterns of American multiculturalism emerge? Any such changes certainly affect museums and their communities, so we should consider the potential consequences.



When results from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) were published in June 2009, there was a collective gasp from arts funders, cultural practitioners and the arts-going public at

the downward turn in attendance (since the previous survey in 2002) among NEA’s “benchmark arts”—defined as “attendance at jazz, classical music, opera, musical plays, non-musical plays, and ballet performances, and visits to art museums or art galleries.” The figures also represented a precipitous decline since the first survey in 1982. Staff at art museums and galleries (the only museum type consistently included in the SPPA) may have breathed more easily after that first gasp, since their attendance figures looked much better than the numbers for other cultural organizations. Any relief, however, would be short-lived as readers turned to the detailed analysis. The document shows a persistent connection between race, ethnicity and cultural participation and the slow but steady decline in attendance at traditional “high culture” activities.

Non-Hispanic white Americans were over-represented among adult art museum visitors in 2008 (78.9 percent of visitors, although whites constitute just 68.7 percent of the U.S. population), while Hispanics and African Americans were significantly underrepresented. Indeed, members of minority racial and ethnic groups were less likely to participate in the arts across the full range of activities measured in the survey. Between 1992 and 2008, the gap between the percentage of white and non-white Americans who visit art museums also grew steadily.

The SPPA asks primarily about art museum and gallery attendance rather than the full range of museums and their visitors. Fortunately, other data can fill in some of the gaps. For example, a 2006 survey of “in-person or virtual visits” to a broader range of museums conducted by the Institute of Museum and Library Services found Asian Americans to have the highest participation rates for art museums (36.6 percent) and science/technology museums (34.1 percent). Whites had the highest visitor rates in historic houses/sites (37.3 percent) and history museums (24.3 percent), and Hispanics had the highest rates in natural history museums (25.3 percent). African Americans had the lowest participation rates (ranging from 18 percent to 22 percent) across all categories of museum types in this study.

Surveys vary somewhat, but the overall pattern is clear. The burning question is, why? What can explain the persistent disparity in racial and ethnic participation in major cultural institutions—and especially in museums?

Researchers and scholars have offered explanations for the differences in racial and ethnic patterns in museum attendance, including historically grounded cultural barriers to participation, a lack of specialized knowledge and cultivated aesthetic taste, a weak tradition of museum-going habits and the influence of social networks that encourage leisure activities other than museum visits. Museum attendance has also been affected by changing patterns of work and leisure in the United States and the changing structure and dynamic of family life. Work and family structures are shaped by race, ethnicity and social class in ways that may hinder museum-going by members of minority groups. And factors such as where people live, museum locations, transportation options and financial barriers to entry, which

Where Do We Go from Here?

A Call to Action

BY Elizabeth E. Merritt

often correlate to race and ethnicity, can limit museum attendance.

African Americans and Latinos have notably lower rates of museum attendance than white Americans, in part due to historic discrimination. A summary study of SPPA data from the 1980s on white and black attendance at arts events concluded that the measurable difference in participation could be tied to “subtle forms of exclusion.” Museum researcher and author John Falk points to historic patterns of segregation and exclusion as one reason that comparatively fewer African American families instill museum-going habits in their young children. Marketing studies (such as Paul DiMaggio and Francie Ostrower’s 1990 report “Participation in the Arts by Black and White Americans”) suggest that African Americans are more likely to attend events characterized by black themes and in which blacks are well represented among performers, staff and audience members. This was dubbed the “FUBU test”—for us, by us—in a 2008 report by audience researchers Chloe Chittick and Peter Linett. This research is further supported by an Urban Institute survey finding that African American and Hispanic participants are more likely than others to list the desire to “celebrate heritage” and “support a community organization” as reasons to attend arts and cultural events.

Studies focusing specifically on Latino attitudes toward museums have produced similar insights. A 2008 report for the Smithsonian National Museum of American History found that second-generation Latino survey respondents have “very strong expectations that museums should include diverse staff, bilingual interpretation, Latino perspectives and some Latino-themed content.” Even though many Latino museum visitors in this study were English-speaking, they still appreciated bilingual signs as “signals” that museums are inclusive and welcoming to immigrant families and non-English speakers.

It’s clear from this report’s case studies that there are many things museums, individually and as a field, can do now. AAM will launch the next stage in this discussion with its own call to action. On behalf of the association, I hereby challenge myself and my colleagues in the museum field to:

- Broaden our sense of identity. I worry less about defining what a museum is and more about identifying other places that perform some of the same functions that we do or that we aspire to. What can we learn from other public spaces where people choose to spend time socializing, talking and learning: libraries, community centers, even coffee shops and bubble tea stores? We need museums to be places where people want to hang out, not just places they feel they ought to visit.
- Take responsibility for learning, in depth, about the communities we want to serve. My major take-away from this research is that diversity is fractal. When you take a closer look at categories, they break down into subgroups that contain just as much complexity—right down to the level of the individual. Look and listen to understand the nuances of your communities’ shared and different needs.
- Invest in the diversity of the field. Right now only 20 percent of museum employees are minority. Eighty percent of museum studies students are white and 80 percent are female. We need to tackle this problem at all stages—increase awareness of museum careers, recruit more diverse students into museum studies programs and look outside traditional training programs for bright, interested people and then invest in their continued education.
- Heed the Millennials’ call for participatory and social activities in museums. There is a rapidly emerging consensus that the most successful museums of the future will be places to hang out, engage and contribute. They will be moderators and filters of contributed wisdom and diverse perspectives, in addition to being sources of scholarship and opinion.

- Take the lead in building a new era! It is always more comfortable to stick with what we have always done well than to test new ways of operating. But be positive about your ability to make your museum matter to groups that are not core visitors now. And don’t expect it to happen without a lot of deep thought and hard work.

AAM and its Center for the Future of Museums pledge to keep driving this conversation forward. Together with you, we will build a bright vision of the future of museums.

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Museums seeking to attract and keep a more diverse group of users will need to consider carefully what “diversity” means for their audiences (race and ethnicity according to currently defined categories—or something else?), how their audiences and communities are changing (for example, which minority groups continue to be under-represented?) and what “diversity” is likely to mean in the future (will there be new multiracial, multiethnic group identities with different experiences and expectations?).

The term “majority minority” brings together disparate groups of people in the United States who now constitute a minority of the population and who frequently share an outsider status but are already in the process of becoming a collective majority. But will these groups actually form a coherent whole? Will they find common ground in experiences, perceptions, motivations and tastes that museums can use to develop strategies for community engagement? Or will Latinos, African Americans, Asian Pacific Americans, Native Americans and others continue to be separate groups with more differences than commonalities—all of them remaining minorities by virtue of their size—who will need to be reached through different kinds of museum strategies and programs? These are not merely academic questions; they suggest the need for museum staff to understand the demographic patterns of their changing communities in highly nuanced ways.

Many racial and ethnic groups support culturally specific museums and exhibitions that relate to their own heritage, history and traditions. But culturally specific museums that attempt to reach across established group boundaries and explore similarities and differences between groups are breaking new ground. For example, the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago worked with members of the local Latino and African American communities to produce “The African

Presence in Mexico: From Yanga to the Present,” an exhibition that received international acclaim for raising awareness about the complex history of race and ethnicity in Mexico. And the Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle, a cultural center serving the Asian Pacific American community, has long promoted cross-cultural understanding among the many groups and nationalities that are categorized as Asian, especially through “community response” exhibitions that are planned as a collaborative effort between curators and community members.

Museums such as these are building canopies under which dialogues among disparate groups can take place in a safe environment. In the process, they forge a new role for themselves as cultural agents helping to foster civic dialogue about race, ethnicity, immigration and culture in their changing communities.



Race and ethnicity are persistent factors in American life, and that’s not going to change anytime soon. But attitudes about race and ethnicity are not fixed. One way to preview future attitudes is by listening to today’s young people, whose experiences and choices will shape our future. Pollster John Zogby calls the Millennial generation (roughly 18 to 29 years old) the “First Globals” and contends they are the first generation that “takes globalism as a given ... [and] has embraced diversity so thoroughly that distinctions of race, gender and sexual orientation have faded into a faint background music.” In terms of cultural participation and museum-going habits, there are already indications that a dramatic generational shift is under way as these young Americans opt for new modes of participatory engagement. Will age eventually eclipse race and ethnicity as the key factor that shapes museum use in the future?

One highly visible form of emergent cultural shift is the generational divide between “digital natives” (people who have grown up with computers, video games and the Internet) and older Americans who are the “digital immigrants” to this technological world. Museums are still developing ways to make use of new technologies and the networking and marketing opportunities afforded by social media. But these technologies and the interactions they allow are simply givens among young Americans—no longer innovative practices but expectations.

There is evidence that the digital divide by race and ethnicity is narrowing—and not just among the young. The 2005 Pew Internet & American Life Project found no significant differences by race among the 57 percent of U.S. teens who use the Internet to create original content. Meanwhile, Internet use by Hispanics has been growing at a rate of four times the national average, such that Hispanics are now “more likely than other groups to text message, search the Web through mobile phones and browse social networking sites,” according to a 2010 discussion on the marketing website Media Post. In cyberspace, generational experience

already seems more determinant than race or ethnicity.

As the digital divide narrows, a generational divide widens as younger people prefer highly participatory forms of cultural engagement. There has also been a surge in personal artistic creation, such as digital curation, again with younger Americans in the lead. A recent report from the Center for the Future of Museums dubbed this trend “myCulture.” Media scholar Henry Jenkins identified a related trend in online communities, which favor communal rather than individual modes of cultural reception and promote opportunities for shared problem-solving and new ways of processing and evaluating information and knowledge. Museums have something to learn from these cultural forms.

In order to “listen to the future,” we recruited three Chicago-based focus groups earlier this year. Representing different racial and ethnic backgrounds, they included people ages 16 to 25 of different education levels and museum-going experience. While small (eight members, on average), these three groups reflect the coming demographic realities in American society. Significantly, the young people engaged in these discussions did not describe their museum-going experiences from perspectives shaped by race or ethnicity but in terms of modes of participation. What they want from museums are interactive, immersive and participatory activities. They want to be more than outside observers looking in. And the museum attributes they value most highly are uniqueness, novelty and authenticity.

While children’s museums, zoos and science museums were recognized for their hands-on exhibits, the participants wanted more hands-on opportunities at art museums, as well. When asked to envision her own dream museum, one participant responded, “What if you could try your hand at creating your own painting via computer simulation after being inspired by a painting on the museum wall and then having it

judged?” Another participant imagined the museum-as-lounge, a space conducive to sitting and contemplating, talking and socializing, as well as learning. More than anything else, the focus group participants wanted choice—of activities and exhibits within the museum and between museums and other leisure activities outside an institution’s walls.

The members of our focus groups never mentioned museums as the kind of place they would choose to spend their leisure time. In fact, they generally described museums as static (“places that exhibit things”), didactic (but not necessarily places where the learning was fun or engaging) and places where you had to be quiet and stand outside looking in. By contrast, one participant said, “I like the Getty [in Los Angeles]. ... It’s like Oak Brook Mall except a museum.” Museums are not shopping malls, of course, but there may be some lessons to learn from them about what makes the mall an enjoyable destination for these young people: a place where visual, auditory and other senses are stimulated; a setting where one can choose to be alone while in a public space or to socialize with others; a place with a variety of activities to fit many tastes.

Many museums are experimenting with innovative, engaging and participatory practices, trying to become what Museum 2.0 blogger Nina Simon calls “participatory museums” (see museumtwo.blogspot.com). However, these experiments didn’t appear on the radar screens of either the college-educated or teenage participants in our focus groups. As representatives of the diverse American population of the present and future, however, they are prime groups for museums to attract—especially as museums take on expanded roles as community centers, civic institutions, informal learning environments and canopies that can stretch more widely to encompass diverse individuals and communities.

