Museums and Trust

SPRING 2021
In our polarized country, trust has eroded significantly.

Historically, museums have been highly trusted institutions.

Is that still true?
The answer is yes.
Research Methodology
BROADER POPULATION SURVEY

- Fielded May 2021
- Sample purchased from Alchemer
- N = 1,206 (1,003 completes + 203 useful partials)
  Demographically, the sample closely represents the US adult population by age, educational attainment, and race and ethnicity.
IN THIS RESEARCH DECK:

🔼 Overall Results

◉ Values, Behaviors, and Demographic Lenses
  └ Museum-going behaviors
  └ Perceptions of neutrality
  └ Inclusion
  └ Race and ethnicity
  └ Political values
Overall Results
To get started, let’s explore the overall results to see how museums rank on the trust scale.
How trustworthy do you find ...
(respondents indicated on a scale of 0 to 10; average scores presented)

- Friends and Family: 6.6
- Museums: 6.4
- Researchers and/or Scientists: 6.1
- Nonprofit Organizations/NGOs: 5.3
- Local News Agencies (such as newspapers, radio, TV): 5.1
- National News Organizations such as NPR, The Wall Street Journal, New York Times: 4.8
- United States Government: 4.5
- Corporations and Businesses: 4.4
- Social Media: 3.8

Overall Average: 5.1
How trustworthy do you find ...
(respondents indicated on a scale of 0 to 10; average scores presented)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Museum Type</th>
<th>Average Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nature Centers</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botanical Gardens and Arboretums</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural History Museums</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science Centers or Museums</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoos and Aquariums</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art Museums</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History Museums</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children's Museums</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historic Sites (including Historic Houses, forts, battlefields, mills, etc.)</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Statistically, all these museum types are virtually tied)

Overall Average: 6.6
But what contributes to their trust in museums?
MUSEUMS ARE FACT-BASED
MUSEUMS PRESENT REAL/ORIGINAL/AUTHENTIC OBJECTS
MUSEUMS ARE RESEARCH-ORIENTED
MUSEUMS OFFER INDEPENDENT AND OBJECTIVE INFORMATION
MUSEUMS ALLOW PEOPLE TO DRAW THEIR OWN CONCLUSIONS
MUSEUMS ARE NONPARTISAN/NEUTRAL
MUSEUMS EMPLOY/CONSULT CONTENT EXPERTS
MUSEUMS SHARE MULTIPLE VIEWPOINTS
NONE OF THESE/I DON'T TRUST MUSEUMS

50%
46%
44%
37%
36%
35%
31%
29%
6%
Overall, the trust in museums seems to be rooted in a perception that museums are (or should be) fact-based and non-partisan ... and thus “neutral.”
And for many members of the public, social issues are wrapped up in politics, and therefore partisan.
Do you think museums are non-partisan/neutral sources of information, or do you think they have a political agenda?

Most neutral

- They are non-partisan/neutral: 35%

Least neutral

- They don't necessarily have a political agenda, but they have an opinion or point of view they share: 48%
- They have a political agenda: 15%
Do you think museums should be neutral, or can they take a position?

- Museums should always be neutral: 48%
- Museums can take a position related to their mission/purpose: 30%
- Museums can and/or should take a position on important issues, even controversial ones: 21%
Is it appropriate for museums to suggest or recommend behaviors or actions to the public?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This is never appropriate</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only if they are related to the museum's mission/purpose</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, on any issue</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There is a lot of nuance behind these results, however, with different segments of the population having more trust ... and others being more skeptical.
Values, Behaviors, and Demographic Lenses

Turns out, it is a lot of things. From our upbringing to our race (and more), each of us develops our own unique set of values, attitudes, and beliefs that shape our worldviews.
To understand how attitudes around trust can vary, it is helpful to back up and examine what influences us all in the first place.

Turns out, it is a lot of things. From our upbringing to our race (and more), each of us develops our own unique set of values, attitudes, and beliefs that shape our worldviews.
In this research, we are going to look at trust through five values, behaviors, and demographic lenses:

- Museum-going behaviors
- Perceptions of neutrality
- Inclusion
- Race and ethnicity
- Political values
Museum-going behaviors
“Museum-goers” are those who said they had been to a museum in the past two years (25% of sample)
Overall, museum-goers are more trusting than non-visitors.

(For museum-goers, museums are the #1 trusted source of information; they remain #2 for non-visitors, behind friends and family.)
Across the board, museum-goers are more likely than non-visitors to find museums credible on the content they share.
Museum-going behaviors

Neutrality notes

Museum-goers are more likely to think museums have a point of view. But they are just as likely as non-visitors to think museums “should” always be neutral.
Museum-going behaviors

Demographically

Museum-goers skew slightly:

- Younger
- More likely to have some post-secondary education
- Slightly less diverse: 27% of white people are museum-goers vs. 22% of people of color
Museum-going behaviors

Politically

Museum-goers are equally split between conservatives and liberals (about 30% each)

About a quarter of museum-goers are moderate, and 12% identified as apolitical
Perceptions of neutrality
Three segments, comparing those who think:

- Museums are neutral (32% of sample)
- Museums have a point of view (44% of sample)
- Museums have a political agenda (13% of sample)
People who think museums are neutral have higher levels of trust

Trust Level

Perceptions of neutrality

(For those who think museums are neutral, museums are the #1 trusted source; they remain #2 for the other segments, behind friends and family)
On most topics, those who think museums are neutral are over 2x more likely to find them credible sources of information than those who say museums have a political agenda (“point of view” falls in the middle).
Perceptions of neutrality

Demographically

People who either think museums are "neutral" or have a "point of view" are demographically similar.

But people who think museums have a political agenda skew:

- Somewhat younger
- Less likely to identify as female
- Somewhat lower levels of educational attainment
- More racially and ethnically diverse
Politically

- “Neutral” skews slightly more liberal
- “Point of view” and “political agenda” skew more conservative
- And those who say “political agenda” are less likely to be politically engaged at all
Inclusive spectrum
We assessed respondent attitudes towards inclusive content to develop the following estimates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>ANTI-INCLUSIVE</th>
<th>LEANS LESS INCLUSIVE</th>
<th>STATUS QUO</th>
<th>LEANS MORE INCLUSIVE</th>
<th>INCLUSIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BROADER POPULATION</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**“ANTI-INCLUSIVE:”** People who exhibit anti-inclusive attitudes. This can range from extreme white nationalists to those who actively avoid any inclusive content.

**“STATUS QUO:”** People who neither seek out nor avoid inclusive content; largely satisfied with long-standing presentations of history and art. Exposure to inclusive content can range from none to quite a bit.

**“INCLUSIVE:”** People who actively seek out inclusive content and/or explicitly want museums to include inclusive stories of the past and artworks.

An infographic about the methodology used to assess inclusive attitudes will be forthcoming, fall 2021.
Generally, inclusive people are more trusting.

But anti-inclusive people are just as likely to trust museums as the people in the status quo categories.
While inclusive people think museums are more credible overall ...

... anti-inclusive people are the most likely to find museums credible on history ... 4/5 of them.
Anti-inclusive people are the most likely to say museums *should* be neutral, while inclusive people generally match the overall results.

Additionally, a basis in facts is an expectation of both inclusive people and anti-inclusive people (but not so much the “status quo” segments).
Demographically

Anti-inclusive people skew:
- More male
- Most likely to have “some” post-secondary education
- More rural
- More white

Inclusive people skew:
- More female
- *Slightly* higher educational attainment
Politically

- Inclusive people skew more liberal
- Status quo skews more moderate
- Anti-inclusive people skew more conservative
Race and ethnicity
Examined in multiple ways:

• Households that only identify as white  
  (non-Hispanic/Latino/Latina - 66% of sample)

• POC households (households of color/no white people – 31% of sample)  
  • And specifically Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino/Latina households (15% and 9% of sample respectively)
  (Other racial and ethnic groups did not have stable samples)

• 3% of households included both people of color and white people
White people are more trusting than people of color, and significantly more trusting of museums.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Trust: Average All Sources</th>
<th>Trust: Museums</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White/No People of Color Households</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People of Color Households</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American Households</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino/Latina Households</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Neutrality notes

White people are significantly more likely to think museums are neutral and should be neutral than people of color.

And people of color are more likely to think museums should take positions on important issues than to think museums should be neutral.
Demographically

**White people skew:**
- Older
- More likely to identify as female

**Respondents of color skew:**
- Younger
- More urban
Politically

No significant differences
Political ideology
Criteria

- Conservatives (31% of sample)
- Moderates (28% of sample)
- Liberals (26% of sample)
Liberals overall have higher levels of trust
And they trust museums more

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Trust: Average All Sources</th>
<th>Trust: Museums</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONSERVATIVES</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MODERATES</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIBERALS</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(While museums continue to rank #2 to “friends and family” for conservatives, they are tied with “friends and family” for #1 for moderates; for liberals, museums rank #2 to “researchers and/or scientists”)

Political ideology
Across the board, liberals find museums more credible. Conservatives are significantly less likely to find museums credible about art or racial and ethnic issues rooted in history. (Moderates fall in the middle)
Neutrality notes

Liberals are 50% more likely than conservatives to think museums are neutral.

But conservatives are more likely to think museums should be neutral.

That is a big distinction, as it likely reflects both perceptions and desires ... as well as different ideas of what “neutral” means.
Demographically

Conservatives are more likely to:
• Have “some” post-secondary education

Moderates are more likely to:
• Identify as male
• Have “some” post-secondary education

Liberals are more likely to:
• Identify as female
• Have a college degree
• Live in a suburb
• Identify as white

People of color are slightly more likely to identify as "moderate" or say they "don't care" about politics
Liberals are the most likely to fall in the “inclusive” segment, and are the most likely to want prosocial content from museums.
In a time when trust in most sources of information is declining, museums have proven resilient, retaining their “superpower of trust.”