

# SOCIAL CHANGE, ACTIVISM, AND NEUTRALITY

A Museums for Me data story

The museum sector is currently grappling with the shifting role of museums as active advocates for social change. Some museums are taking steps to address social issues relevant to their communities in their exhibits, collections, and programs. Some museums are hesitant to embrace the role of advocates for social change out of concern over public expectations for museums to remain neutral. The understanding among museum staff and volunteers that museums are not neutral is shared by some museum-goers, although not all.

Canadians were asked if specific social issues changed how they saw the role and value of museums. Over half of respondents felt that technological and digital innovation, and Indigenous reconciliation positively impacted how they saw the role and value of museums. Nearly all the social issues raised elicited a positive response. Canadians clearly believe museums have a constructive role to play in addressing social issues.

## HOW HAVE THE FOLLOWING CURRENT SOCIAL ISSUES CHANGED HOW YOU SEE THE ROLE AND VALUE OF MUSEUMS?



The question is not **if** museums should address societal issues, but **how**. When asked this question, Canadians selected education, better representation of all Canadians, and advocating for social change as the preferred ways for museums to respond. This echoes the public perception that museums are trusted institutions that excel in preservation, education, and storytelling, but could do more to represent their communities (see [Getting to Relevance Through Accessibility and Representation](#) and [Telling the Truth: Trustworthiness, Learning, and Sharing Authority](#)).

## HOW CAN MUSEUMS ADDRESS THESE KINDS OF SOCIETAL ISSUES?



To understand the importance of this data for the future for museums, it is important to look at demographic shifts evident in the responses. The data shows that younger Canadians, aged 18 – 34, are more likely to think that museums should actively advocate for social change. This contrasts with older Canadians, aged 55+, who are more likely to think that museums should be neutral and apolitical.

## HOW CAN MUSEUMS ADDRESS THESE KINDS OF SOCIETAL ISSUES?



Younger generations want museums to tell the truth about Canada's shared history, to better represent the stories and experiences of all Canadians, and to play an active role in advocating for social change. They have an expectation that museums will not shy away from difficult histories, but that they will present them in a way that is fact-based, dispels misinformation, respects multiple perspectives, and seeks to uncover the truth.

*"Society needs to hear harsh truths and sometimes a museum is the only place they will see and hear that."*

*"Present the truth above all else; the full picture, 'warts and all', not just the sunnier side of our history."*

– SURVEY RESPONDENTS

There is an increasing acknowledgment among museum workers that museums are not neutral. However, the expectation of neutrality persists with **68% OF RESPONDENTS** agreeing that museums should be neutral and unbiased in their presentation of material and exhibits. Neutrality implies impartiality and objectivity, but museum workers know that exhibits, collections, and programs are not objective. The work of museums is imbued with the biases of its staff, board, volunteers, funders, and other stakeholders. Even the visitor brings their own bias to the interpretation of the materials presented.

## MUSEUMS SHOULD BE NEUTRAL AND UNBIASED IN THEIR PRESENTATION OF MATERIAL AND EXHIBITS.



To counter the lack of agreement around the term 'neutrality', museums should move away from the idea that museums are neutral and instead highlight their role as a credible advocate for societal issues.

*"Museums need to stop trying to see themselves as neutral. They have a role to play in educating their communities particularly on issues of social justice and climate action."*

– SURVEY RESPONDENT

All data collected as part of a 2021 national survey, *Museums for Me*, undertaken as part of *Reconsidering Museums*. For detailed information on questions and responses, see the [Museums For Me: Engaging Canadians on the Future of Museums – What We Heard](#) report.

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