



**RECONSIDERING  
MUSEUMS**

# TRUST AND VALUE

**The Role of Museums in Canada in the Twenty-First Century**

2021

## Acknowledgements



Trust and Value: The Role of Museums in Canada in the Twenty-First Century

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**Canada** 



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## Introduction

In 2016 – 2017, the Alberta Museums Association (AMA) engaged a variety of stakeholders in the process of reviewing its Strategic Plan. While the review underscored the continued relevance of the Plan’s objectives, it also revealed that despite the success of museums in community engagement and education, public funding and private support for museums and heritage lagged behind that for the broader arts and culture sector. Museum workers, trustees, and volunteers expressed over and over their frustration at the difficulty in speaking to community leaders about the significance of museums and museum work. They want to advocate on behalf of museums as important public institutions, but they often cannot find the words to explain succinctly why museums matter. The AMA realized that this issue was not limited to Alberta.

### **The lack of a clear articulation of public value has implications for the museum sector in Canada.**

While museums across Canada have made great progress in engaging communities and serving diverse publics, transitioning from ‘nice’ to ‘necessary’ institutions in Canadian public life remains a challenge. Learning how to speak with conviction about the public value of museums requires a better understanding of what Canadians think about museums, and what they expect from their museums both now and in the future.

In 2019, a consortium of provincial and territorial museums associations (PTMAs), led by the AMA, received funding from the Canada Cultural Investment Fund to investigate how Canadians today value museums in their communities, and the role museums and heritage organizations should play in the lives of individuals, research fundamental to developing **a toolkit for advocacy**. Central to the project was **a national survey**, conducted in collaboration with Hill+Knowlton Strategies Canada (H+K), designed not only to elicit information about what Canadians think about museums today, but what they want to see in museums for the next generation. While COVID-19 changed the implementation plan for the study, it also enabled a broader outreach across the country through social media and other online platforms. The survey questions and approach were also informed by a study of historic data, looking at what Canadians thought about museums in the past and what they valued. We asked, *What has stayed the same? What has changed? What will change?*

## Valuing Museums: Looking Back

In 1971, the federal government announced a new national museum policy based on the principles of democratization and decentralization. One of the goals of the new ‘D & D’ policy, as it became known, was to ensure that the largest possible number of Canadians would have “access to the collected resources of our human and natural heritage.” In the new museum policy, funds for museums were allocated based on what government policy makers assumed the public wanted, but it was soon realized that a major handicap in implementation was “ignorance about the actual and potential audience for museums.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1973, the federal government funded a team of researchers to undertake the first comprehensive study of behaviour and attitudes of museum-goers and non-goers in Canada. A total of 7,230 personal interviews were conducted across Canada, and detailed surveys were left with the interviewees. Over half the interviewees (57%) returned these questionnaires. This groundbreaking study – *The Museum and the Canadian Public* by Brian Dixon, Alice Courtney, and Robert Bailey – was published in 1974 and provides a baseline for subsequent surveys of visitation and attitudes to museums in Canada.

### *1973: The Museum and the Canadian Public*

In 1972, there were 838 museums in Canada, many recently established or expanded as a result of centennial celebrations in 1967. Canada’s population was just under 22.5 million. In comparison with 2021, the population was younger (10% over age 65, now 20%), less diverse (15% foreign born, now 25%), and less well educated (fewer than 10% of Canadians had university degrees; today, more than half of Canadians have a college or university degree).

### Visitation

From personal interviews and questionnaires, the researchers learned that

- about 60% of Canadians had visited a museum or historic site within the past 12 months; 48% visited a museum, art gallery, or science centre;
- over a five-year period, 84% had visited a museum at least once;
- a core of Canadians – 13% – were non-goers, who had not visited any museum in five years.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in the introduction to Brian Dixon, Alice Courtney, and Robert Bailey, *The Museum and the Canadian Public*. Toronto: Published for Arts and Culture Branch, Dept. of the Secretary of State, Government of Canada by Culturcan Publications, 1974, p. 2.

The researchers also learned that those who said they had visited a museum within the past year “are likely to be consistent and frequent museum-goers; those respondents who did not attend a museum within the past year are likely to be only sporadic museum participators,” and when they do make a visit, “they are more likely to be attracted to general museums and historical sites than to other types of museums.” A third of respondents said they had no or very little interest in museums.<sup>2</sup>

The researchers found that in a given year, **a small proportion of museum-goers can make half of all visits** – “in the case of art museums, for example, just 8% of the total Canadian population accounts for 49% of the art museum visits made ... for general museums, 7% account for 41% of visits, and for historical sites, 13% account for 53% of visits.”<sup>3</sup>

Lastly, the researchers found that the **Canadians who visited museums most frequently were urban, younger, and better educated, had higher incomes**, and were more likely to live in western Canada.

## Value

In 1973, over two-thirds of respondents (69%) told the researchers that museums were among Canada’s more valuable institutions, and they made them feel proud of their heritage. Museums were a great place to take the kids, to learn something new, and to explore nature and the past, and were good places to take visitors. They characterized a museum visit as “educational” (81%) and “rewarding” (82%).

Even those people who visited museums rarely, or not at all, still liked the idea of the museum: **“A great number of respondents strongly support the concept of the museum while for the most part avoiding the reality.”**<sup>4</sup>

## Roles

Over three-quarters (79%) agreed that the “main purpose of the museum is to bring the past into the present and the future,” but the researchers also noted that nearly two-thirds of respondents indicated that museums might adopt a more present and future orientation: 40% agreed with the statement, “Museums tell me little about the present and the future”; 24% were undecided.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Dixon et al, *Museum and the Canadian Public*, p. 101.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

## Relevance

Canadians described **why they did not visit more often**:

- museums were too far away and difficult to get to
- museums were often physically uncomfortable and unsettling
- Canadians wanted more interactive exhibitions, more learning opportunities, and a more welcoming place.

People who did not visit museums at all saw them as “unsympathetic, fortress-like,” elitist (interesting only to scholars), and unchanging.

**What would make Canadians visit more often?** Over 50% of respondents wanted museums to:

- make entry free
- bring in artists and craftsmen and create things on the spot
- provide free guidebooks and pamphlets
- provide more advertising and publicity about what museums are really like
- provide more advertising and publicity about museum activities
- provide sections designed for young children

## *2016, Two Generations Later: What Changed*

By 2016, there were **2,600 museums in Canada**, making it easier to visit a museum close to home.<sup>6</sup> Many museums had **more active public programs**, including activities designed specifically for children. The Canadian Museums Association’s 2016 Brief, *The State of the Museum in Canada*, reported almost 7.5 million school visits made each year.<sup>7</sup> Museums also integrated **new information and communication technologies** in their services and outreach.<sup>8</sup>

Below are some general findings from surveys conducted between 2012 and 2016.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Canadian Museums Association, *The State of the Museum in Canada. Brief to the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage*. Ottawa: June 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 3. In 2018-19, there were around 4.92 million students enrolled in public elementary or secondary schools, so students are likely making multiple visits (Lucie Jeudy, “Enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools in Canada in 2018/19, by province,” Statista, July 6, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/449110/enrollment-in-public-elementary-and-secondary-schools-in-canada-by-province/>.)

<sup>8</sup> In 2016, four in ten Canadians (42%) said they used a museum or heritage institution website in the past year, for the most part in preparation for a visit (Environics Research, “Report: Arts and Heritage Access and Availability Survey, 2016-2017,” prepared for the Department of Canadian Heritage and Canada Council for the Arts, 2017, p. 25, [https://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/200/301/pwgsc-tps-gc/poref/canadian\\_heritage/2017/051-16-e/report.pdf](https://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/200/301/pwgsc-tps-gc/poref/canadian_heritage/2017/051-16-e/report.pdf)).

<sup>9</sup> Statistics Canada has been surveying Canadians about their participation rates in heritage and cultural activities in the General Social Survey (GSS) every five to six years since 1992. It can be difficult to compare data from different surveys, which do not ask

## Visitation

Almost half of all Canadians (48%) visited a museum or art gallery once a year. (To put that figure in perspective, in 2019, pre-COVID-19, about 58% of Canadians visited a movie theatre once in 12 months.<sup>10</sup>) About 80% of Canadians visited every five years, whether at home or abroad. Heritage attendance increased with level of education and by income. New Canadians visited at rates higher than those born in Canada. Attendance was lower among Indigenous people (64%, compared with 81% of non-Indigenous Canadians).<sup>11</sup>

## Value

**In 2016, 80% of Canadians said museums contribute to the quality of life** in their community; it was higher for public libraries (94%). In 2012 (the last year in which the question was asked), most Canadians saw the museum's roles in preserving the past and educating children as most important (96%). In addition, almost all Canadians (92%) thought children should visit museums.

In the early 2000s, surveys started to ask Canadians how they valued history and who they trusted to tell them about it. **In 2016, 96% of Canadians said museums are credible sources for information about history.** In fact, most people thought that after their grandparents, museums were the most trusted sources, ahead of university professors and high school teachers, books, newspapers, and the internet. In a 2009 study, however, **less than half (46%) of Indigenous people surveyed rated museums as a "very trustworthy" source of information.**

## Relevance

Non-goers felt the museum was too far away, the exhibits never changed, the cost was too high, they did not have the time, or they preferred other activities. Most importantly, non-goers did not think the museum was for someone like them – it was not relevant or they did not feel comfortable there.<sup>12</sup>

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the same questions, have different target audiences, and interpret the data in dissimilar ways. Most data included here are from the latest available survey, GSS 2016.

<sup>10</sup> José Gabriel Navarro, "Movie theater attendance in the last twelve months in Canada as of December 2019," Statista, August 12, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1179570/movie-theater-attendance-canada/>.

<sup>11</sup> Data on heritage attendance from Environics Research, *Arts and Heritage Access and Availability Survey 2016-2017*. Includes museums, art galleries, science centres, zoos, botanic gardens, and heritage sites.

<sup>12</sup> Feeling comfortable in a place means you feel like you belong, you know the rules, and there is lots to interest you. Data from Business / Arts, "Culture Track: Canada," 2018, <http://www.businessandarts.org/culture-track-canada/>.



# Valuing Museums: Looking Ahead

## *2021: Museums For Me*

In 2020, there were approximately 2,600 museums in Canada, and Canada's population is now over 38 million. The Canadian population is aging: in 2020, there were more seniors over 65 than children under 14. The population is increasingly diverse, especially in urban centres. Since 2006, the Indigenous population has increased by more than four times the growth rate of the non-Indigenous population, and Indigenous Canadians are visible and active in all sectors of society. More than one-fifth of Canadians are people of colour; in 2018 – 2019, 44% of first-year university and college students identified as people of colour.<sup>13</sup> Canada has one of the most highly educated populations in the world. As of 2020, more than half (56%) of Canadians aged 25 – 64 have a college or university degree. The rapid increase in mobile device ownership, the rise of social media, and an increasingly globalized internet have transformed the way people access, share, and shape information and knowledge. Almost all Canadians (94%) have access to the global information web.

In late 2020 and early 2021, the consortium of PTMAs led by the AMA with H+K consulted over 3,000 Canadians to find out what people think about museums today and how they serve (or do not serve) their communities, what museums could become in the future, and how to turn that vision into reality.<sup>14</sup>

## Visitation

- About 40% of Canadians visit a museum once a year.<sup>15</sup>
- Half of these are avid museum-goers, visiting two to six times per year, and younger people in this group visit more often.
- An additional 43% of Canadians visit a museum every few years.
- Indigenous people visit at about the same rate as other Canadians.
- Lower-income Canadians visit less often.

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<sup>13</sup> Catalyst, "Quick Take: People of Colour in Canada," October 20, 2020, <https://www.catalyst.org/research/people-of-colour-in-canada/>.

<sup>14</sup> The 2021 national survey undertaken in collaboration with H+K reached 1,700 Canadians through a special *Museums For Me* online survey. In addition, H+K accessed Leger Opinion's national online panel to survey 1,400 Canadians in March 2021, with an oversample of respondents who identified as Indigenous or with a lower household income. 87 people from museum and heritage groups participated in 4 dialogue sessions (one in French and three in English). For detailed information on questions and responses, see the *Museums For Me: Engaging Canadians on the Future of Museums – What We Heard* report.

<sup>15</sup> This museum may not be in Canada. In 1974, 61% of respondents said visiting a museum while travelling was more appropriate. The number of Canadians travelling internationally, not including travel to the US, tripled between 2000 and 2019 (pre-COVID-19) (Statistics Canada, "Canadian residents returning from abroad, annual," Government of Canada, February 21, 2020, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200221/cg-b003-eng.htm>).



**Community museums attract fewer Canadians.** 33% reported visiting at least once a year, and 25% once every few years. When asked about the role of local museums, 83% agreed they were a place to learn the history of the area, and 74% felt they brought value to the community.

## Value

Over half (54%) felt that museums reflect their interest in collections, exhibitions, and programs, and **80% of respondents agreed that museums are highly credible sources** of information, though Indigenous respondents were somewhat less likely to find museums highly credible. The majority of Canadians continue to see museums as providing learning (81%), and a good place to bring children (80%), but a third of respondents aged 35 – 44 (those likely to have children) were concerned about the cost of visiting.

## Roles

A large majority (87%) agreed that the role of museums is to preserve knowledge and objects from Canada's history, and a slightly smaller percentage agreed that museums should show and explain objects from the natural world. **In 2021, 81% also felt museums should preserve knowledge and objects from Indigenous history.**

When asked more specifically about the **most important functions of a museum**, respondents in 2021 ranked in order:

- education (73%)
- preserving history (71%)
- helping visitors and tourists learn about a place (41%)

When asked, however, if museum functions will **change in the future**, more than a third of respondents thought the **roles listed below might become more important**:

- providing context and inspiration regarding today's pressing issues like climate change (42%)
- helping people understand social and cultural issues (38%)
- research institutions advancing knowledge (35%)

The majority of Canadians (70%) agreed that **museums should be neutral and unbiased** in the presentation of materials; however, 40% of respondents also agreed that they want **museums to take a stand and challenge the status quo**.

## Relevance

**Just over half of Canadians (56%) felt their museums fulfill their cultural needs in collections, exhibitions, and programs.** Almost half of respondents felt community members should be involved in the creation of exhibitions, and over half supported **dialogues with communities** to ensure that what museums present remains relevant.

While four in five (80%) participants aged 65 or older agreed or strongly agreed that museums should be neutral in their presentation of materials, only two-thirds (65%) of those aged 18 – 24 voiced this opinion. Half of Canadians felt museums do not reflect today's world (compared with 40% in 1973) and **over a quarter (28%) of the 18 – 24 age group felt museums reflect only European approaches to culture.** A third of respondents aged 25 – 34 are ready to volunteer, and almost a third in this age group are more likely to donate to museums. Almost a quarter of respondents (23%) felt that museums are an expensive form of recreation.

## What Has Changed? What Has Stayed the Same?

**Note:** In the following tables, “–” indicates this question was not asked or data was not available.

VISITATION	1973 <sup>16</sup>	2012 – 2016 <sup>17</sup>	2021 <sup>18</sup>
% of Canadians visiting a museum in last 12 months	48%*	48%**	44%***
% visiting in last 5 years	84%	80%	82%
% who never visit	13%	–	17%
Museums are expensive	21% (avg) <sup>19</sup>	12%	23%
Museums are a waste of money	–	6%	7%
Museums are elitist	28%	–	9%

\* museum, art gallery, or science centre

\*\* museum or art gallery

\*\*\* pre-COVID-19 visitation rate for museums

### Takeaways:

- **The percentage of Canadians visiting museums has not changed significantly in 50 years.**
- **Most Canadians no longer see museums as elitist.**
- **Museums are considered by some groups to be expensive.**

VALUE	1973*	2012 – 2016*	2021*
Museums contribute to the community / quality of life	–	86%	74%
Museums increase attachment to Canada / proud to be Canadian	65%	81%	–
Museums reflect my culture and heritage / proud of my culture	73%	–	54%
Museums make me feel part of community / a sense of community	–	80%	70%
Museums are good for children	78%	92%	80%
Museums are trusted sources	–	96%	80%

\* Includes % who “strongly” and “somewhat” agree

<sup>16</sup> For the following tables, 1973 data from Dixon et al, *Museum and the Canadian Public*.

<sup>17</sup> For the following tables, 2012 – 2016 data from Statistics Canada GSS surveys.

<sup>18</sup> For the following tables, 2021 data from *Museums For Me* Leger Opinion online panel conducted for H+K.

<sup>19</sup> In 1973, a museum visit was considered expensive by 28% of non-goers and 14% of museum-goers.



## Takeaways:

- **Museums may not reflect the heritage of many museum-goers today.**
- **Museums continue to be seen as good for children.**
- **Museums continue to be seen as trusted sources.**

<b>ROLES (Importance)</b>	<b>1973</b>	<b>2012 - 2016</b>	<b>2021</b>
Preservation	-	96%	87%
Preservation of Indigenous history	-	-	81%
Education	81%*	96%	73%
Tourism	75%	91%	41%

\* Respondents were asked to categorize museums as “relaxing,” “educational,” etc.

## Takeaways:

- **Preserving Indigenous collections and knowledge is important.**
- **Education as a central role is declining in importance.**
- **Museums are not just for tourists.**

## Conclusion: Changes and Challenges

Over the next 20 years, Canada's population will become increasingly diverse. By 2036, immigrants will represent between 25% and 30% of Canada's population. These would be the highest proportions since 1871. Thinking about the projections below will help museums proactively meet the needs of their communities:

- By 2036, immigrants and second-generation individuals will represent between 40% and 50% of the population.<sup>20</sup>
- By 2036, people of colour will be about one-third of the population.
- By 2036, almost three-quarters (71%) of people of colour will likely reside in Toronto, Montréal, or Vancouver.<sup>21</sup>
- By 2041, the Indigenous population will be 2.5 to 3.2 million, at an average annual growth rate between 1.3% and 2.3%.<sup>22</sup>
- By 2050, roughly 25% of the population will be over the age of 65.

Technology and climate changes are other important factors for museums to consider. By 2026, 39.26 million Canadians (almost everyone) will have internet access.<sup>23</sup>

On the climate front, Canadians will be living in a warmer country. Between 1948 and 2016, the mean annual temperature increase for Canada as a whole was 1.7°C and 2.3°C for northern Canada. Most Canadian Arctic marine regions will be sea ice-free for part of the summer by 2050.<sup>24</sup>

### What does this mean for museums?

How Canadians think about the past and understand heritage is changing, particularly in regard to Indigenous histories and cultures. How will museums reflect the heritage of Canada's increasingly diverse population? How will museums embody reconciliation with Indigenous peoples?

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<sup>20</sup> Statistics Canada, "Immigration and Diversity: Population Projections for Canada and its Regions, 2011 to 2036," Government of Canada, February 23, 2017, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/91-551-x/91-551-x2017001-eng.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Statistics Canada, "Indigenous population in Canada – Projections to 2041," Government of Canada, October 6, 2021, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2021066-eng.htm>.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Johnson, "Number of internet users in Canada from 2016 to 2026," Statista, Aug 24, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/325649/canada-number-of-internet-users/>. And by 2026, Canada's mobile population is projected to surpass 38 million (L. Ceci, "Mobile internet usage in Canada – statistics & facts," Statista, October 14, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/topics/3529/mobile-usage-in-canada/>.)

<sup>24</sup> National Research Council, *Canada's Changing Climate*, Government of Canada, 2019. [https://www.nrcan.gc.ca/sites/www.nrcan.gc.ca/files/energy/Climate-change/pdf/CCCR\\_TableKeyMessages-EN-033119-FINAL.pdf](https://www.nrcan.gc.ca/sites/www.nrcan.gc.ca/files/energy/Climate-change/pdf/CCCR_TableKeyMessages-EN-033119-FINAL.pdf).

Museum attendance tends to decrease with age, often due to disability issues. How will museums ensure improved accessibility for the growing number of Canadians over 65?

Frequency of museum visiting increases with level of education, and the majority of younger Canadians have post-secondary education. How will museums ensure that content is credible and appealing to this audience?

Canadians are also confronting significant global changes in climate and the environment, and they want museums to provide unbiased and credible content and context around these issues. How do museums plan to address the climate crisis?

As more and more people seek information online, museum education programs are no longer the only place to learn about nature and the past. How will museums ensure they reach a learning audience online as well in the museum?

**Canadians today still like going to museums, and they still trust them. They see museums, like public libraries, as community institutions, but they are uncertain if museums can rise to the challenges the future holds.**

**Are museums ready for the future?**