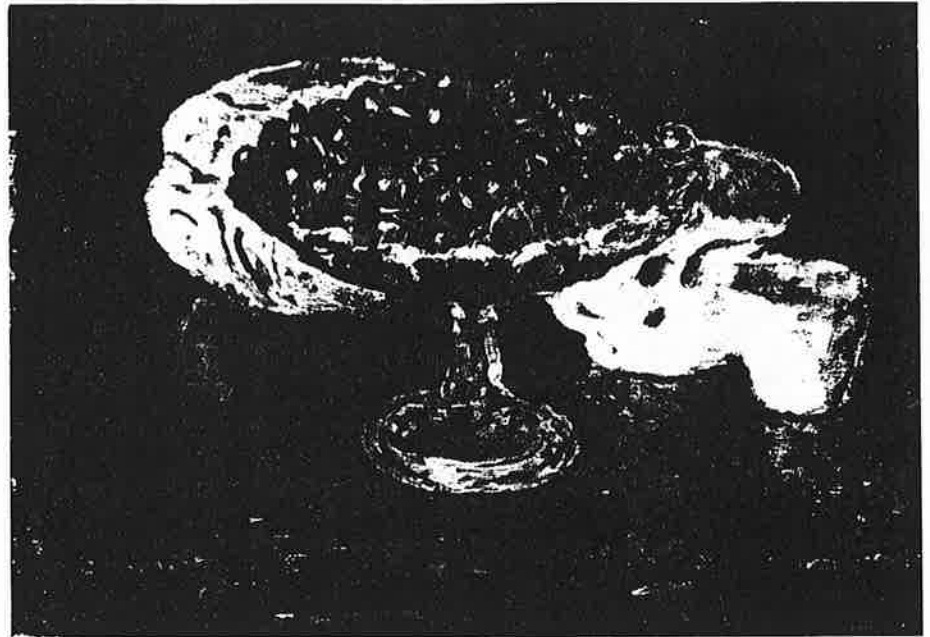


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Much of the last 30 years has been a period of unprecedented growth and popularity for museums. Older institutions saw their attendance grow steadily and hundreds of new museums were built. But as the 21st century approaches, growth has flattened out, attendance has dipped at a number of institutions, and several prominent museums either have been forced to close or suffer from significant financial difficulties. Although museums have become an established part of the educational infrastructure and have achieved educational legitimacy in the eyes of the public, their future is anything but clear. What is clear is that museums' future health and vitality depends on their maintaining and, if possible, increasing the number of people who visit them.

Currently, museums are one of the most popular leisure venues in America and continue to out-draw sporting events, for example. Yet statistics can be misleading. Despite museums' popularity, research shows that the museum-going habit is far from evenly distributed throughout the population. Less than half of all Americans visit museums even once a year, and fewer than one in five visit with any regularity.

Why *do* people visit museums?

In this article I will develop a framework for describing who currently does and does not attend museums and why. It includes demographic variables such as age and education, as well as psychographic variables, such as an individual's attitudes toward leisure and education; personal and cultural history variables, such as early childhood experiences; and environmental variables, such as advertising and word-of-mouth recommendations. With this framework, I seek to go beyond easy-to-measure demographic categories in search of a set of factors that better explain the complexities of museum-going. In a subsequent article, I will use the framework to propose more reliable and effective ways to diversify and broaden museum audiences.

Demographic Variables

In recent years, researchers have made a considerable effort to address the question of who visits museums. Much of the data collected from their studies has been based on demographics. Researchers have found that a number of variables affect museum-going, including education, income, occupation, race, and age. One fairly consistent finding is that museum-goers are better educated, more affluent, and hold better paying jobs than the average American. This is true of visitors to art, history, and science museums, as well as zoos, arboreta, and botanical gardens.

There are two other demographic variables that appear to correlate to museum-going. The first is age; the second is race or ethnicity. Studies have found that museum-going is not evenly distributed among different

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age groups. Even excluding school field trips, elementary school-aged children still represent a significant percentage of all museum-goers. Most children do not go to museums on their own; rather, they are brought by their parents. For many museums, family groups are the largest single category of visitor. Accordingly, adults between the ages of 25 and 44 and children between the ages of 5 and 12 are disproportionately represented among museum audiences. For example, 10 years of demographic studies at the Smithsonian Institution revealed that (excluding school groups) about half of all Smithsonian visitors were between the ages of 20 and 44, 30 percent were children, 16 percent were between 45 and 64, and less than 4 percent were 65 or older. Visitors to art and history museums tended to be older than this average, visitors to science-oriented museums younger. In general, museum-going peaks for most adults between the ages of 30 and 50, and then drops off again.

Considerable attention has been focused in recent years upon the issue of whether museums are under-utilized by non-majority populations, in particular African Americans, Asians, and Hispanics. Over the last decade a large number of studies have documented that African Americans and other minority groups are under-represented among the museum-going public. In a study I conducted on African-American leisure habits, I found that African Americans visit museums at a rate 20 to 30 percent lower than the national norm. However, extreme caution needs to be used when interpreting these findings. Although it appears to be true that, as a group, minorities are less likely than the European-American majority to visit museums, this is not as simple as it appears. It cannot be assumed that this fact is somehow related to race.

The minority populations of the United States are not monolithic. For example, a recent epidemiological study in New York followed up a finding that African Americans had significantly higher incidences of high blood pressure and heart disease than did European Americans. When the situation was studied in detail, though, researchers found that variations in blood pressure and heart disease were greater within New York's African-American population than between blacks and whites living in the city. My research into the museum-going behavior of African Americans strongly reinforces this reality. It revealed that African-American leisure behavior is very similar to European-American leisure behavior, though tremendous differences in leisure behavior exist within the African-American community. Where black-white differences exist, and there are some, race does not emerge as the best variable to explain them. Museum-going, like much human behavior, is far too complex to be understood merely on the basis of demographics.

Demographic descriptions do reveal some interesting patterns of museum-going, but demographic categories alone cannot tell the whole story. It is true, for example, that European-American individuals with higher income and education levels are more likely to go to museums than minority individuals with low incomes and education levels. But it is not true that being white and having a higher income or education level means you will go to a museum. To understand and be able to predict museum-going/non-going behavior requires more information than demographics provide.

Psychographic Variables

What, beyond demographics, is known about Americans who go to museums? A variety of studies have used "psychographics" to evaluate museum-going. Psychographics describe psychological and motivational characteristics of individuals. For example, due in large part to the work of Marilyn Hood, we now know that museum-goers possess the following psychographic profile: They value learning, seek the challenge of exploring and discovering new things, and place a high value on doing something worthwhile in their leisure time. Such characteristics are shared by people of all races and ethnicities, incomes, educational levels, and ages, regardless of gender.

Studies document that museum-goers are individuals who value learning. They believe that they and their children should be continually learning, continually searching for new information, continually stretching intellectually. The primary reason most people attend museums, whether by themselves or with their children, is in order to learn. That is a major reason why museum-going correlates so highly to level of education. This is not because one needs a college degree to think learning is important. It is because individuals who think learning is important are more inclined to pursue higher education than those who don't. Individuals who value learning seek it in many forms—through higher education; by watching educational television; by reading books, magazines, and newspapers; and by visiting museums.

Most Americans who visit museums believe that education is an important lifelong process, and they perceive educational activities as an interesting and important leisure-time pursuit. They are also likely to see museums as places that provide opportunities for them to expand their own and their children's learning horizons. But although many, if not most, Americans share the perception that education is a useful pursuit, not everyone thinks it is something that needs to happen throughout one's life or perceives it as an important leisure-time activity. Personal interests and values help to predict museum-going behavior, but like demographics, they fall short of providing a full explanation.

Personal and Cultural History

Much of an individual's leisure behavior is influenced by early childhood experiences and parental modeling. From a variety of studies, we now know that some early childhood leisure activities seem to influence adult museum-going. They include reading, taking family trips, and participating in clubs, associations, or scouts. However, one of the best predictors of whether an adult will go to a museum is whether he was taken to museums by his parents when he was a child. Unfortunately, this is an area where not all Americans have had equal opportunity. Historically, many minorities, recent immigrants, and the economic under-class had less opportunities to visit museums as children than the more affluent majority population. A range of factors conspired to prevent earlier generations of Americans from visiting museums, including racism, poverty, and growing up in rural areas or foreign countries where few museums exist. Overall, it is fair to surmise that proportionately fewer minority, immigrant, and poor children went to museums with their parents a generation ago than did affluent majority children. This history directly influences current leisure behaviors.

Environmental Factors

There are a variety of factors, cues, and experiences within an individual's environment that influence museum-going. They include the tourist who is visiting a new city while on vacation and asks the concierge, "What are good things to see and do here?" They include the desire to do something special with a visiting friend or relative. They include advertising and promotional campaigns from the institution and word-of-mouth recommendations from friends and family.

Most American museum-goers say word-of-mouth recommendations are the single most important factor affecting their decision to visit a museum. The more friends and family one has who are museum-goers, the more likely one is to go to a museum. For example, Colonial Williamsburg estimates that more than 80 percent of first-time visitors and nearly half of repeat visitors originally heard about the institution from friends or family. Similar findings were discovered at such diverse institutions as the California Science Center, Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village, Anniston Museum of Natural History, Biltmore Estate, and Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. At these institutions, advertising and publicity programs accounted for less than 20 percent of visits.

Brochures, advertisements, and promotions initiated by museums do make a difference, but rarely will they turn a non-museum-goer into a museum-goer. Messages aimed at changing behavior generally only work when someone is ready to be influenced. On any given occasion, it is often the added incen-

tive of a successful promotion that tips the scales and moves an individual to visit a museum. Among people inclined to visit a museum, an announcement about a special exhibition on a topic of personal interest will be sufficient to get them in the doors.

As with any leisure experience, time and money—more appropriately thought of as "value"—enter into the equation. Museums used to be relatively inexpensive or even free. Thus, finding the time was often the primary impediment to going to a museum. Since leisure time is decreasing for most Americans, time will continue to be a factor that affects whether or not people visit museums.

Money, too, has become an issue for many potential museum-goers. Museums, under pressure to become financially self-reliant, have come to depend on gate revenues for survival. The result has been a steady rise in the dollar cost of museum-going. Once a problem for only the very lowest socio-economic strata, admission costs have escalated to the point where even the middle class thinks twice before going to the local museum. But compared with other leisure/entertainment opportunities, museum-going is relatively inexpensive. And even people with limited resources engage in leisure activities they deem satisfying. Hence, the real issue is perceived value. Those individuals who find the experience satisfying will judge the cost (in dollars and time) inconsequential; those finding the experience lacking in personal value will find the cost too dear.

Implications for Museums in the Future

Fifty years ago, museum-going was a restricted activity, enjoyed by a relatively small elite. The museum community was dominated by a few large art and natural history institutions, located in the largest cities. Museums were largely supported by wealthy patrons, and the staffs catered to their values and interests. Today, a variety of large and small museums—covering a wide range of topics and supported largely by corporate and/or public monies—serves a much more diverse public. This trend towards broadening both the scope and scale of museums is likely to continue well into the next century, in part because museums have been working to make it happen and also because the population continues to become more diverse, better educated, and more affluent.

The core psychographics and the personal values and beliefs of the museum-going public, however, will remain relatively constant. A generation ago, museum-goers probably looked, psychographically, remarkably similar to today's museum visitors: They valued the challenge of discovering new things, placed a high value on doing something worthwhile with their leisure time, and wished to share these values with their children. (I say probably because earlier generations of museum

visitors were never assessed in this way.) What has changed and will continue to change dramatically is the number of individuals holding these values and interests. Whereas a generation ago they were held by a relatively few individuals, today they are held by a large percentage of the population. And that percentage is likely to continue to grow. As our society becomes increasingly technologically based, information rather than things will be the primary currency of everyday life. Museums provide an entertaining and effective tool for delivering information *en masse* to an information-hungry populace. America is rapidly becoming a "learning society," and museums have the potential to be major players during this transition.

Future Demographics

Attendance at museums will continue to grow over the next 50 years. Visitation will become increasingly bimodal, with visitors drawn from the two growing population groups—children and older adults. Some museums will strive to become child specialists, others will become older adult specialists, and most will attempt to balance the competing demands of these two large population groups.

Minority populations in the United States are currently among the least educated and most impoverished. This will start to change as the growing Hispanic, African-American, and Asian middle class develops. I predict that this new middle class will be composed of educational over-achievers, and family museum outings will become an accepted part of their repertoire. Similar to other constituencies, this group will need to be thoughtfully wooed with special marketing promotions, and served by programs and exhibitions that cater to its specific cultural and historical backgrounds and interests.

Future Psychographics and Personal History

The one thing that is unlikely to change significantly over the next half-century is the psychographics of museum patrons. A concern for learning, a desire for challenging new experiences, a high value on worthwhile leisure time, and a perception that learning is a lifelong activity and not vested exclusively in the schools, will still characterize museum-goers in the 21st century. In fact, I predict that by the middle of the next century these psychographics will reflect most Americans. Museums should find themselves optimally positioned since these values and interests represent those of the dawning information age and the resulting "learning society." The number of individuals predisposed to visit museums should steadily increase over the next 50 years.

The personal histories of today's children are the personal histories of tomorrow's adults. Fostering a child's interest in

art, science, or history will increase the probability that she or he will become an adult art, science, or history museum-goer. **Proactive efforts to involve more families in museum experiences will lead to increased attendance and support in the future.**

The educational leisure market of the future promises to be large and lucrative. It will be up to the museum community to evolve and keep pace with what is becoming an ever more competitive and aggressive marketplace. Museums currently have history and inertia on their side, but the world is changing rapidly and nothing should be taken for granted. Over the next 50 years, museums will need to remain nimble in order to survive and successfully maintain, let alone enlarge, their share of the leisure audience.

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