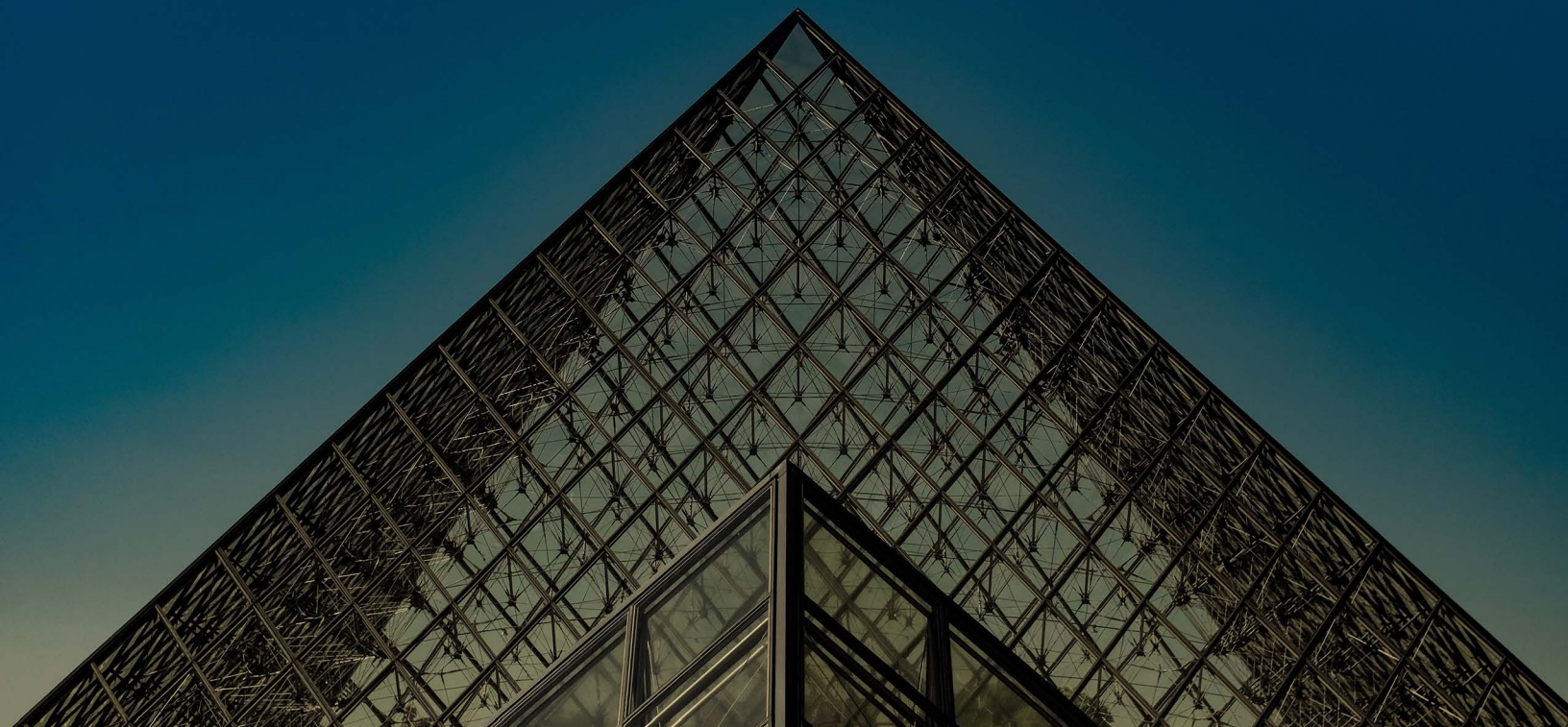




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CLARE MURRAY

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# Functions of art museums: what visitors and museum staff believe

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**Keywords** Museum visitor motivation; active learning; Harvard Art Museums

**Abstract** Do art museums in the 21<sup>st</sup> century view themselves as sites for active learning? And do their visitors visit them primarily to make meaning of works of art? The author sought answers to these questions in a survey study of Harvard Art Museums staff and visitors, examining the primary functions of an art museums and the primary reasons for visiting. Results revealed a striking inconsistency between perceived museum function and reasons for visiting. Both visitors and staff members believed the primary function of art museums to be active learning (teaching people to look at and learn about art and challenging them to think about topics in new ways). However, visitors often reported that they had come to the museum that day to have a relaxing, entertaining time than to learn. Staff also believed that relaxation and entertainment are the main reasons why people visit art museums. This finding encourages art museums to make their approaches to active learning more salient.

**About the Author** Clare Murray is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of cARTie, Connecticut's contemporary art gallery on the go. She conducted research for this paper as an independent study while studying for her MEd in Arts in Education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She holds a BA in Economics and Latin American Studies from Colby College, and most recently completed a Fulbright Predoctoral Fellowship in Spain, studying the educational programming of an emerging network of independent cultural spaces there. She has worked in art museums and children's museums across New England, and is pursuing further studies at Teachers College, Columbia University.

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Luis Camnitzer's 2009 conceptual art piece, *The Museum Is a School*, adorns the entrance façades of art museums across the world. The work consists of a written statement – “The museum is a school. The artist learns to communicate. The public learns to make connections” – that puts active learning, as a particular museum educational experience that helps visitors make meaning of works of art, at the forefront of conversations about art museum purposes. As Camnitzer alludes, making such meaning challenges artists and the general public alike to engage with and think deeply about a range of information.

Within the art museum realm, active learning can be cognitively challenging by provoking reflection, inspiring thought, and stimulating imagination. It manifests as an auspicious goal, only recently adopted by institutions like Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, which affirms its mission to “strive to share the pleasures of reflection, inspiration, provocation, and imagination...”<sup>1</sup> In practice, active learning involves thinking about why a work of art was made, what the artist's intention might have been, whether the work is moving, and if so why or why not, what the broader symbolic meanings of the work might be, and how that work connects to one's own life and experiences.

Historically, art museums have not always operated as active learning institutions. Interview studies have uncovered a wide variety of perceived functions of art museums, as discussed below. Active learning has only sometimes been one such function.

### **To preserve and exhibit**

Worrying about the “democratization of the museum”<sup>2</sup> and taking issue with the increasing use of “the art museum as an instrument for mass education and social action”,<sup>3</sup> traditionalists like the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s (New York) former Director, Phillippe de Montebello, and the Harvard Art Museums’ former Director, James Cuno, put the preservation and display of works of art above visitor experiences. “I believe that an art museum [must first and foremost] collect, preserve, and exhibit works of art,” states Cuno.<sup>4</sup> By preserving the past, art museums communicate histories, however complicated and/or incomplete. The objects that art museums hold in their collections are rooted in stories from certain time periods and places, and it is the role of art museums to maintain those records.<sup>5</sup> In so doing, they teach information.<sup>6</sup>

### **To increase tolerance and understanding of others**

In sharp contrast are more progressive views on perceived art museum purposes, such as increasing tolerance and understanding of other people and cultures. According to progressive museum employees and volunteers who prioritize social action, art museums broaden horizons and increase mutual tolerance by bringing separate communities of people together to share experiences around art.<sup>7</sup>

### **To promote well-being**

Art museums can also serve as “places to engage emotionally with beautiful things”<sup>8</sup> and thereby promote well-being.<sup>9</sup> Though neither museum founding doctrines nor mission statements explicitly emphasize psychological functions related to well-being, research evidence demonstrates that art museums can improve physical and emotional well-being.<sup>10</sup>

### **To ensure “free-choice”**

Falk and Dierking argue that museums can and should be sites for well-being by advocating for free-choice learning. They consider free-choice learning, albeit it “not [being] something new,”<sup>11</sup> paramount. Looking to the future, they insist that museums ought to be developing “experiences that not only meet but exceed the public’s leisure expectations.”<sup>12</sup>

### **To promote economic growth**

In 2017, the American Alliance of Museums published a landmark study entitled “Museums as Economic Engines.” This report makes the case for an economic function of museums, including art museums, pointing to economic impact analyses of art museums.<sup>13</sup> The idea that museums function in part to grow the economy is in the minds of many.<sup>14</sup>

### **To stimulate active learning**

Museums are increasingly recognized as helping people make meaning of works of art, especially through the formalization of the museum education field. Falk and Dierking consider various components of learning in museums, and are explicit that “one’s learning can take many forms, both passive and active.”<sup>15</sup> In university museums, in particular, Chatterjee notes that object-based learning as a practice that involves both active and

experiential learning is necessary “to encourage enhanced use of university collections in new, pedagogically powerful, modes.”<sup>16</sup> Leaders from Project Zero, a research institute focused on the complexity of human potentials, have written manuals for stimulating active learning in art museums through (a) orientation, (b) attitude adjustment, (3) choice and personalization, (4) high-level cognitive experiences, and (5) reflection and connection, and these ideas have been readily circulated amongst the Association of Art Museums.<sup>17</sup> Note that even while many interviewees cite active learning as a function, museums continue to spend far less on their umbrella education departments than on other departments. According to data collected from the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) in 2017, art museums spend an average of 7% of their budgets on education, in comparison to 15% spent on curation, 13% on collections care, and 10% on development.<sup>18</sup>

The study discussed in this paper examines the extent to which art museum staff and visitors believe that art museums serve, first and foremost, an active learning function – providing an opportunity to make meaning of works of art. This study focused on one art museum connected to a university, now called the Harvard Art Museums. Known for its renowned art collection, the Harvard Art Museums was originally founded to teach the visual arts. Since its founding, the Museums have become a public-facing institution, ranking among the top five museums to visit in the Boston area on popular travel sites.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

Ninety-two Harvard Art Museums staff members and 100 Harvard Art Museums visitors participated in this study, completing a brief survey in early 2020.

The surveys consisted of two rank-order questions where participants were asked to rank three statements in order of importance, as well as three open-ended questions. The first rank-order item listed three possible museum functions:

- to educate visitors about art of today and the past
- to provide visitors an enjoyable way to spend time
- to challenge visitors to see and to think

The second rank-order item listed three possible reasons for visiting the museum beyond simply *looking* at art, exploring why visitors specifically choose to look at art.

- to learn about art of today and the past
- to have a pleasant and relaxing time, often with friends
- to be challenged to see and to think

There were also three open-ended questions:

- If you think your museum should be striving for another kind of goal, please explain. / What was the best part of your museum experience today?
- If you think there is another reason why people visit museums, please explain. / If there is another reason why you came, please explain here.
- Can you tell me about a personal memory you have, from any time in your life, about a memorable museum experience?

## Survey results

### Museum functions

As shown in Figure 1, both Harvard Art Museums visitors and staff members rank the function of an art museum “to educate visitors about art of today and the past” as the most important function. “To challenge visitors to see and to think” was perceived as the second most important function, and “to provide visitors an enjoyable way to spend time” was perceived as the third function. Visitors and staff perceived museums to sites for active learning in purpose; not only do museum visitors and staff expect museums to educate visitors about art, but they also expect museums to challenge further thinking and seeing. Together these purposes comprise our definition of active learning: challenging people to engage with and think deeply about a range of information, thereby making meaning of works of art.



Figure 1. The most important museum functions perceived by visitors and staff.

### Reasons for visiting

As shown in Figure 2, Harvard Art Museums visitors and staff converged in rating two reasons as equally important: “to learn about art of today and the past” and “to have a pleasant and relaxing time.” Lowest ratings in this study were given for “to be challenged to see and to think.”

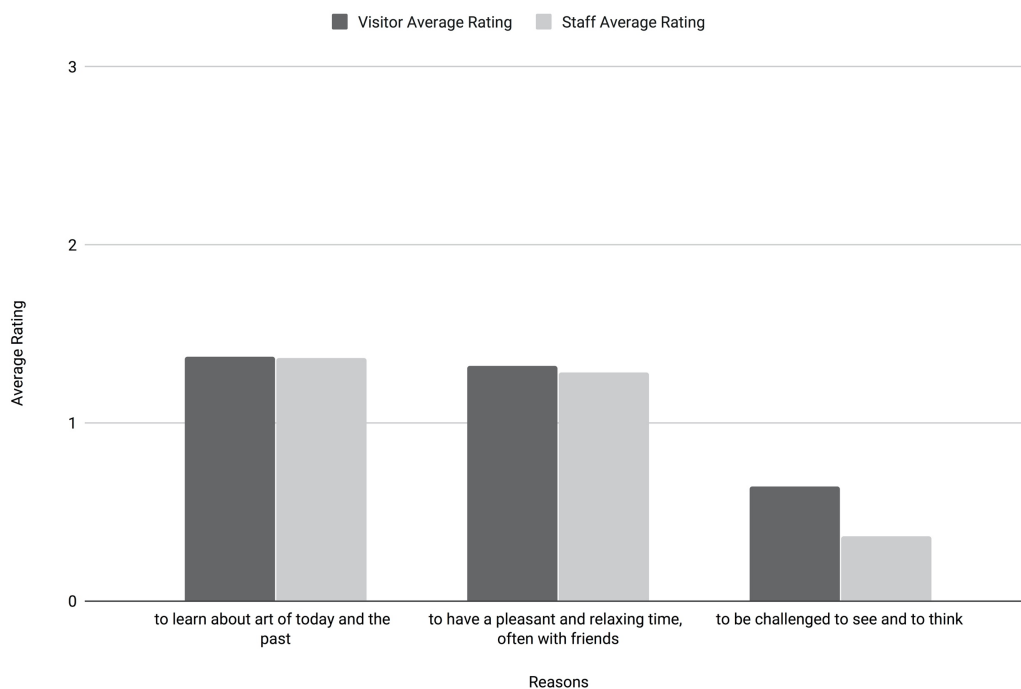


Figure 2. The most important reasons for visiting perceived by visitors and staff.

### Functions vs. reasons for visiting

Figures 1 and 2 reveal an inconsistency in response to the two rank-order items, with active learning recognized as a top priority function, but not a top priority reason for visiting the museum. To examine this divergence of importance given to active learning when considering functions vs. reasons for visiting, a one-way repeated measures ANOVA was performed, with respondent type (visitor, staff) as the between subject factor, and question type (function, reason for visiting) as the repeated measure. The author collapsed the two active learning-related responses into one (“learning about art of today and the past” and “being challenged to see and to think”) and compared this composite against the response of “to have a pleasant and relaxing time.” Thus, each participant received a score of 1 or 0 for each question type, with a 1 given when participants gave either of the two active learning choices a top ranking of 1. A zero was given for responses in which the non-active learning response was ranked as number 1.

Results revealed a significant effect of question type,  $F(1,163) = 77.769, p < .001$ . This occurred because participants were more likely to rank one of the two active learning choices as the most important function of a museum than they were to rank one of these two choices as the most important reason why they visited the museum that day (visitors) or as the most important reason that they believed draws people to art museums (staff). There was no effect of participant type: visitor and staff responses were not reliably different. These results are graphically displayed in Figure 3.

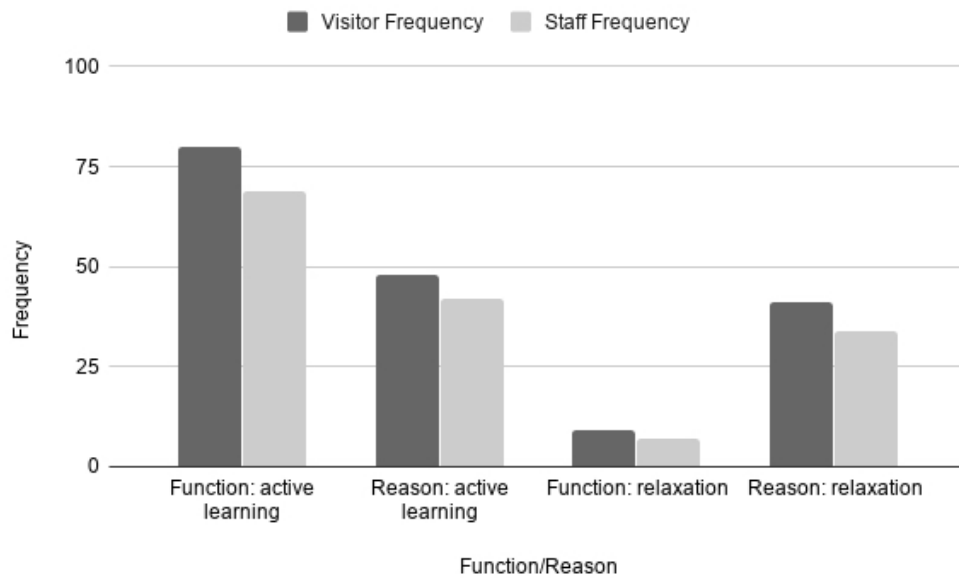


Figure 3. Divergence in visitor and staff perceptions of active learning functions and reasons for visiting.

### Open-ended analyses

Regarding the open-ended responses, an emic approach – which seeks to understand and describe different perceptions of reality – to coding was employed. In contrast to the etic approach, which relies on prior assumptions about how people perceive phenomena, the emic approach is not linear; indeed, it starts by identifying ideas, themes, and behaviors that emerge from the data and then proceeds to connect findings to relevant theories.

No statistical analyses were performed on open-ended responses. However, all responses were coded independently by two raters. Below, we report the categories that emerged when both coders assigned the same code to the response. Codes assigned by only one coder were not applied, though the percent of misaligned codes is reported.

The first open-ended question for museum staff followed the rank-order function question, and asked staff members if they thought the museum should be striving for some other kind of goal besides the three they had been asked to rank. Only 22 staff members offered other functions. Some listed more than one function, and all functions given were coded. The independent raters coded all but 1 of the 22 responses in the same way. Four categories of functions emerged:

- (1) being responsive to what visitors want, adapting to visitor needs so as to expand the visitor base (25.1%)
- (2) offering the community a safe, supportive, inclusive, and/or engaging space (24.3%)
- (3) ensuring accessibility of art for those with disabilities (22.2%)
- (4) non-visitor institutional aims such as improving staff conditions, researching provenance, and working toward environmental neutrality (29.4%)



Three of these categories were about being responsive to visitor needs interests, and desires (numbers 1, 2, and 3 respectively). The fourth category referred to non-visitor goals. Figure 4 displays the categorizations in a pie chart.

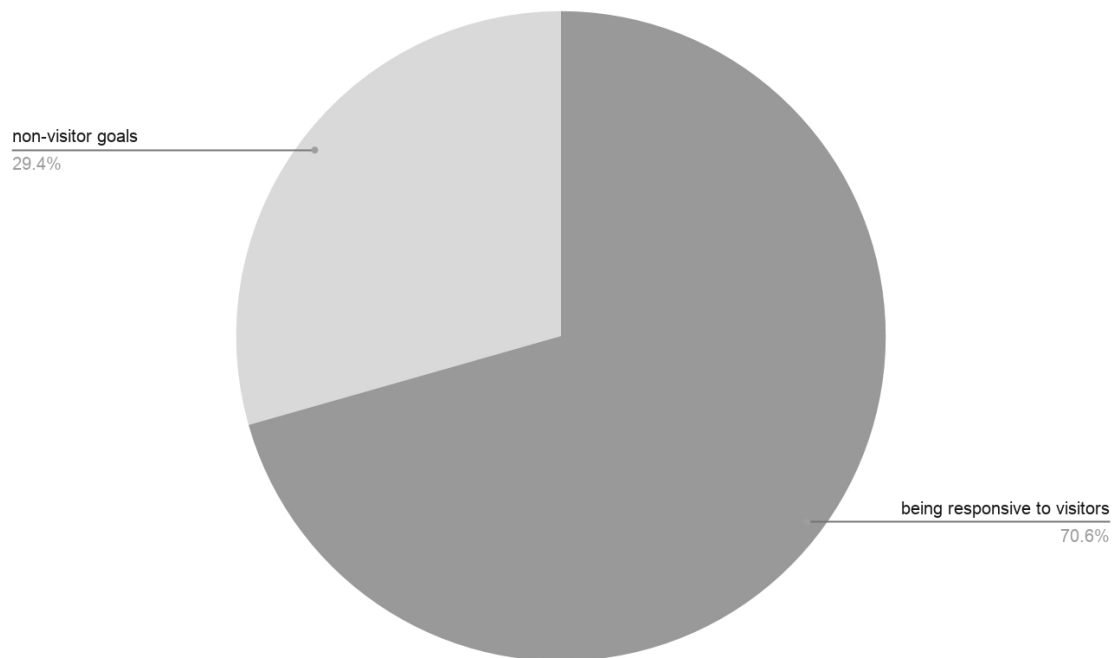


Figure 4. Additional museum goals perceived by staff.

The second open-ended question for museum staff followed the rank order reasons for visiting question, and asked staff whether they believed there were other reasons why people came, again beyond simply *looking* at art as our interest was in why visitors specifically choose to look at art. Sixty-five staff members responded. Some participants listed more than one other reason, and all reasons given were coded. The independent raters coded all but 5 of the 65 responses in the same way. Ultimately, six categories of responses emerged:

- (1) seeking stimulation and/or inspiration from beauty (34.5%)
- (2) seeking a respite, solace, or desire to unplug and escape (24.1%)
- (3) understanding another culture (17.2%)
- (4) desire to become “cultured” (13.8%)
- (5) desire to demonstrate that one is the kind of person that visits museums – that is, bowing to social pressure (6.9%)
- (6) desire to reflect about big issues like the human condition (3.4%)

As can be seen in the pie chart in Figure 5, “stimulation and/or inspiration” emerged as the most frequently-cited reason in addition to those they had rank-ordered. To find solace and a respite, to understand another culture, and to feel cultured followed in frequency of citation. No mention was made of any kind of learning or thinking. These staff responses buttress the rank-order results of both visitors and staff in which active learning and thinking were not seen as reasons for visiting.

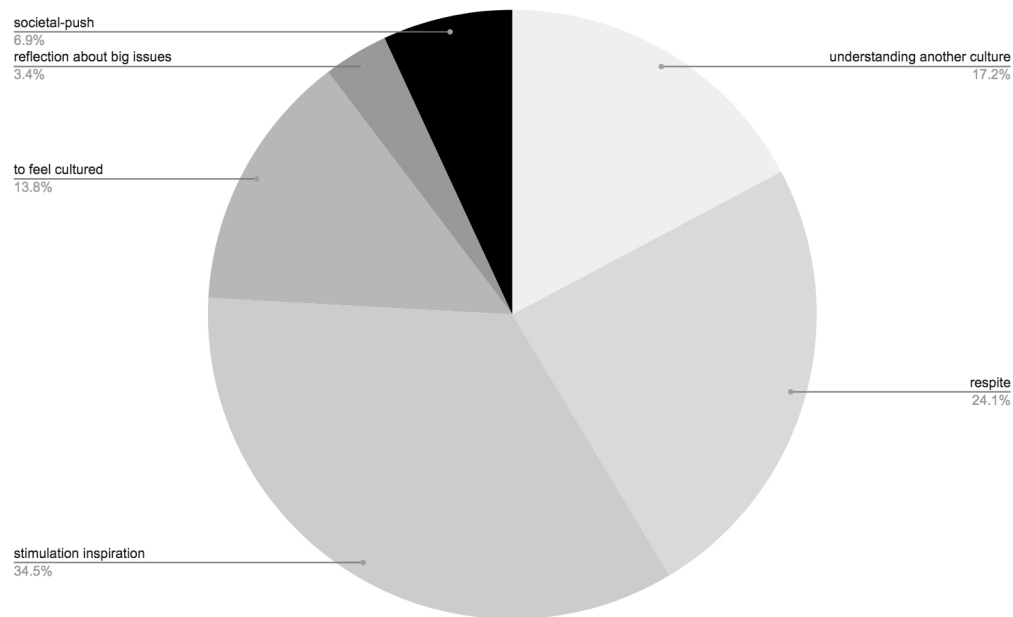


Figure 5. Additional reasons for visiting perceived by visitors.

Visitors were also asked about additional reasons for visiting the museum beyond simply *looking* at art, though only 10 visitors responded. These participants emphasized the convenience of visiting, citing things like: “I had class here,” “I needed a snack from the cafe,” and “I was in the neighborhood.”

When visitors were asked to describe the best part of their museum experience that day, 96 responded. Most simply mentioned seeing the art on display, which proved difficult to interpret as we were more interested in understanding why visitors *specifically* choose to look at art. While some emphasized the presentation of different pieces and many mentioned the new temporary exhibition, featuring more than 120 Japanese Edo period works of art from the Feinberg collection, a private collection promised to the Harvard Art Museums, others talked about specific works of art. The social and introspective aspects of the museum visit mattered to many visitors as well. Though many respondents gave just one reason, others gave multiple reasons. The independent raters coded all but 8 of the 96 responses in the same way. We classified responses into the following seven categories. Three were about some type of active learning or understanding:

- (1) learning about and understanding art (12.9%)
- (2) discovering something new about art (5.6%)
- (3) understanding world (0.9%)

The remaining four were about other issues besides active learning.

- (4) seeing art (52.8%)
- (5) being in the space (13%)
- (6) being with others (12%)
- (7) being with self (3.7%)

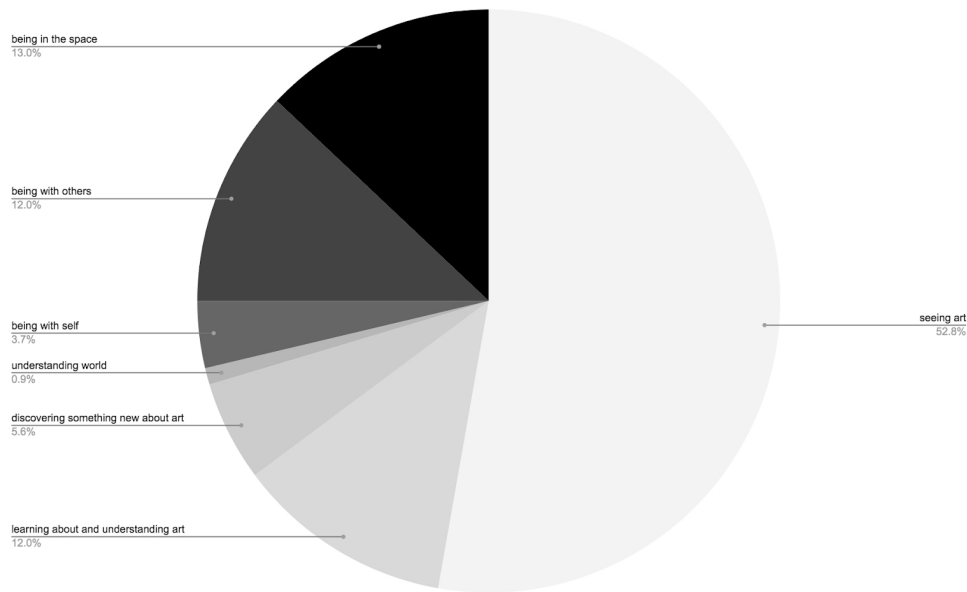


Figure 6. Best parts of the museum experience as reported by visitors.

As shown in Figure 6, three of these categories explicitly mentioned some type of active learning or understanding (numbers 1, 2, and 3). Seeing art emerged as the most frequently-cited best part of the museum experience. We did not consider this an active learning reason, though it is possible that respondents meant seeing art to *both* engage with it *and* think deeply about it; we posit follow-up inquiries, had this study not been anonymous, would have been elucidating to understand the *specific* motivations for looking at art. The remaining three categories have to do with well-being—the positive experience of being in the museum space, being with others, and being with oneself.

The final open-ended question asked both museum visitors and staff to recall a memorable museum experience. Responses were given by 86 visitors and 65 staff. After excluding participants who mentioned experiences in non-art museums, and those who did not cite a memory, we were left with responses from 61 visitors and 50 staff. The independent raters coded all but 2 visitor and 2 staff responses in the same way. Memories were classified into 7 categories, as shown below and in Figure 7:

- (1) tied to a specific museum, show, and/or genre of art, without mention of a specific work of art (38.6%)
- (2) tied to a specific work of art or presentation of work, regardless of museum being mentioned (25.7%)
- (3) evidencing social connection (12.9%)
- (4) evidencing learning, thinking, discovering, transformation (12.9%)
- (5) tied to a tour/field trip (5.7%)
- (6) related to a feeling (2.9%)
- (7) seeing art in person, for the first time (1.4%)

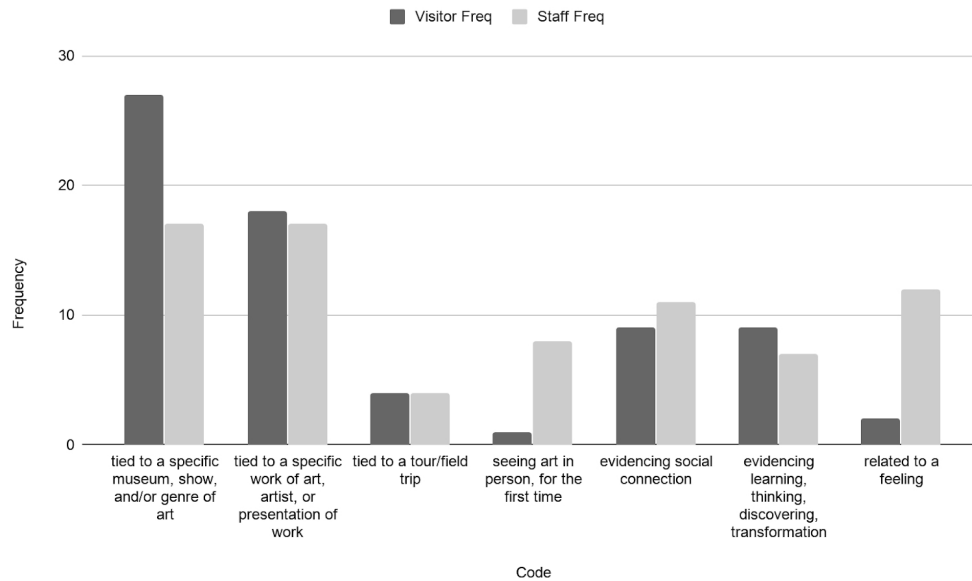


Figure 7. Memorable museum experiences as reported by visitors and staff.

Only 12% of respondents mentioned active learning, thinking, and discovery (code #4). Two-thirds of the memories were tied to a specific museum, genre of art, or a specific work they had seen (codes 1 and 2). These responses speak to the power of art to create strong memories. That people carry memories of museums directly associated with particular works of art and/or museums is interesting, and calls for further inquiry: What made specific museums or specific works stand out in people’s memories? Are meanings of works of art always made in memories? Finally, what museum practices hold potential to leave lasting impacts?

### Analysis

The most striking finding reported here is the disconnect between people’s perceptions of the primary function of an art museum vs. people’s actual reasons for visiting, and the reasons that staff members believe people visit art museums. The majority of visitors reported seeing art, learning about art, and discovering something new about art as preferred parts of their visits, and both museum visitors and museum staff ranked “to educate about art of today and the past” as the most important function of museums, followed by “to challenge to see and to think.” One museum staff member asserted, “I think that my first two choices are inextricable – museums use the art of today and the past to challenge people to see and think,” and another visitor commented, “the descriptions of the art and what they meant at the time of their creation was powerful and made me think about arts’ role today. Helped me understand my world better.”

When visitors reported on why they had come to the museum that day, and when staff reported their beliefs about why people visit art museums, both ranked having a pleasant and relaxing time as more important than being challenged to see and to think – both integral components of active learning in museums. Thus, staff beliefs about why people come to an art museum converged with the reason that actual visitors gave. This lack of

acknowledgement of the challenging and sometimes disrupting, educational potential of an art museum in deciding whether to visit or not is notable, and it raises the question of what it means to be an active learning institution.

As art museums are lauded for realizing their full potential as educational institutions, and as active learning factors increasingly into museums' mission statements, academic art museums, in particular, may profit from making their function of provoking deep learning and thinking through challenges more salient. Simply declaring their aim to challenge visitors to see and to think is likely not enough. More effective would be the development of new ways to prompt active learning experiences that not only challenge people to engage with the range of information embedded in art, but to also think deeply about that range of information, a signpost Hubbard affirms holds potential more broadly in the simulation of critical and creative thinking.<sup>19</sup> Already, many museums are trying to challenge viewers' thinking and seeing with their wall texts, but there are ways for wall texts and other interpretive materials to pop off the wall in different ways to provoke disrupting conversations.

Regarding only a single type of interpretive material, The Victoria and Albert Museum (London) suggests some best practices for writing wall text. These include writing directly to the education level of the museum's audiences, asking questions that prompt close looking and thinking, and being transparent about unknown backstories that dissolve the barrier between the 'expert' and the public – saying things like “its history is a puzzle, but it may have been...”<sup>20</sup> Pairing provocative wall text with intentionally juxtaposed paintings rich in comparison and contrast potential is another way to make critical thinking and active learning explicit. This approach has been taken at the newly renovated Museum of Modern Art (New York), where objects are grouped by theme rather than period in a way that encourages viewers to see commonalities across works from different time periods and cultures.

Given the specificity and rootedness of the Harvard Art Museums within the cultural hub of the Greater Boston area,<sup>21</sup> the findings reported here may not apply to art museums in general. Studying other types of art museums is called for in furthering this kind of research. It is possible these findings can be replicated in other art museum types and locations, but it is important to acknowledge that the Harvard Art Museums, as an academic institution, does espouse a different mission than other types of art museums – to enrich the academic experience of the Harvard University student body and to cultivate critical and creative leaders for society. The study reported here finds that both museum visitors and staff of the Harvard Art Museums do perceive academic art museums as sites for active learning in function, though when it comes to explaining their reasons for visiting, active learning pursuits are not the primary purposes.

## **Conclusion**

That museum visitors and staff members, on average, rate active learning as the most important function of art museums fortifies the original motivation for this study, inspired by Camnitzer's *The Museum Is A School*. The fact that neither visitors nor staff report museum visitorship as motivated by active learning ideals like being challenged to see and to think, however, reveals a disconnect between people's perception of museum functions and reasons for visiting. Should academic art museums wish to more fully embody their identities as the active learning institutions that artists and thinkers like Camnitzer have afforded them,

they need to make their function of challenging visitors to see and to think more prominent. Potential next steps involve devising new instruments for prompting active learning experiences, such as provocative wall texts and unexpected juxtapositions of masterpieces, among other innovative approaches evident in museums like New York's Museum of Modern Art. In so doing, more rigorous museum research studies will be necessary to inform the trajectory of research motivated by this study.

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Figure 5. Additional reasons for visiting perceived by visitors.

Figure 6. Best parts of the museum experience as reported by visitors.

Figure 7. Memorable museum experiences as reported by visitors and staff.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Mission."

<sup>2</sup> McClellan, 31

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 35

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 36

<sup>5</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, *The Educational Role of the Museum*

<sup>6</sup> "Public Perceptions of – and Attitudes to – The Purposes of Museums in Society."

<sup>7</sup> "Public Perceptions of – and Attitudes to – The Purposes of Museums in Society" and Hooper-Greenhill, *The Educational Role of the Museum*

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- <sup>8</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, *The Educational Role of the Museum*, 8
- <sup>9</sup> “Public Perceptions of – and Attitudes to – The Purposes of Museums in Society.”
- <sup>10</sup> Chatterjee, *Museums, Health and Well-Being* and Chatterjee & Camic
- <sup>11</sup> Falk and Dierking, 212
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 225
- <sup>13</sup> Frey
- <sup>14</sup> “Public Perceptions of – and Attitudes to – The Purposes of Museums in Society.”
- <sup>15</sup> Falk and Dierking, 186
- <sup>16</sup> Chatterjee, 179
- <sup>17</sup> “Learning in Museums.”
- <sup>18</sup> Murray, “Arts Education: A Philanthropic Priority?”
- <sup>19</sup> Hubard, 15-21
- <sup>20</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum, 20
- <sup>21</sup> “Culture Track: Focus on Boston.”