

**When I was in high school..."**  
**What Adults Remember about Visiting Art Museums as Teenagers**  
The Impact of Teen Programming in Art Museums

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“Taken as a whole, these studies of museum memory, both recollection studies and short-term memory studies, suggest that museum memories are salient and persistent and that they are influenced by the amount of time spent in the museum, the mode of presentation, the social and physical milieu, and the prior experiences and knowledge of the visitor.” Falk, John H. and Lynn D. Dierking. "Recalling the Museum Experience." *Journal of Museum Education* 20, no. 2 (1995): p.13.

“In the past five years, additional research has confirmed both the value and the importance of using long-term memories to understand the impact museums have on visitors. In addition, recent advancements in the neurosciences and the cognitive sciences have permitted a greater understanding of how these findings fit within larger psychological and biological frameworks and independently validate the importance of this line of research. For example, our findings on the importance of context, and the presence of an emotional, physical, and social “stamp” on all memories, have now been independently substantiated by numerous investigators in a wide range of situations. Finally, of importance to the museum field is recent research which finds that what people remember about a museum experience immediately following their experience – for example, as they exit an exhibition – often bears little relationship to what they recall weeks, months, or years later. Thus, as the museum community comes to fully understand and appreciate the importance of meaningful assessment, every effort should be made to include the measurement of visitors’ long-term memories.” John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, as quoted in Hirsch, Joanne S. and Lois H. Silverman, eds. *Transforming Practice*. Washington, DC: Museum Education Roundtable, 2000, p. 277.

### **A Museum Study of Long-Term Memory**

I administered an ethnographic, qualitative survey during the spring and summer of 2014. The study was approved by the IRB at the University of Texas at Dallas, and administered using Qualtrics.

### **3 Essential Questions drove my research:**

1. What do adults remember about visiting museums as teenagers? How do adults perceive the impact of those visits?
2. What is the content and form of these memories?
3. What insight can these recollections provide for classroom teachers, docents and museum professionals currently working with teenagers?

**The online, anonymous survey consisted of four open-ended questions:**

1. What memories remain with you from your high school trips to art museums?
2. In what ways do you connect with visual art/design/ architecture in your life now?
3. How does engaging with visual art/architecture benefit high school students? How does it benefit the museums?
4. In which year did you graduate? Where did you attend high school? Please name the school(s) and the city.

**Responses**

There were 116 responses from 4 countries and 19 US states. Graduation years ranged from 1958 and 2014. I sorted the responses into four categories:

1. Concrete (exhibits, architecture, activities, souvenirs, museum's name, city)
2. Emotional (affective response to the visit)
3. Intellectual (concepts, insights, reflections)
4. Social (who they visited with, the nature of human interactions and reactions)

**1. Concrete Memories**

- 90% mentioned location: 78 different art museums by name, 24 cities.
- 38% recalled the art by name: 5 blockbuster exhibitions, 13 categories (ie: Aztec, Impressionism), 28 artists, 3 works of art. Specific recall increased with younger respondents.
- 10% mentioned keeping tangible reminders of the museum visit (Postcards, photographs, sketches, informal make-and-takes) "I wish I still had the notebook."
- 5% mentioned architecture "My favorite museums are often those that mix art with unique architecture."
- 16% visited museum trips while traveling. Of note: High school students visit museums while on college trips, and college students visit when returning home for holidays.

**2. Emotional Response**

- 75% noted a positive emotional response (excited, curious, interested, enthralled, loved, enjoyed, inspired)
- 10% mentioned feeling awe in the presence of something greater than oneself. "I knew it was important. I could feel it."
- 7% were indifferent "I don't remember much"
- 2% had negative responses, which related to people, not the art. "The guard watched us like we were criminals." "Everyone there was old."

### 3. Intellectual Response

- **45% Connected with the Global Human Experience**

The value of art is "...to bring the huge daunting world down to human scale to make sense of it."

"Acquaintance with objects has a way of expanding my awareness of the variety in human cultures."

"...think about culturally relevant issues we share across time and place..."

"allows people to become more empathetic and conscious of their own feelings and those of others..."

"Art is a window into another person's soul."

Art has helped me "...value the creative genius in others"

- **27% Used Art to Understand History**

"I was impressed by the age [of the exhibit]."

"...actually SEE history..." "...living history lesson"

"Museums...give my friends and me insight into the time period in which the works were created."

"...better appreciation for preserving the past"

"How did [the work of art] get to this museums after all of its years of existence?"

- **23% Considered Aesthetics**

"Seeing something so massive and yet so delicate always made me ponder the dualities of life."

Visiting art museums "...made me more aware and sensitive to all the beauty and fascinating things around me every day..."

- **33% were Inspired to Take Action**

"We could ask questions every time we went."

Visiting an art museum gave me inspiration... "for fashionable outfits"

"... to decorate my room" "... to write a play" "... to pick out which movie to watch" "... to choose a book to read" "... to bring back my friends" "...to give my own opinion about art" "...to paint"

- **14% believed their time in art museums helped Develop their Self-Concept**

"...establish my individual identity" "...gained awareness of careers...not otherwise known" "...helped me try on lots of hats" "...a place for me to explore my interests and skills" "...a starting place for discovery" "...a safe outlet for emotions and hormones" "...I discovered my talents" Teens who "think outside the box" can find success and pleasure in learning.

"Teenagers can find themselves in art."

- **9% made Connections**

"I can relate works of art to things I see in everyday life." "Art stretches across traditional disciplinary boundaries." "Art and science are not opposites."

- **2% were Negative**

"...so rudimentary that I didn't learn anything" "I didn't have any background to appreciate it"

#### 4. Social Response

- “...I’d never seen an adult struggle to speak with authority and it felt really substantial to me. It was like a wall was torn down and there wasn’t this great gulf between my experience and theirs.... I think it was the last time they [faculty of a Catholic school] ever took a group of students to that particular [Salvador Dali] museum.”
- **23% mentioned positive Peer Relationships**  
Museums provide “a different setting” to push everyone into “a new dynamic.”  
“The museum is a great place to take a date.”  
“As a high schooler, if one can start a conversation about something as unique and serious as art, it is impressive...[to a potential date].”  
“Me and my friends (sic) wandered in one day to get out of the rain, and ended up staying for hours. We had no idea we could enjoy it on our own.”  
“You’re challenged to be the most creative you can be, and to value the creative genius in others.”  
“Creative thinkers” get “an opportunity to be recognized” in an art museum.
  - **15% believed the time they spent as teens in art museums improved their interpersonal skills.**  
“[Art] makes for great conversations.”  
“Art helps you get outside yourself as a teen.”  
“Art forces teenagers to engage in a different way.”  
“...a safe outlet for emotions and hormones”
  - **9% Family Ties** “It was the ONLY place I liked to go with my mother!”