

Five Ways Museums Can Increase Empathy in the World

By Elif M. Gokcigdem. Article originally published by the Greater Good Science Center, University of California, Berkeley.

Summary

At any given time and place, there are multiple ways of looking at and seeing a particular object, issue, or problem, as well as many ways that beings coexist and make sense of the universe.

Museums that encourage us to understand, emotionally engage with, and contemplate this profound truth help us to become more responsive to the needs of those around us and of our environment.

They help us gain a perspective-altering lens that awakens our sense of connectedness, respect, compassion, presence, and purpose. In this way, museums are uniquely positioned to help bridge the empathy gap so prominent in our world.

Museums Hold a Mirror to Society



Turquoise Mountain exhibition, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

Through their social and educational mission, museums can provide a safe space for encountering our collective behavior, knowledge, complex histories, and values. By putting people in proximity to other people's lived experiences, the artifacts from their cultures, and

their stories, museums can help us awaken to different realities and multiple perspectives that exist around us. Personal and multi-faceted encounters with people from other cultures—and their ideas, stories, and artifacts—create opportunities for authentic dialogue with “the other”: someone who is different from us, but shares our world. This serves to challenge any biases and stereotypes we may hold, while increasing our capacity for empathy.

Museums are a Form of Storytelling

Our brains are wired to retain information and make meaning in story format. Before writing was invented, our ancestors relied on storytelling to transfer critical, life-saving knowledge and wisdom and to help bond a community together. Modern research has shown that storytelling inspires empathy-building by allowing us to engage emotionally with the experiences of other people, even those with whom we may have little in common.

Museums often present the stories of people and places far away in place, time, or experience, in order to encourage empathy-building and more wide-ranging compassion. Telling stories from the point of view of the people and cultures featured can also increase our sense of shared humanity, as we see how others face fears, biases, and challenges similar to our own.



The Lunch Counter simulation experience, Center for Civil Rights, Atlanta



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Museums Create Experiential Learning Opportunities

To increase empathy, it helps not only to provide knowledge and stories, but to create experiences that engage us in other ways. Research suggests that experiential learning is an effective way to increase learning in general, and empathy in particular. Museums help us to experience empathy by offering interactive exhibits that encourage more than an intellectual understanding.



The Dialogue in Silence exhibition. By Dialogue Social Enterprises. Copyright: G2Baraniak

Museums Promote Awe & Wonder

How might one go about changing habitual and entrenched perspectives and behavior toward others? This usually requires more than just information; it requires some kind of paradigm shift, often caused by a transformative life event or some kind of deep learning.

For example, think of the “overview effect,” experienced by astronauts seeing our planet from outer space for the first time. This experience induces a strong sense of awe, connectedness to something greater than themselves, and compassion for the whole planet. Museums can also foster experiences of awe and wonder, through art, science, spectacle, beauty, and complexity.

Wonder often occurs around an extraordinary experience—something that is otherwise inaccessible to visitors in their daily lives. Extraordinary experiences should trigger two reactions—the “Wow!” moment—is most effective if it is followed up by a cognitive reaction—the “How?” moment. In a museum setting where there are facilitators and docents available, the “How?” moment can take the form of further experimentation, dialogue, questioning, perspective taking, and reflection.

Since awe has been tied to a sense of oneness with others and altruism, a museum's ability to foster awe can also help with the goal of increasing empathy and compassion.

Museums Provide a Safe Space for Contemplation

Museums encourage contemplation of our world by providing a space where we can slow down and be with what is before us, without needing to perform in any way.

Unlike many everyday settings where the goal is clear, people are invited to explore in museums on their own schedule, moving from exhibit to exhibit as they see fit, following their own internal guidelines.

This naturally allows for a more contemplative and reflective experience. Through this reflection, museum patrons can achieve a deeper understanding of the viewpoints of others and recognize their own connection to all of humanity and the planet.



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