

Visiting and Trusting Museums:
Findings from the Trust Canadians and Their Pasts Survey

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Thank You

First, on behalf of the “Canadians and the Past” research team I want to thank the Canadian Museums Association for the opportunity to share some of the findings from our study. Also thank you to Ms Lalonde for her introduction to today’s session.

I am going to start this mornings’ session by showing slides that summarize some of the survey findings. Dr. Létourneau will take the last 20 minutes of our session and place the survey findings in a larger context where he will reflect on the meaning of history in everyday life.

Introduction

We talked with 3,319 Canadians. Most of our telephone interviews lasted about 20 minutes but many respondents would have been happy to talk to us for a lot longer. Indeed, almost 500 of our interviews lasted 30 minutes or longer. Seventy percent of our respondents agreed we could call back and talk to them a second time about the topics in the survey. Once our respondents understood the survey was not a ‘history test,’ but rather a conversation about the importance of, and their interest in, the past, including the past of their family, the interviews went quite well.

The number of topics we can explore with the survey data is extensive. Today I want to share with you three of our main findings. I want to try to link these findings to museums in a way that I hope will be of interest to you. The three findings are:

- 1, many Canadians **engage the past** in a wide range of activities;
- 2, Canadians accord a great deal of trust in museums, more so than to any other source of historical information we asked about in the survey;

- 3, what we have found in our Canadian survey generally parallels the results of similar studies completed in the United States and Australia.

First I want to talk about engagement.

We asked our survey respondents how often they engaged in a number of activities in the last 12 months. The first slide lists the activities and the percentage of respondents answering affirmatively (slide 2). I have placed the family activities we asked about in the left hand column. Eighty-three percent of our respondents reported they looked at old photos at least once over the past 12 months. When we asked our respondents for details about looking at photographs they talked mostly about pictures of family members, such as grandparents, great grandparents and so on. Less frequently they talked about pictures of buildings or places.

Other family activities we asked about included:

- keeping heirlooms, where we found a participation rate of 74%
- a bit more than half of our respondents reported visiting places from their family's past, for example, visiting a village, family farm, an early school house or the home in which they lived when they were a child
- about the same number of our respondents said they were working on a scrapbook, family diaries or histories, family recipe books and so on
- a much smaller number, about one in five of our respondents, told us they had worked on their family tree or completed other genealogical work over the past year.

We asked respondents to provide us details about the heirlooms they were keeping and the scrapbooks, family diaries and recipe books that they were preparing. We also asked our respondents to tell us why these activities were **meaningful to them**. Most respondents said that it helped them understand who they were, where they came from, and that it gave them a chance to pass on something from the family to their children and future generations. **Respondents talked about being connected to the past and bringing the past into the present.** Smaller numbers of our respondents situated their family history in large narratives.

One respondent, a 61 year old Polish woman living in Toronto, told us they had "just this week" received a "death certificate for a great aunt" who was 90 years of age when she died. After receiving the certificate they had then looked at old pictures, including pictures of her brother who "was born in the little village" in Poland. Our respondent then told us about a visit she made to the same village 32 years earlier and how her aunt remembered there "was a railway track that ran right by the house" and that her aunt "remembered during the war the Jews being transported to the concentration camps. . . ."

While this type of response to the questionnaire was not common, there certainly were other stories that tied family history to a larger history. These larger histories most often involved war and immigration.

Any categories we use to describe the remaining activities, those on the right hand side of the slide, have fuzzy boundaries. At one level, the remaining activities could be described as public history. Public in that they typically reach beyond family, both in terms of the audience and in terms of the infrastructure required to sustain these activities. Again the participation rate is highest – 78% – for a passive activity, watching movies, videos or DVDs about the past. About half of our respondents report reading a book about the past in the last year. Visiting museums and historic sites, perhaps our best examples of public history, have participation rates of 43% and 49%, respectively.

Some general conclusions can be made from the participation rates we found in our study

- Almost all Canadians engage in activities where they encounter the past.
- About half of our respondents report engaging in more than five activities.
- Forty-four percent of them engaged in the three most common family-related activities in the last year: looking at photos, keeping heirlooms and making scrapbooks, family diaries and so on.
- Twenty-two percent, half as many respondents, reported reading a book about the past, and visiting a museum, and visiting a historic site in the last twelve months.

We have very high participation rates for family-related activities, but lower rates for public history.

Lets take a minute to look at the 43% figure for museum attendance. I am not surprised by the 43% figure as is similar to that found in other studies.

I should say that our definition of museums was broad. We asked about “**any museums in Canada or elsewhere.**” In addition, distinctions between museums and historic sites are not always clear. Some of our respondents, when asked to name the last museum they had visited, described what more conventionally would be seen as a historic site. Many respondents referred to major museums in their answers, such as the Glenbow, the ROM, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, The Rooms in St John’s and so on. Other smaller and more specialized museums were also mentioned by our respondents including: the Yarmouth County Museum & Archives, the Pitt Meadows Museum, the Bata Shoe Museum, the 1st Museum of Travel in Moose Jaw, and Huronia – Sainte-Marie Among the Hurons – more of a historic site than a museum. A few museums outside of Canada were also mentioned but, in general, they tended to be big world famous museums such as the MET, the Louvre, the British Museum and so on. I suspect the broad definition we used is why our attendance figures are bit higher than other studies.

When it comes to engaging in the past, museums are in a complex place. In general, museums compete with other cultural, sporting and commercial venues for visitors. When it comes to visiting the past museums also compete for the time people spend on family history. Competing with the family is a very tough road, and there are times it may make more sense for the museum to bring the family inside their institution. Of course, this is not a new idea and museums have been doing this for some time.

Peel Heritage Complex (skipped in the presentation)

*I would like to very briefly share with you how one of our community partners is bringing family history into their museum. One of our CURA, or research partners, is the Peel Heritage Complex. Peel is experiencing rapid population growth as a result immigration. The Peel Heritage Complex is planning an exhibition where six to eight recent immigrants will each have an exhibition case where they tell their story. These participants will be asked to reflect on their experience in coming to Peel and will be encouraged to bring artifacts to help explain their journey. **Clearly these participants will literally be bringing their family history into the museum.** Those who visit the exhibit will be asked to answer a few of the same questions that we asked in the survey. So the exhibit is an extension of the research we are doing.*

Some of our respondents **DO** see links between their family history and a larger historical narrative. I want to finish this section of my talk by sharing with you an answer from one of our respondents who was able to find links between her family history and that of a museum (slide 4).

Web (skipped in the presentation)

*Before we leave engagement and look at questions of trust, I want to make a very short detour and talk about the web for a minute. Forty percent of our respondents report using the web, in the last twelve months, to look up something about the past – this is truly an amazing number. Remember that unlike museums, that have been around for two centuries,¹ the web as we know it today, has been around for about thirty years, and our most popular search engine – Google – has been around for two decades.² I think there is a story in our data about the use of the web as a way to engage in the past. Today, some people, after reading a book, seeing a movie, or visiting a museum or historic place, go to the web to get more information. How to take advantage of these synergies is an important question for museums. Of course, web sites for individual museums and the development of meta web sites, like the Virtual Museum of Canada, are examples of these links between the web and museums. **What is important is not just putting museum information or exhibits on the web, but facilitating connections between the museums and other sources of information.***

Characteristics of those who visit museums

I want to switch directions a bit now and show you our findings about the characteristics of those who visit museums. I have a few slides to help illustrate what we have found. As you know, many surveys have found a relationship between education and visiting museums. For simplicity I am using four educational groups:

- respondents who have not completed high school;
- those who have completed high school but have no further education;
- those who have additional education after high school but not a university degree (so those who have some, or completed technical or community college as well as those who have some university training); and
- respondents who have completed one or more university degrees.

For every step up in education we have a step up in likelihood of having visited a museum over the last twelve months (slide 5). This is a very powerful relationship. At 61 percent, those who have a university degree are three times more likely than those who have not completed high school, to report visiting a museum in the last twelve months.

This relationship between education and increased rates of museum attendance is not unique (slide 6). The pattern for:

- visiting historic sites,
- reading books about the past, and
- use of internet to explore the past is the same as what we found for museums.

There is also a pattern, but somewhat muted, for most of the family activities. By comparing the two slides we can see that education matters more when it comes to predicting participation in public history than it does when it comes to participating in family activities that relate to the past.

The pattern **for income** looks much like that for education (slide 7). As income goes up so does the likelihood of having visited a museum in the last year. Those at the highest income level are almost three times more likely to say they visited a museum in the last year than those with the lowest level of income.

Our respondents NOT born in Canada were three percent **MORE** likely to say they had been to a museum - a small and not statistically significant difference. Of course, those not born in Canada include people who had lived in Canada for many years, perhaps almost all of their life, as well as those who had immigrated in the last few years. When we look at more recent immigrants – those who came to Canada in the last 15 years – we do find they are less likely to report having

been to a museum in the last year (slide 8). The percentage figures for recent immigrants is 38%, for Canadian-born respondents it is 42%, and for settled immigrants it is 47%. So the rate of museum attendance is highest for settled immigrants, lowest for recent immigrants, and our Canadian-born respondents were in the middle.

Women are five percent more likely to report they have been to a museum than men. Parents, however are no more likely to report going to a museum than non-parents. Those under 30 and over 75 are less likely to report visiting a museum - but otherwise there is no relationship between museum attendance and age. Living in big city or a rural area is not associated with museum attendance nor is having an ethno-cultural background other than English or French. In summary, the two best predictors of museum attendance are education and income, and gender is an important secondary predictor of attendance.

Of course, education and income are generally correlated, that is, they go together.

However, not everyone who has a high level of education has a high income. We all know of examples where people who have very limited formal education but have very high incomes. Conversely, we all know of examples where people with very high levels of education have very low incomes. In general, however, as education increases so does income.

We can use a little math or statistics to sort out the relationship of income to museum attendance after ***controlling for education***. Think of it this way, we look at all the survey respondents whose highest level of education is a high school diploma, and within this group, we check to see if there is any variation in museum attendance by income. We do this for each level of education. **What we find is that income matters to museum attendance even after we control for education.**

Using this same type of analysis, where we control for education, income, gender, age, and so on, we find that income is almost as important in predicting visits to historic sites. To a lesser extent income is associated with going to movies and looking at old photos, keeping heirlooms to pass on to future generations and visiting places from the family past.

Income **does not** help to explain:

- the likelihood of reading a book about the past,
- looking up information about the past on the web,
- visiting an archive,
- doing genealogical research,
- scrapbooking, or
- participating in other types of activities that engage people with the past.

This type of analysis, known as regression analysis, **shows us that income matters more to museum attendance than to it does to participating in every other activity we asked about in our survey.**

Of course income can matter in at least two ways. **First**, we traditionally think of the cost of attendance as being a barrier in and of itself. I looked up the cost of visiting the Vancouver Museum, the McCord in Montreal and the ROM in Toronto. The cost of one-time attendance for two adults is 22, 26 and 44 dollars respectively at these three museums. For many people these admission prices are not easily affordable. I understand that both the McCord and the ROM have some days where attendance is free for brief windows of time. I also understand that limited government funding has much to do with the high cost of museum admission. Nevertheless when we look at these admission rates, it is easy to see why income is related to museum attendance.

The second way income matters is more subtle. The cost of admission to a place like the ROM likely reinforces images of privilege, refinement and class for some people and an aesthetic or culture for others. For those who have higher levels of education this image of a museum either does not exist or does not matter. For those with lower levels of education and lower levels of income, museum attendance is rare and it is likely that this image of museums is common. **Only about one in ten of our low income, low education respondents reported going to a museum in the last year; but about seven in ten of our high education, high income respondents reported going to a museum.**

Trust

I want to turn our attention to the questions we asked about trust in the survey.

We asked our respondents to tell us how much trust they had in a number of different sources of information about the past. The results are summarized in the slide now projected (slide 9). About two-thirds of our respondents said they thought museums were very trustworthy. A bit more than one-half of our respondents said historic sites are very trustworthy sources of information about the past. Considerably fewer of our respondents indicated that books about the past (39%), family stories (32%) and teachers (29%) are very trustworthy sources of information about the past.

Just as museums clearly stand out as being on the top rung of the trust ladder, the internet clearly stands out as being the bottom rung. Only 7 percent of our respondents told us they found the internet to be a very trustworthy source of information about the past. While there has been a huge uptake in the use of the internet as a source of information to explore the past there is considerable skepticism in the trustworthiness of the internet. Over time this may change.

Most Trustworthy (skipped in the presentation)

*In addition to asking respondents how trustworthy they found each of the six sources of information, we asked them which source of information they found **most** trustworthy. So think about respondents who answered that historic sites, museums and teachers are all very trustworthy sources of information. These respondents were then asked: of the three they thought to be very trustworthy, which one do they think is the **most** trustworthy source. The results for the most trustworthy source of information further underscore the level of trust accorded to museums (slide 10).³*

- *Seven percent of our respondents insisted that two or more sources of information were equally trustworthy.*
- *About four in ten respondents said museums were the single most trustworthy source of information about the past.*
- *A bit less than half as many respondents said they found either fact-based books about the past, or family stories, or historic sites the most trustworthy source.*
- *Very small numbers of respondents reported that teachers or web sites were the most trustworthy source of information.*

I want to just make a very short detour back to the issue of web sites and museums. Earlier we saw trust for information, about the past, gathered over the internet was low. An interesting question for the future is: to what extent will museum web sites and virtual museums, who display pictures of artifacts, will be able to convey the same sense of authority and trust as do museums.

I want to pursue, at least a bit, this finding about high levels of trust in museums. There are two avenues I want to explore: **first, who are the people who trust museums, and second what is it about museums that make them trustworthy?**

Who Trusts Museums?

By and large there are few demographic differences between those who say museums are very trustworthy and those who give museums a lower rating on our trustworthiness scale. There is little or no variation in the likelihood of saying museums are trustworthy sources of information about the past according to place of residence. Living in one of our three biggest cities (Montreal, Toronto or Vancouver), living in a city of any size, or living in a rural area are not correlated with thinking of museums as very trustworthy sources of historical information.

The difference between men and women in the likelihood of trusting museums as sources of information about the past is very small: 65% of men and 67% percent of women say museums are very trustworthy.

- having children,
- being born in Canada,
- being a recent or settled immigrant, and
- whether you profess to have a religious affiliation or not, **are not correlated** with the degree of trust people place in museums.

There is some variation in how trustworthy museums are rated by age. As we can see in the graph, however, the major division is between those 75 and older compared to all others (slide 11). But, older people, compared to others, express less trust in every source of information except family stories.⁴ So this finding likely says more about aging than it does about museums.

While there is a small amount of variation in likelihood of saying museums are very trustworthy by education, there is no clear pattern to this variation and the differences are small (slide 12). Contrast this slide to the one that plots income by museum attendance, for example.

With respect to income, we have an increase in trust as income increases for the first few income groups and then there is a leveling off and limited variation in trust for those making over 60 thousand dollars.

The overall message is that the high level of trust in museums is found for just about every socio-demographic sub-group of the population we have considered.

We have also looked at the relationship between **trusting** museums and **visiting** museums. The difference in level of trust in museums, as sources of historical information, for those who reported they have been to a museum in the last year, and those who have not, is actually surprisingly small. Of our museum attenders, 66 percent said museums were very trustworthy, whereas the figure was 64 percent for those who had NOT been to a museum in the last year. This two percent difference is not meaningful 64 and 66, in this regard, are the same number.

What about our more frequent museum visitors? Seventy percent of those who have been to a museum once in the last year say museums are very trustworthy (slide 13). The trustworthiness figure for:

- people who reported going two or three times,
- for people who reported going four or five times, and
- for people who reported going more than five times is the same: 68%.

There is, for all intents and purposes no variation in the extent to which people trust museums by attendance!

In any case, to answer my question at the start of this part of the talk: who trusts museums – almost everyone including those who are **not** regular visitors.

Why do people trust museums?

To answer this question I am going to shamelessly plagiarize some work by two members of our Canadians and Their Past team: Lon Dubinsky and Delphin Muise. At this point I should probably put in the usual caveats that all errors in reporting are mine, not the source authors, but I am not going to do so. They are both here and if you do not like what I am saying, please blame them.

After we asked people how much they trust each source of information, we asked them which source of information they trusted the most. For the source they trusted the most, we asked them to explain **why** they had so much trust in their top-ranked source of information about the past.

Many answers were brief, sometimes short and simple, sometimes short and pithy. Short and simple responses included things like: ‘they have the actual artifacts’ (514). Short and pithy answers included comments along the lines of: ‘if they get it wrong, everybody sees it.’

More detailed answers could be classified as assigning authority to museums for one, or possibly both, of the following: the presence of actual artifacts in museums, and the institutional nature of museums.

The presence of artifacts invoked many ideas including:

- a faith that the artifact somehow stands on its own and, by implication, could not be misread;
- a sense of reverence for the artifact and the implication those who collected and displayed artifacts also had a reverence for the past and the truth of the past; and
- a feeling of connectedness, like you were there with the “real thing.”

The institutional nature of museums also covered a wide range of responses including:

- the authority of the state or government authority;
- the belief that research was housed in museums, and this research involved many experts and specialists;

- for a smaller number of respondents, a belief that museums are critically constructive of the large amounts of materials that they have collected; and
- a feeling that with all the visitors museums get they cannot afford to get it wrong.

The combination of the artifact and the institution makes the museum a formidable presence, as well as a trusted presence. Slide 13 details two answers that capture some of these ideas.

To summarize, this is what we have found with respect to the trustworthiness of museums.

- First, museums are seen as the most trustworthy source of information about the past.
- Second, trust in museums is near universal. Rich and poor, those with high and low levels of education, women and men, the young and the old, Canadian-born and foreign-born, all express similar, and high, levels of trust in museums.
- Third, trust in museums is not related to attendance.
- Forth, trust in museums is akin to faith. It is both earned and bestowed on museums. **Bestowed** because there is a belief that artifacts speak for themselves. **Earned** because there is a belief that the system has dedicated researchers and there are checks and balances on what researchers say about the artifacts.

Aboriginal People: An Exception to the Rule

After being so definitive I want to make one exception to the rule. In our survey we had a special sample of 100 Aboriginal People living in Saskatoon and on reserves in close proximity to the city. We asked these respondents almost the same questions. And while the percentage of Aboriginal People who reported they been to a museum in the past year was almost identical to that for the general population, their level of trust was considerably lower. Remember almost two-thirds (64%) of our national sample told us they thought museums were a ‘very trustworthy’ source of information about the past. Less than half (46%) of the Aboriginal People rated museums as a ‘very trustworthy’ source of information. Aboriginal people put more trust in family stories.

When asked about the most trustworthy source of information, Aboriginal people selected family stories three times more often than they selected museums. Clearly, Aboriginal People are not willing to ascribe the same level of trust to large cultural institutions as are other Canadians.

Comparison of three studies.

A third finding from our survey is the similarity of results from related studies completed in the United States and Australia. The US study was started in 1994 by Rosenzweig and Thelen and

the Australian study was started in 1998 by Ashton and Hamilton.⁵ A number of questions are common to all three surveys. We all asked questions about:

- participation in a number of activities - the engagement questions; and
- questions about the trustworthiness of various sources of historical information.

I want to very briefly share with you some of the results of the three studies. The next slides compares engagement levels for the activities asked about in all three surveys. (slide 14). Note how the levels of engagement for all three countries are basically the same. Very similar percentages of Canadian, Americans and Australians reported looking at old photographs and watching movies about the past. Visits to museums and historic sites were almost identical in all three countries. Both the US and Australian studies asked questions other than the ones I have shown here. If we had time to examine all of their data we would conclude, just as we have done for the Canadian results, that:

- many Americans and Australians engage the past in a wide range of activities
- that participation rates are highest for family activities that relate to the past,
- the percentage of the population that visits museums in each of the three countries is about the same, and
- about half as many Americans and Australians engage in public history as engage in family history.

The very similar results for levels of engagement between the three countries is an important finding. The US study was done almost 15 years before the Canadian one. The Australian study was completed about mid point between the other two. There were some variations in the way the questions were asked, different interviewers completed the work, and yet the results for engagement are very similar.

It is not just the levels of participation that are the same, but also the relationships between activity levels and sociodemographics. Remember the strong relationship between education and museum attendance. Here we have it again with the American data (slide 16). We also have the same relationship between education and the participation rates other activities. In both countries the education effect is weaker for family activities and stronger for public history activities.

When it comes to trust, the results of the three studies are more equivocal (slide 16) but a number of clear similarities exist. As in Canada, museums were the source of information about the past that was most often rated as very trustworthy. The proportion of American who felt teachers and fact-based books were very trustworthy sources of information was about the same as that for Canada. The one clear difference between Canadians and Americans for the trust questions, was the much greater amount of trust given to family stories by Americans. The Australian data on

trust mirrors the Canadian data in that family stories are rated as very trustworthy by about a third of the respondents. In Australia, as in Canada and the United States, museums are ranked as the most trustworthy source of information about the past.

The American and Australian researchers also asked respondents to explain why they thought museums were the most trustworthy source of information about the past. The actual responses, as well as the tone of the responses, were very similar in all three countries. As found in Canada, the presence of artifacts, the perceived collaborative nature of research museums and the potential cost of getting it wrong were cited as reasons to trust museums.

And, in all three countries, those who were there first, Aboriginal People in Canada, Native People in the United States and the Aborigines of Australia, all report lower levels of trust in museums.

Conclusions on the three-country comparisons

So what can we conclude from comparing the results of this cross-national research? The high degree of similarity in the results lends support to explanations that are more universal than unique. Explanations for why so many Canadians engage in the past and the preeminence of the family past should also be helpful in explaining why so many Americans and Australians engage in the past. The importance of the past and the meaning people ascribe to the past may be situated in a very local environment, but that environment has been shaped by larger and more universal forces.

Visiting a large national or provincial museums in Canada or visiting a large national or state museum in Australia is a unique experience. But when it comes to who visits these museums and why people trust these museums, the explanations that respondents have provided in all three countries are very similar. Again, more universal, rather than unique explanations, are required.

So this is the hard part of our talk, providing explanations, so at this time I am going to turn the speakers privilege to Dr. Létourneau. He will provide all of the answers.

Endnotes

1. A number of major museums were established in the 18th century including the British Museum in 1759, the Hermitage in 1764 and the Louvre in 1793.

2. Google Inc was incorporated, on September 4, 1998. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Google.
3. About 15 percent of the survey respondents did not rate any of the sources of information as very trustworthy. The slide is percentage after excluding these respondents
4. The percentage of respondents 75 and older who saying each source is very trustworthy are: museums (49), historic sites (40), fact-based books (21), family stories (46), high school teachers (30), and web sites (4).
5. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998; and Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton, "Australians and the Past," *Australian Cultural History*, 23, 2003.