



# Harnessing an Untapped Power

Museums can use emotions to encourage empathy, inspire action, and build creativity.

By Zorana Ivcevic Pringle

“People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel.”

—Maya Angelou



## Museums are places

where we feel a whole range of human emotions: the delight in seeing pandas at play, quiet peace in front of Francisco de Zurbarán’s painting of *Saint Francis*, the pain and terror in the Holocaust Museum.

Scientists define emotions as immediate responses to something that happens in the environment or in the mind. Emotions are full-person events—our physiology changes (quicker breathing or heart rate), our thoughts are affected (evaluating something as liked or disliked), our expressions change (shrinking in discomfort or bouncing excitedly), and our behavior changes (fleeing or facing

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the source of our feelings). In museums, we run toward our favorite exhibits, spending more time in front of some and skipping others altogether.

Why talk about emotions?

Emotions matter for much of what we do as humans. They influence attention and learning, build up or strain our relationships, define our well-being, and inspire creativity. Emotions can consume us, distract us, but also, if approached wisely, teach us.

We work with and through our emotions applying the skills of emotional intelligence. This includes accurately perceiving emotions in ourselves and others, using emotions to help solve problems, understanding potential causes and consequences of emotions, and regulating emotions. Researchers have shown that these skills can be taught. It is possible to learn not to flee or push aside difficult emotions and instead accept them, learn from them, and act on them for personal growth and to create change in the world.

Museums are uniquely able to teach audiences young and old by using the power of emotions to inspire action and creativity. Museum objects can be vehicles for teaching rather than material to be learned. Crucially, unlike schools and workplaces, which intimidate because they evaluate, museums can create an environment of freedom of expression without the threat of grades and censure.

If they harness their potential, museums can create change and serve audiences in five ways.

**1. Museums can create new perspectives and teach social and emotional skills.** In a gallery, we might see Dutch 17th century paintings exuding the confidence of the emerging prosperous commercial class. We can marvel at the exotic fruits and shellfish in the still life paintings. But imagine if in the same space we could also see art from the Dutch colonies. In a museum in Taiwan, I remember a description of the towering Dutch conquerors. Very different emotions were evoked from the perspective of the explorer (and conqueror) and from that of the conquered.

To use the power of emotions to create new perspectives and teach social and emotional skills, museums can reimagine tours. A school group where students experience the same object will teach diverse perspectives and understanding of emotions. Why would an object be experienced as frustrating by some, happy by others, and sad by some? The differences need not be disagreements but can be insights into what we have not noticed before.

**2. Museums can build empathy.** Understanding different perspectives is the cognitive core of empathy. The term “empathy” comes from the German *empathie*, or “feeling into.” We cannot feel the emotion expressed by an object or experienced by another person if we do not accurately perceive and understand those emotions. However, for empathy to happen, we must also care to engage with the world.

Museums can inspire caring for others, and for important

social issues, by connecting people to objects and places imbued with meaning. And we need that caring. Major problems of our time—from income inequality to climate change—are not likely to be solved without the empathy that inspires action.

Museum objects tell stories that inspire soaring positive emotions and dark or painful ones alike. A history museum can allow us to experience the determined courage of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her fellow suffragists. And it can make us feel shame and disappointment when realizing they often excluded Black women. Empathy is “feeling into” the full range of emotions in order to experience full humanity.

**3. Museums can teach how to use the power of emotions.** Museums can teach social and emotional skills—perceiving, understanding, empathizing—as well as their subject matter through the power of emotions.

Consider labels. They explain basic facts about an object: its creator, the title, date created. By itself, the label is unlikely to draw the audience in. What would happen if museums invited the audience to consider the emotions first? In turn, emotions can generate interest and motivate learning.

Imagine teaching about globalization in either a history or an art museum. An audio guide can sweep visitors into feeling the adventure of an 18th century maritime trading voyage and then marvel at the elegance of Asian white-and-blue porcelain brought back by those merchants. As the visitors imagine themselves in



these travels, they will be open to learning that the merchants brought back to their ports not just valuable objects but also a new fascination with distant cultures. Linking this to the Japanese art of the period will show that the fascination was mutual, with Japanese artists importing European influences into their work. The museum visitor can be invited to relate the globalization of the past to their experience of globalization in the present.

**4. Museums can contribute to well-being.** By making audiences feel, and especially by inspiring awe, museums make people feel more fully alive. Psychologists have found that nature and art are the most common sources of awe, an emotional experience that gives us chills and seems to slow down time. At the same time it makes our sense of self smaller and connection with humanity greater.

I remember being overcome by awe at the Guggenheim Museum's exhibition of pioneer abstract artist Hilma af Klint's work, while my

son was awestruck at the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum. This awe makes us feel happier and more satisfied with life. Even beyond individual well-being, scientists have found that feelings of awe influence how people relate to the world and make them more willing to volunteer their time to help others.

**5. Museums can build creativity.** Museums showcase human creativity, from art to science and invention to creating social change. But museums can also inspire creativity.

The World Economic Forum examined key skills for the jobs of the future. Creativity-related skills make up half of the list: innovation, complex problem solving, ideation, and originality. Creativity is sparked by interest and fueled by openness to different perspectives and exposure to diverse ideas. Museums offer objects of interest, include diverse ideas by design, and can relate the objects and what they represent to everyday problems, either personal or societal.

My own work with Centro Botín, an art center in Santander, Spain, shows how the power of emotions can be harnessed to teach creativity. We developed gallery demonstrations, workshops, and courses that build on the power of emotions in art to inspire creative ideas or solutions. Visitors look for art conveying diverse emotions and imagine connections between works of art and real-life questions. Our testing showed that people both grew their creativity skills and used them in their everyday life.

Museums are emotional spaces. And they can influence the course of visitors' emotions. Museums should use the power of emotions to engage, inspire, and teach diverse audiences. But first they must choose to understand and harness this power.

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RESOURCES

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