

Congrès 2026 WHAT ABOUT « DELIGHT »?

Friday, September 25, 2026

Alfieri Auditorium – Musée Fabre, Montpellier & Zoom

In April of this year, a national survey conducted by IFOP for the Art Explora Foundation, in partnership with France Culture, was published, examining the cultural practices of people in France. Based on responses from more than 4,000 participants, the study revealed some encouraging news: an overwhelming majority (86%) consider culture to be essential. Yet this optimism is short-lived. Cultural participation has declined sharply over the past eight years, and 20% of respondents reported having engaged in no cultural activities whatsoever during the previous twelve months.

Museums are no exception to this troubling trend. In 2017, 62% of respondents stated that they had visited a museum or exhibition within the year. In 2026, that figure has fallen to just 43%. Access to culture does not appear to have become more difficult during this period: 66% of respondents consider it easy to access cultural offerings, a proportion unchanged since the previous survey. What, then, explains this decline?

Among the reasons cited, lack of desire or motivation ranks first. The constraints of everyday life (lack of time, increasingly crowded schedules and routines), the effort of planning (having to research programmes and prepare visits), and concerns about potentially disappointing experiences (fear of dissatisfaction, visitor discomfort, overcrowding) all emerge as factors discouraging cultural participation and museum attendance.

For many years, museums have developed rich and varied programmes grounded in rigorous scholarly expertise, which underpins their credibility with audiences. They have expanded mediation and interpretation initiatives centred on the delivery of reliable and accessible knowledge. Museums have excelled in fulfilling their educational role, embracing the mission of knowledge production and dissemination that has been central to the ICOM definition of the museum since 1974.

This fundamental mission remains embedded in the definition adopted by ICOM in Prague in 2022:

“A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically and professionally, with the participation of communities. Museums offer varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.”

Yet one term, present in the 1974 definition and retained in the 2007 version, disappeared from the most recent text in the French and Spanish versions, replaced by the word “enjoyment”: delight — perhaps considered too old-fashioned a notion.

At a time when the Art Explora study highlights a growing disenchantment with culture, and as discussions surrounding sensory, affective and emotionally engaged forms of mediation continue to develop in museums across France and internationally, it seems timely to revisit the notions of pleasure and emotion generated by museum visits and encounters with places, objects, and people.

In an era marked by multiple crises, psychological insecurity, fragmented attention spans and increasing concern for mental well-being, how might museums be reimagined as spaces of refuge? How can they foster wonder and contribute to the well-being of their visitors?

Museums possess many assets capable of rekindling desire: collections that evoke emotion; protected spaces offering respite; temporalities that encourage slowing down; and a distinctive way of engaging with the world at the intersection of intellectual inquiry and embodied experience.

How, then, can we cultivate the desire to visit museums? What conditions enable its emergence? How can it be sustained over time?

Might delight be a concept worth reclaiming? Could it help museums develop forms of interpretation that are both intellectually rigorous and emotionally resonant, rebuild meaningful and enduring relationships with audiences, and enrich the connections that bind museums and their publics?

Émilie Girard, President of ICOM France

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