

Evoking the muses: Exploring the nature of inspiration in art museums

Emily B. Shields

Master of Arts in Museology, Information School, University of Washington

Thesis Committee:

Jessica Luke, Ph.D.

Rachel Hershberg, Ph.D.

Kim Aziz

Mirka Jablonski

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Abstract

Art museums have a unique capacity to elicit positive emotions, with inspiration emerging as a particularly meaningful yet underexplored emotion. This quantitative study investigated whether and how adults experience inspiration during art museum visits. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 54 adults at three U.S. art museums. Results indicate that inspiration is a common emotional response during art museum visits, often characterized by shifts in perspective, feelings of motivation, and admiration. Participants attributed their inspiration to various aspects of the art museum experience, including personal relevance, the formal qualities of artworks, the perceived intent of artists, and the juxtaposition of different artistic ideas. While inspiration was strongly reported, participants also experienced related emotions such as joy and excitement. Findings support the belief that inspiration correlates with perspective shifts and motivation. The study contributes to the growing body of research highlighting the emotional impacts of museum visits and underscores the potential of inspiration to support visitor well-being. Implications for museum practice include enhancing interpretative strategies to foster personal meaning-making and promoting continued engagement beyond the museum visit. Further research is recommended to explore the long-term impacts of museum-inspired motivation and to diversify participant demographics.

Introduction

Art museums have a unique capacity to promote mental health. Studies show that art museum experiences can decrease stress (Mastandrea et al., 2019a; Ter-Kazarian & Luke, 2019), increase social connectedness (Bennington et al., 2016), and increase life satisfaction (Cotter & Pawelski, 2022). Inspiration plays a key role in enhancing well-being, an indicator of mental health. Research shows that inspiration transcends the self and fosters creativity, leading to gratitude or life purpose (Belzak et al., 2017); in turn, gratitude and life purpose are believed to be measures of life satisfaction (LS) that indicate subjective well-being (SWB), but little research has been conducted on people's feelings of inspiration during their art museum experiences. This article describes a study designed to contribute to literature with nuanced data about how people feel inspired during an art museum visit.

What is inspiration?

Inspiration is “a motivational state that compels individuals to bring ideas into fruition” (Oleynick et al., 2014, p. 2). It is a positive emotion characterized by feelings of excitement, enthusiasm, motivation, joy, and awe. While inspiration has been written about in connection to creative impulse, divine knowledge, and meaningfulness in our lives (Hart, 1998), it has most recently been studied in the field of positive psychology, the study of positive emotions.

Psychologist Thrash (2003) has contributed significantly to the study of inspiration, both as a state and a trait. Focusing on inspiration as a trait, Thrash and Elliot (2003) developed the Inspiration Scale (IS) to better understand the nature of inspiration. They found that a) inspiration is strongly correlated with positive affect (PA), with little to no negative affect (NA) at all; b) inspiration is most conducive amongst people with two personality traits, Openness (how open an individual is toward new experiences and perspectives) and Extraversion (referring

to an individual's high energy, socialness, or talkativeness); and c) creativity and productivity are documented consequences of feeling inspired. Focusing on inspiration as a state, Thrash and Elliot studied the experience of feeling inspired, its characteristics and core components, and posited that inspiration is largely comprised of three components: transcendence, evocation, and motivation, where:

Transcendence refers to the fact that inspiration orients one toward something that is better or more important than one's usual concerns...*Evocation* refers to the fact that inspiration is evoked and unwilled...Finally, inspiration involves *motivation* to express or make manifest that which is newly apprehended" (p. 957).

Thrash and Elliot (2004) proposed that the transcendence and evocation components of inspiration are part of the "*inspired by*" process, and motivation is the "*inspired to*" process.

Thrash, Moldovan, Oleynick, and Maruskin (2014) defined three ways in which inspiration manifests: extension, actualization, and expression. Extension is when the individual seeks to reproduce a desirable quality from a pre-existing object onto a new object. In the case that the new object is the future self, this is called *emulation*. Actualization is when the individual is inspired by the qualities of a "seminal idea that enters awareness during a moment of insight, and one seeks to bring the seminal idea into fruition," (p. 498). Expression is when the individual is inspired by well-formed ideas and expresses them through words or actions spontaneously.

What are the benefits of inspiration?

Research suggests that feelings of inspiration have a wide range of benefits for people. For example, inspiration is positively correlated with several well-being variables, such as self-esteem, optimism, self-determination, life satisfaction, and self-actualization (Thrash, 2003; Thrash et al., 2010). Inspiration is a strong predictor of creativity (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Oleynick et al. (2014) studied the creative process, clarifying that there are existing explanations

for where creative ideas originate, but inspiration explains the process by which creative ideas *come to fruition*. Reinforcing Thrash's (2003) conclusions on trait inspiration, An and Youn (2018) found that Open individuals appreciated art more and subsequently felt more creative. Neurologically, inspiration fosters creativity by activating the same neural pathways and engaging the Default Mode Network (DMN) of the brain, which is characterized by introspection, mind-wandering, and generation of ideas (Khanna, 2024). Inspiration is thought to foster creativity by supporting divergent thinking, brainstorming, conceptual blending (emergence of novel ideas through making connections), and emotional resilience (Desai, 2024).

Much of the existing research on the positive effects of inspiration is within the context of education, surveying students. For example, a research study from 2021 supported the belief that inspiration, along with gratitude and meaning in life, are correlates of subjective well-being (Balgiu & Sfeatcu, 2021). The sample consisted of three hundred twenty-five undergraduate students. They completed instruments measuring gratitude, meaning of life, and inspiration, where the state of subjective well-being was measured using the Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE) score and the Single-Item Measure of Life Satisfaction (Li-Si). The results of the study confirmed that these factors are correlates of SWB. However, gratitude was found to be the greatest predictor, whereas inspiration frequency and intensity were low indicators of SWB despite its clear connection to positive emotions. Balgiu and Sfeatcu acknowledge that the relationship between SWB and inspiration may be circular and is difficult to measure.

A second research study focused explicitly on inspiration in university students (Adifa et al., 2023). The authors identify inspiration as a powerful catalyst for academic growth due to its connection to motivation. Two hundred eighty-one students in Malaysia were surveyed using a Likert scale questionnaire, and data analysis revealed that the top five positive effects of

inspiration were the transformation into a better individual; the motivation to do the best in learning; the facilitation of learning at the university; openness to learning new knowledge; and the improvement of academic performance. These findings suggest that inspiration can enhance learning in higher education, but more research should be done on what evokes the inspiration and how people experience inspiration in informal learning settings.

In a third study, inspiration was shown to mediate goal pursuit (Milyavskaya et al., 2024). The authors expanded on Thrash's (2003) model of trait inspiration from a behavioral standpoint, rather than an attitudinal one. They wondered whether inspiration increases the likelihood of achieving a goal. One hundred ninety-three participants took surveys that measured 1) their inspiration, using the Inspiration Scale (IS); 2) their Big Five personality traits; 3) a description of their goals; 4) their ranking of how inspirational the goal was; and 5) progression toward listed goal. Analysis revealed that inspired individuals tended to set and achieve more inspiring goals. This supports evidence that inspiration can lead to behavioral change rather than merely cognitive change. However, the study did not assess these changes in terms of well-being.

Research also suggests that inspiration encourages prosocial behavior. A recent article focuses on inspiration's role in sharing information as a facet of social learning (Xia & Li, 2024). The authors build on Thrash's understanding of how inspiration can manifest. They acknowledge that many studies have been conducted on *extension* and *actualization*, but not many studies focus on the *expression* category of transmission. Similarly, this study was conducted using a sample of fifty-eight undergraduate students. The researchers collected "inspirational messages;" participants judged if, and to what extent the messages were indeed inspiring, and then they were asked to rate how likely they were to share these messages with others. The results show that messages that were highly inspiring and highly positive had a greater likelihood of being shared.

A second study replicated and confirmed the finding that stimuli deemed inspiring, often positive, were more likely to be shared. The researchers conducted a third study, which aimed to measure if participants would share inspiring information in a more diverse way (diverse meaning different from how it was received, more original). Participants completed a “sharing task” where they were asked to imagine they were sharing the inspirational message on social media. Researchers measured participants’ responses, coding for originality, inspiration, and positivity, and they found that participants were indeed more likely to share these messages more diversely.

In addition to Thrash’s scholarship on inspiration and well-being, research suggests that inspiration can also mediate the effects of negative emotions. In the wake of a global pandemic, researchers in China sought to discern the relationship between inspiration and coping strategies (Hao et al., 2023). Five hundred fourteen participants completed surveys that assessed their positive and negative emotions, inspiration, and their coping strategy (problem-solving, seeking social support, or avoidance); positive emotions were associated with problem-solving and seeking social support, while negative emotions were associated with avoidance. Descriptive and correlation analysis confirmed the correlation between positive emotions and approach coping strategies. Additionally, it supported a correlation between inspiration and the likelihood of choosing a positive coping strategy. The findings “expand the transmission function of inspiration from creative products to problem-solving and relationship support,” (p. 5192). Because inspiration has a strong association with approach motivation, inspired individuals are more likely to choose a healthier coping strategy.

The positive benefits of inspiration transcend context. In an experimental study from a sports journal, researchers focused on the *extension* aspect of inspiration transmission,

wondering whether feeling inspiration in an irrelevant context could apply to a subsequent task (Klein et al., 2017). First, participants were asked to complete a vivid recall task, writing about an inspirational moment, either domain-relevant (sports) or domain-irrelevant (creativity). A third group served as the control. All three groups then completed a handgrip test, which was a measure of physical endurance. The authors hypothesized that if inspiration only applied to relevant content, then those who wrote about an inspiring sport-related moment would be more successful at the next. In fact, the analysis showed that domain- and domain-irrelevant inspiration were *equally effective* in promoting endurance during the handgrip test. These findings are significant because they suggest that “novel-content extension” took place; participants were able to perceive an admirable quality in their creative inspiration object (e.g. mastery exhibited in an artwork) and utilize it in a new context (e.g. persistence with the handgrip test),” (p. 32).

Inspiration and neuroaesthetics

The field of neuroaesthetics has been dedicated to understanding why and how visual objects, such as artworks, produce positive emotions, such as inspiration. Chatterjee and Vartanian (2016) propose that an aesthetic experience— defined as an aesthetic emotion (e.g. pleasure, or appreciation) followed by aesthetic judgment— arises from the interaction between three types of aesthetic phenomena: 1) sensorimotor, 2) emotion-valuation, and 3) knowledge-meaning. Although an individual can be inspired by stimuli outside their personal context, research shows that there is a connection between aesthetic stimuli, such as artwork, and feeling inspiration. Welke, Purton, and Vessel (2023) report the results from four studies involving creative writing responses to “aesthetic” and “non-aesthetic” prompts (defined as visual artworks, or a triad of unrelated words, respectively). In the following three studies, participants

performed the same task in response to artworks that participants had previously rated “highly moving”, “unmoving artworks”, or “novel artworks.” Data analysis revealed that feeling moved by the aesthetic stimuli positively correlated with feelings of inspiration (p. 271).

Overall, the extant literature demonstrates a multitude of positive impacts resulting from inspiration. Increased creativity, problem-solving skills, positive coping skills, increased socialization, and increased positive emotions, transcendent contexts, and a tie to the arts, paint a robust image of inspiration’s contributions to visitor well-being and its relevance to museums.

Inspiration and art museums

There is surprisingly little research on inspiration in art museums. What little there is tends to come from studies that focus on the impacts of art museum visits on people’s well-being, where well-being is defined as having multiple dimensions, one of which is inspiration. For example, one study on well-being in art museums from a team of researchers at the University of Washington, featured inspiration as a facet of overall well-being (Luke et al., in press). Participants were recruited at random and asked to complete a short pre- and post-questionnaire. Interviews were conducted at three art museums in Seattle, WA. For the questionnaire, participants were asked to rank six positive emotions and six negative emotions and then compare what they saw. Next, they were asked to reflect on what factors may have contributed to any change in rankings. Multi-variable analysis was done to account for non-museum-related variables, and the findings show that the highest percentage of participants recorded an increase in inspiration. Further, those who reported increased feelings of inspiration cited the artwork itself, the artist, and/or learning from the art (i.e., experiencing a change in perspective) as the factors responsible for the increase in inspiration. The authors note, however, that further research is needed to confirm what aspects of the museum visit are inspiring.

One of the few studies on inspiration in art museums is from Jarvis (2019). In this study, one hundred-five participants were surveyed across three sites that named inspiration in their mission statements. Jarvis used Thrash's Inspiration Scale (IS) (2003) to determine frequency and intensity of inspiration. Participants were not given a definition of inspiration, but rather they were asked to self-define the state and describe an inspirational moment in their everyday lives. Participants who felt inspired were also asked to describe what triggered the feeling. Jarvis found that most visitors described their museum visit as inspirational, naming aspects of the artwork, such as color, content, or artistic talent as the source. This, in conjunction with Luke et al.'s (in press) study on well-being, suggest that artwork is inspiring for visitors, and in turn, inspiration promotes their well-being.

Purpose of this study

The purpose of this mixed-method study was to contribute to literature about inspiration and generate more nuanced information about whether and how people feel inspired during an art museum visit. The study was driven by three research questions.

1. To what extent do adults feel inspired during their visit to an art museum?
2. How do adults characterize the nature of their inspiration?
3. What is it about the art museum experience that adults attribute to their feelings of inspiration?

Methods

Sampling/Recruitment

Data were collected at the Denver Art Museum in Denver, CO; the Newark Museum of Art in Newark, NJ; and the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, GA. The criterion for host museums was to have an encyclopedic collection, so participants had the broadest selection of artwork to

respond to. Consideration was given to geographic location, as to represent different national regions, and to achieve a broader sample. The Denver Museum of Art features more than 70,000 objects and is located in the city's Civic Center. The Newark Museum of Art is New Jersey's largest museum and was founded by librarian John Cotton Dana in 1909. The High Museum of Art is the largest visual art museum in the Southeastern region of the United States at 312,000 square feet.

Participants were adult individuals who were visiting the museum on the days and times of data collection. Participants were randomly recruited as they exited the museum. Data collection at the Denver Art Museum took place in February 2025, while data collection at the High Museum and the Newark Museum of Art took place in late March 2025. Once potential participants were identified, they were approached and asked to participate in a short interview about emotions and art museums. Fifty-four adults agreed to participate and were interviewed. When possible, participants were offered an incentive provided by the host museum. For example, at the Denver Art Museum, a "golden ticket" which granted general admission to the museum for four adults was offered. At the Newark Museum of Art, participants were given a pass offering complimentary admission for two adults and two children. At the High Museum of Art, no incentives were offered.

Participants

Seventy-eight adults were approached, and 54 participants agreed to participate, meaning there was a response rate of 69%. Roughly half of the participants (49%, n=26) identified as women, 47% (n=25) identified as men, and 6% (n=3) identified as non-binary. When asked if participants identified as tourists or locals, 72% (n=39) identified themselves as locals while 28% (n=15) identified themselves as tourists. The majority of participants identified as white (64%,

n=34); 17% identified as African/American/Black (n=9); 15% (n=8) identified as Latinx/Latino/Latino/Hispanic/Chicano; 6% (n=3) identified as Asian/Asian American; 2% (n=1) of participants identified as Native American; 2% (n=1) of participants identified as Pacific Islander; and 2% (n=1) of participants self-described as Ashkenazi Jew. When asked to describe their social group, the majority of participants were visiting the museum with a group of all adults (67%, n=36); 17% of participants (n=9) were visiting alone; 11% of participants (n=6) were visiting with adults and kids; and 6% of participants (n=3) marked “other.”

Data collection procedures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing for probing. Eight questions were closed-ended, and four questions were open-ended (see Appendix A for the interview guide). Closed-ended questions provided ordinal data using Likert scales. The closed-ended questions were adapted from Thrash and Elliot’s IS (2003), which asks about inspiration in terms of an emotion and a state, measuring frequency and intensity. Generally, the interview was structured in four parts: 1) measuring emotions broadly; 2) measuring the presence of inspiration specifically; 3) measuring the nature of inspiration; and 4) participant information. Interviews averaged 5-7 minutes long, and interview audio was recorded using a generative transcription service. Finally, the transcript was segmented by question and entered into a spreadsheet.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data were coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006), and emergent coding rubrics were developed by the researcher and tested for reliability by a critical friend.

Results

Q1: To what extent do adults feel inspired during their visit to an art museum?

Participants' feelings of inspiration were measured in multiple ways. First, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they felt multiple emotions during their visit, including joy, excitement, enthusiasm, awe, and inspiration. Table 1 shows their average ratings on a scale from 1-7, where 1 was they did not feel that emotion at all and 7 was they felt it fully. Results suggest that participants felt all of these emotions, and that inspiration and excitement were the most fully felt, followed by joy, awe, and enthusiasm.

Table 1: Participants' ratings of inspiration and closely related emotions felt during their art museum visits (n=54).

Emotion	Median rating (1-7)
Inspiration	7
Excitement	7
Joy	6
Awe	5.5
Enthusiasm	5

Second, participants were asked to rate the intensity of their inspiration using existing scales (Thrash & Elliott, 2003). Table 2 shows participants' median ratings, all of which were relatively high on the 7-point scale. (At this point, one participant who rated inspiration at a 1 confirmed they did not feel inspired, and the interview concluded, making the sample for the remaining data fifty-three.)

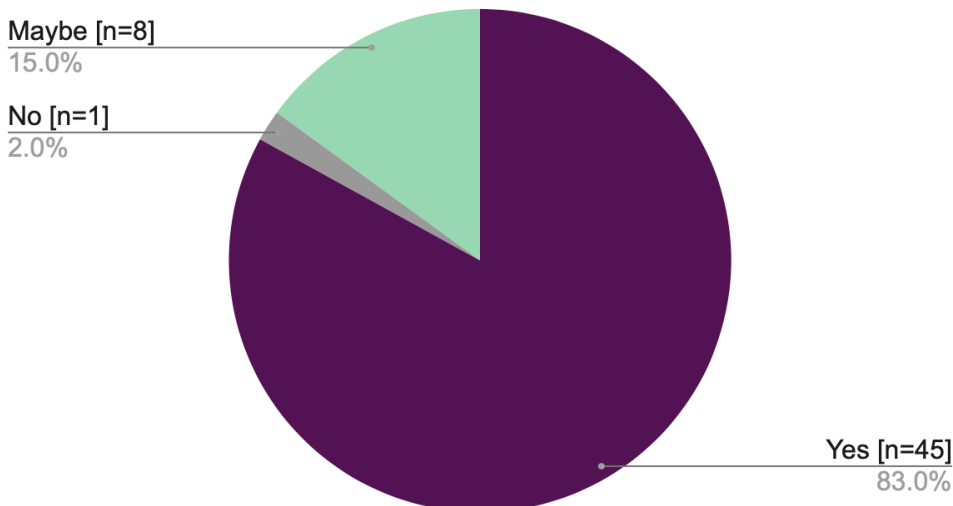
Table 2: Participants' ratings of Inspiration Scale statements to indicate the presence of inspiration during art museum visits (n=53).

Inspiration Scale Statements	Median rating (1-7)
Something I encountered or experienced inspired me during my visit today.	6
I feel inspired after my visit today.	6
I experienced inspiration during my visit today.	4.5
I am inspired to do something after my visit today.	4.5

Third, participants were presented with a definition of inspiration and asked explicitly if they could think of a time when they felt inspired in the museum. For this study, inspiration was defined as “being motivated by something outside yourself that evokes an idea and/or the impulse to produce something creatively.” As seen in Figure 1, most participants said they did feel inspired during their visit.

Figure 1: Participants' responses to feeling inspired during their art museum visits (n=54)

Q1: Do participants feel inspired by their art museum visits?



Q2: How do adults characterize the nature of their inspiration?

Participants who said they felt inspired or might have felt inspired during their visit were asked to qualitatively describe the nature of those feelings. Responses were coded into 5 emergent categories: i) Curious/sense of perspective; ii) Aspirational/motivational; iii) Admirable; iv); Introspective/reflective; and v) Immersive.

Almost half described their feelings of inspiration in terms of a shift in perspective or a sense of intrigue (45%, n=24). This category was marked by references to impactful or unexpected context that challenged the individual. Often, participants mentioned making connections or the process of making sense of an idea. One participant described the feeling, saying:

You could tell that [the subjects in the artwork] were a couple, but then they had totally opposite views about things, so that was confusing, but it also made it interesting. I was like, 'Why are they a couple?' But then, 'Oh, I get it.' They're trying to show that you could have a relationship with someone who has totally opposite feelings about things and yet still get along.

Similarly, almost half of the participants characterized the feeling of inspiration as aspirational or motivational (42%, n=22). These responses were often associated with a moment of increased awareness or engagement, followed by an impulse or the desire to act. One participant said, "I think when you see mastery, it just lets you know that, like, 'Oh, I'm capable of that too.'" Another participant stated, "It was something that was like inspiration, wanting to figure out in what ways things can be better." A third participant expressed, "Being able to open the eyes for the kids was inspiration for me, to plan events where your kids can see themselves in multi-cultural ways, not just as a young person."

Roughly a quarter of participants associated the feeling of inspiration with admiration which was like aspiration but without impulse (28%, n=15). It was often associated with

references to sheer beauty or talent and appreciation. For example, one participant stated, “You know, a lot of it was like, I didn’t even know what I was looking at. I was just looking at a color or a texture,” while another participant stated, “The detail, it was amazing. The fact that someone took a lump of clay and it looked like an actual human being that was covered in clay. It was so realistic.”

Another quarter of participants associated inspiration with introspection and reflection, a more inward response defined by thinking and rumination, also without impulse (26%, n=14). When speaking about a current issue, one participant said, “I didn’t think I’d be thinking about that today, now, maybe I’m thinking about it, and like, our country’s history and things going on in our country.” Another participant lamented,

I wondered like, when I’m looking at the pictures of the slave things, like, how everybody could go about their business and think it’s okay at the same time...They had a map that showed the different numbers of people that were slaves as late as 1866, it’s like a significant percent of the population. That’s a lot, you know, and you can’t...it’s just kind of depressing.

A small number of participants associated the feeling of inspiration with feeling immersed, describing a slightly more stimulating experience marked by physicality or the absence of external distractions (n=2). One participant noted, “I do feel inclined to come here more often, not just to support my friend, but just because I enjoy walking around and looking at art.” Their companion explained, “I think you can look at so many things at once that, like my brain is just always trying to process all of the things, and I think I like it for that reason, and I can kind of pick and choose what exhibits I want to go to, just based off of my mood...it’s a step outside of the normalcy of the day to day.”

In alignment with the definition of inspiration as leading to action or creative impulse, participants were probed to answer whether they felt inspired to do anything specific. Thirty-

seven percent (n=20) indicated that they felt inspired to create. This included the desire to re-engage with artistic practice or to develop a new artistic practice or experiment with technique. Twenty-six percent (n=14) expressed the desire to learn about an artwork, an artist, or a topic they encountered during their visit. Twenty-two percent (n=12) indicated they felt compelled to do something that was not related to artmaking, such as traveling or meeting up with a friend. Finally, 17% (n=9) did not indicate feeling compelled to do anything after their visit.

Q3: What is it about the art museum experience that adults attribute to their feelings of inspiration?

Participants were probed to expand on what they felt attributed to their feelings of inspiration. These qualitative responses were also coded into 5 categories: i) Social/Personal relevance; ii) Artwork; iii) Artist; iv) Juxtaposition of works/ideas; v) Sensory element. Fifty-two percent (n=28) of individuals emphasized that an aspect was inspirational due to its relevance in their social or personal lives. In these instances, it was not that the formal aspects of the art may have been resonant, but more so, there was a degree of relatability. For example, one participant explained,

My being married to someone who's an artist, we've been married for 40 years, that does make a big difference because she's got a curious mind...she would probably have freaked out over the colors. So, I took lots of photos because the colors of some of the art up there, I could see were so rich.

Another participant said, "We went into the Western exhibit, which is my favorite here. I always go back to that one. I'm from New Mexico, so like, there's a bunch of Taos and Santa Fe paintings in there...it's cool to see my hometown like that. A third participant stated, "We've been to art museums all over the world, so it's very inspiring to see something like this in our own backyard."

Forty-seven percent of participants (n=25) referenced artwork more specifically, citing formal elements, or the artwork's cultural context. For example, one participant noted, "There was this one vase, and a tea set...I don't know maybe the color. It was black and white, so it contrasted from everything in the room...It was shiny, and it was really the only one that was different. It was just black and white with some dark letters." Some participants identified items that were memorable by their contrast to other things. Other participants commented that they were unsure why something was inspiring, other than it was merely beautiful. One participant said, "I was looking more at the design of the arts, because that's the engineering in me, which I found very stunning, particularly the beads, and just the time it took to make a piece of Wampum."

Thirty-two percent (n=17) of participants referred more specifically to a trait, technique, or process of the artist, referencing biographical context. One participant marveled at the artistic power to convey emotion, saying, "The artist doesn't have to be in the room...the idea that someone can move you with something they've made instead of actually being in the room with you...I think that's really powerful."

Another 32% of participants (n=17) emphasized juxtaposing ideas or the interaction of artworks with one another. This category is like the earlier category of social or personal relevance, but is more about things inside the museum, whereas personal connections were typically made to things outside the museum. Many participants expressed this concept through comparison of artworks or focusing more holistically on collections and the relationships they formed between one another. One participant was exposed to the idea of artists and commercial partnerships and was challenged by the bounds of what constitutes art, saying, "It was surprising to see something of like, really deep quality and by an artist that I have a lot of respect for and

emotional connection to, but for, like a corporation that I didn't care too much for." Another participant mused over the chronological evolution of modern art, saying, "I was able to compare. So it was the evolution, the progression from Pre- to Post-Impressionism after it goes further. You've got Cubism as well at the end and so, you're able to see the chronological progression as well as the progression in art." Another participant remarked that the overlap and similarities of traditional artistic practices across the world was inspiring and thought-provoking. A third participant reflected that their main takeaway was that, "Everything's different, and people have different ways of thinking how they want to display their art, whether it's color or like different pieces that they put together...Everyone has a way of thinking on their own."

Finally, 5% (n=3) of participants spoke about the museum experience in terms of how stimulated or relaxed they felt. One participant stated, "I come here and see different types of artworks. It just makes me feel like I'm home...it makes me feel more welcomed, and I don't feel overwhelmed by all the things I've seen." Another participant had a similar thought, saying, "It's not just that focusing. I think it's just releasing."

Discussion

The purpose of this quantitative study was to gain a deeper understanding of people's feelings of inspiration in art museums. As an emotional state that mediates many positive benefits, and has yet to be studied in museums, it has value for enhancing the visitor experience and well-being in art museums. Fifty-four adults were interviewed after they visited an art museum; data were collected at the Denver Art Museum, Newark Museum of Art, and the High Museum of Art. The data from this study reveal three key findings: i) people do feel inspired in art museums, ii) most participants described inspiration as a shift in perspective or as

motivational in nature, and iii) the cause of inspiration is overwhelmingly tied to the artwork, although different aspects of it.

People feel inspired in art museums

The majority of participants confirmed that their art museum visits were inspirational in nature. Given recent interest in museums' emotional impacts, this was believed to be true and was investigated in a recent study focused on inspiration and art museums (Jarvis, 2019). However, the purpose of Jarvis's study was to examine art museums whose missions were explicitly to inspire visitors. Therefore, the discussion was surrounding whether museums were fulfilling their mission. We now have increased empirical data to support the notion that art museum visits are largely inspiring for adults. It is important to note that while most participants felt inspired after their visits, participants also felt other emotions just as strongly. This points to the nature of inspiration; it remains difficult to measure and to identify due to its relatedness to other positive emotions (Thrash, 2003; Thrash & Elliot, 2004).

Inspiration as a shift in perspective and as motivational

Inspiration was most characterized as a shift in perspective or a sense of curiosity. Visitors described curiosity during their visits, referencing the process of inquiry or discovery. Some described the process of feeling inspired as an unfolding. When faced with an artwork they could not immediately make sense of, they felt encouraged to find more information in order to interpret the work. These responses seem to suggest a relationship between inspiration and curiosity. This is significant because curiosity is believed to be one of the characteristics of the Big Five personality trait Openness, which Thrash and Elliot found to be correlated with inspiration (Woo et al., 2014; Thrash & Elliot, 2003; Silvia & Christensen, 2020). Curiosity, as the desire to reduce novelty, can also be motivational, and is found to support meaning in life

and well-being (Kashdan & Steger, 2007; Gallagher & Lopez, 2007; Mascaro & Rosen, 2006). Further, Tan et al., in their 2021 article, propose that curiosity is a mediator of mindfulness.

Behind a sense of perspective or curiosity, participants characterized inspiration as motivational. Participants said they felt compelled to do something creative, to learn, or to act non-creatively. This characterization aligns with Thrash's (2004) tripartite model in which motivation is the third process and the component that distinguishes inspiration from other positive emotions. A portion of participants indicated that they felt inspired to create; this provides further evidence that there is a correlation between inspiration and creativity (An & Youn, 2018; Desai, 2024; Oleynick et al., 2014; Thrash et al., 2010b). Some people were already practicing artists who expressed a desire to re-engage with artistic practice or implement a new technique or medium. Others did not consider themselves artists but felt that creating was more approachable. This supports previous research on the correlation between inspiration and creativity. The fact that people who do not identify as creatives also highlights the finding that people can experience inspiration in one context and apply it to another (Klein et al., 2017).

The categories of things people felt inspired to do demonstrates different types of inspiration transmission; those who felt inspired to create either saw something in the museum that sparked a new idea that they wanted to bring to fruition (actualization), or they saw an idea, a process, or a medium that they wanted to apply to their own work (extension). Expression, transmitting inspiration through words, was not so evident in the museum experience, but some participants indicated that they wanted to socialize after their visit, and museum visitors tended to be in groups.

Visitors largely find inspiration in artwork

Data from this study suggest that various aspects of the museum artwork are the principal source of inspiration, albeit in quite distinct ways for different participants in this study. Whether participants feel inspired by the formal elements of the artwork or the artist behind it, participants primarily responded to the museum's artwork, but individuals were inspired in different ways by different things. What differs is the individuals' aesthetic experience. Chatterjee and Vartanian's Aesthetic Triad model (2014) gives insight into what visitors may be drawing upon for inspiration. The model comprises three components, arranged in a Venn diagram: 1) sensorimotor, 2) emotion-valuation, and 3) knowledge/meaning. Rather than connecting purely to an artwork's beauty, the majority of participants felt an artwork was inspiring because they related to some aspect of the artwork personally. This supports current research that affirms that interpreting the meaning and intention behind an artwork is tied to higher levels of inspiration (Sawada, 2024). However, research on personal taste has proven less prescriptive, so while the broad categories of what makes an aesthetic experience stand, they are experienced to varying degrees based on individual preferences. This aligns with the range of ways that people characterized inspiration, and the range of aspects that they thought were inspirational in this study.

Implications

For research

This research provides additional insight into an emotion that has demonstrated many positive benefits for visitors, and this study further supports that inspiration is present in museums. Data on the nature of inspiration contributes to the growing body of research in inspiration in positive psychology, providing support for conceptual models and processes surrounding inspiration. This research also provides insight into what visitors feel caused their

inspiration, helping museums to better understand what aspects of the art museum experience are inspiring. It suggests that artwork is indeed inspiring, either for its formal aspects, for its context, or for an individual's knowledge-meaning system (their personal context) (Chatterjee & Vartanian, 2012; Velez & Spencer, 2018), and it leads us to think about the connection between inspiration and the study of aesthetics. The sample in this study was predominantly white (64.2%, n=34), but the sample featured significant racial diversity due to its geographic breadth, and this is not characteristic of what we know about current museum visitorship (Wilkening Consulting, 2024). Replications of this study with the general public as well as specific racial groups will make these findings stronger. The sample seemed to consist of many artists and creatives, and it is possible that the individuals who are predisposed to interview are those with positive experiences in the museum. Moreover, it's possible that artists and creatives have a distinct experience of inspiration when viewing art as compared to the general public, as they are more practiced in art appreciation, leading to higher-level interpretation (Iosifyan et al., 2025). The goal of this study was to understand inspiration during art museum visits. Therefore, by nature, the opinions of the more diverse public are not reflected in this study.

The majority of participants in this study felt inspired to do something after they left the museum. Further research may include a longitudinal study that provides data on how long the motivational effects of inspiration last, and whether visitors do what they say they desire to do. Another study might more closely examine relations between inspiration and well-being, drawing on previous experimental research in this area. Replications of this study should be done to evaluate how these findings compare to specific groups or communities. Similarly, a replication exploring whether there is a relationship between the frequency of museum visits and the frequency or intensity of felt inspiration. It may be important to understand if people are

going to art museums expecting to be inspired, or whether they are coming to art museums for a different purpose, and inspiration is a byproduct. In addition, the data generated here suggest that participating in post-museum visit interviews may contribute to more meaning-making about such visits, which could also enhance inspirational experiences. This should be examined in future research.

For practice

The results of this study are useful for museum practice. These findings drive several considerations for museum practitioners. For example, if the act of meaning-making, discovery, or contemplating the artist's intent evokes inspiration, how can educators further encourage close-looking, reflection, and engagement? If knowing that the juxtaposition of artworks, or the way that pieces are arranged, and how pieces are in conversation with each other, how can curators deliberately foster this energy to prompt comparison, contrast, and excitement? If inspiration motivates viewers to create, can museums bridge the gap from merely viewing to creating? What kinds of studio or hands-on experiences could be available to visitors? If expression and sharing evoke inspiration, how can museums support the desire to share by providing multi-modal opportunities for dialogue, written reflection, collective storytelling, or message walls, where visitors may leave behind, revisit, or pass along their insights? If museum professionals know that their visitors are likely to feel motivated *after* a visit, how can they leverage interpretative materials to promote engagement once the visitor has left?

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Appendix A

Inspiration in art museums instrument

Adapted from Thrash & Elliot's (2003) Inspiration Scale (IS).

Part 1: Measuring emotions broadly

1. I'm interested in what emotions you felt during your museum experience. Here are 5 picture cards, each showing a different emotion (awe, excitement, enthusiasm, inspiration, and joy). For each one, rate the extent to which you experienced that feeling during your visit. Let's use a scale from 1-7, where 1 is you didn't experience it at all and 7 is you experienced it fully. *Shuffle cards to present at random for each interview.*

Part 2: Measuring the presence of inspiration specifically

2. Next, I'm going to give you 4 cards, each with a different statement on it. I want you to read each one, and tell me how true it was for you, at any point during your museum visit today. We'll use a 7-point scale again, but this time, 1 is that it was not true at all for you and 7 is that it was very true for you. *Shuffle cards to present at random for each interview. Ask probing questions.*
 - a) I experienced inspiration during my visit today
 - b) I am inspired to do something after my visit today
 - c) I feel inspired after my visit today
 - d) Something I encountered or experienced inspired me during my visit today/

Part 3: Measuring the nature of inspiration

3. My final questions are focused on one particular emotion, inspiration. **Inspiration is defined as being motivated by something outside yourself that evokes an idea and/or the impulse to produce something creatively.** Take a minute and think about a time during your museum visit today when you might have felt inspired.
 - a. Can you think of such a time? *If no, skip to Q4.*
 - b. If yes, describe in as much detail as possible this feeling of being inspired you had during your museum visit today. How would you describe the feeling? Was it a positive feeling or a negative feeling? How intense was it? How did it compare with other times that you've felt inspired? Did you feel inspired to do something particular? If yes, what?

- c. What do you think it was that made you feel inspired during your museum visit today?
4. Tell me about a recent time when you felt inspired, not here at the museum, but somewhere else. Describe that feeling of inspiration in as much detail as possible. *Probes: Where were you? Who were you with? What were you doing? What were you thinking?*

Part 4: Participant Information

5. Not counting this visit, how many times have you been to this museum in the last 2 years?
6. Not counting this visit, how many times have you visited any art museum in the last 2 years?
7. Who are you visiting the museum with today?
8. In what year were you born?
9. Would you consider yourself a local or a tourist here in [city]?