

The future of museums

At the very core, museums are storytelling institutions. At our best, museums are platforms to tell stories of human achievement and struggle across the history of the world.

But whose stories do we tell? Whose perspective do we privilege, and whose are left out? Are we becoming better museums by perpetuating social structures of domination in how we tell stories—with those holding social power controlling the narrative of those who have been historically and presently marginalized in our societies? The greatest disruption that the world is demanding is a great equalizer of many of our social institutions. And the biggest innovation we can respond with is to work with communities to have agency and autonomy to tell their own stories on their own terms.

As storytelling institutions, relationships are building blocks of who we need to be. Deep, meaningful, reciprocal relationships with people who have diverse experiential knowledge will become the core of what museums are. Museums have centered objects for so long, but people are ultimately at the center of all that we do and the function we're meant to serve in our societies.

Over the past few decades, technology has widened the gaps in our fractured societies. It has served to confirm and cement long-standing biases that we each hold, dividing us even further. With artificial intelligence demonstrating the power to cater mountains of information to each of our existing worldviews, technology will only serve to further this divide in the coming decade.

We, however, can make choices to resist this trajectory. By centering people and their needs, particularly those who are marginalized in our societies, as a guiding light in all the work we do. This perspective will transform museums into vibrant institutions rooted in communities, serving as communal spaces as people gather again, and spend time with each other with meaning and purpose.

At the Art Institute of Chicago the engineering team sees our digital platforms as additional doors of entry to our museums. As opportunities to engage with our collection for people who might not enter our building to perhaps see themselves reflected back to them. From this perspective, we prioritize open access in all the work we do. This has led us to publish the museum's public API, the most comprehensive API of any museum in the world. We have made available over 50,000 public domain images to download for free, and have made a number of our projects open source, including all the code that runs our API and our entire website.

People have connected with us from around the world sharing the amazing things they've built with our data, including an Alexa skill that searches our collection and plays an audio track from our official mobile app as it displays an artwork image on screen—a project that won an award from Amazon. We've also seen virtual galleries, text message services, a GIF generator, and

even a script that displays a work of art in your terminal window using only text characters. None of this would exist if we closed off our data, our images and our code from the world. Instead, we've chosen to center people, making the resources and information we have easily accessible so that people across the world might engage with our collection on their own terms to tell their own stories. This is the rich, dynamic future of museums that the world is waiting for.