

SCADask

*from collections
to communities*

MUSEUMS' METAMORPHOSIS

SPRING 2026 INSIGHTS REPORT



SCAD is a private, nonprofit, accredited university, offering 100 graduate and undergraduate degree programs across locations in Atlanta and Savannah, Georgia; Lacoste, France; and online via SCADnow. SCAD enrolls more than 18,500 undergraduate and graduate students from more than 100 countries. The future-minded SCAD curriculum engages professional-level technology and myriad advanced learning resources, affording students opportunities for internships, professional certifications, and real-world assignments with corporate partners through SCADpro, the university's renowned research lab and prototype generator. SCAD has earned top rankings for degree programs in interior design, architecture, film, fashion, digital media, and more. Career success is woven into every fiber of the university, resulting in a superior alumni employment rate. A 2025 study found that 99% of recent SCAD graduates were employed, pursuing further education, or both within 12 months of graduation. SCAD provides students and alumni with ongoing career support through personal coaching, alumni programs, a professional presentation studio, and more. Visit scad.edu.

Cover: SCAD Museum of Art guests explore Andrew Roberts' work *Haunted*.

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TABLE *of* CONTENTS

- [01] Executive Summary
- [03] Introduction
- [05] Key Takeaways
- [06] Stewardship and Public Meaning
- [14] Generations in the Gallery
- [22] Beyond the Screen
- [30] Stories on Display
- [36] The Museum Balancing Act
- [44] Conclusion
- [46] Appendices





The Musée SCAD Lacoste tells the story of Lacoste and SCAD in the Luberon region of France.

EXECUTIVE *summary*

Museums are transitioning from object-centered institutions to civic platforms where trust, participation, and relevance define value alongside preservation. This transformation unfolds amid financial constraint, shifts audience expectations, and prompts selective technological adoption.

<i>Paradigm Shift</i>	<i>Opportunities</i>	<i>Future Outlook</i>
Culture Becomes the Connection	Deepen community relevance and social service; position museums as accessible “third spaces;” elevate diverse curatorial voices and authentic storytelling.	Civic Relevance: Museums become engines of empathy and public imagination, where authenticity and inclusion define their social value.
Experience and Exhibition Intertwine	Develop visually compelling, emotionally resonant exhibitions; integrate popular culture and current issues; feature student and alumni work; host social and co-creative programs.	Generational Belonging: Museums evolve into creative commons that mirror youthful values and strengthen community connection.
Technology Follows Human Need	Design multisensory, hands-on experiences; apply AI and analytics to understand visitor behavior; plan for digital preservation and sustainability.	Hybrid Engagement: Museums operate as blended ecosystems where digital and physical experiences reinforce one another.
Community Curates	Expand artist-led and student co-curation; simplify interpretive language; align exhibition themes with academic and community interests.	Collaborative Storytelling: Exhibition-making becomes participatory, fostering cultural literacy and shared understanding.
Resilience Forms Core Infrastructure	Experiment with new funding models; pursue sustainable operations; invest in staff and volunteers; foster open, values-driven dialogue about DEI and change.	Sustainable Stewardship: Museums strengthen trust through transparency, adaptability, and ethical leadership amid change.

“All museums are different. Thought partners should get to know them, ask questions — what makes sense for your location and donors? Your curators? How can we bring that to life and make it exciting for your evolving audience? We aren’t trying to create something that isn’t you — but we are always encouraging institutions to work hard at constantly reinventing themselves — always asking — what is the best we can be?”

BOB WEIS,
AUTHOR, SPEAKER, AND FORMER PRESIDENT,
WALT DISNEY IMAGINEERING

Introduction

Museums in Transition

Museums stand at a crossroads between history and possibility. Formerly defined by objects, today's institutions are increasingly measured by what they enable: connection, dialogue, belonging, and cultural understanding. The museum of the future functions more as a platform where material culture helps visitors interpret history, society, community, identity, and change.

This report examines how museums adapt to shifting public expectations, economic pressure, and accelerating technological development. Drawing on global expert interviews and docent perspectives, the research identifies the forces reshaping museums into more adaptive, inclusive, and participatory institutions. Each chapter addresses a core area of transformation — mission and civic role, generational engagement, digital strategy, curatorial practice, and long-term resilience.

Across these domains, a consistent pattern emerges. The most forward-looking museums operate as civic partners embedded in broader cultural ecosystems. They prioritize human connection, invite shared authorship, and design experiences that function across physical and digital contexts. In doing so, they position themselves as trusted public spaces capable of sustaining relevance across generations.

“Any museum has to think of itself as a public space that is part of the community.”

BOB WEIS,
AUTHOR, SPEAKER, AND FORMER
PRESIDENT, WALT DISNEY
IMAGINEERING



The SCAD Museum of Art's 86-foot-high steel and glass lantern atrium, and entrance. The Savannah, Georgia museum incorporates the oldest surviving antebellum railroad depot in the U.S.



Into the Woods exhibition artist Eva Jospin with attendees at the Winter 2026 SCAD deFINE ART opening reception.

Key Takeaways

Museums are redefining their role as civic third spaces, where trust, inclusion, and community connection are core measures of institutional relevance — and where the most resilient operate with accountability to those they serve.

Physical encounters with authentic objects remain a defining strength, offering focus, credibility, and meaning that digital media cannot replicate.

Younger audiences assess relevance rapidly through interaction, emotional resonance, shared experience, and visible peer representation.

Technology adds value when it strengthens interpretation, access, and participation; it undermines the museum experience when it competes with physical presence or collective engagement.

Curatorial practice is shifting toward shared authorship, with artists, students, and community partners contributing directly to exhibition meaning through increasingly transparent, participatory processes.

Long-term financial resilience depends on disciplined prioritization, flexible funding models, and partnerships calibrated to institutional capacity — with scarcity treated as a baseline planning assumption.

Environmental sustainability and workforce stability are both strategic concerns: conservation standards must be reconciled with high energy demands, while staffing continuity, role clarity, and institutional culture require sustained investment.

Audience insight increasingly depends on data-informed analysis, active listening, and inclusive representation in decision-making, supporting more responsive and relevant programming.



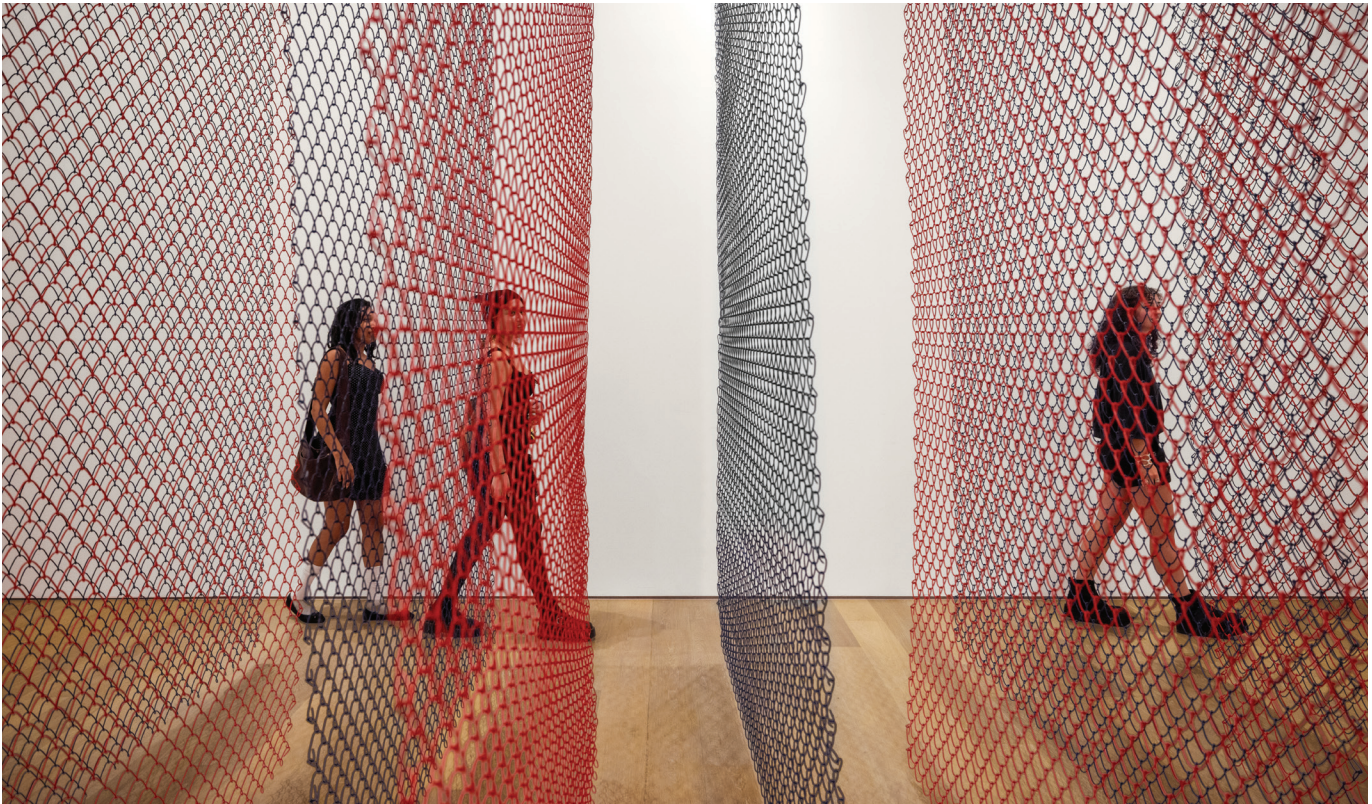
01 STEWARDSHIP *and* PUBLIC *meaning*

Redefining the Museum's Civic Role

Across the world, museums are reassessing their purpose. Beyond preservation, their focus now extends toward public value including how collections help people make sense of culture, history, and one another. Formally neutral institutions increasingly act as civic participants, interpreting the past while creating space for contemporary dialogue and future possibility.



Awol Erizku's debut solo museum exhibition, *X*, at the SCAD Museum of Art.



Visitors explore Rana Begum's Fall 2025 exhibition *Reflection* at the SCAD Museum of Art.

Museums as Civic Infrastructure

The contemporary museum serves the public directly. Stewardship remains central, but conversation and connection have become equally important. Many leaders describe museums as civic infrastructure: places where collective memory intersects with public imagination. Through exhibitions, education, and outreach, museums translate culture into shared experience and provide forums for dialogue across difference.

This role is visible worldwide. Museums in Poland have developed bilingual programming for Ukrainian refugees. German institutions host displaced scholars and artists. For instance, Emanuele Marconi, Director of Berlin's Musikinstrumenten-Museum, Staatliches Institut für Musikforschung, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, says, "Museums are much more engaged with society than they were 20 years ago. ... Now we engage with people from Iran, Ukraine, and many other countries. ... Museums try to alleviate or improve the situation of people fleeing their countries or help save the heritage of countries that are invaded. I see, for the future, a closer connection [to society]."

In Latin America and Southeast Asia, community museums function as informal classrooms, teaching local history through oral storytelling and craft. These efforts reflect a growing belief that museums can strengthen social cohesion and help communities process collective experience.

“Physical objects will continue to have power. They’re the tangible evidence of our history with real primacy in our culture.”

EMANUELE MARCONI,
DIRECTOR, MUSIKINSTRUMENTEN-
MUSEUM, STAATLICHES INSTITUT FÜR
MUSIKFORSCHUNG, PREUSSISCHER
KULTURBESITZ

Why Authentic Objects Still Matter

In a screen-saturated world, authenticity has become a defining strength. Encountering the texture, weight, or surface of a real object demands a kind of attention digital media rarely sustain. “When you’re looking at something, you are exactly the same distance as the artist who made it,” explains Lyman Allyn Art Museum Director Sam Quigley, “You can’t touch the art, but you know you’re that close. I believe that effect is going to be more and more coveted in the future. There’s going to be a hunger to see and bask in the aura of the real object.”

Museum objects physically communicate truth through material continuity, offering an experience that resists distortion, slowing perception and restoring focus. Many visitors describe relief in standing before something genuine and unmediated in encounters that build trust. The endurance of objects affirms that material culture retains meaning as technologies and platforms change around it.

Holding Complexity Without Resolution

Museums increasingly address difficult histories and contested narratives. Exhibitions on colonialism, migration, gender, and collective trauma reflect a willingness to present contradiction. This approach favors ethical storytelling grounded in context and reflection, allowing multiple perspectives to coexist within the same space. Such work requires transparency. Some institutions publish curatorial rationales or incorporate visitor feedback directly into displays. Others convene community review panels before opening major exhibitions. These practices position interpretation as an ongoing process.

Whose Stories Are Told — and Who Tells Them

Relevance depends on representation. As curators expand the range of artists, regions, and voices on view, more audiences can recognize themselves within museum narratives. Collaboration with communities, scholars, and artists has become routine, reshaping exhibitions into shared enterprises grounded in lived experience and professional expertise. Many institutions now invite artists from underrepresented communities to serve as guest curators. Others partner with local organizations to collect oral histories or reinterpret archives. These collaborations extend institutional reach while grounding authority in mutual respect.



Tomokazu Masuyama's "Runner" (2022) in his SCAD Museum of Art Summer 2025 exhibition *Liberation Back Home*.

Designing for Welcome and Belonging

Future-oriented museums cultivate belonging. “I envision museums becoming a third space like libraries are intended to be. It would be so wonderful if people could just hang out at the museum and do homework, talk with friends, and just look at art,” says a docent from the Telfair Museums in Savannah, Georgia. Imagined as welcoming third places, museums can be even more embedded within the community.

Elements like accessible layouts, attentive staff, flexible programming, community gatherings, free admission days, and informal learning reduce intimidation and encourage return visits. Accessibility now extends beyond physical accommodations as museums experiment with sensory-friendly hours, quiet zones, and wellness programs that connect art with mental health. These initiatives frame the museum as a supportive public

environment where care and curiosity coexist. In addition to preservation, museums’ value lies in their capacity to help people locate themselves, and their communities, within a broader human story.

Museums that successfully establish themselves as civic third spaces are likely to see that identity become a primary driver of relevance over time. As public institutions of all kinds face questions of trust and purpose, the museum’s capacity to hold complexity, center authentic objects, and welcome diverse publics positions it as a durable civic anchor. Institutions that invest now in accessibility, belonging, and community stewardship will be better positioned to weather the funding pressures, political scrutiny, and demographic shifts already reshaping the cultural sector.



A deFINE ART opening night in the Alex Townsend Memorial Courtyard adjacent to the SCAD Museum of Art.

CASE STUDY

V&A East

Opening the Museum from the Inside Out

London's Victoria and Albert Museum has redefined institutional access through a dual-site initiative that dissolves the boundary between gallery and archive. At its center is V&A East Storehouse, a publicly navigable collection space housing more than half a million objects across fashion, design, performance, and decorative arts. Visitors move through a working environment where conservation, storage, and research happen in plain sight. This transparency reframes authority as museum guests shape their own paths, request objects for closer viewing, and experience the collection's full scale without a prescribed storyline.

V&A East Museum extends this philosophy into exhibitions and programming developed in close collaboration with East London communities. Youth engagement, skills training, and creative participation are embedded from the outset, positioning the museum as a genuine local partner. By inviting public navigation behind-the-scenes, the V&A has expanded access while preserving curatorial integrity, demonstrating how large institutions can remain culturally vital by treating transparency and participation as core operational values.



The V&A East model signals a broader institutional shift likely to accelerate in coming years: museums opening their back-of-house operations as a form of public programming. As audiences grow more skeptical of curated surfaces, transparency about how collections are built, conserved, and interpreted may become as important as the exhibitions. Institutions willing to make their processes visible stand to build deeper forms of public trust.

“My hope is you’ll find joy,
something of yourself and a
sense of belonging the moment
you walk through the door.”

GUS CASELY-HAYFORD,
V&A EAST DIRECTOR, LONDON

CASE STUDY

New Museum

Expansion as Mission Reinvention

In 2025, the New Museum on Manhattan's Lower East Side reopened after an \$82 million expansion, adding a seven-story OMA-designed extension that more than doubled its exhibition space. New galleries, an expanded lobby, and panoramic public spaces embody the belief that museums must be porous, responsive, and scaled to the ambitions of their audiences while maintaining curatorial intent. Juxtaposing a glass-meshed polygonal addition with the original building's familiar stacked volumes, the expansion visually underscores how the museum remains both rooted in historical identity and oriented toward the future.

The institution launched its expanded space with an inaugural exhibition featuring more than 150 international artists exploring humanity's evolving relationship with technological and social change, positioning the museum as a forum for collective reflection. The project demonstrates how growth, when governed by mission, deepens public connection and how physical scale can serve civic purpose when institutional intent is kept clearly in view.

“Our new 120,000 sq ft building on the Bowery signals our redoubled commitment to new art and new ideas, and to the museum as an ever-evolving site for risk-taking, collaboration, and experimentation.”

LISA PHILLIPS
TOBY DEVAN LEWIS DIRECTOR,
NEW MUSEUM, NEW YORK CITY

The New Museum expansion represents an emerging model: institutions using physical growth as an investment in adaptability. As more museums face the choice between contraction and reinvention, the question will increasingly be whether scale serves mission or undermines it. Those that tie expansion directly to civic purpose — more access, more voices, more experimentation — are likely to sustain relevance. Those that grow without that clarity risk becoming architecturally impressive but culturally distant.



Emerging Trends

As public trust in institutions continues to erode across sectors, museums that position themselves as genuinely open civic spaces — transparent in process, inclusive in authorship, and responsive to community need — are likely to gain a distinct advantage. The next frontier includes co-governance: communities participating as institutional stakeholders. Museums that build those relationships now will be far better positioned to navigate the political, financial, and demographic pressures of the decade ahead.

Museums operating as civic institutions must translate values into structure. Decisions about representation, access, interpretation, and public presence determine whether the museum functions as a shared civic resource. Leadership choices in these areas shape public trust and institutional legitimacy.

Action Guide

Embed Equity in Institutional Structure

Integrate equity, diversity, and inclusion into governance, hiring frameworks, and curatorial decision-making. Ensure that processes support complexity without relying on rigid demographic targets that increase political or legal exposure.

Center Authentic Objects as Institutional Assets

Prioritize the visibility and interpretation of physical collections as a core differentiator. Direct resources toward activating objects in ways that connect material culture to contemporary experience while maintaining conservation standards.

Redistribute Curatorial Authority Strategically

Adopt curatorial models that share authorship, including artist-led and community-informed exhibitions. Define where institutional authority is intentionally relinquished and where accountability remains centralized.

Position the Museum as a Site of Public Care

Acknowledge the museum's role during periods of social disruption. Where appropriate, support displaced communities, scholars, or collections through partnerships and programming that align with institutional capacity and mission.

Authorize Complex and Difficult Narratives

Commit institutional support to exhibitions and programs that address contested histories and social realities, including displacement and collective trauma. Protect curatorial and educational staff through clear leadership backing and transparent rationale.

Govern the Museum as a Civic Third Space

Design policies, spaces, and visitor protocols that support informal use, rest, study, and social presence. Remove behavioral signals that position the museum as intimidating or exclusionary.





A hands-on encounter with *A Gathering of Bells* by Davina Semo at the SCAD Museum of Art.

02 GENERATIONS IN THE *gallery*

Audience Engagement and Demographic Strategy

One of the most persistent challenges facing museums is engaging visitors between the ages of roughly eighteen and forty. This group, often described as Gen Z and younger Millennials, approaches museums with expectations shaped by digital culture, social experience, and visual fluency. For these audiences, relevance must register quickly and hold through experience.



An Yves Saint Laurent turban from the
André Leon Talley: Style Is Forever exhibitions at the
SCAD Museum of Art and SCAD FASH.

THE TOP FIVE CONSTRAINTS TO REACHING YOUTH, ACCORDING TO A MADE BY US DASHBOARD

1. Staff capacity
2. Budget
3. Need for easy ideas/models to use
4. Not knowing how to deliver what they want
5. Existing audiences/programs are prioritized

Why Relevance Can No Longer Be Assumed

Younger visitors make rapid judgments about whether a space feels worth their time. Museums compete with other cultural venues, social platforms, entertainment, and peer-driven experiences. Kristin Poitras, director of programming and operations at the SCAD Museum of Art in Savannah, Georgia says, “One of the biggest things that a contemporary art museum has to battle with is when you have someone come in who does not know the artists, or you have someone who’s thinking about coming in. What’s going to draw the students in is either the programming or that their professors and teachers are telling them to come. Well-known names are what draw in community members.”

Institutions that fail to communicate value early often lose visitors before deeper engagement can occur. This shift places pressure on museums to clarify intent. Visitors need cues that signal what kind of experience awaits them and why it matters. Ambiguity may once have suggested seriousness or authority; today it more often reads as distance.

How Younger Audiences Decide to Engage

Visual literacy plays a decisive role. Exhibitions that reward interaction, offer sensory engagement, or present strong aesthetic impact attract attention. Scale, lighting, fashion, and immersive environments register quickly and encourage exploration. Shareable moments extend the visit beyond the gallery, functioning as social proof that the experience is worth having. Familiarity also lowers barriers. Cultural references drawn from music, fashion, media, or contemporary social issues provide entry points that feel legible without explanation. These signals create access. Once visitors feel oriented, they are more willing to engage with complex material.

The Social Logic of Museum Visits

Younger audiences rarely experience museums alone. Visits tend to be social, often shared with friends or partners, and shaped by conversation as much as contemplation. Movement through galleries is faster and more selective. Many visitors spend only a few minutes with an installation unless something immediately captures interest as they bypass long-form films and dense text. At the same time, these visitors are highly inquisitive. They ask questions, initiate dialogue, and acknowledge uncertainty.

The speed with which younger visitors move through galleries makes the moments that stop them more significant, not less — and those moments are most often human ones. Emanuele Marconi observes, “School kids at the museum interact with a human. There’s no screen. It’s slow. This slowness, I think, is highly appreciated by the young generations.” This openness creates opportunities for conversational interpretation, live facilitation, and formats that privilege exchange over instruction.

“Gen Z most likes the exhibitions where people can touch things and immerse themselves in the art — the multisensory.”

KRISTIN POITRAS,
DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMMING AND
OPERATIONS, SCAD MUSEUM OF ART,
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Belonging Is the Experience

Today, exhibitions can communicate meaning without needing guests to have prior knowledge by using strong narrative framing. Social programming like evening events, themed gatherings, and participatory activations reframes the museum as a place to inhabit as visibility reinforces belonging. When students and young professionals see peers, alumni, or near-future role models represented in exhibitions, the museum signals possibility instead of distance. As one Telfair Museums docent says, “[Younger generations] want to walk away feeling inspired in some way, whether it be by art that uses similar materials, the artist being from a similar background, or seeing art that they are personally interested in. They want to feel represented.”

Removing practical and psychological barriers remains essential. Admission cost, tone, and perceived exclusivity shape decisions long before a visit occurs. For younger generations, engagement begins with welcome.

Looking ahead, the institutions that earn sustained relevance with younger audiences will be those that treat Gen Z as stakeholders to involve. As this generation ages into positions of professional and civic influence, they will shape which cultural institutions receive philanthropic support, public funding, and political goodwill. Museums that invest now in genuine participation — involving young people in programming, governance, and curatorial decisions — are building the audiences and advocates they will need to survive.



Students at the SCAD Museum of Art 2025 Fall exhibition opening.

“The number one takeaway for anything is that I want people to come back, especially kids. The kids want to come back and do things again, but they also grow and want to do something different — see more things, see more things differently, and see them with new eyes.”

BOB WEIS,
AUTHOR, SPEAKER, AND FORMER PRESIDENT, WALT
DISNEY IMAGINEERING

CASE STUDY

Musée SCAD Lacoste

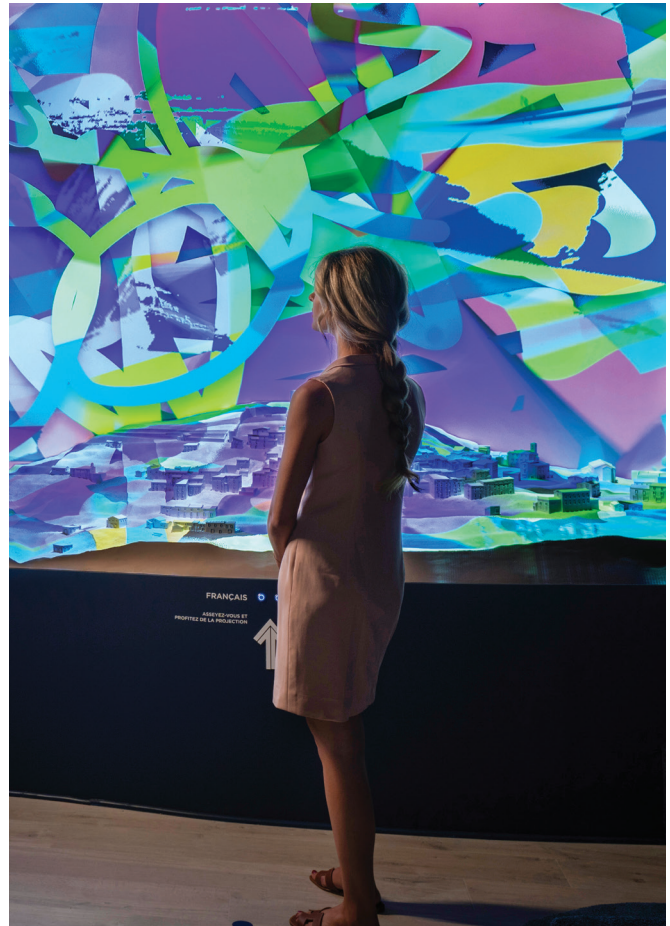
Generational Belonging by Design

Set within a historic house in Provence, France, Musée SCAD Lacoste organizes its visitor experience as a three-act narrative — using visual emphasis, spatial pacing, and deliberate technology to guide visitors toward contemplation.

The first act establishes context through a layered timeline, a color-saturated contemplation room, and a topographic map set into a former cistern. The second act makes preservation visible: a sculptural village model synchronized with button-activated media traces SCAD's restoration work, while architectural models and before-and-after photography render transformation concrete. The final act shifts from history to possibility — student work, a majors wall, and reflective design elements presenting creative pathways without

“The guest journey unfolds as a three-act immersive experience, where a central theme of DUALITY — the old and the new, art and technology, the village and the valley — weaves through each exhibit, culminating in a powerful narrative of a beautiful, creative future risen from ancient ruins.”

CT NGUYEN,
FOUNDER OF STUDIO THO, SAVANNAH,
GEORGIA



spectacle. Throughout, technology remains restrained and purposeful, reinforcing clarity rather than competing with the objects and spaces it frames.

Visitors leave with a clear sense of place, purpose, and possibility shaped by proximity to real work and real outcomes. Heritage is experienced as an active and usable living resource connected to the future being made.

Musée SCAD Lacoste points toward a future in which exhibition design is increasingly understood as an act of identity formation. As museums compete for younger audiences whose sense of self is still in formation, the ability to connect heritage with personal possibility will become a decisive differentiator — attracting the students, creatives, and cultural explorers who will define museum participation in the near future.

CASE STUDY

American Alliance of Museums:

Gen Z Redefines Audience Expectations

In 2025, the American Alliance of Museums synthesized research, interviews, and field observations to document how younger audiences engage with museums. The central finding: Gen Z visitors do not passively consume. They approach museums as social, emotional, and participatory environments. They also make rapid judgments about whether a space is worth their time, often within minutes of arrival.

Speed of judgment, social experience, and comfort with uncertainty emerged as defining behaviors. Younger visitors assess relevance through visual cues, tone, and atmosphere. They arrive in groups, treat museums as shared destinations for conversation and reflection, and are willing to ask questions and challenge interpretation in ways that create genuine opportunity for dialogic engagement. Galleries that support gathering extend visits; rigid, silent environments shorten them.

“If museums want to be successful in engaging with Gen Z, then museums need to have Gen Z represented in the decision-making.”

RYAN SHANK,
DIRECTOR OF DIGITAL EXPERIENCES AND RESEARCH, CONNOR PRAIRIE MUSEUM, FISHERS, INDIANA

The research reframed access as a cultural signal. Admission cost, language, staff approachability, and peer representation all shape whether Gen Z visitors feel welcome before they encounter a single object. Relevance, the research concluded, is produced through conditions in addition to content.

Gen Z's comfort with uncertainty and challenge means younger visitors will increasingly push back on authoritative interpretation — not to undermine museums, but to participate in them more fully. Institutions that have not developed frameworks for genuine co-creation will likely find their interpretive authority eroding, regardless of the quality of their collections.



Emerging Trends

The generational transition now underway will reshape museum audiences. As Gen Z moves into its peak cultural and economic influence, the institutions that built authentic relationships with this cohort early will have a structural advantage: loyal audiences, credible voices in debates about public cultural funding, and communities willing to advocate for their survival. Institutions that wait to adapt until generational pressure becomes undeniable will find the cost of change far higher — and the window for trust-building far narrower.

Museums seeking sustained relevance among younger audiences must shape conditions that influence how visitors decide to enter, stay, and return. Engagement is determined by the signals an institution sends through space, language, and visibility. Leadership decisions in these areas establish whether the museum reads as welcoming, understandable, and worth attention.

Action Guide

Design for Immediate Legibility

Ensure that the purpose and tone of the museum experience are intelligible within the first five minutes of entry. Orientation, visual cues, and introductory interpretation must communicate relevance without requiring prior knowledge.

Center Narrative Over Accumulation

Structure exhibitions around clear narrative arcs. Story coherence must guide curatorial decisions, pacing, and interpretation.

Use Familiarity as an Access Strategy

Integrate recognizable cultural references like contemporary issues, design, fashion, media, or lived experience as points of orientation. Familiarity should open pathways to complexity.

Make Peer and Near-Peer Success Visible

Embed student work, alumni outcomes, and near-peer examples within core exhibition spaces. Visibility of attainable futures reinforces belonging and motivation.

Direct Exhibition Investment Toward Visual Impact

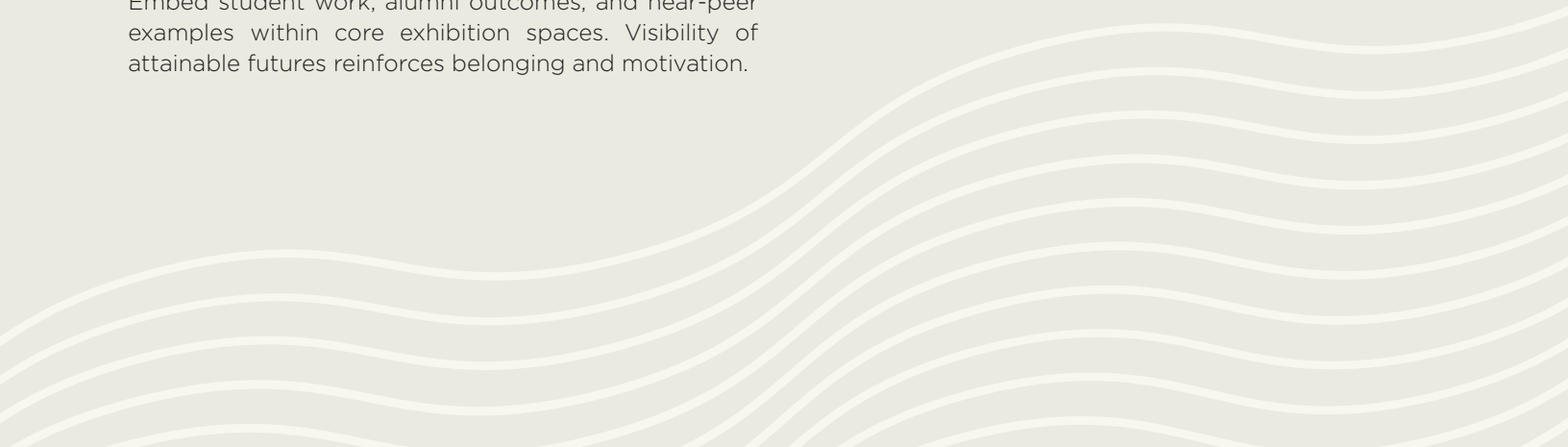
Direct exhibition investment toward scale, material presence, and sensory clarity. Visual strength should function as an entry point that rewards attention and encourages exploration.

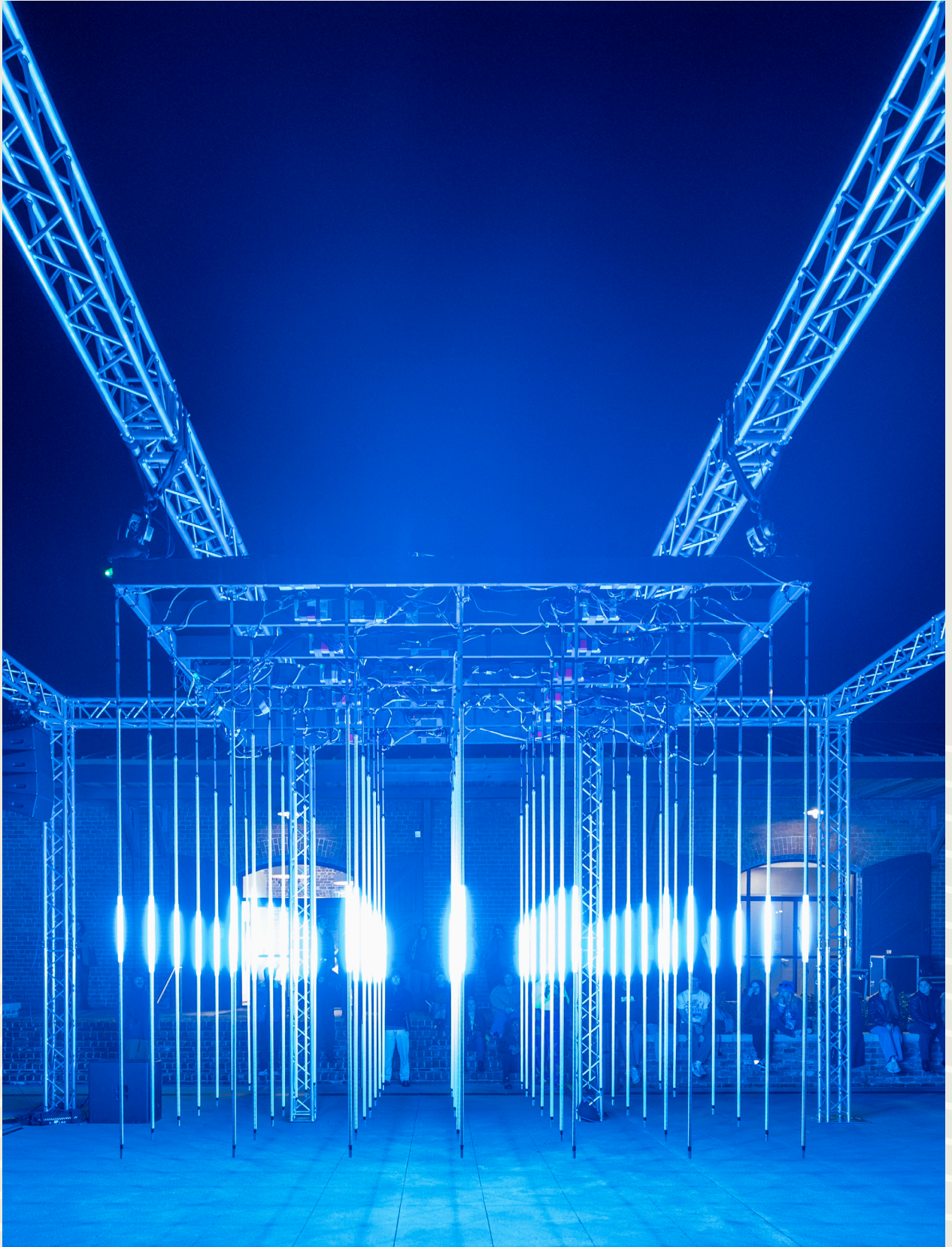
Eliminate Structural Barriers to Entry

Eliminate cost, tone, and access signals that communicate exclusivity. Admission policies, language choices, and staff interaction should consistently signal welcome.

Govern the Museum as a Social Destination

Support group visits, conversation, and informal gathering alongside contemplation with spatial design, operating hours, and program priorities.



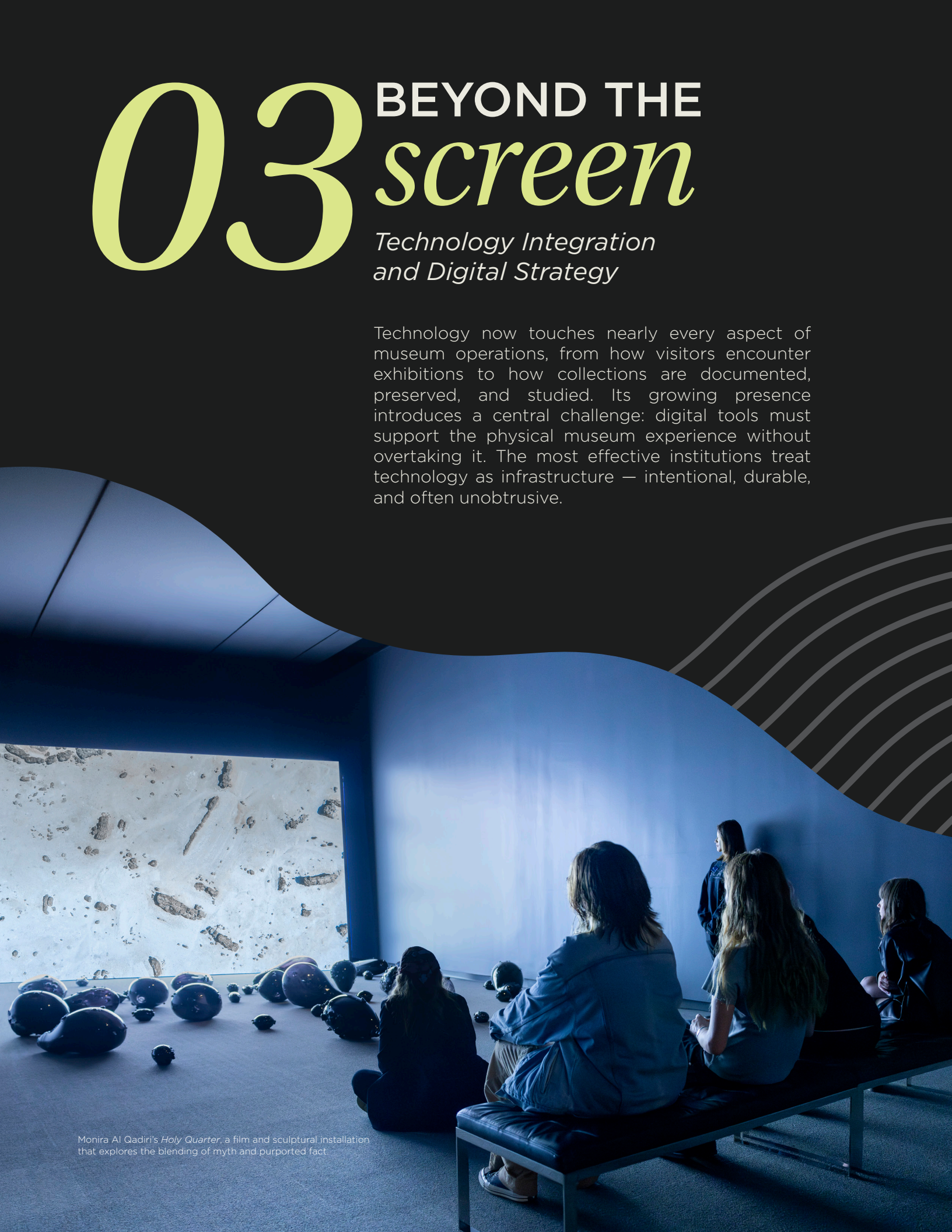


VOLUMES, a site-specific interactive light installation by Texas-based artist Ezra Masch that responds in real time to the rhythms of drummers.

03 BEYOND THE *screen*

Technology Integration and Digital Strategy

Technology now touches nearly every aspect of museum operations, from how visitors encounter exhibitions to how collections are documented, preserved, and studied. Its growing presence introduces a central challenge: digital tools must support the physical museum experience without overtaking it. The most effective institutions treat technology as infrastructure — intentional, durable, and often unobtrusive.



Monira Al Qadiri's *Holy Quarter*, a film and sculptural installation that explores the blending of myth and purported fact.

When Technology Supports Presence

On the exhibition floor, digital tools can deepen interpretation and expand access, but their value depends on restraint. Sam Quigley says, “I’m a strong advocate for digital pervasiveness but I’m a stronger advocate for the direct experience of the authentic objects one-on-one in the galleries.” Augmented reality, virtual reality, and mobile devices risk drawing attention away from objects and fragmenting shared experiences. When screens dominate, they weaken the qualities that distinguish museums from other media environments. Successful integration favors moments of enhancement that complement physical encounter and preserve group connection.

Operational realities reinforce this caution. Interactive systems are costly to acquire and maintain, and they degrade quickly under heavy public use. Broken or unreliable technology damages trust and leaves lasting negative impressions. Haley Clouser, assistant curator at the SCAD Museum of Art explains, “Interactive museums, or experiences that involve touch, often require significant maintenance. One frequently overlooked aspect is the care and labor undertaken by art installers and front-of-house staff to keep the interactive elements constantly clean and functioning.” Many museums now favor fewer, more resilient interventions that can perform consistently over time.

“What technology will best provide is an enriched experience to the physical visits of the collection. The trend that is the most promising is a more immersive experience.”

GABRIELE ROSSI ROGNONI,
CURATOR OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS
AND ARTWORKS, ROYAL COLLEGE OF
MUSIC, LONDON



Visitors at Musée SCAD Lacoste end their experience learning about the creative possibilities at the university.

The Operational Reality of Innovation

Behind the scenes, digital systems are reshaping core museum practice. Three-dimensional scanning and printing have transformed documentation, allowing collections to be studied, compared, and shared across institutions and borders. “Technology is enabling us to shift museum documentation and to share data for research at a level that would never have been imaginable before,” says Gabriele Rossi Rognoni, Curator of Musical Instruments and Artworks at London’s Royal College of Music. Visitor analytics provide insight into movement patterns, dwell time, and engagement, informing spatial design and interpretive decisions. Artificial intelligence has begun to support archival enhancement, particularly in improving historical audio and video, though adoption remains uneven due to staffing limitations and institutional caution.

Digital Stewardship in Education

Filmed on the LED volume stage at SCAD Savannah Film Studios, SCADclass Architecture virtually reconstructed the Pantheon in its original Roman state, removing later Renaissance modifications through collaboration with SCAD’s Interactive Design and Game Development and reference to Raphael’s historical drawings. Projects of this kind parallel methods increasingly used in museums, where digital reconstruction, scanning, and simulation support conservation, research, and interpretation without replacing the authority of the original artifact. As Celeste Guichard, Ph.D., notes, “The desire to create wonderful settings that transport you has remained constant. It’s just the tools to do that change over time.”





From the SCAD Museum of Art exhibition *Cloaked in a Cloud*, *Disguised in the Sky* by George Clinton, a cultural icon whose contributions to the arts span seven decades, including his tenure with Parliament-Funkadelic.

Digital Responsibility and Public Trust

These advances introduce new vulnerabilities. Digital collections face threats from cyberattacks, data loss, and reliance on commercial cloud infrastructure. Unlike paper archives, digital assets require ongoing migration and stewardship. Museums must plan for “digital depreciation,” accounting for the long-term cost of maintaining access as platforms and standards evolve.

At the public interface, digital presence typically functions as a primary point of contact. Websites, apps, and social platforms shape perception and access, particularly for younger audiences. Forward-oriented museums adopt proactive digital storytelling grounded in clarity and institutional voice, while exploring publishing models that retain control over content and audience relationships. Such digital strategy succeeds when it reinforces trust and extends the museum’s civic role.

The next phase of digital strategy will be defined less by what technology museums adopt and more by what they choose not to adopt. As AI-generated content becomes indistinguishable from institutional voice, and as digital platforms increasingly commodify cultural experience, museums will face mounting pressure to clarify what makes their digital presence distinctive and trustworthy. Institutions that govern their digital identity with the same rigor they apply to conservation — prioritizing authenticity, long-term stewardship, and public accountability over reach and novelty — are likely to emerge as credible anchors in an increasingly fragmented information environment.

CASE STUDY

Qatar Museums:

AI as Interpretive Infrastructure

In 2025, Qatar Museums introduced an AI-powered tour system that adapts routes, content depth, and language in real time, responding to individual visitor interests, movement patterns, and engagement preferences. A visitor focused on design receives different contextual prompts than one who is interested in history or architecture, enabling self-directed navigation without fixed pathways or prescribed narratives.

The system operates with deliberate restraint. Content delivery complements physical encounter — objects, space, and scale remain central. Visual intrusion is minimal by design, preserving gallery attention while expanding interpretive flexibility. Qatar Museums maintains institutional control over content, language, and cultural framing, ensuring alignment with local context and public responsibility. Multilingual access is embedded from the outset.

Qatar Museums' approach anticipates a shift that will define museum technology strategy over the next decade: the move from AI as spectacle to AI as infrastructure. As the cost of personalized interpretation falls and visitor expectations rise, institutions that have not built governance frameworks to deploy AI responsibly — with clear accountability for cultural framing and curatorial integrity — will find themselves either behind or exposed. The question will not be whether to use AI, but whether institutions have the capacity to use it well.



“By using artificial intelligence to deepen cultural engagement, we are not only increasing accessibility to Qatar’s diverse art landscape, but also building meaningful, personal connections between our audiences and the stories we tell through art.”

MOHAMMED SAAD AL RUMAIHI,
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, QATAR
MUSEUMS

CASE STUDY

Savannah African Art Museum:

Art Museum:

Student-Led Virtual Worlds

In 2025, SCAD students Pragma Verma and Yeoul Shim developed two connected virtual experiences in collaboration with the Savannah African Art Museum: Gems of Africa and Afroverse. Built across Meta Horizon and Unreal Editor for Fortnite, both projects treat digital worlds as gamified interpretive systems — translating real artifacts and oral histories into explorable environments.

Gems of Africa used GenAI tools to accelerate scripting and environment creation, enabling rapid iteration by designers without traditional programming backgrounds. Afroverse extended the approach into a Fortnite world where 3D-scanned objects were embedded into quests drawn from African mythology. Cultural narratives were fact-checked by curatorial staff, and living descendants contributed oral context — grounding the work in institutional accountability.

Throughout both projects, curatorial oversight maintained interpretive integrity. The work demonstrates how digital tools can expand access and participation while preserving institutional responsibility. The projects also signal a shift in how the next generation of museum professionals will approach the intersection of technology and cultural stewardship.

Student-led projects like these are early indicators of a broader transition: the next generation of museum professionals will arrive fluent in game engines, generative AI, and immersive platforms, and will expect to use them. Institutions that create structured space for this kind of experimentation now, in partnership with universities and emerging practitioners, will build the internal capacity to lead digital innovation. Those that treat student work as peripheral rather than as legitimate interpretive practice risk falling behind as these tools become standard.

“I see Afroverse and Gems of Africa as more than digital projects — they’re my way of helping culture travel beyond museum walls. By bringing together game engines, AI, and real museum collections, I wanted to create playful experiences where technology connects heritage with new audiences. For me, this work is about blending culture, care, and fun — turning museums into living worlds people can explore and feel part of.”

PRAGYA VERMA,
(M.A., ANIMATION, 2025)



Emerging Trends

Digital strategy is approaching an inflection point. As generative AI matures, physical-digital integration deepens, and audiences expect personalized interpretation as a baseline, museums that have treated technology as optional or experimental will find themselves structurally behind. The institutions best positioned for this shift will be those that have already built governance frameworks for AI, established long-term stewardship practices for digital collections, and developed a clear institutional voice across digital platforms that visitors recognize and trust as distinctly different from algorithmically generated content.

Digital strategy now shapes how museums operate, preserve knowledge, and maintain public trust. Leadership decisions must govern how technology supports physical experience, institutional capacity, and long-term stewardship. The following directives establish boundaries for responsible digital integration.

Action Guide

Treat Technology as Infrastructure

Authorize digital tools only when they demonstrably enhance object-based experience or access. Rather than compete for attention or fragment shared experience, technology should support presence in the gallery.

Limit Front-End Interactivity to Durable Systems

Restrict exhibition-facing technology to solutions that can perform reliably under sustained public use. Avoid systems that require intensive maintenance, specialized labor, or frequent replacement.

Invest in Back-End Digital Capacity

Allocate resources to documentation, research, and analytics systems that strengthen institutional knowledge. Technologies such as 3D scanning, data tracking, and archival enhancement should be governed as core operational assets.

Prioritize Shared Experience Over Individual Screens

Direct digital design toward collective engagement. Favor spatial, ambient, or environmental technologies that preserve social connection within galleries.

Plan Explicitly for Digital Depreciation

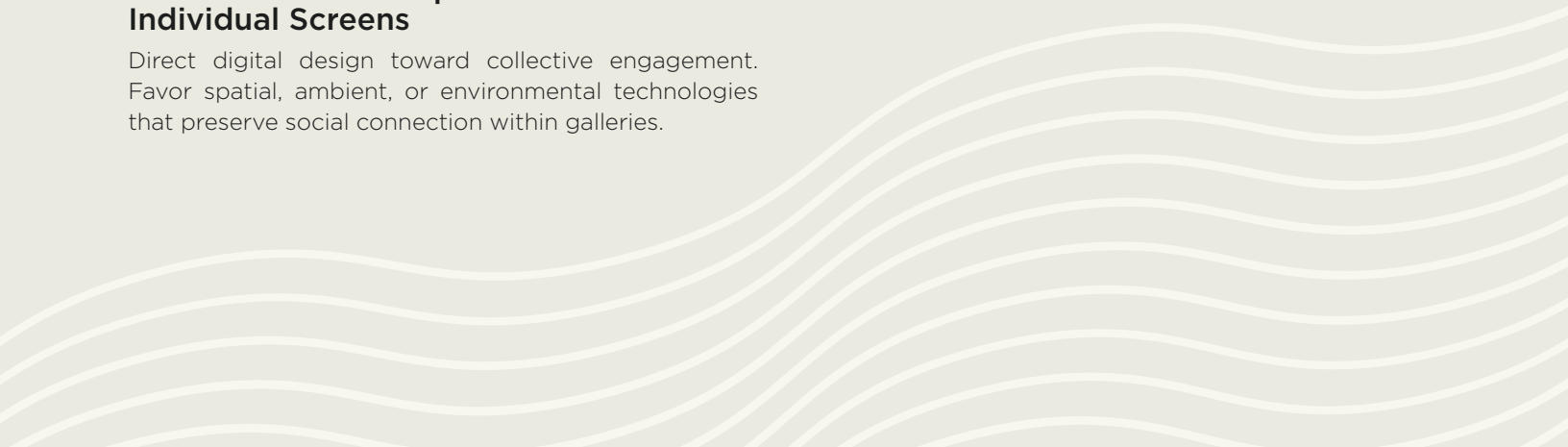
Account for the full lifecycle of digital systems, including maintenance, migration, cybersecurity, and eventual replacement. Treat digital assets as ongoing stewardship responsibilities.

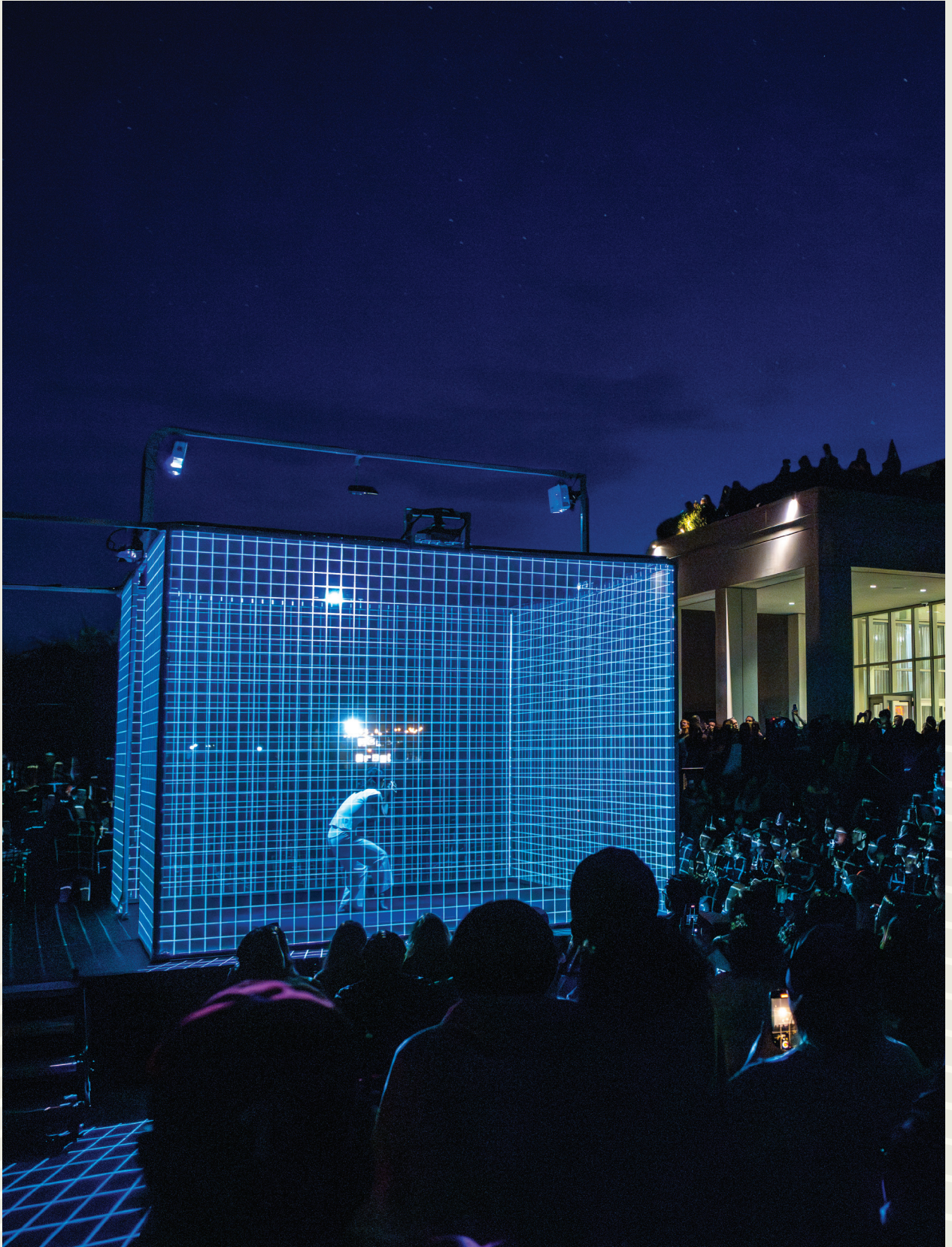
Govern Artificial Intelligence Conservatively

Authorize AI use in clearly defined contexts, such as archival restoration or research support. Establish internal review standards to ensure transparency and alignment with institutional values.

Control the Museum's Digital Public Interface

Maintain institutional ownership over digital voice, content, and distribution. Ensure that websites, apps, and social platforms extend public trust and civic purpose.



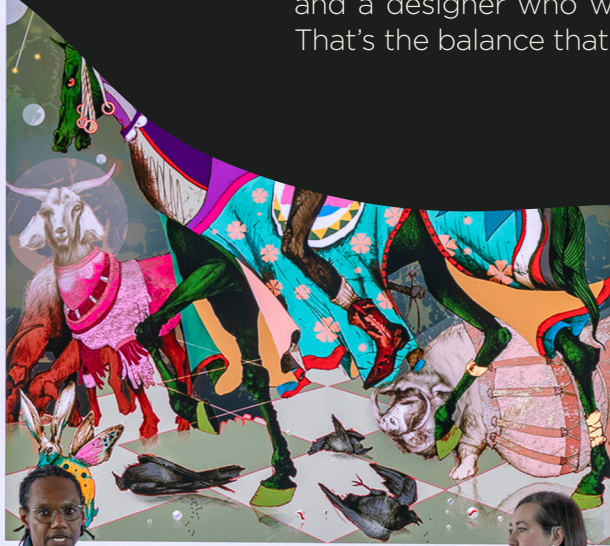


SCAD deFINE ART 2024 opening party special presentation of *Hakanaï*, directed by Claire Bardainne and Adrien Mondot.

04 STORIES ON *display*

Exhibition Development and Curatorial Practice

As museums expand their civic and educational ambitions, curatorial practice has shifted toward broader relevance. Exhibitions increasingly speak across disciplines, interests, and lived experience, recognizing that engagement deepens when visitors see clear connections between content and their own intellectual or cultural worlds. When partnering with museums, designers like Bob Weis, Author, Speaker, and Former President, Walt Disney Imagineering, ask, "How much of the story is told through the artifacts and how much of it is artificially told? ... Sometimes it's a struggle between a curator who loves what they have and a designer who wants to tell a meaningful story. That's the balance that everybody's trying to find."



Wondering What Type of Creature I Am
"2"
ing colored digitally on Somerset Velvet F

SCAD alum Lavar Munroe (B.F.A., illustration, 2007) teaches a master class on creative process, joined by Honor Bowman (M.F.A., painting, 2014), executive dean of academic services.



Guests at the *André Leon Talley: Style Is Forever* tribute exhibition at the SCAD Museum of Art.

Making Meaning Accessible

Curators now plan exhibitions around themes that intersect with fields such as design, technology, fashion, and social inquiry. This approach positions exhibitions as shared intellectual ground. Language plays a central role. Dense academic text often alienates visitors; clear, accessible interpretation builds confidence and invites deeper exploration. Writing for broad comprehension creates entry.

Sharing Curatorial Power

Museums are also reconsidering authority. Gabriele Rossi Rognoni explains, “80% of the conversation in the 1990s was about preserving the collections and studying and researching the collections, and now 80% is about ... stories and changing perspective in the narratives that we’ve traditionally delivered.” Artist-led exhibitions, where creators shape presentation and interpretation, challenge long-standing institutional hierarchies. This model positions the museum as a platform for perspective. By sharing control, institutions create space for voices historically excluded from formal interpretation. Collaboration extends to students and communities. Many museums involve students in co-curation, research, and even gallery construction. Workshops and participatory programs linked to exhibitions further dissolve the boundary between institution and audience, reframing exhibition-making as a collective endeavor.

Process Over Product

These shifts emphasize transparency and participation as exhibition development becomes visible, iterative, and dialogic. Visitors encounter both finished narratives and the thinking behind them. This approach strengthens trust and positions the museum as a place where meaning is built through exchange.

As curatorial authority continues to disperse, the distinction between *professional* and *community* interpretation will become increasingly difficult to sustain. The most forward-looking museums are likely to formalize this blurring by building permanent structures for shared governance of exhibition meaning. Institutions that develop those frameworks thoughtfully, with clear accountability and intellectual rigor, will model a new form of cultural authority: one grounded in relationships.

CASE STUDY

Minneapolis Institute of Art: *Meet at Mia*

In the absence of a summer blockbuster, the Minneapolis Institute of Art in Minnesota reframed exhibition-making as an exercise in participation. The 2025 Meet at Mia initiative repositioned the permanent collection as a flexible platform for social connection — activating multiple galleries through rotating themes, informal gatherings, artist interventions, and facilitated encounters.

Rather than centering a single narrative, the program invited visitors to treat the museum as a place to meet, linger, and explore without a prescribed path. Interpretive strategies prioritized accessibility over exhaustive explanation. Educators and facilitators played a visible role, supporting dialogue and lowering the threshold for engagement.

Crucially, the initiative evolved in real time, incorporating visitor feedback and adjusting formats across the summer. Exhibition development became iterative and responsive, reinforcing trust through transparency. Mia demonstrated that relevance can be sustained through adaptability: the permanent collection functioning as a social and intellectual commons, activated by community.

Meet at Mia points toward a future in which the permanent collection — long undervalued relative to temporary exhibitions — becomes a museum's primary strategic asset. As blockbuster budgets shrink and audiences seek experience over spectacle, institutions that have built participatory frameworks around their existing holdings will be better positioned than those dependent on imported programming. The collection itself, activated through community, becomes the differentiator.



“We’re focused on creating dialogue, connections, and experiences that celebrate the same level of excellence within our local art community.”

TRICIA HEURING,
DIRECTOR/CURATOR OF PUBLIC
FUNCTIONARY, MINNEAPOLIS MUSEUM
OF ART, MINNESOTA

CASE STUDY

Denver Art Museum:

Artist Takeover



In 2025, the Denver Art Museum in Colorado invited a contemporary artist to assume temporary control of select gallery spaces through its Artist Takeover program. The initiative transferred interpretive authority directly to the artist — spatial arrangement, text, sound, and visitor flow all shaped by a singular creative perspective.

The museum established clear structural parameters: conservation standards, accessibility requirements, and visitor safety remained institutional responsibilities, while authorship of interpretation was deliberately decentralized. This balance preserved accountability while opening space for forms of knowledge and expression the institution could not generate on its own.

Audience response reflected heightened engagement. Visitors encountered exhibitions as conversations, not pronouncements. The presence of the artist's voice throughout the space reduced interpretive distance and encouraged visitors to consider their own role in meaning-making. The model demonstrates how structured decentralization of curatorial authority can expand interpretive range while keeping institutional responsibility intact.

The artist takeover model signals a broader future for curatorial practice: one in which the museum's role shifts from author to host. As artists, communities, and audiences become more confident in claiming interpretive space, institutions that have built clear frameworks for structured decentralization will be able to move fluidly between modes of authority. Those that have not will face increasing pressure to share control without the governance structures to do so responsibly, risking both institutional integrity and community trust.

“Community building and inclusivity are rooted in creativity. This program aims to forge connections between creatives and visitors, highlighting artists' voices in a social environment.”

SARAH ROCKETT,
MANAGER OF CREATIVE AND PUBLIC
ENGAGEMENT, DENVER ART MUSEUM,
COLORADO

Emerging Trends

Curatorial practice is approaching a structural transformation. The shift from institutional authority to shared authorship — already visible in artist-led exhibitions, community co-curation, and participatory programming — will deepen over the next decade as audiences expect to see themselves represented and involved. Institutions that develop rigorous frameworks for shared authorship now will be better prepared for a future in which interpretive control is ceded in ways that are intellectually honest, culturally responsible, and institutionally sustainable.

Exhibitions translate institutional values into public experience. Leadership decisions about authorship, language, and process determine whose knowledge is centered, how meaning is communicated, and whether visitors feel invited into interpretation.

Action Guide

Broaden Curatorial Scope Across Disciplines

Direct exhibition planning toward themes that intersect with multiple fields of study and lived experience. Ensure that exhibitions speak beyond specialist audiences while maintaining intellectual rigor.

Define When Curatorial Authority Is Shared

Authorize artist-led and community-informed exhibitions through clearly articulated frameworks. Specify where authorship is intentionally decentralized and where institutional accountability remains.

Make Curatorial Process Visible

Support exhibition formats that reveal decision-making, research, and revision. Transparency in process should function as a trust-building tool.

Mandate Accessible Interpretive Language

Set institutional standards for interpretive text that prioritize clarity and comprehension. Require interpretation to be intelligible without prior art-historical knowledge while preserving conceptual depth.

Embed Collaboration Into Exhibition Development

Integrate students, artists, and community participants into exhibition research and production in structured ways. Treat collaboration as a designed process.

Evaluate Exhibitions on Meaning

Assess success based on interpretive clarity, audience comprehension, and relevance.





A SCAD FASH docent provides information and in-depth context to *The Blondes: Glamour, Fashion, Fantasy* in Atlanta.

05 THE MUSEUM *balancing act*

*Financial, Operational,
and Cultural Resilience*

As museums broaden their civic and cultural duty, they do so under mounting constraint. Institutions are expected to deliver greater social impact, technological sophistication, and audience responsiveness while navigating limited resources and internal resistance to change. Sustaining relevance now requires constant negotiation among competing demands. As Sam Quigley says, “Economics is something that needs to be factored into all of the conversations about museums.”

In “Bring You Home Stratus,” Tomokazu Masuyama places a traditional Japanese villa in the setting of a Beverly Hills courtyard.



Doing More With Less

Financial scarcity has become a structural condition. Many museums operate with declining budgets and reduced staffing, a trend expected to continue. Funding for temporary exhibitions is often minimal, shifting staff time toward fundraising and partnership development. Dependence on external support introduces volatility into planning and restricts institutional flexibility.

Sustainability Versus Conservation

Environmental responsibility presents a persistent challenge. Museums rely on strict climate control to preserve collections, making them among the most energy-intensive public institutions. Efforts to reduce environmental impact often conflict with conservation standards developed under different assumptions. Addressing this tension will require long-term investment and a reassessment of preservation practices at a sector-wide level.



The "Soundscape Cave" at Musée SCAD Lacoste, an evocation of ancient and medieval life with expressions from 14th-century philosopher and poet Petrarch created by David Dempsey (B.F.A., sound design, 2013).

"I've seen declining budgets and a reduced number of staff in museums. This is the trend and the way it will be in the future. ... The evolution of technology helped fix some of these problems because we can do with databases things that were once unimaginable 35 years ago. At the same time many [European] museums have outdated organisational charts and are missing key staff positions in fields that 20 years ago were not as relevant as today."

EMANUELE MARCONI,
DIRECTOR, MUSIKINSTRUMENTEN-
MUSEUM, STAATLICHES INSTITUT FÜR
MUSIKFORSCHUNG, PREUSSISCHER
KULTURBESITZ, BERLIN

Internal Capacity Under Strain

Organizational culture can slow adaptation. In some institutions, resistance to new tools, workflows, or public engagement strategies persists at the management level. These constraints place pressure on staff tasked with bridging outdated systems and contemporary expectations. Bob Weis says, "The museum has to keep itself fresh, get people to come, and make them want to return. That's why it's very hard to be a one-off museum unless it's in a community that has a lot of turnover from a tourism point of view."

Workforce instability compounds the issue. Hiring challenges, high turnover, and shrinking volunteer pools disrupt operations and weaken community connection.

Museums embedded within larger institutions, such as universities, face additional complexity. Shared governance, space boundaries, and competing priorities require constant negotiation, often stretching already limited capacity.

Values Under Pressure

Museums pursuing equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives operate in a polarized environment. DEI efforts may trigger donor withdrawal, funding threats, or legal scrutiny, encouraging caution or self-censorship. Leadership increasingly depends on discernment — choosing when to act, when to pause, and how to build durable community trust that can sustain values-driven work over time. Resilience now rests on judgment. Institutions that remain viable balance ambition with realism, aligning mission, capacity, and public responsibility.

The financial and operational pressures facing museums are structural. Institutions that fail to build genuinely diversified funding models, develop flexible operating structures, and cultivate durable community relationships will face an existential choice between contraction and closure. Those that survive will likely be smaller, more focused, and more deeply embedded in their local ecosystems than today's museum sector assumes is viable. The museum of the future may look very different from the institution of the past — and planning for that reality now, rather than defending against it, is the more resilient posture.



A view from *Fruits of Labor*, paintings inspired by Greek mythology, animal archetypes, and astrology, by Summer Wheat (M.F.A., painting, 2005).

“A lot of times the desire to fundraise compromises the museum’s own goals. ... The challenge is how do you get donors excited? And if you’re an old institution, how do you get new donors to share your excitement. You need to come up with ideas that are so big and dramatic that people see how they can move the needle, and they want to be a part of them. The bigger the idea, the better it usually goes in the nonprofit world.”

BOB WEIS,
AUTHOR, SPEAKER, AND FORMER PRESIDENT, WALT
DISNEY IMAGINEERING

CASE STUDY

Adler Planetarium

Leadership, Welcome, and Operational Realignment

In 2025, Chicago's Adler Planetarium appointed a new president and entered a period of deliberate reassessment. Rather than announcing expansion or technological overhaul, leadership focused on fundamentals: visitor experience, staff culture, and public trust. The institution framed its mission around being a welcoming civic space where science education, curiosity, and public service intersect.

Operational discipline defined the approach. Programming decisions reflected staffing realities, with investment directed toward maintenance, accessibility, and reliability over high-risk installations. Staff-facing priorities addressed morale, role clarity, and the demands placed on front-line educators — recognizing workforce stability as a strategic concern.

The transition illustrates how leadership priorities shape institutional resilience. By investing in fundamentals rather than ambition, the planetarium reinforced its public role under sustained sector-wide pressure — demonstrating that relevance is maintained through consistency, clarity, and genuine accountability to the communities a museum serves.

The Adler's approach anticipates a model that may become more common as the museum sector consolidates: institutions that succeed through operational clarity and community trust. As large, complex museums face mounting financial and staffing pressures, the institutions that have invested in fundamentals like reliable programming, staff culture, and welcoming public presence may prove more durable than those that have prioritized ambition. In a resource-constrained future, discipline may be the most strategic asset.

“It's key to be welcoming to all. We're a science organization, so we're standing steadfast with science inquiry at our core.”

ELIZABETH BABCOCK,
CEO AND PRESIDENT,
ADLER PLANETARIUM, CHICAGO



CASE STUDY

The Jewish Museum:

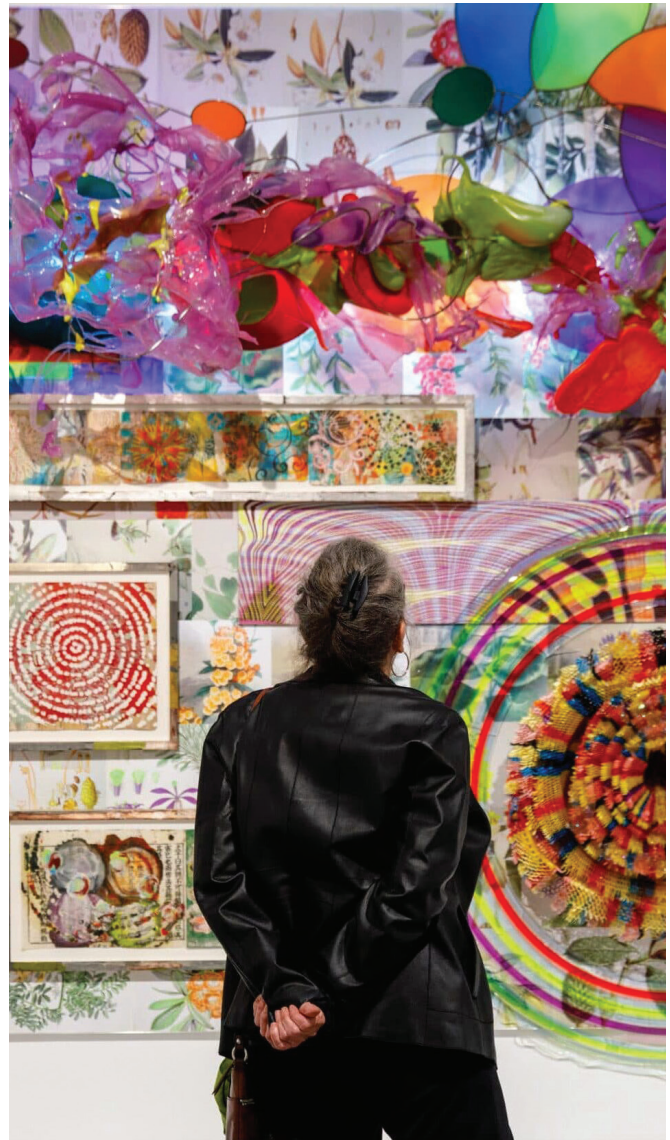
Renovation, Restraint, and Institutional Continuity

In 2025, the Jewish Museum in New York reopened following a multi-year renovation focused on essential infrastructure upgrades, accessibility improvements, and long-deferred building needs. The project tested the institution's ability to sustain relevance while physical access was limited — a challenge familiar to independent museums operating under constrained resources.

Financial stewardship guided every decision. Rather than pursuing spatial growth, leadership prioritized systems that would stabilize long-term operations, including climate control improvements critical to conservation standards. Throughout the closure, the museum maintained continuity through off-site partnerships, targeted digital engagement, and advance planning for reopening exhibitions closely aligned with their mission.

Clear communication with donors and the public throughout the renovation emphasized transparency around scope and priorities, reinforcing credibility during disruption. The reopening confirmed that physical renewal can support institutional purpose without redefining it and that governance discipline during constraint is itself a form of public trust-building.

The Jewish Museum's renovation strategy offers a template for an increasingly common challenge: how to sustain institutional purpose through necessary physical disruption without losing the public trust that makes reopening meaningful. As more museums face deferred maintenance, aging infrastructure, and the need to reconcile conservation requirements with sustainability goals, the ability to communicate transparently with donors and audiences during periods of limited access will become a critical institutional competency — one that the sector has historically underinvested in developing.



“With this reimagining ... we hope visitors discover new points of connection and deepen their appreciation of the traditions that have shaped the Jewish experience throughout the global diaspora and in resonance with other cultures.”

JAMES S. SNYDER,
HELEN GOLDSMITH MENSCHEL DIRECTOR,
JEWISH MUSEUM, NEW YORK CITY

Emerging Trends

The operational pressures currently facing museums — declining budgets, workforce instability, sustainability demands, and political scrutiny of DEI commitments — are likely to intensify before they ease. The institutions best positioned for the future will be those that have stopped treating financial resilience as a separate concern from mission and have instead built adaptability into their governance, funding, and staffing structures. Museums that plan for scarcity, invest in staff, and build genuine community accountability are building the infrastructure for a more durable form of cultural relevance.

As expectations placed on museums expand, leadership must operate within persistent constraint. Financial pressure, operational limits, and external scrutiny shape every strategic decision. Resilience depends on disciplined prioritization, long-term stewardship, and clarity about what an institution can sustain.

Action Guide

Align Ambition With Institutional Capacity

Limit institutional commitments to initiatives that can be supported over time. Expansion of mission, programming, or technology must be matched to staffing, funding, and maintenance realities.

Stabilize the Workforce Before Expanding Output

Prioritize staffing continuity, role clarity, and workload sustainability. Address burnout, turnover, and volunteer decline as operational risks.

Evaluate Sustainability Against Institutional Risk

Assess environmental goals alongside conservation requirements and operational exposure. Decisions regarding climate control, infrastructure upgrades, and energy use should reflect long-term institutional risk.

Anchor Values in Governance Structures

Embed inclusive commitments within institutional policy and leadership structures. Values-driven work should be supported by governance clarity and community accountability.

Exercise Institutional Discretion Strategically

Exercise institutional discretion in politically and culturally charged decisions. Leadership should prioritize actions that build durable trust and long-term institutional resilience.

Clarify Institutional Boundaries in Hybrid Contexts

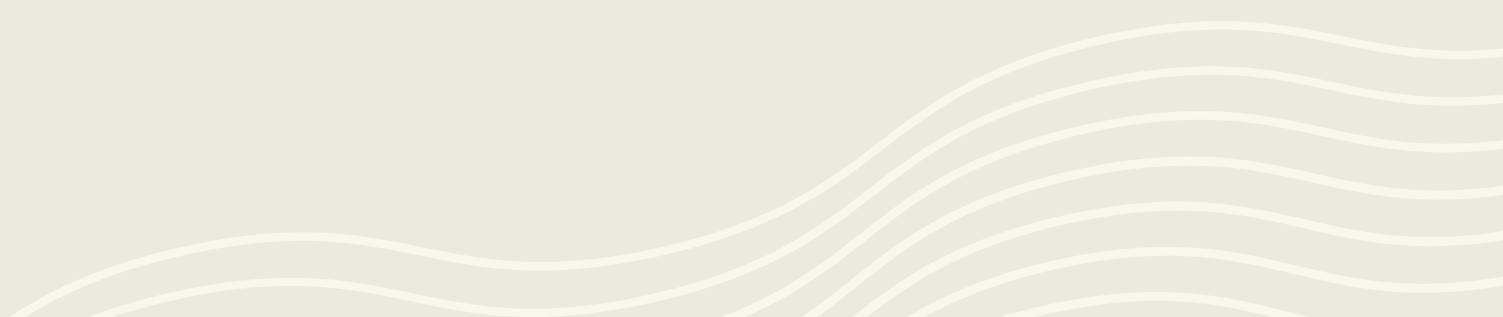
For museums embedded within universities or multi-use environments, define space, governance, and authority explicitly to reduce friction and protect mission focus.

Authorize Only Maintainable Technology Systems

Authorize technology adoption only for systems supportable over a ten-year horizon, including staffing, updates, and replacement. Reliability and longevity should outweigh novelty.

Adopt Scarcity as a Baseline Assumption

Adopt scarcity as a baseline assumption in long-range planning. Operating models should remain viable under reduced staffing and unpredictable funding.





"Selva" from Eva Jospin's *Into the Woods*, her debut U.S. exhibition at the SCAD Museum of Art.

Conclusion

Museums' relevance depends on how effectively they connect objects to people, communities to history, and the past to shared futures. Across mission, audience engagement, technology, curatorial practice, and operations, the institutions best positioned for the future act with clarity and restraint. They prioritize presence over spectacle, participation over authority, and trust over reach. They design experiences that welcome diverse publics, share authorship, and maintain human connection across physical and digital spaces. In doing so, museums affirm their role as civic institutions where culture is actively lived.

The museum of the future is no longer defined by the size of its collection or the ambition of its architecture. It will be defined by the depth of its relationships — with communities, with younger generations, with the artists and practitioners who shape cultural meaning, and with the public who decide, year after year, whether an institution still deserves their trust. The institutions that survive the next few years will be those that treat trust as infrastructure: built carefully, maintained consistently, and never sacrificed for reach.

Five forces will determine which museums thrive:

- 1.** **Civic embeddedness:** institutions that function as genuine community partners will have the advocacy and goodwill to weather political and financial pressure.
- 2.** **Generational relevance:** museums that have built authentic relationships with younger audiences — involving them as collaborators — will have the participation and philanthropic pipeline they need to sustain operations.
- 3.** **Digital integrity:** as AI-generated content proliferates, institutions that have governed their digital voice with the same care they apply to conservation will stand out as trusted sources of cultural meaning.
- 4.** **Shared authorship:** museums that have developed rigorous frameworks for community co-curation will model a form of cultural authority that is more credible, more inclusive, and more durable than the institutional voice alone.
- 5.** **Operational discipline:** institutions that have aligned ambition with capacity, invested in their workforce, and planned for scarcity will be structurally better positioned than those that have deferred those decisions.

None of these forces are new. Each is visible in the work already underway across the institutions documented in this report. What is new is the urgency. The window for building these foundations — before generational pressure peaks, before digital fragmentation deepens, before financial constraints become existential — is narrowing. The museums that act now, with clarity and intention, will define what the institution becomes.



Fall 2025 welcomed the tribute exhibition to fashion icon André Leon Talley at the SCAD Museum of Art. Since then, the exhibition has travelled to SCAD FASH in Atlanta (2025-26) and SCAD FASH Lacoste (2026).

Appendices

[47] Methodology

[48] References

[52] Acknowledgments



Methodology

+ 500 raw data points

1 in-person SCADask survey to
SCAD Museum of Art visitors

12 museum docent interviews

SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia

Telfair Museums, Savannah, Georgia

10 global museum and design
expert interviews

Haley Clouser, Assistant Curator, SCAD Museum of Art,
Savannah, Georgia

Emanuele Marconi, Director, Musikinstrumenten-
Museum, Staatliches Institut für Musikforschung,
Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany

CT Nguyen, Founder of STUDIO THO, Savannah, Georgia

Sam Quigley, Director, Lyman Allyn Art Museum, New
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Jimena Palacios, Historian & Cultural Heritage
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Kristin Poitras, Director of Museum Programming and
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Gabriele Rossi Rognoni, Curator of musical instruments
and artworks, Royal College of Music, London, United
Kingdom

Andreia Wardlaw, Director of the Walter and Linda
Evans Center for African American Studies, SCAD
Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia

Bob Weis, Author, Speaker, and Former President, Walt
Disney Imagineering

Matthew Zeller, Curator for Europe, Musical Instrument
Museum, Phoenix, Arizona



A view of Tomokazu Masuyama's Summer 2025 exhibition *Liberation Back Home* at the SCAD Museum of Art.

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	<i>Quote, p. 8</i>	Quigley, Sam. Interview by Sarah Snook. Zoom, July 11, 2025.
	<i>Quote, p. 9</i>	Telfair docent. Interview by Elizaveta Kavunets. Savannah, GA, Nov. 9, 2024.
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