

The drop in museum visitors reveals a nation without aspiration or hope

5 A government report shows that visitor numbers to UK museums and galleries are down by millions. This is not due to distracted young minds – it is a symptom of economic strife

10 Britain's leading museums and galleries, according to figures released by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, have dramatically lost visitors. Museums including the Tate galleries, National Gallery, V&A and British Museum collectively clocked up 47.6 million people from April 2015 to March 2016 – a significant fall from the previous year and the end of a British museum boom that had become a matter of national pride. Our museums are no longer on the up; the culture-hungry crowds are not growing. Why? 15 And what is to be done?

This figure is even more troubling when you see it in context. It confirms earlier signs of a flagging interest in museums in Britain. A BBC analysis found two years ago that both the National Gallery and Tate lost 20% of their 20 British audience in a five-year period up to 2014; this latest DCMS data proves that British people really are getting less likely to wake up on a Saturday morning and say: "Let's go to that Kandinsky exhibition." In previous years, the DCMS released its attendance figures with a fanfare, 25 boasting of booming audiences to the museums it supports. This year's announcement has been different. Publicity was oddly muted. No wonder, for here are the headline figures from the Department's own report:

30 *In 2015-16 there were 47.6m visits to DCMS-sponsored museums. This was a decline of 6.2% on 2014/15, and a decline of 2.8% when Tyne and Wear museums are excluded from 2014-15.*

35 *In 2015-16, there were 7.9m child visits to DCMS-sponsored museums. This was a 14.4% decrease on 2014-15, and a decline of 1.8% when Tyne and Wear museums and the Horniman museum are excluded from 2014-15.*

40 Footnotes explain that Tyne and Wear museums are no longer sponsored by the DCMS, while there are concerns about the "robustness" of the Horniman's statistics. Even after these adjustments, the shortfall is striking. The decline involves overseas and British visitors, for the report says there were "an estimated 22.4m visits to sponsored museums in 2015-16 by overseas visitors, accounting for 47.1% of all visits. This was consistent with 2014-15, when overseas visitors accounted for 47% of all visits." In other words, overseas visits declined proportionately to the entire shortfall. 45 Some 23.8 million people from overseas went to our big museums in 2014/15. That number fell by about 1.4 million in 2015-16.

It seems likely that fear of terrorism kept away some of those global visitors. Such fears have also hit the world's most popular museum, the Louvre. If you are looking from Tokyo, London is very close to Paris. Yet we should

worry most about the decline from Britain itself. Why are museums losing their appeal for the British public?

Is Brexit Britain losing brain power? Has The Great British Bake Off addled our minds even before our mental borders are permanently closed to European influence? Would a generation of screen-addicted teenagers rather play video games?

No – it is not because minds are shrinking. It is because the same economic pressures that have uprooted politics around the world are destroying the aspirations we express when we go to galleries. There is nothing more aspirational than visiting a museum or art gallery. It is an expression of hope and self-esteem. Just as lying in bed all day binge-watching TV and eating crisps is probably a mark of melancholy. Going out to an exhibition or taking your kids to the Natural History Museum is surely a symbol of belief in your family and the future.

So it is especially telling that there was a 1.8% decrease in visits by under-15s, even after the DCMS adjusted this figure. Does that mean the internet is making young people turn away from art and knowledge? Nonsense, because this is probably not their decision. Children generally go to museums with parents or carers, or on school trips. If they are visiting museums less, it is because adults are not bothering to take them.

These figures mean many parents are giving up on taking their children to museums, or rationing visits more than they did. Remember, these museums are mostly in London. It is a significant investment for the majority of Britons to go to the capital to attend a museum.

Call them the “squeezed middle” or the more fashionable “left behind”, but these figures prove many people are finding investment in culture – and their children – more difficult. Schools are, too. The most shocking of these statistics is the 6.9% decrease (after adjustment) in educational visits and participation in on-site activities for under-18s. This is the most dramatic fall in any of the data, and it shows why the DCMS is not too keen to flaunt this report.

The decline in school trips is surely a direct result of increasing economic and other pressures on schools under the coalition and, now, Conservative governments. You can see how financial constraints and radical curriculum reforms might make that museum trip something all too tempting to slash. These figures reveal how Britain is failing its young people, and losing the passion for self-improvement that our free public museums used to nurture. A nation that loses interest in museums has not just lost its head. It has lost hope.

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