

Preliminary Report on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Museums in Toronto (March 2020-present)

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has been disastrous for the museum sector in Toronto, as it has been for museums around the world. The nature of the situation is aptly expressed by the International Council of Museums' (ICOM) report on the results of the "Museums, museum professionals and COVID-19 follow-up survey": "Our first report, published in May 2020, presented a dire situation for museums and museum professionals around the world, with around 95% of institutions forced to close in order to safeguard the wellbeing of staff and visitors, resulting in serious economic, social and cultural repercussions."¹ There have been some profitable outcomes, such as the opportunity to expand audiences through online programming. But these gains also have substantial financial and socio-cultural caveats, as this preliminary report reveals. While the financial and employment impacts have been especially damaging there are additional contexts of impact that may be less immediately obvious, including the suspension of acquisitions and loans, setbacks to diversity and inclusion initiatives, unanticipated casualties of the online pivot, and a loss of interest and engagement on the part of the communities that museums serve.

This report aims to provide a resource for future planning within the sector. It examines in greater detail the nature and extent of the impact of COVID-19 on cultural institutions in Toronto, for the period from mid-March 2020 through to the time of writing (February 2022), with a focus on nine of the city's museums and cultural institutions (hereafter referred to as "museums" for the sake of brevity). The primary data on which the report relies consists of financial and operational information (including visitor numbers) pertaining to the period mid-March 2020 through to the end of March 2021, drawn from the available annual and financial reports and financial audits of the museums in question. An analysis of this data is combined with a consideration of secondary data in the form of circumstantial information (from museums' annual and financial reports as well as other types of reports, surveys, public health data, news articles, and government documents), available up to the time of writing, treated with caution as a source of statistical information but recognized as an equally valuable source to be considered alongside the data – particularly given that the report comes at an early moment in which to measure the full impact of the ongoing pandemic.

¹ ICOM (International Council of Museums), Report: Museums, museum professionals and COVID-19: follow-up survey (2020), p. 4.

The report has a three-fold purpose:

1) to provide museum professionals with a preliminary summary of these impacts on the basis of the data and information available;

2) to collate the data currently available in the annual and financial reports of the museums in question, and make this easily accessible for reference across all of these institutions;

and

3) to offer preliminary recommendations for concrete strategies that museum professionals and government officials can put into action, to sustain the industry and buttress it--in the middle of the ongoing pandemic and into the future.

Introduction to the Report

Background: The Problem

Toronto's museums are in trouble. The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, began its onslaught on Toronto's museums as early as the first government-mandated closure of March 13, 2020. Due to the social distancing requirements stipulated by the Government of Ontario, extended periods of closure and limitations on visitor access and engagement have created not only financial instability for museums but also a great deal of uncertainty as to how best to proceed.

In their December 2020 "Value-for-Money Audit" of two of the museums examined in the present report (the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Royal Ontario Museum) – presented by the Auditor General of Ontario to the Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries in assessment of the current state of these institutions' funding, expenditures, and financial accountabilities – the report's compilers noted succinctly that "since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a sudden and dramatic impact on the culture sector, including the three in-scope entities. Closures, new public health expectations, and evolving public sentiment have significantly impacted attendance, revenues, educational programming and operations."² Museums have also moved low on the list of potential visitors' spending priorities: a public survey in June 2020 of more than 4,000 Canadians across the country revealed that those surveyed planned to spend money on "essential" things like food, education, and utilities and less on "discretionary" things like restaurant dining, entertainment, and recreation – into the latter category of which museums and galleries fall. A reluctance to spend on recreation was even higher among Ontario respondents.³ Strategies that will safeguard Toronto's museums for the future, then, are at the top of the list for the city's museum professionals and for anyone who recognizes the economic and cultural value of the industry.

Trouble for museums means trouble for the city and the province. Museums are vital to both the province's and the City of Toronto's tourism economy, both financially and culturally: as revealed by the 2018 "Toronto's Visitor Economy" report, the largest percentage of visitor spending in Toronto (29%) supported employment in the "Attractions and Recreation" sector.⁴ Prior to the pandemic, 45% of Ontario's

² Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, "Value-for-Money Audit. Museums and Galleries" (December 2020), p. 11.

³ Mowat and Rafi, "COVID-19: Impacts and Opportunities," prepared for the City of Toronto (September 2020), pp. 200-201.

⁴ Toronto's Visitor Economy. An Economic Catalyst for the City and the Region (2018), p. 40.

museum visitors were tourists.⁵ Within Toronto's own culture sector, the city's museums are a major contributor to its tourism industry. As noted by the compilers of the "COVID-19: Impacts and Opportunities" report, produced for the City of Toronto in September 2020, "Toronto's exceptional artists, institutions and industries are critical factors in Toronto's livability, vitality and prosperity. Culture underpins Toronto's diversity, giving expression to the many cultural communities that have built Toronto and the neighbourhoods they call home. Culture is a primary motivator to travel here, drawing more than 2 million international travelers a year. [. . .] Torontonians love culture [. . .]. The World Cities Culture Forum reports that 41 per cent of working-age Toronto residents attend a museum or gallery at least once a year."⁶

Museums are also key contributors to the province's purse, including \$1.6 billion a year in revenue and \$600 million a year generated from school trips.⁷ Museums also provide more than 11,000 jobs. Since the pandemic closures began, Ontario's museums have lost more than \$120 million in revenue. As noted by the Ontario Museum Association, these losses are "especially concerning for independent, not-for-profit, non-municipal museums that generate 65% of their annual revenue from activities like fundraising, school tours, and admissions – areas all severely limited by the pandemic." Without museums, the protection and promotion of our collective heritage, the means to effectively tell our stories and create a sense of community, and the opportunity to build partnerships with other industries like education and tourism are in danger.⁸

⁵ Ontario Museum Association (OMA), "Exhibiting Resilience: Empowering Ontario's community museums for strategic recovery" (October 2020), p. 7.

⁶ Mowat and Rafi, "COVID-19: Impacts and Opportunities," prepared for the City of Toronto (September 2020), p. 199.

⁷ All dollar amounts in this report refer to Canadian dollars (CAD).

⁸ Ontario Museum Association (OMA), "Exhibiting Resilience: Empowering Ontario's community museums for strategic recovery" (October 2020), pp. 2, 7-9, 12.

Purpose of the Report

This report comes at a crucial moment, then, for Toronto's museums and for the city and province that they serve and support. It answers a significant, mid-pandemic need for a clear picture of an ongoing situation and a response to fundamental questions about the nature and extent of the pandemic's impact and its implication for the future of the sector.

Intended for distribution to all museums within the Greater Toronto Area, but likely of interest to institutions in other parts of Ontario and Canada, the report acts as a compliment to studies being written throughout the sector. It serves to consolidate, make accessible, and usefully interpret the available data with an eye to making a preliminary assessment of the data's implications (both short- and long-term) for the state of the sector within Toronto. It also aims to provide a set of preliminary recommendations for strategies that museum professionals can incorporate into ongoing and future industry planning and crisis management.

Reports like this one are currently underway across the sector, both within Ontario and around the world. The goal in each instance is to provide a clear picture of the ongoing situation and offer guidance for strategic recovery across each of the key dimensions of the industry for which data is available, including:

- forms of funding and revenue (both external and self-generated)
- numbers of visitors and types of visitor engagement
- forms of programming (including new online formats), both for exhibitions and education
- membership (retention and cultivation)
- expenses (including "hidden" costs, like insurance and health protocol compliance)

Method: The Approach and its Rationale

The report's analysis focuses on the experiences of nine museums within Toronto, over the course of the period from mid-March 2020 (the moment of the first government-mandated institutional closures) through to the present (February 2022). Primary data concerns the period from mid-March 2020 through March 2021.

The nine museums in question are:

- Aga Khan Museum (AKM)
- Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO)
- Gardiner Museum (GM)
- Hockey Hall of Fame (HHF)
- Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA)
- Ontario Science Centre (OSC)
- The Power Plant (PP)
- Royal Ontario Museum (ROM)
- Textile Museum of Canada (TM)

These museums have been chosen on the basis of two fundamental characteristics:

- 1) they are either provincial institutions (or those that receive substantial government funding) or private museums of substantial financial means
- 2) they are institutions about whom there is a sufficient quantity of data available for meaningful analysis of impact and experience over the period in question
- 3) they are all located within the City of Toronto and share similar (though not identical) visitor audiences, both local and international in nature

The report's analysis relies upon a combination of primary and secondary data directly relevant to these nine museums. Secondary data (including circumstantial information) plays an important role in the present report, as a preliminary analysis of a still-unfolding situation for which data is incomplete; it also provides a broader situational context for the analysis made possible by the primary data. Secondary data also pertains to museums and cultural institutions in Toronto for whom no substantial or consistent primary data was available for the period in question, requiring that they be omitted from the final list of focus institutions (for example, the Bata Shoe Museum); this data is only used for the purpose of context and is acknowledged as purely circumstantial within the report.

Primary sources of data include:

1. annual reports and year-in-review documents (covering the period mid-March 2020 through end of March 2021), produced by the nine museums and publicly available on their websites
2. financial reports and financial statements (covering the same period as above), produced by the museums and publicly available on their websites
3. a financial audit of two of the nine museums (AGO and ROM); covering the same period as above), produced by the Auditor General of Ontario and publicly available online

Secondary sources of data include:

1. reports, documentation, and surveys concerning the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on Ontario museums (covering the period March 2020 to the time of writing), produced by the Ontario Museum Association (OMA) and publicly available online
2. information about tourism and the museum sector (covering the period March 2020 to the time of writing), recorded by the City of Toronto or by organizations working in its service, publicly available online
3. public health data, statistics, and impact studies for the City of Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area, relevant to the duration of the pandemic from mid-March 2020 to the time of writing
4. news articles, broadcasting transcripts, social media feeds, and blogs (covering the period March 2020 to the time of writing), publicly available online, which treat topics relevant to the report (including the pandemic's impact on museum closures, finances, visitor attendance, and changes to programming); these sources are primarily anecdotal in nature or reflect personal experience rather than record statistical data
5. government documents regarding policies that are directly relevant to the report or impact upon the primary data (including mandated museum closures), relevant to the duration of the pandemic from mid-March 2020 to the time of writing

Various types of data are considered, to address impacts on a range of industry dimensions, including:

- revenues (total, self-generated, donations, grants)
- admission fees
- membership fees
- expenses
- visitor numbers (on site and online)
- membership numbers
- educational programming participants (individuals and school groups)
- losses of revenue

The Nature and Interpretation of the Data

The preliminary status of this report, combined with certain inconsistencies and deficiencies within the primary and secondary data sources, means that certain analytical caveats need to be acknowledged at the outset.

For example, the annual and financial reports produced by the nine museums are inconsistent in the categories of data they provide: some provide comprehensive reporting and numbers for all forms of financial information, membership, and visitor attendance while others record information for only a few of these categories, summarize this data in the form of percentages, or provide none at all. These categories also vary across institutions – or within an individual museum’s reports – from year to year.

The “year” represented by a museum’s annual report can also vary: in the majority of cases this is the governmental fiscal year (1 April through 31 March) but there are also instances in which the year reported is the individual fiscal year (1 January through 31 December). In the present report’s analysis these two types of year have been aligned for the purpose of standardizing the datasets; readers should nonetheless be aware of this discrepancy.⁹ In part, this decision is guided by the limited quantity of data available at the current time of writing.

Not all the museums under study have released their annual and financial statements for the 2020-2021 year. To establish a clearer picture of the pattern of each museum’s financial and operational situation, the present analysis includes available data for each institution from the years 2017 through 2021. An additional report, to be written once complete information for 2021 becomes available, will be able to analyse more thoroughly the nature and extent of the pandemic’s impact and expand upon the findings and recommendations made here – all of which, it is hoped, will nonetheless be useful in the shorter term and may still be reflected in future findings. The present report’s findings are intended to provide a summary of the available data and to offer insight into identifiable trends, with a view to contributing to the ongoing creation of strategic recommendations for the future.

It is also important to note that there is no single, overarching template to which all institutional annual and financial reports are required to conform. Although there are certain standard commonalities of reporting, the information presented can be – and is – determined by each institution’s administrative prerogative. In the case

⁹ Data for the AKM and GM relates to the year January 1 through December 31. Data for the AGO, HHF, MOCA, OSC, PP, ROM, and TM relates to the year April 1 through March 31.

of reports covering 2020 and 2021, these choices also appear to have been guided by a desire to shift attention away from certain shortcomings (such as quantities of self-generated revenue, visitor attendance numbers, and numbers of school visits) and to focus instead on (among other things) achievements in online programming and exceptional gains in social media following. In these instances, some categories of data included in the annual reports of years prior have been removed altogether (including in-person visitor numbers). This is understandable given the circumstances but also makes for an uneven dataset.

Also noteworthy are the variable institutional classifications of the museums analyzed in this report. Some are provincial museums and registered Canadian charitable organizations that receive support from members, sponsors, donors, and government funding bodies (federal, provincial, and municipal), while others are privately-owned institutions. Each of the museums studied here has a different governing and administrative structure, donor and sponsorship portfolio, and variable financial pull overall within the larger context of museums in Ontario and Canada. These disparities, in fact, are an issue that that pandemic has thrown into sharper relief, as discussed in greater detail below.

Inconsistencies in the annual reports have meant that the present report is also required to rely on additional forms of primary data (including audits, which consist of primary data reported to or solicited by government authorities) and sources of secondary data, prioritizing those that are generated by reliable sources (including the museums in question).

The analysis (which includes findings and recommendations) is also based in part on contextual and circumstantial information derived from the annual reports and other sources. The information obtained from secondary sources is difficult to quantify as – or equate with – primary data. News articles and other sources of circumstantial or anecdotal information has been referred to, as appropriate, throughout. Some of this information will be directly relevant to and useful for understanding actual impacts (as in the case of articles about new types of museum programming) but most have been used only to help establish, understand, and articulate a wider set of industry contexts and perspectives. Anecdotal sources, although they often relate directly to or are based in the primary data, are approached here with caution as potentially biased sources of information. They are also informed by personal emotion – an important factor that underpins every aspect of the circumstances examined in this report, including the conditions that generate the primary data itself.

The present report declares in detail the source of each item of data or information provided, and gives justification for its use when this is warranted.

Summary of Key Findings

The report's key findings are as follows:

- financial losses across the sector have had a significant impact on museums, and have been particularly damaging to smaller institutions
- the requirement for some museums to cut costs has had a negative impact on employees and volunteers as much as museums
- continued and increased government funding has been, and will continue to be, essential to helping museums survive the pandemic
- a significant drop in on-site visitor attendance, due to museum closures and restrictions to permitted numbers, has had a profoundly damaging impact on museums, particularly those whose operations rely on this form of engagement
- there are additional and coincident factors that have compounded the negative impacts of the pandemic on visitor numbers
- the online pivot has yielded benefits and pitfalls – financial, socio-cultural, and economic in nature
- the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on institutions reliant upon high-risk groups
- free forms of admission, attendance, and participation may not be sustainable in the long term
- there is a need for clearer communication pathways regarding the pandemic
- closures due to the pandemic have also impacted safety and conservation
- annual reports produced by museums have altered in structure and content
- the pandemic has prompted museums to make changes to long-term strategic planning and risk management
- the pandemic has had both positive and negative impacts on innovative programming and research

Preliminary Analysis and Recommendations

A set of specific recommendations, based on the report's findings – and grounded in both the data and circumstantial evidence – are offered at the end of this report. These address strategies to consider and actions to take on the part of museums and their supporters (with a focus on governmental authorities in a position to provide financial and other forms of aid).

These recommendations include:

- the active solicitation (together with the Ontario Museum Association's recent submission of recommendations to Ontario's Budget 2022) of increased and sustained levels of government funding, particularly for smaller or less moneyed institutions; this funding will be required to counter losses of revenue and address costs across the various dimensions of the sector, including the ongoing requirements of the online pivot
- a renewed approach to digital and online strategies, including social media strategies, to help address the need for alternative forms of visitor attendance and participation
- a careful and collaborative approach to the digital requirements that now impact on all dimensions of the sector, taking into consideration individuals and groups who lack access to or may be marginalized or otherwise negatively impacted by these requirements
- a proactive approach to creating centralized communication channels and clear messaging, in collaboration with government authorities
- a more consistent approach to the structure and content of annual reports
- a fresh approach to programming that explores alternative modes of display, education, and research

The Data

The charts below represent data extracted from the primary sources for each of the nine institutions covered by this report, in connection with the categories identified. Specific sources are identified in the relevant notes. Note that in many instances data is not available for the 2020-2021 year, resulting in an incomplete picture when considering all institutions in relation to one another within the same category; individual instances of unavailable data are indicated in each case. The nine institutions are:

- Aga Khan Museum (AKM)
- Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO)
- Gardiner Museum (GM)
- Hockey Hall of Fame (HHF)
- Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA)
- Ontario Science Centre (OSC)
- The Power Plant (PP)
- Royal Ontario Museum (ROM)
- Textile Museum of Canada (TM)

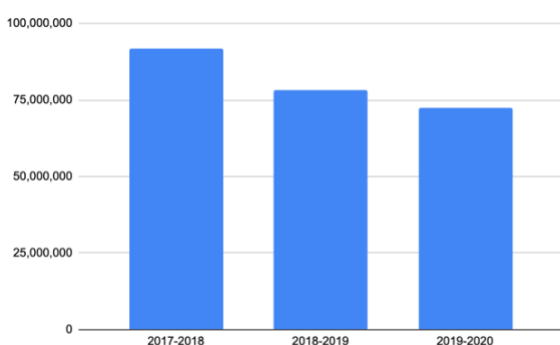
Because of the inconsistencies between each museum's mode of reporting and the content of their annual reports (which makes impossible an even comparison of data in each category, across institutions), individual charts have been generated for each institution under each category of data. Readers should also be aware of the differences between data ranges within the charts for each category (e.g., quantities of money in one chart might range up to 100 million in one chart, but only 5 million in another) and the variable years for which data is available (these are also noted in the relevant footnotes). Tables with complete and specific data for each of these charts can be found in the Appendix.

Data is provided for the following categories:

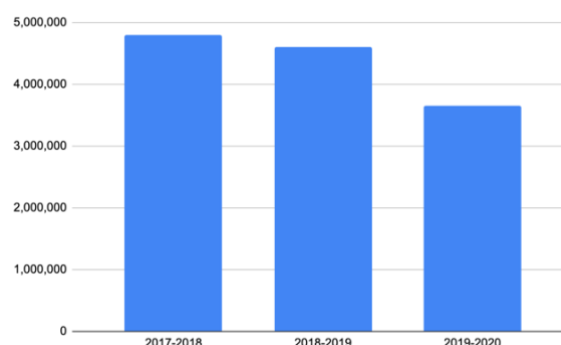
1. [Revenue \(Total\) \(\\$\)](#)
2. [Revenue \(Self-generated\) \(\\$\)](#)
3. [Revenue \(Private gifts and/or donations\) \(\\$\)](#)
4. [Revenue \(Grants\) \(\\$\)](#)
5. [Revenue \(Admission fees\) \(\\$\)](#)
6. [Revenue \(Membership fees\) \(\\$\)](#)
7. [Expenses \(Total\) \(\\$\)](#)
8. [Visitors \(Total, individual, on site\)](#)

9. [Visitors \(Members, individual, on site\)](#)
10. [Members \(Total number of individuals subscribed\)](#)
11. [Members \(Total number of households subscribed\)](#)
12. [Members \(Individuals, newly subscribed\)](#)
13. [Social media following \(Total number of followers\)](#)
14. [Website visits \(Total, individuals\)](#)
15. [Educational programming participants \(Total, individuals, on site\)](#)
16. [School group visits \(Total, individuals, on site\)](#)

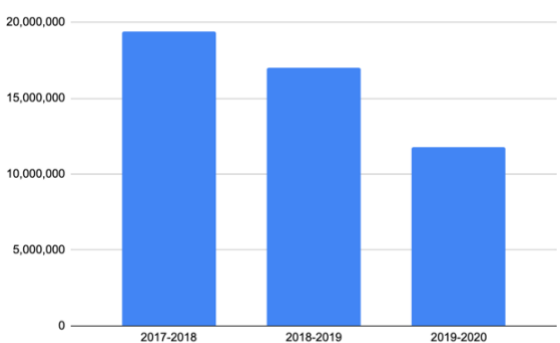
1. Revenue (Total) (\$) ¹⁰



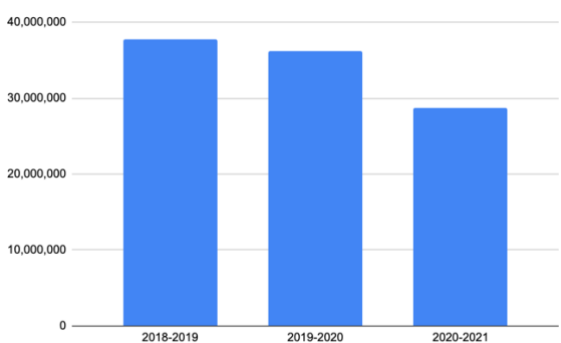
AGO¹¹



GM¹²



HHF



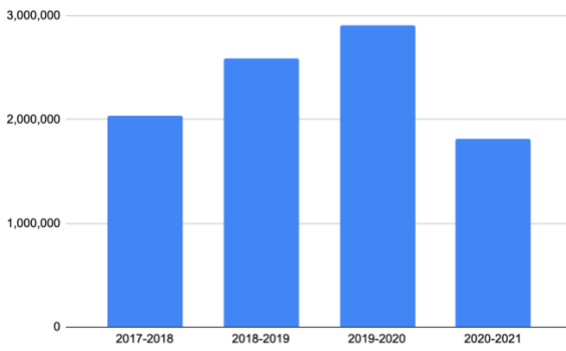
OSC¹³

¹⁰ Relevant data for the period in question is not available in this category for the AKM or the TM.

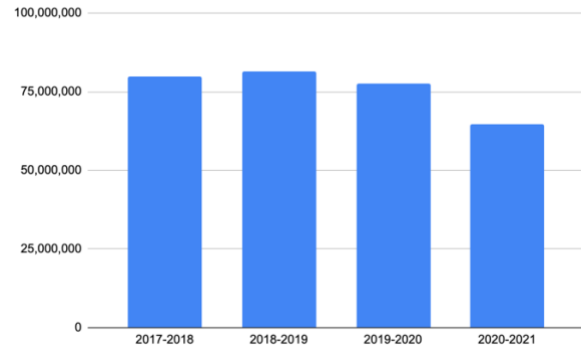
¹¹ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

¹² Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

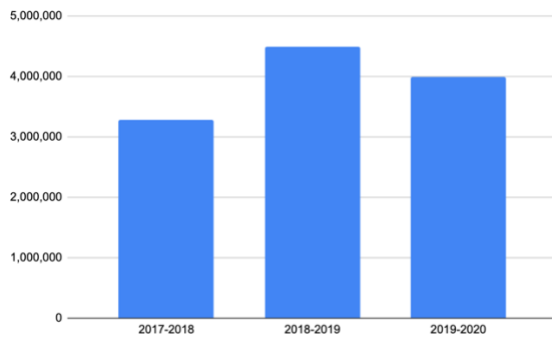
¹³ Data for 2017-2018 not available.



PP

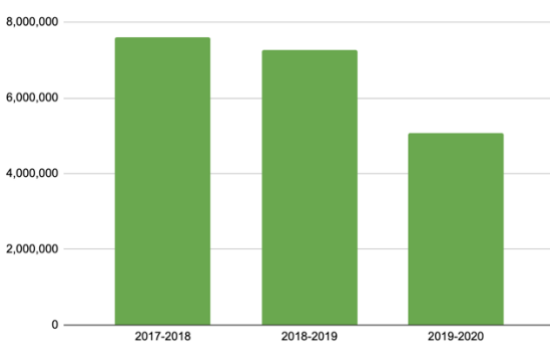


ROM

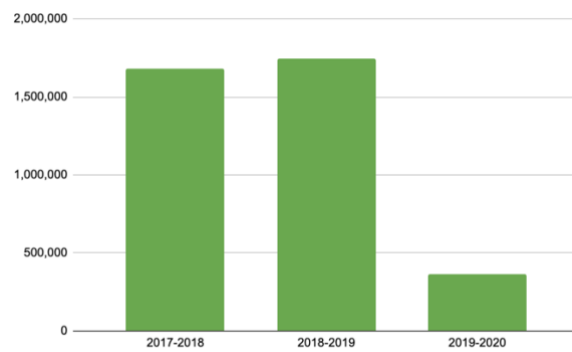


MOCA¹⁴

2. Revenue (Self-Generated) (\$)



AGO¹⁵

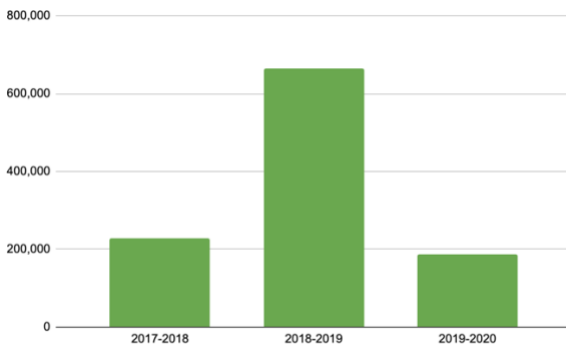


GM¹⁶

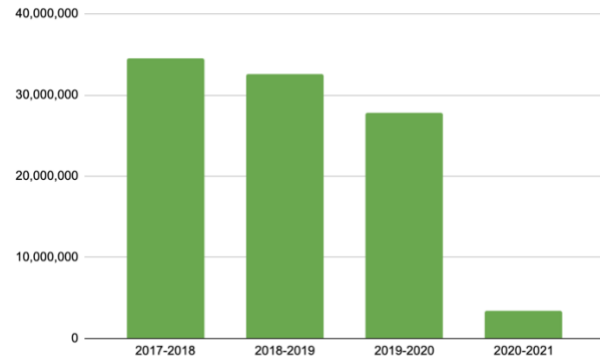
¹⁴ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

¹⁵ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

¹⁶ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

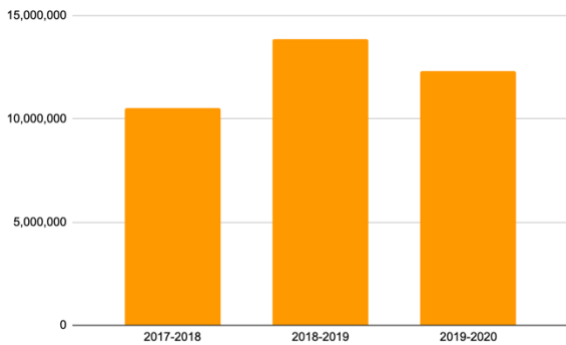


MOCA¹⁷

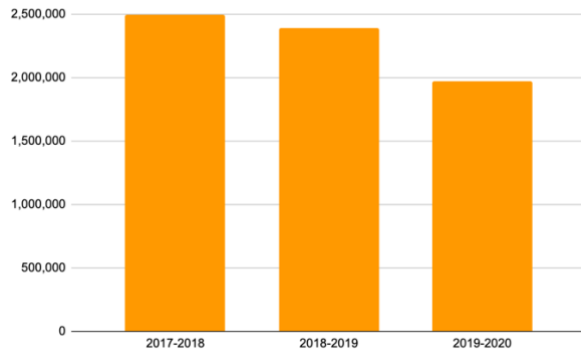


ROM

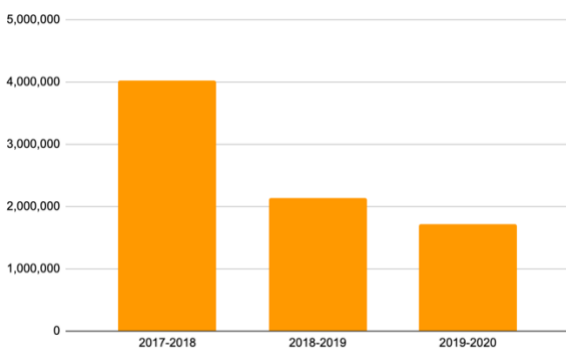
3. Revenue (Private gifts and/or donations) (\$)



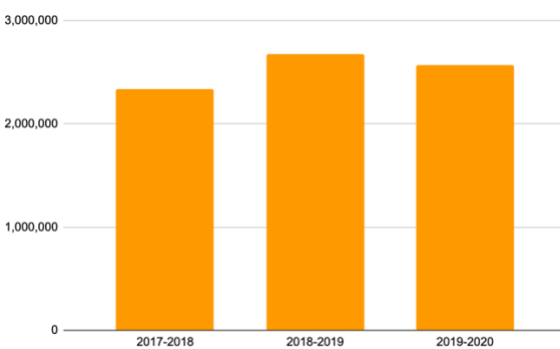
AGO¹⁸



GM¹⁹



HHF²⁰



MOCA²¹

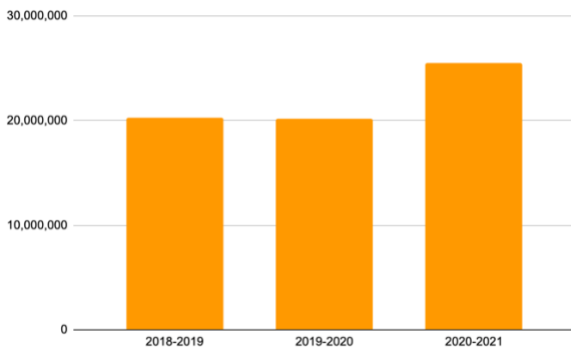
¹⁷ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

¹⁸ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

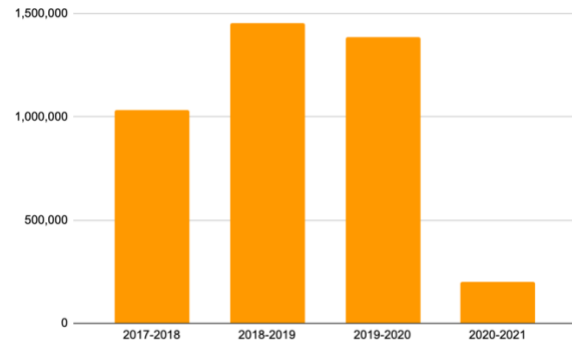
¹⁹ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

²⁰ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

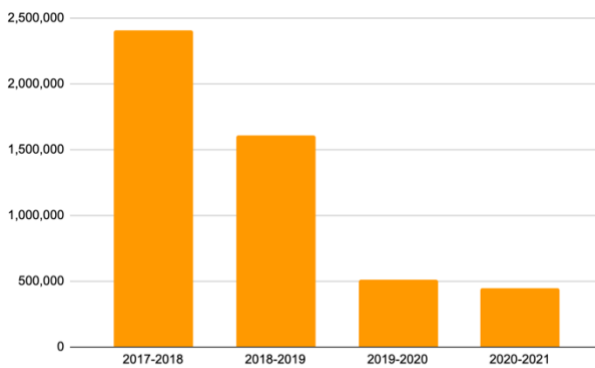
²¹ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.



OSC²²

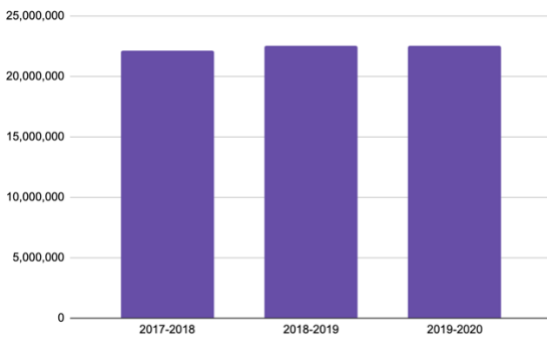


PP

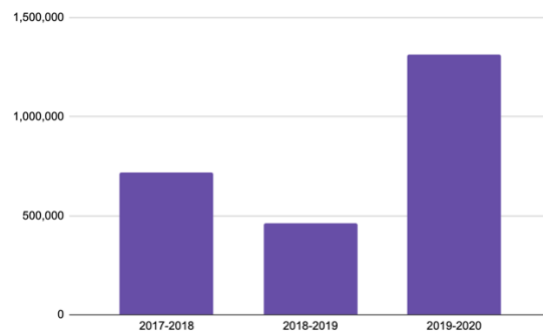


ROM

4. Revenue (Grants) (\$)



AGO²³

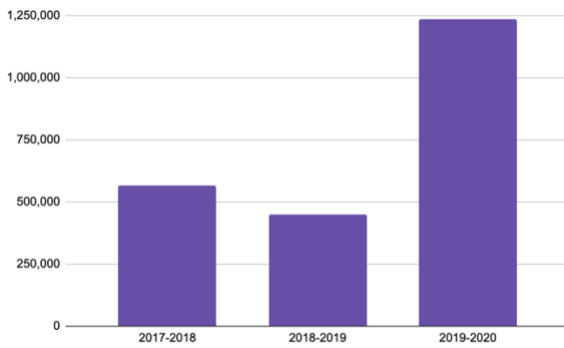


GM²⁴

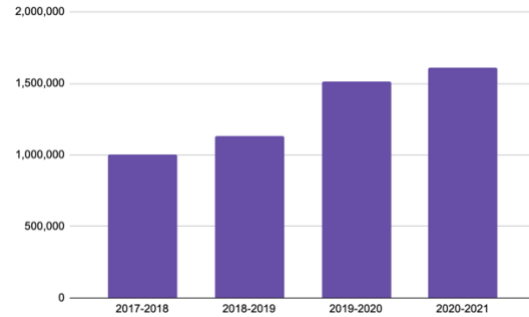
²² Data for 2017-2018 not available.

²³ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

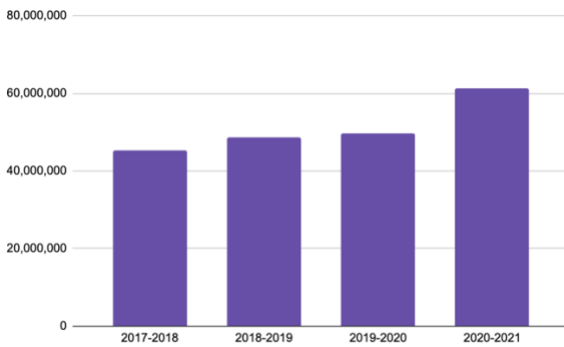
²⁴ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.



MOCA²⁵

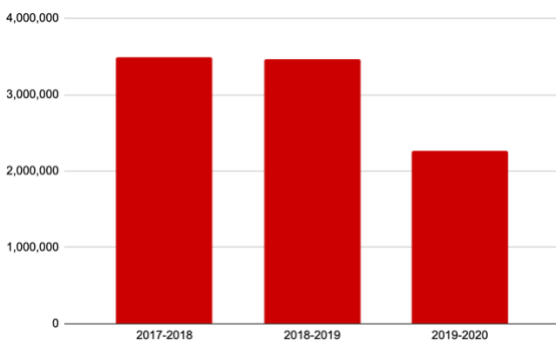


PP

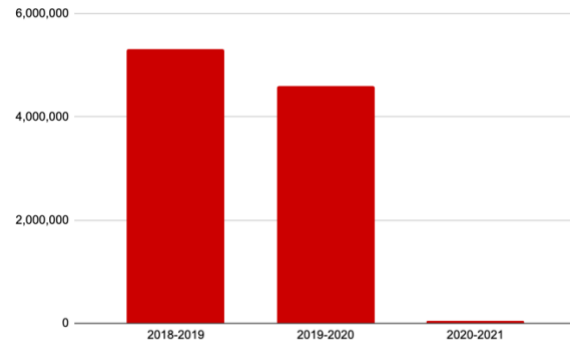


ROM

5. Revenue (Admission fees) (\$)



HHF²⁶

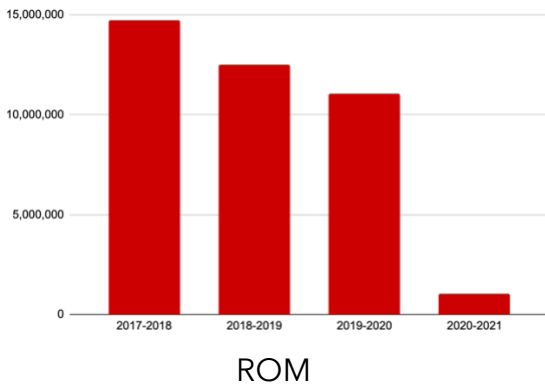


OSC²⁷

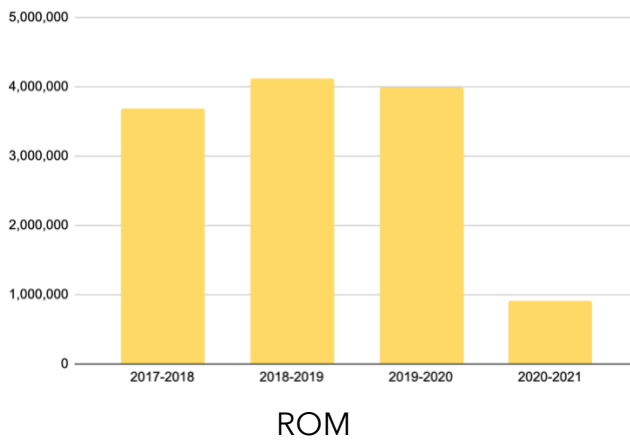
²⁵ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

²⁶ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

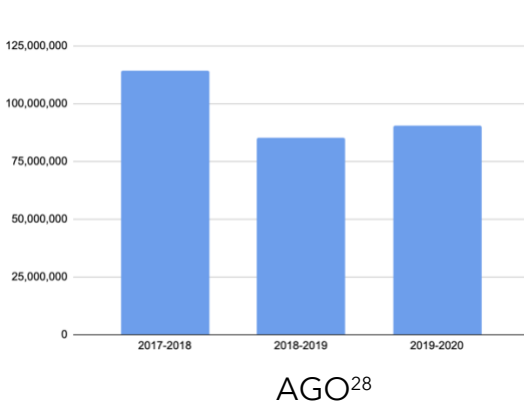
²⁷ Data for 2017-2018 not available.



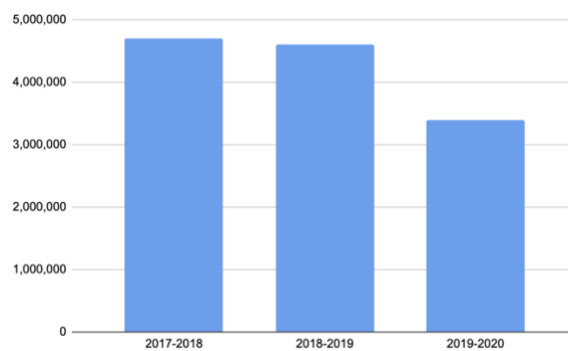
6. Revenue (Membership fees) (\$)



7. Expenses (Total) (\$)



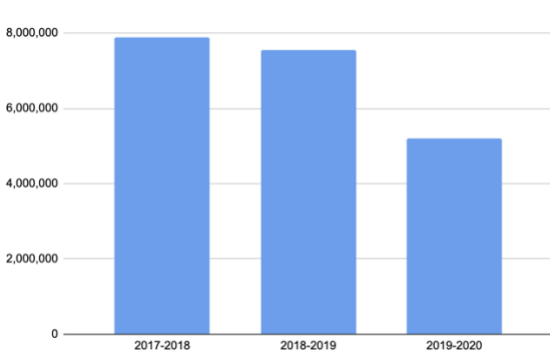
AGO²⁸



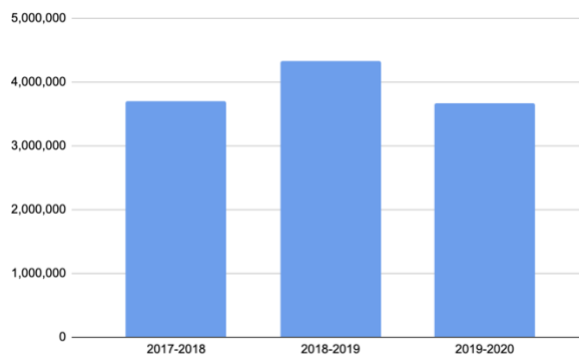
GM²⁹

²⁸ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

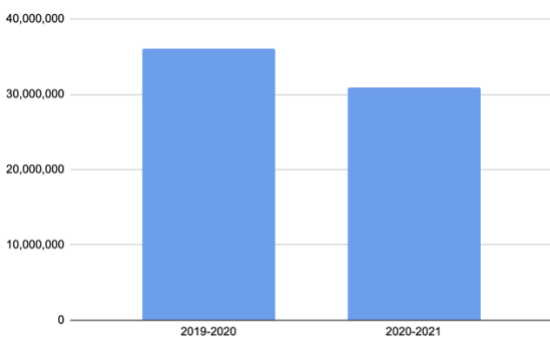
²⁹ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.



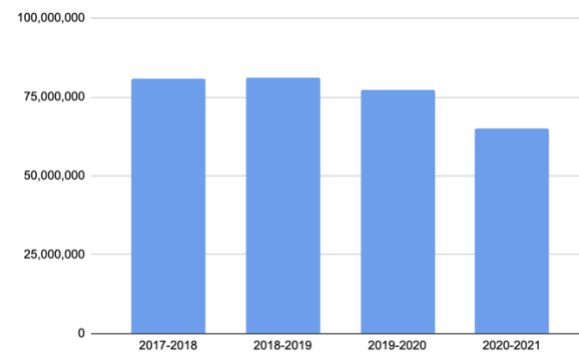
HHF³⁰



MOCA³¹

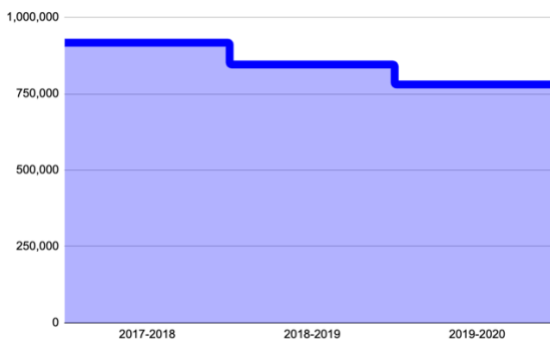


OSC³²

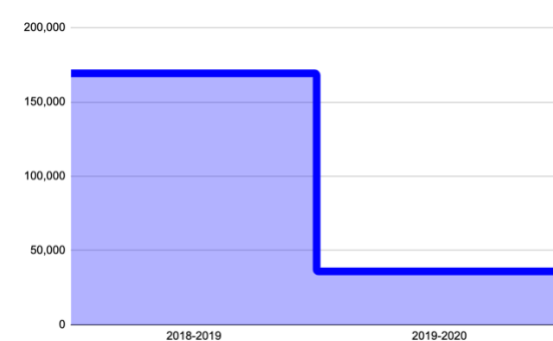


ROM

8. Visitors (Total, individual, on site)



AGO³³



AKM³⁴

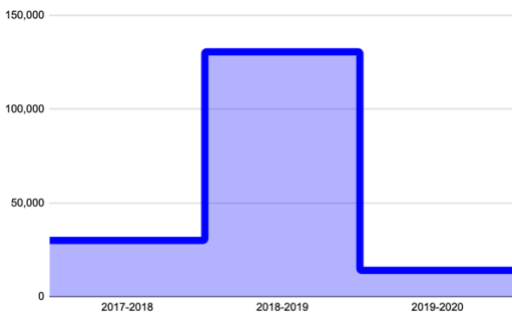
³⁰ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

³¹ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

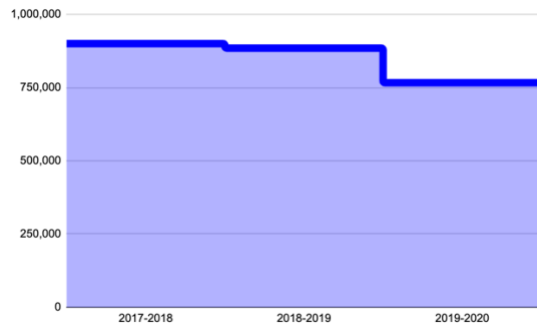
³² Data for 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 not available.

³³ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

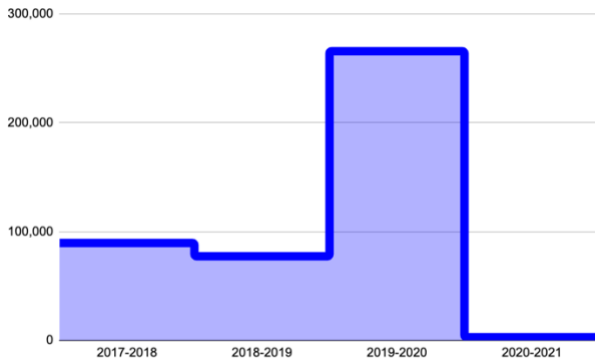
³⁴ Data for 2017-2018 and 2020-2021 not available.



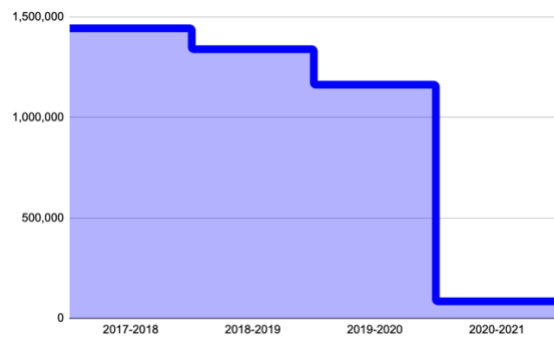
MOCA³⁵



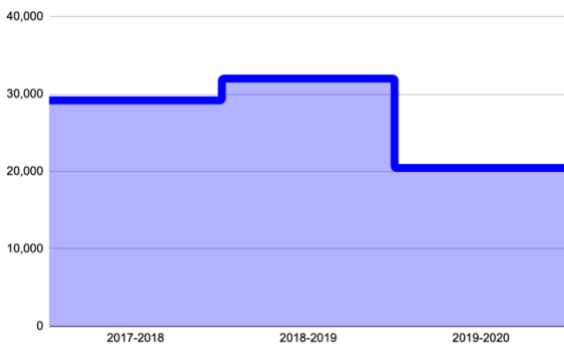
OSC³⁶



PP



ROM



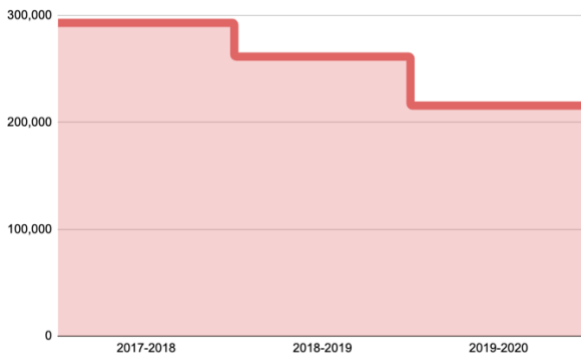
TM³⁷

³⁵ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available. Note that MOCA first opened to the public on September 22, 2018, hence the low on-site visitor numbers for the 2017-2018 year.

³⁶ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

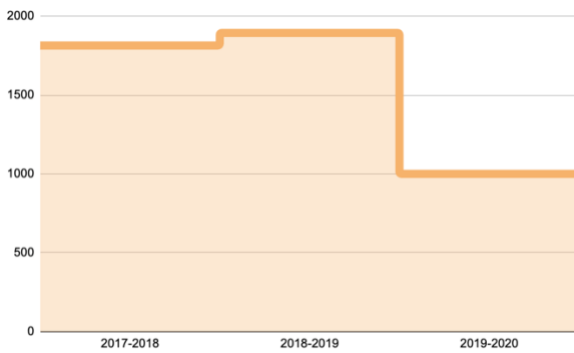
³⁷ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

9. Visitors (Members, individual, on site)

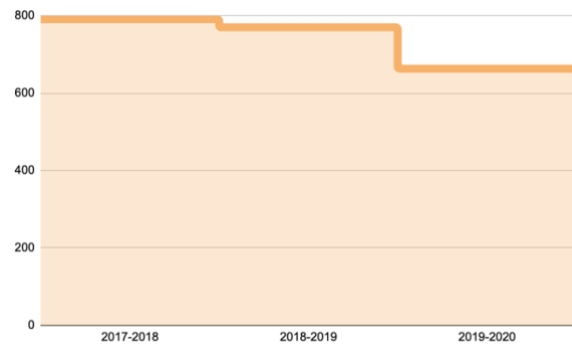


ROM³⁸

10. Members (Total number of individuals subscribed)

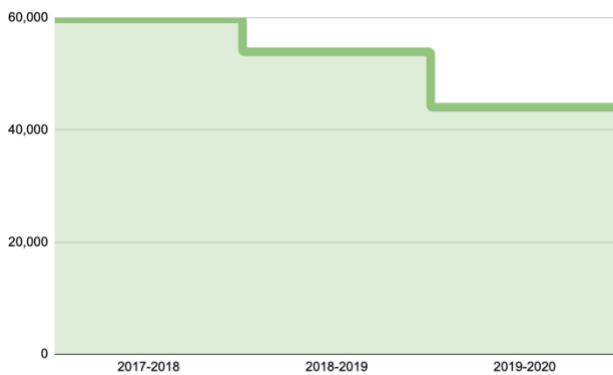


MOCA³⁹

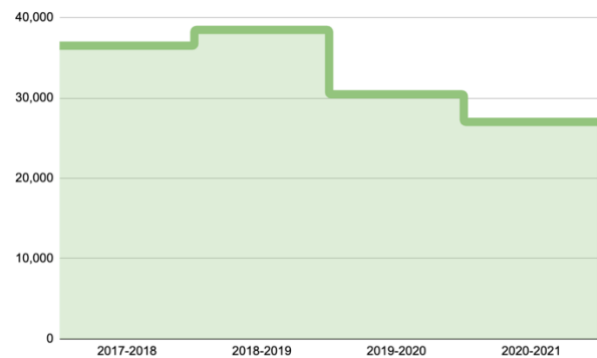


TM⁴⁰

11. Members (Total number of households subscribed)



AGO⁴¹



ROM

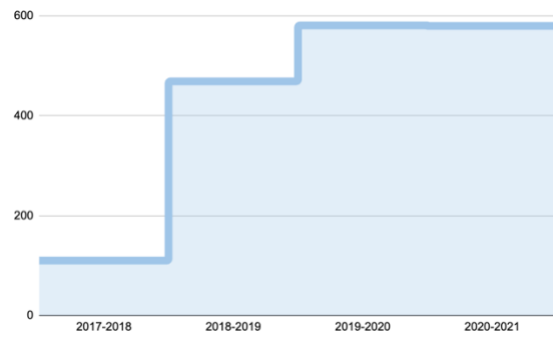
³⁸ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

³⁹ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

⁴⁰ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

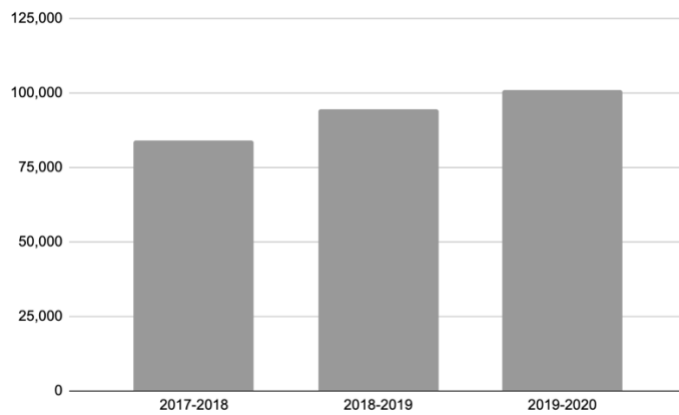
⁴¹ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

12. Members (Individuals, newly subscribed)

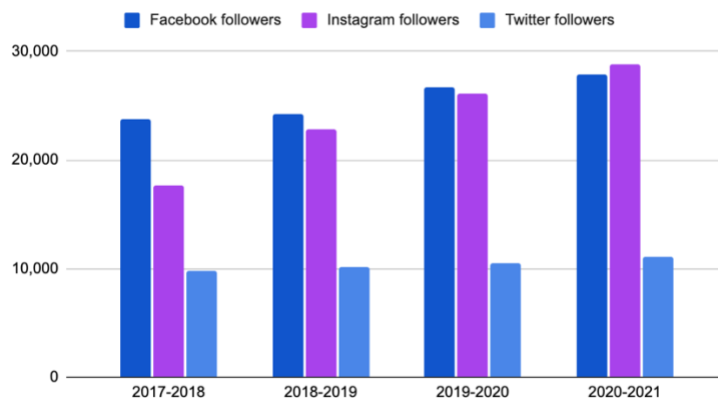


PP

13. Social media following (Total number of followers)

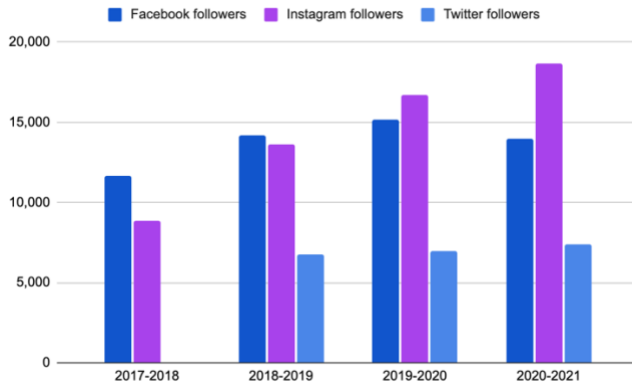


OSC⁴²



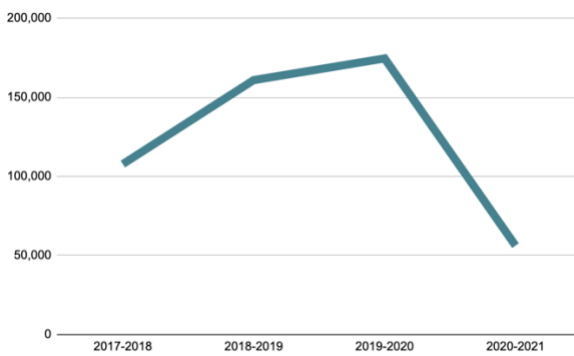
PP

⁴² Data for 2020-2021 not yet available. Numbers here are total followers across three social media channels: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter.

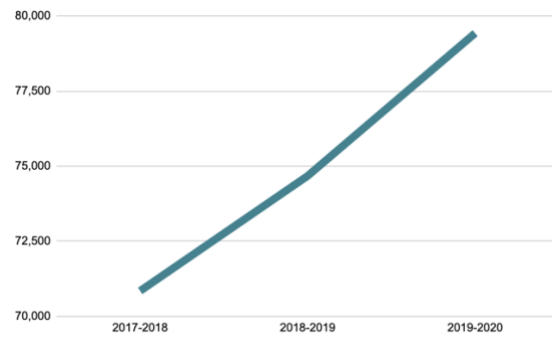


TM

14. Website visits (Total, individuals)

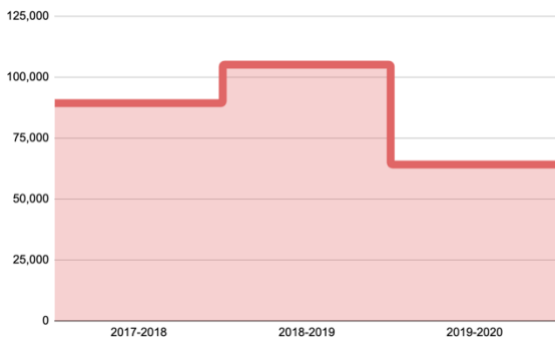


PP

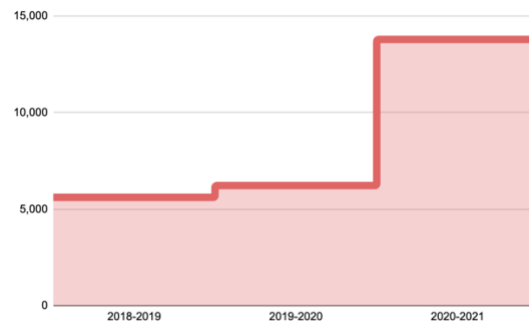


TM⁴³

15. Educational programming participants (Total, individuals, on site)



AGO⁴⁴



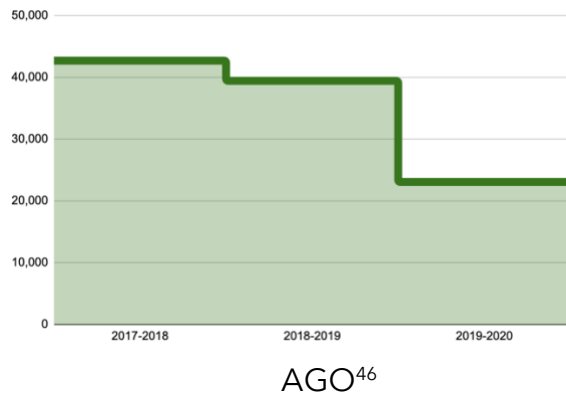
PP⁴⁵

⁴³ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

⁴⁴ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

⁴⁵ Data for 2017-2018 not available.

16. School group visits (Total, individuals, on site)



⁴⁶ Data for 2020-2021 not yet available.

Major Findings

1. Losses of revenue – particularly the self-generated revenue on which many museums heavily rely – have been slightly more manageable for institutions who historically count on (or were able to call upon new injections of) government funding and donations, but near catastrophic for smaller museums who lack substantial financial pull:

The financial strain on museums resulting from the pandemic is apparent from both the data and the commentary in annual reports. A mere glance at the charts for the categories of non-grant revenue ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [5](#), and [6](#)), above, makes this apparent. Long periods of closure have obviously had a tremendous impact on revenue – especially self-generated revenue derived from paid visitor attendance, sales of exhibition and event tickets, shop sales and merchandising, property rentals, and in-person educational programming, among other forms of financial support on which many museums rely.⁴⁷ In some cases these losses also included forced refunds to customers with tickets for events or who had paid deposits in advance for programming that was subsequently cancelled.⁴⁸ The Ontario Museum Association's "COVID-19 Impact Survey" (conducted between March 20 and April 1, 2020) revealed that 74% of the institutions who responded "have less than 3 months of reserve funds" and 63% are "losing ALL revenue for April 2020."⁴⁹

Periods of closure and restricted entry have been harmful. Museums first closed for two weeks before the end of the fiscal year of 2020 (in mid-March 2020), followed by successive – and unpredictable – periods of closure up to the time of writing. The resulting financial upheaval was apparent even at the end of 2020: the AGO, for example, reported in its 2019-2020 Annual Report "an operating deficit of \$2 million due primarily to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic."⁵⁰ The report notes further that "the Gallery [began] to see lower attendance and related revenue categories in the weeks prior to the closure on March 13, 2020, and experienced a sudden and significant impact on most revenue sources while labour and other operating obligations continued through to March 31, 2020."⁵¹ Visitor numbers were

⁴⁷ As noted in the Royal Ontario Museum's Annual Report, 2020-2021, p. 33, "Closing the [ROM] for two extended periods has had a significant impact on all our sources of self-generated or earned revenue, including ticket sales, membership, programs, and paid client events."

⁴⁸ The Ontario Science Centre notes in its Annual Report, 2019-2020, p. 31, that "[c]ash deposits of \$295,000 received from the Centre's Ancillary Operations have been refunded to customers subsequent to March 31, 2020."

⁴⁹ Ontario Museum Association (OMA) COVID-19 Impact Survey, responses, n.d., n.p. Note that only 6% of the survey respondents are museums located in Metropolitan Toronto.

⁵⁰ AGO. Year in Review, 2019-2020, n.p. The most recent available financial data for the AGO is from the 2019-2020 report, which covers the period April 1, 2019 to March 31, 2020.

⁵¹ AGO. Year in Review, 2019-2020, n.p.

strong for this year (in-person attendance is registered at 844,406, “including all attendance to the building and special events, and representing the top ten highest attendance year in AGO history”), but this number includes the period of 2019-2020 leading up to the pandemic.⁵² An in-person visitor attendance number for the AGO for 2020-2021 has yet to be released.

The ROM’s summary of its finances in its 2020-2021 annual report gives a clearer picture of the longer-term financial impact on museums over the first full year of the pandemic. Closure for two extended periods of almost twelve months in total had a profound impact on revenues: “Self-generated revenue – ordinarily generated from admission and membership fees, events, programming and concessions – was just \$3.4M, an astonishing 88% lower than \$27.7M the previous year.”⁵³ The museum was forced to rely on over \$56 million in provincial grants, federal emergency funds, and a highly successful fundraising campaign. But even with this injection of support, “total revenue fell to \$64.7M, down \$10.8M from the previous year.”⁵⁴

The Ontario Science Centre’s (OSC) summary of their financial performance in 2019-2020 reflects losses on account of pandemic: the centre “welcomed 766,487 visitors” and earned total revenues of \$36.3M compared to \$37.8M in the previous year, representing a decrease of 4% due to lower than anticipated admissions, education sector unrest and closure of the Centre [on March 14, 2020].⁵⁵ The OSC is a good example of an institution with ample government financial backing already in place: historically, the province of Ontario has provided the institution with approximately 53% of its revenue, the remainder generated by its business centres to fund its operations and activities (including funds from general admission, parking, and ancillary operations). The OSC lost \$1.2 million in 2019-2020, compared to a net profit of \$1 million the year prior.⁵⁶ This loss was substantially higher in 2020-2021: a total of \$3.5 million.⁵⁷

Financial giants like the ROM who rely on self-generated income from things like in-person visitation, ticketing, shop purchases, and facility rental may have the means to counter these losses in ways that smaller – and newer – institutions with the same dependencies do not. MOCA, for example, which opened only in late September 2018, had barely established its footing before the pandemic began. The dramatic rise and fall of their visitor numbers between 2018-2019 and 2019-2020

⁵² *Ibid.*, n.p.

⁵³ Royal Ontario Museum Annual Report, 2020-2021, p. 30.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵⁵ Ontario Science Centre Annual Report, 2019-2020, pp. 12, 31.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵⁷ Ontario Science Centre Financial Statement, end of March 2021, n.p.

(see the chart under category [8](#), above) is echoed by a similarly worrying drop in the museum's self-generated revenue over the same period (see the chart under category [2](#), above). These losses were partly due to the institution's inability to rely on facility rental income, a key category of the museum's revenue as identified in their annual reports.⁵⁸ The Textile Museum (TM) – a “boutique” museum with far less financial means and visitor numbers, and a regular operational week of only 4 days – reported a substantial loss of \$200,000 for 2019-2020.⁵⁹ Their losses for 2020-2021 have yet to be reported, but in view of the fact that the museum lacks the means (in funds and personnel) to stay open, and has remained closed for most of the latter year, that amount will likely be higher.⁶⁰

There are also both hidden and new types of costs that museums are now required to account for as part of the new financial landscape. Insurance costs, for example, are an “urgent crisis” for museums: as noted by the authors of the “COVID-19: Impacts and Opportunities” report, prepared for the City of Toronto in September 2020, “[i]nsurers are currently unwilling to insure against pandemics or further outbreaks of COVID-19 associated with the worksite. This causes an untenable risk for producers, venue owners, employers and others, and could threaten any gains made to access to space and employment. The City should advocate with other orders of government to alleviate this structural issue that could paralyze cultural industries.”⁶¹ Costs related to compliance with public health protocols, too, have been a concern from the onset of the pandemic, bloating museum budgets beyond the confines of their usual allowances.⁶²

2. The requirement for some museums to cut expenditures in other areas of operation, in order to survive, has had a negative impact on employees and volunteers as much as museums:

Also apparent from the annual reports and other forms of contextual evidence is the impact the pandemic has had on various dimensions of the museum workforce, including full- and part-time employees, volunteers, and new recruitment. While some opportunities have emerged for new types of employment or volunteerism (for example, in the field of digital and IT specialisms that can cater to the increased

⁵⁸ See, for example, MOCA Annual Report 2020, p. 21.

⁵⁹ Textile Museum of Canada, Annual Report 2019-2020, p. 11.

⁶⁰ Textile Museum of Canada, Annual Report 2020-2021, p. 5, where the authors note periods of closure from March 13 through to August 2020, and November 23, 2020, through to September 15, 2021.

⁶¹ Mowat and Rafi, “COVID-19: Impacts and Opportunities,” prepared for the City of Toronto, September 2020, p. 206.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 206.

demand for pivoting content and programming online), there have been layoffs, substantial cutbacks to hours, suspensions of volunteer programs, and a halt placed on new hires.

The ROM's financial requirement to take "drastic steps to limit expenditures," for example, included placing many staff members on emergency leave, reducing staff working hours, and requiring volunteers to work from home: "70% of staff were placed on declared emergency leave in April [2020] with most remaining staff asked to work 80% of hours for 80% pay. After the ROM re-opened in July, most full-time staff were gradually returned to work over the fall, but most part-time staff have not been recalled owing to continuing health restrictions and public closure."⁶³ The ROM (some of whose staff are unionized) made an effort in 2019-2020 to safeguard existing employee salaries and benefits, reducing expenses in other areas instead.⁶⁴ While some institutions had the funding in place to sustain new hires and appointment, even moving into the more challenging 2020-2021 year (the ROM recruited at least seven high-level employees over the 2020-2021 year⁶⁵), others were required to significantly limit or freeze the hiring of new staff. The much smaller Textile Museum of Canada, for example, found the lengthy periods of closure to make for an unpredictable "immediate and future financial situation [. . .]. Regrettably, we were forced to lay off several of our staff, halt our volunteer program and put much of our ambitious planning on hold."⁶⁶

Volunteerism seems to have suffered as much as employment. The ROM noted in its 2020-2021 report that "[i]n 2020-21 [. . .] most of the volunteers' in-person interactions with visitors were placed on hold along with most community programs".⁶⁷ Added to this are the wider labour disruptions taking place in the education sector at large, where numbers of new hires or availability of educational staff to take part in joint initiatives with museum partners have also been impacted by the government's social distancing and closure mandates.⁶⁸ Seasonal and other forms of temporary hiring have also been impacted: the Ontario Museum Association's "COVID-19 Impact Survey" (conducted between March 20 and April 1, 2020) revealed that 68% of the institutions who responded have "delayed or cancelled

⁶³ Royal Ontario Museum Annual Report, 2020-2021, p. 33.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30: "Expenses were reduced to \$65.1M, a drop of \$16.3M from \$81.4M the previous year. Salaries and benefits continued to be the largest expense at \$30.9M, down from \$38.9M the previous year. Almost every other area of operating expenses was reduced compared to the previous year, in most cases significantly."

⁶⁵ Royal Ontario Museum Annual Report, 2020-2021, p. 30.

⁶⁶ Textile Museum of Canada, Annual Report 2020-2021, p. 5.

⁶⁷ Royal Ontario Museum Annual Report, 2020-2021, p. 31.

⁶⁸ Gallagher-Mackay et al., "COVID-19 and Education Disruption in Ontario: Emerging Evidence on Impacts" (June 4, 2021), n.p. On the impact of labour disruptions in education on museums, see also the Ontario Science Centre Annual Report, 2019-2020, p. 11.

seasonal hiring.” The survey concluded that “Museums need [. . .] support for [temporary] program workers.”⁶⁹

3. Continued and increased government funding (which comprises a substantial portion of museum revenue for the period covered by the pandemic, as shown by the data) will be essential to helping museums survive the pandemic:

While some institutions have been lucky enough to receive increased or sustained donor support and revenue from member subscription retention or new subscriptions, many have seen losses in these areas. Government funding – in the form of both long-standing and emergency funds – has been integral to most of Toronto’s museums over the course of the pandemic, particularly to offset the losses from self-generated revenue. As noted by the authors of the 2020 “COVID-19: Impacts and Opportunities” report, while museum revenue “typically consists of 33% of government funding [. . .] next year [2021] it is anticipated to be 60% government funding as ticket and merchandise revenues contract. There is no certainty regarding when [self-generated] revenue may return.”⁷⁰

The cancellation of fundraising events threatened to put a dent in important opportunities for soliciting donor funding, although some museums have managed to uphold and even exceed both donation and membership targets. The Gardiner Museum, for example, reported at the end of 2020 that the cancellation of major fundraising events due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic was countered by a significant retention of memberships (particularly at the highest levels of membership), as well as significant support for donors.⁷¹ The Gardiner also received an injection of emergency funding from major corporate and non-profit donors.⁷²

Many museums have received substantial financial support in the form of government grants. In 2020-2021, for example, the ROM received a vital early payment of an Ontario Provincial operating grant of \$27.3 million, “which ensured cash flow as other revenues disappeared,” and a provincial stabilization grant of \$10.4 million, “which was instrumental in reducing the financial impact of the pandemic.”⁷³ The ROM’s grant and donation portfolio during the most challenging year thus far (2020-2021), in fact, has been impressive: the museum also received

⁶⁹ Ontario Museum Association (OMA) COVID-19 Impact Survey, responses, n.d., n.p. Note that only 6% of the survey respondents are museums located in Metropolitan Toronto.

⁷⁰ Mowat and Rafi, “COVID-19: Impacts and Opportunities,” prepared for the City of Toronto (September 2020), p. 200.

⁷¹ The Gardiner Museum 2020 Annual Report, p. 4.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁷³ Royal Ontario Museum Annual Report, 2020-2021, pp. 2, 30

“\$4.8M in grants for critical capital and rehabilitation projects,” a number of Federal Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy grants of \$6.9 million in total, and continued and substantial support from the ROM Foundation (“despite a challenging fundraising environment”) in the form of \$6.8 million in grants to support programming, research and capital project activities.⁷⁴ Not all of Toronto’s museums have been so fortunate. The data (see the charts under category 4, above) clearly shows the substantial portion of government funding received by some of the slightly smaller of the city’s institutions in both 2019-2020 and 2020-2021, particularly the Gardiner Museum and MOCA.

The pandemic has also thrown into sharper relief the disparities in quantities of funding received across Ontario’s museums – an issue that was already a problem in the sector in years prior.⁷⁵ This, combined with the revelations of annual and financial reports over the past two years, has prompted the Ontario Museum Association to propose a set of specific recommendations for inclusion in Ontario’s 2022 Budget, including an increased level of government funding for smaller community museums.⁷⁶

4. Significant drops in on-site visitor attendance due to museum closures and restrictions to permitted numbers have had a profoundly damaging impact on museums, particularly those whose operations have been constructed around this form of engagement and/or rely on it for their survival:

Government mandated museum closures due to the pandemic drastically reduced in-person visitor numbers and made in-person experiences and interactions impossible. The City of Toronto’s Economic Development and Culture (EDC) Report on the pandemic’s impact (written in December 2020) noted that “[m]any of EDC’s programs and services were paused or modified during the first and second COVID waves. To comply with public health measures, in-person programming was cancelled, including the closure of City-run museums and cultural centres. Other services such, as film permitting, were delivered virtually.”⁷⁷ Public-facing museum and heritage services in Toronto were “[t]emporarily suspended [. . .] during lockdowns (including public programs, curriculum-based education programs, third party rentals, special events, and permits).” Tour programing was “reimagined” and

⁷⁴ Royal Ontario Museum Annual Report, 2020-2021, p. 30.

⁷⁵ Ontario Museum Association (OMA), “Exhibiting Resilience: Empowering Ontario’s community museums for strategic recovery” (October 2020), p. 10.

⁷⁶ See the discussion under Conclusion and Preliminary Recommendations, below.

⁷⁷ Williams et al., “Economic Development and Culture: Impacts of 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic Response on Current & Forecasted Service Levels, City of Toronto,” December 7, 2020, p. 10.

visitor experience “redesigned” to align with public health guidelines and site capacity requirements. Education and volunteering [were] pivoted online.⁷⁸

Closures and periods of restricted access took place throughout 2020 and 2021 and are still ongoing. In response to government guidelines and public health directives, the AGO, for instance, closed its doors to the public on March 13, 2020, reopening in stages, on July 2, 2020 (to members and Annual Pass holders) and July 23, 2020.⁷⁹ All Ontario museums were closed by 24 March, 2020.⁸⁰ The ROM closed from March 14 until July 10, 2020, in response to the same requirements and (as the museum puts it in its 2020-2021 annual report) “to prioritize slowing down the spread of the pandemic, and to ensure the safety of our staff while safeguarding our facility and collections.”⁸¹ After the July 2020 reopening, most institutions had to restrict entry significantly, either by reducing allowed numbers or cutting back on open days. This was done to help curb the pandemic’s spread but also to cut costs and address revenue shortfalls resulting from a significantly reduced number of returning visitors even after doors had reopened. The ROM, for example, writes in its 2020-2021 report, “As a further mitigation to manage costs, the ROM was only open five days a week (Wednesday to Sunday) after the July re-opening. Our July 2021 reopening plan is to continue to be open just 5 days a week until attendance warrants otherwise.”⁸² A second closure took place in November of 2020, continuing through to July 2021. In 2022, museums were once again required to close in early January: the AKM, for example, closed its doors to the public on January 5. These periods of closure have made for a chaotic and unpredictable situation, particularly for museums that rely on in-person interaction as part of their institutional mandate, structure, or program delivery. A lack of people on the ground has also meant reductions in valuable revenue from hands-on and in-person programming.

The ROM paints a vivid picture of the situation and its impact on museums who rely on foot traffic not only for the visitors themselves but for the additional supports they provide: “[t]he impact of these necessary health measures was instant and devastating. Deprived of our lifeblood, which is the visiting public, attendance dropped to record lows (after years of record-setting attendance reaching 1.3 million people), self-generated revenues evaporated, philanthropy temporarily slowed, and museum activities were essentially reduced to what could be accomplished from the safety of one’s home, with the notable exception of security, facilities and collections

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁷⁹ AGO. Year in Review, 2019-2020, n.p.

⁸⁰ Ontario Museum Association (OMA) COVID-19 Impact Survey, responses, n.p.

⁸¹ Royal Ontario Museum Annual Report, 2020-2021, p. 2.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

management staff, who ensured the safeguarding of the ROM and its holdings.”⁸³ The ROM’s total visitor attendance number for 2020-2021 “was a disappointing 84,487, down 93% from 1,163,150 the previous fiscal year as a consequence of COVID-19 and being closed for more than seven months of the year. During the July through November period, when we were permitted to open, attendance averaged about 15% compared to the previous year, peaking in September at about 35%. During these few months, hands-on galleries remained closed due to government health and safety restrictions, further reducing attendance.”⁸⁴ The significant drop in in-person visitors to the AKM and the Textile Museum during the 2019-2020 year, and to the ROM and The Power Plant in 2020-2021, is apparent from a mere glance at the charts under category [8](#), above.

An analysis of the data concerning visitor numbers (for which on-site numbers took a sharp nosedive, as is clear from the charts under category [8](#), above) should nonetheless take into consideration the significant increase in online visitors and social media engagement. This is meaningful in terms of overall engagement on the part of public audiences, and – for institutions who were able to successfully or substantially pivot programming online – made for both fruitful new forms of visitation, a greater diversity of visitors, and even an increase in overall numbers. But online successes are counterweighed by the fact that in-person visits remain integral to both museums and visitors in various ways.

School visits are particularly important in this respect – both financially and in terms of institutional purpose – both to museums and to the boards of education throughout the region: the vital experience of hands-on, interactive types of learning and physical engagement with objects or materials in the form of school trips are in some cases a requirement of the curriculum for children and teens attending schools in the Greater Toronto Area.⁸⁵ The Ontario Science Centre, who has historically relied heavily on in-person attendance in the form of public visitors and school visits, and has a number of spaces dedicated expressly to hands-on interactive experiences, notes in its annual report for 2019-2020 that “[a]ttendance was 17% behind target and 13% behind last year primarily due to the closure of the Centre on March 14, 2020 [. . .] and decreased school admissions due to the labour disruption in the education sector.”⁸⁶ The OSC is not the only museum to have constructed an

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁸⁵ For example, the arts curriculum for children and teens in the Halton Board of Education, which takes its guidance from the regulations of the Ontario Ministry of Education: see <https://www.hdsb.ca/learning-and-resources/Pages/Arts-Programs.aspx>; <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/arts.html>; <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/arts.html>).

⁸⁶ Ontario Science Centre Annual Report, 2019-2020, p. 10.

institutional identity, spaces, or programming around in-person interaction: the Gardiner Museum, for example, whose educational programming is centred on a series of sculpture workshops, depends on in-person attendance. In 2020 the museum had to get creative, initiating a new online version of its clay workshop series that included delivery of materials to learners' doorsteps.⁸⁷

A comprehensive analysis of changes in types and numbers of visitor engagements, which takes into consideration not only in-person or on-site visitors but also quantifiable participation in online events and social media engagements, was not possible to produce for the present report on account of inconsistencies and deficiencies in the reporting on these variables across the museums in question. A future report will ideally gather sufficient data to address each of these categories.

5. The pandemic alone may not be the only cause of a decline in visitor numbers: its effects may have been compounded by other coincident (and in some cases, related) factors:

While visitor numbers sharply declined due to the pandemic, other factors – such as a lack of exhibitions or events that attract larger or more diverse audiences, the level of overall public interest in a specific institution, and job actions or other events that impact visitor access – may also have contributed to a decline in numbers.

The Auditor General of Ontario's "Value-for-Money Audit" of the AGO (compiled in December 2020) revealed that visitor attendance numbers were in decline at that institution even prior to the pandemic: "Despite admission incentives, visits to the AGO, admission revenues and membership sales declined. We found that in 2019/20, despite introducing a free annual pass for those 25 years of age and under, and a discounted annual pass for those over 25 years of age, the AGO's attendance to tour the gallery declined by 11% from about 833,000 in 2018/19 to about 743,000 in 2019/20. The AGO's management attributed the decline in attendance to exhibitions that did not meet their attendance targets."⁸⁸ The audit records total visitor attendance numbers at the AGO for 2016 through 2020 as follows: 2016-17 (965,589); 2017-18 (917,261); 2018-19 (845,677); 2019-20 (780,228).⁸⁹ In response to the "Value-for-Money Audit" of December 2020, the AGO

⁸⁷ The Gardiner Museum 2020 Annual Report, pp. 6, 11.

⁸⁸ Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, "Value-for-Money Audit. Museums and Galleries" (December 2020), p. 19. Numbers relate to the year of April 1 through March 31.

⁸⁹ The auditors note further: "We analyzed data from the AGO and found that in the last five years, 60% of all its exhibitions for which it charges a separate admission fee had not met their attendance targets. Attendance ranged from between 56% and 90% of the total targeted attendance. Although AGO indicated it informally monitored and analyzed attendance, it did not document these analyses and

responded that its “attendance and budget fluctuates from year to year, largely depending on the exhibition and programs schedule. It is important to note that COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on attendance and revenue streams.”⁹⁰

In connection with visitor attendance at the ROM, the same audit noted that although “[o]verall attendance at the ROM increased by 44% from about 808,000 visitors in 2010/11 to 1,163,000 visitors in 2019/20 [. . .] since 2017/18, attendance has been declining, which ROM management attributes to teacher job actions in 2019/20 and less-than-expected attendance for the temporary exhibitions.”⁹¹ In its assessment of the ROM, the audit suggested a correlation between a pattern of decreasing memberships (detectable in numbers from 2017 onward, exacerbated by the pandemic but also in evidence prior to that event) and an exhibition strategy that insufficiently attracts new visitors and memberships – a factor that the ROM itself acknowledges as one of the failings of its exhibitions.⁹²

6. The online pivot has created various profitable opportunities for museums and their visitors, both institutionally and financially. But these may not be enough to counteract the losses, and the cost-benefit differential varies dramatically from institution to institution. It may also not prove to be beneficial for every type of audience:

Many museums have had success in pivoting their programming online. The annual reports for 2020-2021 make abundantly clear the desire on the part of most institutions to emphasize this fact, perhaps at the expense of providing a true and complete picture of the reality. Boasting about substantial numbers of on-site visitors has largely been replaced by boldly touting social media follows and successes in online participation in exhibitions and educational programs. To be sure, there have been both successes and the emergence of new and valuable opportunities. Social media engagements increased, either continuing from earlier annual trends or dramatically expanding, pointing up the significant value of social media platforms for conducting museum business. Museums formerly limited to Toronto visitors and tourists are now able to engage an international audience. New channels for visitor attendance and engagement, together with new modes of collection display, have emerged, including virtual exhibitions, e-learning activities, and social media events.

could not provide them to us for review. Exhibition attendance is important, as the AGO attributes changes in overall visits to its galleries.” Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, “Value-for-Money Audit. Museums and Galleries” (December 2020), pp. 11, 19. Numbers relate to the year of April 1 through March 31.

⁹⁰ Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, “Value-for-Money Audit. Museums and Galleries” (December 2020), p. 20.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 75.

But there are also some significant shortcomings, both short- and long-term, that need to be acknowledged.

Undeniably, there are unprecedented opportunities for new categories of employment in online and web applications within the sector. The increase in the variety of ways that museums can engage with visitors, providing new forms of access and drawing in a more diverse audience, represent a particularly important gain. For example, after closing in March 2020 the Gardiner Museum shifted many of its activities, initiatives, and communications online – including digital exhibitions, online artist talks, virtual field trips, social media engagement, and blog posts – with success that showed “how meaningful digital engagement can increase our accessibility and reach, something we will continue to prioritize beyond the pandemic.”⁹³ The circumstances of the pandemic prompted the Gardiner to “be creative and find new ways to serve our communities beyond the Museum walls. The result was greater accessibility and diversity in how we engage with our publics. [. . .] The challenges we faced as a result of the pandemic encouraged us to work together creatively and to imagine alternative methods for sharing our collections, exhibitions, classes, and programs with both new and established audiences. We will continue to experiment with and leverage digital platforms to increase accessibility.”⁹⁴ Moving educational programming (or expanding its scope) online enabled the Gardiner to reach “a wider, more diverse audience,”⁹⁵ and new online and hybrid initiatives captured first-time visitors and educational programming participants.⁹⁶ The pandemic also provided new opportunities for learning and skills acquisition for museum professionals themselves.⁹⁷ And some online events permitted a much larger number of visitors to engage than an on-site equivalent would have: the Gardiner’s 3 Works online artists’ talks series, a course in 10 installments, “attracted more than 7,500 views, a considerably larger audience than we would have been able to accommodate on site.”⁹⁸

Virtual exhibitions greatly expanded audience and engagement numbers at the Aga Khan Museum, who also pivoted many of its activities online, with a #MuseumWithoutWalls initiative that “grew into a virtual sanctuary of art, performances, and learning, reaching more than 5 million people worldwide.”⁹⁹ The AKM’s experience shows the importance of – and need for – sufficient levels of

⁹³ The Gardiner Museum 2020 Annual Report, p. 3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 6.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁹⁹ Aga Khan Museum. 2020: A Year in Review, p. 1.

funding to make the online pivot a success: the museum solicited and redirected funds from major donors toward expanding their online platform for educational programming, with “synchronous experiences by unveiling new tours, live discussions, teacher resources, and curriculum-linked expansion activities that connect cultures through art.”¹⁰⁰ The ROM, too, equally prompted to “dramatically [expand] our digital programs to maintain and deepen our audience engagement,” launched the ROM at Home platform, provided a series of oversubscribed Virtual Field Trips (free to Ontario schools), and made a range of other types of online programming available to people across Ontario and around the world.¹⁰¹ In order to achieve these ambitions, however, money was (and will continue to be) vital: in its 2020-2021 annual report, the ROM outlined a new strategic objective in the form of a detailed and comprehensive Digital Strategy, which includes significantly expanding and deploying its current online software provisions, developing a new corporate intranet, creating substantial new digital content related to exhibitions and collections that will make that content available to visitors, making significant upgrades to visitor-facing touchpoints in the museum space, and exploring new platforms to enhance visitor opportunities and experiences.¹⁰² The ROM’s ambitions make clear the potentially high financial cost of moving museums online, and the challenges faced by smaller, less moneyed institutions eager to keep up.

The pandemic was also regarded by many institutions as a useful opportunity to rethink their diversity and inclusion initiatives – to develop relationships with communities and “reenvision themselves as more access-driven, anti-racist, and decolonial,” introducing new perspectives, collaborations, and initiatives.¹⁰³ The Power Plant, for example, saw the online pivot as a prime opportunity to “develop a suite of thought-provoking digital programs” that would serve existing audiences and capture new ones.¹⁰⁴ Online initiatives attract and make possible a more diverse, international range of visitors – and even a new and more diverse membership. In their 2020-2021 report, the ROM noted the international expansion of their membership base for that year: “In addition to Canada, the ROM Members are [now] in over 30 other countries, including the United States, Russia, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Luxembourg.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁰¹ Royal Ontario Museum Annual Report, 2020-2021, p. 2.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁰³ [Akimbo blog author], “Propositions for a Post-COVID Art World – SFU Galleries,” Akimblog (Akimbo), n.p.

¹⁰⁴ The Power Plant Annual Report, 2020-2021, p. 2.

¹⁰⁵ Royal Ontario Museum Annual Report, 2020-2021, p. 18.

Some institutions were also successful in moving other forms of programming or activity online, such as shop sales: the Textile Museum, for example, reported in 2020-21 that “[w]e were thrilled with our success in also getting the Museum Shop operating digitally with an ever-increasing inventory of items available for sale online.”¹⁰⁶ The Gardiner Museum also pivoted sales online, offering online sale as well as curbside pickup.¹⁰⁷ Pivoting sales of shop merchandise online provided some museums with the chance to turn renewed and amplified attention toward productively revising their e-commerce practices for the longer term.¹⁰⁸

The online pivot was also beneficial to some museum professionals (those who remained employed) in allowing a greater variety of ways to work, including the option of working from home and other more accessibility-friendly types of working. The ROM, for example, “adapted its working practices and invested in hardware and software that enabled staff to work from the safety of their home.”¹⁰⁹ In March 2020, the Ontario Science Centre launched its “virtual science centre” and “transitioned staff to working remotely.”¹¹⁰

Replacing “in-person” with “online” experiences, however, is not an ideal solution in every instance. The drawbacks are educational, financial, cultural, and socio-economic. Online learning, for example, can work for some but not all. There has been a great deal of discussion around the challenges of online learning, both for learners (especially younger ones) and their teachers.¹¹¹ School tours and educational programming, both of which require in-person experiences for learning, may compromise a key condition of educational experience in a purely online iteration. There are also significant financial considerations. The authors of the “COVID-19: Impacts and Opportunities” report of September 2020 note that the sector-wide transition to digital platforms – “critical to retaining engagement with local and international communities” – required substantial funding and expertise, making the procedure a barrier for many institutions. (To be sure, museums who already had a significant online presence and provision in place before the pandemic began, or those who had the financial means to support required expansion, had an unfair head start.) Not only this, digital tools and platforms may prove to be only a “stopgap measure” during periods of closure for museums engaged in decolonization and

¹⁰⁶ Textile Museum of Canada, Annual Report 2020-2021, p. 6.

¹⁰⁷ The Gardiner Museum 2020 Annual Report, p. 14.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁹ Royal Ontario Museum Annual Report, 2020-2021, p. 5.

¹¹⁰ Ontario Science Centre Annual Report, 2019-2020, p. 5.

¹¹¹ See, for example, Harvey, “‘Our brains were not actually designed to work that way’: How online learning harms kids’ well-being and what parents can do to help,” *The Toronto Star* (January 12, 2022), n.p., and Hinton, “Why Teaching Kindergarten Online is So Very, Very Hard,” Online Learning, George Lucas Educational Foundation (October 21, 2020), n.p.

diversity initiatives: without sufficient finances, staff training, and infrastructure to support them properly, these projects cannot achieve their complex goals or adequately explore themes in new ways with new audiences.¹¹² There are additional cultural barriers presented by the online pivot: Indigenous performers, for example, who participate in live performances, view online iterations of those performances as compromising the integrity of the artistic experience and offering artists unfair compensation.¹¹³ Transitioning activities online, which requires substantial technological expertise, also presents barriers for individuals and groups who do not have the training or means to access it, making for an increased alienation of people who are already marginalized, whether socially, culturally, or economically. “COVID-19,” note the same authors cited above, “has extended the digital divide, and this could aggravate social and economic equity issues, particularly for low-income communities and people with disabilities, unless this outcome is addressed.”¹¹⁴

Moving fundraising events online, too, may be detrimental to the process of soliciting donations, a key source of income for museums. While some institutions, like the Gardiner Museum, managed to “capture new audiences and supporters” by moving their fundraising events online in 2020,¹¹⁵ others appear not to have been so successful: in 2020-2021, The Power Plant was required to move its primary annual fundraising event, the Power Ball, online – renaming it “Power Up.”¹¹⁶ Judging from the sharp decrease in quantities of private gifts and donations received that year (evident from the data represented in the chart under category 3, above), it may be the case that virtual fundraising for The Power Plant was less lucrative than an in-person event would have been, given the restrictions (and perhaps overall lack of appeal) that online events present.

The shift to online visitor attendance, too, has the potential (in some respects) to counter deficits in physical attendance, but this varies depending on an institution’s financial health and the degree of its reliance on in-person visitors. The AGO, for example, has historically relied heavily on physical visitor attendance – visitors who come to the gallery in person to tour the permanent collection.¹¹⁷ The ROM also relies

¹¹² Mowat and Rafi, “COVID-19: Impacts and Opportunities,” prepared for the City of Toronto (September 2020), p. 211.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

¹¹⁵ The Gardiner Museum 2020 Annual Report, p. 5.

¹¹⁶ The Power Plant Annual Report, 2020-2021, p. 50.

¹¹⁷ Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, “Value-for-Money Audit. Museums and Galleries” (December 2020), p. 22: “Over the past 10 fiscal years, the AGO’s overall attendance increased by 38%, from about 613,000 visitors in 2010/11 to about 844,000 in 2019/20. We noted that 2019/20 was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which required the AGO to close two weeks before the end of its fiscal year. However, even after accounting for the impact of the pandemic, we noted that attendance was lower than in 2018/19. AGO management attributed fluctuations in its yearly

heavily on in-person attendance: “[t]he majority of individuals who visit the ROM do so to tour the [museum]; in 2019/20 these visits totalled approximately 1,021,000 and accounted for 88% of total attendance.”¹¹⁸ Institutions like the ROM also rely on popular in-person engagement activities, such as those featured in their interactive Hands-On Galleries – the essence of which involves the visitor being on site.

7. The pandemic may have a disproportionately negative impact on institutions who rely on visitors belonging to a high-risk group:

The authors of the December 2020 “Value-for-Money Audit” noted in connection with the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, for example, that the institution’s “reliance on seniors [as the gallery’s target audience] for membership sales may put its future membership revenues at risk, since the COVID-19 virus has been shown to pose a higher risk to seniors, potentially impacting their willingness to renew their membership and visit the gallery.”¹¹⁹ This is yet another important dimension of institutional identity for museums to take into consideration in future planning.

8. Free forms of admission, attendance, or participation (whether in-person or online), are integral to continued prosperity, but their sustainability will depend upon the institution and its financial means:

The correlation between free admission and higher levels of museum attendance was apparent even before the pandemic: in 2019-2020, the majority of the annual number of visitors to the AGO (40%) received free admission, followed by visitors with memberships (at 38%), general admission (at 13%), and then seniors, youth, and school groups.¹²⁰ In 2020, the ROM noted that, among the visitors who take part in the museum’s educational programming, 81% participate in activities that are free with museum admission, including museum tours and visits to the institution’s interactive Hands-On Galleries.¹²¹

attendance to exhibitions that did not meet their attendance targets. The majority of individuals who visit the AGO come to tour the gallery – in 2019/20 these visits totalled approximately 743,000 and accounted for 88% of total attendance. [. . .] 40% of visitors to tour the gallery visited free of charge, 38% had paid a membership fee or purchased an annual pass that allowed them to visit, and 18% of paid general admission (youth, adults and seniors). The balance of visitors comprised school groups and discounted group tours at 3% and 1%, respectively.”

¹¹⁸ Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, “Value-for-Money Audit. Museums and Galleries” (December 2020), pp. 58-59.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 109-10.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

Free admission attracts visitors and participation, but it is financially difficult to sustain. The “Value-for-Money Audit” of December 2020 found that the AGO’s unfortunately-timed introduction in 2019-2020 of a free annual pass for visitors under the age of 25 – which did not in this case significantly expand visitor numbers (admittedly impacted in part by the onset of the pandemic, and perhaps compounded by the interest level of the targeted demographic) – may be unsustainable according to the funding projections for future years.¹²²

The AGO’s program was put in place prior to the pandemic, but other museums initiated free entry programs and events after the pandemic began, in order to encourage visitor attendance during periods of reopening. For example, after reopening for a period in 2020 (between July and November, after the mid-March 2020 closure), the Gardiner Museum offered visitors free admission and created a new series of outreach educational programs (to engage and provide opportunities for visitor access), two initiatives that had positive impacts – including increased access for and greater numbers and diversity of visitors – but meant a loss in the revenue usually generated by admission fees and ticketed educational and exhibition programming.¹²³

9. Museums require clearer communication pathways, both in terms of the regulations communicated to them by government leaders and in terms of government support in communicating institutional safety to the public:

As noted by the authors of the “COVID-19: Impacts and Opportunities” report of September 2020, “Leaders across sectors highlighted the need for clarity of communication regarding the requirements to reopen their businesses, and to protect workers and the public. [. . .] Public-facing sectors such as those in culture that depend on large public gatherings need support from government to encourage the public to return to theatres, music venues and all performance spaces. Both consumer confidence and worker confidence were seen as pre-conditions of business recovery.”¹²⁴ There has been significant confusion and frustration within the sector, at various points throughout the pandemic, as to why museums have been required to close while other forms of recreation or entertainment (such as golf courses) have been permitted to remain open.¹²⁵ Various museums have reported feeling “left behind by the province,” despite working hard to meet all of the protocol requirements that other types of organizations have put in place, permitted on that

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹²³ The Gardiner Museum 2020 Annual Report, p. 3.

¹²⁴ Mowat and Rafi, “COVID-19: Impacts and Opportunities,” prepared for the City of Toronto (September 2020), p. 206.

¹²⁵ Taylor, “Shuttered museums languish while Ontario golfs,” *The Globe and Mail* (May 28, 2021), n.p.

basis to open. In the summer of 2021, for example, a time of the year vital for museum revenue, the government-mandated closure of cultural institutions in Ontario hit museums hard: “The visual arts were the first to close and they’ll be the last to open. We are trying to understand why this is the case,” as Zainub Verjee, executive director of Galleries Ontario/Ontario Galleries (GOG), put it in a June 2021 interview. Confusion has also arisen regarding the differences between the rationale for closures in 2020 versus those in 2021: says Sharon Godwin, director of the Thunder Bay Art Gallery, “We do not understand why it’s different this year, and why non-essential retail can open with limits and yet we can’t. It doesn’t make sense.”¹²⁶

10. Long periods of closure present significant safety and conservation problems for museums:

As reported by *The Toronto Star* in August 2019, closures mandated by the government on account of the pandemic introduced logistical problems: “A lot can go wrong in a museum that’s been shut down. Moths can get into textiles. A change in temperature or humidity can make mummies leak fluids. Museums [around the world] have reported break-ins.”¹²⁷ Moving forward, crisis management will not only need to address finances and people but the very collections and spaces that make museums what they are.

11. The pandemic has altered the nature of some museums’ annual reporting and the content of those reports:

The Bata Shoe Museum, for example, includes detailed numbers for in-person visitor attendance in their “annual review” reports leading up to 2020: numbers are reported proudly and in bold characters in the reports for 2017, 2018, and 2019, for example. In the museum’s 2020 annual review, however, this reporting is replaced with a summary of “global engagement” numbers (on the museum’s website and via social media), guided in large part by the institution’s decision to “[pivot] to a completely virtual museum experience” after the first closure in March 2020.¹²⁸ Although periods of in-person visitation and activities did continue at the museum after this date (during periods of reopening), no in-person attendance numbers are provided in the

¹²⁶ Collins, “Ontario public galleries demand right to return by Step 2,” CBC Arts, CBC (online) (June 21, 2021), n.p.

¹²⁷ Kopun, “It’s a constant battle to keep Canada’s museums afloat. COVID-19 has made it worse,” *The Toronto Star* (August 19, 2020), n.p.

¹²⁸ Bata Shoe Museum Annual Review, 2017, p. 25; Bata Shoe Museum Annual Review, 2018, p. 16; Bata Shoe Museum Annual Review, 2019, p. 18; Bata Shoe Museum Annual Review, 2020, p. 15. The Bata Shoe Museum’s data, as provided in the institution’s annual reports, was considered for the present report but proved to be insufficient in detail for meaningful analysis and comparison.

2020 report. Indeed, the annual reports of other institutions for 2020 onward are also beginning to emphasize online forms of engagement either in place of or alongside in-person visitation.¹²⁹ In 2020-2021, the Textile Museum shifted from reporting numbers of educational programming participants as “on site individuals” to “online” individuals, part of a more broadly evident move toward emphasizing online engagement as part of the museum’s annual reporting.¹³⁰ Other institutions are more consistent with numbers across all of the years captured by the present report, including being forthcoming with on-site visitor numbers for 2020-2021 (such as The Power Plant, who report numbers for both on site and online visits in 2020-2021: 51,660 in total, with only 2,874 on-site¹³¹).

12. The crisis of the pandemic has prompted various museums to make active revisions to their long-term strategic planning and strengthening of risk-management plans:

At the end of 2020, the Gardiner Museum took the opportunity to draw up a new 3-year strategic plan for 2021-2023, based in a broad and collaborative consultation process that involved not only staff and board members but members of the community and other local organizations – a move whose “urgency” was prompted by the lessons and experiences of the pandemic up to that point.¹³² The board of directors at the Aga Khan Museum noted in their 2020 annual report that the year had presented an opportunity for reflection on lessons learned, and that “[c]hallenging times call not only for thoughtful action and meaningful dialogue. They also call for introspection and planning ahead.”¹³³ The ROM’s 2020-2021 report noted that the lessons of the pandemic and the “interruption of almost a year” that resulted from it prompted them to “strengthen our approach to enterprise risk management in line with provincial risk management guidelines. This work is expected to be completed during the latter part of the 2021-22 fiscal or in early 2022-23.”¹³⁴

13. The pandemic has had both positive and negative impacts on innovative programming and research: on the one hand, it has prompted museums to

¹²⁹ For example, The Power Plant Annual Report, 2020-2021, pp. 4-5; the Bata Shoe Museum Annual Review, 2020, p. 17; and the Textile Museum of Canada, Annual Report 2020-2021, p. 17.

¹³⁰ The Textile Museum of Canada, Annual Report 2020-2021, pp. 17, 19, which reports “525 online” school program participants and “500 online” public programs participants. In the museum’s 2017-2018 report, on-site individual visitors were reported at 2,450; in 2018-2019, 4,291; and no data was provided for 2019-2020, perhaps on account of the long-term closure of the museum during that year.

¹³¹ The Power Plant Annual Report, 2020-2021, pp. 4-5.

¹³² The Gardiner Museum 2020 Annual Report, p. 3.

¹³³ Aga Khan Museum. 2020: A Year in Review, p. 1.

¹³⁴ Royal Ontario Museum Annual Report, 2020-2021, p. 35.

revise these activities, inspiring introspection into the nature and role of the industry as a whole and – on a smaller level – new subjects and themes; on the other hand, the suspension of acquisitions and loans and interruptions to institutional partnerships has created obstacles for innovation:

Living through the pandemic has been an emotional experience for museums, just as it has been for everyone else. It has inspired reflection on new topics and subject matter, new forms of display and collection content, and new perspectives on collections – and even a reconsideration of the role of the museum as an institution itself. Some new themes have been directly informed by the experience of the pandemic itself, thus broadening the scope of museums' thematic treatments of works as well as inspiring new methods and approaches to them.

The Gardiner Museum, for example, after the temporary closure in March 2020, recognized this as an opportunity to reimagine one of their community-outreach initiatives (The Gardiner Museum's Community Arts Space) "as a way to promote collective wellness and envision new ways of being together while in isolation. Guided by the theme 'Community is Essential,' we delivered a series of workshops focused on safety, care, and hope." The museum invited three new partners – the Turtle House Art/Play Centre, the FCJ Refugee Centre, and the ArtHeart Community – to collaborate on a new online iteration of the project, featuring online workshops and a delivery service that provided packages of clay to participants so they could learn from home.¹³⁵ The Aga Khan Museum created "new programs and social initiatives" – including a new online series of artists' talks that offered "new ideas and fresh perspectives" – aimed at providing "a welcoming, safe haven for people and communities to rediscover the arts as a source of hope in the wake of a global crisis."¹³⁶ Some institutions engaged in programming that directly responded to the pandemic: the ROM initiated a project to collect "artifacts" of the pandemic, including masks and other PPE equipment, for a prospective exhibition.¹³⁷ The initiative is part of a larger project of pandemic-oriented research underway at the ROM, which reveals the opportunities presented by the pandemic itself for new avenues and subject areas for research, exhibition, and visitor engagement.¹³⁸

However, as is to be expected, the pandemic has put a large dent in collections development and loans, disrupting the normal process of acquisitions and jeopardizing collaborative initiatives between institutions engaged in shared exhibitions or exchanges of materials. In 2020 the Gardiner Museum was forced to

¹³⁵ The Gardiner Museum 2020 Annual Report, p. 11.

¹³⁶ Aga Khan Museum. 2020: A Year in Review, pp. 3, 13.

¹³⁷ [Chang], "Royal Ontario Museum works to collect artifacts of the pandemic including masks," The National (CBC Television), transcript (September 8, 2020), n.p.

¹³⁸ Royal Ontario Museum, ROM at Home: ROM Ideas: Pandemic Research, n.d., n.p.

suspend its acquisitions program for most of the year.¹³⁹ The ROM noted in its 2020-2021 annual report that “[d]evelopment of collections through donations and purchases was less active during this pandemic year, yielding 84 acquisitions for art and culture collections and 9,718 acquisitions for natural history collections” and that “[r]equests for loans from the Art & Culture collections were comparatively modest at the beginning of the fiscal year and borrowing institutions either cancelled or asked that their requests be deferred until they could re-assess the pandemic’s impact on their projects.”¹⁴⁰

While some institutions (particularly those with substantial financial means) saw the shift to an “internal focus” prompted by the pandemic as an opportunity to reassess and make progress with putting into action various diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives (such as the ROM¹⁴¹), other institutions have found this difficult or impossible. There have been delays and interruptions to these initiatives, compounding the barriers to progress that were already in place prior to the pandemic.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ The Gardiner Museum 2020 Annual Report, p. 6.

¹⁴⁰ Royal Ontario Museum Annual Report, 2020-2021, pp. 20-21.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31: “In addition to the many outreach activities in collaboration with the ROM’s communities and partners, internal focus meant progress on several initiatives. Inclusion and equity strategy planning was launched with the participation of a group of employees from departments across the Museum. The ROM’s two employee resource groups, IBPOC (Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour) and ROM Pride, have held open sessions for all ROM staff interested in learning more about their work and ways to support their efforts.”

¹⁴² Mowat and Rafi, “COVID-19: Impacts and Opportunities,” prepared for the City of Toronto (September 2020), pp. 205, 215.

Conclusion and Preliminary Recommendations

The following section outlines a set of preliminary recommendations in relation to each of the findings outlined above. The aim of the present report is to provide a working list of solutions and strategies to be put into action by museums across the region, to help address current challenges and plan for the future. This list will grow as additional information and data comes to light in the coming year, regarding the experiences and impacts of the pandemic during 2020-2021. A shortlist of useful resources, below, provides readers with additional sources to consult for information and advice.

What Museums and their Supporters Can Do Next

1. In response to Findings 1, 2, 3, and 8, concerning financial losses across the sector (with a particular impact on smaller, community museums), threats to employment, hidden costs, the unsustainability of free forms of access, and the need for continued and increased government funding:

The Ontario Museum Association's "COVID-19 Impact Survey" (conducted between March 20 and April 1, 2020) concluded succinctly that "[m]useums need: a dedicated relief fund; early grant release; a digital response fund; and support for program workers."¹⁴³ As the OMA has amply shown in its own studies, surveys, and reports, government funding will continue to be essential: the provincial stabilization grant of \$10.4 million that the ROM received in 2020-2021 was credited by the museum with preventing "damaging additional expenditure cuts" – including those to staff, programming, admission and programming fees, and other essential operational needs.¹⁴⁴ The OMA has also shown that smaller, community museums are in even greater need of government support than before: their official submission to Ontario's Budget 2022 includes a recommendation for "increased support for community museums" of \$10 million per year, to help "towards stabilizing operations and local recovery."¹⁴⁵ Government funding also needs to address the hidden costs, such as those demanded in order to meet new health protocols and insurance needs. As noted by the authors of the "COVID-19: Impacts and Opportunities" report, "[s]upport for museums is required to address the challenge of sharply reduced revenue and increased costs related to increased personal protection equipment, sanitization supplies and retrofitting of spaces for social distancing measures."¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Ontario Museum Association (OMA) COVID-19 Impact Survey, responses, n.d, n.p. Note that only 6% of the survey respondents are museums located in Metropolitan Toronto.

¹⁴⁴ Royal Ontario Museum Annual Report, 2020-2021, p. 30.

¹⁴⁵ Ontario Museum Association 2022 Budget Submission (December 2021), p. 1.

¹⁴⁶ Mowat and Rafi, "COVID-19: Impacts and Opportunities," prepared for the City of Toronto (September 2020), p. 211.

Ultimately, the solution to financial need in the form of government funding rests in the hands of provincial and federal authorities, but museums will need to be proactive about demanding financial aid – in the form of grant applications and other forms of active solicitation – to be able to continue to support Ontario’s economy and meet the needs of the communities they serve. A reliance on donations and private support alone will likely not be sufficient to keep Toronto’s museums afloat if the pandemic continues. As a major step in this direction, the Ontario Museum Association has submitted a set of specific recommendations to Ontario’s Budget 2022, with museums’ financial needs as a priority.¹⁴⁷ The terms outlined in the Government of Ontario’s “Ontario Culture Strategy” show that those in power are aware of the situation: given that the Strategy integrally links together “telling our stories” with “growing our economy,” the health of museums needs to be prioritized. For the Strategy to achieve its four key goals – to “promote cultural engagement and inclusion, strengthen culture in communities, fuel the creative economy, and promote the value of the arts throughout government”¹⁴⁸ – those responsible will need to put their money where their mouth is.

2. In response to Findings 4 and 7, concerning shrinking visitor attendance numbers, both in the short and longer term, and the significant impact of this on museums who rely on either in-person engagement or high-risk groups:

There is no easy solution when it comes to museums’ reliance on in-person visitation. Institutions that rely heavily on in-person visitor attendance, or that have constructed their infrastructure, operations, and programming around this reliance, may profit from revising their visitation model and bolstering their online provisions. But this will require sufficient funding and careful thought about best – and most inclusive – practices, as outlined in recommendation 3, below. Regarding the overreliance of some museums on high-risk groups, such as the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, the authors of the 2020 “Value-for-Money Audit” suggest rethinking (among other things) institutional social media strategy to better target both key member

¹⁴⁷ The OMA’s “Support Museums in Ontario’s 2022 Budget” (January 18, 2022) makes three specific recommendations for “targeted provincial support” to help museums recover after the pandemic and continue to support the public they are mandated to serve: “1. An Ontario Museum Relief Fund, valued at \$10 million, in immediate response to the impacts of COVID-19 – to support museums’ survival during periods of closures”; 2. “A Digital Response Fund, valued at \$10 million over three years”; and 3. “Increased support for community museums by \$10 million per year to reach 300 communities across the province – towards stabilizing operations and local recovery.”

¹⁴⁸ Government of Ontario, “The Ontario Culture Strategy: Telling our stories, growing our economy” (2015-2021), n.p.

demographics and other groups (such as young adults), to diversify and expand its membership.¹⁴⁹

3. In response to Finding 6, concerning the pitfalls of the online pivot and the financial and socio-cultural barriers it presents:

As noted by the authors of the 2020 “COVID-19: Impacts and Opportunities” report, “[h]eritage institutions voiced a need for support for digital adaptation. There will be a need to access funding and expertise to reskill staff and build new platforms and experiences with an emphasis on accessibility, collaboration and inclusion.”¹⁵⁰ One of the specific recommendations outlined by the Ontario Museum Association in their submission to Ontario’s Budget 2022 is a new Digital Response Fund, “valued at \$10 million over three years,” an investment that will help to address these ongoing needs – including providing “more quality educational experiences for more of Ontario’s students.”¹⁵¹ Training – and fair access to that training for anyone who needs it, including marginalized individuals and groups – will be a primary concern.

As the authors of the “COVID-19” report point out in greater detail, “up-skilling” will be required across the sector for stakeholders to acquire the specific skills needed to catch up with the ongoing shift to digital technologies and to address an increasing dependency on digital forms of working – particularly if this will become the “new normal” that many anticipate. There are digital requirements now in place across all dimensions of the sector – from programming to management, sales, and marketing. “The shift was sudden, and financing, skills, infrastructure and innovation are needed in order for stakeholders to thrive in this new model. The digital market is a global market, so it brings with it heightened competition. Ensuring Toronto’s cultural entrepreneurs have the knowledge they need to succeed in this instantly international market is a critical first step to enabling success in the new-normal, at home and abroad. This need is exacerbated by the systemic exclusion faced by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) professionals seeking managerial and executive roles in the cultural sector; a challenge requiring specific, targeted interventions.”¹⁵² The process will also need to identify and actively include marginalized individuals and groups in the conversation, to ensure that the needs of everyone and not just the few are being met.

¹⁴⁹ Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, “Value-for-Money Audit. Museums and Galleries” (December 2020), pp. 109-10.

¹⁵⁰ Mowat and Rafi, “COVID-19: Impacts and Opportunities,” prepared for the City of Toronto (September 2020), p. 211.

¹⁵¹ Ontario Museum Association 2022 Budget Submission, pp. 1, 4.

¹⁵² Mowat and Rafi, “COVID-19: Impacts and Opportunities,” prepared for the City of Toronto (September 2020), p. 209.

4. In response to Finding 9, concerning the need for clearer communication pathways regarding the pandemic:

As noted in the 2020 “COVID-19” report, museums have expressed the need for help with clarifications regarding closure periods (and the rationale for these) and reassurances to the public about the safety protocols that have been put in place during periods of reopening. There is a desire for “the government to strengthen public confidence, when it is safe to do so, to encourage the citizens to come back to [. . .] museums.”¹⁵³ Together with provincial and federal organizations like the Ontario Museum Association and the Canadian Museums Association, and municipal authorities – including the City of Toronto – museums can work with authorities to create a stronger network and a more centralized set of communications channels to make messaging clear and continual.

5. In response to Finding 11, concerning the inconstant structure and content of museums’ annual reports:

As the present report reveals, an introduction of consistency in categories and reporting across the annual reports produced by museums would be extremely helpful – not only for the purpose of generating comparative reports like this one (which serve to aid the institutions in question) but for gaining a clearer picture of the condition and status of institutions across the sector, and establishing more accurately and comprehensively what it is that museums need in order to be successful in the longer term.

6. In response to Finding 13, concerning the pandemic’s negative impact on innovative programming and research:

As noted by the authors of the 2020 “COVID-19” report, there is a need for “support for creators of content focused on the importance of inclusion, anti-racism and decolonization. [. . .] Many in the sector are taking advantage of the situation to reimagine what museums and heritage sites can be in the future. Institutions could reposition themselves as brokers of space and ideas, versus curators and creators. Voices and experiences from outside of institutions can be elevated, thereby making museums more essential to their community and representative of the community where possible.”¹⁵⁴ One solution that has been proposed is to explore alternatives to

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

traditional forms of exhibition, including “new and interlocking forms of programming that stretch well past the gallery walls” – a strategy that is also more cost-effective; this might include either online, hybrid, or in-person variations of “conferences, publications, podcasts, reading groups, residencies, [and] film screenings.”¹⁵⁵

Museums will need to push the boundaries of what has worked in the past and re-think their forms and subjects of programming and research. New partnerships and co-produced activities and initiatives, including those that reach beyond the confines of the museum sector, may also provide useful opportunities to build innovation into programming: Jason Farago proposes the intriguing example of capitalizing on the recent use of museums as vaccination sites, with exhibitions produced in collaboration with hospitals, universities, labs, and research institutions.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Farago, “10 Ways for Museums to Survive and Thrive in a Post-Covid World,” Critic’s Notebook, The New York Times (May 21, 2021; updated August 16, 2021), n.p.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, n.p.

Useful Resources

Here is a list of additional resources for the reader to consult and share with others.

Ontario Museum Association (OMA):

OMA Resources (including reports and guidance concerning the pandemic):
<https://members.museumsontario.ca/resources>

OMA 2022 Budget Submission:
https://members.museumsontario.ca/sites/default/files/Ontario-Museum-Association_Provincial-Budget-Submission_2022.pdf

New Regulation and Measures for Museums (a briefing from Lisa MacLeod, Minister of the Ontario Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries):
<https://members.museumsontario.ca/resources/news/item/new-regulations-and-measures-museums>

Canadian Museums Association (CMA)

CMA website:
<https://www.museums.ca/>

Toronto History Museums:

Toronto History Museums website:
<https://www.toronto.ca/explore-enjoy/history-art-culture/museums/>

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Charity Intelligence.ca (Art Gallery of Ontario): <https://www.charityintelligence.ca/charity-details/6-art-gallery-of-ontario>.

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Financial Statements of the Royal Ontario Museum, March 31, 2021: <https://www.rom.on.ca/sites/default/files/imce/pdf/royal-ontario-museum-financial-statements-2020-21-en.pdf>.

Gallagher-Mackay, Kelly, et al., "COVID-19 and Education Disruption in Ontario: Emerging Evidence on Impacts" (June 4, 2021): <https://doi.org/10.47326/ocsat.2021.02.34.1.0>.

The Gardiner Museum 2018 Annual Report: <https://www.gardinermuseum.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018-Annual-Report-June-6-2019-final.pdf>.

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https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/arreports/en20/20VFM_13museums.pdf.

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https://members.museumsonario.ca/sites/default/files/OMA_COVID19_Survey_Infographic.pdf.

Ontario Museum Association (OMA), "Exhibiting Resilience: Empowering Ontario's community museums for strategic recovery" (October 2020):
https://members.museumsonario.ca/sites/default/files/Ontario-Museum-Association_Exhibiting%20Resilience_Empowering%20Ontario%E2%80%99s%20community%20museums%20for%20strategic%20recovery_White%20Paper_Online.pdf.

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Appendix

The tables below record the data represented in the charts above, under the section “The Data.”

AGO

Year	Revenue total (\$)	Revenue self-generated (\$)	Revenue private gifts/donations (\$)	Revenue grants (\$)	Expenses (\$)	Visitors (on site total)	Members (total - households)	Education participants (individual)	School group visits
2017-2018	91,942,000	7,590,000	10,529,000	22,166,000	114,405,000	917,261	59,815	89,357	42,715
2018-2019	78,225,000	7,276,000	13,888,000	22,551,000	85,125,000	845,677	53,939	105,164	39,437
2019-2020	72,376,000	5,070,000	12,327,000	22,553,000	90,461,000	780,228	44,028	64,178	23,055

Data in this chart is from:

Charity Intelligence.ca: <https://www.charityintelligence.ca/charity-details/6-art-gallery-of-ontario>.

Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, “Value-for-Money Audit. Museums and Galleries,” December 2020, pp. 11, 48:

https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/arreports/en20/20VFM_13museums.pdf. For each year range, numbers relate to the year April 1 through March 31.

AKM

Year	Revenue total (\$)	Revenue private gifts/donations (\$)	Revenue grants (\$)	Admission fees (\$)	Visitors (on site total)	Visits (online)	Education participants (individual)
2017-2018	16,355,774		5,978,257	613,182			
2018-2019	16,282,532	8,830,000	4,901,248	727,340	169,298		10,025
2019-2020		8,200,000			35,912	5,000,000	

Data in this chart is from:

Aga Khan Museum. 2019: A Year in Review, p. 3: https://agakhanmuseum.org/about/pdf/AKM_A-Year-in-Review-2019.pdf. Numbers relate to the year January 1, 2019 through December 31, 2019.

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GM

Year	Revenue total (\$)	Revenue self-generated (\$)	Revenue private gifts/donations (\$)	Revenue grants (\$)	Expenses (\$)	Instagram followers	Twitter followers	Website visits
2017-2018	4,800,000	1,680,000	2,496,000	720,000	4,700,000	10,000	28,000	932,645
2018-2019	4,600,000	1,748,000	2,392,000	460,000	4,600,000			
2019-2020	3,650,000	365,000	1,971,000	1,314,000	3,400,000			

Data in this chart is from:

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The Gardiner Museum 2020 Annual Report, p. 15: <https://www.gardinermuseum.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020-Annual-Report.pdf>. Numbers relate to the year January 1, 2020 through December 31, 2020.

HHF

Year	Revenue total (\$)	Revenue private gifts/donations (\$)	Admission fees (\$)	Expenses (\$)
2017-2018	19,411,000	4,023,000	3,490,000	7,896,000
2018-2019	17,010,000	2,131,000	3,462,000	7,549,000
2019-2020	11,749,000	1,715,000	2,267,000	5,204,000

Data in this chart is from:

Hockey Hall of Fame, Audited Financial Statement, 2019, p. 2: <https://www.hhof.com/pdf/2019HHFMAuditedFinancialStatement.pdf>. Numbers relate to the year April 1 through March 31.

Hockey Hall of Fame, Audited Financial Statement, 2020, p. 2:

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Charity Intelligence.ca: <https://www.charityintelligence.ca/charity-details/565-hockey-hall-of-fame>.

MOCA

Year	Revenue total (\$)	Revenue self-generated (\$)	Revenue private gifts/donations (\$)	Revenue grants (\$)	Expenses (\$)	Visitors (on site total)	Members (total - individual)	Education participants (individual)
2017-2018	3,289,891	228,644	2,333,747	567,146	3,704,750	30,000	1814	
2018-2019	4,485,691	665,675	2,678,449	448,801	4,338,666	130,613	1894	8,821
2019-2020	3,989,750	186,612	2,567,947	1,235,191	3,669,232	14,000	1000	

Data in this chart is from:

MOCA Annual Report 2018, pp. 6-8: https://moca.ca/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2021/07/MOCA_AnnualReport_2018.pdf. Numbers relate to the year April 1 through March 31.

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OSC

Year	Revenue total (\$)	Revenue private gifts/donations (\$)	Admission fees (\$)	Expenses (\$)	Visitors (on site total)	Facebook followers	Instagram followers	Twitter followers	Loss of income (\$)
2017-2018					900,225	84,200	84,200	84,200	
2018-2019	37,800,000	20,311,000	5,320,000		884,837	94,409	94,409	94,409	
2019-2020	36,254,000	20,216,000	4,596,000	36,108,000	766,487	100,883	100,883	100,883	1,195,000
2020-2021	28,713,000	25,465,000	40,000	30,901,000					3,544,000

Data in this chart is from:

Ontario Science Centre Annual Report 2019-2020, pp. 10-12: <https://www.ontariosciencecentre.ca/media/1888/annual-report20192020.pdf>. Numbers relate to the year April 1 through March 31.

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Numbers relate to the year April 1 through March 31.

PP

Year	Revenue total (\$)	Revenue private gifts/donations (\$)	Revenue grants (\$)	Visitors (on site total)	Members (new)	Facebook followers	Instagram followers	Twitter followers	Website visits	Education participants (individual)
2017-2018	2,037,768	1,035,086	1,002,682	89,537	110	23,800	17,703	9,758	107,784	(not avail.)
2018-2019	2,587,318	1,451,861	1,135,457	77,243	469	24,231	22,820	10,162	160,874	5,611
2019-2020	2,903,966	1,388,594	1,515,372	265,815	581	26,668	26,156	10,500	174,548	6,221
2020-2021	1,810,350	202,903	1,607,447	2,874	580	27,882	28,760	11,125	56,208	13,791

Data in this chart is from:

The Power Plant Annual Report, 2017-2018, pp. 4-5: https://www.thepowerplant.org/thepowerplant/medialibrary/Files/2017-18_Annual_Report_website.pdf. Numbers relate to the year April 1 through March 31.

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ROM

Year	Revenue total (\$)	Revenue self-generated (\$)	Revenue private gifts/donations (\$)	Revenue grants (\$)	Admission fees (\$)	Membership fees (\$)	Expenses (\$)	Visitors (on site total)	Visits (members)	Members (total - households)
2017-2018	79,768,000	34,519,000	2,410,000	45,249,000	14,747,000	3,693,000	80,962,000	1,443,838	293,210	36,504
2018-2019	81,375,000	32,604,000	1,607,000	48,771,000	12,523,000	4,129,000	81,026,000	1,340,098	261,586	38,467
2019-2020	77,485,000	27,749,000	512,000	49,736,000	11,056,000	3,999,000	77,404,000	1,163,150	215,660	30,448
2020-2021	64,680,000	3,435,000	450,000	61,245,000	1,028,000	907,000	65,075,000	84,487	(not avail.)	27,025

Data in this chart is from:

Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, "Value-for-Money Audit. Museums and Galleries," December 2020, pp. 58, 74, 76, 77:

https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/arreports/en20/20VFM_13museums.pdf. Numbers relate to the year April 1 through March 31.

Royal Ontario Museum Annual Report, 2020-2021, pp. 18, 30: https://www.rom.on.ca/sites/default/files/imce/pdf/annualreport_20-21_en.pdf.

Financial Statements of the Royal Ontario Museum, March 31, 2021, p. 4: <https://www.rom.on.ca/sites/default/files/imce/pdf/royal-ontario-museum-financial-statements-2020-21-en.pdf>. Numbers relate to the fiscal year of April 2020 through March 2021.

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Year	Visitors (on site total)	Members (total - individual)	Facebook followers	Instagram followers	Twitter followers	Website visits	Education participants (individual)	School group visits	Loss of income (\$)
2017-2018	29,190	791	11,654	8,854		70,848	2,450		
2018-2019	32,000	770	14,171	13,630	6,744	74,674	4,291	68	
2019-2020	20,451	663	15,160	16,700	6,932	79,428			200,000
2020-2021			13,981	18,648	7,399		525 (online)		

Data in this chart is from:

Textile Museum of Canada, Annual Report 2018-2019, pp. 12-13, 38-39: https://textilemuseum.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/TMCAnnualReport_20182019.pdf.

Numbers relate to the year April 1 through March 31.

Textile Museum of Canada, Annual Report 2019-2020, pp. 11, 15-16, 58-59: https://textilemuseum.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/TextileMuseumOfCanada_AnnualReport2019-20_zlweb.pdf.

Numbers relate to the year April 1 through March 31.

Textile Museum of Canada, Annual Report 2020-2021, pp. 17-19, 25, 27-28: https://textilemuseum.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/TextileMuseumOfCanada_AnnualReport2020-21.pdf.

Numbers relate to the year April 1 through March 31.