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OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA RELEASES RESULTS FROM ITS FIRST YEAR OF VISITOR-DRIVEN SOCIAL IMPACT RESEARCH

Research centers on evaluating the Museum's role as a civic connector, serving a diverse array of audiences

Oakland, CA— February 19, 2019—The Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) today released the results of the first 12 months of its innovative social impact research and evaluation work. This ongoing research program was developed and launched by the Museum as a new way to evaluate visitor engagement, and specifically to better understand the role OMCA plays in connecting different Bay Area residents and communities.

In particular, the research seeks to understand how the Museum can foster social cohesion, actively supporting each visitor's sense of connectedness to the diverse range of people and ideas that make up the community. Key takeaways from this period of research demonstrate that a majority of visitors—**97%**—report that they feel welcome at the Museum, while **73%** report seeing narratives that relate to their lives reflected within OMCA's exhibitions and programs. Over the last five years as the result of OMCA's broad range of exhibitions and programs, the makeup of the Museum's audience has shifted. This past fiscal year, **56%** of visitors identified as people of color, and **62%** were under age 45.

“Museums have both a responsibility and an opportunity to support critical engagement with diverse ideas, through the objects that animate our history and that bring forward the differing perspectives of individuals and communities from both the recent and distant past. But museums also can and should serve as sites of common ground, connecting people and nourishing their lives,” said Director and CEO Lori Fogarty. “This is especially true at a time when communities—in the East Bay and across the country—feel fragmented, when our discourse is polarized, and when the common ground necessary for our collective well-being can seem so elusive. I am excited that OMCA is a pioneer in exploring how to collect social impact data and that we can use the resulting data to understand how well our institution is serving audiences and where we need to improve.”

OMCA's research is centered around four fundamental statements about visitors' experiences and perceptions about visits to OMCA:

- I feel welcome
- I see my stories reflected
- I connect with other people
- I express my ideas, and am open to those of others

By inquiring about these core concepts—rather than just focusing on reactions to the content of a particular exhibition or program—the Museum aims to understand how it is currently fostering greater connections, trust, and shared understanding between different people and social groups. The data also suggests where the Museum might need to work harder to support this kind of engagement.

Throughout the year, 1,711 visitors completed a survey that included a set of questions with rating scales, designed to draw out aspects of social impact:

- *I feel welcome and at ease when I visit the Oakland Museum.* **97%** of visitors agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.
- *I appreciate that the Oakland Museum tells stories from different communities.* **95%** of visitors agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.
- *I value hearing ideas that are different from mine at the Oakland Museum.* **92%** of visitors agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.
- *I enjoy talking with friends and family when I'm at the Oakland Museum.* **84%** of visitors agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.
- *I enjoy being around new people at the Oakland Museum.* **81%** of visitors agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.
- *I feel comfortable expressing my ideas at the Oakland Museum.* **79%** of visitors agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

Additionally, researchers asked two questions differently, to test visitors' responses:

- *I'm not sure the Oakland Museum is a place for people like me.* Only **4%** of those responding agreed with this statement, while **89%** disagreed.
- *My experiences and identity are not reflected in the Oakland Museum's exhibits.* Similarly, only **8%** agreed with this statement, while **73%** of visitors disagreed.

“This data is revelatory, providing significant insights into community perceptions about the Museum, and reinforcing both our great strengths as well as some areas that need further work,” said Johanna Jones, OMCA’s Associate Director of Evaluation and Visitor Insights. “As a museum created by the City of Oakland fifty years ago, seeing clearly how our visitors relate to OMCA and to each other is crucial to our service to this community. With this research, we now have a clearer picture of the ways visitors connect and the role we can play in strengthening those connections. We have also established a process that makes it easy to continue collecting data in the future.”

The data revealed a number of additional insights about both the Museum’s programs and its visitors, including:

- The Museum’s Friday Nights series of programs, held primarily outside in its amphitheater and gardens, are the strongest driver of social connections among visitors—supporting both bonding with people visitors already know as well as opportunities to meet new people. Of those surveyed, **92%** of visitors who attended Friday Nights programming “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement that they “enjoy being around new people,” and **88%** “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they “enjoy talking with friends and family” at the event.
- Overall, those who identify as female corresponded with the highest levels of those reporting strong social connections and engagement at and with OMCA. Members likewise reported high social impact responses—though it is not yet clear whether membership drives social impact, or if visitors become members when they feel socially connected to the Museum.

- Two areas of concern related to data collected from visitors identifying as people of color or from lower-income households, audiences that have historically been underserved by museums:
 - While people of color now comprise more than **50%** of OMCA’s total annual audience, and they report seeing their experiences and identity reflected in the Museum’s exhibits, they are less likely to engage with family and friends at the Museum and less likely to enjoy meeting new people at OMCA. Additionally, they are less likely than other visitors to feel they can express their ideas at the Museum.
 - Similarly, those from lower income households are less likely than wealthier visitors to feel welcome at OMCA. They are less likely to see OMCA as telling stories from different communities, and they are less comfortable expressing their ideas at the Museum.

The results of all of this research—and in particular the data indicating areas in need of additional attention for visitors of color or from lower income households—is being considered as part of OMCA’s strategic planning process. OMCA director Fogarty added “We have made significant strides in engaging the community and diversifying our audience. However, there is clearly still work to be done to ensure that all visitors see the Museum as a place where they can connect with other people and, in doing so, feel comfortable sharing their perspectives and engaging in dialogue about the history and future of the community.” Among the initiatives underway to support these improvements are: OMCA’s campus renovation project, which will physically open the Museum up to the community in new ways; expanding program offerings to create opportunities and inspire dialogue between visitors for current and new audiences; developing strategic partnerships with valued community organizations, such as the Oakland Public Library, to reach low-income communities; and enhancing staff training programs, to ensure that there is greater cultural inclusiveness across all Museum departments and a deeper understanding of the audiences it serves.

Understanding OMCA’s audiences—and their relationship to the Museum, the community, and each other—is also essential to the long-term process of increasing and maintaining diverse audiences. For example, when the Museum launched its Friday Nights program series in 2013, the new diversity of the audience for this program was apparent: more people of color, families, younger generations participated than were typically seen at the other programs. As OMCA became more systematic with collecting visitor data, it became clear that the overall visitor profile was becoming younger and more ethnically diverse as a whole—not just attendees of specific programs. While OMCA has continued this audience development work, resulting in the strong results of the last fiscal year (56% of visitors identified as people of color, and 62% were under age 45), the Museum’s social impact research provides another important way to understand visitors' experiences, and to improve engagement with them.

OMCA’s research process was designed and developed so that it could be managed primarily by the Museum’s in-house team and maintained over time as part of regular evaluation efforts, to ensure continued data collection and analysis. The 1,711 respondents surveyed during the first year were chosen at random across a selection of OMCA public events and exhibitions; participation was voluntary, and each respondent was informed about how their anonymous responses would be used. To encourage honest answers and mitigate against bias in responses, those who agreed to complete the survey were provided with an iPad loaded with the survey questionnaire, so that they could answer independently. The resulting data was analyzed by Johanna Jones, Associate Director of Evaluation and Visitor Insights, with support from an outside statistician. Going forward, the Museum plans to review feedback on the process itself and then continue collecting data.

As an institution dedicated to the art, history, and natural sciences of California, and one that was established through a public vote 50 years ago, OMCA is uniquely positioned to engage in critical

dialogues on the experiences of the past, present, and future in the Golden State. As a result, the Museum's social impact research is an institutional priority—an activity that relates directly to its connection to and services for the community—and is being funded by the OMCA's *All In!* capital campaign. Achieving the goals of the campaign will ensure that support continues for this evaluation process, providing critical data points that will inform the work of OMCA's curatorial and educational departments in creating exhibitions and programs that deeply engage the diverse communities that comprise the Bay Area.

ABOUT THE OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA

The Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) tells the many stories that comprise California, creating the space and context for greater connection, trust, and understanding between people. Through its inclusive exhibitions, public programs, educational initiatives, and cultural events, OMCA brings Californians together and inspires greater understanding about what our state's art, history, and natural surroundings teach us about ourselves and each other. With more than 1.9 million objects, OMCA brings together its multi-disciplinary collections of art, history, and natural science with the first-person accounts and often untold narratives of California, all within its 110,000 square feet of gallery space and seven-acre campus. The Museum is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year as a leading cultural institution of the Bay Area and a resource for the research and understanding of California's dynamic cultural and environmental heritage for visitors from the region, the state, and around the world.

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