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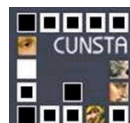
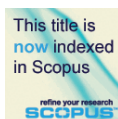
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Inclusive museums in the Japanese super-ageing society: the third-place advantage

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Abstract

Museums are increasingly regarded as tools of cultural welfare to enhance individual and collective wellbeing, particularly for the elderly. This report aims to provide an updated analysis of the accessibility and inclusivity of Japanese museums for visitors over 65, assessing existing programs, identifying barriers, and suggesting strategies to enhance the cultural offer in response to the needs of this growing demographic, especially in Japan and Italy. The study is based on data collected using a questionnaire and interviews with Japanese museum managers, enriched by examples of best practices observed firsthand. The findings reveal strong interest from the elderly in museums, often limited by physical and organizational barriers, as well as a cultural offer not always suited to this group. The report concludes with recommendations to improve accessibility and encourage the engagement of over-65s, enabling them to fully benefit from a museum experience tailored to their needs.

I musei sono sempre più considerati strumenti di welfare culturale per promuovere il benessere individuale e collettivo, con particolare attenzione alle persone anziane. Questo report mira a offrire un'analisi aggiornata sull'accessibilità e l'inclusività dei musei giapponesi per i visitatori over 65, valutando i programmi esistenti, individuando ostacoli e proponendo strategie per potenziare l'offerta culturale in risposta alle esigenze di una fascia demografica in crescita, soprattutto in Giappone e Italia. L'indagine si basa sui dati ottenuti tramite un questionario e interviste ai responsabili dei musei nipponici, integrati da esempi di buone pratiche osservate direttamente sul campo. I risultati rivelano un forte interesse degli anziani per i musei, spesso frenato da barriere fisiche e organizzative, oltre che da un'offerta culturale non sempre adeguata. Il report si conclude con suggerimenti per migliorare l'accessibilità e favorire il coinvolgimento degli over 65, consentendo loro di beneficiare pienamente di un'esperienza museale calibrata sulle proprie necessità.

1. Introduction. Inclusive museums and creative ageing in a global context

Cultural institutions can play an essential role in the vitality of older adults: with ample leisure time and a passion for art, history, and culture, older citizens have the opportunity to profit from museum experiences and dialogue with younger visitors. This study explores how museums can support creative ageing – defined as engagement in artistic and cultural activities that promotes wellbeing, social connection, and lifelong learning in later life – within the specific context of Japan's super-ageing society, drawing insights from Italy and worldwide.

While several nations face ageing populations, the specific comparison between Japan and Italy provides a unique ground for analysis. This methodological choice is not based on a generic similarity in demographics and cultural heritage, but on two key factors that make their dialogue particularly insightful. First, Japan and Italy represent the global forefront of this demographic shift: Japan has the world's highest percentage of older adults at 29.1%¹, with

¹ Fujioka 2022.

Italy² following as one of the oldest nations globally. This positions them as the most interesting case studies for the challenges and opportunities of a super-ageing society. Second, Italy stands out for developing structured and pioneering approaches to creative ageing that offer a valuable benchmark for the Japanese context. Examples from both museums and regional regulations are not isolated initiatives but systemic models integrating cultural, health, and social policies. Italy's proactive framework therefore provides an ideal standard against which to assess the accessibility and inclusivity of Japanese museums, addressing the core research questions of this study.

This study also considers the broader concept of cultural welfare³, which highlights the positive outcomes that arise when social, health, cultural, and artistic sectors work together effectively. From this perspective, cultural participation is recognized for its multiple benefits: it can meet social needs, like inclusion, and significantly contribute to public health and wellbeing, as supported by the World Health Organization's (WHO) 2019 report⁴. Additionally, cultural participation makes use of cultural resources, like museum collections, and promotes artistic expression. All these elements combine within the community to enhance overall quality of life. This approach aligns with the WHO's longstanding definition of health, established in its 1946 constitution, as «a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity»⁵. It is also consistent with following global strategies like the Ottawa charter for health promotion, which emphasized creating supportive environments and community action to improve health⁶.

Cultural welfare, promoting wellbeing through community cultural life and equitable access, goes beyond traditional aid. While traditional welfare often focuses on offering essential services or financial support, cultural welfare concentrates on cultural engagement and equitable access to improve overall wellbeing and community connection⁷. Museums, as third places⁸, are vital for active ageing⁹, linking health and participation to improve the overall quality of life. Oldenburg defines third places as social settings distinct from home (first place) and work (second place), characterized by neutral ground, accessibility, a welcoming atmosphere, regular visitors, and opportunities for social interaction¹⁰. Museums can fulfil this role by providing neutral ground accessible to all and a

² Tinto 2023.

³ Cicerchia *et al.* 2020.

⁴ Fancourt, Finn 2019.

⁵ WHO 1946.

⁶ WHO 1986.

⁷ Cicerchia *et al.* 2022, pp. 77-84.

⁸ Oldenburg 1989.

⁹ WHO 2002.

¹⁰ Oldenburg 1989.

welcoming atmosphere through inclusive programming, attracting visitors via targeted activities like those explored later in this article, and generating conversation through facilitated dialogues and reminiscence sessions, consequently offering spaces for older adults to connect, engage meaningfully, and feel a sense of belonging. By actively supporting wellbeing, cultural welfare provides a practical framework for museums to unlock their potential, relying on the concept of social interaction that is central to Oldenburg's view. This idea can help to develop individual potential and facilitate cross-sector ties in health, social policy, and arts, as we can see in the UK's *Arts on Prescription* program¹¹, which links creative participation to health gains. On the other hand, it must be stressed that to effectively offer educational programs, social events, and interactive exhibits for lifelong learning and connection, elements core to active ageing¹², museum's level of accessibility must be adequate.

The social model of disability¹³ views disability as a societal barrier, not just impairments, urging action on physical, cognitive, and social obstacles. The idea of universal design¹⁴ supports this view by providing a framework for inclusive museum spaces and programs, usable by all, regardless of age or ability.

Older people should be involved in activities suitable for their abilities. For example, the Marche Region (Italy) in 2018 issued the voluntary service law¹⁵, which engages active older adults in cultural roles. This practice can be found also in a museum from the same region – the *Museo del Mare*¹⁶ in San Benedetto del Tronto – where the program *La scuola dei nonni* (*The Grandparents' School*), sees older adults lead tours in an old classroom replica. Another Italian region, Tuscany, has also provided a regulation on creative ageing. The Regional Government Resolution n. 1269 of 6 November 2023¹⁷ defines dementia programs drawing from the experience of museums participating in the *Musei Toscani per l'Alzheimer* (*Tuscan Museums for Alzheimer's*) network, and sets standards for caregiver inclusion, participant caps, dedicated spaces, and educator roles, with the goal of stimulating cognitive skills and easing social issues through art and community, without the intent of replacing therapy. Inspired by the Italian National Dementia Plan¹⁸, the resolution aims to raise

¹¹ National Health Service, *Social prescribing*, <<https://www.england.nhs.uk/personalisedcare/social-prescribing/>>, 01.07.2025.

¹² Cohen 2005.

¹³ Oliver 1990.

¹⁴ Mace 1988.

¹⁵ L.R. 12 March 2018, n. 3, "Istituzione del servizio civile volontario degli anziani".

¹⁶ Museo del Mare, *La Scuola dei Nonni*, <<https://www.comunesbt.it/museodelmare/Engine/RAServePG.php/P/33431MDM0104/M/20011MDM0104>>, 01.07.2025.

¹⁷ D.G.R. 6 November 2023, n. 1269, "Caratteristiche dei programmi museali dedicati alle persone con demenza".

¹⁸ Istituto Superiore di Sanità, *Piano Nazionale Demenze*, <<https://www.iss.it/le-demenze-piano-nazionale-demenze>>, 01.07.2025.

awareness, reduce stigma, and improve quality of life by informing families, enhancing care, and encouraging participation.

Nowadays, creative ageing activities can be found even in small communities¹⁹, but the most influential and groundbreaking program was *Meet Me at MoMA*²⁰, developed by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York (USA), and specifically tailored for individuals with Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia alongside their family members or care partners. Launched in 2006, this program has become a model for arts engagement with this part of the audience. It is still active and operating monthly, providing an opportunity for dialogue through art in MoMA's galleries, where specially trained educators highlight themes, artists, and exhibitions, using art to evoke memories and emotions. Recently, another project that has gained attention in the creative ageing field is *House of Memories*²¹, an innovative dementia awareness and support program for caregivers and people living with dementia. Developed in 2012 by the National Museums Liverpool, it uses museum collections to evoke memories and provide a sensory journey, including hands-on training for caregivers, access to memory boxes filled with historical objects, and the development of the *My House of Memories* app, which allows users to interact with museum items digitally. To be even more inclusive, the program also features *House of Memories on the road*, a mobile museum experience that brings immersive, multisensory environments directly into communities, offering a unique way to engage with cultural heritage and personal memories.

As previously mentioned, Japan and Italy are the two nations with the highest percentage of older citizens in the world and share two major common points: demographic need and cultural richness, but is Japan in line with Italy's innovations in the creative ageing field? Italy's proactive approach – from Marche's voluntary service law to Tuscany's dementia programs – provides a valuable comparative introduction to the central questions of this study: how accessible and inclusive are Japanese museums for older adults, and what can enhance the experience of these visitors?

2. Background on creative ageing in Japan

2.1. Role of museums

Japan is a country with a very rich cultural diversity and the sheer number of museums present in the nation reflects this statement well: in 2018 Japan's

¹⁹ For further insights see BAM 2021.

²⁰ Museum of Modern Art, *Meet me at MoMA*, <<https://www.moma.org/visit/accessibility/meetme/>>, 01.07.2025.

²¹ National Museums Liverpool, *House of Memories*, <<https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/house-of-memories>>, 01.07.2025.

Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) conducted a social education survey²², claiming that in the country there were 5,738 museum-like facilities. Furthermore, this number was then broken down into categories, accounting for 3,328 history museums, 1,069 art museums, 472 comprehensive museums, 454 science museums, 112 botanical gardens, 93 zoological gardens, and 81 aquariums.

In addition, Japanese museums hold a particularly pivotal role in the lives of citizens: the Agency for Cultural Affairs in 2018 released the first basic plan on the promotion of culture and art²³, where it is stated that museums should serve in a wide range of roles, not only limited to preservation, transmission, creation, exchange, and dissemination of culture and art, but also for local lifelong learning activities and volunteering. They should also aim to solve social problems through collaborations with educational institutions, welfare organizations, and medical care organizations.

To fully understand the significance of creative ageing activities in Japan, it is necessary to consider these two concepts in connection with a third one: the rise of a super-ageing society. The average life expectancy is increasing faster than the population growth rate, and therefore the ratio between working-age individuals and older people is changing rapidly: in 1965 nine workers supported each older person, whereas in 2008 there were only three working-age people for one older adult. Currently this ratio has thinned to two to one, and in 2050 it is expected to reach a level of equality: for one older person there will be only one working-age individual²⁴. It is important to stress that average life expectancy is distinct from a healthy life, which is the period during which daily life is not impacted or restricted by health problems. In 2019, the average life expectancy for men was 81.41 years and 87.45 years for women, while healthy life expectancy was 72.7 years for men and 75.4 years for women²⁵.

The trend is in continuous ascent and the gap between the two aspects will be increasingly narrower, making the need for active and creative ageing programs even more necessary in the future. Japanese citizens will live on average more than 90 years, and the healthy lifespan will be even longer, with the consequent necessity of developing appropriate activities to fill the days of older people with moments of sociality and culture. To address this matter, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum has already established a volunteer program specifically targeting healthy older adults, designed to enhance social engagement and apply their vitality in support of the museum's educational objectives. This initiative engages older people physically and socially active

²² MEXT 2020.

²³ Agency for Cultural Affairs 2018.

²⁴ Ogata 2021a, p.3.

²⁵ MHLW 2020.

as volunteer guides, enabling them to share personal details concerning the atomic bombing of 1945. Through this role, they offer visitors a compelling, firsthand perspective that profoundly impacts audiences, countering social isolation while providing a unique point of view to younger generations.

Being in contact with art can improve the health and wellbeing of all citizens²⁶, with striking similarities to natural therapies such as forest bathing (森林浴 *shinrin-yoku*, a Japanese term for the practice of immersing oneself in the forest atmosphere), which provides a series of benefits to the person who is in contact with nature: blood pressure, pulse rate, sleep quality and mood improve, depression and stress hormones decline, and immunity increases²⁷. Professor Izumi Ogata (Kyushu Sangyo University)²⁸ was the first scholar to apply the concept of forest bathing to museums, calling it museum bathing and defining it as activities that capitalize on the healing effects of museums to promote people's health and prevent disease through museum visits. This concept aligns with the need to create accessible and welcoming museum environments for older adults, where factors such as reduced stress, comfortable pacing, and opportunities for quiet contemplation are crucial.

Achieving these benefits, however, is still directly linked to the museum's accessibility: environments that induce stress due to architectural obstacles, lack of rest areas, or sensory overload directly undermine the potential for such restorative experiences. Through empirical trials conducted in selected museums, Professor Ogata proved that forest bathing and museum bathing have similar relaxing outcomes. This makes it clear that, along with medical prescriptions, doctors should also consider social prescriptions²⁹ when treating older adults. An interesting example of social prescribing in the Asian continent comes from Taiwan, where this procedure is becoming increasingly popular. Selected Taiwanese museums provide opportunities for individuals with dementia and their caregivers to engage with art and experience the visit along with other people. This is made possible thanks to the collaboration of a cultural institution with a medical center, like the Taipei City Hospital, which offers support to the activities proposed by the National Taiwan Museum³⁰.

²⁶ Fancourt, Finn 2019.

²⁷ Li 2020.

²⁸ Ogata 2021a, 2021b and 2022.

²⁹ An interesting initiative in the social prescription field comes from Canada, where in 2018 the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts together with Médecins francophones du Canada (MFdC) started a project in which patients with different physical and mental health issues were able to obtain free admission to the museum, along with their family members, to benefit from the positive influence that museum visits have on the human body. Physicians (who are allowed to release 50 prescriptions each), university researchers and hospital personnel collaborated with the museum's education and wellness division team with the goal of creating adequate art appreciation programs (Ogata 2021b).

³⁰ Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum 2023, p. 34.

Art appreciation programs can play a key role especially in dementia-related diseases, and major figures in the Japanese medical field agree with this concept. Using the words of Toshitaka Shirai (Deputy Hospital Director, Dementia Disease Medical Center Director at the Eiju General Hospital),

recent research has shown that engaging in art-related activities can delay the progression of dementia, maintain cognitive functions, physical abilities, and sociability, and positively impact everyday life.

Art therapy, for instance, began in the UK in 1942 and encompasses various modes of expression, from painting and ceramics to sculpture, haiku, and dance. Beyond its therapeutic aims, it can also alleviate the woes and worries of health, promote personal growth, and help individuals to reclaim their sense of self.

Artistic activities can revitalize the brain with pleasant stimuli and have been known to aid mental stability and more regular sleep patterns. The key is to establish a setting that allows individuals to engage and enjoy themselves without feeling stressed. Seeing, appreciating, and making art often bring out people's untapped abilities, which can then lead to positive experiences that improve self-confidence and mental balance; this in turn can also reduce symptoms such as wandering and anxiety. As for the "day-night reversal" commonly seen in dementia patients, increasing daytime activities like this can help establish a healthier sleep-wake cycle³¹.

In terms of empirical trials related to the physiological and psychological effects of museum visits and art appreciation, Japan was a pioneer. Already in 2001, the Menard Art Museum (Komaki City, Aichi prefecture) conducted a trial³² involving three different exhibitions: "Chagall lithographs" (43 participants), "Women in the streets of Paris" (30 participants), and "Secrets of the masterpieces III: Japanese-style painting and handicrafts" (31 participants). The study reported decreased cortisol levels as well as an improvement of the levels of stress, mental and physical strain, depression, anxiety, fatigue, and hostility: the healing effects of museums were in this way proved³³.

Benefits for the quality of life were also confirmed by a more recent randomized controlled trial conducted at the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum by Yoko Hayashi *et al.*³⁴. This study aimed to compare changes in mental and physical health between two groups of older Tokyo residents: the ones who participated in productive art-based activities and the ones who did not. On the other hand, this research was not able to demonstrate a significant effect of museum-based activities on the wellbeing of older Japanese citizens, so further studies are already planned.

³¹ Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum 2023, p. 36.

³² Menard Museum, <<https://museum.menard.co.jp/outline/healing.html>>, 01.07.2025.

³³ Ogata 2021b, p. 4.

³⁴ Hayashi *et al.* 2023.

2.2. *A selection of Japanese age friendly museum programs*

In Japan, the social issue of population ageing is particularly pressing, prompting numerous museums and cultural associations to address its impact. To observe these initiatives directly, several institutions were contacted before a research visit to Japan (Fig. 1). The following sections present the primary insights gathered from those that provided access to their activities.

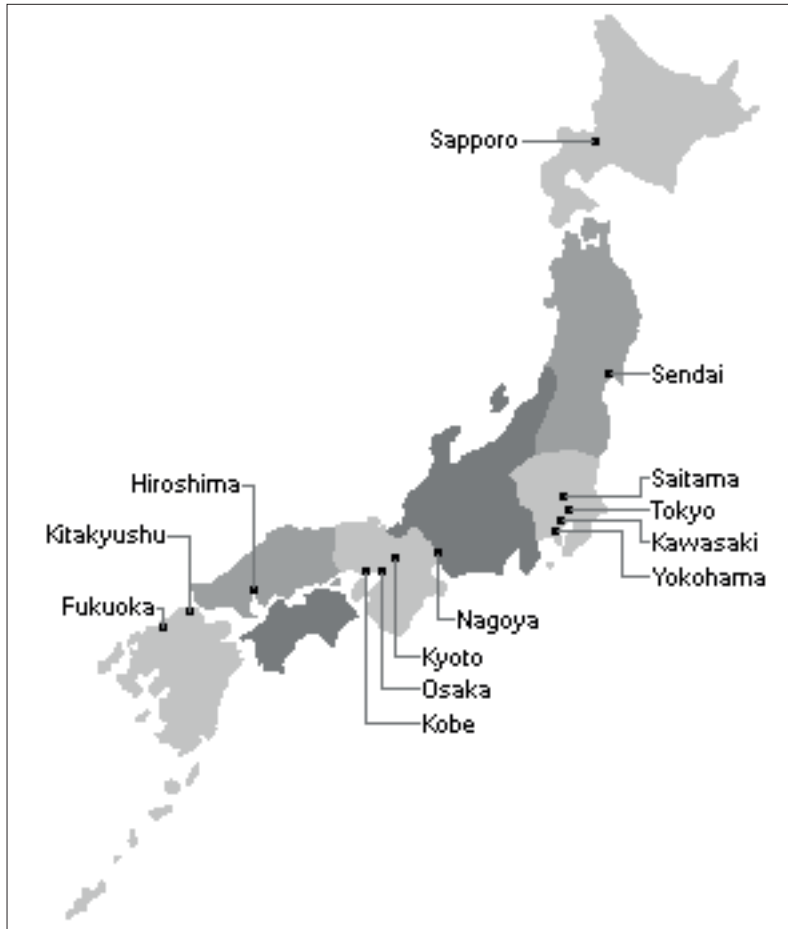


Fig. 1. The locations of the case studies presented: Tokyo, Nagoya (Kitanagoya City), Sapporo

2.2.1. *Zuttobi Project, Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum (Tokyo)*

The Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum is a prefectural museum located in Ueno Park (Tokyo), best known for its temporary exhibitions of both Japanese and international modern art. It was the first public art museum in the

country, inaugurated in 1926 as the Tokyo Prefectural Art Museum and then renamed in 1943. The current building was designed by modernist architect Kunio Maekawa and constructed in 1975.

In April 2021, the museum inaugurated its first art appreciation program for older visitors, which in March 2022 was called *Creative Ageing Zutto-bi*. This initiative, which takes its name from a combination of the Japanese words *ずっと* (*zutto*, that stand for “always”) and *び* (*bi*, that means “art”)³⁵, aims to stress the willingness of the museum to become a place in which people feel welcome, whatever their age.

Zuttobi now practices and researches multi-disciplinarily in collaboration with Tokyo University of the Arts Geidai³⁶. Geidai’s main buildings are in Ueno Park (Tokyo) too, but it also has facilities in Toride (Ibaraki), Yokohama (Kanagawa), Kitasenju and Adachi (Tokyo). Several famed artists were trained at the university in a large variety of fields of art that cover painting, sculpture, crafts, music composition, traditional instruments, and more. Its history dates to 1949, when two specialist schools, the Tokyo Fine Arts School and the Tokyo Music School, both founded in 1887, were merged resulting in the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music. The original subdivision is still relevant to this day, given that Geidai is characterized by the presence of a Faculty of Fine Arts and a Faculty of Music. In 1963, the university inaugurated its graduate school providing master’s programs, gradually expanding its offer through the years and opening doctoral courses in 1977. After the abolition of the National School Establishment Law and the formation of the National University Corporations on April 1st, 2004, the university was named *Kokuritsu Daigaku Hojin Tokyo Geijutsu Daigaku*. Four years later, it changed its English name from Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music to the current Tokyo University of the Arts.

Zuttobi activities are crafted with a positive view of later life, which is associated with the pure advancing of the years instead of negative concepts like getting old or declining, and has the support of several institutions from the local Taito Ward (Tokyo), such as hospitals, community general support centers, and the Taito City Council of Social Welfare, together with artists and researchers from Japan and beyond. Between 2021 and 2023 *Zuttobi* used ongoing exhibitions to involve older adults, including individuals with dementia and their families, to enjoy art with the parallel objective of facilitating new encounters between the participants, stimulating dialogue, and exchanging of ideas.

The idea of implementing an art appreciation program for older people

³⁵ “Tobi” is also the nickname of the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum.

³⁶ Tokyo University of the Arts, <<https://www.geidai.ac.jp/english/about/a-brief-history-of-the-university/>>, 01.07.2025.

was initiated alongside the *Creative Well-being Tokyo* project organized by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government and Arts Council Tokyo (Tokyo Metropolitan Foundation for History and Culture). The *Creative Well-being Tokyo* project coincided with the museum's internal discussion and needs to respond to the super-aged society in Japan. Prior to the implementation of the *Zuttobi* project, Sawako Inaniwa (former curator, chief of learning and public projects at Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, 2011-2021) had the opportunity to participate in the pioneering projects, such as *Meet me at MoMA* and *The MoMA Alzheimer's* project at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), and *Met Escapes* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) in New York in 2011. Based on these case studies, Inaniwa had been developing the idea of something similar that could be implemented at Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, sharing her idea with Atsuyuki Nakahara (Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum curator), who also had seen *Met Escapes* in another opportunity, until Hayato Fujioka joined Inaniwa at Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum in 2021. The period of research conducted thereafter by Fujioka, which was essential for planning the first steps and objectives of the project, required one year of preparation and looked also towards good practices from Taiwan and the United Kingdom in particular, such as the avant-garde social prescription initiatives that was covered earlier in the article. The influential *House of Memories* project, established by the National Museums of Liverpool, served as another key reference point³⁷.

The *Zuttobi* project works in tandem with the *Tobira* project (2012), an initiative managed by the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum and the Tokyo University of Arts Geidai. This project involves a group of volunteers, nicknamed *Tobira*, as art communicators partnered with the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, with ages ranging from 18 to over 70. *Tobira* art communicators are selected through an open application process, and their backgrounds are quite different. However, their goal in *Zuttobi* activities is the same: to support the older visitors' experience³⁸, making them feel comfortable and listening to their thoughts and feelings about the selected works of art, tackling the solitude and isolation that they may experience in their daily lives.

Zuttobi collaborates with hospitals and welfare centers, conducting on av-

³⁷ Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum 2023.

³⁸ The *Tobira* project is not aimed only towards older people: the *Museum Start i-Ueno* initiative, organized by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum (Tokyo Metropolitan Foundation for History and Culture), and the Tokyo University of the Arts with the involvement of the International Library of Children's Literature, the National Museum of Nature and Science, the National Museum of Western Art, the Tokyo Bunka Kaikan, the Tokyo National Museum, the Ueno Royal Museum, and the Ueno Zoological Gardens, is a program that focuses on children, with the scope of assist and let them live the joy of museums present in the Ueno Park area in Tokyo, and is facilitated and supported by *Tobira*. For more details: <<https://museum-start.jp/en/about/outline/>>, 01.07.2025.

erage two activities each year: one is usually aimed at active older adults, one at those with dementia but, especially during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, some encounters were arranged online. The participants of each event normally are between 15 and 20 people, and the visit to the museum lasts 1 hour / 1:30 hours at most.

Tobira art communicators usually participate in the project for three years, but it is not rare for them to participate in it for a longer period by independently arranging activities on their own. There are currently 130 art communicators, and each one of them attended a series of lectures and activities before obtaining the role: the principal session is composed of different events focus on participation, where *Tobira* learns how to conduct program activities and excursions, while the practical session is sub-divided into three themes. The first is a course on art appreciation, the second on accessibility, and the third on architecture: all these topics are applied to the museum spaces (Fig. 2)³⁹.



Fig. 2. Participants of Orange Café. Exploring the Museum with *Tobira*: The World of Danish Furniture at Finn Juhl and Danish Chairs (Source: Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum 2022)

³⁹ Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum 2016, pp. 22-23.

2.2.2. Creative ageing activities and research, Hokkaido Museum (Sapporo)

The Hokkaido Museum is in the suburbs of Sapporo (Hokkaido prefecture), inside a prefectural nature park of 2,000 hectares, and offers a broad view of the nature, history, and culture of Hokkaido. Founded in 1971, it was renovated twice.

Its main exhibition, renewed in 2015, consists of five themes⁴⁰. In 2017, the exhibition received a total of 80,519 admissions, 11,305 of which (14%) were visitors aged 65 and over. This number is particularly interesting if compared with the rate of the older population in Hokkaido in 2023, which is 32.8%, and underlines the great potential that creative ageing initiatives could have to increase the percentage of older adults involved in museum visits.

Due to its unique and important collection, many groups come to visit the museum. School groups are the most representative (34.4%), but the ones with older people in them (general groups and welfare groups) reach the considerable number of 24.8%. The remarkable presence of older visitor groups in Hokkaido Museum is confirmed by the numbers obtained thanks to a questionnaire submitted in 2016 by Katsura Aoyagi (Research division, Hokkaido Museum) to the museums of Hokkaido network. In response to the question «Have groups of older people been involved in the past 3 years?», 82.4% of respondents answered positively, 5.6% negatively and 12% did not have the data available.

The researcher Katsura Aoyagi also published two interesting research reports, which are worth summarizing. The first⁴¹ is focused on the issues endured by older adults while utilizing support programs at the Hokkaido Museum. The study primarily used data from a postal questionnaire, with some findings also compared to a 2003 survey conducted throughout Japan. The results indicated several key points regarding museums in Hokkaido. First, these museums often lack adequate planning ability and appeal to older people in terms of their exhibitions and educational projects. Second, a high proportion of older adults volunteer at these institutions, usually providing guidance at events or cooperating in survey research and similar tasks. Finally, many museums reported that they do not have sufficient funding or staffing. The proposal advanced by the researcher to fix these issues is to start by developing easily implementable activity programs to promote older people participation and encourage the recruitment of volunteers.

The second research report⁴² is based on a survey submitted to the staff in charge of recreation at day services for older people throughout Hokkaido,

⁴⁰ Hokkaido's tale of 1.2 million years; The culture and recent history of the Ainu; The secret of Hokkaido's unique identity; Towards our time; The ecosystems of Hokkaido.

⁴¹ Aoyagi 2016.

⁴² Aoyagi 2020.

with the goal of clarifying possible issues at facilities for older adults: the findings suggested that these centers lack an adequate number of recreation staff. Even though slightly less than 70% of them used museums for their activities, they encountered a series of challenges: lack of museums in excursion range, lack of available information about museums, and lack of rest areas within the museums. The researcher suggested that museums should undertake specific measures depending on the target audience, which she divided into three groups: the first are the museum users that visit for reminiscence purposes, and for them she suggests improving publicity and seeking advice on barrier-free facilities; the second are the museum users who do not visit for reminiscence purposes, and for them interactive exhibits are recommended; the last is the segment who does not visit museums at all, and for it the researcher suggests that the museums should offer mobile recreation-oriented programs capable of directly visiting older people.

To better understand their needs, the Hokkaido Museum also reached out to thirteen older adults from a day service in Sapporo, to ask them questions. The main outputs of this research indicated that older visitors wish to visit an accessible and wheelchair friendly museum, and experience the works on display while sitting down in a comfortable seating area. Their main purpose is recreation, so it is very important also to propose exhibitions in line with their tastes.

Another questionnaire, aimed at older adult centers in Hokkaido (208 respondents), indicated that the most interesting display in museums for the respondents turned out to be “Living of the good old Showa (1925-1988)” with 85.6% of positive answers, followed by “Nature experienced by the elderly” (51.9%) and “Experience-based display: a sound, a smell” (47.6%). As far as the services provided by museums, the most chosen option was recreation of a business trip (49%), followed by supporting assistance (44.7%), recommending visit routes (43.8%), and increase of experience-based display (41.3%).

To further meet the needs of older visitors, in 2024 the Hokkaido Museum had taken their suggestions into account and offered an alternative exhibition in parallel with the main collection. The exhibition ran from April to August and was focused on the use of sheep’s wool, featuring documents and videos from the archives related to activities undertaken by the museum in collaboration with older citizens from Hokkaido.

2.2.3. Reminiscence method, The Showa Era Lifestyle Museum (Kitanagoya City)

The Kitanagoya City Museum of History and Folklore, now known as the Showa Era Lifestyle Museum, is located north of the city of Nagoya in the Aichi Prefecture, and was first established in 1990 with the goal of offering lifelong learning to the citizens by providing local history exhibitions from the Jomon period (about 5000 BCE) and lifestyle trends, such as occupations and

customs, from the Meiji Era (1868-1912) and the Showa Era. This period takes its name from the reign of Emperor Showa, which spanned from December 25, 1926, to January 7, 1989. Over time the museum's collection focused on the Middle Showa Era (1955-1964), which marks the beginning of the present way of life in Japan. The permanent exhibition is extraordinarily rich and includes approximately 10,000 daily life items from the museum's collection of more than 150,000 items that can trigger visitors' nostalgic memories from these times.

Given the nature of the materials exhibited, the museum naturally attracted a certain kind of visitor: local older residents. With the goal of activating the brain and revitalizing the mind and body, in 2002 the museum began a collaboration with professionals from the welfare, education, and medical fields. They adopted the reminiscence method and applied it at the Kato family residence (a nearby old Meiji-era home registered as a national tangible cultural property), where the Kitanagoya City Reminiscence Center was later established. The reminiscence method⁴³ is a non-pharmacological approach introduced in Europe and the United States of America in the Sixties and aims to stimulate visitors' discussions, anecdotes, and memories by using photographs and daily utensils familiar to the people involved in the visit (Fig. 3).

The project, which involves synergistically both the Reminiscence Center and the museum, has been set up with the approval of the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, and is now entering its twenty third year of activity. To rate its efficiency a series of evaluation indices are used (such as cognitive function, quality of life, degree of withdrawal from society), along with measurements taken before and after the participation at the reminiscence method school and the museum-welfare collaboration activities. After attending the reminiscence school at the center, participants maintain their health by continuing their efforts as members of the Ikiikitai, the association of the Reminiscence School graduates, in the role of museum educators during the intergenerational exchange workshops that bring them together with local children. This is the goal of the project: to provide lifelong learning from an early age to the golden years for each of Kitanagoya City's citizens.

In a similar effort to the one of the National Museums of Liverpool initiative *House of Memories'* Memory Box, the Showa Era Lifestyle Museum also lends out boxes containing nostalgic items from the collection, called Reminiscence Kits. These memory triggers are particularly useful for involving older people that cannot physically go to the museum and stimulate a dialogue, making them talk about the things that they care about.

⁴³ The Showa Era Lifestyle Museum, <<https://showa-era-lifestyle-museum.city.kitanagoya.lg.jp/reminiscence-method/>>, 01.07.2025.



Fig. 3. A moment from a Reminiscence School that took place at the Reminiscence Center (Kitanagoya City)

2.2.4. *ArtsAlive (Tokyo)*

After discussing three different programs put in place directly by the museum's staff, it is worth briefly addressing the topic from another point of view: the one of an external organization which takes its creative ageing projects to the museums, named ArtsAlive.

ArtsAlive is a non-profit organization founded in Tokyo by Yoko Hayashi in 2009, with the aim of empowering all people through art, regardless of their age, including older adults with cognitive challenges. The organization has developed *ARTRIP*, an art program based on scientific evidence for individuals with cognitive impairments, offering also training seminars for the program facilitators. These seminars are especially important since one of the main goals of ArtsAlive is to disseminate the basic concept and procedures behind *ARTRIP*, giving professionals the possibility of replicating the program in their reference community. Another goal is to create a link between Japanese

art museums and health services, involving both doctors from the local area and professional caregivers⁴⁴.

ArtsAlive had a particularly significant role following the Covid-19 outbreak, given that loneliness and isolation increased greatly because of the restrictions that were caused by the pandemic. To tackle these issues, the local governments of Japan were required to take measures and *ARTRIP* was chosen by the Cabinet Secretariat in fiscal year 2023 as a model project, being so effective in preventing social issues. The beneficial effects of *ARTRIP* are mostly related to the interactive nature of the program, which facilitates dialogue and new encounters between older adults that usually have difficulties in their social sphere: art conductors are properly trained to create a safe space where everyone feels welcomed, and therefore in most cases the participants are eager to come back for another meeting⁴⁵.

In 2023, the organization, thanks to the funding of the Nippon Foundation, conducted a survey regarding the implementation of art-based programs for people affected by dementia and their families in Japanese museums. The questionnaire was submitted to 412 institutions across Japan and got the significant amount of 150 replies. The museums' managers were asked whether they had a dementia-targeted program in place or not, the reasons for not being able to propose one, and their willingness to adopt one within the year. Among them, 13 museums (8.6% of valid responses) wanted to implement a program for people with dementia, while 57 museums (38%) said they would like to consider implementing one. The reasons behind their inability to implement one were lack of funding (49.6%), not enough time to dedicate to the project (32.8%), uncertainty about how to adopt a similar program (48.8%), lack of a person in charge of the project (49.6%), and lack of information about how to approach people with dementia (48%). Among the respondents, all of them were interested in the topic, but 67.6% stated that they had no trained education staff or budget, making it difficult to plan a similar endeavor⁴⁶. The program, given its constant goal of improving, periodically holds meetings involving both the chair, Yoko Hayashi, and art curators from museums in which *ARTRIP* took place. These encounters are important to present outcomes and shortcomings of the program, together with future challenges, given that several museums that have started to propose *ARTRIP* are willing to insert it permanently in their cultural offer⁴⁷.

⁴⁴ Musei Toscani per l'Alzheimer, *Musei Resilienti: esperienze in Giappone. Intervista a Yoko Hayashi*, <<https://www.museitoscanialzheimer.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/MTA-Yoko-Hayashi.pdf>>, 01.07.2025.

⁴⁵ ArtsAlive, *ARTRIP* project, <<http://www.artsalivejp.org/2622/>>, 01.07.2025.

⁴⁶ ArtsAlive, *Results of the survey on programs for people with dementia in art museums*, <<http://www.artsalivejp.org/2510/>>, 01.07.2025.

⁴⁷ ArtsAlive, *Review of the implementation of Art Lip*, <<http://www.artsalivejp.org/2694/>>, 01.07.2025.

More recently *ARTRIP* was conducted at ten art museums of the Akita Prefecture, and the Akita Prefectural Museum has decided to develop their access programs for older people, including those with dementia, relying on *ARTRIP*. The local educational board which runs the museum has decided to implement *ARTRIP* as a core program and has set up a three-year project to disseminate it throughout Akita Prefecture, involving art museums as well as outreach programs at nursing homes.

In addition, a three-year contract with the city of Yokohama was signed to disseminate *ARTRIP* at care facilities: to this aim, professional caregivers are being trained so that they can conduct activities at their workplace on a regular basis.

3. *Methodology*

As confirmed by the Statistics Bureau of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications⁴⁸, Japan holds the highest percentage of older population in the world at 29.1%, with 36 million of its 125 million citizens being over 65 years of age. Italy follows as the second nation in this ranking, with 23.6% of its 60 million population being older individuals. Recognizing the significant social role of museums in promoting community engagement and cultural participation, it was appropriate to further investigate the accessibility and inclusivity of Japanese museums concerning their older audience members. To guide this investigation, the present study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How accessible and inclusive are Japanese museums for older adults?

RQ2. What measures can be implemented to enhance their experience?

To do so, an online survey was created; the following parts of this report share findings. The questions used to create an online survey on the Google Forms platform were written in English but, with the help of Kirin Hirai (master's student at Tokyo University of Arts Geidai), a Japanese version was also developed. The survey consisted of 15 questions, mostly with fixed answer options, but in some cases also allowing for the respondent's own input.

Once completed, the link to the questionnaire was sent, along with a recommendation letter written by Professor Michiaki Koshikawa (Tokyo University of Arts Geidai), using a mailing list based mainly on the museums belonging to the Japanese Council of Art Museums⁴⁹. Its members are divided into

⁴⁸ Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Statistics Bureau, *A Statistical Overview of Older Adults in Japan*, <<https://www.stat.go.jp/data/topics/topi1291.html>>, 01.07.2025.

⁴⁹ Japanese Council of Art Museums, <https://www.zenbi.jp/index_en.php>, 01.07.2025.

10 blocks: Hokkaido, Tohoku, Kanto, Tokyo, Hoku-Shinetsu, Tokai, Kinki, Chugoku, Shikoku, and Kyushu. A fax was instead sent to those who did not provide a valid e-mail address.

Data collection began on May 27th, 2024, and ended on July 10th, 2024, reaching 111 completed questionnaires by Japanese museum managers. The survey was completely anonymous and voluntary, with the opportunity of submitting the willingness to be updated and successively contacted by the researcher.

Following data collection, the responses were exported (using Google Sheets), then reviewed and cleaned prior to analysis. The primary analytical approach involved quantifying the frequency of responses for each survey question. This allowed for the identification of the most common answers and emerging trends, facilitating a better understanding of the current state of museum accessibility related to each specific question. Data visualization tools (such as charts created in Microsoft Excel) were used to help identify and illustrate patterns within the dataset.

These findings were also used, together with the most interesting suggestions from museum managers, to elaborate the short series of recommendations included in this article and aimed at Japanese museums that are willing to improve their degree of accessibility and inclusivity for older visitors.

This research acknowledges several limitations. First, positive response bias may have influenced the results, as respondents might have presented their museums in a more favorable light. Anonymity was emphasized to mitigate this bias, but its complete elimination is challenging. Second, selection bias is present due to the reliance on publicly available contact information (primarily the Japanese Council of Art Museums members list), potentially excluding museums with fewer resources or different organizational structures. Specifically, smaller regional or community-run museums lacking dedicated administrative staff or online presence might be underrepresented, potentially distorting findings towards larger, better-resourced institutions that are more likely to be part of formal networks and have accessible contact details. This could limit the generalizability of the findings to all Japanese museums. Third, the language barrier could have introduced bias, as respondents needed to comprehend the survey questions in English. While a Japanese translation and cover letter were provided, it's possible that nuances were lost in translation or that museums with English-speaking staff were more likely to participate. This might distort the sample towards larger or more internationally oriented institutions. Further research could explore these limitations through qualitative methods or by targeting a broader range of museums.

4. *Japanese museums for older people survey: research results*

4.1. *Profile of respondents*

Thanks to the mailing list containing mainly museums belonging to the Japanese Council of Art Museums it was possible to obtain a total number of 111 respondents willing to participate in the research.

Most of them (22.5%, 25) manage an institution based in the Tokyo prefecture (東京都) but the answers came from museums located in 38 Japanese prefectures out of 47 (Fig. 4). The prefecture of Aichi (愛知県) was the second most prolific (7.2%, 8) with Ibaraki (茨城県) being the third (6.3%, 7). The remaining contributions came from Nagano (長野県) (5.4%, 6), Shizuoka (静岡県), Tochigi (栃木県) (4.5%, 5), Fukuoka (福岡県), Hiroshima (広島県), Toyama (富山県), Niigata (新潟県), Kanagawa (神奈川県), Yamagata (山形県), Iwate (岩手県) (2.7%, 3), Kagoshima (鹿児島県), Ehime (愛媛県), Hyōgo (兵庫県), Osaka (大阪府), Mie (三重県), Yamanashi (山梨県), Chiba (千葉県), Aomori (青森県), Hokkaidō (北海道) (1.8%, 2), Miyazaki (宮崎県), Saga (佐賀県), Kagawa (香川県), Tokushima (徳島県), Yamaguchi (山口県), Shimane (島根県), Tottori (鳥取県), Wakayama (和歌山県), Nara (奈良県), Kyoto (京都府), Gifu (岐阜県), Ishikawa (石川県), Saitama (埼玉県), Gunma (群馬県), Akita (秋田県), Miyagi (宮城県) (0.9%, 1).

A significant majority of the data came from museums run by municipalities (81%, 59) of the 73 respondents who specified their museum type identified as such. This strong representation suggests that the findings of this study may be particularly relevant to municipal museums in Japan. Municipal art museums contributed with half of the answers (50.6%, 37), while municipal museums (not related to art) were just under one third (30.1%, 22). National art museums (4.1%, 3) and national museums (2.7%, 2) represented 6.8% (5) of the remaining respondents, while corporate museums reached 4.1% (3). Further museum typologies with only one entry were a university museum, a public interest incorporated foundation museum, a private art museum, a prefectural museum, a prefectural art museum and a cultural center.

Museum collections, on the other hand, were more diverse. Taking into consideration a sample of 147 answers, modern art (29.2%, 43) and contemporary art (23.8%, 35) represented the most common typology of cultural items preserved in the museums, with culture and history (17.6%, 26) just behind. Other data came from institutions that can be labelled as traditional art museum (9.5%, 14), ceramics museum (8.1%, 12), science and technology museum (3.4%, 5), daily objects museum (2.7%, 4), photographic art museum, open-air sculpture museum, manga museum, literary museum, industrial museum, folklore museum, film museum, and society and current affairs museum (0.6%, 1).

The survey respondents (111) represented museums of varying sizes based on

annual visitor numbers. While a small percentage came from institutions with fewer than 5,000 (2.7%, 3) per year or between 5,000 and 10,000 visitors (7.2%, 8), there was strong representation from medium-sized museums, registering 10,000-25,000 visitors annually (27.9%, 31) and medium-large ones, with 25,000-50,000 visitors (21.6%, 24). Notably, the largest sample of respondents (40.5%, 45) represented museums receiving over 50,000 visitors each year.

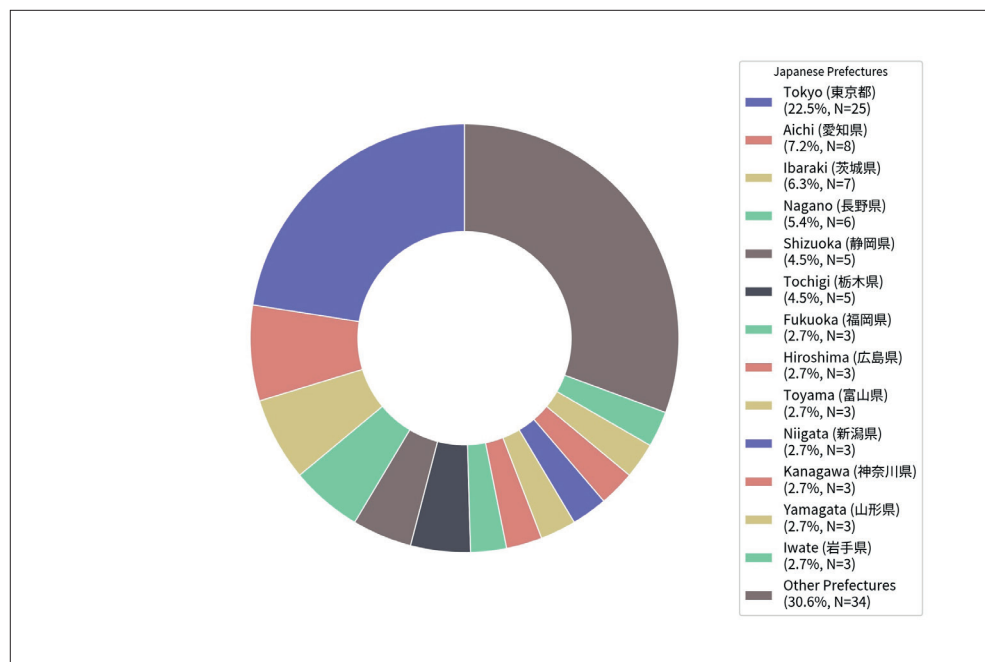


Fig. 4. Prefectural breakdown of museum survey respondents in Japan (Source: author's elaboration)

4.2. Findings on Japanese museums for older people online survey

4.2.1. Percentage of older visitors

Respondents were asked to quantify the annual number of older visitors in relation to the overall number of entrances, with the aim of better understanding and concretizing the impact of this part of their audience. The total amount of the answers was 111, but 24 museums declared that they did not have this kind of data available: as a first key finding of the research a suggestion for Japanese museums would be to improve visitor tracking to analyze them and, with the collected data, be able to customize their cultural offering to the needs of the audience that they are referring to.

The gathered sample of 87 answers, anyway, allowed to reach the purpose of the question. A very small number of museum managers claim that older people constitute less than 5% (4.6%, 4) or between 5% and 10% (6.9%, 6) of total visitors, while 32.2% (28) confirm that older people represent between 10% and 25% of total annual visitors.

The most chosen option by the respondents was that older visitors are between 25% and 50% of the total audience (33.3%, 29), an amount that, if we add the 20 museums that have chosen the option “more than 50% of total visitors” (23%), leads to the second key finding of this study (Fig. 5). It is safe to say that older visitors represent a significant portion of the total audience of Japanese museums. The collected data confirms that for more than half of the museums involved (56.3%), they constitute a percentage ranging from 25% to more than 50% of their visitors. Considering this, the importance of evolving and adapting the museums’ cultural offer to this part of the audience is very clear as every change in this direction would impact on a large number of people already familiar with museums, with the possibility of attracting new older visitors not previously interested.

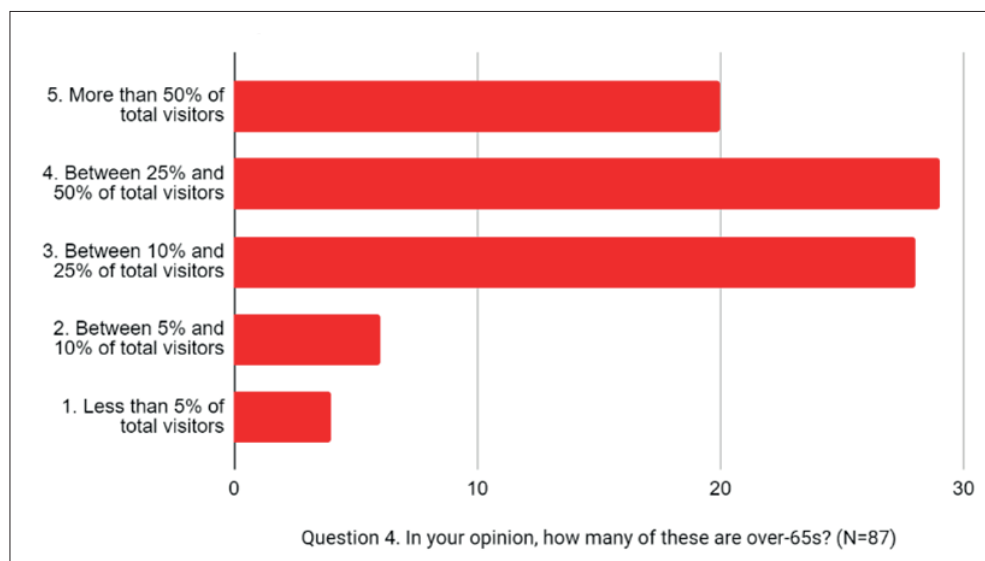


Fig. 5. Japanese museums for older people online survey: percentage of older visitors (Source: author's elaboration)

4.2.2. Obstacles encountered by older visitors during their visit

Museum managers were asked to choose among the five most frequent obstacles that older people can encounter during their visit. In this case the final data sample consisted of 183 answers, since it was possible to choose more

than one option, but 23 of them were not considered since the option “data not available” was chosen, so the actual sample is 160.

32.5% (52) of respondents indicated that older visitors encounter difficulties with psycho-physical/sensory accessibility, such as inadequate lighting, small or low-contrast text, and insufficient rest areas. 20.6% (33) who reported architectural barriers further underscores this point, highlighting the need for museums to actively address these obstacles to ensure inclusivity. A similar number (20%, 32) indicates difficulties related to accessing services (e.g., lack of dedicated parking, suitable toilets); difficulties in moving within the museum’s spaces (16.2%, 26); and difficulties related to linguistic and/or cultural accessibility (e.g., guides, audiovisual content) (10.6%, 17). The last category is considered the least frequent obstacle for a pleasant visit to the museum. It is therefore fair to say that improving accessibility on the psycho-physical level would make a difference for older visitors, given that one museum out of three is not properly prepared to welcome them. This third key finding could be really useful, since it is quite easy and not very expensive to make improvements, even small ones, such as providing numerous and comfortable rest areas in which to spend some time to relax and watch the artworks or objects without rushing, reviewing the lighting system, and reconsidering captions and informative panels with older people’s needs in mind. These actions could be an important starting point. Beyond the pre-defined options, open responses from museum managers consistently highlighted digital accessibility as a distinct and significant concern. Several noted that online reservation systems and digital services pose substantial challenges for older visitors, who may be less familiar or comfortable with these technologies. Difficulties included navigating websites, using online ticketing platforms, and accessing digital exhibition information. The lack of non-digital alternatives (like phone reservations or easy in-person ticketing) was explicitly cited as creating barriers. Furthermore, the physical distance from public transportation was mentioned as another practical obstacle, impacting ease of access.

4.2.3. Special services for older visitors

Each of the 111 respondents were questioned about their services, asking whether they included special services designed to match older visitors’ needs or not. The overall majority answered negatively (68.5%, 76) but a positive sign can be found in 31.5% (35) that gave a positive answer. When further questioned about the kind of services available in their museum, managers made it clear that accessible facilities (42.1%, 16) and restrooms and/or benches (42.1%, 16) are the most common options, while special guided tours (7.8%, 3) and creative practical workshops (7.8%, 3) are provided but only in a few cases. In this case the concept that emerges as the fourth key finding for Japanese museums is the chance of improving considerably their degree of inclusivity towards the older visitors by adding to their cultural offer, along

with the regular activities, guided tours and creative workshops following the good examples that are already present in the country.

4.2.4. Support for older people with disabilities

Respondents were then asked to state their degree of support for older visitors with visual and/or auditory disabilities. 76.6% (85) of Japanese museum managers claimed not to offer this kind of service, with only 23.4% (26) providing it. Those who responded positively, when asked to further discuss their methods of support, divided their choices (31) almost equally between the options provided: tactile models (29%, 9), large-print captions and informational panels (25.8%, 8), audio description of each displayed item (25.8%, 8), and dedicated tour guides (19.3%, 6). Using the provided open answer question option, respondents suggested more helpful means of support, such as allowing the entrance of assistance dogs; offering Braille and tactile chart guidebook; making magnifying glasses available; including a touch art corner within the museum spaces; approaching older visitors, if needed, using written communication.

4.2.5. Discounts for older visitors

When asked about offering financial incentives or discounts specifically for older visitors (111), 45% (50) of museum managers confirmed they provide such support. On the other hand, the majority (55%, 61) stated that no specific financial benefits for older visitors were available at their institutions. The most common benefit provided among the collected data (52) is a discount on the entrance fee (57.6%, 30), but a significant number of museums (42.3%, 22) offer free entrance to older visitors. Managers, however, used this question to give additional suggestions that could be useful to their colleagues: the discount could be applied to older residents only; a reduced admission fee could apply to visitors aged 65-74, while those aged 75 and older receive free entrance; admission for older adults can be guaranteed for special exhibitions only, or just for a specific day of the week (ideally the quietest and least busy, to provide a comfortable experience for older visitors).

4.2.6. Priority of improving accessibility for older visitors

When asked about their priorities, respondents (111) almost split in two: 47.7% (53) pointing out that improving the degree of accessibility for older visitors for them is indeed a priority, while 52.3% (58) answered negatively (Fig. 6). Subsequently, the collected data (85) gave a more detailed view of the efforts already put in place by the museums: 29.4% (25) improved the physical accessibility of the museum spaces, 20% (17) increased the offer of cultural activities aimed at the older part of the audience, 28.2% (24) improved the promotion of the museum's cultural activities and 22.3% (19) offered improved linguistic and/or cultural accessibility. Further suggestions were related to ticket sales, which,

to be accessible for older users, should be available not only by website but also at the entrance of the museum, and physical accessibility, which can be improved by offering a wheelchair rent or, in the case of a museum with exterior spaces, by making efforts to make outdoor walking easier.

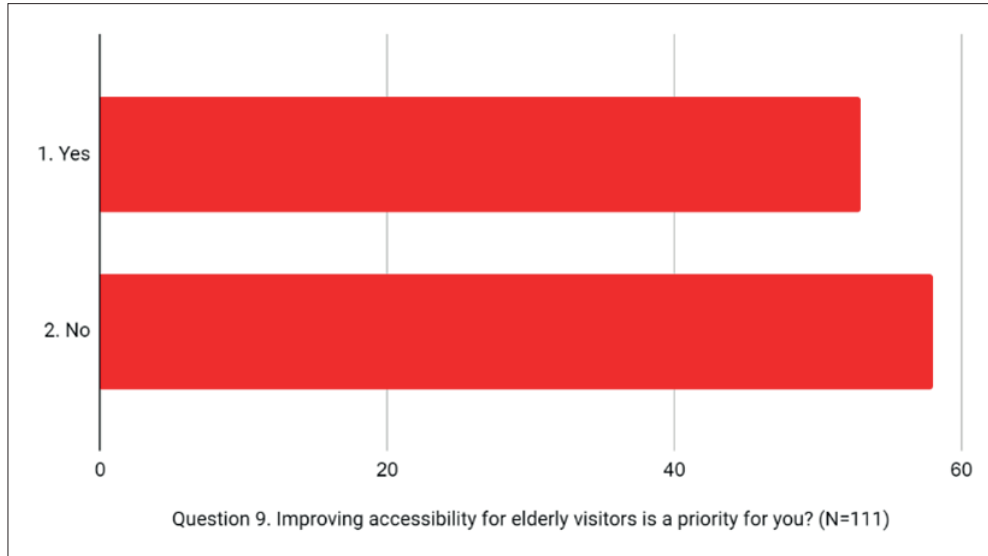


Fig. 6. Japanese museums for older people online survey: priority of improving accessibility for older visitors (Source: author's elaboration)

4.2.7. Usual activities for older people during museum visits

Respondents were asked to indicate the activities that older visitors usually carry out during their time in the museum. In this case, the collected data (211) gave a clear answer: this category of visitors mostly visits exhibitions or permanent collections by themselves (44%, 93), but it must be pointed out that these numbers can be influenced by a lack of suitable activities for them to choose from. In fact, the remaining options reached 56% of the total answers, with the participation in cultural and educational activities managed by the museum (21%, 45) being the first choice, attendance to special events the second (18%, 38), and involvement in guided tours the third (16.5%, 35). 13 museums did not have this kind of data available. Museum managers hinted at other activities not covered by the survey's option, such as doing volunteer work; purchasing goods at the museum shop; being involved in their grandchildren's education; using the museum cafe or renting the gallery to hold personal exhibitions.

4.2.8. Museum's cultural activities promotion

Promoting the cultural activities put in place by the museum is a very crucial task, and respondents were asked how they get in touch with the older part of their audience. Collected data (164) pointed out that 37.8% (62) of museums are still using traditional methods of communication (e.g., newspapers, flyers), while 36% (59) do not organize promotions divided by age group. 21.3% (35) implemented the use of digital communication channels (e.g., social media, newsletters) and 4.8% (8) attended special events or initiatives. Some museum managers suggested alternative solutions to reach the older audience, such as direct contact with the city hall's care division for older adults or efforts to build a community. This broad and interesting point of view truly incorporates the final goal of this research: if an older adult feels directly involved in the cultural life of their surroundings, their wellbeing will naturally benefit from more dynamic and shared activities.

4.2.9. Museum's cultural offer for older visitors

Each museum has a different cultural offer, aimed at different audiences. Respondents were asked to indicate if they had specific activities for older visitors (122), and the response was overwhelming: 66.3% (81) do not. This key finding contrasts with previous discoveries, where the research proved that a significant part of the museum audience is composed of older people. An adequate understanding of the needs and tastes of this wide segment of visitors is necessary, followed by a progressive implementation of suitable activities. Nonetheless, a good number of Japanese museums has already cultural activities in place for older people: 9.8% (12) host thematic exhibitions, 8.2% (10) offer creative workshops, 5.7% (7) propose meetings with experts, 5.7% (7) hold slow guided tours, and 4.1% (5) organize musical events.

4.2.10. Contribution of older people to the museum activities

In the previous questions older adults were always seen from a passive perspective, but this is not necessarily always the case: as we have seen, older people have plenty to offer and in this regard museum managers were asked to give their opinion (241) on how and if an older person could contribute to the museum's activities. Two options stood out: by working as a volunteer (30.2%, 73), and by sharing life experiences and transferring cultural knowledge (30.2%, 73). These two ideas are closely related: older people are successful volunteers largely due to the wisdom and experience they've gained over time. Furthermore, 19.5% (47) of the respondents believe that older people could help to organize cultural activities and 17.4% (42) suggests that older people can support cultural activities economically. Only 2.4% (6) do not think that older adults can support museum activities.

4.2.11. *Older people's participation in cultural activities*

One of the key questions of this research was connected to the degree of participation of older visitors in the museum's activities in comparison to other age groups. It was previously underlined that the percentage of older people visiting museums is high, but does this part of the audience engage with the cultural activities proposed by the institution? Collected data (78) provide a positive answer: for 66.7% (52) of the respondents the percentage of older people who participate in the cultural activities offered by the museum, compared to the other age groups, is higher. 17.9% (14) stated that the percentage is similar, while 15.2% (12) claimed that it is lower (Fig. 7). 33 museums did not have this kind of data available.

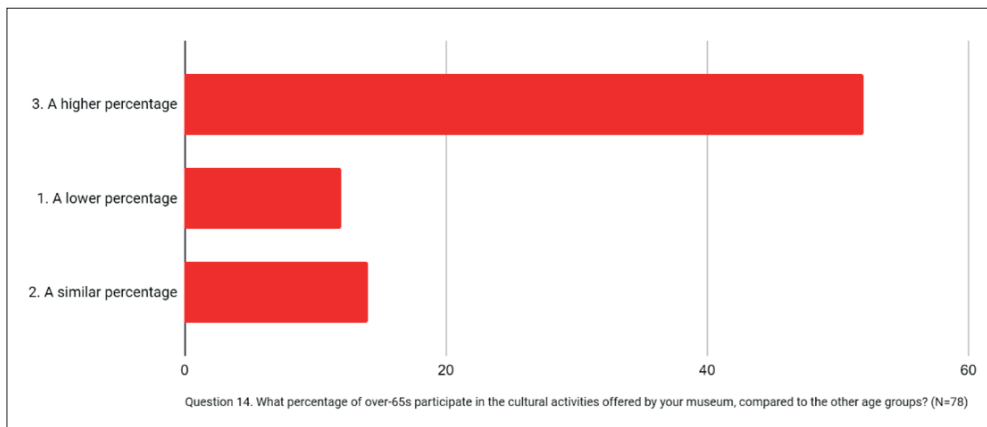


Fig. 7. Japanese museums for older people online survey: older visitors' cultural activities participation (Source: author's elaboration)

4.2.12. *Older people involvement in planning museum's activities*

The survey's final question explored the potential for older adults to actively participate in planning museum activities, reinforcing the concept of museums as third places: social hubs beyond home and work. A significant 47.5% (67) of respondents favored involving older adults as volunteers, leveraging their experience and knowledge. Additionally, 24.1% (34) suggested organizing meetings with older adults to assess their needs, and 19.1% (27) proposed establishing collaborative workgroups between older adults and museum staff. These findings strongly support the idea that museums can support social interaction, civic engagement, and a sense of belonging for older adults, key characteristics of a healthy and active lifestyle. However, a small minority (9.2%, 13) still viewed older adults passively, highlighting an area for further development in museum philosophy and practice.

5. *Conclusions and recommendations for Japanese museums*

This study, through a comparative lens focused on Italy's pioneering models, evaluated the accessibility and inclusivity of Japanese museums for older adults, a key demographic in Japan's rapidly ageing society.

A survey of 111 museum managers across 38 prefectures, combined with case studies, reveals both strengths and gaps in museum services for this audience. Key findings underscore that while older people constitute a significant portion of museum visitors (over 25% in 56.3% of surveyed institutions), many museums still lack tailored activities (66.3% offer none) and face persistent psycho-physical accessibility barriers (cited by 32.5% of respondents). At the same time, older adults show high engagement in cultural activities (66.7% participate more than other age groups), and successful initiatives, like the *Zuttobi* project or ArtsAlive, demonstrate the great potential of inclusive programming.

These insights show that museums have two key opportunities: first, to contribute positively to the wellbeing of the growing older population, and second, to strengthen their function as essential community hubs. However, challenges such as limited funding (e.g., 49.6% cited by ArtsAlive's survey respondents), staffing shortages, and digital barriers must be addressed. Furthermore, an operational challenge emerged from the survey: many museums frequently lack specific data about their older visitors, such as demographics or participation rates in activities. This consistent data gap makes it difficult to systematically understand and effectively respond to the needs of this key audience. It is also important to recall the potential selection bias identified in the methodology: the findings, while insightful, may particularly reflect the situations in the larger, better-resourced (often municipal) institutions that constituted a significant portion of the survey respondents.

Based on the survey data and exemplary practices, the following recommendations provide practical, evidence-based strategies to improve accessibility and inclusivity. Each is linked to specific findings, includes implementation steps, and considers resource constraints to ensure feasibility, allowing Japanese museums to better serve their older visitors. It is important to stress that, while this study focuses solely on the Japanese context, its findings on engaging older adults and the proposed strategies for enhancing accessibility and tailored programming hold valuable insights for museums and cultural institutions globally. Particularly in other nations experiencing similar demographic shifts towards an ageing population, the principles outlined here can lead to broader efforts to provide inclusive cultural participation and strengthen the social role of these cultural institutions.

Recommendation 1. Track visitor data to customize museum offerings

- *Findings:* 24 of 111 museums lack data on older visitors, limiting their ability to customize experiences.

- *Action:* museums should systematically track visitor demographics (particularly age) to understand and meet older people's needs.
- *Implementation:* use simple tools like exit surveys (paper-based for older people), or partnerships with local care homes or cultural associations to reach older adults.
- *Feasibility:* low-cost and scalable, requiring minimal staff time; data can be used while compiling funding applications to justify initiatives for older visitors.

Recommendation 2. Improve overall psycho-physical accessibility

- *Findings:* 32.5% of respondents had pointed out psycho-physical barriers, such as inadequate lighting and insufficient rest areas, as the most significant obstacle for older adult visitors.
- *Action:* to create a more welcoming and accessible environment, museums should prioritize addressing these barriers. This will not only benefit older adults but also improve the experience for visitors of all ages and abilities.
- *Implementation:* practical steps include increasing the availability of seating by adding benches, improving visibility by adjusting lighting, and ensuring readability by enlarging caption font sizes; a medium-sized museum could pilot these changes in a single gallery to assess their impact and gather feedback from older visitors through a suggestion box or brief survey.
- *Feasibility:* these improvements can be implemented incrementally; museums can also explore partnerships with local businesses, such as seeking sponsorships from furniture stores to donate or subsidize the cost of benches.

Recommendation 3. Build an older people-inclusive community

- *Findings:* older people can excel as volunteers (30.2%) and knowledge-sharers (30.2%), yet few museums involve them in planning (9.2% oppose it).
- *Action:* actively involve older people in planning and volunteering, encouraging the formation of regular visitor groups.
- *Implementation:* create an advisory group composed of older people (5-10 members) to co-plan events, or establish a volunteer program like Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, where older people share personal stories.
- *Feasibility:* recruit via flyers or local centers; scale up with stipends if funding allows.

Recommendation 4. Prioritize older people in cultural programming

- *Findings:* older people are a major (25-50% of visitors in 56.3% of muse-

ums) and highly engaged audience (66.7% participate more than younger users), yet only 7.8% of museums offer special tours or workshops.

- *Action*: museums should evolve their offerings to capitalize on this engaged part of the audience.
- *Implementation*: replicate successful models like Hokkaido Museum's sheep's wool exhibition, co-designed with older visitors, or introduce low-budget reminiscence sessions using existing collections; network with museums like the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum to share resources and expertise.
- *Feasibility*: start with pilot programs using current staff and volunteers, seeking small grants (e.g., from local governments) to expand based on initial success.

Recommendation 5. Overcome digital barriers

- *Findings*: managers note older people struggle with online reservations, a barrier not quantified but recurrent in open responses.
- *Action*: ensure fair access by offering older people age-friendly alternatives, guaranteeing inclusivity in this digital age.
- *Implementation*: provide a telephone booking line staffed during peak hours and simplify websites.
- *Feasibility*: low-cost and quick to implement; train existing staff or volunteers to manage, which avoids the need for new hires.

Japanese museums stand ready to embrace a future where they are even more central to the wellbeing and connection of older adults. This study highlights their immense potential and provides practical, achievable recommendations to help museums become truly inclusive third places. We encourage museums to build on their strengths, experiment with these ideas, and share their outcomes. By taking these steps, Japanese museums can confidently lead the way, becoming vibrant pillars of the community and setting a powerful example of cultural engagement for an ageing world.

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