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# Upholding Diversity in Cultural Spaces

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Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art

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# Upholding Diversity in Cultural Spaces

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**Keywords** Cultural representation; Community engagement; Diversity; Inclusion; Cultural awareness

**Abstract** This article examines the responsibilities museums of the future will have in connecting with communities of diverse cultures through an increase in employing people of color, contributing to a plan for community vitality, and increasing diverse cultural representation in exhibition planning and programming. Preparation for the next generation requires consideration of the reality that in less than fifty years a demographic shift in the United States will result in a neotenic American population with brown and black people representing the majority. How will cultural institutions and arts spaces respond to this expeditive racial shift and implement an inclusive and diverse agenda? The focus lies within the duty to serve the public as cultural gatekeepers. The future of museums must be challenged to serve as cultural safe spaces, work to attract and engage diverse audiences, and bolster society for the common good of a multicultural global community.

**About the Author** Stacey R. Queen is currently the education associate at The Amistad Center for Art & Culture at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut. Prior to her position she was the education programs coordinator at The National Great Blacks In Wax Museum in Baltimore, Maryland and a museum educator at the Maryland Historical Society. In addition, she has over twenty years of experience as an educator and was a visual arts teacher in the Baltimore City Public School System for four years. She has conducted research on the visitor experience in museums and creative spaces at The Baltimore Museum of Art; Daughters of the American Revolution Museum, Washington D.C.; The Louvre, Paris, France; Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France; the Capitoline Museums, Rome, Italy; and Vatican Museums, Rome, Italy. She can be contacted at: [staceyqueen@gmail.com](mailto:staceyqueen@gmail.com).

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While museums today do an extraordinary job of collecting, preserving, and exhibiting works of art and artifacts, and offering a comprehensive breadth of public programs and exhibitions, museums of the future need to look for greater opportunities to employ a multicultural and diverse staff, interpret difficult social issues through exhibitions, and engage a global community to effectively shape conceptions of diverse cultures. Many fine art museums, historic sites, and commercial galleries are doing such work; however, in order for cultural spaces to continue implementing sustainable agendas, progressive missions, and effectual strategic plans they must shift with growing social, political, and cultural contentions that smite communities and rob them of becoming flowering sites of aggrandizement.

Consider the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA) allowing space for the creation of culture evolution while addressing pressing social and political issues across the African Diaspora,<sup>1</sup> the Institute of Arab & Islamic Art where they promote dialogue between cultures,<sup>2</sup> and the Andy Warhol Museum that offers a gender-inclusive space for LGBTQ+ youth.<sup>3</sup> Each institution is doing extraordinary work, using art as a vehicle to engage, connect, inspire and empower visitors, staff, and volunteers to undertake notable change. They are

doing the work that needs to be done for community vitality by embracing people of different races, religious beliefs, and sexual orientations; doing acts of kindness that help to comfort others; and doing good and thoughtful deeds for those in need of hope. Twenty-first-century cultural spaces serve a global community and allow museums to create a world of inclusive compassion for all by doing what is right and just. This outlook will allow museums of the future to be adaptable, sustainable, and forward thinking for generations to come.

Historically, the modern American museum's primary focus was Eurocentric and served a predominately white audience who were interested in studying and viewing art, artifacts, and curiosities while being less interested in a visitor experience that was inclusive and diverse, setting the tone for what we know today as the twenty-first-century museum.<sup>4</sup> Denise Meringolo states, "prior to the twentieth century, elites largely dictated the form and content of American culture. Over the course of the late nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, however, less wealthy, less well-educated, and more racially and ethnically diverse Americans gradually acquired more leisure time and some disposable income."<sup>5</sup> This pivotal shift in cultural content established the framework for today's museums.

While twenty-first-century museums have become a primary destination for visitors of all ages and ethnic backgrounds, the missions of cultural institutions must continue to be visitor-centric and serve to celebrate diversity, inclusion, and equity. Every visitor who enters the doors of a museum brings their own biases, beliefs, and prior knowledge to what they encounter in exhibitions. Curators with the best intentions assemble exhibitions that are not always representative of less wealthy, less well-educated, and racially diverse, visitors today. The trajectory of the work done by content specialist gives way for opportunities to consider non-Eurocentric worldviews and present works of art that resonate with all.

If present social, political and economic matters in the United States are an indication of what the future holds, America will continue to tackle arduous issues that affect the entire populace. Concerns with immigration, border security, women's rights, education, underemployment, fair housing, healthcare, gun control, and systemic racism plaguing communities across the nation will continue to elevate stress levels and anxiety of our citizenry. Research shows people of color are affected by social unrest at higher rates than whites and often rely on resources that inadequately meet their needs. According to the American Psychological Association, minority racial groups are more likely to experience multidimensional poverty than their white counterparts, African American unemployment rates are typically double that of Caucasian Americans, and African-Americans and Latinos are more likely to attend high-poverty schools than Asian-Americans and Caucasians.<sup>6</sup> Such dismal statistics will continue to trend upward unless community organizations and cultural institutions take the lead and provide meaningful and sincere resources that address social anxiety.

Community leadership is an area where museums of the future can assist in alleviating social ills by providing safe spaces that address issues that happen right outside the doors. Hashtags like #blacklivesmatter, #metoo, and #neveragain are just a few issues that have been tweeted and posted on numerous social media sites and have shifted the way we discuss racism, sexual assault, and school violence, respectively. While millions of people discuss these matters, museums must become venues for public discourse and alacrity. Future museums

will help to bridge iniquitous social gaps, allowing marginalized, people of color to increase their chances of obtaining culturally and socially fulfilling lives simply by uniting in spaces to discuss and develop action plans to facilitate positive change.

As museums move forward with planning exhibitions and public programs to address community needs, consideration must be given to multicultural audiences and ways to present artifacts and works of art that are reflective and inclusive. In *Mounting Frustration*, Susan E. Cahan writes,

*The tendency to view whiteness as normative persists in the major museums, and even though it may be expressed in ways that are more subtle now than in the 1960's, the result is a similar kind of bigotry: in the assessment of a museum director that an African American candidate for a curatorial position is not the right choice because she's too 'narrow' in her focus, based on the assumption that her only interest is African American art and, even if this were the case, that art by African American artists does not speak about the fullness of human experience; in the perception of a funder that white curators are the most objective evaluators of art because they don't favor a particular cultural group (except perhaps their own, which is not seen as favoritism); in the steady rhythm of the token exhibition.<sup>7</sup>*

In order to accomplish a more inclusive strategic plan in educational programming and curated exhibitions, museum staffs must look just as diverse as their visitors.

Museum directors, collections managers, curators, historians, and researchers are majority white, while visitors are diverse and multicultural. In 2009, an American Association of Museums study showed more than 400,000 people work in America's museums with about a fifty percent split in gender. Museum workforce by race indicates 10.1% identify as Hispanics, 11.7% identify as African American and 79.4% identify as white.<sup>8</sup> A recent report conducted in 2015 by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey shows that out of 278 museums across the country, race/ethnicity percentages in leadership positions are 3% white/Hispanic, 4% African American and 84% white.<sup>9</sup> Overwhelmingly, decisions being made in museums are being made by whites. Certainly, museum leaders are interested in presenting works of art created by people of color and engaging with audiences of color, therefore representation must exist at leadership levels. Strides have been made at some museums, however, there is room for continued growth. Underrepresented minorities have made advancements in the field, some include Valerie Cassel Oliver, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Erin Christoval, Assistant Curator at the Hammer Museum, Ashley James, Assistant Curator for Contemporary Art at the Brooklyn Museum, and Rujeko Hockley, Assistant Curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art are all pushing a multicultural agenda in their museums.<sup>10</sup> Just as leaders of color are achieving great success now, future leadership must be progressively cultivated.

With a rise in African American and non-white Hispanic leadership roles, educational programs at the primary and secondary levels must be available to draw interest to the field. In some cases, elementary and high school programs have developed curricula based on museum work with objectives of preparing students for research and curatorial work as they matriculate. Such programs are at the very nexus of producing the next generation of museum professionals that will usher in new methodologies and praxes for museum exhibitions and educational programming. Capitol Region Education Council (CREC) in Hartford, Connecticut, oversees a school with a museum focused curriculum. Its website states, "Museum Academy provides a comprehensive and challenging museums-based learning environment to students in preschool through grade five. This approach enables students to learn naturally in environments that support guided exploration and discovery, encourage meaningful apprenticeships, and foster interactions between peers, while also creating hands-on artifacts."<sup>11</sup> The hands-on, object-based learning at the primary level allows students to work not only in classroom settings, but museum environments with a framework based on best museum practices and standards. This helps to level the playing field, especially with marginalized students, who hold an interest in the arts and humanities and allows them to gain the skills and knowledge suitable for professional museum work. The curriculum provides a solid foundation for students to visit museums, engage in object-based learning, and learn at an early age, the value of cultural institutions and heritage sites.

Programs in higher education across the country provide students with an excellent foundation and insight into the world of professional museum work. Museum internships also offer experience in the museum field for aspiring professionals. The Getty Museum offers a program specifically for multicultural students, "aiming to encourage greater diversity in the professions related to museums and the visual arts, the Getty Foundation created the Multicultural Undergraduate Internship program in Los Angeles to support substantive, full-time summer work opportunities for college undergraduates from cultural backgrounds that have traditionally been underrepresented in the arts."<sup>12</sup> These high school and college interns are excited and thrilled about the opportunity of working in a museum and bring fresh perspectives to museum projects. Beyond their museum internship experience, each student expressed great interest in supporting the arts and humanities into their college and career years. Museums of the future will benefit greatly from embracing youth professional development. Regardless of what area of museum work students are interested in, there are opportunities for them to gain hands-on learning experiences. This prepares future leaders for museum work. The Native American Museum offers internships in conservation. "the Conservation Office at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) offers several types of training opportunities for students interested in pursuing a career in conservation and for practicing professionals."<sup>13</sup> With so many extraordinary opportunities for high school youth and college scholars to get involved in outstanding training in museum studies, it is unfortunate that there are so few positions held by non-whites. Museums leadership in the future will benefit greatly from a diverse and inclusive staff who will articulate the fullness of a multicultural human experience.

Diverse leadership in museums and cultural spaces broaden worldview approaches to address social -isms and phobias, with individuals who often bring real-life experiences to their roles. Cultural engagement must be driven by meaningful concern for community growth and vitality. Communities can no longer rely on a government that lacks honesty, integrity, and

believe budget cuts for the arts are the answer to 'trimming the fat.' Social plagues will continue to exist in communities of color, if those in position do not change how they plan for effective community impact. Can museums become change agents in the communities they serve? Perhaps, some just want to focus on collecting, preserving, and exhibiting. There is a shift taking place within American culture; museums of the future have to ride the tide and prepare for change.

The social transition ushers in opportunities for museums to connect with other organizations with a shared set of values and beliefs. Collaborations allow museums to offer a variety of services. Partnerships with other institutions create a cohort of organizations serving the good of the public. Building alliances with organizations that provide services for the community that museums are unable to fulfill and creating a community plan to uplift marginalized people will promote virtue and wellness. Future museums must create safe spaces for all people to not only enjoy art, but to also find resources that will enhance their quality of living. Consider other spaces that serve the general public. Hospitals serve people who need medical attention and use the latest technology in medical advancements. Schools and universities teach those who are interested in learning. Churches serve those who desire spiritual uplifting and consolation. Museums must provide sanctimonious spaces for audiences who want to go beyond viewing visual arts and find peace and inspiration for a culturally evolving society. In search of inner peace and a desire to escape the -isms and phobias of society: racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia, cultural spaces can offer solace and peace. Quiet and still galleries are the ideal places to reflect. Yoga and meditation practices will become common as more visitors seek Zen-inspired experiences. According to Regina Carswell Russo of the Cincinnati Art Museum, "the art museum is a place of reflection, a place to find solace and to go inside as you look at the beauty around you." She goes on to say, "what better place to pair these two art forms: going inside to see the beauty within and coming into the space to see the beauty around you?"<sup>14</sup> A beautiful environment surrounded by beautiful works makes for a beautiful experience. Does beauty transverse culture? Do less wealthy, less well-educated, more racially diverse visitors see themselves represented in museums? Museums of the future can ensure all-inclusive offerings.

Cultural awareness in visual arts and a growing appreciation for non-Western creativity have been at the core of the rise of emerging artists of color in contemporary art. While their work appears in many public and private collections, far too many remain hidden from public view. Exhibitions must highlight diversity in order for the visitor experience to be rewarding for all. Many contemporary artists are creating works that feature people of color so when these works are on view visitors see faces that look like themselves, diverse representation. For example, the figures in the paintings of contemporary artists Kerry James Marshall and Njideka Akunyili Crosby reflect people of color in settings that are warm and familiar, attractive and representational. In addition to exhibitions, performances and programs centered on artists of color are crucial to program operations. Giving voice to social issues through visual arts opens up discussions to engage visitors in conversations surrounding race and culture to think creatively about ways to build stronger communities. Ongoing visual representation will attract a new generation of supporters and patrons of the arts and humanities.

Additionally, many purveyors of art want to walk into museums and galleries and see people of color in the paintings of Mickalene Thomas and Kehinde Wiley. Art connoisseurs of color

want to enter creative spaces like the Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn and see colossal sculptures like Kara Walker's *A Subtlety of the Marvelous Sugar baby an Homage to the underpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant*. Art lovers of color want to experience the 2.0 version of Venus De Milo created by the hands of Vanessa German. The Latin American community wants to see more artists like Ana Mendieta and Juan Sanchez on the walls of gallery spaces, bringing their unique style and rich history to the art world. Multicultural representation delivers a sense of empowerment, inclusion, and feelings of 'yes, I belong here.' Museums of the future will help to foster feelings in visitors that evoke a stronger sense of pride and self-love increasing a growth in audience and continued support.

Embracing acts of inclusion, equity and diversity are not new agenda items to the conversation of museum work. In many ways we see the concept of museums of the future being implemented in a number of arts spaces today; however, there is certainly a need for progressive growth. In the words of the museum scholar Stephen E. Weil, "the successful museum has gone from being about something to being for someone, a human place filled not primarily with things but more importantly with our memories, our stories and our emotions."<sup>15</sup> Museums have contributed to the ethos of society for centuries, they are resilient and adaptable to change. Success will hinge on the wellness of the communities they serve, the development of fresh leadership, and the ability to connect with diverse audiences. Citizens become embolden when cultural organizations stand behind them and support their efforts. Museums of the future must continue to develop standards and best practices that are inclusive and demonstrate equality for all. Together, we can celebrate diversity, uphold cultural integrity, and make a positive impact on the world.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://mocada.org/about/mission-history/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.instituteaia.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.warhol.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=97377145>

<sup>5</sup> Meringolo, Denise D. *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012, 133.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/minorities.aspx>.

<sup>7</sup> Cahan, Susan E. *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, 266.

<sup>8</sup> [www.aam-us.org](http://www.aam-us.org).

<sup>9</sup> <https://mellon.org/programs/arts-and-cultural-heritage/art-history-conservation-museums/demographic-survey/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.culturetype.com/2017/12/27/next-23-art-curators-to-watch-who-took-on-new-appointments-in-2017/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://ma.crecschools.org/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.getty.edu/foundation/initiatives/current/mui/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://nmai.si.edu/explore/collections/conservation/training/#twi>

<sup>14</sup> <http://rubinmuseum.org/events/series/mindfulness-meditation>

<sup>15</sup> Schwarzer, Marjorie. *Riches, Rivals, and Radicals: 100 Years of Museums in America*. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 2006, 217.



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