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The Art of Oppression:

How Art Museums' Practices and Collections Perpetuate Inequality

I. Introduction: Where We Are

“I was studying for my doctoral exams at the Getty Research Institute ... One night, while riding the shuttle down the hill to parking, a staff member asked me if I worked in the cafeteria. As a Latina already underrepresented in the field, this was an alienating experience.”¹ This is just one of 838 posts and counting on the Instagram account, Change the Museum, which seeks to pressure “US museums to move beyond lip service proclamations by amplifying tales of unchecked racism.”² With over a hundred institutions addressed throughout their hundreds of posts, personal accounts like this show how museums still lack true diversity and inclusion, and even actively increase the marginalization and oppression of underserved communities such as people of color and low-income individuals. Expanding beyond the individual level to broader statistics tells a similar tale as well. During the fiscal year of 2018-2019, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. totaled over \$1.3 billion in assets ranging from individual donations, art acquisitions, and grants.³ This is just the financial acquisition of one year of one art museum in the United States. While their demographic trends in visitors is much harder to find, if they are

¹ Change the Museum, “I was studying . . .” *Instagram*, June 10, 2021, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CP8eqDHIUqK/>.

² Change the Museum, biography, *Instagram*, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/changethemuseum/>.

³ “2019 Annual Report: Treasurer’s Report and Financial Statements,” National Gallery of Art, accessed February 28, 2022, <https://www.nga.gov/about/annual-reports/2019/treasurer-financial.html>.

reflective of other demographic trends amongst art museums, then low-income and minority groups were not the main audience. Based on a 2010 report from the Center for the Future of Museums, an initiative of the American Association of Museums, non-Hispanic white visitors made up 78.9% of museum and gallery visitors in 2008 despite only making up 68.7% of the US population.⁴ African American visitors were dramatically underrepresented by only making up 5.9% of museum and gallery visitors despite constituting 11.4% of the US population in 2008.⁵ The African American community isn't the only underrepresented group in museum visitor demographics – low-income⁶ and other minority groups⁷ are less likely to visit museums than their privileged counterparts due to a perception of feeling unwelcome.⁸ It is not only in visitor demographics that one sees a lack of representation – according to USA Today, there are only 986 works by black artists in the National Gallery's collection out of the 153,621 total works.⁹ If art museums are so culturally significant that the major ones (including ones that don't even charge for admission such as the National Gallery of Art) are raking in over a billion dollars yearly, then what does it say when they are not serving disadvantaged communities as equally as their rich, white counterparts, and there are widespread firsthand experiences of exclusion and discrimination? When examining the various harms and structures that play a role in exclusion from museum audiences, staff, and collections, it becomes apparent that museums further oppression of already marginalized groups through various harms, indignities, and exclusions.

⁴ Betty Farrell and Maria Medvedeva, *Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums* (Washington, DC: The American Association of Museums Press, 2010), 12.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Colleen Dilenschneider, "Why Cultural Organizations Are Not Reaching Low-Income Visitors (DATA)," published May 18, 2016, <https://www.colleendilen.com/2016/05/18/why-cultural-organizations-are-not-reaching-low-income-visitors-data/>.

⁷ Farrell, *Demographic Transformation*, 12-13.

⁸ Ibid and Dilenschneider, "Why Cultural Organizations."

⁹ Nicquel Terry Ellis, "Art so white: Black artists want representation (beyond slavery) in the Met, National Gallery," USA Today, May 5, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/05/05/black-artists-african-american-art-museums-galleries-collections-painting/3483422002/>.

Various ethical frameworks and feasible, promising solutions show that museums have an urgent duty to right these wrongs to promote a culture of equity in their institutions and across society.

II. Harm Analysis

The lack of representation within museum audiences and collections for low-income and communities of color harm these communities. When underserved communities are excluded from museums, they miss out on opportunities to develop one's central capabilities, gain educational opportunities, and experience positive representations and recognition as a dignified part of one's community. Therefore, museums further societal oppression and harm already marginalized communities when they do not include and represent them in a dignified, substantial manner.

Capability Analysis

Martha Nussbaum introduces the concept of central capabilities, previously presented by Amartya Sen, in order to assess quality of life amongst individuals and to determine whether one is living a dignified life or if they are disadvantaged.¹⁰ Among her list of central capabilities necessary to live a full and dignified life, Martha Nussbaum lists play, affiliation, and senses, imagination, and thought.¹¹ Play is defined as “being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities,” affiliation as being able to interact with and have sympathy for others as well as being treated as a dignified individual, and senses, imagination and thought as being able to cultivate these senses in a “truly human” way and through education.¹² These three capabilities can all be

¹⁰ Martha C. Nussbaum, “In Defense of Universal Values,” in *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 70.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 78-80.

¹² *Ibid.*

further cultivated, and their thresholds met, with activities that entertain and educate while linking one to their own culture and the culture of others, such as visiting museums. However, as mentioned in the introduction, not everyone is equally represented in the demographics of who goes to museums and whose work is presented in museums. Not going to museums is a missed opportunity on cultivating one's capability of senses, imagination, and thought because they are missing out on educational benefits. Additionally, it is a missed opportunity to cultivate play through the entertainment cultural institutions present. Play should not be underestimated as a capability, because it is important that people have entertainment to elevate and enrich their lives beyond basic survival. Not visiting museums also limits one's ability to develop affiliation because one is missing out on cultural capital that would further integrate them into their society's culture by presenting them with a shared understanding of what is artistically valued. However, even if underserved groups do visit museums, if they do not see themselves represented positively in the art or as artists, then they miss out on the potential to develop a sense of affiliation completely as they have negative internalized views reinforced, they do not see themselves as a part of this cultural institution, and thus they do not understand themselves as being culturally significant at large. Such threats to affiliation are important to address because if one lacks affiliation, then they experience increased marginalization and a disconnect with society as a whole. Underrepresented groups such as low-income individuals and racial or ethnic minorities are faced with capability deficits in play, affiliation, and senses, imagination, and thought due to their underrepresentation in museum audiences and collections.

Missed Educational Opportunities

To examine why not going to museums constitutes a capabilities deficit, we must first establish the benefits of going to museums. A study published in 2013 by Jay P. Greene et al. compared student responses in “surveys include[ing] multiple items assessing knowledge about art as well as measures of critical thinking, historical empathy, tolerance, and sustained interest in visiting art museums” between those who visited the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Northwest Arkansas and those who did not.¹³ The results show that “disadvantaged students assigned by lottery to receive a school tour of an art museum make exceptionally large gains in critical thinking, historical empathy, tolerance, and becoming art consumers.”¹⁴ Gains in these areas were typically two to three times larger than those of the overall sample, and advantaged students from large, non-rural towns and low-poverty schools experienced little to no changes in these areas.¹⁵ Greene et al. suggest that this difference is because “if schools do not provide culturally enriching experiences for [advantaged] students, their families are likely to have the inclination and ability to provide those experiences on their own.”¹⁶ This implication and the data supporting a notable increase in critical thinking, historical empathy, tolerance, and an inclination to consume more art after visiting art museums suggest that museums are a powerful tool to make up for the disparities in capabilities more privileged versus less privileged students may have. Specifically, an increase in these areas further cultivates one’s central capabilities of play, affiliation, and senses, imagination, and thought, as museums serve as a leisure activity, cultivate one’s ability to connect to others past and present, and increase their

¹³ Jay P. Greene, Brian Kisida, and Daniel H. Bowen, “The Educational Value of Field Trips,” *Education Next* 14, no. 1 (September 2013), <https://www.educationnext.org/the-educational-value-of-field-trips/>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

ability to think critically. In another study by Greene, the results show that after multiple field trips to the Woodruff Arts Center in Atlanta – which houses the High Art Museum, Alliance Theater, and Atlanta Symphony on its campus – students received higher scores on math and ELA standardized tests.¹⁷ Greene speculates that due to widespread studies that show exposure in one subject (such as the arts) does not directly increase performance in another (such as math) that this effect could result from “extra arts activities [increasing] student interest and engagement in school.”¹⁸ Therefore, visiting arts institutions such as art museums increases students’ ability to engage in quality learning, and thus their central capability of senses, imagination, and thought.

Lois Hetland et al. also draws attention to the fact that art exhibitions give students the opportunity to engage and develop skills in public discourse, as opposed to the private nature of work in other subjects.¹⁹ Especially when exhibiting work of their own, students hone presentation skills and skills in receiving peer critiques, and when consuming work, they engage in critical thinking through discussions and providing feedback.²⁰ In an *Arts & Activities* article, Catherine Grytting explains that art classes can support joy of learning, intellectual growth, emotional growth, and social growth by encouraging reflection, creativity, self-expression, and “spatial, kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences.”²¹ Hetland and Grytting’s discussions of the benefits of making and exhibiting art and taking arts classes can be applied to

¹⁷ Jay P. Greene, "An unexpectedly positive result from arts-focused field trips," Brookings, published February 16, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2018/02/16/an-unexpectedly-positive-result-from-arts-focused-field-trips-in-school/>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Lois Hetland, Ellen Winner, Shirley Veenema, and Kimberly M. Sheriden, “What Can Be Learned from Exhibitions,” in *Studio Thinking 2: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2013), 37.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Catherine Grytting, “The benefits of art education,” *Arts & Activities* 127, no. 3 (April 2000): 66, <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.wlu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aft&AN=505858657&site=ehost-live>.

the importance of visiting art museums because it is a comparable exposure to the visual arts, especially during a time when art classes in schools are losing support. While such studies may focus more on student art and arts education, it is relevant to the positive effects of museums because many similar conversations happen when discussing the art of peers or the art in museums, and thus similar effects are likely to occur. Additionally, museums act as a strong source for education in the arts, and thus what happens in the classroom may happen on an even larger scale in a museum and help lessons from art classes carry on beyond an individual's academic career. While it is hard to quantify the disadvantages faced by not visiting museums, the many notable advantages experienced by visiting art museums and engaging with the visual arts indicates that not visiting art museums furthers disadvantages faced by racial and ethnic minorities and low-income individuals when compared to their more privileged peers who are regularly visiting such cultural institutions. This missed potential is the quantifiable extent of the disadvantage itself. Thus, it is important to actively work to increase visitation to museums by disadvantaged groups since it is such a powerful tool for growth, especially in areas related to central capabilities.

Lack of Representation in Art Museums

As previously mentioned, there are only 986 works by black artists in the National Gallery's collection out of the 153,621 total works.²² Many major art museums follow this trend, and when there are depictions of racial minorities or low-income groups, they tend to be rather negative or patronizing. For example, Claude Monet's *La Japonaise* (Figure 1) depicts his Western European wife in a kimono and holding a traditionally Japanese hand fan. While some

²² Ellis, "Art so white."

may try to write this exoticism off as a relic of the past, as recently as 2015 the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston was having visitors of all races dress up in a replica of the picture's kimono, hold a Japanese fan, and pose for a photo.²³ When Japanese communities visiting such museums both see images such as these not placed in proper historical context and also have the racist, orientalist context replicated right in front of them, they are being told that their culture is not worth dignity and respect but rather they are just a costume for patrons' amusement. Their dignity is harmed when they are reduced to caricatures and outcast as "others" for entertainment and consumption. Thus, it is important for museums to place problematic representations of minority communities and their cultures in the proper historical context and not further them so these stereotypes and fetishizations are not endorsed, even if inadvertently.

Aaliyah El-Amin and Correna Cohen emphasize how if problematic, racist, or offensive representations are not placed in the proper context, then these harmful representations of minority communities may be internalized by students of color, negatively impacting their sense of self.²⁴ Additionally, a lack of representation of these communities among artists displayed and collected and depictions within these artworks may alienate students of color and make them feel as if they do not belong in such spaces.²⁵ Thus, their central capability of affiliation is particularly harmed when disadvantaged communities do not see themselves as belonging in the very institutions that play a significant role in determining what is culturally valuable. If offensive portrayals are prioritized over substantial representation, then a great indignity is done to communities of color because art museums are indirectly saying that these communities are

²³ Brian Boucher, "Museum of Fine Arts Boston Cancels Kimono Dress-Up Event After Being Accused of Racism," *Artnet News*, July 7, 2015, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/museum-of-fine-arts-boston-apologizes-for-kimono-event-315000>.

²⁴ Aaliyah El-Amin and Correna Cohen, "Just Representations: Using Critical Pedagogy in Art Museums to Foster Student Belonging," *Art Education* 71, no. 1 (January 2018): 8–11, doi:10.1080/00043125.2018.1389579.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

only useful as far as they can be consumed by more privileged groups. Additionally, there is a harm to the capability of senses, imagination, and thought when groups are marginalized by the very institutions that would help cultivate these capabilities. Overall, harm is done to low-income and minority communities when they are prevented from gaining educational benefits and do not have the ability to engage with positive representations of their communities within art museums.

III. Structural Analysis

A series of representations, relations, and rules within art museums and their art lead to various reasons why marginalized groups do not feel that these spaces are for them. Jonathan Eastwood and Claire Smith present the elemental forms of social structures as representations, relations, and rules to help explain how social structures function, which is vital in a discussion such as ours because social structures illuminate how individuals' choices are enabled or constrained by our social environment.²⁶ Thus, these concepts will aid in discussing the harms in a lack of diversity across multiple museum aspects. Within museums, there are few board members²⁷ or staff members²⁸ who are people of color, and this limited representation and relation of white people leading over lower-ranking people of color (when they are even present) leads to the implied rule that these spaces are not for those communities. This lack of representation is enhanced by the perception that lower income communities and communities of color feel relatively unwelcome at art museums,²⁹ sometimes even due to real or perceived

²⁶ Jonathan Eastwood and Claire Smith, "Some Elemental Forms of Social Structure and their Intersections," accessed April 2, 2022, <https://wlu.instructure.com/courses/7570/files/595642?wrap=1>.

²⁷ Yaling Jiang, "What It Takes to Make Museum Boards More Diverse," Artsy, September 29, 2020, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-takes-museum-boards-diverse#:~:text=A%20demographic%20study%20of%20board,Black%20and%201.9%25%20were%20Asian.>

²⁸ "Latest Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey Shows Number of African American Curators and Women in Leadership Roles Increased," Association of Art Museum Directors, January 28, 2019, <https://aamd.org/for-the-media/press-release/latest-art-museum-staff-demographic-survey-shows-number-of-african.>

²⁹ Dilenschneider, "Why Cultural Organizations."

racism.³⁰ Furthermore, the art itself often exalted in museums plays into colonialist traditions, and this upholding of an exploitive power relation creates a perception and norm that people of color are to be consumed themselves and not represented as dignified subjects or consumers of art. Overall, several structures of representations, relations, and rules create the perception that these spaces are reserved for the white elite and not marginalized communities.

Representations, Relations, and Rules within Museums

A 2017 demographic study of museum board leadership by the American Alliance of Museums found that “89.3% of board members at participating museums were white, while 5.2% were Black and 1.9% were Asian.”³¹ A 2018 survey by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation found that people of color only made up 12% of senior leading staff at museums; similarly, only 26% of education staff, 16% of curators, and 11% of conservation staff were people of color.³² When people go to museums and see so few people who look like them in leadership positions, this is likely to create the perception that these spaces are not for them.

In her essay “It’s Time to Stop and Ask ‘Why?’” Lisa Sasaki points to how despite the fact that the call for museums to diversify their staff and audiences has been around for decades, very little has been done to actually answer this call.³³ Sasaki suggests that part of this may be due to the outward rather than inward focus of these calls for diversification, and museums need to change their own cultures to reflect the importance of diversity before anything can truly be

³⁰ John H. Falk, "Leisure Decisions Influencing African-American Use of Museums," *Visitor Behavior* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 12, https://www.informalscience.org/sites/default/files/VSA-a0a1u2-a_5730.pdf.

³¹ Jiang, “What It Takes.”

³² Association of Art Museum Directors, “Latest Art Museum.”

³³ Lisa Sasaki, "It's Time to Stop and Ask 'Why?'" in *Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion in Museums*, edited by Johnnetta Betsch Cole and Laura L. Lott, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 69.

done.³⁴ Relations amongst employees can often impact diversity initiatives, because if those leading diversity programs are often questioned or even challenged by their colleagues, it can decrease their drive for the cause due to the lack of internal support until the program fizzles out completely.³⁵ Thus, it is not only the lack of representation of people of color within museums, but the lack of internal support amongst employee relations that can cause a lack of diversity.

Similarly, in his essay “Museums, Racism, and the Inclusiveness Chasm,” Carlos Tortolero claims museums have an issue identifying their racism as racism, which leads to the inability to address the issue of lack of diversity, or, as Tortolero puts it, lack of integration.³⁶ He also addresses how even directors who want to diversify may be limited by their boards,³⁷ thus further explaining the issue of how when board members are primarily white, they will not necessarily be acting in the interests of people of color since these communities do not have a seat at the table. Additionally, African Americans have stated in surveys that they perceive museums as racist institutions, even if only a small percentage say they have directly observed or experienced racism in museums.³⁸ This lack of direct experience with racism does not affect the surveyed group’s perceptions of museums, because they believe that such issues still exist or that these spaces are not for them,³⁹ thus supporting the notion that racial minorities do not feel as if museums are for them. If it is not due to their direct experiences in museums, perhaps it is due to something more indirect, such as lack of representation within museum audiences and staff. Overall, the lack of feeling welcome in museum spaces,⁴⁰ especially due to real or perceived

³⁴ Ibid, 70-71.

³⁵ Ibid, 72.

³⁶ Carlos Tortolero, "Museums, Racism, and the Inclusiveness Chasm," in *Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion in Museums*, edited by Johnnetta Betsch Cole and Laura L. Lott (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 9-10.

³⁷ Ibid, 11.

³⁸ Falk, “Leisure Decisions.”

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Dilenschneider, "Why Cultural Organizations."

racism,⁴¹ is often due to the lack of representation within these spaces, power relations that prevent the push for diversity, and the culmination of the former two into the implied rule that museums are not for communities of color.

Representations, Relations, and Rules within Art

Surveys have shown that communities of color and low-income communities often go to museums to support their own communities and cultural heritage.⁴² Thus, when there are no representations of people of color to celebrate within museums, these communities may be less compelled to go. Similarly, the representations within museums of people of color that are offensive may reify the “historically-grounded cultural barriers to participation that make museums feel intimidating and exclusionary to many people”⁴³ as they tell them museums are not places of dignity meant to uplift them, but rather to exploit and consume them. Take for example the work of Paul Gauguin. Often exalted as a brilliant artist, his works can be found in museums around the world. He was inspired by hearing accounts of the Tahiti exhibit at the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris to travel to the recently acquired French colony, which is where he drew inspiration for many of his most famous works.⁴⁴ Thus, Gauguin is rooted in a tradition of colonialism that includes the use of human zoos at such Colonial Expositions.⁴⁵ His works are a prime example of primitivism, which is an art movement that focused on idealizing “primitive”

⁴¹ Falk, "Leisure Decisions."

⁴² Margaret E. Blume-Kohout, Sara R. Leonard, and Jennifer L. Novak-Leonard, *When Going Gets Tough: Barriers and Motivations Affecting Arts Attendance* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts Office of Research & Analysis, 2015), 2-3.

⁴³ Farrell, *Demographic Transformation*, 13.

⁴⁴ Meredith Mendelsohn, "Why Is the Art World Divided over Gauguin's Legacy?" *Artsy*, August 3, 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-art-divided-gauguins-legacy>.

⁴⁵ For more on the history of human zoos at colonial exhibits, see "Human Zoos: A Shocking History of Shame and Exploitation," *CBC*, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/natureofthings/features/human-zoos-a-shocking-history-of-shame-and-exploitation>.

cultures as naïve paradises untouched by the burdens of “civilized” (or rather Western European) life. Not only did Gauguin’s images patronize Tahiti in such a colonialist way, but they also sexualized young Tahitian women and he himself took three young wives who were thirteen, fourteen, and fourteen when he was a grown man, and he infected all three with syphilis.⁴⁶ Thus, he is not only a colonialist engaged in the problematic tradition of primitivism, but a pedophile.⁴⁷ Despite his problematic colonialist views of Tahiti as a primitive paradise untouched by civilization and his literal pedophilia, he is still exalted by many in the art world.⁴⁸ What does this tell communities of color, especially those who identify with countries attacked by colonialism? When they see his sexualized images of young girls of color such as *Spirit of the Dead Watching* (Figure 2) that show his colonialist fetishization and paternalistic misunderstanding of non-European cultures, they are perhaps told they do not deserve the dignity of accurate and respectful depictions, but rather they are what museum goers should be consuming. Instances such as these combined with the fact that limited artworks by artists of color exist in most major museums⁴⁹ alienate communities of color because they have limited to no representations of their communities to celebrate. Thus, the power relations amongst artists such as Gauguin and the subjects they took advantage of lead to the representation that non-Western people and people of color are for fetishistic consumption. Art museums that uphold this work without placing it in the proper historical context or also collecting positive portrayals by, of, and for people of color reinforce this view and lead to the understood rule that museums are not for marginalized communities because they are what is being consumed, and they are not the consumers.

⁴⁶ Mendelsohn, “Why is the Art World.”

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ellis, “Art so white.”

IV. Ethical Analysis and Recommendations

Since positive museum representations within audiences and art further the development of capabilities of play, affiliation, and senses, imagination, and thought, it is not only important to include marginalized communities in these cultural spaces, but it is an ethical duty. When examined through lenses of utilitarianism and contractualism, it becomes apparent that it is important to cultivate these capabilities by increasing representation of marginalized groups in museum boards, staff, programming, and collections or exhibits. Utilitarianism is a moral theory that suggests the most ethical course of action is one that produces the most good for the most people, and contractualism is a moral theory that says the most ethical course of action is one whose principles cannot be reasonably rejected by any party.⁵⁰ These moral theories are an important part in our discussion because they help provide a framework to decide what is morally correct and important, as well as how one may respond to any counterarguments against the prescribed course of action. Utilitarianism and contractualism are particularly important because they are two of the most prevalent moral theories and often have opposing strategies to get to their moral rights, so if they converge on a prescribed course of action, then it further supports the ethical importance of such actions. Diversifying collections and exhibits, expanding programming types and topics, and effectively marketing these developments towards such communities may increase museum-going as racial minority and lower-income groups often cite supporting community events and celebrating their cultural heritage as a major reason they visit arts-centric spaces.⁵¹ However, when examining how exactly museums should achieve these goals, ethical questions arise. For example, there are heated debates about whether museums are

⁵⁰ Howard Pickett, "Intro to Ethics & Moral Theory Utilitarianism & Contractualism," YouTube, posted March 5, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEYXQ3Nm25U&ab_channel=HowardPickett.

⁵¹ Blume-Kohout, *When Going Gets Tough*, 2-4.

betraying their missions to preserve and display works of cultural heritage when they deaccession works by major white, male artists as a way to raise funds to diversify collections. Furthermore, by diversifying collections, exhibits, and programming, museums may risk alienating their current primary audiences and donors. Thus, in the aim to achieve a more ethical organization by promoting programs and artwork that better serve the entire population, museums must grapple with questions regarding how far they are obligated to go for the sake of diversification.

As previously established, marginalized communities (particularly racial minorities⁵² and low-income groups⁵³) do not attend art museums as much as their white and affluent peers do, which limits their development of capabilities such as play, affiliation, and senses, imagination, and thought. Additionally, we have discussed how this may be due to the representations, or lack thereof, in positions of power in museum boards⁵⁴ and staffs,⁵⁵ derogatory representations of non-white and non-European individuals in art museums display, and limited representations of works by artists of color.⁵⁶ Thus, there are notable harms and indignities done to low-income individuals and people of color when museum conditions do not account for positive, diverse representations. These harms combined with the exploitive power relations that result make the current lack of representation unjust. Perhaps a museum's defense to this lack of diversity in artists would be they want to focus on those already deemed significant, preserve their traditions, and guarantee that they can retain current donors and audiences, but this is a weak argument. A contractualist would easily say that it is an art museum's ethical duty to diversify their collection.

⁵² Farrell, *Demographic Transformation*, 12.

⁵³ Dilenschneider, "Why Cultural Organizations."

⁵⁴ Jiang, "What It Takes."

⁵⁵ Association of Art Museum Directors, "Latest Art Museum."

⁵⁶ Ellis, "Art so white."

Due to the harms imposed from a lack of inclusion in museums, people who are excluded from the traditional institutional practices of museums and art history could reasonably reject the principle of maintaining tradition at the cost of their exclusion. Furthermore, the “tradition” and its legitimacy could itself reasonably be called into question, because is a tradition that upholds exclusion really an accurate representation of how art has developed throughout time? It seems that this tradition is an objectionable one not only for its harm, but for its inaccuracy as it does not provide a wholistic account of art’s history as the influences of women artists and artists of color are often overlooked. Thus, it would not be reasonable for museums to continue to perpetuate institutional harms to marginalized communities simply to preserve an incorrect tradition. Similarly, a utilitarian would say that the benefits of inclusion in museum practices and collections outweigh any harms that letting go of traditions may bring to museums, such as the loss of a few Andy Warhols or discriminatory donors. Since utilitarianism looks to maximize the most good for the most people, a utilitarian would look at the expanded capabilities and educational opportunities that result from museum inclusion and how many people they have the potential to affect. Similarly, educational benefits would increase through promoting historical accuracy because a wholistic view of art’s development throughout time provides more insight. In both moral frameworks, a counterargument may suggest that losing donors may render museums ineffective at their mission overall if they have no money to operate on, but if museums expand their audiences, they will also likely expand their donor base. There are affluent individuals in many marginalized communities that could replace and even expand on donations from discriminatory donors, and the importance of minor donations from a greater number of visitors also should not be underestimated. Thus, counterarguments about the loss of donors fall flat for utilitarians because there is little to no harm to quantify, and it does as well for

contractualists because it is not a reasonable principle to object to because museums will continue to gain support – perhaps even more so than they have previously. Overall, museums have more to gain than lose by diversifying their collections, programming, and audiences, and thus museums clearly have an ethical obligation to change their exclusionary practices.

To rectify the current harms and injustices that arise from exclusion within the arts, museums should diversify their programming, marketing strategies, and collections and exhibits. As previously mentioned, racial minority and low-income communities cite celebrating their cultures and communities as a major reason they visit arts spaces.⁵⁷ Thus, it logically follows that including more positive representations of the art and culture of such groups would motivate them to visit these spaces more, while still respecting the dignity of their individual choices. However, even when there are diversity initiatives or affordability access programs in place targeted at these communities, they are not always aware of it – in fact, high-income households are over three times as likely to be aware of these programs than low-income households.⁵⁸ While it would be inaccurate and even patronizing to assume that free programming is the solution to attracting marginalized communities, this example shows that while some institutions are already addressing barriers to museum attendance such as affordability, they may not be effective due to inefficient communication. Thus, it is important that museums not only include programming aimed at drawing in groups that are underrepresented in their audiences, but that they adapt their messaging accordingly so it reaches these communities. Some examples of strategies include “building relationships with leaders in lower-income communities to help spread the word, partnering with organizations that already serve these audiences (e.g. churches, schools, libraries, etc.), and actually thinking about how these hopeful audience members make

⁵⁷ Blume-Kohout, *When Going Gets Tough*, 2-4.

⁵⁸ Dilenschneider, "Why Cultural Organizations."

decisions.”⁵⁹ Voluntary focus groups and surveys are another potentially effective communication tool. Additionally, perhaps museums could partner with marketing firms who specialize in messaging for racial minorities or low-income individuals, especially if a failure to communicate results from the museum team’s training stemming from a predominantly white field.⁶⁰

In addition to revamping marketing strategies and programs, museums should also focus on diversifying their collections and exhibits. Michael O’Hare, a professor of public policy at UC Berkeley’s Goldman School, estimates that major museums have about 90% of their collections in storage at any given time.⁶¹ When looking at a collection as large and culturally significant as the Met’s, this means that nearly \$55 billion (yes, billion) worth of art is in storage and closed off to visitors. To say this seems like an excessive waste is an understatement, especially when major museums could be loaning out these works to less endowed museums or deaccessioning them to raise funds to hire new and more diverse staff, create more access programming, and – perhaps most controversially – diversify their collections. Thus, art museums should deaccession even just a fraction of their works in storage to raise funds for buying works from artists of color, LGBT identities, or any underrepresented identity or group.⁶² Diversifying collections would allow more permanent and temporary exhibits that represent marginalized communities, and thus increase representation from these groups within artists, art, and audiences. Similarly, diverse programming would follow as programming is often tied to the current exhibits at museums.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Association of Art Museum Directors, “Latest Art Museum Staff.”

⁶¹ “The Gray Market: The Unknown Cost of Keeping Art in Museum Storage (and Other Insights),” Artnet News, January 15, 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/market/gray-market-big-numbers-missing-museum-scandals-insights-1199105>.

⁶² Credit to Cate O’Kelley for this general idea since she mentioned it while discussing her thesis, *Institutional Transformation and the Diversification of Museum Permanent Collections*.

Talks of deaccessioning are a hot debate in the art world, with many museums who choose to deaccession certain works facing backlash from the public and even sanctions from the Association of Art Museum Directors.⁶³ In 2014, the AAMD sanctioned the Virginia's Randolph College Maier Museum of Art's and Delaware Museum of Art's plans to deaccession some of their works to increase the school's endowment fund and to pay off debt related to a recent expansion, respectively.⁶⁴ The AAMD found both institutions to be in violation of their guidelines, and said of the Delaware Museum of Art's plan "with this sale, the museum is treating its works from its collection as disposable assets, rather than irreplaceable cultural heritage that it holds in trust for people now and in the future."⁶⁵

An important difference between the aforementioned cases of deaccessioning and cases of deaccessioning to diversify is the intent: the former cases are to benefit the finances of the institution, and the latter case is to promote inclusion and diversity. However, even museums who deaccession to diversify face backlash. In 2018, the Baltimore Museum of Art proposed a plan to deaccession works by Andy Warhol, Franz Kline, Jules Olitski, and Kenneth Noland in order to raise funds to buy works by nonwhite and women artists, and then again proposed a similar plan in 2020.⁶⁶ While the AAMD relaxed their guidelines about deaccessioning due to financial hardships many museums faced during the coronavirus pandemic, backlash against the Baltimore Museum of Art's deaccessioning is ongoing: "eleven former trustees have signed an open letter calling for an investigation by the Maryland attorney general, two board members have resigned, and two former chairmen have rescinded pledged gifts."⁶⁷ Thus, even when

⁶³ "The Most Controversial U.S. Museum Deaccessions: Why Do Institutions Sell Art?," *Artnews*, October 26, 2020, <https://www.artnews.com/feature/most-controversial-museum-deaccessioning-plans-1234575019/>.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

deaccessioning with the intent to diversify, museums still face backlash and risk losing major donors and being put under investigation. This raises an important ethical question: when deaccessioning their works, even in the name of diversifying their collections, are museums violating their founding principles of preserving cultural heritage? A contractualist may say that this is not a reasonable argument, because one could reasonably object to museums not diversifying on the principle of preserving tradition, especially when the deaccessioning would promote expanding the tradition and not replacing it. However, if one considers objecting to this supposed failure to preserve cultural heritage, one must consider how museums already violate this principle due to how much of their collections sit in storage. How are museums preserving and presenting cultural heritage if it remains unused, unseen, and unacknowledged? Thus, it would be hard to justify not deaccessioning art to rectify the harms, injustices, and capability deficits others face when many of these works are hoarded in storage and rarely, if ever, on display, and thus already do not fulfill their purpose of preserving cultural heritage. Similarly, a utilitarian perspective would say that the benefits of selling art in storage to rectify these issues of exclusion outweighs the harms of jeopardizing an already limited and even harmful tradition. Keeping art in storage seems to only benefit the museum itself, both financially and reputation-wise by increasing the amount of art, and thus dollars, they have in their collection. However, deaccessioning these works to raise funds to diversify collections seems to increase benefits for a greater number of people through promoting opportunities for educational and capabilities growth for millions of marginalized individuals, and it is hard to say that the reputation and financial status of a few institutions outweighs the intellectual, personal, and capability growth of millions. Particularly when the artworks in storage aren't benefitting anyone or anything except

the museum itself, a utilitarian would argue they should be deaccessioned in order to benefit the many individuals within marginalized communities.

Even in less controversial cases of diversification in museum exhibits and collections that don't involve deaccessioning, backlash is ongoing. In 2010, the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery opened "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture," which "was the first major museum exhibition to focus on the lives and works of those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) in the making of modern American portraiture over the past century."⁶⁸ Within a matter of weeks after opening, the Museum pulled a four-minute video by David Wojnarowicz titled "A Fire in My Belly."⁶⁹ The video was made at the height of the AIDS epidemic in the US and represents the suffering of someone living with AIDS, and the artist himself died of AIDS at age 37 in 1992.⁷⁰ However, even though this video was initially displayed in fall 2010, a brief scene of ants crawling over a crucifix (Figure 3) resulted in outcries deeming the video sacrilegious, especially so close to the holiday season.⁷¹ Then-Speaker of the House John Boehner calling the entire exhibit a "misuse of taxpayer money"⁷² – although reading between the lines, one may reasonably suspect complaints from the Speaker and the public may result from homophobia given the nature of the show. In light of the backlash, especially from Congress, the Smithsonian made the choice to pull the video.⁷³ While this is certainly an act of censorship and failure to uphold artistic expression and creative freedom, it is also worth noting that all the Smithsonian museums receive two-thirds of their

⁶⁸ "Censorship at the Smithsonian," ACLU, December 2, 2010, <https://www.aclu.org/blog/free-speech/censorship-smithsonian>.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

funding federally, with the other third coming from their endowment.⁷⁴ Thus, it makes sense that they would fear disapproval from Congress.

In cases such as the Smithsonian's attempt to diversify collections and promote diverse exhibits, one must ask another ethical question: do museums have a responsibility to push for diversification, even at risk of alienating their main audiences and funders and thus risking their entire institution itself? While it may be compelling to say that museums should prioritize their own survival, one may say that if they need to uphold exclusionary practices to survive then maybe they shouldn't be operating at all. For example, from a contractualist perspective, one could reasonably object to museums not presenting more diverse art even if it is controversial. Meanwhile, discomfort seems to be a weak and unreasonable objection, especially when art historically pushes boundaries even at risk of backlash and discomfort. If a museum can only survive through silencing narratives that make some uncomfortable, then perhaps they are not an ethical institution and thus should either be dramatically restructured or not exist at all. A utilitarian perspective would also argue that increasing someone's capabilities of play, affiliation, and senses, imagination, and thought through positive representations that draw them into these cultural spaces is a benefit that heavily outweighs risking alienating pre-existing audiences and donors. However, a utilitarian perspective may say that this depends on how much money the institution would lose, and how much societal or cultural harm would be done if it were to cease operations. To address this concern, it is worth examining a case where a diverse mission succeeds and even surpasses other museums.

The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture "is the only national museum devoted exclusively to the documentation of African American life, history,

⁷⁴ "Smithsonian Institution," Wikipedia, accessed March 23, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smithsonian_Institution.

and culture.”⁷⁵ This museum is dedicated to promoting inclusion of the African American community in the United States’ history, and thus serves a good example of how such a mission may not alienate donors or audiences, but rather draw them in. When the museum opened in September 2016, it broke all the Smithsonian’s records by surpassing the 1 million visitors mark in a little over four months.⁷⁶ Additionally, the length a visitor stays in a museum, or “dwell time,” is an average of six hours or more, which far exceeds the average of most museums, which is about 75 minutes to two hours.⁷⁷ While it may be harder to find information on their endowment and how their donations compare to other museums, if visitor interest is any indication then the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture is a promising case that proves when museums focus on promoting diversity and inclusion, they succeed more than any other museums may expect. Thus, neither a utilitarian nor contractualist should fear a museum’s loss of support when diversifying audiences since this case proves that museum interest, and subsequently support, increases. Museums should promote diversity and inclusion to fulfill their ethical duties, and also to increase their own success. Overall, museums have a clear ethical duty to promote diversification of programming, collections, and audiences in order to promote expansive wellbeing of marginalized communities.

V. Conclusion: Where We’re Going

The Associate Director of Museums at Washington and Lee University, Isra El-Beshir, provides insight on the current state of museums and what they could do better to support

⁷⁵ “About the Museum,” National Museum of African American History and Culture, accessed March 23, 2022, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/about/about-museum>.

⁷⁶ “Five Facts about the Smithsonian’s African American Museum of History and Culture,” New Orleans Museum of Art, June 12, 2019, <https://noma.org/five-facts-about-the-smithsonians-african-american-museum-of-history-and-culture/>.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

diversification in the future. El-Beshir states that museums need to incorporate diversification particularly in three areas: representation, interpretation, and exhibitions.⁷⁸ According to El-Beshir, representation examines whose voices are heard and whose are silenced.⁷⁹ A lack of representation can result in staffs or boards who turn towards the one person in the room that represents an underrepresented group for answers on every topic related to their identity, providing a patronizing and reductive idea that their group has a monolithic voice that they can fully represent.⁸⁰ Similarly, issues of representation could also refer to a museum who lacks any representation of underrepresented voices and simply expects that they know what a group's needs or wants are.⁸¹ While a group's representation, or lack thereof, can be addressed by hiring multiple individuals from those groups, it could also include consistent conversations with focus groups made up of individuals from these communities, or through surveys and other forms of voluntary participation.⁸² Interpretation is also important in addressing what and how museums explain the works they have on display.⁸³ While part of this includes explaining the proper historical context and disclaimers for problematic works such as the Monet and Gauguin pieces already discussed, it also includes how museums explain concepts as a whole.⁸⁴ For example, do museums put up interpretation that assumes visitors already know certain art techniques or movements, or does it take the time to explain these concepts in order to avoid excluding those who have not yet had a chance to learn?⁸⁵ If they fail to do so, they may risk alienating people

⁷⁸ Isra El-Beshir (Associate Director of Museums at Washington and Lee University) in conversation with the author, April 2022.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

without much exposure to art history and further perpetuate the problematic notion that cultural institutions are only for certain people.

The third factor El-Beshir promotes for diversification is exhibitions. As heavily discussed throughout this paper, exhibitions are important in the push for diversification, and museums must ask themselves whose work they have and what does it say.⁸⁶ In May through December 2021, Washington and Lee University displayed three paintings by Los Angeles-based artist, Almigdad Aldikhairy, in a series titled *Chaos in Color* (Figures 4-6).⁸⁷ This exhibit is a prime example of the representation that museums should strive for: through a vibrant color palette and imagery linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, the exhibit “invites visitors to reflect on the beauty of our natural world, our responsibility to our environment and society, and to think of those less fortunate and disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, including low-income families and households, as well as indigenous and other communities of color.”⁸⁸ It increases representation of marginalized voices in art by displaying paintings created by a Sudanese artist that invite viewers to reflect on experiences that may differ from their own. Not only does it thus diverge from upholding white male artists as the only geniuses in the art historical canon, but it also invites viewers to contemplate issues not frequently represented throughout art history, such as the struggle of low-income communities, indigenous peoples, and communities of color. The series represents these groups in a dignified way; it does not present a one-dimensional representation of such groups or fetishize their cultures through its imagery, nor does it subsequently encourage viewers to patronize or consume these communities. Rather, it encourages viewers to consider how these experiences may be similar or different from their own

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ “Chaos in Color,” Washington and Lee University, accessed April 9, 2022, <https://www.wlu.edu/arts/museums/visit-the-museums/exhibitions/past-exhibits/chaos-in-color/>.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

in a universal language of bright and bold colors and symbols linked to the pandemic. Thus, it breaks from traditions that may present marginalized individuals as up for consumption, and instead promotes issues that affect them disproportionately through a dignified, universal way.

These three factors may not be a wholistic plan for addressing complex issues of inequality in museums, but they serve as a good starting point for museums to reflect. All efforts to diversify, in these categories and others, must be ongoing so that they are not merely tokenizing.⁸⁹ Museums may have little data produced on the effects of their diversification efforts because many are just starting, or they simply may not have much progress to show and don't want to make themselves look bad,⁹⁰ but this should not prevent us from recognizing the clear importance of diversifying museum audiences, collections, and programming. There is much work to be done to make museums more inclusive spaces, but the potential of such initiatives is powerful as they stand to unite and empower communities through intellectual growth, affiliation through dignified representation, and cultural engagement and entertainment. To benefit everyone and truly fulfill their missions of preserving and presenting cultural heritage for all, museums must rapidly answer the call for diversification.

Word Count: 7865

Pledge: On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on this paper.

Signature: Chloe Parsons

⁸⁹ Isra El-Beshir (Associate Director of Museums at Washington and Lee University) in conversation with the author, April 2022.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Images

Figure 1: Claude Monet, *La Japonaise* (1876).



Figure 2: Paul Gauguin, *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, 1892.



Figure 3: Still from "Fire in My Belly," David Wojnarowicz, 1987.



Figure 4: Student installation of *Chaos in Color*



Figure 5: Student installation of *Chaos in Color*



Figure 6: Student installation of *Chaos in Color*



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